Worth the Candle

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Summary

A teenager struggling after the death of his best friend finds himself in a fantasy world - one which seems to be an amalgamation of every Dungeons and Dragons campaign they ever played together. Now he's stuck trying to find the answers to why he's there and what this world is trying to say. The most terrifying answer might be that this world is an expression of the person he was back on Earth.

Note: Up there at the top, it says "Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings". This is very distinct from "No Archive Warnings Apply". The warning that there are no warnings is your only warning; do with it what you will.

Update schedule is, as always, whenever I feel like it (though there is a spreadsheet tracking word count). Most discussion for this work takes place on /r/rational whenever a new chapter is posted.

This story is now cross-posted on Royal Road.
I strained against the collar that held my neck in place, trying to get a better look around. My hands and feet were both cuffed, with thick metal bars connecting the cuffs to each other, resulting in no give at all. I had a gag in my mouth as well, but that was a little bit looser.

Five seconds ago, I had been passing notes in fifth period English.

I could see other people bound just like I was in the dim red light that came from regularly spaced bulbs. We were in two lines that faced each other. There was a loud droning sound that I imagined would be hard to talk over, if I hadn't had the gag. That sound, along with the vibrations in my seat and the curved walls, told me that we were in a plane, though I had no idea where we were going, or where we were.

I didn't see anyone that I knew. I had been in English class, so given that I was abruptly transferred into bonds aboard some barebones airplane, it stood to reason that perhaps others from my class had been too. The other boys and girls were around my age, but they didn't look like they went to school in Bumblefuck, Kansas. Part of it was the hairstyles, which over-represented mohawks and bright colors. But more than that it was the hard looks on most of their faces, a defiance that I associated more with terrorists on television than high-schoolers.

A man in army fatigues walked down the middle aisle of the plane, between the two lines of knees. He stopped just in front of me, which allowed me a good look at him. He was cleanly shaved and grey at the temples, with a scar that ran from the bottom of his chin up to his nose. His eyes were filled with an intense, burning hatred as he looked at us, which was accentuated by the way he grit his teeth.

"Rebels. Traitors. Murderers. Dissidents. Thieves. You are the scum that has floated up to the surface. A less civilized society would have put you to the sword the moment you were caught. We believe in our ideals. Strength through adversity, righteousness through struggle. If you survive, you will be stronger for it. Make it to the outpost, and a place in the Host is waiting for you, your crimes forgiven."

With that he walked away. I had questions, but I couldn't raise my hand and my attempt at yelling just came out as a gurgle around the gag in my mouth. None of what he'd said sounded comforting. I'd already been flush with bewilderment, but now fear had finally added itself to the mix.

The boy across from me was shaking his head from side to side. He'd been doing it for a while, but he'd started speeding up. With a quick jerk he hooked part of his gag on a bit of metal surrounding his neck and pulled it off completely. He showed no satisfaction at that, instead opting to start speaking.

"We're allowed to cooperate," he shouted. "We stand a better chance of survival if it's us against them instead of everyone for themselves. We can --"

He was drowned out by the airplane opening up its belly. A mile below us were farmlands in the half-light of an overcast day. I struggled against my restraints and prayed that I would wake up, even though I knew in my heart that this wasn't a dream. My feet were dangling into the open sky now.
Some loud mechanism was making a clank. I still couldn't move my head much, but in my periphery I could see people dropping down into the sky below us. As the sequence got closer to me, I saw that none of them were wearing anything resembling a parachute. What the army guy had said was ringing in my ear: strength through adversity. That seemed like the kind of thing you might say right before you murder someone.

Then the mechanisms released me and I fell, free of restraints.

The wind rushed past me. My stomach lurched at the feeling of weightlessness. I spread myself out, almost instinctively, trying to brace myself against the wind. I had let out a scream when I'd first started falling, but stopped when the wind started trying to force its way up my open mouth. I was going to die, just like all the others, and there was nothing that I could do to stop it. From this height, even an impact against water was sure to be as hard as against concrete.

I looked to the others that were falling, hoping that one of them had a solution.

Instead, I saw a murder. A boy with a pink mohawk had swooped down to collide with a girl. He struggled against her, holding onto her with one hand and a leg wrapped around her, and with the other hand pushing her chin up. When he applied sudden force, her neck snapped, and he detached himself from her as her lifeless body twisted and tumbled toward the ground.

To my horror, I realized that he was coming my way. I had no idea how to maneuver while skydiving, short of "spread out to slow down, put your hands to your sides to go fast". Given how fast the mohawked murderer was coming toward me, I elected to go fast and pinned my arms to my side. It took a few seconds to stop myself from spinning, but I certainly was going faster.

That meant that the ground was coming up towards me at a frankly alarming rate. I must have hit terminal velocity fairly quickly, but the perception of speed was greater the closer the ground got. I tried to think about why that was, and got as far as wondering whether it had to do with the viewing angle before deciding that I didn't really want to spend the last moments of my life trying to recreate physics knowledge from base principles.

When I looked back behind me, the pink-haired guy was gone. I could only see a few of the others in the air, as well as a few tumbling bodies that I assumed must be corpses.

The ground had gotten really close, close enough that I could start to make things out beyond just the irregular grid of farmland and a smattering of houses. To my left was a vast cloud so close to the ground that it must have been fog, but in the general area where my body was going to splatter was what looked like a gas station. There were no cars around, but there were people; they were looking up toward me with glowing red eyes. I might have found that ominous if it weren't for the whole imminent death thing. I closed my eyes as my heart hammered away in my chest. As deaths went, at least it would be fast.

I kept my eyes screwed shut, right up until the point where I realized the wind was dying down. When I looked around, I saw that death wasn't quite so imminent as I had thought; I was slowing down. There was a glowing rune on my right hand which I would have sworn wasn't there five seconds ago. By the time I finally got to grips with the fact that perhaps I hadn't been thrown out of the plane to my death, I was sliding down from the sky at a rather sedate pace. I was going to land maybe a hundred yards from the gas station in a big field. Four of the red-eyed people were nearby, but they were moving toward a girl who had already touched down. I could see now that these people had pallid skin and torn clothes, which, along with their shuffling gait, screamed ‘zombies’ in ten foot high neon letters.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I heard a pleasant chime and words popped up in front of
Achievement Unlocked: Down, But Not Out …

I blinked twice and the message vanished. I had no idea what the hell that was about, but I had bigger things to worry about, like the zombie shuffling toward me. I had on black jeans, white sneakers, a leather belt, and a dull gray T-shirt. There was nothing I could use to fight it with, but I wasn’t about to try, given how slowly the zombie was shuffling toward me. (I also briefly wondered who the hell had dressed me, since black jeans weren’t my thing and I never wore a belt.)

I heard a scream of “Get the fuck off me!” from over to my left. I turned to look at the girl I’d seen from above, careful to keep the zombie near me within my eyeline. The girl had somehow gotten surrounded. Her eyes caught mine and she yelled to me, “Help me!” There was something indignant about the way she said it, like she was offended that I wasn’t doing anything.

I hesitated, and when I did, one of the zombies lunged toward her, moving surprisingly fast. She pulled away from it, but I could see that her shoulder was bleeding.

I started running. Not toward her, but away, steering clear of the zombie that was next to me. I had no weapon to speak of and I had only managed an orange belt in middle school karate, which is what they hand out to basically anyone who sticks with it a few weeks. I could hear the girl screaming, and I wasn’t sure whether it was at me or the zombies around her. Then her scream was cut off.

More words appeared in front of me. I looked at them more closely this time, though I didn’t stop running. The words moved with my eyes, like a heads-up display. They were just out of the center of my vision, but stayed in focus no matter what I was doing with my eyes. The words didn’t make me feel too good.

New Affliction: Cowardice!

I made my way toward the gas station, running at a jog and trying to conserve my energy. There were no zombies near it, and no people either. It would have been hard for me to forget that I’d seen someone get murdered in the air. I had blinked away the message calling me a coward, but I could feel my cheeks flushing with anger the more I thought about it. I had seen someone fucking die and I was supposed to just throw myself into a melee to help someone I didn’t even know? That wasn’t cowardice, that was just common sense.

Just before I got to the gas station, another message popped up.

Skill unlocked: Athletics!

I didn’t know what that meant either, not in this context, so I double-blinked it away and looked at the gas station, or at least at what I had thought was a gas station. Up close, it was clear that I was wrong. It had some of the hallmarks of Midwest gas stations, like the cheap cinder block construction and the unadorned metal doors. Where there should have been gas pumps, there were instead black shards of obsidian jutting up from the pavement. If they hadn’t been surrounded by cheap concrete curbs, or so evenly spread apart with metal trash bins between them, I might have thought that they had sprung up from the ground.

There were other incongruous notes, like the stack of clear barrels sitting out front, or the signs that showed advertisements for fresh frongal legs. That word, ‘frongal’ tickled at my mind, but I couldn’t make sense of it.
The road running by the building looked like normal asphalt, with a double yellow line down the middle. There were power lines running alongside the road and cars sitting in the parking lot, though there was something off about the shape of the cars, not just their 1950s style but something having to do with the way the hoods swelled up.

All of it was in a total state of disrepair; the grass I’d been moving through was two feet high and there were weeds surrounding the building where they’d managed to grow up between the cracks in the sidewalk. The building itself was covered in grime and two of the windows were busted out, with shards of glass visible on the ground.

I stood where I was, trying to work things out.

“Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore;” I muttered to myself. That had always been my dad’s thing; he said it whenever we went on a trip and crossed state lines.

My plan had been to get to the gas station and … well, I didn’t know what. Gas stations had people, food, phones, and transportation. If this thing wasn’t a gas station, I had some hope that wherever I was it was a proxy of one, but that didn’t help the fact that it was completely rundown and deserted. My gut was telling me that if I went inside I would find spoiled food or ransacked shelves, with no power to speak of and a phone that was non-functional. My gut also told me that if I went in there, I’d be easily cornered by anyone - or anything - that came after me.

My heartbeat was starting to slow down. The zombies that I had left behind were still shuffling towards me, and there were others out there, further away, which were visible mostly by the red pinpricks of their eyes. I looked at the building that was not-quite-a-gas-station and tried to steel myself. If nothing else, maybe there would be a weapon inside, or something I could use as one. I jogged forward and peered in through the busted out window.

The bad news was that it was almost exactly as I had feared. The shelves were almost entirely bare of supplies and the foul smell coming from the place seemed to say, “Hey, all this food is rotten and gross”. I still held out a little bit of hope that I would be able to find something in a can that hadn’t gone bad, assuming that wherever I was actually had things in cans. This whole world I seemed to have (literally) landed in was just one step to the left of reality as I knew it. About 90% of it could have been straight out of Bumblefuck, Kansas, if everyone had just gotten up and left for a few years, but that last 10%, like the red-eyed zombies and black crystal shards … well, they kept sending a chill up my spine.

When I slipped into the gas station, I saw a guy’s feet sticking out from behind one of the shelves. I almost yelped in surprise, but managed to hold it back. Now, my big fear was that this guy was going to rise as a zombie, or that I would round the corner to find something chowing down on his body, both of which I considered a real possibility. Another part of me thought that this was my best chance to get either a weapon or some answers. I had already checked my own pockets and found them empty. I picked up an empty rack for greeting cards, raised it over my head like a bat, and stalked forward.

Skill unlocked: Improvised Weapons!

The sound that accompanied the appearance of the text did make me yelp in surprise. I’ll admit that I was a little keyed up. Just after that though, I saw the foot twitch.

I’d always been far at the ‘fight’ end of the ‘flight or fight’ spectrum. I don’t say that because I want to sound tough, more to excuse the fact that my dumb ass ran right around the corner and started beating the life out of the corpse on the floor, which all things considered was probably not what I would call smart. I hit him twice on the head before the rack partly broke, then two more times until
it fell apart completely.

**Skill increased: Improvised Weapons lvl 1!**

The corpse was still moving, slowly crawling to its feet. I glimpsed a handle beneath its torso and grabbed for it; to my surprised pleasure I found I was holding what looked to be a rusted machete.

**Skill unlocked: One-handed Weapons!**

I blinked away the message as I brought the machete down on the zombie, just as it twisted its head around to look at me with glowing red eyes and a slack expression. The machete hit him right in the forehead, with my weight entirely behind it. I heard a crack of the skull splitting --

**Critical hit!**

**Skill increased: One-handed Weapons lvl 1!**

-- and the machete wedged itself halfway down his face, embedded between his glowing red eyes.

If there had been any justice in the world, that would have been when he stopped moving. His red eyes would have faded like at the end of Terminator, and he would have slumped back down onto the floor. Instead, he lurched toward me, opening his mouth. The only thing that saved me from getting bit (since my reflexes were essentially non-functional) was the fact that I was still holding the machete and it was still halfway through his head. That was enough to keep him at bay.

When I brought up a foot to kick him backward, a message came up telling me something about unarmed combat, and I put my full weight behind my foot to push him backward while keeping a firm grip on the machete. The machete came out of his head with a wet sucking sound and copious amounts of dark red blood, while the zombie tumbled backward and fell into a pile of garbage. He was back on his feet surprisingly fast though, and stared at me with his glowing red eyes, not seeming to mind the empty air between them.

That was how you killed zombies, wasn’t it? All the comics and movies I’d seen had been clear on that score, destroying the head was the only way to be sure, because they could keep coming if you did anything else. If that wasn’t how this guy was going to die though, what was I supposed to do?

I backed away from him as he shuffled forward. A quick glance out the window showed that more zombies were near me than before, though not so close that I couldn’t make a run for it. I looked back at Split-Face and tightened my grip on my machete. I wasn’t dumb enough to think that I could take all these zombies on without making a mistake, but if it came to it I needed to know what it took to kill one. My heart was beating like crazy in my chest, but I steeled myself.

The crazy messages that kept popping up were like something out of a videogame, that much I had noticed. Maybe that was why I’d been so certain that an axe to the head was going to kill Mr. Split-Face. But that didn’t work. So if I were playing a game, and literally cleaving someone’s head in half didn’t kill him, what would I do? Well, that was a sign that the designer was trying to be a clever little shit by subverting the expectations of the player. Come to think of it, I had done that in a D&D session once, a first level dungeon crawl.

Split-Face was still coming toward me and I was thinking about D&D for some stupid reason. What had I done, when I’d made the zombies’ heads irrelevant? I’d moved their weak point to their heart, that was it. And I’d given them glowing red eyes, just to have some descriptive flair.

Holy shit.
I aimed my machete at Split-Face’s heart, and I was just in time because he lunged at me a split second later, spearing himself straight through the chest. He stopped moving almost instantly and slumped to the floor with my machete still piercing him. That was when his red eyes finally faded to a milky white.

*Skill increased: One-handed Weapons lvl 2!*

*Zombie defeated!*

*Achievement Unlocked: Rambo*

*Level up!*

That last message came with a sensation that I can only describe as orgasmic. Golden light burst forward from me in a wave that kicked up wind and I briefly lifted up off my feet. It was like someone had jabbed a live wire directly into the pleasure center of my brain.

It was over in less than a second and left me trembling afterward.

“Did I just level up?” I asked the empty air. None of what had happened since I had found myself on that plane had much sense, but what I was seeing the outlines of was so weird that it almost started to make a bit of sense.

First, I was in a game, or at least something that resembled a game.

Second, that game had elements that I personally had created. It wasn’t just the red-eyed zombie variants that you had to stab through the heart, I was pretty sure that I remembered those black crystals out front. I’d called them the blackthornes, and they were used to power an ancient necropolis. Frongals I remembered too, they were giant frogs that people raised and slaughtered like pigs.

Naturally that just raised further questions. I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed, and that was when I saw my character sheet.

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PHY
2 POW 1 Unarmed Combat 2 One-handed Weapons 0 Two-handed Weapons 1 Improvised Weapons
2 SPD 0 Thrown Weapons 0 Dual Wield 0 Pistols 0 Bows
3 2 END 0 Rifles 0 Shotguns 0 Parry 0 Athletics
MEN
2 CUN 0 Dodge 0 Engineering 0 Alchemy 0 Smithing
2 KNO 0 Woodworking 0 Horticulture 0 Livestock 0 Music
3 2 WIS 0 Art 0 Blood Magic 0 Bone Magic 0 Gem Magic
SOC
2 CHA 0 Gold Magic 0 Water Magic 0 Steel Magic 0 Velocity Magic
2 INS 0 Revision Magic 0 Skin Magic 0 Essentialism 0 Library Magic
3 2 POI 0 Wards 0 Language 0 Flattery 0 Comedy
0 LUK 0 Romance 0 Intimidation 0 Deception 0 Spirit
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At that moment, 0 Luck sounded about right.
The thirteen ability scores all have hovertext that defines them, available whenever the character sheet is shown. If you are viewing this story in a format that strips the hovertext, here they are for reference:

**PHY**: Physical - Your body and physical existence in the world. Governing stat for all physical skills and the three physical abilities.

**POW**: Power - How much force you can exert. Used to break down doors, bend rebar, or shove someone out of the way.

**SPD**: Speed - How fast you move. Used to juggle knives, race over rooftops, or do cartwheels.

**END**: Endurance - How much you can physically withstand. Used to prevent poisonings, go on forced marches, or tread water.

**MEN**: Mental - Your mind and mental existence in the world. Governing stat for all mental skills and all three mental abilities.

**CUN**: Cunning - How smart you are. Used to figure out puzzles, learn new things, or decide which wire to cut.

**KNO**: Knowledge - How much you know. Used to make connections between disparate concepts, dredge up old memories, or memorize a ten digit number.

**WIS**: Wisdom - How much you can mentally withstand. Used to prevent stress reactions, make decisions without emotion, or meditate.

**SOC**: Social - Your personality and connection to others. Governing stat for all social skills and the three social abilities.

**CHA**: Charm - How much people like you. Used to convince princesses, barter with barmaids, or plead for your life.

**INS**: Insight - How well you can read people. Used to uncover a princeling's secret, call a bishop's bluff, or avoid being stabbed in the back.

**POI**: Poise - How well you withstand other people. Used to withstand interrogation, keep a blank face during a hearing, or keep dry eyes during a wedding.

**LUK**: Luck - How lucky you are. Influences everything, governs nothing.
The character sheet appeared whenever I closed my eyes for three seconds. That’s not me being casual with my language, I sat there and timed it after the first time it came up. It was like the messages I’d been seeing that flashed up into my field of view to inform me of achievements, skill unlocks, and things of that nature. No matter where I turned while my eyes were closed, the whole character sheet stayed in focus. If I moved my eyes to the sides, it switched to mostly blank ‘pages’ with nothing more than empty panes and the occasional title like “Virtues”, “Companions”, “Spells Known”, and things of that nature. I did eventually find one that said “Afflictions” which had “Cowardice” listed, but it didn’t seem like that actually did anything, or at least it didn’t have a tooltip. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no inventory, though there was a pretty pointless page that gave me a physical description of myself. The only information of note there was that I was level 2, which I’d already guessed.

(I won’t belabor my physical description. My friend Greg had once said that I looked like someone had chosen ‘default’ for every option in the character creator, which I’d tried to laugh at but cut kind of deep. I wasn’t handsome, I wasn’t ugly, none of my features were very prominent, my eyes were blue, my hair was brown, average build, average height … After Greg had made his comment at one of our D&D games, my nickname had been ‘default’ for a while, at least until I stopped pretending to find it funny, and even after that my friends would use similar lines to trash talk me, saying that I was “the most generic man alive”, “a white bread with skim milk motherfucker”, or “the human equivalent of vanilla ice cream”. Not that I was any less of an asshole to them.)

I opened my eyes and looked around the gas station, then to the zombies out front. I judged that they were far enough away that I didn’t need to worry about them quite yet and closed my eyes, even though a part of me (probably my WIS) was saying that it was a really bad idea to just stand there not looking out. I did it anyway; I wanted some answers.

The problem, so far as I could see it, was that this wasn’t a system that I was familiar with. You might think that’s hubris talking, as though I thought I’d have been just fine if the character sheet had been for 5th edition D&D, but at least it would have been a start. 5th is harder to munchkin than Pathfinder, but at least I have a handle on the ins and outs of it. That would have been a huge advantage. I’d thought that on first glance, and thought it even more when I discovered that looking at the abbreviations for long enough brought up tooltips. (Tooltips inside my head!)

There were abilities and skills, which were familiar enough, though if there were thirteen abilities in total that seemed like a bit much. There were four rows of ten, for forty skills in total. They apparently needed to be unlocked before they could rank up. Thirty-six skills were still greyed out, their names just on the other side of readable no matter how hard I squinted at them. If this game was like other games, then I could guess at what some of the missing skills would be …

But there were risks there. I opened my eyes and looked out at the zombies, with their glowing red eyes. The zombies were an idea I’d had, one that I’d presented to my friends in a D&D session, and here they were come to life. I’d put myself at risk thinking that ol’ Mr. Split-Face (he of the slick puddle of viscera on the floor) was going to be like any old zombie I’d seen in TV or movies. If I had been a game designer (and I did consider myself one, in a way, since I did most of our DMing) then I would have made a zombie like that, placed right at the game’s start, as a way of giving a warning. “You cannot depend on your knowledge of other games,” Mr. Split-Face seemed to say.

I picked the machete up out of the zombie’s body, dislodging it from his heart. The smell hit me in a wave and made me want to puke, but I just barely managed to force a lump of something back down.
my throat. I went back to the front area of the store, stepping warily and trying not to make a sound. A quick look at the coolers in back showed them in a total state of decay. I didn’t think I would find anything of value in them, nor did I think that my stomach could survive the assault of that stench. Mostly, I wanted to get out of here, except that the fields outside and the long empty road were not exactly as much “out of here” as I might have liked. I tried to remember what the military guy on the plane had said, but came up blank.

I closed my eyes again and looked at what I was starting to think of as my eyelid menu. There was a small, glowing ‘+2’ in the upper right, just outside the character sheet proper. When I looked at it for a second, the character sheet rippled and changed, expanding slightly to allow for some plus and minus signs to surround all the ability numbers. That part was somewhat comfortable to me; I had increased in level, so I had some points to distribute.

I had no idea where to start though. If Rule 1 was “don’t depend on game design to exactly match other games” then Rule 2 was “don’t depend on game design to be good”. I had played enough poorly thought-out games to know that sometimes there were broken abilities and dump stats, but just knowing that systems were sometimes flawed wasn’t enough to know where those flaws were. All I could do was stare at the character sheet and make some guesses.

A third of the abilities were social; those I dismissed out of hand, since the zombies were my main concern at the moment. A third were mental; those I reluctantly decided against, since they were usually good for doing magic, which I hadn’t unlocked, and if the “linear fighters, quadratic wizards” rule applied then I was liable to get my ass handed to me before I could become powerful. That left everything under PHY. Curiously, I could increase either PHY or the three abilities it was tied to, POW, SPD, and END. The tooltips gave me no indication of what the underlying mathematical reality was.

When I tried to put a point in PHY, I saw them both vanish, moving it up by one, which cascaded to the other three abilities and increased those by one as well. Ah. That seemed like a pretty good deal to me; I was basically getting double the number of points, or maybe only half again if PHY didn’t actually do anything on its own. If the game design were sensible, then this was probably a generalist/specialist trade-off, but in order to meet the immediate (and largely unknown) problems I was facing, a generalist approach was probably right.

When I opened my eyes, the zombies had gotten worryingly close. I gripped my machete and stepped out of the gas station’s front door. The zombies were slow, slow enough that I could out-walk them, but the trick was that they would just keep walking, and trying to kill them wasn’t without its risks, especially if they could infect a person with a scratch or bite.

(If I was actually trapped in a game, then basic game design dictated that the game not kill players over something that they didn’t know and couldn’t find out. Of course, Rule 2 was that I couldn’t depend on good game design, and there were some genres or schools of thought where it would be acceptable, like in Call of Cthulhu where deadly wasting sickness was par for the course. Still, if it had been me, I would have had the source of the zombies be something like a dread necromancer putting all his effort into sustaining this undead militia, or some intriguing bit of technobabble like a necrotic field effect.)

There were about thirty of them in all. The closest was twenty feet away. I walked up slowly, cautiously with my machete held in front of me. I remembered reading that stabbing things in the heart was surprisingly difficult, because you had to have your blade dodge both the sternum and the ribs. Worse, machetes were made for getting a lot of power behind a swing. Trying to pierce something with one was like trying to make a hole with a meat cleaver. The basic purpose of a machete was cutting down jungle undergrowth or sugar cane, not poking holes in hearts.
I didn’t mention it before, but can I say how utter bullshit it is that I only had a 2 in KNO? I wasn’t terribly athletic, I wasn’t great in social situations, and I wouldn’t have even called myself that smart, but dammit, I had drunk knowledge from Wikipedia like I was dying of thirst and I’d read a mountain of books.)

I lined up my strike and swung for the zombie’s neck. She lurched forward right as I did make my attack, and I ended up hitting her in the shoulder instead. I had to push her away from me in order to prevent her from getting her hands on me, and when I did my fingers touched surprisingly warm flesh. It was like pressing my hand against a feverish forehead. I hacked at the zombie again, this time striking her in the collar bone. The crack of bone made me wince, but I reared back for another swing. My arm briefly blocked my view for just long enough that the zombie had time to move. I ducked out of the way of her hand, then backed up to give myself some room.

**Skill Unlocked: Dodge!**

Well, I couldn’t say that one was too much of a surprise. I swung at the zombie again, hitting her in the temple this time, and one of her red eyes flickered out like a light. I wasn’t sure quite what that meant; when I had made my own version of these zombies, their eyes were nothing special and the glowing effect was purely cosmetic.

The other zombies were getting closer to us, so I attacked again, resolving to turn tail and run if this didn’t do anything. My machete came down from up high in a double-handed overhead swing with all my power behind it and hit right at the place where I had broken her collar bone. There were two distinct wet cracks as the machete cut its way through ribs and then the light in her other eye went out. I managed to hold onto my machete as she slumped to the ground.

**Skill increased: One-handed Weapons lvl 3!**

**Zombie defeated!**

I had hoped to kill a few more before leaving, mostly to level up, but they were clustered too closely together now, and I wanted to escape before things got dicey. I moved away from the center mass of the crowd and slipped through them without any problem, then got on the road and started walking at a brisk pace.

The thing was, I didn’t actually know whether the stats I could see written on my eyelids actually *did* anything. When I’d swung the machete I hadn’t felt any better at it at level two than level zero, and there was no clear relationship between that number and the outcome, at least not to me (with the heady rush of leveling up being the one exception). That meant that staying in one place and trying to kill relatively easily killed things was still too much of a gamble, at least until I learned more.

I’d had a choice when I’d gotten to the road, and I had decided to go toward the distant buildings rather than the flat, seemingly endless plains. It was overcast, so I couldn’t see the sun, and without that I had no idea which direction I was going. I had never really had much experience outdoors. Maybe if I had, I would have been able to find directions without the sun to guide me. There was something having to do with moss, I remembered, but I couldn’t recall what it was. It wasn’t really like directions would help anyway, not when I had no idea what kind of world this was.

I tried to keep a steady pace to my walking, fast enough that I would be able to get somewhere, but slow enough that I wouldn’t get tired. Oh, and the zombies were still following me, as I could see by the veritable field of red eyes behind me. They were slow, but if they kept on me I was going to have to find somewhere to hole up in order to sleep. They didn’t seem to be very strong, though I’d thought I’d seen a few bursts of speed and power from them, like when Split-Face had stood up in the gas station or when they did their lunges. A door might hold them back, but for long enough that
I would be able to sleep? I’d need an exit strategy on top of that. The military guy had said to get to the outpost, which seemed like a reasonable goal (and the start of a quest) but he hadn’t said what direction it was in or how far away. Either way, I didn’t think I would be able to get there before I needed sleep, so finding a safe place to hole up was imperative.

**Skill increased: Athletics lvl 1!**

Right then, brisk walking apparently counted as athleticism, which was good to know. I had been waiting for that one, and I *did* notice a change this time. My steps became a little more sure, a little more swift, and I straightened my posture slightly. I wondered how much of that, if any, was psychological. Either way, it gave me some more information about the game system, which was welcome.

I didn’t have too much time to ruminate on that though, because I had come close enough to the crop of buildings to get a look at them. It looked like the kind of tiny town that you could find all over the Midwest in general and Kansas in specific, a place that existed mostly because there was a limit to how far farmers were willing to drive for groceries, gas, and a haircut. Three giant grain elevators dominated the town, but again there was a note of the exotic, because each had a large antenna rising up from its side, marked with floating, rotating sigils that were barely visible by the unearthly blue light they cast.

It was with a start that I saw people moving across the main road. They were running, a short-haired blonde girl in the lead and two guys with pink mohawks chasing after her. Or at least, that’s what I thought at first, until I saw the thing following them. It was a blackened creature of corpses, with eyes as large as headlights and a body so big it would have a hard time hiding behind a gas station. It was moving far faster than the zombies had moved, slamming down its fists and dragging itself to make up for a back leg that was crooked and broken.

I was between a rock and a hard place, with the enormous necrotic monster ahead of me and the horde behind me. I didn’t think either was within my abilities, but at least if I moved on ahead there were buildings that I could hide in and maybe try to loot while the big guy was distracted.

**Affliction: Cowardice lvl 2! (WIS -1, POI -1)**

“How is that cowardice?” I asked, but I soon realized the answer. I’d gotten ‘Cowardice’ when I had run away from the girl getting attacked by four zombies, right when I’d landed. Here I had been presented with another girl running from both the scary guys with mohawks and a monster, and I hadn’t even spared a thought to running to her rescue. “That’s not cowardice, that’s selfishness, if anything,” I said to the air. There was no response, not that I had expected one.

I began jogging toward the town. The nearest building looked like some kind of mechanics shop; there was a large folding door by the road and while the vehicles in the parking lot were rusted out, some of them also had doors off the hinges and open hoods in a way that suggested some of the disrepair predated whatever it was that had happened here. The biggest point in its favor was that it was the closest place to hide from the Big Ol’ Corpse-Legs, which had disappeared out of my sight.

There were no zombies in sight, and a quick peek through the small window in the side door showed nothing waiting for me. With rusty machete in hand, I opened it slowly and tried my best to emulate what the SWAT teams I’d seen on TV did, sweeping the room from side to side (a technique that probably makes more sense when you have a shotgun or rifle). The room that I’d come into was some kind of waiting area, the kind that in the Midwest had uncomfortable chairs, stale coffee, and a few out-of-date magazines, all of which mingled with the smell of car guts and wheel skins to create a very specific ambiance. Here it was almost the same, but the coffee pot was replaced by a tea kettle
sitting on top of a handful of rocks (though the little cups of creamer and packets of sugar were about what I was used to).

The smell was atrocious, probably because of the body. Sitting in one of those uncomfortable chairs was the corpse of one of the guys with pink mohawks. I would have been on guard, waiting for him to rise from the dead, but he had two very precisely placed dime-sized holes in him, one in the center of his forehead and the other right in the center of his chest. He was practically drenched in blood from the chest down.

I think it was only my experience hunting deer and cleaning the kills that got me through that without throwing up. It brought back the same queasy feeling I’d had one summer when I’d shot a buck in the gut and had to chase it all over the hills as it bled out, but I’d gotten through that, and I would get through this too.

I moved further into the building by the light of dirt-clouded windows, looking for anything useful, but mostly trying to make out whether the shapes I was seeing had limbs or heads, and whether the reflections of light that I saw were buttons or eyes. I kept my footsteps as quiet as possible, but it all sounded impossibly loud to me --

*Skill unlocked: Deception!*

The chime that came with the message caused me to tense up for a moment as my heart hammered in my chest. It had been some time since I had gotten one of those messages, enough that I had almost forgotten. I pushed the questions it raised out of my head. (Did this system use the same skill for both stealth and lying to people? What stat governed Deception, SPD or CHA? What condition had caused the unlock to trigger?) The next door, which based on my reading of the building would lead into the shop itself. I took a deep breath, slowly lowered the door handle, and pushed the door open with my foot just a crack to look inside.

Standing by a workbench, among various car parts, tools, and cans of unidentified fluids, was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

I’m not really sure what protocol is here, in terms of prose. I mean, I don’t want to sound like a creep, so maybe I should stay as generic as possible and tell you about her dark red hair pulled back in a braid, the glacial blue of her eyes, how starkly alert she looked as she peered over the parts in front of her, or her grease-smeared clothes. Save for her eyes, I wasn’t really focused on any of that. My mind was consumed by tracing her curves, the swell of her tits in her blood-stained t-shirt, the fullness of her lips and the delicate way she had them parted -- and yeah, it was pretty fucked up that the splatter of blood on her shirt wasn’t worth rating much of a mention. I was consumed with staring at her and thinking how gorgeous she was, until I noticed that she was having a powerful effect on me, at which point different parts of my mind were given over to marveling at the sensation of being so attracted to a girl, and others were still focused on her.

Imagine that someone spent a few years studying your likes and dislikes, running through video of your every private moment, somehow surreptitiously hooking up EKGs to measure your physiological responses without you knowing. Then imagine that they sat down with that data and the best photo manipulation artists in the world and made the absolute perfect picture to cause your heart rate to spike, a jolt to run up your spine, butterflies in your stomach, and a cold sweat on your palms. Then imagine that they did this again, over and over in slight variations, until they had a full 4K 60fps 3D movie to show you. That was what it was like watching her.

(And if that analogy sounds a little bit frightening to you, then I think it did its job, because there was a part of me that was afraid of how pretty she was, a part that was angry that someone could provoke such a reaction from me, and a small, mostly unexamined part that was instantly distrustful of
someone that could hijack my brain in the way she did.)

She was rooting around in the parts on the bench, occasionally turning one over. She picked up a particular one, a flat little rectangle with what appeared to be a handle. With a smooth motion she held it at arm’s length and swept it to the side until a small hole in the thing was pointed at me. That small hole was roughly the size of the ones in the dead guy out in the reception room, and even in the state I was in, I was able to peg the thing she was holding as a mostly flat, mostly vertical gun.

“Don’t move,” she said.

“Buh,” I said. I’d wanted to say ‘but’, to start some sentence, but it caught in my throat.

**Skill unlocked: Romance!**

(Har har game, har har.)

“Name,” she said.

Eventually some spinning gears in my mind slipped into a position to do some work, and I realized that she was asking me my name. “Joon,” I said.

“Jon?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No, Joon,” I said. “Short for Juniper.”

She was staring at me with her teeth set. There was a tension to the way she held herself, like a bow ready to let an arrow loose.

“Background?” she asked.

“Uh,” I said slowly, trying to play for time. I had a sneaking suspicion that this was exactly the kind of thing that POI was used for, and mine was at a whopping one point thanks to the penalty I’d taken.

“Background,” she said with a curl of her lips.

“Student,” I said. I had no idea what she wanted from me; maybe saying that my dad flew helicopters and my mom worked in a box factory would have been more helpful.

She looked me up and down, or at least as much as she could given that I was still partially obscured by the door. “Which athenaeum?” she asked.

“I, uh, I don’t know what that is,” I said. It was true when I said it, but right after a memory sparked and I recalled the term; it was a fancy term for a place of literacy and learning, taken from the name of the Greek god Athena. I’d used it in a D&D campaign before, when the party had been tracking a goblin ranger through the halls of the abandoned Athenaeum of Quills and Blood.

“Why did they put you on the plane?” she asked. I could tell that my athenaeum answer hadn’t done me any favors. Her gun was still pointed at me, which only slightly dampened my attraction.

What had the guy on the plane said? **Dissidents.** “I was caught distributing pamphlets,” I said, hoping against hope that she wouldn’t press me on it.

**Skill increased: Deception lvl 1!**

I couldn’t tell whether she believed me or not, but she lowered her gun slightly so it was pointing at
my stomach instead of my chest. “Step out from behind the door,” she said. I did so, lifting my hands above my head and putting my machete on full display so she could see that I didn’t mean to be a threat. “Drop the machete,” she said. I did as she asked.

“The Fuchsia Coterie came down with us,” she said. “They have a mission in the Risen Lands, and part of that mission is putting down anyone who sees them. Ordinarily, one in one hundred survive the journey to the outpost, but the Color Riot will ensure that you don’t even have that hope … not unless we work together.”

Well, that was a pretty shockingly straightforward hook.

“I’m in,” I said. “What needs doing?”

**Quest Accepted: Seven Bells for Seven Hells!**
“That is an XC-class soulcycle,” said the most beautiful girl in the world. The thing she was pointing at sat off to the side of the auto shop floor. It looked more or less like a motorcycle, but it had metal wheels instead of rubber and where a gas tank would normally go there was a thick glass barrel which stood completely empty. “Comfort has been picked clean and I think that’s our best chance of getting workable transportation. I can’t do it without you.”

“Two questions,” I said. “First, you haven’t given me a name.”

“That’s not a question,” she replied. “But if you’re Juniper, you can call me Cypress.”

“Second, who or what is Comfort?” I asked.

“Comfort is this town’s name, and from what I saw while I was falling, it’s the only place of note for a dozen miles,” she replied with an arched eyebrow. “You missed the giant sign?”

“I guess I was distracted by all the zombies,” I replied.

**Skill unlocked: Comedy!**

But apparently the humor was lost on her, because she lifted her gun back up and pointed it right at my chest.

“What did you say?” she hissed.

I swallowed hard. “We, uh, don’t say the z-word?”

She slowly lowered her gun again as her pale blue eyes searched my face. “I didn’t believe you, when you said that you were a dissident. I know that things have gotten bad, especially for the poor, but … there are still traditions worth keeping. There are still rules worth following.” Her eyes left mine as her thoughts went elsewhere.

“Uh,” I said. “Okay. I really didn’t mean anything by it. I didn’t know that calling them z-um thing like that would be a big deal.”

“That’s the whole problem,” she spat. “It’s throwing the baby out with the bathwater, assuming that there aren’t reasons.”

“No, I mean, I’m not from around here,” I said. “I’m from Bumblefuck, Kansas. The first thing I saw of this world was the inside of the plane just before we dropped. I don’t know if I was magically transported here or what, but I’m not even from this world.”

**Achievement Unlocked: Full Disclosure**

Cypress looked me up and down again, which gave me more time to think about how pretty she was, not that I needed it. I was starting to get annoyed with myself, but that didn’t really stop me.

“I see,” she finally said. “You’ve been dream-skewered.”

“Uh … what?” I asked.

“It’s okay,” she said. “We can still make it out of this and I can get you the help that you need.” She spoke slowly, as if to a child.
“I’m not dream-skewered,” I replied. “I’m from a place called Earth.”

Cypress nodded. “I know it,” she said. “It has seven continents, two large oceans, and it’s a spinning globe with ice at the top or bottom. Right?”

I nodded, slowly.

“That’s the dream that skewers,” she said. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “All thoughts and memories wiped away in an instant, replaced by the dream of Earth and a different life there. It’s a fate only slightly better than death.” She shook her head. “You can still help. We still need the soulcycle up and running so we can escape the Coterie. It’s just going to make things a little bit more difficult.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m sorry, I need to … “ I paused and tried to gather my thoughts. “I need more. How many dream-skewered are there? Do they all have delusions of being the one to have thought up this place? Do they all see the game overlay? Do they level up like me?”

She bit her lip. There was something new behind her pale blue eyes, a softer emotion. “There have been perhaps a thousand of the dream-skewered,” she said. “They are cared for and studied at the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny. To my knowledge, their only delusions are of their lives lived on Earth. You think that you created Aerb?”

Aerb. That was exactly the sort of laziness that I would have shown if a player had asked me the name of the world and I hadn’t had one available. “Parts of this world look similar to ideas that I had come up with back on Earth,” I said. I didn’t know the full scope yet, but there were about four or five points of similarity so far, and I had only seen a very small fraction of the world. Please, please don’t have Fel Seed.

Cypress frowned. It was a pretty frown. “How narcissistic,” she said. “Nothing against you, obviously, I’m just thinking about it in the context of the delusion. The interesting thing about the dream-skewered is that their records of Earth match up, even if they haven’t had communication with each other. But for you to work elements of this world into your delusion … if, when we get out of here, you’ll have to consult with the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny.”

**Quest Accepted: Straddling Worlds!**

I’d done nothing of the sort, but I was starting to realize that accuracy of language was not the game layer’s strong suit.

“What about the game overlay?” I asked. She gave me a questioning look. “There are words that appear over my field of view,” I said.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” she said. She looked toward the motorcycle - the soulcycle, I guess she’d called it. “Whatever is wrong with you … it has to wait. We’re safe here, I think, so long as the Coterie doesn’t attack en masse, but that’s only a matter of time. We need damned souls to fuel the soulcycle.” She walked over to the work bench. I noted that she still held her gun in one delicate hand. She picked up a small jar with thick glass walls, put a long spike in it, then handed it to me. Our fingers touched briefly.

“She said she’d called it. “Whatever is wrong with you … it has to wait. We’re safe here, I think, so long as the Coterie doesn’t attack en masse, but that’s only a matter of time. We need damned souls to fuel the soulcycle.” She walked over to the work bench. I noted that she still held her gun in one delicate hand. She picked up a small jar with thick glass walls, put a long spike in it, then handed it to me. Our fingers touched briefly.

“Have you ever used one of -- no, sorry, your memories are gone, of course you wouldn’t remember if you had. Stab the spike into the heart or head of a corpse, it’s spiraled to draw the soul out. If you see someone die, you have thirty minutes to collect before the soul leaves the body. If their heart is still intact, you have maybe three minutes until they rise as one of the undead, but the soul is still retrievable so long as they’re put down before the half hour is up.” She went back to the bench and
picked up a glass stopper. “Keep the jar sealed when there are souls within it, they’ll dissipate otherwise. We’ll need seven, I think, to get where we’re going.”

*Seven Bells for Seven Hells.* That was the first thing that really succeeded in affecting my impression of Cypress. She had killed the guy in the waiting room, I was almost certain of that, but that didn’t really bother me. She had pointed a gun at, variously, my face, throat, groin, stomach, and chest, but a defensive posture was something to be admired in a place like this. Destroying souls in order to fuel a motorcycle that would get us out of here … well, that was pretty metal, but it left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Wait, is there an afterlife?” I asked.

Cypress’ lips formed a thin line as she looked at me. “I was serious when I said that we don’t have much time, Joon.” The sound of my name leaving her lips sent a shiver down my spine.

“Alright,” I said. “You want me to go out and scavenge. I can do that.” I looked at her gun, which she was still holding loosely by her side. “I would probably fare better if I didn’t have to go into melee.”

To my surprise, Cypress handed me her pistol. My surprise must have been evident on my face, because she gestured to the worktable. “I’ll build another,” she said.

*Skill unlocked: Pistols!*

I looked down at the gun in my hand. The boxy part had roughly the proportions of a deck of playing cards, but slightly bigger and set on edge. A rubber grip with a trigger was attached to it; it wasn’t a normal trigger you’d pull with your finger, but instead the kind of thing you’d find on a spray bottle, where the trigger extended down the length of the handle and was squeezed with all the fingers of the hand. I looked at the hole in the boxy part, but couldn’t see inside. There was no obvious mechanism for feeding ammo into it.

I had a bunch of questions for Cypress, but I worried that she would think they were dumb. Questions like, how the fuck did you build a gun in the hour or so we’d been here? Or, what does this gun even shoot? Or, isn’t this gun going to be difficult to shoot given that you have to squeeze your entire hand? And, given that, how did you manage to shoot a guy in the center of his head with this thing? She knew that I knew nothing about this world though, and had offered me the gun anyway, without deeper explanations, so I figured asking would just get her even more exasperated with me and wasn’t likely to get answers.

“Seven souls,” I said. “I’ll be back when I have them.”

*Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 0!*

I went out the way I had come, back through the dark hallway and into the reception area. The corpse was still sitting there, smelling up the place. I took a moment to take stock of my situation.

**Theories as to What the Frick is Going On**

1. **Dream theory:** I’m either dreaming, in a coma, hallucinating, or having a mental break. This doesn’t feel like a dream, and I can’t really do anything about it if this theory is true, so … noted but discarded.

2. **Simulation theory:** I’m playing a game of some kind, with hyper-realistic visuals, full haptics, smells and tastes, in a world custom-made from elements of my own imagination. That
explains the things that have been coming on-screen, plus the near-orgasmic level up, plus how someone as hot as Cypress (Amaryllis?) could possibly exist. It does not, however, bridge the gap between fifth period English class and sitting on the plane … in what was in retrospect, obviously a cutscene. Plus all the tech needed to do an in-depth, personalized simulation like this would basically require the Singularity to have happened.

3. **Actuality theory:** This place exists, and I got here through hitherto unknown magic or technology, which slammed me into a body that was identical to my own (as confirmed by a check of the freckles on my arm). That didn’t explain the game overlay in the slightest.

4. **Dream-skewer theory:** I was actually a guy from Aerb who was suffering from delusions that he was from a place called Earth, complete with memories of my pet hamster Mildew, the phone number of a Chinese takeout place in Bumblefuck, Kansas called the Great Wall, the time my grandmother had chastised me for using the salad fork during dinner, hundreds of little tiny things like that, along with all the big ones. Cypress had said that happened before, so maybe, but it didn’t explain the game overlay either.

Of course, the truth could be a mixing and matching of some of those theories. Anyway, the real question wasn’t so much what I believed to be true, but how I would change what I was doing on the basis of the possibilities. I considered the chance of Aerb being a dream fairly high, but that wasn’t particularly actionable. None of it was, frankly. If it was a game, the rules were opaque, and whether I was from Earth or Aerb didn’t immediately matter except in the metaphysical sense. It had been awhile since I’d looked at Maslow’s hierarchy, but I was fairly certain that metaphysics was fairly high up it, above more basic things like “not getting killed by zombies”.

Part of taking stock meant closing my eyes and looking at my character sheet. It had filled out a little bit more as I had unlocked more skills, but I was a little bit worried about the negatives to WIS and POI, which left both of them at a single point each. The ‘Cowardice’ thing seemed progressive, which meant that if I got hit with it again, I risked falling to zero on both of them. In various editions of D&D, hitting zero in any stat was special; you didn’t just suck at that thing, you became paralyzed, fell into a coma, or died depending on which one it was. Now, I didn’t know whether that would be the case here, but given that death was on the line I couldn’t risk it, especially since something like paralysis or coma would effectively be death.

But I’d gotten the two levels of ‘Cowardice’ affliction for what I thought were self-motivated but completely rational decisions. I’d been scared when I’d seen that girl surrounded by zombies (and the memory of her bones cracking made me wince) but I didn’t think that was what had motivated me to run. The problem was, if I was going to get punished by the game layer for not running in to be a big damned hero, then maybe the calculus slid the other way. If you asked me, running into a fight you didn’t think you could win solely because you were worried you would be punished with death didn’t exactly scream courageous.

I was also somewhat chagrined that offering to help Cypress by charging into danger wasn’t considered heroic enough to lose at least a level of ‘Cowardice’, but I figured I’d have more of a right to gripe when I had actually done something, instead of just sitting in the waiting room with a corpse. Speaking of which …

I went up to the body. Pink mohawk aside, he was dressed down, with light brown pants made of some kind of canvas and a plain, unadorned t-shirt. I took the small glass jar from out of my pocket (which it sat awkwardly in, like carrying around a can of pop), pulled the spike out from it, and approached slowly. I wasn’t quite sure how long he had been dead, but the blood hadn’t coagulated yet, which made me hopeful. I also wasn’t sure on the procedure, but I stuck the spike in his chest hole, trying to keep my fingers from touching him while I pushed it in. The head of the spike was almost touching his blood-soaked shirt when it began glowing a soft, pale white. I watched it, not knowing what would happen. Within the space of half a second, a ball of light had formed, which
unceremoniously dropped down. I managed to catch it in the glass jar before it could land on the corpse’s bloody lap.

**Quest Progress: Seven Bells for Seven Hells, 1/7**

The instant feedback was welcome. I pulled the now-dormant nail out of the corpse, wiped it off on a part of his shirt that was relatively untouched, stuck the spike in the jar, sealed it up, and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I had apparently just captured someone’s soul.

I went to the door, gun in hand and machete dangling from my side. The coast looked clear, but in a videogame this would have been a perfect place for a jump scare. I pushed the door open with my foot and went out into the oppressively gray sky overhead.

This, then, was the town of Comfort. I’d been paying more attention to the enormous monster than to the buildings, and after it was out of sight I was focused on the auto shop. Now that I was paying more attention, I saw something I’d missed: half the buildings were made of cobblestone, with thatched roofs. That fact hadn’t even registered with me. I wasn’t sure whether I had mistaken them for something else or simply not processed them, but it was another reminder that this wasn’t Kansas.

Now then, in a videogame, usually when some NPC gives the player what’s clearly a main story quest, the first thing any right-thinking player does is ignore it completely. Videogames basically trained gamers for it; no matter how many mouth noises the NPC made about the desperate urgency of the task, we knew that it wasn’t *really* urgent, not unless there was a countdown timer on the screen, and maybe not even then. It was considered poor game design to punish people for taking the time to see the sights and explore the world.

In tabletop RPGs, it sort of depended on what kind of DM you had. Myself, I wasn’t afraid to bring down the hammer hard if the players didn’t react to the word ‘urgent’ with actual urgency. To my way of thinking, if your words of warning meant nothing, then you’d shot suspension of disbelief in the foot. Of course, in a tabletop game it was usually easy enough to route to a different plot point if the village burned down, and I understood that game designers didn’t exactly have the luxury of rewriting the plot around every failure, but that was part of what I felt made tabletop games so much better.

So yes, there was a part of me that was screaming that the appropriate reaction to being in a game was to run back to the area with zombies and level grind until I was a badass so I could steamroll through the town of Comfort. But if this place was on some level influenced or inspired by my thoughts and ideas, then didn’t it become more likely that the game layer would agree with my opinions?

I was stuck by the door awhile, thinking about this instead of moving, paralyzed not by a precipitous drop in WIS, but by my own indecision and over-thinking. Who knows, maybe I might have sat there forever if two guys with pink hair hadn’t crept around the corner.

They started moving almost as soon as I spotted them, both keeping low to the ground and behind whatever cover they could find. I aimed my pistol at them, holding it with both hands. I wished that I had spent some time in the auto shop practicing instead of thinking myself dizzy or fawning over Cypress. One had a length of pipe, while the other, for whatever reason, was carrying a sword. I took aim at the one with the pipe as he scurried between cars -- my first time ever aiming a real gun at another person -- and squeezed the trigger.

The pistol made a little *thwip* sound, but there was no flash of light like I had expected and the recoil was like being pushed with a feather. At first I thought something had gone wrong with it, but the guy I had aimed at stumbled slightly and when he got behind a car I noticed blood where he’d been.
“Void tunneler!” he called out. “Fuck!”

Naturally, the words meant nothing to me. I carefully watched the cars for movement, which was how I just barely had time to duck out of the way of a brick thrown straight at my head.

**Skill increased: Dodge lvl 1!**

The guy with the sword wasted no time at all in jumping over the hood of the car he’d been hiding behind and trying to rush me. It might have worked if the brick had hit me, but I was able to recover quickly enough to point the gun at him and squeeze the trigger. Another little *thwip* and blood started pouring from his chest, but while he was staggered, he was still coming toward me. I squeezed the trigger a second time, but the pistol beeped at me.

Blood had quickly soaked sword-guy’s shirt, and I could practically see his heartbeat by the way the bloodstain was spreading in pulses. He started running toward me, heedless of his wound, and I backed up toward the auto shop, gun still held in front of me. I waited as long as I could, until he was less than five feet away from me, then shot him in the chest.

**Skill increased: Pistols lvl 1!**

**Fuchsia Coterie minion defeated!**

He toppled to the ground, dropping his sword and giving out a gurgling moan. I stepped forward and kicked the sword away from him, then turned and looked for his friend just in time to see the pipe coming down on my arm. I heard a snap of bone right when it happened (New Affliction: Broken Bone) and would have dropped the gun if I hadn’t been holding onto it with both hands. His follow-up hit me in the shoulder, but it wasn’t the shoulder holding the gun, and I angled the gun under my arm to shoot him point blank in the stomach.

He howled in pain, which gave me enough time to scramble back away from him. He tried charging me, the same as his friend had, but I was ready for it and kicked him square in the junk. I got a notification about unarmed combat, he collapsed on his side, and a squeeze of the pistol’s long trigger caused another *thwip* that made a hole just above his ear.

**Skill increased: Pistols lvl 2!**

**Fuchsia Coterie minion defeated!**

**Level up!**

The golden light came again, with a wind that blew errant bits of newspaper away from me, and I got that same glorious hit of ecstasy, like the opposite of getting hit in the face with a frying pan. It lifted me up, just a few inches, and when I came down the afterwash of it momentarily made me forget that my arm was broken.

At least, that was what I thought until I tried moving my arm. It felt perfectly fine, and delicate probing soon turned into rough probing as I tried to feel at where the break had happened. I closed my eyes and three seconds later was looking at my character sheet, moving my eyes to the side to switch screens until I got to the one labeled “Afflictions”. ‘Cowardice’ was still there, but ‘Broken Limb’ was nowhere to be seen.

Apparently all it took for me to heal from a broken bone was leveling up. I opened my eyes back up and breathed a sigh of relief. When I had been in 6th grade I had broken my arm doing a stupid BMX trick and spent eight weeks in a cast, which had made the summer one of the most boring in
my life. Out here, I figured that a broken arm was basically a death sentence. If I hadn’t leveled up … well, it didn’t do to think about.

I looked down at the two bodies, then at the gun in my hand. It had been a clear case of self defense, but that didn’t really take the sting of guilt and horror out of it. I had no idea what the Fuchsia Coterie’s deal was, but even if they had meant to kill me I didn’t think that meant they deserved outright death. Their lifeless eyes were hard for me to look at, so I tried to focus on something else, which brought me to the glass jar still awkwardly sitting in my pocket. Right. I had a job to do.

The one with the pipe I had shot in the head, so I tended to him first. The spike was just slightly smaller than the hole my pistol made, so it was quick work to slip it in, and I was ready this time, so the soul fell into the jar without incident.

**Quest Progress: Seven Bells for Seven Hells, 2/7**

The guy who had been coming at me with a sword (a sword!) I had hit in the chest, and I wagered based on the angle that there was a good chance I had hit him in the heart. I stuck the spike, still red with the other one’s blood, straight into the wound and waited for a bit. Nothing immediately happened, so I grabbed my pistol, aimed it right at his forehead --

His eyes snapped open, both of them glowing with a red light. I pulled the trigger almost immediately, which opened up a dime-sized hole in his head, but I realized almost immediately afterward that these zombies didn’t care about their heads at all. I scrambled away from him and drew my machete, then realized what I was standing next to, dropped the machete, and picked up the sword instead. As soon as the zombie got to his feet I was on him, stabbing forward through his chest right next to the hole I’d put in him. His eyes winked out and he fell down, again. I watched him for a moment, breathing heavily. After a brief second to think, I picked my gun back up, went over to the one with the pipe, shot him right in the heart, then went back to collect sword guy’s soul, praying that it would still be in there after he’d turned zombie.

**Quest Progress: Seven Bells for Seven Hells, 3/7**

*Halfway done,* I thought to myself, and even though that wasn’t actually true, it made me feel better to say it.
Reaver

Look, you probably want to hear more about the sexy motorcycle mechanic or the punk gangs or the giant zombie creatures, but before we go too much further, I need to tell you about my D&D group. I know, I know, but so much of Aerb is a reflection of my scribblings while DMing, so there is a point to this. I’ll try my best to keep it to what’s important.

To start with, “D&D group” is probably a misnomer, because we played a lot more games than just D&D, and the group had a Ship of Theseus thing going on where people came and went until Arthur and I were the only constants, and then eventually it was just me. The only real point of continuity was the Collection. The Collection actually predated the group; when Arthur’s brother had gone off to college, he’d left Arthur with two dozen source books for various tabletop RPG systems, though about half of them were for D&D. We’d added to the Collection over time, keeping our names in the books and sometimes taking them home with us, but for the most part the Collection stayed at Arthur’s house, taking up first one, then two sagging bookshelves in his downstairs den.

Arthur was the backbone of our group. Even when he wasn’t playing a leader, he would take point and ensure that the plot kept moving forward. He was a total geek, but he knew that he was a geek, and didn’t seem to care what anyone else thought about him. When we played, he was usually the only one to put on a voice and stay in character. I was the one making the worlds, but Arthur was the one that really made them come to life, because he had this ability to just instantly invest himself in whatever was presented to him.

More than that, he could read me really well. It was my habit to get an idea in my head and start up a campaign with reckless enthusiasm, then get bored of it after a few weeks and keep chugging on without really feeling that spark of inspiration anymore. Arthur was always the one to bail me out, to say “How about we try something new next week?” without ever calling attention to the fact that I had lost the thread. The first few times he did it, I just breathed a sigh of relief, not noticing that he had been acting in my interest. He was a great guy, super busy with basically every non-athletic activity that our school offered (academic decathlon, mathletes, mock trial, yearbook, etc.), but always there for me despite that.

In the summer of our junior year, Arthur was taking his station wagon through an uncontrolled intersection when he got T-boned by a truck going twenty miles over the speed limit. He spent eleven days in a coma, then died from complications.

There were times, months later, when I would be eating lunch in the school cafeteria and turn to tell him something, only to realize my brain had been running on auto-pilot and he wasn’t there, and would never be there, and whatever dumb thing I had wanted to tell him was just going to get added to the stack of things that he was never going to experience. I’d used to think when people talked about death leaving a hole, they were talking about roles and responsibilities, but after Arthur died I started seeing it in a different light. It was more that he had become a part of me, a person so important to my life that my interactions with him were on the level of instinct. With his death, a long stretch of wiring in my brain became faulty.

Anyway. The Collection moved to my house. His parents offered to let us keep using their den, but my mom told me that it wouldn’t be good for them to have their dead son’s friends coming over twice a week (and yes, those were pretty much her exact words). We kept on playing, though it obviously wasn’t the same. Arthur had been the group’s de facto leader, but now that duty fell on my shoulders, and not only was I the one making things up and running the game, I wasn’t in the best mental state.
I’m telling you this because Aerb had features that were stolen from my D&D games, and all the stuff I was most scared of came from the post-Arthur era. Fel Seed, Nightsmoke, the borogoves, the mimsies … I sent the party into the thresher because I was angry at the world. It was more than just making the encounters too hard and the world unfair, it was beyond the fact that everything I made was grimdark, it was the hopeless despair that infused everything. I introduced villains whose evil couldn’t be undone, where their murder would just be a matter of futile revenge and the world would never be set right.

And now, I was worried I was going to have to face them.

Having collected the souls from the men I had killed, I stopped to take another look at my character sheet. Again there were two points to spend as I pleased. I looked through the other pages but saw nothing, except that the “Companions” page listed “Amaryllis” with a zero next to it and a box below that was greyed out. At least that was a testable prediction, and if it turned out to be her name, then that meant there would probably be a few instances where the game would give me hints or information ahead of time.

It was tempting to put the points into WIS and POI, given that both of them were sitting at one point each and I didn’t know what would happen when they reached zero … but that would be woefully inefficient given that neither was as likely to save my life as the physical abilities were and I wouldn’t get the bonus. So instead, I sunk both my points into raising PHY by one, which raised POW, SPD, and END as well. This time I was alert and aware of my body; I felt the change go through me. It was like straightening up and giving yourself good posture, but without actually changing how I was positioned. I didn’t have much fat on me to start with, but I felt it melt away, and my muscles tightened slightly as they grew. I also felt slightly taller; I wondered whether that would keep up if I kept increasing my physical abilities.

I left the machete where it lay on the ground and hefted the sword. It was a shortsword, with about a foot and a half of blade, a curled crossguard, and a wrapped leather grip. The Fuchsia Coterie hadn’t had any weapons when they came down, at least not that I’d seen when we were all falling, and even if they had I would have found the sword to be a bit incongruous, the same as stone buildings with thatched roofs. It seemed like lazy world-building. If you had mass manufactured plasterboard, two-by-fours, and asphalt shingles, then you didn’t also see buildings that looked like they had been mortared together out of field stones and thatched roofs, not unless they were there for the tourists, and Comfort didn’t seem like it had been much of a tourist location. Similarly, no one but weeaboos and fantasy geeks had swords if there were pistols, not unless there was something like the Holtzman effect from *Dune*.

The sword didn’t weigh much, but while I had been able to slip the machete through my belt, I was worried that the sword was sharp enough to actually cut. I picked the pistol back up in order to feel what it would be like to hold one in each hand.

**Skill unlocked: Dual Wield!**

But just feeling them, I knew that it was basically idiotic to try to fight with both at once. What I needed was a sheath or a holster, preferably both, and a backpack in order to have a more convenient place to hold my jar of souls. That basically made my next decision for me; it was time to find the shire-reeve’s office.

The town of Comfort didn’t have particularly stalkable streets. There were alleys, but they were wide ones, and except for the main street, the buildings were spread from one another with narrow strips
of sidewalk between them. There were cars lying abandoned in the streets, the same kind I’d seen at the gas station with convex hoods, and most of the frontages were wrecks of broken glass. There wasn’t any sign of clean-up, and no visible attempts to repair the damage to be seen. Whatever had happened here, it had been fast. I had seen ghost towns before, but most of them developed slowly as people moved away and businesses failed for lack of customers.

The building I was looking for was sitting right next to a small, two story courthouse. It only vaguely resembled the courthouses back home; the whole thing was like a pyramid with its top cut off, and instead of faux-Greek columns it had arches coming down from the top and arcing into the ground. The flagpole with a tattered bit of red still hanging to it and large bronze statue of a man were enough that I was fairly certain that it was a courthouse.

I had no idea what the governmental structure of the Risen Lands looked like, but Comfort, though small, followed a pattern I was familiar with. It was surrounded by farms and farmlands, far away from any other town. The whole point of this town existing was that the sparse population of the surrounding area needed a place to go for the essentials they couldn’t grow or make on their own. I was certain that there was a store with farming supplies somewhere, and a hardware store where someone could get some nails and a replacement hammer. But a town like Comfort wasn’t just going to be a collection of shops and the houses of the people who worked in those shops, it was going to have government services as well. Hence, a courthouse, so looking up the deed to a parcel of land or a marriage certificate didn’t take a six hour round trip to whatever the local equivalent of Wichita was. I knew based on the size of Comfort that it was bound to have one -- but it wasn’t the courthouse that I was looking for, it was the shire-reeve’s office next to it, because if a farmer needs legal services to be within a half hour’s drive, then he definitely needs a lawkeeper at least that close.

(Again, 2 KNO was bullshit.)

The other reason that I thought it would be here, aside from deductive reasoning, is that I included shire-reeves in pretty much every game I ever DMed. Shire-reeve is just an archaic way of saying “sheriff”, but I thought it had a particularly fantasy feel to it, and it revealed the etymology of the word in the process, which was a personal joy of mine. The place I was looking at had a symbol of a triangle inset with a mushroom instead of the pointed star that sheriffs in America used, and the coloring of the cars out front was light blue with black stripes. There was no reason that they would necessarily be called sheriffs, let alone shire-reeves … and yet as I edged closer to the building, I was able to make out the faded lettering stuck to the window, which did indeed say “Aleister Duchy Shire Reeve’s Office”. Huh.

The glass door was broken and a corpse lay halfway out of it with shards digging into his gut. The blood was fresh, which meant that it was at least relatively recent. I stepped closer, holding my pistol in my right hand and trying to watch the windows around me. The two guys I had come across had melee weapons instead of guns, which I took as a hopeful sign. I wasn’t really interested in a gunfight unless I was the only one that had a gun. On the other hand, Cypress had said that she made the gun (with a box of scraps?) which meant that maybe other people could make them too.

I made it to the body without seeing anyone and bent down next to him. Everyone I had seen on the plane was at least as young as me, and this guy was no exception to that rule. I didn’t recognize him, but I didn’t expect to. With a grimace I raised the void tunneler and shot him in the head. Watching carefully, I could see that a hypothesis I’d had was correct; it wasn’t actually shooting bullets, just making holes by some other means. Knowing that wasn’t immediately helpful and raised more questions, but questions on top of questions were pretty much par for the course at this point. I slid the spike into his head, hoping that I would get another easy one.

*Quest Progress: Seven Bells for Seven Hells, 4/7*
I breathed a silent, shaky sigh of relief as I screwed the cap back on my glass jar and rearmed myself.

I had no illusions that the shire-reeve’s office would be unlooted. It was the first place that anyone who had landed in Comfort would go. Whatever weapons and body armor they had on hand would have been taken by people who had gotten there faster than me, and if the Risen Lands had been used as a dumping ground for undesirables long enough that Cypress could accurately quote one-in-one-hundred as making it out … well, that meant the chances of usable weapons being in the shire-reeve’s office was basically nil. People would have taken them, then people would have died to whatever terrors stalked the night, and the weapons would have been scattered to the winds.

That still left the other stuff though. I wasn’t confident that I’d be able to find a holster to fit the boxy gun Cypress had (apparently) made, but I was a little more hopeful about finding other things on the long list of things that I’d prefer to have before we left Comfort.

I also had grimmer business here. I still had more souls to collect before I could return to Cypress and have her fuel the soulcycle, and if I wanted to avoid conflict (which I really, desperately did) then that meant finding people who had recently died. As evidenced by the corpse through the door, any place that multiple people had the bright idea to go to was bound to be somewhere I could find work as a vulture.

I swept into the front office, dual wielding even though it felt ridiculous. There was a reception area with a desk that was covered in papers. A corpse sat at the chair there, but it was so old that the skin was shrink-wrapped to the skull and the wispy strands of remaining hair had gone white. I gave it a thwip with the void gun just to be sure, but it wasn’t so much as twitching. A calendar behind it showed a picture of a tall white spire sticking up out of an island that was barely larger than its base; I recognized that almost immediately as one of the White Spires from my Drowned Valleys campaign setting, but didn’t stop to take it in. The name of the month was, apparently, ‘Halig’.

I kept on going, keeping my eye out for people, bodies, and zombies. One of the offices had a long-dead man in it with a visible wound where his heart had been pierced, but at his hip was one of the things I had been looking for: he was wearing a sheath for a short sword. I took it off him as carefully as I could, but he slumped to the side and his head fell off in the process. It was the work of a few minutes, but I was happy (and slightly surprised) that my sword actually fit the sheath. I tied it so that it hung from my hip and practiced the draw a few times.

I moved slowly through the shire-reeve’s office, keeping an eye out for the safe that would probably hold their guns and other equipment. I was trying to keep quiet, in case there was someone here (since, after all, the corpse out front had been less than thirty minutes old) --

**Skill increased: Deception lvl 2!**

I froze as soon as the message came up. I had initially unlocked the skill when moving through the mechanic’s shop, and gained a level in it when I’d lied (poorly) to Cypress. Seeing the skill up meant one of two things. The first option was that trying to sneak across Comfort slowly incremented some hidden variable that had only now rolled over. The second option was that my skills only increased when they were actively used for something … and Deception had gone up because someone was close enough that the skill was actually being applied.

I backed up into the corner of the empty room I was in and hid behind some filing cabinets, trying to keep my breathing shallow enough that I wouldn’t make any noise. The sword and gun together felt incredibly awkward and after a brief moment of deliberation I slipped the sword in its sheath, very conscious of the sound the metal made against the leather.

**Skill increased: Deception lvl 3!**
I was listening closely, straining my ears to hear something. If the skill up was dependent on someone being close by, that made me wonder what the range on it was. Half a block? Less? The lack of sound either meant that they were far away, or that they themselves were sneaking --

I saw the rifle poke into the room before I saw the person holding it. The barrel swept from side to side and once that was done, another of the Fuchsia Coterie entered into my room. I was mostly hidden by the filing cabinet, but the further he moved into the room, the more exposed I would be. I leveled my pistol, aimed at his head, and fired. He saw the motion and turned but a hole was punched in his head, right through his nose. I got three notifications in rapid succession, each with their own chimes, which almost covered up the sound of crunching glass and a creaking floorboard from outside the room.

I ducked down but stayed behind the cabinets. The guy laying on the floor had long pink hair done up in a bun; he was shaking as he bled from the hole in his head, like he was having a seizure. His rifle lay on the ground next to him; it was much more traditional looking than the pistol I held, with the exception of the curved magazine that came out from the top rather than the bottom and a faintly glowing red symbol on the side.

The situation wasn’t great for me. Someone was outside the room, maybe multiple people, and I had roughly three minutes until the guy on the floor rose up as a zombie. So far as I could tell, there wasn’t much of a risk to them of simply waiting me out. The room did have a grimy, half-broken window to the outside, but that wasn’t going to help me since I’d get a knife to my back as soon as they heard me trying to open the window. Baiting them out seemed like my only option, but before I could do that, someone threw a small purple crystal into the room.

It was connected to a small, dime-sized battery with some wires and what looked like chewing gum. It landed right next to the body. I ducked behind the filing cabinet on instinct, before the thought grenade even had the time to go through my head, I think processing it more by the way it had been thrown than what it looked like.

The explosion was small and subdued, but the effects were immediate as things started falling down around me. The carpet and floorboards were missing near the center of the room, and a quick glance at the body showed only a thin wet strip of it left. The far wall of the office was mostly gone, not blown away but simply vanished with no debris. Without giving myself time to think, I darted forward out of the hole the grenade had made, feeling a cold wet sting on my shoulder as I did so, looking around wildly to see whether there were any threats in sight. When I was covered by the wall I turned around toward the hole I’d left out of and raised my pistol, just in time to shoot the guy coming through in the chest. He grunted at that but raised his own gun toward me after I’d thrown my pistol to the ground, just as I was trying to draw my sword.

**Skill unlocked: Parry!**

**Skill increased: Parry lvl 1!**

I got the messages in time with the explosive sound of gunfire, a painful jerking of the sword in my hand, and the clanging sound of a bullet hitting metal. I lunged forward with my sword and stabbed the guy in front of me in his arm at an awkward angle (especially because I had been aiming for his chest). Blood was pumping out of his chest, soaking his shirt, and his breaths had a raspy gurgle. I sliced at his arm with my sword again as his pistol came back toward me and felt it hit bone. When he tried to scream, blood came out of his mouth, and he fell backward.

I grabbed my pistol back up off the ground and aimed it toward the hole in the wall, but no one came through it. I was breathing hard and my back was getting increasingly wet, presumably with blood if
the stinging pain and exposure to the open air I could feel on my shoulder blade were anything to go by. I risked a glance back and saw that a palm sized piece of my shirt was gone, along with all the skin underneath it.

I crept forward to the hole and peeked inside, gun leading the way. The office was a wreck. The fronts of the filing cabinets had been removed, as well as most of the files in them save for a few papers at the back. I could see where I’d been standing, how the filing cabinet had been instantly eaten away there, making a hole that was almost exactly the size as the stinging wound on my shoulder.

I took a moment to go back to the guy outside and shoot him in the heart, not wanting to risk a zombie creeping up behind me, and while I was at it I stuck the spike in as well. There was very little left of the corpse inside the office; I tried sticking the spike against part of his skull, but there was no glow and eventually I gave up. When I moved into the hallway though, I found a surprise: there was a third pink-haired member of the Coterie, holding a sword and quite dead. Most of the wall around him had been destroyed by the grenade, save for a few places where there were something approximating shadows. I guessed that electrical wiring or plumbing must have blocked some of it, but not enough to save this guy, who had at least an inch of flesh removed from him in a number of places, including his skull. I shot him in the heart to prevent him from rising and collected his soul as well.

*Quest Progress: Seven Bells for Seven Hells, 6/7*

That meant one more to go before I could return to Cypress. I did wonder why it had to be seven instead of six or eight; she hadn’t told me and I had stupidly not asked. If the souls were fuel, did that mean we needed seven to get to wherever we were going? She was too pretty, that had been my problem. That, or not enough clear-headedness on my part. It had been distinctly hard to think around her.

I swept through the remainder of the shire-reeve’s station I hadn’t covered. The only weapons I found were those that belonged to the Fuchsia Coterie; the rifle had been almost completely destroyed by what I was pretty sure had been a void grenade, while the pistols fired conventional bullets and seemed worse than what I had. I changed my mind on that score once I found an empty holster attached to the corpse of a decaying husk. It was too narrow for the void tunneler, but I didn’t mind carrying around the extra weight of another gun, so long as it was on my hip.

Most of what the station held were papers. I didn’t have time to give them much more than a glance, even though I was burning with curiosity about this world, not just because it would have an impact on my chances for survival, but because of what Cypress had called narcissism. There were so many elements of it that I recognized as mine. I was afraid of the things I had dreamed up, true, but I wanted to see them all the same, to see the fingerprint of my mind impressed on this place. Annoyingly, the only newspaper I found covered only the goings-on of Aleister Duchy, and while there were hints to other things, mentions of the Cradle King and the Barber’s Edict (both of which I recognized), it was written for people who would already know the basics.

The stripped-off skin on my back didn’t quite crust over, but it at least dried into a sticky patch of blood on top of the raw meat of my shoulder. It hurt more as time went on and I knew that the next fight I got in would be worse for it, because every quick movement on my part would send a shock of searing pain through it. The game layer didn’t seem to indicate any sort of health point, only sufficiently bad afflictions, and apparently this one didn’t rate an entry. The back of my shirt was clinging to me where I had bled.

I walked out of the shire-reeve’s feeling exhausted, in part because the adrenaline of the fight had
faded and in part because of blood loss. I hadn’t eaten since … well, since I had eaten a hamburger and fries in the cafeteria of Bumblefuck High School, and I wasn’t sure that counted. I hadn’t had any water in nearly as long.

So when the thing made of thirty corpses came around a building and almost instantly snapped its faux-head around to look at me with burning red pits framed by dismembered arms and legs, I was terrified, certainly, but a part of me thought that I wasn’t going to have enough energy to escape. I turned and ran, back into the shire-reeve’s office, hoping that I would figure something out.
Goraion

It wasn’t anything more than a collection of corpses, not that I could see. There was no stitching holding it together, no barbed wire running through it, and not even any visible strands of unearthly purple light. It wasn’t clear how the corpses were stuck to each other either, since they weren’t gripping each other, and there was no real rhyme or reason to their arrangement. I had no idea how it had been made or formed, but at a good approximation someone had taken a giant mold of a creature with four nominal limbs and poured corpses into it. Some of the pieces that made it up still twitched.

I had already given some thought to how to kill it. The zombies were killed by either puncturing or otherwise destroying their heart, but this thing didn’t seem like it would have a clear analog, and even if it did have one it would have been buried behind at least a foot of flesh. The void tunneler seemed not to leave much in the way of an exit wound, the ballistic pistol didn’t seem like it would be much better, and even if I could stab Zombie Voltron up to the hilt with the sword, I put low odds on that working. Which left … not a lot, actually. The power lines in Comfort were dead, so I couldn’t shock it. There were presumably no working cars, so I couldn’t run it over. I hadn’t seen any pits I could (somehow) push it off, no conspicuous cliffs, no lakes to drown it in, and not much in the way of flammables to (again, somehow) burn it down. The only likely thing I had seen was the grenade the Coterie had thrown at me and I didn’t know how to get one of those.

If this were a videogame, I would have pounded my head against a boss creature like this for at least an hour, trying different strategies until I had sussed out the patterns of attack and could manage to grind it out. If this were a tabletop game, I would have killed the party for trying to go up against something that I’d given them several hints was beyond their level. Either scenario ended with death for me, and I wasn’t about to count on getting extra lives or the chance to roll a new character.

So I ran, fervently hoping that I wasn’t going to get another level of “Cowardice”, fall into a stupor from having 0 WIS, and get devoured.

I heard bricks and glass crashing down as Zombie Voltron chased after me down the hallway of the shire-reeve’s station. I hooked left into the room where I’d had my little battle with the Coterie and gave a brief glance backward. As I’d hoped, Zombie Voltron was being slowed down by the need to tear his way through the walls like a goddamn maniac. I jumped over the floor that the grenade had wrecked but landed awkwardly and felt a sharp pain in my ankle just before I tripped and tumbled to the ground.

Critical failure!

New Affliction: Sprained Ankle lvl 2! (SPD -2, Athletics -5, Dodge -5)

I hobbled to my feet, trying to ignore the pain, and began limping forward as fast as I could. It was my left ankle that I’d hurt. Each step felt like I was jamming a nail into my ankle, but I could hear Zombie Voltron behind me as it wrecked its way through the building and I didn’t have much of a choice. When I’d first come into town I had seen it chasing after people and it seemed like they had been faster than it, but with my ankle all fucked up I thought my chances were basically dogshit. Across the street was a building helpfully labeled “Pet Store” with the door hanging half off its hinge, and having no better option, I trundled toward it.

Zombie Voltron had broken out of the sheriff’s office, hopefully twisting his own ankle in the process. He was a lumbering creature, his “feet” nothing more than haphazardly positioned corpses. They were falling apart, not because they were rotting but because every step he took crunched bones and tore at dead flesh.
The pet shop was a nightmare of glowing red eyes, all of them looking my way. I didn’t stop to look at any of them, but those red eyes shone from aquariums with little hamster wheels, habitats with driftwood and fake leaves, and looked at me by the hundreds from murky tanks. I limped past them all, trying not to seize up at the sight of them, motivated by the crashing sound behind me as Zombie Voltron made contact with the shopfront. (I couldn’t help but wonder if the pets had been turned by whatever apocalypse had hit Comfort, or if they had all starved to death in their cages and then risen as zombies after the fact.)

I limped through a doorway with a tattered curtain over it at the back of the shop, then through a stocking area with boxes loaded high, and finally out a door back into the overcast daylight. I stopped when I realized that I couldn’t hear anything behind me. Well that’s ominous. The back of the shop had a small little parking area and loading zone, and beyond that was a wide alley. That meant there was a row of shops between myself and main street, then another two blocks or so to the auto place where Cypress was waiting. I swallowed hard and started limping, trying not to grunt in pain with every step that I took.

“Pssst!” came a voice from one of the buildings in the alley. I spun around and pointed my gun in that direction, but was able to stop myself from firing. There was a boy hanging out a window, leaning over so he could see me. To my surprise, I recognized him. He was the one who’d been shouting about how we were all in this together right before we’d dropped. “Come here!” he whispered, loud enough that it carried.

I limped over to him, holding the trigger-handle of the gun so that I could move it up and fire at a moment’s notice. The pain in my ankle was getting worse, and I could feel fresh blood dripping down my back.

“Inside,” he said, and when he did the door near him opened up. I limped over to it, cursing under my breath.

I was instantly suspicious. I had always been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, ever since my grandmother had told me there would be candy at church and made me sit through a two hour sermon in order to get it. Of course, the root of the saying was more about the appearance of propriety, since I don’t think anyone expected you to just ignore equine dentition altogether. They’re grazing animals, their teeth are important!

There were two people ducked down in the back of the clothing store, one a pallid boy clutching a stomach wound and the other a girl with a scar running from the side of her mouth to just below her ear. She was the one who had opened the door for me, and she closed it quickly as soon as I was in. She spared a glance at my ankle and a longer glance at my weapons, but said nothing. From a different room, the guy who had called to me from the alley crept in. I guessed he was about my age, blonde and muscular like a Nazi recruitment poster. He gave me a strained smile and held out his hand.

“Poul,” he said.

I shook his hand slowly. “Joon,” I replied.

“This is Becca and Sly,” said Poul, with a gesture first to the girl, then to the boy.

“Sly’s not going to make it,” said Becca. She sat down and grabbed her knees. A dagger was stuck in the floor next to her.

Sly gave a weak laugh. “It’s true,” he coughed. “Gonna get added to the undead army.”
Poul grimaced at that. “We’ll find a way,” he said, but he didn’t meet Sly’s eyes when he said it. He let the silence linger for a bit, then turned to me. “The Host dropped a gang with us, as if the Risen Lands weren’t bad enough.” He looked down at the makeshift pistol in my hands, then the sword at my side and pistol at my hip. “You look like a dangerous guy.”

“Not in my current condition,” I said. “Plus even at peak condition I don’t think I could take on the moving mountain of corpses out there.”

Becca was staring at my weapon. Her scar was clearly deep, because her frown was only present on half her face. “What weapon is that?” she asked.

“Void tunneler,” I said.

Poul winced and Becca sucked air through her teeth.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Poul. “The Exclusion Zone predates the Imperial ban.” A forced smile crossed his face. “That confirms you as a dangerous guy then. Did you build it?”

“Yes,” I said immediately.

Skill increased: Deception lvl 4!

It’s pretty hard to maintain a straight face when a message suddenly pops up in front of your face calling you a liar. I decided then and there that I would level up Deception as quickly as possible, if only so I’d stop getting startled by it.

(I should hope that it would be obvious why I lied. I didn’t trust these people yet, and even if I did, that didn’t mean that I could betray Cypress’ confidence. More to the point, the motorcycle we had could take two people at most out of Comfort, and that would give them an incentive toward betrayal.)

“What’s the play?” I asked, mostly to switch topics.

“There is none,” said Becca, but Poul was already shaking his head.

“There are two fronts right now,” said Poul. “That works to our advantage, so long as they’re killing each other. A defensive strategy is the best option, since our odds get better with every kill on either side.”

“Convenient that it also means taking the least risks,” said Becca. “We’re going to starve to death.”

“We can forage,” said Poul.

“No,” coughed Sly. His voice was weak. “My uncle did the math, sent it to me in prison a few days before we dropped.” He was noticeably more pale than when I had first come in. “Graduation rates have been steadily dropping, month after month, year after year. It’s getting harder for anyone to leave the Risen Lands. Reports from those who make it back are that most of the food that was still good has been eaten through. Any car that worked got taken early on, there’s no one to drive them back into the --” he coughed and waved his hand, then kept coughing until blood started coming up from his lips. I kept waiting for him to stop, but he kept going, until Poul moved over and laid a hand on his shoulder. When Sly eventually stopped coughing though, he just lay there, not moving to wipe the blood from his mouth. His chest had been heaving with the heavy breaths he was taking, but now it was completely still.

“Shit,” said Poul.
“He’s going to rise,” said Becca. Her words were soft, as though uneager to leave her lips.

I raised my void tunneler. “Move aside,” I said. I limped forward and aimed carefully as Poul backed up and got behind me. The *thwip* seemed louder than usual, but that might have just been my imagination. I stared at the clean hole I’d made, the flesh that had vanished from his body.

Maybe I’m a bastard, but my first thought was, *Well, that’s the seventh soul I need.*

“Fuck,” said Becca.

“I don’t know any last rites,” said Poul.

“Me either,” said Becca. She reached into the pocket of her jeans. “I picked up a few coins though. Thought we might need an obol.” She handed a silvered coin the size of a half-dollar to Poul, who opened Sly’s mouth, slid the coin inside, then closed his mouth again. He turned to me. “Last rites?” he asked.

I swallowed and focused on the body. “May your darkness turn to light. May the burdens lift free of your immortal soul. May you swiftly find your way to heaven and thereby find your peace.” I didn’t think that I’d made a total hash of it, but I noticed movement to the side and saw Becca pulling her dagger from the floor.

“What the *fuck* is heaven?” she asked me with gritted teeth.

“Calm down,” snapped Poul. He turned from her and looked me over, as if seeing me for the first time. “That was certainly … unorthodox.”

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “I didn’t … I’m not from here, I’m dream-skewered, I don’t know … I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“Fucking cultist,” spat Becca.

“We need to work together,” said Poul. “You’ve noticed that he’s the guy with the weapons, right?”

That stung a bit. I really should have just been smart and said that I didn’t know any last rites either, but I had thought about my years and years of playing different roles as DM. I was fairly certain that I had made up last rites on a few different occasions. Apparently though, instead of bringing comfort to the two of them, I’d made myself look like an ass. The glass jar in my pocket, the one with six small white souls floating in it, felt especially heavy and awkward. I wondered what their reaction would be to that; Becca had been nearly ready to kill me for saying the wrong prayer.

“We still need to decide what we’re doing,” said Becca. She stood up and looked out over the racks of clothes to the street outside, then quickly ducked down. “Undead have gotten thick. And like it or not, it’s going to be easier to move without Sly.” My ankle throbbed at the mention of moving.

“We can at least wait a day,” said Poul. “That’s enough time for them to stop wandering the streets.”

“The Coterie are here for a reason,” I said. I gently massaged my ankle, which had become swollen and tender. “Whether it’s their purpose or not, they’re hunting.”

Poul and Becca shared a glance.

“Say that again, but slower,” said Poul.

“They’re here for a reason,” I said. I could feel myself blushing. First the thing with the last rites, and
now they were looking at me like I’d grown a second head.

“You said Coterie,” said Becca. “As in the Fuchsia Coterie?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Part of the Color Riot, I think?” The term ‘dream-skewered’ seemed to mean nothing to them, which was a problem. I’d gotten lucky that Cypress had been the first person I met.

“Motherfuck,” muttered Becca.

“Bad enough when we thought it was a gang,” said Poul, shaking his head. “But I still think we should stay put. There’s no reason the Color Riot would send one of their cohorts here … Hells, to slip them onto the plane under the Host’s nose? They wouldn’t do that if they were just trying to kill us. And if it really is the Fuchsia Coterie, then we can’t afford to tangle with them.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what sort of stories they tell about these people, but I’ve already killed four of them. Five, maybe, depending on how you count. There can’t be that many of them left.”

“Who the fuck are you?” asked Becca. The color had drained from Poul’s face.

“There’s a safe place I know of,” I said, ignoring Becca’s question. I looked toward main street, and though my view was obscured, I could hear the milling horde. “And while I may be too slow to make it there right now, I think there’s a way I can fix that.”

“He’s insane,” complained Becca.

“He’s well-armed,” Poul countered. “Do you think he would have gotten to this point if he were crazy?”

“Yes,” said Becca flatly.

“Well if that’s the case,” I said slowly. “It’s at least a beneficial form of insanity.” *Dream-skewered.* “You can leave and we can meet up later, but I think that’s riskier.”

“We run at the first sign of it going south,” said Becca. “We’re not going to wait while you’re overrun and we’re not going to help you.”

“Deal,” I said. I stood up and limped toward the front of the store. The zombies didn’t see me right away, which gave me some time to level my void tunneler at the nearest one, aiming right for the center of his chest. I had to put some weight on my ankle, which was painful, but I was hopeful that it wouldn’t be for too much longer.

*Thwip.*

**Skill increased: Pistols lvl 4!**

**Zombie defeated!**

I had been trying to ignore the messages as much as possible, mostly because they didn’t help me at all. The character sheet clearly did do something, but it was frustratingly vague and clearly didn’t represent all the game mechanics, especially considering that I didn’t even have hit points or a health bar. (And I did briefly wonder how I was supposed to tell how close I was to death, until I thought *just like you did back on Earth, dummy.*)
Thwip.

Thwip.

Zombie defeated!

I learned something useful, which was that the void tunneler took four seconds to cycle. I had been careful with it, not wanting to push it too hard for fear of it irrecoverably breaking, and had elected not to do tests with it for that reason. Here, though, I had some ability to control the circumstances of this fight. More of the zombies had turned toward me as my pistol kept making its little sound, but the windows to the clothing shop weren’t floor-to-ceiling and the zombies would have to negotiate a wall to get to me.

“You said you had magic,” said Becca.

I ignored her and set my sights on another zombie. They were slow, but still walked at a decent speed, which meant that firing on them was still somewhat difficult. If I could have aimed for the head it might have been different, but my target was their heart, which is quite a bit smaller.

Thwip.

Zombie defeated!

I had now killed three zombies and two members of the Fuchsia Coterie since my last level up, and I thought I had to be close to level four. The zombies were unfortunately starting to mass toward me, and I seemed to have underestimated how many of them there were. With a start I recognized one of the zombies; he had a split in his jeans right at the crotch, and I remembered seeing him back by the gas station. That meant the horde trailing me had caught up and dispersed into Comfort. Frick.

By the time I had killed three more, I was starting to get worried. I glanced back and Becca and Poul and saw that both of them were standing by the doorway, with Poul keeping watch to make sure the coast was clear and Becca staring daggers into my back. I saw her eyes widen briefly and snapped my attention back to the storefront, where the zombies were starting to behave differently.

Where they had been pressed up against each other before, now they were starting to coordinate somewhat, crawling over each other or shifting out of each other’s way. The crowd was forming a tight knot of zombies that seemed more concerned with each other than with me, their movement slightly away from me, in fact. I realized what was happening just as I fired my pistol again and killed one of the closer undead. There wasn’t really anything that I could do about it at that point though; the undead were fused together, lifting up their makeshift torso, and spreading their fused together limbs. Zombie Voltron 2 was slowly coming to life.

Thwip.

Critical hit!

Skill increased: Pistols lvl 5!

Zombie defeated!

Level up!

I was ready for the heady rush of leveling up this time and I leaned into it, taking a huge breath as it hit me, tasting the honey-flavored wind that rippled the tattered clothes still hanging on mannequins
in the store. When it had passed, the ache in my ankle was gone and my shoulder was unblemished.

I ran from the zombies just as two of them toppled over the wall and into the store. Becca was staring at me with an open mouth as I rushed toward her, but she managed to pull herself together enough to beat me out into the alley. The three of us ran together; I had given Poul my ballistic pistol, mostly because he kept insisting that if I was killed by the zombies the two of them would be nearly defenseless.

There was no crashing sound of the clothing store being destroyed, but we kept running all the same. It was two and a half blocks to the auto shop, which I had reluctantly told Poul and Becca about. I was still short a soul, but hadn’t dared to try taking it from Sly’s corpse with both of them there, not after the way they’d reacted to my attempt at last rites. (This was cowardice or caution, depending on how you defined things, but the game layer didn’t count it against me.)

We kept to the alley, darting across the street at full speed, past zombies shambling around as their glowing red eyes turned to track us. We were halfway down the next block when an enormous figure lumbered into view at the end of it. For a second I thought that the second Zombie Voltron had somehow outpaced us and cut us off at the pace, but with dawning horror I realized that the configuration of corpses was familiar. This wasn’t the one that had just come together, this was the original. Which meant that Zombie Voltron 2: Electric Boogaloo -- yes, a quick glance confirmed that it was behind us, moving to block the other end of the alley.

“Left!” I called, and darted off down one of the thin sidewalks that threaded between buildings. Poul was just after me, with Becca after him, but as I looked back at her I saw her shirt snag on a bent piece of pipe that was sticking out of the ground at an awkward angle. It ripped her shirt but yanked her backward in the process and she fell to the ground, slamming her head on the cement.

This was the moment that I had been dreading. If I’d had to take a stab at what the rule for Cowardice was, it meant not helping people in need in order to increase my own chances of survival. I turned back toward Becca and sprinted, sliding past Poul as he kept running. My void tunneler was in hand and pointed to the alleyway. I reached Becca just as one of the Zombie Voltrons peered in at us. Up close, his red eyes were bright enough to be almost blinding. I shot at him with the pistol, thwip, hitting him right in his left eye, and though it winked out, I saw corpses slithering around each other, rearranging. My left hand was grabbing Becca by the leg and pulling her backward, out of harm’s way. Zombie Voltron’s arm-of-corpses wormed its way between the buildings and slammed down where her head had been a half second prior.

“M’ fine,” said Becca as I dragged her. Either she was surprisingly light or I didn’t know my own strength. I counted to four in my head, then fired at Zombie Voltron again. I couldn’t see the hole it made, and the creature made no reaction. Becca kicked at me and struggled to her feet, but when she tried to take a step she stumbled and slumped against the wall before staggering back up to her feet.

I moved beside her and got beneath her arm, draping it over my shoulder and holding onto her wrist. I was partly supporting her and partly carrying her. Any thoughts she might have had about protesting had left her and she tried her best to stay on her feet. The space between buildings was just barely wide enough for both of us to pass, but if we’d been shoulder-to-shoulder instead of hip-to-hip we probably would have been stuck.

When we got out from between the buildings, Poul was nowhere to be seen. I’d been terrified that the other Zombie Voltron would come around and box us in, but they didn’t seem to have that level of either speed or coordination. We were back out on the main street now, with rusted out cars and shambling zombies all moving toward us. Becca was putting more of her weight on me as I tried to think of what to do -- thinking that was cut short when Zombie Voltron came out from around the
buildings and began lumbering toward us. The way we’d come was blocked; the other Voltron was making its way through a space far too narrow for it, squeezing and wriggling to do so.

The one on the street charged us. I fired my void tunneler at it again, swearing as I did so.

**Critical hit!**

I had a moment of hope, but all that happened was that one of the corpses which made up the necrotic abomination fell to the ground. I had seen the hole this time, right through the chest of that zombie … oh. Piercing a zombie through the heart killed it, this creature was made up of zombies, therefore all I would need to do was pierce every one of its hearts to kill it. *One down, fifty to go.*

I slid the void tunneler into the waistband of my pants, lifted Becca up and slung her over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry, and started running. Running was probably a generous word for it, considering that I was carrying more than a hundred pounds.

I tried my best to weave between the cars, hoping that Zombie Voltron would have trouble navigating them and making up for my deficit in speed. I could hear it after me though, the wet slap of ruined corpse-flesh as it ran and the crunch of bones as it came down too hard. Judging by sound, it was gaining on me. The only point in my favor was that I was still moving toward the mechanic’s shop, where hopefully Poul and Cypress would be able to give me a scant bit of cover, but it was another two buildings to go and I was moving painfully slow. Whatever fight Becca had left in her was gone, and she was nearly limp against me, which made her all the harder to carry.

I heard a loud sound, very close behind, and risked a look just in time to see the end of Zombie Voltron’s arm coming toward me. The ruined mess of flesh that made up its feet was gone, replaced by a dozen grasping hands attached to arms that waved around.

It was too close to me, and I was too slow. One of the hands grabbed onto Becca’s forearm, and as soon as its grip was secure it yanked her away from me, other hands coming to join the first one, grabbing her throat, hair, shoulder, anywhere they could reach. I managed to grab hold of one of her legs before she could fall completely off my shoulders, but the mass of zombies pulled her away from me with a force that nearly pulled my arm from my socket. I lost my grip and watched in horror as the arm made of corpses whipped to the side, smashing Becca against a metal dumpster. The edge of it hit her in the spine and separated her body in two, splattering blood and guts against the ground.

“No!” I screamed.

**Affliction: Cowardice Removed!**

I could feel my pulse beating in my temples and my vision was starting to blur. I had been angry before, consumed with blinding rage, but it had never been so perfectly paired with adrenaline. With a shaky hand I yanked the void tunneler out and started to level it at Zombie Voltron … then I turned and ran, because that was the smart thing to do.

I swore as I ran, cursing the injustice of it, the raw unfairness of trying to do the right thing and seeing it all fall apart anyway. It was how I had felt after Arthur died, this furious anger at a world that was so indifferent to us, a burning desire to find God and punch him in his fat fucking face for letting a thing like this happen.

I ran until I thought I had lost them, then doubled back, keeping my eyes open. The rage was fading into a firm commitment that I would kill every single fucking zombie in this place before moving on. I’d grab this stupid fucking world by the neck and bend it to my will if I had to, I would mold and shape it against its protests until nothing was so shitty as that had been.
I’d felt the same way on Earth for about six months after Arthur died. This feeling was an echo of
that one, or maybe it had just dredged up those old thoughts that I had been starting to put behind me.
I had known Becca for all of half an hour, if that, and I had only gone back to save her in the first
place because I was worried about my own life. The part of me that wasn’t set on howling against
the world could see that this was more of an old scab being ripped off than a rational response to
Becca’s death, but that didn’t change how I felt.

I killed five more zombies as I snuck back to the mechanic’s, more because I was angry than because
they posed a real threat. The little thwip was unsatisfyingly quiet, though there was some satisfaction
to be had in the notifications that popped up. There was no sign of the Zombie Voltron (Zombies
Voltron?), which I was thankful for. It had taken an act of will to keep myself from standing my
ground and fighting them until they killed me. I didn’t see the Fuchsia Coterie either.

When I reached the mechanic’s shop, I heard someone say “Psst!” Poul stepped out from around a
corner and walked over to me, crouching as he did so. He was looking around and opened his mouth
to ask a question, but stopped himself.

“There were three undead at the door,” he said instead. He patted the pistol at his side. “I figured this
thing was a little bit too loud, didn’t want to attract too much attention, so I led them away then came
back. Are you … okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Becca didn’t make it.”

“Shit,” said Poul.

I moved to the door and opened it up. The smell that hit me was foul; the corpse sitting in the waiting
room had ripened. “Come on, I’ll make introductions.”

Cypress greeted me about the same way that she had when we’d first met; she had a new gun, a rifle
this time, which she pointed straight at me. She was crouched in a makeshift bunker of car doors that
she must have put together. I had forgotten how deeply attractive she was; that fact had become a
point of data in my mind which didn’t reflect the visceral pull she had on me.

“I heard a commotion outside,” she said calmly. “Were you followed?”

“No,” I said. “But I did bring company.”

Cypress jerked her head to the side, the universal sign for “move out of the way then”.

“I have a void tunneler trained on you,” she called to Poul as he stepped forward. “My trust in
Juniper, such as it is, does not apply to you.”

Poul made no response to that. He was staring at Cypress. “Holy shit,” he said.

Yes, that had been my reaction too, but at least I was polite enough not to say it.

I’d misread him though, because Poul went to his knees and bowed down. I raised an eyebrow at
that; Cypress rolled her eyes.

“Princess Amaryllis,” said Poul from the ground. “I pledge myself to your service.”
Cold Comfort

Poul’s prostration didn’t seem to gain him any favor with Cypress, now revealed as not just Amaryllis (as my character sheet had already informed me) but Princess Amaryllis. That raised a whole host of questions, most salient of which was how, exactly, she had ended up on a plane full of criminals.

“Juniper, the soulcycle can hold two people at most, and that’s with one of us riding pillion,” said Amaryllis. “It’s not clear to me that you’ve thought through the logistics of this.”

“I did think about it,” I said. “But I couldn’t leave them to die.”

“They?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“Him,” I replied with a swallow. I wanted her to give me a sad look or something to show she understood the subtext and sympathized, but she focused her attention back on Poul.

“Name,” she said slowly. “So I know what to call you.” I don’t think it had escaped anyone’s attention that she still had her rifle trained on him. It made me nervous. I had been taught trigger discipline and gun safety growing up and this was a gross violation of that. Never point the gun at something you’re not fine with destroying. Or maybe she’s just fine with killing him. But I wanted it to be an act, a show of force covering softness.

“Poulus Cambria,” he said.

“Background?” she asked.

Poul was silent for awhile. “Soldier,” he finally said.

Amaryllis frowned at that. “How did you end up here?” she asked.

“I would prefer not to say,” he replied.

“Too bad,” said Amaryllis. Her finger was already on the makeshift trigger of the rifle and I saw it move slightly, adding pressure. I wanted that to be a bluff, a tactic to get him talking, but Poul was still kneeling, his face toward the floor, and the gesture would have been wasted on him.

“I was convicted of rape by a military tribunal,” he said.

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “That’s not a crime that often goes punished these days,” she said. “The General Council changed the law to require two witnesses in addition to the victim. Were there long deliberations, in your case?”

“No,” replied Poul.

“Well then,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper, is there any good reason that I should keep him alive?”

“He helped me,” I said, though as I said it I realized that it wasn’t exactly true.

“Rank sentimentality suits no one,” said Amaryllis. “Poulus, is there a reason you should live instead of die?”

He was silent for a long time, long enough that I thought Amaryllis would shoot him for not answering, but even though she was threatening him with death, she was doing so with patience
rather than knee-jerk malice. I hadn’t fully understood the background context of their conversation, but I gathered that Poul was guilty of the crime he had been charged with.

“The Coterie are here, my lady, and I believe they are here for you,” he said after a long moment. “There are undead stalking the Risen Lands, some of them beyond your own considerable abilities if you have no competent help. You have said that the soulcycle holds two? Well I would submit that I am a better companion than Joon. I have military training and before my disgrace I was well-decorated with high marks in --”

My mouth was hanging partway open when I realized what he was doing, and even then I had trouble articulating anything. I was saved when Amaryllis interrupted him.

“Shut up for a moment,” she said to him. “Juniper, how did you fare out there?”

I slipped my hand into my pocket and pulled out the glass jar. Six small greenish souls swam about in it, circling the magical spike I kept in there for lack of a better place.

“I have six of the seven,” I said.

“Under what circumstances?” she asked. She was still aiming her rifle directly at Poul, who had not moved.

“Two were scavenged from those already dead,” I said. “Another four were from … from the Fuchsia Coterie.” The killings still left a bad taste in my mouth. I’d acted in self-defense, but I couldn’t quite convince myself that it had been a good thing.

“Juniper, if there is only room for two, would you rather it be you or him that comes with me?” she asked.

“My lady,” Poul began.

“Silence,” said Amaryllis.

I swallowed. I didn’t actually think that she would kill him in cold blood, but I was still hesitant. “I would go with you,” I said.

Thunk.

Poul collapsed to the floor and blood began pouring out from the top of his head.

“What the fuck?” I asked. “You can’t just - you can’t just do that!”

Amaryllis ignored me. She stood up from behind her makeshift barricade and calmly walked over to Poul’s corpse, then kicked him over with her foot, lowered her rifle, and fired into his chest.

“The jar, please,” she said.

I was staring at her, and not just for the usual reason. I hadn’t thought that she was going to kill him, and I hadn’t wanted him dead, not even after I had learned he was a rapist, not even after he’d tried to throw me under the bus. I made no move to hand the jar to her.

“We could have let him go,” I said.

“Yes,” Amaryllis replied. “We could have let him go, but he was willing to betray you, which means that he would have been willing to betray me. I wasn’t going to take the chance that he was stupid enough to approach the Fuchsia Coterie with information about me, what resources I had, where I
had been hiding, where I might be going … and who I was with.”

There was nothing that I could say in response to that. I kept trying to think of some other option that she hadn’t seen, some other way, but all I really had to offer was optimism that I didn’t actually feel. I handed the jar over to her and watched as she extracted Poul’s soul.

“So now he’s going to have his soul destroyed,” I said slowly.

Amaryllis paused and looked at me with a frown. “Do you know why I trust you?” she asked.

I thought about my character sheet, and what it had to say about her. Loyalty 0. “Do you trust me?” I asked.

“Trust is a complex thing,” she said. “I do trust you though, at least to an extent, and hope that you continue to trust me too.” She let Poul’s soul fall into the jar with the others. (Quest Complete: Seven Bells for Seven Hells!) There were some differences, but they were nearly indistinguishable from one another. “You wouldn’t have done as I asked and returned here if you didn’t trust me. On some level you had considered the worst case option, where I killed you as soon as you came through the door.”

I hadn’t thought of that at all.

“The reason that I trust you is because you revealed that you were dream-skewered,” she said. “There are many stories that a covert agent might give, but it would never occur to the intelligence operations of the various kingdoms to present as so incredibly out of depth and without power. More to the point, there are perhaps a dozen covert agents in the entire world who could successfully fake both a profound ignorance of the world and a deep steeping in the history and culture of Earth.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” I said. My mind had drifted slightly while she talked as my eyes focused on the flawless curve of her collarbone.

“I know more of the dream-skewered than most,” said Amaryllis. “There was a time I took an interest in cosmology, and Earth was always one of the lingering questions in that field. That bit of ignorance you just displayed … that’s a trademark of Earth, a nearly sure proof of origin.” She held up the jar of souls. “You think that destruction of a soul is a bad thing.”

“It’s not?” I asked.

“Where do you believe people go when they die?” she asked me as she moved over to the soulcycle.

“I … I don’t,” I said. “I was never --” I thought for a minute about the cultural gap that might exist between us and how to say what I wanted without making assumptions on her knowledge. The misstep with saying last rites for Sly had left me a bit skittish … and Amaryllis’ description of Earth had been more along the lines of how continents and oceans it had. “There are things on Earth called religions,” I began.

“We have them too,” said Amaryllis. “Organizations built around the gods?”

“Do literal gods exist on Aerb?” I asked. “Literal in the sense of … there’s incontrovertible evidence of their actual presence, not just natural phenomena attributed to them?” I was tensed up; my personal conception of gods was that they were basically Lovecraftian in nature, elder beings of incredible power and inscrutable goals, and yes, that interpretation of gods extended to most major world religions. That view had been reflected in the worlds I’d created for D&D. If I was in a world where a Cthulhu knock-off was real …
“There are five gods,” said Amaryllis. She unscrewed a bit of thick glass from the tank of the soulcycle and poured the seven souls into it. They sat at the bottom, floating over each other. I couldn’t help but notice that the soulcycle’s tank was only a tenth full, and if the glass barrels I had seen around town were any indication … well, that meant a truly staggering number of souls. A bit of tension released from Amaryllis’ shoulders as she screwed the cap back on. “I’ve met three of them in the flesh.”

“Okay,” I said, when she didn’t continue. “Well, on Earth there’s no evidence that any gods exist, and I’m one of the people who thinks that they don’t. And as part of that, I don’t think that anything happens to people when they die, they just … cease to exist.” I could feel a tightness in my throat as I thought of Arthur and pushed forward before my emotions could get the better of me. “But we don’t have immortal souls on Earth, at least not that anyone can identify.”

“Hmmm,” said Amaryllis. She turned her attention from the soulcycle and looked at me. I could feel my heart pounding away as our eyes locked. She had killed Poul without emotion and it seemed like an affront to morality that I would still be able to look at the perfection in the curve of her lips and feel such attraction toward her. “You know, that’s not the answer that I thought you would give. Most of the dream-skewered believe that there is an afterlife which exists as a reward and one which exists as a punishment. They look on the destruction of a soul similarly to you, because there’s this presumption that everyone is going to the good afterlife rather than the bad one.”

“And?” I asked. “You use souls as a sort of fuel or something, because no such presumption exists in your society?”

“There are nine thousand hells,” said Amaryllis. “The highest hell is slightly better than Comfort, in its current state. Our infernoscopes can penetrate only down to the five thousandth hell, but there only brief reprieves from torture and pain exist, and those reprieves are marked by fear and anguish.”

It took me a bit to connect the dots from what she was saying to the question Becca had asked me. ‘What the fuck is Heaven?’ she’d asked. That was a reasonable question, if your standard cosmological model didn’t include one.

“You don’t believe in heaven,” I said. “You don’t even have a word for it.”

“We do have a word,” said Amaryllis. “We call them antihells. It’s a term you’d find in scientific papers but even then is somewhat blasphemous.” She pursed her lips. “We know what awaits us after death. Destruction of the soul is a mercy.”

She seemed to believe it. And yet … it was hard for me to believe that morality and utility were so well aligned. It would be like if the giant chugging factories of the industrial revolution made everyone healthy and wise instead of belching out noxious smoke that poisoned the lungs of a few generations. It wasn’t that I believed the world (worlds, I suppose) were zero sum, but I was instantly suspicious of how motivated the thinking might be.

“Alright,” I said instead of prolonging the conversation further. “So what’s the plan?”

“We ride,” she said simply. “Seven souls will get us up to maybe fifteen miles per hour. That will have us in Silmar City within two days, even if we stop and hole up during the night tonight. With two of us, we could trade driving duties, but it’s difficult to sleep on a soulcycle.”

**Quest Accepted: Out of the Frying Pan!**

I waited, but she had begun an examination of the soulcycle’s metal wheels.
“What’s in Silmar City?” I asked.

“It’s complicated,” she answered. She turned from her inspection and looked at me. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Then you’re an idiot,” she replied. “Do you realize that I sent you to your death when I asked you to go retrieve those souls? It’s a profound miracle that you returned with them. I knew that when I sent you out but I coated my words in hope and honey. You have no reason to trust me.”

“I told you before, I see words and numbers in my head,” I replied. “Your name is there. You’re listed as my companion.”

“Ah,” said Amaryllis.

“I have proof,” I replied. “When I close my eyes I can see more information. Some of that I can change. When I do, there are actual results in the real world. Watch me closely.” I closed my eyes and waited the three seconds to look at my character sheet, the first time I had done so in some time.

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I was sorely tempted to put the two points into MEN or SOC, mostly for the purposes of preventing any abilities from going to zero, but I had already committed to PHY when I told Amaryllis that she would see a change. When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me.

“What - what kind of ... “ she stammered. “I … I’ve seen that trick before.” I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think I can explain it to you, how impossible that should have been. If it had been less than instant I would have had to believe that you were a skilled magi of blood or bone, but I was watching closely and you changed without so much as an eyeblink between one form and another. A minor change, but ...” she shook her head.

“Where did you see the trick before?” I asked.

“Invreizen,” she said. When she saw my blank look she added, “God of Sea and Ice.”

**Quest Accepted: God Botherer!**

I didn’t really know how to respond to that. The simple, obvious conclusion to draw from that was that I was a god, but that seemed almost certain to be wrong. Could gods be dream-skewered? But that would presuppose that my entire life on Earth was a lie, which wasn’t a bullet that I was willing to bite, and it didn’t explain the form that the game system had taken. Or perhaps I was drawing on godly power in some way without being a god, or the gods and I were drawing from similar sources.
of power. Or maybe the only similarity was in what they looked like.

“We need to get moving,” Amaryllis said suddenly. “We’re not safe here and we need ample daylight left when we start looking for a place to spend the night. I’m not sure that it would be safe to drive at night anyway, since the roads in the Risen Lands haven’t been maintained.”

“There are a lot of things outside that want us dead,” I said.

“I’ll go gather the mines,” she said. “We might have to fight our way out of Comfort.”

**Quest Accepted: Comfort Zone!**

I had so many more questions for her, but I also thought she was right about needing to leave. The image of Becca being bisected was one that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to forget, as much as I might try. As I looked at Poul’s body, I got a grim reminder that Amaryllis herself wasn’t exactly who I had hoped she would be. She had shown me compassion when we’d first met, then sent me out to what she had thought was my death anyway. It might have been easier to deal with her if she hadn’t been the picture of physical perfection.

While Amaryllis was pulling things down from the ceiling tiles in the hallway, I began looking for a coin to put in his mouth. This time, I’d figure out more appropriate last rites.

Amaryllis had mined the hallway with small purple crystals like the one that exploded in the shire-reeve’s office. They all had wires attached to them, which led into the garage and to an assembly I hadn’t noticed on the other side of car doors she’d been using for cover. At a guess, all she had to do was press her foot down and anything in the hallway would have been utterly destroyed.

She saw me with Poul, but she didn’t say anything about it. I tried my best to compose some sort of prayer, but nothing really seemed true, necessary, and kind.

“These are void bombs,” said Amaryllis, carefully holding one in her open palm. The others were covered in a piece of soft leather. “They are extremely dangerous.”

“Oh, that must be why someone threw one at me,” I said.

**Skill increased: Comedy lvl 1!**

“Then you know how dangerous it is?” she asked. I don’t know if she didn’t get the joke, or just didn’t think it was funny. Based on past experiences, the latter was a better bet.

“Yes,” I said, thinking about the skin and flesh that had been missing from my shoulder.

“They’re disconnected now, but I have the switches for them ready to go, it won’t take longer than five minutes,” she said. “The void will penetrate in all directions, so you’re going to have to make sure that there’s something between us and the detonation. It’ll go through about six inches of flesh and bone, half an inch of steel, or five hundred feet of air. Got it?”

I nodded. It sounded like I was more or less right about it being based on density. When she put on the switches and handed one to me, I got a small surprise.

**Skill unlocked: Thrown weapons!**

It didn’t bode well that I was going to be handling these things with a zero in that skill, but so far I hadn’t actually done too badly. My very first time swinging a one-handed weapon had been a critical
hit that had split the zombie’s face in two, not that it had much effect on the outcome. I handed it back and she slipped it into a piece of soft leather.

When Amaryllis started up the soulcycle, I wasn’t quite prepared for it. My uncle had one of those huge, thick motorcycles, the kind that get referred to as ‘hogs’, which the soulcycle more or less resembled. I was thinking that this would be similar, with a thick chugging sound that would make it hard to talk. Instead, it gave off a sound like a crack of thunder and short, finger-long arcs of lightning arced out from the wheels as the whole thing rose up from the ground. It sat there with a shimmering translucent blue aura around the wheels, a few inches off the floor.

“Ignition was louder than I had hoped it would be,” said Amaryllis. She took the void tunneler from me, slung a pack that had been sitting beside the workbench over her shoulder, and straddled the soulcycle, which lowered a fraction of an inch. “Grab the rifle, shoot anything that gets close.”

I picked up the rifle --

*Skill unlocked: Rifles!*

-- but that message wasn’t entirely welcome, because it meant that my methods of attack were both ones that I was untrained with.

(There was something that had been bothering me about the game layer for some time now; it assumed that I was starting almost completely from zero. I had been in decent enough shape, good enough not to make a total ass of myself in Phy Ed, so why had the Athletics skill unlocked when I’d started running? Similarly, I had gone hunting almost every fall since I was ten years old. The rifle that Amaryllis had built was different from those, but how did the game layer interpret me to have zero skill with rifles in general?)

I climbed on board the soulcycle just behind Amaryllis and practicing sighting down the barrel of the void rifle and very lightly testing the pressure of the trigger to see how much give it had. I hadn’t removed my sword from my hip, but Amaryllis hadn’t questioned it, and the game layer seemed to indicate that there was some use for it.

“Bombs are in the pouch,” she said. “Deal with them carefully, because one would be enough to kill us both. Ready?”

“The door’s closed,” I said, looking at the rolling garage door.

“We’re going out the other way,” said Amaryllis. She twisted the throttle and steered the soulcycle through the garage, past Poul’s body and down the hallway. I was using two hands to hold onto the rifle, which meant that I was clinging to the soulcycle with just my thighs, similar to riding a horse without hands. Even going slow it was a little bit terrifying, in part because of the arcs of electricity (or something like it) that came from the shimmering aura we were using in place of wheels. It occurred to me that even though the soulcycle was fairly quiet, the glowing wheels, arcs of lightning, and fuel tank with glowing souls in it would all make us incredibly conspicuous.

The door was partly open already; Amaryllis must have done that when she was retrieving the bombs. She slowed down only slightly, raised her pistol with one free hand, and used it to nudge the rest of the door open. A single zombie was standing twenty feet away, staring at us with its glowing red eyes. Amaryllis took aim and with a *thwip* of her gun it crumpled. Then, she put on speed.

It was fairly underwhelming. As she’d guessed, the soulcycle topped out at fifteen miles per hour, which was fast enough to beat a person sprinting after us and certainly meant we could out-pace the Voltrons. It was still slower than I could pedal a bike though, and in comparison to a car it was...
practically sedate.

We’d made it all of half a block when the window of a car shattered next to us. Amaryllis was turning the soulcycle before the sound of the gunshot even reached us. I gripped the soulcycle between my legs, trying hard not to get bucked.

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis. She steered us down one of the streets that branched off from the main thoroughfare and put a building between us and our shooter just as the sound of another shot came rolling across the fields. “Ballistics,” she called back to me. “Their effective range is three times ours, maybe more.” She kept the soulcycle going, turning abruptly in an unpleasant way to take a different street. “If we drive toward them, we’re fucked. Ideas?”

“Punch through Comfort,” I said.

“If they have ballistics there?” she asked.

That was a very good question, to which I had no good answer. “We have to try,” I replied.

I felt a little bit sick when she nodded to that, because I knew it wasn’t a very good plan but the fact that she was concuring meant she agreed it was our best bet. So far as I saw it, the only other option we had was to hole up and hope that we could scavenge enough not to die while also successfully hiding out from both zombies and sweeps. Hit-and-run guerilla tactics might work in our favor, but all we needed was to get unlucky once. The only reason I was still alive was that leveling up had put me back in perfect health twice after serious injuries.

When we turned down the next street, we saw three members of the Fuchsia Coterie standing on the roof of a two story building with one of them firing down on one of the zombie conglomerates, which was putting its forelimbs against the building and trying to swat at them. The rhythmic thwip sound was now audible over the sound of the soulcycle. The Coterie saw us immediately and two men with pink hair and long rifles raised them to fire at us. I lifted my own void rifle up and aimed at them just as they were aiming at me.

(We weren’t all that far away from each other, but I was moving, not in control of my movement, trying to keep my balance by squeezing my legs around the seat, and using a makeshift weapon that I had never fired before, which operated on technology that was beyond my understanding. I knew even before I took the shot that I was basically shooting for the sake of covering fire, hoping that they would see me take aim and move out of the way, thereby reducing the window they had to fire on us.)

Thunk.

**Critical hit!**

**Skill increased: Rifles lvl 1!**

**Fuchsia Coterie sniper defeated!**

I blinked in surprise as one of the riflemen tipped forward and fell over the edge of the roof, landing awkwardly on the conjoined zombies, which grabbed at him with the arms that jutted out from their collective body. When I looked up, both of the others were gone from view, most likely hiding from what they must have thought was hideously good aim.

(“I’ve always thought it was dumb,” said Reimer. “You roll a 20 and you get an automatic hit? So a level 1 commoner with cerebral palsy goes up against the greatest warrior of all time, a man in
magical full-plate with a frickin’ tower shield with little mini tower shields floating around it, and there’s a 5% chance that he’ll hit? How is that not dumb?”

“It’s not about simulation,” Arthur replied. “You’re not supposed to think that the whole world is made up of people with levels who are acting in accordance with these abstract rules, that’s what’s -- I don’t want to say dumb, because I can see where that might appeal to people, but that’s not what these games are usually about. They’re about telling this small, improvised story that no one but a handful of people are ever going to hear. Having a rule like an automatic hit on a natural 20 is just in service of story-telling.” He turned to me. “Joon, tell us that story.”

“Which story?” I asked. “The one about the level 1 commoner and the best warrior in the world?”

Arthur nodded. He was putting me on the spot and we both knew it, but that was part of how things were between us. Arthur considered it part of the implicit contract between player and DM.

“Alright,” I said. “The commoner’s name is Moxit, he’s got cerebral palsy, and he’s depended on the kindness of strangers pretty much his whole life. He hates it, but there’s not really any other option for him. Eventually Kerland, the big bad warrior comes to town. He knows that he’s basically invincible to these people, which is why he likes these out-of-the-way places where there’s not even a hedge druid to send a messenger bird for aid. Now, the villagers know that Kerland is unstoppable, so they’re ready to submit right away, giving Kerland roasted chickens, loaves of bread, spare coin … and if he pushes, one of the village’s daughters might volunteer to keep his bed warm. And when Moxit sees this, he’s enraged. All these people he’s known all his life are acting helpless. Moxit spends his days struggling, trying to do what he can, trying not to be this burden. And now, now all these villagers are just giving up. So when Kerland is in the village center, Moxit steps out of a building with his bow at the ready. Kerland sees him and goes into a defensive stance, because while he’s incredibly powerful, he’s not so stupid as to give someone a free hit for no reason. Moxit looses his arrow,” and here I rolled a die behind my screen, a 15, which I quickly flipped to a 20 before holding it up to show the group. “His arrow releases at the perfect time and though at first it looks like it won’t, it eventually curves to just the right angle, going just over the tower shield in front of Kerland, passing right by the small floating shields of Romoc, and striking at one of the few weak points in the armor, a place between the plates where it’s soft leather. The arrow doesn’t kill Kerland, not even close, but it does graze him, and in that moment Kerland feels a real fear, because now they know that underneath a small kingdom’s worth of magic items and a body that would make the God of Might green with envy, Kerland is still just a man.”

“Hax,” said Reimer. “And the commoner could have just as easily rolled a 1. And the epic level fighter goes and straight up murders him with a single swing of his sword, and cleaves into someone standing next to the commoner just to make a point.”

“In which case it would be a different story,” said Arthur, “One about the futility of fighting, or about ego, or something like that. There are so many paths, the dice roll just shifts you from one path to another, from one story to another.”

And then the pizza came, and the argument was more or less forgotten.)

My eyes tracked back down from the roof of the building to Zombie Voltron, which had integrated the corpse of the sniper I had shot down. It turned to look at us with its bright red eyes and after a moment where something like a thought must have passed through something like a brain, it dropped its forelimbs from the building and began bounding toward us.

“Bombs,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was steady, as steady as it had been right before she put a hole through Poul’s head. I slung the rifle over my shoulder and grabbed reached into the pouch, grabbing two of the small leather balls that each contained a bomb. “Turning,” said Amaryllis, and I had to use my free hand to hold onto her hip in order to keep myself from slipping. “Throw when I say.”
The Zombie Voltron came around the corner after us. It was slower than us, but we had zombies and cars to navigate around, while Zombie Voltron just barreled past, barely slowed down. My heart was in my throat and fresh fear washed over me every time the soulcycle slowed down to maneuver.

“Now, behind that car!” shouted Amaryllis.

I hit the switch and threw the bomb, hitting the side of a car just as we passed it and gaining a skill level in the process. I grabbed onto Amaryllis again as I turned back to watch, one bomb still held firmly in my grip. The zombie-thing reached the car and for a moment I thought the timer would be too long, but I heard the subdued detonation and saw layers of flesh instantly exposed on the corpses near the back. Some of them tumbled down to the ground, but it didn’t stop the creature itself.

“Get it?” asked Amaryllis. I turned back to face the front just as we came within a hand’s breadth of a zombie’s lunge.

“No,” I said. “Another?”

Amaryllis released one handlebar and lifted up her pistol, quickly firing it at a man I didn’t see until he was already stumbling to the ground and clutching his leg. “We need cover,” she called. “Wait for it.”

The town of Comfort was not particularly long, and we were rapidly reaching the end of it. I was worried about what would happen when we got out onto the open road; the rifles I was familiar with could shoot several football fields and it didn’t seem like that was too different here. Moving targets were harder to hit, especially if they were making an effort to move erratically … but I had landed a nearly impossible shot not a minute prior and I was scared to death that it cut both ways.

As it turned out, I should have been more worried about what was happening behind me. A second Voltron had joined the first, and both of them were chasing us. The obstacles we faced had started to thin out, but there was something in the red light of their eyes that was making me queasy. I felt a sigh of relief when they suddenly stopped, but then the two beast-shaped corpse piles began touching each other, frantically merging by sliding their component bodies over one another. In my mind’s eye I imagined a creature as large as a two story house rushing towards us, but what happened instead was that the mass of bodies parted to reveal something smaller than either of them had been.

If they had looked like they’d been molded from someone mashing bodies together, this new thing instead looked like the product of careful deliberation, as though someone had picked out the ten most intact bodies and put them together like they were working from factory instructions. At the front there were three human heads all facing toward us, their bodies trailing behind them to make up parts of the thing’s legs and torso. All glowed red as it looked around and tested its step. Then it began running.

“It’s faster than us,” I called out to Amaryllis. I set the bomb down, wedging it between us, and aimed the rifle behind me, awkwardly twisting in my seat while trying not to fall off. It was hard to tell whether my first shot hit, but the Death Hound didn’t stop or even slow. Kill the hearts. That was a simple plan with difficult execution, especially since the void rifle couldn’t penetrate through more than six inches of flesh.

“What’s faster?” asked Amaryllis. Her gun was out again and she was taking shots at something or someone I couldn’t immediately see.

“Find cover,” I said. “Gotta throw another bomb.”

She fired her pistol again. We were out of the town now, with only a few sparse buildings left on the
long road ahead. “Car ahead,” she said. I was whipping my head back and forth, trying to judge time and distance. The Death Hound was too close to us, if I made the same throw I’d made before it would pass by the grenade uninjured.

I hit the switch on the bomb and threw it forward, ahead of us. I saw it roll and hit the car wheel and would have counted down if I thought these makeshift weapons had precise timing. I watched the void bomb on our entire brief approach, willing it not to kill us. At the last second I turned back to see the Death Hound and began to unsling my rifle again. We passed the car and I heard the muted detonation at the same moment, the events so close together that I almost thought that we were going to be caught in the blast. Instead, the Death Hound fell apart with arms, legs, and heads tumbling out onto the road.

*Greater Umbral Zombie defeated!*  
*Quest Complete: Comfort Zone!*  
*Level up!*

You might have thought that the golden light was familiar to me now, but it still managed to catch me by surprise, and the wave of ecstasy was no less sweet for having experienced it before. I lifted out of my seat, only slightly, and came back down without losing my balance. Amaryllis must have felt what was happening to me, because she turned the soulcycle then overcorrected the other way, leaving us briefly wobbling as she regained control.

“You,” said Amaryllis after some time. “We’re going to figure out what you are.”
Amaryllis spotted a house beside a barn when we were two hours out from Comfort and we turned down a dusty, bumpy road overgrown with weeds to get there. We did a sweep for zombies, killing the two we found, then hid the soulcycle away and began trying to find something to eat. The kitchen was filled with long-since rotted food that I was almost hungry enough to attempt eating. On top of that there were cabinets with broken doors and upturned cans, clear signs of looting.

Eventually I went into the yard and looked around in the undergrowth. It hadn’t taken me terribly long to find where a garden once stood, and that was where I found our supper of raspberries, tomatoes, and onions.

**Skill unlocked: Horticulture!**

Before anything else, Amaryllis insisted that I tell her about the magic I possessed and the delusions I was under. We sat together in the porch as the sun set, until eventually the only light was moonlight filtered through a still-overcast sky. I described things in brief, until eventually I found myself having to tell her about tabletop roleplaying games.

“My friend used to describe it as basically a play.” I said. I didn’t really say Arthur’s name much anymore, mostly because it brought a lump to my throat. “Except it’s a play without a script and instead of just making things up as you go along you have numbers and dice as a guide.”

Amaryllis nodded. “There is a form of public performance similar to that in Five Spires,” she said.

*Five Spires exists,* I thought to myself, filing that away for later. I had seen one of the White Spires on a calendar back in Comfort, so that wasn’t a particular surprise. “Do they use dice?” I asked. One of Greg’s favorite jokes was his character breaking out a pencil and paper and whittling dice to play a game-within-a-game. I’d humored him sometimes, when I thought the joke was funny. I had no idea if that kind of thing would end up here.

Amaryllis shook her head. “The action stops at various points within the play so that one of the characters can come forward and ask the audience for advice on some crucial decision. When the audience has made their choice clear, usually by yelling, the action resumes. All possible decisions are written ahead of time, with the traditional form having thirty-two possible outcomes. It’s low art. These games are similar?”

“No,” I said. “That sounds more like Twitch plays Shakespeare.”

She gave me a blank look. “Explain.”

“Uh,” I replied. “Nevermind. We’d be here all night.” I paused. “Do you have computers in Aerb?” (I hadn’t seen any in the shire-reeve’s or any of the shops that we’d been in, but I wasn’t sure that meant anything. The Risen Lands were in an exclusion zone, and making assumptions about the rest of the world based on what I saw here would be like an alien landing in Chernobyl and trying to infer what humanity was like from what it saw.)

“Yes, we have computers,” said Amaryllis.

“Okay, well the other thing I need to tell you is that while there are games that are played with paper, pencils, and dice, later on a bunch of those games transferred to computers, first by just adapting in the rules as well as they could, and after some time doing that they became their own thing. I mention
that because I think that’s the sort of thing that the words and numbers in my head are mimicking. There’s, uh, a lot to talk about there.”

She gave me another blank look. “I don’t understand how a computer helps,” she said. “You said that there was math involved with these character sheets, but I was under the impression that it was all done by hand.”

“Right,” I said, not sure where the disconnect was happening. “So instead, the computer handles all that. Wait, are computers expensive here? On Earth they cost … a week’s wages, if you’re doing menial work.” That was roughly what my netbook had set me back.

“For how long?” asked Amaryllis.

“How long?” I asked.

“If you spend a week’s wages, how long do you have the computer’s labor for?” she asked.

“As long as they last, but most people trade in after two or three years,” I replied. I could feel the disconnect growing, but couldn’t imagine where it was. If they only had large-scale mainframes here her confusion would make more sense. “Low cost means that there are a lot of them.”

Amaryllis sighed. “When I say computer, I mean a woman trained for at least three years at the Athenaeum of Mathematics and Metaphysics, usually hired for the purposes of complex mathematical calculations relating to cryptography, physics, or the more esoteric magics. What is it that you mean?”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s actually what the word used to mean on Earth. Not with the athenaeum or magics, but ‘a person who computes’.” I had used that as a plot for a short adventure in a steampunk campaign. “We have electronic computers.” Amaryllis raised an eyebrow. “The numbers are more complex than in tabletop, because if you swing a sword with a certain amount of force, at a certain angle, then you can calculate whether it hits a different sword that’s moving at a different angle and speed, and the computer will just do all that without you having to think about it and tell you whether or not you parried.”

“I don’t think this is helping us,” said Amaryllis. “There have been a thousand dream-skewered, all of them interviewed and tested many times over at the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny. The details of these mechanical computers are interesting in an academic sense but don’t remotely explain the physical effects of your personal magic, nor the governing logic of it. There are so many questions that I’m starting to find it frustrating.”

“You think it’s frustrating?” I asked. “At least you have some knowledge of Earth and some context for my condition, even if I think you’re probably wrong. There’s this entire world of Aerb that I know nothing about, and half of it seems to be tied to things that are already in my head. And, I like talking about roleplaying games, partly because it lets me not think about the people I killed today, but you haven’t been very forthcoming with information.” As soon as the words were out I felt like I had gone too far. I’d snapped at people from time to time back on Earth; it was practically a daily occurrence in the weeks after Arthur had died. I was worried that she would turn away and say something like ‘we should get some rest’, but she only looked at me for a moment.

“We both want information,” she said. “Question for question, no more than a few minutes per answer, and follow-up questions can be taken as your next turn. The Athenaeums recommend structure. You can go first.”

I took some time to think.
Things to Ask Cypress Amaryllis

1. How do I learn spells?
2. What powers do gods have?
3. What happened to the Risen Lands?
4. Why were you on that plane?
5. What are you the princess of?
6. How large is Aerb in comparison to Earth?
7. How quickly is technology progressing, if at all?
8. What do the dream-skewered say about Earth?
9. Does Fel Seed exist?
10. Do the mimsies exist?
11. Is there a city called Nightsmoke?
12. Why don’t people say the z-word?
13. What are void crystals and why were they banned?
14. Where do souls come from?

I probably could have kept going. Every thirty seconds a new one popped in my head. I could sort of see the point of going tit-for-tat on questions though. It wasn’t just about equality in sharing information, it was about ensuring that both people would at least try to ask each other the important things first. I knew that we couldn’t spend all our time talking, which meant it was time to prioritize. I ended up starting with something that hadn’t even made the initial list.

“What’s in Silmar City?” I asked.

“That’s too many questions,” said Amaryllis, but she gave me a small smile after she said it, so I kept my complaint on my tongue. It was the first time she’d smiled at me. “The short version is that Silmar City was the target of the attack that formed the Risen Lands, it’s awash with the walking dead, and there was once a secret facility there dedicated to the study of necrotic field effect, which I believe contains a key we can use to teleport ourselves to safety.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question before I remembered that we were taking turns. “Okay, your turn.”

Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 2!

“What skills does your character sheet say you have?” she asked.

I closed my eyes and read them off, slowing down only at the last three. “Comedy, level 1; Deception, level 4; … and Romance, level 0.”

She looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I was sure that I was blushing. (And yes, I was in mortal danger, locked off from the world I knew, I had killed people, but she was so, so pretty and maybe I was just a stupid sop for looking at her like I did, or maybe I was trying to find comfort in whatever I could). “Your turn,” she replied.

“Okay,” I said quickly, trying not to trip over my tongue. “Where do souls come from?”

“Really?” she asked. I nodded. The question wasn’t important to my personal well being, but it had been nagging at me. “Can I ask why you want to know? You can count it against me, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “By my reckoning, the tank on the soulcycle could hold about seventy souls, maybe as many as a hundred. Everywhere I’ve gone, I’ve seen empty glass tanks that look like they
probably contained souls. Even simple math seems to show that there are far, far too many souls sitting around.”

Amaryllis let out a puff of air that didn’t quite rise to being a sigh. “The soul first appears six days after conception, though we don’t believe it’s capable of going to hell until roughly one month after formation. You are correct that our desire for souls as a power source far outstrips those available from people naturally dying, so to that end we have laboratory techniques which create souls from volunteer samples. Almost all the stock you see comes from a combination of Podsnap’s Technique and Bokanovsky’s Process.”

That sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. Souls and the afterlife were one of the default assumptions in most fantasy games, so it wouldn’t have surprised me if I had thought up something like that … but the memory was unclear, and I was distracted by a sudden realization of the implications.

“You’re creating souls to damn them to the hells,” I said.

Amaryllis shifted uncomfortably. “In theory,” she began, then stopped. “The lie we tell ourselves is that the souls will be created and then used up with no conscious experience to speak of. Usually that’s true, but accidents and assaults happen. A large enough bomb detonated in a city wouldn’t just claim the lives of the people, it would consign the purpose-made souls to hell. Thousands of them, maybe millions.”

“Shit,” I said. What happens when someone gets to hell? Do they have a body? Would thousands of newborn babies just drop out of the sky? It churned my stomach enough that I decided I didn’t want to ask just now.

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “In the games you play, what skills, aside those you’ve already ‘unlocked’ would you most expect to see?” she asked.

“Um,” I swallowed, trying to shift gears. I closed my eyes and looked at my character sheet. “One-handed weapons implies two-handed weapons, parrying and dodging imply blocking with a shield, pistols and rifles mean maybe automatic rifles or shotguns, horticulture is new but that makes me think along the lines of crafting or gathering skills like smithing or mining, and of the social skills … persuasion is notably absent, and I think I would have gotten that by now, but that does leave intimidation. And depending on how magic works, I’d think I’d have at least one magic skill.”

“Try to intimidate me,” said Amaryllis. She leaned back and waited with an expectant look on her face.

“Um,” I said. I raised my fist. “You, you had better … had better not sleep during your guard shift tonight. Or else.”

Skill unlocked: Intimidation!

Critical failure!

I had hoped that Amaryllis would laugh, or at least give me another smile, even if it was a small one, but instead she just raised an eyebrow. “Did that work?” she asked. “You took your focus off me for a moment.”

“Yes, it worked,” I said. “Thanks. I critically failed.”

“Yes, I saw,” said Amaryllis. She didn’t smile, she smirked, but it was close enough that I started
“Is it your turn or mine?” I asked.

“Yours,” she said calmly. I had this certainty that she could read me like a book.

I tried to think back to my list, but I was tempered by her last answer. I was going to have to sleep in this creepy house. “What are you the princess of?” I asked.

“What are you the princess of?” asked Amaryllis. “Nothing.” She saw my frown and tucked hair behind her ear. “I was part of the Lost King’s——” she stopped and shook her head. “Can I tell you a story, as a prelude?”

“Sure,” I replied. I had just noticed myself getting tired and was willing to end our mutual questions in favor of sleep. A story that gave me a reprieve from the intensity of thought the question game required sounded nice.

“There was once was a great and powerful king,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was different, in telling it, and I had the feeling that this was a proper Story, not just a recounting of things that happened. “He was everything a person could want a king to be, kind and just, noble and pure, charming and avuncular, like he was a loving father to the entire kingdom. He had two sons, one a warrior, always on the battlefield, and the other a scholar and administrator. Each of the princes was skilled in his own way, each loved equally by their father.

“One day, the king went on a great and dangerous quest. He never returned.”

Quest accepted: The Lost King, Found?

I immediately began paying the full amount of attention as Amaryllis continued.

“The administrator had been put in charge of the kingdom while their father was away, but it was his brother, the warrior, who was the eldest and therefore the rightful heir. As weeks turned into months, the warrior began to push for the administrator to declare their father dead. The administrator refused, because their father was so wise and powerful that he would never have gone on a quest of such importance and then simply failed. The brothers argued at length as the months turned into years. It was a time of peace, one forged by the king, which meant that the warrior was mostly concerned with petty threats and the appearance of strength. It was the administrator who had all the actual powers of rule, in the king’s protracted absence.

“Eventually matters came to a head. The two brothers fought one another … I’m actually going to skip this part, because the way it usually goes it takes ages to get through, but it would suffice to say that the administrator bested the warrior three times and the matter was laid to rest. To avoid a civil war and ensure that the matter was truly settled, they jointly declared that their father, that wise and glorious king, would not give up his crown until either he returned or his body was recovered.”

Amaryllis let out a breath. “That was five hundred years ago. Every heir of either brother since then has been styled as Prince or Princess, and there are hundreds of us in almost every important governmental role, so don’t think that I actually stand to inherit a proper title of Queen one day. I’ve seen more than one foreigner make that mistake.” She held out a hand. “Amaryllis Penndraig, tenth of her name, Special Liaison on Existential Emergencies for the Kingdom of Anglecynn, long may it stand.”
I shook her hand weakly. My blood had run cold. “The Lost King,” I said slowly. “What was his name?”

She looked at me like she thought I was about to faint. “Uther Penndraig,” she said slowly.

“Oh,” I whispered. I recognized the name, only this time it wasn’t one of mine.

“Tom, character name?” I asked.

“Elhart Cloakshield,” he replied in his most pompous voice, the one he reserved for elves and wanna-be elves. “Signature move: twirling his cloak and using it like a shield.”

“So he decided that he couldn’t let a name like Cloakshield go to waste?” I asked.

“There is literally nothing in the rules that allows that to work,” said Reimer.

“Maybe Cloakshield is a family name?” asked Arthur. “The Smith family name comes from generations of blacksmiths, it’s not totally insane to think that they’d get a name that identified their most defining combat ability.”

“An ability which, again, the rules do not provide for,” said Reimer.

“Eh, we can do it as a weak custom magic item,” I replied. “I’ll figure it out later. Arthur, character name?”

“Uther Penndraig,” he said with a smile. “Mechanically he’s a pretty standard sword-and-board fighter, but I’ll be taking some paladin levels later on, just to warn you.”

I jotted that down in my notebook. The start of a campaign always saw my notebooks more organized and the first session started with a page neatly divided up so I would have places to write down details of all the player characters. It would only be later that it would descend into scribbles of names and places I never remembered a few days later.

“Arthur Pendragon?” asked Reimer. “I thought we weren’t doing copycat names.”

“I said you couldn’t be a warforged named Megatron,” I replied with a roll of my eyes.

“He’s the leader of the Decepticons!” said Reimer.

“Technically I picked *Uther*, who is Arthur’s canonical father,” said Arthur. “And I picked the Middle English version of Penndraig so it would be less immersion breaking. But yeah, I always wanted to have a character that was something of a King Arthur ripoff. Not that I think I *am* King Arthur or anything, but I grew up with the name and I’ve always thought there was a connection to famous people you share a name with, like if your name were Alexander you might have an interest in Alexander the Great, or if your name were Benjamin you might think about Benjamin Franklin.”

“Didn’t he have syphilis?” asked Tom. “Also, why are there no famous people named Tom?”

“Tom Hanks?” asked Reimer.

“Historical Toms, I mean,” said Tom.

“Thomas Aquinas,” I said, holding up a finger. “Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Edison,” I continued. We went around the room like that for a while, until eventually Craig went to Google and began
listing off every single Tom of note since the New Testament. Arthur leaned over to me while that list was being read off.

“T can change the name,” he said.

“No, it’s fine, I get it,” I replied. “I mean, obviously you can’t start as the King of England, but I’ll see what I can do about a watery tart throwing a sword.”

And that was more or less how Arthur had started down the road to becoming the Best King Ever.

And now Uther Penndraig was here, in this world, as a part of this game or whatever it was. I shouldn’t have been so surprised by that; every world I had ever made had players stomping around in it, why shouldn’t those characters be there too? But I’d always felt like players were intrusions in the worlds, not fully acquainted with what I had made, and I was always bending to them, even to Arthur, if only a little bit. A fresh wave of fear came over me as I thought about some of Reimer’s characters being here.

And that quest, “The Lost King, Found?” If Uther Penndraig was a real person in this place … he wouldn’t be Arthur, I couldn’t start imagining that, and he had been missing for five hundred years, but the game wouldn’t give me a quest that I couldn’t complete, would it? I started getting dizzy with hope just thinking about it. Even if Uther wasn’t Arthur, it was a creation of his, a character that had started as a ripoff and become its own personality.

“Do you want first shift or second shift?” asked Amaryllis. “We’ll sleep here tonight, since I don’t see any red eyes on the horizon. We might have to get up in the middle of the night to clear them out before they can clump up.” It took me a moment to realize that she’d let the questions and answers die out without even mentioning it.

“Second shift,” I said. “If that’s okay with you.”

The air had gotten chilly and we hadn’t found any usable bedding in the house. I wondered whether I would even be able to get to sleep given all that had happened that day. I tried to make myself comfortable on the hard floor with, Amaryllis sitting next to me and keeping watch, but it was cold and awkward. I spent some time looking up at the ceiling of this abandoned place, then turned over and looked at a wall instead.

This went on for about half an hour until Amaryllis reached down, placed a thumb to my forehead, and said a word that seemed to slip off my mind like a runny egg. I was out like a light before I could even think the word magic.
I woke up to Amaryllis whispering. She was kneeling beside me and touching my face. I had a moment of confusion at seeing her until the world came back into focus and I realized where I was.

**Achievement Unlocked: Under the Moon of the First Night**

“It’s your turn to keep watch,” she was whispering. “Are you awake? Are you with me?”

“Yes,” I replied. I got to my feet and looked around, blinking. The sky was no longer obscured by clouds, which made things a lot brighter than when I had gone to sleep. Multi-colored stars had been revealed, with all the colors from across the spectrum of visible light, pinks, greens, blues, and oranges that were astrophysically impossible. There were no constellations I recognized, but there was something like the Milky Way, a thick region of stars so dense their individual colors were hard to make out; it looked like a gash upon the sky. And the moon … the moon had no blemishes on it, no familiar craters, but it was laced through with geometric lines that all seemed to terminate in a point of pinkish light where the Sea of Tranquility would have been.

“Celestar,” I breathed. Once the home of the elves, before they’d been forced to flee. *This world has elves.*

“Residual knowledge?” asked Amaryllis.

I wanted to say that it wasn’t, to protest that Celestar had been my idea, this permanent monument to what the elves had lost, stark and clear for everyone to see, every single night … but instead, I said, “Probably,” then, “Get some sleep.”

“Wake me at first dawn,” she said, “My watch was clear, I hope you can say the same.” She laid down where I had been and folded her arms across her chest, then lay still. I looked her over, then turned away because I felt like a creep.

At best guess, I had four hours to spend on watch. The porch we’d taken up residence in had a full view of the fields. We weren’t as defensible as I would have liked, but there had been no red lights of zombie eyes visible for miles around and the Coterie, if they were in pursuit, would know our direction as we left Comfort but almost nothing else about where we were going or might possibly stop.

Keeping watch was dreadfully boring. Most games, both tabletop and computer, would just skip through the watch and tell you if something interesting happened. Games weren’t meant to simulate tedium, which was more or less what keeping watch was. After what felt like thirty minutes but was probably more like ten, I started getting antsy.

It took three seconds to bring my character sheet up. I had two more points to spend from having leveled up. I was very conscious of having my eyes closed, a situation which was not amenable to keeping a lookout. I resolved to drop back out of the menu at a regular interval and then looked over the stats. My modus operandi had become to simply pour points into PHY, which increased POW, SPD, and END. I could feel the changes from it already in the way that I moved. I was more muscular than I had been in fifth period English class, enough that people back home probably would have asked me if I had been working out, but I didn’t think that I’d place at the top of my class in terms power, speed, or endurance, at least not yet.

The problem was, I didn’t know what the game’s power curve looked like with regards to the
numbers it showed me. If they were sublinear (that is, produced less of an effect per point invested) then I was almost certainly better off spreading points around as soon as I could spare them. If they were linear (that is, produced an equal effect per point) then I was still better off spreading them around because of the diminishing marginal utility of each point (e.g. the difference between being able to jump 10 ft. and 12 ft. was a lot greater than the difference between being able to jump 200 ft. and 202 ft.). If the points were exponential … well, then I had probably already blown it, because if I’d spent it all on SPD I could have had it up to 10 by now.

The problem was, the stats weren’t exposed.


Nothing happened. But then, I had never used voice commands for any of the game stuff. The tooltips appeared when I looked at things long enough, I’d swiped from one page to the other using eye movements, and I’d spent ability points by looking at the little plus signs. Nothing had indicated to me that vocalizing what I wanted was a path to success.

I opened my eyes and looked out at the fields, scanning for movement and light as was my dreadfully dull duty. I kept this up for a minute or so, then retreated back into my character sheet.

Everything game interaction had been done using my eyes in some way. How would I signal that I needed some kind of main menu then? What was the eye control equivalent of pressing Escape on the keyboard or Ctrl+Alt+Del? It would have to be something that I wouldn’t just do by accident, but that I could still do fairly easily. I still wasn’t counting on basic principles of design being followed, but ideally it should be something that held meaning, because obviously I couldn’t refer to a shortcut cheat sheet.

I tried lots of things, until my eyes were starting to hurt from whipping them around. Why couldn’t the game have done something like putting a discreet box in the upper lefthand corner? Eventually I decided that the answer was probably about encoding. The game recognized blinks, which I’d been using to clear messages, it recognized left and right swipes, and though they didn’t actually seem to do anything, the pages at least gave some movement when I tried going up and down. If I were going to encode something … well, if I were going to encode something, and it was just for me, not a generalized system for other people …

Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right …

And I didn’t have to think about how I was going to complete the rest, because the settings screen popped up in front of me with three vertical columns of options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ironman Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardcore Ironman Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond Hardcore Ironman Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helldiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead-man's Switch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I read through it cautiously, careful not to hover over any checkbox for too long, lest I accidentally change something. Then I swore silently, under my breath, careful not to wake Amaryllis. The tooltips had given me bad news. On the one hand, I had already been acting under the assumption that death would be bad (duh), but to see “you will die for real” spelled out so clearly and unambiguously, and to see a checkbox I couldn’t uncheck taunting me was still like a slap in the
face. Similarly, “Verisimilitude Mode” was locked down, and it cut off a number of features that I would have found exceptionally useful. I hadn’t had “Fast Travel”, but now I knew I never would, because I was stuck in Verisim Mode.

“Helldiver” confirmed the existence of the hells, but it led down a philosophical rabbit hole. Was it better to die or to live a life of eternal suffering? I didn’t know that I could properly answer that. Amaryllis had said that the highest level of hell wasn’t much worse than Comfort, which seemed bearable, even in the long term. I decided against checking the box right that instant. Similarly, the “Dead Man’s Switch” would kill me if I was going to suffer a fate worse than death. That seemed on the surface like a similar deal with regards to death and suffering, but it left me asking the question of “Worse by whose definition?” so the checkbox was also left unchecked.

I turned “Verbose Quest Logging” on, then “Hit Points” and “Mana Points” too, on the theory that they would give me more information, and more information was good.

When I opened my eyes, there was a little red bar in the lower left corner of my vision, in a place that should have been at the very edge of my periphery but was somehow still entirely in focus. When I paid any attention at all to it, it showed two numbers with a slash between them, “27/27”, and the word “Health” appeared running vertically alongside the bar. That wasn’t terribly helpful and the tooltip said there was no mechanical impact, which didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. Convention would have dictated that there be a blue bar on the right side for mana, but I didn’t know any magic as yet.

I looked for zombies, and there were still none.

Despite opening the settings page, there was nothing there that helped me. There was no way to expose the actual mechanics of the game, not even by enabling hit points, because the hit points were just a representation of health that seemed like it would be far inferior to what I could tell just by paying attention to my injuries. And by my reckoning, I was still at least three hours away from the end of my shift, maybe more.

However, the fact that mechanics weren’t directly exposed didn’t mean that there was no way to figure them out. The game had given no explanation that touching a weapon would unlock a skill, but I had cottoned onto that after seeing it happen two times. I checked to make sure that Amaryllis was still sleeping, then grabbed the void tunneler and stepped out in the night.


Skill increased: Pistols lvl 6!

I strolled over to the target that I had set up, a dented aluminum can with a label so faded that I could just barely make out a red splotch. It had holes in it now, perfectly round like they’d been drilled in with machine precision. My aim wasn’t great; I had missed twice and I could see one of those times had put a hole in the wooden fence I’d set the can on top of. I turned it over twice, then went back to take position a little bit further away, scanning the horizon the entire time. I wished that I had a silencer, but had no idea how to fashion even a bad one for something like this gun. It wasn’t very loud, but even with a light breeze rustling the tall grass, it was the loudest thing around.

I was faintly surprised that I was able to increase in skill by shooting at a can. Logically, people got better at combat-related things mostly by intensively training outside of combat. Professional MMA fighters had something like four ten-minute fights a year, which were interspersed with months of intensive training. Fighting in the real world had value, sure, but it was the months of training that mattered most. But that was boring, so games always found ways to minimize that truth, because a game that gives players an incentive to do really boring things is a poorly designed game. Otherwise,
you’d have people sequestering themselves away and shooting at cans until their Pistols skill was up to maximum level and they could shoot the wings off a fly at a hundred yards.

I kept shooting, *thwip, thwip, thwip*, and was eventually able to learn a thing or two. First of all, it *did* matter whether I was making an effort, because holding the pistol off to one side and covering my face so I couldn’t see what I was shooting at did nothing. Second, the skill ups got slower as I went, which I had more or less expected. Third, for whatever reason I wasn’t getting critical hits or misses. And fourth…

*Skill increased: Pistols lvl 12! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat SPD.)*

That was after what felt like about two hours of shooting, enough that my fingers had gotten numb. It wasn’t dawn yet, but it was noticeably lighter now, enough to make the stars seem to fade away.

The message wasn’t clear on whether it meant SPD was a primary stat for that ability, or a primary stat because it was one of the basic ones. It was still enormously important in figuring things out, because it meant that not only did I know for certain that abilities were associated with skills, it also meant that I knew how important abilities were. My go-to plan of putting everything into PHY was basically shot now, because neglecting mental and social abilities would mean that I would forevermore suck at the associated skills. In other words, I couldn’t make up for lacking in cunning by being really, really good at skills that took cunning.

I shook my hand, set the gun down, and tried to think about what to do next. That was when I got hit in the side of the head with a rock. I swore, dropped down, and was grabbing for the gun just as I heard Amaryllis shout, “You’re dead.”

I rubbed at the side of my head, which was bleeding slightly. My hit points were down to 24/27, which didn’t seem right to me. I stood up, picked up the gun, and walked over to Amaryllis. If she had been standing beside the house, I might have had an excuse for not seeing her before her rock hit me, but she was on the opposite side of me from the house, which meant that she had to have snuck around me without making a sound.

“Sorry,” I said as I wiped my bloody fingers on my shirt. I belatedly realized that I didn’t have a change of clothes; I’d be wearing that stain for a while yet.

“You were on watch,” said Amaryllis.

“I know,” I replied. “I was looking around, I just, I wanted to get better for when we get to Silmar.”

Amaryllis paused and her face softened slightly. “And did you?”

I nodded. “Fewer misses, better clustering on the hits, both while moving further away from the targets.”

“Unnatural improvements?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “I think so.”

“You left me while I was asleep,” she said with a frown. “While I was at my most vulnerable. If I could sneak up on you, so could someone else. I could have had my throat slit because you violated our agreement. Don’t do it again.” She turned away from me. “Come on, we should get going.”

Generally speaking, when I made maps I included as few details as possible. The bare minimum for tabletop worldbuilding was a starting location and a destination, with nothing but those two points
and a line connecting them to each other. Of course, a world with only those two initial necessities would seem barren and lifeless, so I would add things in to give the impression that it was a living, breathing place. A line marks a river that needs crossing, which implies a bridge, a forest runs alongside what are presumably fields, and there are other roads aside from the one between the only two 'real' locations, which go off and (presumably) connect to other places. Keeping a simple map with a lot of suggestive elements helped when one adventure rolled into the next one, because one of those lines could be attached to a new location that I’d thought up. By not marking down too much ahead of time, I was free to improvise when players asked me things, things like “Is there a wizard’s tower nearby?” or “Where is the nearest place we could find some trolls?” A detailed map would have left me scrambling to change things around when I needed the world to be different from what I’d originally put down.

I mention this mostly because the area we traveled through was almost exactly the sort of nondescript place that separated the two points of importance. It was flat (former) farmland as far as the eye could see, broken up with occasional streams and clumps of trees. There were farmhouses and the occasional gas station, miles of electric poles stretching electricity across the land. It could have been Kansas, or Nebraska, or virtually anywhere in the Midwest. If this place had been a character, it would have been the blandest of NPCs, the shopkeeper who sells you his wares without giving so much as a hint of having any personality or motives.

I shot at things as we went, using the rifle to do so. Amaryllis had suggested it. We were only going fifteen miles an hour, after all, and while the zombies were fairly infrequent so long as we stayed clear of places with a lot of buildings, there were road signs, trees, and rocks for me to take aim at. This time, I got the message much sooner.

Skill increased: Rifles lvl 6! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat CUN.)

That made me nervous for the value of my choices thus far, and with some reluctance I put my two points in raising MEN (and thus CUN, KNO, and WIS) by one. It wasn’t just a matter of rifles, I really didn’t want to get locked out of being able to perform magic.

We stopped after four hours of travel in the middle of a long stretch of road with no one in sight. My legs and back were killing me, and I was as hungry as I thought I had ever been back on Earth. I’d picked up an affliction “Hungry” but it didn’t appear to have any penalties associated with it. I imagined that like “Cowardice” it would get worse if I didn’t do something about it, and tried to ignore both the hunger and the looming status effects.

“Forage should get better as we move toward Silmar,” said Amaryllis. She was going through a stretching routine that looked totally unfamiliar to me, moving with smooth motions that paused in difficult-looking configurations. She would have looked amazing while eating a ham sandwich, but during these stretches I felt my heartbeat pick up. Maybe there was a part of my brain that thought she was dancing for me.

“You think we’ll find something to eat?” I asked, trying to ignore her.

“Silmar was the site of the attack that created the Risen Lands,” said Amaryllis. “They’ve been dropping people here for years, all over the place, but if you want to survive you move away from Silmar. It’s basically been untouched. Most of the food will have gone bad anyway, but we have better odds of finding things that are unspoilt. Besides that, the field effect was stronger near the epicenter, which means that rats and birds would have been caught in it too.”

“And … that’s a good thing?” I asked. Before she could answer, I realized what she’d been saying. “ Meaning that animals wouldn’t have gotten into everything, because they’d have been zom … turned into glowing-eyed undead versions of themselves.” I tried to think about that some more. “If
I’m hearing you right, a weaker version affects larger things?”

Amaryllis shrugged. “It’s academic,” she said. “I would rather stick to telling you the things that could save our lives in a crucial moment rather than going over esoterica about the necrotic field effect present in the Risen Lands.”

Maybe if I hadn’t been so thoroughly chastised for shirking my watch duty, I would have tried to push back, but I was on edge thinking about getting a message that loyalty had dropped. Amaryllis was someone the game deemed important and I figured that if I lost her, I was as good as dead.

“Do you think the Fuchsia Coterie will follow?” I asked.

“If they can,” she replied, craning her head back to perfectly expose her neck. “Part of the reason we’re going to Silmar is that I expected them to have arranged themselves to intercept us going the other way. I’d say there are even odds that they can get a vehicle up and running, if they didn’t have something equivalent in their supply cache.”

“Supply cache?” I asked.

“That’s a guess on my part,” said Amaryllis. “They didn’t leave the plane armed, and their weapons weren’t outside of the norm for what might be found, but it strikes me as suspicious that so many of them would have found weaponry. There are laws against flying over the Risen Lands, but they’re poorly enforced. It wouldn’t have been trivial, however … someone spent a fair amount of personal and political capital in order to have me die in a way which could be vigorously denied afterward. In the Lost King’s Court, it’s acceptable to murder your opponents, so long as you don’t let anyone know that you’re doing it. So yes, I believe that the Fuchsia Coterie is better supplied than one would expect of men dropped into this wasteland with nothing but their clothes.”

“We’re better equipped than I would expect,” I said, looking over at the pistol and rifle that sat beside the motorcycle powered by human souls. It still had seven souls in the tank, I noted.

“Our enemies have made the crucial mistake of underestimating a Penndraig,” said Amaryllis. She stood up, rolled her shoulders, and began walking back over to the soulcycle. “Though one has to wonder how many Penndraigs died almost immediately after making a statement like that.”
We made one last stop when Silmar City was in view on the horizon. All I could really see of it was that it was less reflective than I thought of cities as being; whatever materials the taller, skyline defining buildings were made of, it was something gray instead of glass. All that could be held off for later though, because I had been preparing to speak with Amaryllis for the last long stretch of road.

The plan we'd come up with didn’t really deserve to be called that.

Anglecynn had established a research base within Silmar City to study the effects of the necrotic field effect. Part of their remittance was a teleportation key, which was apparently an incredibly valuable and literally irreplaceable bit of magic which allowed organic beings the ability to teleport, a process which was apparently lethal if you didn’t possess one of these magic items. (Amaryllis hadn’t called them magic items, but I called it like I saw it.) Amaryllis was on part of the council that had established this base, and when it had stopped responding, there had been something of a panic, mostly because an operation to recover the teleportation key was going to be necessary and there was no money in the black budget to fund said operation, and pulling in more funds would have required other council authorizations that would have brought significant unwanted attention on the faction within Anglecynn that --

“Blah, blah, blah, politics,” as Reimer would have said.

I didn’t want to treat everything she was saying as essentially flavor text, but Amaryllis didn’t seem to be in the mood for giving me a civics lesson, and I wasn’t especially enthusiastic about trying to untangle all of the assumptions implicit in the background she was giving me. And there were other parts that mattered to me much more, such as:

“Assuming that you’d found the money in the budget to retrieve the key, what would that have looked like?” I asked.

Amaryllis frowned and knit her eyebrows. “There would be a series of advisors to develop the plan,” she said. “However, in lieu of that, and with the caveat that I might be missing something major … it would likely have been a team of five or ten, because that’s the increment the teleportation key applies to, three casters of different flavors among them in order to provide redundancy in getting back, plus one brute, possibly a caster himself, linked through the soul in order to take the hits himself, plus at least a single blade-bound warrior to scythe through lesser threats. They would have cleared forward to the facility, attempting to identify the threat and prepared to teleport back out if things exceeded their abilities, then depending on what they found there, they would have gone in and done their best to find the key based on the facility floorplans that they would have acquired ahead of time.”

“Ahh,” I said slowly. “Are you sure we want to do this?” That was a question that I asked a lot as a DM, mostly as a signal to the party that they were going to do something incredibly dumb.

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ve evaluated the options and this is the one least likely to end up with me in a shallow grave.”

“Alright,” I replied. “Then before we go, I want you to teach me magic.”

“That’s impossible,” said Amaryllis with a shake of her head. “Even the simple magic, like what I’m able to do, takes years of study. I know three spells, none of which you would be able to do without
at least three months of intensive study.”

“And if my power applies to magic too?” I asked.

Amaryllis paused. “We can spend a half hour,” she said. “Time is only of the essence because of the possibility of the Coterie behind us, and I think we can spare a little bit for testing. Tell me what you know about blood magic.”

“Uh,” I paused. “Nothing. I mean, I have some guesses, but nothing immediately springs to mind.”

“Guess for me please,” she said.

“Well … my guess is that it would be something like what I’ve seen before, back on Earth,” I said. “So maybe blood magic is the ability to control blood telekinetically, or maybe it’s using your blood to store spells from other sources, or maybe it’s tapped into the elemental plane of blood, or maybe you have to drink blood to take on the blood’s power, or maybe you have to spill your own blood as a sacrifice in order to fuel different effects.”

Amaryllis was giving me a funny look.

“Was one of those correct?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “The depth of the dream-skewer astounds me sometimes.” I frowned at that and she hurried on. “No, blood magic taps into the raw, vital essence of the body, tapping it and shaping it for other purpose. The most skilled blood magi can extend their power beyond the body itself, extending their essence into the shape of a tool or weapon.”

“And these weapons are … blood whips or something?” I asked. That seemed a lot like telekinesis to me.

“Whips would be nearly impossible,” she said. “The energy of the body only obeys the laws of physics reluctantly. No, spears are the most common. That sort of magic is beyond my level though, and I’m only telling you about it for the sake of illustration. For now, close your eyes and feel your blood pumping within you. Listen to the beat of your heart and feel your pulse, not with your fingertips but just as it flows through your neck, your arms, your thighs. Open your eyes.”

When I opened my eyes, she was standing closer to me, and if I hadn’t been able to feel my pulse before, I probably would have felt the rush of blood then.

“This next part normally causes some frustration,” she said. “Once you feel your blood, truly feel it, not just as some part of you that operates automatically without your involvement, you have to think about it in parts. Think about the warmth of your blood, think about how your fingers would feel if you tied them up with string and cut your circulation, then think about the warmth of your blood spreading back into them.” I did as she said. “That’s an exercise we practiced, but we don’t have the time for it now, not to do properly, and don’t want to risk your fingers.” I nodded, still trying to feel what she was talking about. This was sounding more and more like some kind of ki system.

“Now,” said Amaryllis. “Call on the warmth of your blood and push it to your fingertips.” She concentrated on her index and middle fingers, which ignited with flame. She let me watch for a few seconds, then it disappeared, with no apparent ill effects. “Now you try.”

I did as she had instructed me, feeling my blood, feeling its movement, feeling its warmth, then pushing that warmth to my fingertip - which lit up with flame.

_Unlocked skill: Blood Magic!_
Achievement Unlocked: Thicker than Water

Spell discovered: Aarde’s Touch!

Amaryllis stared at my lit finger. I stared at my lit finger. A small, blood-red bar popped up in my lower right field of vision. When I released the mental sense of pressure I was placing on my fingertip, the flame went out. Neat.

“Who is Aarde?” I asked.

“A god,” Amaryllis replied. “That spell took me months to learn. Months. I had the best teachers in the world and literally centuries of institutional knowledge on how best to coax someone into understanding. You … had me, giving you a haphazard lesson from incomplete memories, over the course of a few minutes, when both of us are half-starved. It should be impossible, unless …” She stopped with downcast eyes.

“Unless?” I prompted.

“Unless you knew blood magic in your previous life and the skewer took you only incompletely,” she replied.

“No, I think it’s the game thing,” I said. I stuck out my finger and lit it up again. It was much easier the second time and took no more effort on my part than snapping. The mana bar wasn’t moving at all, and didn’t seem to display any numbers for me. “What’s the limiting factor on blood magic?” I asked.

“Personal skill,” said Amaryllis.

I frowned at that. I was pretty sure that the game wouldn’t be showing me a mana bar that represented personal skill. I spread the flame across my fingertips, then covered my entire hand in it until it was blazing like a torch. “So I can keep doing this indefinitely?” I asked. “Does this do anything other than provide light?”

Skill increased: Blood magic lvl 1!

Amaryllis’ mouth was agape at my display, which I have to admit felt quite good. “The light it produces is a reflection of the heat you’re invoking,” she said. “It doesn’t have much utility, though you can go around without carrying a lighter. I swear the reason smoking was even remotely popular at the athenaeum was that it allowed people to show off their proficiency.”

I nodded at that, then let the warmth leave my hand and the fire wink out.

“So what you’re saying is that we could have had a fire last night?” I asked.

“A fire clearly visible from miles in every direction, yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Ah,” I replied. “Point taken. Wait a minute, I need to see what the spell looks like in my head.”

I closed my eyes for three seconds and called up the character sheet, then navigates to the page where “Spells Known” were listed. The page had changed somewhat since last time I had seen it; there was now a heading for Blood Magic and below that, Aarde’s Touch.

Aarde’s Touch: Channels the warmth of your blood to create a small fire at your fingertips, which does not burn you. Objects set on fire or heated may still harm you. Saps heat from your body and may leave you feeling chilly if used too long. Consumes 0 drops of blood.
“Huh,” I said, opening my eyes. “This spell … doesn’t make a lot of sense. Flames are a result of oxidation, aren’t they? I mean, that hasn’t changed in this world?”

“You would have to visit the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood if you want to know more,” said Amaryllis, and while that was a pitch-perfect NPC line, no quest popped up for me. “I had a knack for it, but I’m a novice … though if you were just wondering whether flames are caused by oxidation, then yes, they normally are.”

“By my count we’re not yet through the half hour,” I said, lighting my hand and then letting it extinguish as my concentration lapsed. “And you said that you knew three spells.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Fine then, something more advanced in the realm of blood magic,” she said. “Feel your blood coursing through your veins, then feel your pulse, feel the movement of it within your veins.” She made a fist with her slender fingers, which somehow didn’t seem threatening at all even though everything I knew about her indicated that she was fully capable of kicking my ass.

“Now, draw back, and with the next pump of your heart, as you feel the blood flow down your arm - -” Her fist blurred through the air and made a sound like the swing of a baseball bat through the air.

“Draw on the force of your heart. If you manage it, tell me what information you learn.”

I made a fist and concentrated on my blood. I was fairly sure that I had never tried to focus on the pulsing of my blood in my veins before, and if I had, I wouldn’t have been able to actually tell when the blood was moving, especially since it was necessarily moving in both directions. But here, on Aerb, I could feel it, almost keenly when I was paying attention. I reared back, tried to set my tempo to the beat of my heart, then --

**Skill increased: Blood Magic lvl 2!**

**Spell discovered: Crimson Fist!**

It seemed like an unbelievable amount of power to be put into a fist, and I went off-balance, stumbling slightly before regaining my composure.

“It’s called Crimson Fist,” I said.

Amaryllis nodded. She didn’t look happy. “And you picked it up on your very first attempt, having been introduced to the concept of blood magic only half an hour prior,” she said. “That’s troubling. I’m more convinced than ever that it’s imperative we get you out of here, somewhere you can be safely … diagnosed.”

That long pause? That was troubling. I put that on the back burner and closed my eyes to look at the spell.

**Crimson Fist:** Channels the force of your blood to gain kinetic energy in the form of a punch. Your fist is in no way protected by this spell. Drawing on this spell too often may leave you feeling sluggish. Consumes 3 drops of blood.

I opened my eyes and looked at the mana bar in the lower right of my vision. As I did, it gained a label, “Blood” and numbers appeared on it, “75K/75K”. I tried to do some quick math on that, but numbers had never really been my strong suit. The body had 10 pints of blood or so, I knew that from research I’d done before we played a one-shot of Vampire: The Masquerade. Were there 7,500 drops in a pint? That sounded plausible. At any rate, the bar hadn’t moved, and there weren’t enough significant digits to see the numbers change.

“Is it possible that you’re not right about limits?” I asked. “The description shows a cost in terms of
blood.”

Amaryllis frowned. “So from your perspective, you’re simply being told things by this … game layer, you called it?”

“Yes,” I replied. “It told me your name before --” Poul, who you killed. “Before it was revealed to me.”

“There is some cost in blood, yes,” said Amaryllis. “But it’s usually considered so marginal that it’s not worth thinking about. There are aspects of discomfort as well, but they’re survivable.” She hesitated. “To wield a blood sword does require the blood to be drawn from the body, but traditionally a blood magus would have the skill to return their vital essence to themselves with none lost. If the rules of progression are different for you, I have no idea what might happen. It might be dangerous.”

She turned to look at Silmar City on the horizon. “Our allotted time is up,” she said. “The only spell I know is the one for sleep, and it’s not only unattached to a school, but there’s no way for me to safely demonstrate it, or you to safely practice it, at least as we are now. More to the point, it won’t help us when we get there.”

I was itching to unlock another magic skill so that I could start leveling it, but I knew part of that was just a desire to feel ready for whatever was ahead of us. We’d had little luck in foraging, only enough so that I hadn’t hit another level of hunger. But this was it, here and now; we were going into Silmar.

I’d expected Silmar City to resemble Wichita or Omaha, differing mostly in a few small details, which had been the general theme I had seen thus far. Instead, there were no less than six thirty-story tall castles in place of skyscrapers and a twenty-foot tall stone wall forming a loose circle around the city. There were nothing like suburbs outside the city walls and very few buildings in general, save for a tiered parking garage some distance from the gate and what looked like an administrative building near that.

“Shit,” said Amaryllis as she slowed the soulcycle to a crawl. “The gate isn’t open.”

“Is that … unexpected?” I asked. The gate in front of us was made of metal and glowed with sigils similar to the ones that I had seen on the grain elevators in Comfort.

“Not entirely,” said Amaryllis. “Most cities close their gates at night. But we’re going to have to find a different way in. And … hells, if all the gates are closed, then the undead haven’t had an opportunity to fully spill out into the fields around us. That explains our easy approach, I suppose, but it means that there are millions of them in there.”

“And if they group together, they form up,” I said slowly. “We … don’t actually have a reliable method of killing the big ones. Or that sleek one that almost caught up to us. And they seem to get smarter when they’re bigger, at least capable of rudimentary tactics. And if they come in bigger sizes than what I’ve seen, and those bigger ones have human-level intellect …” I trailed off. Well, we might be fucked.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said. She turned around in her seat to look at me. Our faces seemed startlingly close. I could see flecks of silver in her icy blue eyes. “This is your last chance out,” she said. “I can give you the soulcycle and you can leave. We’re further from the Host’s outposts now, by a few days at least, but I won’t obligate you to risk your life to save mine.”

“I have your back,” I said.
Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 3!

That gave me a warm glow, and I felt myself blushing again. She thankfully turned away from me before she could see it and looked at the door, which was as wide as a four-lane highway.

“The sigils there prevent most forms of force,” she said. “That’s mostly irrelevant to us, because we don’t have force anyway. The void guns could do it, eventually, but if that door is a foot thick … we’d be looking at the better part of a day to punch out a hole large enough for us to just barely slip through, and I’m not so confident in these weapons that I wouldn’t expect a malfunction before we were finished.”

“So we go around,” I said.

Quest Progress: Out of the Frying Pan - The main gates into Silmar City are blocked and you lack the capability to breach them. Find a secret entrance in order to get inside.

“Does Silmar City have any secret entrances?” I asked after I finished reading the text.

“If it does, they’re not known to me,” said Amaryllis. She momentarily tightened her grip on the soulcycles handles. “Your power is telling you something?”

“It mentioned secret entrances to me,” I replied. “I was hoping that it would jog your memory.”

Amaryllis shook her head. “This place was known to me mostly because of the facility here,” she said. “I never visited it back before its fall, and obviously not since.”

“Do you know what the walls are for?” I asked.

She gave me a quizzical look. “They’re primarily for defense,” she said. “What other purpose would the wall serve?”

“Defense against what?” I asked. “If it were defense against the undead then they would leave a door that the undead couldn’t get through, right?” Mustn’t say the z-word. “Obviously they weren’t preparing to defend against the undead, but they were preparing to defend against something, otherwise why would they spend so much time, money, and wasted development on these walls?”

(I wasn’t entirely sure it was true to say that they had to have walls for a reason. In a game, even one that I was responsible for, there were setting details that just didn’t make sense. I hadn’t yet definitively found those in Aerb, just things that I lacked an explanation for, if you get the difference. I wasn’t one to condemn a setting because there was no immediately apparent answer, only if there was no possible answer that didn’t require jumping through a thousand hoops.)

“The defense is general,” said Amaryllis. “A wall of this nature isn’t difficult to build and maintain for a corps of steel mages, not in the post-Bessemer era, and they can move it virtually at will in order to allow for expansion. Besides, it’s useful to have a city with clearly defined ingress and egress points, not just for taxation of goods, but to control the movement of population.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a non-defensive use of a wall,” I said. “If the wall is there to prevent people from avoiding taxes, then I would expect smugglers to have their own methods in and out of the city.”

“And how would we find them?” asked Amaryllis.

“That … is a good question,” I said. “Not here, certainly, not so close to where the equivalent to a border guard is, but if we circled around we might be able to find something. Not a tunnel,
necessarily, but -”

“It would have to be something that hypothetical smugglers were hiding from the city,” said Amaryllis. “That means that it would be hidden from us as well. And getting over the walls would be simple, for a smuggler, doable with only a long ladder.”

I felt certain that the game wasn’t lying to me though, since it hadn’t done that thus far. If we assumed that smugglers’ routes were going to be too difficult for us to reasonably find, then what could secret entrances mean? Amaryllis must have been doing her own thinking, because she was mostly silent. That suited me fine; I needed do less thinking aloud.

Cities were living, breathing things. They generally took in food and raw materials and spat out waste and finished goods. Unfortunately, the existence of teleportation magic complicated all that. Amaryllis had said that teleportation was lethal without a key, but there were a whole host of things people wanted to move which were already dead. The road into Silmar City had seemed somewhat small for its size, but that made sense if you assumed that bulk transport was almost completely removed from the equation. I hadn’t yet seen train tracks, and semi trucks were almost non-existent.

“What doesn’t get teleported?” I asked.

“Hrm?” asked Amaryllis.

“You use teleportation for moving goods around countries, right?” I asked. “What things don’t get teleported?”

“Water,” she said immediately. “It’s horrendously heavy in comparison to its value. Liquids in general are problematic, but water … that almost never gets shipped. It’s easier to just draw from a river instead.”

“Is there a river near here?” I asked.

“The Sarkan,” said Amaryllis. “It flows past Silmar City, on the other side from us. The walls actually touch the riverbanks there, I believe, with a bridge over it. What are you thinking?”

“That water has to be brought into the city somehow,” I said. “Presumably wastewater has to leave in a similar way. Maybe they’ll have grates up, depending on what kind of defense parameters they had, but my guess is that it will be nothing like these gates and walls, especially not on the outflow.”

“We’re going to go into one of the most stereotypically videogame places of all time: the sewers.

“We don’t have many other options,” murmured Amaryllis. “We should at least check the other gates to make sure that we can’t slip in that way. Going through the piping though … I suppose won’t be that dangerous, since the undead wouldn’t move into a restricted space unless they had reason to.”

A half hour later we were looking at a set of outflow pipes sticking out just above the water of the Sarkan River.

*Quest Progress: Out of the Frying Pan - The sewers of Silmar City are relatively unguarded. Make your way through them and out into the infested city.*
I had some serious questions about the quest system. What would it have done if we had decided to brute force our way into the city? What about if we had spent a few hours going back and grabbing a ladder, then awkwardly carrying it to Silmar City? What if we’d found some rope and fashioned a grappled hook? The quest system had inside knowledge of the environment we existed in, but where was that knowledge being pulled from? It was, to say the least, worrying, and I took it as proof that I was actually in a game, even if it was a game that was so far beyond any technology I knew as to be incomprehensible, one that I had been thrust into while in the middle of my life, and one that had given me an assurance that my death was still on the line.

It took us a few minutes to get through the grates on the outflow pipes using the void tunneler, but it was easy enough. The grate fell to the ground with a clank and we stared down the pipe, which was large enough for us to walk down without crouching.

“What about the soulcycle?” I asked, looking back to it. My butt was sore from all the riding we’d done, but I regretted leaving it.

“Good point,” said Amaryllis. She went over to it and pulled a long, thin rubber pipe off it, which she hooked into itself so it formed a loop. She slipped that over her head as a necklace. “There,” she said. “Now no one can take it. Not that we’re going back for it.”

“What about the souls?” I asked, looking at the tank, which still had the same seven souls sitting in it. I had to wonder about that; it didn’t seem like they were depleting, which meant my initial impression of them as being fuel like gasoline must not have been quite accurate.

“They’ll fade in about five years,” said Amaryllis. “It’s doubtful that anything will have changed in the Risen Lands in that time. She began moving back toward the outflow pipe.

“I’d like to take them with us,” I found myself saying.

Amaryllis regarded me for a moment, then shrugged. “Suit yourself,” she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out the empty glass jar, which she’d brought with us. “You know that we can’t bring them back to life, right? Not even if we wanted to, which we wouldn’t.”


It took longer than I would have liked to get the souls out, as apparently the tank was more designed for entry than exit. Amaryllis stood by and offered me no help, even though it was eating into our time. I have to admit that annoyed me a little bit, though it did give me some measure of what Loyalty level 3 actually meant. When I was finished, we finally headed into the sewers.

I led the way, with the void tunneler in one hand and fire in the other, which provided our only source of light. My sword was at my hip, though I was desperately hoping that I wouldn’t get into a situation where I needed to use it. Amaryllis followed behind me with the rifle. I’ll admit that made me nervous; from what I had seen she had good trigger discipline and impeccable aim, but if we ran into anything I was going to be between her hole puncher and her target. I didn’t think that she was going to shoot me in the back, but she was visibly annoyed at my skill with Aarde’s Touch, and clearly had no compunctions about murder. I hoped that didn’t play into her calculations on whether or not to take a shot.

There was a trickle of water flowing through the pipes, just enough that I could see which way it was
flowing. That made navigating the pipes nearly foolproof, since all I needed to do was go upstream. I was hoping to get to a water treatment plant or whatever the local equivalent was (a topic that Amaryllis had professed ignorance on). From there, we could break through doors or climb out windows and get onto the city streets of Silmar City, and from there start making our way to our objective.

The first sign of trouble was the corpse of a dead rat, which was partially decomposing and badly mangled. I stared at it for a long moment.

“What is it?” asked Amaryllis, who was stopped behind me.

“Rat corpse,” I said. I knelt down and looked at it. “From what you said, rats should have been caught in the stronger field effect here?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis slowly. “Though rats would be risen as undead once they died either way. I was mostly referring to what would have happened during the attack itself. All of the rats would have turned undead all at once, all across the city. Same for the birds and humans.”

“Right,” I said. “So how in the hell did this rat die?”

“That’s not a question that I think we want to find the answer to,” she said.

But something about the rat was nagging at the back of my mind, aside from the simple question of what had killed it and what that implied about what was down here. I was also wondering what mental ability I would need to boost in order to have that thought at the tip of my tongue come to fruition, if any.

It was another few minutes before I saw a flash of red at the end of the tunnel, moving frighteningly fast. The plain old zombies were almost not enough to be considered threats, now that I was armed. The big ones, the Zombies Voltron, were slow enough that I could outrun them. It was the mid-sized one that we’d faced down just outside of Comfort that really scared me, especially in this environment, which would turn claustrophobic in a hurry if we had to run away. We had only a single void bomb left, and we were casting light that I assumed would draw any of the undead like moths to a flame.

I stopped in my tracks when I’d seen the two red eyes, and Amaryllis stopped behind me. I waited, tensed, for it to come forward, but it must have been moving through one of the side tunnels, almost perpendicular to us. There was a chance that it hadn’t seen us … but there was no noise either, not the slap of dead flesh against a wall nor the sound of a foot stepping in water.

“We have contact,” I whispered. I heard Amaryllis shift behind me as I raised my hand higher and put more of the heat of my blood into Aarde’s Touch so that it engulfed my entire hand from my wrist to the tips of my fingers. It still wasn’t terribly bright. I could also feel the chill that the spell description had warned about, but at the moment that was a lesser concern.

I waited another few seconds, then stalked forward with my gun pointed ahead of me. My hand was shaking slightly, which caused the tip of my gun to waver, which in turn increased my feeling of doom as I realized that I was going to have a harder time landing my shot. I almost lost what little cool I had remaining when the game gave me another inopportune message, this one about my ability with blood magic.

Eventually I came to the split in the pipes where I had seen the undead thing go past. I took a deep breath of mildewed air and quickly turned the corner. I got a shot off, thwip, right before it started moving, before I even had a chance to take in its form.
It was made of the corpses of rats, hundreds if not thousands of them, arranged with four limbs and reared back on two of them. It was a mess of wet fur and wriggling tails, with bits of legs and heads sticking out from between the bodies, all forming a solid mass. One of the things I’d be hesitant to call hands reached forward with a dozen rat claws arranged together and extended. I backed up, but it caught my left hand and left several long rows of deep scratches.

**New Affliction: Rat Rot! (END -1, CUN +1)**

I had no time to process that, because I was trying to back up and kick at the rat thing so it couldn’t get close to me. The second time I tried kicking it in the chest, my foot seemed to sink right into it, the rat corpses parting way just enough, then crawling back around to hold my foot tight. I stumbled backward, losing my shoe to the rats in the process and falling on my ass in the shallow water at the bottom of the pipe.

I heard the solid *thunk* of Amaryllis firing her rifle and scrambled to my feet just in time to duck under another swipe from the dozens of tiny claws. Without thinking too hard I dropped my void gun, drew my sword, and swung with it. The sword sliced right through, cutting rats in the process. I saw bits and pieces falling to the ground, but the rat colony reformed itself to compensate and took another swing at me.

I raised my sword to block, but it rammed its arm straight through, heedless of the rats I was cutting up. The claws dug in and ripped away flesh from on the inside of my arm, right at my elbow, and I screamed out in pain as I pulled back and made a sloppy swing with my sword again.

**New Affliction: Blood Loss! (END -1)**

**Skill increased: One-handed Weapons lvl 4!**

My sword arm was wet with blood as I took another step back, and the mass of rats didn’t seem at all injured. I heard another *thunk* from Amaryllis, this one frighteningly close, and saw a number of rat parts drop off from a hole I couldn’t even see in the poor light coming from my flaming hand. I struck again, coming down at an awkward angle because my elbow had hit the side of the pipe, and cleaved straight through the swarm of rats from its shoulder through to its leg.

**Affliction: Blood Loss lvl 2! (PHY -1, END -1)**

I was feeling quite cold now, and somewhat dizzy, and the bar that seemed to be tracking my blood supply had taken a noticeable dip, and when the rat thing swept an arm toward me I wasn’t able to react fast enough to dodge or parry. It sliced through my stomach, cutting up the t-shirt and leaving long red lines.

Amaryllis pushed me to the side, which made me fall against the curved side of the pipe in a bloody heap. She stepped forward and punched at the center of the rat thing, moving so fast I heard the rush of air before her fist went straight through with a wet crunch. I let out a moan of pain that was meant to be panicked advice, telling her that we couldn’t deal with it that way, but then she drew her hand out of the rats and a split second later there was the muted sound of a void bomb going off. The rats all fell apart into a pile on the ground, most of them missing pieces.

**Umbral Rat Zombie defeated!**

I was worried they were going to swarm us, until I saw how slow they were, then I tried to move and realized how slow *I* was, which was when I started to panic a little. I was still bleeding, enough that I could see it pumping out my veins, as well as the visibly shrinking blood supply mana bar.
Amaryllis stomped the rats to death, one by one, moving with purpose, until none were left moving. Then she came to me and looked me over. Her own hand, the one she’d punched the rat thing with, was scraped up and bleeding lightly, but she moved as though unaffected.

**Affliction: Blood Loss lvl 3! (PHY -2, END -1, MEN -1, SOC -1)**

“Did you punch that thing with a grenade?” I asked her. I was starting to feel quite dizzy.

“Shut up and don’t move,” she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a belt, which she quickly wrapped around my wounded arm and pulled painfully tight. Then she took out a screwdriver, which she rested against her pinky. She took a deep breath and set her finger on fire. She held it against the screwdriver, wincing in pain and visibly sweating, until the smell of burnt flesh was rising in the air and the screwdriver was red hot. I knew what was coming and closed my eyes, trying not to think.

The red-hot screwdriver came down on the pit of my elbow, where my vein must have been sliced open, and cauterized it with a pain that was surprisingly dull at first, then so sharp and white-hot that my whole body involuntarily clenched up. I almost couldn’t hear the sound of my blood and flesh hissing.

“You said leveling up heals you?” she said.

I nodded weakly, then dared to look at my hitpoints. **1/8. Lovely.**

“Well we had better make sure that happens in the next half hour, or I think you’re probably going to be beyond my ability to do anything.” From her bag she pulled out a strip of cloth, which she quickly wrapped around her finger. She didn’t so much as wince. If it weren’t for how she clenched her teeth, I might not even have known she was in pain. “We’ve got no void bombs left, you’re injured, and we still don’t know if we’re any closer to getting to the surface, let alone what we’ll find there. And encountering another one of those,” she paused to stomp on a rat that had gotten close to me, “Probably means that we die.” She looked down at her wounded hand. “Plus I think there’s a great chance this is infected.”

“We’ll manage,” I said as I struggled to my feet, something I tried my best to do gracefully and failed miserably at. I did manage to stand up eventually though. My estimation, based on the blood meter, I was down about two pints (the meter unhelpfully told me **61K/75K**). I wasn’t entirely sure that it would refill when I level up. I’d broken my arm and that had been fixed, along with its associated affliction, but the cowardice affliction had stayed in place for a few levels until I’d tried to save Becca.

Amaryllis took lead and I limped behind her. My pistol had been soaked in water, but still seemed to fire fine. On the other hand, the person firing the pistol was in bad shape. I didn’t want to look at my character sheet, mostly because there wasn’t going to be anything actionable on it, but if the ability stats worked like I thought they did, then I was down to two points of END and the combination of Blood Loss and Rat Rot was giving me the equivalent of stat equivalent of losing four levels.

**Affliction: Hungry lvl 2! (PHY -1, MEN -1, POI -1)**

Frick

“I need to look at my character sheet,” I said. It came out with a rush of air. I was practically panting.

“Go quickly,” said Amaryllis. “We need to keep moving.”
A quick glance confirmed my mental math; I now had four stats sitting at zero, all my mental stats save MEN, plus POI. I breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that it hadn’t actually killed me. A look at my skills gave me another bit of good news; so far as I could see, if skills were capped by their primary stat, it wasn’t obvious that having that primary stat reduced would also reduce my skills.

“Okay, we can keep moving,” I croaked out. The burn on my arm was excruciating. “I just needed to see --”

“Save your strength,” said Amaryllis.

I don’t know exactly how long it was that we moved through the tunnels. My sense of time and sense of self were both warped. My heart was hammering away through all of it, both because I was afraid of dying and because it was struggling to make do with far less blood than normal. We encountered a few other zombie rats, but none of the monstrosities, which was a good thing, because we both would have died. We also came across another of the mangled rat corpses, which I finally understood. The rat-horde beast used corpses as feet, bringing down hundreds of pounds on the lowest ones each time it took a step.

Eventually though, we came to a ladder that led to a grate, and that grate led us up into something vaguely resembling a place meant for people, with metal walkways and unlit overhead lights. More importantly, it had a door, which promised other doors, one of which would lead us to the outside. I sat down and rested my head against a railing, then gestured toward it.

“Look, we found the way to more zombies,” I said.

“Don’t say that word,” hissed Amaryllis.

“Sorry,” I replied. My throat was barely working.

“Do I need to let you get the kills?” she asked.

It took my mind a second to work through what she was asking me. “Oh, don’t think so,” I replied. “I get a message when you kill things for me.”

“I’m going to leave you here then,” said Amaryllis. She shifted the sling on her rifle. “Moving alone I can cover ground faster, which means that I can scout out ahead and engage in hit and run tactics if need be. I’ll come back for you with food and medical supplies as soon as I find them. If what I do helps you to live and we’re separated from one another …”

“Meet up,” I said, nodding my head because I couldn’t keep my neck straight.

“Meet up,” Amaryllis agreed. I could see the way she clenched her jaw. “Twenty-first floor of Sorian’s castle, that’s where the facility is. I’ll … I’ll try to wait for as long as I can, if I can’t make it back.”

She left me, out the door without another word. I closed my eyes and wearily pulled up the settings menu, then checked the “Helldiver” option. While I was there, I tried to uncheck some of the options, like the one informing me that this was my one and only life, but of course those options stayed locked, as I had known they would.

And after that, I just waited for a while, staring into the darkness because I was too cold, tired, and low on blood to use Aarde’s Touch to light the room. I thought to myself, so this is what dying feels like, and then amended it to, this is what dying from blood loss feels like, and then amended it a second time to, this is what heavy blood loss feels like, regardless of whether you die or not, because I didn’t actually know that I was going to die, did I? In what I still thought of as the real world,
people survived much worse injuries than this on a daily basis. I checked my health and mana; 2/4 health, 59K/75K blood. I had gained back a point, presumably by not dying for long enough that my wounds had started to close a little bit. The same thing had happened after Amaryllis had hit me in the head with a rock.

If I had been waiting for anything, it was for Amaryllis to kill something and a message to pop up on my screen, but I had seen nothing like that. After maybe a half hour on the uncomfortable floor of this industrial room in the complete darkness, I decided that being left for dead by Amaryllis with just enough pretext to make me not blame her (and her to not blame herself) didn’t mean that I actually had to die there. So I climbed to my feet, feeling wounds on my stomach, hand, and arm slightly reopen. I tried to use blood magic to light my way, but my blood pressure was too low for me to feel my pulse. Instead, I stumbled forward, holding the railing and saying a silent prayer of thanks to whatever Silmar City’s version of OSHA was.

It took a long time, enough for another thousand drops of blood to drip out of me, but I made it to the door and opened it, which provided some very dim light from down the hallway. I moved toward the light, leaning up against a wall as I did so. My toe kicked a corpse after a hundred feet; there was just enough light to see a perfect hole right in his chest. And her kills aren’t counting for me, just lovely.

After a turn in the hallway, I was in the light. There were half a dozen corpses here, and by the look of them they had been reverted from undead back to dead again by someone with a void rifle, three guesses who. The light was coming in from a high window, too high for me to see out of even if I had been in good enough condition to stand on my tippy toes.

I moved through more doors and down more hallways, taking the path that Amaryllis had left whenever it was obvious. I encountered no zombies of my own, just the destruction she’d left. There was something frightening about how methodical she was, how precise she was with her shots, enough that it pushed me just a little bit out of my haze. The zombies were slow, sure, not much of a challenge, but it still took effort of will to face them down and wait for the perfect moment.

Finally I reached wide double doors with frosted glass windows on either side of them. It took basically all my strength to lean into the handle and push the door open. Before me stood Silmar City, high walls behind me, a brief stretch of lawn in front of me, and beyond that, towering over office buildings, were six improbably immense castles. That wasn’t what drew my attention though; standing tall enough that its head was visible over three story buildings was another creature made of corpses, with red eyes so bright they reminded me of a lighthouse.

*Quest Complete: Out of the Frying Pan - You have made it to Silmar City!*

*Level Up!*

*Quest Accepted: Into the Fryer - The teleportation key lies in a secret research facility nestled into the top level of Sorian’s Castle, one of the six corporate castles in Silmar City. Get the key, find Amaryllis, and leave before her friends show up.*

I sank down to my knees as the golden wave of bliss took me, but it lifted me partway up, supporting me entirely as it shook my body with ecstasy. It seemed to last longer this time, long enough that I felt myself in its grip. When it stopped, I felt this hollow emptiness, as though I’d been pithed. And yet that sensation didn’t last that long, because I was also whole, devoid of affliction, all my blood back in my body, and I wasn’t even hungry anymore.

I stretched out and smiled, then went off to find Amaryllis.
I don’t think I can overstate how great it was to have all my blood back. It made me almost empathize with vampires a little bit, because if it felt this good to have all my blood back in my body, how great would it be to add in even more blood? Of course, that feeling was nothing that I was going to share with anyone on Aerb, because vampires probably did exist here given how often they’d shown up in my games. I guess I could only hope that they were the ones I’d used in Contratto, with a single point of failure for every vampire clan.

Blood magic felt almost natural now. I barely had to think about the heat of my blood to get a flame on my fingertips. I was dead certain that there were other applications to blood magic, given what I had seen of it so far, but I wasn’t sure whether I was going to be able to learn them without outside help, or given Amaryllis’ warnings, whether I would want to learn them without outside help.

Before I went too far from the water treatment facility, I stopped to assess my character screen and dump more points into MEN, mostly because I now knew that there were physical combat skills like Rifles that depended on it, and partly because being a human torch in the sewers had capped me on Blood Magic (which was, apparently, governed primarily by WIS). There was no noticeable effect from putting those points in, unlike the instant feedback of getting stronger and faster, which was disappointing.

With that done, I had some decisions ahead of me. Obviously step one was to find Amaryllis. It might have been different if she didn’t have a vital connecting hose to the soulcycle around her neck and all seven souls needed to start it in a glass bottle in her purse, but she had both those things. That meant escape from the city was going to be much more complicated than just tracing my way back through the sewers and hoping I didn’t run into rats we’d missed the first time.

(It did occur to me to do that, maybe after foraging for some food, or maybe depending on leveling up at a fast enough rate to combat the hunger affliction, but it seemed perverse, in a way that I’m not sure I can articulate. As a DM, I had always felt a cold chill run through me when the party decided they were going to take up raising dire goats instead of going down into the Castrato Caverns like the dwarven matron wanted them to, partly because I was prepared for the castrated dwarven criminals storyline but knew next to nothing about raising goats. So maybe my feeling was that there was a contract between players and game, and I had a quest to get the key and find Amaryllis. To deny that quest and fuck off to do something else was to spit in the face of the game, and I respected games too much to do that.

And I won’t deny that there were some sunk costs involved in pursuing this quest, in the sense that I had already incurred the costs involved in getting into Silmar City, and maybe there was a tiny bit of sunk cost fallacy going on.

And … well, I hesitate to say this, because it makes me seem no better than a preteen girl mooning over One Direction, but Amaryllis was really pretty and there was something about coldly practical princesses that I apparently found really appealing.

I guess my point, if I have one, is that maybe there was a more sensible thing that a perfectly rational actor could have done, but I had my own reasons.)

The problem with finding Amaryllis was that stupid Verisim mode was on, which meant there were no quest markers showing up on my HUD or painted lines on my minimap, or however that would have worked if I had been able to enable it. All I had to go on was “the twenty-first floor of Sorian’s castle”. I wasn’t even sure whether going there was my best option, because I wasn’t sure that
Amaryllis would try to make her way directly there. She was capable of making void bombs out of… well, *something* that she had apparently been able to get from somewhere in Comfort. I had no idea what she had ripped the void crystals out of, except that Poul had said something about an imperial ban. That wasn’t very helpful.

So instead of bumbling toward the local equivalent of downtown, I decided to do some good old fashioned looting, and I made myself a shopping list in my head as I went, including things like a map, new clothes that weren’t ripped and bloody, new shoes that weren’t soaked through with sewer water, and a backpack so that I could have some actual possessions.

One of the weird things about what had happened to the Risen Lands was that it had left pretty much everything intact. Buildings were still subject to the elements and the zombies, as well as whatever people got dropped in from planes, but the zombies didn’t really seem to be in the business of mindlessly destroying things unless there were people in the way, and buildings were built to withstand normal weather conditions. I wasn’t sure exactly how many years had passed since this place had become known as the Risen Lands, but at times it was easy to imagine that it had been yesterday, or that it wasn’t abandoned at all and the people had stepped out.

Back on Earth, my dad had been big into helping people out, and a few times I went with him when he would bring his truck and tools across Kansas to help people who had suffered through tornado strikes. Back in 2011 I remember going to Reading and helping pick through piles of merchandise at a yarn store to see what was salvageable after the roof had been torn off and let the rain in. As tornados went, that had been a bad one, an EF3 hitting the town almost perfectly … and yet we’d gone through Reading only a few years later, and even though half the town had been destroyed it was almost all back in place, all except the trees.

So as I wandered through Silmar City, I was looking for places that I thought I’d be able to loot, but I was also thinking about this city and what had happened to it, and what that said about the world. Something like a half a million people had died all throughout the Risen Lands, and the place was made into an exclusion zone, never to be touched again, leaving what had to be trillions of dollars of infrastructure laying around to rot. It wasn’t just the sheer amount of stuff laying around, but the farmlands themselves, farmlands which seemed to still be fertile. All of it had been bundled up into an exclusion zone where no one ever went. For what reason?

I lost my train of thought when the tall buildings I assumed were factories or office buildings gave way to places with shopfronts. The streets of Comfort had been in a nice, ordered grid like I was used to, but Silmar City took what I thought of as the Paris approach, where blocks were arranged in awkward wedges and streets were a spider’s web. For someone used to streets that extended on until they hit flat farmland that stretched to the horizon, it was pretty claustrophobic. When I saw a shop with clothing, I took that as a welcome respite from the abandoned streets.

The door was locked, but it was nothing that a quick *thwip* of the void tunneler couldn’t fix. I was really growing to love that thing. I moved slowly, trying my best to make sure the place was clear before I did something dangerous like trying on a pair of pants, and just for good measure I spent about ten minutes trying to hide in and around the store, just to see whether I would get a notification about my Deception increasing.

I was apparently still in a more industrial part of the city, because the clothes in the shop were geared toward hard labor: heavy fabrics, sturdy buckles, and an array of tools near the front counter. I found basically everything I wanted in terms of clothing over the course of the next twenty minutes, from a pair of steel-toed boots to a pair of heavy canvas jeans I hoped would offer a little protection against the claws of the undead. There were packs of clean socks and underwear, the kind always bought in bulk, and while they had a faintly unpleasant odor to them, they seemed to be structurally sound. It
was whatever the local equivalent of summer was, which made heavy clothing a little bit inadvisable, but I figured that was probably a price worth paying for armor, especially since I found a canteen for water, and a shoulder pack to stick things in. The only things on my shopping list I didn’t find were food, potable water, a map, and a multitool.

Of course, everything was just a bit off from what I was used to. The currency symbol seemed to be δ, placed after the (Arabic) numbers. The underwear had been packaged in a thin canvas bag rather than the thin, clear vacuum-pack plastic I was used to. There were no zippers anywhere; they used buttons instead. The aglets on my new shoes were metal, not plastic, and I didn’t think that was a simple matter of workmanship because none of the other shoes had plastic either. I knew that they had plastic in Aerb, but most of what I had seen was hard plastic or rubber. Did they not have plastic bags? The trash can beneath the shop counter had a paper liner rather than a plastic one, and yes, I did check specifically to sate my curiosity.

These attempts to study and understand the world were partly driven by my desire to bury myself in thought, to distract from all the problems I was facing, but I wanted so badly to know what kind of world this was. I had four quests to pursue here, but the most important goal I had was understanding the nature of this new reality I had found myself in. The metaphysical questions weren’t really actionable at the moment, I had decided that almost right away, but if I had a self-defined quest, then it would have been to get to the bottom of what this place, which was so steeped in my own thoughts and so reminiscent of Earth, really was.

I continued my trek through the city, stopping only briefly to listen for movement when there was an intersection ahead of me or when I wanted to read a sign painted on a storefront. Silmar Velocity Services, Planus Tattooing, and Eckhart Prognostications all caught my eye, but I moved past them when I saw nothing immediately interesting inside. I knew I could probably have spent years of my life exploring this city, with all its weirdness and quirks, even if I ignored all of the places that were obviously just eateries.

When I was a few blocks away from one of the towering castles, I finally found the thing I was most looking forward to: a bookstore. The name Able & Adler Booksellers was emblazoned across the front window, which was dirty but unbroken, and within I could see books on display, plus row upon row of full shelves behind them. I unlocked the door by shooting a hole in it, then went inside to see what I could find. My breath caught when I found a full section labeled “Magic”.

I started reading through the titles before remembering that this place might have zombies, so I grudgingly made a sweep of the shop before returning to my browsing. A Tour of the Elemental Planes, Insights into the White Spires, Bessemer: A History in Steel, on and on, each more tantalizing than the last. Their arrangement was haphazard, though there were defined clusters. Eventually I pulled out The Commoner’s Guide to Revision Magic and began reading (hoping all the while that I would get a notification about a skill unlock).

Revision mages are masters of time, able to reverse its flow with the strength of their will alone. The Athenaeum of Claw and Clocks is among the smallest institutions of learning, its members and graduates renowned for their solitary natures and their reticence to display their most fabled abilities.

It is with great honor that I accepted the invitation of Mistress Audrey Lavolen to discuss revision magic, its role in the workings of Aerb, and some common misconceptions about what it can and cannot do, the latter issue being one of great importance to her. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to George Aurelio, who facilitated the writing of this book in too many ways for me to count.
The general rule of thumb is that revision cannot wipe things out of existence, only break them down into their component parts, and then only through sufficient application of revision such that whatever process created the object in question is undone (see Ch 4). When it comes to its interaction with other systems of magic, it’s important to remember that generally speaking, *magic* cannot be reversed, only the *effects* of that magic.

To wit, a steel mage can create a towering wall which is immune to the ministrations of a revision mage, because the magic which creates the wall cannot be undone and the revision mage cannot revert the wall back to a time before it existed. The same applies to the cluster of similar effects we call teleportation, because the revision mage cannot unteleport someone or something that has arrived, putting a hard limit on how far they can roll a teleported object back. Some of the caveats to this will be discussed in this chapter.

Contrarily, velocity magic is almost entirely centered around producing effects, which present only somewhat heightened challenges for a revision mage, challenges which have more to do with reaction times than actual expenditures of power. Tattoo magic --

But as I was in the middle of reading that sentence, the glass front of the shop shattered completely and I turned just in time to see a beast made of corpses lift up toward me. I stumbled and ran in a sudden panic.

I must have been lured into a false sense of security by the scarcity of zombies thus far in Silmar City, because I had neglected to prepare an escape plan from this bookstore. I ended up running down the aisle, with the corpse-monster chasing after me and pushing down bookshelves to get through. When I reached the back of the store I took a sharp turn and doubled back, moving between the shelves that had been knocked over like dominoes and were now resting up against the wall, stepping on books as I went.

I hurdled over the knocked-over display and into the street, then after a moment of hesitation turned down back the way I had come, which seemed like the safe option. Running at a dead sprint was a lot harder in the heavier clothes, and I was heating up quickly, but I was hoping to lose the monster behind me like I’d done back in Comfort. Unfortunately, speed was only half the battle, and I quickly found myself going down a street that I didn’t quite remember, which was exactly the sort of place that I didn’t want to be. I ducked down behind a set of stairs and waited with my gun drawn, hoping that I had made enough twists and turns and turns through the irregularly angled streets.

After a minute or so of waiting, I came out and started moving again, trying to find my position relative to the city center and the so-called corporate castles by the position of the sun. I desperately wanted to get back to the bookstore to continue reading, mostly in order to get some measure of just how many magic systems this one world could contain. I cursed myself for not doing the smart thing and pulling down random books to put in my shoulder pack before I’d started reading.

I wandered on, more wary than I had been before. I was on the lookout for Amaryllis, but if she had left any signs of her passing, I wasn’t seeing them. That left me essentially aimless, right up until I found a corner store with a stock of faded maps that gave the general layout of Silmar City.

The first thing I noticed was that the streets weren’t labeled. Instead, each block had a name on it, and the streets were merely the unimportant void between the blocks. That was the Japanese addressing system, and I was pretty sure that it would have thrown me for a loop if I hadn’t discovered and used that same system for a handful of major metropolises in my D&D games.
The second thing I noticed was Sorian’s Castle, helpfully labeled as its own big block of real estate. I breathed a sigh of relief and picked up a pencil off the counter to mark it, only to realize that it was some weird form of pencil with wrapped paper instead of wood, and a black core that had dried out. It crumbled as soon as I tried to write with it. *Note to self, if I’m stuck here for awhile, I should try to invent graphite.*

I moved slowly, creeping my way along as I moved toward the castle. I didn’t think that the stories-tall corpse monstrosity would be able to sneak up on me any more than Godzilla could have, but it wasn’t the only thing that was stalking these quiet streets. The lack of plain old zombies was a little bit concerning, since it meant that I couldn’t snipe them for skill ups. It also meant that they had all been rolled into the bigger versions.

I was about three blocks away when a woman in fatigues came running around the corner, straight toward me. She was carrying a bow that was almost as tall as she was. When she saw me, she gave me a smile and a salute.

“Better follow!” she called to me as she sprinted past. I found out why a few seconds later, as two of the semi-trailer-sized zombie-things came following after her. I ran, naturally. It was only as I was running that I realized the woman’s ears had tapered to a point.

She was faster than me, but when I followed down the street she’d took she was standing there with an arrow nocked and aimed right at me.

“To the side!” she called.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I ran to the sidewalk, then continued up it until I was past where she was. It wasn’t until that point that I turned to look behind me. Naturally I was certain that a bow was an incredibly ineffective weapon against a creature like that. You had to hit the individual hearts of enough zombies that it would fall apart, and even a well-aimed arrow would be lucky to get two hearts. I didn’t say any of that, because I didn’t want to be the asshole who tells someone that they’re doing it wrong right before they knock it out of the park.

When she released the string, the arrow zipped through the air, until it was ten feet away from her. There, still in flight, it split into two identical arrows, and after another ten feet, each of those split into two arrows, on and on, until it was practically a cloud of arrows all flying through the air, loosely clustered together. They struck the zombies with the sound of wet flesh being pierced a hundred times and the umbral zombies, both of them, tumbled and fell apart. A number of the component zombies got up from the ground, some of them with arrows stuck through them, but they were slow and shambling, not really a threat unless they had you cornered.

The elf grabbed her bow in both hands and stretched with it over her head while yawning. “You’re welcome,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said. I was looking her over. The fatigues she was wearing had no insignias or other symbols on them. She was blonde, roughly as tall as I was, and with a smattering of freckles across her face, marking otherwise pale and flawless skin. My eyes kept being drawn to her ears, which came up into long points. “Though actually, you led those things toward me.”

“Hrm, so I did,” she replied. She sauntered over toward me and looked at the red-eyed zombies stumbling our way. “What exactly brings you to this part of town, hooman?”

“Uh,” I said, which was really not my best-ever stall for time. I needed a more clever way to delay before I started giving things away. “I was going to ask you the same thing.” *Nailed it.*
“Well, I see you’ve noticed the ears,” she said. “And the teeth as well, eh?” She smiled at me, and whatever she thought I had seen, her smile didn’t really help me figure it out, because her teeth looked normal, if a little bit unnaturally white. “Half-elf,” she said.

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“So your question should have been, ‘What brings you to this part of town, half-elf?’ instead,” she continued, looking at me expectantly.

I was paralyzed by a couple of things. First, I was standing in front of a real live honest-to-god elf (or at least a half-elf) just like I had seen in probably hundreds of source books and fantasy paintings. I figured I was probably going to feel the same way my first time seeing a dwarf too.

Second, and as an issue of actual importance, I was immediately suspicious of her. The odds of me running into anyone in this city were … well, hard to calculate, given that I didn’t know how many people were running around in Silmar City at any given moment. But the quest I had said ‘leave before her friends show up’, and that small bit of wording hadn’t slipped past me.

“Myself, I’m looting,” she said. “Violation of imperial law, that, but if the empire is going to just let all this stuff go to rot, then I don’t consider it the worst crime a person can commit to steal some of it away.” She paused. “And this is where you tell me what you’re doing here.”

“I’m,” I began. “Just sort of bumbling around.”

Skill increased: Deception lvl 5!

I was a bit miffed at that. I hadn’t really lied.

“Bumbling around,” said the half-elf with a nod. “I, too, often find myself wandering about in cities deep in the heart of exclusion zones, carrying makeshift pistols. There’s something that’s so freeing about being lost, don’t you think? An exhilaration that comes with being untethered from even the bare knowledge of where you are in the world, hrn?”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s … a nice bow you have there.”

Skill unlocked: Flattery!

That didn’t seem right. Had I never said anything to flatter Amaryllis? Thinking back I couldn’t think of a specific instance, but she was so damned impressive it seemed impossible I had never said so, or at least let slip how beautiful I thought she was in a moment of ineptitude.

“Oh, thank you,” said the half-elf. “Family heirloom, very valuable, but occasionally one likes to fire a volley of arrows. Your own … pistol? It’s very … rustic.”

I looked down at the pistol in my hand. “Look, I’m, uh, looking for a friend I got separated from,” I said. “Have you seen --” I thought about Amaryllis and how I would describe her, then thought twice about it. “-- anyone?”

“I don’t think the two of us have quite gotten to the point where we’re freely sharing information,” she replied, “And I’m sorry, but I have to place some blame for that on your reticence. Is there any particular reason that the two of us can’t be friends?”

“No,” I replied. My eyes involuntarily went to her bow, the first real magic item I’d seen thus far (if I didn’t count the void weapons). I wondered how often she could fire that volley of arrows and how dead I would be if I got hit by it. My guess was very dead. “Look, to be honest with you … I came
here by way of the plane.”

She raised an eyebrow at that and gave me a low whistle, then glanced at the zombies that were making their way toward us. “And your friend too?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, because I didn’t really think that was the sort of thing that I could plausibly hide.

“Well then,” said the half-elf, still watching the zombies. She held out her hand to me. “Name’s Fenn Greenglass.”

“Juniper Smith,” I replied, shaking her hand. I was fairly sure that there were no records anywhere in the world that would back me up on having that name.

She turned to me and smiled. “Well Mr. Human, if you’re amenable, traveling alone in Silmar City is pretty much the most insanely dangerous thing a person can do, so I’d like to introduce you to my party, and you can travel with us, at least until you find your friend. No obligation, but it’s safer for all of us.”

Shit. I still didn’t trust her. “I was planning on going to Sorian’s Castle,” I said. I didn’t trust her, but being cagey wasn’t getting me anywhere.

“Fine by me,” Fenn said with a shrug. “I’ll see if I can talk the others into it, but we’ve ventured in there once or twice before. And if not, then maybe one of them has seen your friend.”
“So what would you have done if one of the umbral undead came after you?” asked Fenn as we walked back toward where her party was apparently waiting.

“I can outrun them pretty easily,” I said. “Same as you.”

“The big ones, sure,” she replied. “But they can spawn little ones, made up of fewer bodies but more perfectly crafted, and those not even I can outrun, which means that you’d have no chance. I’m assuming that you haven’t encountered one, because if you had you’d know your plan was basically suicidal.”

I shrugged. “It’s not like I have a lot of options.”

“True, true,” said Fenn. “Of course, option one, which most people who get the drop choose, is not to go to Silmar City. The deal with the Host isn’t a bad one, if you can make it to them.”

“Sure,” I said.

“So you came here by mistake then?” asked Fenn.

I didn’t have a reply to that, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Look, I don’t mean to scare you off, but the people I’m keeping company with on this fine day are going to want some answer, any answer, and telling them you were bumbling around isn’t going to cut it,” she said in a soft voice. “You don’t have to come right out with whatever the truth is, though obviously that would be preferable, but you might say something like, oh, I don’t know, you came to Silmar City because you thought it would have things worth taking, things that you could use to make a sure escape.”

“The planes have been dropping people for years,” I said. “A relative of mine told me that the graduation rates had been falling for years, because everything had already been picked through. So … we came here, because this is the place that no one goes.”

“Oh, well, that wasn’t convincing in the slightest,” said Fenn. “And not just because I knew that you were lying.”

“Is there a reason you’re helping me?” I asked. If you are. “Not that I mind.”

“A demon told me to,” replied Fenn in a cheerful voice.

“A … demon?” I asked. I was trying my best not to say anything that would give me away as completely clueless about Aerab, but Fenn was making it difficult. I would have naturally assumed that demons were a part of this world, but for someone to be open about a demon giving them instructions seemed like a fairly major thing that I’d missed thus far.

“Isn’t that the human saying?” asked Fenn. “When you do something you ought not do, you say that a demon told you?”

“Oh,” I said. “The imp of the perverse?”

“Ah, that’s the one,” said Fenn. “I knew I was close. We’re just about where I left the others, let me do the talking.”
We rounded a corner (given the odd angles of the streets, Silmar City was almost entirely composed of corners) and came across three men and a woman standing around. They came to attention as soon as they saw us, with hands going to weapons and postures shifting into defensive stances. They let up only a little when Fenn called out to them.

The fastest way that I can describe those four was that they were a pretty classic adventuring party. There was a big guy, nearly seven feet tall by my guess, covered from head to toe in thick full plate armor, holding a massive shield he’d scooped up from the ground when he’d seen us and a pistol three times bigger than mine, which was finely machined; he was the tank. Beside him was a rat-like creature with quills coming from his head, which I guess made him more of a porcupine, dressed in robes and with his hand resting on the grip of what I judged to be a katana; he was their damage dealer. The other two I judged to be mages of some kind, both human (and yes, it occurred to me that I was in a place in my life where I was referring to people by their species); the woman wore tight-fitting red robes with bones strapped to her in bandoliers, while the bald man was nearly naked and covered in tattoos. Had Amaryllis mentioned bone magi? And the last words I’d read before I’d run from the bookshop had been ‘tattoo magic’.

And in addition to being pretty close to what I thought of as a typical adventuring party, it didn’t escape my attention that their composition matched what Amaryllis had described as the ideal strike force: five people, casters of various flavors, a brute, a blade … Fenn was the odd one out, but if I’d had any faith in her statement that she was a simple looter, that was out the window now. Unless this is just what simple looters are like in this world, in which case I am fucked.

“I found a friend!” called Fenn. “I was just telling him how we’re all looters.” That was the most obvious form of ‘I’m giving you the story I gave him so don’t contradict it’ that I had ever heard, so obvious that I assumed I was just meant to treat the looting story as a polite mind-your-own-business type of fiction.

“You have made many missteps today,” said the porcupine samurai. “Do not leave us again. And we are not in the business of picking up strays.”

“Sorry Juniper, he’s very rude,” Fenn said to me. “Quills, Juniper has lost his friend and I was hoping that we could help him. The more the merrier, right?”

“No,” said Quills (a name that I wasn’t going to risk calling him, not until I’d heard it from his own rodent-like lips), “We are here with a purpose, one which is the business of no one else.”

“Oh, well, if you put it like that,” replied Fenn with a roll of her eyes. “Juniper here fell out of a plane, and his friend did too. Does that change your opinion on the matter?” As an aside to me, she said, “Quills takes an interest in people falling from planes.”

Quills looked at me. “Describe your friend.”

“Uh, he has short blonde hair and a weak build,” I said. “Last I saw, he had a rifle on his back, but he might have lost it when we got separated from each other.”

Skill increased: Deception lvl 6! (Further skill gains from telling lies are capped by joint primary stat POI.)

“You are just the most atrocious liar I have ever met in my entire life,” said Fenn. She rested a hand on my shoulder, which I resisted the urge to shrug off. “And I was raised by wood elves. Look, you can tell us the truth, you’re not going to get in any more trouble than you’re already in.”

“I’m in trouble then?” I asked.
“You’re in the heart of an exclusion zone,” rumbled the man in armor. His helmet concealed his face and muffled his voice.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like you’re an errant schoolboy,” said Fenn. “I’ve certainly never thought of myself as a schoolmarm. In point of fact though, you’re looking for your friend and we might be able to help, but we can’t help if we have no description from you, can we?”

“Red hair, pale blue eyes, a maiden, but with purpose to her,” said the bone mage. Her fingers trailed over the bones strapped to her. “Intelligent, resourceful, daring.”

“Well, that’s more of a description than anyone gave me,” said Fenn with a huff. She turned to me. “Does that sound like your friend? There are, I gather, a few questions that Quills would like to ask her.”

“Fenn, silence,” said Quills. “Juniper, how did you come by an acquaintance with this young girl? That question should be harmless enough for you to answer and might lead us down productive avenues of conversation.”

The eyes of the tattoo mage glowed brightly, literally glowed with yellow light, then burnt out with a fizzing sound as a small tattoo on his chest faded. “We need to move,” he said calmly.

“Where are we going?” Quills asked Fenn. She twirled her finger in the air and pointed down one of the streets, then without saying anything started jogging in that direction. The others began following her, except for Quills, who stayed with me. “You’re coming with while we relocate,” he said.

I didn’t ask what would happen if I didn’t, mostly because I didn’t want to cement my place as their prisoner, and instead just jogged on after everyone else. Quill stayed behind me as we ran. I figured I was just about one sword stroke from a messy death, depending on how much he thought he needed me.

We regrouped in a burnt out shop, which smelled heavily of ash. I was mildly surprised that the whole city hadn’t been burnt to the ground in the absence of human intervention, but the walls seemed thicker in this place than I was used to on Earth, made with heavy stone rather than wood and drywall.

“It’s safe here?” asked Quills. “You’re certain?”

“For now,” shrugged Fenn. “You know I’m only a half-elf, right?”

“Give us a perimeter,” Quills said to the tattoo mage.

“I have six left,” he replied.

“Understood,” nodded Quills. When the tattoo mage left, Quills turned back to me. “How do you know this girl?” he asked. His eyes were watching me, and I was looking him over, trying to read him like he was so obviously reading me, but he was a freaking anthropomorphic porcupine and that was far too distracting. “Did you meet on the plane? No, you would have been bound and gagged. You met after you were on the ground?”

“Yes,” I said, to save me the shame of being read like a book. I wasn’t good enough at lying, not yet, and I apparently wasn’t going to get better anytime soon, not if the message about skill caps was to be believed. “She gave me a fake name, Cypress, but she had a plan for us to get out. The Fuchsia Coterie was there, killing people, and I didn’t have better options.”

“The Color Riot is involved?” asked the bone mage. She sighed at Quills. “This mission is getting
increasingly fucked.” Her hands went to her bones again, touching them one by one. “We have a mission outline, and a good one, with the tools we need to accomplish it. We’re saddled with,” she waved in Fenn’s direction, “but that’s a calculation that probably would have worked out, had we not been diverted in mid-stream to this other fucking mess. This isn’t any way to run missions. If you have two objectives that need to be accomplished, you don’t just spread a below-strength team thin and hope they can do both, you prioritize and pick the one that might actually be accomplished.”

“Are you done?” asked Quills. The bone mage nodded. “First, you’re saying too much in front of our guest, who need not be burdened by petty smugglers’ squabbles. Second, our focus was shifted from one task to the other, which we are, I agree, relatively ill-equipped for, specifically because it is one which should be easier, and more importantly, is very much time critical. Third, the tasks interrelate with one another. She knows where it is.”

“And how does she know that?” asked Fenn. “Who the hells is this girl you’re after?”

“I would tell you, if you needed to know,” said Quills.

I kept my mouth shut. I had told him that Amaryllis gave me a fake name, and he had apparently bought that bit of truthful deceit. I felt like I should level up just from that. How famous was she, anyway, if Poul was able to recognize her on sight? Why was she famous, if there were literally hundreds of other princes and princess? It would be like someone recognizing, I don’t know, a state senator or something. This wasn’t one of those academic “I wonder why the world is the way it is” questions that I sometimes got stuck on, I legitimately needed to know this in order to know how I should behave around these people.

“Where was she going?” Quills asked me, which was on the long list of questions that I didn’t want to answer.

“Sorian’s Castle,” I said. I paused for a moment, trying to think of what I could say that wouldn’t expose me as dream-skewered, be incredibly stupid, or otherwise jeopardize my life. “What are you going to do with her, when you find her?” Questions seemed safe, and so far Quills hadn’t treated me like I was undeserving of answers.

“He’d tell you, if you needed to know,” said Fenn with more than a trace of bitterness in her voice.

“Fenn oversteps her bounds,” said Quills, “It is one of the worst habits she’s displayed thus far, among many. Cypress, as you call her, will be debriefed and then released.”

Ah, so they are going to kill her. Because if they weren’t going to kill her, why wouldn’t he just say that they were taking her back to civilization? Wait, the magic number for teleportation is five, which means that if they were taking her back, one of them would have to stay behind. Presumably there are some limits on these teleportation keys so that having one doesn’t let you just dump as many people as you want, because Amaryllis treated it like a sensible limit to unit size.

“But you’re taking the teleportation key?” I asked. I registered surprise from Quills and the others. “She told me about it, that’s why I agreed to come to the city. That key was meant to be our way out. It’s your primary mission, but you don’t know exactly where it is, which is at least part of why you want her.” I hoped that I wasn’t saying too much. There was at least some value in seeming dumb and ignorant, but I wasn’t sure what their training or mission objectives said about people who had outlived their usefulness. “I can help you,” I continued on. “I traveled with her for two days, I know how she operates, what tricks she’s likely to use. We really did become friends. I can talk to her, help convince her to give you what you want, if she’s not naturally inclined toward that.”

“And your price?” asked Quills. “The keys can move five, and we can’t come back for you.”
“Protection while we travel,” I said. “A weapon, maybe, if you can spare one when you go.” I looked to the two mages. “Magic to improve my chances of getting out of the Risen Lands.”

Quills looked me over. “We’ll require your weapon,” he said. “And Leonold will bind you. Otherwise, I accept your offer.”

The tattoo mage stepped forward and reached out a hand toward me. Up close, I could see the tattoos moving across his bare chest, very slowly but still moving, wriggling like living things. There were a few landscape scenes, but otherwise the tattoos were mostly creatures, items, and complex patterns. There was a tattoo that wrapped around the palm and back of his outstretched hand, showing spikes, and this one was rotating, moving faster than any of the others.

“It’s important that you not resist,” he said.

I took his hand, and he gripped me tight. The spiked tattoo touched me, feeling like cold metal on my flesh, and then I saw it appear on the back of my own hand, spinning across my skin.

Unlocked skill: Skin Magic!

Achievement Unlocked: Skin Deep

It didn’t stay there though; instead it migrated up my arm, like a chilly bracelet, disappearing beneath my jacket. I could feel it moving though, past my elbow, tickling my shoulder, and then finally wrapping itself around my neck.

Quest Accepted: Heading Off the Skin Mage - Leonold has placed the Fool’s Choker around your neck. Disable it, kill him, or circumvent it before he kills you.

“I’ve never been in contact with skin magic,” I said slowly.

Leonold raised an eyebrow. “I appreciate the respect,” he said with a nod. “But you’re mistaken. I could still feel the burnt out rune on your right hand.”

Right, from the airplane. Did that not trigger an unlock because it was part of the opening scene? I touched my neck, where I could still feel a faint line of cold. “And what does this do?” I asked.

“If I activate it, which takes but a thought, it will cut about half an inch into your flesh,” he said calmly. “You are familiar with the location of your carotid artery?”

“Purely as a precaution,” Quills said quickly. “When we leave, it will fade from you.”

I nodded at that, trying not to feel too panicked by the thought-activated noose around my neck.

“I’ll take charge of the boy,” said Fenn. “Teach him the ins and outs, as it were. I do this as a service to you, most noble porcine.”

“Porcine means pig,” Quills replied mildly. “But I’m sure that your famously haphazard upbringing has once again caused you to innocently botch the common tongue. We’re going to Sorian’s Castle. What can you tell us that’s of use?” he asked her.

“The corporate castles are death traps,” said Fenn. “Funny enough, they weren’t designed with the living suddenly becoming the undead in mind. There were a few hundred people living in each of them. When the buildings lost power, they switched to a backup, and when that backup eventually failed, all the doors opened, as a fire safety measure. Well, that meant that the undead were free to roam, but their stochastic motion meant that they all ended up in the same spots, and since they all
lived and worked together, unanimity-of-purpose is higher, which means more umbral undead than you might otherwise expect from a highly populated area.” She shrugged. “Other than that, it’s your typical case of close quarters combat against enemies who can only be killed through precision or overwhelming firepower, plus it’s within the stalking grounds of the Biggun, whose entire existence is devoted to killing interlopers. So I believe the human term would be ‘cakewalk’?”

The bone mage swore and clutched at one of the bones by her chest, as though getting ready to throw it against the wall. “This is idiocy, Quills,” she said.

“Your opinion has been duly noted, Tova,” said Quills, which was apparently his actual name. “We knew that this was going to be difficult.”

“Difficult,” spat the bone mage. “Not suicidal. And we were supposed to have better intel.”

“We were,” nodded Quills. “It is my understanding that the political situation in the capital is more unstable than we’d known, and certain plans that this mission was contingent upon have failed entirely. This leaves us in an admittedly awkward situation.”

“Alright,” grumbled the tall man in armor. “I will ask the question I believe is on all our minds. The intent was that we would procure the teleportation key and use it to leave. In the event of abject mission failure, we were meant to radio for evacuation.” There followed a brief silence from beneath his helmet. “Were you to declare this mission a failure, do you currently believe that evacuation would be forthcoming?”

Quills’ nose twitched slightly. “The parameters for mission failure --”

“Just answer the damned question,” said Leonold, the tattoo mage.

“I’ve heard nothing explicit to that effect, but I believe we’re on our own,” said Quills. “It might be different if our second objective were achieved.”

Everyone seemed upset with that, save for Fenn, who was holding back a smile. She caught my look, shrugged, and grinned at me.

“To Sorian’s Castle!” she said. “May we succeed on our merits or die in ignominy.”

“There would be no ignominy,” said Quills quietly. “This mission would be buried under so many layers of classification that our names would never see the light of day.”
The tattoo mage’s eyes burnt out again not long after that, so we got moving, following Fenn’s
guidance and this time making our way to Sorian’s Castle, which we weren’t too far from. I’d
already seen it on the map, and it wasn’t too much larger than I was prepared for, which is to say that
it was incredibly large and worthy of being called a city within a city. The walls were high and had
arrow slits starting at the second level, with everything below that being solid stone wall. This struck
me as being particularly idiotic, given that sightlines in the middle of the city were basically crap and
a siege of this place wouldn’t be worthy of the name, not unless there were considerations that I
wasn’t aware of (which was entirely possible).

I was still feeling out of my depth, naturally, but more than that, I was feeling like I was no longer in
a game. A party of characters with their own strengths and weaknesses, trapped behind enemy lines
with only their skills to survive and the only path forward through an area of danger … well, that
was well-worn territory. The problem was, I wasn’t actually a part of it. If this had been a game, then
I would have been an NPC that the players had captured in order to wring some use out of him, and I
had DMed that situation more than enough times to know how that went. I’d been stripped of agency
by virtue of being in a position where agency would get me killed, not just because of what I was
assuming was an overwhelming disparity in terms of gear, knowledge, and training, but because I
had a tattoo around my neck that the game had practically told me would kill me sooner rather than
later.

I wasn’t even sure that they were the bad guys, where “bad guys” was defined as “aligned against
Amaryllis”. I didn’t know whether Amaryllis was a good person or not, so calling the people trying
to kill her bad was probably too much of a stretch, given the information available. More likely than
not, if this world had parallels with the ones I’d created for D&D campaigns, there were layers of
gray on one side and pitch black darkness on the other.

So things were stacked against me. On my side, I had: (1) Amaryllis was probably still out there
somewhere and would probably give me aid if she could … probably. (2) Fenn was clearly a part of
this mission under duress or coercion of a nature TBD, which could probably be leveraged. (3)
Everyone except for Quills showed some dissatisfaction with this mission and the way it was being
handled at the top, wherever that was, and they weren’t likely to turn on each other, but infighting
was a useful distraction. (4) They had taken my void tunneler but not my sword, which probably
meant it was useless or at least ineffective in terms of hurting them. That was probably true if the skin
mage could cut my throat with a thought. It still seemed like a classic case of underestimation to me
though. (5) I had the game elements, like the ability to level up and heal all my wounds, plus my
ability to learn things far faster than should have been possible, plus hints and clues that the game
incidentally fed me.

It was that last aspect I started work on as we moved around Sorian’s Castle. Taking on the tattoo
had unlocked Skin Magic, which meant that I had the very beginnings of the abilities that Leonold
had shown. I knew no spells, but I did have a piece of magic touching, or maybe buried into, my
flesh.

(Now you might be saying to yourself, “Juniper, prodding at the kill-you necklace is a bad idea” and
I would normally have agreed, but the quest I had been given specifically said that I could
circumvent it. And yes, listening to the text messages inside my head was also not good standard
operating procedure.)

The cold feeling was only there when I thought about it. If I paid close attention, I could feel the
exact boundaries of it, the peaks and valleys of the spikes. That sense went far beyond my body’s natural ability to feel heat and cold. I pushed against the feeling, slowly, trying to imagine that I was moving the opposite direction across the same channel of communication.

**Skill increased: Skin Magic lvl 1!**

I’ll have to say, that surprised me. The tattoo hadn’t moved at all, but my sense of it instantly sharpened. I pushed against the tattoo again, slightly harder. It had traveled along my arm to reach my neck, and if its function was tied to its location, which I desperately hoped it was, then moving it down to a finger would make a half-inch cut result in nothing more than a severing. Leonold hadn’t checked whether I was a skin mage before he’d bound me, which I hoped was another instance of underestimation that would give me wiggle room.

I’d gained two more levels in Skin Magic before we reached the front entrance of Sorian’s Castle, and was no closer to having moved the tattoo. I’d also gained a level of Deception as well, which was quite unexpected considering the earlier message I’d got. Was it because I was trying to surreptitiously work at the skin magic without anyone noticing?

The front of Sorian’s Castle was a massive portcullis that rose up almost twenty feet. It was down, but a corner of it had been bent outward, enough that you could have comfortably driven a van through it. Beyond that there was a courtyard, and only then did I see the glass frontage that I expected from a skyscraper, even if it was hidden in a cove and most of the glass was broken. Light was coming in from the third floor of the castle, which seemed to consist mostly of pillars rather than walls, at least from where I was standing.

“No undead,” muttered Quill.

Fenn stepped forward, coming up next to me. She casually slipped her arm into mine and leaned against me, holding her longbow with her other hand. “That’s not terribly unusual,” she said. “They’re not exactly patrolling creatures, and if someone had come by any, that were standing near the entrance would have been drawn out. If someone had gone running past, even past lesser umbrals, they would have been drawn inside.”

As she spoke, she was squeezing my arm. A short squeeze, two long squeezes, a pause, two short squeezes … it went on like that, and I recognized it as likely being Morse code, but I had no idea what message she was trying to spell out. I looked at her as she spoke, and on a final squeeze she gave me a pleasant grin, which I met with a puzzled stare.

Fenn sighed. “There’s nothing for it but for us to go in. I’m getting the sense that we shouldn’t stay out here much longer.”

“Then we move, slowly and carefully,” said Quills. “I will take lead, Tova will be in the back with Leonold. Fenn, stay beside Juniper and be ready to unleash artillery on my command. Juniper, we will make no special effort to protect you.” He rested a clawed hand on the tall armored man. “Carter, I wish you luck.”

But before we could start moving, a wave of corpses came around the corner, eerily silent as it set down one of many limbs, carefully placed so that it avoided cars and lampposts. It was almost two blocks away from us, but my heart was hammering in my chest. This thing was only vaguely shaped like a creature. The arrangement of the dead within it had suggestions of arms and legs, and the eyes were so blindingly bright that I had to force myself to keep looking in its direction.

“Move now,” called Quills, running even as he spoke the word. The Biggun reared back one of its arms, using so many of the dead that there was no clear point of articulation, leaving the limb it
showed looking more like a tendril. It snapped that tendril forward at startling speed, back and forth, each time sending a body flying through the air at us at startling speed.

Quills drew his sword and cut through one without breaking stride, giving me my first look at his long, thin katana, diverting both halves of it to their side of him. Another corpse hit the big man, Carter, right in his immense shield, but he took it without so much as a grunt of effort. Others slammed into the ground, splattering flesh and viscera and shattering bones. It was only because I was paralyzed with indecision that I saw one of the hurtling corpses smash into Leonold, hitting the completely unarmored man hard enough that his head should have snapped back or been sheared off - but it didn’t even move him, not a bit. It was Carter who jerked back with the hit instead. Linked through the soul to take the hits himself, those had been Amaryllis’ words.

I finally came to my senses and ran. I was at the back of the pack by quite some distance, which gave me the marginal benefit of not being where the majority of corpse-fire was landing. Quills cut several bodies down in midair, sometimes stopping his forward motion in anticipation of them so he could protect the others. Carter moved faster than I’d thought a man in thick full plate could, even accounting for everything I’d read that debunked full plate being restrictive. The two mages took a few marginal hits when pieces of bodies flew like shrapnel, and I saw those hits reflected on Carter in sudden, awkward movements of his body. Fenn … Fenn didn’t seem to be dodging really, in the sense that she was watching the incoming corpse-fire and reacting to it, but she always seemed to be where the body parts weren’t.

I drew my sword as I ran, trying to watch for a body flying through the air toward me as quickly as a speeding car. When one came, I dropped into a quick roll across the street, hoping that I wasn’t putting myself in exactly the position to take a hit.

**Skill increased: Dodge lvl 2!**

And then I was on the move again, still bringing up the rear as the others reached the broken portcullis. That at least would give us some cover from the corpse-fire, though if the interior of Sorian’s Castle was infested with zombies we were going straight into a pincer. An errant corpse smashed into a car right next to me and its top half went spinning toward me. I lifted my sword and caught it in the ribs, which was enough to arrest its motion.

**Skill increased: Parry lvl 2!**

The zombie was still living, I realized, or at least undead, because its eyes were glowing and it was moving. I let it slide off my sword as I hurried forward, now further behind than before.

“Artillery!” shouted Quills as I made it through the portcullis. We had company up ahead, three of the Zombie Voltrons and one of the smaller, sleeker versions, all of them bounding toward us from out of the ruined glass frontage, into the courtyard.

Fenn drew her bow, closed one eye and squinted, then released. Her arrow once again split in the air, first into two, then four, then eight, until it was a full volley ripping through the undead. Two of the Voltrons collapsed, but the third she didn’t hit, and the slender, ten-corpse zombie had rolled itself behind one of the ones penetrated by arrows. Errant arrows, of which there were many, crashed into the building behind the zombies.

Quills kept up his speed and ran straight toward the Zombie Voltron with his sword trailing behind him. When he reached it, he spun with sword outstretched, cutting a thin line right through it that caused pieces of it to drop to the ground. When it swung its arm-like appendage at him, he sliced straight through that too, and then followed it up with another cut to the creature’s nominal leg which caused it to slide down into a red-eyed pile.
Tova and Leonold took on the smaller one, her with bones in hand, striking at it with impossible speed and punches that I could hear crack bones, him with his skin aglow in colors. It was hitting them hard with its many arms and legs, until they had struck through enough of its hearts that it collapsed into pieces.

“Run!” screamed Fenn as she followed her own advice, disappearing into the castle’s lobby. Unlike the others, I had never stopped, and I weaved through the fighting, looking behind me only briefly to confirm what I suspected, which was that the Biggun had made its way down the street to the portcullis. It was releasing parts of itself, small blobs in relation to its size, but recognizable as one of the fast conglomerations, well capable of running us down.

We ran. There were more zombies inside, but Quills had a sword which was apparently capable of cutting through anything, and none of them were the dangerous, stuck-together sort. We raced up a central staircase in near-darkness, with the big brute, Carter, nearly falling behind, then up another staircase, then a third, until we were on the fourth level.

“Leo, time out,” shouted Quills.

The tattoo mage stopped right where he was and held out his hand, then ran in a small circle not more than ten feet wide with his hand trailing behind him. It started with a blue glow in his hand that built as he went, until his entire arm was covered in vibrant blue light. It was just before he finished that I realized everyone else was inside the circle and I was outside it; I took a step forward and Fenn reached out to pull me in, right as the circle closed and everything went black.

I felt the pulse of my blood, which was racing, and lit my finger on fire, which illuminated the six of us standing around, the floor we were standing on, and nothing at all beyond the circle that Leonold had traced.

“You’re burning our oxygen, asshole,” said Tova. Her hair was in disarray and a number of bones were missing from her bandoliers.

“Blood magic doesn’t oxidize, not unless he sets something on fire,” said Quills. “It’s the best light source I think we have. Small mercies.” To my surprise, he gave me a short bow. “Leonold, what does spell integrity look like?”

“It was a sloppy cast,” the tattoo mage replied. “We’re also sitting at six, not five, which cuts down our time. Figure an hour and a half until we’re not in fighting shape when we get out.”

“And where the fuck is that?” asked Fenn. “Seems like nowhere to me.” Her hand moved to the blackness around us, but Quills slapped her away.

“We’re outside of time,” said Quills. “Don’t touch the border unless you want to lose a finger. Carter, status?”

Carter finally removed his helmet for the first time since I’d seen him. He was hairless and his skin was blue; one of the kashoonk, if I remembered the races I’d created correctly. His face was bloody and bruised, and one of his eyes was swollen shut and leaking a white fluid. “Broken wrist, broken ribs, broken face, broke all the fingers of my left hand, bruised from head to toe, feeling like a raw piece of meat. I’m going to need half Tova’s healing just to keep me going.”

“Make it so,” replied Quills. Carter immediately set to work removing his armor, which was awkward for all of us because there wasn’t quite enough space for six people. Tova grabbed bones out of her bandoliers, looking them over and setting some aside. While they did that, Quills turned to me. “We are here largely on your word,” he said. “Is there anything you have held back? Any hint as
to where she was going within the castle?”

I tried to steady my breath. I was breathing up their air and my usefulness was rapidly diminishing. Knowing a little bit about Amaryllis wasn’t going to help if we didn’t run into her, and I couldn’t imagine how she would possibly have gotten past what had greeted us in the courtyard. I had few pieces of information to parcel out and when they were gone, I was probably dead. If I held them close to my chest, I was also probably dead.

“I don’t know what you know,” I replied. “She said that there was a secret facility on the twenty-first floor.” Though the game said that it was on the top floor, and I’m not sure that’s the same thing. “The facility was meant to study the necrotic field effect, but they … lost contact, or something, taking their key with them.”

Quills shifted his nose from side to side. “She actually trusted you then.”

I nodded. “Maybe not wisely.” I wanted to let the fire on my fingertips wink out and hide. I had done the same thing she’d done when she left me for dead: I had made a calculation, and she had come out on the wrong side. It still made me feel like shit though.

“So who the hell is our mystery girl? Who gets marooned in the Risen Lands and knows everything there is to know about secret research facilities that violate the exclusion zone?” asked Fenn. She maneuvered in the tight space until she was next to me. Her hand rested on my shoulder as she looked to Quills.

“Amaryllis Penndraig, Princess of Anglecynn, Special Liaison on Existential Emergencies,” I replied. I was fairly sure that Fenn was the only one who didn’t know that, and now, at least, I could get some information from Quills.

“Oh,” said Fenn. “Well, fuck.” Her eyes momentarily went to Leonold, then to me, then down to the tattoo around my neck. She turned back to Quills. “So, you just want to have a friendly chat with this girl, most senior of the Penndraig line, before sending her on her merry way to die in the middle of Silmar City? Because it seems to me like either we’re meant to kill her, or you’re meant to take her out of here, and if it’s the latter, then that’s probably bad news for the least valued member of the team.” She tousled my hair with the hand that had been holding her bow upright, then caught the bow just before it tipped over and fell. “No offense to our stray, who would take that title if only he were a member.”

Quills’ hand was still wrapped around the grip of his blade, which he had not yet sheathed. “It is of no concern,” he said. “We will not find her. This mission has been reduced to our mere survival.”

I wasn’t willing to press the question, and to my surprise Fenn didn’t seem to be willing to either. She instead turned and kissed me on the cheek, then with a languid motion fell to the floor and assumed a sitting position.

Skill increased: Romance lvl 2!

“You’ll stay with us, for now,” Quills said to me. “I am blade-bound; our oath is our word. But the caution you received, that we would make no special effort to keep you alive, that is also true.” With that he turned away from me, sat down, and began cleaning his blade.

Tova was still working on Carter, holding a bone in one hand until it smoked while touching his bare flesh with her other hand. The healing wasn’t complete; his wounds got better, but his flesh didn’t become unblemished. When she had burnt through one bone, she tossed it aside and selected another, moving over his body (now bare save for a pair of briefs) delicately and occasionally asking
soft questions he answered with monosyllables.

Leonold was tattooing himself by the light of my flame, using a small pot of ink and a needle. He grit his teeth as he did it, but made no sound. This was apparently part of the process for a skin mage, or a tattoo mage. I didn’t know whether that was a difference in terminology or a real difference in praxis, but I didn’t want to interrupt the man who had magic wrapped around my neck.

So having nothing better to do, I sat down next to Fenn.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I kissed you,” she asked.

“Not particularly,” I replied. “I thought that was just … your way of trying to get under my skin. Or Quills’.” I kept my voice low, but the space outside of time we were in was quite small, and Carter was taking up a lot of it.

“You’re cute,” said Fenn. She kept her own voice low to match mine. “Not what you just said, that was borderline offensive, but in general appearance and mannerisms. There’s something very human about you, has anyone ever told you that?”

“No,” I replied. “But … I’m not very worldly.”

“Well,” said Fenn. She scooted closer to me, until she was pressed up against me, and placed her head on my shoulder. I was hyperaware of the feeling of her pointed ear touching me. “Perhaps that’s what I mean when I say that you’re very human.”

“Don’t play with your food,” said Leonold from across the room.

“I’m only half-elf,” replied Fenn, not raising her head from my shoulder. “I have consumed very few people in my days.” She shifted slightly, then sat up and looked at me. “There’s something very cozy about being close to death, isn’t there? Something about wolves howling outside the door that sends an electricity through people? Or is that just my elf side speaking?”

She moved her head in close and used her nose to push my face to the side, then kissed me on the cheek. I let it happen. I was feeling exhausted, not so much physically but mentally, probably the result of having so much to process in so little time and the stress of looming death. It felt nice, but I was too wrung out to experience any real sensuality. She leaned forward more and brushed her lips against my ear.

“They’re going to kill us both,” she whispered, just loud enough so that I could hear it. She pulled back, brushing her cheek against mine, and then looked at me straight on. There was nothing playful or seductive about those dark green eyes. The look on her face was meant only for me; she had positioned herself to be unseen by the others. I wasn’t terribly good at reading people, not enough for me to decipher her microexpressions, but the sheer intensity of it alone was frightening.

“Of course, there’s much written on the subject of pre-battle coitus,” Fenn said aloud as she turned back to face the others. “Some are of the opinion that it saps men of their fighting spirit, while others feel that it calms the mind. Myself, I think there’s something to the notion that a little teasing can spurn a man onward to greatness.” She let out a sigh and disengaged from me entirely, so that we were only sitting next to each other. “So, you say that you’re not worldly. Is this your first time seeing a meatshield?” she gestured at Carter.

“I’ve … heard stories,” I said. “Never in person, no.” Was he literally called a meatshield? Was this world really that bizarre?

“He’s linked by the soul to the rest of the team and takes all the hits they would take,” said Fenn.
“Very funny stuff, really, because you could punch Tova in the head and Carter would be the one to feel it. Of course, he’s the one with all the armor, so likely you’d break your hand in the process, which I suppose is not all that funny, except to outside observers. And before you try anything, he wasn’t linked to me personally, because I am for some reason not trusted by these otherwise warm-hearted smugglers.”

“Enough talking,” said Tova. “And Juniper, more light for this part.” After a second she added. “Please.”

I flared the fire until it consumed my hand, and got a message that I had once again capped my skill for blood magic. I watched as Tova took the thickest bone still left in her bandolier and traced her fingers over Carter’s blue-skinned chest. This bone stunk worse than the others, filling our enclosed space with a lingering acrid smell. Halfway through, Carter grunted and arched his back, letting out a whimper as he collapsed back to the ground. When it was finished, Tova was breathing heavily.

“Healing is as done as it’s going to get,” said Tova. “I have about a fifth of my total reserves left,” she gestured to her bones. “Enough for a single fight, or critical healing in a time of need.”

Carter began putting his armor back on. I wondered how often he had been hurt for the sake of others, how often he had gone through similar healing processes in order to come back into the fight. It seemed rather masochistic to me.

But Fenn hadn’t told me about the link he shared with the others in the interests of satisfying my curiosity, she had said it because they were going to kill us both. She’d told me about Carter because if I wanted to live, I would need to deal with Leonold, and to do that, I would need to deal with Carter first. I wasn’t actually sure why either of us were alive, if Quills and company really were bad guys, but I trusted Fenn more than I trusted them. I wasn’t quite planning on killing Carter and Leonold in cold blood, but that was partly because I had no real ideas on how to do that.

“We need to plan,” said Quills, standing up swiftly. “We are currently on the fourth floor, with unnumbered undead ahead of us and unnumbered undead following behind us. There are seventeen stories between us and our objective. Tova, you are a non-combatant unless Carter dies, in which case you are to use every scrap of your remaining power as rearguard. Leonold … status?”

“The usual bits and bobs, but if we’re talking things of note, then two of Prince’s Invulnerability, five of the Pseudo Perimeter, which probably wouldn’t even work in here, one more Fool’s Choker, and a single Faltering Candelabra,” said Leonold, occasionally pointing to pieces on his skin.

I felt at my collar as he spoke, pushing again at the tattoo. I had finally managed to budge it at level eight of Skin Magic, but “budge” was on the order of centimeters rather than moving it away from my neck, and the levels were coming much slower now.

“Prince’s Invulnerability lasts for about six seconds?” I asked. “Covers six people?”

Leonold stared at me. “Yes,” he said. “How’d you know that?”

Well, you see, there’s this game called Dungeons and Dragons in a place that may or may not exist called Earth, and there are spells created by Gary Gygax and the Wizards of the Coast, but there are people called dungeon masters who can make up their own spells to give to wizards, and that one was one that I made up before I got here.

“I read it somewhere,” I said slowly.

“Where?” asked Leonold.
“It’s not important,” said Quills. “The headaches have started, that means time is short. Juniper, don’t speak again.”

I closed my mouth, even though an idea was forming. Prince’s Invulnerability had been a mistake, one of those spells that I’d thought was really cool when I’d handed it over but which tipped the game on its side. The problem wasn’t the mechanical aspect of preventing all damage, it was the shenanigans that allowed; in the very first session they had it, the party made a dramatic escape by putting on the invulnerability and then jumping from the parapets of a lich’s castle.

(Yes, this did involve a lot of arguing about whether real-world physics superseded D&D rules when D&D rules were stupid and unrealistic, plus consulting with online calculators that took into account drag coefficients, plus a smattering of jokes about the airspeed of an unladen swallow.)

“Fenn,” asked Quills. “How many artillery shots?”

“One,” she replied with a frown. “You call it and I’ll make it, but you had better pick well. Also, if we’re counting assets, then you should probably put my charms there as well. I have not yet tried to charm the undead, but we’ll call it a last-ditch effort, shall we?”

“I am more hoping that your luck assists us,” said Quills, paying no more attention to her than to give her a shake of the head. “Juniper, you have some access to blood magic, but can I assume that it’s limited?”

I literally learned everything I know earlier today. “It’s nothing more than a party favor,” I replied. “But …” I hesitated, unsure how to proceed. There was so much that I didn’t know about this world, and I couldn’t ask questions without looking like a fool, or worse, revealing that I had a mental disorder that you could find in whatever the local equivalent of the DSM-5 was. “We should take the elevators,” I said.

“It might have escaped your notice, hooman friend, but there’s no power,” said Fenn. “Easy to see how someone could overlook that.” But in spite of her snark, I was breathing a sigh of relief, because she’d just confirmed for me that the doors I briefly glimpsed at the lobby level were, in fact, the doors to elevators, and not only that, that these elevators required electrical power rather than running on some crazy system of gnostic runes.

“You want us to climb,” said Quills, shaking his head, “Worse than stairs, because our options will be too limited in the event they follow, and attack from above would send us falling to our deaths.”

“No,” I replied, starting to get that warm feeling of excitement at a plan that might actually work. “I want to launch us.”
Thank you for signing up for ELEVATOR facts!

The thing to know about modern elevators is that they have a lot of safety features.

1. There’s not a single cable that holds up the car, there are about eight, each of which is capable of holding up a fully loaded car all by itself.
2. The elevator car and counterweight it’s attached to are usually on tracks in order to provide friction in the event of a catastrophic failure.
3. The elevator car has safeties on it that activate if there’s what the manual would euphemistically call an “overspeed event”, or in other words, when the car is moving way faster than it should.
4. The pulley at the top of the elevator shaft is the thing that actually makes the elevator car and counterweight go up and down, and it has a governor on it that locks the pulley into place if there’s too much centrifugal force from an overspeed event.
5. At the bottom of the elevator shaft there’s usually some cushioning, not enough to always prevent injuries or deaths, but enough to add some margin of error.

That was about what I knew. Here’s where I would normally make some crack about how KNO 2 was bullshit, but my KNO was up to 4 at this point and I was honestly not sure that I would have been able to remember all that if I’d been asked a few days before. That was a sobering thought; it would be the first real indication that the game layer was actually monkeying around with my mind.

Anyway, here’s what I knew about the safety features of elevators in Aerb:

1. ???

(That’s overstating it a bit, since I was a big believer in convergence of designs, and therefore this world probably followed those rules as well, whether it had been created from an imprint of my mind or whether my dream of Earth was inspired by buried memories of Aerb. Even if there was no Elisha Otis to invent the elevator in Aerb, the principles of design would be largely the same, modulo anything that magic could do. Elevators had braking systems to prevent people from plummeting to their deaths, not because of anything specific to Earth. So far Aerb appeared to have what I would call physics plus, but what I had seen so far indicated that they didn’t have free energy, which meant that they needed to conserve energy, which meant that elevators would have counterweights to reduce the energy needed move cars around.)

Unfortunately, no one else knew all that much either, which meant that I was putting forward a plan that was at least partly based on ignorance. It was possible that there was a governor at the top of the elevator shaft that would trip through centrifugal force when the counterweight started moving down, and it was also possible that lack of electricity would simply lock both the elevator car and counterweight in place.

“Risk and reward,” murmured Quills after we’d discussed the idea some. “If it works, we skip past seventeen floors of hard fighting. If it fails … we’ll have spent resources that we can’t afford to spend. The undead will come at us and we’ll have to kill them, rather than just running away. Still, on balance … Leonold, the Prince’s Invulnerability will protect us?”

“Yes,” nodded Leonold. “It’s six seconds, no more, no less. If our ascent takes longer, I’ll have to activate it twice. And if our ascent fails, then we’ll be out a use.”
“Then I’m in favor,” said Quills. “We’ll move to the elevators, make a stand there, then hopefully get to the top and disembark from there. Fenn, we’re going to use your final artillery shot. Objections?”

Carter shifted uncomfortably, but neither he nor anyone else said anything. Personally, I was starting to more keenly feel the effects of the enclosed space; my headache had gotten sharper and I was sweating. I was fairly sure that I would have felt warm, had I not been keeping a fire going with my blood for the past hour.

And yet even when there was agreement about what we were doing, we stayed within the bubble of dilated time. (Do I need to point out that I was eager to learn how to do that? I mean I hope that you at the very least think of me as not being brain damaged, so yes, I wanted to learn how to put the game on pause.) One of the “bits and bobs” included in Leonold’s arsenal was 200 feet of rope, which he pulled from a tattoo on his wrist, and which he thereafter treated as though it were entirely real. This he did some crude knotwork with, because it was better to have that prepared while we were safe than while we had the zombies after us.

And then, after all the waiting, most of which I spent practicing moving my throat tattoo, we were suddenly ready to go. As everyone got into position within our small space, I could feel my heart beating quickly in my chest and my breathing grow faster. That might also have been from the carbon dioxide poisoning.

When the time dilation fell away there was a flash of light that left me blinking and a blast of air moving away from us. There was barely time to take in the scene we’d left behind before we were moving again, racing toward the elevators.

When we got there, Quills delivered three quick cuts to the elevator door, then Carter delivered a solid kick to the triangle of free-standing metal, which crashed inward and fell down four stories, because the elevator wasn’t waiting. I stuck my head in and flared up light from my hand, then breathed a sigh of relief. “Fourth one down!” I shouted, even though they were right next to me. That was failure point one behind us; there was an elevator on the right level for us to use.

We reached it just as three of the slick corpse menageries came crashing down the hallway. Quills called for artillery, and Fenn obliged, with her arrow again splitting in two every ten feet. We were in relatively close quarters though, which meant that the assault wasn’t quite as powerful by the time it reached its target, and only one of the things became a pincushion, falling apart and letting the other two through. Quills cut through the elevator door, then turned to meet them.

My own role was to help Leonold with the preparations, in part because I’d given them the impression that I wouldn’t be completely clueless about what we’d find up there, and in part because I could produce light to work with. I followed him into the elevator and then hoisted myself up through the grate that he’d opened.

Look, I’d never been on the top of an elevator car back on Earth, and had never seen the top of one except in movies, so when I say that what we found looked exactly Earth-like, you have to take it with a grain of salt. I’m sure that there were differences, but I’m not sure what they were. The car ran on tracks, there were more tracks for the counterweights, and eight cables went straight up beyond what we could see. Everything still seemed to be in fine shape, minus a small bit of dust that might have been there when this castle was active. That was pretty reasonable, given that this place had essentially been mothballed for an unknown number of years. At any rate, that was failure point two waving as it passed us by; the elevator looked how it needed to look for this plan to work.

“If you fuck this up, I’ll kill you,” Leonold whispered to me.

I nodded and tried to ignore my shaky hands as I helped him to prepare. The cables were bolted into
the frame of the car; we needed a way for us to be carried up with the ends as soon as someone, presumably Quills, cut them loose. To that end, we began weaving the rope through the cables, leaving the prepared lasso loops dangling out so that we could each slip into them. I was working one-handed, since my other hand held the flame, basically just being an extra hand for Leonold.

“Is this going to hold?” I asked him, even though that question had been gone over a few times while we were planning. The tattoo mage didn’t answer me. The rope he had wasn’t very strong, not even as strong as climbing rope, but it didn’t need to be that strong, especially if we were setting things up so that there was strain was distributed across many ropes.

“Good?” Quills shouted to us as we were finishing up.

“Close,” Leonold called down. “No problems.”

“Candelabra,” Quills shouted.

Leonold didn’t hesitate; he dropped down into the elevator and then cast a spell that I could only halfway see while I waited for him to come back. Only I wasn’t just waiting, I was working as hard as I could to move the Fool’s Choker around my neck. On Earth, the worst thing about having a full neck tattoo was that it was visible to everyone. On Aerb, that was the second worst thing, but it was still pretty bad, because it meant that even if I moved it, it would be immediately visible that I’d done so - unless, of course, I was in a dark elevator shaft and controlled the only source of light. It was slow work to shift its position, but I had finally felt that cold band of magical ink slip to the side, right as Leonold came back up. It was no longer a choker, more a ring sitting on my shoulder, and while I was sure it would still hurt, that was better than having a slit throat.

Leonold returned to his work, moving quickly. He hadn’t been looking at me at all before, and to my relief that continued as he did the last of the knotwork. I nevertheless positioned the light so that I would be as obscured as possible, and let it dim slightly. When he was finished, he slipped one of the loops over his head and arms until it was nestled in his armpits, then walked a half step away to draw the lasso tight. He leaned slightly, testing it.

“Good to go,” he shouted. To me, sotto voce, he said, “I shouldn’t have said I would kill you, that was just nerves talking. This mission … you don’t know the half of it. And now it’s down to this insanity.”

“S’okay,” I replied. I had a lump in my throat.

The others made their way up, first Fenn, then Tova, then Quills, and finally a battered and unsteady Carter lifting himself up while kicking at something below him.

“Hurry,” he said, just as the car was rocked by an impact. Leonold helped slip a loop around him and then supported his weight. From the grate, a single arm snaked up, its fingernails bent backward and falling out.

Quills made the first cut by the weak light of Aarde’s Touch, slicing through the roof of the elevator. So far as I could tell, either blade-bound had absurdly sharp and durable blades, or they found conventional physics to be terribly unexciting. When a second cut followed the first, metal began to creak, and when his third cut came, the elevator lurched down. The section of metal we were standing on was peeled back by the tension of the cables pulling at their mounts now. Quills drew a sharp breath and aimed his blade.

“Invulnerability on three,” said Quills. “One, two,” spears of golden light shot forward from a large tattoo that was now centered on Leonold’s chest, one of them going to each of us and connecting us
to him, then fading out. “Three,” said Quills, bringing his sword down.

I had thought that we would rise faster. In my head, we’d go soaring upward, like a coin launched from a slingshot, but while it wasn’t at all sedate, it was slow enough that I had time to count the floors. I had let the fire I was providing go out as soon as we started moving and was now holding onto two ropes, both Tova’s and my own, trying not to feel ill from the swaying feeling.

“Belay cast!” called Quills.

And then just like that, the six seconds were up, and we were still rising in darkness, only my nausea at the movement was compounded by the painful squeezing feeling around my chest. The ropes had drawn us all together, so that flesh was pressed to flesh, and I could feel Fenn’s hot breath as we continued up. I was still trying to count floors by the faint light that seeped in from elevator closed doors. We had, at any rate, sailed clear of failure three, because no pulley governor was engaging, and we were still on the rise.

“There’s this thing called the unspoken plan guarantee,” said Tiff. She had turned her chair to the side and was propping her feet up on Reimer’s chair, which he disliked but allowed. “Basically what it means is that if you hear people talk about a plan in a movie or novel or TV show, then that plan will fail, or if not fail, then run into some unforeseen complication.”

“I’m not sure I get it,” said Arthur. “We’re not bound by traditional narrative rules.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either,” I said. “The unspoken plan guarantee exists because there’s no tension in hearing a plan and seeing it in action. In tabletop, the dice provide the tension.”

“The dice provide some tension,” replied Tiff. “But if the plan is good enough, then there’s the same problem, and we have someone at this table whose job it is, at least more than others, to make this whole shebang entertaining, and who also has the power to introduce complications ex nihilo.” She made a finger gun at me and mouthed a pew sound. I smiled and rolled my eyes.

“So you’re saying that we should keep things secret from the DM?” asked Reimer. “In my experience, that doesn’t work too well.”

“Oh, well not big secrets,” said Tiff. “We should keep little secrets, tiny things we hold in reserve that we agree not to mention out loud in the hopes that Joon forgets about them, or parts of the plan that can legitimately surprise him so he doesn’t feel the need to insert things into the game just to make it more interesting.”

“Seems a little adversarial,” replied Arthur. “In the tabletop-as-performance model … well, I guess there you could make the same argument, that the performance is better if there’s some aspect of hidden things being shown.”

“Or,” said Tom. “We could just not ever plan anything.” He tapped the side of his head. “If you have no plans, then you don’t have plans that need hiding.”

We were around the fifteenth floor when we reached failure point three point five. I was the only one who knew about it, hence the awkward numbering.

I listened to the beat of my heart and the rush of my pulse, then pushed heat into my closed fist, trying to watch closely to see how much light was given off. My grip on Tova’s rope was tight, and if I understood correctly the flame was nothing like an actual flame, so the visible light in the dark elevator shaft was basically nothing. I pushed more of the heat of my blood into my fist, then more,
then still more.

After the first second, the heat was uncomfortably hot, and after the second second, it was painful. I would say that it was unbearable, but I was bearing it, because I had to. And then, just as I was getting ready to cry out in pain because of the burns I was inflicting on my hand, the rope holding up Tova snapped and sent her screaming as she plummeted. The game messages came quickly after that.

*Skill increased: Deception lvl 8!*

*Inge Carter defeated!*

*Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 1!*

*Achievement Unlocked: Microhitler*

*Tova Feidlimid defeated!*

*Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 2!*

*New Virtue: Ruthless!*

I felt sick to my stomach as I read through those and blinked the messages away as soon as I saw them. Tova hadn’t fallen straight down, she had clanged hard against the side of the elevator shaft, probably hitting a girder or ledge. I wasn’t next to Carter, but I’d felt him jerk around and then start swinging. After that, I’d heard the clanking thud of her hitting bottom. Even without the game telling me so, I would have known that she was dead. Even if the fall had somehow not killed her, the zombies would have, so I had to at least be thankful that her death was a quick one. *Please, please be the sort of person who deserved that.*

And we were still rising, faster than before, almost to the top.

“*Invuln,*” said Quills, his voice hard.

Again the spears of light came out from Leonold, but this time they touched only three of us, Quills, Fenn and myself. It was enough illumination to see Quills quickly slice through Carter’s rope, letting him drop down below. Two seconds later, we went crashing into the top of the elevator shaft, pulled forward and around by the pulley, which finally gummed up with the cable mountings and metal plate hitting it at high speed. I landed in a crumple, with my torso and one leg on something made of metal and my arms out in the middle of nothingness. I still had a rope around my chest, but I had no idea what it was connected to.

When I suddenly started feeling things again, the pain in my burnt hand was almost crippling, so I stayed where I was, not daring to move.

“*Roll call,*” said Quills. His voice was calm and steady.

“I’m fine,” said Leonold.

“Peachy,” replied Fenn with a cough.

“Juniper?” asked Quills, as I tried to slow my breathing. I had known that the fire would hurt, but I hadn’t realized that it would hurt so much. Worse, I was absolutely sure that it would be clearly visible, leaving me caught red handed.
“Tova,” I said at a whisper. “She was right beside me.”

“Give us light,” said Quills.

I placed my hand down on the metal beneath me, tried not to hiss as the raw flesh touched it, then used my good hand to create a small flame. I saw Quills holding onto a strut, with his sword drawn, Leonold blindly clutching part of the gridwork that the pulley was attached to, and Fenn sitting casually on a walkway to the side.

“What happened?” asked Quills. I would have sighed in relief that the question was directed at Leonold instead of me, but my hand was getting more painful by the moment.

“There were too many failure points,” said Leonold through clenched teeth. “Eventually, we had to hit one.” And now I’m home free, until we step out into the light and they see my burnt hand and displaced tattoo. “I’d still like to check the ropes though.” Fuck.

I let the light from my hand dim further and flicker. “Not sure how long I can sustain this,” I said. “I’m already getting the shakes.” Most of that was because of the radiating pain of my burn. I did wonder how deep it had gone, what I would see if I looked at it. I’d put in enough heat to burn the rope, or at least damage its structure; what had that done to my hand?

“Post mortems are unimportant right now,” Quills said smoothly. Leonold gave me a suspicious look in the dim light, but my hand was held high and the shadow from my head mostly covered my neck. Quills stood up, sword in hand, heedless of the fact that he was balanced precariously over at least a twenty-story fall. He climbed his way down to the elevator door below us, standing on a thin ledge, and with four strokes of his blade cut a square hole in the door. The detached metal slid back and fell into the elevator shaft, tumbling down until it banged against the sides and made a racket.

“Oh the plus side, the upper floors should be relatively clear,” said Fenn. “They weren’t residential and the undead have more trouble going up than down, meaning that over the years many of them would have filtered into the lower levels through stochastic motion. All that’s left is to find the key and skedaddle.”

Leonold climbed down and out the door, following Quills, and Fenn followed after with catlike grace. I unlooped the rope from around myself, feeling the stinging pain in my hand as I briefly brushed it against the rope, then slowly, agonizingly, made my way over to the catwalk, and from there down a slender ladder that the others hadn’t even used, trying my best not to succumb to vertigo. My injured hand was cradled to my chest as I made the transition in, hoping that I could somehow talk my way out of what the injury implied.

But just as I stepped onto the floor I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder as the tattoo sliced into me, and then --

Leonold Pavran defeated!

Quest Complete: Heading Off the Skin Mage - Leonold Pavran tried to kill you as he died, but you managed to move the tattoo just in time.

Level up!

I was taken by the golden glow of raw power and wrapped in its warm embrace, the pain in my shoulder and hand instantly gone with no trace they’d ever been there. My mind was fuzzed with a feeling like pure, rapturous love that was gone as soon as the level up put me back down on my feet.
I’m pretty sure that Fenn and Quills would have been staring at me, if Leonold wasn’t lying on the ground with a dagger sticking in the side of his head. Instead, Quills had his sword drawn and was moving back from where he’d been toward Fenn.

Fenn ran, and Quills chased her. There were too many things going on for me to process it all, but we were in a sunlit reception area on the top floor of Sorian’s Castle, with a desk against one wall and a blue and yellow crest with a badger on it behind that. Fenn went to the nearest of the two doors out, pushing it open, and I firmly believe that she would have died then and there if the door had been locked. She had a bow, a magical one, but with no magic remaining, and he had a sword which could cut through practically anything.

I ran after them, not knowing what I could possibly do against Quills, not even if I managed to catch him off-guard. I came into the room, a wide open area with a dome nearly two hundred feet across and furniture that had been pushed to the sides, just after him. I almost bumped into him as he came to a stop and raised his sword, not at me, but at a familiar someone crouched down behind a makeshift barricade a hundred feet away.

Thunk.

A perfectly circular hole appeared in the thin blade Quills was holding and he grunted. I stared with mouth agape at Amaryllis, who was calmly crouched down with her rifle aimed down the length of the room, shielded by a thick wooden desk that had been tipped on its side. Quills cursed and did a tumbling roll to the side, coming to land behind a plush couch. Fenn was similarly hidden behind what looked like a piece of laboratory equipment, with an arrow nocked in her bow. She didn’t quite have an angle on Quills.

“Identify yourselves,” called Amaryllis. Her voice was raised to cover the distance between us.

“Brownsnout Quills-in-Hand,” said Quills. “Blade-bound leader of the now-former Fireteam Blackheart, pledged in service to the Kingdom of Anglecynn, long may it stand.”

“Fenn Greenglass,” replied Fenn. “I am technically a consultant to Fireteam Blackheart, but we’re having a very petty squabble right now with regards to some recent vacancies within the fireteam, some of them quite recent indeed, if you catch my meaning. I appreciate you not shooting me when I came in.”

“Only because you surprised me. Brownsnout, which of the Lost King’s get sent you?” she asked.

There was a long pause from Quills. “The command came from Prince Larkspur Prentiss, my lady.”

“You thought about lying to me and decided against it,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll count that as a point in your favor then.”

“They were going to kill you, princess,” replied Fenn. I could see her eyeing the spot where Quills was hiding behind cover, trying to judge whether it was a shot worth taking. “Personally, I would count that at least one point against him.”

It occurred to me that I was the only one not in a stand-off. I was standing by the door, not hidden behind anything. I had been mute thus far, watching and waiting. I closed my eyes for three seconds and tried my best to keep listening while I looked through the menus. I had points to spend, but what I really wanted was the “Companions” screen. I’d seen the messages, so it didn’t come as much of a surprise to see Fenn there. She had a brief biography there, and to my surprise, so did Amaryllis. I wondered when that had happened. It wasn’t a screen I checked often.
Fenn Greenglass, Loyalty lvl 2

Fenn is a half-elf born to a elven father and human mother. Her childhood was spent with alternating months in the Isle of Eversummer and the colony of Rogbottom. While her ears marked her as exotic and dangerous among the humans, her teeth marked her as a hideous disgrace among the elves. She has never felt at home in either world and pretends to understand less than she does in order to highlight her differences before anyone can call her on them. After she reached maturity she held several odd jobs until settling into a dangerous, solitary life entering into the Risen Lands exclusion zone to take whatever wasn’t nailed down. That life ended when she was arrested selling contraband to a fence. When Anglecynn needed a guide through Silmar City, she was pulled from prison and given a second chance.

“Fenn is listed as a companion,” I said to Amaryllis. “Quills is not.”

“You vouch for her?” asked Amaryllis.

“I do,” I said, hoping that the biography the game had fed me wasn’t lying. I had already cast my lot with Fenn anyway. Maybe if I’d been given fewer threats to my life from Quills’ team, or maybe if they hadn’t made it so clear that my life was worthless to them ... hell, if the teleportation key math had worked out differently and they could have pretended that I would have a spot, maybe it would have all worked out differently.

“Brownsnout, why did you come?” asked Amaryllis.

Quills was silent for a moment. “Juniper and Fenn know enough that I can’t tell any lies which might soften the story,” he said. “I’d have preferred not to do it like this.”

He leapt up from behind the couch, rolled over toward me,

*Thunk.*

And grabbed me by the shirt, whipping me around to put me between himself, Fenn, and Amaryllis. His sword, now with a second hole through it, was at my neck. He was bleeding from his chest, but it was just a red wetness rather than a font of blood. He was breathing quickly, and it smelled like rotten wood.

Then we started moving. Quills stayed as far away from me as he could while still being within range to cut me down. His katana was longer than I remembered it being, with a three foot blade, and he stepped in such a way that he could cover the ground between us easily.

“I think both those women would be fine with me dying,” I told Quills. “I’m not sure what your plan is here.”

“I can handle Fenn,” said Quills. He spoke loud enough that everyone would be able to hear him. “Graduation for the blade-bound involves advancing upon a number of archers, deflecting their arrows until you’ve reached them. I chose to go against five and made it through unscathed. Fenn, you know it’s in your best interest to see this play out. You gain nothing by wasting arrows I can easily turn aside.”

Fenn shrugged and set her bow down on the ground. “You’re right,” she said. “Not my fight. Dibs on going against the loser.”
“As for the princess, she values you,” said Quills. His voice was lower now, his words just for me. “She has a defensive position there, one that took time to set up. She has the key already. My guess is that you’re what she was waiting for.”

“Maybe,” I said, though I didn’t really believe it, not after what I had seen of Amaryllis. “That won’t stop her from taking the shot.”

“It’s stopping her right now,” replied Quills. “All I need is to close the distance.”

Amaryllis had her rifle trained on me as we crept forward. Alright, maybe not on me, per se, but pointed at a target that was right behind me. And Quills was right, she was letting us get closer, one step at a time. Part of that might have been her wanting to wait for a better shot, given that she had a four second cycle time on her rifle. In theory, her best strategy for saving her own skin would be to wait until she could take two good shots before he reached her. For that to work, she would have to get me out of the way, maybe by just telling me to move and expecting me to do it, regardless of how likely it was for me to get bisected. It was in the interest of Quills to keep me going for as long as possible to ensure that he only had to block two shots with his blade, likely taking two more grazing hits in the process before he was on her and capable of killing her. And it was in my interest to just keep shuffling forward and hoping that something unexpected happened. I had theoretical tricks that I could try, half-formed ideas about blood magic that might have done something, but I would only get one shot.

We were almost exactly halfway across the large, domed room when Fenn spoke.

“Ahem,” she said. Quills and I both turned back to look at the half-elf, who had silently picked up her bow and drawn it. Quills was still holding onto my shirt and pulled me closer. We had come to a dead stop.

“Do you think this will accomplish anything?” asked Quills. “It will slow our progress, nothing more.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” said Fenn. Quill’s stance changed, his sword swung around to meet her arrow, and I ducked down behind him (whether through luck or some inkling of what was going to happen, I don’t know).

I guess Quill’s plan had been to bat the arrow out of the air and continue on, or simply outlast whatever was left in her quiver. Using a sword to hit an arrow in mid-flight was apparently part of his suite of bullshit sword magic, so that wasn’t as stupid as it might have sounded.

But when the arrow was ten feet from her bow, it split in two, and then in two again, and again, and by the time the arrows reached him there were five hundred of them. I was down on the floor, not being a lookie loo, so I didn’t actually see it, but in my mind’s eye his pupils dilated in dawning recognition of what was coming at him, enough that he could recognize what was happening but not enough that he could actually do anything about it. More likely, the arrows were going something like 150 mph and his synapses literally wouldn’t have had time to register it, even if his blade-bound powers might have been able to deflect it.

He collapsed to the ground, stuffed full of arrows, and I screamed out in pain, because you don’t fire five hundred arrows at a guy and not also hit the person ducking behind him.

**Brownsnout Quills-in-hand Defeated!**

*Quest Complete: Into the Fryer - The enemies are dead, the key is in hand, and the path forward is clear … but to where?*
“Sorry!” called Fenn as she jogged over to me.

I was shaking in pain and staring down at an arrow that had pierced me in the calf. I had been directly hit by three of them, and grazed by at least one or two others. I was bleeding from my temple, from my side, from my shoulder, and there was an arrow sticking into my stomach which took up surprisingly little of my attention. But for all that, the blood meter in the lower left of my vision wasn’t taking a dip just yet, and my health meter was showing me at seventy-five percent.

“You fucking shot me,” I grunted at Fenn.

“You seem to be a pretty durable fellow,” said Fenn. “Besides, I think it’s better than the alternative of being sliced in half by an angry porcupine, which would have been your ultimate fate. Quills was the one of the four that I least wanted to fuck with, and that had nothing to do with his prickly bits.”

“You fucking shot me,” I grunted again. “Not to sound ungrateful.”

Skill increased: Comedy lvl 2!

“Well, can’t say I wouldn’t do it again,” said Fenn. She leaned down to look over my wounds. “You know, your princess over there still has a gun trained on me, do you think you could find it in your heart to convince her that I look prettier without a hole in my head?”

“Amaryllis!” I called. “She saved my life, I need your help.”

“I have the key,” she called back. “Do you trust her?”

“No!” I replied. “She fucking shot me!” I grunted through the pain. “But she killed the people that were going to kill us,” my breathing was getting heavy from the effort of speaking loudly, “So I think we should all get out of here together.”

“You know,” said Fenn, “You are really harping on this being shot thing, in a way that I do not find very attractive. I did use a bodkin point, you’re welcome.”

To make a long story short, Amaryllis came over and patched me up as best she was able. The three direct hits I’d taken had all managed to miss major arteries and the bodkin point apparently did less damage on entry and exit than some others. The cut on my temple was actually the most alarming, not because of the injury I’d sustained there, but because if it had gone an inch to the left I would have had an arrow stuck in my brain.

“So,” said Fenn, once I was in somewhat better shape. “I am currently persona non grata in the Kingdom of Anglecynn and my read on your political situation is that it wouldn’t be wise for you to return, so where are we going, my lady?”

Amaryllis looked Fenn up and down. “You said she was a companion,” said Amaryllis, “Same as I am.”

“The game thinks she’s loyal,” I replied. “The metrics say she’s as loyal as you were when we were in the sewers. Less than you are now though.”

Amaryllis raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t a metric I’d shared with her. Fenn simply smiled along as though she knew what we were talking about. I did wonder what would happen if Amaryllis said no;
the key was the last bus out of Silmar City, and I wouldn’t have blamed Fenn if she’d fought tooth and nail for it.

“Then we’ll stay together, for now,” said Amaryllis. She pulled something from the handbag at her side, a small golden disc with a glowing green center. She placed her thumb on it lightly and it pulsed to her touch. “Our destination is Barren Jewel.” She glanced at Fenn. “That’s non-negotiable.”

I recognized the name; it was a city in the middle of a desert, sustained by magic, full of cutthroats, and disconnected from the modern world. I wasn’t sure how that would translate in Aerb, which had fairly ready access to both radio and teleportation.

“Is there anything anyone needs before we go?” asked Amaryllis.

“Loot,” said Fenn. “Let me look around here and grab some valuables we can hawk in the Jewel.” She trotted off to snoop around this large room, which I gathered from some equipment off to one side had once been the research facility. Before that, I could only guess; the lobby said it was the office of someone important, but everything else said it was an open living space for a king or CEO.

“I have questions,” I said, “Nothing that can’t wait until we’re safe.”

Amaryllis rested a hand on my arm. “It’s going to be a long, long time until we’re safe.” She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. “I’m sorry I didn’t go back for you.”

“No, that’s --”

“I left you for dead with just enough of a veneer that I could feel at peace about it,” she said. “You must have known that. It wasn’t until I was making the climb that I had to admit to myself that I wasn’t going back for you. I’m glad you’re alive, Juniper. You’re a very decent person.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Wait, did you climb the castle walls?”

But Fenn returned before I got much more than a nod from Amaryllis, and then the disc in her hand started spinning, and we were off to the next part of what I generously decided I would call an adventure.

*Achievement Unlocked: Tutorial Complete!*

END BOOK I
"The city of Barren Jewel lies at the heart of the Datura Desert, surrounded on all sides by hundreds of miles of sand dunes and rocky cliffs. It’s a city of cutthroats where the guards either turn a blind eye or are in on the take, a place of powerful magics lurking in the shadows, with just enough of a veneer of civilization over it that the rich can still sit on the backs of the poor. You crest the hill and get your first look at it just before nightfall, when the sight of city lights after your long journey might seem almost welcoming." I was reading off my laptop screen, which was always awkward, even when I had done some rehearsing beforehand.

“It’s just a model,” said Tom, which he said after pretty much every description of a big city, and somehow it caught me off-guard every time and still managed to be funny.

“So wait, did we pass any caravans while traveling?” asked Reimer.

“No,” I said. “There’s almost no trade going to or from Barren Jewel.”

“So … why does it exist?” asked Reimer. “No, how does it exist? How do they get food and water?”

“Easy, Create Food and Water,” said Craig.

“That’s not,” Reimer began, then he opened his book and began reading without finishing his thought.

“That seems like it would require a lot of magic,” said Arthur.

“It does,” I shrugged. “The Datura Desert wasn’t always a desert, it was once thriving farmland and quiet woods. All that changed when a creeping blight started spreading across the land, killing plants and livestock. It was the mage Alvion who gave his life to create a well of magic in the city that would later become Barren Jewel, a magic that allows that place to thrive even as the lands around it have died.”

“Aw, I liked Alvion,” said Tom.

“He’s … a historical figure?” I said as a question.

“You’re thinking of Alvino,” said Arthur. “Who was from the Scattered Asches campaign and not even a mage.”

“Okay,” said Reimer. “Create Food and Water is a 3rd level cleric spell, they get one of those at 5th level, plus another if their domain is creation, so a single mid-low level cleric can provide 24 hours’ worth of food and water for maybe thirty people, and a 20th level cleric would cap out at providing food and water for maybe two thousand people, if that was literally all they were doing with their magic.” He looked up from the books he had open. “So it doesn’t work out unless there are a hugely disproportionate number of really powerful clerics in the city.”

“We actually moved past that already,” said Tiff. “Joon said there’s some kind of magic that lets the city not have to worry about food and water.”

“All casters in the party are now able to cast Create Food and Water as a 5th level cleric once per day,” I said. “You feel the magic in your bones as soon as you’re within city limits, a promise from the great mage Alvion that you will not starve from the horrid blight that covers what is now the Datura Desert.”

“Yeah,” said Tiff. “Why do people live in Flint, Michigan, why don’t they just move somewhere where there’s clean water and functional city services? Why do people starve to death in Africa when they could just fly to America and buy food from supermarkets there? Why do those dumb Chinese peasants toil away in factories making cheap cellphones for pennies an hour instead of just moving to San Francisco?”

And that led to Tiff and Arthur having one of their famous “discussions” where they argued about upward mobility and late-stage capitalism, or something like that. They were a staple of what I’d call the Tiff-Arthur epoch of our D&D group, because Tiff had strong opinions and Arthur really liked arguing about things.

I wasn’t really paying attention, because I was trying to revise my notes on Barren Jewel to match what I had just improvised.

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**PHY**

6

**5** POW 1 Unarmed Combat 3 One-handed Weapons 0 **Two-handed Weapons** 1 Improvised Weapons

5 SPD 1 Thrown Weapons 0 Dual Wield 12 Pistols 0 Bows

6

5 END 9 Rifles 0 Shotguns 2 Parry 9 Athletics

6

5 CUN 2 Dodge 0 Engineering 0 Alchemy 0 Smithing

4

4 KNO 0 Woodworking 0 Horticulture 0 Livestock 0 Music

5

4 WIS 0 Art 12 Blood Magic 0 Bone Magic 0 Gem Magic

4

4 INS 0 Revision Magic 8 Skin Magic 0 Essentialism 0 Library Magic

5

3

2 CHA 0 Gold Magic 0 Water Magic 0 Steel Magic 0 Velocity Magic

2

2 POI 0 Wards 0 Language 0 Flattery 2 Comedy

3

0 LUK 2 Romance 0 Intimidation 8 Deception 0 Spirit

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**Quests**

- **Straddling Worlds:** There are others like you, those with dreams of a place called Earth. The so-called dream-skewered are studied at the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny. You can travel there to find out more.

- **God Botherer:** There are gods in this world, titans of power and masters of domains, each their own creature with their own special rules. Tread carefully around these creatures, especially if you wish to someday join their ranks.

- **The Lost King, Found?:** Five hundred years ago, Uther Penndraig, figure of legend, King of Anglecynn, and ancestor of Amaryllis, disappeared from this world while on a quest of grave importance. This enduring mystery must have an answer for those brave or foolish enough to seek it, mustn’t it?

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**Amaryllis Penndraig, Loyalty lvl 5**

Amaryllis is the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, the Lost King, which gives her special claim-in-fact to a fair number of his estates and heirlooms bound along cognatic or enatic primogeniture, ultimogeniture, and gavelkind rules. She was once a keystone member of a bloc of power within the Lost King’s Court, but now she has been cast out through means both semi-legal and downright nefarious. Her homeland of Anglecynn is forbidden to her now, at least until she’s gathered enough power to wedge open some doors.
To my surprise, teleportation was extraordinarily painful, and I say that as someone who had, in the past few days, had his arm broken with a pipe, twisted an ankle running from a mass of corpses, lost two pints of blood to undead rats, had a severed vein hastily cauterized, burnt through the flesh of my hand, and was pierced by three arrows thanks to friendly fire. The teleportation key Amaryllis held pulsed with green and then we were no longer in Sorian’s Castle and instead sitting in the sand beside a rocky cliff. The pain all happened in the interim, which didn’t seem possible, because I wasn’t aware of any time passing at all. The effect was distinctly unsettling.

“So,” said Fenn, looking over her bow to make sure that it was still fine. The half-elf was still dressed in the army fatigues she’d been wearing when I met her, now with more blood on them. “Do we have friends in the Barren Jewel or are we just crashing the party?”

“No friends,” said Amaryllis. “But no enemies either.” Her cheek twitched. “It’s just Barren Jewel, there’s no article in front of the name.”

“You couldn’t have dropped us in the city?” asked Fenn. “The gates won’t be down, because they’re never down. Supposedly they rusted shut a century ago.”

“The teleportation key is so valuable it’s a threat to our lives,” I said, as Amaryllis slipped it into her bag. “I don’t know how well it can be controlled, but if someone had seen us appear in a flash of light or whatever, we would have immediately faced some unpleasant complications.” I was gratified to see Amaryllis nodding along.

“Yes, but now we have a different problem, which is that we either have a wall to get over, or we have to talk to some guards and convince them that letting us in unmolested is a better idea than taking our stuff and stabbing us in the stomach,” said Fenn. She sighed and pulled off her pack, one I thought she had probably taken from Leonold’s corpse. “I have things to sell,” she said. “But I need to get into the city to do it. Without money, we can’t get room and board, and Juniper, even if you are remarkably durable, I’m guessing you’ll need some time to heal up.”

“Will you?” asked Amaryllis.

“I healed just before we ran across you,” I replied. “Unless we get into a fight, it’s probably not happening.”

Fenn was watching us with a grin. “Did you know that I like to be in on secrets?” she asked. “That’s something that you should know about me.”

“It’s not really a secret,” I said. I had kept it from Fireteam Blackheart, but that was more a matter of covering for the fact that I didn’t know a damned thing worth knowing. “I mean, unless it should be?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, “It should. The things that I’ve seen from you would make you worth an enormous amount of money to either the athenaeums, private individuals, corporations, or countries. Part of that depends on your growth potential, but while we’re in Barren Jewel, it should be as much of a secret as my identity.”

“Are the two of you intentionally teasing me?” asked Fenn with her arms crossed. “Come on, we’re in this together right, I’m a companion, I think it’s only fair that I get to know what everyone else knows.”

“We should be moving,” said Amaryllis. “We’re ten minutes from the walls right now, it’s just around the cliff. Juniper is hurt.”
“I’m dream-skewered,” I told Fenn. Amaryllis trying to compartmentalize information seemed like it was doomed to failure, and I was the best judge of my own injuries. “On top of that, I have some kind of special ability to learn things more quickly than I should, and I have information that I shouldn’t have.” Note to self: Figure out a way of phrasing that which is more concise while also sounding less insane.

“What sorts of information?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow.

“In your childhood you spent alternating months in the Isle of Eversummer and the colony of Rogbottom,” I said.

Fenn was already a pale woman, but with the blood drained from her face her skin was practically white. “What was the name of the ship that ferried me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “All I have is a paragraph of description. Mostly it was things that I had already figured out.”

“Do I have a description?” asked Amaryllis.

“You do now, you didn’t before,” I said. “I don’t know what changed. Probably our connection.” I hesitated for a moment. “I’ll recite them for you both, in private, when we have some time.”

**Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 4!**

That came as a surprise to me, especially since Amaryllis was only at loyalty level five. I wondered whether that came down to the interactions that I’d had with them, or their individual personalities.

“How does the teleportation key work?” I asked. “You think about the place you’re going and then you go there?”

Amaryllis shook her head. “Either you go to a place that you’ve physically been before, or you follow the pull of a touchstone. It can be used once every two hours, no faster.”

“How do you not know that?” asked Fenn.

“Dream-skewered,” I said. “I don’t have any memories before about three days ago. Or I have memories, but they’re from an alternate Earth. Er, sorry, from an alternate Aerb. Uh, one with no magic. Ish.” I turned to Amaryllis, trying to ignore Fenn’s puzzled look. “So you’ve been here before?” I asked, looking at the desert that stretched out endlessly ahead of us and the cliffs behind us.

Amaryllis nodded. “You have a thought?”

“I’m not sure it’s worth anything,” I said. “We want a room within Barren Jewel, some place that we can stay for days if not weeks. I’m injured and the most conspicuous among us, plus I don’t have even basic knowledge of … anything really, customs, money, fashion, language, I’m essentially a blank slate. So if we need a room, the two of you should go in together then come back out and teleport me directly into a room, since I won’t be able to climb a wall.”

“How injured are you?” asked Amaryllis. “Can you wait outside in the heat and winds for two hours?”

“Huh,” I replied. “If I had to put a number on it, I would say that I’m at about an eleven out of twenty-seven. I’m not losing any measurable amount of blood though.”
Skill increased: Comedy lvl 3!

“I just got a point of skill for that,” I said. The best jokes were the ones that no one else got.

“Congratulations,” said Amaryllis. “That still leaves the problem of how we’re going to get over the wall.”

“As high as the one around Silmar City?” I asked.

“See for yourself,” said Amaryllis, stepping forward. Fenn followed, and I hobbled after, my leg throbbing in pain from where an arrow had been extracted.

Barren Jewel was not as I’d pictured it in my head. In my mind, it was something like Agrabah, a place with Moorish architecture and domed minarets. Instead, a twenty foot tall wall (with parapets but unmanned) surrounded blocky buildings with wires haphazardly running between them. I could see only part of it given how tall the wall was, but there was nothing particularly Middle Eastern about it. If anything, it was cribbing from brutalism; the tall buildings didn’t look like places where people were meant to be comfortable, nor did they give the impression that aesthetics had been considered at all, except perhaps that whoever had made them had deliberately moved in the opposite direction. It made me wonder where the ‘Jewel’ part of the name came from.

“What a beautiful sight,” sighed Fenn. “I’ve never been myself, but I’ve heard enough stories, and they don’t do the place justice.” She pointed at a slender building that rose up above the others, by far the tallest in the city, at least from our vantage point. “If that building was a person, it would be an assassin in the dark.”

Amaryllis blanched. “I’d hoped not to come back here. Juniper, what’s your plan?”

“I can punch fast using blood magic, the Crimson Fist,” I said. Amaryllis nodded. “Is there any reason that I couldn’t do the same with my legs?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “There’s a style of blood mage fighting that uses the legs more than the arms.”

“That’s not quite what I had in mind,” I said. “I was planning on boosting both of you up over the wall.”

It took some time for us to set it up, and then just as I was listening to the sound of my heart with Fenn’s feet balanced on my hands, Amaryllis suggested that I try it with rocks first. I did that twice, getting a feel for it, and on the second time I was able to launch a hundred pound rock fifteen feet in the air, which caused a brief flash of intolerable pain in my leg.

Spell discovered: Crimson Foot!

Crimson Foot: Channels the force of your blood to gain kinetic energy in the form of a kick. Your foot is in no way protected by this spell. Drawing on this spell too often may leave you feeling sluggish. Consumes 3 drops of blood.

Spell discovered: Sanguine Surge!

Sanguine Surge: Channels the force of your blood to gain kinetic energy in the form of a leap. Your body is in no way protected by this spell. Drawing on this spell too often may leave you feeling sluggish. Consumes 5 drops of blood.

Huh. Two spells from trying one thing seemed generous, but maybe it was because I was trying to do something that wasn’t perfectly covered by what the game had in mind.
“I think we should be good to go,” I said. My health bar hadn’t budged, in spite of the pain.

Fenn went first, gamely stepping up with her bow tied to her bag and a prim and proper pose. She stood in my hands, lightly touching the wall for balance. She was heavier than the rock, by quite a bit given what she was carrying. I listened to the beat of my heart and tried to feel my pulse going through my legs, then began a countdown in my head timed to the rhythm. When I got to one, I lifted with my legs and put all my momentum into my arms, sending her sailing straight up, where she deftly grabbed the edge of the wall. I hissed in pain at the feeling of my injured leg, and unlike the time before, the pain didn’t subside. I clenched my fist and ground my teeth as I watched Fenn do a rather gymnastic pull-up that swung her up and over. She stuck an upraised thumb out for us to see just afterward.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Amaryllis. She was eyeing me warily.

“I’ve been through worse,” I said, then when I’d thought about it for a bit, “I’ve been through worse *today*, actually.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. She unstrapped her void rifle from her back and rested it against the wall. “I’m leaving this with you. Barren Jewel is technically a minor member of the empire and there’s a ban in place. Use it if you have to. Get some practice in.” She licked her lips. “I’m sorry that I’m leaving you again.”

“You waited for me in Silmar,” I said. “There was nothing to forgive, but if there ever was, it would be forgiven.”

“You think too highly of me,” said Amaryllis.

I was puzzling that over when she climbed into my hands. She was less steady than Fenn was, but she was lighter, both because she was shorter and because she was carrying less. Her hair briefly got in my face as I crouched down; she smelled like the sewer we’d gone through together, and I was sure that I wasn’t much better, if perhaps with a bit more of the smell of blood on me.

It was harder to find the rhythm of my pulse this time. I wasn’t sure whether it was because my heart beat faster around Amaryllis, or because of the renewed pain I was in, but it was a full minute of her standing on my hands and me trying to concentrate before I pushed her up with a grunt. She let out a squeak of surprise at the movement, but grabbed onto the ledge, and I saw Fenn’s pale hands come out to help her up. Then I lay on my back beneath the wall for a bit, where I’d fallen over, feeling the pain of my wounds and the heat of the sun.

This sort of thing wouldn’t happen in a game, or in any sort of narrative, really. The hero didn’t get stuck outside a wall waiting for his companions to come back over and pull him to safety. If I were a very proactive protagonist, I probably would have leapt to my feet, gritted my teeth through the pain, and then used Sanguine Surge to leap up into the air and climb over the wall myself.

Or if I was the other kind of protagonist, the one who reacted to events going on around him … well, let’s see, the obvious thing to have happened was that when I boosted Amaryllis up I would have seen strange, armored hands grab her, or a tentacle, or whatever, or I would have heard her scream in pain, and then I would have been forced to do something about it. Or maybe some guards would come across me and force me into a dungeon I would have to escape from. Or I would see my health going down, or my blood draining from me, through some injury that I’d opened in getting my companions over the wall. Something like that, something to keep me moving and reacting so the plot would keep humming along.

I waited a bit, but there was only the faint hum of the city on the other side of the wall and an
unpleasantly warm breeze, so I continued laying there, not moving.

I was tired. I wasn’t tired physically, because I had leveled up an hour ago and that had gifted me with the equivalent of a good night’s sleep. No, I was tired of this whole thing, being trapped in a strange world that seemed to be a smashed together from things I’d imagined, being ignorant of everything there was to be ignorant about, the lying, the killing … god, the killing. Carter and Tova had been the worst, because I had known them, but I’d killed seven people now. I wouldn’t have done it differently, but it still made me feel a little sick.

“Microhitler”, that had been the achievement I’d been given when Carter died. Craig had been the one to explain it, and I don’t remember where he got it from, but it was probably 4chan. Hitler killed 6 million people, so killing 6 million people could be defined as 1 hitler. Standard SI prefixes applied, so killing 6 people was one microhitler.

(If Tiff had been part of the group during that conversation, I am absolutely sure that she would have done her best Hermione impression and said that actually a Hitler should be defined as killing 11 million people, because it wasn’t just the Jews but the gypsies, homosexuals, et cetera, and actually Hitler didn’t directly kill those people, he gave the orders, and if you accepted that the Nazis were just puppets following orders then you disagreed with the Nuremberg principles.)

The “Microhitler” achievement implied other, more difficult achievements, and I was queasy at the thought that this was a game where it might be possible for a player character to kill six million people. Worse, it might be the sort of game where I would be forced into killing that many people.

I took solace in the fact that the game wasn’t being particularly game-like at the moment. No game I knew of would take a few hours out of the player’s time for quiet, melancholic contemplation while laying in the fine sand. I was tired of this place, but it was finally done forcing things on me, at least for a while.

I woke up, and in doing so realized that I had fallen asleep. Amaryllis was slapping me lightly in the face as my eyes fluttered open. It was nice, to wake up to her blue eyes and her pretty face framed by her long red hair. Her clothes had changed and she was wearing a long white robe with a cinch at the waist and a headband over a hood. She still smelled like a sewer though.

“Still good?” she asked as she looked my body over.

“Yuh,” I replied. “You?”

“Fine,” she said. “Wall’s easier to climb from the other side. Ready?”

I let out a long sigh. “Yeah.”

There was that moment of pain again, that seemed to happen all at once while I was nowhere and no time was passing. It didn’t so much fade away as stop completely, leaving only a memory. Then I was in a dimly lit room with a large bed and a small one, with Fenn standing to one side grinning at me and candles flickering at our arrival.

“The hoomans have returned!” said Fenn with a touch of real glee. “Juniper, did you get in a fight out there, or did you look that bad when we left you?”

“If I had to put a number on it, I would say that I’m now a ten out of twenty-seven,” I said. “So yes, four percent worse.” I laid down on the ground, not wanting to stain clean bedsheets. The floor was cool stone tile, which felt good against my skin. I had heated in the sun while I slept. “Oh, I’ve also lost, um … two or three percent of my blood.”
“Seems irresponsible of us to let him bake,” said Fenn as she tapped her chin. “He’s not making much sense.”

“He has numbers in his head,” said Amaryllis. She knelt down beside me and started looking at my wounds. “They’re apparently moving in the wrong direction. We need healing, probably sooner rather than later.” She looked down at her hands, one with a burnt finger and the other scratched up by zombie rat claws. “I do too, for that matter.”

Fenn nodded. “While you were out I asked around, we have our choice of a disreputable bone mage or a disreputable blood mage. I’m sure that the upper crust have their own healers, but we probably want to keep a low profile, given the whole juicy secrets thing. Say, don’t you think it’s a bit unfair that I don’t have a secret?”

Amaryllis ignored her. “We should get going then. My preference is for a bone mage. Their services are more reliable and with less risk.”

“Also more expensive,” said Fenn. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and bit down on the nail. “We have some money from what I hawked thus far, but it was a raw deal given that I’m an obvious outsider with no contacts. If we’re staying here for a while, better for me to hold off on selling the loot until I have some toehold, don’t you think?”

“Juniper is a savant,” said Amaryllis. “He learned the basic principles of blood magic in the space of a few minutes this morning and got us over the wall this afternoon by applying those principles in novel ways. I don’t know whether this will extend to other skills to such an extent, but if he keeps up this rate of progress then he’ll be able to rival the gods within a month.”

“You’re putting your chips on him,” Fenn nodded. “Now that I get. It’s a bet, but not that foolish of one. Juniper, do you agree that you might rival the gods?”

“Um,” I said. “How easy is it for a skin mage to move tattoos around?”

Amaryllis stared at me with mouth agape. “... did you literally learn skin magic in the three hours we were apart?” She stumbled over that last part, just a bit, I assume because she didn’t want to mention that she’d left me to die. “A skin mage is expected to be able to control their skin to such an extent that they can move a non-magical tattoo by the end of their first year of training,” she continued. “Invested tattoos they can usually move freely, but for those applied by others … when you enter into the athenaeum as a student, they put a tattoo known as a Fool’s Choker around your neck —”

“Yes,” I said, giving a weak snap of my fingers. “That’s the one.”

Amaryllis kept staring at me for a moment, then turned to Fenn. “Juniper is a lever by which the world can be moved.”

“Well, that at least explains why you stuck around waiting for him,” said Fenn with a wry smile. Amaryllis frowned, but didn’t deny it. “Fine, we’ll go see the bone mage.”
I’d had other things on my mind when I got the achievement “Tutorial Complete”, but what little attention I’d devoted to it had been to wonder how in the hell you could have a tutorial section that took three days to clear and featured something like a dozen perilously close brushes with death. Unless the game was meant to be played with a much more generous number of deaths, or it was supposed to be brutally difficult (the Super Meat Boy of RPGs?), everything from when I’d fallen out of the plane to when I’d left Silmar City being a tutorial didn’t make too much sense.

(There was a rabbit hole that I was trying not to distract myself with: the question of what would have happened if I had done things differently. I had been branded a coward by the game for not coming to that nameless girl’s rescue right when I’d first landed. If I had gone over and pulled the zombies off her, rescued her from her predicament … what would have happened then? Or when I’d left the gas station, what would have happened if I had gone away from Comfort instead of towards it? What if I had killed Amaryllis instead of accepting her quest? What if I had somehow convinced her to go toward the Host’s outpost instead of accepting her notion that we should go away from it?

Videogame designers couldn’t actually create that many multiple paths, because there was diminishing marginal utility on each branching path, especially considering that the bulk of players would only play through a game once. In a videogame, there were lots of ways to try faking the element of choice so that the player felt like what they did actually mattered, but generally the changes were cosmetic until it got to the end, where you’d get different endings, or there were two different paths through the game that hit all the same areas and saw you speaking to all the same people.

So in a videogame, trying to go down the road to somewhere unknown when I was meant to go to Comfort would probably have run me into some kind of unstoppable wall, to force me to go where the game wanted me to go. I don’t know quite what would have happened, but it would have been something like the Fuchsia Coterie showing up, or a mass of zombies that I couldn’t beat, or if the game designer were really lazy, then just an invisible wall that broke suspension of disbelief.

But in a tabletop game, it was easy enough to just improvise things. If the party doesn’t want to go to Comfort, then sure, you can take that long road and they’ll think up something for you at the end of it. If I were the GM, I would have planned for Amaryllis to be in Comfort, and if the party didn’t want to go there, or they killed her when they met her, or something else like that, then whatever, she would be dead and I would come up with a new lead-in for that quest, or I would take the hint the party was giving me and figure out a totally new quest.

Or, if you were a sneaky GM, you could do the same thing that game designers did and take away a little bit of choice by making some choices not matter. If the player decides that he wants to go away from Comfort instead of toward it, eventually he’ll find himself in the town of Amenity, which has the same basic design and all the same quests, NPCs, and enemies. Heck, if the player never saw a sign saying “Comfort” then you didn’t even need to rename it.

But what really fucked with my head was that you could do the same thing with people. Let’s say that you wanted the player to meet an important princess from Anglecynn, the recent victim of something sort of like a coup and the main driver of the plot. What I would do is place her down right next to the player at the very start of the game, surrounded by zombies and yelling for help. If this whole thing was like a tabletop game, then a clever GM could have planned for me to see that first girl, and for that girl to have been Amaryllis. After I had run away instead of helping her, I’d been slapped with a penalty, and since I never knew a single thing about her, a different girl could
have become Amaryllis instead, with the whole universe rewriting itself around that change. Come to think of it, I had been slapped with the second cowardice penalty after not running to help a different girl, and it was entirely possible that if I had raced after her and fought her attackers she would have, in time, revealed herself to be Amaryllis Penndraig. And actually, Amaryllis had given me a fake name when we’d first met, so if she’d died, or I had decided not to go back to her, there was still a chance for a rewrite up until the point where I returned with Poul and he recognized her.

In the right kind of tabletop game, reality warped around the player and bridges were built as they were needed.

The length of this digression is why I called it a rabbit hole, and the depth of paranoia and thought I could sink into the idea was one of the reasons I was trying not to question the nature of this reality too much, at least not unless I could come up with something testable, and I had nada thus far.)

When I got out into Barren Jewel though, covered in a hooded white robe that hid the worst of my injuries, I was struck with what the achievement “Tutorial Complete” had meant. Before, I’d been running from one place to another, with clear goals and relatively few metaphorical side streets to check out. Walking (to be honest, hobbling) through the streets of Barren Jewel though, I was enraptured by the sights and sounds, and more than that, by the possibilities.

We passed a creature with chitinous plating and mandibles, walking upright like a person, with a long polearm on his back. Three elves with pursed lips went by us, all a head taller than me, dressed in red cloaks with golden trim, and Fenn cinched her hood to hide her ears from them. I watched a turtle-like creature buying a jar of red powder from an otherwise-normal woman with leathery wings folded across her back. There was a gap in the crowds that I thought was open space, but when we got closer I saw that they were dwarves, not little people but thick, burly, blunt-nosed dwarves with elaborate braids and ornate armor. Most of the people I saw were human, and most were in white, black, or blue robes, but there were also these weird and thrilling things. I wanted to shrug off my wounds and follow the toaster-sized cyan crystal that was floating down the street with purpose, or a lanky man who was still eight feet tall even though he was walking with a stoop to keep from hitting the power lines that criss-crossed above us.

And yes, Barren Jewel was kind of a shithole. All the color seemed to be reserved for the people, with the buildings being a rather uniform off-white color, mostly free from embellishments aside from signs and lettering. There were gutters that stunk more than I did, with the occasional heaped up pile of something rotting. The wires overhead were what my dad would have called an eyesore, and they weren’t up to American fire codes. There were beggars, dirty amputees holding their hands up and small children who raced after me asking for coin I didn’t have until Fenn gave one of them a clap around the ear.

But there was so much to do and see, and it wasn’t like I was playing a videogame where the NPCs were basically just obstacles that would path around me, or where the buildings were just facades with doors that could never be unlocked, this was viscerally real. The world of Aerb had never felt like it was forcing me to do anything, not really, but before there had been a progression and now … I was free to chart my own path through Aerb and decide on what was important to me.

The bone mage’s den was somewhat typical of the architecture I’d seen in Barren Jewel thus far; it was the same off-white material that the walls here (and in Silmar City) had been made from, with a rectangular doorframe that had an ill-fitting door in it. There were multiple holes by the hinges, and I gathered that the person installing it had either botched the door or it had been replaced a few times before. It was recognizably a shop, in that there was a crude logo of a bone on a sign above the door, with another hand-lettered sign on the door saying simply “Kindly Bones”. There were windows, but they were high up, allowing in light but not giving a view to what was inside.
Fenn entered without knocking; Amaryllis and I followed after. There was no proper second story to this place, though it was tall enough for it. Instead there were two long ladders allowing access to the ceiling, where thousands of bones hung down like cloves of garlic in an Italian kitchen. There were bones on the walls too, set in little racks there, and then on the ground there was a wall of cabinets with small drawers, each individually marked with handwritten slips of paper. Atop one of those cabinets was burning incense, which filled the room with a slightly floral scent that didn’t quite cover up a deeper chalky smell.

Aside from that, there was a chest-high padded bench with rotatable arms, and a pale woman with black spots running from her ears down to her collar, where they disappeared beneath her robes. She sat behind a small desk with some papers.

“Welcome to the Kindly Bones, I am Magus Bormann,” said the woman with a short bow, palms pressed together. “How may I serve you?”

“We’ve come for some healing,” said Fenn. “My friend here was accidentally shot with a number of arrows by a party who shall remain nameless.”

“It was you,” I said. “You were the one who shot me.”

“Disrobe and let me see,” said Bormann. Her eyes went to Fenn. “Consultation is free, but can I assume that you will be the one paying?”

“Grudgingly,” Fenn shrugged.

I took off my robe, revealing my torn up jeans, shredded shirt, and bloody wounds. We had discussed it, but elected not to change me out for something else, in part because I was certain to get anything I wore bloody.

“Fully disrobe, if it’s not too painful,” said Bormann. “Have you taken healing from a bone magus before?”

“No,” I replied. I looked to Fenn and Amaryllis (amusement and apathy, respectively), then began taking off my clothes, wincing when dried blood pulled away from my flesh. I sat up on the padded bench and removed my jeans as well, cursing as I pulled the cloth away from my thigh. I was somewhat gratified to discover that my body had undergone changes for the better; I wasn’t exactly ripped, but I had visible abs when I wasn’t sitting down. I hadn’t been fat or paunchy back on Earth, but my dad had some cause to use the word “scrawny”.

“Hrm,” said Bormann. She briefly poked at the wound in my stomach, then at the one in my leg, and after that went to the lacerations I’d taken from the arrows that had mostly missed me. “Was the intent to treat only the most serious of wounds, or all injuries sustained?”

“All,” said Fenn. “Again, grudgingly.”

“Then I think it can be done for half a million tcher,” Bormann said, speaking to Fenn. “He’s in good health, aside from his wounds, no obvious complicating problems, no other visible magics that might interfere.” Fenn grumbled, slipped a hand into her purse, and pulled out a handful of paper notes that Bormann took and counted swiftly. “Lay back and we’ll begin the work. It should take roughly two hours or so.” She looked to Fenn and Amaryllis. “You may leave and come back, if you have pressing needs.” Fenn left quietly, while Amaryllis stayed.

“That,” I began, seems long. But I was comparing this woman against Tova, an intimidating woman working under pressure and presumably with vast resources.
“If you have a question, I am free to answer,” said Bormann. “This type of work does not require terribly much attention at this point in my career.”

“I was wondering what it took to learn bone magic,” I said. “Or … anything about it, I guess. I’ve seen it performed once, in an emergency, but beyond that …”

“Let me get the bones first,” said Bormann. She went to one of the cupboards and withdrew a number of bones, which she laid down on a tray table beside the padded bench. She held them up, one by one. “The chief aspect of healing is vitality, so for that we select from resilient creatures. In this case, the Eastern carrier gull, and more specifically, his ribs, which will correspond to your torso, and his leg bones, which will correspond to your leg, plus a few others for the more minor injuries.”

She took a narrow rib not much longer than a finger in one hand and placed her other hand on my stomach, right next to the wound. The bone glowed, very faintly, and a tiny odorless curl of smoke rose from it as she did her work. Eventually she set the bone to one side and picked up another, identical one to repeat the process. I could feel something happening in my stomach, but it was slow going.

“I had five years at the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh,” said Bormann, “That’s about the minimum required to call yourself a proper bone mage. Study mostly consists of understanding skeletal structures of various animals and how it relates to their aspects, along with the study of aspects and the mortal form. We don’t learn how to pull from the bones until the second year.”

Three more bones had been used while she spoke, and the pain from my stomach had subsided somewhat.

“Almost done with that section, we’ll do your leg next,” said Bormann with pursed lips. “Is my talking calming to you?”

“Yes,” I replied. “So, ow, so you pull aspects of creatures from their bones?”

“Just so,” said Bormann. “Vitality is the most widely useful, because the effects fade as soon as the bone has had its essence pulled from it. With vitality, the concentrated healing remains. The other four aspects are swiftness, strength, focus, and intellect.” She said that last as the wound on my stomach finally closed completely; she wiped away some dried blood there with a stained washcloth and moved on to my leg.

Vitality, swiftness, strength, intellect, and focus. Or, rearranged, strength, swiftness, vitality, intellect, ________, and focus. Which is really close to power, speed, endurance, cunning, knowledge, and wisdom, which appeared in a neat little column by my character sheet.

“What about knowledge?” I asked.

“Ah, you’ve heard stories,” said Bormann. She had the leg bones in hand and was looking over my arrow wound some. “Bone mages sucking the memories out of a person’s skull, that sort of thing?” I nodded cautiously. “Well, it’s not so dramatic as all that, if you pull deep it’s too many memories all at once, disorganized and opaque, and if you take a shallow pull you get pieces too disparate to make sense of. And either way, it needs to be written down or dictated quickly before it fades, which creates its own problems. People always think of it as having their secrets scooped out of them, but that’s not how it works in practice. Either way, it’s not really an aspect as such, and rarely studied.”

Amaryllis spoke up for the first time. “Juniper, if you have further questions, I think it would be better for you to hold off on them until we’ve had a chance to talk.”
Bormann raised an eyebrow at that, but she was enough of a consummate professional that she didn’t question someone coming in with multiple arrow wounds, and she continued on about her work without further comment.

Amaryllis was probably right to keep me from asking more questions, because for all I knew I was three seconds away from asking a question that would expose me as either not knowing things that everyone knew, or knowing things that no one was supposed to know. The former wasn’t that much of a problem; I was fine with being branded an idiot, if less fine with raising eyebrows. The latter could get us killed, especially given how scarce our resources were.

So instead, I sat silently and did some thinking about bone magic. The aspects that Bormann described pretty clearly mapped to the attributes on my character sheet, minus the social attributes, the umbrella attributes, and luck (maybe, unless they categorized those differently). That made bone magic really easy to graft onto the game layer; all you’d need is some logical rule that said “when you pull from a bone, choose an attribute that animal had in life and add it to your own”. I was guessing it was more complicated than that, but I would have an incredible advantage in bone magic even above and beyond my ability to skill up, because I would be able to actually see the mechanical changes.

“Are there other ways to learn how to become a bone mage?” I asked. I caught Amaryllis giving me a slight frown, but she didn’t so much as give me a small shake of her head, so I figured I was on safe ground. “Are there people who train outside the athenaeum?”

“It’s illegal under imperial law,” said Bormann with a grin. My blank face must have given away that I didn’t get the joke, because her grin fell away.

“The argument goes,” Amaryllis began, “That there is a limited number of good, useable bones in the world, and though new bones are being made all the time, that still leaves a limit on how many are created a year, both through natural processes and on farms. A lackluster bone mage pulls less from a bone than a superb one, which means that a weak bone mage goes through far more bones, depleting a scarce resource and overall increasing the price of much-needed healing in the long term. I’m sure that the players in that game are transparent to you,” Uh, no? “The Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh gains in power if they’re the only source of accredited bone magic, existing bone mages get to take out the competition and keep their prices high, the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood sits on the fence for a bit because on the one hand restricting healing to accredited bone mages means that blood mages have some benefit from decreased competition, but on the other hand it lowers the relative prestige of blood mages and those who teach it because now there’s this bottleneck of privilege, and then there are all the farmers, hunters, trappers, et cetera who make their livings, in part, off providing bones, and they’re of course staunchly against this change in imperial law because of how it affects their bottom line, on and on until you have hundreds of voices arguing with varying strength that the imperial law is either good and bad, and eventually the vote gets decided by some combination of money and influence rather than whether it’s actually good policy.”

I could practically hear Reimer with his refrain of “blah, blah, blah, politics”. My problem was, I didn’t actually have the context for most of this to be that meaningful. At a best guess, the athenaeums were like super powerful universities with alumni at high ranks in various companies, political fields, and probably militaries. The empire … was a thing? Actually, all I knew was that there was a thing called imperial law which Bormann found funny for some reason.

That was when I realized that Amaryllis wasn’t feeding me information, she was covering for me. I hadn’t interpreted Bormann’s joke in the right way, Bormann had noticed, and Amaryllis had both offered a distraction and an explanation for my confusion. I wasn’t some idiot who didn’t know why imperial law deserved a smirk, I was obviously confused about the political reasons behind the ban
on unlicensed bone mages.

“Are you one of those I should go to if I have problems with political solutions?” asked Bormann. “Most of my clients are involved in a skilled trade, it’s not often that I meet someone who understands what actually goes on in the empire,” She continued with her work, sealing the wound on my leg entirely until there was only a small pink mark where the arrow had entered, then moving on to the minor wounds. “Though to be frank, one of the things that I’ve missed least about the athenaeum is how invested everyone was in imperial goings-on.”

And with that rather diplomatic end to the conversation, we were again silent. I was feeling much better, though still a little light on blood, and I was content to just keep my mouth shut instead of asking more questions. It wouldn’t be too long before I would have some time alone with the rest of what I was starting to accept as my party. Rather than doing nothing, I closed my eyes and looked at my character sheet, but none of the numbers seemed to be changing with the application of bones. With my eyes open and on my hitpoint total, I could occasionally catch it ticking up if I was paying attention, but that was a digital representation of an analog process, or maybe the hitpoints were just a best guess at how healthy I was. (I hadn’t increased my END since turning hitpoints on, but I was going to pay attention when I did.)

“Looking much better!” said Fenn as she sauntered in. “Though I suppose you should be, for half a million tcher.”

“He was lucky,” said Bormann. “The arrow in his leg just missed his femoral artery. The one in his stomach managed not to pierce any internal organs. Whatever you were doing, I would highly suggest that you not do it again … though if you do, I hope that you remember me.” She laid a bone down on the metal tray, then dipped her hands into a small bowl of water and began rubbing them. “The work is done.”

All my wounds had been sealed, now leaving only small pink areas of new flesh. So far as I could tell, what the bone mage had done wasn’t so much magically knitting my flesh back together, she was accelerating the process of natural healing by a few orders of magnitude.

“The girl too,” said Fenn. “She has some cuts on her hand, and a burn, I think.”

Bormann went over to Amaryllis and looked at her hands with a frown. “This burn … blood magic?”

Amaryllis shrugged.

“It’s important that I know, so that I can properly heal you,” said Bormann.

“What exactly would it cost to eliminate your need to know?” asked Fenn.

Bormann frowned. “Double the rate, if you want me to pour more magic in and hope for the best. I also won’t make any guarantees about the quality of the healing.” She looked at Amaryllis’ other hand and stifled a sigh. “You took these wounds earlier today, by the look of them. Were your nails yellow then?”

Amaryllis looked closer at her hand. “No,” she said cautiously. “Infection?”

“It might be rat rot,” I said. The three of them looked at me. “I had it once. That’s what I was told it was called.”

“I’m unfamiliar with it,” said Bormann. “Fifty thousand tcher for your wounds, half that if you tell me more so I can make an assessment. And if rat rot is a disease, I don’t know what it would take for
me to burn it out of you. It would be a good way for me to line my pockets, if I was the sort of healer who liked to string people along.”

“Do we have your confidentiality either way?” asked Fenn.

“No,” said Bormann. “If the city guard comes knocking and asking about people who were involved in something they shouldn’t have been, besides just shooting each other with arrows, then I’ll tell them what I know with only the slightest pushback.”

“Then we’ll pay the full rate,” said Fenn. “Better you not know, if you’d be obliged to tell. And we’ll deal with the rat rot later, if we have to.”

Once we were finished, Fenn pulled some clothes out of her bag for me and I put them on. It was nothing special, just a t-shirt and some ill-fitting pants, and it was all somewhat loose, but my robe went over the top of it anyway. Bormann graciously offered to toss my old clothing and then we were on our way.

“So,” said Fenn once we were outside. “I’m thinking that a bathhouse is the next thing on our list, some place that we can wash off the stink of our misadventures.” She yawned, stretching out briefly touching the bow on her back, as though to reassure herself that it was still there. “Also, Juniper, you’ll be glad to know that I found out why we’re really here. No friends, but no enemies either, that might have applied to a dozen places that we could have gone. There’s a deeper meaning to why Barren Jewel was so very, very non-negotiable.” She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, and there was no humor left in her voice.

“We should keep our voices low,” said Amaryllis. “We can discuss this in private. I had planned to, after we’d gotten some rest.”

“Suit yourself,” Fenn shrugged. She cast me a raised eyebrow just before she turned away.

We had a very silent walk back to the inn, and though I was no longer limping, the sudden tension between the group was doing its own job of sapping the wonder from me as we walked the exotic streets.
“So,” said Fenn as soon as we were through the door to our room. “I finally figured out what this companion thingy reminded me of: a kharass, an elf cultural thing. Basically, there are groups of people who are cosmologically linked to one another by a wampeter, which I guess is their … purpose is close, but theme might be closer. I’ve always been garbage at translating.”

“We were going to talk about why we’re really in Barren Jewel,” I said.

“Oh hush, I’m getting there,” said Fenn. “See, I’ve been thinking a bit about us as a trio and what our theme might be, what might unify us. A princess, a looter, and someone with brain damage? There wasn’t that much in common. After a little bit of time though, it occurred to me that we are all displaced in one way or another. You have probably noticed by now that I’m a half-elf, which leaves me between worlds. Juniper thinks he’s an Airthian stuck here on Aerb. And Amaryllis is a princess without a kingdom, a noble among the poor.”

“And?” asked Amaryllis, after a pause in Fenn’s monologue.

“And I was thinking that my situation is not one that can be solved. I will never be an elf, I will never be human, and there are no sanctuaries for half-elfs, nor would I go to one if I could. I was cast out of the two homes I was born into simply by the nature of my birth. Likewise, Juniper’s situation has no solution. There is no place called Airth, there’s no way for him to go home, his displacement is as permanent as mine. Yet you, princess, you want to go home, and while that might just be feasible given the benefits of your bloodline and with Juniper’s help, it’s not part of our wampeter. It can’t be, because neither Juniper or I have any stake in the matter. So, you tell us why we should brave the thaum-suckers of the desert and take back your ancestral home.”

I raised my hand. “Can I ask, are you pronouncing Earth wrong on purpose?”

“I don’t want to take Caer Laga back,” said Amaryllis. “There are a significant quantity of magic items there, all of which should be mine to bind to.”

“Either way,” said Fenn. “This is an ‘Amaryllis gets what she wants’ type of plan you were going to pitch us, and while Juniper might go along with it because you’re a young, stunningly attractive female of his species, I personally must make my reservations known, especially if we are unified by cosmological purpose.”

“I’m missing several things,” I said. “First, what is a thaum-sucker?”

“They’re a creature that feeds on magic,” said Amaryllis. “The Datura Desert would be dangerous even if it were only four hundred miles of hot sand with no water or plants to speak of, but it’s the thaum-seekers that elevate it to the level of a major exclusion zone. It is true that going to Caer Laga would require us to brave them, but I have confidence in our abilities, so long as we have some time to prepare, which I believe we do.” She turned to Fenn. “You’re a self-confessed looter, I would have thought I would get less resistance from you.”

“I never looted for the love of it,” said Fenn. She rubbed her chin. “That is to say, I did love the feeling of finding buried treasures, and the, um, archeology, looking through other people’s things, and I loved surviving with only my wits, my luck, and my grossly overpowered warbow. And I loved the solitary nature of it too, certainly. But for all that I’m not some idiot who would have gone and done it if there was some other profession waiting in the wings for me.”
“That’s not why you don’t want to do it,” I said. “You would have led with ‘it’s hard and dangerous’ if that was what was really motivating you.”

“Can we talk about the elephant in the room?” asked Fenn. I nodded. “We are in possession of a fucking teleportation key.”

“Um, I don’t really have context for that,” I said. “Amaryllis told me it was our ticket out of the Risen Lands, and that it was valuable, but … it does seem really useful, and it’s irreplaceable, I get that, I just don’t … really understand the fuss except by inference.”

“Dream-skewered,” spat Fenn, as though it was a swear word. “Oh, this is not going to be very fun.” Then she brightened slightly. “Except, wait, you don’t know any jokes from Aerb, do you? This duck walks into a bar and asks, do you have any grapes?”

“When originally created, there were a thousand teleportation keys,” said Amaryllis. “Some were lost over time, a very few destroyed. At current, they number just over nine hundred, but that’s including some guesses as to which are held in private hands or otherwise kept secret. Five people, twelve times a day, times nine hundred keys, means some fifty-four thousand people traveling freely around the world every day. It’s the backbone of intraimperial travel. It’s the glue that allows the empire to functionally work. Now, the value placed on teleportation for a single person is close to ten thousand obols, which means that the per-day value of a teleportation key is six hundred thousand obols.”

“Define obol,” I said. “Define it in terms of … a loaf of bread. How many obol does a loaf of bread cost?”

“And does a spoiled princess know?” quipped Fenn.

“It depends on the sort of bread,” said Amaryllis, with a roll of her eyes in Fenn’s direction. “Barren bread sells for something like a tenth obol apiece. Proper bread, the kind made using wheat flour, would be more like two or three obol. Anything made by an artisan would be more.”

I nodded along, letting the confusing words wash over me. “Okay, let me pick a new metric, how much would someone get paid in hourly wages for, say, being a cleaner? Not a professional, just a small job that needs doing?”

“Five obol, maybe,” said Amaryllis. Which was just about minimum wage. Which probably means that the value of an obol is close enough to a dollar that I’m not that far off if I freely convert the two.

“Thank you for the context,” I said. “I think I understand … except that we used tcher to pay for the bone mage.”

“Is this really something that we should be talking about right now?” asked Fenn. “I personally thought that we were trying to discuss, oh yes, the fact that we have a fucking teleportation key. Or was I the only one interested in that?”

“I am,” I said. “But how easy is it to extract value from? You said before that they go to either the touchstones or where you’ve been before. I would imagine that we don’t want to go to any of the touchstones, because people would see us and steal our incredibly valuable teleportation key that we’re really not supposed to have. That leaves us with the places we’ve already been, and this is another place where I’m sure my ignorance is showing, but … I was also told that bulk teleportation of non-living things is relatively cheap, and you have radio technology, which means that being couriers is probably out, even if we could do that without drawing attention to ourselves, and that leaves … smuggling?”
“See?” Amaryllis asked Fenn. “Juniper has been in this world for three days and he can see all of the inherent problems. Smuggling? We’d be starting from nothing and going against all the gangs, cartels, syndicates, et cetera in Aerb who are already doing their best to occupy that same niche. And they have production, distribution, and economies of scale on their side.”

Fenn shrugged. “Point taken, regretfully.”

“So then the question is how to leverage the teleportation key without drawing undue attention to ourselves, and without putting ourselves in a position where we’re in danger,” I said. “That leaves looting, doesn’t it? We can return to the top of Sorian’s Castle and take everything there that’s not nailed down.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise,” said Fenn. She turned to Amaryllis. “You knew that the key was there. Fireteam Blackheart knew it was in the city. Blackheart got written off, but who else is going to be looking for it? If we teleport in, how likely are we to be surrounded by angry men with swords and guns?”

“I need a day, or maybe as much as a week, to get some news from Anglecynn,” said Amaryllis. “Internal politics are hard to track from the outside. Unless we have some pressing reason to rely on luck … the odds that someone will be waiting for us, or that there will be wards set up to catch us, are unacceptably high and get higher as time passes.”

“And yet,” said Fenn. “Caer Laga beckons.”

Amaryllis bit her lip hard and winced at the pain. “Alright,” she said. “Can I make a proper pitch?”

I nodded and Fenn laid back on the big bed before saying “Fine.”

“Juniper, first you need a very brief education,” said Amaryllis. Fenn let out a “harumph” at that. “Just as on your world, there are artisans on Aerb who make all manner of things,” continued Amaryllis, speaking quickly. “Sometimes, for reasons that no one really understands, one of these artisans will go into a forge frenzy where they’re overcome by a very particular idea and become dead-set on pursuing it, to the exclusion of money, reputation, family, sleep, food, et cetera. Once they’re finished, they come out of it, and sitting on their workbench, or wherever, is this thing that they didn’t actually know how to create, drenched in otherworldly magic and utterly, forever unique. Those are the entads. You’ve seen two of them so far, Fenn’s bow and the teleportation key.”

“But you said there are a thousand of the keys,” I said.

“All thousand were created at once,” said Amaryllis, “All in the course of a single forge frenzy. Supposedly it was a giant tower of keys that interlocked. Anyway, the entads range from useful to overwhelmingly powerful. Now, one of the quirks that most of them have is that they don’t change ownership lightly.”

“Ah,” I said. “Some are bound along cognatic primogeniture lines while others are gavelkind.”

Amaryllis stared at me. “It was in your biography, which I still need to read for you. But I get the gist of it, there are magic items that pass down as heirlooms that you have claim-in-fact to, and some of them are sitting unrecovered in Caer Laga for some reason.”

Amaryllis paused to consider her words. “Caer Laga was abandoned by my great-grandfather with wards still intact and a cache of heirlooms, primarily because of the cost associated with maintaining it within the Datura. My bloodline gives me the right to pass through the wards with the two of you in tow. There shouldn’t be anything within and we should be able to use the teleportation key to leave, which means that the only risk involved is in passing through the Datura and facing down the
thaum-seekers.”

*Quest Accepted: Mothballs - According to Amaryllis, one of her ancestral homes lies empty with riches bound to her within it. Unfortunately, it's quite some distance away through hostile territory. Prepare carefully.*

“I’m in,” I said. “So long as we have some time to prepare.”

“I’d like to first off know what’s in it for me, second to know precisely what you’re hoping to gain from it, specifically the nature of these entads, and third, I want to know what the wampeter of our kharass is. Except I think those are actually in the opposite order of importance, so invert that list,” said Fenn. She didn’t seem concerned that I had accepted quickly.

“I don’t think wampeter and kharass are applicable to us,” said Amaryllis. “Except insofar as they represent useful terms for us to work with in forging a temporary or permanent team. As for the others, the answer to those questions is the same. Three of the seven heirlooms I believe to be at Caer Laga can either be used by the three of us as a whole or given to the two of you through investiture.”

“Well at *that* I’m all ears,” said Fenn. “You should have led with it.”

“I would have,” said Amaryllis with ice in her voice. “But you came in here talking about elfish traditions and how I was being too concerned with furthering my own interests.”

“Oh, I still think that,” replied Fenn. She had been laying on the bed, partly talking to the ceiling, but now she sat up and pointed a finger at Amaryllis. “You have more to gain than we do, and our gains will be chained to your successes or failures. Let’s say that you invest Juniper with a fancy new sword and weeks or months down the line you have some disagreement with him. That fancy sword was candy you dangled in front of him, but now it’s leverage over him.”

“That is entirely in the nature of investiture,” said Amaryllis, rubbing her face. “I don’t understand why you’re being so difficult about this. What is it you propose to do instead?”

Fenn frowned. “Better for us to get this out now,” she said. “I’ve traveled with people before, partnered for mutual benefit, and if you go skipping off happily into the sunset then come nightfall things get out of hand. I’m game for going to Caer Laga, so long as we do it with open eyes.”

Amaryllis stared with mouth agape. “You … you were willing to go this entire time?”

“Certainly,” said Fenn.

“Alright, fine,” said Amaryllis, swallowing whatever else she might have wanted to say. “Then we need to stop wasting time and get to planning.”

“The two of you smell,” said Fenn, “And I’m not so hot myself. So long as we’re not under a time crunch, I would propose that we find a bathhouse posthaste, get a night of rest, and then plan in the morning, with some sanity restored to us.”

Amaryllis made a strong argument that I shouldn’t go anywhere without having roughly two weeks of education in what not to do in Barren Jewel, but Fenn kept cracking jokes about the sewers smell and complaining that we were going to have to throw away one of the sets of new clothes that she had bought us. Maybe Amaryllis was as close to her limits as I was, because eventually she relented.

“It’s best that you not talk to anyone,” said Amaryllis. “I think you’re smart enough to figure out why. We’ll be apart while we change, which I think is the most dangerous moment, but at any other
time the two of us can cover for you.”

“I think you’re overcomplicating this,” said Fenn. “There’s such a thing as being too paranoid.”

I laughed at that. “That really makes me want to stay inside,” I said. “The kind of people who say that there’s such a thing as being too paranoid are invariably not being paranoid enough.”

“Is that an Airth thing?” asked Fenn as she scrunched her nose at me.

“Okay, so you definitely are saying it wrong,” I replied. “And no, it’s not really an Earth thing. I don’t really have the proper qualifications to speak on what is or is not the proper level of precaution. We seemed to do fine with the bone mage.”

“You almost gave yourself away,” said Amaryllis. “Just don’t talk. Any questions you have can be raised later, with us, in private.”

That left the question of the teleportation key, which was worth something like billions of dollars in future earnings. Amaryllis had been guarding it closely and visibly touching her handbag for it often enough that if I were a thief I probably would have gotten a glint in my eye just from that. Going into the bathhouse would mean leaving it with her clothes there, which was a non-starter. Leaving it at our inn was also not an option, because the elderly innkeepers apparently couldn’t be trusted not to go through our things (at least according to Fenn).

My idea had been to hop the wall again and hide it out in the desert, but that was because I was ignorant of the fact that this problem could be solved using magic.

The tattoo mage seemed a little too pleased to be looking at Amaryllis for my tastes, at least until he got a whiff of her. The bone mage hadn’t complained, but she also had the benefit of incense in her shop and a specialty in medicine. After some negotiation with Amaryllis and payment from Fenn, he began a tattoo on the inside of her left arm. To my surprise, he was using a mostly modern looking tattoo gun which was plugged into the wall. I’d never had a tattoo myself, but I’d gone with Tiff when she wanted one to memorialize Arthur. The biggest difference between the tattoo shop in Bumblefuck, Kansas and the one in Barren Jewel was the effort put into sanitation; Amaryllis was getting a tattoo from a guy who didn’t seem like he’d ever heard of latex gloves, cross-contamination, blood-borne illnesses, or anything like that. Amaryllis closed her eyes while he inscribed a circle on her skin. Her tattooist kept looking at her. Any leering he’d had before was replaced by wariness, bordering on fear.

“Can we talk?” whispered Fenn as she slipped her arm in mine. “This will be awhile.”

“Sure,” I replied. She pulled me along until we were outside the shop.

“So how in love with her are you?” asked Fenn. This was about as serious as I had seen Fenn, aside from when she’d told me that Quills and friends were going to kill us.

“Uh, I’m not,” I replied.

“Okay, on a scale from 0-9, how in love with her are you?” asked Fenn.

“There are a lot of different ways to divide up love,” I replied. “Physical attraction, emotional attraction, empathy, those sorts of things. I know you think that my mind is clouded because I’m a teenage boy, but –”

“No,” said Fenn. “I’m worried that I’m about to be the third wheel in this little group we have here. I see how you look at her, and I see how you don’t look at me, even when I’m giving you little lovers’
kisses.”

“That’s not —”

“It’s fine,” said Fenn. “I’m under no illusions about how I compare to a princess,” the word left her lips at a bare whisper, so quiet that I probably wouldn’t have caught it if I couldn’t see the movement of her lips, “and I know a half-elf is no one’s idea of a catch but a pervert’s.”

“I think you’re pretty,” I said.

**Skill Increased: Flattery lvl 1!**

“Well, you’re a pervert,” said Fenn with a smile. “You really walked into that one, didn’t you?”

“Look,” I said, “I think you’re probably worried about what it’s going to be like down the road, right? If everything goes well in, um, that place we’re going, then that will cement us as a team, even if it’s just one of mutual convenience. You’re thinking that if I were to fall head-over-heels for her then you would always get outvoted two-to-one, and that’s a perfectly reasonable fear.”

A silence lingered between us for a bit. “Except what?” asked Fenn. “Isn’t this the point where you’re supposed to make some soothing sounds at me about how you would never, ever do such a thing?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. I watched the people going by us and was momentarily stunned to see someone riding an ostrich-sized bird. “I’ve been in this world for three days. I’m missing huge swaths of knowledge about how it works and who the people in it are. Your fear seems reasonable to me. If you want me to give you my assurances, I guess I could say that our traveling companion scares me a bit, that she’s too impersonal to have much a connection with aside from what my special eyes tell me, and I’m much more focused on …”

I came up short. This was the place where I should maybe have said that I was focused on getting home, but the truth was that home kind of sucked. Home was a place full of anger and sadness. It was a place where people kept saying that it would get better with time, and they had been right, but I sort of still didn’t believe them. Aerb was all fresh and new, a complicated, aged, worked-over world, but here I was free of scars, and whatever emotional stuff I was working on had been dropped at the door, at least for the time being. I was worried that Aerb was eventually going to make me face some things I didn’t want to face, but until that point, and so long as I was gifted with superpowers and not in that much danger, I didn’t really want to go home.

“Personally,” said Fenn. “I want a big old castle with lots of servants, handsome men waiting on me hand and foot, exotic foods and thrilling plays, and enough wine to drown in if I so choose. Not such a bad goal, if you’re looking for one.”

I didn’t believe that for a second. Partly that was because characters in movies, novels, and games never had that simple of a motivation, even when they claimed to. The mercenary always had some tragic backstory to be solved, or some deep underlying issue that would mean that they would never be happy even if they got their gold-plated castle. The crude biography I had for Fenn seemed to say as much. I also didn’t believe her when she said that looting an exclusion zone was her only viable path in life.

“We should get back,” I said. “I don’t want her thinking that we’ve run off. I’ll take what you said under advisement, and I can at least promise that right now I don’t think we’re close to forming any ironclad voting blocs.”
Fenn nodded and clasped me on the shoulder. “You know, I somehow find that more comforting than a blanket assurance. It shows you’re thinking, at least.”

**Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 5!**

When we got back into the tattoo parlor, Amaryllis was just finishing up. I don’t know whether she noticed us leave or not, but her eyes were still closed and her face still calm as the tattooist completed the elaborate circle on her skin. When he was finished, he touched it with his bare fingers. Though the skin was red and raw, Amaryllis showed no reaction to this.

“Package?” the tattooist asked.

Amaryllis opened her eyes, reaching into her purse, and pulled out the teleportation key, which was wrapped in white cloth and tied shut with twine. He took it without a word and with a squint of his eyes the tattoo started spinning on her skin. The circle was a hand-length across her arm, curving with it. I watched carefully as the key was shoved into her skin, passing into it with only token resistance. When he was finished, ink moved within the spinning circle, then became part of it, until it reformed into a simple, unmoving image of a package tied up with string.

“Done,” said the tattooist. “To pull it back out, grab at the edge and concentrate on it.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis, flexing her arm. The redness of the fresh tattoo had faded completely, and once she had put her robes back on, there was no way to tell she had a billion dollar magic item hidden within her skin.

And with that, we were off to the public baths.
The closest thing to public bathing I had ever experienced was in the high school locker room, which had rows of showers lined up and nothing in the way of privacy. I’d say it was obvious that the showers were segregated by gender, but that was manifestly not obvious to the people of Barren Jewel. I paid with money Fenn had given me, stuck my clothes in a cubby, walked out with a towel provided by an attendant, and was greeted by a sea of flesh.

From the outside, the public baths were a big, ugly building, unpainted and unadorned except for a texturing that looked like it would scrape my skin off if I brushed against it. Inside though, a wide open space with tall, sculpted pillars holding up a glass ceiling that let in the last of the waning light. There were sconce lights at regular intervals, each with their own flame, some of them so high up I was left wondering how they were lit. Everywhere there was color, from the turquoise and gold tile to the green and red murals on the wall that depicted an elaborate pastoral landscape. In a way, it was the opposite of the streets of Barren Jewel; there I had seen plain buildings with colorful people walking between them, but here it was a beautiful, lovingly wrought interior with plain, unadorned people, all either nude or with simple white towels.

Which wasn’t to say that I found the people unnoteworthy, because there were skin colors we didn’t have on Earth, people with odd proportions and strange protrusions, men with tusks, women with feathers, and the occasional upright animal with wet fur. Most of the people looked human, but the ones that weren’t drew my attention.

“It’s rude to stare,” said Fenn from beside me, which made me jump. She had a towel wrapped around her, leaving her with some modesty. When I looked at her arms, I realized that I had never seen them uncovered. She had keloid scars in precise patterns starting at the joint of her shoulder and running down to the middle of her forearm. They were curlicue, almost organic looking in their shape, but exactly identical on both arms.

“See, I say that it’s rude to stare, and what do you do?” asked Fenn.

“They’re very pretty,” I said.

Fenn turned away from me and shrugged. “They weren’t exactly my choice. And they’re non-functional, in case you’re wondering.”

I hadn’t been, because until that moment it hadn’t occurred to me that one of the differences between ‘skin magic’ and ‘tattoo magic’ might be that there were other sorts of magic you could do with the skin. If I was right in assuming that skin magic extended to ritual scarification, then what else was there? Intentionally stretching the skin? Piercings? I had eight levels in the skill, but knew practically nothing about it. I was about to ask Fenn more, even given her obvious discomfort, but then I saw Amaryllis, who had shed her towel and waded into the water.

I didn’t really have enough experience to say whether this was true of all public baths, considering that the one in Barren Jewel was the only one I had been in, but it wasn’t a particularly sexy place. There were families bathing there with small children running around them, and though it didn’t seem like Aerb was in the middle of an obesity epidemic in the same way that the Midwest was, there were plenty of people whose bodies were far from what I’d define as aesthetically pleasing (in fact, there were a few people I thought looked malnourished).

It might have been because of that context that I found the sight of Amaryllis to not actually be the most erotic thing I had ever seen in my life, instead taking a close second. The position of first is not
one that I intend to recount here, but it would suffice to say that I’d briefly had a girlfriend back on Earth, and she had been putting effort into seduction, even though she didn’t need to.

Amaryllis wasn’t trying to be sexy, or if she was, she was doing a really good job of pretending that she wasn’t. She waded into the water, pulling her hair into a tight bun as she did so, which brought her hands up over her head and showed off the muscles of her arms. She had dimples just above her butt and muscles visible along her ribs that tensed with her movements. If she’d really climbed up Sorian’s Castle it wasn’t a surprise that she was in amazing shape, but her curvature still spoke to softness and seduction. She looked back at me while she was doing up her hair with her fingers touching the back of her neck and it felt like my heart suddenly stopped when our eyes met, before it started again, pumping quite a bit faster. My breath caught in my throat.

(Look, I know you probably think that I’m a creep, because one of the classic creep things is reading some kind of sexual intent into things that weren’t intended to be sexual. Tiff was the only girl I had ever talked to at length about that sort of thing, and she’d said that one of the things that sucked most about the boy/girl dynamic was that boys, especially high school boys, would see a girl stretching out and they would not just look appreciatively at her tits, but they would also convince themselves that this was some kind of show specifically for them, or an unspoken overture toward something more. Really, sometimes she just needed to stretch out after sitting in a desk for an hour and a half. I tried to keep all that in mind as I watched Amaryllis, so I wouldn’t think that every little thing she did was some display for me.)

I went into the water until it was waist deep, then tried to wash myself clean and think about something other than the fact that Amaryllis was naked so close to me. That work became a lot more effective when Fenn handed me a bar of soap with a rope through it. Fenn herself had shed her towel as well, revealing her slender elvish body, and gave me a grin and a wink when my gaze momentarily slipped below her eyeline.

I’d just about gotten clean when the fighting started. My first awareness of it was my wrist being grabbed and pulled. I tried to yank back from it, but the grip was like iron, and when I turned to look at my assailant I realized it was Fenn, who was quite a lot stronger than she looked. She was making her way through the water and trying to drag me along as though I was the world’s dumbest man for not simply following her.

I saw the blood in the water shortly after that though, accompanied by screams and the movement of other people around us, which was all I needed in order to start moving as quickly as I could. I looked back to the center of the water to see a pitched battle of magics. I probably would have stopped to watch in awe if not for the pressure of Fenn’s hand around my wrist. All I had were impressions, of a naked man leaping high above the water and blasting red light through a crowd, of a naked woman riding a wave away from the action, and in one spot, a place where time seemed to be flowing backward. There were clothed people too, in among the bathers, armed with guns and swords, cutting through people.

We ran, Fenn at the lead holding my wrist with one hand and gripping Amaryllis’ hand with the other. We had stayed close to the edge and were among the first ones out of the water, in part because Fenn had started moving before there had been any sign of trouble.

“Grab your stuff, meet outside!” shouted Fenn, and with that she let go of my wrist, leaving me to run toward the changing room all on my own. When I got there though, I saw the attendant who had handed me my towel was dead on the ground, his throat slit, and three men with weapons were waiting there with hard looks in their eyes.

Without thinking about it too much, I cranked back my fist and put the entire force of my racing
pulse into it. The man I was going for apparently wasn’t expecting a naked man to attack him with blood magic, because his only reaction was a look of surprise before I shattered a number of bones in his face and what felt like half the bones in my hand.

**Critical hit!**

**New Affliction: Broken Bone!**

**Risen Bile member defeated!**

We collapsed to the floor together, me because I hadn’t been thinking about slowing down, and him because I’d apparently hit him hard enough to kill him. I felt a sharp bite in my ankle as I rose to my feet, but it hadn’t been the other two coming after me, only me cutting myself on the fallen sword. I picked it up with a wet left hand and turned to face the other two, but other people were slipping into the changing room now and the two of them were working against the throng of people, stabbing at them. In the distance, I heard the loud staccato claps of gunfire.

Now, you’re probably going to think that this is stupid, but I rushed those two men, naked, wet, injured, and using my off-hand. I might not have, if I hadn’t seen them kill a child. Maybe it was the jarring feeling of one moment trying to adapt to cultural views that made me uneasy and the next running for my life, or maybe it was the small part of me that wanted to right a wrong, but I swung my sword in at the side of one of them and though he was armored enough that I didn’t cut into him, I did force him to turn toward me while his friend held the doorway.

That was about as far as I had thought things through, if that. He came at me like a madman, screaming over the sounds of battle and swinging his sword like he meant to overpower me with his every strike. I parried and dodged, and by the third time I realized that he wasn’t actually a very good swordsman, and in fact, probably worse than I was. All he really had going for him was some leather armor and ferocity, plus the fact that he was using his main hand, and while I’d grant that counted for a lot, he was the first person I’d come across who I thought I might have been able to take in a fair fight.

I dodged another three slashing strikes, getting more sure of myself with each one and ignoring the messages that were coming up, until I found what I thought was an opening and lunged forward, aiming at his chest. Instead, I hit him right at the bottom of his throat, stabbing him through and losing my sword as he spun away from me in flailing panic.

**Risen Bile member defeated!**

That was when I ran, leaving my clothes in their cubby because I couldn’t spare the time to look through them all, down the hallways and out the front door of the bathhouse. I came out onto the streets of Barren Jewel, still fully nude and bleeding for my efforts. I stood there in the now-cool air breathing heavily and looking around. I was drawing some stares from people, but I was the first one out and no one seemed to be aware that something terrible was going on in there. I wanted to scream for help, but I didn’t know what I would say, and after a few seconds time I realized that getting questioned by the local equivalent of the police was exactly the opposite of what I needed.

I was saved from indecision when Fenn and Amaryllis came out of the bathhouse, both of them in their robes. Fenn took one look at me and let out a laugh, then threw me a towel she’d been holding.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Alright,” said Fenn when we were safely home and she’d checked that her bow was right where
she’d left it. “I think hiding that key in a tattoo was just about the smartest thing anyone has ever done.”

“What the hell happened there?” I asked, cradling my hand. I was sitting in a towel on the smaller of the two beds. My feet were disgusting from walking through the streets without shoes. I counted myself thankful to not have stepped on anything.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Fenn. “That was one of the crazier things I’ve seen in my life.”

“I think they had at least two goals,” said Amaryllis. “They were going after a few particular people, but they were also killing indiscriminately.” She shook her head. “At first I thought that it was directed against us.” She turned to Fenn. “We were very lucky.”

Fenn shrugged. “Or very unlucky, depending on how you figure it,” she replied.

I looked between the two of them. “Not to trouble the two of you, but I’m in quite a bit of pain here.” Gingerly moving a finger sent pain shooting up my arm. So far as I could tell, there was only a single broken bone in my hand, though it had felt like more when it happened. “I think another trip to the bone mage is probably in order.” My feet stunk from running in the street, and if the first trip to the bathhouse hadn’t been a disaster I probably would have suggested that we return there.

Fenn grimaced. “We don’t have unlimited funds. It wouldn’t be hard to find paying work to bring in some tcher, but that would take time. Besides, you’re the blood magic wunderkind, can’t you just heal yourself?”

“Possibly,” said Amaryllis. “He learned the fundamentals quickly.” She turned to me. “I never had any training in the healing side of blood magic, so you’ll have bear with me. If you pick it up as quickly as you picked everything else up, you should be able to mend that bone within about ten minutes.”

“Yeah,” I winced, “That would be great.”

“Alright, most of what physicians do, especially with broken bones --”

“Oh, we’re doing this little lesson now?” asked Fenn. “Because if we are, I’m going to go find some food. I don’t have a magical pick-up-powers-from-simple-descriptions brain, and I find lessons to be quite boring.”

“Bring us back something,” said Amaryllis. She rolled her shoulders and stretched. “I’m hoping that this won’t take long.”

When Fenn had gone, Amaryllis took a moment to look over my hand, making me hiss in pain a few times before she gently set it back down. A bruise had blossomed on it.

“Most of what physicians do, especially with broken bones, is to set things right such that the body can properly heal itself,” said Amaryllis. “That natural healing is what the lower levels of bone magic stimulate, as you’ve already experienced. For blood magic, I’m given to understand that it’s very similar. The blood in your body provides nutrients and oxygen, it clots your wounds, and it provides the basis for a whole host of other healing when you’re injured. So in a similar way to how you use the heat of your blood for Aarde’s Touch and the pulse of your blood for the Crimson Fist, you need to focus on the healing property of your blood. I … have never felt it myself, as I’m not a proper practitioner, and I don’t know the helpful analogies.”

“Okay,” I said slowly as I looked down at my hand. “Just … feel the healing. Promise you won’t be
upset with me if I get this right away?”

“Why would I be?” asked Amaryllis, but she seemed annoyed by the mere question.

“Nevermind,” I replied. I focused on my hand, and specifically on the broken bone, the bone that came down from my middle finger. (Metacarpal? That sounded a bit too much like a pokemon to be right.) I tried to think about my blood healing me, clotting the wound … doing whatever magical blood stuff it was supposed to do. I tried to think back on what it had felt like to have my broken arm heal back on Earth, but that had taken eight weeks and went too slow for me to notice anything except the itching of the cast and the dull throbbing of pain.

I was at it for about ten minutes, with no lessening of pain or skill pop-ups, before my attention began to drift, and it was another five minutes after that before I said anything.

“Is luck a real thing?” I asked.

“You’re supposed to be focusing on healing,” said Amaryllis. She narrowed her eyes. “You did this when you were supposed to be keeping watch too. Do you have attention problems?”

“No,” I said. “Not usually. I was just … thinking that it would be easier.”

“You thought it would take you less than fifteen minutes to learn something that takes multiple years of intensive study for others to learn?” asked Amaryllis.

“Well … yeah, kind of,” I replied. “I picked up blood magic and skin magic pretty quickly and I was under the impression that those should have taken multiple years of study each. In games there are sometimes gates to certain spells like attributes or skills. Normally I’d get a message, but this is pretty far from being normal. So the fact that I haven’t learned it quickly says to me that maybe it’s going to take a different approach.”

“You’re going to have to draw this ‘character sheet’ out for me,” said Amaryllis. “It’s probably better to have a physical version that we can manipulate and mark up.”

It was a little bit shocking to me how quickly I could go from trying to think unsexual thoughts about Amaryllis, to killing people who were basically a mystery to me, to feeling annoyed about Amaryllis taking ownership over my power. She was right; it probably did make sense to write things down, especially those things which weren’t obvious from just looking at the game layer itself, like what ability capped which skill. A message log seemed like it would really have come in handy, especially when other things were going on. But still, it was my weird game power thing, not hers, and I didn’t like or trust Amaryllis enough that I was ready to accept the “we’re in this together” thing with open arms.

“Define luck,” said Amaryllis.

“Um,” I replied. “I’m not sure that I can.”

“Elves are lucky,” said Amaryllis. “If you bet against them in a coin toss, you’ll lose nine times out of ten. If you try to shoot them, the bullets will miss more often than they should, though still within the realm of what’s strictly possible. Half of this comes from changes in the world around them that they have no obvious mechanism to meaningfully affect, while the other half comes from their own actions which they undertake for reasons which aren’t always clear to them.”

“Fenn began pulling us out of the bathhouse before anything had actually gone wrong,” I said.

“Yes,” Amaryllis replied. “She’s a half-elf, which I would assume would make her less lucky by any
of the standard metrics, but I’m not actually sure how or whether genetic dominance plays a part. Curiosity satisfied?”

“Why’d you ask me for a definition?” I asked.

“To see what you meant,” replied Amaryllis. “On Aerb there many people under delusions about how the world actually works, who think that there’s such a thing as luck which applies in all sorts of circumstances that it demonstrably does not. Gamblers will say that they’re rolling hot, or that the dice are due for a streak, or things like that, and though the Athenaeum of Mathematics and Metaphysics has done enough research to rule that out, these myths persist. The same goes for things like carrying around a frongal bone or spitting in a fountain.”

“We came to Barren Jewel today,” I replied. “The bathhouse we were in was attacked today. Is that just some horrible coincidence? Because that doesn’t exactly seem likely to me.”

“You’re saying that it was bad luck,” asked Amaryllis. “Not just bad luck, but an effect that someone could presumably measure?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. Really, I was thinking that it was the contrived sort of thing that would happen in a game, except for the fact that it didn’t appear to involve us in any way. In a game, the attackers would have been sent after us because of some cryptic prophecy, or because they had some way to track Amaryllis, therefore compelling us to action, or maybe it would be that Fenn was a mole feeding information to the enemy. But they hadn’t been after us, at least not noticeably, and we’d left without anyone monologuing at us or discovering some vital clue. It seemed too much like coincidence, but also too pointless, which was why I was thinking about my 0 LUK.

Fenn came back while I was in the midst of my second session of trying to heal my broken bone, which was now red and swollen. I was happy to cast aside the fruitless exercise in favor of some food. It was street food, a small, fried animal of some kind, wrapped in thin waxed paper. Fenn didn’t say exactly what it was, beyond “food” and I wasn’t inclined to press her on it.

“The bathhouse thing was apparently the work of a group called the Risen Bile,” said Fenn after she’d finished her portion of critter. “The city guard are out in force, but who knows what it is they’re going to do about it. Word on the street is that they have something up their butts about nubile women like Mary and I bathing in the sight of lustful men, I’m not sure I buy that though.”

“Mary?” I asked.

“We’ll need something to call her in public,” said Fenn. “It’s Amy, Mary, or Liss, and I picked the one that I like best.”

“I don’t really care what I’m called. No luck on the blood magic, by the way,” said Amaryllis.

“And that’s why I picked up some bones,” said Fenn with a smile, waving around a tiny little rib.

“There’s no one to teach him,” said Amaryllis. “And before you suggest it, we’re not going back to the bone mage in order to learn.” She looked at me. “You didn’t acquire bone magic in the time you were there, did you? I’d think that would be the sort of thing that you’d inform us of.”

“No,” I said. “But I didn’t acquire blood magic just from hearing about it, it was from the actual practice of it. Same with skin magic, kind of. Just seeing tattoos and knowing that they did things wasn’t enough, it was the feeling of a tattoo sliding over my skin. I think maybe if I had been more aware of it, I might have triggered the skill from the parachute tattoo. That’s just a theory though.” I took the bone from Fenn’s hand. “I guess now would be a fine time to test it.”
I tried doing what I had seen Magus Bormann do, holding the bone in one hand while concentrating on my injury. She had described it as pulling, but that word didn’t mean a lot to me. Maybe it would have if I could have felt some power in the bone, but it just felt like a greasy bone to me.

“What kind of animal was this?” I asked, hoping that I wouldn’t regret the answer. *Please don’t be rat, not after what we saw in the sewers.*

“It’s a gunzel,” said Fenn. “They keep them as pets in some places. Here in the Barren Jewel they’re really popular because they’ll eat up rotten manna.”

“Mana?” I asked. “Like magic?”

“Manna,” said Amaryllis. “Extend the ‘n’ sound. Also called Barren bread. I suppose we might as well teach you the words of power.” She held her hand out in front of her. “Besoneth.”

*Spell discovered: Alvion’s Flesh!*  

And there, without any ceremony or lightshow, a small loaf of bread appeared from nowhere and landed in her hand. “Terrible stuff. We won’t be eating it unless we don’t have a choice. The milk is more palatable. She held up her hand in a small fist just above her mouth. “Ilimoneth.”

*Spell discovered: Alvion’s Blood!*  

Milk poured down from Amaryllis’ fist, directly into her mouth. She swallowed it without pause, then coughed once and made a face.

“I’m surprised that a princess would have ever tried Barren milk,” said Fenn. For once, this wasn’t said as a joke or insult.

“I once thought it important to know what the poorest of the poor ate and drank,” said Amaryllis. “It’s helpful in the context of public policy to understand the reality of the people you’re governing. Barren milk and Barren bread are foundational foods for the poor, and even the middle classes sometimes use them to stretch their budgets.”

“So this gunzel,” I said, trying to get us back on track, “It traditionally eats leftover manna? Its life before becoming street food would have been as a scavenger in the city?”

“No,” said Fenn, blinking at me. “You think that would make any sense, for a vendor to rely on scavenger animals caught in traps or something like that? That’s daft. You’d make a horrible businessman.”

“So … farms?” I asked. “Someone keeps these creatures in a cage, says the spell to make them food and milk, and harvests them?” The image of a factory farm immediately came to mind.

“More or less,” said Fenn. “I’m not sure on the specifics myself, all I know is what I asked about. I didn’t think you would need the creature’s life story to get with the healing.”

I wasn’t sure that I did, but I tried to think about this creature as I turned the bone over in my hand. I tried to think about what life would be like for a gunzel, and failing that, I tried to think about what life was like for a chicken that was kept in a cage and fed the cheapest possible food in order to produce meat. Moments of fear as the rarely seen handlers came by, uncomfortable restrictions within the cage, a desire for freedom, perhaps, though maybe more than that just the will to keep on living and growing in spite of it all. Not even necessarily the mind, if gunzels or chickens had them, but the body’s efforts to turn slop into bone and muscle. That seemed like it was at the heart of END, the body’s perseverance, and that was what I was trying to pull on.
Unlocked skill: Bone Magic!

Achievement Unlocked: Sticks and Stones

Spell discovered: Physical Tapping

I felt the magic leave the bone, gone as soon as I’d grasped it, like a kiss on the wind. My broken bone didn’t feel any better, nor had I been able to perceive any change in myself. Yet I had felt the magic of the bone, just for an instant, and more importantly, the game had confirmed that I was on the right track.

“I’m going to need some more bones,” I said with a smile.
Skill increased: Bone Magic lvl 10!

Spell discovered: Power Tapping!

Spell discovered: Speed Tapping!

Spell discovered: Endurance Tapping!

Skill increased: Bone Magic lvl 12! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat KNO.)

Affliction: Broken Bone Removed!

It took me the better part of eight hours to cap out bone magic and fully heal my hand. Fenn left to go get more bones once it was clear that I was going to power through the hundreds available in the gunzels. Each bone was a pittance of power, even when I was pulling from it as hard as I could. Watching Bormann work made me think that it was less efficient to do it that way, so I tried to stick to teasing the power out of the bones as slow as possible, which gave an even smaller effect but over a longer period of time, which I suppose was meant to be a net gain in healing.

It wasn’t until I hit level 10 that I unlocked the ability to pull specifically endurance from the bone, rather than just all physical stats, and that helped me to speed up the healing process. It still took all of the bones I had available to me to get my finger fully healed, and it was still slightly bumpy afterward where the bone came back thicker. With another few hours and hundreds of the gunzel bones, I might have been able to get it entirely back to normal, but by the time I was finished both Fenn and Amaryllis had long gone to sleep. Fenn had gone first, unceremoniously stripping down to her underwear and claiming the big bed, while Amaryllis watched me work and kept me focused until an hour later when she was yawning so much it was a distraction. They shared the big bed together, and Fenn had one arm wrapped around Amaryllis’ waist, in what I was fairly sure was a subconscious attempt to bother her. That was when I finally changed out of my towel and into a set of clothes that Fenn had bought for me.

I kept on. I could feel the desire to sleep, but not the need. I wasn’t tired, but I was sure that I could have gone to sleep on the small bed within a handful of minutes if I had made the effort. I wasn’t exactly sure where Barren Jewel was in relation to Silmar City, nor whether they had a time difference, nor how much, but it was possible that I was experiencing some combination of jet lag and the magic powers of leveling up. Besides, I had taken a nap out in the sun.

It was nice to have some time alone to think. My mind kept going back to the bathhouse. There were a few things bothering me. First, Risen Bile was a terrible name, not the sort that you’d give to yourself unless you were a punk band or deliberately evil. Second, the rumors that Fenn had picked up said that they had done this terrorist attack because of some moral crusade, but we’d seen them targeting specific members. Third, the two men I’d fought had been weaker than I had expected, given the display of magic inside, which left me thinking that they were pawns or patsies. Fourth, I shouldn’t have been there. This was apparently a world where luck was a real, physical thing, and while I took Amaryllis to heart when she said that only elves had luck, I also knew that she didn’t know everything about my power, and my power said 0 LUK.

I tried to will a quest into existence in order to get more answers from the flavor text, but that predictably failed.
With some pencil and paper that Fenn had procured for me, I began writing down everything on my character sheet and then all the things that the game had told me and not recorded anywhere, with a special focus on the skill caps. I still had two points yet to spend and I was waffling on where I wanted to put them. The fact that Bone Magic had unlocked something on reaching a round number changed my thinking a little bit, since that made reaching those round numbers more valuable.

After I had filled a page with those observations, I began work on filling another page, this one with thoughts and questions about how the game tied into everything I’d created as a DM. I’d so far held off on asking about them, partly because I didn’t want to bother Amaryllis about unimportant things, and partly because there were questions that I didn’t want the answers to. I was feeling like I had put it off long enough though, and to be honest I was feeling a little bit more confident about this world’s ability to handle things, given the magics they apparently had at their disposal.

I was three-quarters down the page when Fenn woke up with a start, dislodging Amaryllis, who opened her eyes briefly and then readjusted herself to go back to sleep. Fenn stretched out and popped out of bed, still wearing very little clothing. She opened the window just a crack, enough that I could hear a very distant sound of gunshots, then shut it again. Had that been what woke her up? The sound of guns, too faint for me to hear while I was writing? I added a bit about the nature of elves to my list of questions.

“Whatcha writing?” Fenn asked as she moved over and peered down at my page.

“Put on some clothes,” I said. I was pretty sure that she was just standing next to me so skimpily dressed to provoke a reaction.

“Make me,” said Fenn. She reached forward, past me, and ran a finger down my list. “You’re listing exclusion zones?” Her finger stopped at Fel Seed. “Or just trying to make yourself feel bad?”

“He’s real,” I said slowly. “This world has a Fel Seed.”

“You don’t believe the legends?” asked Fenn. “Or wait, you have that broken brain that thinks it invented a lot of the details of this world from whole cloth. So you think that you thought up Fel Seed? In what context?”

“It’s a long story,” I replied. And not that pleasant of one. “Is he -- was he killed?”

“Nope,” said Fenn. “Still sitting on his throne in the City of a Thousand Brides. Not sure if that particular part of your brain survived your stroke, but he’s not someone we talk about in polite company.”

I shook my head. “He was built to consume the world. If he were in the process of doing that, or if he were killed, that would make sense, but … he’s still alive, doing his … work?”

Fenn patted me on the head. “You are a very strange hooman,” she said. “What is it you think an exclusion zone is?”

“Um, it’s like Chernobyl, which is a place on Earth where there was a horrible accident,” I said. That seemed like where the terminology would have been borrowed from, if I was designing this world, which in some sense it seemed like I was. “People who went into the heart of it would suffer from horrible cancerous growths and then die, or maybe just be killed outright by the poison there.”

“And the thing that keeps Chernobyl from spreading is the exclusion rule, right?” asked Fenn. She ran a hand over her ear. “The whole world would become a Chernobyl if not for that.”

“Um,” I said. “That’s … not really accurate to Chernobyl. I mean, there it’s something called a
nuclear weapon --"

“Ah, Blue Fields?” asked Fenn.

I paused with my mouth open. “There are nuclear weapons on this planet?” I asked.

“There were. But then they got excluded,” replied Fenn. “Gods, otherwise there probably wouldn’t be anything left of Aerb. You could still set one off in Blue Fields, if you really want to make that your life’s goal, but that seems a bit silly, even for a hooman.”

I was mind flooded for a moment by thinking about what that all meant. There were nuclear weapons, which seemed at the far end of the technology I’d seen present on Aerb, but they were somehow prevented from going off in … what, some kind of Dies the Fire type of scenario? Some change in the laws of the universe?

“So Fel Seed can’t spread,” I said slowly. “Because he’s … excluded. Somehow.”

“Yup,” said Fenn. “Just him, his captives, and his spawn, excluded from civilized society. Though we seem to be in something close to a civil war right now, so eh, clear houses, as you humans say.”

“Glass houses,” I corrected her. My eyes began to drift to her midriff and I looked down at the paper in front of me instead. “So you’re saying that most of these are exclusion zones. Places where there was a spreading sickness or evil that was stopped?”

“Sure,” said Fenn, leaning over me. Her arm was next to me as she pointed at the paper, and I glanced briefly at the curling pattern of scars there. I shut down the urge to ask if I could touch them. “Fel Seed, Nightsmoke, yes, Parsmont, yes, City of Lasting Blood, technically yes, Glassy Fields, a big yes … but you’ve got things like the white spires here, which are benign, a few I don’t recognize, like this ‘Teeth City’, and it’s kind of a jumble.”

“How many of these exclusion zones are there?” I asked.

“Fifty-three,” came an answer from the bed. Amaryllis swung her feet off the bed and blinked a few times before standing up and looking down at her rumpled clothes in distaste. “Hand healed?” she asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Fifty-three?”

“By a conservative count, yes,” said Amaryllis. “I won’t bore you with the imperial politics of it all. And since we’re all up, we have other things that need doing, like preparing for Caer Laga. Fenn, I would appreciate it if you put some clothes on.”

Fenn pouted, but began slipping her pants and shirt back on. I was certain that it wasn’t by accident that she was pointing her butt in my direction as she did so. I caught a frown from Amaryllis at that, but tried my best not to read too much into it.

“First things first,” said Amaryllis once we were all clothed. “I think that we should train up Joon.”

If this were a movie, here is where we would have a montage.

After Amaryllis looked at my handwritten character sheet, she asked me for specifics on what kinds of things had made those skills go up in the past. I moved ahead of her in the conversation a little bit by suggesting exercises I thought would work well to raise those skills in the controlled environment of our hotel room, and after some discussion of what was most important, with general agreement
that a focus on combat was best, I spent about a week maxing out all my skills except for pistols and rifles, neither of which could be done without making a racket, and horticulture, which I didn’t have an easy way to increase.

I learned the skill Bows from simply touching Fenn’s bow, but she wouldn’t let me shoot it and ended up spending a fair sum on a bow that I shot at targets across the room. That was only enough to count once I had some very small targets to aim at; until it was a challenge, the game wouldn’t give me anything for it.

There were a few interesting things that I learned about the game in the process though.

*Skill increased: Parry lvl 10! (Skill capped at five times the value of secondary stat INS.)*

*New Virtue: Nascent Blade-Bound!*

First, getting to level 10 in a skill *did* occasionally unlock something, though it was inconsistent. Second, skills were capped at either three times the primary stat, or five times the secondary stat, which put an additional restriction on how high skills could go and made the social skills more important than I thought they would be.

I got a few more virtues along the way, but they were incredibly minor effects when I looked them up on the ‘Virtues’ screen. Unarmed Combat 10 gave me the virtue “Hardened Knuckles” that lessened the toll unarmed combat would take on me (no numbers, just that flat statement). Dual Wield 10 gave me Ambidexterity, the uneasy feeling of being equally adept at using either hand for a task and removing all preference (which I immediately tested by writing; it was unnerving to sign my name left-handed). Thrown Weapons 10 gave me “Range Finder”, the ability to more easily determine how far away something was. Improvised Weapons 10 gave me “Structural Assessment”, the ability to hold and wield improvised weapons in such a way that they would break less easily, though never outside the bounds of reason.

Like I said, it was nothing that left me in awe, just very minor benefits. If you could have bottled any one of those, you could have sold them for a mint, especially Ambidexterity, but I wasn’t convinced that they would ever make the difference between life and death.

The most awkward were probably the social skills.

“Alright,” said Fenn, rubbing her hands. “Flatter me.”

“Um,” I said. “I don’t actually think this is all that necessary. We’re going to an abandoned castle and fighting some mindless creatures along the way, right?”

“Thaum-suckers aren’t mindless,” said Fenn. “They’ve got a cunning to them, makes them dangerous. But no, they’re probably not going to be swayed by telling them what beautiful blue eyes they have. Me, on the other hand, I’d be more amenable.”

“Your eyes are green,” I said.

“Your eyes are …” I hesitated, choosing my words. “I could get lost in the beauty of your eyes, the way they seem luminous in the morning light, and when I see you smile, and that smile touches those elegant eyes, my breath catches in my throat and my heart hammers in my chest.”

*Skill increased: Romance lvl 3!*
“Alright,” I sighed, “That worked.”

“Hooray!” said Fenn. She bit her lip. “Now flatter my, hrnm, … tongue.” She stuck out her tongue. “Ad do i’ igh.”

So that was all very silly and awkward, but it thankfully didn’t go on very long because my social skills were capped at 6. Romance was the worst, partly because I couldn’t see myself ever using that skill, and partly because Fenn seemed to like being a flirt. I couldn’t tell whether she had any actual interest in me or whether she was just having fun at my expense, or maybe both. Either way, I wasn’t about to act on it or do anything but be flustered. Still, practicing Romance and Flattery with Fenn was preferable to doing it with Amaryllis.

Other than that? I’m not sure what to say. It was a week of my life, lived mostly in a hotel room because there were recurring bouts of violence on the streets and Amaryllis -- Mary, now -- didn’t think it was smart of me to go out when I was so ignorant of the world.

They did try to remove some of that ignorance, but they were trying to haphazardly cram a lifetime of knowledge into me, and it was mixed in with things that I remembered from D&D, which made me misremember things with some frequency. There were also too many things for me to ask about and too many things that they would both assume were the same between our worlds.

**Common Knowledge About Aerb**

1. Aerb was about ten times larger than Earth, flat instead of a sphere, and shaped like a hexagon. If you went far enough north, you would end up in the south, and it was the same in any direction. (Amaryllis gave me a measurement for Aerb and I had to approximate Earth’s size given that I could only remember how wide the continental United States was.)

2. Aerb had no time zones, because the sun was in the same apparent position no matter where on Aerb you were, with no parallax. Despite that, there were still seasons, because the sun got smaller in the winter and larger in the summer. There were also regional variations in temperature caused by something called the projection layer, a super-atmospheric phenomenon that Fenn was ignorant of and Amaryllis didn’t know too much about.

3. There were roughly 200 “mortal species”, plus the Animalia, which were anthropomorphic animals like Quills. There had been five distinct waves of elven migration from Celestar, each of which was considered a different species. There were dwarves, but they mostly kept to themselves, underground. There weren’t “evil” species per se, but there were evil cultures made up exclusively of one type of species, which Amaryllis seemed to think was an important distinction and Fenn rolled her eyes at.

4. There were twenty-two different kinds of magic, and that was the conservative count. Many of those only included in the less-conservative count were hereditary, racial, or otherwise not the sort of thing that was available to just anyone. Looking at my character sheet and assuming it was laid out in a sane way, I would have access to at most fifteen of them, though probably less. (I was extremely interested in learning more of them, but Amaryllis thought that all the low-hanging fruit had already been picked. That didn't stop me from asking questions, but she was right that there were significant barriers that it didn't seem like my ability to learn things really quickly would overcome, or which would be useless to us without the necessary resources to capitalize on them.)

5. When people said “the empire” they meant something akin to the United Nations, in that it was a rather toothless organization whose real power came from member countries agreeing to impose standardized laws or make global (they said hexal, for obvious reasons) sanctions against one another. The proper title was “The Empire of Common Cause”, but people just
called it “the empire” or “The Third Empire” if they were being snarky, for historical reasons that I don’t think are too important.

“Okay,” I said after one of these infodump sessions. “But there’s one thing that I don’t really get.”

“Just one thing out of literally everything in the entire world?” asked Fenn. She was getting annoyed with the whole dream-skewered thing, I could tell, just like she’d predicted she would be.

“So, forge frenzy is distributed fairly randomly and on a per capita basis, right?” I asked. Amaryllis nodded. “Well, what I don’t really understand is how the Lost King and Anglecynn still have so much power, unless they’ve been hoarding entads and heirlooms created in Anglecynn or brought in from elsewhere. But if that’s the case, then I wouldn’t expect the most direct descendant to have much in the way of any particular power.”

“And why do you think that?” asked Amaryllis. “Why shouldn’t power acquired retain its value? It would dilute, because succession of heirlooms follows different rules, but I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Okay,” I said, “Well more magic items are being created every year --”

“Why?” asked Amaryllis.

“Because … there are more artisans over time?” I asked. “Unless this is a mechanization issue?”

“Why would there be more artisans over time?” asked Amaryllis, using her patient voice. She was getting annoyed with the dream-skewered thing too, but she dealt with it much better.

“Every year there are more people than the last,” I said, just before realizing that wasn’t necessarily true on Aerb. “Okay, explain this to me, is global population going up or holding steady?”

“During the reign of Uther Penndraig, five hundred years ago, the hexal population was twenty billion,” said Amaryllis. “Today it’s five billion.”

“Seems to me that people need to start fucking more,” said Fenn. “At least, I heard that was how babies were made.”

“Sex doesn’t help if people use prophylaxis,” said Amaryllis. “And it’s a complicated issue even beyond the question of whether the replacement rate is high enough. The exclusion zones are a problem that keeps getting worse and there are singular events which cause dips in the world population that we never recover from.”

“Aerb is dying,” I said.

“Well that’s a leap,” said Fenn. “Celestar, now there’s a place that died, if you need context for world death.”

“It’s not clear whether it’s dying or not,” said Amaryllis. “The overall trend is downward. Optimists feel that the final graph will be sigmoid, with a long period of stability before the First Empire, a period of instability, and then a second long period of stability.”

We moved on to other things after that, but it left me thinking holy shit is this world grimdark. There was no heaven, only nine thousand hells, and Aerb itself was becoming a shadow of itself. It was obvious to me that this was a reflection of my own mind; since Arthur had died, I hadn’t really been a believer in bright and happy futures, and even before then I had always made my worlds a little dim so that the heroes could shine all the brighter. That was the thought that gave me hope. If I had
designed this world, then maybe I was a hero in it, one of the people whose purpose was to blaze with light and banish the darkness.

Fenn and Amaryllis did most of the other preparations, moving through the city to gather supplies when the fighting calmed down a little bit. There were still periodic bursts of gunfire, audible when the window was open, and the occasional metallic smell of blood in the air. Whoever the Risen Bile were, they were being slaughtered by the city guard. The word from Fenn was that the guard was being a little bit overzealous, which caused civilian casualties that no one was happy about. Between that and the looting that followed some of these attacks, the city wasn’t a great place to be. Perhaps if the tattoo Amaryllis wore wasn’t single use, she would have pulled it out and we would have made our preparations elsewhere, but I almost got the feeling that the instability was to our benefit.

We filled our packs with food and water for the trip. Fenn bought (or perhaps stole) a sword for me, along with a void rifle I discovered to my surprise was the same one I’d left outside the wall a week ago; she had recovered it for me. Fenn filled her quiver with arrows and acquired a new dagger to sit on her hip, replacing the one she’d stabbed Leonold with. I wasn’t sure how much of what we had was stolen by Fenn and how much had been legitimately bought, but it didn’t really seem to matter. On the night before we left, she came into our room and unloaded a sack full of bones for me to pull from, and I was certain that she hadn’t come by them honestly.

And then, just like that, we climbed over the wall and set out for Caer Laga.
We traveled across the desert together, trudging through the sand in our white robes, moving single file to hide our numbers so that one person could play trailblazer, a duty we rotated. It had been explained to me that magic in the general sense could be divided up into three categories: latent, passive, and active. Thaum-seekers (or thaum-suckers, depending on which of my party members I asked) could sense out and hunt down both passive and active magic at incredible range, but latent magic was mostly safe from them unless they were right on top of us.

Fenn’s bow was latent magic, unless she used its special ability, in which case the thaum-seekers would probably see it like a lighthouse on the horizon. Similarly, Amaryllis wore a magical tattoo on her arm concealing the teleportation key, which would remain as latent magic until she pulled it off and took the teleportation key out. And void crystals were “mundane” though every bone in my body was telling me that they were basically witchcraft.

That left me and the not-inconsiderable magical power that I was carrying around. I had a pack of bones, but was not to use them unless we got into combat. I had the blood flowing through my veins, but wasn’t supposed to even think about tapping into it unless it was a very serious emergency. Skin magic I couldn’t really use, because we hadn’t had any money left over for tattoos. That left all of the weird game character stuff that was unique to me, which we weren’t sure would count as magic at all. It was something we’d want to learn sooner rather than later, because if the thaum-seekers were drawn to me then we’d want to know before we were too far away from the safety of Barren Jewel, when we could still bail out on our trip to Caer Laga.

“It’s confusing to me that you even make a distinction between magic and not magic,” I said as we ate our first meal of the trip, something called portable soup, which reminded me a lot of ramen, minus the noodles. “On Earth we say magic when we mean something mysterious or supernatural, but blood magic seems like it’s got a major university dedicated to its study.”

“Never call an athenaeum a university,” said Amaryllis.

“Rule number 137 for surviving life on Aerb,” said Fenn. She wasn’t actually keeping track of the rules Amaryllis was giving to me, but the numbers did go up each time, and I had a sense that she would be surreptitiously thinking up clever ways to stretch the joke in the future.

“Oh,” I said. “But it seems to me like so-called ‘magic’ has been studied until it’s lost any sense of the supernatural and all mystery has been drained from it. I mean, there’s some wonder left in it for me, because the athenaeums are closed to me and for now it’s not safe for me to have even a disreputable teacher, but that’s not the case for the population at large. There are corner stores that will etch you with ‘magical’ tattoos.”

“What word would you have us use?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It’s just something I was thinking about.”

Fenn sat down and began slurping from her own bowl of soup, which she’d been letting steep. “Well I personally was thinking about the thaum-suckers racing across the desert to claw our eyes out,” said Fenn. “I think we’re clean though, and we should be well beyond the range of Alvion’s Word, so we can keep moving as soon as we’ve finished.”

So we walked through the desert, packs on our backs slowly lightening as we ate and drank our way through our reserves. Every time I drank water, I was glad that I was one pee stop closer to carrying
less around. While we were back in our hotel, I had this great idea for adapting the Tsiolkovsky rocket equation to desert travel; it takes a certain amount of water to travel a certain distance, but carrying that water means you travel slower and use more water, so you need more water to get further, and that has to be added into your calculations. Eventually, you run into the tyranny of the desert equation. (I didn’t actually remember the rocket equation, so might be badly mangling that; I was a hard fantasy geek, not a space geek.) We were only going about fifty miles, plus some leeway, broken down into about five days of going ten miles across the sand dunes and past rocky outcroppings, one gallon a day, with a gallon weighing eight pounds, meant forty pounds of weight in water alone, plus a sword, plus a rifle, plus food, plus clothing, plus bones.

“I should have built a wind sail,” Amaryllis grumbled at the end of our first day.

“Oh?” asked Fenn. “I’m pretty sure that would have the same problem as my idea of taking some voetsa out to ride on, which is that we’d need to get them over the walls. Also, I’m not sure what winds you’d be planning to harness, because this air is practically unmoving.”

“Still,” said Amaryllis.

“On the bright side, we still haven’t seen any of the thaum-seekers, right?” I asked. “If we can make it to Caer Laga without running into one or having an incident, then we’re basically home free, right?”

“I don’t think we’re that lucky,” said Fenn. “But … maybe we could be?”

I had two ability points floating, yet to be spent on anything. As soon as Fenn knew that LUK was a thing, she’d wanted me to dump those points into it. Amaryllis thought that I should choose a primary and secondary attribute, whichever ones were tied to the most valuable skill, and ditch the bonus from putting the points into the three general abilities. I didn’t quite welcome the advice from either of them. I was still holding onto those two points, partly because I was suffering from decision paralysis and partly because I was hoping that the game would reveal some One True Path to me. There were still skills that I hadn’t uncovered yet; I didn’t want to commit only to find out that I’d given up on something amazing.

I let Fenn’s comment pass by without responding to it, and we slept in the surprisingly cold desert. I wasn’t surprised that the desert would be cold at night, since there wasn’t any foliage or moist air to keep the heat in, and anyway I knew that deserts tended to be cold at night. Still, even knowing all that and taking it into account, I was surprised by the cold.

Walk, walk, stop, eat, drink, walk, walk, rest. Fenn started the trip with a large volume of chatter, but by the middle of the second day she was mostly silent, focusing her efforts on putting one foot in front of the other. Amaryllis was much better at pacing herself.

And for me? I didn’t find it easy, but one of the neat things about my peculiar power was that training Athletics to 15 by lifting makeshift weights in our hotel room for hours on end made me well-suited for a trek across the desert, even though I was pretty damned sure that the muscle groups weren’t related. I almost offered to take some water or equipment from one of the girls, but decided against it because the last thing I wanted was to misjudge my abilities and fall down like an idiot three days in after being too chivalrous.

We walked during the day and slept during the night. There were arguments for doing it the other way around, but the temperature didn’t climb terribly high during the day, and visibility was low during the night. Our biggest concern was the thaum-seekers, not the heat or a lack of water, and on balance we’d decided that it was better to stay in one spot at night with someone keeping watch than to bumble around in the dark making noise. The thaum-seekers would pour on speed to get at active
magic, and would track passive magic from miles away, but I was assured that if they came across latent magic they wouldn’t hesitate to go for the kill. In this world that meant anyone with skin, bones, or blood, and we happened to have all three.

Contrary to what Amaryllis had said, I didn’t have attention problems, but I hated keeping watch with a burning passion. Back on Earth I had been something of a daydreamer, and years of schooling had made me very adept at zoning out and thinking about other things. Trying to keep aware and alert was hard enough, but the real kicker was that my thoughts kept turning toward things that I didn’t want to think about when I was left alone with myself, same as they had for the last nine months on Earth.

Tiff’s room was on the second floor of her house, with a window that overlooked the roof of their back porch. The first time I’d come over to her place she’d popped out the screen and led me onto the roof to look at the stars with her.

(Tiff always felt like she had moved to town around the middle of high school, but that wasn’t actually true. She’d grown up in Bumblefuck, Kansas, same as the rest of us, it was just that she lived out in the country and she had mostly kept to herself, cloistered within her own group of friends. That group of girls had collapsed at some point freshman year, first with Laurel, a keystone member, moving away, and then with two of the girls dating boys a few grades ahead of us. Tiff was adrift for a few months, until she fell in with us. Her alternate trajectory into our D&D group always left me feeling like she hadn’t actually been in Bumblefuck until sometime before that first session with us. Whenever I was reminded that she had been there all along, it felt like a sloppy retcon, because how could I have not been aware of her?)

We sat on the roof of her porch, where she’d laid out a blanket for us. I was on my back, looking at the stars, trying to remember some of the constellations we’d made up together but not able to focus. She was curled up beside me in one of her father’s sweaters, three sizes too big for her so it covered her hands in the cold night. Her head laid on my chest, rising and falling with my breathing. She’d been crying earlier, but had mostly stopped, her shaky breath returning to normal. It was a month after Arthur had died.

“I’m worried about you,” she said in a small voice.

“Oh?” I asked.

She lifted up a hand that had been wrapped around me and poked me in the chest. “You’re hurting.”

I did as much of a shrug as I could without dislodging her. “He was my best friend,” I said. “It’s supposed to hurt. I’d have to be pretty fucking sociopathic to feel nothing.”

“I worry that you,” she stopped and bit her lip, “I worry there’s a part of you that’s sinking into it. It’s … well, my uncle, he has a CCW license, and the way he talks about maybe having to use it one day it’s like you know that he’s just high on this fantasy of getting to shoot someone to death.”

“You think I wanted Arthur to,” die, but I couldn’t get the word out. The words were coming out monotone anyway, devoid of the anger that I should have been putting behind them.

“No,” said Tiff. “No, no no no, it’s, the thing I’m trying to say is that it’s like you’re waiting to show people how much you’re hurt. And I get that. I want to scream at them too, to ask how they can just keep carrying on when he’s,” dead, she couldn’t say it either, “gone. And I know that I was this, interloper, I wasn’t his best friend, I know it’s harder for you.” She was quiet for a while as she blinked back a fresh round of tears. “I’m worried that you’re hurting, and there’s something alluring
about the pain, because it’s a righteous, meaningful pain. I,” another sigh and a deep, steadying breath, “don’t want you to keep going down this dark path.”

“You think you understand me better than you do,” I told her.

She was silent for a long moment. “Maybe,” she said softly. “I’m trying though. I know there’s this void that can’t be filled. I know that. It’s the same for me --”

“It’s not the same,” I said, almost by reflex.

She was quiet again, until she started crying, but it was quiet, soft crying, not wracking sobs this time. I looked up at the stars, but couldn’t see them because I was blinking back tears. I didn’t mean to make her feel bad. I couldn’t hold back though, I couldn’t tell her the lies that she wanted to hear. She wanted me to say that I missed Arthur, but at least we could still take comfort in each other. I couldn’t say it though, because at the time I didn’t think it was true.

Tiff missed the next D&D session because of a doctor’s appointment, then the one after that because of a family thing, and then she stopped giving excuses and just didn’t show up, which was probably for the best given how those sessions went.

So my cold nights in the desert were pretty miserable, because they were doing a great job of calling up all these unpleasant memories. Maybe it was the isolation, the desolation, or the cold, or maybe it was Celestar hanging in the multi-colored sky and reminding me that sometimes things got ruined and could never be fixed.

Days were better, partly because I had company and partly because walking got me into a sort of zen state where time passed quickly. We navigated by the sun, or rather, Fenn did, and it was Amaryllis who did most of our pace-setting. That left me content to stare off into the distance, white robe shielding my eyes, looking at nothing.

We spotted Caer Laga on day four. The desert wasn’t totally featureless, it just didn’t have any plants, water, soil, or buildings to speak of. That left sand and rocks. It was atop one of these rocky bits that Caer Laga had been built, with the base of it starting some hundred feet up and no clear path up the cliff face. It was a rounded fortress with no battlements or crenellations and a circular sloped roof covering the entire thing. There were windows, but they were small and defensible. We were still a day away from it, but at least our objective was in sight.

Amaryllis suffered a fall not long after that. We were walking along a rocky ridge that one of the dunes was butted up against, hoping to spare ourselves an arduous climb up a second dune or having to take a longer path. One moment I was in my partial daze, the next I was watching her roll down the dune.

"Fuck," muttered Fenn, who followed her down, skidding along the sand. I squared my pack and did the same, trying desperately to keep my balance.

"Are you okay?" I asked as soon as Amaryllis came to a stop. She was pinned down by her pack, clearly breathing but not moving.

"Ankle," she said. "Hurts."

"Well, that’s not how I thought this particular adventure would end," said Fenn. "I thought it would be more of a claws and teeth type of thing."

"Help me up," said Amaryllis. We did, with me doing most of the work, first pulling her pack off her
and then moving her so that she was laying with her back against the sloped sand. “I’m not sure this is it for us.”

“Like hells,” said Fenn. “We can’t risk having Joon heal you and it’s another eight miles to Caer Laga, which seems like it’s going to involve quite the climb.”

“Six miles,” said Amaryllis. “We have options. We can outrun the thaum-seekers. Or we can fight some and outrun others. We’re close.”

“Or,” said Fenn. “You can pull the key from your arm, we can go back to the Barren Jewel, and we can be luxuriating in creature comforts within the hour, then back here as soon as the two hour timer is up.”

“Where the thaum-seekers will surely be waiting for us,” said Amaryllis. None of this conversation was all that new to us, since we’d gone over exit strategies before stepping foot into the desert. We still had the room rented in Barren Jewel, with a section carefully marked out on the floor where we would teleport in and explicit instructions that nothing was to be disturbed.

“Can you walk?” I asked.

Amaryllis temporarily put some weight on her foot and then abruptly fell back down with a sharp gasp of pain. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Okay,” I said. “My vote is for dragging Mary to the cliff and healing her there, then climbing up out of the range of the thaum-seekers before they reach us.”

“How long will it take you to heal her?” asked Fenn. “Your hand took eight hours. We’re not going to have that kind of time.”

“I wasn’t as good then, and I had worse bones,” I replied. “It won’t be eight hours. That said … I don’t know. I’m still pretty new at bone magic.” And the game was still being stingy with giving me raw numbers. “I still think moving to the cliff is the right idea. We’re through most of our food and water already, I can transfer everything in Mary’s pack to mine, and we can fashion hers into a sled to pull her there.”

Fenn clacked her teeth. “We planned for five days, we were making fine time, now we’re going to be slowed down some, but … if we didn’t have our get-out-of-jail-free card, or if I were expected to do extra work, I would probably object more strenuously. Fine. Let’s do it.”

The whole thing was a little easier said than done, partly because Amaryllis was clearly in pain and I didn’t want to jostle her, and partly because she kept wanting to help, especially with the sled that we were making. It was clear that one of Amaryllis’ specialties was engineering, but having her direct me was a bit maddening.

Skill unlocked: Engineering!

That took some edge off the irritation though.

Five hours later, we saw our first thaum-seeker. It was sitting at the top of a hill, peering off into the distance, but not in our direction. From a distance I could only barely make out its red dog-like form. I had been given a description though, of terrible claws, teeth that extended well beyond its lips, and wide nostrils that dominated its face. I thought maybe I could see its teeth, but not much else.

“Frick,” said Fenn.
We moved down a slope and out of its line of sight, then stuck to the valleys after that. With the heavy packs and careful navigation we had to do, as well as the effort expended in taking circuitous routes or going up and down dunes, we’d been making about a mile an hour through most of the trip. With me pulling Amaryllis, it was going a lot slower. I was worn out from four days of travel, and I was also pulling a hundred and twenty pounds of princess, plus everything that had remained in her pack. By the end of the day, she was muttering a swear with every bump and shift in weight, and we were still about two miles away.

“What do you want to do?” I asked when we stopped for a break. I made a bowl of portable soup for her with a side of pemmican. Her face was sweaty. The ankle was badly swollen, and I noticed with distress that her right hand had gotten a lot worse since we’d been to the bone magus. The nails were thicker than they had been, almost completely yellow, and cracked down the middle, where they wept a clear fluid. That I hadn’t seen them before said to me that she’d been hiding them from us.

“Continue on,” said Amaryllis. “We’re not far.”

Fenn looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I saw her mouth the words ‘voting bloc’. This was really not the time for us to have a discussion about where loyalties lay, nor for me to be swayed by the desire to get in anyone’s good graces. I surreptitiously flipped her a middle finger, which she smiled at.

“We have an unanticipated climb ahead of us,” I said. “I know we brought pitons and rope, and I know that you’re a fantastic climber, but I worry that I’ll be suffering from exhaustion by the time we get there. Even if I can heal you, it’s too dicey, and we’d be trying to make the climb at night. I think we should teleport out. We can recuperate in Barren Jewel, and if they’re attracted to the scent of the teleport, we can wait them out a bit, then come back in and fight them off while making our way to Caer Laga.”

Amaryllis sighed. “Fine.” She reached over and touched her tattoo. “Fenn, I don’t suppose you’ve changed your mind?”

“As amusing as it might be to leave Joon twisting in the wind on this one, no, I haven’t,” replied Fenn. “Let’s get the hells out of here.”

Amaryllis reached for the edge of the tattoo with her cracked yellow nails, digging in slightly, wincing in pain, and pulling at the skin. I expected the tattoo to animate or move, with something similar to what I’d seen happen when Leonold pull rope from his arm. Instead, we just sat there while Amaryllis narrowed her eyebrows and tried to dig her broken nails into the tattoo to no effect.

“It’s not working,” she finally said.

“Well are you doing it right?” asked Fenn.

“This isn’t my first time using a tattoo,” said Amaryllis with a frosty voice. “It’s the tattoo that’s not working.”

“Because of the rat rot?” I asked.

Amaryllis curled her hand into a fist, hiding the nails. “I don’t think so,” she said. Nevertheless, she tried to awkwardly curl her left hand in and touch her tattoo with her healthy fingers. Still nothing happened.

“If you’re fucking this up on purpose,” Fenn began.

“I’m not,” said Amaryllis. Her face was flushed. “What would the endgame be? I could pretend the
tattoo wasn’t working now in order to get my way, if I was the petulant child you think I am, but what would I do when we’d gotten to the cliffs, or once we were inside Caer Laga? If I were a sociopath you should trust that I’d be the kind that looks to the future and doesn’t get caught in obvious lies. It’s not working.”

“So,” I said carefully. “That would seem to be a problem, since we’re forty-some miles from Barren Jewel and have, conservatively, a day’s worth of food and water left.”

**Quest Accepted: Exit Strategy - You are stranded in the desert with limited food and water, no access to magic unless you want to risk being gutted by feral thaum-seekers, and a wounded party member. Hope you prepared carefully!**

“Um,” I said. “I just got a quest. The gist of it is that things aren’t looking great. Quest completion is probably getting out of the desert. It said … it said that it hopes I prepared carefully.”

“We did prepare carefully,” replied Amaryllis. “We should get going.”

“Shit,” said Fenn. “To Caer Laga? You said yourself that there’d be no reason to suspect that you’d be able to extract the key there if you can’t pull it here. From everything you’ve said, this place was shut down and left waiting more than a hundred years ago, which means there’s not going to be any food or water there either. Even if we heal you, scale the cliff, and get inside, what does that get us?”

“Heirlooms,” said Amaryllis.

“Wait,” said Fenn, squinting slightly. “The armor, a sword for you, a sword for Joon, the box, the gloves for me, the amulet, the jar for us, … you said the jar had healing properties?”

Amaryllis nodded. “If I’m right, and it’s there, and I can bind to it, then yes.”

“And you think that this healing will prevent us from starving?” I asked.

Amaryllis frowned. “I don’t know. But … I think it doesn’t matter. Our options at the moment are to try returning to Barren Jewel on quarter rations of food and water, or forging on ahead and hoping that we can find some salvation. On balance, forging ahead gives better odds.”

Maybe I should backtrack a little bit here and give you some history, which might help to clear up some mysteries. (If you’re one of those “blah, blah, blah, history” people, I’ll meet you at the next linebreak.)

**Mystery #1:** How is Amaryllis the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, if she’s about as old as a senior in high school and there are thousands of Penndraig princes and princesses? Well, you probably figured this one out for yourself; generations don’t always progress at the same rates. It had been roughly five hundred years since Uther Penndraig had left his two fully grown sons to go off on some presumably ill-fated quest, leaving behind what I’d slowly come to understand was an **incredibly** vast armory of magic. Amaryllis was ten generations removed from him, which came out to be something like fifty years per generation.

From that you can probably guess what her family line looks like; it was mostly men carrying the name and they were both long-lived by human standards and having children really, really late in life. This wasn’t just happenstance, not after the fourth generation, it was a specific reproductive strategy aimed at creating a solid family line that could take advantage of specific family heirlooms once held by Uther Penndraig. As previously stated, magical heirlooms followed succession rules, but these differed from heirloom to heirloom.
Amaryllis’ line was favored by any succession rule that favored brothers or sisters over sons or daughters, and by any succession rule that favored older generations over newer ones, and any succession rule that split things equally among a generation. That meant a lot of magical power resting in the hands of a single young person.

“But what of her mother and father?” you might ask. Well, her father had been eighty-two when she was born, and died when she was two years old. Her mother became a power in her own right, because some heirloom successions favored husbands and wives over children, but she died (in what was likely an assassination) when Amaryllis was ten years old. Most of this I learned from Fenn, who had done a fair amount of asking around because she was an intolerable snoop.

Anyway that brings us to ...

**Mystery #2:** Why couldn’t we just teleport into the fortress, get the items, and then get out? That had been my first question, since not being able to do that seemed like dumb videogame logic to me. The answer was that the teleportation key only allowed you to go to one of the touchstones (which I thought of as magic homing beacons) or to a place that you’d already been, and Amaryllis had never been to Caer Laga. Her father and/or mother probably would have taken her to get it in her memory, but they’d both died when she was young.

But that raised another question, which was ...

**Mystery #3:** Assuming that Caer Laga was gracefully shuttered in full working order, why were there any magic items left behind? And the answer to this one turned out to go fairly deep. See, Caer Laga was in the middle of construction right when the blight began spreading over what later became the Datura Desert. They had time to finish the fortification and lay some powerful warding magic into the stones of the place. A redoubt in the middle of a wasteland where there are no resources to extract or choke points to defend might seem like a pretty crappy and pointless thing to build, until you remember that in the Lost King’s Court, assassination wasn’t exactly out of place. A redoubt in the middle of an exclusion zone is actually a really great place to lie low if you’re under attack, doubly so because if you’ve been there you can teleport in with a teleportation key, and if you haven’t been there you’re stuck -- well, basically doing what we were doing, but probably with better resources and a bigger team.

And naturally if you have a ton of magic items and most of them only work on you or your closest allies, you’d keep some back at your super secret fortress that you have set aside for when things go to shit. The exact details of these magic items hadn’t been written down, probably for reasons of operational security, with the thought that these details would be told to Amaryllis in person. They weren’t, because Amaryllis’ life had apparently been written by Lemony Snicket.

(The small part of me that had initially scoffed at the adventure as being plainly a stereotypical adventure was mostly placated by all this, but I was still trying to find some cracks in the world, some place where the myriad rules and facts didn’t quite line up with what I observed.)

We forged on ahead, even as darkness fell over the desert. I dragged Amaryllis, trying to keep her steady but sometimes failing to a grunt or gasp of pain. Fenn went a little bit ahead, making sure that the way we were going was clear. By the time we reached the cliff another three hours later, I was exhausted and aching. It would have been a great time to suck the power from a bone to reinvigorate myself, and an even better time to level up.

“So,” said Fenn. “Thaum-suckers don’t have shit on us.”

“We should plan out a route up the cliff face,” said Amaryllis. “It doesn’t look too difficult to me.
Joon, if you could get out the void rifle and start firing up the cliff to get us some handholds and places to put pitons, that would probably be a good use of downtime.” She had made a few modifications before we’d left that ‘theoretically’ reduced the chance of malfunction.

I sat up from the ground where I had sprawled out and grabbed the rifle and began firing it fairly randomly in a line up the cliff. *Thunk, thunk, thunk.* I took sips of water in between, trying to pace myself on what remained of our supply. The rocks went a hundred feet up before they reached the bottom of Caer Laga’s wall, the equivalent of ten stories, and I wasn’t at all looking forward to the climb.

“He’s been carrying you across the desert for the better part of a day,” said Fenn. “We should rest here for the night and climb in the morning.”

“You’re not worried about the thaum-seekers?” asked Amaryllis.

“Of course I am,” said Fenn. “But I’m more worried about what’s going to happen if one of us falls to the desert floor after we’ve alerted them to our presence. I believe the human phrase is ‘certain death’, and we’re in a place where no one is going to collect and extinguish your soul. Petition to rest until first light, your highness.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis, looking down at her ankle. “First light. I don’t think I’ll be sleeping much tonight, so I’ll take the first shift.”

I took that opportunity to lay back down in the sand and stuff my face full of pemmican, which was starting to grow on me. I fell asleep with my mouth full of protein and fats.

Somewhat predictably, I was woken up by yelling.
It wasn’t first light, but twilight had come over the Datura Desert, enough to banish the multi-colored stars from the sky. It wouldn’t be long before the sun (somehow) rose over the infinite plane of tessellating Aerbs (no seriously how) and splayed light on us once more.

I was a bit more concerned with the yelling, which was coming from Fenn, and once I saw it, the totality of my attention was turned toward the beast that was leaping over the dunes on a path straight toward us. One fun fact about the thaum-seekers that I don’t think I’ve shared yet is that they’re really, really fucking fast. They have crap acceleration, but given enough time to get moving, their powerful muscles allow them to chase down pretty much any form of transportation that’s not teleportation. This particular thaum-seeker had apparently seen us, and it was coming right for us.

I heard the thunk of the void rifle, and looked over at Amaryllis, who had positioned a pack behind her to give her something to lean against. She was peering down the barrel of her handmade weapon with a calm chill. Fenn was the one who had been yelling at me to wake up, and she was standing there with her bow drawn and arrow nocked. As I watched she loosed an arrow, which flew through the air and struck the thaum-seeker to no obvious effect.

I scrambled to my feet and picked my sword up off the ground. I was still waking up, but it still struck me that against a beast like a thaum-seeker, a sword was really not the weapon that I wanted to be using.

“No magic,” said Fenn as she drew and fired another arrow in the creature’s direction.

I had just enough time to remember a nighttime story that my father had read to me, which had always scared the crap out of me even though it was supposed to be cute fun. It has terrible tusks and terrible claws and terrible teeth in its terrible jaws.

And then it was on us, swiping wildly as it went over our heads and slammed into the cliff above us. I don’t know why I had expected it to turn on a dime when it took it so long to pick up speed, but I heard a crunch of bone as it hit the rock and it tumbled down to the ground where it sprang to its feet, swiping claws through the air. I raised my sword, which was knocked from my hand in a spray of blood which came mostly from its razor-sharp claws cutting off two of my fingers at the second knuckle. I screamed in pain.

Critical failure!

“Duck!” Fenn called from some distance away, and I flattened myself to the ground without needing another word from her. A second later, a now-familiar volley of arrows flew over my head and drove straight into the thaum-seeker, killing it instantly.

Thaum-seeker defeated!

“Okay, so I shot my wad a little bit there,” said Fenn. “But it looked like --”

“We need to move,” said Amaryllis. “Now, Joon, heal me?”

I went over to her, trying not to stare in shock at my missing fingers, and began picking up the bones beside her. I was bleeding, less badly than I would have thought, which was probably because the thaum-seeker hadn’t made that clean of a cut. I placed my bloody, disfigured hand on her ankle and used my other hand to touch the bones. I pulled as hard on the power in the bone as I could, targeting
the particular aspect of endurance I knew was inside it, then picked up another one and repeated the process when the first crumbled to ash.

Fenn had already started up the cliffside. There had been ample handholds before, and it hadn’t been a true vertical, but I must not have woken to the thunk of the void rifle, because there were clearly irregular holes drilled into the cliff at awkward intervals where no other grips were available, at least for the first fifty feet. Fenn was taking advantage of those and moving quickly, not stopping to steady herself or look very carefully at where she was going. For a moment I thought she was leaving us to our fates, but when she was thirty feet up she found a small ledge to stand on and drew her bow again.

“It’s a nice day for a climb,” Fenn called down to us. “When you’re ready, that is. Two shots left, by the by.” I burned through another of the bones and prodded Amaryllis’ leg; she winced and shook her head. “I’d say take your time,” Fenn continued. “But we have company approaching from all sides, six -- nope, seven -- in total. My guess is more to join the party shortly.”

It took another two thick bones of healing for Amaryllis to rise to her feet and begin the climb, her void rifle strapped to her back and everything else left on the ground below. I followed after, trying my best to climb with one good hand, worried that if I used both I would get the handholds all slippery. I was moving slowly, slower than Amaryllis, who climbed like vertical movement was as natural as walking, as though she’d never been hurt at all. Fenn was still on her ledge, now with an arrow nocked, and she kept glancing to the two of us and muttering under her breath. I’d left my sword behind, having lugged it across the desert and only used it long enough to have two of my fingers removed.

“Take the next shot you get,” I told Fenn.

At this point I was praying that the thaum-seekers would prove to be terrible climbers, but that was a flight of fancy. What I was hoping for was a level up. I considered myself overdue for one, seeing as the last one I’d gotten had been from Fenn killing Leonold, back in Silmar City, and I’d both finished a quest and killed two people since then, plus those that Fenn had taken down. I’d thought that the thaum-seeker would be it for certain, but nothing had happened, and I wasn’t entirely sure that a level up would regrow my lost fingers, but I was really hoping it would.

Fenn loosed another of her artillery shots, aiming far away from me. I heard the whistle of them moving through the air as they multiplied through their flight, then arrows driving into flesh and striking sand. I didn’t stop to look down and see the results, because I got a helpful message from the game.

**Thaum-seeker defeated!**

**Thaum-seeker defeated!**

And yet still no level up. Fenn only had a single artillery shot left and she needed to be a good distance away to actually use it, but I was focusing too hard on climbing to think about how fucked we were. Just after I blinked the messages away, I heard a number of dull thuds in a row as thaum-seekers slammed into the rocks. Alright, so they’re suicidally inclined toward killing us, good to know. And then I did take a moment to look down, and saw them climbing up after me, not terribly graceful, and not able to use the handholds as effectively as I was, but still moving faster than I was.

“Sorry Joon,” shouted Fenn as she threw her bow over her shoulder and began climbing again. That was fine, her normal arrows were plainly ineffective and her artillery shot wasn’t any good up close, so if she’d stayed on the ledge it would really be more about moral support than actually helping me.
I got a little more reckless with my climbing, grabbing onto handholds and moving forward without testing my weight or practicing the motion of switching from one handhold to another. To be honest, I probably would have dumped stat points into PHY as an emergency measure if I thought that I could have spared the time to do it.

I heard more thudding, crunching sounds from down below, and I felt each of them through the rock I was desperately gripping onto. Fenn had quoted seven, but they hadn’t stopped at seven, they seemed to just be pouring more and more on. I glanced up higher than the next handhold for the first time in a long time and saw Amaryllis looking out over the ledge right next to the tall walls of Caer Laga itself, with Fenn another twenty feet below her. She hadn’t said where exactly the wards were, but I was hoping it was there, because my pain in my hand was starting to overwhelm the adrenaline.

I was forty feet from the top when something hit my left foot hard enough that I was almost pulled from the rocks by the force. I screamed in pain when I realized that razor-sharp claws had cut through both my shoe and foot. I looked down and saw the thaum-seeker lifting itself up and drawing back for another strike. My foot was dripping blood down into his face. I moved just in time to avoid his swipe, but if we kept doing this I was going to be stopped in place, and there were others climbing up around him.

Alright, time to get stupid.

My heart was hammering away in my chest, fueled by its need to offset the blood I was losing and whatever mixture of neurotransmitters my brain had determined were acceptable to deploy when faced with near-certain death (i.e. all the good stuff). It didn’t take me long to find the movement of my pulse, and I braced myself against my foothold and handholds just in time to catch the beat of my heart. The power of blood magic launched me twenty feet into the air along the surface of the cliff.

I was mostly saved by the fact that the cliff wasn’t at a true vertical, but it was a close thing, because my injured hand slipped from a handhold and my injured foot spasmed again the rock, leaving me momentarily stopped from tumbling back down by only a single hand. It took me time to find my footing again and steady myself, time that the thaum-seekers spent clattering their way up the cliff. I could barely hear them over the sound of my ragged breaths. That left me another twenty feet from Fenn and Amaryllis, both standing beside Caer Laga, so I steadied myself and used the power of my blood to do another supernatural leap.

Fenn and Amaryllis were waiting for me, both laying down on the flat ground with their hands stretched out. Fenn grabbed my right hand and Amaryllis grabbed my left, but my right was covered in blood down to the elbow from where my missing fingers had been bleeding, and I quickly slipped from her grasp, off to the side, which started pulling Amaryllis. I landed one foot on an awkward piece of rock jutting from the cliff and managed to stop myself from falling. Amaryllis was halfway off the cliff, still holding onto me but not secure herself.

“Coming up,” I said, before pushing off from the foothold with another surge of blood magic and landing in a heap with both of them on the slender piece of flat ground. I scrambled to my feet and looked down at the approaching thaum-seekers. We had barely seen them on our way to Caer Laga, but at the first use of magic they must have come in from all over the desert. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, with more of them racing in. This high up we could see all the way to Barren Jewel, which was little more than a smudge on the flat desert.

I finally had a chance to check my vital stats and saw that I was at 15/27 health and 69K/75K blood, better than I thought I had a right to. Behind us was a wall too flat to climb, with windows too high to reach, and there was no path we could take. The thaum-seekers were closing in fast. “We have to get behind the wards!” I shouted.
“We are,” Amaryllis replied.

I watched as one of the great red beasts slipped a claw up above the ledge and my mouth opened in shock as that claw was vaporized. The thaum-seeker lunged up regardless, and I witnessed it being peeled back like someone was doing a destructive scan, revealing strange bits of bone and flesh that took away first its hands, then face, then head. The legs and lower half of the torso fell down, having not quite risen to our level.

*Thaum-seeker defeated!*

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

The rest of the thaum-seekers stopped where they were on the cliff face, and the ones on the desert a hundred feet below us came to a halt, save for those that were still barrelling across the sands to us, but even those slowed down, digging their claws into the sand to gain traction or tumbling across the dunes to kill their momentum. They didn’t retreat; they simply stared up at us.

“Well that’s frickin’ creepy,” said Fenn. “We’re confident in this ward business?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “Mostly. Caer Laga has been standing abandoned for generations. The wards weren’t supposed to degrade with time.” It felt like there was more to that thought, but she didn’t say the rest of what she was thinking.

“Then let’s get our butts in gear,” said Fenn. She looked up at Caer Laga. “That is quite the wall to scale. And not much in the way of windows.” She pointed at the narrow windows. “I suppose it wasn’t enough that this place was built in the middle of an exclusion zone, a hundred feet up, but the windows had to be arrow slits too, just in case some silly fuck decided to … god, I don’t even know what your ancestors were thinking.”

“They’re not that narrow,” said Amaryllis. “I think we can slip through, if I can get up there.” She unslung her rifle and began firing at the wall, carefully making handholds. I wondered how confident she was in whatever changes she’d made to the void rifle. I wasn’t sure what catastrophic failure would look like, but wasn’t eager to find out.

“You okay Joon?” asked Fenn as we heard the thunk of the rifle, over and over. Her attention was directed down at the unmoving thaum-seekers that peppered the rocks. “You should really learn to climb better.”

“I should learn to use a sword better,” I replied. I looked down at my hand, which was still trickling blood. I was missing the pinky and ring finger of my right hand, which was shaking badly. It began to hurt more as I came down off the high of fearing for my life. “Fuck.”

“You’ll live,” said Fenn. “I thought you were supposed to do some magic healing thing soon.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m … not entirely sure what happened.” I sat down with my back against the warm wall of Caer Laga. Blood loss was going to become a problem again, I could tell that, and if I was going to get dizzy I wanted it to be as far from the cliff as possible. “I’m hoping that it wasn’t just because it’s been you doing most of the work.”

“Well, if the game is going to punish you for being smart about things, then it sounds like a shit game to me,” said Fenn.

“Sure,” I said. “But if you were making a game where people can get more powerful by killing goblins, then –”
“Don’t speak of goblins like that,” said Amaryllis.

“Oh,” I said. *Note: ask about goblins later. Were they the bookish variants? Or was this just some fantasy political correctness thing?* “Well, imagine that you made a game where someone was supposed to kill the undead, but instead of using a rifle and sneaking around, they built a giant trap and lured all the undead into it. You’d want to say ‘nu-uh, that doesn’t count’.”

“Why?” asked Fenn. “Is this a human thing? You set up an objective, but you need to have that objective accomplished in some circuitous way, and then you slap people on the wrist when they figure out a clever trick?”

“Unspoken rules,” said Amaryllis. *Thunk.* “We had to remove a general for violating them during war games.” *Thunk.*

“Anyway,” I said. “If it were me, I’d put an xp penalty on things that you killed with the power of that bow. That hasn’t been a bad heuristic so far, so … I’m not asking you to stop, but if that’s how we resolve encounters, I’m not sure that I’ll get that much out of them.”

“Feh,” said Fenn. “Well, the ugly beasties are still staring at us. I was hoping they’d give up.”

“Holds are done,” said Amaryllis. “They’re awkwardly angled. I’ll go up first, alone for now.”

“We’ll be safe here?” asked Fenn. “That ward won’t activate on us if you’re too far away?”

Amaryllis hesitated for a brief moment. “You should be fine. Besides, there are several wards here, I can feel their bindings when I pass through them. That one, the one that the thaum-seekers were hitting, I think it was only for them, projected away from the physical structure for added protection. There are different ones for people, which shouldn’t start until we’re past the walls. My will should allow you past those. Like I said, you’ll be fine.”

Fenn sighed and sat down next to me. “Let us know when we should follow.” She rested her head and closed her eyes.

I watched Amaryllis climb. I had known that she was well-muscled (a flash of her at the bathhouse went through my mind, that one specific image trapped like amber of her putting her hair up and looking back at me), but watching her climb was awe-inspiring. She used not just the dime-sized holes she’d drilled into the wall, but small imperfections in the stone exterior, sometimes seeming to stand on a perfectly flat surface. At other times she pulled herself up with her upper body alone, all of her weight put onto a few fingers. Through all this, she was still carrying the void rifle across her back. Climbing was apparently just one of the things that she was really, ridiculously good at.

She came to the lowest of the windows and with a careful series of motions, took the void rifle from her back using a single hand, placed the muzzle against a specific portion of the window, then using the same hand got her fingers in position to squeeze the trigger handle. *Thunk.* If I had been asked to do that at ground level after having ten minutes to practice, I was fairly sure that I would have failed nine times out of ten. *Both my companions are higher level than me.*

After Amaryllis slipped inside, Fenn spoke up.

“So,” she said. “What are the odds that she abandons us?”

“One percent,” I said.

“Alright,” Fenn replied. “I will take those odds.”
“I don’t have any money,” I replied. “I actually don’t have anything but the clothes on my back, and
I’m down half a shoe.” I looked at my foot, where the heel was bleeding. “So I’m not sure what
we’re betting.”

“An unspecified favor,” said Fenn. “If she doesn’t come back, you owe me a hundred favors. If she
does come back, I owe you a favor. You said hundred to one, right?”

“Seems like you’re just giving me a favor,” I replied. “If she was only pretending her tattoo had
failed, and really intends for us to die here, there’s no way for you to collect, is there?”

“Who knows,” said Fenn. “We might end up in the same hell. There’s no death clause on this bet,
Joon. If we starve to death out here, or if the ludicrous wards up and kill us, then I’m a-coming for
you to make you pay up.”

After twenty minutes had passed, I was getting a little bit nervous, not just that Amaryllis might have
left us, but that something might have happened to her inside. It was dead quiet. The thaum-seekers
were still below us, arranged in exactly the same positions, waiting on us to come to them, or
whatever their thought process was (if they had thoughts). Fenn was silent, and I was too injured to
want to make conversation.

Amaryllis finally climbed back out the window when a half hour had passed, much to my relief. I
nudged Fenn, who had fallen asleep (or pretended to). “One favor,” I whispered.

“T ook your time,” said Fenn.

“Got the glove,” said Amaryllis, pulling a single black glove from her pocket. She had shed her
robes, her rifle, and her shoes, leaving her in a t-shirt and pants. The glove was the single blackest
thing I had ever seen, so black that I would momentarily lose my idea of the shape of it when its
individual parts overlapped each other.

“I thought it was supposed to be two gloves?” asked Fenn.

“I guess not,” said Amaryllis. She slipped the black glove on. “All I had on this one was the word
‘extradimensional’, but so far it seems to suck in whatever the glove touches and then spit it back out
on command. It should be the solution to getting the two of you inside. There’s no way Joon is going
to make that climb in his condition.”

Fenn frowned. “You want to stick us into a glove,” she said.

“Just for a moment,” said Amaryllis. “I can make the climb before you run out of air, if there’s air to
run out of inside the glove.”

“How safe do you think it is,” I asked. “If you had to put a number on it?” A 1 on a 1d20? A 1 on a
1d100? I probably would have taken a 1% chance of death at this point, if there weren’t better
options.

“I tested it inside,” said Amaryllis. “It can fit at least two covered armchairs, both of which I returned
to existence without any damage to them. Usually heirlooms don’t fail catastrophically if you exceed
their bounds. I can make the climb faster with bare feet, you shouldn’t have any problems with any
time limit.”

“I’d be more comfortable with rope,” I replied. Amaryllis’ face fell. “Not that I don’t trust you, but
we have some time.”

“I found the jar too,” said Amaryllis. “It was sealed. There was a warning on it. All our food is at the
bottom of a cliff that’s still covered in magical beasts who would like nothing better than to kill us. They seem to be content to wait. If I’d found any rope, I’d be throwing that down to you now. The faster we can get inside, the sooner we can split up and search for something that will let us extend the time it takes for us to starve.”

“You had me at starve,” I replied. That was an old D&D joke, one that we’d collectively run into the ground. Amaryllis didn’t laugh, and neither did Fenn. Neither gave the traditional continuation, which was ‘but starve was the last thing I said’.

“Fine,” said Fenn. “Juniper, if I die, avenge me.”

Amaryllis rolled her eyes. “Hold your breath as long as possible, and don’t try to leave until you have to, I don’t want you falling out of the glove while I’m climbing, because that could kill us all. It takes ten seconds to charge up, so try to time your breathing to that.”

Fenn went first, sucking in a huge amount of air while Amaryllis gripped her forearm with a gloved hand. After ten seconds had passed, Fenn disappeared entirely and without any obvious effect. Amaryllis quickly moved to me, and I began taking in deep breaths, trying to find one to hold. At nine seconds I started holding my breath, and at ten seconds the world went black.

I found the way out right away, almost instinctively. It was like I was in a space no more tangible than a soap bubble, and all I needed to do was to direct a thought at it to pop myself out. If not for that, I might have panicked, but I could feel at the back of my mind the possibility of escape if I really needed it. I wasn’t particularly claustrophobic, but it was completely dark, I was holding my breath, and I was weightless, with my clothes drifting away from my skin until they were tugged back.

I started counting, for lack of anything better to do, and tried to figure out where Amaryllis would be on the wall, based on how fast she’d climbed it before. She’d be moving faster now, both because she had a route and because she was carrying cargo with a time limit on it. How long could a person hold their breath? In D&D you could hold your breath for double your CON score, so about twenty six-second rounds, or two minutes, if you were an average human. I didn’t know what the game used for that, though I suspected it would be END. Obviously there was no math that I could see or rulebook I could consult, but I was hoping that I could at least last a minute, maybe two.

My counting was getting faster the longer I was in there, and I tried to consciously slow it down to compensate, but either way I was starting to get that panicking feeling of needing to take a deep breath of air by the time my count reached the triple digits.

I came back into the world disoriented and gasping for air, with a sudden jolt of pain as my wounds were exposed to fresh air. Then all that pain went away in a glow of light.

Quest Complete: Mothballs - You have arrived at Caer Laga and laid claim to the heirlooms within. You may return to Caer Laga at any time with your teleportation key.

Level up!

It had been too long since I’d felt that light touch me, the fingers of it gently gracing the pleasure centers of my brain. I felt somewhat hollow as it receded from me, a feeling that hadn’t come with it before, and it was with regret that I returned to the real world.

We were in a stone hallway, more spartan than I might have expected with nothing adorning the walls. But then, this place had been constructed in a hurry as the land was turning to desert around it, hadn’t it? There’d have been no reason for them to make it luxurious.
“Better?” asked Amaryllis. I nodded and flexed my hand, where my fingers had returned, whole. I wondered whether we would find duplicate fingers if we went back down to the desert floor.

Fenn was standing next to Amaryllis with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily. “Ya know,” said Fenn. “Elves can hold their breath for an hour. Guess I didn’t get my dad’s lungs. Also, let’s never travel by glove again.”

“Come on,” said Amaryllis. “Let me show you to the fruits of our labors.”
Rolling Need

She led us down several hallways as we slowly regained our breath, moving with purpose. I caught glimpses of other rooms, mostly bare but some with covered furniture in them. These were ideal conditions for keeping things in stasis, since there was rarely weather in the Datura and it was almost constantly warm and dry. A part of me wondered whether this was going to be our base of operations, which any good videogame needed to have. I could see that as a quest, to get this place up and running again, to have people and things shipped in at great expense … even though it would be pretty damned impractical, which was the whole reason that this place had been mothballed in the first place.

We eventually came down to an opened metal vault, lined with pedestals, hooks, and shelves, most of which were empty. Three mannequins sat at the back, only one of them with armor on it, a suit of elegant full plate with a heavily stylized anvil on the front. There were two swords. One had a thin basket of metal around the handle, and I would have called it a rapier if its edge didn’t look too sharp for it to be primarily a thrusting weapon. The other was a very plain blade with a somewhat dull reflection; it was a sword so generic that it somehow seemed like it was hiding something.

There were other things as well, an amulet with a blue gem sitting on a pedestal, a small wooden box inlaid with ivory, and a ceramic jar depicting fairies playing, its lid closed tight with red tape. With the glove, that made seven items in total.

I recognized three of them from the games I’d run.

“We probably shouldn’t open that jar until we’re ready,” I said.

“You have some hint?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know what its proper name would be,” I replied. “I, um, never gave it one. But if it’s what I think it is, it’s full of fairies made of marzipan. When we open it, they’ll attack.”

“What is the godsdamned point of that?” asked Fenn.

“I think they’ll only attack the first time,” I said. “At least, that’s how it was when I made it.”

“In this long dream you once had,” said Fenn with pursed lips.

“He’s been right before,” said Amaryllis.

“Marzipan fairies,” said Fenn, with a raised eyebrow. “And they … heal you?”

“If you eat them, yeah,” I replied. “The jar keeps generating them over time, but after the first batch I think the rest should be docile.” I had given the party the item as a way to partially make up for the fact that no one had wanted to play healer; fairy murder became a recurring joke. You had to snap their necks so they didn’t wriggle on the way down.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “We can prepare for that. These fairies will be our food source then. Hopefully it’s enough to stave off starvation for a while.”

“I think that armor is immobility plate,” I said, pointing at the suit. “It’s basically an immovable rod in armor form. It stops you from moving.” I pointed at the box. “And that’s probably the clonal kit, which can make a copy of any of the standard adventuring kits, though I’m not sure how that would translate here.” Amaryllis and Fenn were both staring at me.
“Well, damn,” said Fenn. “I guess we get to see whether you’re nuts or not.”

“This is the first time you’ve made specific, testable predictions,” said Amaryllis, which sounded enough like agreement that I was slightly hurt.

“That’s not true,” I said. “I’ve had all sorts of insights into things that I shouldn’t have, given that I’m dream-skewered.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “But most of those were pieces of knowledge available to the general public, or provided to you by the words written across your eyes, which I would consider separate. If I’m hearing you correctly, this is the first time that your actual memories of creating this game will be tested. Everything else could have been formed post hoc by an irregular skewer. You remembered about Barren Jewel, but it didn’t fit in with the dream of Earth, so the skewer warped your mind by inventing this game you played and placed Barren Jewel within that fiction. If you’re correct about these items, that rules out the backformation hypothesis.”

I looked between the two of them. “Have you been talking to each other?”

“Of course,” said Fenn. “We’re a team, that’s what we do. Did you think that we’d have a self-confessed mentally diseased team member and not talk about it with each other? I’m not that irresponsible.”

“We didn’t mean anything by it,” said Amaryllis. “Nothing was said that we wouldn’t have said in front of you. There were just … decisions that we needed to be prepared for.”


Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 6!

“You do?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “The story as you’ve heard it is basically, ‘I created most of the elements in this world with my friends as part of a game and now I’m trapped here’. I would probably think that was absolutely crazy if someone said it to me, even with the demonstrable abilities I’ve displayed. Caution was, or is warranted. It’d be pretty dumb of me to chastise either of you for doing what I would have done.”

“That … is remarkably mature,” said Amaryllis.

“I’ve been through some things, in the last few months,” I replied with a shrug, but I was blushing, because Amaryllis was impressed with me.

“Hoomans, I admire this display, but I was promised a glove, and you know the saying,” said Fenn.

“No glove, no love?” I asked. I smiled and then laughed at my own joke, which neither of them had any reason to find remotely funny. That made it even funnier to me.

Amaryllis handed over the glove and went to the swords (and for having a fancy name like “investiture”, apparently all it meant was handing the magic item over to someone else). Amaryllis touched first one sword, then the other, and handed me the suspiciously boring one. It immediately sprang to life in my hands, changing and warping into different forms, becoming thicker, then thinner, sharp, then dull, long, then short, never staying as one particular sword for very long. Despite that, it was perfectly balanced in my hand the entire time, forming counterweights in the grip to ensure that the shifts it underwent weren’t too jarring.
“Oh, neat,” I said. “It’s the Anyblade.” I directed a thought at it and transformed it from a sword to an axe wrapped in decorative gold hair, then to a small dagger with a skull on the hilt, then to a bronze khopesh. When I turned it back into a plain, generic sword it had settled down considerably, shifting only gradually between different forms. I stilled it with a thought.

Amaryllis was staring at me again. Her own sword had done nothing much of note while I’d played with the Anyblade.

“How many magic items did you think up?” asked Fenn. She was looking at my Anyblade with envy in her eyes.

“First off, you can’t have it,” I told Fenn. “Second … I think the answer is probably hundreds, if we’re just talking about the ones that I made, not the ones that were appropriated from a sourcebook or intentionally adapted from some other canon. If you included all the really derivative stuff, I’d say maybe a thousand.” I tried to quickly check my math. Four players, times eight years playing, times two sessions a week, times fifty-two weeks a year, at one magic item per session per player, was a sloppy-rounding upper bound of three thousand two hundred. With weeks off, being low on players, not always being DM, or handing out duplicates it had to be a lot less. “I don’t know for sure. Why?” (Truth be told, I was quite enjoying myself. I had acquired loot, and I was on pretty solid footing, especially relative to Fenn and Amaryllis. The feeling of knowing something that they didn’t, and having it actually be useful instead of just being some bit of ‘Airthian' pop culture, was a pleasant one.)

“Mary, how many magic items are there in the world?” asked Fenn. She pointed straight at Amaryllis while keeping her eyes on me.

“I find it annoying that you would expect me to know that,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “Also, we’re talking about entads and heirloom entads, magic item can refer to a larger class of …” Fenn was moving her hand to mimic a flapping mouth. “A billion would be a close approximation, that’s one for every five people, but Pareto’s Principle applies, and twenty percent of the population has eighty percent of the entads.”

“Pareto was from Earth,” I said quickly. “He was an Earth mathematician.”

“No, she was a well-respected computer,” said Amaryllis.

“Irregardless,” said Fenn. “There are a billion magic items in the world, and Juniper claims to have thought up hundreds or maybe thousands of them. If he’s right about what the items do, and I think he probably will be, then … someone else could apply math, but that seems like a pretty astounding coincidence to me.”

Amaryllis tucked her hair back behind her ear and frowned for a moment. It took me watching the marginal movement of her lips to realize that she actually was doing the math. I wasn’t even sure where you’d start for that.

“It’s a pretty astounding coincidence, yes,” Amaryllis finally said. “One in one quintillion, or thereabouts. That would require a bending of probability beyond even the powers of the oldest elves.” A silence fell on us after that.

“Welp, add that to the ol’ mystery pile then,” Fenn smiled, “I helped!”

“We should fight the fairies soon,” I said. “If I’m remembering right they spawn in slowly, and if we’re going to be here for a while, we’ll want to get as much out of them as possible.”
“Armor first,” said Amaryllis, stripping off her shirt as she walked toward the mannequin. I averted my eyes after a moment of shock. We’d all shared a room together for a week, and I had seen Fenn naked more times than I could count, since she took some delight in seeing me react. Amaryllis wasn’t exactly shy, but it seemed to me like she’d taken some steps to be more modest, for my sake if not her own. She was beautiful, and though I tried, I couldn’t quite constrain myself to believing that I was simply her traveling companion when I saw her unclothed.

I turned my back and kept my attention on the Anyblade, testing the limits of its abilities. It could only do blades, but it was pretty permissive when it came to what a blade was, and I could work whatever I wanted into the ornamental features of the sword, axe, or other bladed weapon I formed it into. Changes didn’t quite happen at the speed of thought, but it was fairly close, enough that I thought that I could probably use a change in shape to my advantage during combat. The Anyblade had belonged to a rogue of Reimer’s, and Reimer had a tendency toward munchkinry which I liked to indulge him in, within reason. I tried to think of the things he’d tried, and which I had allowed. With a thought, I protruded a key from the base of the hilt. I smiled at that, and had the sad thought that Reimer would probably have loved to be here.

I turned around when I was nudged in the back, and saw Amaryllis in her full armor.

You know that scene in stereotypical teen movies where the artsy girl with no fashion sense or the tomboy who wears baggy clothing or whatever -- the hot actress that everyone pretends isn’t hot, because she needs to be hot to sell the movie but needs to be unattractive for the story to work -- anyway, she has prom, or a big date, or something like that, and so she gets her hair styled, puts on a dress, takes off her glasses, and applies some makeup. Then there’s this big reveal, where - ta-da! - it turns out that she’s actually really pretty.

Amaryllis was not more pretty wearing magical armor. It was pretty armor, and she was definitely pretty, but the armor was proper full plate, which meant that it didn’t display any curves or expose any skin. No, instead of becoming pretty, Amaryllis became deadly. I mean, she was already deadly, muscular and precise, my introduction to her had been her calmly pointing a gun in my face, I’d seen her kill a lot of people, and yet … somehow I hadn’t fully understood it until I saw her dressed in full plate, holding a magical sword, her hair tied back in a neat bun, and with a blue amulet glowing around her neck. Amaryllis wasn’t someone to fuck with. She would scythe her way through an army and stand on a mountain of corpses if she thought that was necessary. She would kill without mercy or warning. She would display as much compassion and regret as a claymore mine.

(And I hope you can see where I’d draw the comparison to a teen movie, because we’d already had our equivalent of that scene where the female lead drops her glasses and the male lead reaches over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and say something like, “you know, you’re kind of cute without your glasses”, but for us, it had been the moment she’d killed Poul in cold blood because her motorcycle wouldn’t comfortably fit three people, and I’d thought, “you know, you’re a little bit of a cold-blooded killer”.)

The first proper thought to run through my head was, “Holy shit am I glad she’s on my side,” which did soften the jolt of fear and unease I’d experienced. My second thought was the less reassuring, “Wait, how sure am I that she’s on my side?” The answer to that was, of course, 6. I was 6 sure that she was on my side, 6 out of maybe 10, maybe 100, maybe even more. My only consolation was that both Amaryllis and Fenn were at about the same loyalty, which wasn’t actually much of a consolation at all, especially not if they were talking about me behind my back.

“You look nice,” I said.

“It’s not about looks,” said Amaryllis. She spun her sword around, then held it in front of her. The
blade disappeared, leaving her holding only a hilt, then reappeared in place. She frowned at it briefly. “The sword’s benefit is fairly minor, but might be useful in a pinch.”

“Um,” I said, no longer sure that it was wholly wise to offer her good advice. “Is it actually gone, when it disappears? What happens when it comes back in and there’s something in the way?”

Amaryllis made the blade disappear again and pointed the hilt toward the nearest mannequin. The blade reappeared, stuck halfway through its chest. Amaryllis pulled the blade out, inspected it, then slashed at the mannequin with frightening speed, flickering her blade on and off, which left a series of deep, penetrating cuts.

“Thanks,” she said, giving me a small smile.

“That leaves only the amulet unaccounted for,” said Fenn. “I don’t suppose it has the power to get people out of a desert? Because even if we can survive off fairies made of almond, then we’re still stuck here.”

“The amulet is passive, and no real help here. We’ll unseal the fairies first,” said Amaryllis. “Then we’ll try to figure out what our endgame is. Joon, we might need you to put everything you can into tattoo magic. You should have four points to spend now?”

“Yes,” I replied. Her continued possessiveness over my power still rankled. “I’ll hold them in reserve. Obviously I don’t want to go down that path as yet.”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis. She slipped on the helmet that came with the suit of armor, which locked in place all on its own with a hiss. “Let’s go.”

We did actually end up doing a little bit of monkeying with the clonal kit before opening the jar. One pleasant surprise was that we could all use it, which brought the item count to one for me, one for Fenn, two shared, and three for Amaryllis. The unpleasant part of the kit was that it was fairly particular and somewhat finicky. What you had to do was hold the box (roughly the size of a backpack, but boxy) in both hands, think about some sufficiently generic profession, and the box would give you a collection of items related to that profession, which you could direct to some degree by concentrating correctly.

We tried some stuff that might have worked and gotten us out of the jam we were in, like trying to make the clonal kit produce a box of teleportation keys by thinking specifically about a guy who had that as his profession, but that didn’t work at all. The clonal kit could make food if we thought about chefs or waiters, but here we ran into one of the limitations I’d worried we might; anything you made with the clonal kit needed to be repaid.

“So, the problem was that telescopes are like, really, ridiculously expensive in D&D,” I said. “And I made the mistake of saying that yes, it could make telescopes, which were worth … um, the equivalent of what someone working minimum wage would make in ten years or something dumb like that, I don’t know, the games had kind of dumb economics unless you did a lot of work, anyway,” I took a breath, “To curb that, when the players decided that they were going to just make a bunch of telescopes and sell them, I said that you had to pay the box back. In other words, you have to put things back in the box for it to work again, or you have to give it something of equal value.”

“And the box was worth more as a magical box than just, I don’t know, making a box full of precious gems?” asked Fenn.
‘What profession do you think just lugs around a bunch of gems?’ I asked with a laugh.

“Gem mage, o weak-brained human,” replied Fenn. “They’re the ones with the gems?”

“Er,” I said. “Right, but that wasn’t a thing in our games, probably because no one ever thought it was a good idea to tie a class power to material wealth.” Beyond what was already in the game, anyway.

“Even without the fairies, the clonal kit will allow us to stave off starvation for quite some time,” said Amaryllis. “Depending on what the kit thinks things are worth, we can likely cannibalize much of what was left behind in Caer Laga, or use the kit to arbitrarily turn items into higher value, lower weight items for transport. For now, we need a net.”

What followed was a few different attempts at making nets as we tried to get one that was tight enough to potentially capture a marzipan fairy. Eventually Fenn came up with a profession that captured butterflies, which were apparently a delicacy in some far off land, and while that had the ring of pure bullshit to me, the clonal kit produced a fine mesh net for us.

We draped the net over the jar, popped off the lid, and that was about when all hell broke loose, because either I had forgotten just how tough I’d made the fairy fight, or I had thought that goddamned fairies made of literally nothing but honey and almond meal wouldn’t actually be a threat to us. Maybe I just hadn’t been properly paranoid, since I wasn’t considering that the fairies would coordinate.

The first twenty or thirty out of the jar (it’s really hard to count fast-moving creatures the size of a thumb) lifted off the net, putting their full weight behind it and moving to the side so it would slip off. We hadn’t weighted down the net, because we were idiots who had underprepared. Once the net was clear, the rest of the fairies flew out of the jar in a torrent, spreading gossamer thin wings and darting around the room for just a moment before they went on the attack.

Amaryllis’ sword flickered through the air, strobing in and out of existence as she cut through the mass of fairies, and a fair number of them split in half and tumbled to the ground. A few of them plinked against her armor for a moment, then they split away from her and went towards Fenn and I. I swung my sword through the air, but the individual fairies were small and agile, and swords really weren’t meant for that kind of work. I tried to give the Anyblade a different shape, but nothing came to mind, partly because I quickly had fairies all over me.

They tugged at my skin and bit at me, going for my eyes, mouth, nose, and ears, grabbing my fingers and slipping in under my clothes. I dropped my sword and swatted at my face, scraping several fairies off and injuring myself in the process, because they had grabbed onto my eyelids and nostrils. My hands slapped against the places I felt pain, squishing fairies flat, until a quintet of fairies made a play for my mouth, opening my lips before I realized what was happening, then slipping past my teeth and using their tiny legs and hands to force themselves down my throat. That was about when I started worrying less about the fairies that were biting me and trying to rip through my skin, and started worrying more about whether I was going to choke to death. I chomped down to kill the fairies that had ahold of my teeth and then stuck my fingers in my mouth to try to grab the ones that were already activating my gag reflex. One I caught by the leg with my thumb and forefinger, enough that I could pull her back and bite her through the midsection, but the other one was too far down, kicking my uvula and making me short on breath.

Then Amaryllis was on me, slapping away at the fairies on me, but I was still choking on the one in my throat, which was doing its level best to squirm its way down. I was already panicking and trying to take deep breaths that would let me get air around it, but when she grabbed hold of some internal piece of my throat, that flap that lets you not get food in your lungs, I began a choking scream.
Amaryllis, in full plate, pushed me to the ground and placed a knee firmly on my chest. She held the sword hilt high above me, pointed straight down, and my eyes went wide with fear and understanding right as the blade materialized, the point of it suddenly going right through my throat and impaling the fairy inside.

I choked and turned over, spitting a slimy marzipan fairy onto the floor and then scrambling to my feet, looking for more of them and trying to take in deep breaths while at the same time using my shaky hands to protect my mouth. I was bleeding all over, spotting my clothes with blood from a hundred bites, and especially on my face it felt like my skin had been ripped and torn at the membranes.

The room was silent. A half-dead fairy wriggled on the ground and Amaryllis stomped on it with an armored boot. The floor was littered with fairy corpses and splattered with blood.

“F**k me,” said Fenn. “Fuuuck me.” She was laying face up on the ground, staring at the ceiling, looking like she’d been smacked in the face with a rake a few times. She was bleeding all over her face, with small chunks taken out of it and a small bit of her ear missing. “Joon, if you did actually invent that thing through some stupid metaphysical loophole, I’m going to cut off your limbs and consume your flesh.”

“We should eat them,” I tried to say, but there was a hole in my windpipe, so it came out as, “Wegh a ggeh,” and then a bunch of coughing that ended up with a lot of blood on the floor. I stuffed a fairy into my mouth, chewed it as viciously as possible, then gulped it down, trying to ignore the burning pain of marzipan mush sliding past the hole in my throat. Almost immediately I began to feel better though, and I saw my health go up two ticks. I grabbed another bloody fairy corpse from off the ground (my blood, not the fairy’s) and shove it in my mouth. It took some time, and another eight fairies, but my wounds closed up and I was feeling much better.

Fenn had taken the hint and done the same, taking a bit less time than me, probably because she hadn’t been subjected to an emergency tracheotomy.

“Well,” I said. “That’s the jar o’ fairies.”

“Why would you make a thing like that?” asked Fenn. “How is that fun for anyone?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied, but it wasn’t really that complicated, we were just teenagers in Kansas during a time of peace and prosperity, and the jar of killer fairies had been part of a pretend world with only fictional consequences.

“Well,” said Amaryllis, taking off her helmet again. She peered into the jar. “It appears that this has been claimed, and if Juniper is right then we should have a much more convenient source of healing than a bone or blood mage, as well as food to ensure that we don’t starve. The only cost was pain.”

“Very easy to say when you weren’t hurt,” replied Fenn.

“Yes, it is,” said Amaryllis with a conciliatory nod. “There are other suits of armor that belong to my family line, a few of them I could grant to you through investiture. Once we get out of here, we might want to look into getting more for the two of you.”

“So it’s bribery, eh?” asked Fenn. She looked down at her black glove. “You certainly know the way to a half-elf’s heart, I’ll give you that. I’m less confident that there is a way out of here. Stripping down to expose the tattoo again might not be a bad idea, and I have always said that your upper arm was your most fetching feature.”
Amaryllis sighed and began to undo her armor, which was apparently quite the process.

“Wait,” said Fenn, suddenly tense. Her long ears twitched. “You wouldn’t have happened to have set up a rescue for us before we left, would you?”

Amaryllis shook her head and I could see her straining to listen, just like I was. I heard the distant sound a little bit later, a rhythmic one coming from outside and getting louder, but though it was very familiar I couldn’t quite place it until Amaryllis spoke up.

“Is that a helicopter?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “And if you didn't arrange for it, then ... you said that going to Sorian’s Castle wasn’t wise, because there might be wards set up to catch us? Is there a chance --”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Elf sense is screaming at me,” said Fenn. “Usually I listen, but it’s a bit incoherent right now, which is never a good sign.”

“Human sense is screaming too,” I replied. I picked the Anyblade up off the floor. “Exactly how safe are we here? How much will these wards protect us?”

Amaryllis put on her helmet. “We’re going to have to hope that our enemies have once again made the mistake of underestimating us.”
Siege

Warding magic was, apparently, a really complex thing, at least to hear Amaryllis tell it. I didn’t care so much about the low level aspects of warding, like how shapes were defined, just the high level stuff, like (hypothetically) how a fortress would be warded against intrusion and how intruders would get around those protections. Amaryllis had complained that I was asking her to describe centuries of cat and mouse games between warders, then mostly not indulged my need to know on the theory that I probably wasn’t going to think up anything clever in the next ten to fifteen minutes.

I found that really frustrating, so I’ll lay some knowledge on you so that you’re not as annoyed as I was.

Wards provided generalized, rules-based, countermagic. This was really, really powerful in Aerb, where “magic” included abstract categories and concepts, like ‘blood’ or ‘bones’ or ‘water’ or even ‘velocity’, especially since wards could act on so-called latent magic. Trying to explain all the rules behind warding would take too long and be too boring, even if I just stuck to Goettl’s Laws, but I can boil it down to some practicalities:

1. Buildings older than two hundred years tended to have permanent wards, while newer buildings tended to have periodically refreshed ones. (The clickbait explanation would probably have a title like, “How Bessemer Killed The Permanent Ward”.)
2. Most high-value buildings were warded against teleportation, except for the occasional room meant to handle teleported goods (or more rarely, people).
3. Most high-value buildings were warded against sufficiently high velocities, making them resistant if not impervious to ballistics and explosives.
4. Wards generally acted as either barriers or nullification zones, usually with some holes poked in them by whoever made them in order to alter their functionality. A consequence of this was that as soon as you were within the wards, you were as affected as you ever would be (unless the ward alerted the warder, in which case you might have company).
5. Wards could be broken by a skilled warder, but that took a lot of time and money, plus direct access to the ward itself, which could often be a problem.
6. Wards could be bent fairly easily by a warder, but would resume their shape after the fact (wards were generally unmoving). This was a far more common method of ward circumvention.
7. While most wards were used as barriers, some sufficiently powerful ones annihilated the magic in question instead. A powerful ward against blood would annihilate blood that got inside it (this kills the human).
8. Warders were athenaeum-trained and used a tool intrinsically tied to them that they spent something like six months building. It called to mind a Jedi having to build his own lightsaber, and was the primary reason that I hadn't unlocked Ward Magic, or whatever the skill would be called.

Speaking non-generally, Caer Laga had a ward that blood couldn’t pass, which would have prevented anyone from entering if not for the fact that a clever warder had poked a hole in it shaped specifically for a hereditary bloodline and anyone marked-through-thought as friend. This was our primary defense against intruders. It wouldn’t do anything to the intruders, it would just hold them back … unless they could bend or break the ward and then just walk right in.

“Could be worse,” said Fenn as we moved quickly down the stairs to the vault. “They came in a helicopter instead of teleporting in. We know they’re there.”
“And they can’t hover forever,” I said. “Unless this place has a helipad or they’re willing to risk an uneven landing on a sloped roof, we only need to hold out a few hours before they have to fly back.” My dad flew helicopters for a living and I was happy to have picked up a few things from him.

“Souls,” said Amaryllis, her voice muffled by the concealing helmet. Oh. Right. Helicopters here wouldn’t use petroleum products, they would use human souls. We’d driven for two days on a tenth-full tank of seven souls and not used up one of them. Odds were, they’d be able to hover nearly indefinitely.

“So the plan isn’t to lock ourselves into this vault, is it?” asked Fenn, as we reached the place we’d picked the magic items up from. We’d avoided windows, for obvious reasons.

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “It’s heavily warded, more than the rest of Caer Laga. If they’re breaking the wards, it’s a decent place to take a stand against most of the opponents we might face. If they’re only bending the wards, then I don’t think they’d be able to get down here, the distortions would be too extreme for that. They have radio though, and they’ve almost assuredly called in their arrival, which means that we’re more trapped here than we were before.”

“Less trapped,” I said. “We can steal the helicopter.”

“None of us knows how to fly one,” Amaryllis began.

“My dad flew them, back on Earth,” I said. “I know, they’d be different here, and even on Earth I wouldn’t have been able to manage take-off or landing, but I think I can fly well enough for us to get back to Barren Jewel and have a survivable crash landing, especially with you in the immobility plate. We’re closer to getting out alive than we were five minutes ago.”

I hated the helmet Amaryllis wore. It was finely detailed and solidly built, but I could only see her eyes through a slit and though I hadn’t been good at reading her before, now it was basically impossible.

“Ohay,” she finally said. “We figure out exactly who we’re dealing with, then we kill everyone on the helicopter and somehow figure out a way to do that so that it doesn’t crash in the process. And we’d still have to worry about the thaum-seekers, because they’ve been known to launch themselves high into the air in pursuit of winged craft.”

Well, fuck. I had ‘flown’ helicopters before in the sense that I was allowed to take control of the flight stick under my dad’s direct supervision in calm, clear weather, because what’s a little gross violation of FAA regulations between father and son? I was fully aware that A) flying an Aerbian helicopter would not be the same B) I was completely unprepared to take evasive maneuvers if a thaum-seeker launched itself into the sky at me and C) if this game even had a skill like Helicopters or Piloting, I hadn’t unlocked it, let alone trained in it.

And the thing was, I still wasn’t sure that “hijack a helicopter” wasn’t the best plan we had available.

“So I guess we need a scout,” said Fenn, “And I would guess that it’s not going to be the one of us in full plate, and probably not the one who has almost zero experience being a sneak-thief, which leaves yours truly.”

“You have the glove,” said Amaryllis. We’d taken twenty seconds to put both the jar of fairies and the clonal kit into it. “Be careful. If you can, spin some kind of story, but we don’t know who they are or what they know.”

“Huh,” said Fenn. “You surprise me sometimes. I thought you would --”
“Go,” said Amaryllis. “Time is short.”

“And there she is,” smiled Fenn. “Joon, you’re still on avenging-me duty.”

“I’d rather kill them before they kill you,” I replied. “You owe me a favor.”

“Go,” said Amaryllis. Fenn smiled and slipped out the door.

As before, I lit the place with a hand of fire. It had been a while since it was just Amaryllis and I, and even longer since we’d been together with just the light of my blood. I felt awkward around her. Maybe it was the armor, or maybe it was what felt like sure knowledge that she would kill me if I threw too much of a wrench in her plans. The armor did a wonderful job of hiding her face and body from me; I wondered how much her prettiness had been a factor in how I interpreted everything about her.

She pulled a clasp on the side of her neck and slipped off her helmet, revealing a slightly sweaty face. Yup, she was still beautiful enough to make me weak in the knees. “You’re going to have to decide what it is you’re going to specialize in, sooner rather than later,” she said.

“I know,” I replied. “It’s kind of moot now though, since I don’t have the time to train up anything.”

“To me, that indicates that you should have decided a week ago,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t want to push you to do something that you’ll regret, but you have four points to spend now. That’s enough for you to double your ability in Blood Magic, or if you wanted to become blade-bound you could do that too, but Joon, you need to stop waiting, because there’s a chance that we’re going to die in the next hour because of your indecision.”

That hit me like a kick to the heart. After Arthur had died, people had always told me that it wasn’t my fault, and I had known that was true, but I still thought about all the things I could have done differently, all the actions that I could have taken to prevent his death, all the little ripples through time of everything I had ever done which had led Arthur to that specific time and place.

And Amaryllis was right. We might die because I decided it was better to hold onto those points instead of spending them. My experience in the game thus far had been routinely running into problems that I had just barely survived, with a dependence on level ups to save my life, and powerful allies to kill my enemies. That did not indicate that this was the time to sit back and be conservative.

“Fine,” I said, the word coming out harsher than I’d planned, “What’s your preference?”

“Everything into wisdom,” she replied. “The strength of blood magic at its upper tiers can be frightening, but even at lower levels you shouldn’t be too far from being able to heal yourself. In the long term, I think sending you to an athenaeum to hone your skills is going to be the right choice, and I spent enough time at the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood to ensure I can help you navigate it.”

That didn’t sit right with me. Not the fact that she had plans for me, though I wasn’t entirely fond of that either; the idea of blood magic being my long-term future just didn’t seem compelling. Blood magic was essentially *ki* magic, and the end game for it, so far as I had heard, involved making swords from my blood and pouring energy into wounds in order to heal them, which wasn’t terribly interesting to me. Or rather, it was interesting, but it didn’t seem like it would crack the world open, and if I wasn’t going to crack the world open, then I wanted something that actually resonated with me.

I didn’t have the problem some of my friends did of constantly rerolling new characters. Instead, I
had the problem of constantly rerolling new worlds. There came a point where I had sucked all the fun there was to suck from a place, and green pastures beckoned. Changing my character class or making a new character didn’t seem like options here, at least not with ‘Diamond Hardcore Ironman Mode’ enabled, so I was sure that I was going to run into that wanderlust problem eventually, but I didn’t particularly like blood magic even now, in part because of the weak, nauseous feeling of blood loss I was starting to get all-too familiar with, and in part because it seemed to pale in comparison to some of the others, especially if I already had the ability to leap twenty feet into the air.

Deciding to go down that path now was like … well, I was going to say like taking an English degree instead of a Computer Science degree, but I guess even if you hate computers and love literature that’s still a fairly reasonable choice given the job market. And I was going to say that it was like playing a healer because that was what the party needed, instead of what you preferred, but I had seen what happened when the tragedy of the commons struck and a party went without a way to regain health. The truth was, there was something to be said for a conservative, boring, sensible option, and maybe I would have gone for that if the description the WIS stat gave itself were more alluring, or hinted at deeper promise. *Wisdom: How much you can mentally withstand. Used to prevent stress reactions, make decisions without emotion, or meditate.* Useful, maybe, but did it even make people more wise in the conventional sense? It seemed more like the mental counterpart to END or POI, given it used some of the same language.

What I was really thinking about was Quills, katana in hand, slicing through elevator doors like they were made of paper and able to advance on five archers and slice their arrows from the air as he went. Amaryllis had said that a standard fireteam included one in their ranks, didn’t she? That meant at the very least they weren’t strictly outclassed by other kinds of magic, not unless there were stupid political pressures from the athenaeums or something like that which forced suboptimal fireteam composition, which would have actually been pretty typical for Aerb.

“I think I’m going blade-bound,” I said, conscious that I was probably giving up an opportunity to increase my loyalty with her.

“Oh whatever you do,” said Amaryllis, “What I care about most is that you do something.”

I closed my eyes and put two points into PHY, raising it and all its child stats by 1, then two points into INS. I’d gotten the “Nascent Blade-Bound” virtue by increasing Parry, and that wasn’t going anywhere until I raised its secondary stat of INS. Putting INS up by two points meant that I would cap at 20, except that *primary* stats constrained at triple the value, which meant that I was going to get to find out what the primary stats were for both Parry and Dodge, probably when they hit 18.

This was one of the options I had been considering for awhile. On the one hand, there were physical increases that I thought were probably good for my continued survival, even if I ended up being some kind of wizard. On the other hand, I didn’t think that this was the sort of game where social skills could be safely dumped, especially not if internal party strife was going to be a theme. INS seemed like the best of the three social skills to me, not just because it was needed to raise Parry and Dodge (by anticipating attacks?), but because getting a better handle on other people seemed like it would solve many of the same problems that CHA would, while understanding and empathizing with others would theoretically make low POI less of a problem.

(The other reason I wanted at least one social ability was that right now, either Fenn or Amaryllis was the party face, and I didn’t quite like how much steering power that gave them, especially since I was still having trouble teasing apart what their individual plans and motives were.)

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I was hoping that I would have some stunning breakthrough by doubling my INS. I’d been trying to figure out what each of the abilities would look like if they were maxed out some day, and my imagining of INS was that I would basically be Sherlock Holmes except exclusively for social situations, able to tell that someone had unresolved issues with their father because of the way they clicked a pen twice before signing a contract. I got nothing like that.

Of course, I knew Amaryllis already. Her father had been an old man when she’d been born and died when she was two years old. It wouldn’t have taken the magical deductive powers of a Sherlock Holmes to guess how she felt about that; he would have been a shadow over her life, a man who her culture defined as her protector, gone before she could know him, and maybe she resented him for it, or maybe she’d made peace with it, or she venerated him because of the things he’d accomplished and the fact that he was never around to fuck things up and prove he was human. Or maybe she just never thought about him at all, because she was too focused on the needs of the present and future to worry about the past.

I did wonder how much of that I would have been able to think through a few minutes prior, when INS was 2 instead of 4. You probably didn’t get social superpowers from a single level’s worth of points, but you had to get something, right?

“Good,” said Amaryllis. “Now if we die, at least I’ll know it wasn’t because we were conserving resources for future fights. Cold comfort in hell, I’m sure.”

“We’ll make it through,” I replied. “I haven’t failed a quest yet.” I smiled, and she gave me a weak smile back, which was enough for me to start thinking that 6 Loyalty meant something.

Fenn ruined the moment by slipping into the room with us, her breathing slightly hitched.

“All right,” she said with a smile. “We have some good news. The first bit is that there are only four people, plus the pilot who’s staying well back, which means that we’re at even odds. And if you can do basic math you’ll be thinking that I said four when there’s only three of us, but the second bit of good news is that one of the four is their warder, and they’re just bending the wards, not breaking them. So if we fight inside, that means three on three. Our third bit of good news is that they’re not true professionals, like Mary thought they would be. If these lot were hired by the same fucks who sent me to die in Silmar City, I’ll buy a hat. And fourth is that since they’re just bending wards, they keep having to circle around the place to find new windows, because the tunnel they’re putting in the wards sucks.”

“And the bad news?” I asked.

“I didn’t say there was bad news,” replied Fenn. She took her bow from her back and casually checked the string. “Of course, now that you mention it … their leader is the gold mage of Barren
Gold mage? That had been part of my week-long briefing, but … was that the one that reversed time? No, those were revision mages, gold mages used actual metallic gold somehow, and I couldn’t quite remember the details, in part because there was a confusing jumble of ideas about it in my head and I wasn’t sure which one was right. I was pretty sure that they weren’t a Mistborn rip-off, but the metal tribes which were loosely adapted from that series did exist in Aerb, confined to their own section of the world.

“Telekinesis won’t protect him from a void rifle,” said Amaryllis. *Oh right, tactile telekinesis, that was the gold mage thing.* She was holding her sword, but had the rifle slung across her back.

“No, gold mages don’t have a defense against the void, that’s true, not unless you count flinging a coin at your forehead before you can get a shot off,” said Fenn. “But the second bit of bad news is that they have a revision mage with them. He’s penny-ante, from the way he’s being treated, but I’m pretty sure he’s got the power to patch up holes faster than you can make them, at least if we’re talking about the rifle.”

“And what’s the third piece of bad news?” I asked.

“I can’t blame you for following the pattern, little human friend,” said Fenn. “But the unaccounted for member of their little group didn’t do or say anything that would let me peg her. I’ll grant that’s bad news in its own right. She had a blade, but she had a pistol too, which makes me hopeful that she’s just meant as backup muscle for the gold mage.”

Amaryllis chewed on her lip for a bit. “I agree that these people are probably not from the Lost King’s Court,” she said. “You know for sure that it was Barren Jewel’s gold mage? He couldn’t be from somewhere else?”

“It was him,” said Fenn. “Accent, clothing, and description all matched. I took the lay of the land our first day there.”

“Then who would these people be?” I asked.

“We were thinking that someone from the Lost King’s Court, probably one of Larkspur Prentiss’ people, came here, set up a ward of detection, then left,” said Fenn. “They’d have to figure out that you have the teleportation key to think of Caer Laga, but maybe, since the scene we left back at Sorian’s Castle could have been a bit more subtle.” She ran her black-gloved hand through her blonde hair. “However, there’s no reason that there couldn’t be a standing detection ward around Caer Laga, laid there by someone else.”

“The resources that would take,” Amaryllis began, then stopped, thinking. “A gold mage, based out of Barren Jewel, ferrying a warder he doesn’t have to pay for her labor … maybe.”

“Giving it the personal touch, as it were,” said Fenn.

I rubbed my face. “I’m not sure that I understand this,” I said. “If they’re not specifically after us, then what are they doing here?”

“Well, no one said they weren’t after us,” said Fenn. “If I were one of the top ten richest, most powerful men in Barren Jewel, and I’d been making the investment of flying out here every year or so with a trusted warder in tow, I’d have been doing it so that I could sidle up to one of the scions of Penndraig when she most needs my power and resources. Favorable position for a trade or contract and all that.” She paused. “Alternately, it would be so that I could capture or kill that scion in
exchange for a reward from her enemies.”

Amaryllis closed her eyes and sighed. “I think you’re right. I also think that this fight isn’t winnable as it currently stands, only avoidable. Which means that it’s time for diplomacy.”

“Did you miss the part where I said that he might be here to kill you?” asked Fenn. “Aumann is supposed to be fairly ruthless.”

“Let me know if you think there’s a better option,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn grimaced. “I was preferential to the kill everyone approach,” she said.

We made our way through Caer Laga, which was partly lit in most places by the sunlight coming through the thin windows. There were light fixtures set into the walls, but whatever source of power this place once used, it was long-since dormant.

“They’re up ahead,” whispered Fenn, her ears giving a slight twitch. She had her bow out and arrows at the ready. “Based on what I saw before, they shouldn’t be able to push past where we are now. Ideal conditions.”

Amaryllis cleared her throat and spoke to the bend in hallway, raising her voice. “Isaac Aumann,” she said. “My name is Amaryllis Penndraig, tenth of her name, Princess of the Kingdom of Anglecynn. I hold claim-in-fact of Caer Laga, one of my ancestral homes, which you are intruding upon.”

There was silence for a moment. “You’ll forgive me, princess,” came a mellow voice, “but it would appear that our tunnel into your wards doesn’t allow us to speak face to face. I’m sure that is a matter of coincidence rather than any mistrust on your part. Would you mind terribly marking me as a friend so I could gaze upon your legendary beauty?”

“I think for now it would be better if we didn’t meet face to face,” said Amaryllis, keeping her voice hard. “A gold mage by his nature cannot be disarmed.”

“Oh, well I wouldn’t dream of asking you to put yourself at a disadvantage,” replied (presumably) Aumann. “If you have weapons and armor I wouldn’t insist on you disarming and disrobing as courtesy might dictate. Friends allow each other the freedom to be rude.”

“And that’s what you consider yourself? My friend?” asked Amaryllis.

“Every stranger should be considered a friend until there’s reason to do otherwise,” replied Aumann. “It was the Lost King who said that, was it not?”

“The quote is apocryphal,” said Amaryllis. I guessed that it was authentic though; when Arthur had been playing Uther Penndraig, he’d said it often. “I’d like to know why you’ve come to Caer Laga, so we might discuss terms.”

More silence. “I suppose by now you’ve noticed some trouble with teleportation,” he said. Amaryllis looked to the two of us, but of course neither of us knew what the hell he was talking about, unless he had set up the tattoo mage to sabotage the teleportation key, which … well, which seemed like the sort of convoluted plan that you’d see in a videogame to enable the plot, when I thought about it for a few seconds. “My warder can explain it better than I, but the wards on Caer Laga are now hundreds of years old, and contained a number of defects that later wards do not have, namely regarding the barriers against teleportation. The long and short of it is that you’re not going to leave here until and unless it’s on the say-so of my warder.”
Amaryllis had narrowed her eyes. “You set a trap to extort the next member of my line to arrive here,” she said. “You … were not acting on recent information?”

“An unhappy coincidence,” Aumann replied. “I understand there is less for you to pay me with, since you are, of late, impoverished. Still, I should think that you didn’t arrive here entirely bereft of heirlooms. Pass them to me and I will lift the secondary interdiction, allowing you to be on your way.”

“They’re useless to you,” said Amaryllis. Her jaw was set. “Heirlooms respond only to my bloodline, and you wouldn’t be able to trust those which have been given over through investiture.”

“Oh, well, the value of a thing is not in the personal use one obtains from it, but in the value placed on it by others,” Aumann replied. I could practically hear the smile in his voice. “I would, naturally, be willing to sell them back to you when we are both in a less confrontational mood.”

Amaryllis clenched her fist. I had no idea what was going through her mind, aside from perhaps the indignity of being blackmailed in what was supposed to be a secure base of operations. I was also a bit confused; the reason that we weren’t able to teleport out was that the tattoo was malfunctioning (or had been sabotaged), and that was skin magic, not teleportation magic. We’d been miles away from Caer Laga the first time we’d tried retrieve the key from the tattoo, and it seemed unlikely to me that an interdiction would extend that far.

Which meant … what, that the tattoo had been sabotaged, and then Caer Laga had been separately sabotaged by a different party, one which apparently thought it was playing a different game with us?

I put down my can of Mountain Dew, gave the group my best evil smile, and began chuckling. “You fools, so quick to believe that I would be willing to put your vile past behind us, so ready to believe that others would fall for the self-righteous fictions you’ve spun for yourselves.” I steepled my hands. “The meal you’ve just eaten was poisoned. And with that, my son’s death will be avenged.”

Tiff made a T with her hands, which we had started using for “timeout, I am speaking out of character now”. It was just the four of us, with Arthur gone for mock trial. Craig would show up later in the night, without explanation, like he often did.

“Yes?” I asked.

“We still have the tongue-wigs, right? The little bugs that we replaced our tongues with, along with the glamour on them?” she asked. “I’m pretty sure those were supposed to eat all poisons or something with their alien biology.”

“Yes, you have them,” I said.

Reimer looked up from his notes. “They confer poison immunity.”

“Yes, they do,” I said.

“So …” said Tom, before belatedly making the T symbol. “I don’t get it, why is he poisoning us?”

“You had a long conversation about this,” I replied. “You killed his son during the werewolf epidemic, before you found out there was a cure.”

“No,” said Tom, “I mean --”
“He’s trying to poison us,” said Tiff. “He just picked a strategy that was never going to work on us, because no one knows about the tongue-wigs but us. Makes sense, from his point of view.”

“It’s about frickin’ time,” said Reimer. “You remember that rogue I built, and then we spent like three months real time fighting only things with sneak attack immunity?” He brought that up a lot. “Sometimes things have to go our way.”

“It’s not really about that,” I replied. I wished that Arthur were there, because I knew he would be able to word it better, and I knew I was about to pull back the curtain a little bit too much. “People need to have their own plans in motion that don’t have anything to do with you, that imperfectly counter your strategies because they don’t have the right resources or information. So, imagine Count Gardner, distraught over his son, angry with the Vibratos for absolving you, and plotting his revenge. He hates you, sees you as a law unto yourselves, which you pretty much are, and he wants you to die, right? So he decides that you’re all foolish enough to sit down to dinner with him, if he made the right monologue about how it took him some time to put the past behind him. He does his own research on poisons, talks to various alchemists, pulls black market sellers up from his dungeons to acquire some for him, and after a significant amount of planning, time, and money, he gets you all to ingest powdered green-elk horn, its flavor perfectly masked by a combination of herbs in the meal you just ate. He called you self-righteous, but right now, that’s his sin. A cleverer man, or one less consumed by retribution, would have just waited until you were dead and not gloated about it. Then the poisoning fails, for reasons that he couldn’t comprehend.”

“I stand up from the table and say the command word to materialize my blade,” said Reimer. “Not today, Count Gordner.”

“We’re going to need to gather some proof of this,” said Tiff. “Probably not smart if we kill another noble and only have hearsay in our defense.”

“Either way, roll for initiative,” I replied.

Trying to work backward a little bit, and extrapolating some, this was Aumann’s plan:

1. Use exploits on unpatched wards to set up a second anti-teleportation ward on top of the first that would allow people to teleport in but not out.
2. Set up a detection ward to find out when someone comes into Caer Laga.
3. Wait until someone teleports in.
4. Arrive triumphantly at Caer Laga and extort whoever is there.

This didn’t seem like a terrible plan, except for the part where he’d be making an enemy for life with a powerful branch of a powerful family, and the other part, where he would have to be ready to face down whoever came into Caer Laga. The problem was that we needed more than just him lifting the interdiction on teleporting; we needed him to give us a ride in his helicopter. Telling him that was probably a bad idea, because then he’d know he had more leverage than he’d thought.

“Your ultimate aim here is money,” said Amaryllis. “Not power?”

“They’re the same for a gold mage, you know that, princess,” said Aumann.

“You know that my family line has fallen on hard times,” said Amaryllis. She turned and began miming to Fenn, holding out her right hand and touching her amulet, then pointing at my sword. “Aside from those heirlooms that were waiting in the vault, of which there were only two, I have little of worth to give you.”
Fenn was already moving into action, touching the amulet for ten seconds until it disappeared into the glove, then touching the void rifle on Amaryllis’ back, then touching her bow, then moving to me. I wasn’t quite willing to give up the Anyblade though; instead of handing the sword over, I shrunk it down to the size of a toothpick, made the blade as blunt as possible, and stuck it in my mouth, held firmly between my teeth. Fenn shrugged, disappeared her quiver (which would have looked mighty suspicious with no bow) and then slipped off the black glove and stuffed it down into her dirty robes.

“If you take those two heirlooms from me, I will be left with nothing,” said Amaryllis. “It’s unlikely that I’d ever have the money needed to buy them back from you at a rate you’d find acceptable. I came to Caer Laga to get a toehold of power and wealth back, from which I would be able to retrieve what remains of my interests elsewhere in the world. If I hand my heirlooms to you, it’s over for me, and if it’s over for me, you gain nothing from this venture.”

“Fine,” said Aumann. “Then hand over the teleportation key.” Part of me wondered why he hadn’t asked for that in the first place, if he thought we had one (which we only technically did).

“I don’t have one,” said Amaryllis. “I walked here from Barren Jewel and climbed the cliffs. If you circled around the outside of Caer Laga, you’d find my blood and an open window.”

I occurred to me only then that Amaryllis had been using exclusively ‘I’ instead of ‘we’ as she spoke. Now she was claiming that my blood was hers. To me it seemed to put her in a weaker position for negotiation, especially since she was going to need to mention us eventually, and while the flip side was that we were a card left to be played … well, I wasn’t sure how that actually helped too much, given that it was an ‘unwinnable’ match even before we’d stowed our weapons.

It took some time for Aumann to respond. “It appears you’re telling me the truth, or at least part of it,” he said. “The unhappy fact of your family’s fall from grace has made this venture much less profitable than I’d imagined. Unless you had something in mind?”

“I want passage by helicopter back to Barren Jewel, as a show of good faith on your part,” said Amaryllis. “After that … I told you that I intended for Caer Laga to be the first stepping stone on a climb back to power. I would be willing to make an alliance. There are four hundred eighty-six heirlooms bound to my line. Two hundred thirty-seven of them can be invested or otherwise shared. I am offering power, if we can have mutual trust.”

I could see Fenn mouthing ‘no’. Amaryllis held up crossed fingers. Was that the universal sign for ‘I’m telling lies’, even on Aerb? Either way, Fenn seemed to accept the assurance.

“A good first step to mutual trust would be for you to grant me a bridge past this ward,” said Aumann. “I’m getting somewhat tired of speaking without seeing your face, and I’m sure my warder doesn’t appreciate holding this tunnel open for so long.”

Amaryllis winced at that. Her sword grip was at her side, the blade hidden in extradimensional space, or wherever it was it went off to when she willed it away. She looked to me and Fenn, shrugging. Fenn put her hand sideways and waggled it. I slowly, hesitantly, put a thumb up.

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “Just you though.”

Moments later, a bald man with mottled red and white skin poked his head out from around the corner. He smiled when he saw us, then strode forward. He was wearing bracelets made of small metal balls, and a necklace of the same design. His suit was close-fitting and made of what I assumed to be silk; his feet were bare.
“You didn’t mention friends,” said Aumann, looking us over. “Quarter-elf?” he asked, looking at Fenn. His eyes dipped to her clothes for a moment, which were stained with blood and had some holes where the fairies had bit her. My own clothes were in a similar state of disrepair.


“Hrm,” said Aumann. He looked at me, but apparently didn’t find me interesting enough to comment on. “Your passage to Barren Jewel does not include those two.”

“Yes, it does,” said Amaryllis. “They are trusted companions, invaluable to me.”

Aumann made a show of scratching his chin. “The helicopter doesn’t have more room,” he said. I could still hear it, though it was somewhat distant, flying high, I assumed, in order to avoid the monsters that were surely sniffing after it.

“Two trips then,” said Amaryllis. She took her helmet off and cradled it in one hand.

“My, I can see why they say such things about you,” said Aumann. “They make a mention of your beauty every time your name appears in the newspapers, which is often, of late, at least for those of us interested in foreign affairs.” He looked between me and Fenn. “Two trips? That sounds fair to me, though it comes at some risk and expense.”

“I would, of course, need one of your people to stay back with them,” said Amaryllis.

“Whatever for?” asked Aumann. Then he laughed. “Oh, I see, as insurance. You worry that I would renege on our deal and leave them as stranded as you were before I showed up. Tell me, what was your plan for leaving this place?”

“We were placing faith in the power of a helpful stranger,” said Fenn. (I had resolved to keep my own mouth shut, at least partly because there was a sword in it.)

“Well, I’m afraid I won’t be agreeing to keeping one of my people back as a hostage,” said Aumann. “I’m not averse to this partnership, but there are a few too many imponderables for me to stick my neck so far out.”

“I’m afraid I must insist,” said Amaryllis. Her grip on her sword hilt didn’t quite tighten as she said it, but her tone did enough that it felt like she was promising consequences. I was hoping that was a bluff, because by the way the girls were acting, I didn’t think she could win a fight against him, if it came to that.

Aumann grinned. “If I leave, are you planning for another to come along and rescue you?”

“We would figure something out,” said Amaryllis.

Aumann held out a hand and the metal balls that made up his bracelet shifted and split, following the contours of his skin and rolling along until they lined up in place on his hand. From the way Amaryllis reacted, it was the tactile telekinesis equivalent of pointing a loaded gun at us. She was too far away to strike at him with a sword, but her helmet was off anyway, and if I was treating the metal balls on his hand as bullets … well, it didn’t look good.

“It’s clear to me now that any relationship between the two of us would largely revolve around me waiting for you to stab me in the back as soon as you had accumulated enough power. You have two options,” said Aumann. “I can kill your minions with two pulses of power and then take you with me by force, perhaps after a brief fight that you would almost certainly lose, or you can submit to my hospitality and allow these two to, as you said, figure something out.”
Amaryllis hesitated. Having 4 INS didn’t help me figure out what was going through her mind, leaving me with only guesses. Her options weren’t good either way. I was pretty sure that if Aumann was tanking his chances for a peaceable alliance, it was because he intended to use her as a negotiation chip with those who wanted her dead. There was also the more horrifying option, which was that she would be subjected to torture and coercion until every last bit of use had been wrung from her.

She set her sword hilt on the ground, where it materialized its blade.

“So,” said Fenn. “As it turns out, the correct strategy was to wait them out.”

“Shut up, for once in your life,” said Amaryllis. She turned to me. “Juniper, I hope you know that my trust in you goes beyond numbers. This is only goodbye for now.”

I responded with a nod. Shit, she actually thinks that I can somehow save her.

“Come along,” said Aumann. “I’ll treat you nicely if you promise not to bite.”

Watching Amaryllis walk away with him filled me with the painful but not unfamiliar sensation of helplessness. Aumann kept an eye on us the entire time, until finally they rounded the corner.

“Might have gone better for her if she hadn’t stuck her neck out for us,” said Fenn with a sniff.

“You still have the bow,” I said. “We can follow and end him.”

“If I thought that would work, I would have done it without you needing to say it,” said Fenn. She sat down on the ground and crossed her legs. I heard people talking from around the corner but resisted the urge to follow Amaryllis. She had accepted the deal and taken the best of two bad options. “Looks like it’s just you and me now.”

“She can still beat them,” I whispered, as the voices beyond us faded. “They’re going to be in a helicopter and she has the immobility plate. All she needs to do is wait for it to get going at speed and then turn it on.”

“Which, at best, crashes the helicopter and drops her into the desert where the thaum-seekers would assuredly be waiting,” said Fenn. “Sit back, relax, and we can think about things when they’re gone.”

“This can’t be it though,” I said. “I was supposed to fly that helicopter. Narrative convention dictates that I was supposed to fly that helicopter, I have a fucking very specific skill in my backstory, mentioned to both of you, and what the hell, I don’t get to fly the helicopter? This is garbage. There wasn’t even a fight.”

The sound of the helicopter was getting closer. I wanted to yell at Fenn to grab her bow and shoot the thing down, but that would only force a fight that neither she nor Amaryllis had thought we could win, and in conditions that were less than ideal.

“You understand that this isn’t a game, right?” asked Fenn. “The world doesn’t follow narrative conventions, no matter what kind of black magic is fueling your rapid learning and incredible healing.” She hopped back up to her feet. “She’s gone. She made sure we had some gifts for our troubles. Unless you think she’s going to turn the tables around and come back to rescue us, which knowing that one isn’t entirely out of the question, then it’s me and you for a bit, and that means that I need you to understand this thing we’re in right now as reality. You stop thinking like you’re in a game, or a story, or whatever it is, because that’s not what’s going to help us, alright?”
The sound of the helicopter began to recede into the distance.

*New Affliction: Cowardice!*

*Quest Accepted: Your Princess is in Another Castle - Amaryllis has been captured by the gold mage of Barren Jewel, Isaac Aumann. Find her, rescue her, and there might even be a kiss at the end.*
Like a Glove

It was the first time I really felt like Aerb had failed me. It hadn’t exactly been fun before, though parts of it certainly were, and it hadn’t been easy. And for all that, I wouldn’t even say that it was particularly gamelike, just maybe able to be mapped onto a game. This garbage? This felt like I was sitting through an unavoidable cutscene where Amaryllis got taken from me, and there was nothing that I could have done.

Maybe what I was supposed to have done was go full shonen anime. On hearing that we weren’t likely to win the fight, I should have given a rousing speech about going beyond the impossible and kicking reason to the curb, or believing in the heart of the cards, or being the very best there ever was. I had a really hard time believing that the result of that would actually have been a victory. Aumann hadn’t really known who he was going to find at Caer Laga, and he’d come anyway, probably because he assumed that he was strong enough to fight whoever was there.

While I was sitting propped up against the wall, feeling sorry for myself and idly changing the Anyblade’s form, Fenn pulled out the black glove and began depositing things onto the floor.

“There,” she said, when the clonal kit hit the floor, “This is what we have to work with. Box that makes something from someone’s profession, jar that’s slowly filling itself with marzipan fairies of healing, artillery bow, amulet that we don’t know what it does but neither of us can use, void rifle, and extradimensional glove. Plus a sword that can be any sword we want it to be, which doesn’t seem all that much more helpful than a dagger.”

“No obvious plan is jumping out at me,” I said. “We had all this stuff when Amaryllis was still here. If there was a way to escape Caer Laga and get back to Barren Jewel, we would have found it then.”

“We weren’t in dire straits then, plus there were things going on,” said Fenn. “Look, I’m not good at the pep talk thing, so if you want to just go ahead and assume that I consoled you about whatever it is that’s upsetting you, it would probably work out better for both of us.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just not seeing it.” I looked at the laid out items. “You’re missing a few though. We have Caer Laga and its wards, we have packed up furniture, we have everything else there is stashed away here … at least the clonal kit can make us proper food so we don’t have to eat fairies.”

“See, isn’t it better to focus on something?” asked Fenn. “I think tricking the clonal kit is the right path to success here. All we need to do is think of the right travel occupation. Oh, or maybe we could make some gems!”

“Gems,” I said.

Fenn touched the top of the clonal kit, screwed her face up in concentration, then opened the box. Sitting inside were eight small gems, six of them in the colors of the rainbow, arranged in a circle on the wooden bottom of the box, and a clear diamond next to a black jewel in the center.

“Ta da!” said Fenn. “Alright, now do your thing.”

“Um,” I replied. “Am I correct in thinking that you want me to learn gem magic, right here and now?”

“Yes,” said Fenn. “That’s your whole thing, right? The reason that the princess has, or had, such a throbbing erection pointed your way? To hear her tell it, you were able to give yourself a three-year
“I was under the impression that gem magic was more of an offensive tool,” I said. I reached into the clonal kit and pulled out the diamond, looking it over. I wasn’t an expert on gems or how they were cut, but this one seemed to be unpleasantly asymmetrical, as well as being quite small.

“Yes,” said Fenn. “The important word there isn’t offense, it’s tool, as in a thing that we can use, if need be. If you’re strong enough to grasp a diamond and shoot the white light, that might be enough to stave off thaum-sucker attacks for a few hours. That’s not a solution, but it might be part of one.”

I grasped the diamond in my hand. I had seen a gem mage, as it happened, back in the bathhouse. He’d been naked, jumping into the air, blasting a thick beam of red light at someone who was presumably his attacker. Cut and polished gemstones had power to them, which mostly came out in the form of light, with variance in them produced by the color, cut, clarity, and size. It was on the more systemic end of magic systems I’d learned of in Aerb, though I didn’t know the full set of rules that governed it, nor how to get my start as a gem mage.

I tried a lot of analogies, since those had been helpful in the past. “Think of X as Y,” seemed like a good starting point for trying to conceptualize most of the magic I had come across so far, maybe because it was borrowing from familiar mental pathways. I wouldn’t be surprised that those analogies were wrong on a fundamental level, like most analogies were, but they were still helpful in me gaining skill. None of the analogies I thought up helped me though. Really, I’d been hoping that the answer would just be the first thing that I thought up, because Aerb was infused with my memories, preferences, and intuitions, or at the very least, I was warped in such a way that I could make predictions about the world.

Gems were not the light pouring from them, they weren’t filters, they weren’t lasers, they weren’t faucets, they weren’t distillations of power, they weren’t a color wheel, or anything else I tried. No matter what I did, I couldn’t feel even the smallest scrap of latent power from them, not even for a moment, which meant I never had a crack to dig my fingers into and pry the magic open. Maybe one of those analogies really was right, and I just didn’t have a firm enough grasp, but either way, I put the gems down after half an hour of trying everything I could think of. In retrospect, it had been wildly optimistic for me to think that I could learn a new school of magic just from base principles and a handful of reagents.

In the meantime, Fenn had been making her way through Caer Laga, looking for things of use. She brought everything that wasn’t nailed down to a large room off the hallway I was practicing in, placing things noisily down with the glove.

“This glove is great,” said Fenn as she watched me put the gems down in the box. “It needs a name though, all the best magic items have names. Shadow Fingers? Sable Palm? No, neither of those are right, I’ll think on it. I assume from the lack of searing light that you’ve had no luck with gems?”

“None,” I said. “Did you find anything we can use?”

“Furniture, mostly,” said Fenn, “I’d assume that it’s a few hundred years out of style, if I knew anything about fashions of the rich and famous. There are a few pieces of art, but from what I can see they took all the stuff that was worth anything, leaving behind whatever was not worth the cost of transport. I did find a much more mundane armory, probably the place where hired help would keep their equipment. Most of what was there is gone, but a few pieces remain, probably as part of the emergency retreat plan. There is a kitchen, with nothing in it, there are bathrooms that I assume lead to a dry septic system somewhere, there are pipes stuck to the walls, probably put in after construction, that I know lead to a cistern near the top of the fortress, confirmed dry, and there are bedrooms with no mattresses.” The armory was a boon, but other than that, it was more or less what
I expected.

Fenn held out her gloved hand and a metal box came crashing down to the ground next to her.

“I also found a lockbox with half a million obols worth of paper money, stocks, bonds, and gold,” she said with a smile. “That’s the kind of find that would normally get my heart hammering, except that we don’t have any way to get back and spend it. Yet.”

“It’s something we can feed the kit,” I said. I paused. “That seems like a lot of money.” I wanted to tell her that in the first editions of D&D, experience points were awarded based on number of gold pieces obtained, but I held back, because it was of interest only to me. It annoyed me to not be able to share things like that. I would have said I missed my friends, but I didn’t even really have that many friends left on Earth.

“It is a lot of money, to the likes of you and I,” said Fenn. “To the ruling class of Anglecynn, not so much. A cool half million, locked away for years? Well, no problem, there’s a whole lot more where that came from. I don’t mock her for being spoiled without cause.”

“She was captured,” I said. “I would appreciate if you were a little less flippant.”

“I suppose I can make the effort, for the boy I’m probably going to die with,” said Fenn. “But do you know what I think we’ll find if we get back to Barren Jewel? I think we’ll climb up the tall castle that we think she’s sequestered in, and when we get to the top, we’ll see twenty or thirty dismembered bodies, with your princess standing in the middle of them, dressed in her fancy armor and with her fancy sword coated in blood.” She was getting into this, talking faster and with more animation. “Then she’ll turn her sword off and the blood will fall to the ground in a perfect little line, and she’ll look at you and say, ‘What took you so long?’” The impression she did of Amaryllis was terrible.

“I think her situation is a bit more dangerous than that,” I said. I looked down at the clonal kit, then at her glove. “Do you think that the extradimensional space of the glove counts as latent or passive magic?” I asked.

“No clue,” said Fenn. “Our dear Mary would know, I’m sure, bless her heart.”

“I’d think that it depends on how it functions,” I said slowly. “I don’t know how extradimensional space is defined on Aerb, but if the glove is magically folding space around it, I’d assume it’s passive, while if it’s sending things somewhere and then calling them back, I’d assume that it’s latent when not in use and active when it’s calling or retrieving. That’s the distinction that the thaum-seekers care about, right? Your bow isn’t a magic bow to them until it does something magical, just like my blood is just latent blood until I do something with it? I guess the glove is black, but I’m not sure it’s supernaturally black, since we have vantablack on Earth.”

“And what, exactly, are you thinking, human?” asked Fenn with narrowed eyes. “We obviously can’t take things out of the Obsidian Hand while we’re in the desert, for fear of calling the thau-smuckers to us. We can take whatever we’d like from Caer Laga, because I’ve yet to find an upper limit on what Raven’s Claw can pack inside it, but how does that actually help?”

“You need a single word name for it,” I said. “The adjective-noun construction says that you’re trying too hard. Just call it Sable.”

“And what is it you want to do with Sable?” asked Fenn.

“Well,” I said. “You know how you said we should never travel by glove again?”

“Yes,” Fenn said slowly.
“Well, I’m thinking that we might be able to travel by glove the entire fifty miles back to Barren Jewel,” I said.

“That’s,” said Fenn. “I’m trying to think of the word, but stupid doesn’t seem to quite cover it. You’d have to … well, first of all …” She stopped again, not seeming to know where to start.

“I can list the objections,” I said. I was momentarily frustrated by my lack of pen and paper, before realizing that we had the clonal kit in front of us. I laid my hand on it and tried to figure out what profession would get me what I wanted. Scribe? I opened the box to find a quill, a sealed pot of ink, and some thick papers. I closed the box again, not quite satisfied with that, in part because I had no idea how to use a quill. Computer, that was a profession here, right? I opened the box and found a slender pen and thin, scratch paper.

1. Is the glove latent magic or passive magic?
2. Can the glove be used on its own wearer?
3. How can we move the glove fifty miles … … in the right direction … … without the ability to control it?
4. How can we breathe for long enough to get to Barren Jewel?
5. How can we ensure the thaum-seekers don’t get us?

“So,” I said, “That’s two things that I think we can test fairly easily, and a few problems to solve, but we’re closer than we were before.”

“How are we going to test whether the thaum-suckers will go after it?” asked Fenn. “You know even less about wards than I do, and I have no idea whether we’ll be allowed back into this place if we leave. Amaryllis gave us something like a guest right, but do you normally allow your guests to freely move in and out of your house?”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So we get some string.”

“You are not throwing this glove out the window,” said Fenn. “It’s my friend. I’ve named it.”

“Do you have a better idea for getting across the desert?” I asked.

“We climb down the cliff and walk,” said Fenn. “Like we’re not actual, legitimate morons. We have the clonal kit, it can make us as much food and water as we need, especially now that we have money to feed it when it gets hungry.”

“And you’d be willing to leave the glove behind?” I asked. “Because if the glove attracts the thaum-seekers, we aren’t going to be able to move with it. We need to figure it out either way.”

“I hate it when other people are right,” muttered Fenn. “Okay, but we’re going to dink around with the clonal kit for long enough that we get some really good string.”

The clonal kit was actually sort of a pain. You couldn’t ask it for specific items, all you could do was think of a profession that had that item as part of its “standard” set of tools and materials. You couldn’t just grab an awl, you had to think “leatherworker” at it. This alone wouldn’t have been so bad, but there were some professions that were either too specific or just not recognized. On top of that, the way we were using it was basically generating a “kit” and pulling a part of it out, then “repaying” the box for what we’d taken.

“Two problems,” said Fenn. “First, this fucking thing does not give us the change we are due, and second, it’s absolutely gouging us.”
“Probably to prevent arbitrage,” I replied. I got a blank look. “One of the problems with a magic item that can create things is that people will try to sell those things. The clonal kit has a restriction on that already, in that you have to pay it back for what you created, but that could still lead to other problems. Say you know the clonal kit values pliers at 12 obols, and you find a place where you can sell pliers for 14 obols, then all you’d have to do is sit there, make a kit with pliers, take the pliers out and sell them, then put some of the money back in the box, making a profit indefinitely.”

“Well, until the guy you’re selling pliers to has enough pliers,” said Fenn.

“Sure,” I replied. “But then you move on and figure something else out, and that becomes your profession: figuring out what the box values things at, then finding someone who will buy them for less. And that’s … not really what games are about. Or at least not D&D.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Fenn. “You’re positing this world where … what, magic items have no value?”

“No,” I said, “That’s not it at all, the value they have is always about adventuring, not about setting up shop somewhere and becoming a boring merchant who spends his days with his nose in spreadsheets. Or ledgers, whatever you guys use here.”

“But that’s not this world,” said Fenn. “People with magic set up shop with it all the time, that’s practically the entire function of magic. I keep forgetting that your entire life in this world covers about two weeks, but Fireteam Blackheart? They are not the norm. Amaryllis is not the norm, she’s … do you have equalists on Airth?”

“I’m not sure what that is, but there’s probably a correlate, yes,” I replied. “Also, it’s pronounced Earth and I think we’ve known each other long enough that you can stop pretending you don’t know that.”

“Amaryllis Penndraig is everything that the equalists rail against,” said Fenn. “She is basically privilege incarnate, born with power vested in her by her bloodline and by the vast sums of money her ancestors have accrued. Most of that money comes, directly or indirectly, from the heirlooms passed down from the time of Uther Penndraig. You see what I’m getting at? On Aerb, magic items aren’t like what you’re describing.”

“Except this one is,” I said with a nod at the clonal kit. “And there are other ways of limiting utility, if you wanted to. The teleportation key is extremely valuable, so valuable that we can’t really use it to make money because of the risk that someone would come after us and try to take it. Or with some of the others, maybe the market has already reacted to magic being able to do certain things, or a magic item is undercut by existing services, or something like that. The jar of fairies? We could use that to heal people and charge for that, but would we really be making that much money when a blood or bone mage could do the same?”

“Yes,” said Fenn flatly. “You understand that healing you wasn’t cheap, right? If I could set up shop somewhere selling dead fairies, I could live a comfortable life. Not a fancy life, but a comfortable one.”

“And you’d have me believe that you’d actually do that?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” said Fenn. “I’d get bored within a week. Mostly likely I’d pawn the work off to someone else and go for something bigger and better, but that’s me, right? You could give me a goose that lays golden eggs and I would probably get myself killed trying to get a second one. I suppose that’s why I’m out here in this abandoned castle trying to figure out a way to get back to civilization, instead of in Barren Jewel working a trade.” She sniffed. “I suppose that’s also why I’m
on board for rescuing the princess.”

“Really?” I asked. “Then let’s go throw a glove out a window.”

Except that it wasn’t actually that simple, because things kept getting in my way. The first problem was finding the right kind of material to anchor to the glove. We ended up settling on thick, cabled wire, which took about thirty different iterations of looking in the clonal kit to get. Second was the problem of fashioning some way of attaching the glove that would absolutely ensure that the glove wouldn’t slip off once we threw it out the window. In the course of making a holder for the glove, my engineering leveled up, which led to …

“You have to practice it up,” said Fenn. “If your life were on the line, would you go up against someone with three swords when you could have ten swords by holding off a few hours?”

“Three levels and ten levels?” I asked. She nodded. “No, I guess not --”

“Then you have to make sure that the number in your head is as high as it will go before we try this, and we’re still doing a dry run first, with a different, non-magical glove,” said Fenn. “And stop looking at me like that, I know I’m being too cautious.”

“It’s not that,” I replied. “You’re being paranoid, that’s good, I just … didn’t expect it from you. I am a little worried about how much time we’re going to eat doing all this stuff, especially given what might be happening to Amaryllis.”

“She’ll keep, even if they resort to torture, which I don’t think she’d let it come to,” said Fenn. “I know you’re sweet on her, but we have to trust that she can hold her own. For now, stupid experiments with gloves.”

“She knows about the things we have,” I said. “All loyalty and emotion set to the side, the longer we wait, the more likely she is to reveal that we’re here, which means a repeat visit from the gold mage, which … probably doesn’t end well for us, does it?”

“Fuuuuuck,” said Fenn. “Alright, point taken. But I’m not letting you lose this glove.”

Skill increased: Engineering lvl 10!

New Virtue: Material Analysis!

Material Analysis supposedly allowed me to see “weak points”, though I noticed nothing terribly obvious when I started looking around (which made me really hope that this wasn’t one of those things silently disabled by Verisim mode). It certainly didn’t flash red on anything or give me a targeting reticule. I could see the weak points of Fenn, the places where I could hit her to inflict the most damage, but I’d been able to see them before getting the virtue. Still, better to have than not.

Skill increased: Engineering lvl 11!

Skill increased: Engineering lvl 12! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat CUN.)

“I think now would be a great time to put more points into cunning,” said Fenn, when I informed her of this fact. That was when I realized that I hadn’t told her.

“I already spent those points,” I said.

She frowned at me. “Amaryllis got to you, didn’t she?”
“I wouldn’t put it like that,” I said. “We didn’t know exactly what we were going to face and I didn’t want to hold back when I’d already been having too many close calls, so … yeah, she talked to me, and I spent the points.”

“Ugh,” said Fenn. “And you didn’t end up spending them on something useful to our current situation, perchance?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I put them toward becoming a blade-bound.”

“You dummy,” huffed Fenn. “It was either cunning, knowledge, or luck, those were the three you should have done, and I have to tell you that luck is something this plan seems entirely dependent on. Doesn’t cunning say that it’s about being smart and solving problems? Isn’t that what we’ve spent the last however many hours doing? And I haven’t even agreed to this! I still think we’re probably better off just going for a walk.”

“I think we underestimated the thaum-seekers,” I said. “We ran up against one and couldn’t get out of trouble without calling dozens more toward us by using a limited resource. If that had happened while we were halfway across the desert, we would have all died. Do you think otherwise?” Some of that was down to my critical failure, but certainly not all of it.

“No,” said Fenn. “But I’m going to help train you up before we go, either way we decide on. You’ve got to get better with a sword.”

It was already set in my head though. I hadn’t just been doing nothing while I increased my engineering, I had been using tools and materials from the clonal kit to build a rocket, which was mostly done. I had a very slight advantage from having a short-lived stint in the school rocketry club (mostly at Arthur’s insistence) but I had no internet to consult for a guide, and the clonal kit either couldn’t or wouldn’t produce books for me to read on the subject. My plan was starting to get some details; build a rocket, give it wings, make sure that it can glide on its own, figure out how to get fifty miles of distance, and then --

“How’s it going to get anywhere near Barren Jewel?” asked Fenn. “I don’t trust your aim at something fifty miles away.”

“Radio,” I said. “Took a bit for the clonal kit to give me one that had its own power source, but eventually I got one from a ‘park ranger’. I’m not sure how to do it just yet, but there are broadcast towers in Barren Jewel, which we’re going to be flying towards --”

“Inside the magical glove,” deadpanned Fenn. She had done that test herself; yes, she could use it on herself, putting her into the extradimensional space and leaving the glove to drop to the floor.

“-- and the fact that we’re flying toward the radio signal helps us, because I can set up reflectors on the glider that will allow totally analog alterations to the rudder orientation without anyone needing to control it. We don’t need pitch or roll, in theory, just yaw.”

Fenn stared at me. “Just how much did leveling up engineering help you?” she asked.

“That’s just the plan,” I said. “It’s the implementation that’s going to be tricky. You can say that you’ll set up circuit conditions all you want, but actually doing it, and in a way that can survive at least some of the unexpected … that’s a lot more difficult.”

“You wouldn’t have thought of all that this time yesterday though,” said Fenn.

“No,” I replied. “Definitely not. I think that engineering might be like magic, where just a little bit of training gets me past the first few years that I’d have to sink into the thing. I’m at fifteen with one-
handed swords, but from what you said I’m only a bit above being competent. But for blood magic, I’m far past where Amaryllis ever was, and she was in the athenaeum for three years. If I got, say, the equivalent of a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering by raising it to twelve … I’m not sure.”

“Competence is on a scale,” said Fenn. “You’re better with a sword than most people who’ve ever held one. They’re not much used in armies anymore, but I’d favor you against the average foot soldier, before even taking into account your magical blade. You’re likely to surpass my ability soon. Of course, bows are more my thing, for obvious reasons, and you have a ways to go before you match me there.”

Not long after that, we finally threw the glove out the window after three different test runs to make sure that we could get it down past the barrier and then pull it back up. That all went smoothly, and no thaum-seekers showed up, which was the last barrier of resistance for Fenn. I think that fear of the thaum-seekers was what finally pushed her in my direction; it was clear now that we couldn’t fight off even one, not without using magic.
Rocket Man

It would be another three days before we were ready to go, which meant that Plan Glove-Rocket didn’t actually save us any time as compared to walking through the desert, but at least part of the delay was from all the time that Fenn wanted me to spend training. I didn’t like it one bit; I kept imagining that the worst was happening to Amaryllis and had to reassure myself that she was tough enough to handle things on her own.

“Hooman, it was your dumb choice to focus on blades,” said Fenn. She held a slightly rusted sword from the armory in her hand. “I’ll be damned if we’re going to try this escape plan without you as good as you can possibly be.”

“I’m already better than you,” I said. I was keeping the Anyblade as a simple longsword, but some testing had showed that I was equally proficient with it in any form it took. The skill was One-Handed Weapons, not simply swords, which meant that I could wield an axe or dagger with equal ease. The feeling of switching between them was a little bit unsettling, since I had muscle memory for things I had never done before.

“Yes, you’re better than me now,” said Fenn. “But you’re not going up against me, you’re going up against a suicidally ferocious beast that cut off two of your fingers and almost killed you last time.”

That was a fair point, and I kept my complaints to myself after that. I even embarked on some independent training of my own, which was to test the limits of blood magic as far as putting speed into my stride. All it really took was using Sanguine Surge with every step and trying to angle myself so that I was gaining horizontal speed instead of vertical. I had hoped that I would unlock another spell, but apparently it didn’t count. It was six drops of blood for every step, which meant that I could actually suffer from blood loss if I tried to run all out. I didn’t get a good grasp on my top speed, mostly because the longest corridors in Caer Laga were curved and the largest rooms were too short.

It wasn’t all building things and training though. We took breaks for eating and sleeping, naturally, but we also stopped to talk.

“Can I ask about the scars?” I asked. We’d finished a bout of sword-fighting and were both somewhat sweaty and breathing hard. I had capped out Parry at 18, as planned, which revealed its primary stat as SPD, a minor (and predictable) bit of new information.

“You can ask,” said Fenn. “And by my measure, just did.”

“You said that they were non-functional,” I said. “I wasn’t told much about scar magic.”

“Oh,” said Fenn. “For a moment I was worried that you were trying to get to know me.”

“I was giving you an out,” I shrugged. “I do want to know about you, but not if it’s stuff that you don’t want to talk about. So you either say, ‘here’s some stuff about scar magic’ and then I take a hint and drop it, or you tell me something personal.”

“Can this count as the favor I owe you?” asked Fenn.

“Not a chance,” I replied with a laugh. “You know, I’m really worried that we’re going to get in a fight someday, and you’re going to stop there with a nocked arrow and ask me if shooting the guy charging at me is a favor.”

“Oh, now that is a good idea,” said Fenn. She chuckled softly, then was silent for a bit. I let the
silence breathe and gave her time to collect her thoughts. “Elves,” she began, then stopped, frowning. “People say that elves stop aging when they reach maturity, but that’s not the half of it. When an elf hits about forty years old, that’s adulthood, and adulthood means that their physical form is set for life, unless someone cuts off their hand or brands them or -- you know, that sort of thing. Humans? They change all the time, put on muscle, put on fat, get skinny from malnourishment, they tan, they sunburn, all sorts of things. Elves can get stronger or whatever, they can die from not eating, it’s just that their body does not change, not ever.”

She let out a puff of air. “So anyway, scar magic. The short answer is that you get scars on your skin and they give you abilities. It’s a form of passive magic, a pretty powerful one. You go through the pain of this scarring in very specific patterns, and when you’re done and they’ve healed, you can put your fist through stone or leap up a few stories into the air. The problem with it, aside from the perfection of technique needed to do the scarring right, is that the scars themselves need to be positioned properly upon the skin, and if the skin changes too much, the magic gets lost.”

“So elves use it more than other races,” I said.

“I’m tempted to say that only elves use it, but I don’t really know,” said Fenn. She sat up some and took off her shirt, revealing her scarred arms in all their glory, their curving, organic looking patterns that must have taken a master to do properly. They were pretty, in their own way, but I wasn’t about to say that to her until after she’d finished her story. “The different types of elves have their own ways of doing things, but among the wood elves it’s a rite of passage. You get your magic scars when you come of age, to say that you’re now unchanging, and anyway, it plays into this cultural thing called ‘fäsh’ that -- well, it’s complicated, but the elves are really big on things staying the same.”

She frowned. “The elves hated me. A lot of my childhood was basically meant to torture me, and I guess that I can only be thankful that a lot of it washed over me because I didn’t fully understand elvish culture. The scars though … I knew that I wasn’t going to ever be perfect and unchanging like them, I had freckles, for fuck’s sake, I had to cut my hair every so often, like, duh, I’m not an idiot, the scars were just going to be scars on me. And I wasn’t even forty, I was seventeen, but they wanted to spit in my face so they decided that I would take the rite early. I refused. They drugged me and did it anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“The worst part was that it worked, for the space of about a week,” Fenn continued. “I was so strong, so fast, and it felt so good. Then my skin changed, just a bit, and the scars lost their power, and I’ve been living with them as ornamental ever since. It’s a brand, basically, saying ‘this one, she’s not an elf’.”

“I’d say ‘fuck the elves’ but I worry that you’d take it the wrong way,” I replied.

“No, fuck the elves,” said Fenn. “Not that anyone else is that much better. I grew up getting lots of speeches from elves about how humans were terrible, and lots of demonstrations from humans determined to prove the elves right.” She stood up and stretched. “So that’s the deal with the scars, satisfied?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks. It’s sometimes hard to … to know what you’re thinking, whether you’re just saying things for a joke.”

“Me?” asked Fenn. “Psh, no, never.” She paused slightly. “Did I get a loyalty bump?”

“No,” I replied. “Were you thinking about that?”
“Well, it crossed my mind,” said Fenn. “I never tell that to anyone, I usually say that I was mauled by a bear. I just thought, you know, embarrassing personal trauma, that’s gotta be worth at least a point, right?”

“I think my loyalty to you probably went up a few points,” I said. “But the game doesn’t track it going that direction.”

**Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 8!**

Fenn gave me a warm, genuine smile, which she hid by putting on her shirt. I declined to tell her about the loyalty increase, partly because I was worried that it would undercut what I had said. I wasn’t trying to game the system like she had been, but maybe she would see it like that.

I ended up building an entire second glider, work that went much faster than the first one, especially given that I now had what was basically a workshop full of tools and parts in the main dining hall of Caer Laga. It ate up more time, during which I was particularly worried that we’d hear the sound of a helicopter in the distance, or, since gold mages could use their telekinesis to fly, that we’d simply see Aumann walking down the halls. Neither of those things happened though, and I launched the first rocket-glider out the highest window we could find.

We watched as it shot off into the distance, using spyglasses (helpfully provided by the clonal kit) to track it. I was faintly surprised that I was able to judge how far away it was, but I had the Range Finder virtue, which apparently extended to looking at rockets. Eventually I lost track of it, when it became too small to see, but it had been going in a straight line even after the propellant was spent.

“Shit,” said Fenn. “Are we actually doing this then?”

“Yes,” I replied. I could feel my hands shaking. If I were DM, and my players tried something like this, I’d allow it, wouldn’t I?

“All we need is sunlight,” said Craig. “We have the linked portals, right? So we just hold onto one of them and get the other into direct sunlight.”

“Range is a mile,” said Reimer. “London is cloaked in fog out to much farther than that.”

“Okay, so we just send the portal up instead,” replied Craig.

“How?” asked Arthur. “We can’t fly. I know we talked about one of us becoming a vampire and infiltrating their side, but that doesn’t help us in this specific case because we’d have to fly into the sunlight.”

“Step one, steal a cannon,” said Craig. “Step two, point it straight up. Step three, fire one half the portal instead of a cannonball.”

“While we’re inside, fighting Dracula?” asked Arthur. “I guess we could get someone to do it for us, timed to the bells of St. Mary’s …”

“Joon, how high up does the magical fog go?” asked Reimer. “Also, how high up could we shoot a cannon?”

“Three hundred yards is maximum range for a Napoleonic 12-pounder, and the fog rises up to about 300 feet, meaning that St. Paul’s Cathedral just pokes out over it,” which is where I’d planned for the climax of the arc to take place, but I guess we’re not doing that.
“Okay, easy peasy,” said Craig.

“Except for the part where we’re basically subjecting a magic item to ballistic velocities,” said Reimer.

“What kind of a roll would I need to make to know whether the portal would survive?” asked Tom.

“Knowledge arcana,” I replied. He rolled and told me 19. “You think that it would probably survive the firing, especially if you take the time to magically reinforce it, but you have no way to control its descent or prevent it from landing in the Thames or similar.”

“Okay, so, we can’t test it and we have one shot, but it’s certain death if it works,” said Reimer, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And we’re also going to probably lose the portal rings, but that’s a price I’m willing to pay given their restrictions. By my calculations we’ll need some kind of parachute to slow it down once it’s at the apex ...”

They agreed on a plan, and moved on to the next things, which was getting a cannon from somewhere and finding out a way to sneak into Whitehall, where Dracula had set up shop. In the meantime, I was trying to figure out what to do about this cockamamie scheme of theirs. I couldn’t just say that it flat out worked, because then they’d only succeed by DM fiat, and I couldn’t have them fail either, for the same reason, but I’d never liked turning major moments on a roll of the dice, not when we were so far outside the bounds of the systems we were playing in.

So I decided to split the difference.

Fenn had sucked everything up into Sable, and we both wore our breathing gear, which we’d gotten from thinking “pearl diver” at the clonal kit. I touched the glove, which was set into rocket/glider, and Fenn closed her eyes in thought. Ten seconds later, I was in the void.

I don’t think I can properly describe how terrifying that was. Sable was invested in Fenn, not me, which meant that everything I had set up was going to have to be done by her. I trusted her, but I still would have preferred to have been the one to set everything in motion. I was properly equipped for the interior of the glove this time, and spent some time looking around, just to take my mind off of what was going on outside. I had a pocket watch, a flashlight, and the Anyblade, along with a small waterskin. Across my chest was a bandolier with five dead fairies in it. The flashlight was mostly so that I could see without using Aarde’s Touch; I wanted to be in peak condition when we got out of the glove.

We had independently tested everything that we could. I’d spent some time with the radio reflectors sweeping them back and forth across Barren Jewel, watching the rudder adjust itself in response. I had spent an hour inside the glove with the breathing equipment on, just to make sure that I wouldn’t suffocate or get the bends. That still left a lot of area uncovered. We didn’t know for certain that the glider would be able to make it to Barren Jewel. We didn’t know that the mechanisms I’d put in place would allow us to stop. We didn’t know what would happen if the glove were destroyed, but we couldn’t test that either.

A look at my watch showed that a minute had passed, which meant that we were probably off to the races, flying through the sky at ludicrous speeds as we burned through our propellant. I tried to stay calm as a feeling of claustrophobia came over me. Getting out now would mean plummeting down into the desert sand, which meant that the things I had with me were the totality of what was available to me until it was safe to get out of the glove -- and there was no information from outside coming in to us, so the only thing that we could do was time it.
Achievement Unlocked: Outside the Box

Achievement Unlocked: To Infinity and Beyond!

I stared at those two messages for a bit, trying to decipher them. The Buzz Lightyear one was probably because I was flying, though this was a world with planes, so that didn’t seem so exceptional to me, and I had already done a skydive right at the start of the game, which if you watched Toy Story was the kind of “falling with style” that they most often referenced.

“Outside the Box” worried me a bit. Was the game making a comment on my solution to escaping from Caer Laga to complete the Exit Strategy quest? And if it was, what was the “intended” solution, if there was one? How was “Outside the Box” being said? I didn’t have a firm enough grasp on the game’s sense of humor to know whether that was something it would say sarcastically.

So I spent some time thinking about that, then tried to let my mind wander when I wasn’t looking down at my pocket watch. We had agreed on an hour, by which time the glider should definitely have crashed, which meant that it would be safe to exit. In theory, the glider sitting on the desert dunes would be safe from everything but an errant thaum-seeker, so it didn’t matter too much if we left right after the crash or after half an hour. I was sitting in the void, breathing air from a metal cylinder, but I could still feel that opening waiting for me, and I wasn’t dead, so I at least had that going for me. It was claustrophobic, but it was also a little bit calm, right up until the half hour mark.

Quest Progress: Exit Strategy - Your homemade rocket glider has crashed five miles short of Barren Jewel, thanks to a bit of errant sand in the rudder. While the thaum-seekers haven’t been alerted to your presence yet, they’ll be coming for you as soon as you step out of Sable.

My heart started racing as soon as I saw that. It had an unusual amount of specificity, down to the name we’d given the magic glove. More than anything that had happened thus far, this felt like the hand of a Dungeon Master reaching down to set things up for me. Would I have allowed the rocket glider to work, if I were DM? Well, yes … but I would add in a complication. When Craig had wanted to shoot the portal ring up into the sky above the magical fog so that they could use the other end to shine sunlight at Dracula, I had decided that it would work … but not completely, not enough that the encounter itself was trivial.

Alvion’s Word was the name for the magic that protected all of Barren Jewel, and it projected a mile out past the city walls. That meant that we had roughly four miles to go, four miles across hot sand dunes, with thaum-seekers that would be on us as soon as we left the glove. How long had we had, from when Fenn had fired her artillery shot to the others showing? Long enough for me to heal Amaryllis, long enough for Fenn to climb up and keep watch, and it had felt short, but I was rushing and under pressure, so … a low single-digit of minutes?

I moved faster than Fenn when I used my blood to run, and she wouldn’t have any reason to come out of the glove for another half hour, since she wasn’t getting any messages directly from what I’d have to describe as being my own personal god. I could wait and exit the glove with her, but she would just have to go right back in for me to carry her, and if our timing was off, we’d burn valuable seconds when I could be running.

I shrunk the Anyblade down, small enough to once again fit in my mouth, its blade as small and blunt as it would allow. I unclipped the waterskin and unbuckled the tank of air. Was I really doing this? Trying to outrun a creature I knew could exceed a hundred miles an hour?

I stepped out from the extradimensional space of the glove, and the things I’d unstrapped came crashing down. The glider was half-buried in the sand, but the vantablack glove was sitting exposed,
and I pulled it from its casing in a single fluid motion, then put all the motion of my blood into my legs to climb the dunes and get my bearings.

As soon as I saw the smudge of Barren Jewel on the horizon, I leapt again, trying to get as much horizontal distance as possible. I landed on top of another dune and took a moment to get my footing, then jumped again, trying to get into a rhythm, but it was difficult, because the dunes were unevenly spaced. Three more jumps though and I was clear to run on a flatter stretch of sandy ground.

I was surprisingly fast, even given the experiments that I had done in Caer Laga. There I hadn’t had much room to get up to speed, but on the desert flats it was easy to add on more velocity. Before long, the biggest impediment wasn’t the way the sand stole the force of my feet, but instead the air resistance. I remembered reading that for cars at low speed the tires provided the majority of the friction, but that fell away at higher speeds, when it was all about trying to move air out of the way. Cars were designed with airflow in mind, and I was just a muscular teenager without the aid of modern airflow designs.

I looked behind me just in time to see a thaum-seeker racing after me, its clawed feet only briefly stepping on the tops of the dunes I’d left behind. I had no idea how fast I was going, but his relative speed made it seem like I was practically standing still. I pulled the Anyblade from my mouth as I ran and reshaped it so that it was a thin dagger in my hand, small enough that it had little weight to it. I was trying to increase my speed as well, but the air seemed too thick, and any effort was wasted on it. (So why wasn’t it a problem for the thaum-seekers? Magic, probably, those snaggle-tusked bastards.)

The big problem (aside from the thaum-seeker and all his buddies surely right behind him) was that I couldn’t watch him and keep my eyes on the ground ahead of me at the same time, and I was moving fast enough that I barely knew where I was going to step before I laid a foot there. I started bounding as the thaum-seeker got closer, using the brief time I was in the air to look back and judge his approach. On the last jump I landed just ahead of him and lunged with the full weight of my blood magic to the left --

**Critical success!**

-- just barely in time enough to Dodge him as his clawed hand swept past me, and like I’d seen at the cliffs, these things had little ability to control their monstrous momentum. He went skidding across the sand, out ahead of me, and tumbled across the ground as he tried to dig his claws into the sand.

But by now there were others visible, converging on the magic that I was putting out, and when I looked at Barren Jewel I could see that I was still two miles away, which meant a mile to safety, which meant … well, that I was going to be sliced to ribbons unless I did something drastic. They were moving too fast and just as I could get crit successes, there were crit failures too, the last one I’d gotten while running enough to twist my ankle.

I dug deep into a well of power I really hadn’t wanted to touch. There was magic in my blood, magic that lay latent until I tapped it, but I was already tapping it as hard as I could. I grit my teeth and focused on another source of latent magic: my bones.

I sucked power from my ribs one by one, tapping each of them for speed, and the burst of movement I got from them was intoxicating. It wasn’t just velocity though, it wasn’t speed, it was *SPD*, the governing attribute for dexterity, grace, and nimbleness. It wasn’t like time was slowing down, but instead like I had a better knowledge of how to use every second available to me. Each rib drained left me feeling slightly hollow, and each was accompanied by a message about an affliction, but I didn’t waste my time reading them because another stolen glance behind me showed that I still wasn’t safe, and just like that I ran out of ribs to pull dry. But *now* I was going too fast, tearing my
way through the air that was solid as a wall trying to stop me, and if I lost the SPD I was certain that I would tumble and fall, so I started pulling from the fingers of my left hand, extracting power from each knuckle in turn, and when those were done, the bones that lay under the palm.

I had finished the bones of my left hand just as I felt a cold pain on my back -- another message at that -- and I pitched forward, into the sand, scraping my face across it as I suffered the equivalent of a major motorcycle accident while going freeway speeds. When I came to a stop, my back was burning with pain and my face was thoroughly abraded, but a wild look toward the thaum-seekers showed that they weren’t after me anymore. I stopped to read the long message printed on my eyes.

*Quest Complete: Exit Strategy - Safely within the protection of Alvion’s Word and in no danger of starving, you’ve made your way back to Barren Jewel. If safety isn’t what waits for you there, then at least it’s a different, more human kind of danger.*

I slumped back onto the ground and with a weak hand reached into my bandolier to take out a fairy and eat it, then again, and again, until I had eaten all five, each one sealing wounds. My breathing slowly came back down to normal and my heart stopping threatening to explode in my chest, but I felt hollow inside. To my surprise, my hand and ribcage felt no worse the wear for having been drained with bone magic, but at the same time, I could feel that there was no longer any magic left there. I checked the glove to make sure that it was okay, then lengthened my Anyblade so it was usable, thankful that I hadn’t had to try fighting. After three seconds, I had my menu open to check on what had happened to my bones, but all that greeted me was this:

*Affliction: Drained Bone (x51)*

After some time had passed with me laying on the sand, I got to my feet and started walking toward Barren Jewel, which was still a mile away. The quest had triggered early, because I could very easily see myself dying out here, especially if I hadn’t had the fairies for some quick (if incomplete) healing. I had also lost a full six thousand drops of blood, some from running and some from the cut on my back, and the fairies hadn’t restored any of it.

What I really wanted was a level up, to feel that golden taste, to be refreshed in body and spirit. They didn’t remove every affliction, and I was skeptical that they would take care of something as drastic as using my own bones for fuel, but just to feel it again, if only for a moment … wasn’t this a major quest? Didn’t I deserve it?

I was a hundred steps from the walls of Barren Jewel when Fenn popped out of the glove, which I’d been carrying, and landed on her butt in the sand. She looked around for a moment, then took off her breathing mask and grabbed the glove from me, which she slipped on with a sigh of satisfaction.

“We did it!” she shouted. “What the hell happened to you?”
I ate from the fairy jar, squeezing their tiny bodies to crush their marzipan internal organs, until I was fully healed, back at 36/36 hit points. My health meter had increased in size when I’d put points into PHY, but I didn’t fully understand the pattern I was seeing, nor did I fully grasp what it meant to have health points, since I certainly didn’t feel like I had more survivability. That was a mystery for another time though, because Fenn and I went back over the wall (using the clonal kit to grab some clean robes) and into Barren Jewel. The warning on Sanguine Surge about sluggishness was definitely holding true, and that wasn’t just because of the blood loss I’d suffered from running four miles using it.

“We should find a different place to stay,” I told her. “Visit the old one, sure, check for messages there, but anything Amar - er, Mary knows, it’s got to be assumed compromised. I can see them asking her where she was staying, and her telling them because it was something that didn’t really matter.”

“We’re not going to stay at that hovel, thank you very much,” said Fenn. “No, you and I are going to live the good life. We’re stacked, remember?” She had her bow across her back and her full quiver, but the glove was too conspicuous, so had gone into her pocket. Within the glove was the box containing a fortune. We’d burned through a sizable amount of it paying the clonal kit to make various things for us, but that still left us flush with cash.

“I’m worried we’re going to need it to get Mary,” I said.

“You’re in no shape just now, you need rest,” said Fenn. “Why do you keep getting hurt so badly? Even with the fairies, you can’t keep from hurting yourself in ways that they can’t fix.”

“I saved both our lives,” I said. “I’d think that would get me a bit more credit.”

“I’m sure it was very heroic,” said Fenn. She frowned. “I was going to try being serious for a moment and thank you, but then it occurred to me that I could keep score instead. I saved your life, what, four times now? Against your -- I’m being very generous here -- one?”

“I am too tired to even think about it,” I said. “But I’m pretty sure that your count is off, because I should have two, including this one.”

“How so?” asked Fenn.

“Can we please find a place to stay first?” I asked.

Most of the temporary housing in Barren Jewel was for residents of the city. That made sense when I thought about the fact that teleportation cost the equivalent of $10,000 per passenger, which meant that it wasn’t a cost undertaken lightly. Barren Jewel wasn’t much of a tourist destination either, for obvious reasons, so most of the people who would have need of a hotel, motel, flophouse, or similar would be those who had been displaced for some reason or another and were in the process of finding a new place to live or waiting on construction or repairs. That was where we’d stayed on the first go-around, in a building with maybe twenty units whose owner probably prayed for calamities that would let him fill rooms.

But there were still people who teleported into this city, and those people didn’t always have the favor of someone with a great deal of power and a nicely furnished guest room, which meant that there was at least one place in Barren Jewel that catered to those of means. Fenn and I now counted
ourselves in that group.

The first thing I noticed were the plants in the lobby.

I wasn’t counting the days, but it had been maybe two and a half weeks since we’d left the hellscape that was Silmar City and come to the different hellscape that was Barren Jewel and its surrounding environs. Both were exclusion zones, but at least the Risen Lands had plants, trees, and grass, some of it working its way up through the cracks in the sidewalk of the city or creeping into buildings. In the Datura Desert, nothing grew, and the blight extended into Barren Jewel itself. So I hadn’t seen a plant in quite some time.

Fenn gripped my arm and gently guided me away when I went to go look at one of the palm fronds in the corner. “I’ll excuse it this once, since you’re in rough shape,” she said in a low voice. “Don’t go poking things.”

She paid for our room in cash -- well, she would have to, wouldn’t she, since Aerb didn’t have credit cards, because they were pre-computer? Except didn’t credit cards predate computers by a little bit, they used carbon paper and a machine that took impressions from the raised letters, or something like that. So it was entirely possible that there were credit cards in Aerb, I supposed. Even setting aside the plants, the lobby was stunningly presented, in a way that reminded me somewhat of the bathhouse. Was that a thing in Barren Jewel, to have ridiculously ugly exteriors hiding shining, clean scenes within them?

“We’ll be up in the room soon, darling,” said Fenn. “It’s been a long day,” she explained to the concierge. We had on fresh clothes, helpfully provided by the clonal kit, but we’d had nothing but sponge baths during our stay in Caer Laga. I’d never been big on baths, which felt too much like soaking in my own filth, but right now I would have given quite a lot to slip into a warm tub of water. The feeling of blood loss and overall sluggishness that was overcoming me were another reason not to invest too heavily into blood magic. I couldn’t spend my life like this.

Fenn led me to an elevator and we stood in silence next to an elevator attendant as we rose.

“Better than our last elevator ride by a fair sight,” said Fenn.

“Fewer deaths, certainly,” I replied.

The elevator attendant looked at me, but I hadn’t even managed to pique his curiosity enough for him to raise an eyebrow. Fenn rolled her eyes, but there was a slight smile on her face, and she slipped her arm into mine, though that might have been because I was swaying a bit.

When we got into the room, I flopped down onto the white cotton bed without bothering to change out of my robes. It wasn’t much past midday, but I felt like I could do with some sleep. It seemed like such a pleasant place for a nap too, with cream-colored walls, blue-colored trim, and smooth, slightly cool tiles. Instead of actually doing that, I pulled myself up into a rough approximation of sitting and looked at Fenn, who was undressing.

“Not wasting time now that we have a bed, are you?” I asked.

“This is not for you,” said Fenn as she stripped down to her underwear. “Unless …” she put her hand to her mouth and looked at me with wide eyes. She turned slightly away from me. “Are you propositioning me? Because I’m quite flattered, but --”

“Knock it off,” I muttered, looking away.

“Fine, fine,” she replied with a laugh. “I paid for hot, running water, and I’m going to take advantage
of it.” She removed her underwear and stepped into the private bathroom, which she absolutely could have done in the other order. I heard the sound of a shower not long after and slumped back onto the bed, where I closed my eyes.

I had been invested with the Anyblade, Fenn had been invested with Sable, and we had both been invested with the jar o’ fairies and the clonal kit. Investiture was a complicated thing that varied from heirloom to heirloom, but I had been assured that we had at least a month left before we risked losing any of those four, and most likely we would have them until either Amaryllis cut a magical mental tether or some while after she had died.

(Heirloom entads were inextricably tied to the people who had inherited them, and they couldn't be divested of them by anything short of death. This had all the obvious knock-on effects you would expect, like incentive to kill someone with a lot of heirlooms if you were the next in line, and a concentration of power in the hands of the few, and all kinds of other things like that. Worse, there was a grace period between when entads were created and when they became bound to a person or a line, which meant that entads concentrated in the hands of people with power and money, helping to create solid dynasties like the one that Amaryllis was a part of. In his lifetime, Uther Penndraig had amassed a huge quantity of them, one which the Lost King’s Court had been the beneficiaries of. Strangely, and as one of the grand and impossible things that Uther had made his stock and trade, he had untethered himself from his stockpile before his long trip, leaving everyone ever after wondering whether he had ever truly died, or whether he would return to Anglecynn in its time of need.)

I could take some solace in the fact that our four magic items continuing to function properly was very weak evidence that Amaryllis was still alive, somewhere in the city. The fact that we hadn’t been visited by a helicopter or gold mage also spoke in favor of her continued good health, because we were expendable if she were under pressure, especially given that our chances had looked grim. On the other hand, the fact that she hadn’t sent us rescue meant that she was still trapped.

We’d have to do some investigation on this gold mage Aumann, and figure out a way to either beat him or steal her away without him knowing, but we knew that he had a warder and a revisionist, probably some others as well, and that’s about where my chain of logic was when I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up from my cat nap when Fenn sat down on the bed beside me, still wet from her shower and with a towel wrapped around her. “Shower’s open for you, stinky hooman,” she said. “Get your rest after that’s done, so you don’t stink up the bed.”

“Don’t leave while I’m showering,” I said. “We have things we have to talk about.”

Fenn flopped down onto the bed. “I have bought this room with our hand-earned loot and intend to enjoy it, at least for a bit.”

I went into the bathroom, which was filled with the warm steam of Fenn’s shower, and turned the water on before closing the door and then stripping away my clothes. The robes were relatively clean, but the shirt was bloody and had gashes through it, and everything was soaked with sweat from the long run. The warm water of the hotel shower was the first time since the ill-fated bathhouse trip that I finally felt like I was actually getting clean, rather than just smearing sweat, dirt, and sand over my body. It was nothing like home, of course, since for one the water pressure wasn’t as good and for another the water had a faint smell to it that spoke of filtration systems that hadn’t gotten everything clear, but it was still a hot shower, taken in private. I rested my head against the tile of the wall and might possibly have fallen asleep like that, just for a few seconds.

When I came out, with a towel wrapped around my waist, Fenn was asleep on the bed, half-covered by a blanket but not enough to be modest, since she wasn’t wearing clothes. Beside her, on a small
table that hadn’t been there before, was a metal plate with two large metal domes, what I had to assume was room service. I opened both of them and took the thing that looked like a burger with too-red meat over the thing that looked like a curl of fried something sitting in soup. I demolished the maybe-burger in no time flat, since it was vastly better than the street food in our first hotel room, rations on the road, and whatever we could convince the clonal kit to make for us in Caer Laga. The thick-cut fried vegetable wafers next to the maybe-burger soon joined it in my stomach. I was eyeing the fried soup thing when Fenn woke up.

“There’s food,” she said as she yawned and arched her back.

I talk a lot about how pretty Amaryllis is, and not as much about how pretty Fenn is, and I would rather just not mention either because they’re people beyond how attractive I find them. Comparing them is unfair to Fenn, plainly, because Amaryllis is just complementary to my tastes in a way that goes beyond how pretty she is in general. I thought there was a good argument for the look of Amaryllis being designed, but how fucked up was that to say of a woman, “Oh, she was designed specifically for me”? So even if that were true, I wouldn’t have said it.

Fenn was slender bordering on skinny, somewhat flat-chested, and not very muscular at all, though you wouldn’t have known that if you’d taken a punch from her, because elves laughed in the face of muscle mass, and half-elves at least gave the concept a chuckle. I had thought her scarred arms were pretty, before she’d told me her story, and I still thought that they were pretty, beautiful even, but it was tinted with a sense of “fuck those elves for leaving their mark on you”, and I knew that neither part of that was something that she wanted to hear.

I liked the freckles on her face, more now after days in the desert than when we’d first met, clustered around her cheekbones and across the bridge of her nose. I liked the shape of her ears, her slightly crooked and inhumanly white teeth, and it was all more than the sum of its parts, especially in the way that she smiled and joked. She was pretty, and I don’t want to diminish that by comparing her to anyone.

And this is a really long way of explaining why I was, very briefly, staring at her tits, something that I would normally gloss over because you don’t need to know every little thing that goes through my mind, except that she caught me.

“Oh gods,” said Fenn, covering herself with an arm and laughing. “Were you actually propositioning me?”

I could feel myself blushing, not just because of the implication, but because I had gotten caught being unchivalrous. I turned away from her and looked at the food. “It’s not -- I’ve explained that things are different in my culture, I can’t -- you could be more accommodating to me.”

“Oh I bet you’d like me to be a lot more accommodating,” laughed Fenn. “If you catch my drift? That works as a human expression, for a woman to accommodate a man? As a sex thing?”

“You know damned well that it does,” I said. The flush in my face wasn’t going away. “Just eat your food.”

“On a scale from 0-9, how in love with me are you?” she asked. She leaned forward and grabbed her plate of food and some silverware, to eat on the bed, still without putting clothes on.

Where 0 is not at all in love, and 9 is eternally devoted, heart and soul …

“Are you actually thinking about the answer?” asked Fenn, her mouth half full of food.
“Do you have to undercut absolutely everything?” I asked. “Can’t we just have a serious conversation for once instead of making a joke out of everything?” I was unaccountably annoyed by her just then. I had enough insight now that I knew at least part of the answer, which was that if things were a joke, then they didn’t have to be serious. Her biography had said as much.

“Joon, we have had so, so many serious conversations,” she replied. “Even on the first day we met, when I told you that Quills and company were going to kill us all, do you remember that? I didn’t try to make a joke of it.” She was eating while she talked, speaking around the food in her cheeks.

“Yeah, but,” I started, then stopped, then, “Death shouldn’t have to be on the line for us to have a serious conversation.”

“About this?” asked Fenn. “Even if you’d started to form some pitiable attachment to me, and you could get over the elements of me that are more elf than human --”

I turned back to face her. She was still naked, with a blanket covering her lap and her meal sitting on top of it. She was holding a spoon in one hand, halfway to her mouth, and the fingers of her other hand had soup on them, so she was holding them slightly away from her to keep them from getting on anything. It was kind of ridiculous, and took the wind out of my sails. She watched me for a bit, then continued moving the soup to her mouth and slurped it loudly.

“I’ve explained that we have elves on Earth,” I said. “I’ve told you, elves are, as Tolkien conceived them, basically perfect beings, timeless, practically immortal, just a step removed from angels. Maybe everyone here hates the elves, because of war crimes or just the typical elvish snootiness taken up to 11, or they’re dicks here, but on Earth people like elves, they want to be elves, it’s so common for people to be attracted to elven features that there are whole groups of other people who take it upon themselves to argue that elves represent unrealistic beauty standards, and sure, all that is taking place on the internet … the, uh, global internet of connected electronic computers, sorry, I lost the thread.”

“You were saying that in your culture, being attracted to a half-elf would be a very natural thing, not a perversion,” said Fenn.

“Was that your problem in the past?” I asked. “People who chased after you because you were a half-elf, rather than who you were as a person?” That I could see some Earthian parallels to.

Fenn shrugged. “Maybe at loyalty level seven I’ll tell you,” she said. “And we’ve been ignoring the elephant who’s not in the room, who we’re still thinking we’ll rescue. That’s the real kicker there, the one that would make a true, serious conversation about ‘feelings’ painful for me and awkward for you, if we just laid everything out there like dwarves.”

“Is that a thing that dwarves do?” I asked, partly from curiosity and partly to change the subject. I couldn’t remember how the conversation had started, exactly, but I had lost my footing pretty badly somewhere along the way, and was feeling lucky that her loyalty to me hadn’t gone down.

“Oh yes,” said Fenn. “Dwarves are notoriously blunt about how they see the world.” She slurped some more soup. “I’m willing to make you a deal. I’ll try to respect the culture you come from and its standards of modesty, so long as it’s not too much trouble for me, which it shouldn’t be during the course of us trying to figure out how to help Amaryllis. I know, by now, what gets those particular gears turning in your head, so I will be a gentlewoman and avoid intentionally turning them. In return, I want a light and airy time from you, or as much of one as we can have when plotting against a gold mage and trying to rescue an ally who may or may not be under threat of unspecified tortures.” She paused. “Also you owe me a favor.”

“You just tacked that favor on at the end,” I replied.
“Well the deal seemed a bit too sweet otherwise,” replied Fenn. “I’m giving you one thing that you want and another that you should want.”

“You already owe me a favor,” I said.

“So?” asked Fenn. “We owe each other favors then, that’s fine, do favors cancel out in human culture?”

“No idea,” I said. “Okay, deal.” I stuck out my hand and she shook it, using her soup covered fingers and smiling, then with a pleasant smile lifted her blanket up to cover herself more completely.

None of that actually settled anything, but it did shelve it, at least for a bit.

Let’s talk comic books for a bit, shall we?

Superman created the flying brick archetype of superhero: fast, strong, nigh-invulnerable, and capable of flight. This was all well and good, but it wasn’t at all thematic, and Superman, as well as his successors, routinely defied physics in ways that their powers shouldn’t have allowed. There were geeks who shook their heads in frustration at Superman catching a woman falling from the sky, because obviously her back should have snapped from the force of stopping either way. Or Superman would catch a plane whose engines had catastrophically failed, and these geeks would make long comments about how the chassis of a plane was not at all capable of supporting the entire plane at a single point in its midsection.

The solution to both the thematic problems and the physics problems was to boil Superman and his ilk down to a single, unified power: tactile telekinesis. Superman wasn’t actually invulnerable, he just had a telekinetic force field that projected a few millimeters from his skin, which counteracted forces against him. Superman wasn’t actually powerful, he just subconsciously leveraged his extremely short-range telekinetic power to put force behind his punches. He flew by using telekinesis on himself. He could extend his telekinesis to cover people, applying force to their entire body in order to prevent their death by acceleration, and he could cover a plane to ensure its structural integrity.

Gold mages had tactile telekinesis, and when I’d heard that, Superman had been the first thing that I thought of. (It was Superboy, not Superman, who actually had tactile telekinesis, and there were lots of problems trying to apply it to Superman specifically, simply because of his other powers like laser eyes or cold breath, and the need for him to instinctively use it in certain ways without actually knowing what it was he was doing.)

The reason they were called gold mages is that this power of theirs was tied directly to the amount of gold they owned, where ownership was defined by a magical ritual performed on the gold once per month. Gold mages almost always had vaults that they could securely store their gold within, which they could return to on a monthly basis to re-up their claim of ownership.

This had all been explained to me by Amaryllis back during my weeklong crash course on Aerb.

“So what do we need for me to learn gold magic?” I’d asked.

“At minimum, you’d need a pound of gold,” Amaryllis had said. “The ritual to claim the gold isn’t exactly secret, but it would take some time, effort, and money in order to find a copy. After that, twenty minutes of your time to go through the motions, which would give you some small amount of power. But even if we had the amount of money necessary to induct you into the ranks of the gold mages, there’s a catch, which is that gold magic expects much from you, first and foremost that you maintain some level of gold within your vault, but with some other demands that you’d have to
meet.”

“And if I can’t or won’t?” I’d asked.

“You can get locked out of the magic forever,” Amaryllis had replied. “At this time, I don’t think pursuing that type of magic is a viable option, nor are we likely to tangle with one. Let’s move on to flower magic.”

“So, let’s say that I want to kill a gold mage,” I said to Fenn the next morning, after both of us got some much-needed sleep (in the same bed, but (somewhat) thankfully without contact). We had ordered room service again, and I’d managed to get a very normal-looking breakfast of bacon and eggs, even if the bacon was sliced half an inch thick.

“Hold onto your horses,” said Fenn. “Why do you want to kill a gold mage?”

“I … Amaryllis is being held by one,” I began, but I stopped when I saw her point. “You think that we should go in, get her, and then get out.”

“I think we need to listen to the word on the street,” said Fenn. “Killing that gold mage is not our end goal. I know that’s probably the best path for you to get another level up, and gods help us that might be necessary, but the thing we are actually trying to accomplish is getting Amaryllis back to us. Mostly to make sure that our shiny toys keep on working.”

“Hypothetically,” I said slowly. “If our goal were to kill Aumann, how would we do it? Enough bullets or arrows to overwhelm his power? Forcing water down his throat to choke him out? Poison? Something else?”

“Forcing water down his throat doesn’t work when he can just force it right back up,” said Fenn. “Hitting him hard enough would work, but we’ll have to get some measure of his power, which again, is the value of getting the word on the street. As for poison, he’d probably have found some solution to that.”

“Blood or bone magic?” I asked. Both seemed likely candidates.

“I can’t say for sure,” shrugged Fenn. “Most likely he’s got a few heirlooms at auction.”

“Shit,” I said slowly. “So it’s possible that he’s not only got a version of Superman’s powers, but he also has other magic that we don’t know about, some of which he would have bought specifically to counter plans intended to kill him, and which we wouldn’t necessarily know about until after we actually tried those plans.” I thought back to Count Gardner, my NPC who had failed to kill the party for a very similar reason.

“And, naturally, we don’t have to or particularly want to kill him,” said Fenn. “I mean, I wouldn’t mind it, and I’m sure that you want your points, but he’s probably going to be a bitch to kill, which means why risk it?”

“Levels are how I get better,” I replied. “Even with that aside … in a game, I wouldn’t expect to go in for a rescue mission and not face the named antagonist.”

“In a game, would Amaryllis have been taken from you?” asked Fenn.

“Maybe,” I replied. “It depends on the game. I’m not saying that we have to kill him, just that when we’re asking questions, it might be good to keep in mind that we might be forced to at some point. I would rather fight him on my own terms than see him show up right after we’ve unlocked her cell
door, or whatever.” I rubbed my chin. “Void weapons hurt him?”

Fenn sighed. “Yes. Anything that’s not directly counteracted by force. Or we could cut off his connection to his gold, though I’d think that’s the first thing anyone would try, so it’s what he’s most prepared for, especially if he’s got a pet warder of some skill to make his vault secure. And I hate to belabor this point, but you don’t seem to be getting it. We shouldn’t fight him. There’s a reason that we didn’t do it in Caer Laga. Joon, do you remember those ball bearings he held up to us? He could have shot those at the speed of a bullet. A bullet fired at him? That would just come to a stop against his skin.”

“Okay,” I said. “Point taken.”

“Finally,” Fenn huffed. “What you and I need to do is go out into the world and gather information. The radio says that peace and order has been restored to the city after the Risen Bile were put down, so we should be able to use a little less caution when moving about.”

“So, what, we need to know whether Amaryllis is alive, where she’s being held, what kind of forces or resources Aumann has at his disposal, anything else?” I asked.

“You’re forgetting one thing,” said Fenn. “A thing that I’d like us to do first, as it happens.” She cracked her knuckles and gave me an evil smile. “There’s a tattooist who has some explaining to do.”
My left hand felt slightly numb, but otherwise no worse the wear for having its bones sucked dry of their latent magic. I flexed it every now and then, still suspecting that I was waiting for the other shoe to drop on that score. Bormann would probably know, but I didn’t quite know how to start that conversation, since “actually, I picked up bone magic since I last met you” seemed like it would raise too many questions. I wasn’t sure exactly how much danger that would put me in, but I wasn’t eager to find out. Nevertheless, it seemed prudent to get some answers sooner rather than later. For now though, we had other business.

The tattooist was a skinny guy with exposed arms, each covered in tattoos. It wasn’t really a sleeve, because they were individual pieces, with thick borders of unblemished skin between them. His shirt showed more tattoos on his chest, stopping just above his shoulders. He was actually more or less what I would have expected from a tattoo shop on Earth, except that he didn’t have much in the way of piercings, and he would almost certainly have spent a few years at the Athenaeum of Steel and Sweat. I hadn’t paid him much attention the first time around, since my attention had been more on Amaryllis, and looking back, I had been more worried about the way he was looking at her than I was on him as a person.

(From what I’d learned, tattoo mages came the closest to being a traditional D&D wizard, at least in terms of mechanics. A D&D wizard prepared their spells at the beginning of the day from a set list of spells that they know, and uses them up for whatever purpose as the day goes on. The spells were all defined in the books, and did different things that didn’t always follow that much logic. There was a spell that could make an invisible hand of force, and a spell that could make spooky sounds, but you couldn’t combine the two into one effect, you had to just cast two spells. Tattoo mages were similar; a limited number of fixed spells, limited opportunity to mix and match effects, but a wide variety of spells with diverse effects. The biggest difference was that they scribed their spells on their skin instead of meditating over a spellbook; after a tattoo mage was spent, they’d still have to have a rest, just like a wizard would.)

The tattooist was in the middle of creating an elaborate piece on someone’s back when we walked in. He did a double take when he saw us.

“Busy right now,” he said. There was a slight unsteadiness in his voice. “Come back in a few hours.”

The large, bearded man turned his head toward us and frowned. His eyes were yellow and his nose had ridges on it, but he was close enough to human that I didn’t think it mattered. His ear was tattered, like part of it had been bitten off. I’m not sure it was our intrusion that he was frowning at, because his frown deepened from time to time as the needle moved across his back.

“I think every ‘naeum-trained mage here in Barren Jewel has a story,” said Fenn. Obviously we weren’t going to come back later to make things more convenient for him. “Barren Jewel is an expensive place to get to and an expensive place to leave, two hundred miles from anywhere, which means you probably had to pay into the key system, and I have to wonder why that is.”

“There are people willing to pay your way,” said the man on the table with a rumbling voice. “That’s a story all its own, I guess.”

“I said I’m busy now,” the tattoo mage said. “This takes concentration.”

“You were talking earlier,” said the man he was tattooing.
Fenn smiled. “Zeke, was it?”

“Yeah,” said the tattoo mage. He kept his focus on his work, or at least pretended to.

“Well, Zeke, you and I have a little bit of a problem, because I paid you for services rendered, and come to find out, it didn’t work,” said Fenn. “I’m a knowledgeable girl, studied in the ways of the world, and things like that aren’t supposed to happen. In fact, if I’d thought that was even a possibility, I probably wouldn’t have paid you.”

“I’d need to see the tattoo,” said Zeke. His voice trembled.

“Not an option right now, I’m afraid,” said Fenn. “Not an option specifically because you fucked us.”

“I didn’t,” said Zeke.

“If you’re gonna get the shake down, I’ll come back to have you finish this later,” said the man on the table with a glance backward. “Don’t fuck up the lines because you’re thinking too hard about covering your ass.”

Zeke breathed a frustrated sigh. “Okay, we’re done early then.”

He used a cloth to wipe down the man’s back, then put on some padding while we waited. The man threw on his shirt shortly afterward and strode to the door, stopping briefly by the window to turn the blinds, then flipping the sign on the door from Open to Closed.

“Don’t kill him,” the man said to Fenn. “Need him to finish the tiger.” Was that what that was supposed to be? Then he left us behind, alone with the tattoo mage.

“So,” said Fenn. She paused, then turned to me. “Did you want to give this a go?”

“Um,” I replied, then cleared my throat and looked at Zeke.

Intimidation was capped by INS; it was the only one of my social skills that was. I kind of understood the thought behind that; in D&D, Intimidation was Charisma based, but the game layer here divided out all the social skills in different directions. Intimidation wasn’t Charm, it was more the opposite of that, and it definitely wasn’t Poise, because it wasn’t much about keeping a straight face. There was some elements of those to intimidating a person, but mostly intimidation was about making credible threats that actually got to the heart of what a person feared.

And as Fenn pulled on her glove so black it ate all the light coming at it, reeking of magic, I realized that having me talk to Zeke was part of her intimidation strategy. She was essentially saying, “You’re such a small, insignificant piece of garbage that I’m handing this off to someone for practice.”

“You fucked us,” I said to Zeke. “You know that you fucked us. Now that we’re here, staring at you, it’s obvious to us that you fucked us.” I found myself actually getting mad at him, the more I thought about. “I almost died in the fucking desert because you decided to pull one over on us.”

Skill Increased: Intimidation lvl 7!

“Now hold on,” said Zeke. "It might be interference from --"

I moved forward and punched him square in the stomach, as hard as I could. He crumpled and coughed, gasping for air. I leaned down and gripped him by the neck. “She was my companion you little shit. She might be dead because --” I remembered that I wasn’t supposed to be beating the crap
out of this guy, I was supposed to be asking him for information, “Tell me what you did, and why you did it, and I will let you live.”

**Skill Increased: Intimidation lvl 8!**

Zeke kept coughing, but struggled to his feet. “It’s a variant,” he said, short of breath. I hadn’t realized that I could punch people that hard now. “Keyed to -- me.”

I grabbed his finger in my hand. “You paused,” I said. “Probably because you thought that I would kill you if I didn’t have an incentive to keep you alive, right?” I squeezed his fingers hard and he tried to pull them away from me. He had tattoo magic in his skin, so he wasn’t defenseless, which was part of why it was important to make him think an escalation would result in his death. “Unlike you, I stick by my word. I said that if you tell me how and why, I would let you live. You have exactly one more opportunity.”

**Skill Increased: Intimidation lvl 9!**

I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly the skill was increasing. Level 8 was where the slowdown began, and level 10 was where it became a grind. Maybe my increased Insight was helping, or maybe it was because I wasn’t trying to subvert the system by doing roleplay exercises with a party member, but either way, it was noticeably faster.

“Please,” he said, trying once again to pull his fingers from my grasp. “It’s a variant, keyed to a word. It’s new, discovered in the last few years, the athenaeum didn’t want it spreading because they thought it would weaken the trade, I wasn’t even supposed to know about it.”

“You thought that we were easy marks,” I said to Zeke, staring in his eyes. “We were young, not obviously affiliated with anyone, lightly armed, showing no magic, and we were spending a fair bit of money, so you thought … you thought that you could extort us.”

“Or he’d sell us a story about how he’d have to be paid some money to fix what went wrong,” said Fenn. "That's extortion of a different feather. Not a great strategy in the long term."

“I’ve been scraping together the money to leave,” said Zeke. He looked at his trapped fingers and winced. “You’re right that there’s a story, behind how I got here, it’s --”

“I don’t care,” I said. The last thing I wanted was for him to give me a quest. Gambling debts, a kidnapped sister, running from something … if it were me telling the story, he’d have some kind of humanizing backstory that made sense of his motivations and pointed the players toward something they could do besides just get revenge. I didn’t want to risk that though. “Tell me the word we need.”

“Azalea,” he said. I stared into his eyes, trying to figure out whether he was lying. What calculations were going on in his head? It had to be clear to him now that we outmatched him, even without him seeing the full extent of our abilities and possessions. That didn’t mean that he would tell us the truth though, not if he thought that was too big of an advantage to give up.

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” said Fenn. She moved over to his workbench and laid her gloved hand on a wooden box filled with supplies.

“What are you doing?” asked Zeke.

“I’ll be taking this,” said Fenn, as the box disappeared. “Now, I don’t want to put you out of business, because you’ve been very helpful to us.” She looked around the shop and spotted a second tattoo gun. She grabbed it, looked it over, and as she did, it disappeared into her glove. “And finally,
I think we’ll take half of your, what do you call it? Book of flash?” She looked around some more until she finally pulled a book from under the shelf, which she leafed through. It was a three-ring binder with a number of pages in it.

“No, I need those!” said Zeke, as Fenn opened the rings and took roughly half the pages.

“You need them?” I asked. I punched him in the throat and let go of him so he could topple to the floor. “That must suck to need something and have it held hostage,” I spat. “We’ll bring everything back, unless you lied to us. You still have half your things until then.” I paused for a moment, hand itching to draw the Anyblade from where it was concealed in my pocket. “Tell anyone that we were here and I’ll make sure your death is creative.”

**Skill Increased: Intimidation lvl 10!**

Zeke was on the floor, coughing and retching, so I’m not sure that he heard my message. Fenn slipped off Sable and returned it to her pocket, then went to the door with a cursory look back at me. I followed quickly, feeling awkward about just leaving him there. That hadn’t been part of the plan in my head.

“You went a little hard on him,” said Fenn as we made our way back into the crowded streets. “You also escalated too fast. Treat a man like that and he’ll think his life is on the line, and if he thinks that his life is on the line, sometimes he’ll unleash every scrap of magic at his fingertips. Shouldn’t have to tell you that, since you did the same yesterday.”

I flushed. “Sorry,” I said. “I’ll keep it in mind for next time.”

“Mind you, my experience has much more been one of being on the opposite end of such negotiations,” continued Fenn. “The guard always want you to know that they’ll break your fingers if you don’t cooperate with them. Not that the underworld is terribly kind to wily half-breeds with smart mouths either.” She whistled a few bars. “Would you have killed him?”

The streets were still filled with sights that grabbed my attention, but there was some repetition to it now, and the sense of the familiar was creeping in. The first time I had seen a dwarf, it had been a shock, but the second time, that shock was dulled.

“It wouldn’t have been smart,” I replied.

“Oh, well I can agree with that,” said Fenn. “But was there a chance that you’d do it anyway?”

“It was unfair,” I said. “If people run into problems, it shouldn’t be because of things they had no control over.”

“That is awfully high-minded from someone who punched a man in the throat,” said Fenn.

“He had that and more coming,” I replied. **Besides, that’s the sort of thing that the game seems intent on rewarding.** “But I’m talking about games. If there’s stupid RNG bullshit or whatever, fine, that you can plan around, but why build a thing that just fucks you over for going in blind? And this is the second goddamned time this has happened to us. Counterplots are fine, but not if the player isn’t aware of them.”

“Someone put a hornet in your hat,” said Fenn. “Also, you know me well enough to know that I don’t understand half of what you’re saying, right?”

“I know, just venting,” I replied.
“Besides,” said Fenn. “This is my third or fourth time being in this position within the last few weeks. Do you understand how Silmar City went down from my end? It was me, getting pulled from a jail cell and told that I would be working as a guide for some very dangerous people in a very dangerous place. Once we get there, the information that was supposed to be collected concurrently never came, and other plots going on elsewhere in the world basically left us stranded, except on top of that there was also this missing girl that they wanted to get, whose very identity was a threat to my life, because they couldn’t let me live if I knew they’d killed her. Do you get how many fucking plots must have piled up on top of each other? To be expected from the Lost King’s Court, but please, don’t complain about getting blindsided by plans, not after you lucked your way through Silmar.”

“You’re being very charitable to my luck,” I said.

“I don’t think I am,” said Fenn. “Can you imagine if you ran into Fireteam Blackheart as it normally is, without me in the mix? They’d have extracted their use from you, then ground you into a fine paste. Hell, the elevator ride was elf luck, through and through.”

“What?” I asked. “Are you … that was me! Have you gone this whole time thinking that I did nothing?”

“More or less, yes,” said Fenn. “What do you mean ‘it was you’?”

“I snapped the rope,” I said. “I burnt my hand nearly through doing it.”

We were moving in the direction of Bormann, to have a conversation that I wasn’t really looking forward to. My hand hadn’t gotten better, it still felt numb, and I could feel something similar in my chest. I was also still suffering from blood loss, even if eating my way through high-class room service had done wonders for my constitution.

“Well how was I supposed to know that?” asked Fenn. “Oh, is that why you think that you saved my life twice? I guess I’ll give you that one. You still have some catching up to do.”

“You said four to one before?” I asked. I rubbed my left hand, trying to bring some feeling back into it. “What are the four?”

“Well, number one was the very first moment we met,” said Fenn. “Number two —”

“I would have outrun them, I wasn’t in any danger,” I said.

“Number two,” continued Fenn. “That was me murdering Leonold before he could use the Fool’s Choker against you. Fatal flaw of that particular tattoo is that it makes people really want to kill you to get rid of it.”

“I moved the tattoo,” I said. “And it went off, despite your best effort to kill him quickly.” I was aware that we were being somewhat indiscreet, since we were having this conversation in the middle of a busy street as we walked, but I could barely hear her, and we didn’t technically have enemies right now, since I was fairly sure that after five days Aumann would have written us off, if he hadn’t done so the moment his helicopter flew away.

“Oh?” asked Fenn. “Oh, right, the healing thing,” she said. “That saved you from having your flesh cut up?”

“Yes, it did,” I said. “No thanks to you.”

“And what exactly was the trigger for you leveling up?” asked Fenn. She was looking ahead, not at
me, which made her smile all the more irritating.

“Fine, that one I’ll give you,” I said.

“And of course the other two aren’t at all in contention,” said Fenn. “I shot a porcupine and a thaum-seeker, both just for you.”

“Fine,” I said. “That makes it three to two though, I only need one more to catch up, and I’m sorry to say it, but I’m getting better faster than you are.”

“You don’t hate to say that at all,” laughed Fenn.

It felt good to have her back in a joking mood, after our conversation in the hotel room about what my brain was flagging as high school level relationship drama. Of course, if this place was a reflection of me, or my thoughts, or whatever, then high school level relationship drama was probably to be expected. The “Aerb is all me” hypothesis had more than a few kinks in it though, with the “Coward” brand being one of them.

We arrived at the Kindly Bones and found Bormann sitting behind her desk, putting away a pulp novel that she must have been reading right before we came in. She looked at us in surprise.

“More amateur archery gone awry?” she asked with a faint smile.

“We had a drunken bet that we’d like to settle,” said Fenn.

“You don’t look drunk,” said Bormann.

“Well, you have to honor your bets, even if they were lubricated with liquor,” smiled Fenn. “I’d be more than willing to pay you for your time and expertise, if you’d oblige us.”

Bormann smiled. “I don’t recall whether either of you were mages of any sort, but there are certain secrets we agree not to share when we conclude our training. Now, the law in Barren Jewel isn’t so tight as in other places, but I’ve found that keeping a closed mouth is a valuable skill in my line of occupation, and prefer to do so wherever possible.”

“We’re not looking for secrets, per se,” replied Fenn. “We’re more looking for … well, corner cases, things that a bone mage would know, but which wouldn’t come up for those of us who are only loyal customers.”

“I see,” nodded Bormann. “Well, I’d be happy to answer your questions, but I hope you understand that there are some things I cannot answer, whether because of bonds I still honor, for your safety, or for my own. And obviously discussions of previous patients would be off the table.”

Fenn nodded, then looked to me. I cleared my throat. “Alright, hypothetically, could a bone mage draw power from their own bones?” I already knew that they could, because I’d done it, but I wanted to see her reaction to that before I asked my actual question.

“It’s possible,” said Bormann. Her lips were drawn tight. “It happens, on occasion, if a bone mage is in such a dire situation that cannibalizing their own body for a brief burst of power seems wise.” She looked at Fenn and her eyes widened slightly. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Fenn. She must have caught my look. “Elves practice ritual cannibalism, mostly on the worst of the worst. It’s the second highest insult an elf can express, the first being to make someone eat themselves.”
“Okay,” I said, blanching at that. “So what happens to the bones, if the power is sucked from them when they’re still inside the body?” Please, please don’t say that it necrotizes.

“It’s nothing you would notice much from the outside,” said Bormann. “The bones become more brittle after the fact, and the marrow within them doesn’t function as it should, which can lead to problems of the blood like anemia, fever, risk of infections, or things like that.” Fuck. “The most interesting change is within bone magic itself. The body will compensate for the loss, given a few months, and strengthen the remaining bones, and to some extent the flesh around them.” She gestured to a few of the larger bones hanging from her shop. “There are specialized farms that perform the procedure on their animals, empowering the others, which are then shipped to people like me once the animal has been brought to slaughter.”

“So,” I said slowly. “A person who had burned through the magic of their rib cage would have a weak point there?” I asked. “But it would be made up for in other ways, given time?”

“You’re speaking of the extreme end,” said Bormann. She was watching me. “It’s not just that bones have a magic to themselves, they’re steeped in, and provide for, the raw essence of a creature. I’m obviously speculating, but if it were the entire rib cage, all twenty-four bones, there would be little way for the other bones to compensate. Weakness of the lungs, heart, the entire digestive system … it would depend specifically on the person in question, their vitality in particular, but I would predict an appreciable decrease in quality of life.” Fuck, fuck. “Perhaps if I knew the nature of this bet, I could help to arbitrate?” She was humoring us, I was sure of it.

“Joon heard this story,” said Fenn. “I can’t remember the details exactly, but the guy burned through fifty-odd bones, all his ribs and every bone in his hand. I said that a bone mage couldn’t do that, and even if they could, they would die soon after that. But you’re saying that he would have been fine, just a little sick from it?”

“Sick for the rest of his life,” nodded Bormann. “The ribs in particular are vital to the production of blood. But I wouldn’t think fatal, not necessarily.”

“How would you fix it?” I asked. I was feeling weak again, not just from the blood loss but from the bad news I’d been delivered. “Are there … bone transplants?”

“You’re well beyond my level of expertise,” said Bormann. “I would imagine that there’d be some solution, in this wide world, but gaining access to it would be another issue.”

**Quest Accepted: Boneitis - You used up the power in your bones and it’s not going to come back without some serious magic applied to it.**

Fuck, fuck, fuck. That quest pop-up meant that this probably wasn’t going away just by waiting it out or leveling up. And not only was I probably going to have a weak spot until the issue was resolved, not only was I going to get sick, but it was also going to screw with my ability to effectively use blood magic.

Fenn clasped me on the shoulder. “Don’t look so glum, you won both halves of the bet, that’s twenty thousand tcher from my coffers to your own.” She turned to Bormann. “And for you, because I like you, and because I admire both your candor and discretion, and because we might have use of you in the next few days, amateur archery being such a dangerous but alluring sport and all, fifty thousand tcher.” Fenn reached into her robes and handed over some money.

“That’s quite generous,” said Bormann, but it wasn’t so generous that she had to refuse.

“What are we going to do?” I asked as we left the Kindly Bones.
“We’re going to find Mary,” said Fenn. “What was the count she gave, something like two hundred that might be given out? I’m sure somewhere in there a solution awaits.” She turned slightly and pointed at a tall cylindrical building, matte grey with windows placed in a miserly way. “That’s Aumann’s place. I was half-hoping that retracing our steps through Barren Jewel would turn up a message left for us, but we haven’t been so lucky thus far. So, we’ll visit our old hotel yet, but that phallic building is probably the place we’re going to try to get inside.”
The Impish Inn

We sat at a small table in the back of the Impish Inn, each with our own glass of something called kefir, a thin, alcoholic yogurt that I occasionally took sips of to try acquiring the taste, a process that wasn’t moving along terribly well. That was okay though, because the Impish Inn was my first real fantasy tavern, and I was trying not to miss anything. There were supposedly around 200 “mortal species” on Aer, but humans dominated Barren Jewel, and they were in the majority worldwide. That meant that I was still seeing new ones all the time, some of which I recognized and some I didn’t, plus the Animalia, which were the anthropomorphic animals. Their forms, like Quills, usually had the bare minimum done in order to get them upright - they were all pretty damned far from human.

The Impish Inn (probably called that for the alliteration, since as far as I could tell it didn’t have rooms for rent at all) had an actual, honest-to-god imp sitting in a cage near the front of the bar. It was a pathetic creature, with a body that came to a point at every opportunity, from his ears, to his nose, to his joints. He reached out with his little hands through the bars and pleaded with people for food or drink, and though I saw a few people indulge it, it never stopped its begging. Fenn had explained to me that creatures came up from the hells from time to time, but that it apparently “wasn’t a real problem worth thinking about”. Apparently not, if someone could keep one of those things as an attraction in a run-down tavern and not have people get up in arms about it.

People mostly stuck to their kind, I noticed. There was a table of hobbits, all of them sitting on booster seats and clustered close together as they shared miniscule drinks. Three bald women with blue hands, vitrics, shared drinks and spoke in low voices, leaning in toward one another to be heard over the din. A pair of large creatures with green-striped snouts sat in specially reinforced seats - after watching them for a moment I concluded that they were on a date, assuming that body language translated properly.

“Not all places are so accommodating as this one,” said Fenn as she watched my gaze. “It’s one of the reasons that people typically gather in ghettos. Special diets, special seats, special washrooms, special everything, it all gets to be a bit much, so most places will simply build for their most common customer, the human, and that’s that. Works for me, but I imagine it’s a bit of a pain if your tail keeps getting in the way everywhere you go. Of course, Barren Jewel is also somewhat unique, because it’s more a place where people end up, rather than a place people go. So far as I understand it, the variety here has been slowly whittled down as the years have worn on.”

I nodded at that. Fenn herself was in robes, which were pulled up like a hijab to frame her face and hide her ears. It wasn’t that I minded her ears, but I thought she looked prettier dressed that way; it drew all the attention to her facial features, her dark green eyes, the way she pursed her lips when she was scanning the crowds, and the constellations of freckles. Obviously I didn’t say any of that.

We were at the Impish Inn to covertly gather information, which we had started on by talking to the bartender and telling him to send people our way. The story we were going with was that we were from out of town and looking to go into business with Aumann, but needed to know more about him and his dealings. The bartender knew who Aumann was and not much more than that, but he’d smiled when Fenn had given him a generous tip and we’d heard him making inquiries on our behalf, not mentioning us by name. As yet, he hadn’t sent anyone over to us.

(This plan was not without its risks; the other plan that Fenn had put forth was that she would skulk outside the building, wait for someone to leave, tail them, and then strike up a conversation with them which would eventually lead back around to Aumann. I hadn’t liked that plan, mostly because
it meant her going off on her own for indeterminate periods of time, and she’d relented without a
fight. We still held the element of surprise, and Aumann was the only one who had seen our faces at
Caer Laga, so I thought meeting people in a tavern was more or less safe.)

“So,” said Fenn, “While we wait, tell me an Earth story. I’ve never heard one before.”

I looked around us. No one was really close enough to listen in. “I’ve told you lots of stories from
Earth,” I said. “Besides, you don’t believe that Earth is a real place.”

“You’ve told me about games that you and your friends played,” said Fenn. “And you’ve gone on
and on about the rules for these games, and the settings, and conceits, and whatever else. But if
Earth is a real place, or at least a fully-realized fiction, then it should have its own stories, shouldn’t it? Tell
me one of those. A story of your people.”

I paused and thought about that for a moment, then launched into one of the stories I thought I was
most likely to get correct, as well as having the least background that would need explaining. Fenn
listened for awhile as we watched the people, sipping on her kefir, but when I got to a certain point
she started paying more attention, furrowing her brow and frowning in concentration.

“And then,” I continued, “Standing over the pit, with his hand cut off, Luke Skywalker says, ‘You
killed my father!’; and the Dark Lord Vader replies, ‘No, I am your father’.”

“Can I stop you there, for a moment?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “We’re like, two-thirds through, sorry, I should have picked something shorter.”
Really, I could have stopped at the end of *A New Hope*, but I was having fun, and for the first time
she’d seemed interested in ‘Earth stuff’.

“You haven’t read any books on Aerb?” she asked.

“Just a few paragraphs out of one,” I said. “I’d like to change that.”

“And I would guess that Amaryllis hasn’t been telling you any stories from Aerb?” asked Fenn.

“I’d like to know where you’re going with this,” I said.

“Your story,” said Fenn. “It’s cribbing from *The Star War*. Not just in terms of the plot, but it’s got
some of the names too, and the *lines*, at least all the famous ones, are taken straight from the play.”

I sat back in my chair. “Huh,” I said. I drank more of my kefir and grimaced at the taste, which was
slow to acquire. “Okay, so there are a few explanations for that.”

“Number one,” said Fenn. “Incomplete skewer, changed your remembering of the play into a story
from the place you only think you’re from.”

“Or,” I said. “It could be an easter egg placed by the developers, something that I would notice,
chuckle at, and then look by.”

“If the world entire was made for you,” said Fenn. “You understand why I’m not willing to credit
that utterly narcissistic fantasy, right?”

“I do,” I said. “Wait, there are other dream-skewered, it’s a, a medical condition here, right? The
story could have just come from one of them.” That didn’t seem entirely out of the question, and it
could give a plausible explanation to the mechanism by which the easter egg had been hidden, so
that it wasn’t just developers being cheeky and breaking the world to add in modern day references
… but they hadn’t been all that concerned about that in any other way before now.

“One problem with that,” said Fenn. “The play’s author is famous, and he predates you by hundreds of years. He wrote a large number of plays, as it happens.”

“So?” I asked. “That’s all consistent with the dream-skewer hypothesis.”

“He wasn’t just a playwright,” said Fenn. “He was a ruler, a king. They called him the Warrior Poet, before his heritage was uncovered, and then they called him the Poet King.” She was watching me. I got the sense that I was being tested, but I didn’t know the question, let alone the answer. “Of course, that was before he left on some great quest and never returned. Now, he’s usually called the Lost King. The man who wrote *The Star War*, *The Redemption of Shawkshank*, and *The Ozian Wizard*, among dozens if not hundreds of others? That man was Uther Penndraig, great-great-great-whatever-grandfather to,” she stopped and looked around, “To the nobility of Anglecynn.”

“Holy shit,” I said with wide eyes. “He was dream-skewered.”

“What? No!” said Fenn. “How is that the conclusion that you come to? I’m telling you that the man couldn’t have just been some nut from another world, no offense, --”

“Taken,” I said. “Just for my sake, pretend that Earth is a real place, even if there’s no way to prove that.”

“Fine, I’ll do that, as a favor to you,” said Fenn.

“No,” I said. “You’ll do it because I’ve been very kind in trying not to suggest that Aerb is artifice, and we don’t want to both be pissed off about it.”

“Grumble grumble,” said Fenn, waving her hand. “Anyway. Uther Penndraig was the best swordsman who ever lived. He founded the First Empire. If you were ever to meet one of his spawn they’d be dripping in magic items, and that would be just a fraction of what he gathered in his lifetime. He founded two of the Athenaeums and was a master of eight different kinds of magic. Being dream-skewered might explain him being a poet, playwright, singer, and painter, but he was far, far more than that. Also, if our friend Mary ever asks, pretend that I don’t think he’s that great. Seems like the kind of thing that would really get her goat.”

“So what you’re saying,” I said, rubbing my chin, “Is that Uther Penndraig was the lever that moved the world?”

Fenn sighed. “Ugh. Point in your favor.” She took a swig of her kefir and winced as it went down.

I was thinking about Arthur. I hadn’t told Fenn or Amaryllis about him. When Amaryllis had first told me about Uther, I was sure that my reaction had been noticeable, but she had never asked me about it, instead electing for us to go to sleep. Had that fallen through the cracks, because that was the night I had neglected my watch to go train? Had she misjudged my reaction? Or … or more likely, more in keeping with how she moved through the world, had she made the connection herself and thought it best to leave that card unplayed?

(It maybe says something about how I thought of Amaryllis that I could picture us getting in a fight, and just as I was about to storm away angry or call it quits between us, she would blurt out that her great-great-whatever-grandfather had been a man like me. And she probably knew more about Uther than anyone else I was likely to meet, which meant that she could rebind herself to me, or use her ancestor as a way to bring context to what she had done, if it was necessary, or maybe just throw me off my balance. That imagining of Amaryllis was awfully uncharitable, but she’d left me to die twice
now, and when I pictured her, it was with helmet on, armed and armored, ready to murder without remorse, if she deemed it was necessary.)

But my mind kept going to Arthur. If he had landed in this world, like I had, what would he have done? He’d have sunk into a role, like he always did at the table. He usually played a knight or a fighter, but on occasion he dipped into being a bard. D&D had always been about the worlds for me, the inner workings of the places and people, but for Arthur it had been about the stories. It would be just like him to borrow from the Western cultural canon and leave his mark on this place, to sing the songs he’d heard on the radio growing up, and while no, Katy Perry’s California Gurls would probably not resonate with anyone on Aerb, there were others that would, especially once he was a king and he had a whole court following his every whim. And what would Arthur have named himself in this new world? Why, he would have picked the name of his favorite character, Uther Penndraig.

The dizzying sense of hope was returning to me. That quest, The Lost King, Found? raced to the very top of my priorities. I would need to dig into books, to read up on his life to see what he had been like, to confirm my suspicion that he wasn’t just a king, not just dream-skewered, but a player in this game, that he was Arthur, who I had last seen in a coma, both eyes blackened, with medical wrap over him and cuts on his face. Arthur, who had been my best friend, Arthur, who died too young.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” asked Fenn.

“I need a library,” I croaked out. “Or a bookstore.”

“Because of Uther Penndraig?” asked Fenn.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“I already gave you a point, you don’t have to gloat over it -- but we can discuss that later, because we’ve got company,” said Fenn, switching gears smoothly. She waved a hand at a pretty young woman with two small horns on her head. I was fairly sure that she was what D&D would call a tiefling, someone who was at least partially demonblooded. The way she looked at the caged imp with pity made that all the more likely. She was wearing white robes, which were somewhat stained at the hem, and walked to us hesitantly.

“Quinten says that you’re … inquiring? Into Aumann, that is,” she said. She remained standing beside our table.

“That’s us,” said Fenn, “Don’t you worry, we’re just doing our due diligence before we try to arrange a meeting with him,” she said smoothly. “We won’t ask you anything that would risk your job, and you’d be free to leave if you felt that we were crossing a line best left uncrossed.” She pulled a note from her robes and laid it on the table, one marked as worth five thousand tcher.

Obviously we would compensate you for your time, and you’d be free to tell your employer after the fact, though we’d prefer a little more time to gather information before we make our pitch.”

She wavered for a second, looked me over, then took the note and sat down, folding it away. “What would you like to know?” she asked. “I’m only a maid, I don’t know how much I can help you.”

“I’m Emily,” said Fenn, “And this is Sam.”

(I had to talk Fenn out of clever anagrams, puns, or coded messages, opting instead for boring, human names that no one would look twice at. She had eventually agreed that giving away anything
would be stupid. The cleverest pseudonym was the one that said absolutely nothing about the true identity behind it, not even to reveal that there was a pseudonym.)

“Vanity,” she said, doing a good job of ignoring how I looked at her.

“Trifles Tower,” said Fenn. “That’s his?”

Vanity nodded. When Fenn let the silence stretch, Vanity spoke, “He renamed it, it used to be the Clocksmen Tower, until about ten years ago when Aumann took hold of it.”

“Has he been a gold mage long then?” asked Fenn.

“No,” said Vanity. “Twelve years, or thereabouts.” More silence, which again compelled her to continue. “Before that, there were three gold mages in Barren Jewel, always fighting one another, sometimes being replaced. Aumann came in and took over their vaults, one by one. But that was before my time.”

“Any idea how he managed it?” asked Fenn.

“His friends say that he was more cunning and his enemies say that he was more treacherous,” shrugged Vanity. “I know that none of those victories were through direct combat. He seems to take some pride in that.”

Fenn winced. Right, because that means he’s probably smarter than previously thought, and at the very least, someone who studied how to defeat a gold mage. “I’m slightly hazy on ‘the call of the gold’, but it’s my understanding that there is, in some sense, a constant need for accumulation. Do you know how Aumann is handling that need?”

“I think he gets it shipped in,” said Vanity. “But I’m not entirely sure. There’s some talk of it among the staff.” She shifted in her seat. “There is worry that he can’t keep it up forever.”

“And you said that he has enemies?” asked Fenn. “People that might complicate a business arrangement?” I probably wouldn’t have thought to include that last bit.

“The Risen Bile,” said Vanity, spitting to the side. “Others, that are lesser, business rivals, politicians -- I believe the mayor is none too fond. Enemy might be putting it too harshly.”

Fenn frowned at that. “And what do you know of his business holdings?” she asked. “Just in general, we’ll get the full overview from the man himself, I’m sure.”

“He has his thumbs in many pies,” said Vanity. “Two of the cheese factories are his, I know. He won the bid on the bathhouse, so that will be his too, soon. He’s got a fair number of people, a warder of some talent among them, and he himself makes use of his power, helping out when there’s need for muscle.” She looked between the two of us. “But none of that you wouldn’t know from talking to anyone else who works for him.” And in fact, most of that we’d already known.

“The Risen Bile,” said Fenn. “It was my understanding that they were all dead.”

“Mostly dead,” shrugged Vanity.

“So there’s some cleanup still going on,” said Fenn. “And why are moral crusaders so against him? He wouldn’t have acquired the bathhouse until after that attack, right?”

“He tore into them,” said Vanity. “He offered his services to the city guard, free of charge, and made short work of them whenever another group were found.”
Fenn tapped her fingers against the table, frowning. “One last question then, I think. Have there been others, possibly like us? Newcomers from out of town, here trying to make a deal or otherwise bring themselves into his sphere of influence?”

Vanity looked between the two of us. She touched her horns, one then the other in quick succession, then tapped her chest where her heart was. “Twenty thousand tcher,” she said in a low voice. Fenn calmly pulled the money from her pocket and discreetly slipped it across to Vanity, who furtively stuck it in her robes. “He left in his helicopters, five days ago,” she said, leaning forward, voice low. “When he came back, there was a woman with him. Red hair, very pretty. I didn’t see her myself. Whoever she was, the tower started buzzing with activity and hasn’t stopped. People are being moved around, some of them going on trips.” She stood up from her chair. “That’s all I know.”

“Thank you,” said Fenn with a nod. “I think it goes without saying that this conversation won’t come up in the course of our business dealings with your employer, and as you said, it could conceivably have come from anyone in the tower.”

Vanity nodded and then left, hurrying out the door.

“So,” said Fenn. “I’m tempted to call that a whole lot of nothing.”

“She’s alive,” I said. “That’s not nothing.”

“Was alive, five days ago,” replied Fenn. “And we'd figured that she would be anyway. Though 'activity' could indicate that Aumann is going after the buried treasure, and our mutual friend probably gave him the maps, which … I guess we can count in our favor, if we really need a win that badly.”

“So what’s the plan?” I asked. “I’d still like to go to a bookstore, now that the city has settled and we have the funds for it. We can create the gems for gem magic, the only gate left should be an understanding of how to activate them, which I’m hoping that I can get from a book.” Plus, I really wanted a detailed biography of Uther Penndraig.

“We’re not just going to talk to one person and then leave,” said Fenn. “Sam, you and I are going to be staked out here all night. We’re going to use the information we just gained to pry our fingers into other cracks. We can change our story now, say something like, ‘We know that Trifles Tower has had many people coming and going of late and we would like where and why before we go to your master with a proposition.’”

“Too obvious,” I replied. “Even I could see through that.”

“You haven’t even heard my proposition,” Fenn smiled. “I was going to offer a vast reduction in travel costs.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “How, exactly?”

“I can get around the restriction on the teleportation keys,” she said. “It’s supposed to hold five, no more, but I can move dozens on a single ticket.” She mimed putting on a glove.

“Huh,” I said. “Would that actually work?”

“Well I have no idea, but it sounds like it would, doesn’t it?” asked Fenn. “We obviously can’t actually meet with Aumann, and obviously he might know about the glove, but it’s plausible to other parties, which means that it works as a story. Hopefully they just accept the money and don’t pry too deep.”
I frowned. “Wait, is that kind of thing done often?” I asked. “That glove can’t be the only magic item that uses extradimensional space.”

“What kind of life do you think I lived, Joon?” asked Fenn. “I’ve traveled by key four times in my life, you were there for one of them. It’s expensive. No, after my father was killed, I did some wandering, but I spent most of my time traveling back and forth across the Risen Lands, finding things to loot and then selling them in civilization.”

“Huh,” I said. “I guess I just assumed …”

“What, that I had been back and forth across the empire, seeing its sights?” she asked. She shook her head. “I wish that were true, for my own sake, because it might mean a better life led. Now, I was trained by the elves, who hated me but wholly believe in the value of doing a good job, and I have met my fair share of dangerous people, but no, this whole experience is quite novel. Mostly in a good way, though I could do with a few less threats to my life.”

“You and me both,” I said. I touched my chest briefly. I wasn’t feeling too bad, but I was sitting down, and worried that I might get dizzy when I stood up. It was, I was fairly sure, a symptom of blood loss, rather than fucking up my chakra or whatever it was I had done to my skeletal system.

“Do you mind handling this alone for a bit?”

“And where would you be going, my young companion?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow. “Little boy’s room?”

“Bookstore,” I said. “No sense in both of us sitting here all night. We’re on more of a time limit than we were this morning.”

“You’ve tired of my companionship already?” asked Fenn with a smile, but it wasn’t a very funny joke, and there was an edge of sadness there so faint that I might have been imagining it.

“You’re my best friend in the world,” I said, which was the truth. “I’ll be back before you know I’m gone.”

Fenn reached into her robe and withdrew a few thousand tcher, which she passed to me. “I’m not going to be your mother hen like our Mary would, but … tread carefully out there. You won’t have me to back you up.”

“I won’t get into any fights that I can’t handle by myself,” I smiled, then left before she could object. She’d have preferred I stayed, clearly, but spending our entire night waiting around for people to come in so we could have brief, coded conversations with them … that didn’t exactly sound like my idea of a good time, especially not if we were going to be drinking kefir, which I was pretty sure was made from Barren milk.

I wandered, trying to keep track of landmarks. The streets in Barren Jewel were haphazard, same as they’d been in Silmar City, following organic, branching paths instead of a nice, American grid. That marked this city as predated automobiles, or maybe just meant that its original construction predated urban planning. There were almost no cars in Barren Jewel, though I had seen a small, three-wheeled, motorized vehicle I recalled as having a ridiculous name. Tuk-tuk, maybe? There were animals as well, rideable birds and once a lizard, though those were rare too, and from what I had seen, more of a status symbol than practical transport.

I found an old, worn bookshop called Another Chapter, with a warren of books and a shopkeeper at the front with a cash box nestled beside him and his attention on a worn paperback. The books showed only faint organization, but what they lacked in order, they made up for in volume, with
narrow aisles so that there could be more books. I was halfway down one of them, reading titles, when the shopkeeper realized that someone had gone past him. He called down the aisle to me.

“Can I help you?” he asked. I saw his thumb was stuck in his book.

“I have a list,” I said. “It starts with a biography on Uther Penndraig.”

An hour later, I had fourteen books piled high in my arms:

- **From Farmer to Founder** - A biography of Uther Penndraig, written a few decades after he had become the Lost King, though the copy I was getting had the language updated to be “more modern”. (Fun fact, apparently Aerb had linguistic drift, which was confusing given that people were clearly speaking English.)
- **The Complete Works of Uther Penndraig** - A book that collected everything that Uther had written in his life, including poetry and songs. It was about a thousand pages thick, and a quick look at the index showed that there were numerous adaptations of Earth works, as well as a few original pieces, mostly related to military, magic, or politics.
- **The Dream that Skewers** - You can probably guess the subject of that one. Reading the first page was enough for me to get a sense of the book as Gladwell-style popular science, but it was the only book on the subject.
- **Portrait of the Many Hells** - A book with black and white illustrations taken from infernoscopes, though most of the book was actually consumed with text descriptions.
- Seven books from **The Commoner’s Guide** series, which Yasin, the shopkeeper, told me were more about demystifying magic than actually teaching magic, which was by and large only done at the athenaeums.
- **The Book of Blood** - A guide to the varied races of Aerb, their relationships between one another, and then the bulk of the book, which covered interbreeding, an apparently quite complex issue. (Sadly, it had nothing to do with blood magic.)
- **The Exclusionary Principle, Seventh Edition** - Partly a catalog of the exclusion zones, including a map splayed across the inside of the front cover, and partly a (quite old) treatise on what exclusion was.
- **Fingers of the Celestial Hand** - This was described to me as being five dossiers on the gods, and I checked through it to make sure that it contained relatively little in the way of biography. It was more about the five gods as forces within the world, which I was much more interested in.

None of these were immediately useful, save perhaps for **The Commoner’s Guide** books, of which Warding Magic and Revision Magic seemed germane.

“Quite eclectic,” said Yasin. “No fiction in there, save for Penndraig’s works?” He clucked his tongue. “I can understand the need to study, but surely some escape from the real world would be welcome, so long as you’re in my shop?”

I laughed at that. “I have to imagine that this is already a bigger sale than you normally get,” I said.

“True, true,” smiled Yasin. “But it’s not just about the sale, it’s for your own fulfillment.” He reached over to his stool and picked the paperback up off it, adding it to my pile. “Free, for you.”

I looked down at the title, **The Prince and the Handmaid**. “You were still working on it,” I said.

“I know how it ends,” said Yasin with a smile.

While I counted out what I owed him, he packaged my books, wrapping them first in paper and then some clever knotwork. When I went to grab it, I saw a little card for **Another Chapter** sitting on top
of the bundle, with a note from Yasin saying that he had been happy to help me.

I was feeling pretty pleased with myself as I walked down the streets back to the Impish Inn. I had completed a task, by myself, without getting into trouble or taking direction from anyone. I knew enough about the world to not raise any red flags during a trip to the store. It was a small victory, but a pleasant one. I kept expecting a complication of some sort, an altercation in an alley that I would have to stop or risk another level of Cowardice, or someone recognizing me, or a thief trying to steal my books, but my paranoia was not rewarded.

When I went back into the Impish Inn, Fenn was deep in conversation with a dwarf, who was jabbing the table with a finger. I approached them slowly, not wanting to interrupt, and Fenn gave a subtle shake of her head to warn me off when she spotted me. I was more than fine with that; I unpacked the books and pulled out the biography of Uther Penndraig, which I began to read.
There are many places that one might start the story of Uther Penndraig, but to understand the man he became, it is best to go through his life as he did, one year at a time.

He was born Isiah of Colm, in a farming village so small that last names were not yet in general use. His mother died in childbirth, leaving him to be raised by his father, who remarried when Isiah was two years old. His father was a farmer, and Isiah, along with his six half-brothers and two half-sisters, worked the fields every summer. There is very little written about this time in Uther Penndraig’s life, and he rarely, if ever, spoke of it.

When Isiah of Colm was sixteen years old, the Dark King’s campaign of conquest spilled into Anglecynn. The dark army, composed largely of goblins, orcs, and dwarves, passed through Colm, taking whatever food there was to take from storehouses and killing or conscripting any fighting-age men they came across. Isiah of Colm was in the woods near the family farm when the army came through and returned just in time to see the fresh carnage that had been visited against his father, step-mother, and half-siblings.

In many tellings, this is when Isiah of Colm picked up his sword and began the fight, and while the image is perfectly compelling, with a strong narrative logic to it, historical research does not bear it out. Leaving eyewitness accounts aside, there are exactly two contemporaneous sources by which to trace the arc of Uther’s life. The first are the many grave markers which still stand in Colm, relics of the dark army’s movements, each giving the year of death as 1138 (ed. 9 BE). The second is in 1142 (ed. 5 BE) when Uther Penndraig entered into Greychapel and attempted to pull Avengion from the stone it was lodged in. Aside from those two sources, and a number of eyewitness accounts made years if not decades after the fact, there is no record of Isiah of Colm or Uther Penndraig for that roughly four year period, not within the records left behind by the Dark King, nor in the contemporaneous letters sent to and from the Anglecynn resistance.

This four year gap is something of a mystery. Certainly it would take some time for a sixteen-year-old farmer’s son to properly train with a sword, but proper training would require someone with skill, and the only mentor Uther spoke of having during this time was the flower mage Vervain, who certainly would not have been able to teach him as much as he appeared to know during that first visit to Greychapel, not even with Uther’s relentless quest for excellence, his natural athletic talents, and his inborn skill with a sword.

There is a third contemporaneous record, which I am hesitant to bring up. Several years ago, a number of scripts written by an unknown playwright were unearthed in Anglecynn, all written in the same hand and performed by The Erstwhile Players, a troupe that was active during the time of the Dark King’s conquest and later occupation of Anglecynn. So long after the fact, it is nearly impossible to track the movements of the troupe, and they were hanged, to a member, in 1141 (ed. 6 BE) for subversion of the Dark King’s will, specifically for the performance of a play called *The Fellowship of the Ring*, of which no written copies exist. The other scripts from this troupe, however, do share a passing resemblance to the other, later works of Uther Penndraig, and the handwriting is a close approximation.
It is impossible to say with certitude whether Uther Penndraig was ever a member of The Erstwhile Players, or whether it was he who authored the scripts that have been uncovered. If he was, this paints a very different picture of his path toward taking up arms against the Dark King. A theater troupe during the era of Anglecynn’s occupation would have not been neutral toward the Dark King, they would have been actively paid by him as part of general morale improving efforts, one of the investments the Dark King made into captured territories. Perhaps Isiah of Colm was simply biding his time, spending his evenings drilling with wooden swords and plotting his revenge upon those that killed his family.

Yet in Uther’s own plays, and the commentaries he has written, he focuses on the Call to Adventure of a young hero, and often on the Refusal of the Call, both phrases always capitalized.

I set the book down to think about this. Arthur, if it was Arthur, had been dropped into the world with a family, a father and some siblings, and then the most stereotypical possible thing had happened: the Dark Lord had shown up and murdered his family. That was where the traditional, so-cliche-no-one-uses-it hero’s journey began, with some horrible thing happening that set the hero down the path to righting wrong.

And Arthur (if it was Arthur) had said “fuck that” and gone to seek his fortune in a theater troupe, using his natural affinity for acting, along with his wide knowledge of pop culture ... For three years? Maybe, if he had been smart and avoided encounters, if he’d kept his head down, if, if, if. Or maybe he had been getting stronger in the safest ways he could think of. All I really had to go on was a few lines of guesswork in a biography written long after any of it had happened. But either way, no hero can refuse the call to adventure for long, because at some point they’ll get pushed violently back onto the railroad of destiny.

In the story of Uther Penndraig, that would be the end of the first act, and in the second act he would meet his Merlin.

I looked over at Fenn to see her still deep in a protracted conversation with the dwarf. She was smiling, somewhat ferally, and I hoped that meant that she was getting something good out of him. I went back to my book, still looking for answers, something that would confirm beyond a doubt that it was actually him.

Uther Penndraig arrived in Caledwich, fully formed. Whatever had happened to him in the four years between the death of his family and his first time through the gates of the then-capital, he had become a skilled swordsman and a polished speaker with a stolid determination and a devotion to good. He had met and gained the loyalty of two of his eventual seven companions, those who would later become his Knights of the Square Table. He had Vervain, the flower mage, and Forty-Two, a changeling of ill repute and recent friend. Both of them were, by that point, already sworn to him, heart and soul.

Forty-Two was one of Reimer’s characters, a fairly forgettable shapeshifting assassin loner. His name was part of a boring, tragic, backstory that I won’t get into here. The thing was, this threw a wrench into my “Uther is Arthur” calculus. I really wanted Arthur to have come through a portal five hundred years ago and recreated one of his characters, because that would mean that he was alive. But if there were other characters from our games, then what did that mean? How many of Reimer’s characters had been in Aerb at any point? Had any of them been dream-skewered, or actual people I knew put in the shoes of their characters?

The fact that Forty-Two was a historical figure really made me start to have doubts; that was another
biography I was going to have to pick up, if there wasn’t enough information about him in this one. If he was just Forty-Two, not Reimer-as-Forty-Two, then that was weak evidence against Uther being Arthur-as-Uther. It was also the case that Uther Penndraig was, on both counts, a family name predating him, not one that a maybe-Arthur had picked out for himself, which meant that the world was waiting for him with a backstory already set up.

I kept reading. It was interesting stuff, not just because of the story, but because of the small details that weren’t fully spelled out, things I was supposed to pick up from context. I kept trying to find some definitive proof that it was Arthur in there, that I wasn’t just reading about a preternaturally gifted king going on adventures, but the only threads of that were in the form of the stories and plays he had written. What I wanted to come across was a line where Uther spoke about his best friend Juniper Smith, but I never found it.

I got about a quarter of the way through the book before Fenn came over to me, partly because she was taking forever to wrap things up with the dwarf, and partly because I’m a fast reader. I can give you the Cliff Notes version:

The Penndraig line had been wiped out, down to the last child, when the Dark King had taken Caledwich. The last thing that Constantine Penndraig had done, when the invader was knocking on his door, was to have an enormous rock brought into Greychapel, which he embedded his sword in. The unique magic of the sword made both sword and rock completely invincible, for all practical purposes, and the sword could not be removed except for by the hand of someone in the Penndraig line. Constantine had intended this as a big fuck you to the Dark King, who would have had to spend time and effort removing the affront to his rule, but the Dark King turned it around and said, “Hey, the old king is dead, his line is dead, and here’s definitive proof, if anyone wants to pull the sword from the stone, be my guest, but everyone else, this is your reminder that there’s no royal line left”.

So of course Isiah of Colm was actually the son of a secret princess, and he rolled into Caledwich with a plan, which was to take the sword out of the stone, giving him both claim to Anglecynn and a sweet sword in the process, as well as signaling to everyone the start of a proper resistance movement against the Dark King. As I was reading this, I was thinking that it was pretty fricking dumb of the Dark King to not just take the rock out of Greychapel, for exactly that reason … but then I got to the part where Uther tried to pull the sword from the stone, and failed, whereupon he was ambushed and had to fight his way out with his allies in tow.

As it turns out, the Dark King was at least a little bit genre savvy, and he’d taken the impenetrable rock with Avengion out under the cover of darkness, then brought in a new, specially made, identical rock, with a replica sword stuck in it. It wasn’t just that the sword in the stone was proof that there wasn’t any living Penndraig, so long as people accepted that the sword in the stone was authentic, it served as proof against any potential claimant, as well as a honeypot for would-be heroes. So that was Uther Penndraig’s introduction to the world, which took about two chapters to tell, half of it concerning his parentage, which I wasn’t really that interested in -- all I really needed to know was that he was a secret heir to the throne.

After that, Uther spent about a year recovering from his fight, gathering more powerful allies, including two more of his Knights of the Square Table (one a skin mage, who was named after a bumbling wizard Tom used to play but didn’t seem to share all that much in common with the character, and the other a cleric, though Aerbian clerics were a lot different than in traditional D&D). After that, he went after Avengion again, which he’d discovered the location of. The Dark King had stuck the giant, invincible rock into a lake, and Uther had needed to enlist the help of a magical mermaid to retrieve it. The biographer didn’t call her the Lady of the Lakes, but I could read between the lines; whoever was writing the story, they were cribbing a bit from Arthurian legend.
At that point, Uther was twenty-one years old. The First Empire was founded in 1147 (0 FE), which was only another four years, and a quick look at the index showed that covered about another quarter of the biography. His two sons were born very shortly after the formation of the First Empire, and then he disappeared from the face of Aerb on a quest at the age of fifty-five. I was trying my best not to skip around in the book, especially because there wasn’t likely to be any answers found at the back of it, but I was already itching with questions I didn’t think would be answered. If it was Arthur, then what kind of person would he be after forty years in this place, most of it spent with him as an ultra-powerful king?

I wished that Amaryllis were sitting with me, not just so that we wouldn’t have to go on this dangerous quest to save her, not just because she was pretty, but because I thought she would indulge me in a conversation. I hadn’t asked her about Uther when we were together, and I regretted that now, but I hadn’t thought that he was Arthur, and it was all ancient history, as far away in time as Martin Luther nailing up his 95 Theses.

Fenn sauntered over while I took another break from the book, dwarf in tow. He was about four feet tall, but with a wide frame and what looked like plenty of muscle beneath his fur cloak. He had an axe by his side, which was decorated with swirls that it took me a moment to recognize as hair. His thick beard had braids that were dyed grey, his nose was crooked, and his eyes were wary, moving around to take in the tavern.

I’ll give you a brief primer on Aerb’s dwarves, but you’re probably fine if you just think of them as bog-standard fantasy dwarves. They were the second most populous species on Aerb, after humans, with there being about a billion of them in total, though you wouldn’t have known it to look at a map or take a walk through most major cities. The dwarves were a combination of farmers and miners, thanks to a doughy fungus they spread on their walls which ate away at the rock and turned it into something that was, at least for the dwarves, enough to sustain them. Being able to convert rock to food meant that they never needed to return to the surface, so many of them didn’t; there were about a thousand dwarven city-states of varying size, some of them without any entrance short of that provided by teleportation, and some warded against even that.

Oh, and one other thing about dwarves; they didn’t have women, just men. Supposedly there was a time when dwarves carved their next of kin out of stone, but a grand racial curse was bestowed upon them that forced them to become a biologically reproducing race, which they could either do with each other, or by themselves. They weren’t actually all men, because that would imply that dwarves had a gender distinction, but they did have male secondary sex characteristics, and I’ll refer to them as ‘he’ and ‘him’ from here on out.

(Incidentally, I remembered making dwarves like that. It had come from a time after Tiff had joined our group, when her own interest in the role of sex and gender in society had led me down some interesting paths in worldbuilding. The dwarves-who-sculpt-their-children and dwarves-who-have-one-gender actually came from two different campaigns, but on Aerb they were just merged together.)

“Juniper, while you have had your nose buried in a book, I have acquired a friend,” said Fenn. I looked at the dwarf, who didn’t seem like a friend. “His name is Grak, and he’s going to help us with our heist.”

The tavern had gotten noisier as it had slipped toward evening, as the tables began filling up, but it still made me wince to hear her use my real name. I also hadn’t been informed that we were even doing a heist, unless this was part of some con on this dwarf. I wasn’t entirely clear on the relationship between dwarves and elves, but didn’t figure that it would matter to Fenn much either way, not unless the dwarves were total dicks to one another.
“The name is Grakuil Leadbraids,” Grak corrected. He sniffed, flaring his wide nostrils as he looked at me. “Your companion has already given the terms.”

“The terms,” I nodded. “Fenn … good work.”

Fenn gave me a short bow. “You are most welcome.” She stretched out. “The hour has grown late and we have other business, but we’ll meet here again early tomorrow morning,” she said to Grak. “There are preparations we’ll need to make in the meantime, over the course of the next few days. We can discuss specifics tomorrow.”

Grak nodded to both of us, then walked away.

“Care to keep me in the loop?” I asked Fenn.

“Turns out that Aumann has some enemies,” she said. “I’ll tell you more while we eat over room service.”

Fenn frowned when I ordered the same pseudo-burger I’d had before. “Where’s your sense of adventure?” she asked. “When we rescue Amaryllis and she reclaims her place on the throne of Anglecyan, she’s going to take you to all sorts of fancy society dinners where you’ll be expected to eat all manner of things. Better to expand your horizons now.”

I frowned at that. “My horizons are plenty expanded,” I said. “But fine, I’ll get the … elk strips. Are there domesticated elk?”

“Why would you need to domesticate them?” asked Fenn.

“Nevermind,” I replied. “So tell me about this dwarf.”

“Just a moment, I need to call the order in,” she said. She hopped off the bed where we were sitting together and made for the phone, which had a rotary dial and hung on the wall. The mixing of technology into Aerb still tripped me up sometimes, because it was hard for my brain to switch from ‘I am talking to an actual dwarf now, dwarves are a thing here’ to thinking about things like power lines, elevators, and radio. I wondered whether it was any different in Uther’s day, whether it would have felt like high fantasy to Arthur back then.

“Alright,” said Fenn once she was off the phone. “Our dwarven friend -- is he a companion, by the way?”

I closed my eyes for three seconds and navigated the menus, trying not to pay attention to the words that showed up when I passed by the Afflictions screen. I wasn’t feeling well, but I thought most of that was still just weakness from the blood loss. At any rate, the Companions screen still just showed Fenn and Amaryllis, both with the same descriptions they’d had before.

“Nope,” I said. “Still the same.”

“Well, shit,” said Fenn. “I’d been hoping. Our dwarven friend-but-not-companion Grak is on a mission from his homeland to steal a bunch of gold, and he can’t return until he does.”

I frowned at that. “You said that he was Aumann’s enemy,” I said.

“Do you want the long version or the short version?” asked Fenn. “Because the short version is that he wants to steal some gold.”
“I’ll take the long version then,” I said. “The bartender sent him over to you?”

“Ayup,” said Fenn. “Plus two others, though they were less helpful, mostly looking to drain our coin, I think. But Grak, he was the prize. The long version is that dwarves have a complicated cultural history with gold and gold mages. To hear Grak tell it, the dwarves understood gold as a sacred metal from early in their cultural history, something to be revered and respected. Then one day, hundreds if not thousands of years ago, they found out that the other mortal species on the surface liked gold too, and the dwarves were tempted into parting with their gold for creature comforts in those pits they like to live in. It was only later that the dwarves discovered the curse laid upon the gold, which they felt some responsibility for, and which has impacted them through a series of endless wars.”

“Hrm,” I said. “I was under the impression that dwarves had city-states, not an actual nation? Does it make sense to say ‘the dwarves’?”

“It’s complicated,” said Fenn. “Dwarves feel a racial unity more than other races, I guess. They’re not part of the Empire of Common Cause directly, they’ve got their own loose governing body which in turn deals with the empire, as a kind of buffer.” She shifted. “Really makes me wish that Amaryllis was here, because I feel like I’m going to make a hash of it.”

“So … Grak is here to reclaim some gold to prevent some curse?” I asked.

“Guess what the curse is,” said Fenn, smiling and biting her lip in a way that I found quite pretty on her.

“When you put it like that,” I said, “The answer has to be gold mages.”

“Got it in one,” said Fenn. “Grak, and apparently some of the other dwarves, enough that he was given funding, believe that it was dwarves who caused gold mages to come about by releasing their stockpiles of gold into the world.”

I frowned at that. “I’m not actually sure how that’s a curse, in the conventional sense of the word.”

“I think they mean the call of the gold,” said Fenn. “Gold mages are powerful, but they’re mightily constricted in what they can do with that power, because if they don’t devote themselves to the call of the gold, they’ll fall behind. It’s not just adding a pound of gold to the vault every month, it’s adding a pound the first month, then two pounds the second month, then four pounds the third month, and so on.”

“The curve can’t be that extreme,” I said. “Aumann has been a gold mage for twelve years now, if the requirements were doubling every month that would be … um, more pounds of gold than there are grains of sand in Aerb. Which is probably not the case. The exponent has to be a little more gentle than that.”

“Whatever,” said Fenn, waving her hand. “You get what I’m saying. Anyway, the gold mages start really feeling the pressure after a while, so historically, at least to hear Grak tell it, they had two main options, one of which was to go steal some gold from someone else, and the other of which was to start up or capture a gold mine. And given that dwarves had already been mining gold since time immemorial, an enterprising gold mage could kill two birds with one stone and go after one of the dwarfholds. Steal all the gold, then enslave the dwarves and make them dig up more gold for you.”

“Okay … so the dwarves think that gold magic is their fault,” I said. “They sold the other mortal species gold and were punished by the existence of gold mages.” I had no idea how plausible that
actually was, but it didn’t seem, prima facie, to be very plausible.

“Well, it’s not actually all dwarves, anymore than you would say all humans,” said Fenn. “Grak’s clan was hit especially hard by a gold mage a few centuries back, until the gold veins were stripped clean. Anyway, that’s his mission, and why he’s willing to work with us.”

“Oh,” I said slowly. “And what does he bring to the table?”

“You’ll like this,” said Fenn, with a twinkle in her eyes. “He’s a ward breaker.”

“Huh,” I said. “I’d guess because gold mages and warders go together, so if you had a quest to take back the gold, you’d take an interest in breaking wards. That works for me … but you kept telling me that our goal was to get Amaryllis back, not to kill or disable Aumann. That changes, with Grak in play?”

“Er,” said Fenn. “I may have indicated to Grak that I knew where Aumann’s cache of gold was, and I might have said that I had concrete information that it was in the same location where Amaryllis is being held. Which, mind, isn’t a terribly bad guess.”

“We know where Amaryllis is being held?” I asked. My heart started beating a little quicker; Schrödinger's Princess had been weighing on me, even if it was reasonable to assume that she was imprisoned but mostly fine. “We know that she’s alive?”

“Oh, right,” said Fenn. “Buried the lede there, did I? She’s a floor below the penthouse, behind some heavy wards, unhurt but unhappy, at least as far as the servants know. Aumann and his inner circle are the only ones who know her true identity, but he’s not made a secret of the fact that he’s got a guest.”

“So the plan is to use Grak to get up to the top floors of Trifles Tower, use him to break the wards on Amaryllis, and then bust out?” I asked. “And hope that he’s not really pissed off at us when he realizes that the gold isn’t actually there? Did you tell him about Amaryllis?”

“Not as such,” said Fenn. “But he knows that we’re not just after the gold, and the gold might be there after all, so it’s not like we’re hornswoggling him. Not much, anyway.”

“And if the gold isn’t there?” I asked.

“Are you going to be a moral crusader about this?” asked Fenn. “Because it was, oh, earlier this morning that you were beating up a guy for information and I was stealing his stuff.”

“He deserved it,” I said. “I’d really rather not trick people into becoming our allies.”

“Okay,” said Fenn. “Then tomorrow morning I’ll go to the Impish Inn and say to him, ‘sorry, but you have no actual incentive to help us’, shall I?”

I could feel myself getting angry. As little as a few months ago, I probably would have responded to her with righteous fury, telling her that yes, she should go tell him the truth, even if it cost us. It wasn’t even that I was particularly inclined toward being a staunchly moral person, it would have just been that we were on opposite sides. So I took a step back and tried to think things through.

Yes, it was a decent guess that Aumann would keep all his valuables, people and gold alike, in one location, because there was a limit to the number of secure locations you could realistically hold at any given time, especially if you constantly needed money to pour into your ultimate source of power. The personal repercussions for us were unlikely to be all that bad, since warding magic had very little in the way of offense and it wasn’t like we would suffer from a reputation hit. The biggest
issue was that it was a crappy thing to do.

“You’re right,” I said with a sigh. “I’d rather we not do it this way, but if a resource is going to fall into our lap like this, then our actual objective is important enough that I’ll bend a little bit.” *It’s what Amaryllis would do.*

**Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 9!**

“Oh,” said Fenn.

“I mean, we can fight about it if you want to,” I said. “It certainly *seemed* like you wanted to fight. But I’ve been trying my best not to get into arguments with people just because I found a solidly fortified position to fight from.”

“Huh,” said Fenn. “Is that a human thing, wanting a fight with someone but not because there was anything all that important on the line?”

“Yup,” I said. “And you’re half human, so you tell me. Any particular *reason* that you’d be spoiling for a fight?”

Fenn frowned. “Nope, I said light and airy, so light and airy is what we’re going to do.”

“There’s part of you that’s worried about what happens if we actually get her back,” I said.

“And what makes you think that, little hooman?” asked Fenn.

“First off, I’m bigger than you,” I said. “Second, when we were ordering food you were snotty about it, talking about how ‘I’ not ‘we’ would have to go to society dinners. You told me before that you were worried about Amaryllis edging you out, it’s reasonable that you would still be worried about it now, maybe even moreso given that she’s got leverage over both of us with her heirlooms. You don’t want to be left behind.” *And you were basically cast out by both sides of your family, which is why you always had more acquaintances than friends. Now that you consider me an actual friend to you, you’re worried about losing me, because you aren’t going to be able to just brush me off by pretending that you never actually cared.* But those were guesses on my part, and I didn’t know how to say them so that they would come out positive and empathic rather than cuttingly clinical.

Fenn winced. “Okay, a little bit I’m worried, I guess. But pretend that I didn’t just say that.”

I looked her in the eyes. “Fenn, you’re my companion. It’s written on my character sheet. If there are fancy society dinners that either circumstance or Amaryllis forces me to go to, you’ll be coming with, dressed to the nines.”

“To the nines?” asked Fenn.

“It’s … actually I don’t know,” I replied. “And anyway, you still owe me a favor, remember?” I smiled at her. “Couldn’t let you off the hook without getting my value from that one, could I?”

Fenn opened her mouth to say something, but there was a knock on the door, and by the time she’d brought the tray of food back in, she had either gotten distracted or decided against continuing that line of conversation.

“So,” she said as she began eating some kind of noodle dish with a wide variety of colored vegetables, “Any interesting books?”

“Kind of,” I said. “Books on magic should be useful. I’m hoping that the clonal kit and The
Commoner’s Guide to Gem Magic together will be enough to let me figure that stuff out. I’m about a quarter of the way through a biography of Uther, which … is less helpful than I had thought it would be, at least as far as forming a hypothesis. The others are mostly books that I can use for reference, or that I hope will let me get a better picture of the world.”

Fenn picked up The Prince and the Handmaid from the pile. “And this one?” she asked.

“A gift, for being a good customer,” I said. “You can read it if you’d like, I doubt I’ll have the time for leisure, and I’m pretty sure that you’ll be sitting around waiting for me to finish up with things.”

“Speaking of which,” said Fenn, as she slipped Sable out from her pocket and stuck it on her hand. “The time will soon come for you to learn how to make a tattoo.” She began dumping things onto the bed, first the gun, then the box of inks, then the book of illustrations. “If you ask me, we should have robbed the guy blind from the get-go.”

“Easy to say in hindsight,” I replied. “Also, not something that you put forth when it was an option.”

“Bah,” said Fenn. “Let me have my retrospective victories.”

I ate a few pieces of the elk, which was similar enough to venison, cooked rare and seasoned heavily, but I didn’t have much in the way of appetite. Instead, I set my plate aside and picked up the tattoo gun. It was time to learn some spells.
Plot Relevant

**Skill Unlocked: Art!**

**Skill Increased: Art lvl 6!** (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat CHA.)

**Skill Increased: Skin Magic lvl 10!**

**New Virtue: Shifting Skin!**

**Skill Increased: Skin Magic lvl 12!** (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat KNO.)

**Icy Devil:** Wreaths your hand in ice, imbuing it with the ability to chill anything you touch for the next three minutes. Single use. Self only. Required size is roughly 1 square foot.

**Liar's Cup:** Allows you to drain minor toxins from your body, such as boscleaf, alcohol, caffeine, terrablend, nicotine, or granchar, and stealthily deliver them by touch. Infinite use. Self only. Required size is roughly 2 square feet.

**Lecher's Vine:** Produces a small, thin vine that can surround any standing entrance such as a door or window for a period of twenty-four hours. You will be alerted any time something passes through the ring of vines. Single use. Self only. Required size is roughly half a square foot.

**Surface Sheath:** An object pressed against the tattoo will skin into and become part of the magic of the skin, allowing it to be retrieved later by pulling at the edge of the tattoo. Object must be inserted within thirty minutes of tattoo completion. Required size depends upon the size of the object to be stored.

**Snake:** A non-poisonous snake comes to life and slides from your skin. It has normal intelligence for a snake and holds no particular affection for you. Single use. Self only. Tattoo size determines size of the resulting snake. Taking care of a snake is a big responsibility!

There was a hidden cap to tattoo magic, which was that it seemed to depend on my Art skill, something I hadn't known existed until I'd tried to draw something with the tattoo gun. I wasn't using my own skin, and instead spent some time mucking about with the clonal kit until it gave me a piece of fresh skin to work with (profession, "tanner"). The tattoos themselves were very tightly specified in terms of angles, arcs, inks, and relative size of individual pieces. It called to mind an assignment we'd had in art class to make a vector logo; logos needed to be scalable and consistent, so each part of them had to be defined in mathematical terms, allowing infinite, varied reproduction. A tattoo mage wasn't just drawing a devil on the skin that came to life and gripped his hand, he was drawing a very specific devil.

And as it turned out, I just didn't have the skill with a tattoo gun to complete all but the five most simple tattoos, of about thirty in the half book that Fenn had grabbed. Still, a few hours of practicing had allowed me to put a number of tattoos onto my skin, and the new virtue I'd gotten made moving them across my skin to other areas as easy as directing a thought at them, which meant that I could do all my tattooing on the relatively large expanse of skin on my thigh, moving the tattoos elsewhere when I was finished.

All thing considered, it was more or less a bust, which was why I moved on to gem magic.

According to *The Commoner’s Guide to Gem Magic*, gem magic didn’t have analogies at all.
Instead, gem magic had three different axes of effect, and each gem could be assigned a numerical value for each of those axes on the basis of its color. The book didn’t call it the RGB color model, but it kept using the words red, green, and blue.

(It goes without saying that this made no sense. I mean first of all, the entire reason that RGB was a valid model for color at all was that human eyes only had three color-sensing cells that responded to those wavelengths. It would be entirely possible to make an organism that had different spikes at different wavelengths, or one that had another color-sensing cell. There were creatures on Earth that had four color-sensing cells, and it probably went without saying that with 200 mortal species on Aerb there were some that didn’t sense colors like humans did, a fact specifically mentioned by one of the appendices of the book. But apparently, gem magic was implemented in the world in accordance with human color definitions.)

All of the colors were offensive, all projecting force onto the world, with variance in terms of number of projectiles, spread, speed, refresh, and what seemed like a dozen other things. It wasn’t until the book laid it out in an example that I really got it (though that did make me feel like a commoner).

- A pure red gem will fire a constant projection of force, half of which will be directed back at the user. This beam will have 0 spread.
- A pure blue gem will fire once every eight seconds, emitting fifty projectiles at a spread of 180 degrees, which will alter course toward user-intuited targets up to 90 degrees.
- A pure magenta gem will fire once every four seconds, emitting twenty-five projectiles at a spread of 90 degrees, which will alter course toward user-intuited targets up to 45 degrees. One-quarter of projectile force will be directed back at the user.

**Skill unlocked: Gem Magic!**

**Achievement Unlocked: By Your Powers Combined**

I was a little bit annoyed when thinking about light going through the gems allowed me to gain access to the magic within them, because that was the second thing I had tried. Sure, I understood more about gem magic now than I had then, including some knowledge about what effect the crude gems made by the clonal kit would actually do, but I’d already gotten the analogy down, hadn’t I? The gems had to be about light, if the output was light and the underpinning was RGB values. Maybe the analogy didn’t matter, in this case, and it was the knowledge that counted, but it really did seem like the sort of thing that I should have been able to get on my own.

I got another little bar, which popped up right beside the bar measuring blood. This one was a cerulean blue and throbbed with a faint light. A quick look showed its label as “Mental Exhaustion”. It had a value of 9/12, which was equal to three times any of my mental stats aside from MEN itself. If I could knock over four end tables before draining myself of mental energy, ho boy, look out world, here I come. (Yes, I was disappointed in the ability to shoot magic lasers out of my hands, because I had become spoiled.)

The hotel room wasn’t actually a great place to practice gem magic, which I learned with the first blast of red light, which knocked over the end table. Fenn had applauded that, but she was making her way through *The Prince and the Handmaid*, and returned to her book after it was clear that I wasn’t going to start knocking other things over.

I set up a target area with a few pillows from our bed and a thick-skinned citrus fruit we’d gotten with dinner, then started using the red gem to knock it over. The gem wasn’t quite pure, and it became clear to me that it was really, really important for gems to be, if not of a pure color, then at least with a favorable combination of effects. It reminded me a lot of finding a randomly generated
gun in Borderlands and hoping that it was more than the sum of its parts.

And it wasn’t just that I had to worry about color, because there were so many aspects to the gems which altered their behaviors in different ways, ways which depended on each other. A larger gem had more power than a smaller gem, but a lack of clarity increased the mental exhaustion of using a gem in relation to its size. Facets could have different types and levels of symmetry, which changed the metrics involved, some flatly negative, a few flatly positive, and most with some tradeoffs involved.

And all that was fucking useless because the clonal kit refused to provide me with any more than the eight gems it had provided for me the first time I’d tried, no matter how many permutations I tried on the basic premise. From what the book had said, gem mages all carried unique loadouts, so maybe the clonal kit was confused by trying to create what “a gem mage” would carry, which was why it kept creating the same thing.

I fired off a few blasts of red at the fruit, going over to set it back up each time. I was relieved to see that the gem wasn’t actually costing me three mental exhaustion each time, but that meant that mental exhaustion in the game sense was a numerical representation of my actual mental exhaustion, and that was what gem magic was draining. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, especially because I was pretty sure that I would need my mental acuity tomorrow, and as was typical, the game wasn’t giving me any hints on how quickly I would recover from mental exhaustion.

Firing off enough red blasts to get Gem Magic up to level 5 took me down to 6/12, which was low enough that I decided to stop there. I tried all eight of the gems, which had their different (but more similar than unique) effects. It was only black and clear that I couldn’t get to work; going on the basis of RGB, white would be all values set to 255 and black would be all values set to 0, but apparently those two were “special”, and beyond my ability; the black one was countermagic for gems, capable of negating an assault to within limits defined by the gem’s characteristics. Diamond had no offensive capabilities at all, and was instead used to boost gem magic, though The Commoner’s Guide to Gem Magic was silent on exactly how that was supposed to work, given that you could only use one gem at a time. Working in pairs, maybe?

It would suffice to say that gem magic was also kind of a bust. I was glad to have it, rather than not have it, but it seemed like a pistol would clearly outmatch it, at least given the gems and ability I had. And worse, the gems were quite expensive, probably beyond our ability to pay with the clonal kit’s high prices, which meant that if I was going to have them on hand, I was going to have to forgo the use of the clonal kit.

“You didn’t eat all your elk,” said Fenn, when she noticed me staring at the gems in my hand.

“Yeah, not that hungry,” I said. I’d had one of the three thick strips, then set it down.

“You had some street food during your sojourn to the bookstore?” asked Fenn.

“No,” I replied.

“Well, you’ve got to eat,” said Fenn. “Especially if you’re sick. You fucked up your bones and you’re low on blood, elk is good for you, it’s got iron.”

“Yeah,” I said. I’d lost fifteen pounds after Arthur had died, but then the lack of appetite was caused by depression, not whatever was going on with my guts as a result of not having a magically functional rib cage, or whatever it was. I’d had similar talks, about how I had to eat, from my mom, my dad, and Tiff. Eventually I was just shoveling food into my mouth, trying to ignore the fact that it didn’t really have a taste. So I decided that Fenn was probably right, and cut up four room
temperature pieces of elk, chewing them quickly and swallowing them down.

“You okay?” asked Fenn.

“Sooner is probably better than later, when it comes to the rescue plan,” I said. I rubbed my hand. It did feel a bit weaker than before, but it was hard to tell, because it was my left hand, and I’d only had a short time of experiencing ambidexterity.

“Grak is ready to jump the gun too,” said Fenn. “He’s been in town a month trying to crack this thing. I’ve given him some hints as to our resources, which has made him quite eager.” She watched me eating the cold elk. “I can get different food for you, if you’d like,” she said.

“No, it’s fine,” I replied. I glanced at the book she’d been reading. “Anything good in there? Or … plot relevant?”

“Bad guy wins,” Fenn replied with a shrug. She paused. “Plot relevant in the sense of?”

“In the sense of … I don’t know, was there a clue? Or something like that?” I asked.

“How did you get this book?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow.

“The shopkeep was reading it when I came to the store,” I said. “When I left, he said something about me needing leisure reading too, and then added it to the pile, free of charge.”

“And you think that it has some … relevance?” asked Fenn. “You think that the shopkeeper was reading that specific book because the universe meant for you to have it, because it has a cosmic connection to some unspecified thing?”

“It might,” I said. “I mean, it’s not out of the question. That’s the kind of thing that elf luck would do, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” said Fenn. “It’s more a feeling of going with the flow, moving along a certain path, weal and woe kind of thing. Not random guys giving you books that turn out to have hints. You’re saying that’s how games work?”

“It’s how narratives work,” I replied. “Anton Chekhov was this playwright in the 1800’s who posited that, basically, every element in a play needs to be there for a reason. If you have a gun placed on the mantle in the first act, it has to be fired by the end of the third act, because otherwise you screwed up by putting a gun there in the first place. Ernest Hemingway was the same way, I think.” I flexed the fingers in my left hand, which didn’t feel quite right, and which flexing didn’t quite fix.

“Games are different though, because you can’t guarantee that the setups are going to have payoffs unless you take away all elements of player choice, or plan multiple payoffs for each setup. I mean, in a tabletop game, you place a gun on the mantle at the start of the session and then maybe the action moves somewhere else without the GM being able to do anything about it. My own personal strategy was to just lay down as many details as possible and then wrap them back in whenever I could.”

Fenn sat patiently through all that. “You really like your games, don’t you?” she asked. “We should play sometime.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “I mean yeah, I would probably like that, if we ever got a decent stretch of time where we weren’t running out of food or money, or where people weren’t trying to kill or torture us, or … you know, the kind of garbage we’ve been dealing with.” And then I can get sent from Aerb to
a different fantasy world I made for the game-within-a-game. Yay! “But what I’m trying to get to, at least a little, is that some amount of game logic might apply, because of my own particular brand of something like luck, so if The Prince and the Handmaid is a clue, what kind of clue is it?”

Fenn picked up the book and flipped through the pages until she reached the very end. “What’s your last name?” she asked.

“Do you honestly not know it?” I asked. “I can’t tell whether you’re joking or not.”

“Alright,” said Fenn. “You tell me your last name, and I’ll tell you whether or not I was joking.”

“Fenn, we’ve been together for almost three weeks now, how is it possible that you don’t know my last name?” I asked.

“It never came up!” said Fenn. “Do you know my last name?”

“Greenglass,” I replied almost immediately.

“You’re a filthy cheater, that’s written on your eyes,” replied Fenn, nearly as quickly. She laughed at that. “But seriously, what is it?”

“Smith,” I said.

Fenn nodded, then sat next to me and pointed out a line in the book.

The wedding took place in the gardens of Castel Chernwith, one of the old holdings of Uther Penndraig with plants yet living that were planted by his firm hand. The largest of these was a juniper tree, which had grown to shade a large bronze statue of the great smith Merschen Edel. It was here that Uther was said to come from time to time, and so in the same shade his magnificent ancestor had stood under, steeped in the ancient history of Anglecynn and promising himself and his bride to its legacy, did the Prince and his Handmaid finally marry, sealing their vows with a kiss.

“Like I said, bad guy wins, the prince is a total dick that poisons the guy the handmaid is in love with, and she’s a bit of a cunt because as soon as that guy gets weak from the poison she loses interest and goes back to the prince.” Fenn pointed to the line again. “But there, juniper and smith, seems like the kind of thing that might be a clue.”

“It’s proof,” I said slowly. “Proof that he knew me.”

“Uther Penndraig knew you?” asked Fenn. I could hear the skepticism in her voice, but she wasn’t being dismissive, like I thought she would be, like she normally was when the topic of Earth came up.

I hadn’t told her about Arthur. I hadn’t said his name out loud yet, not since I’d arrived here. I didn’t like saying his name, because it brought a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes. And maybe there was a part of me that thought it was sacred, and that any hope I’d had about him still being alive somewhere in this fantasy world would be washed away as soon as I admitted he had ever existed at all. But that was all stupid stuff my brain was doing that didn’t make sense, I could see that, and now it was at the point where it needed to be said, because I was going to need help, if I was going to find the Lost King.

So I told her about Arthur.
Fenn was a good listener. I mean, she wasn’t a good listener in general, she was actually kind of terrible at it, even setting aside that some of that was an act or her sense of humor, but while I was telling her about Arthur, she sat beside me and listened to what I said, nodding along when I needed encouragement and then slipping her hand into mine when my voice went hollow.

“I’m sorry,” said Fenn.

“Yeah,” I replied. I was silent for a bit. “Anyway, that was him. Uther was his character, the Best King Ever. I have a quest to find the Lost King. And he … he planted a juniper tree beside a statue of a smith, and that was where he went when he wanted to think about me. I know that’s all just my version of things, that it might just be the dream-skewer talking --”

“No,” said Fenn. “I believe you.”

“You do?” I asked. “All of it?”

Fenn had been holding my hand, but now she unlaced our fingers. “All is a strong word,” she said. “I think there’s a place called Earth, and your soul, with all its experiences, is from there. Maybe that’s what the dream that skewers is, one personality writing itself over the other like a palimpsest.” She hesitated. “But there are so many things that you say are from your games, or taken from your world in some way, and … I don’t see how that makes sense, because it would mean that this entire world is about you and only you. That would mean that not only am I your actual, factual companion, I only exist to be your companion.” She clenched a fist. “Sorry, really don’t want to be talking about existential stuff right now, but … it’s kind of doing my head in.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “The whole thing has been kind of a head trip for me too.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn, “I guess so.” She looked down at the copy of *The Prince and the Handmaid*, which was sitting on the floor. “So that was the book’s purpose? To spur on this conversation? Or … to give you some concrete detail about Uther?”

“I’ll need to follow up on it,” I said. “Maybe it’s just me trying to connect the dots.”

“Well, fuck,” said Fenn. “It’s not like I was planning on doing anything better with the rest of my life. When we find the Lost King, he better have some well-oiled, muscular men waiting for me.”
Grakhuil Leadbraids was at the Impish Inn before us, and when we arrived he led us into a back room with a nod to the barkeep and a grimace at the caged imp that served as the tavern mascot.

“I sold my profession for this room,” said Grak with a sniff as he sat down in one of three chairs arranged around a table. I noticed, but didn’t comment on, the booster seat that gave him an extra few inches. There wasn’t much room to move inside the room, but it was enough for us. Grak had papers spread out on the table, most of them with drawings on them. “We should be safe here, as safe as a warder can make any place on short notice. No sound will leave these walls.”

I had stayed up late reading The Commoner’s Guide to Warding Magic, enough to get some sense of the boundaries a warder had to work with. There were lots of different types of magic in Aerb, and since warding was counter-magic at its heart, warding against “latent magic” meant that wards could extend into other areas that didn’t seem, on the face of it, to be magical. There were velocity mages, water mages, wind mages, vibrational mages, steel mages, flower mages, revision mages, the list ran on and on, and on top of that, there were individual “spells” that were independent of any school, plus magic inherent to exclusion zones, plus magic only available to monsters, plus unique magics inherent in magic items. The block against sound was, I figured, some kind of barrier against latent vibrational magic.

“I have seen as much of Trifles Tower as I could from the outside,” said Grak. Warders had warder monocles, which let them physically see the wards. “Sheriot placed strong wards on all entrances. There is a way for servants to get in which has weaker, sloppy wards I have already probed and can easily subvert. We are going to use the servants’ entrance without breaking the wards there. I will deal with any wards as we go up the tower. The two of you will kill anyone who gets in our way.”

Fenn cast me a look at the word kill. I’m sure the words ‘moral crusader’ were going through her head, but I wasn’t about to say anything that would get Grak in a huff. We needed him, and if he asked us to do something utterly immoral, like murder a maid who saw us, we could just refuse. Guards were a more morally grey issue; they wouldn’t even necessarily know that Aumann had Amaryllis, they might just be men doing their jobs … and I was pretty sure that I would hesitate before striking them down, but I would strike them down, non-lethally if at all possible. Even as the thought crossed my mind, ‘non-lethally’ seemed like a pipe dream.

“What about Aumann?” asked Fenn.

“We will wait until he’s away,” said Grak. “He always travels with his revision mage to cover for gaps in his gold magic. His warder will not be a problem if she is there.”

“And the others?” asked Fenn. “Word on the street is that he’s got a few other heavy hitters under his employ, still mage and velocity mage among them. The velocity mage, if he exists, would be quick to respond if they know we’re there. And I have to say I don’t like the idea that we’re just waiting for Aumann to leave.”

“Echert is his still mage,” said Grak. “He spends his days at the cheese factory. Lida is his velocity mage. She never goes inside Trifles Tower because of the existing wards against velocity there.”

Fenn grumbled in acknowledgement of Grak’s superior intelligence gathering.

“We should still get Aumann away ourselves,” I said. “I think we have the resources to set up a diversion for him, something that will pull him from the tower for a set amount of time. Gold mages
love gold, right?"

Grak raised a thick eyebrow. “You have gold?” he asked. He looked to Fenn. “You have gold?”

Fenn sighed, making it sound more like a hiss of pain. “We’ve got three pounds,” she said. “For emergencies only.”

Grak ground his big, flat teeth, tensing. “He will sense it,” he finally said. “He will be drawn to it, if it’s close enough, long enough. Forced to it. Where is the gold now?”

Fenn dipped her hand down her shirt and pulled up the black glove, which she laid on the table. “There, for me to call out as needed. This is the item I told you about.”

Grak relaxed marginally, from high alert to just looking like he had a stick up his butt. “Can I test it?” he asked.

I wanted to give him a flat no, because Sable was not just a very useful magic item but contained the bulk of our current party loot, but Fenn tossed the glove over to him. Grak pulled a wand from beneath his furs and drew a single line across the table, then waved the glove back and forth across it.

(The wand was of a very elaborate make, and a staple of the warders; from what I had gathered, it was equivalent to a Jedi building their own lightsaber, except that warders were functionally useless without theirs, at least until they engaged in a complicated, months-long process to build a new one that was uniquely keyed to their soul. The other bit of warder kit was a monocle, which was a similarly involved process to build and let the warder see wards.)

When Grak was finished, he tapped the place in the table where he’d drawn the line, then tossed Sable back to Fenn, who slipped it on. “And?” she asked.

“The glove blocks the gold,” said Grak. *Meaning that line was a weak ward against latent gold magic. Neat. “You’re right. We can set a trap to lure Aumann.”*

“That’s like sixty thousand obols worth of gold that we’re basically giving away to the enemy,” said Fenn. “Am I the only one that has a problem with that?”

“We’re dead if this plan fails,” I said. Grak nodded. “No,” replied Fenn. “You’re not thinking about failure the right way, there are lots of ways that the plan could end without us so much as having exposed ourselves. *If* we were to set up a distraction using our literally sixty thousand obols worth of gold, then we’re fully committed before we even get through the doors, which means that we can’t back out, not without blowing our funds.”

“You’re right,” I said with a frown. I looked to Grak. “It’s something about the call of the gold that will tell him where the gold is, right?” I asked. “Can you block that?”

Grak looked between the two of us and sniffed, then tugged on one of the braids of his beard. “You want to collapse the ward at a distance,” he said. “Clever.”

*Loyalty Increased: Grak lvl -1!*

I blinked at that. I needed a discreet way to close my eyes for a few seconds and check my character sheet. If Grak was a companion now -- wait, if Grak had *negative loyalty*, then -- I wasn’t actually sure what negative loyalty meant, but it didn’t seem like it was good. In the end, I decided that Fenn would just cover for me.
“Is he well?” asked Grak.

“He’s thinking,” replied Fenn. “He trained with the Elon Gar, but only for a fortnight before he was kicked out. The only real trick he learned was to think a little bit better by shutting out the world for a moment. No doubt when he opens his eyes back up, he’ll have something clever for us.”

Grakhuil Leadbraids was, indeed, listed under “Companions”, with a greyed out box where his biography should have been, and a -1 for loyalty. That was the first time that the game had given me a negative number, so hooray for firsts, except that Grak was **actively** disloyal to us, if I was reading the negative right. (Or he was **so** loyal that it had caused an integer overflow, but that didn’t seem likely.)

“We have three pounds,” I said. “We can set up three different locations around the city to distract Aumann with. Depending on how much he’s drawn to the gold, how well he can sense it, we should do some work beforehand, pulling gold in and out of the glove for brief periods of time and then moving on so that he gets used to the idea.” I turned to Fenn. “Have we pulled the gold out yet since … our arrival?”

“No,” said Fenn, rubbing her chin. “I’d imagine that there was a ward against gold in the place we picked it up then, to hide it from his senses?”

“You stole this gold,” said Grak with a nod. “Most would hide it so, if they had the resources.”

Neither Fenn or I particularly wanted to discuss our time at Caer Laga with the dwarf, for obvious reasons. I decided that I was going to pick up warding as soon as I had a month to devote to making the relevant equipment, because tripping over mostly invisible wards or dealing with ones that I had never seen before was not my idea of a good time. Of course, if Grak was a companion, then the rules I set down as DM long ago meant that he would have to have some way of actually having his character work with the party, instead of being doomed to a role as adversary.

“So we go around Barren Jewel, pulling gold out for long enough that he senses blood in the water, then putting it back,” said Fenn. “Then on the day of, Grak sets up wards around as many distinct piles of gold as possible, wards that will need a gold mage to break, and we send him on a scavenger hunt across the city while we climb the tower and go for the prize.”

“How much can the glove carry?” asked Grak.

“It has no known upper limit,” said Fenn with a satisfied smile.

“We’ll put all of the gold into it,” said Grak. “He will either degenerate or lose power completely. We can leave without ever having seen him.”

“He’ll know,” said Fenn. “First bar that leaves his vault, he’ll know, and that’s assuming his warder doesn’t trip you up and get the message that we’re in there, taking his stuff.”

“We could leave out a window,” I replied. “I know travel by glove is no one’s favorite, but … it’s doable. We could just flutter down to the ground and pop back out, no need for gas masks.”

“We don’t know who is going to be in the tower,” said Fenn, “Even if the big guy himself is out in the world, away from us, and his most powerful minions are gone, we don’t know what we’re going to find.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Grak.

“More time,” said Fenn. “Time to talk to people, time to get some intel, maybe, I don’t know, go to
city hall and get some old permits that show the floor plans or something.”

“This is Barren Jewel,” said Grak. “Such things are not done here.”

Fenn deflated somewhat. “Why are people always suggesting that I come up with alternate plans?” she asked. “Doesn’t seem fair to me. I mean, I would suggest that we apply for jobs at Trifles Tower, but Aumann has already seen our faces, which means that we’d be banking on him either not recognizing us or just not showing up to vet a low level position, and odds are that wouldn’t even get us into the upper levels.” She looked at Grak. “And I doubt that he would allow a dwarf in his employ at all.”

Grak nodded. “Where exactly is the vault?”

“We lied,” I said.

“Joon, for the love of --” Fenn began.

“He’s flagged as companion,” I replied.

“You lied,” said Grak, prompting me to go on.

“Aumann is holding our friend, Princess Amaryllis Penndraig of Anglecynn, hostage,” I said. “He’s going to use his resources and her information to collect more money and more gold. We know where she is and we assume that his stash of gold will be near where she’s kept, and besides that, the top of his tower is the most likely place.” I was banking a lot on the fact that dwarves valued being forthright. “We need your help because we can’t do this without you. I think you need our help too, if you’ve been here for a month.”

Grak grumbled at that, thinking, while Fenn looked daggers at me. But it wasn’t exactly like I could duck out of our conversation with him in order to talk about whether or not we should bring him in, not just because it would be awkward but because having a private conversation would undermine the trust I was placing in him. What I really wanted, more than anything, was to get his loyalty up.

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 0!

“I was right not to trust you,” he said, which was basically the opposite of what the game was saying. I kept waiting for a ‘but’, and it never came, because that was apparently all Grak had to say, except …

“Yet you’re still sitting at this table,” said Fenn.

“Your quest was to bring gold back?” I asked. “Was it any gold, or Aumann’s gold in particular?”

Grak shifted in his seat. “One thousand pounds is my penance to the clan,” he replied.

“Or about twenty million obols,” I said. “Alright, if you help us to rescue Amaryllis, we can provide that, if it turns out that there isn’t any gold in the upper levels of the tower. Obviously if the gold is there, you’ll break down the wards and we’ll rob him blind, but if it’s not, then Amaryllis Penndraig will have the ability to pay for your services.”

Fenn was still glaring at me, but Grak was looking a little more relaxed now. “You intended to deceive me,” he said. “We can work with each other, so long as we’re working in the same direction.”

Fenn raised an eyebrow at him. “Water over the bridge, just like that?”
Grak shifted in his seat. “It’s different, in dwarven culture,” he said. “Most of the other mortal species allow bad blood to perpetuate through retribution and mistrust.” He looked me in the eyes. “It marks us as naive to others.”

“Because it doesn’t scale well,” I said. I remembered that cultural trait; I’d given it to hobbits, not dwarves. “It works in smaller settings, where it’s important that you not have constant feuds and escalations, but in a city of a million people, you run into too many people that you can only ever expect to see once. The counterpoint to forgiving first offenses is that you judge second offenses harshly, but in the city that’s just not an option, because there’s no second offense for you to levy against.”

“Are you a student of dwarven culture?” asked Grak.

“No,” I replied. “Just a student of cultures generally.”

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 1!

And I would like to be a student of dwarf culture, especially to understand how they resolve the inherent contradiction in a tit-for-tat-with-forgiveness strategy with sending people out to steal gold. “Dwarves have always interested me though.” I turned to Fenn. “I’m sorry I didn’t consult you first, but you have to understand how it would have looked if I had tried to have a private conversation with you before telling him the truth, right? It would have seemed like we were getting our stories straight.”

Fenn pinched the bridge of her nose. “All’s well that ends well. Are we still going ahead with the plan of hiking our way up the tower and spending our gold on distractions?”

“I’m open to better offers,” I replied. “We still have some time. We’ll want to watch Aumann to see how quickly he responds to the presence of gold in the city, do a few dry runs mapping out his movements.”

Fenn was pissed at me, as might have been expected. She didn’t bring it up when we finally left the back room at the Impish Inn, and I was content to let her stew about it while I tried to think about how the fight would go. She would call me a traitor, maybe, or say that I was naive, or … something like that, maybe, given what she’d said before. She hadn’t brought up the fact that Grak might be only pretending to work with us in order to sell us out, but I’d seen his loyalty go up twice, and that seemed proof enough against nefarious intent. His loyalty meter wouldn’t be rising while he was plotting against us, would it? (Would it?)

We moved through the city together, passing by people, shops, ugly buildings, and haphazard wires. We didn’t say anything to each other as we walked through the hotel lobby, and the only thing Fenn said in the elevator was our floor number. I sat in one of the room’s chairs while Fenn flopped out onto the bed, and I waited for her to raise her objections, which I was sure were going to be personal rather than professional. It was about the fact that I hadn’t consulted her, that was the source of her anger, this feeling of being unappreciated, certainly not the outcomes of the meeting, and only maybe some piece of ‘the ends were good but the risk was unacceptable’.

“How many companions are you going to have?” Fenn asked the ceiling.

“Uh,” I replied, because that wasn’t where I saw the conversation going at all. “Uther Penndraig had seven, so that’s not a bad guess.”

“So there are, maybe, four others left to find,” Fenn said to the ceiling. “Crap, I’m going to have to
read that biography of Uther Penndraig, aren’t I? I’m going to have to figure out how they dealt with it.”

“With what?” I asked.

“With being caught up in your wake,” said Fenn. She sat up and looked at me. “You turned on a dime, because the game said so, and that means that we turned on a dime.” She sighed. “I’ve got whiplash, that’s all.”

“You wanted him to be a companion,” I replied. “You said that, when you first introduced him to me.”

“Sure,” said Fenn. “But I thought it would be us bringing him into the fold, not … this. Not you making a unilateral decision, and yes, I understand why you made that choice, why you thought it was important not to loop me in, and I have a good enough read on Grak that I think he’s actually pretty happy, but … I feel like I’m a side character.”

“You’re … worried about your place in the narrative?” I asked.

“Does loyalty ever go down?” asked Fenn.

“I haven’t seen it happen, no,” I replied. “Generally speaking … it depends, but generally speaking most games like to satisfy the need to see numbers get bigger, so no, generally loyalty goes up and not down.”

“Do you understand why, if I accept your version of reality, that might be terrifying?” asked Fenn.

“Because it’s not how people work,” I replied. “Yeah, I get it.”

“I think I should be more angry with you than I am,” said Fenn. “We talked about what our story was going to be with Grak and then you decided, in the moment, that you were going to tell him anyway, despite us having a whole conversation about how we weren’t going to do that. I was upset by that, but I could feel that anger fade, and by the time we left the tavern I was over it.”

I stared at her. “Wait, you’re mad at me because you’re not mad at me?”

“Ugh, it sounds so dumb when you put it like that,” said Fenn. She flopped back down on the bed.

“I get it,” I replied. “You know that there are changes in how I’m thinking, right? I put points into the mental stats and now I’m left second-guessing myself about what’s me and what’s been modified by the game. When I was putting that rocket together in the desert, I was trying my hardest not to think about how I knew how to do all these things, how much was pulled in from my experiences on Earth and how much was just inserted as-needed by the game itself. I doubled my insight and now when I think things about people, there’s always this temptation for me to think, oh, that’s the game feeding me information, screwing with my head. And if it’s not, then I was fundamentally, irreversibly changed on a core level.”

“And how do you deal with it?” asked Fenn, looking at the ceiling again.

“Mostly I don’t,” I shrugged. “I push forward, try not to think about it, focus on other things, do what needs doing. I don’t think it’s a question that has an answer, so … ignore it, I guess.”

From the angle I was looking at her, I could just barely see her smile at that. “It’s brilliant,” she said. “Ignore the problems, make jokes about them … a task I was purpose-built for.” Her smile faded. “I really hope that I wasn’t purpose-built for it.”
“Yeah, me too,” I replied.

*Loyalty increased: Fenn lvl 10!*

*Companion Passive Unlocked: Twinned Souls (Fenn)!*

I resisted the urge to say “fuck” and instead closed my eyes to look through the screens to figure out what that actually did. It was listed under “Companions”, just below Fenn’s biography.

**Twinned Souls**: Fenn is a loyal companion, now formally part of your kharass, and will never lag behind you in relative power, so long as she is a member of your party.

Huh. That … was actually pretty good. I was a generalist, with a generalist’s build, but so long as I kept gaining levels (which I fully intended to do) it had seemed like I was destined to make Fenn largely irrelevant, at least in terms of combat ability, since I was already a better swordfighter than her, and the last few levels of Dodge and Parry had been difficult because there wasn’t actually that much challenge in it. That left the question of whether to tell her, which was hardly a question at all.

“You just hit loyalty level 10,” I said. “The game says you have a thing where you’ll match power with me as I level up.”

Fenn was quiet for a moment. “Neat!” she finally said. She sat up again and then closed her eyes. It took me a moment to realize what she was doing. “Aw, no stats screen for the half-elf,” she said as she opened her eyes and looked at me. “So if you’re on the path to becoming the next Uther Penndraig, then I’m on the path to becoming, what, the greatest archer the world has ever known? The most charming half-elf in the land? The word power is a bit ambiguous, tell your game that I’d like more, please.”

And with that the tension was broken, at least a little bit, which I was happy for. I had suggestions about how to gauge power, which mostly revolved around doing simple, repetitive tasks that had a chance of failure we could assign a metric to, but Fenn thought that was the most boring thing in the world. We descended into other topics from there, stories of Earth and Aerb, tales from Fenn of stalking the Risen Lands for treasure, and for the most part, we went back to normal.
We went into Trifles Tower through the service entrance two days later, with only minor deterioration to my condition, after Grak spent ten tense minutes with his wand against the wards, subverting or changing them somehow. We’d watched the outside for long enough to get a sense of what people wore; the bottom two thirds of Trifles Tower was an eclectic mix of residences, office spaces, and stores, which meant that there wasn’t much need for us to wear disguises as we made our way up the stairs. Most of the traffic in the building would be through the central elevator, meaning that we’d have the stairs to ourselves anyway, if luck was on our side. After we were in the stairwell we’d taken out the equipment it wasn’t wise to show off on the street, like the bandoliers of dead fairies and a second bandolier of bones.

When we got up to the seventh floor, Grak stopped us. “Ward,” he said. He squinted against his monocle, looking at something that was invisible to us. He crept closer and stuck out his wand, prodding at something. He grinned and sheathed his wand. “It’s nothing,” he said. “Basic detection ward against a variety of magics, intended as warning if any of the big guns come knocking. We’re the wrong kind of big guns.”

I winced at that. Grak had not been appraised of my unique situation. “Do you have specifics?” I asked. “Would it tell her about skin magic? Gem magic?”

“Are you curious or cautious?” he asked.

“I have tricks up my sleeve,” I said. I shifted one of the snake tattoos down my arm until the head poked down from my long sleeves. When Grak had seen it, I lifted my hand and lit the tip of my finger on fire with a pulse of my blood. “Nothing earthshaking.”

Grak looked me over. “This ward will alert her to high velocities consistent with either gunfire or a velocity mage,” he said. He moved his wand marginally, though neither of us could see what it was pointing at because his monocle was at his side. “It will detect against the latent magic in any gems, gold, carapaces, flowers, fires, crystals, pustules, devils, or demons, as well as the passive or active magic of a blood, bone, skin, wood, or gold mage. Which of those apply?”

I hesitated. “Is it just at the barrier here, or will it apply throughout the building?”

“Which, of those, apply?” said Grak with gritted teeth.

“We have gems in the glove,” I said. “I have a single tattoo that’s passive in nature,” which I don’t actually know how to remove, come to think of it “but I’d like to know whether we can get around that by me entering the glove, having Fenn cross through the ward, and then me exiting the glove.”

Grak sniffed, which I’d come to think of as one of his nervous tics, like he thought that he could learn more about a situation by smelling. “Should work,” he said. “The glove can make a fool of many wards. You should have told me.”

He was right, but I’d been trusting The Commoner’s Guide to Warding Magic when it had said that skin wards were used almost exclusively to prevent physical intrusion.

“You’re more well-trained than I gave you credit for,” said Grak.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Usually keeping that under wraps works to my advantage.”

“You’re more well-trained than should be possible, given your age,” said Grak, still watching me.
“We don’t have time for this conversation,” I replied. “I give you my word that after we’ve finished getting Amaryllis back, I’ll tell you everything.” I tried not to put too much stress on the word ‘my’ there; Grak liked me more than he liked Fenn, and he certainly trusted me more than her, for obvious reasons.

“Fine,” said Grak. “You heard what I said about demons and devils?”


Grak grunted, which he sometimes did by way of assent. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and saw pitch black in my peripheral vision, and started on the controlled breathing that I’d been practicing, mixed in with all of the reading and other practice, plus scoping out Trifles Towers, plus finding locations for our distractions and helping to set them up, plus the bouts of feeling sick. (I would probably have listened to Fenn about us going too fast with this plan, but I’d broken two fingers in my left hand the day before while trying to open a jar. I murdered and ate some fairies to fix them, but it was a grim reminder that I was getting less useful as the days went on.)

I spent no more than ten seconds in the void of Sable before being spat back out onto the stairs. We went a little more slowly up the stairs now, with Grak being even more cautious than he had been before. The stairway wasn’t quite an institutional fire escape, but it had some similarities, mostly in the sparsity of furnishings and bare bulbs that provided illumination. I was still well enough to not feel winded from the climb, but it was a strain nonetheless, and I could tell that Grak was feeling it. Some of his stops with his monocle out were, I was pretty sure, because he wanted to catch his breath a bit.

“Contact, site A,” said Grak when we reached the thirteenth floor.

That meant that active gold magic had passed through a ward he’d placed in a room we’d rented on the north side of the city. Once Aumann was there, it would take him an estimated fifteen to twenty minutes to use physical force to break the wards around the gold, maybe a bit more, and then he’d either be heading back to the tower or off to one of the other sites.

The problem was, the plan had been for us to spend some time waiting at the top of the stairs until he got to one of the sites; he had moved a lot faster than we’d thought he would, or maybe we had moved a lot slower. We had another seven floors to the top.

We booked it up the stairs, straining hard, Grak more than me or Fenn. We hadn’t seen anyone using the stairs yet, nor had we heard anyone using them, which meant that the stealth aspect of the plan was going fairly well, and we could use that in order to make up for the timing aspect going decidedly poorly.

We reached the top of the stairs and took a moment to catch our breath.

“Shit,” whispered Fenn. “This is the nineteenth floor. Trifles is supposed to have twenty floors, right?”

Of course we all knew that it was, because we’d been over the details, such as we had them, backward and forward. Supposedly, Aumann’s guest was being held in the top floor, next to where Aumann himself slept, but the full layout of the building wasn’t known to us. Being short a floor meant trouble for us.

“Wards on the door,” said Grak in a low voice, looking through his monocle. He winced. “Three varieties of vaporization, none affecting us, but it says unpleasant things about Sheriot’s skill. She’s better than I thought she was.”
“Any detection?” asked Fenn. “Or are we good to breach?”

Grak hesitated, then unhooked his axe and pulled back the leather sheath that covered the head. Warders were, as a general rule, useless in any combat scenario where they couldn’t dictate the terrain ahead of time. I wasn’t quite sure what Grak was capable of, but I was hopeful that since he was my companion he’d be capable of something.

“We’re going in hot then,” I said. “Assume that we’re compromised from the word go.” I hesitated and looked at the door. It swung outward, toward the stairwell landing, “Just a sec.” The Anyblade was a small dagger in a hidden sheath beneath my shirt, but when I pulled it out I made it into a thin, hard knife with a blunted point, thin enough that I was able to use it to pop up the pins that held the hinges in place. With those gone, there was nothing holding the door in place by the pressure of the hinge pieces against each other. “Fenn?” I asked.

She held Sable forward and pressed the glove against the door. Ten seconds passed by, and I tried not to hold my breath, because there was a good chance I was going to need all available oxygen to deal with whatever was on the other side of that door.

When the door disappeared, we were greeted by two people in a small, unadorned hallway. The woman was leaning up against the wall, facing us, one leg propped up and her hand on the man’s shoulder, beside his breastplate. He was leaning into her, away from us, with very little room between their faces. There was just enough time for the smile on the woman’s face to fall before Grak’s axe flew through the air at them, cleaving straight through the woman’s skull. The man turned to look at us in shock and horror, blood covering his face, and an arrow caught him point-blank in the eye, driving him back against the wall.

Collateral damage. My dad had always hated that word, the way it shirked responsibility from the people killed for no goddamned reason except that they were in the way of the objective. I’d known that it might come to this, but I hadn’t thought it would be so soon. This had been the sort of morally grey situation that I always forced my players into, it shouldn’t have been surprising to find one here.

“That’s the warder down,” said Grak in his low voice. He held his hand out and the axe flew backward, spinning dangerously fast, to land in his grasp. I stared at him. “Sheriot,” he said, pointing his axe at the woman whose face had been nearly cleaved in half. And he was right, of course, if I had only been focused on the words the game had written.

Sheriot Trosty defeated!

Trifles Tower guard defeated!

“No one coming,” said Fenn at a whisper. She pulled a metal nail with runes on it from Sable and briefly placed it first in Sheriot’s brain, and then in the guard’s, pulling both their souls out and putting them into a small glass bottle. As a seeming afterthought, she touched both bodies for the required ten seconds and put them into Sable. “We should move.”

I kept my objections to myself as I tried to work through the wave of dissonance. No, that hadn’t been some random maid or receptionist flirting with a guard in a back hallway, it had been the woman that had helped Aumann kidnap Amaryllis, and wasn’t that just fucking convenient, enough that I felt my anger growing at the way the game was jerking me around. It wasn’t just that happenstance had led us to an unreasonably good ambush, but the moral convenience of killing someone who deserved it.

We moved down the hallway with Grak in the lead, his monocle occasionally going up to his eye to look for more wards. There were occasional rooms that we looked in on, Fenn with her bow at the
ready, and me with the void rifle behind her, but they were bedrooms or sitting rooms, and one was a
kitchen. This floor, then, was the place probably where Aumann kept his closest staff, most of them
either gone to oversee his businesses or temporarily teleported away from Barren Jewel to seek out
whatever buried treasures Amaryllis had told him about. I was pretty sure Aumann being stretched
thin was one of the reasons that Fenn hadn’t pressed too hard about the speed we were putting this
into place; it was another way in which time was not on our side.

The hallway we’d been following eventually turned a corner and opened up into a large room with a
wide staircase leading up. It was beautiful and detailed in a way that I hadn’t expected; the call of the
gold was supposed to be a constant pressure on a gold mage, something that pressed on them, which
I had thought would lead to miserly behavior. Here, instead of that, there was a tastefulness and
delicacy that spoke to incredible amounts of money, the kind of money that allowed you to have
things be simple because you knew that they were perfect.

There was a single guard standing next to the staircase, idly reading a paperback book and turned
slightly away from us. Fenn raised her bow, popped an arrow out of Sable, and silently nocked it.
The arrow punctured a hole in his head before he could react to the sound of the bowstring. This kill
wasn’t quite so clean; he turned around, dazed, and when he spotted us something like a word came
out of his mouth. He was clutching at where the arrow had gone through his head when Fenn
followed it up with a second one, and this one made him crumple to the ground.

Trifles Tower guard defeated!

We hesitated, waiting for someone to come running, or some kind of reaction, but there was none. I
had a bad feeling about this, not just the revulsion at the fact that we were killing guards who were
just collecting a paycheck, but this was seeming entirely too easy. In the real world, sometimes things
were easy, but in a game, ‘too easy’ meant that the tone was just being set for a major fight.

We had a brief, quiet conversation about what our plan was. The grand staircase leading up was the
logical path to take, but there was another hallway on this level. The elevator that most people would
have taken up to get to the nineteenth floor was opposite the stairs, and I was just thinking that I
should deploy my Lecher’s Vine around the elevator door to warn against intruders when we heard
the ding of an arriving elevator.

Fenn was the first to react; she sprinted toward the stairs, then turned around and loosed an arrow just
as the doors opened up. The arrow split itself, so there were more than two hundred by the time they
reached the elevator itself. The elevator operator, a boy with a wolf’s ears who looked to be in his
early teens, was partially shielded by where he was standing, and he twirled to the side as he was hit
by a few of them in his arm and leg. The elevator’s other occupant was a man in a business suit and
spectacles, and he was hit by at least a hundred of them. Where the points of the arrows hit him, they
stopped completely, and for just a second he was standing there looking like a pin cushion, arrows
touching him but not actually piercing him or his clothing.

Then the arrows all fell to the ground, and him without a scratch to show for it. That was when he
pulled out a handgun and started firing on us.

We scrambled for cover. The still mage, Echert, was shooting at Fenn, since she was the clear and
present threat, his shots deafening, but she was either lucky or fast enough that three shots managed
to miss her before she was hidden behind a couch. Grak pushed over a table for cover and began
using his wand to create a ward, but I couldn’t fathom what that would be given how long wards
took to make.

I raised up the void rifle and took my shot with a loud thunk, which opened up a hole in his left arm
that was mostly visible by the blood that pooled from it. That unfortunately got his attention focused
on me. I got three fairies out of my belt and stuffed them in my mouth just as the first bullet hit me in the chest. Maybe I was imagining things, but I had the distinct sensation of blood being pushed through my veins the wrong way. I definitely wasn’t imagining the pain of a broken rib. I chewed and swallowed the fairies, trying to move enough that his next shot wouldn’t also hit me, but we weren’t far enough away from each other, and the void rifle had a four second cooldown. I put the pulse of my blood into a Sanguine Surge that allowed me to dodge another shot and begin moving toward cover, but the still mage was moving on his own now, trying to close the distance between us.

Grak’s axe came sailing through the air and struck the still mage in the neck. I thought it was more for a distraction than anything else, because still magic’s whole deal was bringing things to a halt, but though the axe was stopped, it still had an effect; Echert suddenly had an extra foot of hair getting in his eyes.

I shot him again, this time hitting him in the stomach, which was not at all where I’d intended to put the hole. He grunted in pain and raced toward me, heedless of the wound, trying to get me within reach. I wasn’t sure how many bullets he had left in his gun, but I knew he was trying to get a grip on me so he could stop me in place and then kill me at his leisure. I threw the void rifle to the side, because I knew I wasn’t going to get another shot with it, and then raced toward him, which gave him pause. When I grabbed him around the neck he stared at me in confusion. I was stopped in place, naturally, that was the nature of his magic, it was practically instinctive on his part. That didn’t stop me from using my tattoo, the Icy Devil, which sheathed my hand in ice.

He got the brain freeze a moment later and released his stilling grip on me, but that did nothing for the fact that I was still clutching him tightly. He tried to bring his gun up, and I moved my other hand to block him; he shot me just above the hip, and that hurt, like being smacked by a baseball bat that left a burning pain inside me, but it didn’t actually help his situation any. He stopped me in place again, fighting against the cold going straight to his brain, and lifted his gun higher, trying to get it pointed at my head. I could feel something else, a killing intent from him that was striking at my chest. One of the ways that a still mage could kill was to stop your heart for long enough, but some people could shrug it off, and so far it seemed like I was passing that Save or Die check.

Echart Halderson defeated!

The grip of stillness was lifted with a thunk that came to my right. I grabbed all the remaining fairies from my bandolier and stuffed them in my mouth as I sank to the ground. I really, really needed to stop getting shot, and I hadn’t had a level up in what felt like far too long. The fairy magic went about magically healing my wounds, and I looked around for the others, only to find that they were both by the elevator; Fenn had taken a fairy from its storage space within Sable and shoved it into the kid’s mouth, but he was limp and breathing shallowly. She was trying to get him to chew, trying to work his jaw around the marzipan, but it wasn’t working. I limped my way over as my wounds started closing, keeping an eye on the bar that showed my hit points, which had dipped down to 5/36 but was now steadily rising.

I took bones from my bandolier and applied healing, but he was badly injured and I was mediocre at bone magic, which meant that the work I was doing wasn’t enough. I hadn’t brought them with for the healing, that was what we had fairies for. I’d brought them for a burst of speed or power. It wasn’t long before I’d emptied all ten bones, casting them aside one by one as I’d drained them.

“Give me a corpse,” I said.

Fenn gestured toward me with Sable and the body of the warder, Sheriot, materialized in thin air and fell to the floor. I grimaced and stuck my fingers in her brutalized face, feeling the ragged ridge
where her skull had split, then reached out to the boy with the furry ears and rested my hand on his. Grak cottoned on to what I was doing fast enough and started hacking at Sheriot with his ax, biting down to the bone so I could leech END from her and put it into the kid. Each time he hit her corpse, her hair grew out a foot, until it was a tangled mass on the ground.

“Contact, site B,” said Grak, right as I was finishing up the final touches. I’d drained eight of the bones from Sheriot’s corpse, one after the other, and the bleeding had mostly stopped. Fenn looked pallid, maybe because she hadn’t wanted to kill this kid, or maybe because of the copious amounts of blood.

“Let’s fuck off out of here then,” said Fenn. “He’s stable?”

“Yeah,” I said, though I wasn’t sure that I wasn’t just giving her a polite lie. The game had not informed me that we’d defeated a random teenaged elevator operator, at least, and he was still breathing with a weak pulse.

As we went up the stairs to the twentieth level, I was pretty confident that at the very least, there probably weren’t more people coming for us. The handgun had been loud enough to be heard on the floors below, and if someone was coming, then they would have probably come by now. I had refilled my bandolier just in case, but Aumann was at the second lure, presumably with his revision mage in tow, and that only left the velocity mage, who supposedly never went into Trifles Tower. Of course, if she were to get a phone call, she could arrive in a flash ...

The top floor of Trifles Tower was a single wide, open room with a large bed, doors leading to a porch, a kitchen area, shelving, and various curios lining the walls, which went up nearly thirty feet before coming to a sharp point where they converged. I didn’t really have time to look at any of that though, because Amaryllis was standing at the doorway of a small room that seemed to have been partitioned off from the rest of the place.

The intervening days since we’d last seen each other had not been kind to her. Her right arm was too skinny and horribly yellow, withered like it had aged a hundred years. The nails on that hand were no longer there, leaving only red divots at the end of her fingers. She had dark bags under her eyes and her hair was stringy. She was wearing only a plain shift that left her looking shapeless.

*Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 8!*

Her mouth moved, but we could hear no words.

“Wards,” said Grak as he moved forward with his monocle up. He turned to look at us. “Look for the gold. Sheriot on her own wouldn’t be enough to put up vaporization wards against blood, bone, or skin, you won’t run straight into death without me.” He tapped his wand against the wards around the doorway and frowned.

“We’re getting out of here,” said Fenn. She slipped Sable partly off so her fingers were holding onto the edge of it, and swung the empty parts across the ward, where Amaryllis caught them. Ten seconds later, Amaryllis had disappeared, and a second after that she was standing on the other side of the ward.

“He has the key,” said Amaryllis, without so much as a thank you, a glance in Grak’s direction, or any acknowledgment of the absurdity of us being there with her. “The tattoo is still sealed, but it’s on his body. He doesn’t know what’s inside it.”
“Nice to see you too,” said Fenn. “You’re welcome.”

Grak dropped to one knee. “Princess Amaryllis, I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

“We need to go,” I said. “No telling how long until he gets back.” I turned to Fenn. “I’m a fan of glove-out-the-window.”

“My things are in his vault,” said Amaryllis. “It’s down on the floor below. Ten seconds each for the blade and the armor, once we break past the wards.”

“Forgive me, princess,” said Grak as he rose to his feet, “But I don’t think that it will be so easy as with the ones that caged you. An absolute ward against velocity would prevent that trick from working.”

“Then we’ll figure something out,” said Amaryllis.

“Here,” said Fenn, taking out a fairy from Sable and handing it to Amaryllis. “You’re not looking too hot.”

“If we have limited time, we should go down to his vault now while we can,” said Amaryllis. She bit the head off the fairy and swallowed it without stopping to chew.

“No, we should leave,” said Fenn. “We can’t beat him and having your stuff won’t help you if you’re dead.”

“Agreed,” I said. “I have a quest to save you, it’s not complete yet, that means that it’s not a foregone conclusion that we can leave.” Grak gave me a funny look at that, but he’d have to have been an idiot to see everything I’d done and not have his questions. I was more focused on getting all of us out of there, because if I were running this game, I would be sorely tempted to force a final confrontation with the primary antagonist if it was at all plausible for that to happen.

“Contact, site C,” said Grak. “He was a lot faster the second time.”

Fenn held out Sable and grabbed an oxygen tank (with a mask) that materialized out of it. “Now.”

“His gold is in that vault,” said Amaryllis. “We can end him.”

I could see by Grak’s face set, and Fenn’s eyes roll. We weren’t exactly set up as a democracy in this party, and we didn’t have the conflict-resolution channels that it would have been nice to have, which meant that this was either going to be solved by debate or by seeing who could dig their heels in furthest, and we didn’t have time for either of those.

“We’ll go to the vault,” I said. Better that we do something than nothing.

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 2!

I could see by the set of Fenn’s teeth that she was pissed off, but she started toward the stairs all the same, and the breathing apparatus vanished back into the glove as we moved.

We went down the other wing this time, past more rooms until we got to a solid iron door. Grak immediately ran his wand across the ground back the way we came and spent a valuable minute of
our time on erecting a ward against high velocities before turning back to the door we’d been staring at. With his monocle out, he looked at the door and grimaced.

“Wards are heavy, absolute velocity, blood and bone to stop us, but all three breakable in five minutes. A few more are there too, which don’t matter. The physical door is a problem.” Grak reached forward and touched the heavy lock, which looked like it was going to require a key, the kind that Aumann was sure to keep on him at all times.

I stepped forward and drew the Anyblade, shifting the hilt around until it was roughly key-shaped, then stuck it in the keyhole. The Anyblade wasn’t meant for this work, I knew it, but I also knew that this was something that Reimer had done time and time again, until I started having every villain in the land use two-factor. It wasn’t terribly much work to feel the resistance of the springs and wiggle the blade-hilt around, though it probably would have gone a lot faster if that had been one of the things that I had practiced. Eventually I got it, turned the blade, and opened up the vault.

Inside were three suits of armor, five weapons, a handful of other things I assumed had to be magical if they were sitting there waiting for us (among them a pile of rope and an armchair), and there, right in the middle, a pile of gold. I was pretty sure that the entire thing could fit into a few cubic feet, maybe even a single cubic foot. It was far from being a dragon’s hoard (though those were always far too big to make any sense), but it was definitely worth millions of dollars. Call of the gold aside, it made it almost tempting to become a gold mage, if you could get so much power from such a (visually) small amount. There were a few gold coins and pieces of jewelry, but most of it was just in the form of stamped gold bars.

Grak began work on breaking the wards, while Fenn began probing at the wards using her fingers. I wasn’t quite sure why she was doing that, because she knew as well as I did that an absolute ward against velocity meant that you couldn’t do things like poke the finger of a glove across, because it would stop any and all movement at its border. A void rifle could get past it, because the void went through things without any velocity (bullshit, if you asked me, but the void was also “not magic”), and light was apparently not included as a thing that had velocity (because otherwise the room would have been completely dark), but there was very little else that would get past it.

Amaryllis had taken the void rifle and was sitting prone on the hallway floor sighting down it, applying pressure to the trigger with the index finger of her withered yellow arm. The red pit where her fingernail had been was weeping a clear fluid.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “When this is over we’re going to need to seek out some very expensive healing. ‘Rat rot’ is progressive.”

“I meant more … whatever you went through,” I said.

“Not the time, Joon,” said Amaryllis. She hesitated, as if remembering how to be a person. There was no way she had missed the copious amounts of blood on the floor by the elevator. “Thank you.”

Fenn laughed at that. “I’d say don’t mention it, but you almost didn’t.”

I wanted to say something then, to express how much trouble we’d gone through, or how much I’d been thinking about her, or even to ask her whether she had known or suspected that Uther Penndraig was dream-skewered, but Grak finished his work.

“Wards are down, spoofed my way past them,” he said with a feral smile that didn’t look quite right on a dwarf’s flat, wide teeth.
Fenn moved in at once, going straight for the armor, which I thought was weird until I realized that they were probably going to be the hardest things to move. As Sable started sucking them up one by one, I pulled out a folded up sack out of a tattoo on my arm and started loading the gold into it, one bar at a time. The gold bars were incredibly heavy, even with me knowing beforehand that gold is very dense and hard to move. A solid cubic foot of gold weighed something like 1200 pounds. Grak began helping me and we’d moved over about half of it, one twenty-pound bar at a time, when Fenn came over and grabbed the sack with her black glove. Sable took about ten seconds to suck up something, and it couldn’t do multiple things at once, but ‘thing’ was a loose definition as shown by the fact that it didn’t strip us of clothing when we went inside it. That was one of the reasons that I’d used a few applications of the Surface Sheath to put folded up sacks on my skin. While our sack of gold was counting down to vanish into the glove, I pulled out a second one, which Grak and I kept filling.

Thunk.

At the sound of the void rifle I abandoned my task and ran out of the vault to the hallway, drawing the AnyBlade and extending it to dagger length. I was just in time to see Aumann fall over with a hole in the middle of his forehead, his bracelet and necklace of ball bearings falling apart and scattering to the floor, the muscles under his red and white mottled skin going slack.

And then I was treated to the sight of those ball bearings reversing their motion and coming back to him as he rose up from the ground, with movements that made no sense unless physics were running in reverse. I dashed forward, sword drawn, none too hopeful about my chances, and brought the Anyblade down in the form of a two-handed greatsword that nearly clipped the ceiling, right as I saw the hole in Aumann’s forehead fill in with flesh.

The Anyblade hit him in the head and clanged off him, twisting in my hands. Aumann stared at me in confusion for just a second, then brushed the Anyblade with the back of his hand, sending it flying from my grip and through the wall, breaking several bones in my hand. Then he touched me and the world lurched sideways.

**Affliction: Cowardice Removed!**

When I came to I was in abject pain. My left arm wasn’t broken, so I used that to reach into my bandolier with a shaking, bloody hand and pull out more fairies, which I shoved into my thankfully also-unbroken jaw. Chewing was still a pain though, and swallowing was downright excruciating, because I had only a single hit point left, and the state of my body reflected that. Reimer had always said that health didn’t matter until you lost your last point, and that was manifestly not true in my case, but at the very least, everything else was recoverable.

I got to my feet with a gob of too-sweet marzipan in my mouth, grunting at the feeling of pressure on my newly healed legs. I was in an office of some kind, with books and papers scattered all around and a hole in the wall that was just about my size. I had no idea how much time had passed during my blackout, but it couldn’t have been that long, since my blood was still wet and not at all crusted. I limped forward as I kept on swallowing down fairies, running through my entire bandolier for the second time that day.

I was nearly to the hole in the wall when I saw metal balls zip past, fast as bullets, then a man’s voice, Aumann’s, say “There are wards”.

That was the first thing to give me hope. Aumann was powerful, powerful enough to flick metal balls away from him as fast as bullets, powerful enough that his telekinesis hit me as hard as a car, and he had a revision mage who was presumably going to stay close to him, but he couldn’t see wards, and a warder was at their most dangerous when they’d had time to prepare the battlefield. Of
course, Grak hadn’t prepared the battlefield, but Aumann didn’t know that, and he would have seen his bullets slow down to non-lethal speeds.

Barrier wards were the easiest, most common type of ward, but there were area wards too, like the ones that they used to stop teleportation, and if I were Aumann, I would be extremely worried about gold magic denial that would keep me from being Superman, or something that would stop revision magic from healing me up from another void rifle shot. And if I were Grak, I would be putting up those wards as quickly as possible at the border of the vault they were all presumably hiding in.

Sable wasn’t cutting Aumann’s ‘connection’ to the gold, but I was pretty sure that our side would win any war of attrition, because even if Sable didn’t count as taking the gold out of his control, then surely directly destroying the gold would. And Aumann knew that we had the void rifle, and he had to be able to model us well enough to know that we were willing to give up a little bit of gold in order to depower him, which meant that he knew he was on a time limit.

Which left me, standing in a ruined office, with no weapons to speak of save for the tattoos that laced my skin, and no real plan. The Anyblade had been flung somewhere, I assumed that Amaryllis, Fenn, and Grak were hiding in the vault, maybe even with the door closed, and Aumann … if it were a game I were running, and anyone even moderately cautious was playing Aumann, this was right around the time that they would bust out the 11-foot pole.

Another metal ball went zipping by, but a few moments later I saw it flying back through the air the other direction. Revision magic, testing for invisible wards, which meant that the revision mage now had line of sight down the corridor. So long as the revision mage was there, Aumann could be more bold in moving forward, and he could test for wards against gold magic, and when he found none there was pretty much nothing stopping him from tearing his way into the vault and killing everyone inside it.

I looked around for a weapon and found a heavy metal paperweight on the desk, which I picked up and hefted. Against the gold mage, it would be useless, but against the revision mage … well, they had the truly absurd ability to revise themselves in the event of their death, injury, or incapacitation, which meant that he was basically unkillable (with a few asterisks, but not ones that applied to a guy holding a paperweight).

So I sat there, positioning myself next to the hole in the wall, trying to get as good a view toward the vault as I could, hiding so that if (when) Aumann walked by I wouldn’t be in his direct line of sight. I had the paperweight hoisted like I thought it would do something.

My breath caught in my throat as I saw Aumann walking closer. He held a cane in his outstretched hand, which he was swinging from side to side like a blind man. As I looked closer I saw that he wasn’t actually holding the cane, it was telekinetically stuck to his palm. If my guess was right, he was wrapping the cane in his tactile telekinetic field, which meant that as soon as he hit a ward against gold magic he’d be able to feel it and stop there.

Through the hole in the wall I saw the revision mage follow behind. He was a slightly overweight man with a ponytail, wearing a brown, buttoned-up jacket and khakis. We had staked out Trifles Tower a few times when testing how fast Aumann’s response to gold was, and I had seen the revision mage, Colwin, a few times, flying away with Aumann. I could just barely see everything from my position, Colwin following Aumann, and the vault door that was only partially closed.

When I saw a small hint of pure black come out from behind the vault door, I sprang into action, and a number of things seemed to happen all at once, some of which I would only learn about later.

Amaryllis popped out of Sable, materializing from the extradimensional space with her void rifle up
at her shoulder and a fair amount of pressure already on the trigger. She fired off her shot a fraction
of a second after appearing, putting a hole into Aumann’s head for the second time that day. Colwin
put out a hand to start reversing that the moment it happened, but that was just about the time I came
out through the hole in the wall and bashed him in the side of the head with a blood-magic-assisted
paperweight.

It cracked his skull and left him falling to the ground, but then the both of us were moving backward
in time, erasing my memories of any of that happening, and the second time around he ducked
beneath my wild swing. I came at him a second time, reversing my swing to hit him with a
backhand, once again fueled by my blood, and hit him full on in the base of his neck, and then we
were going back through time again, erasing my memory again, and the thing was I knew this was
happening, I had read all about it in the Commoner’s Guide, I knew that single combat with a
revision mage was essentially pointless, I knew that I must have been landing those hits because
there was no way that he was dodging from blows he couldn’t even see coming.

But I also saw Amaryllis, who to my fractured perception was teleporting down the hallway towards
us, holding a sword hilt in her hand, and after the third time I hit Colwin, I stopped just shy, because
Amaryllis was right next to him and he had a sword sticking straight through his head. I saw him
move back and forth along it,

Isaac Aumann defeated!

Level Up!

Colwin Hearst defeated!

Quest Complete: Your Princess is in Another Castle - Amaryllis is safe from harm for now, and
you with a big pile of gold to show for it you lucky dog.

Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 9!

Level Up!

Achievement Unlocked: Tenth

I was wrapped in a golden glow, tinged with red this time, and it was like a goddess had taken my
brain out of my skull, trailing every yellow-white nerve from it, then stuck it into her mouth and ran
her warm, sucking tongue along the tip of every nerve ending. It was bliss, pure and yet still
unrefined, and once it was done I was left looking at my fingers in wonder, like someone had put me
back together wrong. I still floated in the air and sent out a gust of wind, but I wasn’t even aware of it
until afterward, as I was coming to.

And yet the bones of my ribs and my left hand were still devoid of their energy, and the quest to fix
them hadn’t gone away, because no, the game hated me, it had the capacity to give me limitless
pleasure and locked it away behind the all-too-brief moments when it decided that I had done a good
job, it had the ability to heal me completely but for whatever bullshit reason it had decided that me
doing the clever thing and using my own bones as fuel was too clever and had to be cured because
life couldn’t ever be fucking fair, it was a constant march of brutality and pain with --

“Stop,” said Fenn. She was standing beside me with a hand on my shoulder, looking me in the eyes.
My foot stopped whatever it had been doing, which, when I looked down, was apparently kicking
the revision mage’s face into a bloody pulp. I looked back to Fenn, who was staring at me with wet,
worried eyes. She stepped closer and shifted her hand, so she was grabbing my neck, then gave me a
quick kiss on the lips. “I thought you were dead,” she said as she backed away from me. “If you do something that dumb again I am going to kill and eat you, do you understand?”

I wasn’t sure whether she was referring to me fighting the gold mage or me fighting the revision mage, but either way she was probably right. I looked over to Aumann’s corpse, which Amaryllis was squatted over. She had stripped off his clothing and was bringing a knife to bear against his rib cage, making a careful cut to his still-warm skin next to a tattoo.

“Wait,” I said, moving forward. “Azalea.” The tattoo glowed for a second, giving off light blue sparks around the outline of the wrapped package, and when I stepped down to grab it, it came off the skin easily, the two-dimensional image expanding to three dimensions in my fingertips. I pulled off the twine and unwrapped the cloth, then looked down at the teleportation key.

“Why that word?” asked Amaryllis. She had looked exhausted from the moment we first rescued her, but now there was no longer a fire in her; whatever thoughts had been sustaining her, they were gone, leaving her vacant.

“Tattooist picked it,” said Fenn. “He probably saw the family resemblance.”

Amaryllis closed her eyes and nodded at some piece of cultural knowledge that had apparently passed me by. Vervain the flower mage had been Uther Penndraig’s equivalent to Merlin, and flower names were common among the Penndraig lines, but I had no idea who Azalea was and it seemed like the furthest thing from important at the moment.

“We should clear the rest of this,” said Grak from beside the vault door. “I see we’ve got a teleportation key, that should make the getaway a mite easier.”

The rest was cleanup, the kind of thing that you never want to deal with when you’re in the middle of coming down from having finished something hard. Fenn took the corpses of first Colwin, then Aumann, and after that we stole everything else that was left in the vault, putting it all into the glove, and even then we weren’t done, because there were, predictably, wards against teleportation within Trifles Tower, which Grak finally identified a gap in back on the top floor patio.

We left, with Amaryllis again operating the teleportation key, and after a painful moment -- a pain that caught me by surprise, because I had forgotten -- we were standing in a forest of trees so tall they would give redwoods a run for their money, standing at least a mile from a large house in a clearing, with a roof of grass and wildflowers.

“Check for wards,” said Amaryllis after she spent a moment looking around. Grak paused for a moment, and I didn’t know him well enough to make an accurate prediction about what he was thinking, but my best guess was that he was wondering whether this was his life now, going around with clearly insane people with mysterious powers who had stolen millions of dollars worth of gold and magic items and casually used a billion dollar piece of magic to move across the world. But he didn’t say anything about any of that, and instead pulled out his monocle to look around.

“Some around the house,” he said. “Built into the stones, at a guess, but we’ll know more when we get there.”

Amaryllis nodded, then just stood there for a moment, swaying, and I managed to catch her as she collapsed.

END BOOK II
“So, we have a teleportation key,” said Grak in a conversational tone as we walked across the forest floor with trees towering above us and blocking a fair amount of the light. The dwarf tugged on the dyed-grey braids of his beard as we walked and occasionally moved his warder’s monocle to his eye to peer at the house we were walking toward.

I was carrying Amaryllis, who was out cold, cradling her in my arms. Her yellow, withered arm and the red marks where her nails had once been were painful to look at, so I mostly kept my eyes forward instead of looking down at her. She tensed in my arms occasionally, fluttering her eyes open for long enough to make sure that I was still carrying her and then falling back into something like sleep.

“The first thing I learned when I joined this crew,” said Fenn, “Is that you can’t expect to get answers to your questions right away, and you can’t expect that people will tell you things that it might have been good to know.” She held up a finger. “For example, it was only three days ago that I learned our pal Juniper was friends with Uther Penndraig.”

Grak sniffed. “I don’t like elf jokes,” he said.

“They’re half-elf jokes,” said Fenn, twitching her pointed ears. “And I do have to say that they’re an acquired taste. So far Juniper is the only one to have acquired them, and it took him quite a while.”

“Nah,” I replied. “I liked you from the start.” Carrying Amaryllis was less of a strain than I thought it would be, but then again, I was fresh off a level up and she had lost weight while she’d been locked up in the castle. I didn’t like seeing her so frail.

“Aw, I liked you too, little hooman,” said Fenn.

Grak coughed into his fist. “It isn’t in dwarf nature to be roundabout,” he said. “I was trying to do you the courtesy of allowing you to give an explanation for the teleportation key of your own accord. Tell me where it came from.”

“It belonged to Anglecynn,” I replied. “They were using it to … violate imperial laws regarding exclusion zones, I guess, or something like that, and they were trying to keep the fact that they’d lost it quiet. We grabbed it out of the Risen Lands exclusion zone.” I was skipping a few bits in there, not because they weren’t important, and not because I was actively trying to keep anything from Grak,
but because it seemed like it was going to take forever to explain. That was the same reason that I said ‘nevermind’ when Fenn asked me what a Rickroll was.

“And what is this warded place we’re going to?” asked Grak.

I looked down at Amaryllis sleeping in my arms. “Fenn?” I asked.

“No clue,” she replied cheerfully. “When we left the lands of the undead, the place Amaryllis chose to take us was Barren Jewel, where we had a delightful misadventure in the desert.”

“In the desert?” asked Grak with a raised eyebrow.

“She picked Barren Jewel because it was a place where we could acquire a safe spot to use the teleportation key, where we could get some healing, where no one would be looking for us, and close by to a supposedly-secure location where we could acquire lots of valuables,” I said. “So working from that, I would guess that she chose this place under similar criteria, though,” I looked around, trying to see some hint of what lay beyond the forest but finding only trees, “I don’t think we’re terribly close to civilization here, unless I’m missing something obvious, and my guess is that we’re probably short on some other relevant criteria as well.”

“Hence checking for wards,” nodded Fenn. “Might be this was one of the places that Princess Amaryllis was expected to go, one that they’d have sent people to once they figure out she was alive, or at least once they knew that she wasn’t dead, if they do know that. I guess all they know is that they don’t have a confirmed kill.”

“How long was she captured?” asked Grak, who was taking all this in remarkable stride.

“Seven days total,” I replied.

“Aumann would have interrogated her,” he said. “He would have broken her bones and peeled off her skin until she told him everything that she knew. He had a revision mage to undo the damage and wipe her memories. He was sending people out to locations that she named.”

“And he’s dead now, so that’s,” I stopped. “Moot. Except it’s not, because if he was sending out people, he might have sent them here, except … the keys only go to touchstones or places you’ve been before, which means that they would have had to set down wherever the closest one of those is and would be making their way here right now.” I cursed under my breath. “And unless Aumann was running really tight infosec, which we know he wasn’t, then information about Amaryllis might have leaked back to her so-called family.”

“That’s if Aumann didn’t tell them directly,” said Fenn. “I mean if you’ve got a belligerent princess you know would gut you at a moment’s notice, are you really going to keep her around like a caged tiger waiting to attack? I wouldn’t, but that’s partly because I know her. She’d figure out a way to slip poison into my cup halfway through the first day.”

“He was sending people out to hit all the supply caches,” I replied. “He wouldn’t do that if he was planning to sell her to the highest bidder.”

“Of course he would,” said Fenn. “You remember what he said to us, the value of a thing is in what people will pay, it wouldn’t be enough for him to sell Amaryllis to the people that want to kill her, he would do that and then go to the next-closest descendant of Uther Penndraig and say, ‘Hey, how much you want to give me for this magic rope I stole?’”

I grimaced at that, because she was right, that was exactly what he would do.
Up close, it looked like someone had built an estate house and then picked up the grassland like a blanket to tuck the house in for the night. I wasn’t entirely sure whether the house had been built on flat land and then earth had been filled in after it with new grass put down, or if the house had been carved into an existing hill. The terrain around us was mostly flat though, so I thought it was probably the former. Either way, it was a pretty, picturesque place in a clearing, with wildflowers all around it and a shaft of sunlight coming down that couldn’t have been more perfect if it had tried. There was furniture outside the house, most of it looking like highly polished driftwood, a long table with eight chairs arranged around it, a pair of benches set beside a fire pit, a swirling garden, and rocks placed in a decorative ways that made them seem as though they’d been found there.

“We get it,” said Fenn, “You’re rich.”

And yeah, this place was like a giant finger to the proletariat, not just because it must have cost an enormous amount to build and maintain, not just because there were no roads that I could see which meant that goods and people would have to be teleported in at outrageous expense, but because the place was cozy, Hobbiton cozy, rich-people rustic, and we were in the middle of an immense forest, but the word ‘gentrification’ did enter my mind.

“Nothing suspicious about the wards,” said Grak when he finished lifting the monocle to his eye. “No detection wards that I can find at a distance, and only the usual wards you’d find on a high-value building, proof against teleportation magics and unreasonably high velocities. Expensive wards, the work of multiple warders, a few of them ornamental.” He pointed to the rocks, then just above the large table. “Wards against water, so a dinner party doesn’t get rained out.”

“You think we’re safe to go inside?” I asked. Amaryllis had started getting heavy a quarter mile ago and though it wasn’t at all chivalrous, I really did want to put her down.

Grak nodded. “That means that anyone else would be too.”

We made our way slowly and carefully, looking at the windows. Fenn offered to slip a mask and tank on Amaryllis and put her in the glove so I could walk easier, but I vetoed that idea for obvious reasons. I was hoping that it wouldn’t come to that; there was a reason that Amaryllis had taken us to this place, and I was hoping that it was because she thought it would be safe but useless, a place for us to recuperate and plan our next move.

The front door wasn’t just unlocked, it didn’t have a lock. We moved inside to see a place that was much like the outside, making pretenses towards an organic, rustic feeling. An enormous fireplace dominated the living room, surrounded by plush furniture trimmed with polished branches. Based on the size of the hill the house was nestled in, the twenty-foot ceiling made this the largest room in the house, with doors leading in all sorts of different directions.

I set Amaryllis down on the couch and lightly touched her face, brushing aside stringy hair.

“We’re here,” I whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. “Safe?” she asked, shivering somewhat.

“Probably,” I replied. “Get some rest. We’ll have some questions when you wake up.”

The three of us moved through the house one room at a time, looking in on each of them, Grak doing so with his monocle to search for any wards. Most of what we found wouldn’t have been too out of place back on Earth; they were bedrooms, bathrooms, a large kitchen and a dining table there, a small library with a desk that I was definitely going to check out later, but certainly nothing that seemed all that Aerbian to me. Sure, the construction was obviously not drywall and two-by-fours,
and the pictures on the walls were of fantastical scenes and mysterious beasts, but there was nothing that screamed magic or parallel universe, at least not until we went down into the basement and found the souls.

There was a big glass barrel half-full of those little balls of light, jostling gently against each other on the bottom. Beside this was an engine of some kind, which was putting out a faint hum that had been blocked by the heavy door to the basement. It took my mind a moment to realize that what I was looking at; it was a generator, the reason that this place had power was because on Aerb they just casually used some kind of mad science process to make embryos bud off and create more souls, whose decay was used as a power source, and they kept it right next to the hot water heater like it was nothing.

Fenn went over to the barrel, pulled a glass plug from the top, and then pulled her own glass bottle from Sable, her magical glove. She emptied six souls into the barrel with hundreds of others, then put the plug back in place.

“That’s my good deed for the day,” said Fenn. “Takes a special kind of shitty person to send someone to the hells, no matter how much of an ass they are.” I agreed with that, I suppose, but there was a probably-not-morally-justified part of me that thought Aumann deserved worse than he got.

The only other room of note was a storage area in the basement, a huge place where the aesthetic of the above rooms had been mostly forgotten. Instead of wood floors, there was concrete, scuffed with use and with an open area that had careful marks painted onto the floor. I had seen something similar when we had gone to Caer Laga. This was where anything they were in dire need of could be teleported in, something that was usually done in bulk. What this place had, which Caer Laga didn’t, was a stockpile of dried foods and a walk-in freezer, ensuring that we wouldn’t have to resort to magic in order to stay fed. A cistern beside that was full of fresh, clean water as well.

When we went back into the main room, Amaryllis was up and had just finished starting a fire in the fireplace.

“This place is Weik Handum,” she said as she poked at a log. “It’s known to many. We might have to leave in a hurry.” She turned toward us, finally locking eyes with Grak. “I’m sorry for my curtiness earlier.”

“It’s fine,” said Grak. “A dwarf understands.” He stepped forward and held out his hand. “Grakhuil Leadbraids, of the clan Ligoda.”

Amaryllis gave him a curtsy, using her withered yellow hand to pull her shift slightly to the side. “Amaryllis Penndraig, tenth of her name, of the Kingdom of Anglecynn, long may it stand.”

I could practically hear Fenn rolling her eyes. “We need to get you healed up,” said Fenn. “The boy too.”

“What’s wrong with Joon?” asked Amaryllis, snapping her attention to me. “He leveled up just before we came here.”

“Bone magic,” I said. I rubbed the back of my neck. “Apparently it’s a bad idea to drain your own bones for their magic.” I could feel Grak and Amaryllis looking at me. “It wasn’t really like I had a choice, I was running for my life and needed the burst of speed, I’m pretty sure that I would have died otherwise.”

“And fairies don’t help,” said Amaryllis, more as a statement than a question, because she didn’t think so little of Fenn and I that she thought we wouldn’t think of doing the obvious thing.
“Symptoms?”

“Um,” I said. “Loss of appetite, anemia, and I’ve been breaking the bones a little too easily.” I had gained ambidexterity by raising my Dual Wield skill high enough, but now I hardly used my left hand for anything if there was any way that I could help it. There were other changes, I was sure, but it was hard to tell what they were, because I knew that paranoia was overtaking me. Was that twinge in my stomach the first sign of major organ failure? Was the hitch in my breathing coming on too fast because my lungs had been thrown out of balance? That was impossible to say without a doctor, and probably even then it would take a specialist.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, rubbing her forehead. I noticed that she was favoring her left hand, even though she was right-handed. “Then we need a plan.”

“We’ve got nearly a thousand pounds of gold,” said Fenn. “I’m pretty sure that this is the kind of problem that you can just throw money at.”

“You have five hundred pounds of gold,” said Grak. “Half of what was in the vault is mine. Those were the terms.”

“Fine,” said Fenn. “But then we still have nearly five hundred pounds of gold, which means that we have a ridiculous sum of money to spend on getting the both of you healed.”

Amaryllis turned to Grak. “I assume that when the key is ready again, you’d like to be dropped off somewhere?” she asked. “Our options in that regard will be limited, obviously, but I’m sure we can reach an accommodation.”

Grak shifted. “Juniper offered me a share of your personal wealth, in exchange for my aid in the rescue.”

Amaryllis stared at him. “Everything I have is stored in that glove,” she said, pointing a yellowed finger at Fenn. “I do not have vast riches any longer. Every day that passes, more of what was once mine is claimed by the other members of the Lost King’s Court. There are places, such as this one, and there are secret caches left behind by my ancestors for times of need, but there’s no bank I can draw on.”

Grak shrugged. “It seems to me that staying with the three of you is the most direct path to paying the penance to my clan, if there are some terms we can find amenable.”

“Look, my character’s entire motivation is the loot,” said Tom. “He doesn’t really care that much about the cult of Epsilon, and he doesn’t believe that the gods would allow them to reincarnate a demon, so why should he accept an offer for a ‘fair share’ of the loot?”

Arthur frowned. “You’re right, actually,” he said. “I’m doing it because I think it’s the right thing to do, to appease my god, because I think that the gods won’t allow it but I’m their instrument for not allowing it, for the praise and adoration that provide the crux of my character flaw, because it needs to be done … I would go after them even if there was no loot, so why should I advocate for an equal share?”

Craig looked to Tom. “Doesn’t that just reduce us to being sellswords?” he asked. “I’m not sure that works from a keep-the-team-together standpoint once the adventure is over.”

“Here,” said Reimer, having finally found his place in the book that was open in front of him, “DMG, page 135, there’s a table for character wealth by level.” He turned the book around, offering for someone to look at it and confirm, which no one did. “The game’s assumptions about player
power level rests on us getting equal amounts of treasure in line with our experience gain, it’s what makes the math on combat encounters mostly work out. If I’m following my alignment and backstory then yeah, sure, I would give up a share of the treasure if really pressed on it, but that screws up the game balance.”

“Yeah, but if you don’t screw up the game balance then you screw up the characters,” said Arthur.

“I can fix it,” I said. “You can hammer out an in-character agreement about how to distribute the loot, then I can wiggle things around on the backend so that you get less loot from the adventure and are individually compensated by your paladin’s order and druid circle respectively.”

“Does that work?” asked Craig. “I was under the impression that we were going to get thousands of gold for this adventure, if the church has thousands of gold to spend, why aren’t they spending it on us right now, it doesn’t make sense that they would wait around until after the quest is complete, if they think the quest is so critical.”

I sighed and rubbed my face. “Okay, fine, it’s an iterative thing,” I said. “It’s important for Uther and Zackum to defeat the cult for their own, personal, moral social reasons, but if they just give in on loot negotiations then they’re going to be constantly starved for resources, especially when it comes to the next time, and they know that the risk/reward proposition is already favorable enough with an equal split. And from a keep-the-team-together aspect, the sellswords know that they’ve got a good thing going by being able to pair up with two half-healers that will keep them alive and raise them from the dead.”

“Okay,” said Arthur. “Now let’s do all that in character.”

We took some time to draw up terms. Grak would be paid a pound of gold for every two weeks he spent with us, but it would all be kept within the glove until such time as he wanted to cash out, mostly because it would be impossible for him to carry that much gold around. He would get a third share of any treasure that we found or stole, and temporary access to whatever heirlooms Amaryllis saw fit, with the understanding that it was in her best interests to keep our warder armored up. Other than that, he didn’t really care what it was we did. (A pound of gold every two weeks came out to a yearly salary of just under $2 million dollars, which seemed like a ridiculous sum to me, especially since I wasn’t getting paid at all.)

“Alright,” said Fenn, once we had a simple, written (completely unenforceable) contract. “Now for my terms.”

“There are things we need to do,” said Amaryllis. She’d taken a seat in a large chair by the fire, and was looking like she was running low on energy.

“Looking over our haul is one of those things,” said Fenn. “And I’d rather work things out before that.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis, waving her hand.

“First, I get to keep Sable,” said Fenn, holding up the glove, which was so black it was impossible to see the contours of her fingers. “Not just for the duration of our quest to loot Lady Penndraig’s holdings and kill her enemies, but forever. If Sable turns out to need regular investiture, then Amaryllis, I’ll come to you whenever the time is about to run up.”

Amaryllis hesitated at that. Clearly Sable was more powerful than she’d thought it was from the outset. “Fine,” she said.
“Second, I don’t really have any interest in getting you back in a position of power,” said Fenn. “No offense, but the politics stuff is um, pretty boring, especially in the Lost King’s Court, from what I know of it. Instead, I want to pour our efforts into making Juniper stronger, which means fighting things and completing his quests. Not just for his own sake, but we’re inextricably linked to him.”

“What do you mean by inextricably linked?” asked Grak.

“We don’t actually know,” said Fenn. “Probably soulfuckery, or maybe Juniper is a god. Anyway, I don’t object to visiting the no-doubt hundreds of homes like this one you have and looting them blind, or using the information you have courtesy of your former position in the labyrinthine political bodies of Anglecynn, but it’s Juniper first from here on out. Deal?”

“Deal,” said Amaryllis, a little too quickly for my tastes. Juniper was a lever that could move the world, and Amaryllis wanted to be that lever.

“Third,” began Fenn.

“How much longer is this going to go on?” asked Amaryllis. “I need to lay down.” She was already laying back in the chair, resting her head against it.

“Last one,” said Fenn. “Third, I want us to go to the Isle of Eversummer and avenge my father.”

**Quest Accepted: Summer’s End - Return to the place where Fenn received her scars and bring justice to the elves. (Companion Quest)**

“I just got a quest for that,” I said.

“It worked!” cried Fenn with a small clap. “Okay, we’re going to try more of that later on, get Joon all the quests his little game brain can handle.”

“What magic possesses Juniper?” asked Grak. “I’ve already gathered that he’s five hundred years old.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “Going to sleep now.” She rested her head and closed her eyes.

To my surprise, Fenn picked up a blanket laying across the couch and threw it over her. “Juniper, it might be time you made with the explanation.”

I sighed. “Alright, so I come from a place called Earth, which is a lot like Aerb in some respects and very unlike Aerb in others …”

I have to admit, I had been working on the pitch for quite some time, since before we’d even met Grak. Starting with Earth seemed sensible, say that it’s another world that has some overlap with this one, play up the nature of coincidences and the mystery of how some things resemble each other, pretend that the melange of things that I’d seen in Aerb weren’t just my own creation (which was sort of true, because I had seen a few references to Earth things, albeit ones that I had put in my games), and only then, once all that was laid out, would I say:

“So, part of what’s special about me is that I see numbers in my head that correspond to my skills and abilities, which I can increase whenever I finish the quests that appear in my field of vision.” I said this very patiently and calmly, as though it was the most rational thing in the world. “There does seem to be some correspondence between these numbers and well-studied magics, as related to me by a bone mage.”
“And Juniper’s own special brand of magic marks you as a companion,” said Fenn, which I didn’t really appreciate because it would only complicate matters.

“I see,” said Grak. He looked to Fenn. “Do you have reason to believe that any of this is actually true?”

“Sure,” Fenn smiled, “Juniper is a great guy.”

I slapped my forehead at that. “I’ve done at least six impossible things,” I said. “I mean … didn’t you see me level up?”

“What is that?” asked Grak.

“There was a bunch of glowing light, I healed completely, it happened in the hallway?” I asked.

“When I came from the vault you were kicking a corpse in the head,” said Grak.

“Okay, well … then I can’t prove it,” I said. “Fenn can tell you all of the neat stuff I’ve done, how I’m basically a savant at learning new types of magic, which you’ve seen firsthand for yourself —”

“No,” said Grak. “I’ve seen faculty, but if you’re five hundred years old that’s no surprise, it was only your apparent age that confused me.”

“I’m seventeen,” I said. I think. This body may or may not be seventeen, because it probably belonged to someone else when I slipped into it, assuming that this world wasn’t just created ex nihilo the moment right before I arrived, which it probably wasn’t.

“Fenn said that you knew Uther Penndraig,” said Grak.

“That’s … Fenn, we’re going to have to talk about what jokes it is and is not appropriate to make in front of people,” I said. “But yes, I’m operating under the assumption that Uther Penndraig was originally from Earth. I would have known him nine months ago. Ten now, I guess.” I looked over to Amaryllis, who had resumed sleeping. I hoped that this was just a symptom of her stressful time with Aumann, rather than the rat rot, because if this was the way she was going to be, then I probably wasn’t going to be able to press her for details.

“It doesn’t actually matter to me,” said Grak. “Whether you’re fooling these two or whether it’s the truth, the deal we struck is one that accommodates me. The moment you ask me to act on this strange magic that only you can see, that’s where we have a problem.”

“One sec,” I said. I closed my eyes for three seconds and brought up the character sheet, then stopped for a moment on the screen with my skills and abilities. I had leveled up twice, which meant that I should have seen a ‘+4’ floating in the upper right corner, just outside the character sheet proper. Instead, it said ‘+9’. I’d gotten five extra points from somewhere. Hitting tenth level? That seemed likely, but the game was as always stubborn with giving me information, and there was still no game log to look through.

“What’s he doing?” I heard Grak ask.

“Accessing the mystical secrets behind his eyelids,” replied Fenn.

I flicked my eyes to the side and switched screens, casually looking for any other surprises, until I got to the one labeled companions. To my delight, Grakhuil’s biography was no longer greyed out, which meant that it was probably loyalty level 2 when those were unlocked.
Grakhuil comes from the largely parthenogenetic clan of dwarves in Darili Irid (loosely, Gold Hole). Due to da nad skill in the game of Ranks and overall empathic nature relative to da nad kin, Grak was selected to leave Darili Irid for the Athenaeum of Barriers with the plan that da would return and become the next master warder of the clanhome. Upon returning home, da was entered into a rare arranged pair-bond with another dwarf, and fled from Darili Irid after refusing the Kiss on da nad bond night. Da has spent da nad time looking to make amends for the damage da nad absence caused to da nad clan.

I opened my eyes and looked at Grak. “Okay, first things first, what do ‘da’ and ‘da nad’ mean?”

“They’re part of the dwarven dialect used by my clan,” said Grak. “‘Da’ would be the equivalent of ‘he’ and ‘da nad’ would be the equivalent of ‘his’. It’s nothing that you couldn’t have known by other means.”

“Okay,” I said. “But the meaning is different, because you’re just assumed male for the sake of everyone’s convenience?”

Grak nodded. “Knowing that does not constitute proof.”

“Just curious,” I said. I took a breath. “Your clan comes from Darili Irid, which translates to something like Gold Hole. You were chosen to go to the Athenaeum of Barriers because you were skilled in the game of Ranks, and you came back to an arranged marriage that you ran away from with a refusal of something called the Kiss.”

Grak stared me in the eyes and I hoped that I hadn’t just made some extreme faux pas, or at least not one that was any bigger than reading from someone’s biography. “What else?” he asked.

“Nothing, that’s all I have,” I said. “Hopefully that’s enough.”

“It is,” nodded Grak.

“Alright!” said Fenn. “Then let’s get to looking at loot.” She held her hand out to the side and began dropping things onto the floor.
Friendship is Magic

We had to wake Amaryllis back up for a look at the loot, because the heirlooms were keyed to her, which meant that she was the one that could activate them or, alternately, use investiture to give them over to us.

“Rope first,” I said. “I want to see whether that’s Ropey.”

Fenn picked up the rope and dutifully handed it to Amaryllis, who handled it for a moment before it sprang to life in her hands. It dropped down and slithered over to the fireplace, where it rose up and contorted itself into different shapes. If I hadn’t been ready for it, I would have probably missed the first few, but this _was_ Ropey, and so I knew the shapes would be letters. H-E-L-L-O.

“It says ‘hello,’” I said. “Come here Ropey, do you want to be friends?” The rope dropped down to the floor in a heap and then slithered toward me, wrapping itself around my leg and then pulling itself up to chest level so I could pat it on the raised end that served as its head. “It’s a sentient length of rope,” I explained.

“The Eternal Golden Braid,” muttered Amaryllis from the couch. Apparently getting that fire going had been a poor choice, because she was very low on energy.

“Yeah,” I said, chuckling, “That was the name I gave it, but they called it Ropey. If I remember right it fell in love with a sentient magic sword shortly before that campaign was put on the shelf.”

“And what does it do, exactly?” asked Fenn.

“Oh, lots of stuff,” I said. “Reconnaissance, traps, climbing, all sorts of things. Whatever you would want to do with prehensile rope. I won’t have to boost you up over walls anymore, we can just throw Ropey up and have him tie himself into knots to give us something to grip onto.” I was really happy to see him, mostly because he was the most wholesome, loyal thing I had ever made. He was, if I’m being honest, mostly outclassed by what we already had, but he was still good to see.

Two more of the items were known, not to me, but to Amaryllis, at least well enough that she could give us a concrete description of what they did.

One was a throwing dagger, which had two distinct powers. The first was the ability to fly backward to the hand, similar to what Grak’s axe appeared to have, but fast enough that it stung the palm of my hand. The second ability was that if you hid it on your person, it would teleport around in order to stay hidden, so long as there was a place it could move to. This spoke to a level of intelligence and sensory capability that might have shocked me if we didn’t, you know, have 50 ft. of sentient rope. (The dagger was mine to keep, because I had a Thrown Weapons skill and was lacking for an off-hand weapon, not that I was going to attempt to Dual Wield with my bad hand.)

The second was leather armor, which had the effect of slowing and speeding the movements of the wearer, trading one for the other in short bursts. Fenn offered that she would take that one if I would agree to wear the other (still a mystery to us), and I decided that I was willing to roll the dice, mostly because I knew I had enough different combat abilities that I didn’t want yet another to think about while we were in the middle of a fight.

A third, which was a sickle with a rich oak handle, was Amaryllis’ alone, uninvestable, which seemed patently unfair because she already had a fancy sword. We had no idea what the sickle did, but she was only barely staying awake, so that would have to be tested later.
(A part of me was starting to see a self-destructive pattern with her, the other side of the coin from her being an indomitable, indestructible hellfire woman—teenage girl who would cut down anything in her path to get to her goal. It wasn’t just that she was strong, though she was, it was that she also had a need to be seen as strong. The house had been mildly chilly, in a way that was somewhat pleasant. No one had asked her to move a bunch of logs around and build a fire, she had done that because she had woken up and either consciously or subconsciously thought that she was being a useless burden and needed to either prove herself or provide forward momentum. Or maybe my INS wasn’t all that amazing at tearing apart a person’s motivations and it was a random fluctuation of the rat rot rather than being a deeply character-driven moment for her.)

That left a suit of armor, a bow, and a shortsword from the vault, plus everything we’d found on the corpses we’d collected from Trifles Tower, which amounted to a bracelet Aumann had been wearing, the necklace he wore under his suit, his pocketwatch, and a pair of glasses from the still mage.

I have to say, testing magic items was one of the highlights of my time in Aerb. There wasn’t any equivalent to the identify spell, but Grak could tell whether something had latent or passive magic just by looking at it with his warder’s monocle for a few minutes, and the study of magic was a natural outgrowth of specializing in countermagic. That was how we found the three magic items that Aumann had on his body. I made sure to have Fenn drop his body from the glove outside the house, so his blood would wash away in the rain.

There were, naturally, some things that we couldn’t test. We went outside with the weapons, but I was adamant that we not actually try to hit each other with them, not even with blows that weren’t supposed to hurt, because I wasn’t confident that a vorpal sword wouldn’t accidentally cut off someone’s head, or more realistically, that we’d find out the hard way that a sword left bleeding wounds that magical healing didn’t work on, or something ridiculous like that. It wasn’t entirely clear what the bounds of possibility were, as far as magic items went; six of the exclusion zones were caused by a magic item of one kind or another. The ones we were testing were either owned by Aumann and his people or recently acquired from one of the places known to Amaryllis, so they wouldn’t be that powerful, at least in the scheme of things … but that didn’t help us all that much, because the possibilities were still massive.

Still, the end result was some good, silly fun.

“Okay,” said Fenn. “The bow currently does nothing.” The bow in question had a grip that seemed to be made of sandstone, which let off a dusting of sand whenever it was fired but never actually got any slimmer. The wood that made up its limbs was light and honey-colored, but pretty wasn’t really the criteria we were looking for. “So here’s what I’m thinking, it’s probably keyed to a word of power.” She held up the bow and aimed across the grass toward where she’d set up targets on top of a dresser. The dresser had come from her glove, and I was fairly sure that she had stolen it from our hotel room. “Gambagulon!” she said, and fired an arrow from the bow.

“Does that mean anything?” I asked with a laugh. “Were you hoping that elf luck would let you randomly pick the right word out of every possible word in the world?”

“Wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to happen to me in the last week,” said Fenn with a cheery smile. “Okay, give me some Earth words.”

“We share the same language,” I replied. “The only differences are in terms of references, idioms, and things like that, and more than half those just have a different origin on Aerb instead of being incomprehensible.”

“Fine,” said Fenn, “Just give me your most stereotypical word of power in Earth English, ours would
be something like shouting ‘Abracadabra!’"

“That … is the same as on Earth,” I said.

“Bullshit,” said Fenn. “You have the same story?”

“No,” I said. “It’s just something that people say when they do magic. But we don’t have magic, so it’s something that they say when they pretend to do magic, I guess.” I paused. “What does it mean here?”

“Classical play,” said Fenn. “Supposedly based on real life, but it would have been centuries ago, before the Lost King’s time, if that’s what you’re thinking. There’s a king and his wizardly advisor, who is secretly a traitor, but the king secretly knows that his advisor is traitor, and the wizard is a bit incompetent, so most of what makes it funny is that the wizard is doing all these underhanded things that the king has perfectly predicted. Anyway, it builds up to a climax as the wizard finds this word of power in a book somewhere that will surely destroy the king. One guess as to what the word is, which is revealed when he finally says it to the king’s face. And of course the king already knew about this book, he was the one who had planted it in the first place, so the audience is laughing hard at the fact that the wizard is always playing a level below his opponent. ‘Abracadabra’ is therefore nonsense.”

“Huh,” I said. Sounds like a clue.

“You know,” said Fenn, “Not everything is a clue.”

“I didn’t say it was a clue,” I replied. “You just inferred that from my expression.”

“Well, not everything is a clue,” said Fenn. “I know you’ve got your magical powers and everything, but we’re going to go crazy if we start down that road. More specifically, I am going to go crazy.”

“The glasses shroud people in an aura,” said Grak, who had been sitting at the large table outside the house looking over the other items. “You’re both tinted purple. The entad goes from latent to passive with a tap at the sides. It’s unclear, as yet, what the color signifies.”

“Hrm,” I said. “Is it blocked by line of sight?”

“Yes,” said Grak. He looked at the bow in Fenn’s hand. “Any luck with your own?”

I had put on the armor, a metallic-blue outfit that seemed to display as much variety of craftsmanship as possible, with a large, solid breastplate, scaled armor on the sides and upper arms, then chainmail at the extremities, with leather and cloth underneath. It fit me perfectly, which wasn’t terribly much of a surprise, since that was a standard rule we’d always used. Though I hadn’t been watching her change into it, I was fairly sure that the same on-the-sly magical resizing had happened when Amaryllis had donned the immobility plate, because the thought of that vault having plate specifically sized to a small teenage girl beggared belief (at the time, I hadn’t even questioned it).

I’d moved around in it and tried to get a hint of what magic it might have, turning a somersault and sprinting across the grass, then doing a few drills with the Anyblade, but I’d gone over to see what Fenn was doing fairly quickly.

I knew from Grak’s question that what he was really asking was, ‘Are you two done fucking around?’, which, from an outsider’s perspective, was fair. But it still seemed unfair to me, because it hadn’t been more than a few hours since we’d killed six people, and if I wanted to take my mind off that by having fun with Fenn, then that seemed like a worthwhile use of my time. I didn’t want to
think about the adrenaline thrill of moving to kill someone, the copper taste of blood in the air, the messy way that blood had poured from Aumann when he had a hole punched through his head, the way I felt like I was pushing myself to have remorse and regret that I didn’t actually feel -- I didn’t want to think about any of that, and this was a way for me to do that, so in one sense Grak was justified in not-so-subtly telling us that we were off focus, but in another sense, I was upset with him.

“Nothing yet,” I said. “You thought this armor had both passive and latent abilities?”

Grak nodded, and part of his frown softened. “That says nothing concrete. Resizing is latent, unless it’s in the process of happening. If the armor is lighter, or more breathable, that accounts for its passive magic. It’s common on entads and heirloom entads, part of the way the forge frenzy usually takes shape.”

“But it’s not likely to just be a really good suit of armor,” I said.

“No,” replied Grak. He turned to Fenn. “And you?”

“Look, you’re not our taskmaster,” said Fenn. “If anyone is the taskmaster, it’s Mary, and then only because she’s got seniority. We haven’t arranged for whom the backup taskmaster is, in event of illness or absence, but I personally was eyeing that position —”

“Elf humor,” said Grak, dismissively. “This is important. If we want to succeed at our joint goals, we need unanimity of purpose.”

“Sure, sure,” said Fenn. “Doesn’t mean that we can’t have a little bit of fun from time to time. I’ll have you know that I am our team comic relief, Joon tried out for the position but couldn’t hold a candle to me.”

“If there’s a method of physical activation, it will likely be in the grip,” said Grak. He pointed to the sandstone. “The material is a special one, not normally used in a bow, and it provides a magical effect when touched.”

“Well I’ve tried that,” said Fenn. “I tried rubbing it, licking it, eating some of the sand, blowing the sand out of the palm of my hand, touching an arrowhead to the sand, a number of different ways of holding it, and nothing that I tried worked.” I wasn’t entirely sure how serious she was about having eaten sand.

“Did you try twisting it?” I asked.

Fenn glared at me. “Of course I did,” she replied. She held the sandstone grip in her hand and twisted her hand, which rotated the bow.

“No, I meant,” I paused, thinking of how to phrase it. “Use both hands, like you’re trying to hold the limbs still and rotate the central part of it.”

Fenn did, and that worked, which only deepened her glare. “Stupid bullshit game powers,” she said.

“Sometimes things work like I think they should work,” I said to Grak. He didn’t seem to know how to take that, but his attention was turned back to Fenn a moment later, as she fired the bow.

The arrow hung in the air, a foot away from the bow.

“Huh,” said Fenn. “And now, we wait.”

So we waited. I had a count going in my head, using the mississippi method, and around ‘fifteen
mississippi’ my attention was starting to wane. I began wondering what word they used on Aerb to count off seconds, and whether their second was exactly the same as an Earth second or just close enough that it didn’t make a difference in casual conversation, and it wasn’t exactly like I had a way to check.

“You may need to do something to get it moving again,” Grak began, but then we hit thirty mississippi and the arrow zipped through the air, striking the bar of soap that had been set up on the dresser.

“Thirty seconds,” Fenn and I both said in tandem.

“It needs a name,” said Fenn. “But I’m going to have to work on tactics some, and, oh, wait,” she pulled an arrow out of Sable and fired it, lodging it in place in mid-air, then another, then another, until a full ten of them were hung there, side by side. By the time she’d fired the last one, the first one began moving again, flying toward the air to its target. “Okay, good, no limits on that. Should be able to set up an ambush or distraction with it. That will have to play into the naming decision.”

“You should conserve your arrows,” said Grak.

Fenn held up her glove. “Do you want to guess, perchance, how many arrows are contained within easy reach?” Grak frowned. “I’ll save you the suspense, it’s two thousand. If I run out of arrows, we are probably entirely fucked.” She turned to me. “You’ve still got work to do on figuring out that armor, yes? I was going to check in on our princess.”

“Yes,” I said. Probably good to give those two a break from each other anyway.

As Fenn stalked off, I watched the sway of her hips, which I was pretty sure she was exaggerating for my benefit. She’d said she would stop flirting with me and respect my cultural norms, which she had mostly done, but there were occasional times, as now, when it seemed like she was prodding at the boundaries we’d set.

I realized with a start that Grak was standing next to me. He was examining my armor. “When I left my clan to learn at the Athenaeum of Barriers, it was like being put into another world. It was strange and unsettling.”

“I can see the parallels,” I said cautiously.

“I made two friends in the first week. The three of us were inseparable.” Grak took off the magical glasses, folded them and put them in a pocket, then took out his monocle to inspect my armor. “There is a feature shared by most of the mortal species called propinquity. We bond because we spend time with one another. It’s the same for dwarves, elves, and humans. If we all spend time together I expect that we will become friends, despite our differences in species, outlook, personality, and humor. We start to like people for no other reason than because we’re around them.”

I had the sense that Grak was building to something, but I couldn’t tell exactly what. This was the longest he’d spoken to me in the time we’d known each other. There was something I couldn’t place about the way he talked, not just a noticeable accent with what I thought was a more than usual emphasis on some of the vowel sounds, but in his cadence, which gave the end of every sentence a sense of finality. But for all that, he kept looking at my armor and stayed silent for long enough that it seemed like he was over.

“Well, I hope that we become friends,” I ventured.

Grak sniffed and put his monocle away, then looked me in the eye, which was somewhat awkward
given our height difference. “I made the mistake of having experimental coitus with one of them,” he said. “Neither remained a friend for long after that.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see.” Though the phrase ‘experimental coitus’ was extremely confusing and unsettling, and I vowed to go grab my copy of The Book of Blood from Fenn as soon as possible to check in on some anatomical facts.

Grak breathed a sigh and some tension drained from him. “Thank you,” he said. “This is the sort of conversation I avoid if I can. I didn’t mean to be rude.” He gave the armor a poke, hard enough to almost knock me off balance, but the armor stubbornly refused to do anything noteworthy.

“No,” I said, “You were right that we need to get moving sooner rather than later, and as far as the, uh, interpersonal stuff goes, that’s … a reasonable caution.”

Grak held his hand out to the side and his axe came sailing over from where it had been sitting on the table to land in his hand. “I’m going to hit you now,” he said.

I braced for the impact of his axe, and listened to the sound of it swinging through the air, but it failed to connect. I was pretty sure that I needed more than 18 Dodge to completely avoid a hit while standing still. I looked down at my armor, which was now sporting a white line of discoloration across the bottom of its metallic-blue breastplate.

“It passed through,” said Grak. “It wasn’t a hard enough strike to seriously hurt you either way.” He popped his monocle back in and took a few moments to look at the armor. “That should fade,” he said finally, giving the white mark a poke. “My guess is that the armor allows a strike to pass through you but not in the same place twice. We should wait to see how slow the line fades.”

I looked down at my armor and traced a finger over the white line. That seemed like an amazing increase to my survivability, especially since it meant that shooting me was no longer as much of an option, at least if the protection extended down to where the chainmail covered my calves and forearms. The suit hadn’t come with a helmet, boots, or gloves, so I was standing there in a pair of sneakers that clonal kit had made me. I was pretty sure that I looked like a dork, but that didn’t matter, because I was giddy at the thought of actually wearing magic armor.

“She wants us to kill a unicorn,” said Fenn as soon as we came back into the main room. Her hands were folded over her chest. Amaryllis was sitting up again, no longer asleep.

**Quest Accepted: Unihorn - Travel to the Aon Adharc Glen and kill a unicorn, then allow Amaryllis to drink from its healing blood.**

Amaryllis gave a wet cough. “Remind me never to talk to you in confidence,” she said.

“There are unicorns,” I said flatly, “Because of course there are. And killing one is unimaginably evil, I assume?”

“Why would you assume that?” asked Fenn. “Unicorns are fucking dicks. Are there opposite unicorns on Airth, ones that don’t steal little girls and gore people in the chest?”

“Oh, those unicorns,” I said, “At first I thought you were talking about a different kind of unicorn.” And though I was saying a bit sarcastically, it actually was true, because I remembered exactly the unicorns that she was talking about; I had made them for Tiff.

“I’m not saying that D&D is sexist,” said Tiff with a roll of her eyes. “I mean, the core rulebooks
from third edition on aren’t any more sexist than your average Hollywood action movie, it’s just stuff like women in sexy armor and men in functional plate, or the way the portraits are posed, but it’s mostly genderless and it is making an effort on that front. The problem is that the default assumption D&D uses is of this mostly Middle Ages world that draws on the actual Middle Ages, and both the books and the players are usually going to whitewash that by pretending that the Middle Ages were a time of racial and sexual equality, except that there’s still all this other stuff leftover from the Middle Ages and mythology that will always keep creeping in.”

Tiff was a voracious reader, which wasn’t unusual among our group, but her tastes turned more to non-fiction than was the norm, and she once told me that she read about three words of analysis and commentary to every one word of actual fiction. She said reading what other people thought about the things she’d read or watched was her version of girly gossip, and I took that at face value for quite a while before I realized that she was being a bit impish.

“So there are some monsters that you don’t want to be fighting?” I asked.

“No, no,” said Tiff. Her ponytail had a way of swishing side to side when she shook her head that brought a smile to my face. “I’m saying that, like, the Monster Manual has hags and succubi, right? And I just don’t want them dropped into the game as that, as these unexamined representations of the fucked up way that the Middle Ages thought about women. If we’re going to face them, then I want them to be considered representations.”

“Ugh, Jesus, please no,” said Reimer. “Please don’t ask Juniper to get fancy. You weren’t here for when we played Long Stairs, it was supposed to be this neat little dungeon crawl thing where we were army guys going into an endless fantasy dungeon in Oregon, but we just got constantly bogged down in these moral dilemmas and parallels to American imperial jingoism in the Middle East, or something.”

“It was great,” said Arthur. “Third best campaign we ever played.”

Tiff looked to me. “I wouldn’t mind trying that out sometime,” she said. “Sounds neat.”

“It ran its course,” I replied. And maybe it wouldn’t have, if I had gone with the simpler version of marines using machine guns against fantasy creatures, but there was only so much that you could do with the ‘are we the baddies’ schtick. “Sorry you weren’t around for it.”

“Don’t feel bad,” said Craig. “They talk about the Cranberry Guilds constantly, eventually we’ll just drown out the old campaigns with new ones.”

“Yeah,” said Tiff. “I’m down with that.”

Tiff was still pretty new to the group at that point, and while she’d been enjoying herself, that was the first time she really seemed like she was going to be a permanent fixture. So of course I made a unicorn just for her, a majestic, terrifying beast that was obsessed with virginal purity in the way I suspected a medieval man might be.

“Is there a place you would expect to find a unicorn?” asked Grak. “Is there one we can access from a discreet teleportation?”

“Aon Adharc Glen,” I said. Everyone looked at me. “Got a quest for it just now. Sorry, spoilers. Amaryllis, can you give us the pitch?” She looked tired, and I immediately regretted putting that onus on her. “I’m in, by the way, since I’ve got a quest for it.”

“Can I say that unicorns are fucking dangerous?” asked Fenn. She had her arms crossed over her
chest. “We just fought and killed a gold mage, something we only managed to do because we had,” she glanced at me, “A very lucky combination of circumstance and coincidence, one which I don’t really want to rely on again. We had basically no way to hurt Aumann beside the void rifle, and we had no way to permanently kill his revision mage besides Mary’s sword.”

“So logically, the handful of items we just got will be exactly those that will allow us to kill the unicorn,” I said with a cheerful smile. “Or we’ll pick up the requisite ones along the way, or something.”

“If that’s the plan then I will vote against it,” said Grak.

“I’m halfway kidding,” I said.

“My right arm is almost useless for anything besides using a rifle,” said Amaryllis. “The spread of the disease has quickened. I would guess that at best, we have another ten days until it reaches my brain and does damage that will be much harder to reverse, if it hasn’t already. When I was under Aumann’s care, I convinced him that whatever else his intentions with me, I was worth more alive than dead. Some avenues of healing have already been tried, blood and bone magic among them. It’s an obscure disease with a remote origin, and it’s entirely possible that it’s magical in nature, given how it was contracted. The name ‘rat rot’ doesn’t appear in any book. Some of this information I have by way of Aumann, so it’s suspect, but I do think that he would have healed me if he could have, purely for his own self-interest.”

Fenn nodded along, twirling her fingers in the universal sign for ‘hurry it up’.

“We do have other options,” said Amaryllis. “They will cost us time, but might be worth trying. And here I’d go on about those options for a bit, but you already know what my conclusion is. Unicorns provide an absolute cure to disease, which makes them almost unique in that regard.” She glanced at me. *And I got out of rat rot with a level up.* “When I was eight years old, I met a unicorn at Aon Adharc Glen, far in the northern reaches of Parasteur, while my mother was on a mission of diplomacy. It killed my handmaid and my two guards before taking me for its own. Three days later, I, along with four other girls it had taken, was rescued in an operation that killed three of the ten men that were sent after me.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’s really, really dangerous,” said Fenn with a nod.

“The team was hastily assembled and without critical information,” said Amaryllis. “There were a few scholarly books written based on interviews with the survivors. That information is one of our two advantages. The other advantage is that we have me. I was taken by it, and it should want me back.”

Fenn cast a critical eye over Amaryllis. “No offense,” she started, “But I’m not sure what the unicorn would see in you.”

“I’m a virginal girl before her eighteenth birthday,” said Amaryllis. “Not only that, but it has known me before, which should make me more attractive to it.” She looked down at her arm. “I am well aware of the state I’m in, thank you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Fenn. “I said no offense!”

“I’m still in, but I want go information gathering first, to see if there’s an easier way,” I said. “I think we can afford to spend a day on that.”

“I don’t know what doors Aumann knocked on,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know whether he was in
contact with my family, though I wouldn’t be surprised. I was interrogated, I know that much, but there were a few things that I decided beforehand I would put my effort into keeping quiet, things like this place, like Juniper, and the disease was not one of them. One of the benefits of luring and killing the Aon Adharc unicorn is that it doesn’t require us to go down any avenues that might have been poisoned against us.”

“I have my own condition to think about,” I said. “That’s going to take research anyway, and we might as well kill two birds with one stone. Aside from you, we’re all complete unknowns, there shouldn’t be much risk in asking questions.”

“You don’t know my family,” said Amaryllis.

“Well, that’s my condition, information first, unicorn murder second,” said Fenn. She uncrossed her arms and stretched out, moving around in her still-unfamiliar armor. “Actually, scratch that, I have lots of conditions. If Juniper just leveled up that means that we need to get him training, sooner rather than later, so he can reach his caps before we get to this unicorn business.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” I said. I almost told them that I had nine points to spend, not just the two that they would naturally assume, but held back, mostly because I didn’t want their advice (and already knew what it would be). “Training up is getting more time intensive as we go on. Getting any individual skill to twenty is going to take at least a day, I think, and there are lots of skills to worry about.”

“Then at least get started,” said Fenn. “But I’ve said that I’m grudgingly in, so long as we can talk to some people first. Teleporting in anywhere is dangerous, I get that, we can’t let anyone see us appear from thin air holding a teleportation key, and then we’re stuck for two hours before we can leave again, but it’s a unicorn, killing one is a feat reserved for elven elders, and I’m going to look for my outs.” She turned to Grak. “Does Grak get a vote? Are we a democracy?”

“I vote in favor,” said Grak, “I agree with your assessment of Aumann and his incentives, you would have been a windfall to him. He would have spent a considerable sum to make you well. I also agree with Fenn, we should try to see whether there is a way to solve this problem with only our funds.”

And I hadn’t really had any doubt about how that was going to go, because I had a quest all lined up for it.
In Which Juniper Stares At His Character Sheet

While Fenn and Grak continued magic item testing, I stared at my character sheet and tried to determine how I was going to spend my points.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Well, no, that was the wrong question. The real question was the proper way to minmax, given the information I had available to me. Skills had both primary and secondary abilities associated with them, which probably helped to define success and failure in accordance with some hidden rules that I wasn’t privy to. My guess was that chance to Dodge was something like the roll of a die plus skill in Dodge multiplied by the primary stat and also half the secondary stat, but none of that was exposed to me and it seemed like it would be really hard to test, especially if (as I suspected) the rules changed depending on whether I was in combat or not.

One of the core concepts of D&D character optimization was avoiding MAD, multiple ability dependence. The general idea was that if your character could be boiled down to a single ability score, then you could focus all of your various resources on raising that ability, which would make you superior to the guy who spread his resources thinner. This was in part due to how the math and mechanics of D&D worked out; the game made it harder to just infinitely stack bonuses on a single ability in order to combat that hyperspecialization, but it was still one of the best general optimization strategies.

Because there were both primary and secondary abilities for every skill, it was impossible to go truly single ability, because eventually you’d hit the cap on the skill’s secondary ability. However, there were different ways to divide up the various skills:

1. Skills which have both primary and secondary in the same superclass of either PHY, MEN, or SOC. Those skills can have their cap raised by just putting the points into the superclass ability, which gives a 2:3 payout. (e.g. if One-Handed Weapons has POW and SPD as primary and secondary respectively, and I was only concerned with raising that skill, then I would put points into PHY when the skill was capped on SPD (putting them into POW when it was capped on POW) and attempt to maintain a 5:3 ratio between POW and SPD. If I had done that from the start, then using my lifetime 23 points at level 10 I would have 11 PHY, 17 POW, 10 SPD, and 10 END to show for it, with a cap of 50 on One-Handed Weapons. Going pure PHY instead would result in 14 PHY and 13 for each child stat, with a point left over, resulting in a cap of 39, for a better generalist approach but weaker specialist one.)
2. Skills which have their primary and secondary split between superclasses. This meant that I’d either be pushing points into the superclass abilities on both sides, or I would be “wasting” points on putting them into the specific abilities. (e.g. Parry had SPD as primary and INS as secondary. Going for that skill, and only that skill, the specialist approach would have given me 17 SPD and 10 INS with a cap of 50, but not much else to show for it. The generalist approach would have left me with a 9 in all PHY stats and a 6 in all SOC stats, for a cap of 27 in all skills that didn’t need SOC stats.)
3. Skills that depended on other skills. So far, I only knew of one of those, which was Skin Magic, which required Art to make the tattoos. Skin Magic encompassed more than just the tattoos, since there was apparently scar magic as well, but for all intents and purposes if I wanted to pursue Skin Magic to the exclusion of all other skills, I might be faced with having to raise four different abilities, two each from each of the skills, which could get really complicated depending on which abilities there were and was probably worth avoiding at all costs.
So logically, in order to minmax, I should focus exclusively on those skills that were confined to within a single superclass, which meant that my decision was basically down to three choices, and SOC was a bit of a non-starter, which meant that it came down to either PHY or MEN.

The problem was, the mental stats seemed to be linked mostly to magic, and all the magic I knew sucked. Well, ‘sucked’ was a strong word, but it was blood, bone, skin, and gem magic. Skin magic was the definition of MAD, blood magic was ‘hidden’ MAD because it was mostly a melee-combat oriented magic, bone magic needed a constant supply of bones to drain, and gem magic was not only limited by expensive gems, but also drained mental energy. And worse, I didn’t actually know the secondary abilities for any of those, so they might not even have benefitted from going the superclass ability route (my strongest candidate for Blood Magic’s secondary was END rather than CUN or KNO).

But generally speaking, the conventional wisdom in-universe was that magic was the foundation of civilization and progress. From what I knew of how fights went, there were a variety of mages that you couldn’t go toe-to-toe with in single combat unless you were lucky or smart, and you couldn’t be lucky or smart without diverting points from PHY. With (perhaps) the exception of survivability, MEN seemed like the winner, especially in the long term.

I guess I was also leery of the mental stats for another reason, and that reason was Tom.

The party had been stuck on a puzzle for quite some time, but at least they were working together to figure it out rather than getting bored or frustrated. The puzzle took the form of blocks with lines on top of them, arranged in a particular way and responsive to the touch with displays of lights. There was an underlying, discoverable set of rules that governed the patterns of lights, which they’d slowly figured out and written down, but after that it was a case of beating the puzzle using those rules against an adversarial intelligence. It was, in essence, a boardgame, one that I had developed and then practiced until I was good at it. I had the advantage of that practice, and of not having to discover the rules, but I was pretty sure that I was going to lose, because it was five brains against one.

“Can I roll Intelligence to figure out our next move?” asked Tom. He was playing a gnomish wizard with 22 INT; 18 INT was supposed to be where intelligence maxed out for a human, though that sort of depended on edition. Tom was a great guy, very understanding and funny, but he wasn’t really a thinker, and certainly not on par with his character.

“Eh, no,” I said. “Maybe we’ll do that if you guys can’t beat it on your own.”

Tom shook his fist at the heavens. “Curse my useless gigantic brain!”

“You kind of have to roll with it,” said Craig. “Pun not intended. I mean realistically you’d figure out how to beat the puzzle right away, because you’re going up against Joon, who is decidedly not at 22 INT.”

“Hey,” I said. I mean, it was true, but you don’t just let stuff like that go unchallenged.

“I’m in class with you, you’re like a 15 at best,” said Craig. He held up a finger. “Which is still really good, that’s like a standard deviation above normal.”

“No, it’s not,” said Reimer. “Average for 3d6 is 10.5 with a standard deviation of 3, but that’s for adventurers, not commoners, and if you used 3d6 for commoners you’d get absurd results like one in every 216 people having an IQ of like 145, which is three standard deviations above normal.”
“I didn’t mean literally,” said Craig with a wave of his hand.

“You meant that 15 was figuratively a standard deviation above normal?” asked Reimer. “Do you not know the difference between figurative and literal?”

“We’re saying that Joon would hypothetically have an IQ of 130,” Arthur cut in, “Which would put him in the top 3% of people, or something like that. That doesn’t actually seem that unrealistic to me, there are about 150 people in our class, so he’d be in the top five or six? But the point is that Tom is playing a character who would have an IQ of 160, which would make him Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein, and while you could fake being as smart as them, in order to come up with the same things that they came up with in the same amount of time, you’d have to actually be as smart as them. Tom could never come up with general relativity just by pretending to be Einstein.”

“Okay,” I said, “But I don’t want to give you a riddle and have you roll some dice and then I tell you the answer to the riddle. That’s lame.”

“I agree,” said Arthur with a shrug. “But it seems like you have to cheat at some point, because you aren’t Stephen Hawking and neither is Tom.”

We never really did figure out a good solution to that problem, which was present not just for intelligence but for other aspects as well. It was a bit easier for wisdom and charisma, but the problem was still there, and Reimer got some painful comeuppance when he tried to play the most charismatic bard in the world and then kept sticking his foot in his mouth.

I was worried on two fronts.

First, while it was clear that the game was actually changing things in my head, I wasn’t exactly clear on the nature of how that was working. Building the rocket had been the most intellectually challenging thing that I had done, and the feeling had been one of practiced ease, like I was used to dealing with those kinds of problems. You know how you do something enough times and it just becomes automatic? That happened with muscle memory, but it also happened with other brain functions, and that’s what engineering was like for me. And how was that happening? Was the game just inserting thoughts into my head in some kind of man-in-the-middle assistance? Or was it actually changing the structure of my mind? Would making myself ‘smarter’ or ‘more knowledgeable’ actually do those things, or would it just increase the frequency and severity of thoughts being forced into my brain by the game? (It probably goes without saying that giving more of my thought processes over to the not-quite-unmalicious game was likely a bad thing.)

And second, it was clear that the game was actually changing things in my head. I’d already put points into MEN (and a lesser extent SOC) but still felt like myself. Radically changing my personality wasn’t really something that I was up for, and that seemed like the end result of radically increasing my cunning, knowledge, and wisdom. It was hard to believe that the Juniper that went into the process would resemble the one that came out the other end. I had already started that process and didn’t really feel that much different, but taking the larger leap was frightening, no matter which way the changes were implemented.

So I was cautious. I made a list of problems or questions which I didn’t know how to solve or answer, some of them within the skill domains and some not, trying to spread them around as many different areas of mental faculty as possible, and then including some social and physical problems as well to make sure that I could identify whether there was any spillover. (I would have liked to take some standardized tests, but I couldn’t get the clonal kit to make one for me, let alone two comparable-but-nonidentical ones that I could use as control and experiment.) Here’s a sample of some of the questions:
What is Tsiolkovsky’s rocket equation? (KNO)
How do you always win at tic-tac-toe assuming you start first? (CUN)
What governs the numbers behind hp increase? (CUN)
What governs the numbers behind mental exhaustion? (CUN)
Does Amaryllis feel any actual affection for me? (INS)
What should I spend my points on? (???)
How do I pull social attributes from bones? (Bone Magic, KNO)
What film won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1994? (KNO)

Of course, I was just guessing about what might govern those, and I had no real idea how easy or difficult of problems they might be, but I did want a baseline. The list went on for a page and a half, which was helpful to clarify some things for me, even if it might end up being useless.

And with that I stopped dawdling, closed my eyes, and put the first two points into MEN, which increased all of my mental stats by one each. And then I opened my eyes, because part of the experimental procedure I’d designed included doing things in steps as much as possible.

Nothing really seemed all that different to me. I didn’t feel smarter. Then again, I wasn’t really sure whether people ever felt smarter or dumber, even when they were smarter or dumber due to things like lack of sleep, drug use, nootropics, etc. They might recognize some difficulty or ease with problems they were facing, but absent those problems intellect wasn’t something you felt. I did, maybe, feel a little less emotional, which I might have chalked up to WIS, but it might have also been the relief of having set down this path and not immediately been faced with the existential horror of a changed personality at the first step. So I looked down at my sheet of questions.

And yes, some of them I could solve or answer, which I had worked at before and not gotten.

The four values I had seen for hitpoint maximum were 4, 8, 27, and 36. There was a fairly substantial gap between the 8 and 27 observations, which I would have had data for if I had been looking at my health bar when I’d first started bleeding out in the sewers of Silmar City. If hit points were derived from a single attribute, and that attribute was END, then 1=4, 2=8, 3=?, 4=?, 5=27, 6=36, 7=?.

The big clue was that neither increase was prime, and after doing prime factorization, the pattern became 2*2, 2*2*2, ?, ?, 3*3*3, 2*3*3*2, or alternately, 1*2*2, 2*2*2, ?, ?, 3*3*3, 3*3*4, which would put the missing ones as being 2*2*3 and 2*3*3. There were three numbers that incremented one by one until repeating the process. There were other possibilities, but that was the most simple one, and it gave me several testable predictions. The next increase to END would give me a hitpoint maximum of 3*4*4, or 48, and the missing values, which I’d see if I suffered some gruesome fate that once again left me bleeding out, would be 12 and 18.

Mental exhaustion had gone from being out of 12 to being out of 20, which meant that it was following a different trajectory, and one that I couldn’t predict at all with only two data points, even if I could correlate those to my WIS stat. The likely candidate, given what I thought I had figured out about the END to hitpoint connection, was that it was on a similar multiplicative track; 4=12, 5=20, or 4=2*2*3, 5=2*2*5, meaning that the next in the sequence might be either 5*6 (30) or 2*2*7 (28) (among lots of other possibilities). The former was more likely, given that I didn’t expect the curve to be linear, but it was inconclusive. Fortunately, I had seven ability points left, which meant that I could get more data in short order.

First though, I looked at the most-important-for-now question, which was “What should I spend my points on?” The only new insight I had was that I was capped at 18 for ten different skills, all of which could be raised by just two points into PHY, and while that was a short-term investment, it
was a short-term investment that I might need if we were going to be fighting this unicorn, or if I got into any fights along the way. I had raised sixteen skills above 10 and gotten new (minor) Virtues seven times, plus I had unlocked a bunch of stuff for Bone Magic at 10, which kind of counted. And if I were designing a game, then the stuff that didn’t get a virtue at 10 would get one at 20, and “if I were designing the game” still seemed like a good heuristic.

I closed my eyes and put another two points into MEN, then opened my eyes and looked at the sheet in front of me. The mental exhaustion meter went from 20 to 30, which meant that it was probably in the form of (WIS * (WIS - 1)), or maybe just “the increase will increase by two each time”.

But again, I didn’t feel smarter, or wiser, or more knowledgeable. It just felt like there were things I hadn’t spent the time to figure out, or that I had missed for some reason. Like:

“♬ Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly. ♬”

**Skill Unlocked: Music!**

I had a book of plays, stories, music, and poetry written by Uther Penndraig, and I had the Art skill, but I just hadn’t thought to try singing to see whether I had gotten a skill unlock. I couldn’t really see how music would be useful, unless it was tied to some magic in a way that I didn’t understand, but once I thought about music it was obvious in retrospect that it was something that I should at least try, even if it was only to fill in the character sheet more. And not only was it a skill that I could probably increase relatively passively by singing a lot while I did other things, there might be virtues to be unlocked that could have benefits not related to music.

I tried poetry too:

*There once was a boy from Kans-ass,*
*Who sat in his Eng-a-lish class,*
*He came to on a plane,*
*With no time to explain,*
*’fore he was tossed out on his ass*

But the game didn’t seem to think this bit of doggerel was worth commenting on, not even to give me a message about **Critical Failure!**

So after reviewing my questions again and finding nothing really worthy of note, I closed my eyes and put another two points into MEN, increasing my mental stats by one yet again.

**WARNING: COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT HAS CAUSED PERSONALITY NETWORK TO EXCEED HOLISTIC INTEGRITY THRESHOLDS. REVERSING AND REFACTORIZATION EMULATION TO WITHIN HOLISTIC INTEGRITY THRESHOLDS. ENABLING TRI-STRATUM PSEUDO-INTELLIGENCE INJECTION SETTING TO COMPENSATE.**

The words blasted across my field of vision as soon as I opened my eyes, bright red, all caps, and in a different font. As soon as I had read them, the words disappeared, and I was left looking at the papers in front of me, not really seeing them.

“Well, fuck,” I said out loud. That was not the direction that I had expected a dose of existential horror to come from. I’d read through the Eclipse Phase sourcebook enough to know what was probably meant by emulation; it meant that my mind had been scanned or taken apart and was running on some non-brain substrate which was pretending to be my brain. If I was an emulation, then I wasn’t even at the level of a brain in a jar, I was a brain being simulated at some level of
fidelity on a computer somewhere, which meant that everything I had seen and experienced was probably also a simulation, or something like it.

And maybe it was the fact that I was at 7 WIS now, but I was freaking out about this less than I thought I would. It basically confirmed the simulation theory to me, but that wasn’t actually that surprising. It did explain how I had gone from fifth period English class to Aerb, at least in part. Someone had either scanned in my actual, real-world brain and then made a reconstruction of it on a computer, making some alterations that would give me anterograde amnesia, or maybe they’d constructed me from whole cloth, with no real Juniper Smith on Earth, and possibly no Earth at all.

For what purpose? That was impossible to say. Well, not impossible, because it was a problem with some bounds, but those bounds were huge. Who or what had put me here? Well, it or they had some interest in me specifically, because this world had been created from my thoughts or memories beyond what the dream-skewered seemed to experience. And the message, about exceeding personality bounds, said that they had put in bounds to keep me from becoming not-Juniper.

I had a name for the creator though, one I knew fit as soon as it passed through my mind: the Dungeon Master. I was playing his (or her, or their) game. I had been on the other end of building the worlds, characters, and plot enough times to understand the impulse, if not how or why you would do it like this, without consent or a safety net, besides maybe abject, hedonistic evil.

(There was still the faint possibility that the things I was presented with on the game layer, or this new layer above it, weren’t real, that they were just figments put in place by a unique magic for some reason, but that had become a lot less credible than it had been a few minutes ago, and it had never really been all that credible.)

And really, it didn’t change all that much. I still thought of Fenn and Amaryllis as real, maybe even more real than I’d thought of them before, because now it wouldn’t be that I was real and they were fake, it would be that we were both fake, or maybe just different levels of fake, or the concept of real and fake wasn’t terribly meaningful. Maybe one or both of them had been created to suit me, or to manipulate me by the unseen DM, but that just made them victims. I wasn’t going to pull a Thomas Covenant or anything. The game had given me a warning in the settings screen that if I died I was dead for good. I hadn’t had reason to doubt that.

And Arthur. I was more convinced than ever that he’d been here, on Aerb, somehow, and that if there was ever an end to any of this, if it wasn’t just endless adventuring and leveling up with new companions and better equipment, then the end was going to come when I found the Lost King.

I stood up, feeling like I wanted to go somewhere and do something. I had little doubt that the Dungeon Master had root access to my mind, the ability to wipe away memories or change thoughts. It had been done to me by revision magic, after all, and if it was possible within Aerb then it was possible for whoever controlled the emulation of my mind or the false reality. I hadn’t just caught a glimpse of the layer above the game, I had been allowed to catch that glimpse. It hadn’t been reversed or wiped away. (If there was a message there, I didn’t understand it.)

But the world had rules, and it wasn’t willing to break those rules, or at least it hadn’t shown that it was willing to break them yet. When a person did something, there was a plausible reason for it. Factions and people were driven into conflict by their beliefs and values, not just ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Fenn was Fenn, she wasn’t someone who shifted and twisted to the whims of the game. Even if we had both questioned what the Loyalty number meant, and what impact it might have on her, our growing closeness didn’t seem like it was the work of an unseen Dungeon Master, it seemed like the natural result of our conversations, beliefs, and shared adversities.

“Alright,” I said to the air, keeping my voice low so no one could hear me unless they had a way of
monitoring my every word. Most likely, I didn’t even need to speak, because reading my thoughts surely couldn’t have been out of the Dungeon Master’s power, but it was a matter of ceremony. After a moment, I clasped my hands in prayer, which I hadn’t done in a long, long time. “You already know how I feel about God,” I said. “You probably scanned or created the memory of me attacking Victor Clark like a wild animal when he said that God works in mysterious ways.” That had been a week after Arthur died. “You’re inflicting pain on me when you could choose to do otherwise. You’ve made a world of suffering instead of joy. I never found a good argument that eliminated theodicy and I don’t expect that to change on Aerb. So, fuck you.”

I swallowed. “But until and unless I can actually do something about it, I’m not going to waste any more of my life raging against the heavens. I’m going to keep doing what I’ve been doing. I’m going to keep treating it as though it’s real, because you’ve put effort into making it real, the same kind of effort I like to think I always put into making my worlds real.” I hesitated, because I had no leverage, because I didn’t know what the DM wanted, so all I could do was tell him what I wanted and what I hoped for, which he probably already knew.

“I don’t want Fenn to change because her loyalty metric increased. I want her loyalty metric, if she’s going to have one, to just be a reflection of how loyal she is, not an invisible lever controlling her. I want her to be a real person, or at least as real as I am. And … I’m hesitant to want that for everyone else in Aerb, because sometimes existence is pain, but … if they’re not going to be real, or at least as real as I am, then I want them to be real enough that I can’t tell the difference. I want that for the whole of Aerb, alright? I want to poke at the seams and find out that you thought of everything. And at the end of it, I want Arthur back. That’s the only way that this game is ever going to be worth the candle.”

“Amen.”
It took me some time to collect myself. I ended up putting two points into PHY and another one point into LUK, a balancing of short term survival against long term gains. It was a choice I had made before getting that message from above the game layer, but I was even more certain about it afterward, because I was pretty sure “pseudo-intelligence” was the equivalent of having Tom rolling a Knowledge check because he couldn’t actually be as smart as his 22 INT wizard. PHY was, at present, the more valuable superstat, and it would allow me to reach level 20 on pretty much every skill I cared anything about. LUK was mostly because I had an odd number of points and would probably have to wait until level 20 until I got another odd point, and the time-value of points meant that probably didn't make sense, especially if LUK was properly balanced around not being able to get the 2:3 discount. Besides, there was no way to get a sense of how it actually worked or scaled without spending that first point. (The mental process of deciding these things also helped me to put all the existential stuff to one side, and I won't pretend that my decision was not, in part, influenced by the desire not to revisit the existentially tricky MEN stats.)

Grak and Fenn hadn’t had much luck with the rest of the magic items. Neither the necklace nor the bracelet seemed to do anything, though Fenn’s guess was that at least one of the two dealt with poisons in some regard, since that was one of the classical ways to kill a gold mage. The pocketwatch gave the Aerbian equivalent of latitude and longitude, which was a much simpler coordinate pair given that the world was flat, but much harder to determine given that the sun had the same apparent position no matter where on Aerb you were. The watch was therefore useful, but nothing to write home about. The armchair we hadn’t figured out either; I was suspicious that it was going to whisk us away to the bottom of a dungeon, because I’d once made an armchair that did that, but it did nothing when they sat in it and a dungeon chair seemed like an odd thing to keep in a vault.

I tried to feel engaged with their discoveries, but my sense of detachment wasn’t so easily cured, especially since the news was boring.

I spent some time training, after removing my armor to make sure that I wouldn’t accidentally use up more of its ability to make hits pass through me. I didn’t really want to train, but it was something that needed to be done, and sitting around reading or moping wasn’t going to improve my expected outcomes. I tried to make the training as intensive as possible, exercising as many skills as I could.

The end result of that was me dashing across the open clearing, trailing flames from my hands, singing Rick Astley’s ‘Never Gonna Give You Up’, while Fenn fired blunted arrows at me. Fenn had very quickly set up obstacles by dumping furniture out of her glove, and she’d put small targets up for me to strike with my sword. Grak stood at one end of the clearing, ready to spar with me when I looped back to him, and at the other end were a few melons I was supposed to strike unarmed.

I got sick about fifteen minutes in, but pushed through it as best I could for another few hours, until I felt like I was going to collapse. I had predicted that it would take me at least a day to get to 20 in any one of my skills, but it actually went quite a bit faster than that, and I think I knew why: the tooltip for CUN specifically said it was ‘used to … learn new things’, and it made sense that would have some real mechanical impact as far as what it took to increase skills.

Skill increased: Music lvl 6! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat CHA.)

Skill increased: One-Handed Weapons lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)
New Virtue: Monkey Grip!

Skill increased: Dodge lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)

New Virtue: Thaumic Dodger!

The two new virtues were relatively minor. ‘Monkey Grip’ was the ability to wield larger weapons through eliminating the penalty; I hadn’t known that there was a penalty, but holding a broadsword in one hand no longer felt awkward (the virtue had the same name as a feat Reimer used to love, which did the same thing). ‘Thaumic Dodger’ removed the supposed penalty involved with dodging magic. It seemed like the level 20 virtues were stronger, but they weren’t at the upper tiers of what I knew was physically possible on Aerb, and I was pretty sure that at some point they would allow things that were literally impossible for a mortal man, not just improbable or difficult.

Being capped at 20 because of how I was training was shockingly bad for me. It meant that I couldn’t just train up my Dodge skill against Fenn and hope that our Twinned Souls would allow her offensive power to keep pace so that she was a challenge. The word ‘amateur’ implied that a professional could still help me train, while the word ‘training’ implied that I could still get skills from actual combat, or maybe from other methods. I tried not to dwell on that too much, but it was bad news at a time when my morale was low.

We ate from the stockpiled food in the basement, simple fare with no cooking involved, and then the sun had set and it was time for bed, because we had a long day ahead of us. We each picked a room for ourselves, from the many there were available. Grak put up a detection ward at the main entrance that would wake him if any blood passed through it, and an anti-teleportation ward in the basement where there was the traditional gap in the house’s defenses. I used six of the Lecher’s Vines that I’d tattooed on myself, one at the entrance, another at the door to the teleportation room, and then one at each of our bedrooms. It seemed like overkill but it was also one of the only times that I was likely to use it.

It was good to have something to do, but then I was sitting in my room, not really tired but needing to sleep, and trying not to think too much about the nature of my reality. I was just starting to give in to the pointless desire to dwell on those things when there was a knock on my door. There was a bit of my brain that thought that was awfully convenient of the universe to provide me with a distraction right before I was going to think those deep thoughts, but I forced that bit down like one would force down bile after almost throwing up. Besides, I wanted a distraction. When I opened the door, Fenn was standing there, smiling.

“Got some time to talk?” asked Fenn.

“Yes, please,” I said.

She followed me, past the vines around the doorframe, which gave me a twinge of alert in the one leaf of a vine left tattooed on my arm. Fenn sat down on my bed and smoothed out the covers. She had changed out of her leather armor, and was in a tank top with plain, blue shorts, which had become her standard sleeping attire after she’d agreed to ‘respect my cultural norms’. It had been a long time since I had seen her naked, and I’ll admit that there was a part of me that had a twinge of annoyance at that.

“Grak told me not to fuck you,” said Fenn with a smile.

“Were those his exact words?” I asked.

“Oh, no, certainly not,” said Fenn. “For a traditional dwarf, maybe that would have been the
approach, but Grakhuil trained for like ten years to be a warder, which means that he’s had plenty of
time thrust into civilized society to learn that literally saying ‘don’t fuck Joon’ is frowned upon. So he
does this thing where he tries to be subtle, because he knows humans like to read between the lines,
but he makes sure that the lines are really, really far apart so that you basically have to read between
them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He gave me the same talk. Did he use the phrase ‘experimental coitus’ with you?”

“What?” asked Fenn with alarm. “What does that even mean?”

“You have my copy of The Book of Blood,” I said, “I meant to ask for it earlier.” She was wearing
Sable, which I thought had to be approaching whatever limits it had, because Fenn kept stuffing
more and more into it. She’d stolen all the chairs from around the big table on the lawn.

“One condition,” she said, holding out her gloved hand.

“Which is?” I asked.

“Two conditions, actually,” she said. “Because you gave me time to think about it, which is always
dangerous.”

“Okay,” I said, “What conditions?”

“Alright then, three conditions,” said Fenn with a laugh, “Because you didn’t learn your lesson.”

I gave her my best aggrieved sigh.

“Condition one, I forbid you from looking at the entries on elves and half-elves,” said Fenn.

“Can I ask why, or would that move it up to four conditions?” I asked.

“I don’t know what the bookkeeper told you, but The Book of Blood is somewhat notorious,” said
Fenn. The book appeared in her gloved hand, with its red cover and embossed lettering. It was quite
thick, though that made sense, as it was something of a reference book. She made no move to hand it
over. “Alek Syfriend was this pervert of a gnome who decided that there was a paucity of
information on interspecies relations, where ‘relations’ is code for having sex with one another. He
was really wealthy due to inheritance, so he had the money to travel the world and see pretty much
every species in it, collecting stories and paying whatever necessary to various ladies and gentlemen
of the night to get an up close look. The book turned out to be the single best guide to the mortal
species ever written, but it also appeals to the prurient interest, if cloaked in clinical terms. That’s part
of why it’s hugely popular.”

“O-kay,” I said. “So, the reason that you don’t want me to read from the elf and half-elf sections is?”

Fenn breathed a sigh through her teeth. “It’s, ah, complicated,” she said. “You could call it
something like modesty.”

“From you?” I asked with a smile that she didn’t return. “I mean, you know that when you say ‘don’t
look in this book’ I have to assume there’s something in there that would be of immense interest to
me.”

“It’s not a clue,” said Fenn. “Not everything is a clue. It’s personal. Alright?”

I raised my hands. “Alright, I promise I won’t look up any of the information that you made sound so
tantalizing.”
My mind was racing though, trying to figure out why this would be such an important, somber thing to her. And of course it was the mind’s tendency to go to the extremes and make up the worst possible story, which in this case would be something like, ‘Fenn was the victim of female genital mutilation’, but it was much more likely that, as with her scars, she was just mired in social and cultural ideas and emotions that simply didn’t apply to me. I tried my best not to put too much thought into it, because if she had wanted to discuss it, she would have.

Fenn handed me The Book of Blood. “Alright, condition two, I want to sleep in your bed tonight.”

“Well I’ve got the book now, all your leverage is gone,” I replied. “That wasn’t very smart negotiation there.”

“Eh, I didn’t think you would actually object to having me,” said Fenn.

We had slept in the same large, plush hotel bed together, which had been fine. I had thought that I would wake up with her curled up next to me, like I had occasionally seen her do with Amaryllis during our earlier stay in the motel, but nothing like that had happened, and she’d had what were effectively pajamas on anyway. It was very studiously platonic, the kind of platonic that said, ‘do you see how platonic I’m being’?

“I kind of don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea,” I said.

“Are you so terribly concerned about what Grak thinks?” asked Fenn with a quirk of a smile.

“If you really wanted to sleep next to someone, there’s Amaryllis,” I replied.

“She’s got a creepy yellow arm now,” said Fenn. “Plus I sort of doubt her ability to defend me if we get attacked in the middle of the night. Much better for me to have the most dangerous member of our party an arm's-length away.”

*On a scale of 0-9, how in love with me are you?* I wanted to ask, but didn’t think it was a conversational path that I wanted to go down, not with that flippant of an opening, and maybe not at all.

“Alright,” I said, “You can sleep beside me tonight, but when we get up in the morning you have to make a point of loudly and insistently telling both Grak and Amaryllis that nothing happened between us, okay?”

Fenn watched me. “Was that a joke?” she asked.

“Well, I thought it was funny,” I said. “There’s probably some debate over whether or not that’s enough to qualify something as a joke.”

“I mean, it was really, aggressively unfunny,” said Fenn. “Like you were trying to see whether you could use a lack of humor as a weapon. Were you trying to unlock a new skill? You had Comedy and wanted Anticomedy?”

“Alright, fine, fine,” I laughed. “Two conditions down, what’s the last one?”

“Oh,” said Fenn. She put a finger to pursed lips. “Um, let me think about it.”

“Because you didn’t have a third condition, I knew it,” I said. “Well I’ve already given a lot of ground, and these conditions are bordering on becoming a favor from me to you.”

“Okay,” said Fenn, “I’ve got one. Just to be clear, we’re *not* going to have sex tonight? That’s off the
I blushed at that. It was couched as a joke, the kind of flirty joke she’d agreed not to tell anymore, but I had the distinct impression that it also was the kind of joke where if I took the initiative, it wouldn’t be a joke anymore, or at the very least it would become funny for a different reason. (And then later on, it would become stupid, complicated drama, that much I was sure of.)

“I miss making you blush,” said Fenn with a grin. “Well since we both take Grak’s orders very, very seriously, and that’s off the table, my request,” her face went serious, “My request is, ah, that you try to lower my loyalty.”

“Um,” I said. “I don’t wanna.”

“Because loyalty makes me more powerful and easy to control?” asked Fenn.

“Because I care about you,” I replied.

“Alright, that was the correct answer,” said Fenn.

“In Trifles Tower, when you wanted to leave and the others wanted to go for the gold, I thought that was going to be it,” I said. “So it has to be worse than that, right?”

“I understand why you made that decision,” said Fenn. “I didn’t agree with it, but I’m not some bratty little girl that needs everything to go her way. Look, all I’m saying is that I want you to try to make me less loyal.”

“Seems paradoxical,” I said. “If I try to lower your loyalty on your request, then aren’t I displaying what a great guy I am, thus making you more loyal?” Fenn shrugged. “I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to betray your trust or say whatever mean things there are to say about you. I don’t want to hurt you, and if loyalty can go down, then I think that’s what it would take from me. So no, don’t wanna, can’t make me.”

Fenn stared at me, twisting her mouth into a frown. “Alright,” she finally said with a shrug, “Two out of three ain’t bad. Then I’m going to bed.”

And so I fell asleep to the sound of Fenn’s light breathing and her occasional shift beneath the sheets, as I’d done when we were at the hotel together, and when we woke up in the morning it was before anyone else anyway, which meant that there were no questions to answer about how or why we’d spent the night together.

(Fenn did loudly and insistently tell Grak that she hadn’t had sex with me, and spent some time graphically describing all the ways in which we hadn’t had sex, but she did this out of earshot of Amaryllis. The fact that she was making that joke in front of me and Grak but not Amaryllis was probably significant, but I had decided that social skills were dump stats, so there was no magical aid in unpacking that.)

(As I learned from The Book of Blood, dwarves had something called a cloaca, which was a posterior orifice that served as a universal port for urine, feces, and reproduction. They had no other genitalia. Dwarves engaged in coitus with each other via something called the cloacal kiss, which The Book of Blood described in exacting, clinical detail, but which I will describe here as ‘gross’, particularly the section on ‘cloacal winking’. It was possible for dwarves to crossbreed with a few of the other mortal species, humans among them, with different methods of intercourse depending on whether their partner was male or female. The Book of Blood also described those in exacting detail, and again I think ‘gross’ is probably sufficient. I could sort of understand just from that how Fenn...
wouldn’t want me to read the entry on elves and half-elves, even if it said something innocuous, because there was an undercurrent to the way Syfriend wrote that made me feel like I needed a shower.)

Under different circumstances, the teleportation key might have meant that the entire world was open to us. The teleportation key allowed you to go to either a touchstone or a place where you’d already been before, but in our case the touchstones were right out, because every place with a touchstone was likely to be guarded and warded, something that we really, really wanted to avoid, not just because Amaryllis was a somewhat recognizable princess who a lot of people wanted to capture or kill, but because the teleportation key we had was ridiculously valuable and if anyone saw us arrive they would either try to take it from us, or go tell someone who would then try to take it from us.

That meant that we were restricted to places where either Amaryllis, Fenn, Grak, or I had gone which we could be pretty damned sure wouldn’t be occupied, and which were also in a place that we could walk out of without drawing too much suspicion.

And on top of that, we wanted a specific place, one where we could do research and ask questions about the disease Amaryllis had contracted, as well as about how to fix my drained bones.

That left us with startlingly few candidates.

**Candidate Locations**

1. Amaryllis had spent three years at the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood, and thought she knew several spots that we could enter either it (or the surrounding city of Sanguine) from. Stealth and lies would probably be the name of the game there, though security wasn’t likely to be all that tight, not for the things we were looking for. Rat rot rating: ★★★☆☆☆, Dry bones rating: ★★★☆☆☆, Danger rating: ★★★☆☆☆

2. Caledwich, where Uther Penndraig had tried to pull the sword from the stone, was now home to one of the largest libraries in the world outside the athenaeums. Caledwich was also the beating heart of Anglecynn and the most likely place to run into one of the Princes and Princesses of the Lost King’s Court. Rat rot rating: ★★★★☆, Dry bones rating: ★★★☆☆☆, Danger rating: ★★★☆☆☆, Historical rating: ★★★★☆

3. Cranberry Bay was home to the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh, and given that my personal problem was a bone one, and bone magic was the primary healing magic in the world, it seemed likely that we could find the solution to both our problems there. The catch was that we didn’t have a great point of entry; Amaryllis had visited Cranberry Bay, but she had been young and not on the lookout for hidden spots she could arrive at with a key without alerting anyone. Rat rot rating: ★★★★☆, Dry bones rating: ★★★★★, Danger rating: ★★★★★ on entry, ★★★☆☆☆ after, Nostalgia rating: ★★★★★

And that was it, just those three. We could have gone to Five Spires, or any other major city, and maybe bought some books there, but one of the things the Empire of Common Cause did was enforce intellectual property laws. The athenaeums had a lot of sway within the empire, which meant that they put some restrictions in place to ensure that magical learning was centralized. This was naturally ‘for the public good’ and just happened to increase power and profits to the lobbying body, which was a complete and total coincidence.

(The empire wasn’t actually all that strong or effective, for a lot of the same reasons that the UN wasn’t strong or effective, but the athenaeums were powerful enough that they could use the empire to propagate a legislative framework that almost all the member polities had implemented, or at least put token effort into implementing.
This was then backed up by the athenaeums wielding their power against the various polities of the empire when they tried to defect from ‘sensible’ intellectual property laws and/or certification schemes. Most of the athenaeums had scholarships and departments devoted to placement of their students, which meant that there was a carrot labeled ‘we’ll pay your young people to come here’ and a stick labeled ‘we won’t send you graduated mages’, but with a lather of diplomacy on top of that basic reality. On top of that, most of the athenaeums were filthy rich and nearly nations in their own right, which meant that they could (and did) use all of the standard tactics that corporations used on Earth, like pumping money into politics, having people write editorials complaining about a politician or policy, filing lawsuits, or doing other things like that.

So if you were a prospective publisher of books, you would look at running afoul of either the governments or the athenaeums, then look at how pitifully small the target market was, and then decide to do something else with your time. And it wasn’t like someone could really be expected to learn magic from a book anyway, not when even the simplest of magics took years of intensive, guided study to wield, let alone wield effectively.

This wasn’t to say that there were no books on those subjects. After all, as Stewart Brand said, information wants to be free. However, in a world that had no global internet, information on Aerb had considerably less desire to be free than it did on Earth, and the bootleg books and underground magicians were supposedly something of a rarity.

Where were we? Oh, right, trying to pick a place to go.

We had most of the discussion the night before we left, over our simple dinners of prepackaged foods.

“Well, my vote is for Cranberry Bay,” I said. “It’s the place I know best.”

“We still haven’t established whether we’re a democracy,” said Fenn. “I, personally, think that we should become an anarchosyndicalist commune, taking it in turn to act as executive officers.”

(That was a Monty Python and the Holy Grail reference, which I naturally recognized, but I was certain that if I called her out on it she would say that of course it was a Monty Python quote, you think that’s some Earth thing? And then she would have smiled at having succeeded in derailing the conversation.)

“We can vote,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper will break any ties. I know the campus of Quills and Blood well and have a number of contacts there, though none that I would feel safe revealing myself to. Still, I can send one of the three of you with some advanced intelligence that should make information gathering easier. Healing is a subspecialty of the blood mages. That has my vote.”

“Bone and Flesh seems more likely to help with our problems,” I replied. “We’d be banking on connections outweighing the actual proximity of information if we went with Blood. And neither blood nor bone magic can cure the rat rot anyway, so it’s better if we go for the place that has an emphasis on healing that’s not within the realm of its titular magic, right?” (I had tried with bone magic, just for the sake of it, but it hadn’t worked; diseases were, as stated, outside the wheelhouse for the two most common healing magics.)

“I vote Bone and Flesh,” said Grak. “Blood has always been the weaker healing magic. Reaching for your contacts is a risk I don’t want to take. If we go at the right time of day we can reduce the risk of witnesses.”

“Fine, I’m dying, let’s just do this,” said Amaryllis.
“Welp, looks like we’re going to the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh then,” said Fenn. “I’ve always wanted to see Cranberry Bay.”

She wasn’t the only one. Cranberry Bay was one of the places that I created, and it was special to me, for a very simple reason: I had made it when I was nine years old, in the first campaign I had ever run. It was a simple, innocent place, and the only question was what the lens of Aerb had made of it.
Don't Split the Party

After a moment of blinding pain passed by, I blinked and took in my surroundings, looking for witnesses or threats. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw none, and slowly straightened up. The moment of crisis had gone by in an instant, because now if someone found us where we shouldn’t have been, they wouldn’t immediately think that we were in possession of a billion-dollar piece of equipment that nations would have killed to get their hands on. We’d still be in trouble, but it would be more ‘breaking and entering’ trouble, not ‘stole a nuke’ trouble.

Our destination was a fancy restaurant with a private back room where a much younger Amaryllis had eaten with her mother and a number of guests. We had gone in the morning, before the restaurant would be open, on the hope that the only people there (if any) would be kitchen staff doing prep work, and then ideally we could slip past by leaving out the front door. This, we accomplished with relative ease. I again used the hilt of the Anyblade to fake us up a key.

And with that we were basically indistinguishable from any regular citizens of Cranberry Bay. Amaryllis wore a traditional veil of the women of the Mehkadi Desert, which would prevent anyone from recognizing her even if they knew her face. She wore long sleeves as well, ones that flared at the wrist, with gloves to cover her yellowed hand and missing fingernails. These clothes had been pulled from Fenn’s glove, which had apparently been loaded with a fair number of clothes for all of us, Grak included. When I questioned her about this, Fenn said that I shouldn’t worry my pretty little head about it, and when Amaryllis questioned her, Fenn had only remarked that Sable was purpose-built for shoplifting, which she must have done back in Barren Jewel.

The plan, in short, was that we would go into the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh, raid their library for information, and find a few people who would be willing to talk about bones that had been drained of their power and/or how to cure serious diseases without having to fight a unicorn. We were going to (sigh) split the party so we could accomplish what we needed to as quickly as possible, then leave before sundown with no one aware that we’d even been there. As soon as we’d formed that plan, I had thought about a title card saying, “Three Weeks Later”, or “The Gang Gets Captured” or something deadpan like that. Simple plans made me nervous.

We did split up though, and I was on my own for the first time since … well, since Silmar City, when Amaryllis had left me to die. The strongest argument for me not going out on my own was that there were still gaps in my knowledge, and while most of the major ones had been filled by this point, there were lots of subtle cultural things that I was sure to miss. With that said, the athenaeums were places of learning that people from all over Aerb traveled to, whether by the imperial train network or by teleportation key, which meant that they were much more socially and culturally diverse than almost anywhere else in the world. That meant that I had a lot of leeway to be weird.

So Fenn went to go con someone into talking about drained bones, Grak went to go bluntly ask someone about rat rot (a name which so far seemed to exist only in the game layer), Amaryllis went to go rest in a rented room at an inn (the teleportation key tucked inside a tattoo I had put on her skin) and I went straight for the library.

“The daji hits you, take 23 damage,” I said, without looking up from my notes.

Craig made a few marks on his character sheet. “I’m down,” he said.

“And that’s why you never split the party,” said Reimer with smug satisfaction.
“Should I roll a new character?” Craig asked me.

“Flora and Ike are across town,” I said, pointing to Tiff and Arthur, “Finch is two blocks away, but he’s got no idea that you were attacked, and at best he’d be doing a check to stabilize.”

“Which I could do,” said Reimer. “If I knew that you were dying, which I don’t, because we split the party.” He looked to me. "My turn next?"

“Hang on,” I said. “Craig, do you have anything that can save you? Any special equipment, any magical effects you forgot about, something like that?”

“Nope,” he replied.

“Alright,” I said. “You’re dead. It’s plausible that your body will be found and later recovered by the party, and then you’ll be raised from the dead after that, but most likely all your stuff is going to be gone. That’s the best case scenario for you right now, if you’re really attached.”

Craig waffled, which made me feel bad, because that meant he was actually considering it. “No,” he finally said, “I’ll figure out something else.”

“Now me?” asked Reimer.

“So the argument against splitting the party is that we’re stronger together than apart, right?” asked Tiff. “Like, if we’d run into that daji as a team, then we’d have smoked it without any problem.”

“The game’s balanced around a team of three to six adventurers,” said Reimer. “They’ve got non-overlapping magisteria, so it’s not just that they’re stronger together, though they are, it’s that between all of them, they can do pretty much anything. By themselves, most of the classes can only take on a very specific range of tasks, except high level wizards, because wizards are OP.”

“Actually, I think it’s mostly about the story,” said Arthur. “You can cover more ground if you split up, but not really, because you can’t actually do things at the same time and the players are still sitting there. Half the party is out of the narrative spotlight, which is boring. The reason you’re not supposed to split the party isn’t that people will die, it’s that you’re taking the ‘collaborative’ out of ‘collaborative roleplaying’.”

“Yeah, no offense Joon, but I’d like to join back up with Reimer as soon as possible,” said Tiff.

“Thanks for the eulogy, guys,” said Craig.

The thing was, I didn’t actually know whether the “don’t split the party” trope applied or not, because I knew next to nothing about the mechanical implementation of the game (or the thing the game was running on). What happened to Fenn and Amaryllis when they were out of the narrative focus? I had no idea. It was one of those existential things that I was trying not to think all that much about for fear that I would descend into the depths of madness.

My Dungeon Master had unknown resources that really could include simulating not just all two billion square miles of Aerb and five billion inhabitants, but all nine thousand hells as well. The only thing that I had seen to indicate that this wasn’t what was happening was the fact that a few things had seemed narratively convenient, which wasn’t very strong proof. But again, that was the kind of thing I really was trying not to think about as I walked away from the others.

It was somewhat easy to direct my thoughts elsewhere, because I was in Cranberry Bay, the site of the very first adventure I had ever written.
Cranberry Bay was (very) loosely based off of San Francisco. It was built up on the tip of a peninsula that made up one side of the bay’s mouth. There was no enormous bridge spanning the bay here, but there were piers jutting out into the cold bay water, an island with a maximum security prison on it, and steep hills divided into colorful districts. Every year, cranberries floated up from the depths of Cranberry Bay and were scooped up with large floating nets, to be gathered and sold around the world.

(What’s that you say? Cranberries don’t work like that? The reason cranberries can be seen floating on cranberry marketing material is because the process of wet harvest involves flooding a cranberry bog, agitating the vines, and then collecting the floating cranberries? Yeah, well I didn’t know that when I was nine years old, give me a break. I assumed that in Aerb, cranberries worked differently, or the fruit that was collected from Cranberry Bay was named something else and had only looked and tasted similar to early explorers.)

The restaurant we’d come out of was at the top of the hill, meaning I had a wonderful view of both the city and the bay. It took my breath away a little bit. I had so far seen Silmar City, a lifeless, uninspired place that seemed like it had taken notes from Wichita, and Barren Jewel, which was nothing too spectacular to look at from the outside and a hive of scum and villainy from the inside. Cranberry Bay was different. Where Barren Jewel seemed to be limping along through inertia, Cranberry Bay was a city in the prime of its life, a clear festival of commerce and culture. And as I watched, I could see that we were just in time for the cranberry harvest, because the bay was tinged red and big ships with white sails were dragging nets behind them.

Other than the titular cranberries, there wasn’t that much to suggest the place that I’d built. This city was too dominated by the athenaeum, and it wasn’t really that much of a shipping city at all, not like I’d drawn it up, because teleportation magic meant that with a few exceptions, it didn’t make any sense to send things across the world by boat. The ships in the bay didn’t even have the colors of the Cranberry Guilds on them, which meant that the whole plot about cutthroat cranberry trade wasn’t in play. I didn’t have time for a quest like that one, but it was still a disappointment. A lot of the potential hit of nostalgia had clearly been removed, and I wondered whether that was by intent.

The Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh wasn’t hard to find; four of the five tallest buildings in the city were on its sprawling campus. There was no unifying architectural style to Cranberry Bay, but two of those four buildings seemed like they were meant to be a matching set. Both were giant castles, fifty or sixty stories tall, and at least on the exterior they looked like they had been built by mad wizards who had been told that they could build whatever rooms they wanted so long as they never tore anything down. I had never seen a building that large which still looked ramshackle, and I was immediately suspicious that it was all just aesthetic, a facade meant to look quirky but which hid an interior of straight, clean lines.

It felt good to be on my own. I had always been a fairly solitary person, and with the exception of tabletop nights, I preferred to spend my time alone. I was one of those people who always felt relieved when plans fell through, because it meant that I was suddenly free from the effort of being around other people. Even when it was just Fenn and I, I didn’t really have missions to undertake on my own, nor did I often leave the hotel room to get some fresh air, at least not without her by my side. I liked Fenn, I really did, but being without her was freeing. The game had a bar labeled “mental exhaustion” and the way the stats were set up it seemed logical to think that there was a hidden metric somewhere called “social exhaustion”, one which needed some time to be recharged.

I was out of my magical armor, though I did have a bandolier of fairies across my chest, and the Anyblade was in its ring form, ready to spring to a greatsword with a thought. I had Ropey too, who was coiled into a messenger bag by my side, plus my throwing dagger, a few emergency bones, a sizeable sum of money, and a vial of liquid nicotine I was hoping I wouldn’t have to use. There
were some taboos against going around armed and armored, but few nations had laws against it, and Cranberry Bay (part of the Monarchical Democracy of Esplandian) was not one of them. Come to think of it, I was pretty sure that there weren’t many laws against wearing full body armor in America either. Still, it would have marked me as squarely out of the ordinary, and that was something I really didn’t want to be. The bandolier was maybe a bit unusual, but not so much that I thought I would draw stares.

I kept wanting to stop and look at things. I’d felt the same way in Barren Jewel, but Barren Jewel was a shithole where I felt like I was constantly in danger of being mugged or pickpocketed, and if not that, then maybe just stepping in refuse. Cranberry Bay was clean, and if not quite organized into a sensible grid, then at least with a degree of city planning and complex infrastructure. That made exploration all the more tempting, because it meant that I was more likely to be safe if I wandered off to a place serving teas that billowed with smoke, or went into a shop that had floating stones in its storefront, or decided to follow along after a green-skinned woman with a shell on her back to see what her deal was. The shell was decorated with a complex, miniature cityscape which had been affixed to it, and she walked in such a way that all the buildings of the city stayed level with the ground. I stopped myself from wandering after her only when she saw that I was paying attention and flashed me a smile.

Amaryllis was dying. I wasn’t dying, per se, but my hand was numb and uncoordinated, my appetite was weak, and I was getting some nausea from time to time that wasn’t going to do me any favors in a fight. The anemia that was supposed to accompany the effect wasn’t a real problem yet, because I’d been topped off on blood when I leveled, but in the long term, it wasn’t looking good. That was what was at stake here. Wanting to go fuck off and look at the wares in a random magic shop or follow a turtle woman was basically the equivalent of me putting off homework until the last minute because I wanted to watch anime or write up a city description for a campaign we would never end up playing. It was a mild surprise to find that this part of me hadn’t changed all that much during my three weeks on Aerb. I did eventually manage to make it to what I thought of as ‘campus’ without getting distracted by men in two-foot-tall hats or a gaggle of children with glowing red rings around their necks.

The Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh was fucking huge. It was the only authorized place to learn bone magic in all of Aerb, and had an enrollment of four million students. That made it about six thousand times larger than my high school. In terms of students alone, it was larger than Los Angeles, and that was without including all the teachers, janitors, cooks, landlords, housekeeping, entertainment, et cetera, all the people that it took to make the athenaeum a functional institution, plus every person that was indirectly employed because of the needs of the students, teachers, and staff.

I knew that I was in the thick of campus by the fact that everyone around me seemed to be wearing bones. I was pretty sure that some of that was a fashion choice, because it wasn’t like there were many opportunities to actually practice bone magic, and bones were expensive enough that you couldn’t just use them willy-nilly. Some people wore them like Tova had, with bones strapped in bandoliers, while others wore them coming up from the back, or bundled in a quiver at the hip. Most of the bones were big, but some people favored lots of small bones, like those from a salmon, arrayed within easy reach. I saw a few distinguished-looking people with skulls atop walking sticks, but they were a rarity.

There were relatively fewer humans among the students and faculty I saw walking around; unlike Barren Jewel, they were a plurality here rather than a strict majority. There were quite a few dwarves, mostly traveling in packs, but I saw only two elves. The rest were a riot of races, sometimes in groups and sometimes in mixed company, many that I recognized and a few that I didn’t. Save for the section on dwarves, I hadn’t read through The Book of Blood yet, largely because reading a reference work cover to cover seemed like a pain in the ass, especially when there were other books
waiting to be read and skill training that needed to get done.

We’d done the minimum amount of research ahead of time, so I knew which building I was going for. It was one of the larger ones that sat between the wide green concourses, Coeus Hall, the biggest and most generalized of the athenaeum’s eight different libraries. There were people streaming in and out of it, though fewer than I had imagined there would be. It made sense when I thought about it though. Most of the students were here studying to be bone mages, going through the same five year course of study that Bormann had mentioned to me, which meant the same or similar material and instruction, with the same or similar textbooks. Libraries were more useful if you wanted to go deep into a subject and find the esoterica, so the students going to those would be the ones who were specializing.

I went in through the front doors, passing through a few wards that Grak had warned me about (wards to keep the books in and the water out) and trying to look like I belonged. It was by far the largest library that I had ever been in and it seemed as though the architect had designed the entrance so that I would know it. The library was a hundred feet tall, with most of it sitting under an immense dome. The floors of shelving extended up into the dome, but with a hollow space in the middle that seemed to be there specifically so that you could see all the shelves that radiated out on all ten of its levels.

“First time?” asked a woman in an off-white robe. She was bog-standard human, maybe a bit on the short side, with her hair pinned up in an elaborate bun. She was giving me a pleasant smile.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. I looked around the library, and behind a long, curved desk I could see other people in off-white robes stacking and sorting books. It was a uniform then, which meant that this woman was a librarian. Regrettably, there was no name tag.

“You were staring,” she said, gesturing to the dome. “It happens.”

“The architect wasn’t thinking about what the view would do to foot traffic, huh?” I asked.

“He was under a forge frenzy, actually,” said the librarian. “So in a very real sense, no, he wasn’t thinking about foot traffic. Would you like a tour?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But, I’m actually under a bit of a deadline, so ...”

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she asked.

“Um,” I replied. I didn’t know the library policy on whether non-students were allowed to look at books, and didn’t want to ask in case the answer was that they weren’t. I didn’t know what assumptions she was making about me. “If I told you I was looking for a particular subject rather than a particular book, could you help me find something worth reading?”

“Certainly,” said the woman. She pointed a finger at herself. “Clara.”

“Sam,” I said. “You work here?”

“Work study,” she replied. “We’re going to need the catalogs,” she began moving towards some large rows of cabinets. “I’m not a proper librarian, I work here because it ‘builds character’, nominally to defray the cost of tuition. I can still probably find you what you need.” We reached the cabinets and Clara looked at me expectantly. “What is it that you need?”

“I was looking for information on a very specific, non-contagious,” hopefully non-contagious? “disease, but I don’t know the name of it, just the symptoms, plus where and how it was contracted.”
“Okay, so you’re going to need a reference book,” said Clara. “It would probably help to nail down geographical region, if possible. You’re sure it’s non-contagious?”

“Pretty sure,” I replied. “It was originally spread by rat scratch. And the region was, ah, the Risen Lands exclusion zone.”

*And if she goes to grab someone else, that’s my cue to leave, because I am absolutely not going to let myself get ambushed for having asked the wrong questions.* I wasn’t sure how smart it was to be sharing that information, but this woman was clearly a low-ranking bone mage on work study, and whatever vast, shadowy conspiracy was arrayed against Amaryllis (and therefore me) they couldn’t have spread agents that far, not given that Amaryllis had only been known to have rat rot for something like two weeks.

“Huh,” said Clara. “If it’s confined to the exclusion zone you might be out of luck,” she said. “Worrying about disease in a major exclusion zone is kind of … not done. Is this for a particular purpose?” She saw my hesitance. “Just curious, you don’t have to say if it’s secret.”

“Did you know that Anglecynn drops people into the exclusion zone as a form of punishment?” I asked.

“Ugh,” said Clara, “Yes, I’m well familiar with that bit of barbarism. So someone made it back, got inducted into the Host, but contracted a disease along the way?”

“Something like that,” I replied. “So I’m here, trying to at least figure out what kind of disease it is. He’s got about a week left to live, which I hope explains why I didn’t want to take the tour.” And if she asked about the distance, which was on the order of ten thousand miles, I would just tell her that I got my orders by radio. This wasn’t a terribly clever story, but there was only so much I could do.

“Well then, let’s get moving,” said Clara. She began pulling out a long drawer of organized cards from the cabinet, and that was when I realized that this library used actual card catalogs, because it obviously didn’t have a computer system. “Now, the hope is that it’s not unique to the Risen Lands. They’re a former territory of the Kingdom of Francorum, so we can probably start by, ah -- here.” She pulled out a card and showed it to me. “Start with *Diagnostic Manual of Fatal Diseases of the Bretaigne Continent and Zorish Isles.* Come find me if you’re having trouble.” She grabbed a pencil and paper from the top of the card catalog and copied down the information for me. “I’ll be by the entrance, hassling people who are staring in awe at the upper levels.” She gave me a smile and then left.

The library didn’t use the Dewey Decimal system, so it took a little bit of wandering for me to find what I was looking for, but however they were classifying their books, they were using lots of numbers, and then helpfully labeling all of the shelves and books with those numbers. I found the book I was looking for three levels up, a thick, imposing one next to other thick, imposing ones, and went to the index, looking for ‘rat rot’. When that didn’t bear fruit, I started a search, reading brief descriptions and looking mostly at the symptoms and disease vectors.

I was in the middle of doing this when Clara came by, leading a man with red hair, freckles, and red armor joined at the seams with nearly-black leather. He had a sword at his hip and both a cloak and shield on his back, which would have been enough to mark him as trouble if the look on his face hadn’t said it all.

“Sam,” said Clara, “This is your friend?”

I stared at the man and desperately regretted not dumping all my points into social skills. “Uh.”

*Nailed it again. They keep setting them up and I keep knocking them down. Who needs special*
magic when you’re this good at talking your way out of trouble?

“Have you found anything on ‘rat rot’ yet?” he asked.

I was absolutely sure that my face gave me away. I could feel tension in my stomach and ice in my veins, and I was pretty sure that I was going to start having cold sweats in short order. Stupid 2 POI and 8 Deception meant that I was going to give it all away without actually having said anything. In which case, the logical thing to do was to get myself in a position where I could run away and disappear into the city. I didn’t know whether this guy was a friend or not, but the probably-magical items, slight family resemblance to Amaryllis, and the fact that he could only have learned about rat rot from our enemies were all pretty sure signs in favor of slapping a “foe” designation on him.

“Clara, if you could excuse us?” I asked. No sense in letting her get caught in the inevitable crossfire.

**Virtue: Ruthless Removed!**

**New Virtue: Conscientious!** *(Flattery +5, Romance +5)*

I tried to do my best not to react to those notifications. Ruthless hadn’t actually done anything, at least not in its level 0 incarnation. I didn’t actually use either of the skills I was now getting a bonus to, but it was a sizeable impact to them, and was better than nothing.

“Sure,” said Clara, though she was giving the both of us a wary look. She left without further comment, and the man in front of me waited until she was out of earshot to speak.

“Can you imagine my luck to hear that someone else was looking after a disease from the Risen Lands contracted by rat?” he asked. “Tell me where she is.”

“Who?” I asked. “Actually, first, who are you?”

“Larkspur Prentiss, second of his name, Foreign Security Director of the Kingdom of Anglecynn,” he replied. “My best guess would be that you are Juniper Smith, traveling companion to my erstwhile cousin. Tell me where she is.”

“Who?” I asked. “Actually, first, who are you?”

“Larkspur Prentiss, second of his name, Foreign Security Director of the Kingdom of Anglecynn,” he replied. “My best guess would be that you are Juniper Smith, traveling companion to my erstwhile cousin. Tell me where she is.”

“Sorry, it’s not ringing a bell,” I replied. **Armor, sword, cloak, shield, all probably magical, plus he’s probably got training in at least one school of magic, maybe many, plus hidden magics I would have no way of knowing about, plus extensive training as a fighter. That point I put into LUK was a waste.**

“Where, exactly, did you come from?” he asked, looking me over. **The intelligence reports are muddled and inconsistent with regards to you. Fenn Greenglass I already knew of, hand-selected in fact, and it doesn’t take much of a guess to know that the gruesome fate of Browsnout Quills-in-hand was her doing.”**

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, not caring that the lie was transparent, “But it kind of seems like you’re shit at your job.”

Larkspur looked me over. “Do you think flippancy is how you escape this?” he asked.

“I think that I don’t have to escape this,” I replied. **My guess is that your powers as a Foreign Whatever don’t include going into an athenaeum and kidnapping or killing a random person there. I’m sure that you could make up some kind of story about how I was a dangerous criminal that you tracked down, or something more clever, but there would be an awful lot of witnesses, and my guess is that you’re bound by politics just like any other Prince or Princess of Anglecynn is.”**
That was my read of the situation, anyway, and if I was wrong, then Larkspur’s reaction would tell me something, and my cockiness about it would demonstrate me to be an overconfident idiot, which might be its own advantage. I had no idea whether I was playing this right. The fact that he was apparently here alone was suggestive, and obviously I knew that he was both the guy who ordered the fireteam after Amaryllis, and that he was also chasing after a teleportation key.

“You’re gambling,” he said. “You think that I care more about politics than about catching Amaryllis.”

I shrugged. “Again, I don’t know anything about what you’re talking about. And if I did know anything about anything, I wouldn’t tell you, because you seem like an asshole.” (And on second thought, I didn’t actually believe that it was just luck that brought us together, especially not the smarmy way that he said it, it was probably some kind of probability manipulation, clairvoyance, prediction, or LUK, and the fact that he tried to slip that under my nose like he was oh-so-clever made me hate him even more.)

“That it would appear that we’re at an impasse,” said Larkspur, confirming that politics really were a legitimate problem and that a fight in the athenaeum library of a foreign country would raise a lot of questions that he didn’t want to answer. He looked at the book in my hand. “I wasn’t being flippant, I really did want to know whether you had found anything.”

I slid the book back onto the shelf. However he had found me, the fact that I was here gave him some concrete information, namely that rat rot was still a problem that we were working on. He’d know that just from having read the title of the book I was holding. He seemed to be leaking information far worse than I was, but that wasn’t much consolation, because I was pretty sure that he would beat me in a fight, even if he had come alone.

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“I don’t know what hold she has over you,” said Larkspur, “But if it’s money, I’ll double it, and if there’s some magical item she’s invested in you --” he glanced at my ring, “-- I am in a position to offer you more. Blackmail, hostages, magical compulsions, whatever it is, I can make problems disappear.”

Larkspur was standing at the entrance to the aisle, with a thick railing behind him, and a three story drop down to the library floor beyond that. I was between the books, with not enough room to swing a sword. He was constrained, at least in part, by politics, and while dragging me out of the library probably was an option, it was one that he was loathe to pursue, for pretty obvious reasons. Me? Well as Reimer used to say, politics is a dump stat.

I ran straight for Larkspur, using every ounce of blood magic I could muster, while at the same time reaching my hand into my messenger bag and readying the Icy Devil tattoo if he tried to grab me. I ducked down as he drew his sword and got under him, then pushed with the power of a Sanguine Surge, trying to send him over the side of the railing. He turned to the side to avoid me and my shoulder clipped his stomach, sending him backward. I went over the edge, as planned, and flung my sentient rope toward the railing.

One end of Ropey wrapped itself tight around my wrist, while the other slipped through the posts and knotted itself around them. I fell twenty feet and had my shoulder nearly wrenched from my socket, breaking a number of bones in my hand in the process, then swung back in toward the lower levels and slammed up against a railing, which I quickly climbed over. Ropey fell down from the floor above and started quickly coiling himself around my chest, which I felt a moment of panic over before realizing that he was fashioning himself into rope armor for me.

I stayed on the second floor only for long enough to shove fairies into my mouth, then vaulted over the railing and brought the Anyblade out to its full extension of eight feet and attempted to brace...
myself against it. My clever plan had been to retract the blade when it made contact, allowing me to cushion my fall, but I heard the internal crunch of a rib and ended up coming clumsily down on a table, which was painful but not blindingly so.

From there I was up and running in short order, looking back only for long enough to see Larkspur jump from the fourth floor. It would have been really nice if he had been forced to take some pain and injury getting down, like I did, but when he was two feet from the ground he did what was clearly a double-jump and landed on top of a table, then gave chase with his sword in one hand and shield in the other.

I swore and booked it, making each step a Sanguine Surge timed to my racing heart. I reached into my bag as I went, grabbing the first bone I could find, and sucked it dry of END before tossing it aside to grab the next one, which went to SPD as I raced past frightened and bewildered students and library staff.

But of course it wasn’t going to be as easy as just bum rushing my way through the entrance, because there were two people standing there. The first was an enormous guy in full plate, with a concealing helmet. He had a machine gun at his side, which he wasn’t using, instead preferring to spread his arms wide like he meant to either block my path or catch me. The other was a slender woman with horns who held a glowing staff that she was spinning, twirling it faster with each revolution, which I did not like the looks of at all. I drained another bone for SPD as I barreled ahead.

I threw the dagger at her and wasn’t terribly surprised when she had no reaction to being struck in the face point-first. Instead, there was a plunk and the armored guy’s head moved back a bit; this was that same bullshit soul linking thing that I’d squeaked my way out of back in Silmar City. The dagger returned to my hand, landing in my palm at a speed that was painful. This time I didn’t have a convenient elevator shaft to drop one or both of them down, and I didn’t have the void rifle either. My objective was easier though, because I didn’t have to actually kill them, just escape.

I turned the Anyblade into a halberd and ran right for the guy in armor, then at the last second, slammed it down into the ground and tried my best to leverage myself up and over him like I was pole vaulting, retracting the Anyblade as soon as my weight was off it. I was still riding a high of SPD from the bones and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion; I saw the brute’s hand reaching up for me as he tried to track me and twisted out of the way, then landed on the ground by the door just as the glowing staff became perceptually identical to a translucent disk.

I burst out the door without looking behind me to see what that weapon’s new shape was capable of. I hooked to the left once I was past the door and was treated to the sound of breaking wood as the disk spun through the air where I had been. I pulled my last bone from my bag, shrunk the Anyblade down to ring size, and tried to pull SPD as slowly and steadily as possible to ensure it would last. Then I put all my efforts into outpacing them and tried to figure out what I was going to do next.
Skill increased: Blood Magic lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)

New Virtue: Hypertension!

Skill increased: Athletics lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)

New Virtue: Long-distance Runner!

I stopped using Sanguine Surge with every step once I was down a thousand drops of blood. I’d had a moment of panic when I’d gotten the Hypertension virtue, because the bar tracking blood had seemed to go from almost entirely full to half-full in a matter of an eyeblink. The numbers had changed though, and it was 74K/150K now, which seemed to indicate that my body could or would hold twice as much blood as it could before. I was hoping that I had also gained access to more magic, but now wasn’t the time to do tests. I didn’t want to spare the time to look at Long-distance Runner either, because I was pretty sure that wasn’t anything to get excited about.

I tried to move semi-randomly through the city streets, and kept up a full run until my chest began to ache. I was grateful for the extra points I had put into PHY, because I was pretty sure that the boneitis would be hitting me harder if I hadn’t. I eventually came to a stop in an alley and hid behind a very square-shaped dumpster.

Problem #1 was that I didn’t know how Larkspur had found me, or whether it actually was anything other than blind luck that we ran into each other. It was hard to infer what kind of conversation he’d had with Clara, which would have clued me in on at least what assumptions he’d held going in, but I wasn’t sure that time spent thinking about that would actually be helpful, especially because his half of the conversation was probably extremely deceptive. It was possible but improbable that he had asked her the same questions I had, which might have led her to ask him if he knew me, and them to come up together. I didn’t actually know for sure one way or another.

Problem #2 was that it hadn’t actually been that long since I had gone into the library, we weren’t meant to meet up at the inn until sundown, and I didn’t know where Fenn or Grak had gotten off to, only their mission parameters. I thought that Amaryllis was probably safe, because Larkspur had been asking me where she was, which he wouldn’t have bothered with if it were trivial for him to find out. Had he known that I was going to be in the library? Or had he been guided there by something and not known what, exactly, he would find? It didn’t particularly seem like he had been ready to deal with me, and I wasn’t just saying that in hindsight because I had gotten away.

If Larkspur hadn’t known that I was going to be in the library until he saw me, then my presence gave him more bits of information than I thought it had, but it still didn’t seem like an utter disaster. I had learned at least a little bit about him, his capabilities, and his team members, which I had to regard as a plus. On balance, that was worth half my fairies and all the bones in my bag, along with the information that I’d essentially ended up trading to him, so long as the whole party got back together and in one piece.

I slipped my bandolier into my bag, told Ropey that I didn’t need him as armor at just that moment, and stepped out of the alley, looking around carefully to see whether anyone was looking for me. I was fortunate that all three people I had seen were pretty distinctive, even by the standards of the multicultural wonderland that was Cranberry Bay. There was a strong possibility that there were others I hadn’t seen, since five was the magic number for teleportation keys, but looking askance at
everyone that I saw would only make me stand out more.

I ducked into a clothing store and bought the first two things I thought would work, paying quickly and then stepping into the changing room to put them on right away. I ended up in loose, earth-green pants that were barely held up by a tight belt, and a loose-fitting rosy red shirt that seemed similar enough to what I had seen people wearing on the street. In the changing room, I told Ropey to snake under the shirt, and he followed my instruction perfectly, coiling himself around my arms and chest in a way that wasn’t all that noticeable. With just the messenger bag visible, I gave every appearance of being an unarmed innocent.

I made my way through the streets of Cranberry Bay, working in the general direction of the inn we’d parked Amaryllis at. I was worried that I was being followed, and used the Anyblade for a mirror a few times to discreetly check behind me. Larkspur had touched me, and if he was prepared, he might have had a chance to stick some kind of magical tracking device on me. I’d checked over my clothes and hadn’t seen anything, but just for the sake of safety I had left the old clothes back in the changing room.

My lack of information was unnerving me. I had a fairly decent handle on most of the common magic systems, and even some of the rarer ones, but for a high-ranking Prince of Anglecynn, the sky seemed to be the limit. Magic items in particular seemed like they followed the D&D homebrew rules that I’d used, which were basically that magic items could do anything, so long as it was cool, with their awesomeness mostly prevented from making too big an impact on the world by the fact that there were very few of them. An item that allowed you to track someone you had touched was definitely not out of the question, but the possibilities were so endless it was almost not worth thinking about.

I found a room at a hotel some three blocks from where Amaryllis was staying, making sure that my room was on the second floor and had a balcony that would allow me to both watch for trouble and make a quick exit (and for some reason, paying for a hotel room using pink-and-red paper money still tripped my internal weirdness detector, probably because a part of my brain was saying that I wasn’t old enough to rent a hotel room). From there, I set up a chair positioned to watch both the balcony and the hotel door, which I firmly locked, moved a dresser in front of, and then surrounded with Lecher’s Vine for good measure.

Then I waited, with the Anyblade in one hand and my throwing dagger in the other.

And then I waited some more, thinking that at any moment they might track me to this place and try to take me down.

After about half an hour I decided that if they knew where I was, they were staking me out, but that didn’t make all that much sense, because Larkspur knew that a teleportation key was in play, and didn’t know where Amaryllis was, so for all he knew, I might have gone into this particular hotel in order to meet up with her and then leave Cranberry Bay forever. No, wait, he might have been able to talk to the receptionist and asked about someone matching my appearance, but then … setting up an anti-teleportation ward? I didn’t have a firm grasp on how Larkspur thought or what resources he had available to him, and surreptitiously putting up an anti-teleport ward around a hotel room on the second floor seemed like it would be legitimately difficult.

Still then, where was he?

I waited another four hours, listening to the sounds of the city coming in through the balcony, and occasionally going out to check that there wasn’t a warden pulling a spiderman and tracing a ward around my window. After some time had passed and I started getting bored, I practiced with the returning throwing knife some, eventually leveling it up to 16, which felt like a poor use of my time.
But no one showed up, there was no secret attack, and when the sun started to set, I moved the dresser back from the door and left the hotel.

I was still on my toes when I got back to The Pink Lady, where we’d parked Amaryllis, but much less so. When I got up into the room, Fenn, Grak, and Amaryllis were all waiting there for me.

“Weren’t you wearing different clothes?” asked Fenn.

“I ran into Larkspur Prentiss,” I said. I saw Amaryllis’ face go tight at that, but Fenn gave me a look of incomprehension. “He’s the guy that sent your fireteam after Amaryllis?”

“Oh,” said Fenn, “That Larkspur Prentiss.”

“I lost him a few hours ago, but we should probably leave,” I said. “It might go without saying that I didn’t have any luck at the library. There might have been a minor fight. Also, I need more fairies.”

“And that was all you did?” asked Fenn as she reached out with Sable and started dumping dead fairies into my waiting hand. “Personally, I found out everything there was to know about your bones, plus I went shopping, plus I helped a lost boy find his mom, plus I entered and won an archery contest, and after that --”

“We can have this conversation elsewhere,” said Amaryllis. She lifted her sleeve and peeled the tattoo from her skin, until she was holding the teleportation key in her hand. “Back to Weik Handum, for now.”

“We need to talk about how he found me,” I said. “I don’t believe it was just coincidence, and we didn’t decide to go to Cranberry Bay until yesterday, which means that there’s an unknown power in play. Amaryllis?”

She used her good hand to rub her face. A day of rest didn’t seem to have done anything for her; if anything, she looked worse than the day before, even if her long sleeves and gloves were hiding the worst of the affliction. “Was he expecting you?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I don’t think so. It felt like … like he came to the library looking for the same book I was, and then wasn’t entirely surprised to find me there looking at the book.”

Amaryllis looked at Fenn and Grak. “Anglecynn has state secrets,” she said. “I have to give some consideration to what I divulge, if I ever hope to come back into power. I don’t think that he’ll be able to easily replicate the feat of stumbling across you.”

“That’s not good enough,” I said, keeping my tone firm and even. “Explain what he used.”

Amaryllis looked at me, and I felt an almost overwhelming pity for her. She had been beautiful, and that beauty was still mostly there, but her inner core of strength, what I had seen as her defining feature, was on the verge of collapse. I wanted to take back what I had said and let her be, or bring it up later, more gently. Future political ramifications over information security should have been the furthest things from anyone’s mind, but that was her way of trying to piece her life back together, or pretend that she could go back to being the person she must have been before.

“Explain,” I repeated, because it crossed my mind that POI was the ability to withstand other people, and I couldn’t just give in to feeling bad for her because I was avoiding putting points into social stats.

“It’s only a guess,” said Amaryllis with a sigh, “But my guess is that he dipped into the strategic elf reserve.”
“The what?” asked Fenn.

“It’s possible for a sufficiently skilled bone mage to draw luck from bones,” said Amaryllis. “Luck is a property possessed almost exclusively by elves, so the kingdom has been covertly collecting their bones for quite a long time.”

“Holy shit,” said Fenn. Grak was frowning.

“Larkspur wouldn’t be able to take too much from it though, and if his application of luck only got him to you, and you’ve stayed escaped for a few hours, then I don’t think there’s a threat,” said Amaryllis. “There are upper limits to what even highly concentrated luck allows you to do. My guess is he used a technique to point himself in the right direction and then went from there.”

She knew all this. She knew when we were talking about luck, when we were looking at my character sheet together, when she was giving advice on what I should do, she knew and she didn’t tell me because she thought she knew better than me. I could feel myself starting to get angry with her, and again my mind went to the 2 POI on my character sheet. I didn’t know how that interacted with my WIS, but I was hoping that I could refrain from doing or saying anything just because I was upset with her. I didn’t trust myself to speak politely, so I said nothing.

“So you’re telling me that Anglecynn has been involved in widespread desecration of elfish burial grounds?” asked Fenn. “That’s the takeaway?”

“I think Larkspur probably missed his chance,” said Amaryllis. “But in case he didn’t, we should make for Weik Handum.”

So we teleported away, without another word, and I saved my accusations for later.

“I described the disease and its symptoms to a magus,” said Grak. “Given the information I was able to supply, he told me that it was murinae putredine, a rare and almost invariably fatal disease. I described the princess’ condition and he told me that she would likely die. His suggestion was that I find a unicorn. He said it as though he didn’t believe I would. He also said that a sufficiently skilled blood mage might have been able to burn the disease out through transfusion if it was caught within the first forty-eight hours. I did not find this helpful.”

“And that was your day?” asked Fenn. “Was I the only one who had a solo adventure?” She put a hand to her chest. “Oh my god, am I the real protagonist?”

“... you know that I ran into and had a scuffle with a Prince of Anglecynn and his cronies, right?” I asked.

“Sure, it sounds impressive when you put it like that,” she said. “But then you holed up in a hotel waiting for my adventure to be done, didn’t you?”

Amaryllis ‘wasn’t feeling well’ and had gone to her room to sleep some more, which I was slightly annoyed at, because I wanted answers from her, dammit, and slightly relieved, because it meant that I didn’t need to think about her being sick (and then I was a little disgusted with myself, because being relieved that a sick person is out of sight is a little shitty). We were going after the unicorn, that had already been decided before I showed up, and the plan hadn’t changed too much with my information.

“I will concede that I did spend a lot of the day in a very Earth-like hotel room,” I said.

“Sounds boring,” said Fenn. “Anyway, the archery contest was being held out on the bay, with little
buoys set up as targets, and they gave me a *full* handicap for elf luck, which I thought was really unfair, especially since there was a kashoonk there and he wasn’t given any handicap at all, even with biceps bigger than my thighs. I mean, it was more about accuracy than strength anyway, given the target values, but --”

“I don’t find this amusing, if that’s what it was supposed to be,” said Grak.

Fenn looked to me. I wasn’t smiling either. Maybe she actually had gone and entered an open archery contest, maybe even won it, but either way she was doing a bit that was only a little bit funny, and then only because of the contrast with our dire circumstances. “Tough crowd,” she said. “Okay, fine, I went to the athenaeum, poked about for a bit, and eventually found a *very* helpful raccoon who was willing to talk my ear off about what he called ‘blueprint theory’.” She held out a glove and a thick sheaf of papers appeared in her hand, with small little metal clips used for bindings. “This is a copy of his thesis on the subject, which he said I could borrow. It is, apparently, advanced stuff, quite a few years beyond what your average bone mage ever touches, because it’s not actually *useful* to know unless a bone mage drains their own bones, or at least the bones of something living.”

I took the papers from her as she kept talking.

“Anyway, the idea is basically that the soul has a blueprint of the body, and the bones are the scaffolding that everything hangs off of, with their own local blueprint copies,” said Fenn. “He kind of went on for a long time about whether ‘scaffolding theory’ or ‘blueprint theory’ sounded better, wanted to get my advice, that kind of thing, it was a very poor use of my time. He thinks that some healing works off what the scaffold says and some works off what the blueprint says. Like, I guess, if you had some shingles blow off your house, you’d know where you needed to put new shingles just by looking, right, because there’s nowhere they could go, but if a wing of your house got wrecked by a tornado you’d have to look at the blueprint to figure out how to rebuild. Sorry, I feel like I’m making a hash of it.”

“No, you’re doing fine,” I replied.

“Oh, good,” said Fenn. “But to get at the actual question, the problem seems to be that when you drain bones, you’re not affecting the scaffold, or not just, you’re actually fucking with the blueprint. So your finger gets hurt and asks the nearest bone, ‘hey, what should I do about this?’ but that bone is basically dead and doesn’t respond back, which means that the finger needs to go somewhere else and get an answer to the same question, which takes longer and maybe in the middle of this conversation things get screwed up because of the distance. That’s my layman’s understanding, anyway.”

“Alright,” I said, “So how do we fix it?”

Fenn coughed. “Well, there’s the rub. I asked that same question, and he first thought that it couldn’t be done, because if he’s right, this blueprint, or maybe these *blueprints* can only be seen by squinting your eyes at some of the evidence. Or so he said. *Most* of that evidence comes from draining bones, so it seems like it’s easier to fuck things up than fix them.”

“So you don’t have a quest for me?” I asked.

Fenn looked me over. “Okay, so there are two options,” she said. “Option number one is that you get new bones. Raccoon-friend thought that would probably work, if you got them from someone that was more or less like you.” She paused. “Anything?”

“No quest, no,” I replied.
“Alright, well I’m going to skip over all the reasons that’s a bad idea then,” said Fenn. “Option number two is basically that you get someone to fuck with your soul.”

**Quest Progress: Boneitis - The problem goes deeper than the bones, further than the heart, and straight into the very essence of your mortal existence. Find someone to alter your soul, or alter it yourself; either way, this is a project to approach with caution.**

“Yeah,” I said, “That would do it. Souffuckery … yay.”

“Is it really called that?” asked Grak. He’d been sitting quietly by the side, watching us, and I had almost forgotten that he was there. There was a thing that people did sometimes, where they said something just to be sure that they were heard, and Grak didn’t seem to have that instinct.

“No,” I replied. “The quest isn’t much of a quest, it’s just an update to the old one, with some warnings.”

“Yeah, warnings are probably appropriate,” said Fenn. “They practiced soul manipulation in the Second Empire, it’s kind of not a thing anymore, which means that if you find someone who specializes in it, they’re probably the kind of person you would rather run away from.”

“If you outlaw soul manipulation, only the outlaws will have manipulated souls,” I replied.

“Except not,” said Fenn, “Because most of what they did during the Second Empire was twisting innocent people around until they were barely recognizable monsters. And at the upper echelons they still use scraps of it, it’s not fully illegal, it’s just that the athenaeum was razed to the ground and pretty much everyone involved was killed.”

“Sorry,” I said, “That was a joke.”

“Boo,” said Fenn.

But that was a problem for another time, because tomorrow, we were going unicorn hunting (or rather, we were going to try to kill a unicorn that was hunting us).

“You’re a few miles into the woods when you spot the Unicorn for the first time,” I said.

“Any sign of the girls?” asked Tiff.

“I shoot it,” said Reimer, who was playing an archer/cleric, and who uttered the words ‘I shoot it’ at least twenty times a session.

“Roll for initiative,” I replied, “Tiff, no sign of the girls.” When everyone had given me their numbers, I gave them a description. “The unicorn is tall and shockingly white, not just with a horn atop his head that’s nearly two cubits long, but a billy-goat’s beard, a lion’s tail, and a cloven feet like a swine rather than a horse. Its body is that of an immense stallion, rippling with powerful muscles. Its pure black eyes look at the four of you, then it disappears behind a tree you don’t think could possibly hide its bulk.” I rolled some dice, then looked at my turn counter. “Reimer?”

“I can’t see it?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Fine,” he replied. “Readied action to shoot it when it appears.”
“The unicorn goes just after you, and you see him step out from behind a tree that he, again, could not possibly have been hiding behind,” I said. “Fire your arrow.”

“18, hit?” he asked.

“The arrow flies through the air, but the unicorn’s horn has shifted position, and it knocks the arrow away with a loud snort as it charges in toward you,” I replied.

“Shifted position how?” asked Arthur. “Like, it moved its horn really quickly to knock the arrow away, or it did a teleportation effect, or what?”

“Roll Perception,” I said.

“22,” said Arthur.

“You realize that you have two distinct memory tracks,” I replied. “In one, the arrow was loosed from the bow and was about to hit the unicorn, but that memory ends before that would have happened. In the other, the unicorn moved naturally and fluidly to get his horn into position before the arrow was loosed.”

Craig rolled his dice around in his hand and frowned at that. “Okay,” he said. “So it’s like deja vu, but we remember it both ways.”

“Deux fois vu, I’d think,” said Tiff.

“So not precognition or supernatural reflexes,” said Arthur, “More like … reality warping.”

“Or timeline collapsing,” said Craig. “It sees that it’s about to get hit, then picks a timeline where it didn’t get hit, and merges with that one, dragging us along.”

“No, that doesn’t make sense,” said Reimer, “Why would we remember it? That’s not how the brain works. And anyway, this isn’t really helpful to us, because it doesn’t give us a clue about how to beat it. Do I think that it would be able to keep doing this to every arrow I fire at it?”

“I don’t know, do you?” I asked, which was my response pretty much every time he tried to weasel information out of me. “But anyway, that was your readied action, so it’s still his turn, and he’s charging right for you, horn out in front of him.” I rolled some more dice behind my screen, glancing at them only briefly. “His horn pierces straight through your metal armor, going through it like soft butter, and making a hole that punctures your shoulder. Again, he shifts away from you, and you have two memories, one of him charging and goring you, and the other of him coming to a stop next to you. His horn is bloodless and clean, but you are still very much injured. Take 16 damage.”

“Alright,” said Arthur. “This thing has stolen thirteen girls and killed twenty men, some of them supposedly better than us. We have some measure of it now, does anyone have any bright ideas how to kill it?”
The Feminine Mystique

We teleported into the Aon Adharc Glen fully armored and with weapons drawn. If not for the fact that a murderous unicorn was there, I probably would have found it pleasant. Birch trees stuck up from knee-high grass, with little yellow flowers poking up in small clusters and blue butterflies flapping their wings as they made their way through the forest. We were in a clearing, with the closest tree some sixty feet away.

Grak sprang into action while the rest of us stood with our backs together. He was drawing up a ward around us, circling at ten feet out. One of the things that Grak had done with his day was try to find out more information about unicorns, specifically with regard to warding. He was fairly confident that a ward against latent skin magic (i.e. skin) would work on a unicorn, so that was the one that he was drawing, but he gave us the caution that it was possible that because unicorns were an intensely magical creature our unicorn friend, as Fenn insisted on calling him, might either have skin which was fully imbued with unicorn magic instead of latent skin magic, or he might only have notional skin in the first place.

Killing a unicorn shared some surface similarities with killing a revision mage. With a revision mage, you basically had to ensure that they couldn’t revise backward to a point where they weren’t dead, either by killing them with something their magic couldn’t interact with, or by ensuring that no amount of revision or different action on their part could possibly prevent their death. The big difference was that timeline fuckery, or whatever the unicorn did, didn’t actually seem to care about magic all that much. It wasn’t undoing anything, just doing a sideways merge into a timeline where that thing hadn’t been done in the first place.

So that basically meant that we had to kill it in such a way that we couldn’t not kill it, no matter how many timelines it tried to merge together.

The good news was that Amaryllis had been rescued from a unicorn’s ‘care’ and then, when she was quite a bit older, read through the after-action report of that rescue. We were at least partially going off of what she remembered from that, though by her reckoning it had been at least four years since she’d read it, and she wasn’t terribly confident in her specific ability to recall fine details, because she hadn’t been reading with intent to memorize. The dual memories reported by the men sent to kill the unicorn were always within three seconds of divergence, which meant that all you really had to do was ensure that there was nothing that the unicorn could do within a three-second period to survive.

The bad news was that this power, or magic, or whatever it was, could be used an unlimited amount of times, and the unicorn had other abilities beyond just that big, annoying, deadly one. For example, it could slip behind trees and teleport around, which would allow it to close in on us from practically any angle. And while my normal response to the time fuckery might have been to just use poison (assuming I could figure out a way to administer it), that was all moot, because the unicorn’s natural healing conferred a complete immunity to poison and disease.

Grak finished the ward against skin and then came back to rejoin us with his axe drawn. We still hadn’t caught sight of the unicorn.

“You said that you were fairly certain that this unicorn hadn’t died?” asked Grak.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. We had already gone over this back at Weik Handum, and it didn’t seem like she wanted to repeat what she’d said there. If there was no unicorn, then all we really lost was time. The existence of a unicorn in this glen wasn’t exactly common knowledge, and people with the resources and motive for killing this unicorn were also in short supply.
Fenn began moving before I saw anything, drawing an arrow from her glove, nocking it, and turning to track something unseen in the woods. My eyes caught a flash of white a moment later, but that was it.

“Elf luck still works,” she said. “That’s enemy contact, by the way.”

“Steady,” I said.

The unicorn came out from behind the closest tree to us, nine feet of equine somehow hidden behind a foot-wide birch. I wondered how that was possible, not just in the sense of this being a teleporting unicorn, but we had to have different perspectives on where it was hiding, right? And given that, there wasn’t just physical trickery involved, but visual trickery as well, because at any given time the four of us were looking at different parts of the unicorn.

Fenn loosed an arrow at the unicorn. I watched it sail toward him -- and then I had this other memory, one where he began moving just as Fenn let her arrow fly. He knocked it out of the air with his six-foot long horn and gave us a contemptuous snort that sent curls of steam into the chilly air.

“Well, that’s just like you drew him up,” said Fenn. “Good job, Juniper.”

(It wasn’t actually though. The way I had drawn him up, he had a version of Deflect Missiles that worked with his horn, and that was only once per round, plus a way for him to do the same to melee attacks, again only once per round. It was easy enough to overwhelm him or use area-of-effect spells against him, and the ‘new memories’ thing was mostly flavor because of the theme I was trying to go for.)

“He should be attacking,” I said, watching him. He was stationary, staring at the four of us. “You think he senses the ward?”

“He’s cautious,” said Amaryllis. “You can see there, on his flank, where they wounded him.” I looked to where her gloved and gauntleted hand was pointing and saw a thin, gray scar against his white hair.

“Shit,” said Fenn. “Doesn’t seem like that’s going to work in our favor. Should I shoot him again?”

“Let’s try the void rifle,” I replied. I unslung it from my back and took aim at the unicorn, which was watching me and occasionally stamping a cloven hoof. I was about to squeeze the trigger and shoot it before a thought occurred to me. “Is there any reason that it would just stand there and let me shoot it? Because my only guess is that it’s gathering information.”

“Could be taunting us,” said Fenn.

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. She was wearing her immobility plate, with helmet in place, and I hated that I had to go on the tone in her voice. This creature had kidnapped her and killed three of the people she was with when she was eight years old. “It likes its victims to know and understand that it has power over them, but … the three of you aren’t victims, you’re threats, obstacles.”

I squeezed the trigger on the void rifle, and watched as a dime-sized hole opened in the unicorn’s chest, and then there it was again, this alternate memory, where he had turned and darted back behind a tree. In the memory, I had tried to track and shoot him, but he had moved too fast for me, and my shot had put a hole in a tree instead.

He came at us from a completely different direction, charging at speed with horn down. He covered fifty feet in the space of a single second, and hit the ward hard, his horn swinging to within a few feet of us. And then, suddenly, we all had a new memory, one where instead he appeared behind a
different tree and simply stared at us.

“Okay,” I said, “He’s definitely probing us out. Are we confident in that ward?”

“For another two hours, yes,” said Grak. “More confident now than when it was made. He’s proven that it will stop him.”

“It’s not enough that we stop him,” said Amaryllis.

She was right. The condition for success, as stated by the quest, was that we had to kill the unicorn and have Amaryllis drink its blood. Sitting in a field with a unicorn staring at us for two hours until the timer on the teleportation key was up and we could leave wouldn’t actually accomplish anything.

Logically, the game had to have a way of implementing unicorn timeline fuckery within the game. I didn’t know how the game itself was implemented, but while simulating the entirety of Aerb seemed like a stretch, and simulating all nine thousand hells beggared belief, I was pretty confident that simulating actual alternate timelines was right out. It would be easier if the simulation was local to me, detailed only if my attention was directly on something, but if the Dungeon Master were going to cut corners like that, then there was no way that he would simulate a stupid number of timelines, especially since he was only really interested in the ones where the unicorn won.

My biggest question was whether the unicorn was getting information from the future or not. It was possible that if the unicorn got hurt, or was about to get hurt, or just wanted to, his mental state would get sent ‘back in time’ three seconds and he would get a do-over with more information. It was also possible that ‘time’ got rewound backward three seconds instead, and then events played out with different die rolls (or whatever), which would mean that the unicorn only got alternate timeline information when the merge happened.

These things weren’t functionally equivalent, not if there was a limit to plausibility/probability. If most of what the unicorn did could be summed up as ‘repeat the scenario until I win’ then you could never kill it, because something dumb and out there like everyone dying of random brain aneurysms could happen, or skilled fighters making rare flubs, or something like that. To make a D&D analogy, it would be like saying that you got to reroll the dice as many times as you wanted, which would mean that there was never a point where you wouldn’t roll 20s.

The solution spaces looked different depending on what we were dealing with. Maybe we didn’t need a death he couldn’t escape from, maybe we just needed a death he couldn’t escape from if there was no possibility that he had the information necessary to react to it.

“Okay,” I said. “We need to figure out whether the unicorn is getting information from the future or not. Maybe it is, or maybe it’s picking what actually happened from within a random set of things that might have happened.”

“And how, praytell, do we figure out which is which?” asked Fenn.

“Artillery shot,” I said. “His previous response to you firing an arrow was to wait and watch it come at him, then to use his magic to bring us into a world where he knocked the arrow out of the sky, right? He’s obviously really, really fast, we’ve seen that, maybe even fast enough that he didn’t need to use his power, but he probably can’t do the same for an artillery shot, because there would be too many arrows.”

“Only between eight and sixteen at this range,” said Fenn.

“You think he can parry eight arrows?” asked Grak.
“If he can, it’s worth knowing,” said Amaryllis.

“Okay,” I said. “So what I want you to do is to aim straight at him, wait six seconds at full draw, and then release. If you see him move at all, or you get the feeling through your elf luck that he’s going to move, then you release before the time is up, but only if it’s after three seconds have passed. Alright?”

“Uh, sure,” said Fenn as she thought about that. “You want to make sure that he can’t go back to a time before I had full draw. You’re trying to game it.”

“Yeah,” I said. This wasn’t actually a definitive test on whether the unicorn was actually getting future information, but it was as close as I thought we’d be able to get. I had a flowchart in my head for how this encounter would go, and information gathering was right where we wanted to be given that we didn’t get attacked.

“It’s me he wants,” said Amaryllis. I noticed a slight sway to her as she spoke.

“We have time,” I said.

Fenn nocked an arrow and pulled the bowstring back, closing one eye to sight along the grip. One mississippi. Two mississippi. And then the unicorn was off, back behind the tree and off somewhere else. Fenn turned to track him. One mississippi. Two mississippi. And again, he moved, darting back behind the trees. His movement reminded me more of a deer than a horse, in the way that he could spring forward or to the side. Maybe it was the agility that a cloven hoof gave him.

“Okay,” I said. “He’s smart enough to avoid getting in a situation where he’d have his options limited, he’s staying next to the trees so that he always has an out, and even then, he’s not staying still for long enough that he’d be faced with something inevitable. My guess is that he’s not getting future information, just information from the parallel timelines on merge, which means that all we really need to do is get him in a situation where he can’t see the killing blow coming.”

“The only reason it has to stick around is that it wants me,” said Amaryllis.

“Or because it can’t understand the teleportation key and is waiting for the ward to fade,” said Grak. “I would have to redraw it smaller.”

“Do you have something clever, Juniper?” asked Amaryllis.

I hesitated. “I have a vial of nicotine,” I replied. “If I drink it, then maybe with Ropey’s help I can grab onto the unicorn and --”

“Oh, are we entertaining idiotic deathwish scenarios?” asked Fenn. “Because mine is that I stab it in the throat, but I’m so good at stabbing it in the throat that there’s no possible scenario where it runs me straight through instead of just dying.” She turned to Amaryllis. “So that’s mine, and we know the princess has hers, Grak, did you have one?”

“With enough healing magic it might be possible to entrap the unicorn in a warped ward,” said Grak.

“No,” said Fenn, “It’s got to be something like Joon’s or Mary’s, where you’re putting all of the weight of the adventure directly on your spine.”

“I’m the one that’s dying,” said Amaryllis. She pulled off her helmet, and I looked at her sunken eyes. She had taken a shower and some magical healing, but that had only done so much. “I knew that it would come to this. We all knew that I was the key.”
She laid the helmet on the ground, and began walking forward, unarmed. The ward protected us, but not from the horn, and with three steps she was past the point where it might be able to gore her. Fenn began to raise her bow again, and I laid a hand on her arm to stop her.

“It’s me,” she said the unicorn. She walked forward with a trembling hand held out in front of her. Her voice was higher, more mellifluous than normal. “I’m your sweet little girl, your darling come back to you, still pure and innocent, still untouched by man, still unawakened to the pleasures of the flesh, that’s what you want, isn’t it? Your trembling, virginal, doe-eyed beauty returned, yours to capture again?”

(I felt my stomach churn at her words. The whole ‘innocent little girl’ thing had always left me feeling uncomfortable, maybe mixed with a little bit of shame. Part of that was Tiff’s influence over me. If she’d been here, she would have given me an earful about the male obsession with purity and youth. But that was the whole reason that I had made the unicorn in the first place.)

The unicorn leapt forward and charged at Amaryllis. I kept thinking that it would come to a stop, or at least that Amaryllis would try to dodge out of its way, but all she did was flinch a bit at the end, just before it drove its long, white horn straight through her armor and out the other side.

And then that was just an alternate memory of how things might have been, and the timeline we were in was one where it did come to a stop in front of her.

“Yes,” she breathed with a shaky voice, “You could kill me, thank you for showing me that, you’re so big and strong and handsome, that’s why I came back to you, why I’m here to let you take me away from these people, so you can use your big strong muscles and long, powerful horn to protect me from anyone who might try to defile me.”

The unicorn was semi-intelligent, but couldn’t understand English, so what she was saying to it was mostly to convey emotion and intent to it. She was a better liar than I gave her credit for; even with the overacted character she was putting on, there was something compelling about her words.

Again the unicorn moved in a flash of power and brought his horn down, thrusting it forward and spearing her through, and again the violence and gore, the shock of Amaryllis dead, became just a memory of a thing that never was.

“I know I was taken from you,” said Amaryllis, who tensed and then relaxed at the moment of integration, “And I know you’ve been lonely in this glen, because everyone keeps their daughters from you, but it was those mean men who took me from you, who whisked me away even though I clawed at the ground trying to stay with you. I was chaste and pure and modest while I waited until I could get back to you, back to the only creature that could ever protect me.” She took another step forward and rested her hand on the unicorn’s horn, then stepped forward tentatively, running gloved fingers across it.

Twice now it had gored her through and then made that only a memory, and I was tensed up waiting to see what the beast would decide. There was nothing stopping it from killing her for real, nothing except the fact that it had this intense, pseudosexual desire for her. I was worried that her armor would make her unappealing, or that it would smell the disease on her, or maybe just that she wasn’t pure and innocent except maybe in the sense that she’d never had sex.

But the unicorn allowed her to approach it, and she kept moving forward, down the length of its horn, until her hand met the ward against skin.

“Grak,” said Amaryllis, without looking back. “You’re going to need to remove this ward so I can be reunited with the unicorn.” Her voice was still the same, light and airy. She’d been careful with
her words since coming into the glen, and this was the critical moment.

“Will it stay with you if I draw a new one to protect us?” asked Grak.

“I can’t say,” replied Amaryllis. “You’re in his glen. He has every right to kill you. He doesn’t like

men.”

“I’m not quite a man,” said Grak.

“Whatever you do, do it quickly,” said Amaryllis. “We’ve been apart for so long.”

The unicorn moved backward just a bit as Grak slowly and cautiously made a second ward within

the first, but made no move to attack, or even to give us a memory of attack. It wasn’t clear how

intelligent the unicorn was, but I thought maybe he understood that we were going to release

Amaryllis to him. He certainly wasn’t smart enough to see the trap, or if he was, then his desire for

Amaryllis was strong enough to overwhelm any natural caution.

When the second ward, much smaller than the first, had been drawn upon the ground, Grak raised

his warder’s wand and swished it precisely through the air. The unicorn made the first move, closing

the distance between himself and Amaryllis until his muzzle butted up against her hand. She leaned

forward and gave it a brief, gentle, chaste kiss.

“It’ll be just you and me,” she said, almost too soft for me to hear, “I can help bring in more girls to

your care, I can bring them back to this glen with me, so that we can all be yours, together.” She

brought her head down to touch against the unicorn’s. Where her red hair touched its horn, it

changed, taking on a shiny, spectral quality. “Can I ride you?”

(I held my breath.)

The unicorn lowered its head until its horn touched the ground, and Amaryllis moved over to the side

of him. With a start, he sprang into action, turning toward her and bringing a foot slamming down on

her, stomping on her face, which was the only unarmored part of her. And then that was only a

memory, yet again, a memory that said, “I’m a nice guy, but I can and will fucking end you if you

betray me”. Amaryllis stopped, only briefly, at the unicorn’s side as the memory caught up with her,

and then she put a hand on his flank. He lowered slightly at her touch, and she climbed up with an

ease that spoke of experience with horses.

Amaryllis gripped him with her thighs and leaned forward to wrap her arms around his neck. She

whispered something in his ear, too soft for me to hear, but I was paying more attention to the count.

One mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi.

“Now!” screamed Amaryllis, and the unicorn tried to move with a start, only to find himself locked

in place by the arms around his neck, the immobility plate rigid around him. And then there was not

one memory, but a cascade of memories, all of him trying to buck her and her clamping down,

locking her armor in place and closed tight around his neck.

I sprang into action. I faltered for a moment in the confusion of timelines, because I hadn’t sat there

counting, not in reality, I had been moving from the moment he tried to buck her and she had locked

him down. I raised my void rifle and aimed straight for center mass, trying to ensure that there would

be no possible reality where I hit her instead of him, and pulled the trigger.

Skill increased: Rifles lvl 21! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat CUN.)

New Virtue: Compensator!
There was another disorienting flurry of memories as the unicorn tried and failed to avoid the shot. A few things came to me at once, thought several times along parallel timelines, the first being that I’d been at 12 for Rifles, and I had memories of different messages coming up, which meant I was gaining skill from every timeline, and the second that the unicorn had to be iterating through timelines to find one that worked, trying over and over.

And still, the void rifle put a hole in him, just off-center of his chest, and I remembered times it had gone worse for him, when six inches of penetration had been enough to kill rather than just a wound that missed everything vital. It began to close almost immediately, and within a second it was just a grey dot.

Grak dropped the ward as Fenn moved around to the side, darting with the speed of her armor and then lining up a shot carefully. The unicorn began throwing its head back, trying to smash into Amaryllis, and I could see her jerk from the impact, but almost all of its force went up against her armor, which wasn’t going anywhere. The memories were coming thick and fast now, and I was having trouble keeping track of what was and wasn’t happening. I laid a hand on a bone sticking out of my bandolier and started draining it for SPD, and popped a snake from my wrist tattoo to slither across the ground, as I went to join Fenn.

**Skill increased: Bone Magic lvl 21! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat KNO.)**

**Skill increased: Skin Magic lvl 21! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat KNO.)**

When Fenn shot, I must have lived the same slice of three seconds a few hundred times. She had been moving as far away from the unicorn as possible, and when she shot the arrows split, then split, then split, and I had a wash of memories of it happening, arrows driving deep into the unicorn’s flank. The true reality we ended up in was six of them in the unicorn and another two in Amaryllis’ leg, the odds against that astronomical but still not enough to save the unicorn.

It slowed down, huffing and rearing frantically, occasionally tossing us across into another timeline, giving us memories of things that had happened in just slightly different ways. Amaryllis was bleeding from her face, battered from where he’d managed to hit her just so, but she grit her teeth and waited there as we hopped between realities and the unicorn wore down, until finally it sank so that the front half of his body was supported by the lock Amaryllis and her immobility plate had around his neck.

**Unicorn defeated!**

She dropped unceremoniously and rolled for a bit, then gasped in pain and moved over to the unicorn. Amaryllis ripped one of the arrows out of its side, ignoring her own wounds, and pressed her lips to where metallic blood was trickling out. I moved over beside her and took a small cup Fenn offered, trying to scrape up more blood from the unicorn’s other wounds. When I offered the cup to Amaryllis, she drank deep, guzzling it down, leaving her lips and teeth stained with the silvery fluid. The arrows in her leg popped out, the cuts and fractures of her face healed, and then, with a trembling hand, she removed her glove. Her hand, previously yellow, was now as pretty and perfect as it had ever been.

She looked at me with a maniacal grin on her face, and that was when I noticed that her pupils were crazily dilated, giving her a look that might have been cartoonish if not for the blood (hers and his) all over her face. She reached toward me and gripped me on the neck, then pulled me in for an uncomfortable kiss, with her lips mashing against mine and our teeth clinking together.
When she pulled away she rose from her knees and raised both fists in the air for a scream. “Woooooo!” She pointed down at the unicorn. “Fuuuuck you, fuck you, stupid fucking horse!”

*Quest Complete: Unihorn - The unicorn blood has purged the disease from Amaryllis and cured all the damage it had done. Don’t worry, the high won’t last longer than 1d4 hours.*

I braced for the level up, but it didn't come, and I felt my heart sink at that.

“I feel SO FUCKING GOOD!” shouted Amaryllis as she started to remove her armor. “Did I always feel this good?” she asked, speaking fast and not waiting for an answer. “No, no, I never felt this good, this is the unicorn juice talking, but FENN, do you want to go for a naked run through the woods with me, because I’m not going to die anymore and it’s probably a good idea to try to burn off some of the unicorn blood inside me so that I can get my head on straight and Juniper I’m sorry I kissed you but I knew you’d been wanting me to --” She stopped and struggled with one of the straps on the immobility plate, flailing around with it for a bit.

“Well now I kind of want to try it,” said Fenn. “But we’re going to need at least two people with their heads screwed on straight. Joon, you’re up.”

I looked down at the unicorn corpse and then did as Amaryllis did, pulling an arrow from the unicorn’s side and then sucking at the wound. I’d already had some of the taste when Amaryllis had kissed me; it was metallic and slightly bitter, not the ambrosia I would have been expecting. I didn’t really think that this would do anything for my bones, but not even trying didn’t seem like an option, not even with the psychological reaction that Amaryllis had. Fenn was at my side, watching me carefully as I drank, and before I knew it she had thrown me backward and climbed up to sit on my chest.

I was waiting for it, and could feel the effects start to rip through my mind, holistic integrity thresholds on my personality network be damned.
I came to in a warm bed. The last thing I remembered was planting my mouth on a unicorn wound and sucking out its blood. No, there was something after that, Fenn putting her weight on my chest and smiling, that was it. When I looked over, I saw her in bed beside me, curled up and looking content.

We were back at Weik Handum; I recognized my room. I was out of my armor, which was piled on the floor beside me, along with the rest of my gear. I couldn’t help but notice that I was in just my boxers, and when I pulled back the covers, I saw that Fenn was topless, which set my heart beating faster. I looked at her, trying to work out what had happened in the gap between drinking the unicorn blood and ending up here, and then just looked at her without thinking too much in particular.

When she began to stir, I averted my eyes. I could see through the light in the hallway that it was just barely sundown.

“How are you doing?” she asked, slurring her words slightly as she woke up. “What time is it?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I think maybe you just went to bed?”

“Seems right,” said Fenn. “It took us some time to deal with the unicorn, Grak and I. Too big for the glove by about a foot, and that’s not including the horn. It’s got white guts, come to find out.” She sat up and stretched out, then looked down at her chest. “Does this bother you?” she asked.

“Not really,” I replied, but I could tell I was blushing, and that ‘bother’ wasn’t the right word. “I’m going to have to adapt to the cultural norms of Aerb sooner or later. It’s no big deal. I’ll get, um, desensitized.”

“You and Amaryllis both said some things,” said Fenn.

“Oh?” I asked. I rubbed my head. I wasn’t feeling at all hungover. Whatever the effects of unicorn blood had on my mind, it didn’t seem to have any aftereffects at all, aside from the blackout.

“I mean obviously I’m not going to tell you what those things are,” said Fenn with a laugh. “Grak might tell you, I guess, even though I swore him to secrecy. He did not, not at all, like being tasked with caring for Mary. Eventually he just put up a ward around her to keep her from running off, and then another ward to muffle the sound.”

“And me?” I asked.

“You seemed happy enough to be sat on,” said Fenn with a grin.

“Um,” I said with a swallow. “Did we …” I trailed off as I looked at my clothes on the floor.

“Did I rape you while you were high on unicorn blood?” asked Fenn with a scowl. “Come on, you know me better than that.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Sorry, I just … I never got drunk, back on Earth, the feeling of blacking out is unsettling. I always thought it was conceptually unsettling. Not knowing what was said or done by this person who wasn’t really me … and I mean, I thought maybe that if I had said something to you, or tried something, and without knowing what the Aerbian cultural norms even are in that, ah, regard --”
“Not something I really want to talk about right now,” said Fenn. “Let’s just say that I’ve been on the other side of that fence once or twice, though gladly never to the extent I couldn’t handle myself.”

“Ah, so you’ve gone unicorn hunting before,” I said.

Fenn gave me a weak smile. “It’s been a long day for me. Lots of talking to Grak, which takes its toll, and lots of talking to, let’s call him, Kuniper. We’ll move a letter down the alphabet every time you get hopped up on the blood of a different animal.”

“And you won’t tell me what I talked about?” I asked.

“Honestly, you mostly talked about things that didn’t make any sense to me,” said Fenn. “A lot of it was about Dungeons & Dragons. You spent twenty minutes delivering this monologue on something called a candle of invocation?”

“Huh,” I said. “That doesn’t sound so bad. I mean, boring for you, but not actually that bad.”

“There were other things,” said Fenn. “Little tidbits.”

“Tidbits you’re going to torture me with?” I asked.

“Tease, not torture,” Fenn corrected. “What else are companions for?”

“Ah,” I said. I prodded at my left hand with the index finger of my right. “The unicorn blood did nothing for me, by the way.” It hadn’t even topped me up on blood.

“Well it was still a fun time for all involved,” said Fenn. “Look, can we talk about this in the morning? As much as it’s good to have my Juniper back, I really do need the sleep.”

“Sure,” I said, feeling my cheeks grow warm at the possessive, ‘my Juniper’. “I’m going to go grab some food.”

Fenn laid back and closed her eyes, while I threw on some clothes. As I did, I noticed that all of my snake tattoos were gone, another apparent casualty of whatever Kuniper had been thinking. I looked back to Fenn before I left the room, and wondered whether her state of undress was because of something I’d said to her. Had I told her that I missed seeing her naked? Had I said that I missed when she was more flirtatious? Those both seemed like things I would plausibly say if I were deprived of my inhibitions.

I tried to think of the bluntest possible true thing I might have said, and then winced, because it would be something like a breathless, “I think you’re pretty and sexy and fun and I am sort of a little bit in love with you, and I asked the One True God of this place to make you real in case you weren’t already because you’re also my best friend”. I wasn’t sure whether it would be better or worse if I had then added any qualifiers or clarifications. But that wasn’t even the worst case, because it might have been that I’d said something false, and that was a problem space too large to bear thinking about. I would have to talk to Grak and get him to break his silence; I didn’t actually believe that Fenn had sworn him to secrecy.

When I came into the main room, the fire was crackling away. Amaryllis was sitting on the couch next to it with her legs tucked under her. All traces of blood had been washed from her face, and from her damp hair I gathered that she’d recently taken a shower. She was barefoot, wearing shorts and a simple t-shirt, with a mug of something steaming cradled between her hands. She really was shockingly beautiful, almost enough so that I might be able to forget that I needed to call her out on a few things. I sat down across from her, which drew only a brief glance before her gaze returned to the fire.
Then I read her shirt and started laughing. It said ‘Born to Bone’ on it, with the crest of the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh beneath the lettering.

“All of my clothes are in Fenn’s glove,” Amaryllis explained. “She got this for me while we were in Cranberry Bay. I knew that I would rue the day I gave that glove over to her.” She turned to me with a small smile, but I was still laughing, because Fenn was in charge of her wardrobe and I had to believe that this was just the opening salvo. “Alright, settle down.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just thinking about what else she has in store for you.”

Amaryllis nodded in acknowledgement, then was silent for a moment, long enough that her smile began to fade. “I’m given to understand that I kissed you. I apologize for that.”

“No worries,” I said with a wave of my hand. I remembered that kiss with a slight unease. It had been the wrong moment, and she’d kissed me frantically, sloppily, like I was the first person she’d ever kissed and she wanted it to be the kiss to end all kisses. I hadn’t enjoyed it. Maybe the taste of mingled human and unicorn blood had something to do with it. “You actually said that you were sorry right after it happened, that’s one of the last things I remember.” But what had she said? She’d said that she thought I wanted it, not that she wanted it.

“How was it?” she asked, keeping her tone light.

“Er,” I said, not sure where this was going, and feeling uncomfortable. “It kind of reminded me of my first kiss.” The silence stretched, and I rushed to fill it, as though that needed explanation. “Freshman year I went to this party and sat next to Alicia Aaron for like three hours, and then she offered me a ride home with her parents. When we got to my house I leaned over and … yeah. It was … I don’t know.” Not great? Good only because I’d been lusting after her for a few months? And then we had one date, and she told me over the phone that she didn’t want to go out with me.

Amaryllis turned to the fire and watched it for a bit as it crackled away. “We need to talk about the future.”

“The future of you and me?” I asked.

She turned to me and raised an eyebrow, like I was a complete idiot, which might have been fair. “I meant the future of this group,” she said. “Fenn tells me that you want to go find the Lost King.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my cheeks flush. Of course she didn’t want to talk about our future. I felt like when I had seen her I’d had a plan, and now that plan was melting away. What was it? Oh, yes, she’d just said, the Lost King. “Did you know that Uther Penndraig was dream-skewered?”

Amaryllis was never terribly expressive, unicorn blood aside, but now her face set into almost complete blankness. “I suspected,” she said. “Even before I met you, I suspected. The Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny has seen perhaps a thousand of the dream-skewered, but that doesn’t mean that there were only a thousand. If a thousand ended up cataloged, how many died before anyone figured out what had gone wrong with them? And more rarely, how many ended up being good enough at hiding their unfamiliarity with the world to scrape by, build a life here, and never reveal what they remembered of Earth to anyone? There are theories, in the athenaeum, about how one of those people might be spotted. Those who are familiar with the phenomenon have theories about what historical figures might have secretly been dream-skewered.”

“And something made Uther stand out,” I said. “Words he said, idioms he used, something like that? Or was it the songs, plays, novels, all with a peculiar variety of themes and ideas, as though he was plagiarizing from a whole culture?”
“Once you have the idea in your head, it’s hard to get out,” said Amaryllis. “Everything starts to look like evidence of it. Foreign ideas about how a people should be governed, the very occasional misstep that looks really odd if you don’t have the ready explanation that he went in blind, bits of language that don’t match his contemporaries … it was, in a way, obvious.”

“But it’s not accepted,” I said. I felt my fist clenching. She had known, and decided not to tell me. “Was it swept under the rug by the athenaeum, or his heirs, or what?”

“There were too many holes in the theory,” said Amaryllis. She took a sip from her drink. “I made myself a buttered coffee, did you want one?”

“No,” I replied. No, I don’t want a diversion.

“There were too many coincidences,” Amaryllis continued. If she saw my tenseness or heard the edge in my voice, she wasn’t reacting. “It would be one thing to say that a genius at magic, combat, politics, science, and the arts was dream-skewered, that might eventually happen given enough time. But he wasn’t just that, he was the secret heir to a kingdom, last of a line everyone thought was wiped out, and if he was dream-skewered, then it seemed awfully convenient that everyone who had known him in his old life and could give him away was wiped out by the Dark King. And of course, he would have had to go his entire life without letting on to anyone, even those close to him. He would have had to be a nearly perfect liar.”

“And then you met me,” I said. “And you realized at some point that the explanation for what happened to Uther was standing right in front of you. History was repeating itself. You must have figured it out when you saw my reaction to hearing his story, when I asked you what the Lost King’s name was. You knew then, and you didn’t fucking tell me.”

“You’re angry,” said Amaryllis, keeping her voice mild and light. I felt the urge to go over and slap that serene beauty right off her face.

“I had a right to know,” I spat. “He was my best friend in the world. He was everything to me.”

“I … I didn’t know that,” said Amaryllis, for the first time seeming somewhat fazed. “I thought there was a connection, but --”

“So you said nothing, because you wanted me to be easier to control,” I replied. “You wanted me to be without my own stake in the world, tied to you and your quest to regain power. Or, or you wanted something to dangle in front of my nose at the right time, a hint at the truth if I ever pulled too hard on my leash.”

“Is that what you think of me?” asked Amaryllis. Her mask was breaking now, alarm and surprise seeping out from behind it, but I couldn’t trust that either, because maybe it was just part of the ploy, part of her plan to get me back on track.

“I asked you about luck and you told me only half of what you know,” I said. “Why? The only reason I can figure is that you wanted to make the option less attractive to me.”

“Have you stopped taking anything I say at face value?” asked Amaryllis. Her voice was still mellow, but she was speaking faster and louder than before. “Revealing state secrets is a crime punishable by death in Anglecynn, and there are already solid grounds for a conviction on that count given that I told you about a strictly confidential research facility. There are enough things that I’m going to have to sweep under the rug already, and --”

“And you didn’t think that luck was worth it,” I cut in. “You wanted me to pick wisdom.”
Amaryllis calmly and steadily set her mug on the arm of the couch. “Joon, did you save my life less than twenty-four hours ago just so you could yell at me?”

“I’m not yelling,” I said. I made a conscious effort to lower the volume of my voice. “I need you to tell me everything that you’ve been holding back until now, state secrets or not, even if it’s embarrassing, even if it makes you look bad. Start with Uther Penndraig.”

Amaryllis looked me over. “I didn’t know that he was that important to you,” she said. “You never said a word about this friend, and you never mentioned the connection between the two of you. Communication happens between two people, not just from one person to the other. What would you like to know?”

“Did he ever mention me?” I asked. I wanted her to stop being so damned reasonable. I had puffed myself up, and I could now feel myself deflating. It was easy enough to be angry, I had more than enough experience with that, but not when she was sitting there and calmly answering my questions.

“He planted a number of juniper trees,” said Amaryllis. “So far as I know, he never uttered or wrote down your full name, and I haven’t been able to think of any cleverly coded references hidden in his deeds or works. If you find one, will you trust that I didn’t know about it?”

“No,” I said. “Why would I?”

“Joon, there are things that I didn’t tell you, but I have never, to my knowledge, lied to you,” said Amaryllis. She unfurled herself from where she sat on the couch, the first time she’d moved since I sat down. “You have a number next to my name that displays my loyalty, don’t you?”

“I do,” I sighed. That was the biggest point in her favor, the one that I had been ignoring in order to keep the flame of anger lit. “The problem is, I don’t know how loyalty is defined within the game, and it’s possible there are hidden loyalty numbers for other things. Maybe your loyalty to the throne of Anglecynn is at a twenty, and until your loyalty to me passes that, I’ll always come second.”

“Is that something that you would want?” she asked, gently placing her hands on her knees.

“No,” I said. “Maybe. It depends on the nature of the conflict. I wouldn’t want the game to overwrite your values, but I’d want you to … I don’t know, to not stab me in the back.” I paused. “I’m sorry I yelled earlier.”

Amaryllis shrugged. “I’m surprised that you’d be willing to offer an apology at all. You were right to be upset, I haven’t been forthcoming. There’s one more thing.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the teleportation key. “Do you know how a teleportation key actually works?”

“In what sense?” I asked. “The fact that I’m asking probably says that I don’t know.”

“Most people assume that you think about a place and then you go there. That was the assumption you made. I never corrected you. What it really does is show you a green line, that traces through every place you’ve ever been,” said Amaryllis.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Oh. You didn’t want me to see the places that I had been, in case it would give me some clue as to the person I had been before the skewer. That’s underhanded, but I don’t really have any connection to, um, whoever that person was. It would be interesting, I guess, but,” I shrugged. I was missing something, I could see that, but whatever her perspective was, I wasn’t able to see it. “Did you think that it would show Earth?”

“I thought there was a chance. The Athenaeum of Mathematics and Metaphysics teaches something called conditional probability,” she began.
“We have that on Earth,” I said. “So, multiply the chance that the teleportation key actually shows my worldline as tracing back to Earth by the chance that I would choose to use the key to return to Earth … and then I suppose multiply that by the teleportation key’s value to you, which has to be stratospheric, and yes, I can see where you would think of that as an unacceptable risk.”

“‘Worldline’,” said Amaryllis. “You have that on Earth?”

“As a matter of theory, sure,” I said. I had used it in a game once, as a novel form of scrying where the people were represented as days-long fleshy snakes.

“Well, it wasn’t just the chance that you would leave,” said Amaryllis. “If you saw a line leading back to Earth, however the key would display that to you, then it would always be at the back of your mind. Even if you chose not to abandon me, then you would have made that choice, and in your mind I might owe you something for it.”

“So you’re saying that you thought a lot about it,” I said, shifting in my seat. “I mean, at least you’re not just casually lying to me, at least there’s some thought being put into when to lie.” She had the good sense not to point out that it wasn’t technically a lie. I frowned. “That doesn’t actually make me feel much better.” I looked at the teleportation key. “Did you think about the other possibility? Or, I guess, the more interesting of the two other possibilities? Either the worldline starts in mid-air, right when I came to on the plane, which isn’t very interesting at all, or it traces back whoever this body belonged to. I don’t necessarily want to know if I replaced some poor idiot who was going to be executed, but --”

“But Uther Penndraig was the secret heir to the throne of Anglecynn, and if your life is a mirror of his, then who might you be?” asked Amaryllis.

I hadn’t actually thought of that.

“You thought that was a possibility,” I said, “But you kept it from me.”

Amaryllis handed the teleportation key over, and I took it from her, turning it over carefully. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Do you understand how nervous I am to see that key in someone else’s hands? I don’t understand how you don’t feel raw terror at the sight of me holding the key. It would be so easy to just leave, to put everything behind and abandon it.”

I shrugged. “I’m more trusting, I guess. Or maybe more accepting of my fate. If you left us here in Weik Handum, that would be horrible, but I would figure something out.”

Or maybe I’m not more trusting, just less afraid of being abandoned. Amateur psychology powers, activate!

“Are you going to see where it points you?” asked Amaryllis, studiously not keeping her eyes locked on the teleportation key. “Don’t push too hard or you’ll leave me. Us.”

“Sure,” I said, though I wasn’t at all hopeful that it would take me back to Earth, if I even wanted to go there. The life I’d left back there wasn’t all that great, though it did have the benefit that no one was trying to kill me. If I saw a worldline that led back to Earth, back to fifth-period English, what would I even be going back to? Tom and Reimer were the only people left in our D&D group, mostly because I’d fucked things up with pretty much everyone else. I’d been trying to mend things with Tiff, and it had almost seemed to be working, so I guess there was that.

And if I did get back to Earth, it would almost certainly be just a simulation of Earth, but then I had to start thinking about whether or not it was likely that I would keep my powers, and what my life would be like if I did, and all sorts of other considerations like whether magic would work there too, and in the end it made a lot more sense to just check whether any of this actually needed thinking
When I closed my eyes, the teleportation key presented me with a field of small yellow dots, and littered among them, a handful of green ones, with a single green line. I waited three seconds for the character sheet to pop up, but apparently the game was smart enough to not interrupt me (or possibly, this was the same interface that the locked-away fast travel system used, which was how I might have done it). I almost asked what the yellow dots were, but I figured it out on my own; I had seen a map of Aerb’s forty-four continents, with all the major cities marked, and it was clear that the yellow dots would overlay the cities almost exactly. Those, then, were the touchstones.

That meant the green line there -- and when I looked at it, the view zoomed in. With a thought I could rotate it, not just on the x and y axes, but on the z axis as well. I started looking at it from one end, what I thought had to be Sorian’s Castle given the vertical distance it traveled. The interface had no legends, and didn’t show any buildings or terrain. All there was to go on was the worldline, the path that I had traveled along in what I decided I was generously going to call my adventures. Down the elevator, wandering through the city, into the sewers, then across the Risen Lands on soulcycle, moving back in time along the worldline.

I could tell the places I had spent any amount of time, because there the line got knotted up, tracking me as I stopped to go to the bathroom, or scrounge around for food, or sat and talked with Amaryllis. The teleportation key had a frankly absurd interface from a usability standpoint, but once you knew about it, I was pretty certain that there were steps you could take to make sure you got where you were going. Find an obscure spot, then walk around in a spiral, and that would serve you well enough as a marker.

I finally found what had to be Comfort, and the looping line that traced my path through it, with more squiggles at the mechanics and the clothing shop where I’d met Poul. And then I moved backward again, until I got to the gas station and the sight of my first kill, and back more, until I was tracing the line up into the air, a nearly vertical drop. I backed up the view and followed the mostly-straight line until it touched down on the ground, and here there were unfamiliar squiggles that must have been when I was loaded onto the plane. I stopped and paused there, because I wasn’t loaded onto any plane, someone else was, which meant that all that thinking about a return to Earth was moot.

I kept following the worldline though. There was a pattern to it, with long, mostly straight lines, then lines overlapping each other but always on a grid. Institutional living? Had this body belonged to a criminal in prison? If so, the pre-Juniper had been moved around a few times, because the pattern was largely the same three times in a row.

And then I got to the other end of the green line, to a place I imagined was probably on the scale of a small town, where the lines were so thick it very nearly traced out a full-fledged map. A single place dominated all the others, a cluster of lines, no, the same line, traced over the course of a decade and a half. This was where he lived.

**Quest Accepted: They Say You Can’t Go Home Again - He had a life, before you, and you had a life, before this.**

I stared at the words, then opened my eyes. Amaryllis was looking at me.

“You were in there a long time,” she said. She shifted slightly. “May I have the key back?”

I handed it back to her. “No Earth,” I said. “I did find his home though, the person who got dream-skewered. I got a quest to go there, I think.”
“We can’t,” said Amaryllis. “You know that it’s too dangerous.”

“I know,” I said. “I don’t want to go there. I don’t know what the point would be. If his parents still live in his childhood home … it seems cruel to me.” I looked down at my hands, then at the freckles on my arm. I’d had those freckles for as long as I could remember. I had a memory of Tiff touching them one night while we were on her rooftop looking at stars, telling me that they were like Orion’s belt. This body had those same freckles.

“Are you okay?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said, “Just thinking.”

She nodded and gave me some time, which I mostly spent on thinking about the simulation and what it was trying to tell me, if anything. Was it admonishing me for being here? I hadn’t chosen to replace this random guy, none of this could be laid on my feet. And if we shared the same body, down to the placement of random hairs, then wasn’t that what he was destined for? Or were my memories only dreams, built to conform to the body I was placed into? I wanted to scream at the Dungeon Master and tell him to just stop fucking with me already.

“Are things going to be okay between us?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll get over it. Unless you’re hiding other things.”

“I was fairly high up in our government,” said Amaryllis. “I have a lot of secrets. There’s nothing that I think you need to know though, and no place where my silence would be damaging to our partnership, at least to my knowledge. I do, honestly, want to rebuild from here.” She paused. “And I’m loath to do it, but we will need to talk about the future and what our next steps are going to be. In the morning might be best, with the others around. We can bring it to a vote.”

“Sure,” I replied. “I’m going to try to get some sleep so my schedule isn’t thrown completely off. We’ll talk in the morning.”

I wandered back to my room, feeling a little bit out of sorts. I hadn’t handled that conversation well. I kept replaying it in my head and thinking of what else I should have said, how else I should have phrased my displeasure. Maybe it was the fact that it was Arthur at stake, that she had known he was in this world and kept him from me. There was a part of me that distrusted her for how she had handled me, as though a fight where we’d both been yelling would have been more honest. That was how my parents had always settled matters. I felt like I was the bad guy, and she was the one that had been trying to control and manipulate me from the start.

I was mildly surprised to see Fenn in my bed and remember that she was sleeping there. I took off the clothes I’d put on and climbed back in next to her, then spent a long time staring at the ceiling, thinking.
Tiff had taken to driving me home after D&D. She didn’t live anywhere near me, but she’d said she lived so far out in the country that the extra few miles didn’t matter to her, and I naturally accepted the rides, because she was Tiff.

“I have a question about the unicorns,” she said.

“Unicorns in general?” I asked.

“No, your unicorns, the creepy rape monsters,” she said.

“They weren’t actually rapists,” I said. “Just, rape adjacent. And that was a long time ago, so I’m not sure that I’m going to remember anything.”

“Well, you can make something up for me then,” she said. “The thing was, I kind of didn’t get the time powers.”

“Oh,” I said, “So, the unicorn kind of merges alternate realities to put himself in a position --”

“No, sorry, I mean I get how it physically works, or at least I think I do, I just don’t understand why that’s a power that unicorns have,” said Tiff. I watched her as she kept her eyes on the dark road ahead of us. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, which was one of her most attractive looks. “Not to pull back the veil too much, meaning don’t tell Arthur that I asked, but why did you give them time powers? I thought it was just random, but you usually don’t do random.”

“Eh, it’s dumb, and we didn’t really do anything with it,” I said. “Cutting room floor type thing, happens a lot.”

“You may proceed,” said Tiff, in her best impression of a Star Fleet captain.

“So, I had the unicorns as like this hyper-masculine, purity obsessed, possessive creature, right?” I asked. “That much came through?”

“Yeah,” said Tiff. “I really liked it.”

“Well, the time powers were supposed to be more about manipulation and gaslighting,” I said. “Like, I had this idea of the unicorn as this abusive guy who just beats and abuses his wife or daughter and then pretends that nothing happened, or says that it’s only because he loves them so much, or … whatever. It was more about making his victims question the nature of their reality, I guess?”

“Okay, but we rescued the girls, and you said that they seemed fine,” said Tiff. She pulled up to my house, an unremarkable blue rambler with a pair of trees blocking most of the windows from sight. It was late at night, and all the lights were off.

“Yeah,” I said, looking at my house. “I chickened out. We were getting toward the end of the session and I just, didn’t really want to have this messy, complicated ending that was going to bring everybody down.” I made no move to get out of the car. “I used to do those a lot, and I think I was the only one who enjoyed them, because it was like, that’s how the real world is, things don’t have these nice conclusions, and sometimes even if you save someone they’ve got issues that, maybe don’t scar them exactly, but that they’ll have to work through on their own. There’s not always a panacea.”
“Don’t want to go in?” asked Tiff, after I kept looking at my house for a bit.

“Eh,” I said. “Church tomorrow. Dad’s stopped going and it’s always,” and then I stopped there, because I didn’t really see the point in continuing. I’d been wishing that my parents would just get a divorce for the last few years, but it didn’t seem like either of them were at their breaking point yet.

“Did you want to spend the night at my place?” asked Tiff. I turned to look at her. She was barely visible under the reflected light of the car’s headlights.

“Yeah,” I said. The car started moving again, and I only took my eyes off her for long enough to send my dad a text I knew from experience he wouldn’t read until the morning, keeping the details vague. “Are your parents going to be okay with that?”

“They’re in Toulouse for the week, so I’m all alone,” said Tiff. She cleared her throat. “I don’t want you to think that this is, like, a thing. I mean, I know that your parents are being, whatever, and we’ve been going late so you can avoid them. Just, remember that it’s a position of vulnerability for a young woman.”

“Ah,” I said. My heart was beating faster and my breathing was a little deeper. Tiff had just invited me to spend the night with her, with her parents gone, and she didn’t want me to think that this was ‘a thing’, but everything in my teenage boy brain was screaming that if I ever had a chance with her, this was it.

Whatever my troubles at home, there suddenly wasn’t space in my brain to worry about them anymore.

“I’m really horrible about signals,” said Tiff. “I get that, about myself. But it’s so embarrassing to just plainly say things, right?” She was normally more articulate than this.

“Yeah,” I said. “Or, no. Embarrassing isn’t the thing I feel. For me it’s like I’m walking through this minefield and I get really tense because it feels like one wrong step is going to get me blown up.”

We drove in silence for a bit as we made our way out into the country, past the occasional too-bright reflective sign.

“I don’t want to make things weird between us or in the group, but I have a huge crush on you,” I said. I’d rehearsed that in my head three or four times in the silence, and my chest felt like it was constricting as I said it. “I just, thought you should know, because maybe it would be easier for both of us if I didn’t spend the night, so I’m not torturing myself thinking about the minefield.”

“Oh,” said Tiff. There was a long pause. “Well I like you too.” There was another pause, as a wild grin began spreading across my face. “I like you.”

“Well,” I said. “Good. Good to know.” I was sure that my smile could be heard on my voice. Relief was washing over me, because I had stepped out into the minefield and not gotten my foot blown off, or at least, not yet.

“When I say that I don’t want to make this, tonight, a thing, I mean,” Tiff was speaking quickly, her voice unsteady. “I mean there are certain assumptions that a boy might make if a girl invited him over for the night when her parents were gone, especially if they’d just confessed their feelings to each other. And I don’t want you to think, not that you would, that this was a proposition of some kind, or a promise on my part, that asking you over is consent of some kind.” She let out a breath. “See? Just incredibly embarrassing. I feel like I’m going to melt.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t try to kiss you or anything,” I said. My heart was flopping around in my
chest like a fish out of water, because the ground still felt unsteady. Was it enough that she liked me? She hadn’t said that she wanted to go out on a date, and I hadn’t asked her, and I could think of plenty of reasons why it would be a bad idea, like what things would look like if it didn’t work out, and the fact that Arthur had the biggest crush in the world on her -- everyone knew that, did she know that? I had no idea how I would explain things to him, if Tiff and I ended up, impossibly, as a couple, something I’d been fantasizing about for months but never whispered a word of to anyone.

“It’s more the ‘or anything’ I was thinking about,” said Tiff. She cleared her throat. “You could try to kiss me.”

So I spent the next five minutes of our trip trying to surreptitiously see whether my breath was still fresh, to make sure my lips weren’t chapped, to think about everything I knew about kissing (not much), to plan and strategize and run scenarios in my head until I was almost dizzy.

And then when we pulled up onto the dirt patch that served as parking, I got out and went around to her side, where she was waiting for me, with her chin tilted up and her lips slightly parted, and maybe it was the anticipation of the car ride, or the warmth of her mouth in the cold night air, or the prospect of not just spending the night together but all the nights that might lie ahead of us, but kissing Tiff somehow managed to not just exceed my expectations but transcend them, so I forgot that I even had expectations.

And then we kissed some more in her house, and she took me onto the roof where we looked at stars in the cold, and I kissed her on the head from time to time, because that was a thing I could do now. I didn’t try to go any further than kissing, not even when I could feel her pressing her body against mine as we kissed, or her shaking hands touching my neck as my tongue entered her mouth.

She gave me a ride home in the morning, after I slept on the couch, and the whole way I couldn’t stop staring at her and smiling.

This might sound dumb, but we never ended up telling Arthur or the group that we were dating. At first it was because we didn’t want to make things weird. We were very conscious, especially in the beginning, that it might not last. Some of it was a desire for privacy, or a segregation of social roles, because if we were suddenly dating in all contexts then that would place this huge pressure on us, with questions and probes coming from everyone we knew. And yes, some of it was about Arthur.

“Yeah, I know he likes me,” said Tiff one night, as we lay on her couch together with her DVD player bouncing its image around the corners. “Promise not to be jealous?”

“The mind is a funny thing,” I replied.

“I did like him,” said Tiff. She was watching my face as she spoke. “Especially in the beginning, when we’d get into these big arguments, he was just so passionate about all these stupid little things.” She placed a finger on my collarbone. “You’re like that too, but about different stupid little things, and it’s hard to notice sometimes because your thoughts are like these icebergs, and you only ever reveal the tip.”

“Just the tip,” I said. “Just to see how it feels.”

She gave me a playful slap and then kissed me. “I was saying something. Oh, how is your funny mind?”

“Fine,” I said. “You were saying that you liked him.”

“I did,” said Tiff. “And I knew that he liked me. I kept waiting for him to ask me out or even just
confess to me, but months and months went by and he never did, and then my interest started to fade because there was this other handsome boy, so what was I supposed to do?”

“Make the first move?” I asked.

“Not making the first move is a woman’s privilege I will happily take,” said Tiff. “I get clammy just thinking about it. Feel how clammy I am.” She stuck out her hand, and I clasped it in mine.

“You are not at all clammy,” I replied.

“No, but I like when you touch me;” she said with a faux-shy smile.

“And anyway, this part of it was all fun and games. There was something charming about the cloak and dagger aspect of secret dating, passing coded messages to each other, that kind of thing, and no one was any the wiser, which meant that we didn’t have to tell the group or Arthur and make things awkward or painful for anyone. We carried on like this for about five months.

Then Arthur got in a car accident, and eleven days later he died, and it all went to shit.

We were playing at Reimer’s house, and I’d shown up half an hour early because I had been dragging my feet on preparing for the session. We had started a new, temporary campaign when Arthur got in his accident, because we all felt bad and didn’t want him to miss out on any sessions of the regular one (and if he hadn’t been in a coma, I think we would have tried to play during visiting hours). I’d decided on Long Stairs, vol. 2, because army guys going through an infinite fantasy dungeon sounded like the sort of brainless thing we could use to occupy our time. After he died, I kept running it, because the thought of going back to our old campaign and just dropping his storylines seemed like it would leave me a sobbing mess.

“So, how long have you and Tiff been a thing?” asked Reimer as I looked at my notes.

“A few months,” I said. I didn’t ask him how he’d found out, and I didn’t particularly care. I didn’t even make a token denial. The cloak-and-dagger covert dating thing had, understandably, lost its luster, so we weren’t really bothering.

“Seems like the kind of thing that you should have shared with the class,” said Reimer.

“Fuck off,” I replied.

“Do you wish you’d told Arthur, before he’d died?” asked Reimer.

I picked up my black novelty d20, hard acrylic and the size of my fist, and whipped it at him as hard as I could. He brought a hand up to block it and grunted in pain as it hit his forearm.

“You are such a fucking asshole,” I growled.

“Yeah, I am,” said Reimer, rubbing his forearm. “The difference between the two of us is that I know I’m an asshole, and you prance around like you were his bestest friend in the whole world. You and Tiff could have told him, he’d have been upset but at least it would have spared him being made a fool of. He died a virgin, pining after her, and you were just laughing behind his back about what a moron he was.”

“You know it wasn’t like that,” I said. I could feel the rage building up, and it hadn’t been more than
a week since I’d been arrested for attacking Victor Clark over his whole ‘god has a plan’ thing. But in
the wake of Arthur’s death, nothing seemed like it mattered anymore, and I kept thinking about how
good it would feel to smash Reimer’s face in. “He was my best friend.”

“Maybe when you were growing up,” said Reimer. “After that, Tiff was your best friend, because
you chose her over him.”

Tom showed up a little bit after that, walking into the stony silence and asking if everything was
okay, to which we both replied that it was nothing. What Reimer had said cut deep, because I had
already been thinking those same things, and it wasn’t like you could just call dibs on a girl, they
weren’t property, but at the same time, why hadn’t I told him, if I knew he was still hung up on her?

I killed Reimer’s characters eight times that session, an all-time record by a very wide margin,
sometimes without looking at the dice, and one time without giving him so much as a (meaningless)
roll. After the second death he stopped making new characters and just brought back the old ones
with different names, and I kept killing them in various ways with little regard to the rules, the
narrative, or the increasingly uncomfortable atmosphere of the game room. Reimer just took it
without saying much of anything, except maybe to tip over a mini, and the party trudged on, battling
the endless horrors of the Long Stairs until they found another of his characters, a lost marine or
something equally contrived, who would proceed to die within a few minutes.

“Fun session,” said Reimer at the end of it, without a trace of humor or warmth in his eyes. “Same
time next week?”

When Tiff asked me what that had all been about, I shrugged her question off, because I didn’t want
to have to repeat what he’d said to me.

The funny thing was, while Reimer and I never actually made up, we kept playing together, and in
the end, just before I left Earth, he and Tom were the only ones still willing to play with me. For
Reimer, it was because he was something of a masochist when it came to tabletop, not to mention a
stubborn asshole, and Tom, I guess, because he was a great guy who thought that the final death of
the group before we all went off to college would have been a travesty, or maybe just an insult to
Arthur’s memory.

Looking back, I have to wonder how much of Reimer being a dick to me was just him trying to
process the grief in his own way, in the same way that I started to lash out at pretty much everyone
around me for every little slight, or anything that could possibly be interpreted as disrespect to
Arthur. I was his best friend, and he was mine, that was how I saw myself after his death, and I
applied as much paint to our relationship as possible, until it was sometimes hard to remember that
I’d been anything but a perfect friend.

My relationship with Tiff was one of the early casualties. It was hard to take joy from her kisses
when I felt like I didn’t deserve them. It was hard to comfort her when doing that felt like a betrayal
to Arthur’s memory. He might have wanted me to be happy, but I didn’t want myself to be happy,
and that was probably the death blow for things between Tiff and I. We drifted apart by inches until
she was sitting somewhere else for lunch and the last text message from her (an unanswered ‘how
are you doing?’) was months ago.
In Search of a Quest

I didn’t manage to fall asleep until Fenn snaked a lazy hand under the covers and laid it across my chest. I don’t know if she did that by instinct, accident, elf luck, or because she’d woken up enough to see me staring at the ceiling and thinking, but either way, it was a comfort.

When I woke up in the morning her side of the bed was empty, and my clothes and weapons were laid out for me, with my armor off to one side. The smell of breakfast came in through the open bedroom door, and I dressed in a hurry, electing to leave the armor off. I was feeling much better than I had felt the night before, with a clearer head.

Fenn was cooking pancakes and bacon, and had already made a mess of the kitchen. When I came over to the dining table, which was in the same large room, Amaryllis slid me a cup of coffee in a thick mug, with a small, dark yellow square floating in it that I assumed must be butter. She raised an eyebrow my way, and on the assumption that she was asking if we were still okay, I gave her a nod.

“So, now that we’re all here, we shall eat pancakes and discuss the future,” said Fenn. She set a large plate down on the table, stacked with pancakes, and then another large plate, stacked with bacon. Grak immediately took the top third of the pancake stack and moved it to his plate, then began eating it with his hands. “Enjoy the bounty of the freezer and pantry of Weik Handum, long may it provide.”

“My end goal is to find and rescue the Lost King, wherever he might be,” I said. “I assume that’s going to be difficult, because I have to imagine that a lot of other people with better resources have already tried, but I knew him, so that at least gives me something of an edge.”

“Joon comes out with a strong pitch!” said Fenn. “Can our princess deliver a better counter-offer?”

“The Lost King is most likely dead,” said Amaryllis. “It’s been five hundred years. At best, he’s in one of the hells, at worst, both his soul and body have long since been destroyed. Even if we assume a best case scenario, the original plan we made when I was still sick was that we should endeavor to complete as many of Juniper’s quests as possible in order to make him more powerful. That’s instrumental toward finding and retrieving the Lost King.”

She folded her arms, and I noticed she was wearing a different shirt from the night before, this one with “Boning by the Bay” written on it. I was partially successful in suppressing a giggle.

“Neither of those are plans,” said Grak, wiping the back of his mouth with his hand. “What is the list of quests?”

I closed my eyes and looked at my character sheet, then read them off one by one.

Quests
Straddling Worlds: There are others like you, those with dreams of a place called Earth. The so-called dream-skewered are studied at the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny. You can travel there to find out more.

God Botherer: There are gods in this world, titans of power and masters of domains, each their own creature with their own special rules. Tread carefully around these creatures, especially if you wish to someday join their ranks.

The Lost King, Found?: Five hundred years ago, Uther Penndraig, figure of legend, King of Anglecynn, and ancestor of Amaryllis, disappeared from this world while on a quest of grave importance. This enduring mystery must have an answer for those brave or foolish enough to seek it, mustn’t it?

Boneitis - The problem goes deeper than the bones, further than the heart, and straight into the very essence of your mortal existence. Find someone to alter your soul, or alter it yourself; either way, this is a project to approach with caution.

Summer’s End - Return to the place where Fenn received her scars and bring justice to the elves. (Companion Quest)

They Say You Can’t Go Home Again - He had a life, before you, and you had a life, before this.

(I left that last one off, because it was creepy and I didn’t want to do it.)

“Okay, well I think we all know which of those I would prefer,” said Fenn as she plucked a piece of bacon off the plate. “It feels good to be the best, most important companion.”

“Amaryllis is more important,” said Grak.

“Grak, did we not bond with one another watching over these two hoomans?” asked Fenn. “Did we not fill several jars with unicorn blood, working in perfect harmony, did we not butcher the beast together, did I not cackle maniacally as I watched you try to chase down the naked jaybird?” She asked this last one with a finger pointed Amaryllis’ way and a grin on her face. “Alright, I can see where the cackling might not have been that endearing, from your perspective.”

“Amaryllis controls investiture of the entads,” said Grak. “She is also the most traveled, giving us the widest range with the key.” He took another bite of pancake, munching it with his wide teeth. “She is also the second-least annoying, after me.”

Fenn narrowed her eyes. “Betrayer.”

“We should do them in order of how easy they are,” I said, “We’ll have to factor in the difficulty we might have in moving. I think at a certain point it’s going to make sense for us to just use the normal systems of travel that everyone else uses, just in the interests of keeping a low profile.”

“Straddling Worlds, then,” said Amaryllis. “But Boneitis is more important in terms of keeping you healthy.”

“It’s really not that bad,” I said, “I think boosting my END curbed it. The worst I felt was during training, and -- I should write out an updated character sheet and a list of discovered rules again, but it looks like I’m going to be capped on what I can do when we’re just sitting around making up training exercises.”

“How are new quests formed?” asked Grak.

“I’m not too clear on that,” I said. “Sometimes I’ll get one when someone tells me something, or
when they ask me to do something, and there are some quests that come in parts, meaning that I get the next one as soon as the first part is done.” I took a breath. “So if anyone has anything they think is a quest, you can try to offer it now and expand our options.”

“I need one thousand pounds of gold for my penance,” said Grak.

“Ugh,” said Fenn. “First of all, we already know that, second, that’s not how you deliver a quest.” She cleared her throat and then started in on her best dwarf impression. “Juniper Smith, I have grievously wronged my clan and must return to them with a sizeable fortune of gold as my penance. I will not be greeted warmly upon my return. Your presence by my side upon my return to Drilly Ird would be the warmest possible closure to this chapter of my life.”

**Quest Accepted: All That Glitters - Return to Darili Irid with Grakhul once da has gathered enough gold to satisfy da nad self-imposed penance to da nad former clan. Speak with Grak to learn more. (500/1000) (Companion Quest)**

“That … actually worked,” I said. “I think maybe the difference is that I was invited? It switched from being something that he was going to do on his own to something we’re going to do together?”

“I did not invite you,” said Grakhul. “This matter is personal.” That much was clear from the quest text, and the words ‘self-imposed’ brought both clarity and questions to what it was he really wanted, beyond gold.

“Well it’s going to take another five hundred pounds of gold,” said Fenn, “And I will fight anyone who wants to use group loot to that end.”

“I have no argument with our arrangement,” said Grak, folding his arms across his chest.

“And you still have no quest to return me to power?” asked Amaryllis. “Do you think it would work if I asked you to be my knight?”

I let out a breath. “I think it might interfere with the Lost King quest, if I’m being honest,” I said. I watched her ice blue eyes, hoping that I could catch any traitor thoughts there. “The entire political structure of Anglecynn for the last five hundred years has been built on the fact that the Princes and Princesses are only ruling in his stead, if he comes back, there’s going to be at best a massive reform.”

The idea of dragging Arthur out of whatever hole he was hiding in and bringing him back from the dead, only to have him continue the rule of Anglecynn, caused some dissonance in me. What was my end-game here, after he was back? I didn’t think there was an Earth for me to return to, and certainly I didn’t want to be slapped back into a simulation of the Kansas I had left. I didn’t imagine that Arthur would want that either, but after a lifetime on Aerb, maybe he would have disagreed. I wasn’t entirely convinced that the game wouldn’t end then; it seemed to me like that was the ultimate quest.

“I will accede that’s a possibility,” said Amaryllis. She folded her arms across her chest, mirroring Grak, though her expression was more mild than his permanent resting frown.

“They don’t have to be personal quests, right?” asked Fenn. “They can be anything?”

“Based on the evidence, they just need to be something that I can accomplish.” I rubbed my neck. “So far as I can tell, they don’t even need to be particularly reasonable for a person to do.”

“And if you’re right about the nature of this world, then you’re directly responsible for everything
from the undead to the unicorns, right?” asked Fenn. “So some would say that you have a moral obligation to clean up all the messes you made.” I didn’t like where she was going with this, and my imaginings were just that, fictions made real (or at least more real) by the Dungeon Master of Aerb.

“You’re saying that I should fix everything in the world?” I asked.

“No, nothing like that,” said Fenn. She pointed a finger at Amaryllis without looking at her.

“Encyclopedia girl, tell me how many --”

“I will suffer through being called Mary, and I will suffer through what I don’t doubt are an endless series of horrible clothes you picked up for me, but I am a princess of Anglecynn and the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig and I will NOT respond to ‘encyclopedia girl’,” said Amaryllis.

“That’s where you draw the line?” asked Fenn with surprise. “Someone is in a bad mood this morning. Very well, Princess Amaryllis Penndraig of the Kingdom of Anglecynn, tenth of her name, Slayer of Gold Mages, Drinker of Unicorns, The Immobile Woman, I humbly ask you to tell me how many major or minor exclusion zones might be ended by a rag-tag group of heroes.”

“None,” said Amaryllis.

“Bullshit,” said Fenn.

“If these things could be done by a single person, or even a small group, they would have been,” said Amaryllis. “Do you think the international community is so negligent that they would let Fel Seed sit on his throne in the City of a Thousand Brides if there were any option to do otherwise? It’s flatly impossible to kill him, by any means, not even in theory.”

**Quest Accepted: Gone to Seed - There is a place on Aerb considered worse than the first four thousand hells. Fel Seed sits on a throne of living flesh, unable to spread beyond his domain, but with a rule of horror within it. You know his weakness.**

“Fuck,” I said.

“Were you deliberately tempting fate?” asked Fenn.

Amaryllis shrugged, and I saw a slight smile that disappeared almost at once. “It can be done then?”

“The game seems to think so,” I said. “It also thinks I know his weakness, which, uh, might be a problem, because I really don’t. Let’s not do that one.”

“Well I’m not suicidal,” said Fenn, “Unlike the three of you, I have a vested interest in living. If we can give Juniper’s brain a hundred quests, we don’t have to actually do anything with them, but sometimes the game drops hints that might be useful.”

I agreed with her logic, but I really didn’t want to have the Fel Seed quest sitting there in my head to look at, because if the game put that quest there, then it meant that there was at least a chance it wasn’t impossible, and even if I wasn’t responsible for him, I did have a moral obligation to end him if I was the only one that could do it. He probably wasn’t real, the simulated people he was torturing probably didn’t have actual computing power dedicated to them, they didn’t have real lives … and yet, you could do conditional probability, the odds that those people were real multiplied by their pain and suffering, and surely the numbers would dictate that I should at least give it consideration.

“Thirteen,” said Amaryllis. “You won’t be able to do anything about the ones like Blue Fields or the Datura Desert, but there are thirteen enpersoned exclusion zones which you might be able to defeat, if you rise to the heights that Uther Penndraig obtained.”
“Okay,” I said. “Well I’ve got a meta-quest for that, but I’m actually not suicidal,” anymore, “thank you, and I was thinking that we could do something that’s easy for once in our lives. Are there people we can meet, places we can go, things we can do that don’t necessarily involve combat, or at least where combat is with people who aren’t trying to kill me.”

“I believe there are two ancestral caches left which Aumann would not have been able to break past, even if he knew about them,” said Amaryllis. “One is within an exclusion zone, the other one might as well be. The castle in Glassy Fields is both warded and encased in razor-sharp shards of glass, with the vidrics sure to attack us on approach. It dates to just after Uther Penndraig’s disappearance, which should make it of special interest to you. It was never considered worth the probable costs to retrieve whatever might be there. There’s a reason that no one loots the Glassy Fields.”

**Quest Accepted: The Slayer of Horrors (0/13)**

“Okay,” I said. “Well I’ve got a meta-quest for that, but I’m actually not suicidal,” anymore, “thank you, and I was thinking that we could do something that’s easy for once in our lives. Are there people we can meet, places we can go, things we can do that don’t necessarily involve combat, or at least where combat is with people who aren’t trying to kill me.”

“I believe there are two ancestral caches left which Aumann would not have been able to break past, even if he knew about them,” said Amaryllis. “One is within an exclusion zone, the other one might as well be. The castle in Glassy Fields is both warded and encased in razor-sharp shards of glass, with the vidrics sure to attack us on approach. It dates to just after Uther Penndraig’s disappearance, which should make it of special interest to you. It was never considered worth the probable costs to retrieve whatever might be there. There’s a reason that no one loots the Glassy Fields.”

**Quest Accepted: Through the Lashing Glass - Far inside the Glassy Fields exclusion zone, the only place on Aerb where glass magic still works, lies a castle coated in shards. The treasures within are unknown to the world, but you could unearth them, if you dared.**

I gave her a thumbs up at that, and she nodded.

“The other is three miles down the Boundless Pit, abandoned since the tuung claimed it, but warded against them,” said Amaryllis. “I believe it should contain a suit of armor with a short-range investiture, assuming that the wards around it haven’t been broken past and that the tuung haven’t made an effort to detach it from the pit walls, which they might have. The place was built by an architect under forge frenzy, and contains its own defenses that make it a formidable conquest; since Weik Handum isn’t secure, and cannot be made so, I would suggest that Kuum Doona be made our new base of operations, if we can get to it, though only a fool would chose to defy the tuung lightly.”

**Quest Accepted: A Room of One’s Own - The Boundless Pit is a mile wide and infinitely deep, a chasm from which little returns. The tuung call it their home, and imperial law agrees, but infinity is a large place, and a secure home stays stuck to the wall, waiting to light up with activity once more. Kuum Doona awaits.**

“Okay, got that one too, but I’m not sure that we really need to end every single quest suggestion with a dire warning about how foolhardy or deadly it would be,” I said.

“Though woe betide any who might attempt it, we could look into getting me some kind of awesome magical hat,” said Fenn as she grinned at me.

“Oh, I think it’s not a bad idea,” I said. “I don’t actually think any of that expanded our options, not unless anyone wants to go into yet another exclusion zone.”

“The Boundless Pit isn’t an exclusion zone,” said Amaryllis with a slight frown. “The term has a very specific meaning, even if you disagree with the imperial designations.”

“Okay,” I said. “And given that we can’t stay here without having to constantly worry about whether someone is going to show up and find us, I think that’s probably a reasonable near-term goal. I must be close to leveling though, and in my ideal world, I would do that without combat on the line, especially given that I still need my bones healed. To me, that means our next step is either finding someone who can do soul magic, or going on either the Straddling Worlds quest or the God Botherer quest. Because God Botherer doesn’t seem like it’s going to end at simply meeting a god, that means that we’re down to either going to the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny, or we’re going to try to find someone who can take a peep at my soul.”
“Unless Mary has a supremely trusted soul mage on call, I vote for the athenaeum,” said Fenn.

“Me too,” said Grak. “I would not trust a skilled soul manipulator.”

“Noted,” I said.

“We still have to worry about Larkspur,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t believe that he would dip into the kingdom’s supply of elf luck again, but that’s a possibility that we need to be prepared for. More to the point, he has power both within Anglecynn and the Empire of Common Cause which he could use to make our lives difficult, even if we aren’t moving against him. From there, he would likely try to kill me, or capture the rest of you in an effort to kill me. So long as Anglecynn’s FSD is after us, we’ll have to keep moving around like rats, afraid of the light. It’s ammunition to use against him, if,” she hesitated, “If I ever have a future in Anglecynn.”

“You’re saying we kill him,” said Fenn. “Figure out a way to lure him somewhere, then slice his stupid head off.”

**Quest Accepted: Slice His Stupid Head Off** - You still have to worry about the Foreign Security Director of Anglecynn, Larkspur Prentiss. He’ll have you running like rats, afraid of the light, so long as he lives. Figure out a way to lure him somewhere, then do as the quest title says.

I stared at that message, then blinked it away.

“Something happen?” asked Fenn.

“No,” I said. *Just the quest text quoting the two of you. Are these being written on the fly or are the talking points being inserted into the conversation by the Dungeon Master? Really hoping that it’s the former.* “I got a quest to kill him.”

“The detection wards I placed just pinged,” said Grak, who sat up from his chair. “They’re a half mile out, we should leave before anyone arrives.”

I frowned at that, but moved into action. We had a plan for this, and I wasn’t about to deviate from it. I ran up the stairs to my room while the others went to theirs, snatched up my armor and my messenger bag, which had all my worldly possessions that weren’t in the glove, and then ran back down into the basement, to the one room in Weik Handum where teleportation wasn’t blocked. Grak had put up his own wards there, to ensure that no one could come in through that back door, and when I arrived he was moving his wand, bringing the ward down.

“Wish we could see who it was,” said Fenn as she came into the room, with Amaryllis close behind her. “But not so much that I’m willing to risk getting a bullet in the brain.”

“Where are we going?” asked Amaryllis, who shut and barred the door behind her. She looked incongruous in her t-shirt and shorts, a serious expression on her beautiful face and an excited energy that I knew was only a few moments away from turning deadly if she needed it to.

“Speculation and Scrutiny is the consensus,” I said. “If we’re rats, then I can live with that in the short-term.”

“I’ve never been there,” said Amaryllis as she held out the key. “We can’t use the touchstone.” She closed her eyes, and I could see rapid movement beneath her eyelids. “I can put us a hundred miles away, on some train tracks, it should be in the middle of nowhere with, at most, some farmers around. There, or back to my room in Cranberry Bay?” (The room was paid through for the rest of the week, with strict instructions not to disturb, just for this sort of eventuality, but there was a chance
that a sufficiently widely cast net could have tracked us there and set up an ambush, or at least given an alert.)

“Train tracks are fine by me,” said Fenn. “I’ll prepare my expert-level train-dodging skills.”

“Do it,” I said.

And a few seconds later, with a brief moment of blinding pain, we were standing on train tracks that sat on a raised embankment between two large, ordered rows of flowers. There was no rushing train to greet us; instead there was a short woman with a cloak of leaves and a long staff, her skin green and hair a light brown, the race crantek if memory served. She was in the flower fields, staring at us with no surprise on her face.

Fenn’s bow was in her gloved hand in an instant and she had an arrow out a fraction of a second after moving the bow from one hand to the other, all in a series of smooth motions. I placed my hand in front of the arrow as soon as I saw what was happening.

“I’m pretty sure that’s our next companion,” I said.

The short green woman gave us a small smile and a friendly wave.
The one thing we hadn’t gotten around to discussing was the issue of companions. Uther had seven of his Knights of the Square Table, and extrapolating from that, I was bound to have at least a few more. Both Amaryllis and Fenn I had stumbled across, while Grak had been someone we’d met after setting out some bait. I had an inkling that it might be worth it to find as many companions as possible, but then realized that logistics weren’t on our side, given the teleportation key only took five people at a time.

(We hadn’t tested Fenn’s glove-past-the-limit theory yet, because it seemed too risky to me. Things that were in the glove stayed in the glove across teleportations, but I had this nightmare scenario of putting someone in the glove and trying to exceed the limit, only for the game to punish us by disconnecting the extradimensional bubble. Would the game kill a companion for that? I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t willing to test it, and there were lesser fates we might suffer, like having to go on a long quest to retrieve them from wherever rogue extradimensional bubbles spit out their contents.)

I could at least make some guesses about what a new companion would look like, and what their role would be, given what I had seen so far and what I assumed about either the shape of the game, or how the Dungeon Master thought. Companion #4 would be different from companions #1-3, with as little repetition as possible, which meant that he or she (probably he, given that we were gender-imbalanced (depending on how you counted Grak)) wouldn’t be a dwarf, wouldn’t be a half-elf, and probably wouldn’t be a full elf or a human, though I was less sure on those two. Humans were the majority race here, and a full elf might provide some (totally unwanted) tension with Fenn, but in terms of traditional D&D party makeup, it would be better to go with something else.

Companion #4 probably wouldn’t be a warder, because Grak had that covered, and probably wouldn’t be an archer, because that was Fenn’s job. Amaryllis’ role in the group, seen through the classical D&D party lens, was as the face, the person who did all the talking and politicking, but I didn’t think she really fit in with that role. Instead, she had mostly been the plot-driver, information-giver, and source of wealth, but those weren’t actual party roles. Regardless, my guess was that Companion #4 would have some magic that I didn’t currently (and possibly couldn’t ever) possess.

Lastly, there was the question of magic items. Amaryllis had nothing but the void tunneler when I met her, Fenn had her artillery bow, and Grak had both his warder’s implements and a magical axe. There was something of a trendline there, and it conformed to roughly how actual D&D parties worked; you couldn’t just have new characters come in underequipped, otherwise they would be too weak and demand too much of the new loot, so they had to have something worthwhile on them to keep them in line with the party. If they’re in line with the rest of the party despite having nothing, then they get too powerful once they start getting equipment, which is a different problem.

So when we stumbled into a mysterious green-skinned crantek woman with a fancy cloak who seemed to be expecting us, my companion sense immediately began tingling.

Fenn kept her arrow nocked, but eased up on the draw.

“Hi friend!” she called to the green woman.

“Greetings,” replied the green woman with a small bow. Like Fenn, she was projecting her voice to be heard across the field of flowers. “You might want to step off those train tracks. I don’t think a train is coming, but it makes me nervous.”
The flower fields she stood in were being farmed, for what reason I could only guess at, though my mind immediately leapt to the Dutch tulip futures craze of the 1600s (more likely they were for dyes). Beyond them was forest, and beyond that were tall, dark purple mountains shot through with layers of white strata. There was no one else around, and whoever tended to these flower fields, they didn’t have so much as a shed in the area. It was a strangely idyllic place for a meeting.

Amaryllis stepped down the embankment, putting us closer to the woman, and I followed after, with Fenn close behind me. “Did your eyes say companion, or was that a guess on your part?” Amaryllis asked, slightly under her breath.

“She shows purple, the same as the three of you,” said Grak. It took me a moment to realize that he was talking about his magic glasses, which he’d taken out from his furs and put on. “I think purple means friend. The people of Cranberry Bay ranged between blue and yellow.” He took off the glasses and raised his monocle to the green woman, who was waiting patiently with a slight smile on her lips. “Staff is magic, cloak is magic, woman is magic,” he said.

“Really?” asked Fenn. “The cloak is magic? Thank the gods we have you around.” This was sarcasm on her part; the cloak was made of a variety of different leaves, which were green at the top and shifted in color until it reached her calves, where it was red. There were no obvious threads, seams, or other indications as to what might be holding it together. All in all, it was probably the most obviously magical item I’d seen in Aerb thus far.

“Dial it back a bit,” I said. I tried to keep my voice low. “Grak, thank you for checking.”

“Sorry,” said Fenn. She turned to Grak. “That thing you said about me being annoying really got to me, you know?” She raised her voice and called to the green woman, “Hey lady, are you particularly annoying?”

“No really,” the woman called back.

“Drat,” muttered Fenn.

“Juniper?” asked Amaryllis. “Is she confirmed as a companion?”

“No,” I replied. “I agree it’s suspicious. She was waiting for us, clearly. Even if she is a companion, part of our kharass, there needs to be a plausible reason for her to be here. More dipping into elf luck?” The woman was still waiting patiently for us, resting some of her weight on the staff, which had a bird’s skull at the top, embedded in the knurled wood.

“I don’t know,” replied Amaryllis. She was still standing there in her t-shirt and shorts, and when she cast an eye toward Fenn I imagined she was wishing she had armor on. “Maybe we should stop being rude and go introduce ourselves.”

The crantek had been a race that I over-designed and then only used for a single story arc, and I was pretty sure that my 7 KNO was the only reason that I was able to recall anything much about them, because I hadn’t been studious in reading through The Book of Blood. They were short and green-skinned, with their natural habitat being the boundary zone between forests and fields. Their skin allowed for photosynthesis, but it wasn’t enough to keep them up and running, so they were ruminants as well, eating hard-to-digest plants or grass and then chewing their cud.

The go-to mode of behavior for crantek was to go into the forests, gather a bunch of green things to eat, and then find a sunny place to sit and chew cud. I had all these plans for what crantek society was like, how they handled their winters, what they did on rainy days when the sun didn’t shine, their beliefs about their place within the food cycle, and none of it ever really came up. The most that
I ever got to show them off was with a crantek elder who had a habit of regurgitating and chewing on cud when he was thinking.

The green of this crantek’s skin was a light, pleasant color, and she was cute, with slightly childish features, like I always thought of hobbits being. This bothered me a bit, because the crantek weren’t supposed to be attractive to humans, at least not as I’d drawn them up. Why would they be? Different species (races, in D&D parlance) shouldn’t actually be attractive to each other, not unless they could cross-breed, and that had been something that I’d had a bug up my butt about when I was drawing up the crantek.

This woman didn’t conform to my fifteen-year-old self’s designs in a few ways. She had ears, not concave pits on the side of her head, and her teeth were more-or-less human, at least from what I had seen when she was talking, which made no sense for a ruminant animal. (And yes, I could already think of all the excuses and justifications that I, and presumably The Book of Blood, would use in order to have cute-to-humans crantek, but it still bothered me, because that wasn’t how I had made them.)

“Oorang Solace,” she said with a bow, once we were close enough that we didn’t have to raise our voices. “You may call me Solace.”

“You saw us come in,” said Amaryllis. She had hidden the teleportation key away the moment we’d landed, and wasn’t holding it anymore. “You were waiting for us.”

“Yes,” nodded Solace. “I’ve spent the last year looking for the four of you.”

I glanced at the others. So far as I knew, this time last year I hadn’t yet existed, and my body had been in some kind of institution or prison. Fenn was also in prison, or possibly not yet arrested for looting an exclusion zone, and Amaryllis was still busy being a princess, and Grak was … doing something, but not something all that important in the scheme of things.

“And who do you think we are?” I asked.

“Ah,” said Solace with a smile. “That, I do not know. The spell I cast was not to find you specifically, but someone who was both willing and someday capable of helping me to save my druidic grove.”

“You’re a druid?” I asked. I hadn’t thought that Aerb had druids.

“You’re not a druid,” said Amaryllis. “The last of the loci were exterminated during the Second Empire. They couldn’t move, which meant they couldn’t hide, and they didn’t have the firepower to fight back. There haven’t been any druids for three hundred years.”

I saw Solace glance down at Amaryllis’ shirt (‘Boning by the Bay’) and frown. “I understand that’s what’s taught at the athenaeums these days. Would you care to see some proof?”

From her cloak she pulled out a large, five-gallon bottle with thick glass walls, which she set on the ground in front of her. It didn’t escape my notice that there was no possible way that she could have hidden the bottle in that cloak, which at least gave a hint to what its magic was. The bottle itself was magic as well, that much was clear from looking at it, because inside was a miniature forest with a clearing in the center, which sat on top of a half-foot of dirt. I might have thought that it was a diorama, if not for the details.

Amaryllis stared down at the bottle, and Grak pulled out his monocle to look at it. There was an entire scene in there, laid out before our eyes, an entire ecosystem in miniature, captured.
“Nice bottle,” said Fenn.

“Are you carrying around a locus?” asked Amaryllis with wide eyes. “Is that even possible? Has it been surviving within that bottle for the last three hundred years?”

I held up a hand. “Clearly, you actually are a druid,” I said. “What spell was it that brought you to this specific place and time, placing you at just the right point to see us arrive when we didn’t even know we were going to be here until minutes ago?” That seemed like the most important point to me, because I wanted to first make sure that Larkspur couldn’t use the same method to find us, and second I wanted to see whether we could find Arthur with it.

“It was a spell of Zorisad Yosivun, the Deep Searching,” said Solace with a small bow at the foreign words. “It takes a year to cast, and at the end, that which was sought is found. If it cannot be found, the spell will cost the caster her life. I sought those who would be willing and someday capable of helping me. As the spell is concluded, and I am not dead, and the four of you are the only ones around for miles, I can only presume that you will be the ones to help me.”

I frowned at that. “How does the spell judge willing and ‘someday’ capable?” I asked. “How does it … how is it supposed to know?” What’s stopping us from fucking off to go do something else? I knew the D&D answer, which is that things could always go off the rails at any moment, and the DM was just making as good a guess as possible about what the future would hold, but I really hoped that her answer would be illuminating.

“Zorisad Yosivun works differently depending on what you ask for,” said Solace, again with a small bow as she said the spell’s name. “For people, it searches within hearts and minds and takes its measure of you. It brought me inexorably to this time and place.”

“That was a very non-technical answer,” I said.

“The druids were non-technical,” said Amaryllis. She had been crouched down next to the bottle and now stood up to look Solace over. “They were powerful when near their locus, one of the most powerful of the mages of the Lost King’s day, but even before the Second Empire began its campaign against them, they were beginning to lag behind the other schools of magic.”

Solace nodded. “The revolutions of the First Empire were not compatible with druidic modes of practice.” She reached toward one of the rows of flowers with a slender hand and with a come-hither gesture, one of the blue flowers began to grow, extending its stalk in defiance of the principles of both botany and physics, until it rested just under her nose. She gave it a sniff and murmured in satisfaction, then gestured at the flower again, which sent it back to where it had been. “The Deep Search was only for those willing and possibly capable, it gave no promises about the future. There are things I can offer you, both my aid as a druid and as a flower mage of some small power, as well as the magics the grove has steadily accumulated over the centuries.”

“Alright,” I said, “We’ll do it.”

“Juniper,” Amaryllis said with a tight voice. “You cannot unilaterally decide these things.”

“We’re a democracy, dammit!” said Fenn. “But I vote yes, and you gave Joon the tiebreaker, so consider that another win for democracy.”

Amaryllis sighed.

“You’ll have to tell us what, specifically, you think we can do,” I said to Solace as I watched Grak tapping at the bottle with his monocle up to his eye. “Or I guess if you just used magic to find us,
then you need to tell us what your problem is, in detail, so we can figure out what tools we have to solve it, or might acquire in the future."

“We placed the locus in this bottle three hundred years ago,” said Solace. “The environment inside is self-regulating, and the natural home of the locus, though limited in land area by what the bottle can hold. I am the last of the druids tending to it, and without me, I believe that the land inside will die, and the final locus with it. What the Deep Searching has indicated is that you are willing and might someday be capable of finding a permanent solution to the problem.”

**Quest Accepted: Taking Root - The world has but a single druid, tending to but a single locus. With the locus so constrained within a magic bottle, no more druids may be inducted, but removal might prove fatal. With your help, druids might stalk the world once more. (Companion Quest)**

“There are significant wards inside this bottle,” said Grak. He reached for the top of the bottle, and pressed a thick finger against the neck. Solace made no move to stop him. The bottle tipped up on edge, but the earth and trees inside it stayed in place, not sliding or moving even as Grak pushed the bottle up to a fifteen degree angle. He let it back down, slowly and gently. “Wards are static,” he said. “The wards are anchored to the internal extradimensional space, not to reality.”

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

“No,” said Grak. “It indicates a vastly powerful collective of linked warders.”

“This isn’t the first time Zorisad Yosivun has been used by this druidic grove,” said Solace with a small bow at the words.

“You understand that this isn’t a thing that we can do right this moment?” I asked. Solace nodded. “I don’t mean for lack of will, but because we don’t have the first clue how such a thing could actually be done.” The fact that I now had a quest indicated that it was probably possible, and the fact that it was a companion quest meant that she was a companion, which implied a certain level of trust (though I hadn’t forgotten that Grak’s loyalty had started in the negatives).

“I didn’t ask for those who were willing and capable at the moment,” said Solace with a light shrug.

“Is there a reason for that?” I asked.

“As I said, this isn’t the first time that Zorisad Yosivun has been used by this druidic grove,” said Solce. Her voice was gentle, but I could read the subtext. If the spell couldn’t find what it was looking for, it would cost the caster her life. How many times had this druidic circle cast the spell, with more and more pessimistic wordings, until it had come to this? I couldn’t tell whether that reading was correct or not, but for all her calm I didn’t think that Solace would be standing before us if she had many better options.

“Would you like to meet it?” she asked us, gesturing toward the bottle.

“The locus? In there?” asked Amaryllis, casting her eyes toward the bottle, where the tiny trees were moving gently under the force of a breeze that must have been entirely internal. Her eyes were bright and full of curiosity. “Yes.”

“Seems like a trap,” said Fenn. She still had her bow out and arrow at the ready.

“Helping her is a companion quest,” I said. I watched Solace’s face as I said that. I wasn’t sure how she would take the whole ‘you’re eternally linked to me’ thing, and wanted to hold off on having that particular conversation. She also seemed to have no idea who we were, and if she had been prepared
for our arrival, it wouldn’t have been too hard for her to kill us outright.

“Still seems like a trap,” said Fenn. “Grak and I will stay outside. Grak, start putting up as many wards as you can.”

“I will put up the ones most likely to prevent an ambush,” he said with a frown.

Solace stood in front of the bottle and placed her finger just inside the rim. Her body twisted and warped as it was sucked into the bottle in a flash, distilled down to a tiny thing that was pretty much impossible to see.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. Any sense of wonder that might have been present on her face had vanished, and she strode forward to the bottle. “We should be able to talk freely for a moment. I agree with Fenn that it seems like a trap, but we very much appear to have made the acquaintance of a practitioner of a magic long thought dead, which would be an incredible boon, and that makes me immediately suspicious.” She looked me in the eyes, hers glacial blue and probing. “You said that she was a companion?”

I closed my eyes and started talking even as I waited for the screens to come up. “I was given a quest for the restoration of the grove,” I said. “It was labeled a companion quest, but looking at the companion screen --” I stopped for a moment, because the companion screen was not as I had left it.

Amaryllis was still at a 9 for Loyalty, Grak had moved up to a 3, and Fenn was at 16. The first point of order was that loyalty could, in fact, exceed 10. The second was that Fenn had somehow gained a whopping six points since the last time I checked. The messages the game gave me weren’t recorded anywhere, and didn’t stick around for long even if I didn’t blink them away, which meant that it was possible I’d gained those points while asleep and never noticed it … or something had happened when I was high on unicorn blood.

“-- it doesn’t show her as a companion, not yet, which means that I can’t see what her loyalty is, and we know that those can start in the negatives.” I hoped that my pause didn’t entirely give me away. Fenn and I clearly needed to have a pointed conversation, ideally in private.

Grak sniffed at that, sucking air into his wide nostrils. “I assume that was me,” he said. “Fenn planned to betray me. It would have been foolish not to plot against you.”

“Water over the bridge,” said Fenn with a wave of her hand.

“I think it’s a risk worth taking,” said Amaryllis. “The Second Empire moved against the druids. The Empire of Common Cause might be able to work with them. There are minor exclusion zones that a locus would be able to revive almost entirely. If we can get them reproducing …” She trailed off and looked at me. “You think that this is a result of your power?”

“Um,” I said. I thought that this was Dungeon Master shenanigans to introduce a new player at the start of a new session, but that would be related to my place in the context of this world as a simulation, rather than any displayed or provable powers on my part. “It’s hard to say.” It’s hard to say whether there were potential companions floating around in the world who we had a high chance of bumping into, or whether there were a small, set pool that showed up on schedule, or whether something even weirder was going on.

“Very well,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll go in, the others will keep guard.” She walked forward and without another word, placed her finger into the bottle. The same magic happened again, twisting and twirling her physical form around for a brief second before she was sucked inside.
“Okay,” said Fenn, “We should be able to talk freely now.” She looked to me with a too-serious expression that was a mimic of the one Amaryllis had worn. She broke after a second of that. “Well I personally didn’t have anything, but if one of you two did?” She glanced at Grak. “Remember, vow of silence, don’t mention unicorn blood.”

Grak rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

I stepped forward to the bottle, psyched myself up, and put my finger just inside the rim. There was no physical sensation of my body being distorted to fit through (and shrunk down?) as I entered the bottle, it was the world around me that seemed to be changing, save for the bottle itself, whose mouth was only growing wider. And then I was falling, with walls of glass on either side of me, until they opened up where the neck of the bottle ended. Below me was the woodland I had seen from outside, spread out right up to the glass, with a small creek running from one end to the other, and a clearing that I was dropping down toward.

I hadn’t actually given much thought to the prospect of what I was going to do to arrest my fall. My assumption was that either the magic bottle had some special feature that would allow me to land safely, that Solace would save me, that the locus would save me, that there were wards that would prevent injury, or maybe that I’d simply heal back from the injuries that the equivalent to a mile-long fall would give me. But it wasn’t until after I had fallen a few hundred feet that the raw terror of the rushing wind set in and I started trying to figure out how I was going to deal with this in the worst case scenario. I had left my messenger bag, with Ropey inside it, on the ground back near the flower fields. I had more bones that I could suck dry for END to heal me, assuming that I could stay conscious when I hit the ground, and I could probably take the Anyblade off my finger and shape it into something that would provide drag to slow me, and that would --

I sprouted wings. They ripped through my t-shirt, making me thankful that Fenn had taken my armor, and I was startled to realize that I could control them with a thought. They were huge, with each one stretching out at least nine feet, and even then I could tell that they would only be enough for me to soar, not actually fly with. With an excited thought I reached out to wings, trying to feel the bones in them like I could within my own flesh and blood, but I was disappointed to find nothing there. More than that, my blood wasn’t pumping through these wings either, whatever magic had made them.

Still, I could glide, and the pure silence of it, with no sound but the rushing of wind, called back a memory of biking in the nighttime. Gliding on these enormous wings put piloting a helicopter to shame, in part because it was so effortless to use them. I didn’t need to think about any aspect of flight, it was as intuitive as if I’d had those wings since the day I was born. That probably meant some level of mental hackery, but I wasn’t about to let that ruin my fun.

When I spotted a flash of long, red hair, I angled down. Amaryllis was looking up at me, and as I circled her, losing altitude with every rotation, I could see that her t-shirt had holes ripped in the back as well. Solace was nowhere to be seen, but beside the creek that ran through the field there was a singular tree, standing tall and alone. A small plume of smoke was rising up from a dead branch that extended slightly past the tree’s canopy.

I landed next to Amaryllis by bringing myself to a dead stop and then dropping the final twenty feet, killing my momentum with a final flourish of the wings. I could feel a strain on my ribs that hurt far more than I had expected it to, but when I came back up from my landing I had managed not to actually break any of my weakened bones. The wings were retracting into my back in a hurry.

“Okay, now that we’re alone together, we can finally speak freely,” I said.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Assume that the winds here will carry your every word to her ears.”
“Sorry, that was a joke,” I said. One that probably didn’t work without the context of Fenn’s joke, when I thought about it.

“Ah,” said Amaryllis. “Okay, I get it.” She didn’t laugh or smile. “Was there anything you needed to say, that you didn’t say last night? Something you couldn’t mention in front of Penn or Grak?”

“No,” I replied. “Or … there was one thing. You took an amulet with a glowing blue gem from the Caer Laga vault. Fenn and I never did discover what it did, and it was keyed to you personally, so, I’m not saying that I think it was something that you were hiding from us,” though it totally was “but it was one of the things that I kept meaning to ask you about once you got better.”

“It’s a copy of my great-grandfather,” said Amaryllis. “Wearing it allows the facsimile to converse with me. I’m fairly certain that I could push my own essence into it, which would clear him out and make the copy one in my own image, but I’m understandably reticent to do that.”

“Huh,” I said. “That seems like it could have been useful to know about. Really useful. Four heads are better than three.”

“He’s currently useless,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll spend more time with him later, but he wants me to engage in testing with him to ensure that I’m the sort of person who needs his help.” She looked toward the tall tree that had smoke puffing out of its makeshift branch-chimney. From the ground, I could see that there were a number of natural holes and hollows, and the interior of it was lit. “I’m trying my best to be forthright with you, but we have other concerns at the moment.”

“Right,” I said. “I mean at first I was just trying to make a joke, but, you’re right. Let’s go.”

As we walked toward the tree/house, I contemplated the bottle. Gravity still felt the same, which it probably shouldn’t have, and the light outside the bottle still seemed as bright as it had when we were out there. My eyes were smaller now, so less light should be hitting them, right? The obvious answer was that magic was compensating for that, but the how seemed like it might be important, if only because it might reveal some of the underlying mechanisms of the simulation I was pretty sure I was in.

(From the outside the bottle was eleven inches across, and from the inside I could simply look at the walls, get a very close approximation from Range Finder, and then use some simple trigonometry to correct for the fact that I was looking up at the walls, since trees were in the way at ground level. My quick calculations, which I definitely wouldn’t have been able to do without WolframAlpha before reaching 7 CUN, suggested the interior of the bottle had a diameter of ~1.2 miles, meaning that we were at something like 1:7000 scale. The trees were not tiny at all; they were behemoths.)

Solace was waiting for us by a wide hole in the tree, not something carved, but what seemed to be entirely (impossibly) natural given the grain of the wood. The windows of the tree-home were similar, and if you had never met a person nor seen a home, you might have thought that it was just the tree’s quirks that had made it into this.

“You’re actually a druid,” said Amaryllis. “This land, this square mile of territory, is really inhabited by a locus, which you carry around in your magical cloak. You can travel without your power diminishing, because you’re never more than a single press of a finger from your locus.”

“Yes,” said Solace with a faint smile. “Do you love it for the sake of the power I wield, or for the majesty of a forgotten magic?”

Amaryllis hesitated. “Both,” she said. “Druids are, or have become,” she stopped. “You know. You can travel freely, you must know what the word ‘druid’ means to the people of Aerb.”
“A thing lost,” said Solace with a nod. “A symbol of the death and desecration of the Second Empire, a memento of all that has ever been lost and cannot be recovered. Yes, I know.”

“Then why,” began Amaryllis, before stopping again. “The Empire of Common Cause would welcome a locus, especially a moveable one, with open arms. Almost any nation within the empire would throw money and personnel toward rehabilitating this grove.”

“To come under the control of another is not the way of the druids,” said Solace. “I have one master, and that is my locus.”

“And you would see it die rather than administered by a kingdom?” asked Amaryllis.

“You misunderstand the nature of a locus,” said Solace. “To be administered by a kingdom might be enough to kill it, even if the land it had was large, healthy, and mostly untouched by the mortal species. My locus has been confined to this bottle with a single square mile for near-on three hundred years.”

“And besides that, it’s the kind of thing you would use the Deep Searching for anyway,” I said.

Solace looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “This locus has too little land to induct new druids into the grove,” she said. “It took three deaths to Zorisad Yosivun before we stopped trying to find a kingdom to be our salvation.” And each of those deaths with a year invested in the question. Each one gave you information, if only in the negative, suggesting that what you’d asked for was, despite what you might assume, impossible.

It was bothering me that there was still no message about her being a companion. How it had worked in the past was that a loyalty message would pop up after enough time, and after the second level of loyalty, I would be able to see a biography. None of that was exactly pinned down, and there were more complicated theories, but I really thought that I should have gotten one by now.

“So where is the locus?” I asked.

“Behind you,” replied Solace with a smile.

When I turned around, I saw a doe, six feet tall at the shoulder, with skin so pale brown that it was nearly white, and six eyes that were all staring right at me. It moved closer, twitching an ear, then bent its head low to the ground to eat from the grass there, not taking its eyes off me.

*Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 0!*
Keep Magic Weird

I stared at the six-eyed doe as Amaryllis approached it. It was massive, for a deer, though showed no signs of giving a crap about the square-cube law. I mean, I also didn’t give a crap about the square-cube law, but it was one of those things that you needed to think about when designing creatures, because someone like Craig or Reimer would start questioning how a fly as large as a house was able to generate lift, and “it’s magic” only worked as an explanation a limited number of times before people started thinking that you didn’t know what you were talking about.

I stayed back. I wasn’t actually clear on why Amaryllis was going toward the thing. There were definitely cultural assumptions and pieces of history that I was almost completely ignorant on, given that “magics that were previously considered dead” weren’t high up on my reading/research list (though when I phrased it like that, it seemed like the most obvious thing in the world was to go after specifically those kinds of magic, because that was plot-bait incarnate). I couldn’t tell whether Amaryllis’ obvious affection and wonder for the locus was being faked for some reason, or stemmed from the place of the druids in the cultural canon of Aerb. Had she been faking those emotions outside the bottle, then dropped them as soon as Solace was gone, or had she been actually feeling those emotions, then suppressed them when it was inconvenient to be having them? I had been traveling with Amaryllis for quite some time, and didn’t actually understand her very well.

I wouldn’t say that I hated deer, but a lot of my time with deer had been spent looking at them down the barrel of a rifle, and I considered venison to basically be the only reason that it was worth suffering their existence. Hunting aside, almost all my interactions with deer had been negative, either because they were eating things from the garden or they were narrowly avoiding an accident because they were too dumb to be sensible about roads.

(And was the Dungeon Master trying to say something, by having this creature be a deer, rather than something else? If half the stuff in Aerb was built to my specifications, from things I had dreamed up or reflections of my life, then why a fucking deer of all things? Was this just on the level of “hey you used to hunt deer”, a stupid surface-level reference, or was it actual commentary of some kind? There was a point to asking questions like this, which is that eventually I might be able to figure the Dungeon Master out, but I was pretty far from solving that puzzle.)

“Do they all look like that?” I asked Solace.

“Yes,” said Solace. “Because that is the only one there is.” She gave me a smile as I opened my mouth to try smoothing things over. “It’s okay,” she said. “And no, they didn’t all look like that, back when there were hundreds.”

I almost said that seemed like a lot, before remembering that Aerb was ten times as large as Earth, and having tens of them on Earth would have placed them on the far side of the critically endangered species list. Even at their peak, they had been really rare.

“I don’t know much about druids. Or loci,” I said.

“That’s okay.” Solace nodded. “Not many do, these days. Being absent for three hundred years will do that. Druids were never ones for knowledge anyhow.”

“Huh,” I said. “And, is there a reason for that?”

Solace shrugged. “Knowledge is detrimental to the art,” she said. “I gave you wings so that you wouldn’t die from the fall, but that might have been impossible for me if I’d had any concrete ideas..."
about how wings actually work. It used to be a somewhat common occurrence for druids, to go off in pursuit of better understanding only to lose their intuitive connection.”

“So, like a piano player who can only play when they’re not thinking about what their fingers are actually doing,” I said.

“What’s a piano?” asked Solace with a raised eyebrow. Amaryllis had come back to join us, her time nuzzling the deer apparently complete. I assumed that she’d been listening in on our conversation.

“Uh, it’s a musical instrument that you play like this, I said, holding my hands out as though I was about to type something. “You press black and white keys which raise hammers that hit against strings, which then make sound?” (SOC, dump stat, etc.)

“He means a clavichord,” said Amaryllis with a smile. She turned to me. “The tangents are actually blades, not hammers.”

“Right,” I said. “But druids must have some limits, right? I was just wondering what those limits were.”

“Would either of you wish to become a druid someday?” asked Solace. “It might be possible, once this task is complete and the locus can induct new members.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I think I would like that.” And there I knew she was lying, because the thought of Amaryllis making a commitment to a forest, or the spirit of a forest, or whatever, sent up a bunch of error messages. (To be clear, these were non-literal error messages. I was at a point in my life where I needed to start making that distinction.)

“Then I will choose to demur on that question, Juniper,” said Solace.

I tensed for a moment before some remote part of my brain told me that Amaryllis had already said my name in front of her. “I’m sorry, we never did make our introductions,” I said. “I’m Juniper, this is Mary.” There was a little twist of Amaryllis’ lips at the fact that I hadn’t used her real name, only enough that I knew she got it.

“And who are you, at a deeper level?” asked Solace, still with her kindly smile. “I, again, know almost nothing of you. Three races among the four of you, magic items to spare, and a warder of some skill? There are not terribly many conventional arrangements of people who would suit even that bare bones description. If the four of you really do have a teleportation key, then … well, I don’t know what that would make you.”

“Joon?” asked Amaryllis. I could read the implied question in her voice. Can we trust her?

“It’s complicated,” I said.

I turned to look at the locus. The Six-Eyed Doe, as the game termed it, that was my actual companion, not Solace. And if I were a game master who had a player with the ability to literally see the loyalty levels of everyone on the team, you had better believe I would give them someone their power didn’t work on. The question was whether that meant Solace was meant to betray us, or whether it was a red herring, or whether I was trying to read far too deep into what little of the Dungeon Master’s machinations I could actually, visibly see.

I had made a promise to myself that I wasn’t going to treat people like that, that I wasn’t going to throw anyone under the bus because I doubted that they were real. I had read those kinds of stories, and they almost never worked out right for the protagonist, but it wasn’t just that, it was the idea that if I discounted things as ‘not real’ then I would have to discount my entire life, because I couldn’t
trust any of that either, not even the vividly real ones.

So on her merits, could we trust Solace? No, absolutely not. If I had known that she wasn’t a companion, then I probably wouldn’t have gone into the bottle to begin with. She was a companion’s -- servant? secretary? hand? -- something like those, but that was introducing trust chains into the mix, and I didn’t particularly trust or understand the Six-Eyed Doe as yet either. Solace seemed nice enough, but I wasn’t about to live my life on Aerb on the basis of how nice people seemed when I first met them. That wasn’t to say that I was going to reject the quest, or even reject having her as a traveling companion, but trust had to be earned, if the game wasn’t going to just cough up that information.

“Complicated?” asked Solace. She gave me a small grin. “I’ve been the only druid left on Aerb for the last thirty years. I survived the extermination efforts of the Second Empire. I understand a thing or two about complicated. I won’t ask you to break any silence you feel you need to keep, and Mary, I will confirm that you’re right; I can hear anything that’s said within the domain of the locus.”

“Wait, are you saying that you’re at least three hundred years old?” I asked. “How is that possible? Did you know the Lost King?”

“This body is forty years old,” said Solace. “Young, by crantek standards. When I grow too old I perform the rite of Yaxukasu Axud, which allows me to be birthed again. I have lived for four hundred and eight years, across a number of bodies. The Lost King was before my time, sadly.”

I sighed. “Well, that at least explains how you can be here if the locus couldn’t induct anyone into the grove.” That also meant that she was a source of valuable knowledge, but perhaps not the kind of knowledge that was of immediate use, especially if they were anti-knowledge. “Is healing within the realm of what a druid can do?”

“Oh, of course,” said Solace. “It was what we were most known for. Outside the bottle I am considerably weaker, but inside I can heal almost any injury and cure almost any disease, so long as it’s not too far progressed. Before the Second Empire, people used to bring their sick into the woods in hopes of finding a druid they could plead their case to.”

I frowned at that. “Okay, but wouldn’t it have made more sense to just set up a station where people could come and get a hearing?” I asked. “Why should they have to wander into the woods? I mean why would the druids want totally ignorant outsiders coming in and bumbling their way around?”

“You were right that you don’t understand druids,” said Solace. She gestured to the locus. “It’s order that rankles. Systemization and understanding are anathema to a locus. This world in a bottle has just enough that’s wild and free to sustain the locus, and even then it bucks at me when I go about my work of keeping this place functional.” She ran her hand through her hair. “Do you know your history?”

“I think I can safely say that I don’t,” I replied.

“What you’re suggesting?” asked Solace. “That was how the Second Empire started. They saw the loci and the druid’s groves as resources to be exploited, the domains as places to be penned in and contained. That is fundamentally not how a locus behaves. To study it is to weaken it. To enumerate a druid’s powers is to cause them to fail. That was always what the loci and their druids butted up against, the desire of the mortal species to know and the nature of the locus, which is not to be known.”

If a druid couldn’t use their powers if they understood them, then the first thing I thought about doing was going up a level and trying to figure out what ‘understanding’ meant in that context, and to test
what various things would trigger this anti-understanding mechanism. Obviously going up a level was, to some extent, allowed, right? Otherwise Solace wouldn’t be able to tell us that actually understanding druidic magic would kill it, and she knew enough to know that she would lose power if she actually understood the mechanics in anything other than an intuitive sense. And yet, I was pretty sure that I was edging around something that would be forbidden, or at least that I would be told was forbidden.

“That’s always been my biggest gripe with D&D,” said Arthur. “The magic almost never feels magical, and that’s because it’s bound by rules. Joon solves a lot of that by just giving us weird stuff --”

“It’s the ‘Keep Magic Weird’ initiative,” I said.

“Is that a reference?” asked Tom.

“‘Keep Portland Weird’, right?” asked Tiff.

“Yeah,” I said. I gestured to Arthur to continue. We had seven people for the session, including Craig’s kid sister Maddie, which made it a bit of a madhouse, especially when Arthur was trying to talk seriously about something.

“The problem is that there are rules, and once you know those rules, you can’t be surprised by them,” said Arthur. “It’s a map that has all the lines drawn in, with nowhere left to explore. Wizards are supposed to be magical, but they just boil down to a list of a few hundred spells to choose from. You get the buzz of magic from those spells when you first read them, but after that, it falls flat.”

“You can’t fix that though,” said Reimer. “Not unless you want to go full freeform roleplay without any rules, and that always sucks.”

“That was basically what we did for Actual Cannibal Shia Labeouf, and it worked great,” said Tiff.

“Shia Labeouf?” asked Maddie. She was three years younger than us, not really a kid, but that was how I had always thought of her: Craig’s kid sister.

“No talking when it’s not your turn,” said Craig. She pouted at that. “Whose turn was it?”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at my turn tracker, which was a mess of dry erase marker. I had horrible handwriting. “Tom, you’re up.” (And, as usual, the conversation continued on while I tried to deal with combat and Tom’s questions. I listened in, splitting my attention, unable to contribute without bringing an already-slow session grinding to a halt.)

“You could totally do a purely DM-mediated magic system,” said Arthur. “The player says what they want to do, the DM places a difficulty on it, and then the player rolls some dice. I thought of that in two seconds, I’m sure there are better ways.”

“But the DM is just arbitrarily assigning difficulty?” asked Reimer. “And the player just has to take a guess at how hard it is to actually cast a spell or do whatever unstructured thing it is you want to do? I mean, you’re going to have to introduce rules at some point, even if they’re just meta-level rules like Wish or Miracle, and it’s the rules you dislike.”

“If you had a good DM, I think you could do it implicitly,” said Tiff. “You could do like a social contract type thing, develop an understanding, and then build from there. You’d basically be praying to your god, but the god would be the DM, and maybe he would have his own rules, but you’d never know them, and you’d be discouraged from knowing them.”
“Wanna homebrew it?” asked Reimer with a grin. “If you pitched it, I think Joon would go for it, and then I can cheese the shit out of it.”

“I heard that!” I called out to them. “Tiff, don’t you dare go over to the dark side, stay over in the light with Arthur.”

Nothing ever came of that homebrew plan, which I was thankful for, because I liked the rules. Arthur was right that magic seems a little bit less magical once you stuck everything to a cork board, but it wasn’t less magical for me, because everything I thought up I could make a reality, and that process of making these ethereal ideas into something concrete was one of the things I loved most about tabletop.

I was certain that I was never going to be a druid, and that I would never want to be a druid, and that even if I did want to be a druid, I would probably be powerless within the week because I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from investigating what limits the power had. But there was a bigger problem than that.

“Can I hurt the locus by thinking the wrong thoughts?” I asked. Like, say thinking about the fact that as size increases, volume increases faster than surface area, and the doe just looked like a normal doe without the structural changes necessary to have legs that supported it, and it had six eyes that would require an almost totally different skull from what an actual deer had, and six eyes didn’t really seem like they would help much given the configuration on the head, except maybe for added parallax, and oh god am I killing this deer just by thinking these things?

“No,” said Solace. “You’re trying to pin down what can and cannot be pinned down?”

“I’m just, maybe not suited to this place,” I said. “Or, this variety of magic. I’m a guy who pins things down, by my nature, and if you tell me that it’s mystical, which you seem to be doing, I start to think about all the properties of that mysticality.”

“You would make a bad druid,” said Solace with a laugh. “But no, the things you should be most worried about are telling me how or why something I have done, or am about to do, cannot possibly work, or openly questioning how it did work given some piece of knowledge available to you. As for the locus, it matters more what is done within its domain, and how you see it. It is a thing that values friendships without structure, rather than written or oral agreements. It would never, for example, induct either of you as druids in exchange for your service to it, your service must be given without any preconceptions of trade. If your service is so given, then the locus might take to you, or it might not.”

I looked to Amaryllis, wondering whether she knew that. She seemed like she would make a bad druid too, at least to my eyes, but maybe she was better at the whole gift economy, spiritual guidance, it’s-just-a-show-I-should-really-just-relax thing than I suspected.

“Okay,” I said. “But the upshot is that you’re offering us aid? With no strings attached?”

“Hrm,” said Solace. “I wouldn’t go that far. I will say that my intention is to help you, and it is my hope that it is your intention to help me. I will give you both the material aid and personal effort I believe you require in the pursuit of your goals.”

“But,” I said. “Should you believe that you’re not getting closer to --”

“We’ve accepted already, Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “Or rather, if I understand Solace right, we have already declared our intentions and she has declared hers. I don’t know that there’s more to say on
the matter.”

“Mary is in charge of diplomacy,” I said to Solace with a small smile.

“And that’s something that the four of you do together?” asked Solace. “Diplomacy? If I’ll be traveling with you, will it be to places where diplomacy takes place? I have to say that you seem exceedingly well-armed for diplomats.”

“We’re on our way to the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny, to learn more about the dream-skewered,” said Amaryllis. “Any assistance in shortening our journey would be much appreciated.”

“And there’s another thing,” I said. “I’ve been having a medical issue with my ribs and my left hand that I’d like your help in fixing,” if you can.

(I was trying my best not to tell the druid what she could or could not do, and why it was probably impossible. This wasn’t a test, per se, though I was expecting that it would give me data either way, and that wasn’t my fault, was it? I was also hoping that there wasn’t a placebo requirement; would druidic magic work less well if I thought it wasn’t going to work? Was I allowed to ask whether there was a placebo effect?)

“Remove your shirt,” said Solace.

I did as she said, with only a little bit of hesitation. The spell that had given us wings had ripped two holes in the back anyway. I noticed a slight change in Amaryllis’ expression as she looked at me, a shifting under the mask of good humor she was currently wearing. I was sure that I looked different from the last time she’d seen me. I was quite a bit more muscular now, having gone from 5 PHY to 7 PHY. I didn’t have any dysmorphia from it, none at all, which in itself was odd, because I would have thought there would be little moments throughout the day when I would look down and be shocked by the changes my body had gone through. The game layer, or the simulation, or whatever, had been kind enough to monkey with my perception of self (which, yes, was disconcerting, but I figured was better than feeling like I had been trapped in the wrong body).

Solace placed a hand on my bare chest. She had a pleasant smile, most of the time, despite being four hundred years old and having apparently suffered through the fantasy equivalent of the Nazis, along with the deaths of everyone close to her and a life of hiding. That smile began to fade as a look of confusion came over her green face.

“You’re perfectly healthy,” she said, not removing her hand from my chest. She frowned. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Oh,” I said, “Uh, that would have been … yesterday morning.” I hadn’t touched the pancakes, bacon, or buttered coffee in the morning. I had woken up from bed to eat something and then gotten sidetracked with Amaryllis. And before that, I’d been high out of my mind on unicorn blood, then passed out, which meant that it wasn’t a great day for remembering to eat.

“Well, that explains the malnourishment. But I don’t fully understand this,” said Solace. She moved her hand, touching me, first pressing her fingers firmly against my side, then going for my arm. She grabbed my left arm, in her hand and peered down at it. “Your body thinks that it’s healthy, but it’s wrong. This is --” She stopped and pulled her hand away, then looked at Amaryllis. “What happened to him, exactly? Does he know?”

Amaryllis looked bewildered at that, and I hoped it was authentic. “I don’t know what you’re thinking,” I said, “But I’m a bone mage. I used the magic of those fifty-one bones in a time of need and whatever it is you’re seeing, that’s the result.”
“Oh,” said Solace. She calmed down somewhat. “I knew that it was your soul, I just thought … I hadn’t considered that you had done it to yourself. I assumed that she was a bone mage, and they can touch the soul …” She stopped and looked at me. “The things the Second Empire did with the soul are one of the reasons that they aren’t looked upon fondly anymore, if you’re really so ignorant of history as you claim.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but what’s wrong with you isn’t something that I can fix.”

“Okay,” I said, “I need to put a history book on my shopping list or something.” I paused. “I should warn you that fixing this problem of mine is on our list of things to do, and it’s very possible that meddling with the soul is going to be how that gets done.”

Solace blanched, her light green skin going a shade of lighter, making her look sickly. “I was afraid of that,” she murmured. “But yes, that does make sense.”

“It makes sense in terms of the Deep Searching and why you were brought here,” said Amaryllis. “You think salvation might take dealing with the soul of the locus.”

“Does a locus have a soul?” I asked. “Or, sorry, is that one of those things that I’m not supposed to ask?”

“They do have souls,” said Solace. Her face was set in a frown. “The Second Empire was fastidious in its attempts to understand the world. Never let a death go to waste, they said.” She glanced over to the six-eyed doe, which was still standing close by. “I’d prefer that we speak of this elsewhere.”

I looked up at the top of the bottle. “Is there a better way out, or are we going to grow wings again?”

“I’ll admit that was mostly for effect,” said Solace. “I didn’t have the measure of you as well as I do now. I wanted to show you this place, and its majesty, which is just a scrap of what the locus once had, and will have again.”

(I found it odd and somewhat off-putting that everyone just called “it” “the locus”. Were names too much of a constraint? The game called it Six-Eyed Doe, and that was what I was going to go with, at least within the privacy of my own head. It also seemed dumb to call a doe an “it” instead of a “she”, considering that it was already gendered, but whatever.)

Solace stepped over to the tree-house, which I took an opportunity to glance inside as I followed. It was more ordered than I had expected, given what Solace had said about the nature of druids, but the order was organic, with little out-of-the-way cubbies, stacks of fruits and furs, and nary a straight line in sight. Solace went up next to the door and took her staff in hand, then tapped twice on the wood. It split along the grain, revealing a long tunnel through the wood that extended, fourth-dimensionally, straight through the entire width of the tree.

“Down the rabbit hole then,” I said with a breath.

When Solace started walking down the dark tunnel, I followed after, with Amaryllis right behind me. As soon as she was past the entrance, it sealed shut behind me, leaving me with a claustrophobic feeling and a sudden spike of panic. I was about to light my fingers on fire when I saw a swarm of yellow-green dots appear in front of me, which at first reminded me of the fireflies I’d tried to catch with Arthur when I was little, before I realized that they actually were fireflies. As more of them appeared, I could see by their light that they were coming out from Solace’s long, leafy cloak. They kept on coming, flying up and around us, some of them landing on the roof of the tunnel, until there was enough light to see by.

(I was fairly sure that this was also meant to impress us with a blatant display of magic, just like the
winged glide down into the bottle, and I have to say that it was working on me.)

We went what felt like a hundred yards before a shaft of light opened in front of us, which eventually resolved itself into an ordered row of flowers once my eyes adjusted to the light. Solace stepped out into it as the fireflies swarmed to her and made their way back under the leaves of her cloak. When I stepped out of the tree after her, I looked back to see the long tunnel seem to emerge from a tree that couldn’t possibly contain it. When I looked at the field, I saw Fenn and Grak standing there over the bottle. Fenn had spotted us, and was giving us a wave.

“Can you go ahead to the others?” asked Amaryllis. As soon as she stepped out of the tree, it folded itself back up, looking no different from all the others. “We’ll be along in a moment, but there are a few things I’d like to discuss in confidence.”

“Certainly,” said Solace. The crantek gave us a short bow and strode back to her bottle without a look back.

“So,” said Amaryllis. “It’s complicated?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “The locus is the companion, not Solace herself. Grak’s glasses show her as purple, which I have to take as a good sign, but I would be more confident that we could trust her if she weren’t a minion.”

“She has power,” said Amaryllis. “Her needs are straightforward, and she’s not making many demands. Actually, her goals for the moment are directly aligned with our own; she wants you to be stronger. If it’s alright with you, I’ll probably reveal my true identity to her when we make camp for the night.”

I startled at that, because the idea that Amaryllis was asking me was a little bit odd. “Sure,” I said. I hesitated. “How much of that was true?” I asked. “About you wanting to be a druid? Any of it?”

“The things I want and the things I can have are very different,” said Amaryllis. She reached back to feel the holes in her shirt. “I would like to have a new shirt that doesn’t make me look like an ass, but I doubt that Fenn will be able to resist the urge to show off to our new travelling companion.” She sighed. “I would like to be a druid, to wander the woods in solitude, to have that simple, uncomplicated --” she looked at Solace, “That’s not right, looking at her, I didn’t meant to diminish her sacrifice and struggles. Druids in the fairy tales are different. Maybe that was a safe dream because it was unattainable.” She looked to me, staring at me with those pretty blue eyes, perfect lips slightly parted. “Are you worried that I’ll let thoughts like that get in my way?”

“No,” I said. “The opposite.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She turned back toward the others. “Come on, I don’t want them to think that we were conspiring.”

“We were conspiring against you!” Fenn said to us as soon as we rejoined the others. “Grak started it. Do you know what he said as soon as you left? He said, ‘Now we finally have a chance to speak freely’! His first joke!”

“I understand jokes,” said Grak. “It was not my first one.” He looked at Fenn with a frown. “I regretted it immediately.”

“Solace was just telling us what a wonderful time you all had in the bottle,” said Fenn. “We’re all still friends, right? Everything is copacetic?”
“Right,” I said. “We are, uh, not at full disclosure though, regarding the two major things we’re keeping under our hats.” I paused and realized that I could potentially have been talking about a few different things. “One regarding me, one regarding Mary.”

“Trust takes time, I understand that,” said Solace. “Mary, you were asking if I could assist in travel? How would the four of you feel about being birds? We could be at the athenaeum before nightfall.” Solace scooped the forest-in-a-bottle up and put it in her cloak, a process that seems to be governed by a flourish of sleight-of-hand more than magic.

“That sounds lovely,” said Amaryllis. She turned to Fenn. “Fenn, my shirt was ripped, and I would like a new one, please.”

Fenn broke out into a grin, which she tried and failed to suppress so she could make a serious face. “Hrm,” she said, wiggling her gloved fingers, “No, no, no -- hah, that’s the one, perfect for our circumstances.” A folded pink shirt appeared in her hand, which she tossed to Amaryllis.

I watched closely as Amaryllis unfolded the t-shirt to get a look at it. It was a single word with an exclamation point, in bubbly, curled writing, with sequins and glitter on it. ‘Princess!’, the shirt declared.

Amaryllis stared at it with a blank face for a few seconds before bursting out laughing.
Solace went around to us one by one, tapping her bird-skull wooden staff upon our heads. The tap produced dense mist, which fell down like a sheet to cover the body, and when it cleared, there was a bird standing there instead. I watched that happen to Grak and then Amaryllis, as Solace moved around the circle. Their bird forms looked almost identical, with her being a bit more sprightly and him a bit thicker. The color of the feathers was a dark black, with white on the belly and the lower half of the head.

“What kind of bird is that, if you know, or if that question isn’t indelicate to your, um, profession?” I asked, as Fenn was tapped on the head and shrouded in mist (or possibly, odorless smoke, if it had physical substance at all).

“Don’t really know,” said Solace with a raised eyebrow. “We don’t put much emphasis on measurements, and that aside, how fast or slow an animal goes -- even one of the mortal species in animal form -- is not something that can be reduced down to a simple number. People do it, but it’s pointless and, anyway, doesn’t ever truly match what we see in the world, where there are a million things that might affect a swallow’s flight.”

“I really would make a bad druid, because now I’m trying to think about all the various factors that could influence swallow flight.” I was also thinking about relative levels of error and confidence intervals, but that was probably not something that the druid wanted to hear about.

Solace nodded happily, then tapped me on the head without another word. Mist poured down in front of my eyes, and when it cleared, I was a swallow, with no obvious transition between the two states, not even in terms of proprioception. Had my arms become wings? I lifted them, and it was as natural as if I’d been born into them, not like I had thrust my hands down into a bird suit and was controlling the wings from a distance. I ran forward a little bit on clawed feet, then flapped up into the air.

It took us two hours to get to within striking distance of the athenaeum as we followed the railroad tracks. It was visible almost from the first moment I took off though, as a beige smudge on the top of a singular purple mountain, one which sat a bit off from the rest of the range, at the end of a peninsula. Beyond that was ocean, wide and vast. That rock formation was something I didn’t think you’d ever see in nature, almost aggressively so. As we got closer I saw a city nestled at the mountain base among the trees there, and just barely, the thin line of lights that shone from the cable car lines.

We landed together in a copse of trees beside the main road into Boastre Vino, which ran parallel to the train tracks. There were barely any farms around the place, nor any visible industry, just woodland; it made me wonder at how much of Aerb was simply unspoilt. Twenty billion people across two billion square miles meant that at its peak (which it was now well below) Aerb only had the population density of Earth in the 1930s. Modern day Aerb had a fourth of that, and I wasn’t sure how much of that decline was recent, but it seemed like enough that maybe nature would have
started the reclamation process.

Solace changed back first, then tapped each of us with her staff, returning us to our natural forms one by one.

“We should be a few minutes' walk from the city,” said Amaryllis, once she had a mouth instead of a beak. “Juniper, you still want to do this the legitimate way?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m dream-skewered, so I have a reason to go to the athenaeum, which means that they should let me in and hopefully answer my questions, right? That seems faster and safer than trying to be duplicitous. I won’t be institutionalized or murdered or something?”

Amaryllis shook her head. “From everything I’ve read, the dream-skewered aren’t really confined, because this is the place that’s most like home for them, with an Earthian diet and others that believe they’re from the same place. There’s not a life for them, outside the athenaeum walls. That freedom also gives the researchers a better rapport with their subjects. You should be safe. We’ll ask around before we do it though.”

I let out a breath, trying to drain myself of nervous energy. “And do you think that you’ll all be allowed up with me?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. She looked down at her shirt and smiled at ‘Princess!’ staring up at her. “Clearly I already have the perfect disguise. We’ll spend the rest of today in the city, gathering information, making sure that it’s safe and trying to figure out a cover story, if we need one. I wouldn’t want you going up there alone.”

“You think they’ll let us up armed and armored?” asked Fenn. “Especially the one they think is brain-damaged?”

“We’ll see,” said Amaryllis. “I would suggest armed but not armored. Half of our weapons can be hidden away in one form or another. They might check us, but I doubt it, and in the worst case scenario, we’ll have to put some of it away in a secure vault.”

“A very secure vault,” said Grak with a nod.

“We have Sable to store things in,” said Fenn.

“I don’t want to pin everything on that glove,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a single point of failure.”

“I won’t leave my cloak, for obvious reasons,” said Solace.

“Which in the worst case means we might be splitting the party,” I said with a grimace. “Which didn’t work out well for me last time.”

“And what happened last time?” asked Solace.

“I’ll tell you about it over dinner tonight,” said Amaryllis. “We should do some reconnaissance and make camp at a hotel anyway. Besides, we skipped lunch today.” I grimaced at that reminder; I still wasn’t hungry, though I was feeling a little light-headed.

We strode forward, until we came to the familiar walls that every city so far, save for Cranberry Bay, had up around their borders. Here they were a bit taller and more finely made, tailored as though meant to impress anyone on the approach, even if they were facing the woods. The main entrance was some distance away, just barely visible, but I had seen it from the air and it looked like there was a checkpoint that we really didn’t want to go through, not if it meant trying to explain ourselves.
Grak got out his monocle and looked the wall over for a bit before letting us know that it was unwarded.

Solace stepped up to the wall. “Over or through?” she asked.

“How --” I began. Amaryllis gave me a brief shake of the head. “We should see what’s on the other side first,” I said. “Once we’ve slipped in we should be able to achieve relative anonymity, it’s the breach that carries risks.” It might have been better to do it as swallows, but the inability to communicate with each other was a complicating factor.

Solace nodded and pursed her lips for a whistle, then held out her staff horizontally. A few seconds later, a variety of birds landed on the staff, and she tweeted at each of them in turn, causing them to fly off. It didn’t take long for them to return, though I waited impatiently all the same. Solace listened to each of the birds in turn, smiling gently at them, and when they had given their report, they flew off, one by one.

“Directly through this wall is an access alley with an entrance out onto the city streets,” said Solace. “There is no one there at the moment, though that may change.”

“The birds said all that?” I asked.

“Oh, I have no idea what they said,” replied Solace. She laughed at my expression. “It’s been some time since I’ve traveled with other druids, and even longer since I’ve shared the company of those outside the grove. I’ve missed it.”

“Keep your questions to yourself,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t want to sound mean Joon, or like I’m trying to tell you what to do, but this druid is an asset, and second-guessing every little piece of magic you see goes directly against our interests. Okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I get it, it’s just,” I bit my lip, “It will take some adjusting to, that’s all.”

Solace stepped toward the wall, licked a finger, and ran it down in a straight line from the top of her reach down to the packed earth. The solid stone grumbled slightly and then parted way for her, and she stepped forward without seeming to think about this at all. I followed after, with my Anyblade gripped in my hand as a dagger. I had Ropey in the bag slung on my side, freshly killed fairies in my bandolier, and bones at the ready in a second bandolier in case I needed them.

It was fortunate that there was no one in the alley, and that we made it into the city proper without anyone the wiser, but there was a part of me that kept thinking about how close I was to leveling and how likely it was that a proper fight would get me there. I wasn’t about to antagonize the city guard just to get that fight, but I still itched for it, just a little bit, if it would push me over the edge and into the next level.

We did draw a few stares as we moved through the streets, which I thought was mostly due to Solace’s cloak, or perhaps the five of us moving together. I was glad that we weren’t wearing armor, because almost no one else was either, and those that were definitely drew the attention of everyone they passed.

“You know, I could put your cloak in my glove,” said Fenn. “That would probably save us some eyeballs.”

“Probably,” said Solace. “But no thank you.”

After stopping to ask for directions twice, we came to a tall hotel, where Fenn rented three rooms for us, handing over what looked like a thick stack of cash to the woman at the front desk.
“Alright,” she said as she returned to us. “Our business trip has begun in earnest. I have two of the rooms for two nights, which I think should be all the time we need here, and one of the rooms for three solid weeks, so we can have a secure place if we need to. Mary, you and Solace have some things to discuss tonight, so you’re together, Grak, you snore, so you’re on your own, and Joon and I have twin beds together.”

“Fine by me,” said Amaryllis, without so much as batting an eye. Studious indifference to Fenn and I sharing a room, or actual indifference? I had no idea, and it irked me that I didn’t know. Maybe I wanted her to have at least some reaction. “In the meantime, we should split up.” She stopped and looked around our small group huddled together in the hotel lobby. “Sorry, we’re still a democracy.”

“Sure are,” said Fenn. “I have some things to sell and things to buy, and I’ll be the one to keep an eye on Juniper, because gods forbid he gets discovered as a mental incompetent in these parts. At least, that’s my vote.”

“What could you possibly have to buy and sell?” asked Amaryllis.

“I was hoping to find a buyer for unicorn meat,” said Fenn. “We spent a fair bit of time butchering that thing. I’ll hold back a bottle of blood for us, but we’ve got a few from when we drained the thing, and they don’t go bad fast enough to be worthless.” She looked to Solace. “We killed a unicorn, it was no big deal.”

Solace nodded, which I gathered was not the reaction Fenn had hoped for. “So you have an alicorn?”

“I guess we can sell that too, if we have you,” said Fenn. She smiled at Grak. “Looks like you’ll get your wish there.” Right, because he gets a third of the loot.

“I would appreciate it,” said Grak. “I’ll go under the mountain and speak with the dwarves there. There’s a sizeable city beneath the mountain, Lalon Dohore. It’s been some time since I’ve been with my kind and I can ask them about affairs at the athenaeum.”

“I would prefer to walk the city, if we are going to wait,” said Solace. “I believe I can be worth more on my own, without questions.” Asked of her, or by her?

“Then I’ll try to figure out admittance procedures for the dream-skewered,” said Amaryllis. “Fenn, once you’ve sold the unicorn parts, can you do that too? We don’t know quite what we’re here for, not in the long-term, and it might be something that wouldn’t be disclosed along official channels.”

“Beat the information out of some scholars, got it,” said Fenn.

“And if Larkspur has a way to track us?” I asked. “If we split up and then he finds us, somehow?”

“Then we have a very serious problem,” said Amaryllis. “Unless you think you can beat him, run away. Not to here. Instead, find someone you can pay to run a note to the hotel. Sound good?”

We split up then, and I said a small prayer to the Dungeon Master, hoping that we would reunite without incident.

Fenn and I walked together, making our way through the typical Aerbian jumble of streets that refused to meet at the same angle twice. This place was smaller than Cranberry Bay by a fairly large margin, but it still had more than enough in the way of sights and sounds. Fenn stopped at a stall, which was selling what looked to my eyes like a tentacle with all the suckers removed, placed on a stick, and then roasted with some kind of dark sauce. She got four of them, and handed me three.
“Eat,” she said. “You’re going to be weak if you don’t eat, and if you’re weak, I might die, so I don’t care how much you don’t want food, eat to save my life.”

I ate. The taste wasn’t bad, but I was pretty sure that nothing would have excited my taste buds. “I’m glad we have some time alone,” I said. “There was something that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Eat,” Fenn repeated. She watched as I took another bite. “And what was it my little hooman had on his mind?”

“I need to know what I said to you when I was out of it,” I said.

“Hmmm,” said Fenn. “Grak and I swore a very serious vow of silence on the subject, and he’s made a joke, thus redeeming himself in my eyes, so I’ve decided not to betray him after all.” She paused. “Maybe that will be our thing, me deciding not to betray him after all, over and over again? We’re up to several times already, and I’ve only known him a week.”

“Fenn, I’m serious,” I said. I tried to eat quickly, so I wouldn’t have to think about it sliding down my throat. Was the loss of appetite getting worse? I’d increased END, but I’d also increased muscle mass, which meant that I would theoretically need more calories, and I was starting to worry that long-term damage was inevitable. “Your Loyalty went from 10 to 16.”

“Oh?” asked Fenn. “I thought it might have gone up.”

“And … why would you have thought that?” I asked.

“Well, I’m more loyal to you now,” said Fenn with a beaming smile. She leaned in close for a whisper, with bright, playful eyes. “It’s because of the things you said.”

“That’s not fair,” I replied. “Really not fair. You were worried about your loyalty, about being a puppet. This is something that we should talk about.”

“I’m less worried now,” said Fenn with a shrug. “Because of the things you said.”

“Okay, but,” I frowned. “I still think it’s not fair, because it’s like our relationship progressed without me even being aware of my half of it, and given how much time and effort it took to get you up to 10, --”

“Effort?” asked Fenn. “Well, you sure know how to make a half-elf feel special. I didn’t know that my friendship was so arduous.” But she was smiling as she said it, and I would have smiled too, but it felt like I had been thrown off a boat and didn’t know which way to shore.

“Fenn, you have to at least give me part of it,” I said. I felt my chest constricting. “I’m really worried that, I don’t know, that I eroded away a part of this person that I really care about. It’s not funny to me.”

Fenn watched me for a moment. “That is the nicest thing that anyone has ever said to me,” said Fenn. “Well, aside from some of the things that you said to me when you were high on unicorn blood.”

“So that was it?” I asked. “I said some nice things?”

“And some not-all-that-nice things,” said Fenn. “Oh, those I can tell you, I don’t think Grak would mind so much.” I waited and ate at the last of my tentacle sticks. “You told me that you didn’t like my ears.”
I winced. “I think I can explain that,” I said. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t find them aesthetically pleasing on you, it’s that, ah, more that I find them neutral now, maybe? I did like them when we first met. I mean, mostly because, I don’t know, they were distinctive. They have a nice curve. I mostly don’t notice them anymore, but when I do it’s just, they’re there … you know?”

“And if you had the choice between me having normal human ears and me having elf ears, you would first ask me what I wanted to have, and then you would pick that, or if I really, truly, had no preference whatsoever, then you would maybe be slightly more comfortable with me having human ears, not because you dislike the elf ears, but because you don’t like them, which is a very important and meaningful distinction, but you actually aren’t all that into ears anyway so it’s not worth talking about.” Fenn smiled at me. “Was that your train of thought, more or less?”

“I already said all that?” I asked with a grimace.

“That’s the short version,” said Fenn with a nod.

“I’m sorry, it’s not something that I would ever bring up if I weren’t, again, not in my right mind,” I said. And yet her loyalty jumped six points anyway.

“You say six points difference?” asked Fenn. “I think that was worth a point, maybe two.”

“Huh?” I asked. “That was worth positive points?”

“Well, I would explain it to you, but I don’t want to bring the mood down,” said Fenn.

“I know this is all fun and games to you,” I said. “But I actually am worried that part of your personality got overwritten on accident.”

“Ho hum,” said Fenn. “Fine, but it’s long, and I’ll wait until after we’ve sold the unicorn meat, because we are here.” She gestured to the large market building in front of us, where the smell of meat and blood was coming from. I could see pallets laid out with a variety of meats on ice and large fans blowing cool air around.

I found it somewhat difficult to care about the meat market. Half of the stuff there came in refrigerated, via containerized teleportation, where it was then sold off in a pseudo-auction system. The variety of colors was astonishing to me, with a great many meats having un-meatlike colors: rich browns, vibrant greens, and a variety of eel, laid out in strips, that was electric blue. Most of the meat that came into the city was in the form of simple, cheaply farmed animals, and that kind of thing wasn’t sold by auction, because it was brought in by the ton every day. The meat market was full of all of the weird animals from around Aerb that some mortal species or another considered a delicacy, which were worth the price of teleporting in. Hence our interest.

Fenn talked to a few sellers, who each seemed ready to brush her off until she held out her hand and made a giant refrigerator appear from thin air, filled with ice and unicorn parts (this was quite a surprise to me as well, as I had assumed that the meat had been sitting by itself in extradimensional storage, degrading until it was close to worthless). The unicorn meat was, as it turned out, a delicacy, one prized by the elves, a fact that Fenn seemed to have known well ahead of time.

“We still want the bones,” I said once she was about to agree to a transaction. “It might be possible to extract unicorn magic from them.”

“I want them too,” said a burly man with rocky growths on his face. “You want the bones, I can do the butchering for you, but labor comes out of your pocket, and the price is worse.”

A new round of negotiations began, and I mostly didn’t pay attention. We were going to get more
than a hundred thousand obols out of this, which was far better than I had thought, and I worried that I was going to screw things up if I let some expression come over my face. The money was pretty worthless given our current situation, because we already had millions that we couldn’t really do that much with. The thought of just being able to buy whatever we wanted was a little bit astonishing.

“Alright,” said Fenn, shaking the hand of the fleshmonger. She turned to me. “Now we just have to wait for the butchery.”

“You were saying something about killing the mood,” I said.

“I was just a tiny bit hoping that you would have forgotten,” she said with a sigh. “When is that Larkspur going to show up anyway?”

“FENN,” I said. “My god, it’s like pulling teeth.”

Fenn winced. “Okay, okay. So.” She looked around for a bit. “So I was mostly solitary, following the official end of my childhood, but I did have, oh, let’s say five proper boyfriends in my time as a young woman, which extends to this very moment. Males, for whom I was more than a fling. Two were ‘any port in the storm’ types, who found my hybrid nature off-putting but not so much that they were willing to give me a pass, and those relationships both ended because whatever I was getting from them, it wasn’t worth the occasional abuse I got in return, or the way I was hidden from their friends and family, or … yeah.”

“Ah,” I said. I licked my lips and tried to think of something sympathetic to say, but nothing came to mind. “And the other three?”

“Elf lovers,” said Fenn with a shrug. She was looking at the ground, not at me. “All different about it. One was a collector, the kind of guy who wanted to experience a ‘woman of every flavor’, and I didn’t learn that about him until after he left town. I had liked him, and I’d been tricked by his pleasant words into thinking what we briefly had was something other than just a mark in a column. Another man was always stroking my ears, touching them until they were sensitive and painful, and … just pushing me toward this idea he had of me, rather than letting me be myself. He had this obsession with elves, or at least idealized elves, like my mother did, and it churned my stomach after a time. And the third -- did you read The Book of Blood?”

“You told me not to,” I said.

“Well, that guy is the reason why,” said Fenn. “He seemed normal enough, at least by my standards, or the standards I had then, and it was going well, but when it came time for us to have sex, after I had undressed, he was there between my legs, staring, poking, and prodding. Like I was just this thing to him. I can’t even describe how revolting I felt. Maybe he thought he was … I don’t know.” She paused and took a breath. “I ended things with him then, but not before seeing his personal copy of the book sitting on the shelf, with a little bookmark sticking out of it.” She looked up at me. “I know you have a bunch of crazy ideas about what that book might say about half-elves. You explained your theories to me.”

“And … you found that endearing?” I asked.

Fenn gave me a small laugh, and I could see that her eyes were slightly watery. “A little bit? Maybe?” Her voice was slightly shaky. “You were very sweet about it.”

“Do you need a hug?” I asked. Fenn nodded and moved toward me, and I wrapped my arms around her. It wasn’t exactly what I would call romantic, there in the cold meat market with the smell of meat and blood in the air, and the hum of commerce, but it was still nice.
“I’m not crying,” she murmured into my shoulder.

“Either way is okay,” I said. “I’m sorry those guys were shitty to you.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn. She breathed out a little bit and gave me a small kiss on the shoulder. “It’s like pit fighting.”

“We don’t have pit fighting on Earth,” I said.

“Earth sounds so lame,” murmured Fenn. “Well, you see these pit fighters, and they’re beating the crap out of each other, and one of them loses, but they both go on to fight again later, right? And you can take losses as a pit fighter, that’s just fine, because you can heal up and fight again. But sometimes you’ll see a guy in the pit protecting his right side too much, even though he hasn’t taken a hit there yet, and the reason is usually that he got hit hard enough one time that he’s been worried about another hit like that ever since. Or maybe it wasn’t just the one time, but a bunch of losses in a row, all piled up, and he’s healed from them, but he’s got this thing in his mind where he thinks it’s this eventuality that it’s going to happen again, like no matter the fight he’s going to get this strong hit coming at him from the same place it’s come from before.” She pulled back from me, first to look in my eyes, then to go stand a bit further away. “Thank you for the hug.”

“Anytime,” I said with a smile.

So of course she moved back and wrapped her arms around me, and I wrapped my arms around her. “You are so shit at negotiation,” said Fenn. “It’s actually kind of sad.”
At Arm's Length

Things were a little bit awkward between us after that. I kept wanting her to crack a joke, but she was being very serious as she took payment for the meat, and as we carted the bones over to a cleaner. It was roughly eight thousand pounds of animal, which was spread across no less than four different large refrigerators.

“So you planned this out when you knew that we were going to be going after the unicorn?” I asked.

“I have my own life beyond our little group,” she said.

“Right, but we haven’t actually divided up the money, except for Grak’s share,” I said. “So I have at least a little interest in the schemes that you’re pursuing, if there’s an investment involved.”

Fenn raised an eyebrow. “How dare you accuse me of having actually paid for things,” she said.

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it. “I think you were perhaps the worst person that glove could possibly have gone to.”

“Or I’m the best, because I think ahead to what our needs would be,” said Fenn. “I don’t particularly like stealing, I’m more into looting, but if I see an opportunity, I’ll take it.”

“And Sable must give you a lot of opportunities,” I said.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” said Fenn with a grin.

The meat market had a bone-cleaner, which turned out to be a translucent green jell in a reinforced tank. An anthropomorphic raven took our coin and dipped the bones into the ooze, which bubbled slightly and stripped them clean of any lingering meat, fat, cartilage, or ligaments before the raven pulled them out with a pair of long-handled tongs. This was the sort of thing that I had always dreamed about seeing, not the intense displays of magical power, but someone using what was probably meant to have been a monster in a dungeon somewhere for a mundane task. One of the things that I liked about Aerb was that it was settled and lived in; the first thing that I would have thought of when I came across an ooze like that was domesticating it for use in the bone trade, and someone else had already had that thought, and done the domestication, and now it was just part of the fabric of the world.

After the bones were cleaned and safely stowed within the glove (with two of the smaller ones slotted into my bandolier), we went on our way again, off to find a buyer for the alicorn. The raw magic of the glove had drawn fewer stares than I had expected, though it had drawn a few. Magic wasn’t exactly common, but it wasn’t rare either, and even if magic was distributed along a power law, that meant that the average person still knew a few people who would qualify for the title of “mage”, and few people who held at least one magical item. I imagined that the glove would be more extraordinary to someone who understood the whole of magic across Aerb better, as I was starting to, because it was really, ridiculously powerful. Maybe you wouldn’t understand that, if you hadn’t even read the Commoner’s Guide series.

“So, I hate to prod at things,” I said. “But I’m given to understand that the thing with the ears you reacted to because … because I don’t really see you as a half-elf and forget about the fact that you’re technically a different species half the time, right?”

“I guess,” said Fenn with a shrug. “It sounds dumb when you put it like that. Like I like that you’re inattentive.”
“Well, you also said that was probably worth only a point or two, not six, so I’m left wondering where the other four or five came from,” I said. That assumed that she was right at all, but there wasn’t really a point in second-guessing her own internal sense of loyalty, not if I didn’t actually have numbers to compare it against.

“I’ve already said too much,” replied Fenn. “I joke, but Grak and I really did decide that it was for the best that we keep our silence. He’d be awful disappointed in me.”

As we walked, her arm slipped into mine, and she wrapped her gloved fingers around my bicep. I tensed for a moment, thinking that she was going to send me into her glove for some reason, then remembered that it took an act of will on her part, and sometimes people used their hands for things unrelated to powerful magic. After that I tensed for a different reason, which was the closeness she was showing with me. I liked her, I really did, and it was clear she liked me back, but I’d fucked up every relationship I’d ever had, romantic or otherwise. What she’d said to me about pit fighters protecting against a blow they’d felt one too many times before rang far too true, enough that I’d first thought she was talking about me, not her.

“Well that’s why women in fiction are virgins so much of the time,” said Tiff. “It’s this purity obsession that Western culture has, where men want women to be basically untouched by anyone so that they can be the first, so that one man will just be the focus of her sexual energy for the rest of her life, and she’ll be unable to compare him to anyone else.” She held up a hand in Reimer’s direction. “And yes, I know all the evo-psych reasons for that, doesn’t mean it’s not kind of screwed up.”

(Part of the subtext here, which only Tiff and I knew, was that we’d had sex for the first time a few weeks prior, which was the first time ever for either of us. I would guess that was why the topic, ostensibly about the unfaithful Duke of Lagrange and his plot to kill the party, had turned to the concept of virginity in popular culture.)

“Well, if my part in the conversation can just be assumed, then good, I don’t have to say it,” said Reimer with a smile. “But men and women have different evolutionary reproductive strategies and everything you see is part of that.”

“I don’t think that’s why women in fiction are usually virgins,” said Arthur, setting his can of pop down on the table, “Tiff’s thing, not Reimer’s. I think it’s the same reason that young protagonists are orphans.” He sat back in his chair just a bit without continuing.

“Oh,” said Craig, “That reminds me, I made bingo cards.” He reached into his backpack and pulled out a sheaf of papers, each one printed with a five-by-five grid with words in each space. “You can all put an X in the square that says, ‘Arthur sets up obvious bait’.”

“This had better not be why you were late,” I said.

“This is amazing,” said Reimer, looking over the sheet and making a few marks. “Does that one count for ‘Joon complains that Craig was late’?”

“Obviously,” said Craig with a smile my way.

“‘Tiff says that she’s not a feminist’, do I really do that?” asked Tiff. “I mean, I don’t consider myself a feminist --”

“Count it,” said Craig.

“-- I didn’t think that I said it that much,” finished Tiff with a kick under the table in Craig’s direction that hit me in the knee.
“The Duke of Lagrange looks at the four of you in incredulity as you consult these sheets of paper,” I said.

“Joon tries to get the game back on track’, this literally has everything,” said Reimer.

“Arthur, why are virgins like orphans?” asked Tiff. “I’m not okay with leaving that dangling.” She glanced at me. “Sorry Joon.”

“I’m glad you asked!” said Arthur with a gleeful smile. “Well, the reason that you see so many orphans, besides setting up the various orphan plots, is that if you’re writing a book or screenplay you always have to deal with the parents question somehow, at least if your protagonist is a teenager or young adult. Parents are inconvenient to a lot of plots, because the audience is left with this question about why the parents aren’t important or being brought up, and conservation of detail means you can’t just say, ‘oh, well he didn’t like his parents, or they kind of sucked’, because then the audience starts to think that’s important. So, writers just do the easy thing and kill the parents off. That can either tie into the plot somehow, or just allow the character to start as a blank slate, without having to take up screen time. And in this analogy, prior relationships are like the parents.”

I looked around the table and tried to think about character backstories. No one but Arthur had defined parents, siblings, or prior love interests. There was some baggage, quests that stemmed from their backstories, falls from grace, things like that, and for Tiff and Reimer, explicit dead parents, but it was all stuff that could reasonably be expected to be resolved, if the game actually went on long enough.

“And you don’t think it has to do with a culture that places importance on purity, innocence, and naivete, at least in women?” asked Tiff with her arms crossed.

“That’s a bingo,” said Craig. “I think I made these too easy, version two will be better.”

“I think that’s part of it, certainly,” Arthur said to Tiff. “But I also think that if I were a screenwriter faced with making a 90-minute movie, and I had the choice between having a one-line, ‘I’ve never done this before’ or having this whole long thing where I explained what both parties were bringing into their new relationship, I know what I would choose. Virgins are narratively convenient.”

“Wait,” said Reimer to Craig. “Let me see your sheet, how’d you get bingo?”

“There and there,” said Craig. “Arthur and Tiff have a long disagreement on gender, sex, -- see, I made them different things, just for you -- race, or socioeconomics. And the other one was ‘session goes for 30 minutes without even tangentially engaging with gameplay’.”

“I tried,” I said.

“Yeah, I marked that,” said Craig with a grin.

It was only after the session, when Tiff was driving us to her place, that Tiff picked the thread of conversation back up, this time with just me and her in the car.

“It kind of bugged me, what Arthur was saying,” she said. “About relationships being baggage.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “I think he was mostly talking about narratives, not real people. For people, the narrative starts when you’re born and ends when you die, and usually it’s not very compelling.”

“Disagree,” said Tiff. “For other people, the narrative starts when you meet them, and then you have infodumps with each other to get them up to speed on the plot thus far, which basically boils down to where they are in whatever plot threads they have going on. In that context, baggage is all the
existing plot threads that everyone just has to acknowledge will never get solved, because there’s no way to solve them. So Arthur is looking at these past relationships as not being character defining arcs that happened in the past, but *unresolved threads* instead.

“I’m going to be honest, I don’t really have a dog in this fight,” I said. Maybe it was just who we were as people, or because I was a guy and she was a girl, but everything had changed for me the night we’d first kissed, not when we had sex. It wasn’t a non-event, at all, but the kiss had actually felt transformative.

“Yeah, I know,” said Tiff. She tapped her hands on the steering wheel. “Just venting. I kept thinking about you, and this thing between us, and how it feels like I’m more the person that I’ve always wanted to be now, you know? And I don’t want that diminished as mere baggage.”

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*I’m worried that I’m going to fuck things up with you. No, too direct, maybe too heavy. I’m worried that as soon as we start dating, or whatever the local equivalent of dating is, or whatever resembles courtship for two people who are inextricably bound to each other and together pretty much all the time is, whatever you’d call that, or whatever that would be, I’m worried about fucking it up basically as soon as that starts. And I’m worried that if I don’t make a move soon, then you’ll think that I’m never going to, and that would constitute fucking it up too.*

“Did Grak actually agree to a pact of silence?” I asked, instead of saying any of that.

“Sure did,” smiled Fenn, squeezing my arm.

“And why would he have agreed to that?” I asked.

“Well, you’d have to ask him, but he wouldn’t tell you, because that’s covered by the pact about pacts we made,” said Fenn.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“It wasn’t my idea, I’ll have you know,” said Fenn. “He’s a warder, their job is to think about what kinds of threats a person might face, not just to put up wards where they’re told, though some of them do that too. So when he agreed that it was better to just not talk too much about all the things that you and Mary said, he also covered his bases and said that if we weren’t going to talk, then we shouldn’t talk about why we weren’t talking. Which, now that I think about it, is probably what this is.”

“No,” I said, “You’re talking about why you made a pact about a pact, that’s totally different. And you broke your silence before, so ...”

“Oh, but Mr. Smith, I feel ever so guilty about that,” replied Fenn with an innocent expression. Then her face changed from playful to serious and she squeezed my arm tight. “Deep breath.”

I took in a deep breath and then I was in the void of Sable once more, this time without a breathing apparatus to give me more time. The ones we had were too bulky to fit in my messenger bag, and I had thought that preparing for the specific scenario where I didn’t have enough time to have Fenn get one out of Sable was too fringe to justify me putting one in a backpack.

So I waited in darkness, holding my breath, wondering whether it was something she had seen, her elf luck pingin, or just a joke she was playing on me. Life-or-death jokes didn’t seem like her kind of thing though. I could get out at any time, but since I didn’t know what was going on in the outside, it was better to stay in for as long as possible.
I shaped the Anyblade into a longsword and grabbed Ropey out from the messenger bag, trying to make my movements as slow and economical as possible. Ropey curled around me, with one end trailing down each arm to provide either combat or climbing support. I touched my off-hand to one of the bones in my bandolier, again using languid movements, readying myself to drain SPD from it for the increased reaction time as soon as I was out. I used blood magic to give myself some light, mostly so my eyes wouldn’t adjust to the dark, and then I waited, still holding my breath and trying to fight down the panicked feeling of needing to take a breath.

I came out into an alley, burning the bone for speed as hard as I could and whipping back and forth to get my bearings while I took deep, gasping breaths that left me lightheaded. It was just Fenn, who had backed away from me. She was wearing a hat that covered her ears. There were people walking by on the street, but they gave us only the occasional interested glance before moving on, and not even that as soon as the Anyblade shrank down and back into a bladed ring.

“I saw a guy I assume was Larkspur,” Fenn explained. “My sense of luck pinged first, that’s why I put you in the glove, and I spotted him just after, quite far away. Tallish guy, red armor, sword, shield, cloak, short red hair, serious look just like our Mary, and three other people with him, similarly looking like they were about to start something.”

“They didn’t see you?” I asked.

“Nope,” said Fenn. “Unless they were clever enough not to show it, and had some reason not to try to snatch me. But no, they went into the building we were headed for, the Medicinal Magic store I was hoping to unload the alicorn at.”

“Okay, do you have a disguise for me?” I asked.

Fenn gave me a disappointed look. “You think I wouldn’t?” She held out Sable and produced a wide-brimmed hat with a black veil. “This is mourning garb for the altek,” she said. “Just pretend to be sad under there.”

I put the hat on, which made it difficult to see but would hopefully obscure my face. With a whisper I told Ropey to head back into the bag, because he was also distinctive. I stripped off both bandoliers and put them into the bag as well, then handed the bag to Fenn, who quickly disappeared it into her glove. That left the Anyblade ring as distinctive, and I quickly switched which hand it was on, changing its shape and color as I did so.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll follow the plan, hire someone to send a message to the hotel for the others, then move around and hide out while we wait to regroup.”

“Or,” said Fenn, “Or, we know where they are, and if Larkspur ever saw me, it was in a black and white photo in a dossier, and you’re covered up, so I’m thinking that it wouldn’t be hard to sneak up on him close enough to at least eavesdrop. We know that they’ve got some way to track us, for certain now that I’ve seen them, but we don’t know exactly what that method is, and I would rather figure that out than spend the rest of our natural lives running.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I said. “Especially if we’re at only partial strength.”

“Well then I’m glad I didn’t go with my first suggestion, which was that I could snipe him, then hop into the glove and have you make a run for it,” said Fenn with a grin.

“Was there a big guy in full plate?” I asked. “Because he’s soul-linked, you’d kill him instead of Larkspur.”
“Still probably worth it,” said Fenn. “But this is a good opportunity for the eavesdrop plan, and maybe the only one we get, because we can’t guarantee when we’re going to see these guys again, or whether we’ll have cover from them.”

I hesitated. Killing Larkspur was one of my quests, and maybe this wasn’t on the docket, but it was an objective that seemed easy, and enough to get me within spitting distance of the level up, if I wasn’t already.

“Alright,” I said. “We’ll do it. No offensive action.” Though I was waffling on that, and wanted to add some qualifiers, like ‘unless we can kill Larkspur and then get away’. I halfway thought that was just my desire to level up talking though. (I shoved down some half-panicked thoughts about whether or not I was addicted to leveling up for later examination, but that was a worrying prospect if true.)

I checked her over to make sure that the hat was properly hiding her ears, then we moved out of the alley and toward the store, Medicinal Magic. There was no one stationed outside, which I took to be a good sign. We went as close as the entrance, on the side of the door without a window, then started a casual conversation in quiet tones that neither of us was paying any attention to (Fenn was talking about a book she’d read and I was saying ‘uh huh’ at regular intervals).

“-- short-term losses for long-term gains,” Larkspur was saying. “But given those long-term gains, and the long-term losses we might suffer if the target isn’t recovered, I do think it prudent to continue on this course for as long as feasible.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” came a female voice, one I didn’t recognize. “At this juncture, it’s no longer feasible. You’re taking time away from your duties as FSD and spending money as though it were a resource we weren’t constrained on. This is starting to look like the sunk cost fallacy in action.”

“She has the entad,” replied Larkspur.

“She might. It seems that way given the distances involved. And what good does the recovery of it do you?” asked the female voice, with a touch of exasperation. “It’s a political coup, but one that you can’t capitalize on, because it would raise too many questions about what happened to her, not to mention how you found her. We’ve spent too much political capital and reputation on this already, more than we wanted or agreed on at the outset.”

Larkspur gave a soft growl. “Eight days before the councils are back in session,” he said. “We have until then, at least.”

“You do,” the woman replied. “I’m going home. Good luck on your second time in the EZ.”

“I’ll need you there,” said Larkspur. “If Doris --”

“I know,” said the woman. “And that’s your burden to bear.”

Fenn pulled me along, back the way we came, just a few seconds before a woman swept out of the shop, dressed from collar to toe in a frilly red dress. The veil offered me some leeway in looking at her, and I could immediately see the family resemblance to both Amaryllis and Larkspur, both the red hair and pretty features, but also the seriousness of her expression. She wore a circlet on her head with several gemstones of different colors, all set in a line. She didn’t give a second glance at us, for which I was grateful.

As soon as she had gone off through the crowds, we stopped again to speak casually, me with my
back to the store and her with her eyes peeled to it.

“I think that was enough,” Fenn said in a low voice. “We should take off.”

“No,” I replied. “We still don’t know how they found us. My guess is that they have precognition of some kind, but we need to know the details, whether it’s probability based or has some kind of limits that we can work around.”

“Fine by me,” said Fenn with a shrug. “They’re leaving.” She moved forward, at a casual, steady pace, and I followed after.

Larkspur was in his familiar red armor with black at the seams. Beside him were the two others I had seen at the library, the massive man in full plate who was meant to take the hits, and the horned woman with a staff (not, as yet, spinning and glowing). We kept our distance, far enough back that we couldn’t have heard what they were saying, if they had been talking. It didn’t look like they were though.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

“I could shoot the meatshield in the head or chest,” said Fenn, leaning close to me. “My bow can puncture plate fairly easily. But then again, I’d assume that’s magic plate, and without knowing what kind of magic plate, it’s hard to say how wise shooting him would be.” She paused. “Probably not a great time for an artillery shot, given all the people around.”

I’d been thinking the same thing, and I was relieved to hear her say it. Her casual disregard for others when stealing had worried me a little bit. This was plausibly a time for the sand bow; all we’d have to do is wait for them to stop moving, she could line up a shot, and then we could hoof it while the arrow was still suspended in time.

“They went to that store because they thought we would be there,” I said. “We would have been there if your luck sense hadn’t twigged. So where are they going now? And why?” We’d only spent a few minutes, at most, getting to them; what information were they working on, that they would just leave the shop in relatively short order, rather than waiting in ambush for us to arrive?

We followed them for several blocks, with every intersection seeming to have been given a new angle at random, until we were into the true heart of the city, where there were buildings twenty or thirty stories tall towering over us. Larkspur stopped once or twice to consult something I couldn’t see, and those moments were always tense, because I worried that his goons would look around, or that he was using the magic item that was tracking us and would spin around to catch us. Those things didn’t happen though; that was the thing about paranoia, most of the time you were preparing for things that never ended up occurring.

Larkspur was bleeding information with every step he took, so far as I was concerned. I didn’t have the full picture yet, but I had enough to start making some guesses. The conversation we’d overhead meant that the Larkspur problem was likely to solve itself, at least insofar as he was actively hunting for and attempting to kill us. There were still travel restrictions and warrants to look out for, but true border control seemed like a game that the cities and nations of Aerb had long since given up on, at least if magic was in play. He really was burning non-negligible resources to find us, and this current plan couldn’t last. We knew that his divination (or whatever) was highly imperfect, and my guess from the way he treated the medicine shop was that he had a lot of false positives.

“This is boring,” Fenn whispered to me after about twenty minutes. I shot her a look of disapproval. “What, it is, you can’t tell me that it’s not.”
“It’s important,” I said, though she was right, the tension had nearly evaporated, and now it was just drudgery. They weren’t leading us into a trap, they weren’t on the lookout for anyone following them, and if any of them had been trained to spot a tail, they sure weren’t showing any sign of it. Fenn, for her part, occasionally popped us down a side street for a quick costume change, which was easily accomplished given that she had apparently stolen an entire frickin’ clothing department. (She looked adorable in glasses.)

We did catch occasional snippets of conversation, though we were too far to make out much. The multi-syllable words were actually a little easier to catch, because I could infer missing sounds: “probabilistic”, “triangulation”, “candidates”, “duration”. It was frustrating not to be able to get a clear sense of what they were actually talking about. All I really wanted was for someone to say, “as you know” and then describe in exacting detail what they were actually doing, was that too much to ask? I did get a few glimpses of the thing he was consulting; it looked something like a pocket watch.

“Shit,” said Fenn, as Larkspur looked down for another consultation, something he was doing more frequently. “Luck is twinging, we should … oh fuck.”

I saw it too; our travels through the city on the trail of the Prince had brought us to a place with restaurants, and coming out of one of them was a red-headed girl in a pink ‘Princess!’ shirt, followed by a green-skinned woman with a cloak of leaves and a long staff. Amaryllis and Solace seemed to be in high spirits and were talking animatedly with heads bent together, and I could see that it was only going to be a matter of time before Larkspur or one of his people saw them.

There were too many people around for a fight, and we were under-strength given that neither Amaryllis nor I were wearing armor. There were two cars and a flatbed truck loaded with barrels making their way down the street, moving slowly because of the people that seemed heedless of jaywalking laws (if this place even had any). A full battle here would be a shitshow, especially if we were at it for long enough that the local equivalent of the police showed up.

“Give me the bag, take the shot,” I said to Fenn after only a few seconds of deliberation, hoping that we could end this quickly.

My messenger bag popped out of her glove and she tossed it over, then the bow appeared in her hand, and an arrow after that in short order. I slipped on my bandoliers while this was going on and Ropey slithered over my body to provide protection and support. The Anyblade was expanding to a full, heavy greatsword as Fenn loosed her arrow, which zipped across the hundred feet of distance with a twang of her bow.

The arrow struck the armored man almost precisely in the center of his chest, puncturing all the way through, and I heard a grunt from Fenn beside me. She was bleeding from her chest, in the exact same spot, and staggered slightly before spitting up blood and materializing a dead fairy in her hand. She pitched backward slightly and caught herself only by resting her weight against the bow, then stuffed the fairy in her mouth.

I wanted to stay with her and heal her with bone magic, but the horned woman was spinning her staff, setting it glowing, and Larkspur was running to close the distance, which meant that I really didn’t have that option.

I pulled my throwing dagger from my satchel and threw it at him as I moved. He slowed down slightly and put his shield in front of him; the convex metallic surface shimmered and then disappeared, showing a left-right flipped version of the street. My dagger sailed through it and came right back out, having (apparently) passed itself. It landed right back in my hand, painfully hard, having accomplished almost nothing.
Skill increased: Thrown Weapons lvl 17!

Then Larkspur and I had closed the distance between us, him because he wanted to kill me, and me because I wanted to keep him from killing Fenn. The first screams of alarm had started up from the people on the street as we clashed, my greatsword against his longsword.

I shifted the Anyblade down after the first clash of swords into something thinner and lighter, more maneuverable. He had armor, a shield, and was soul-linked to a meatshield who was surprisingly still on his feet, which meant that I was immediately on the defensive. I was actually a pretty legitimately good sword-fighter at this point, but Larkspur went at me like he had been training from the day he’d been able to hold a sword, which probably wasn’t far from the truth. I was able to parry against him, knocking his sword off the line of attack and occasionally taking a hit on the flat rather than the edge (still painful, but not limb-loffing), but I was doing basically nothing against him, only retreating step by step. Past him, I could see the horned woman spinning her staff, which was glowing brighter all the time and nearly at the point where it was nothing more than a glowing circle, at which point I knew it was going to be a force to be reckoned with.

I grabbed at a bone in my bandolier and drained it of SPD in an instant. I saw the opening that would let me get a strike in, but with the two transference effects going on (from him to the meatshield and from the meatshield to me, if it worked like that) I wasn’t going to risk it. Instead, I used the moment of clarity to knock his sword to the side and yell for Ropey to sic him. My favorite-ever sentient rope was already waiting, loosely gripping my sword arm, and shot forward to wrap around Larkspur’s wrist.

From there it was, at the very least, no longer a losing battle, because his mobility was so restricted that he couldn’t properly swing his sword. He was left trying to shield bash me, which was partially effective, but we were at a stalemate.

I was feeling the adrenaline rush hard, that frantic energy that came with life-and-death. My heart was thumping hard and I pushed Larkspur back with a rush of blood magic, yanking his arm again and nearly sending his sword flying. I heard the twang of Fenn’s bow again, then again, with screams of pain from her. An occasional burst of automatic gunfire came from the other end of the street, and in the background I saw the twirling staff falter and then stop altogether as vines grew up from the cracks in the street and grabbed her by the feet. I had no idea where Amaryllis was, but it seemed like if I could hold Larkspur just a little bit longer his minions would be dealt with, and then all Fenn would need to do was put an arrow through his eye.

He must have realized that, because he dropped his shield and moved in toward me, quick and unexpected. He brought his left hand up and his sword vanished from his captured right hand to appear in his left. I tried to step back or get up my guard but wasn’t quite fast enough, or skilled enough, and the sword came down hard on my shoulder, slicing halfway through the joint. I screamed in pain and fell backward, dropping the Anyblade in the process. Larkspur yanked his right hand, still connecting us by rope, and pulled hard at my partially severed arm, tearing flesh, skin, and ligaments in a moment so blindingly terrifying and painful that I blacked out for a second.

When I came to, what must have been a fraction of a second later, my arm was dangling by a half-inch of muscle and a thin layer of skin, twisting around when I moved and so incredibly agonizing that all I could do was scream. I was vaguely aware of Fenn stepping over me with a sword held inexpertly in her hand, and a blur of pink shirt and red hair moving to protect me, but I was screaming and crying, bleeding all over the place.

Leroy Castillo defeated!
I don’t know how long I was down on the ground, but eventually I felt myself falling, whipping through the wind, then a warm glow at my shoulder which erased the pain, and after that, a bird’s beak tapping on my head sent me straight to sleep.
I woke up gasping for air and looking around wildly. My brain must have been working off some really old subsystems, because my first thought was, *this isn’t my room*, before I remembered that I didn’t have a room anymore. I was on Aerb, not Earth, and on Aerb I was an itinerant wanderer without a home to call my own.

I looked down at my shoulder, fearing the worst, but saw that it was intact, connecting my arm to my torso like it had been doing for more than seventeen years, until very recently. There was a deep red seam there, but it was only on the level of the skin, not in the flesh itself, and my mobility as I gingerly moved it was only slightly limited.

I wasn’t in the hotel; I was in the house built into a tree, inside the bottle, which was presumably inside Solace’s cloak. It was dark, but the remains of a small fire smoldered away in a little blackened recess of the tree. I got up out of the pile of furs that had been serving as my bed and went over to it to warm my hands. There was a chill in the air; I had to guess that the bottle didn’t get sunlight while in the cloak, which meant that there was no outside heat or warmth getting in, ignoring for a moment that the sunlight hitting the bottle would never have possibly been able to heat a square mile of forest and grassland. I called on the heat of my blood to give me a hand of flame, which lit my surroundings a little better.

I tried to take stock of my situation, and my mind kept going back to one thing.

*One of them dead, probably the meatshield, and still no level.*

It was hard to set that aside. The next level *had* to be close, you could slow progression as the player gained levels but you couldn’t stop it altogether, that flew in the face of too many principles of game design. It had been so close I could taste it, one kill *should* have been enough. That thought of *addiction* was still lingering, but I didn’t know what that actually felt like from the inside. Formally, addiction wasn’t just the need for something, it was the compulsion and interference with your life. Leveling up was pleasurable, last time almost achingly so, but I wasn’t sure whether my actions were being influenced by the desire to feel that again, especially since leveling up was the single most important thing I could do for other reasons as well. But maybe self-deception was part of addiction, this idea that you could stop anytime you wanted, or the production of motivated reasoning to excuse what you had done.

My messenger bag was with me, though the strap had been cut through. Ropey lay inside it, and he uncoiled at my touch, then slithered his way to the fireplace. I watched closely as he started making the shapes of letters.

S-O-R-R-Y

“It’s okay,” I replied. “You were doing your best.” He’d been turned into a weapon against me, just momentarily, when Larkspur nearly yanked my arm off. “You saved my life.” I reached out and patted him on the head, and he snaked his way back into the bag. Yup, that was me, providing comfort to a piece of rope.

I was almost entirely naked, aside from my boxers, but I had clothes sitting in a pile on the ground. Just looking at them was enough to tell me that I wasn’t going to put them back on; they were crusted with blood from the fight, which I guess is what happens when you nearly sever an arm. The clothes didn’t really bother me, since it was all stuff that Fenn had picked out, and didn’t really fit well to begin with. When we had some downtime, whenever that would be, I would go shopping on
my own and find some things that I actually wanted to wear, then buy them in bulk.

I yelped in surprise when the Six-Eyed Doe stuck its head through a window and stared at me, but I recovered quickly and tried my best to look dignified. It was luminescent, making its own pale blue-white light that contrasted with the orange of the embers and the yellow of my flaming hand.

“Thanks for your help,” I said to the doe.

It nodded fractionally.

Well, at least it could understand me somewhat, that was something. I rotated my shoulder, trying to get a little bit more mobility back. The doe kept staring at me. I reached into my bag, frowning at the blood on the strap, and pulled out the bandoliers inside it, first grabbing a fairy and eating it, and then pulling out my selection of bones.

“Is Solace here?” I asked the doe.

It didn’t move or reply, which I gathered meant that it either didn’t understand the question, or the answer was no. As I munched on the fairy until it was a wet wad of marzipan, I tried to think about what must have happened. My memories of the final moments ranged from hazy to entirely absent. Solace must have grabbed me and pulled me into her bottle with her in order to gain access to better healing power. She’d clearly been the one to save my arm, and she must also have been the one to put me out. After I swallowed the fairy, my shoulder began to feel better almost immediately, and I briefly wondered why Solace hadn’t fed me one to work in conjunction with her healing magic, before realizing that we’d never told her what they did.

So now I was stuck in the bottle until someone came to rescue me, with just a sentient length of rope and a probably-sentient magical doe for company. Ropey was fine, but the Six-Eyed Doe weirded me out, not least because it kept its head stuck through the window, staring at me.

I touched one of the unicorn bones, then glanced at the Six-Eyed Doe. “We killed a unicorn,” I said. “I hope that doesn’t bother you,” I said. “And I hope that it’s okay to be using some other kind of magic in here, but I think it’s probably fine, right?”

The only response I got was a small dip of its head.

I breathed out a sigh and looked down at the unicorn bone, an aitch bone. I gripped it lightly in my hand, allowed my flame to wink out, and closed my eyes. I was looking for a way to draw out the unicorn magic, because even a single use of its power would be enough to win a fight, if used at the right time. If I could use that power to rapidly gain skill increases, all the better.

PHY, POW, SPD, and END were all there, ready and waiting for me, but there were other things within the bones, which to my mind felt like magical strata, layered there and waiting. The existing attributes all had a specific feel to them, one that I didn’t even consciously think about when I pulled on them. All I had to do was identify that feeling in the bone, or something that approximated it, and I would be able to isolate the specific piece of bone magic I wanted to pull. I could feel others in there now, where I couldn’t before.

Spell discovered: Mental Tapping!

I learned the technique without actually using it, which was a relief, because the unicorn bones were precious. I could feel it there though, the mind of the unicorn, or at least the hint of its mind, or maybe just the echo of its soul. I prodded at the magic, making sure not to pull at it. Like PHY, it
was divided up into three parts, though those three didn’t encompass everything -- was that a hint at the nature of the attributes, that the superstats were somehow more than just their components? Yet I didn’t know exactly what that part, left behind, would entail, not for PHY and not for MEN. Still, teasing apart the lump of magic was something I could do without actually pulling on it, and I already knew their natures.

*Spell discovered: Cunning Tapping!*

*Spell discovered: Knowledge Tapping!*

*Spell discovered: Wisdom Tapping!*

I was a bit pleased with myself at that, but I was no closer to touching the unicorn magic. There were other things in the bone, things that I thought I might be able to pull on later, but after a half hour of trying, I gave that up for lost. I was skill capped on Bone Magic, and my guess was that a 21 meant something equivalent to a graduate degree; I was more skilled with bones than someone like Bormann, who’d trained for five years at the athenaeum, but I wasn’t at the upper echelons just yet. And more to the point, I wasn’t going to get any better unless I raised my level, which I didn’t have any way to do.

No one had come for me. In the worst case scenario … well, maybe the bottle was in Solace’s cloak, and she was dead, which meant that the only way I could get out would maybe be to scale the walls. That would be difficult, seeing as it was a mile and a half climb up a glass surface without any equipment, and depending on how the extradimensional space worked, that might just leave me floating next to the bottle, still unable to leave. The other option would be to become a druid, but Solace had said that would be impossible, and anyway, I would probably never be able to leave because I would keep questioning the nature of any magic that might let me escape, thereby rendering it unusable.

Panic didn’t really do much good though, so I turned my attention toward self-improvement instead (and I’ll be honest, if I had a computer with internet access, I probably would have wasted my time on reddit, because that was what I had done with countless chances at self-improvement on Earth). The problem was, I had almost nothing in the way of resources, and I was capped on most of the skills I cared about. Engineering was the only one I really wanted to level, and I was in circumstances almost uniquely unsuited for that.

That left only one avenue of real progress, and it still had its stupid head sticking through the window, staring at me with six eyes. Six-Eyed Doe, Loyalty 0, that was a metric that I was in the right circumstances to improve.

I walked out from the tree without putting my tattered clothes back on, out into the grass, feeling it on my bare feet. It was cool, but not enough for me to quite feel a chill, because there was no breeze moving the grass around me. The Six-Eyed Doe came over to me, stopping six feet away with its head lowered to my level, staring at me.

“Hi,” I said.

That got no response.

“I don’t actually know how you’re supposed to interact with a locus,” I said. “Maybe you’re not supposed to know, and knowing would destroy that interaction. Maybe it’s like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, where you can either know the exact speed or the exact position of an object, but not both. So I could understand, concretely, how to talk with you, and be unable to actually do it, or I could be able to talk with you but be unable to understand how I was doing it.” I hesitated. “I’m
from another world, one called Earth, that’s where Heisenberg is from, but my guess is that on Aerb he’s a gnome, or the name of an institution or village somewhere.“

The Six-Eyed Doe kept looking at me.

“Look, I’m not going to pour my heart out to you, because I keep worrying that you actually can talk, or you’re more intelligent than you look, no offense, and my read on what I’ve seen of Aerb so far is that I’d get done telling you a long story about something embarrassing, and you would respond by speaking directly to me, just as the world’s way of throwing me off-guard, so I’m not going to do that,” I said.

There was still no response, save for the doe blinking, which it did in sequence, one eye at a time.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess you should know that the two of us are linked together in a way that I don’t fully understand yet. I think that, at least, is something that shouldn’t be hidden away, because it concerns you, and you didn’t have any say in the matter. I don’t want to say that’s my policy for companions, because I don’t think you’re the kind of … thing? The kind of entity that would like being subject to a policy, but maybe I can just say that I chose to tell Amaryllis, Fenn, and Grak, and I think I’ll keep coming up with the same answer for companions in the future. Besides, it’s logistically easier if everyone is in the know.”

The doe bowed its head slightly, and seemed to be looking at my navel for a moment before returning its attention to my face. I couldn’t help but think about Clever Hans, though that was uncharitable.

“Did you know Arthur?” I asked. “He went by Uther Penndraig.” I continued on, not waiting for a response because I knew it wasn’t coming. “You’re the first person, or entity, whatever, that I’ve met who might have actually met him, or at least seen him once, because you’re old enough for it. I like to imagine that he came into your forest at some point and understood you on a level that I clearly don’t. He was always more about that sense of majesty and wonder.”

I paused. I’d kind of given up on actually budging the Six-Eyed Doe’s loyalty. Fenn had gained loyalty just from the things that I had said to her, but that hadn’t actually been intentional on my part, and at least insofar as the ‘I don’t really care one way or another whether you’re a half-elf’ stuff went, part of what must have made that effective was that she knew I was speaking without inhibitions and that I had come at it from an awkward angle that made her actually believe it. I had no idea what would gain the loyalty of the Six-Eyed Doe aside from telling it that I was going to restore it to a proper domain, which I had already done.

So I sat in the grassy field, with the luminescent doe the only source of light, and thought about where the two of us might intersect, what it might eventually come to see in me, if we could ever become something like friends.

“I think that sense of wonder people feel is just a more mild form of surprise,” I said. “How the brain works --” I hesitated, because that wasn’t a thing the doe would probably like to hear, but then barrelled on ahead, because I didn’t know another way to say it, “The reason children have this sense of wonder isn’t that they’re innocent, it’s that their brain hasn’t come to terms with everything there is in the world. They see, I don’t know, a tree, and their brain is processing the fact that this tree has branches that go off in different directions and subdivide into smaller branches that sprout leaves, and those leaves have similar but distinct shapes, so the kid’s brain is trying to build up this model of what a tree is, and that’s why he’s looking at it with wonder, and why he can think that a tree is majestic. But adults, or even teenagers, already understand trees, so when their eyes see a tree, their brain says, ‘oh yeah, that’s a tree’, and it never even really enters their minds. Maybe that is what we mean by innocence sometimes, maybe it’s not always about corruption or being jaded, but just about
a lack of knowledge and how brains deal with that.”

I reached down and touched a single blade of grass, bending it back slightly. The doe was still staring at me, as it had been the whole time, but I was starting to get used to it. I smiled a little bit as I thought about losing my sense of wonder at the fact there was a giant glowing white doe with six eyes staring at me.

“I used to make an effort to induce that sense of wonder in myself,” I said. “I would look at a blade of grass, like this one, and just try to turn off that part of my brain that was categorizing it as a blade of grass, and then turn off all the sub-categorizations, to dump that hard-earned childhood knowledge overboard for a bit and see it as I had first seen it, when I hadn’t known what it was. Sometimes it worked and I could have this moment of relearning, of seeing without knowing.” I tried it then, with the blade of grass I was touching. It was meditation, in a sense, but in another sense it was the real mental effort of clearing every single cache away and digging deep for a mental mapping process that didn’t get used all that often anymore. Psychedelics probably would have helped.

Eventually I did get it, just for a moment, this sense of awe and realization as my brain was tricked into discovering grass all over again.

*Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 3!*

The doe moved forward and gave me a slow, lazy lick on the face.

“Thanks,” I said, as I tried to wipe the deer spit away. I tried my best to not think my thoughts and just feel a sense of majesty. When that didn’t work I tried to think in parentheticals as though that wasn’t what I was actually thinking about (only a sidenote, honest), but I had no idea how successful I was.

(Could the locus read minds? Was that the implication of the sudden loyalty jump? Or could it read them only in a coarse way, so as to sense that moment of wonder? Was it the moment of awe and majesty at something within the doe’s domain what I was being rewarded for, or was it the effort I had put into having that perspective, regardless of where it happened? Had the Six-Eyed Doe’s loyalty been at 0 before that, or had it risen while I was unconscious? And if I had gone to the effort of getting a proper baseline before I’d gone out to speak with the doe, would that undercut the work that I had done here, because the doe would sense that I was trying to game the system?)

So I sat in the grass for a bit more, trying unsuccessfully to recapture some of that ... I hesitate to call it magic, but calling it a circumvention of my brain’s predictive modeling functions seemed far too sterile, especially given my (debatably) psychic companion.

It wasn’t too long before there was light, and after so long with only the doe-glow, it was almost blinding. It was hard to see what was going on outside the bottle, due to the curvature, the imperfections of the glass, and a fuzziness I assumed had something to do with how light behaved at the border. There were people though, and I could see their general features; a tall, slender one with blonde hair that was likely Fenn, an unidentified shorter person, a very short woman with green skin that had to be Solace, and the familiar squat, hairy form of Grak.

One of the people-shapes, the one with green skin, vanished, and an enormous hawk came soaring down out of the sky not long after. It pulled up sharply as it neared the ground, and with a burst of feathers transformed into Solace, who strode out from the feathers as though this was completely normal.

“You’re awake!” she said with a wide smile as she approached me.
“Yeah,” I said. “How long was I out?”

“I have no idea, how long have you been up?” she asked. “I put you in the bottle some twelve hours ago.”

“I slept ten of it,” I said. “I don’t think I actually needed that much sleep though, once my shoulder was halfway healed -- we have these marzipan fairies we pull from a magic jar that heal wounds, up to and including broken bones. Your healing, combined with those, would have had me on my feet much faster.”

“I know that now,” said Solace with a nod. “At the time, I thought that I was doing you a favor by acting quickly and decisively, and once I learned otherwise, I had put you into too deep a slumber to safely rouse you from. It didn’t matter much. The fight was already over when I put you in the bottle and we’ve been in hiding ever since.”

“What was the outcome of the fight?” I asked.

“The soul-linked warrior was killed,” said Solace. “Larkspur escaped, despite Fenn’s best efforts to shoot him in the back as he fled. There was a woman with him, but she escaped as well, though in another direction. On our side, yours was the worst injury.”

“Fenn and Amaryllis are okay?” I asked.

“Fenn took a total of five arrows to the torso and two to the legs,” said Solace. “The soul-linked warrior was wearing some manner of armor that returned the damage dealt to him back to her, which was a price she was willing to pay so long as she had fairies to eat. Amaryllis was shot three times in the stomach and twice in the arm, but I managed to keep her on her feet, and after we used the teleportation key to leave, she healed the rest with fairies. I believe those are now in short supply, given how freely they’ve been consumed.”

I was wincing through most of that report, but being low on magical fairies was the really serious problem, given how much we’d been relying on them. I wished that I hadn’t eaten one while we were in the tree and used a bone instead.

“Grak?” I asked.

“He’s only recently returned to the fold,” said Solace with a small gesture towards where I assumed Grak was, in the outside world. “He came back to the hotel and got our message there.”

“Okay,” I nodded. I looked to the walls of the glass bottle and the world outside it. “And where are we?”

“Per Amaryllis’ instructions, we’re picking a new location at random every hour,” said Solace. “She believes that she knows which particular method Larkspur was using to track us, given what you and Fenn learned.” She grinned. “She’s quite irate.”

“And we have a tree to exit to?” I asked. “I’m eager to see the others.” I looked down at my nearly naked body. “Fenn has all my clothes.”

“We’ll take another way out,” said Solace. She stepped forward with her staff raised and stopped for a moment. “Do you have anything against mice?”

“Uh,” I said, thinking about the dozens our cat had brought to the back porch over the course of the years, and how it had become my responsibility to dispose of the corpses because he was ‘my cat’. “No? Let me get my things first.”
When I came out from the tree, slightly bloody bandoliers and bag around me and sneakers on my feet (a horrible look), she bopped me on the nose and with no transition whatsoever I was clinging to the head of her staff with all four of my paws. Even trying to play back the memories I couldn’t sense where the seam was, between being a human and being a mouse. There wasn’t even a discontinuity (and yes, I did feel a sense of awe at that, but in the biblical sense, the kind of awe that gets used as the root in the word ‘awful’).

With my small mouse eyes, I watched as Solace grew a pair of mighty, leathery wings from her back, gently pushing her leaf-cloak to the side, and with no apparent regard for the mouse on the end of her staff, she launched herself into the air. I tumbled off, naturally, but was caught in her fist, and suffered through the stomach-lurching sensation of rapid, rising flight, trying not to give in to my natural urge to claw and bite at her.

It wasn’t long before we were out, and I was tossed into the air, feeling myself twisting and falling before somehow, miraculously, finding myself in human form, standing on my feet with my companions around me.
“He made a deal with fucking Doris Finch,” said Amaryllis, as soon as I was out of the bottle.

I stared at her; her hair was different, cut short, almost to the scalp, and no longer the red it had been, but brown instead. She was in her full armor, minus the helmet, and it gave her a look that was boyish (but like an extremely attractive boy, enough that it started to awaken confusing feelings in me).

“The shirt says ‘Incognito,’” said Fenn. “But you can’t see it, because someone is a spoilsport.”

“I’m staying armored until he’s dead,” said Amaryllis. She didn’t seem to be in the mood for humor. “We all are,” she nodded to Fenn.

Fenn was wearing her own leather armor, I noticed, and she held out her hand to me. I caught the things she threw to me one by one, first a plain white shirt, then the tights I wore to keep my armor from chafing, then the armor itself. I put those on as quickly as I could.

“The city guard is after us,” said Amaryllis as I dressed. “Not surprising, given the general mayhem. I don’t know what the long-term consequences might be, but ‘not good’ would be a fair place to start. Larkspur might have sold them a story, or got away before it could be linked to him, or maybe he just decided to cut his losses and run, but I know which scenario is worse for us, and that’s the one we have to assume.”

“And we can’t just leave?” I asked. “Teleport out?”

“Yes, we can,” said Amaryllis. She fidgeted slightly. “I’m not worried about the city guard that much, not when we have ready access to disguises and they have poor intel on us, even if Larkspur is the one informing them. We can use the bottle as a way to change up our numbers at will, which means that they’re looking for four or five people when we can stuff everyone into extradimensional space to hide our numbers. I’m not even worried about Larkspur, given that we know what he’s doing and can keep evading Doris. Nothing has changed, except the depths to which he’s sunk.”

“Sorry, who is Doris?” I asked.

“An enpersoned exclusion zone, apparently,” said Fenn. “One of those we’re going to murder.”

_Quest Accepted: Murder in Duplicate - As soon as it was discovered by a precocious young girl, the ability for a person to duplicate themselves was excluded to a thousand square miles and that single person. Doris Finch lives her life in duplicate; to complete the exclusion, it will be necessary to kill every single one of her. (0/9,513,912)_

“Okay, got a quest for that,” I said with a wince. I wondered whether that would count toward the Hitler achievement for killing six million people. “And I would assume that dealing with her is about as ill-advised as dealing with any of the other horrors?” (I didn’t say, ‘But isn’t she just a normal person, aside from the fact that there are nine and a half million of her?’ because I wasn’t an unimaginative idiot.)

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “Not just because she constantly stabs people in the back, not just because the Republic of Doris Finch is congenitally unstable, but because it’s one of those things that the functional core of the Empire of Common Cause has the means and motive to deal with. The bans against working with her aren’t one of those idiotic things that atrophy the rule of law because
member nations put them down on paper and then never look twice at them. If we could prove that he’d entered into an agreement with any of the Dorises, that would be enough to get him executed and have sanctions levied against Anglecynn to boot.”

“But we’re going to kill him instead,” said Fenn with a vicious grin. “His meatshield is gone, that means he’s approximately one arrow away from death, and you had better believe that I’m on board with any plan that involves us gunning for him. I almost got hit by one of my own arrows. No one hits me with my own arrows.”

“And he’s tracking us with some kind of … probabilistic thing?” I asked.

“Doris is,” nodded Amaryllis. “I would guess that they have remote communication through an entad to enable it. And if that’s what’s happening, then he’s leaking highly classified information back to her, which again, any sensible government would lock him away for, if not kill him outright. We should be safe, so long as there’s not a high probability that we’re in any one specific location.”

I wanted to chide Amaryllis for not having told us about this before, but despite the fact that she didn’t like the name ‘encyclopedia girl’ I knew that there was an extreme amount of information locked away in her head, and I had decided that I was going to give her the benefit of the doubt when it came to things that she hadn’t thought were relevant. She had already given me the crash course on Aerb, and so far as I could see, exclusion zones weren’t likely to be relevant unless we were actually going near one (though perhaps this was evidence that I should have pressed for yet more infodumps, or prioritized reading through The Exclusionary Principle above my other reading and training).

“Okay,” I said. “So Larkspur has some way to see where we might be, or get a weighted map, or something like that? And the plan is that we use that to lure him somewhere and kill him?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

I looked around at the faces, trying to see if there was anyone else who disagreed. Solace looked calm and impassive, as though the idea of cold-blooded murder didn’t faze her, which it probably didn’t, and Grak looked as impenetrably stone-faced as ever. They’d had time to talk about this without me. The vote had already happened in my absence, and even if it wasn’t unanimous, it had already been decided.

“He said that the new council session starts in eight days,” I said, “Or maybe seven now. It’s true that he might get us put on a list or whatever, but he might have already done that. He’s an ass, and he’s trying to kill us, but he’s at the end of his rope. What does killing him actually get us? A lower chance that we end up on the wrong lists? A nebulous possibility that it will be easier for Amaryllis to return to power? At most, seven days where we don’t have to be on the run from him? Revenge?”

“You have a quest for it,” said Fenn. “He’s a threat to us, and after that fight in the street, we’ve lost most of our incentive to be subtle. Besides that, you didn’t level, because I would have noticed, which means you’re close to it. Larkspur is going to push you over the edge. Besides, he’s a total dick.”

I glanced at Solace.

“I’ve been told about your power,” said Solace, giving me a small bow. “I requested few details, in case I need to interact with it in some emergency.”

“Right,” I said with a frown. So everyone was on the other side, and wanted to kill Larkspur at least partially because it would help me level. Was I correcting too far in the direction of not wanting to be
controlled by the desire to level up again? “Okay, then what’s the plan?”

“There are two things making our probability spread very wide right now in terms of location, and per the last intelligence reports I got, location was all that the Dorises could give for an entity,” said Amaryllis. She watched me. “This is one of those state secrets that I’m putting myself at risk by telling you, and you have to trust me that I would have done it before if I thought it was at all in play.”

I could feel the tension in the room rise a notch at that. The last thing I wanted was for the personal conflict between Amaryllis and I to spill out into the group. “I understand that,” I said. “It would have been better to know earlier rather than later, but I would have had to trust in your judgement in any case, and apparently he’s made a deal with the devil you thought he wouldn’t make.”

(How was she so attractive in brown, boyish hair? The only woman with hair like that I’d ever found attractive was Emma Watson, and while Emma Watson cutting her hair was an important moment in my young life, short hair wasn’t something that I’d ever thought I was attracted to. Was it just a blade-of-grass thing, where my brain had registered her as pretty enough times that it was starting to grow numb to the fact, and now I was faced with awe as the neural pathways tried to figure this new haircut out? Was my brain bringing her existing attractiveness to my attention over and over again because of the change?)

Amaryllis relaxed somewhat, losing some of the tension in her shoulders, and nodded. “The first factor is that we’ve randomized our movement through the city, which means that our probable location as seen by the Doris clones should cover a huge number of possibilities. The second factor is that we have a teleportation key we can use at any moment. That means that if something were to happen to us, we could simply leave, which is good for its own sake, but also spreads out our probable location even further.”

“What are the limits?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “We don’t know how many entities can be tracked using this method, what’s needed to track them, or where these probabilities are actually derived from at a root level.” She sighed. “I really, really hate working on problems with such limited information. We don’t even know if Larkspur found you at the library using the strategic luck reserve or through this method, so we might not even have two examples to draw from.”

“We know that it’s imperfect,” I said. I rubbed at my left hand. “At a guess, highly imperfect. Larkspur went into a shop that we had been about to enter, and it must have been because Doris told him there was a good chance that we were in there already. Now obviously, we weren’t there. Doris wasn’t able to tell that we were trailing him, either. And given that he talked about triangulation, my guess is that they don’t actually have a map, they’re reading signals instead. If the probabilities displayed are affected by the probability reading, which I think they probably are, then it’s even worse.”

“All we need is to stay in one spot,” said Grak. “He will find us, and we will kill him.”

“Well, no,” I said. “He might not be able to see into the future, but he might still be able to see into alternate presents, ish, and if Doris can track him, then that means he can gather information about things that he never actually did.” I saw Amaryllis raise an eyebrow. “Stop me if someone has already brought this up.” Amaryllis shook her head. “Okay, so right now we’re moving around the city, picking our next location by way of dice or something, right?”

“A deck of cards,” said Amaryllis, “Keyed to a map of city blocks where we might reasonably hide, which, given the ability to transform into birds and land on rooftops, is most of them.”
“Okay,” I said. “So if we stopped moving entirely, and just stayed in this hotel room --”

“It’s a bedroom,” said Grak. “We looked at rooms for rent in the papers and snuck in. There are wards against sound, before you ask.”

“Huh,” I said, looking around. I guess we were fugitives from the law, after all. “Well if we just stayed here, and committed to staying here, then Larkspur would eventually find us, right?”

“Right,” said Amaryllis.

“And then we would kill him,” said Fenn. “Grak would set up all manner of wards, I would find some place to snipe from, and that’s before he even got to you, Amaryllis, and the last druid in the world.”

“More likely, he would send the city guard after us instead,” said Amaryllis. “And we would leave without ever seeing his face.”

“Well, what I was thinking is that he wouldn’t even have to do that,” I said. “If he can track himself, then he can flip a coin about whether or not to send the city guard. If the coin comes up heads, or er, circles, then he stays back and does nothing, or if it comes up torches, then he sends the city guard. And then, if he does send the city guard, he goes to one of three prearranged locations to indicate whether it was a success, failure, or neutral, or whatever bits of information he wants to transmit to his alternate present, where he’s tracking himself trying to figure out the plan.”

“Which means he still fails half the time,” said Amaryllis. She frowned. “Unless he sent them out after flipping torches twice in a row, and so on down that line of thinking, but that depends on how well Doris can see probability, which is unknown.”

“We could leave the city,” said Fenn. “That means he wouldn’t be able to leverage the city guard against us. We’re only staying here so we can use the teleportation key to leave at a moment’s notice, right? And so we don’t tip that we actually do have it, which Larkspur seems on the fence about? For all he knows, we scurried away from the fight just after he turned tail and ran.”

“We need to pick a killing field,” said Grak.

“Right,” I replied. “But it still has to be a killing field that he won’t know is a killing field, if he’s smart about things and only tries any given strategy half the time. I don’t want to continually set things up and have him be a no-show, only for him to screw off back to Anglecynn where he’ll keep causing problems. We already have to worry about his sister.”

“Hyacinth Prentiss,” said Amaryllis. “She’s his cousin-wife, not sister, they wed after his arranged marriage to me fell through. She was always more cautious, and you’re correct that she’s going to be a threat, though not nearly in the same way as him, especially not if we kill him. Killing him weakens her position immeasurably.”

That bit about an arranged marriage was news to me, but it probably wasn’t the time to dig into that, and I knew Amaryllis would say that even if I wanted to press the issue.

“Okay,” I said. “So we need to set up a trap that doesn’t look like a trap to his borrowed probability vision, which we don’t actually know the details of. And on top of that, the last twelve hours have presumably been spent moving around a lot and trying to maximize the spread of probability, which means that any deviation from that is going to draw his attention. Plus he and the Republic of Doris can both safely assume that we know something about the power and are taking active measures to avoid it, right?”
“I thought it was an acceptable trade-off,” said Amaryllis. “We’re safe from him so long as we keep on the move, and the only thing that moving is really costing us is sleep.” She yawned, and I could momentarily see the lack of sleep before her willful energy returned. “Granted, we can’t put that off forever, but we can sleep in shifts as we keep moving, if need be.”

“Okay,” I said. “I think I have a plan, unless there’s a concrete plan beyond luring him and killing him that no one has told me?” Amaryllis shook her head. “We can make twenty miles in an hour if we’re swallows. The land around Boastre Vino is largely uncultivated, and we can use the deck of cards to decide on a random angle away from here. We fly twenty miles using the random angle, then land there and prepare for Larkspur. From his perspective, it should look like we’re running away using some method of probability masking, right?”

“Probably,” said Amaryllis. I wondered if that was a joke, but she didn’t smile.

“We set a trap wherever we land,” said Grak with a nod of understanding. “That makes things more difficult for me.”

“Is this guy really dumb enough to go after us with just him and the devil girl?” asked Fenn.

“I would think you wouldn’t be one to talk about mixed parentage like that,” said Amaryllis with a frown. Fenn frowned back in a mocking reflection. “But to answer your question, I don’t know. I didn’t imagine that he would make a deal with Doris either, but it would appear he has. If I were him, I would cut my losses and run, but he’s already overcommitted this far. Men like the one we killed last night, trained, loyal men, are a valuable resource, one that he couldn’t possibly have tapped dry as yet, but one that he’d have to think carefully about. If he thinks he has us, he might bring in more, but … I don’t know for certain.”

“This doesn’t inspire confidence,” said Solace.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I replied.

“Juniper, I understand why you did it, and I even agree with it, based on what Fenn said, but the reality we’re facing down is that we had a full-on battle with Larkspur in the middle of a populated city street,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know how he dealt with what happened at Bone and Flesh, but here, now, he has an opportunity to paint us as violent criminals. He could spin some story about being in Boastre Vino as part of his classified duties as FSD, collect eyewitness accounts, either legitimate or paid for, set up his brute as a martyr, and make the story as public as possible. It would bring scrutiny on him, possibly more than he could bear, but he could do it in order to fuck us. If we don’t offer up a target to him, and relatively soon, then the chance that he fucks us like that gets a lot higher.”

And if he continued his deal with Doris, whatever that was, it was entirely possible that we wouldn’t be able to stick around anywhere for longer than a day or so. That would mean that training at the athenaeums was flatly out for me, far into the foreseeable future. It would mean that we’d have to fly to any place that we hadn’t already been, and sneaking our way into the imperial teleportation network would almost certainly be a no-go. Hyacinth, his cousin-wife (blegh), would be her own issue, but she wasn’t loaded for bear against us, and I’d already seen her bow out of the chase as being not worth the effort. Larkspur was a danger to us because he was unpredictable, and if we let go of this chance and stuck to hiding, there was a really good possibility that he was going to crop up in the future. And if he did, then he was going to be in a better position.

Besides that, I was going to level up if we killed him.

“Fuck,” I said. “Okay.”
There were sixty cards in an Aerbian deck; the four suits were tines, flowers, cups, and bones, and the eight extra cards were four women (virgin, matron, whore, crone) and four men (fop, scholar, joker, brute). I had originally started dividing the arc in increments of fifty-two before getting a look at the deck and realizing that we were fortunate enough to be able to divide the entire half-circle of land cleanly by the number of cards.

After we’d talked it over some more, everyone disappeared into the bottle to get some rest, then Solace came back out again. A small light had gone on within the bottle, hovering just off-center and slowly rotating.

“Artificial sun?” I asked as she stowed the bottle in her cloak. I was out because I was well-rested and combat-capable, and she was out because she had to be. The lack of sleep didn’t seem to be affecting her.

“Something like that,” Solace agreed.

“I might have found that helpful,” I said with a shrug.

“Yes, you might have,” Solace nodded. “Did you speak with the locus?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “You gave me some time with her?” That wasn’t quite an accusation, but I had my suspicions. The timing seemed awfully convenient.

“Yes,” said Solace, inclining her head a fraction. “You call it a she?”

“I try not to,” I said. “But it is a doe, not a stag.”

Solace nodded. “Words don’t matter much. It’s only convention.”

I opened my mouth to launch into an argument about that, because of course words mattered, because of course convention mattered, but I held my tongue, because most people didn’t find arguments like that endearing, and Solace had four hundred years of being like this, which meant I was really unlikely to change her mind.

The plan was that the two of us would stay on watch for the next hour, then draw a random card from the deck to figure out what direction we were heading. Solace and I would fly for about an hour, then land at the nearest defensible spot, where she would pull everyone out of the bottle and I would guard against attack. In the meantime, everyone else would be getting at least a little rest. It would have been better to have everyone at full strength and fully rested, but we were worried that if we didn’t give him the opportunity soon, Larkspur would simply give up (if he hadn’t already).

The thought that this entire thing might be for nothing, that he might already be back in Anglecynn, was weighing on me. According to everything I knew about narrative logic, he would show up at the field of battle as soon as he saw the probability we were anywhere else narrowing down. Trying to understand the world of Aerb through the lens of narrative was a fool’s quest though, because the Dungeon Master knew where I was looking and what I was thinking, and if a player ever tried something on the theory that ‘that’s how it works in stories’ then it was your duty as DM to slap them down so hard they didn’t try garbage like that in the future.

And if he did go after us … well, what did he know about us, and what did that say about our odds of success? Amaryllis seemed confident that he didn’t know we had a druid, because everything that Solace had done was more easy to attribute to various unknown entads than to a druid that had been in hiding for hundreds of years (“think horses, not zebras”). If he had after-action reports of any kind from Barren Jewel, he might know that we were working with a warder, or at least had been, and the
same went for if it had been him at Weik Handum rather than people Aumann had sent out, or some unknown third party. He knew about and had seen Fenn, and he had a fairly good read on me, though perhaps he would assume I was out of the battle given the injury he’d given me.

From Larkspur’s perspective, he was looking at a group of four to five people with powerful magic items and rudimentary magic skills, one of them, maybe, a warder. I didn’t know whether he was the type to overestimate or underestimate, but my guess was that he would underestimate us, because that’s what he’d done with me at the library. His search method using probabilistic magic also seemed (to me) to be somewhat sloppy, or at least premised on the ability to resolve conflicts from a position of superiority. Unfortunately, it was possible that after underestimating us twice, he would wise up the third time, and even if he didn’t stop his habit of thinking he had the upper hand, he would still have to raise the assumed lower bound of our capabilities.

I was looking at too many unknowns. Donald Rumsfeld got flak for having said that there were known unknowns and unknown unknowns, but I had always thought that was an amazing insight into information and planning. We could, at least to some extent, plan against strategies and powers that Larkspur might have available to him, like if he brought in a gold mage, or a pustule mage, and we could alter what we did in accordance with the probabilities that we assigned to each possibility, mostly based on what Amaryllis knew about Larkspur. But we couldn’t possibly plan against the things we had no idea even existed.

That was what worried me. I thought there was a reasonable chance that Larkspur would use his probability triangulation method, however that worked, to see that we were leaving Boastre Vino, and from the spread I was hoping the deck of cards would give our probability, I hoped it would look like we were trying to make a getaway and then camping in the wilderness. Maybe he would come out to play … but if he did?

“What’s on your mind?” asked Solace.

“I don’t know what this battle is going to look like,” I said. “We’re hoping that our ability to wing it is better than their ability to wing it, or that our preparation outweighs their caution, and I just … I still don’t like it. There’s too much variability.”

“Yes,” nodded Solace. “The unknown can be difficult.”

“Yet that’s sort of your thing?” I asked. “Dealing with the unknown and winning despite not being able to probe deeper into it?”

Solace shrugged. “That’s one way to be a druid,” she said. “Things are easier, if you don’t know all the reasons that something can’t work, so some druids prefer -- preferred, sorry -- to simply take everything as it comes, working on instinct and intuition.”

“And … you’re not like that?” I asked.

“It’s fuzzy, being a druid,” said Solace. She sat on the bed, which had no sheets or pillows, and folded her hands. “But at a certain level, you need to win every single battle you fight, and instinct and intuition alone aren’t enough, not if you fight hundreds of battles. Ignorance is not the great druidic virtue, nor is faith.” She gave a small laugh, and touched her light green fingers to her dark green lips. “It’s funny, but I want so much for you to understand.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“You hate it,” said Solace. “You don’t understand druids and you don’t understand the locus, you have the mentality that spurred the Second Empire toward genocide, and yet … the Deep Searching
brought me right to you. I want to repay your willingness to help by giving you that thing you desire, such as I’m able. I want you to know.”

“Well, I don’t feel like I’m closer,” I said. “Unless you’re saying that the great druidic virtue can only be defined by negation.”

“They say, sometimes, that for a druid to know will lock them away from their art forever,” said Solace. “It’s usually more about how the druid relates to the world, and how the world relates back to the druid. You told me that the airspeed velocity of a swallow was twenty-five miles an hour, and do you recall my response?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You said that wasn’t actually knowledge, it was just … a way for people to pin things down without actually conveying truth, or something like that.”

“Yes,” nodded Solace. “That is how I relate to the world. That is what a true druid is, at the core of their being. It doesn’t matter that you told me this thing you believe about swallows, because it’s only true within a framework that I have utterly rejected. That one is easy for me; others are less so. For all that Amaryllis rushes to defend me, she makes the same mistake that you do. She says, flatly, that I can turn the five of us into birds, and then she begins thinking of that as a tool within her toolbox, a cog within the clockwork of strategy.”

“And … it’s not?” I asked.

“It is,” said Solace. “In the same way that a swallow goes twenty-five miles per hour. It’s a lens through which we might view the world, one that lies far on the side of desiring to place everything within systems and order, removed from the wonder and mystery of actually turning into a bird.”

“Ah,” I said. “I … kind of get it. Maybe. And it’s bidirectional? It’s not just what you personally think about your art, it’s what others think too? How neatly they’ve done the work of fitting a square peg into a round hole?”

Solace nodded. “It’s fuzzy. Everything about being a druid is fuzzy. But yes, when the Second Empire’s efforts at bringing order were met with revolt from the loci, they did try other methods, like keeping the druids ignorant of their plots and plans, or doing tests with unwitting druids. That didn’t work either.”

“Huh,” I said. “Is this something that we need to be worried about? You said that I couldn’t hurt the locus by thinking the wrong things, but … that doesn’t seem to be quite true.”

“A druid and a locus are different,” said Solace. “I practice the art of druidic magic, but the locus is that magic. For myself, it’s not the seeking of truth so much as the rigidity of thought that might put me at risk, but I’ve been doing this for four hundred years, and thought alone is an irritant, not a true threat.” She looked me over. “I think that’s enough. You understand at least some of what I’m trying to convey.”

“So what’s the great druidic virtue then?” I asked. “Doublethink?”

“Hrm,” said Solace with a small smile. “We would say saxud, but that would be a good translation. It’s not enough, on its own, I don’t believe that druidic magic could work if it were so simple, but it’s the element we lean upon most often.” I opened my mouth to ask another question, but she held up a hand. “I would request that you stay your tongue, unless you think it’s of dire importance.”

“It’s a matter of history,” I said. “Nothing to do with your art.” Solace nodded for me to proceed. “I’m not sure I understand what the Second Empire did, or how they did it. Did they analyze the loci
to death, and if that’s what it was, how did yours survive that?”

“Oh,” said Solace, eyes widening slightly. “No, they infringed on the druids through their actions, their attempts at treaties, their science, but that was nothing that we couldn’t have endured. No, they saw land worth taking, and something standing in their way that couldn’t be captured or turned to productivity, and their extermination campaign began in earnest after that. They were unrepentantly evil.”

We were quiet after that, as Solace looked out the open window and I fidgeted with the Anyblade. I didn’t quite believe her version of events with regards to the Second Empire. It was possible that Aerbian history had this period where Pure Evil was in charge, but my guess was that it was more just people being people, which meant people being shitty to each other. Druids were probably a scapegoat for some larger problem, or a distraction meant to take eyes away from poor policy, or a rallying cry that resonated with people in a way that a complex issue might not.

I did have to wonder how much the upcoming battle, if there was one, would depend on Solace. She was the ace in the hole, the black swan that Larkspur would (should) have no possible method of accurately guessing we had on our side. I was hoping that she would show her true worth.
I drew a seven of tines, which meant we’d go in the middle 60° arc, then drew the virgin, which was card #57 according to my scheme. I considered the card somewhat suspect, but I had done a lot of shuffling and wasn’t going to reduce our probability spread by getting superstitious about the kabbalistic meanings of the cards. If the Dungeon Master had picked a specific card for me to draw on the basis of something that I had been giving some thought to as of late, then I doubted I would be able to improve matters by simply drawing another card from the deck.

Solace transformed me into a swallow again, then herself, and we took off together, flying side by side. I relaxed slightly as we passed the city walls, because that meant we no longer had to worry about a last-second ambush. It was mid-morning and a pleasant day for a flight, and I tried to take joy in it as I internally counted the minutes.

After an hour’s flight and (approximately) twenty-five miles in a straight line away from Boastre Vino, we circled around to a copse of trees with some large stones at the center. Grak had said that if we had much of a choice, he wanted us to be somewhere with lots of obstructions, because in accordance with Goettl’s Laws, it was easier to make a ward if you had something to brace it on. His plan was to tap completely dry in making the wards around us, in the interests of having as powerful (and numerous) of wards as physically possible, or if we engaged the enemy sooner, then to put up wards until they showed up.

As soon as we landed, Solace pulled the others out of the bottle by first diving inside and then having everyone spit out of individual trees, like a dendritic version of the birth process. I noticed there was no tree tunnel this time, and the fact that Solace was making an effort not to repeat herself seemed, to me, to be more than just showing off on her part. It was, maybe, a way to avoid falling into patterns or seeing the druidic magic as something that had to adhere to doing things the same way every time.

While Grak got to work, Fenn grumbled briefly about sightlines and then began to climb a tree, and Solace began walking around in order to scout out the territory. That left me with a slightly-rumpled looking Amaryllis, who was rubbing her eyes.

“The Elon Gar have a way to eliminate sleep,” she said. “The masters need ten minutes of quiet meditation a day, and that’s it. This is the first time I’ve ever slept in full plate. I wasn’t too impressed by the experience.”

“Can we talk?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Amaryllis, looking slightly more alert. “Something serious?”

“Um,” I said. “It’s about capital-L Loyalty.” In other words, sort of serious, but not deathly so.

“Oh. And?” asked Amaryllis.

“Well, Fenn passed level 10 Loyalty, I’m not sure whether she told you that or not?” I asked.

“No, she hadn’t mentioned it,” said Amaryllis. “And what does your internal system say that I’m at?”

“Nine,” I said.

“She’s at eleven?” asked Amaryllis.

“Sixteen,” I replied.
“Ah,” said Amaryllis. She hesitated. “Sorry.”

“No,” I said. “I wasn’t bringing it up because, yeah. That whole thing.” The bad blood. The mistrust. “No, when Fenn passed Loyalty 10 it unlocked this thing called ‘Twinned Souls’ that probably doesn’t have anything to do with the actual, literal soul, but makes it so that she’ll get stronger as I get stronger. I think it’s a balance thing, so my companions don’t get left behind me. And given that you’re just one point away, I was wondering whether there was anything that I could do that would, I don’t know. Help with that.”

“Huh,” said Amaryllis. “Give me a second?”

“Sure,” I said. I stepped back a bit and watched Grak move between the trees with his wand in hand, tracing out an irregular ward with the trees as anchor points. A border ward against high velocity was a must, given the risk of heavy-duty machine gun fire. Everything else was at his discretion, especially because my knowledge of wards was being increasingly off-loaded onto him. Raising Grak’s loyalty, somehow, was on my list of priorities, but it wasn’t terribly high, partly because I didn’t actually know how to raise loyalty, other than by trying to be a generally good and understanding person.

**Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 10!**

**Companion Passive Unlocked: Twinned Souls (Amaryllis)!**

I turned to Amaryllis. “What just happened?” I asked.

“Is that working?” Amaryllis asked.

**Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 11!**

“What are you doing?” I asked. “How are you … are you becoming more loyal on purpose?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

**Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 12!**

“You can’t do that,” I said. I will admit to some slight panic on my part, maybe because there was something in the back of my mind that said trying to munchkin the game too badly was going to end with the Dungeon Master putting his foot down. “You can’t just, become more loyal because there’s something in it for you, that’s not how loyalty works!”

“Well, clearly you don’t know as much as you think,” said Amaryllis. She looked down at her hands, giving them a flex. “I think I can feel the change.”

“Please,” I said. “Tell me what you did, or what you were thinking?”

“Well, you already said,” replied Amaryllis. “Obviously my loyalty is because I get something from you, isn’t that it?” There was something slightly hostile in her tone. “Is that really what you think?”

“No,” I said. “I mean, it doesn’t make sense, Grak didn’t become more loyal when we decided to pay him a ludicrous amount of money, I just don’t think that it’s keyed to literal rewards. And I didn’t think that you could become more loyal on purpose, but maybe I’m wrong about that, and if I am, then you became more loyal on purpose after I told you there was something in it for you, so …”

“You don’t understand me,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think I’m really all that complicated.” She sighed and ran her fingers through her short brown hair. “You understand that my plan, even early
on, was to elevate you as much as possible, right?” she asked. “Once I saw how quickly you picked up blood magic, how easily you blew past what I had spent years studying, I thought to myself that you were the key to my return to power.” She rubbed her face. “That changed, over time, but the same thing has been at the back of my head from the start, which was that if you were the same as Uther Penndraig, then I was never going to be one of your knights of the Square Table. Even if I put my heart and soul into training, I was never going to be able to match the people you would pick up along the way. I’d at best be a wallet for you, or a love interest if I --” she stopped herself from saying something, “I knew that I couldn’t keep pace with you, and I knew that what I had to offer you wasn’t going to be worth much, especially if we couldn’t get me back into power in Anglecynn, and -- I’ve been worried about this for almost as long as we’ve known each other.”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“You wiped that away,” said Amaryllis. Her posture had changed somewhat, relaxing. “You wiped that away without even thinking about it. There wasn’t some calculation going on in your mind where you were thinking that I might be more useful if I was trying to win your approval, or if I were in a position of weakness compared to you. You didn’t think about the power dynamic between the two of us. So,” she said. “Maybe I’m a worse person than you, because I would have had those thoughts, but if you didn’t, then yes, there were some things I needed to let go of and recurring thoughts I could toss aside. Hence, loyalty.” She rubbed her eyes again. “I’m sorry, I just woke up and I’m running on less-than-enough sleep.”

“I think that if you tell someone that you’re going to try to trust them more, you have to actually do that,” I said. “So a lot of it is on me.” I looked her over. She was right that I didn’t understand her. “Let’s not have every conversation between us go like this. So ... serious.”

“Agreed,” she said with a soft smile. She looked up to the tree tops. “So, you and Fenn?”

I felt my chest constrict at that. “Um,” I said. “Kind of. Not actually, in the sense of, uh, we haven’t -- it’s nothing official, or unofficial even, but, yeah. We’re sort of … thinking about it. I am, anyway, I can't say for her.”

“Thinking about it while sharing a bed?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“Ah,” I said. “If you mean at the hotel, they were going to be two separate beds.”

“Were they actually?” asked Amaryllis, still keeping her eyebrow raised.

I thought about that for a bit. “When I give that some thought, no, they probably wouldn’t have been.”

There was sound from the trees overhead, and I watched as Fenn made her descent, moving with a grace and agility that screamed inhuman to me, though I was pretty sure that it was also the sort of thing you’d see on Youtube and think, ‘Wow, people sure can do some amazing things if they devote the time and effort to it’. She didn’t even seem to vary her speed at all, like she was doing parkour and using every action, pushing off tree branches, stepping lightly for just a moment, in order to ensure that she kept her movement eerily constant.

A small puff of exhaled air was the only evidence she’d been exerting herself over the course of her rapid seventy-foot climb down.

“Am I really that predictable?” she asked. “See, I was going to exclaim what a crazy random mix-up there’d been on the part of the hotel, I had this whole bit planned about how we would just have to make the best of being stuck under the same covers.” She grinned at me. “You know, I heard all of
that. And before you start, you really can’t complain about someone eavesdropping if you watched them go up into the eaves.”

“Eavesdroppers sit under the eaves of the house,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “You’re thinking of rafters.”

“Eavesdropping, raftersdropping, it’s all the same to me,” said Fenn. She was smiling my way. I was blushing, and my heart was pounding, because it was all sort of out in the open now, especially given who I’d been saying it to. Amaryllis didn’t really look put out at all, but she was good at masks, when she needed to be. I had no idea whether she felt any romantic inclination toward me at all, with the unicorn kiss only serving to make me feel more uncertain. ‘Or a love interest if I --’ was still there in my mind, making me wonder, but if it came down to a choice between the two of them, I had now cast my lot, which had left Fenn smiling and made me feel wonderful.

(Maybe it was the (possibly) upcoming battle against whatever forces Larkspur could muster, which had already set me on edge, but the idea of a proper relationship with Fenn was terrifying in an exhilarating way. I’d fucked up both friendships and relationships before, she was my best friend, we were joined together by a mysterious force that we didn’t really understand, and from what I knew of her personally she wasn’t built for a long-term stable romantic partnership, or at least had about as much of a chance to learn how to do that as I had. So there were lots of reasons that it was probably a bad idea, but we were, apparently, going to be an actual thing instead of just flirting around the subject.)

“So how long are we going to wait for this guy to show up?” asked Fenn, thankfully changing the subject. I might have been imagining things, but I thought I saw a slight blush on the pale skin of her cheeks. “A full day here?”

“We moved once an hour, which was probably overkill, given that we didn’t have any close calls,” said Amaryllis. She turned her helmet over in her hands. “I would guess that if he comes, it will be between two hours and a full day. The longer the wait, the higher the danger to us, because I don’t doubt that he would use that time to rally whatever forces he thinks he needs to bring to bear.”

And that was what worried me. If he showed up, how much was he willing to risk overcommitting? How much was he going to pull people off projects, put them in danger, risk operational security, or incriminate himself? We were hoping that he was going to come in overconfident and underprepared, but it was all up in the air.

Grak took six hours to finish the wards, going in order of what he called the inverted pyramid of potential threat. The most important layers of warding were up within the hour, and more and more pieces of warding became functional after that. None of them were going to last particularly long; one way or another, we would be gone before the clock had run out on them. After Grak had placed the last of them, he came back to join us by the stones, sweating slightly. During the long wait, Amaryllis had fallen asleep, propped up against the rocks, and Fenn had joined her, with her head resting on a pillow in Amaryllis’ lap. Solace was lying in a shaft of sunlight, moving every so often to keep pace with it, like a cat; she had her garments pulled aside to reveal as much bare, green flesh as possible, which left her obscenely indecent by Midwestern standards. I hadn’t designed the crantek as nudists, but I don’t know what I thought halfway photosynthetic creatures would be doing walking around in clothes.

“I just spent a full week’s worth of concordance,” said Grak. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done that.”

“And you think we’re good?” I asked.
“No,” said Grak. “I think I’ve prepared against most reasonable vectors of attack.” He sniffed and looked at the women. “Void weapons are not magic. They would be a problem.” So naturally, if Larkspur knew for certain that we had a warder, or maybe just guessed based on whatever evidence he’d gathered, that would be one of the primary weapons he brought, and it wouldn’t matter whether there was an imperial ban, since he’d already shown himself willing to violate those.

“Thanks,” I said. “You might want to get some sleep, while you can.”

“I’m doing what I’m paid to do,” said Grak.

I looked him over. “I’m not sure I believe that,” I said.

“Which part?” he asked with a frown. “I am putting up wards. I am being paid to put up wards.”

“I don’t think that’s all there is,” I said. “I think we’re paying you handsomely, and we do need your hard-earned abilities, but … what are you after?”

“Penance for my clan,” said Grak, as I knew he would.

“And you want to pay that penance as quickly as possible, so you can return to them?” I asked. I didn’t say outright that his penance was self-imposed, but the quest I’d gotten for him used that phrasing.

Grak looked away from me. “No,” he said after a time. I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t, which meant I could either take a stab in the dark or let it drop. I didn’t really have much else to do besides talk to him, but trying to get him to open up about something that I’d already given him a (rejected) option to talk about didn’t seem like it would be worth anything. Besides, I hated when people tried to do that with me, and more often than not I turned sour on them after they failed to take a hint.

“So,” I said. “Can you teach me how to speak Dwarven? Unless you were planning to sleep more?”

Grak gave a loud sniff. “Dwarves can go longer without sleep than humans,” he said. “It’s better I stay awake. I’ll need to give warning if I detect a crossing of the wards.” He sniffed again, with his wide nostrils flaring. “It’s called Groglir, not Dwarven, if you want the common tongue of dwarves. The language of my clan would not suit you.”

“Okay, Groglir,” I said. I had taken some Spanish in high school, but wasn’t actually sure how you were supposed to go about learning a language, let alone from a different place, let alone one suited for a different species. In the worst case, Groglir would be unpronounceable to the human tongue because of the differences in physiology; the thick teeth and wide tongue would prove themselves capable of making two sounds that I couldn’t distinguish between, or one I couldn’t replicate, or one I couldn’t even hear. I was hoping that the game would act like a proper game for once, and have already arranged for me to not have to worry too much about things like that.

So Grak took the lead, and I started to learn some Groglir nouns. He would point to something, like a tree, and say, “Tree, mara, tree,” and then I would repeat after him. From time to time, he would go back to something, and I would try my best to recall what it was he’d said. At a certain point, when I had something like thirty Groglir words under my belt, he started in on noun morphology, which was ridiculously confusing, partly because Groglir was an ergative-absolutive language rather than a nominative-accusative language like English. (Technically speaking, on Aerb they spoke Anglish rather than English, but other than the slight difference in initial vowel, there was pretty much no difference.) Beyond that, in the same way that nouns could be either masculine or feminine in Spanish, Groglir had five noun classes, and they (obviously) didn’t even cleave along gender lines.
Once he taught me my first verb, *dalkelor*, meaning “opened”, I could make my first actual Groglir sentence, which was “Grakhuil in nogor dalkelor”, or “Grakhuil the door opened”, because of course the first language I came across in Aerb would also have subject-object-verb ordering, just to be extra confusing.

“You know a lot about language?” I asked.

“I learned Anglish late in life,” said Grak. “It was a necessity for learning at the athenaeum. My clan didn’t have the money to spend on a yearly translation tattoo. Children learn languages in the natural way. Knowledge and order help adults more. I learned Anglish using rules. My understanding of Groglir is governed by that same understanding.”

I did wonder how true that was to the mortal species in general, dwarves in particular, or whether it was just Grak specifically. My own understanding was that language was intuitive, which was one of the reasons that it developed so many idiosyncrasies. Learning rigid rules and then applying them uniformly seemed like more of a dwarf approach to things, but it was hard to say whether that was the truth or not, because I had only ever met one dwarf, and he had spent at least ten years away from his clan, changing enough in that time to want to leave his people behind.

By the time Fenn woke up, I had a small handful of phrases I could use, assuming that I didn’t want to change tense, and about fifty words that mostly related to things that were within pointing range. I still hadn’t gotten a pop-up that said something to the effect of, “Hey, you tried hard enough, you know Dwarven now!”, which is what I was not-so-secretly hoping for.

“Well, we’re not dead,” said Fenn with a yawn and a stretch. “How long has it been?”

“Eight hours since we arrived,” said Grak. “Nothing from the wards.”

“Wake Solace,” I said to Fenn, trying not to glance over at the partially nude crantek woman.

“I’m awake,” said Solace from her spot in a sunbeam. “I’ve been awake.” It was afternoon now, and the sun was coming through at an angle, but she was somehow still fully lit. When I looked up at the trees, I saw them bowing out, spreading their leaves to the side to allow a shaft of light in. She put on her clothes with slow, languid motions. “The field mice have relayed to me that all is quiet, and the trees agree.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“If he doesn’t come, all we’ve wasted is time,” said Fenn. “I’ll get to poke an arrow through his skull another day, I reckon.”

“Yes,” I said. “But that means that we’re consigned to a pretty damned long time trying to work beneath the radar.” I rubbed my hand, trying to get some feeling back into it again. It was getting worse with every passing day, and I was worried that the endgame would be that I wouldn’t be able to use it on instinct anymore. “Not that we wouldn’t be, even with him dead, but without the driving force of Anglecynn’s FSD I have to imagine we’d have an easier time of it.”

“We have time,” said Amaryllis, who stood up and stretched out with a groan. “Glove carrier, food please,” she said in Fenn’s direction.

“Yes, your highness,” said Fenn with a bow. She held out her hand and a small table popped out of thin air to settle on the forest floor. She kicked it slightly and then moved it around, until the legs were more firmly in place, then began unloading enormous amounts of food from her glove, cold pasty pies, thick slices of meat, a colorful array of fruits, two loaves of bread, five bowls of what I
took to be some kind of cold soup, and finally, a whole chocolate cake decorated with what looked like elongated cherries.

“I think it might be in our favor if he doesn’t show,” said Amaryllis as she grabbed a pasty. “That says something about his positioning and his strength, if he doesn’t think that he’s strong enough to take us on in this sort of scenario.”

“Oh it’s bad, because it means he’s smart enough to have realized that we weren’t just stopping here for our health,” I replied. “That means he’s more patient and cunning than we’ve been giving him credit for, and he’s content to just sit back and make our lives miserable from a distance.”

“He’s not,” said Amaryllis. “And he can’t risk that I decide to settle down for a quiet life and start having children. I’m the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, but he’s the most direct male descendant, which gives him claim to roughly a fourth of what I have. Hyacinth is second most direct female descendant, which means that together they could lay claim to every heirloom that I have claim-in-fact to right now. Most of those, I assume, they already have physical possession of. But it stands to reason that giving up a fortune in heirlooms and places with wards keyed to me will mean that he’ll never be content, especially not when I might get pregnant at any moment and perpetuate that problem.”

“Is that how you think getting pregnant works?” asked Fenn.

“I am well aware of how it works,” said Amaryllis, quite dryly.

“All I’m saying is that I don’t think there’s much upside to him not showing up,” I said. “The information it gives us is minimal. We avoid a battle with him today, but we’re probably in for a tougher one tomorrow.”

“Oh we just assassinate him,” shrugged Fenn. “That would work too.”

Solace raised an eyebrow at that.

“I don’t think we’re in the business of assassination,” I said.

“No?” asked Fenn. “Because what we’re doing here, setting a trap and then claiming self-defense, that’s so unlike going into his bedroom and slitting his throat in the middle of the night?”

“I agree with the elf,” said Grak.

“Half-elf,” said Fenn. Her ears twitched slightly. “I think maybe this is all moot, because we’ve got company.”

“Helicopters,” said Solace. She brought her staff down and struck the ground with it, closing her eyes as she did so. “Five helicopters, six men and a pilot each.”

“Can you tell if Larkspur is there?” asked Amaryllis. I saw that the teleportation key was in her hand; the plan was that in battle, it would go to Fenn, who was waiting impatiently next to her, all thoughts of food forgotten.

“No,” said Solace, opening her eyes. Her face had an intensity that I hadn’t seen from her before. This was a woman who had known battle. “Most were human, armed with metal weapons, two-thirds of their number armored, others I would assume to be mages. One of the helicopters is special.”

“In what way?” asked Amaryllis.
“I’ve said as much as the winds gave me,” said Solace.

“Thirty men seems like a lot,” I said.

“Go or no-go?” asked Fenn. “Either I’m up the tree to shoot a few thousand arrows their way or we should get the hell out of here.”

“Go,” said Amaryllis, handing over the key.

“I disagree,” I said. “Thirty men of unknown strength bearing down on us? That’s more than we were talking about.”

“We can cut their numbers down before they arrive,” said Solace. She twirled her staff in front of her and set it in the ground with her fingers gripped on the bird’s skull there. Immediately, the weather began to change, dropping by a few degrees as wind started to move and the skies darkened.

“I have faith in my wards,” said Grak.

Fenn took off without another word as the teleportation key disappeared into her glove, climbing the tree like it was no more difficult than sprinting across flat land. I felt a pain at her leaving, worried that we were fully committed to this fight. I’d been quietly voted down by my teammates, and if we left, it was going to be after a brief skirmish showed that the odds were badly stacked against us.

The winds were picking up, blowing gusts of cold wind our way. I had my Anyblade in hand, extended to full length and ready to swing. The copse of trees we were in wasn’t thick enough or wide enough to give us full cover from the fields around it, and I kept looking out there, straining to see whether I could hear the helicopters or not. The winds weren’t helping with that, and I hoped that they weren’t going to be strong enough to force the pilots down before they got within range (and on the other hand, I was really, really hoping that, because then maybe we wouldn’t have to fight).

I looked up the tall tree that Fenn had climbed and couldn’t see her at all. Her bow had seven artillery shots left in it, per her accounting, and given what a well-made arrow could do to plate, I was hoping that a helicopter would fare equally poorly if faced with an entire volley. All you would need was one in the rotors to bring a helicopter down. Just as I started to hear the thumping of multiple helicopters coming our way, I heard the twang of Fenn’s bow. I couldn’t see her, or the arrows, but I could imagine some poor pilot suddenly faced with a cloud of arrows that seemed to have come from nowhere.

I saw Fenn tumble from the tree, touching branches briefly to control her fall, and saw the tree-top explode in a ball of orange flame a few seconds after that.

“Think I got one!” she shouted with a breathless smile as she landed in a roll. “They’re not fucking around.”

Two flashes of bright white light came from between the trees, followed shortly after by overlapping waves of rolling thunder.

“That’s two more down,” said Solace, raising her staff from the ground and looking slightly dazed.

“Show-off,” muttered Fenn, but I knew her well enough to see the nervous energy coursing through her and the tenseness of how she moved. “Joon, follow me to the front?” She took off through the woods, moving swiftly, until we got to the line of trees that Grak had marked for us, which were the anchors for the wards he’d put up and a helpful guide for what was and wasn’t safe.

We peered out through the few trees between us and the fields to the east, waiting and listening. The
helicopters would be flying low, if they hadn’t turned tail and run. Soon they were in sight, three helicopters, two black (one trailing black smoke), and a third that had an impractically ornate design to it, apparent even from a distance. At a guess, it was designed by someone in a forge-frenzy, and that meant that the helicopter possessed some unknown and presumably dangerous magic.

Fenn stepped out from the protection of the wards for long enough to fire two arrows, both of them artillery shots that blossomed into thousands of arrows. I could see now that the helicopters were of simple design; I wasn’t sure why I was expecting Apaches, given Aerb’s demonstrated level of technology. They weren’t laden with weapons, nor heavily armored as I had thought they would be. They were moving in a dangerously close formation, the kind of thing you would never do on Earth, not just because of the technical skill it would take, but because you’d risk getting blown out of the sky by a single SAM.

The reason for that close formation was made apparent when the arrows got near them; thousands of arrows turned into sparks as they got within range of the baroque helicopter in front, so many at once that it was an almost blinding display. The shield, or whatever it was, was shaped like a sphere, centered around the lead helicopter, which raced through the cloud of sparks without seeming to mind. Someone leaned from the side of the helicopter, out the open door, and Fenn stepped back into the safety of the wards just in time for a fireball to splash against them, detonating a tree in front of us. The pieces of flaming wood hit the wards and all that crossed over to us was a warm breeze.

One of the two black helicopters, the one that wasn’t having mechanical trouble, turned to the side and began to land. Fenn began stepping forward to fire another artillery shot off at it, but stepped back almost at once, just in time for another fireball to blast its way directly against the ward in front of us, again sending up a wave of heat but sparing us from the shrapnel, which was reduced to a low enough velocity that it was merely annoying.

“Shit,” said Fenn. She raised her hand as I saw movement within the belly of the helicopter, and with her other hand she pulled me down behind a thick metal wall that appeared from her glove. “You know,” she said, as a sound of thunk thunk thunk thunk started up from the helicopter, “Here I was, thinking that maybe we’d be able to make this a half day.” She was giving me a manic smile. “Mounted automatic void rifle, probably,” she said with a nod in the direction of fire. “I’ve got a few of these walls, not sure if we should retreat or not, but staying here is probably not --”

There was a loud crunching sound, which cut off the seemingly endless series of thunks. Fenn paused and poked her head up over the metal wall, then grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up too. The helicopter was protruding from the ground at an awkward angle, with pieces of metal twisted around and shattered glass littering the area around it. There was a considerable amount of blood.

“Oh,” said Fenn. “I will give that druid credit where credit is due.” She pulled out her bow and fired an arrow toward where the other two helicopters were landing, two hundred feet away, but the arrow was just a test shot, and it exploded into sparks as it hit the invisible globe.

“If they have another gun like that, we’re fucked,” I said. “Walls only hold until they flank us. If they can move or split that point defense --”

“Retreat,” called Fenn, either because her sense of luck was telling her to, or because she’d reached the same natural conclusion I was a second away from.

We raced back through the trees, back to the tall rocks that the others were near, which provided useful cover from void weapons. Effective range on a void weapon was five hundred feet, if you wanted to actually do any damage with them, and I had to hope that meant we would be able to out-maneuver them somehow.
“Status?” asked Amaryllis. She had put on her helmet and was looking suitably frightening.

“Solace got another helicopter,” I said. I looked at the crantek woman, who was leaning against her staff. “They have fully automatic void weapons, and some kind of shield that vaporizes arrows. I don’t think we can win.”

Amaryllis flickered her sword on and off, then reached behind her back and unslung her void rifle, which she handed to me. I shrank down the Anyblade to its bladed-ring form and took it.

“We killed three-fifths of their forces,” she said.

“Solace did,” I replied. My eyes went to the trees, which Grak and Fenn were both watching carefully, then to Solace herself. “Do you have more of those in you?”

“Not like that,” she said with a shake of her head. (Because she didn’t believe she did, because of the structuring risk, or because of inherent limitations to the art?) “The trees will help us.”

“They’re past the outer perimeter,” said Grak, hefting his axe.

“The five of us cannot kill fifteen well-trained men,” I said to Amaryllis. And that was probably true even if there weren’t any mages among them, which there almost certainly were. I was feeling a shudder of terror down my spine when I thought about how fucked we were likely to be if we were against fifteen people of the caliber of Aumann’s crew.

“Twelve now,” said Solace, as I heard a scream in the distance.

“They’re circling in squads,” said Grak. “It would be a good time for the fallback ambush.”

Amaryllis watched me for a second and nodded. I wasn’t happy about it, but I was the only one that seemed to think that our advantages weren’t enough, so we all circled up and touched Fenn as she held the teleportation key out. A flip of a card from the deck later, showing the joker, and we were off and away.

We didn’t go far, only two hundred yards, which put us in the woods close to where the helicopters had landed. The great thing about the teleportation key was that it didn’t just allow for us to travel the world in an instant, it also allowed silent, near-instant movement around a battlefield, especially because we’d done the smart thing and made a circuit around the place before the enemy had shown up. The major downside was, obviously, the two hour time limit, which meant that we had now committed ourselves to actually fighting this battle.

The helicopter pilots were still waiting in their respective helicopters, each one angled such that the mounted guns faced the copse of trees. If Solace’s count was right, there were only twelve men in total, minus the ones she had killed just before we left. If we could stay at a distance and have her pick them off one-by-one -- but I could see that wasn’t going to be possible, because she was barely able to stay standing by leaning her weight on her staff, which meant that we were four people against ten, at best. And if I were Larkspur, I would have put all of my best men into the magical helicopter with me, protected there, which meant that we were likely to be facing down the best of the best.

And just as I was contemplating the unpleasant version of reality in which Larkspur didn’t even show up and this was all just the slaughter of his men, rather than him coming himself, we spotted him. He was with the horned woman and a grotesque man covered in visible boils. Larkspur wasn’t in his usual get-up; instead, he was wearing a completely different armor, a simple breastplate and greaves that left his arms exposed. They probably had some powerful magic to compensate for that.
His cloak was still there though, and he had two swords, one at either hip, in addition to his familiar mirror shield. I looked at them through the spyglass that Fenn had produced from her glove, then handed it over to Amaryllis.

“Pustule mage,” she said at a whisper. “I think I might know him.” She swept the spyglass over. “The good news is that the rest are probably Golden Cete, part of the Color Riot, trained soldiers at a high rank. I don’t think he has a revision mage with him, he would have used it by now.”

I was nervous, sweating in my armor even though I hadn’t really exerted myself. It wasn’t the thought of killing anyone, it was the idea that there were too many people for any of this to be properly predicted. The zombies had been scary, but at least a little unreal to me, shambling creatures that wouldn’t have been entirely out of place in a movie. Individual fights weren’t as much of a problem for me either, because I’d been in a fair number of fights back in Kansas and at least understood the reality of taking a beating. Here, we were waiting on the edge, up against twice our number of people who had either experience or training in this sort of thing, and they wanted to murder us. My instincts were screaming at me to run, and I wasn’t entirely sure that those instincts were actually wrong.

“I need a test shot against the helicopter,” said Fenn, keeping her voice low. “I need to see whether or not the shield is around it, or Larkspur.”

“That will alert them,” I said.

“I can put up a ward against sound,” said Grak. “I’ve recovered enough for that, I think.”

“Fine,” I said. “Don’t actually hit the helicopter, just get the arrow close enough that we can see, and on the opposite side from them.”

“They’re not looking,” said Amaryllis, who was watching through the spyglass again.

It was a few moments later that Fenn loosed her arrow, the sound of the bow undetectable and the arrow completely silent in flight. It came within a foot of the ornately decorated helicopter, but there was no effect of sparks, and it simply continued on until it buried itself in the shrubbery. No one seemed to notice it.

“Well, crap,” said Fenn.

“Void rifle will still get him,” said Amaryllis. “If we can get close enough.”

“We’re locked into killing all of them now,” I said. “We can’t teleport out.”

“We can hide inside the bottle and fly out,” she replied. She frowned when she glanced at Solace and saw the state she was in.

“Probably,” said Solace, answering the unspoken question. “The locus is less powerful than it once was. I may have overdone it.”

“Look, if we’re going to do it, we need to split Larkspur off from the others,” I said. “The pustule mage is the one shooting fireballs, right?”

“They’re not going to split,” said Grak. “They have no reason to.”

I rubbed my face. “And he’s limited by the growths he’s put on himself, like a flesh version of a flower mage?”
“We can’t run him dry, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Fenn. “Not if he was prepared, which I guess he might not be, given the short notice.”

“Then what are our options, at this point?” I asked. “Get close enough to shoot the pustule mage in the head, enter into melee combat with Larkspur, and then hope that the other men in the woods don’t just come out and shoot us?”

“I can kill them,” said Solace. “Or at least stop them. It’ll be easier up close, if that’s what we’re doing.”

“I’ll circle around,” said Fenn. “Snipe them from the other side. Better to do it now, as they’re moving through the woods and mindful of wards.” She looked at me with a faint smile. “I’m a better shot than I was a month ago, believe it or not.”

Amaryllis had said she could feel the power that came with Twinned Soul. I had wondered about that, and what it might mean for Fenn, but apparently she had noticed the effects too. My own personal build was a generalist one, with the exception of social skills, but if Fenn had stats, and those stats were arranged to give her a comparative advantage in archery, then -- well, I had already run the numbers before, she could be up in the 50s for that one skill, and even if she didn’t have stats in the way that I did, it might not be unreasonable to expect that she would be capable of some impressive feats.

This was the first thing that had given me any confidence.

“Okay,” I said. “Then it'll be myself, Amaryllis, and Grak to deal with Larkspur and his friends, with Solace and Fenn to deal with everyone else?” I asked. “Amaryllis, you’re certain that they’re all Golden Cete, there won’t be any surprises?”

“They sometimes have blade-bound in their ranks,” she replied. “We’ve seen how Fenn deals with them.”

“I’ll kill the pilots on the way over,” said Fenn. “Spyglass.” When Amaryllis handed over the spyglass, Fenn raised it to her eye and looked at the woods. “Larkspur is moving in, we’re going to need to go now, while they’re still trying to figure out what happened.”

She tossed the spyglass to Amaryllis and began trekking off into the woods; Solace, with little fanfare, became a small blue-feathered bird that flitted through the air and landed on her shoulder.

“We wait until Fenn kills the pilots,” said Amaryllis. “Then we make our move and hope that they don’t regroup.”

“Return my body to Darili Irid if I die,” said Grak.

“You know I would,” I replied. “And if you fall, we’ll pay your penance.”

*Loyalty Increased: Grak lvl 4!*

Amaryllis gave me a look that said, ‘You can’t seriously be saying that we would pay 20 million obols to some random dwarven clan if he died, but you really looked serious when you said that’, or maybe I was just reading a lot into her incredulity. But I wasn’t spewing bullshit, I actually meant it. Maybe we wouldn’t go right away, and we wouldn’t bankrupt ourselves to do it, maybe I would pay for it all out of my own pocket once I was filthy rich, but part of being a friend to someone was being willing to carry their burdens. Grak and I weren’t exactly friends, not yet, but that was how you made friends, in my opinion; you committed to the friendship.
We were five hundred feet from the trees, two football fields distance, hidden in the trees and bushes. I watched with bated breath as Fenn moved across the open space to the helicopters, placing herself such that the helicopters themselves hid her from view. She sprinted, utterly silent under the sound of the wind but incredibly visible and exposed if anyone saw her. When she reached the first helicopter I held my breath, waiting to hear a scream of pain that would alert everyone, or the sound of an actual fight, but Fenn was inside for only a moment, then back out again.

“Got him,” said Amaryllis, holding her spyglass to her eye. “She stopped to sabotage the void cannon,” she continued with a purse of her lips. “Not what we discussed.”

“I trust her,” I said.

“She’s a capable warrior,” replied Grak.

I felt mild surprise at hearing him praise her, but didn’t actually think that he was right, as such. I’d never considered her as that; maybe she was capable of killing people, maybe even good at it, but her flippancy undercut that so much that I didn’t peg her as a warrior. She had made a life for herself going into the Risen Lands and looting them, which meant probably a considerable amount of time murdering zombies, but I had to wonder at how much experience with things like this she actually had. (And I was aware that ‘things like this’ was a weasely way of getting around thinking the phrase ‘cold-blooded murder’ directly.)

“That’s the second one,” said Amaryllis, letting out a breath of her own as Fenn moved away from the decorated helicopter. Whatever magic the helicopter possessed, keeping the pilot alive didn’t seem to be part of it. “She just gave me a thumbs up,” said Amaryllis. She dropped the spyglass to the forest floor and drew her sword, letting out a slow breath. “We should move.”

We raced forward, with Amaryllis in the lead, staying low and trying our best to put as much as possible of the bulk of the helicopters between us and the trees, but we were off-center from them. I felt like a mouse running from a hawk, painfully exposed and with no better option but to sprint forward as quickly and silently as I could. I resisted the urge to pour on speed through blood magic, or to drain one of the bones in my bandolier, because at best I would be leaving Amaryllis and Grak behind. The human eye was attracted to movement, that had been a matter of survival for our way-back ancestors, and that fact kept running through my mind as we ran. Eventually we’d be close enough that a fireball wasn’t feasible for the pustule mage, or that I could simply raise the void rifle and take him out, but until that point we might actually be fucked if he popped one of those pustules in our direction, and why the fuck was I doing this. But I kept running, because I had set myself down this course, and pulling out wasn’t an option anymore.

We were within a hundred feet of them, still out in the open, when the pustule mage spotted me through the trees. He shouted a word of warning and squeezed at one of the yellow-white blobs on his chest, which shot out and away from him at the size of a fist, slower than an arrow but still fast enough that it would have been impossible to dodge, even if I had been more prepared for it.

The fireball struck me in my stomach, but I didn’t feel the impact of it, and the promised explosion never came. A glance down showed a bleached-white, fist-sized circle in the blue armor. I was stunned by that, and faltered for a moment, but raised the void rifle and took a shot at him with my heart hammering but my hands steady. He collapsed like his strings had been cut, the hole impossible to see given the grotesque colors across his skin, but there was no message of defeat. I ducked back behind a tree and poked my head to see what was happening.

The pustule mage’s stomach was swelling, and his arms and legs were shriveling, like his body was a sleeping bag and the real person inside it was trying to gather himself in the center of it. It wasn’t too long after he’d been shot that he burst out through the pockmarked and diseased stomach skin, a full
man reborn from himself, coated in blood and pus. I took another shot at him, but this one was less successful, and I was on the run as he grabbed at his flesh and sent another fireball my way.

The blast knocked me to the ground, which I turned into a roll, shaking my head as I kept moving, trying to ignore the ringing in my ears and the sudden ache in my chest. I was pretty sure that I was bleeding in a few places, even though my armor must have absorbed much of the shrapnel. I kept on running as soon as I found my footing, trying to chart a semi-circle around the pustule mage but constrained by the heavy undergrowth among the trees.

I heard the sound of another fireball above the shouts from around the woods, but this time felt nothing but a warm burst of air from it. I felt a jolt of adrenaline-fueled excitement at that, because I’d made it inside the inner perimeter Grak had set up, and so long as I stayed on the other side of it from the mage, I’d be fine.

I concretely felt the effects of LUK for the first time, as a path of concrete action opened up in front of me, a step to the side that felt so alien I almost stopped myself. A spinning staff scythed through the trees, slowed by the wards but not stopped entirely, and it would have hit me if I hadn’t moved in anticipation of it. The staff threatened to drop to the ground from a lack of momentum, but instead shot backward, weaving its way through the falling trees and leaving a glowing path through the air. The fallen trees revealed the horned woman, breathing heavily and spinning her staff up again. I raised my void rifle and took a shot at her, but there was no reaction of pain or debilitation from her. I moved back behind more trees, keeping my eyes out for the pustule mage and Larkspur, as well as watching my back for the men from the Golden Cete. I was too far forward now, and I knew it, but I needed the protection of the wards.

I saw a flash of metal that must have been Amaryllis, who was much further back than I was, and another step through the trees revealed the pustule mage, who was going hand-to-hand with Grak, or rather, hand-to-axe. Each chop of Grak’s axe sliced through the discolored boils that dotted the pustule mage’s skin, letting loose bursts of wild magic, and the magic of the axe was causing him to grow hair at an alarming rate. The pustule mage was clearly losing that fight. When he lunged backward and reached for a large wart, I took a shot at him, getting a message about a critical hit and seeing him pitch backward into the dirt. This time, Grak was on him in an instant, slamming his axe down repeatedly, engaging in butchery without a word.

Achmed Lawrence defeated!

(And still no level up, a part of my mind screamed.)

I tracked back, trying desperately to find the horned woman, or to spot Larkspur, getting ready to dodge another glowing, spinning staff if I could catch so much of a glimpse of it, or if my LUK gave me the barest hint of what to do. I finally spotted Amaryllis and Larkspur together, out in the field, as she rolled backward away from his strike. He had his shield out and was advancing on her, and she, fully armored but looking frightfully small, was backing away from him.

I raised my rifle again and was about to take a shot when the glowing staff came spinning into view, moving as a vertical disc this time. There was no luck to let me anticipate it, and the only thing that saved my life was a combination of my reaction time and the fact that the throw hadn’t been dead-on. For a moment I saw the glowing disc pass in front of me as it went by, and I thought that I had successfully dodged it before I felt the lightness of the void rifle in my right hand and a searing pain in my left wrist. When I looked down, I saw my hand laying on the ground, and I reached for a bone to heal me before realizing that all I had was a wrist there, an eerily painless glowing wound where my arm simply ended. I threw the void rifle, which had been sliced through, to the ground and touched a unicorn bone just as muted pain began to reach me, and pulled on END as hard as I
possibly could, then moved on to the next bone before the feeling of health and wellness could even begin to fade. My hands -- hand -- was shaking as I tried to keep on the move, and when my stump was no longer painful I extended the Anyblade from its ring shape.

That was about when I started getting messages about the Golden Cete being defeated, first three at once, then one after another in quick succession, with no names given to them, only roles. That part of the battle, at least, seemed to be going well.

I ran through the woods, in the direction that the glowing staff had come from, sword held in hand, trying not to think about the fact that I had a stump instead of a left hand. Surely all I needed was one more kill, and then the pleasure would course through my body, and I would be whole again, refreshed, no longer weakened by the fact that I was having trouble forcing food down, no longer with a twinge of weakness from the blood I’d lost when my arm was nearly amputated.

The horned woman was still spinning her staff up when I got to her, and I reached with my left hand to tap a bone for SPD, before once again realizing that I had no hand there. I used blood magic instead, burning six drops with every step to race through the underbrush and hurdle the fallen trees.

I saw her eyes grow wide as I approached, but she didn’t stop increasing the speed her staff was spinning at, or maybe couldn’t stop when she was so far along. When I brought my sword down, she used the staff to knock it aside, seeming to lose no momentum in the process, and on my second thrust she did the same, swinging the spinning staff from side to side.

I stepped back and let Ropey fall from where he was wrapped around my forearm, then came back at her again. She was either very good at parrying swords with a staff, or whatever ludicrous magic the staff possessed was doing the work for her, but every time I tried to strike at her, even with blood magic behind the swing, she knocked my sword aside. She was glistening with sweat, and every parry slowed her down, which meant that our battle was either going to come down to attrition or a teammate --

She struck out toward me, slamming me in the chest at the cost of all the momentum she’d built up with the staff. I felt a hard crack of my brittle ribs as they were caved in, and she easily danced away from my feeble effort to slice through her. She was turning to run almost from the moment she hit me, and she got ten feet before the rope around her foot went taut, which brought her to the ground with a satisfying whump. When she brought out a dagger from within her clothes, I hurled the Anyblade at her and then crumpled up in pain.

Skill increased: Thrown Weapons lvl 18!

Critical hit!

Superbia Laquis defeated!

I swore as the fourth message I was hoping for failed to appear. That other kill had been mostly Grak’s, but this one was mine, all mine. I swore again and used both fairies and bones to heal myself, which took time I wasn’t sure I had to spare. Then I retrieved my Anyblade from her chest, grimacing when she reached for me with a feeble hand. The game’s definition of ‘defeated’ wasn’t the same as ‘dead’, and while she was choking on her own blood, I could tell that she wasn’t beyond saving, not for someone with my resources. I raised my sword and hesitated a moment, first trying to figure out if what I was doing was a mercy, and next trying to figure out where the best place to land the killing blow was. I ended up driving my sword down through her eye. She jerked slightly and then went still.

New Virtue: Mercy! (CHA +1)
With that done, I started running toward where I’d seen Amaryllis and Larkspur fighting. I got there in short order, using blood magic to hurry my steps, and gave a hoarse shout when I saw that Grak was lying nearby them, bleeding. I ran forward, panting slightly, trying to get in a position where we could flank him. He turned slightly toward me, taking his attention off of Amaryllis for just a moment, and in that moment I saw her lunge forward.

Her blade appeared within his skull, piercing through the bottom of his jaw and up into his cheekbone. He lurched backward, holding his shield up as a defense against her, bleeding from his mouth and saying something unintelligible but probably profane. I gave Grak enough of a glance to make sure that he was still breathing, then stepped forward to join Amaryllis, who was gasping for breath beneath her helmet.

I was a worse swordsman than Larkspur even before I had lost a hand, but with the two of us he was trying to play defense against two opponents, and his armor was no longer full plate, which meant that a slash against his arm would wound him. That was what I went for first, swinging in from the side, and he predictably brought his sword up to parry me. That gave Amaryllis an opening, and she moved forward enough to start flickering her sword on and off again. Larkspur screamed, spewing blood from his previous wounds, as her sword briefly appeared through his hand.

He kept trying to back away from us, but he must have known that it was over, because he started trying to talk. His tongue must have been cut when the sword appeared in his mouth though, because all that came out were unintelligible sounds and blood.

We made short work of him. It wasn’t pretty. He couldn’t handle both of us at the same time, and he was gripping his sword with a bleeding hand. I had reach on him with the Anyblade, and Amaryllis could simply attack when he tried to parry me. When he raised his portal-shield to block her, she went low and put a hole in his thigh, which left him staggering and stumbling, trying more frantically to speak with us.

I swung hard at his neck when Amaryllis darted to the side, and cut halfway through before being stopped by his windpipe. He fell to the ground, jerking around as his body worked hard on voiding itself of blood.

*Larkspur Prentiss defeated!*

*Quest Complete: Slice His Stupid Head Off - Close enough.*

*Level up!*

The golden power ripped through me, starting at my toes and working its way up, and I sunk myself into the pleasure of it, trying to draw out my perception of that glorious moment until I was so overwhelmed by ecstasy that I couldn’t think well enough to do anything at all.
Blood in the Water

Amaryllis was slapping me in the face. This actually hurt quite a bit, because she wasn’t being at all gentle with me. I raised a hand to fend her off and began to come back to my senses. I had leveled, and it had been fantastic, sending me beyond the ability to think. It was disconcerting how quickly the thought of 'yes, that again' went through my head.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“You need to heal Grak,” said Amaryllis. “Now.”

I scrambled to my feet, looking down at my left hand, which was … well, whole again, but still as numb as it had been before, and there was something else off about it, like it hadn’t been replaced quite properly. Even just looking at it, I could see that it was not right somehow, proportioned slightly wrong, making the skin look loose in some places and tight in others. I didn’t really have time to think about that though, so I ran over to where Grak was lying and began pulling out bones from my bandolier. (I quite selfishly wanted to be basking in the afterglow of the level up, and while I wasn’t such a bag of dicks that I would actually do that, that thought was still poking at the back of my mind.)

Grak had taken a hit to the face, which had cut into his lips enough that I could see his teeth through the wound. By the time I had burned through three bones, he was awake and alert, and he pushed off away from me when I tried to use a fourth.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Solace can do the rest.”

I looked back to the woods, which were silent now. I hadn’t gotten any updates from the game about what was going on there, but those had all just been along the lines of the Golden Cete being defeated. There had been two about Golden Cete blade-bound, which was comforting, but we didn’t have a solid enough count of their numbers that I was confident they were all gone … and would the game give me an update if one of my party members died? Or, perhaps more worryingly, if something happened to a valuable member of the party who was technically not a part of it in game terms, i.e. Solace?

So I ran, thinking about Fenn and hoping that she had done her best to stay at a distance and pepper them with arrows, that she hadn’t run into some magical effect that she couldn’t handle. When I got into the woods I started moving more slowly, thinking that it would be utterly ridiculous to have come this far and then get shot in the head by some mook.

I spotted Solace, slumped up against one of the huge, worn rocks at the center of the copse, with the bottle sitting on the ground beside her, the artificial sun she’d put into it glowing brightly. She gave me a faint smile and a friendly wave, which was when I finally lowered my guard halfway (but only halfway, because there was always the chance she was missing something, or this was a trap, and I wasn’t about to be caught off-guard just because I desperately wanted this all to be over). I could see bodies in the woods, most of them sprawled out with arrows sticking in them. There were arrows scattered all over the ground, and hundreds stuck into the trees, most having clearly come from the same direction.

“All clear?” I called to her as I moved forward.

She gave me a weak nod. I remembered that cranteks had dark green blood only after seeing it smeared on her face and clothes. When I saw what she was holding, I rushed forward with wide
eyes; she had Sable.

“Where’s Fenn,” I asked, or maybe shouted.

“She was cut in half,” Solace said, resting her head against the rock. I felt a chill go down my spine. “Shoulder to hip, clean through, that made putting her back together easier.”

“Is she okay?” I said through gritted teeth.

“No,” said Solace. She coughed lightly. “I had to kill that blade-bound on my own. It cost me time. She’s lost blood, probably too much. I pulled her into the bottle, I’m more powerful there, but he cut through her shoulder blade, across half her ribs, narrowly missed the heart, through the hip, it was … not the worst thing that I’ve ever tried to bring someone back from, but if she survives it …” she trailed off. *If she survives it, then she’ll have had the worst injury where Solace’s intervention had actually worked.*

“I’ll give her a transfusion,” I said quickly. “I have two fairies left, I have bones, let me into the bottle.”

“I’m close to having tapped the locus dry,” said Solace, as Amaryllis came up behind me.

“Fenn?” asked Amaryllis.

“Needs a transfusion,” I said. “I’m going in to do it.”

Fuck, I’m blood type B+, that means that I can donate to B+ or AB+, did I actually know that before or was it injected by KNO? Nevermind. What blood type was Fenn, she wouldn’t be able to answer, there wasn’t a simple method to tell unless I could conjure one up from blood magic somehow, and did humans and half-elves have even remotely compatible blood in the first place? Probably, given crossbreeding, but maybe not. How the fuck do you do a transfusion without the equipment? Clonal kit, that’s how.

I took Sable from Solace’s hand and thrust it toward Amaryllis. “Give me the clonal kit, I’m going in.”

Amaryllis hesitated for the barest of seconds, but took the glove from me and closed her eyes for a moment, taking control of it. The clonal kit popped out and she thrust it toward me, and as soon as I had it I turned back toward Solace.

“Put me in,” I said quickly.

“It’ll be the last thing I do today,” she said. “The leaves tell me everyone is dead, but if we need to - -”

“Do it,” I said.

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis with a nod to Solace. “Juniper, do you know how compatible your blood types are?”

“I -- I’m B+, but --“ I stammered out.

“On the five factors,” said Amaryllis. I gave her a bewildered stare, and started saying some asinine thing about how we needed to do something. She held Sable out toward me and slammed a book down on top of the clonal kit, *The Commoner’s Guide to Blood Magic.* Several bones followed after that, piling up. “Go,” she said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”
Solace grabbed her staff, which was lying in the grass beside her, and tapped it once on the rock. A hole opened up there, which went a foot into the stone before becoming some other place, darkly lit and ominous. Then Solace collapsed onto the forest floor.

I raced forward, stopping for just a moment to grab her, balancing the kit in my other hand, and then moved in through the hole, which was barely large enough for me to go through with both my things and the small woman. This wasn’t like the tunnel through treespace had been, we were somewhere earthy and musty. I heard a grinding sound of the stone closing behind us, leaving us in near-darkness, and pulled Solace’s limp body forward so that she wouldn’t be crushed.

My eyes were adjusting to the light too slowly, so I flared blood magic for flame, which revealed a small room with dried fruits and meats in various cubbies set into the earthen walls. A steep ladder made of tree roots led to where the only light (save mine) was coming from. I propped Solace up to make sure she wouldn’t choke on her spit or vomit, then took the ladder as fast as I could. I came up into the house-tree in the center of the bottle and set the kit, book, and bones down to rush over to Fenn.

She was still wearing her leather armor, or what was left of it. I could see the diagonal path the sword had taken across her body, because there the armor had been pulled away. It wasn’t a straight line; she must have been partially crouched, or turning, as the blade had cut through her body like butter. The seam was red and thick, like a magnified version of what I’d gotten when Solace healed my shoulder, passing from her collarbone, down through her breast, just a bit on the left of her navel, and then through the hip, coming out midway through the leg. She was pale, so white she was almost blue, and sweat beaded on her forehead.

“Shit,” I said softly, and then, “shit” again, because what the fuck was I wasting time swearing for? I started with the bones, draining them into her one by one, going slower than I wanted to in order to maximize the healing from them. The red line faded with each one, until it was barely visible, but that did nothing to improve her color.

I hadn’t read The Commoner's Guide to Blood Magic, I had just skimmed it enough to know that healing was accomplished via transfusion, which meant that in a world where we had magical healing fairies made of marzipan and bones we could pull healing from, it was going to be more complicated and messy than was worth the trouble, especially given that a blood mage could only use it when they, themselves were healthy, and it was only really effective on others. And once Solace had joined up with us, I’d figured that with no less than three other methods of healing, healing via blood magic was probably never going to be that relevant. I’d still intended on powering through it cover to cover, but that had taken a backseat.

And that was all still true, except that in skipping over large swaths of what The Commoner’s Guide had to say about how to heal with blood magic, I had also missed what it had to say on the nature of blood types, which were, apparently, different from what we had on Earth.

It was hard to sit and read a book while Fenn was sitting there, dying, but when Amaryllis told me not to do anything dumb, I was pretty sure that she had meant I should read up on transfusion before just busting out the clonal kit and winging it. And she was right, so I read, trying to keep my eyes from racing ahead to the next sentence. It helped to calm me down though, and I felt my heart rate start returning to near normal as I went through the words. Then I would look over at Fenn, who was probably dying, who had to have lost what, half, two-thirds of her blood getting cut in half? How had she not suffered brain death -- or had she, and that was simply not as serious on Aerb, not with a druid on standby? I returned my gaze to the page, where stupid, boring words were waiting for me.

Even given the above variety of blood seen in the mortal species, the average blood
mage cares most about where that blood falls along the five factors of alignment, which is a categorization system established by the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood in 17 FE in the wake of the Penndraig reforms. Using complicated methods of study, the athenaeum was able to determine normal ranges for five factor blood typing in almost all of the mortal species, as well as how often individuals of these species fell outside the normal range. If tested for blood type, you will be given a five-letter designation, such as IORUM or LPSEM, though testing is not recommended except in rare circumstances.

If you go to visit a blood mage for the purposes of healing and do not know your blood type, they will likely consult one of their books from the athenaeum to ensure that your blood is compatible with theirs. While your blood mage will be trained to tell you the risks, you should know ahead of time that individuals might have different factors than their species would indicate, though this is uncommon and almost always along a single factor of alignment. Blood mages are strictly ordered to work only within a single factor of misalignment, which reduces the risk of an adverse reaction considerably.

There were a lot of things that the book didn’t say. It did not, for example, say what the side effects were, it didn’t say how factors of alignment changed in someone of mixed species, and it didn’t say what, if anything, caused a person to have an alignment that was “off” from their species. It didn’t define the five factors, or how you’d go about figuring those out. I would have thrown the book across the room, but I had always loved and respected books, even if they were nearly fucking worthless pieces of propaganda garbage.

I watched Fenn, with her shallow breathing, too-pale skin, and her nearly white lips. I could feel that familiar feeling of helplessness welling up in me, one that had started when I was watching Arthur in his coma, but which had stayed with me for a long time. I wiped away the nascent tears and turned my mind to what was actually actionable, what concrete thing I could do that would make my life better, even if the situation itself was hopeless, that had always helped in the past -- and here, there was definitely something that I could do.

I started by dumping the two points from leveling into MEN. I was pretty sure my read on the game giving me “fake” intelligence was right, but whether it was fake or not didn’t matter so long as it gave me results. I felt a touch calmer once that was done, though not nearly as much as I had hoped I’d get from increased WIS. Then it was time to turn my mind to the problem.

There were five factors of blood alignment. People of the same species were assumed to be compatible with each other, with deviation along a single factor being ‘uncommon’ but not rare. If Fenn and I were both human, then no problem, we might have unnamed side effects that were almost certainly better than what she was going through now, but I’d be willing to risk that, especially given Solace’s prognosis. But Fenn was a half-elf, which meant that the worst case scenario was that 1) she got all five factors of alignment from her father, and that 2) all five of those were the opposite of whatever mine were as a typical human, and that 3) trying to push my blood into her would have fatal results. That was a lot of assumptions, but it was a starting place.

So far as I could see, the five factors were treated as binary in their letter designations, which meant that there were two to the fifth possible combinations, or thirty-two. Blood mages were ordered to work within a single factor of misalignment, because that made two factors of misalignment ‘uncommon’, and presumably it wasn’t ‘uncommon’ for a blood mage to kill someone through transfusion, which meant that was the zone of safety, or maybe just the zone of not making things worse for Fenn. If blood types were purely random, then I’d get a pure success one time out of thirty-two, within normal bounds five times, and unnamed side effects another ten times.

But it wasn’t purely random, it was determined by species, or at least, different species had different
variances and mostly fell along one side of each factor, enough that this was a useful tool that was routinely used by blood mage healers. For Fenn there were two species in play, and the blood type of elves was a mystery to me, but I could at least assign confidence to all of the possibilities that I could think of. I spent five minutes doing that, trying to stop myself from taking Fenn’s pulse again, and mostly succeeding on actually deciding whether it made sense to try to give her a transfusion.

And in the end, I decided to go for it. I wasn’t confident in my confidence, but I was at least confident that I wasn’t doing it because doing something felt better than sitting by and doing nothing. I got the clonal kit to give me transfusion equipment, which looked horribly unsanitary and archaic to me. The needles were thick metal ones, looking far too wide for my tastes, and Aerb didn’t have proper plastics, so the tubing was a thick, yellowish rubber. The sum total of my experience with blood transfusion was watching TV shows, and having given blood once in the high school gym. I was praying for my mental stats to help me (though not actually literally praying, because the closest thing I had to a god was the Dungeon Master, and this was mostly his fault).

I inserted the needle into a vein in my arm, which filled the rubber tube almost immediately, visible as a darkening in the yellow rubber. The other end was connected to another needle, and I tried to raise it in order to reduce the pressure and slow the flow of my blood from the end of it before realizing that I was no mere mortal, I was a blood mage, and if I didn’t want my blood to go down a tube, I could damned well just tell it not to. (This actually took me a little bit of time to figure out how to do.) Once that was accomplished, I found a vein in the back of Fenn’s hand, and paid special attention to the tip of the needle to make sure that I wasn’t going to inject her with air and give her an embolism.

And then, once the needle was in her, I really did say a prayer, because I decided that probably wasn’t going to make things worse.

_O One True God of Aerb, master of not just the physical layer, or the game layer above that, but of the reality both are embedded in … we’ve got to stop meeting like this, right? I’m not going to come to you with all my problems, or even most of my problems, but -- please don’t let her die. If you’re rolling dice, or some equivalent of that, fudge it for me just this once. You know I won’t be able to tell one way or another. Amen._

Only then did I let my blood flow into her.

(This was how Arthur had died. He’d had his car accident and ended up in a coma. ‘Cerebral edema’ was what they called it when there was too much fluid in your brain, and that was Arthur’s most pressing problem, as the days in a coma went on. His brain was swelling, and if your brain swells too much, there are issues from compression, and then you die. The doctors decided that they were going to go with decompressive craniectomy, which means removing part of the skull so that the brain can expand without squishing itself. The doctors -- look, I don’t actually know any of this, I wasn’t in the room when they were deciding it, and most of this I only learned because of morbid curiosity after the fact -- they must have seen the swelling in his brain and made a list of all the interventions that they could try, weighing the risks and outcomes, and finally they had settled on the craniectomy, and maybe, sometimes, you made the right choice given the information that you had, but the dice just weren’t in your favor. They did their decompressive craniectomy, and that was how Arthur died.)

I could feel my blood, sense it like I somehow had nerve cells floating around in there feeding me back information. I sensed my blood enter Fenn’s body and mingle with her own, racing down her veins toward her heart. It wasn’t long before I had a sense of her as a part of me.

*Spell discovered: Bloodline!*
Bloodline: When you have forced your blood into another person, you can use it to heal or harm them. Apply a bonus or malus of up to your POW/SPD/END to them, at the cost of your own, with five factor modifiers.

The new “spell” was pointless for the current circumstances. What she needed was the actual blood itself, not the game abilities, which I had already given her through bone magic. Still, I dutifully read the information the game gave me, and I could feel the ability to use that new skill. She was like a part of me now, because my blood suffused her, and I could see all the other avenues of this link that the game hadn’t told me about, how I could channel the blood magic through her to light her fingertips up like I could light my own, or how I could use her pulse in combination with my own to add force to her movements, if she had any movements to speak of.

I watched her closely, but she wasn’t showing any obvious signs of an adverse reaction. I had the Hypertension virtue, which gave me twice as much blood at a much greater blood pressure, so I wasn’t worried about myself. I did wonder how much of this might have been planned out, how meaningful it was that it had only been a few days since I had gotten the virtue, and less than an hour since my blood was refilled by a level up. I tried not to think about whether that was by coincidence, luck, principles of design, or a thumb on the scale. Instead, I watched Fenn.

The color returned to her lips, then to her skin, shifting from near-white to the pale pink that it had always been. I kept feeding blood into her until I was down forty-thousand drops, because hypertension wasn’t just a virtue, it was an actual medical condition too, with negative side effects I didn’t really know anything about, and which I didn't want to give her on accident. I pinched the rubber tube and felt for her pulse, which was faster now, almost normal, and with a steady rhythm. I pulled the needle from her arm and used another bone to push END into her, sealing the puncture shut, then took care of myself in the same way.

She wasn’t dying. I let out a slow, shaky breath. I wasn’t sure that she was better, not yet, and I had no idea what the long-term effects of losing half your blood were, but … she wasn’t dying. She was alive. I started crying, just a little bit, that kind of crying that results in some slow tears rolling down my cheeks.

Her eyes fluttered open, and I stared at her. She looked around in confusion, first at me, then down at her ruined armor, then at the tree-house we were in and the light streaming in from the artificial sun outside. She lifted her head up for a moment to look further, down at the red line running across her skin, then flopped back down.

“Dammit,” she said, looking up at the ceiling, avoiding my eyes. It was a while before she spoke. “I had this pun ready about how I’m not half the woman I used to be, but now I have to think of something else.”

“Fenn,” I said. My voice nearly cracked. “Are you … how are you feeling?”

“Oh, you know,” she said, still not looking at me. “Not half bad.”

“Fenn,” I said again.

She finally looked at me, with tears in her eyes. “Please,” she said. “Can we not talk about it? Can we just --” She reached a shaky hand up to wipe tears from her eyes and took a gasping breath that was just short of a sob.

She had lost her battle. She had come as close to death as it was possible to get; she’d probably been clinically dead by Earth standards. What had she seen, when that sword had cut straight through her? How long had she stayed conscious after that? Had she known, in that moment, that she was at
death’s door, had she seen half her body laying on the ground and been unable to feel it, or had she just been consumed with shock and pain? It must have been horrifying, no matter what her experience of it.

“Do you use your right hand to stir coffee?” I asked.

Fenn looked at me in bewilderment, then down at her hand. “I -- I guess?”

“Oh,” I replied. “I use a spoon.”

Fenn stared at me, opened her mouth slightly, then cracked a teary-eyed smile. “Gods Juniper, I don’t know what would be sadder, if that was the best joke you had from Earth, or if you came up with that on your own.” She started laughing then, still with tears in her eyes, and sat up to pull me closer. “Hug,” she said, so I hugged her. My sense of blood was fading with every passing minute, but she still had more of my blood than her own, and it was like I could feel the shape of her just by noticing that sixth sense.

“Okay,” she said, after we had held each other for a while. She pulled away and swung her legs off the bed-nook, then stood up, wobbling only slightly. She began to strip off the armor, which I had to think was a total loss, and the cut had gone through pretty much everything that she was wearing, which meant all her clothes beneath it too. I averted my eyes, because it didn’t seem like she was trying to put on a show for me, it just seemed like she didn’t want to be in this reminder of what had happened to her. She made no comment on the fact that I wasn’t looking at her.

“Where’s Sable?” she asked.

“Amaryllis has it,” I replied.

“That sneaky bitch,” Fenn replied with a grin. “Taking advantage of my brief nap to use the best magic item the party has, that’s just like her.” She kept her tone light and casual. “She’s okay then?” With the last of her clothes off, underwear included, she sat back down in the bed and crossed her legs. “I have no clothes,” she said.

“I noticed,” I replied. “Here.” I began taking off my armor, stopping only momentarily to look at the pure-white mark where it had entirely absorbed the fireball. When the top half of it was removed, I took off my undershirt and handed it to Fenn. I couldn’t help but get a warm glow at the way her look lingered on my abs (a perk of my high PHY).

She stopped to give it a quick sniff before putting it on. “Well now I’m going to smell like you,” she said. “But thank you.” She hesitated slightly. “And Grak is okay too?”

“Everyone is fine,” I replied, realizing that I hadn’t given her an after-action report, and if someone had done that to me, I would have assumed they were holding back bad news. “Solace is tapped completely dry, so we’re going to have to wait on her to recharge before we can leave the bottle. I healed Grak enough that he told me to stop worrying. Amaryllis came through a bit battered but still in fighting shape. Larkspur is dead, along with everyone he brought with him. More than that, I don’t know. Grak and Amaryllis have the bottle, I came in here to save you.”

“Ah,” she said. “Save me?”

“Do you want to hear this?” I asked.

“If it’s about you heroically saving me, then yes,” said Fenn.

“Solace did most of the work,” I said. “After you were … after what happened to you, she brought
you here and put you back together before you died.” Or, possibly, after you had died. On Earth,
you weren’t dead until you were warm and dead, but on Aerb, it probably moved beyond that.
Maybe you weren’t actually dead until your soul left your body. “You had lost too much blood
though, and if you don’t have enough blood to move oxygen around, or to keep blood pressure, then
your heart and brain will start to fail. You were back in one piece again, but you needed blood, so I
gave you some of mine.”

“You know how to do that?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow.

“Not really,” I said. “It seems like it worked though.”

“Seems like it,” she replied. She looked down at her hands and flexed them, tightening them into
fists. “It’s very … intimate.” She traced a finger along the arteries in her wrist and shivered slightly.
“Elves --” she began, then stopped. “I told you about the cannibalism thing?”

“Yeah,” I replied, watching her.

“It’s an insult,” she said. She was still a little bit shaky, still not back to her normal self. “Usually.”
She closed her eyes and tapped at her neck. “But when two elves get married, there’s this part of it
where they stick a finger in each other’s mouth, usually the thumb, and they both bite down hard
enough to draw blood. It’s difficult to explain.” She touched her slender hands to her throat, using
her fingers to feel at her pulse. “I mean, not hard to explain what they do, but just, the weight of it.
Elves have this obsession with consumption. The average meal is a bunch of elaborate, delicately
prepared pieces of raw meat, perfect in every way. The day is centered around eating, divided and
marked by it. For an elf, it’s about being better than the thing the meat came from. Eating is a way of
saying ‘fuck you boar, I’m better than you’. It’s affirmational. In the context of marriage, it’s a
husband saying to his wife, ‘I’m so much less than you that I would give of my body, unasked, to
allow it to sustain you’, and his bride answering the same in return.”

“So, we’re basically elf-married now, is that it?” I asked. For some reason I found that unimaginably
funny, maybe because it was so incredibly hackneyed.

“No,” said Fenn. She was still touching her throat and hadn’t opened her eyes. “I’m just saying that
you filling me with your blood is very intimate.” She opened her eyes and looked at me. “It’s not a
sex thing, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“But it is a romance thing?” I asked.

“Sort of,” said Fenn. “Elf marriage isn’t really about romance.” She shook her head, and I could feel,
distantly, the movement of my blood within her. “I don’t know, I’m explaining it shitty, I was never
very good at being an elf.”

“I get it,” I said. “It was meaningful to you in a way that I didn’t understand, and you wanted to
share that with me, so I would know what you were feeling. If we’re going to be … maybe it’s not
the right time for that, to talk about that, I mean.”

“No,” said Fenn. “I’m still a little fucked up from the old half-and-half.” She traced a diagonal line
across herself. It was maybe the least convincing display of light-heartedness I’d ever seen from her.
“I wouldn’t mind someone in bed with me, so long as we only talked about, oh, I don’t know, small,
fluffy animals or something like that. Or maybe stories of Earth, if you’d prefer.”

So I took off the rest of my armor and crawled into the bed nook with her, in just the thin pants I
wore under the greaves and cuisses. She scooted aside for me, then shifted herself so her head was
on my bare chest and her body was curled next to mine.
“Go on,” she said. I felt her warm breath on my chest. “Tell me a story of Earth. One I wouldn’t have heard before, none of the Penndraig ones. And please, please nothing about Dungeons & Dragons.”

I moved my arm so it was around her, and rested my hand on her back, which I rubbed with gentle motions when she pushed back against me. “Um,” I said, trying to think. “We used to have picnics -- do you have picnics on Aerb?” Fenn shook her head. “A picnic is basically, you make most of a meal at home and then eat it somewhere outdoors, usually in a park. When I was little, we had our picnics at a place called Miller’s Pond, which had a little park next to it. Dad would make German potato salad, which has bacon in it, and mom would make cucumber salad, and then we’d get these pre-seasoned chicken breasts from the grocery store that he would cook up on the grill. I always used that time to feed the ducks, or go fishing, while mom and dad spent their time chatting.”

This was before they started fighting so much, which was more or less when family picnics in the summer ended. I wasn’t about to tell that to Fenn though, not when she needed comfort.

“I decided that I wanted to fish. Miller’s Pond was stocked with fish by the city, and you had to throw them back if you caught them, so it wasn’t really sporting, but I kind of liked having that time to sit and think on my own. On the day in question, I’d taken off my shoes and socks to fish while standing in the water, because I wanted to feel the mud between my feet. I was pretty young.” My fingers traced the contours of her shoulderblades. “I’d been standing there in the water, pruning up, for about ten minutes when I saw a duck swimming by with one of my socks.”

“A duck?” asked Fenn.

“One of the ducks from the pond,” I said.

“No, I mean what’s a duck?” she asked. “Is that an Airth thing?”

“Fenn, you know what a duck is,” I replied.

“Ah shit, you got me this time,” she said. I could hear the smile on her voice. “So this duck got your sock?”

“Yeah,” I continued. “And he was swimming away with it, so I dropped my pole and went running after him, but if you’ve ever run after a waterfowl in its natural environment, you can guess how that went. I ended up falling down in the water and getting myself completely drenched. The duck decided that the sock wasn’t actually food and dropped it in the pond, so since I was already wet I started swimming, hoping that I could get to my sock before it just sank down into the mud and was lost forever. And I did manage to recover my sock, but when I started my way back to shore I saw that my dad had my other sock, and he was walking around doing his best impression of a duck trying to steal it, and my mom was laughing her ass off over by the picnic table.”

I took me some time to realize that Fenn had fallen asleep, which was fine by me.

(Solace came up from the basement, rubbing her neck, a few hours later. She looked at the two of us, gave us a knowing smile, and then slipped out from the house. The doe popped its head in through the window a little later on, and gave its own snort of breath at us, which I didn’t know how to interpret. I eventually fell asleep myself, and for once had pleasant dreams.)
“Well, that was fast,” said Amaryllis. I snapped awake and stared at her, standing over us, and realized that I was in bed with Fenn next to me (wearing no pants), resting her head on my chest. Amaryllis was still in her plate, looking tired but pleased with herself. I think ‘wry amusement’ just about covers the way she was looking at us.

“It’s not what you think,” I said, not making a move to get up. “Unless what you think is that I gave her a transfusion and then we took a nap together.”

“He really filled me up,” said Fenn, who rose and stretched. She turned back to look at me and smiled, and I couldn’t help but very briefly glance down at her naked butt. “Pervert!” she screamed, and leapt from the bed, covering her privates with one hand. She wasn’t even attempting to hide her smile. “Mary, you saw, he looked at my butt.”

Amaryllis held out her right hand, where she was wearing Sable, and materialized a pair of underwear, which Fenn swiftly took from her.

“Also the glove,” said Fenn as she slipped into the underwear. “A woman isn’t decent until her hand is covered by a magical glove with infinitely expansive extradimensional space.”

Amaryllis took off the glove and handed it to her, which Fenn took and put on with a look of utter triumph that turned to momentary confusion and then, quickly after that, a scowl. “Sorry, I should have specified that the glove be invested,” said Fenn.

“I have one condition,” said Amaryllis. “No more shirts.”

“Done,” said Fenn, far too quickly, and with too much of a smile on her face.

“No more shirts with writing,” said Amaryllis. “I still want shirts.”

“Okay, done,” said Fenn, again too quickly.

“Fenn,” said Amaryllis. “Do you think I find this funny?”

“You laughed that one time,” said Fenn, “And it’s fucking hilarious, so I don’t know, you tell me, do you think that I don’t think you find it funny?”

“That wasn’t a genuine laugh,” said Amaryllis with a not-quite stony face.

“Liar,” said Fenn. “And anyway, I agree to your terms, and like a true friend, I agreed to your amended terms, but everyone knows that even a true friend wouldn’t allow a second amendment to an oral contract.”

Amaryllis sighed, then touched Sable briefly, after which a Fenn’s smile widened. She hugged the glove to her chest, then gave it a kiss.

“I touched corpses with that,” said Amaryllis.

“I’ve touched corpses with it too,” said Fenn. “Any good loot?”

“No,” replied Amaryllis. “All of it was bound to Larkspur, now it will be bound to a different cousin. It’s good to have, and good to deprive them of, or possibly use in trade, but there’s nothing that we can actually use.”
“Are we still in the forest?” I asked. “What about the helicopter?”

“I took everything there was to take,” said Amaryllis. “All of the souls of the dead are in a bottle. As soon as the teleportation key allowed us to, I moved us. We’re on the foothills of the World Spine right now, and we should be miles away from anyone, which is the only thing that this place has to recommend it.”

“But I know how to fly a helicopter,” I said. Ish.

Amaryllis stared at me. “How were you proposing that we transport it?” she asked.

I opened my mouth at that, then closed it, because I actually had no idea, aside from ‘use bullshit druidic magic to get it into the bottle’. It was possible that we could take the helicopter apart and put the pieces into Sable, but that would have been a mammoth task for just two people. And we could go back for it, but I could already see all the objections piling up on that front, which were all the same reasons that we hadn’t gone back to the castle in Silmar City. And even if I could navigate my way around those objections, what the fuck were we going to actually do with a helicopter, magic or otherwise? (But it was obvious to me that if the Dungeon Master had a single dramatic bone in his body, I would fly a helicopter at some point, especially because this marked the second time that I had come close to a helicopter and then not been allowed to fly it.)

“Not everything is a clue,” said Fenn with pursed lips.

“But some things are definitely clues,” I said. “Some things have cosmic significance, for lack of a better word. And helicopters are one of them. They’re part of my backstory, again, for lack of a better word. I’m not saying that everything is going to have meaning in one way or another, I’m just saying that this probably is a clue, and if we don’t go back for the magic helicopter, or we can’t take it with us, then we should at least be on the lookout for other helicopters. Really, we should just go there and use bulk teleport to put it somewhere that we can get it again, if we need it. For both the helicopters, actually.”

“Even if we had the incantation --” Amaryllis began. A stack of papers appeared in Fenn’s hand. Amaryllis stared daggers at her. “Even if we had the necessary supplies --” Fenn tossed the papers onto the bed beside me and produced a small basket from the glove with a flourish. “Did you steal those?” asked Amaryllis.

“Stealing is such a strong word,” said Fenn. “It’s not incorrect, I’m just pointing out what a strong, brave woman I am.” She coughed politely into one hand. “You can, ah, ignore any stories about me getting bisected as obvious fabrications.”

Solace and Grak came into the main room of the house then, leaving it feeling slightly cramped. Grak gave me a low bow, and Solace gave me a happy smile.

“Can I ask who’s watching the bottle?” I asked.

“I put up what wards I could,” said Grak. “I need a week of rest if you want me to be useful on that front.”

“Are we safe?” I asked.

“No,” said Grak. “We won’t be safe until our enemies are dead.”

“He’s exaggerating,” said Solace.

“The primary worry, at this point, is that either Hyacinth or Doris will continue what Larkspur
started,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think either is very likely. It’s hard to parse what Hyacinth’s incentives are without a clear picture of what’s going on within Anglecynn, but from what we know she was done dealing with Doris, and she already thought Larkspur had spent too much time and effort on the project. We’ve added revenge to her incentives, but I don’t think that will change much. We still have to worry about her in the long run, but she’s not the Foreign Security Director, which means that she has considerably fewer levers to pull. I’m not entirely sure what her story is going to be about what happened to him, especially since we have the body, not them, but I really, really doubt that we’re in danger from her right now.”

Amaryllis shifted slightly, reaching to scratch at her neck where the armor met it. “Doris Finch can’t leave the exclusion zone. She has agents, but they’re not very good, because she doesn’t trust other people, not even herself. My guess is that she knows that we have a teleportation key, either based on her deal with Larkspur or just from watching the reported probability of our movements. She’s dangerous, but in a different, more unpredictable way. I still think we’re safe here.”

She cracked her knuckles. “And that leaves everyone else. We don’t actually know how many people know that we have the key. The set of people who want me dead is very small, limited only to a select set of my cousins. No one else within this group has enemies that are a threat on the level we operate at. So from my way of thinking, our primary concern is whether or not there’s an intra-imperial alert out for us, and that, at least, is something that we can find out in relatively short order with little risk, because doing those things subtly is next to impossible.”

“So we rest here for a week, or rest while testing whether anyone is in pursuit, or rest while moving around?” I asked. “Then we can go back to Boastre Vino under disguise and see whether there’s a BOLO out for us?”

“A BOLO?” asked Amaryllis.

“Sorry, Earth slang, ‘be on the lookout’, ” I said.

“‘Whether there’s a be on the lookout out for us?’” asked Grak. “Does that parse properly?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “It doesn’t matter. Are we agreed on resting for now?”

There was a round of assent at that. We’d all been through not-insignificant amounts of hell over the last few weeks, so it wasn’t particularly surprising that we would vote for a break. I remembered thinking, back when I was shooting at cans in the Risen Lands, that MMA fighters had about four ten-minute fights every year, spaced pretty evenly. In the past week, I’d had four fights to the death, with very little time to process it or do anything but move forward. I wasn’t exactly in the same position as someone who did blood sports as entertainment, and I didn’t need nearly the recovery time before I was good to go again. Still, it was a lot, and probably more for everyone else than it was for me.

Having real, actual time off was amazing. I’d had times on Aerb that kind of, sort of, if you squinted at it sideways, approached time off, but most of that was spent on training. That wasn’t to say that I was planning on just abandoning training altogether for a whole week, but the game had sort of given me an excuse; I couldn’t go past 20 in a skill without either being in actual danger or having a good teacher. Given that we had given ourselves a week, I expected I would be able to hit that cap without having to devote all my hours training.

After we’d all had food, a communal dip in the stream, and a change of clothes, Solace and the Six-Eyed Doe gave us a tour of the bottle. It was only a square mile, but that meant about three and a half miles of walking the perimeter, and another few miles of going down the trails, all at a rather sedate
pace necessitated by the fact that there were no proper roads and numerous elevation changes. We split into groups, somewhat organically, in part because the deer trails required us to move single-file. Grak took great interest in the wards, some of which were apparently necessary for the (mostly) closed system, and Solace indulged him. Fenn, after whispering in the Six-Eyed Doe’s ear, was treated to a ride, which took her far from the rest of us as the locus stretched its long legs and went for a run. And that left Amaryllis and I, staying back somewhat.

“It doesn’t bother me,” said Amaryllis, apropos of nothing. “You and Fenn.”

I could feel myself tense slightly at that, mostly because I didn’t know how much she was telling the truth, or what her motivation was for saying that. For all that I was giving her a second chance, I felt like I was perpetually off my footing when talking to her.

“I’m glad you’re not bothered,” I replied. “I mean, I’m glad that it’s not going to be a source of tension, or anything, not that it would be.”

“I bring it up because I don’t know what I said while under the influence of the unicorn blood,” said Amaryllis. “Fenn and Grak apparently made a pact between them not to tell us, but I’ve been worried that it’s going to come out at the exact wrong time, so I’d like to be forthright in the interests of not having complications that we can’t afford.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see. And there are things that you might have said that might lead me to believe that you were bothered by our very-much-unofficial-but-probably-not-for-long, ish, thing.”

“You can simply say that you’re courting,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said.

We kept walking in silence for a minute. Amaryllis was more relaxed now than she’d been since I’d met her, which, admittedly, was probably a high point for stress in both our lives. She had taken off the armor and was going around in an unadorned blue t-shirt and shorts, with sneakers on her feet. She probably would have been able to pass as a student at my high school, if she’d been dropped there in some kind of reverse portal fantasy. There were details that would give her away to anyone looking closely, like the blend of textiles in her clothes, or the lack of plastic anywhere on her person, or the brands, but it was very close. She’d draw stares, because she was breathtakingly, heart-stoppingly, beautiful, but that aside, it was eerie how close to home she could make me feel.

“You grew more handsome with every point you put into your physical attributes,” said Amaryllis. This, I could tell, was a rehearsed line. “I didn’t feel anything like attraction to you when we first met, and I could tell that you felt some attraction to me, so I decided that I would keep that option open.” She was walking ahead of me through the tall grass, and she turned back toward me, maybe to see whether I was listening. “I’m a Princess of Anglecynn, marriage and progeny are part of our stock and trade. I never imagined that I would have the luxury of marrying for love anyway. With your ability, if it was as powerful as I had imagined, if you were Uther reborn, you were as good a match as any I was likely to find. Maybe if I were more driven or more callous I would have pressed that advantage. Maybe … maybe I am that callous, I just doubted my ability to actually pull it off, when push came to shove. I don’t have experience with men. I don’t have that natural spark that Fenn does either, that raw sensuality, the way she can effortlessly draw the eye.”

I listened to this carefully, trying not to feel too bowled over by what she was saying. The last thing I had ever expected her to admit was a feeling of inferiority toward Fenn. That she wasn’t attracted to me wasn’t a surprise, but it did still sting. Was I supposed to apologize for my attraction to her, an attraction that I still felt? I couldn’t actually help that, but I would have apologized for being that way if it made any difference.
“You understand why I’m telling you this?” asked Amaryllis. “Some things it’s better to do quickly and thoroughly.”

“Like ripping off a band-aid,” I said, aware that the idiom probably wouldn’t translate. “Was there more?”

“Yes,” she said, letting out a breath. “I decided, at a certain point, that there was something legitimately attractive about you. Not in terms of personal aesthetics, though there was that too, but …” She sucked in a breath. “I don’t know what I said while I was feeling the effects of the unicorn blood,” she said. “So I’m going to say the worst things that I might have said, because right now we have time to get past them. I don’t want us to have another falling out because we didn’t talk about things that are painful or awkward to talk about.”

I could feel a tightness in my chest. “Can we stop and sit somewhere?” I asked. “I don’t like not being able to see your face when you talk.”

“Sure,” she said. She hailed the others, who were engrossed in their own conversation, and they waved to us as we hooked to the left and found a large rock to sit on together. Amaryllis had a solemn face, and hugged her knees. She spoke into the air instead of looking at me. Maybe it was easier for her that way.

She reached up, as if to brush a strand of hair back, but stopped and touched her short hair. “I thought that I would be your love interest, if you started to grow beyond my ability to contribute,” she said. “Uther had his Knights, but he had a wife as well, and Zona had more power than any of them, in all the ways that mattered. All the focus gets placed on Uther, but she’s the ancestor of every Prince and Princess of Anglecynn just like he is. She shaped the future of Anglecynn in her own ways.”

I had set the biography of Uther Penndraig aside before getting to the part where he met her, but I obviously knew that he’d had a wife. It weirded me out to think about Arthur in his twenties, married with children. Maybe I was at a point in my life where that was harder to wrap my head around than the fact that he’d built an empire that had spread across the world.

“So I thought I would be that to you,” said Amaryllis. “If you tried to kiss me, I would kiss you back, and if you wanted to fuck me, then I would --” she looked to me, “Endure it,” she finished, apparently not pulling any punches. “I would get through this thing that I didn’t want to do, and I would learn to like it, or at least learn to not visibly dislike it.” She folded her hands in her lap. “I’m aware of how that makes me sound,” she said.

“Kind of makes me feel like crap,” I said. That wasn’t the half of it. It wasn’t her saying she didn’t want to have sex with me, it was the idea that she would still her instinctual response of recoiling from me. That made my heart drop, not because of what it said about our personal relationship, or just our friendship, but what it said about her.

“I thought it might,” said Amaryllis with a small nod. “I’m not done yet, sorry.” She let out a sigh and hugged her knees closer, still not looking my way. “It was while we were making our way through the Datura that I started to see something in you. There was a glimmer of a real spark when I looked at you, so I did what I thought made the most sense given the circumstances, and I set that spark in kindling, then blew on it to start the fire going.” She paused. “Did I misread your attraction to me?”

My heart was hammering in my chest. “No,” I said, almost choking on the word. “You have to know that I would never have done anything if I thought that there was any chance you didn’t want it.”
“I know,” nodded Amaryllis with a soft smile. “That made it easier to kindle the flame. I fantasized about what it would be like to kiss you, or to have you hold me. I tried to imagine what it would be like to have you take my virginity, and I tried to imagine sex with you as this positive thing that I wanted with all my heart.”

“Did it work?” I asked. (I was trying to be careful with my words, but this was not a conversation that I was cut out for.)

Amaryllis was silent. Then she looked over at me. “A bit,” she said. She pursed her lips. “I don’t know how I would have put it, when I had the unicorn blood in me. My phrasing then might have been stronger. I think that what I managed to make myself feel for you is probably just a fraction of what you and Fenn feel for each other.”

“Ah,” I said, swallowing hard. “I’m glad it didn’t work all the way. Because … Fenn.”

“Yes,” Amaryllis nodded. “I’m working on snuffing out the small fire I had going. I was serious, when I said that it didn’t bother me. She suits you better than I ever would have. You’ll be good together. Probably annoying too, but that’s Fenn. I care about both of you, and it makes me pleased to see you finding happiness in each other.” She hesitated. “I think about alternate presents, and other paths that we might have taken. There’s a sense of loss that I’m trying to shake, like a unicorn’s vision of a past that was lived but never actually happened. I don’t wish that you and Fenn were apart, and I don’t wish that I was with you, but I do think about this other version of me that was more ready to trust, more craving of a man’s touch, warmer and kinder. If I were someone fun, like her.” She bit her lip, hard enough that she winced. “I’m sorry, this isn’t helpful, I’ve said all the things I meant to say to inoculate us against this in the future. I probably shouldn’t say more.”

“Do I need to reciprocate?” I asked. “Do I need to tell you ... things?” (God knows what I said about Amaryllis when I was on unicorn blood, but it apparently wasn’t enough to stop Fenn.)

Amaryllis gave me a small, hollow laugh. “You’re very transparent, Juniper,” she replied. “No, I already know the gist of it. I don’t think there’s anything that I would worry about being blindsided with, in some future argument.”

“Okay,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “Should we go join the others?”

“Give me a second,” said Amaryllis. “I’d like a little time alone.”

I left her on the rock and started down the trail again. Grak and Solace were sitting together a ways away, where the tall woods started, just before the run-up to the side of the bottle. From the looks of it, she was telling him a story, with large hand gestures and the occasional flash of color from her hands.

I wasn’t sure how to feel about Amaryllis and the things she’d told me. On the one hand, I felt like I had dodged a bullet there, because she was suited exactly to my tastes in so many ways. Maybe if we had more time for a slow burn, or if Fenn weren’t there, I would have ended up with her, courting this girl who was trying her hardest not to feel distaste when I kissed her. On the other hand, I felt this irrational need to fix her somehow, to hold her and comfort her until she was defrosted and capable of, I don’t know, experiencing actual romantic love and the joys of sex. I knew that if Tiff had heard me say something like that, she probably would have talked my ear off about how that was a deranged male fantasy that didn't even remotely map to the real world, but it was what I felt all the same. Mostly though, it all just made me sad. No wonder her loyalty had gone up when I’d told her that she was never going to lag far behind me in power.

Fenn came up alongside me, riding the Six-Eyed Doe, as I was lost in thoughts of parallel timelines
and might-have-beens. “I found this funny-looking deer,” she said. The locus bucked below her, hard enough that she had to grip it tight, and Fenn laughed at the struggle until finally the locus went still again. “Good chat with the princess?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Care to tell your Fenn what about?” asked Fenn with a thrum of her fingers on the doe’s flank.

“It’s complicated. Unicorn stuff,” I said. “I’m hoping that you already know all of it, so we don’t have to have this awkward, stressful conversation about it.”

“Ah,” said Fenn. “And you’re in a mood about whatever she told you?”

“A bit,” I nodded.

“Could you tell me what sort of mood, precisely?” asked Fenn. “I am, naturally, a strong, self-assured woman who doesn’t need her almost-boyfriend to tell her that their fledgling relationship is still intact, but maybe you should go through the motions, just to get some practice, in case you ever do date someone that pointlessly needy and insecure.”

“Fenn, I know that this might seem like it’s coming out of nowhere, but would you like to go on a date sometime?” I asked.

Fenn hopped down off the doe with an acrobatic twist and landed beside me. She was giving me the widest smile I’d ever seen from her. “Well,” she said. “This is very unexpected.” She stepped closer to me, within the zone of intimacy. “Obviously I’d have to think about it.”

One of the changes that had happened to my body was that I had grown taller. Fenn and I had started out about the same height, but now I had about two inches on her, which meant that if she wanted to kiss me, she would have to tilt her head up just slightly. She was doing that, obviously so, and she left her lips slightly parted when she finished speaking. I shouldn’t have felt so unsure of myself; I knew how she felt, I knew how I felt, and yet I had this nervous, trembling energy as I moved forward and kissed her, fear and adrenaline coursing through me like maybe, somehow, I had misread her.

She melted into me, pressing her body against mine, sliding a hand up to touch me on the back of my neck, with her fingers in my hair, and I pulled her closer against me as we kissed, like I thought I’d be able to merge us into a single being. I was surprised by my urgent need for her, and she for me, but that surprise was eventually washed away by the pure sensation of her soft lips against mine.

When she pulled away she was breathing heavily and shaking slightly, her freckled cheeks red. She stared into my eyes and ran her tongue between her lips, savoring the aftertaste of our kiss. “Okay,” she said. She shivered slightly, and her hands clung to my waist. “I’ve given it some thought. One date, and we’ll see where it goes from there.”

END BOOK III
“Vervain was far from the first flower mage, but he was the best there ever was,” said Solace.

The glass bottle that contained the locus’ domain didn’t have anything so neat and ordered as a garden would imply, but there was a small section that was devoted to Solace’s side business as a flower mage. In a proper garden, you laid everything out in clean, ordered rows, clearing away the weeds, grass, and everything that wasn’t a cultivated plant. In Solace’s unstructured growing space (okay, fine, garden) it was hard to tell which plants were supposed to be there and which ones weren’t. I couldn’t see terribly many flowers, though some of the plants definitely didn’t look like they belonged; long red vines with sharp brown ridges, a low green plant with blue-edged leaves that spread out to cover a whole square yard of space, and a tree whose trunk was a vivid purple where there were cracks in its thick black bark.

“A flower mage usually has a few carefully cultivated strains,” Solace continued. She spoke calmly and walked among the garden as we talked, touching plants as she went and sometimes looking them over, gently turning a leaf this way or that. “I have eight. Vervain was said to have twelve thousand. He supposedly had no grand secret, he was simply very good at what he did. He traveled widely and spread his seeds in the perfect places, leaving his plants untended, and he had a knack for coming back to find the buds just before the bloom.”

This … was not exactly the foundational education in flower magic that I had hoped for, when I had asked her if she could teach me what she knew. It felt like if I’d asked someone how to program a computer and they’d started me off on a lecture about Alan Turing.

“I mean, it does sound like he had some kind of secret,” I said. “Predictive magic or something like that?”

“Possibly,” said Solace with a nod. She moved beneath a tree, and the dappled light from the artificial sun overhead played across her light green skin. “I’m sure that people have theories, I’m just repeating what I was told.”

“He was a hundred years before your time?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Solace. “He casts a shadow over every flower mage before or since. He was prolific in a way that no one else has ever been. In a word, he was special, and you need to understand that going in.”

“Huh,” I said. “You know, I actually know basically nothing about flower magic, and Vervain is just some guy I read about in a history book, so … if you’re trying to tell me that I’m never going to reach his heights, and I shouldn’t be going down this path without expecting a long, frustrating slog, point taken. But also, you should know that I’m exceptional, and if anyone can do whatever it was Vervain did, it’s me.”

Solace grinned at me. “I wouldn’t have figured you for the cocky type,” she said.

“At this point, I think it’s a realistic assessment of my abilities,” I replied. Not to mention the fact that this entire world very much appears to have been built for me, which we don’t talk about in polite company.

“Ugh,” I said. “I hate that series.”

(When I was rich and famous … well, I was already rich, considering that we as a group had something like twenty million obols worth of gold, magic items, and things Fenn had stolen. But when I was really rich, and could move around without worrying about the international community putting out a warrant for my arrest because of all the people I’d (probably justifiably) killed, I was going to publish my own book series, with titles like Flower Magic: A User’s Manual, and they would tell you how to actually do magic, in concise terms, without personal stories, anecdotes, or blatant propaganda about how great magic users were. And then the athenaeums would start gunning for me, because they were the ones that ensured we had the craptastic Commoner’s Guide in the first place.)

“Amaryllis said, basically, that flower mages carry small buds around with them, and each is a different spell, whose effects are as good as impossible to predict unless you have a lot of time to scope them out,” I said. “She was talking more from the perspective of personal combat though, I think she just didn’t want me to be blind-sided and trying to figure out the new gimmick of the week on the fly. My impression was that it wasn’t a path worth even trying to pursue, because you need a plot of arable land.” I looked to the land around us, a solid square mile inhabited only by five people and a magical doe. “She said you could start with ordinary seeds, which would take a hellishly long time, or take seeds from a flower mage, which had to be done willingly and then half the time just failed anyway.”

“I wonder if she missed the heart of flower magic or gave you a poor overview on purpose,” said Solace with a frown. She put her hand up to shield her eyes and looked across the land, to the large tree whose interior space had once housed a dozen druids and now served as our group home. “That girl will have to give an accounting of herself.”

I frowned slightly at that, because Amaryllis was my friend, and I wanted to defend her, even over an innocuous comment like that. Maybe that was a little bit of me being a white knight, but my perspective on Amaryllis had changed over the last few days. She wasn’t someone who needed protecting, and certainly not from slightly rude comments by Solace, but that didn’t really tamp down my instinct.

“Things have been worked out, between the three of you?” asked Solace, because I had been distracted for a bit too long. “Grak is something of a gossip.”

“I … did not know that about him,” I said. I thought back to him telling me not to sleep with Fenn. “Okay, actually, I guess I did. But we haven’t had that much opportunity to talk. Anyway, things are fine between Fenn and Amaryllis and myself.” It had been three days now that we’d been at the foothills of the World Spine, sitting behind wards and setting watches, looking out for an attack that we were fairly sure wasn’t going to come. Fenn and I were sharing a bed, but --

“I gave Fenn some herbs that will prevent her from having a child, but they’ll take a few weeks to start working,” said Solace.

I could feel my cheeks grow warm at that. “Thanks,” I said. “It’s not really … we’re taking it slow.”

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Slowish.

Fenn and I had been sharing a bed together since even before we started dating, because she “liked company” when she slept, and that hadn’t changed, which meant that each night was spent touching and kissing, snuggling and cuddling. The beds were all set into alcoves, which meant that there wasn’t terribly much privacy, and the deer kept sticking its stupid six-eyed head through the
windows of the tree house, which for me personally was a mood-killer. Fenn simply waved hi to it and went back to the kissing.

Even if we’d had a private room for ourselves, with an actual door we could lock, we probably still would have been taking things slow, because there were elven cultural ideas about ‘consumption’ and a different elven physiology, both of which made me less inclined to try to rush things, at least not before we’d had our first proper date. Our relationship had this frantic, manic quality to it, a desperation and need that almost frightened me, and all the moreso because both of us felt it. The phrase ‘like a dam breaking’ doesn’t really have that good of connotations, when you stop to think about it. It sometimes felt like we were a top, spinning out of control.

Her loyalty went up twice, once when I caught her looking over at me and she shot me a silly, happy smile, and the other other time when I passed by where she was sitting and gave her a quick kiss on the head. I had complex feelings about those loyalty messages, because I found them gratifying, but also didn’t want to see our relationship defined in game terms.

There’s a part of me that wants to sanitize it, to shield it all from view, to explain what being with Fenn was like but draw a curtain over the bed we shared and keep all that private. That’s my Midwestern upbringing talking, and to put up that curtain would be, in a sense, to presuppose that there was nothing there worth talking about, that nothing changed between the two of us as a consequence of those nights. And that is, if you know anything about relationships, clearly untrue, because it’s not like the sex part of things gets divorced from the romance, or the friendship, or any other component of the relationship. Even if you’re not talking, physical intimacy is a dialogue all its own. There’s this idea, I think, in some strands of Earth culture, where we turn from humans, to rutting animals, and then back again, and I don’t think that’s particularly true to my experience.

So, in brief, Fenn and I had spent the previous night feeling our way around each other, both literally and metaphorically. I had still not read what The Book of Blood had to say on the subject of elves and half-elves, specifically with regard to the topic of sex, which took up half the word count of any entry in the book. So when my hand stopped running over her body and slipped between her legs, I wasn’t just filled with nervous excitement for all the obvious reasons I would have been in the opening moves of a relationship. There was a real sense of the unknown. I focused on her entirely, feeling her with my fingers, watching her face. I could see her trepidation and feel the tension in her muscles where her body was pressed against mine.

I don’t know what exactly she feared, whether it was that I would pull away in disgust or study her like a clinical scientist, but she relaxed by degrees as I kissed and touched her, and I paid very close attention to the cues she was giving me, doing what got little intakes of breath or made her eyes go half-lidded, until eventually I found a motion that seemed to work well and stuck with it. I was rewarded with her legs clamping down on my hand and a low, soft moan that I was sure reached the ears of everyone in the house. As soon as she came back to her senses, she pulled me in and wrapped her arms around me like she never wanted to let me go.

Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 19!

Achievement Unlocked: Petite Mort

I blinked away the messages as fast as they came up and felt burning anger slowly rise within me as I listened to Fenn’s breathing slow back down to normal. I didn’t need the game’s affirmation. I didn’t need a fucking achievement pop-up. And what I really didn’t need was the reminder that the Dungeon Master’s watchful eye never left me, that I had nothing like privacy, that I was trapped in an existential nightmare that might pull the rug out from under me at any moment.
When Fenn’s hand rested gently on my stomach and she started kissing my neck, I gently pulled her hand back to me and interlaced our fingers, and whatever she thought of that, she fell into a contented sleep soon afterward. It took me quite a bit longer.

“The key to flower magic is understanding,” said Solace, changing the subject and snapping me out of my faraway thoughts. “Take a seed, plant it in the ground, nurture it as it grows, and all the while, you have to have a sense of that plant, and give it, as much as you’re able, a sense of yourself.”

“I’m not sure what that means in practical terms,” I said. “You’re saying that it’s essentially social, but with plants?” I frowned at that. My social skills were my worst skills.

“Social is a funny word,” said Solace. “I would say that it takes patience, insight, and dedication. That’s the path of true understanding.” Solace reached into one of her deep pockets and pulled out a thick, black seed, which she handed to me. “Plant this,” she said.

I looked down at the seed and turned it over once, looking at the rounded end where it had been attached to a stem of some kind. The edges of the seed were white, but the blending between black and white was imperfect. “And where do I plant it?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that,” said Solace.

“Are you going to Mr. Miyagi me?” I asked.

“Miyagi-sensei was a very wise teacher,” said Solace with a small bow.

I stared at the short green woman with my mouth slightly open. “You’ve … seen Karate Kid? Let me guess, it was one of Uther Penndraig’s plays?”

Solace nodded. “We weren’t totally divorced from culture, back in the good old days before the Second Empire,” she said. “We accepted wanderers of all kinds into our domains. So yes, I’ve seen a very spirited version of it, put on by four enthusiastic players who stayed with us for a time. And the methods of teaching are sound.”

“I’m actually not sure that they are,” I said. “I mean, the wax on, wax off stuff seems more like it’s meant to instill mindless obedience and test patience rather than actually teach in the most succinct way possible.”

“And didn’t I say that patience was the path to understanding?” Solace asked with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. “At these words, Juniper was enlightened.” But Solace was over four hundred years old, and while the rebirth process presumably meant that she had to spend at least some time with the dexterity and senses of a newborn (TODO #432: ask about that), that still meant that she had a wealth of experience that I’d be pretty foolish to ignore.

So she wasn’t going to tell me where to plant the seed. That meant that I had to figure it out on my own. I turned the seed over in my hand again. There was basically nothing that the seed itself told me about the plant, though its size meant that it probably came from a larger plant, which meant that it would need room to put down roots and spread its leaves to take in sunlight. I was pretty sure that trying to predict a plant’s needs on the basis of what its seed looked like was really foolish, or at least unlikely to give good results. Although …

“This is a lesson on its own,” I said, holding up the seed. “Can I ask you any questions without defeating the purpose of the exercise, which is presumably about the process of discovery?”
“It’s for you to feel your way forward,” said Solace. “The feeling is important.”

I sighed at that, and began looking around the garden, both for a place that might be suitable to plant the seed, and for a Clue as to what kind of seed it was. Eventually I found a spot with flat ground and only some short grass that looked like an animal had been grazing on it (there was a fairly wide variety of animals within the bottle, though no predators). I used my hands to pull up the short grass, revealing rich, dark soil beneath it, then poked my finger in it to make a hole and dropped the seed in with the pointed tip facing up, as that was where the sprout would probably come from. When that was done, I pushed the earth back into place and stared at it.

_Skill increased: Horticulture lvl 1!_

“Okay?” I asked.

Solace shrugged.

“I mean, what do I do now?” I asked. “Plant more seeds? Can you, I don’t know,” I made Emperor Palpatine lightning hands at the ground, “Do some mystical druid stuff?”

“That would destroy your connection,” said Solace. “Planting other seeds would also weaken the empathic link you now hopefully have with this plant. Traditionally, someone starting with flower magic would have only a single plant, branching out into more only by the time they’d gotten a plant to a second or third generation.”

I stared down at the ground. I hadn’t even gotten a skill unlock for Flower Magic, though it was entirely possible that all you needed was Horticulture. In which case …

“So I’m monogamous with this plant, which might very well die because I put it in the wrong spot, or because a worm gets it, or a fungus, or a million other things?” I asked.

“Part of building the connection is tending to it,” said Solace. “It is, in a way, better if it depends on you. You will check it, every day, sometimes twice a day, and give it the protection and guidance it needs.”

“Huh,” I replied. “Can I tend to other plants then? Not to put too fine a point on it, but can I walk around the bottle with you and learn some lessons? Actually, can I learn lessons _at all_ about horticulture without compromising this particular connection?”

“Yes, all that should be fine,” said Solace, “So long as you form no new connections to any plants, and given that you aren’t planting them, it shouldn’t be an issue. I can take you to what needs tending. I began growing a fair amount of food, in preparation for finding you, and I thought that we might have a feast tonight.”

So I spent a few hours with Solace, moving around among her plants, helping to prune back branches, picking off dead leaves, pulling up some plants by the roots and watering others. It was nice to have a low-level skill that I could power up quickly again, but I still held a little bit of resentment toward the messages that popped up in my field of view. At the end, when I had leveled up Horticulture eleven times, she inspected one particular plant and gestured me closer.

“Here, this one is ready for harvest,” she said. She reached forward for a small bud, where overlapping pink petals had not yet spread into a flower. Her delicate green fingers touched just beneath where the bud was, and with slight frown of concentration and a pinch, she removed the bud from the plant. She held the small flower bud up to show me. “That, there, is part of the raw essence of the connection I forged with that plant,” she said. “The first time you do this, your plant will
probably die.”

I looked over at the patch of dirt. “That … seems bad.”

“It is,” said Solace. “But to forge a connection and use it, that is the source of power for a flower mage. Once you know what you’re doing, you can drain only part of that connection when you snip the bud.”

I sighed. “This does not seem quick and easy,” I said. Why can’t all magics be like blood magic, easy to pick up with a few sentences of description and two minutes of thinking about it?

“No, becoming a skilled flower mage takes time,” said Solace. “Is that another thing Amaryllis left out?”

“No, she was very clear on that,” I said. “So what does this bud do? How does it do what it does?”

“I can’t answer the how,” said Solace. “I doubt there’s a soul on the plane that could. But as for the what, that depends on the connection, which depends in turn on the both of you. This? she asked, holding up the pink bud. “A distilled connection, deep and powerful, between our two natures. For myself, the nature is usually one of hardness, or nurturing, or endurance, but there are others. This flower comes of a plant of simple stock, now dozens of generations removed from that origin, because I’ve been breeding it for quite some time. If I had to put it into words, they would be persistence, or pliability, or longing.” She squinted slightly. “I don’t know quite where that last comes from, but it’s right. And as for what it does, my sense is protection of some kind. In the past, with this one, it’s been a storm of petals that cloaked me in armor, or a red sap that stuck to my wounds, but the manifestation depends on the specific combination of our natures, and the time in which the bud is used.”

“That’s really not very helpful,” I said with a frown.

“Isn’t it?” asked Solace. “Isn’t knowing that you won’t know something helpful?”

“Given time, that seed I planted will sprout and grow, and eventually when it reaches its culmination in the form of a flower, I’ll pinch off the bud and it will die?” I asked. “And all that time and attention for a single spell whose nature I can only guess at?”

“Yes,” nodded Solace. “They are rarely useless, especially if the connection is strong, and they aren’t random, if you know your own nature, and that of the plant you stole the bud from.”

“That still leaves the question of how Vervain did it, if no one else could,” I said. “If he needed a connection to the plants, how did he have them all over the place? I mean, logically he wasn’t tending them. He just … had a knack?”

“Yes,” said Solace. “That’s as much explanation as I was ever given, along with the same warning that no one before or since has done as he’s done.”

“Hax,” I muttered. Then, when I thought about it, I realized that the answer might literally be hax. To the best of my knowledge, the game had not yet done anything that broke its own rules, nor had it fudged any dice. That didn’t mean that those things hadn’t happened, just that the game had plausible deniability. But if Vervain was a Merlin-type, and needed to be wise and mysterious with incredible powers, especially Powers as the Plot Demands, then maybe the game legitimately had hacked him to be that way. And if it hadn’t, then maybe it was something to look into. I was sure that thousands of people had the same thought before, but I was Juniper Smith, and I …

… actually had kind of a shit track record, when I really thought about it.
As we left, I looked in on the seed I had planted. The lesson that Solace had been trying to teach me was one of connection, understanding, and patience, but I wondered whether the game was trying to teach me a lesson too, by bringing Vervain to my attention once again. Whatever was being said to me, if anything, I didn’t understand it.
It did feel kind of weird to take a vacation, mostly because none of us had jobs. Actually, Grak had a job, which was as group warder, but for this one week the work he did was keeping the bottle warded against intruders, which was none too arduous. Solace had a vocation, which was as druid to the Six-Eyed Doe, and she was still doing that; so far as I could see, it involved a lot of walking the domain, changing various things in small ways, usually with the magic that came to her by way of the locus. But that left Amaryllis, Fenn, and myself with only our personal ambitions, and that, of course, led to some discussion.

“How was speaking to the flowers?” Fenn asked me as I came back from the nominal garden. She had come out to greet us with a smile on her face, which meant that she must have been keeping an eye out for when we’d get back. She had been smiling a lot these last few days, giddy, infectious smiles, not just when she saw me, but also when she was talking with the others, or helping prepare food, or bathing in the stream.

“It went well,” I said. “I am not, as yet, a master flower mage.”

“Well boo to that,” said Fenn. She reached forward and took my hand, then led me off away from the house. Solace gave me a smile and a raised eyebrow, and I could tell that all my protestations about ‘taking it slow’ had been understood as blatant lies.

It was weird, officially being in a relationship with Fenn. Weird in a good way. She hadn’t changed at all, except for a wild improvement in her already pretty chipper mood, but somehow the simple knowledge that we were together made her look so much more attractive than I had already found her. I watched her a lot, and caught her watching me, and we would sometimes just smile at each other like we were mentally impaired. I’d often thought that love, especially new love, was simply, literally, that: mental impairment caused by a flood of hormones and neurotransmitters within the brain. I still did think that, but I was in love, so didn’t really care, and I figured that at least during downtime, I could spare a few points of MEN if it meant being happy.

She led me to a part of the field beside the tree where a blanket had been laid down by some eager half-elf feeling a great anticipation at my return. She was wearing a bright yellow sundress, no doubt stolen from a store somewhere, which revealed her long legs, and her arms, which were scarred in intricately curling patterns.

“I would have been such a help with flower magic,” said Fenn as she flopped down onto the blanket. That too, was likely stolen from somewhere, because what Solace had made available in the main house were mostly furs, and not ones that had seen much working. “Helpful like you wouldn’t even believe.”

I laid down next to her and looked her over, which made her do a small shimmy on the blanket for me, and from there we were kissing each other, which went on for quite a while.

“Can I ask a question?” asked Fenn. As part of that process of getting to know each other on a physical level, I was starting to understand her cues, and from the way she was kissing me, she was telling me to slow down and talk, which I did, a little reluctantly.

“One kiss for one question,” I said.

“Do I have to give you a kiss, or do you have to give me one?” asked Fenn.
I paused at that, looking her over, with my eyes lingering on her lips. “Is there a difference?”

“Oh, you would know if I kissed you,” said Fenn. “So far I’ve just been letting you kiss me. Me kissing you? Totally different experience, very much different, but I would be willing to give you a single one of my extra-special kisses if you would entertain my question.”

“Oh, you would know if I kissed you,” said Fenn. “So far I’ve just been letting you kiss me. Me kissing you? Totally different experience, very much different, but I would be willing to give you a single one of my extra-special kisses if you would entertain my question.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I will be judging you harshly.” Her tone was light, but I was starting to be able to tell when her nonchalance was forced -- a sense I’d been honing even before we’d started dating, not that we had, as yet, gone on a date.

“Do you ever think about stopping?” asked Fenn.

“Ah,” I said, pulling back from her slightly. We were being serious, it seemed. “Meaning, instead of your dream of a big old castle, humble servants to wait on you hand and foot --”

“They would be oiled, muscular men,” Fenn corrected me.

I frowned at that. “And where am I, when you’re with these men?”

“Oh, you would be available,” she said. “Presumably you would be doing your own thing some of the time, in that version of my future.”

“But there’s another version now?” I asked.

“I was asking you the question,” said Fenn. Her eyes kept taking in different parts of my face as she watched me.

“Right,” I said. I looked down at my deformed hand. I was pretty sure that it would have hurt, if it weren’t so numb. “Assuming that I get my soul fixed, and that fixes my hand and ribs?”

“Yes,” nodded Fenn. “Do you ever think about getting to a stable point and simply stopping?”

“I hadn’t, actually,” I said. “Can I do that now?”

“Out loud,” said Fenn. She shifted so that she was sitting up, cross-legged in front of me.

“I’m not great out loud,” I said, shifting my position to match hers.

“Don’t care,” said Fenn.

“Alright,” I said. “Well, if by ‘stopping’ we mean abandoning every quest, saying goodbye to the party, probably not amicably given the things they all want to accomplish with our help … well, we’d have about six million obols worth of gold, depending on how we split things with Amaryllis, and I don’t know much about Aerbian market baskets or exchange rates, but I have to imagine that would provide us with a pretty decent, modest life together, especially since we could supplement the nest egg with actual work.”

“Together?” asked Fenn. Her pointed ears perked at that.

“Sorry,” I said. “We still need to schedule that date, and then see how things go from there.”

“Worst case scenario, I guess we can just be platonic friends who live together,” said Fenn.

“Could we still kiss, even if we were just platonic friends?” I asked. “Wait, did Aerib have a Plato?”

“ Heck, we could probably figure out how to platonically have sex,” said Fenn, and an
uncharacteristic blush came across her cheeks. Not embarrassment, or maybe some of that, but more the rising warmth of anticipation.

“A couple of platonic children?” I asked with a grin.

Fenn turned away, smile fading in an instant. “Quarter-elves.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I … I didn’t put points into my social abilities.”

“S’fine,” shrugged Fenn, turning back toward me. “It’s all fantasy anyway, right?”

“Do you really not want children?” I asked.

“I don’t think they would have it as bad as I did,” said Fenn. “There are better places than Rogbottom ever was, and I would keep them away from elves entirely, but … maybe, possibly, a hypothetical quarter-elf could hide who they were and pass for human. That comes down to variance. And even if they couldn’t hide it, maybe they would happen to fall in with some good people who didn’t really care one way or another. I don’t know. The world is garbage for a lot of other reasons. I never really wanted to bring a child into it.”

“Okay,” I said. “First thing I do, once I’ve ascended to godhood, I’m going to put my boot on the face of this world and say ‘hey, be nicer to half-elves’.”

“But to do that, you need to ascend to godhood,” said Fenn. “Hence, not stopping.”

I hesitated. “I’m not a hugely driven person,” I said. “I’m not like the heroes of stories who have this basic need to go out and right wrongs, or overturn an unjust society. I wasn’t like that back on Earth, and I don’t think that I’m going to be like that here.”

“And with that said,” muttered Fenn, not meeting my eyes.

“And with that said,” I continued, “I believe, in my heart of hearts, that Arthur is waiting for me at the end of this. I would go to any lengths to get him back. He was my best friend. I owe him that.” And as I said it, I began to feel guilty, because here I was, sitting on a blanket in the middle of a meadow with a pretty girl, as though I had forgotten all about that.

“Ah,” said Fenn. “So … no little cottage in the woods with your darling friend Fenn?” she asked.

“Yes, of course we’re going to have that,” I said. “There’s just a mountain of bullshit we need to get through first.”

“Alright,” said Fenn with a nod. “Not that I would have wanted to stop, necessarily, or that I wouldn’t have gotten bored of the contentment, but … it’s been on my mind.”

“And now I get a kiss, for having answered the question?” I asked. “A very special kiss, it was rumored?”

“Yes,” said Fenn. She hesitated slightly. “Last night, was everything … was there a reason that you were satisfied with just, being generous? Was it …”

“I got an achievement for it,” I said. “I mean, I wasn’t trying to get one, that wasn’t why I stopped, it just popped up, after you had finished. That kind of pissed me off, to have the game nose in.”

“Oh,” said Fenn, relaxing slightly. “And was I …” She paused, as though I could finish her sentence for her, which I couldn’t, at all. “Was I within your expectations?”
“I loved touching you,” I said. “I loved watching you as I touched you.” I didn’t fully understand what she was asking me, only that it was related to her hang-ups about sex. An affirmation of her as desirable, along with long nights of attentive lovemaking, seemed like the best way to deal with that. (So far as I could tell from touch alone, half-elven genital topology fell well outside the norms for humans, but it wasn’t any of the weirder scenarios I had been prepared to accept; it hardly seemed like a thing to get worked up over, unless you had a lifetime of people saying that it was.)

“Okay,” said Fenn, breathing out and relaxing. “Now, to properly receive my special kiss, you’re going to have to lay back and remove your pants.”

I was a simple man, and did what I was told.

I went back to the house some time later, while Fenn went to go ride the Six-Eyed Doe, a fairly common occurrence. Everyone seemed to like the magical deer a lot better than I did, and I couldn’t really figure out why that was. I knew my problems with it, like the fact that it could only really express vague emotions, or the way it seemed to be watching me far too often, or the fact that I didn’t really like deer as a species (though it was obviously only deer-shaped). What I couldn’t really figure out was why anyone else liked it.

I wondered how much of it was just a matter of shared culture that I was manifestly blind to, or the cultural weight of the Second Empire and their extermination campaign. I grappled with figuring out an Earth metaphor that might apply. It might be like the dodo being rediscovered, and the attention that would be lavished on it by people who saw it as a symbol of the horrors of exploitative colonialism. Or maybe it would be the same way that American culture had treated Native Americans, as though they were this font of intense spiritual wisdom rather than primarily being displaced people with a culture that had been frayed at the edges. Or maybe it was like seeing a number tattooed on an old woman’s arm and having this moment of shocked realization at what must have happened to her.

Even Grak seemed to like the Six-Eyed Doe; he went for walks with it, and reached up on his tiptoes to pat its flank. I was pretty sure that the dwarves, with their underground clans, had basically squat to do with the Second Empire or any shared cultural responsibility for what had happened to the loci, but there he was, bonding with it.

This wasn’t entirely academic. The historical records showed Uther Penndraig having seven companion-analogues, his Knights of the Square Table (I groaned whenever I thought about that name). However many companions were available to me, the Six-Eyed Doe was taking up one of those spots. More than that, I didn’t know what kinds of impacts increasing its loyalty might have, or whether taking it out of the bottle and introducing it to the world might require a stronger bond between the two of us. I could at least find some common ground with Solace, but with the magical deer? At best, I could practice meditation and feeling a sense of awe, or helping out to make sure that the bottled domain stayed in balance, but that seemed like a very slow path to building rapport.

(Amaryllis, Fenn, and Grak all got a paragraph-length character biography within the game’s “Companions” screen, which I was pretty sure happened on hitting Loyalty lvl 2. I’d closed my eyes and paged through after my little experiment in experiencing awe and wonder, only to find that instead of text, the Six-Eyed Doe had a picture that expanded outside the box it was meant to be set within. This was the first time that the game interface had shown me anything other than text, symbols, or lines to make boxes.

The picture had various scenes, devoid of any clear chronology and bleeding into each other where they met. When I looked at it, the view zoomed in, leaving the rest of the game interface behind and filling my vision with only the pictorial story of the Six-Eyed Doe. Most of it signified little to me,
because it was focused on rivers and forests, with the occasional animal. I focused in on people, where I could find them, and ended up looking at a full-on orgy with writhing, naked bodies of a hundred different species. To one side of it, up and to the right, armored men were coming in and slaughtering the people, but toward the bottom there were a handful of pregnant women sitting around, and beneath them various women giving birth, with naked children walking away through the woods, and some donning leather armor of their own to fight off the attackers.

This was the story of the locus, as told by some insane artist who had the ability to paint photorealistically at a yottapixel scale but lacked any idea of how to tell a coherent narrative. It took me some time to find the bottle, which sat all by itself, away from everyone. There was no attempt at being literal; it was only barely big enough to contain Solace, who sat with legs folded and her staff across her lap. It was such a small thing, in comparison to the rest, and that was probably the point.

The house at the center of the bottle was made from a massive tree, which seemed to have grown with an interior space suited for humanoid habitation all on its own. None of the wood had been cut or broken away, it just followed its own organic flow that happened to make openings for windows, entryways that approximated doors, a few flat surfaces that could be used as tables, and roots that happened to run parallel for a place to sit. Scattered through the large, curved room in the center were various alcoves, some only reachable by climbing, where the beds were. I use the term ‘bed’ loosely, because apparently ‘textiles’ were not a watchword of the druidic grove, and of course they had nothing like box springs.

We had, of late, taken over the floor space. A large, ornate desk lifted from the study of Weik Handum (by Fenn, naturally) sat there, clashing with the rest of the naturalistic furniture. This was where Amaryllis sat, with papers in ordered piles in front of her and a book open in front of her. She was making notes, with Grak beside her, looking on. I could hear Solace in the area of the big curved room that served as a kitchen, but she was just out of sight.

“What book is that?” I asked.

Amaryllis set down her pencil and turned to me. “I really don’t want to bring you back down to earth, but would it be possible for us to set some ground rules?”

“Uh,” I said. “About … what?”

“When I went out to get some water for Solace, I saw you and Fenn,” said Amaryllis. Saw us doing what, she didn’t say, but I wasn’t so tone deaf I didn’t understand her meaning.

“Ah,” I said. “I’d thought we were, um, far enough away.”

“You were not,” said Grak. He sniffed. “I put up a ward against sound around your alcove. Be warned it will fail as soon as the bottle moves.”

“Sorry,” I said, feeling my cheeks go red.

“Well I thought it was wonderful,” said Solace, coming in from the kitchen with a smile. “This place has been devoid of the sounds of pleasure for too long.”

And then I was really blushing, because it was one thing to get caught out, twice, in an embarrassing way, but it was another to get appreciation from a third party. I would have called Solace a creep for listening in, but it was really my fault. I could have asked Grak for some privacy wards, and I hadn’t, mostly because I had still had it in my head that Fenn and I were taking things slow, which the last half hour had shown me was not entirely accurate.
“I … would really rather not talk about any of this,” I said. “We’ll try to be more considerate of the close quarters.”

“That’s all I ask,” Amaryllis said. “I really don’t want to put a damper on,” there was a very slight hitch in her voice, which I might have imagined, “your happiness.”

“So what’s the book?” I asked, eager to change the subject.

“It’s a reprint of *On the Nature of Narrative*, by Uther Penndraig,” said Amaryllis.

I frowned slightly. “Let me guess, part of Fenn’s expansive collection?”

“Grak and I went into town,” said Amaryllis.

I stared at her, then looked to Grak, and finally to Solace. “This isn’t what we agreed on,” I said. “Using the teleportation key --”

“We didn’t,” said Amaryllis. “Last time we moved the bottle, I put us within a two mile walk of an unremarkable mid-sized city without a touchstone.” She bit her lip slightly. “And you’re right, I should have told you, but I was feeling claustrophobic and needed to get some fresh air.”

“Sorry, you’re going to chastise me for being inconsiderate when you left without telling me?” I asked. “Pot, kettle, et cetera. You put your life in danger, which means all of our lives.”

“The noise of your sex made this place feel too small,” said Grak.

“Nice and cozy, I thought,” said Solace with a shrug.

I was blushing again, but didn’t really have a good response, because me protesting that we hadn’t actually had sex seemed like it wasn’t all that great of a defense. Amaryllis had said that she was happy for us but a little forlorn, and … well, yes, we were being really really insensitive about that.

“Sorry,” I said again.

“I’m sorry too,” sighed Amaryllis.

“Sorry about what?” Fenn asked as she came in through the door. She was looking a little windswept; the locus could run incredibly fast, faster than even its long legs would have dictated. The smile she gave me was radiant, like she had just stepped off a plane to greet me at the gate after weeks apart.

“The noise, last night,” I said.

I could see Fenn blush at that. She was very pretty when she blushed, and it called to mind the color in her cheeks when she was kissing me. “Well, I blame Juniper,” said Fenn.

“Urk,” I said, grabbing at my chest. “Betrayed by my most loyal companion.”

“Uther had an obsession with narrative,” said Amaryllis, a little too loudly and quickly. She had moved back over to the table and was looking at the book. “It doesn’t show in his body of work, but if we assume that most of those novels and plays are plagiarized from or inspired by Earth, then we can still fall back on his non-fiction, which probably pulls from the ideas of Earth as well, but still contains his own framing of those ideas.”

“Amaryllis is searching for meaning in our journey,” said Grak.
“Yes, but, no. Uther searched for meaning in his journey,” said Amaryllis, “His personal life story mapped fairly well to the model of universal narrative he constructed, which his modern editor thinks is just an aspect of Uther’s mythmaking, or maybe that Uther’s works reflected who he was as a person and his own personal journey informed those works. Reading this, it’s pretty clear to me that Uther wasn’t just talking in the abstract, he was grappling with something.”

“So it’s a clue?” I asked.

“Not everything is a clue,” said Fenn and Grak in tandem. She moved forward to give him a high five, and he grudgingly returned it. I was starting to get the feeling that Fenn was just more popular than I was.

“Yes, I think it’s a clue,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think that we’ll be able to predict too much by fitting our adventures to any kind of narrative structure, though I’ve started on the process, but I do think it might provide insight into how Uther thought, and from there, maybe into where he went.” She flipped a few pages back in the book, and gestured for me to come closer.

(It seemed a little unfair to me that Amaryllis hadn’t gotten any less pretty, now that I was with Fenn. I don’t want there to be any mistake about it, I was basically all-in on this new relationship, but Amaryllis was still stunningly gorgeous, and my heart beat just a little bit faster when I stood next to her. I wished there was some attraction switch I could turn off in my brain, but there wasn’t.)

“Here,” she said, pointing to the page. “It’s a circle. The hero starts at the top, in a place of comfort, then gets the call to adventure, --”

“Right,” I said. “This is cribbed from Joseph Campbell, Hero of a Thousand Faces, it doesn’t look anything different from what’s in there.” I had only read it because Arthur had insisted. This was more proof that Uther and Arthur were the same person, not that I needed it.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. “So this is just more plagiarism? Words he repeated but which held no significance?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll add it to my reading list, I guess, but ... “ I traced my finger around the circle, which I was well-familiar with, because Arthur had been familiar with it. His biography had even mentioned the Refusal of the Call. Going around, Vervain was supposedly his Mentor, the Crossing of the Threshold would have been ... what, trying to seize the sword from the stone the first time? I would need to read both books in order to figure it out. “What does your provisional map look like?”

“For him, or for us?” asked Amaryllis.

I looked over her notes, which were done in her meticulous handwriting, with my character sheet sitting there among the other papers.

“For him,” I said. “I don’t understand the story map, given that he lived on Aerb for so long. Traditionally, the end of the story would be when he defeats the Dark King and takes power in Anglecynn.”

Amaryllis shook her head. “He talks about both cycles of repetition and nested cycles,” she said. She flipped forward another few pages, to show another diagram. This one had lots of circles on it, some in chains and others as circles within circles. “He says, basically, that narrative is infinitely extensible, that any conflict and its resolution can be mapped as being a number of smaller conflicts and smaller resolutions, some of which are taking place concurrently. If you really wanted to, you could write a sequel to any story, so long as someone is left alive, because the hero’s journey starts in a place of
comfort and returns to it with something having changed, and then you’re all set up for the next journey to begin.”

“That sounds almost nihilistic, if we take the context as Uther talking about his own life,” I said. “The story never ends, because there’s always more, barring death.”

“That’s life,” said Amaryllis. “He makes that explicit in a few places, the endings of stories are, in his view, just a contrivance, or a contract between author and audience about where to stop the continual cycles. If you were looking at his life, and trying to map it all out in accordance with these ‘journeys’, then I think that the cleavage points of circles are pretty clear.”

“He thought that our brains were wired for stories,” I said. “Arthur did.” It was easier to say his name now, because he was real in this world, somewhere, or at least had been. “Given that wiring, people see stories in things that aren’t stories all the time. The brain gets set up for stories, and fits anything close enough into that story shape.”

“You’re saying that not everything is a story?” asked Amaryllis. Fenn smiled and raised her hand for a high five, which Amaryllis left hanging.

“I’m saying,” I stopped and paused to think about it as Fenn high-fived herself. “I don’t know. If Arthur found it compelling, then he’s probably worth listening to, because he was the one who told me that about brains, and he would have done his best not to fall into that trap.”

“Tell him the theory,” said Grak.

Amaryllis frowned at him, but turned back to me and started in. “Let’s pretend that you’re Uther Penndraig,” she said. “You believe that life is a series of narratives, not in the sense that you can map narrative patterns onto life events, but maybe … there’s some controlling entity that’s responsible for spinning up a new tale. You’re part of a game, possibly, but it’s a game that’s trying to display these circles. How do you test it?”

“It depends on the genre,” I replied. “You said yourself that life never really ends, there’s always another struggle, another conflict. Unless you’re a god, you can’t really bring a final close to any of it, you can only have … breaks, I guess, or downtime. Places where the tension eases.”

“If we chart Penndraig’s life as a series of journeys, calls to adventure, metaphorical deaths and rebirths, then returns to comfort and a new normalcy, we can define a few large ones,” said Amaryllis. “And as a matter of fact, there are often dramatizations of those journeys. Penndraig against the Dark King ends with him restored to the throne. Meeting of the Seventeen Swords goes from the time he becomes king to just after the First Empire finally finds its footing. After that, there’s the Invasion of the Ice Wizards, then the Apocalypse Demon, then the Wandering Blight -- those are the major ones, from what we’ll call the Foundational Era, when threats started coming out of the woodwork to stop him.”

“Huh,” I said. “Were they all external threats that came to meet him?”

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “And if we accept the world as artifice, as being as fantastically centered around him as you think it is around you -- not that you’re necessarily wrong -- then what defines the next era?”

I thought about that for a bit. “He couldn’t stay in his castle, with his wife and his children,” I said. “He couldn’t run the Empire he’d built. It depends on genre, and on the --” Dungeon Master “-- person controlling the narrative, but if the world is going to keep giving you explicit conflicts, a new call to adventure whenever you rest on your laurels, then staying in the castle only means that the
new threat or conflict has to be one that seeks you out.” I had only skimmed the remainder of the biography, but I knew enough about how he had shaped Aerb to know what came next. Besides, if you were thinking in terms of narratives, then it was pretty obvious. “Sitting on the throne means that you’re on the defense, forced into action when adventure comes calling,” I said. “If you think there’s going to be a new plot no matter what you do, then the smart thing would be to be proactive and seek that plot out, so that your family and kingdom can get on without being at risk from the outside.”

“The Roaming Era,” said Amaryllis. “After seven years of facing down threats, he picked up his sword, put on his armor, and went back out into the world to right every wrong that he could find.”

“And there were no more external threats?” I asked. “After three major attacks against his home, or kingdom, or empire, there was nothing that he had to come racing back for, something that only he could handle?”

“None,” nodded Amaryllis. “There are alternate explanations, of course, especially given how tight-lipped he was about his motives. I haven’t been able to find anything in his writing that would confirm that he went wandering in order to make the world stop throwing its own threats at him. It is, on the face of it, simply insane to think that the world would work like that. But --”

“But it might?” asked Fenn. “That’s what we’re saying, that we might live in a world where we have to go out and pick fights because otherwise the fights will keep coming to us?”

“That’s why we assassinated Larkspur,” said Grak.

“Assassination is a strong word,” said Amaryllis with a frown in his direction. “And he did come to us.”

“But you’re saying that we’re going to have to keep fighting forever?” asked Fenn.

“No,” said Amaryllis. She locked eyes with me. “I’m saying that Juniper might.” She shrugged. “If the hypothesis is correct, anyway. If Juniper’s ultimate aim is to find out what happened to the Lost King, for ill or good, then the only reason I think narrative is a promising line of inquiry is that I don’t think anyone else has tried following it before. That said, there are hundreds of theories about what happened to Uther, and I’m going to have to dig into them just to get a sense of what evidence everyone else has. We’re in a good position. If we assume that Uther Penndraig was dream-skewered, and more than that, a member of Juniper’s Dungeons & Dragons group, then that gives us an insight into him that no one else has.”

“If he really was Arthur, then he spent about forty years on Aerb,” I said. “I knew him as a teenager. All of his formative experiences were here, all the development of his ideas, he had a wife and children, loyal companions for, again, nearly forty years.”

“Even if that’s true, you also made this world,” said Amaryllis. There was something hard in her eyes.

“Not really,” I said, wincing. “I would say that it cribs from a lot of the worlds I made, but it’s … it’s an amalgam, a synthesis of those ideas, I didn’t make Aerb, I made a bunch of prototypes. And some of the ideas aren’t even mine, they’re just … ideas that I might have had. Or places where I cribbed from someone else.”

“You don’t think that you’re the closest thing to Uther Penndraig in this world?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “I am.” I doubted that I would ever be Arthur’s equal here, but unless any of the other
members of the group reared their heads, then “teenager from our Bumblefuck, Kansas D&D group” was about as small of a subset as you could get.

“And what you would do, if you were trapped in this cycle like he was?” asked Amaryllis.

“I guess I would do what he did,” I said. “I would be proactive. I would go out conquering and slaying evils, and if I had to do it indefinitely, then so be it.”

“Each time winning by the skin of your lips?” asked Fenn.

“Skin of your teeth,” I replied.

“Teeth don’t have skin,” said Fenn with a frown.

“Yeah, look, it’s like a biblical thing or something,” I said, trying to move on. We seemed to get tripped on this kind of thing constantly, which was part of why I kept feeling like my list of things to know was growing out of control.

“What’s a biblical?” asked Grak with a frown of his own.

“I’m fairly sure that the idiom came from the mynah,” said Solace, “They do, in fact, have skin on their teeth, and are renowned for their ability to escape calamities.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Okay,” I said. “Fenn has a point.”

“About teeth?” asked Grak.

“If I were trapped in a cycle of endless conflicts and resolutions, and I didn’t know whether I was going to win every time, and I thought that maybe each battle might be my last, I wouldn’t want to continue on, I would want to stop and go live in a quaint cottage somewhere.” I glanced over at Fenn who was standing beside me, and she gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “Thanks,” I said.

I did my best to keep my heart rate down and not blush as I turned back to Amaryllis. “He was always more driven than me. He was in all the clubs, he was prepared for college, he read five times as many books as I did, he was prepared to defend every absurd thought that occurred to him -- he was more of a fighter than I was. Non-literally, that is.”

(I was pretty sure that if I had died instead of him, the idea of committing suicide wouldn’t even have occurred to Arthur.)

“So, I think he would have lasted longer,” I continued. “But maybe he reached the end of his rope, in which case …” I looked down at the diagram, of circles within circles, and a long string of circles that represented sequels without end. “If it’s just an endless series of conflicts and resolutions, then there’s no escape, but maybe you could think of it all as being embedded in a single, enormous, forty-year story. In which case -- when were the infernoscopes invented?”

“20 FE,” said Amaryllis.

“If he was trying to complete the loop on the in-world layer, then maybe he was trying to go into the hells and rescue his family there, or maybe banish the hells entirely,” I said. That didn’t quite feel right to me though. “If he were me, then maybe he would try to find the god of this place and have a talk, or a fight if he could manage it somehow.”

“Which of the gods?” asked Solace.
I shook my head. “I mean, something brought him here,” or recreated him here, “So, maybe, he went to go find that entity, whatever it was. I’m … not actually sure that logic extends properly though, because obviously if the world runs on narrative -- no, if Uther’s life ran on narrative, then it seems like the person or thing that sucked him into this world would be outside of that narrative structure. It doesn’t quite make sense to try to close the loop that way.”

“We’re too deep in assumptions,” said Grak.

“I agree,” said Amaryllis. “We need more direct evidence that can point us in a helpful direction. Joon, I’d like for you to think on it more, and I’ll bring you whatever it is I can find.” She hesitated. “If you’re comfortable with that.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “You know your own history far better than I ever could.” It made me slightly uneasy to entrust this to her, but it was clear that the one book I had on Uther Penndraig barely scratched the surface, and I was pretty sure I knew the next turn that this conversation was going to take.

“So in other words,” said Fenn, “It’s reasonable to suspect that Juniper can’t sit around either? Otherwise we’re going to get visited by a demon bent on world destruction?”

“I’m building a timeline of what’s happened since Comfort,” said Amaryllis. “It’s not done yet. And Grak is right, we’re too far into assumptions. We don’t want to stand still anyway, that doesn’t further our mutual goals,” she glanced at Grak. “Grak is the exception, given his payment schedule.”

Grak shrugged.

“The more important part of charting what’s happened to Juniper is in mapping it to both what happened to Uther, how Uther thought about narrative, and how the logic of what’s come before applies to what might happen after,” Amaryllis continued. She glanced briefly at Fenn. “But it’s a work in progress, and I don’t feel comfortable using it to make predictions, as yet.”

“So you think I’m going to die?” asked Fenn. I looked at Fenn and saw unexpected tension on her face, mixed with anger.

“There are too many variables,” said Amaryllis. “It’s too much guesswork.” Fenn continued to scowl at her. Amaryllis flipped through the book, until she got to a specific line, which she read out loud. “‘It is a universal truth that narrative hates stasis. Narrative is built around interlocking rings of conflict and resolution; to the extent that a narrative allows stasis, it is by recycling these rings of conflict, repeating that which should by rights have been resolved. Yet that can only continue for a certain amount of time, at which point the audience grows bored, and anyone who cares about narrative qua narrative will make a fundamental change at that point, often to the detriment of the protagonist.’”

“Okay,” said Fenn. “I’m officially not a fan of this theory.” She turned away from us and left the house, not quite stomping away.

“Alright,” I said with a nod to Amaryllis. “I guess you better tell me what happened with Uther’s wife.”

"It wasn't his wife," said Amaryllis. "It was all the others."
“Uther had a lot of love interests who died?” I asked. “I mean, he had love interests … in addition to his wife?”

“Which version of history do you want?” asked Amaryllis.

“I want the truth,” I replied.

“I don’t know the truth,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper, you have to understand that this was all five hundred years ago, and he was a very private man. Even if he wasn’t, the fact that he was such a central figure in the founding of the First Empire, not to mention the dynastic head of what would become the Lost King’s Court, not to mention that he founded two of the athenaeums — he was really, really important, and his role in history very quickly became a matter of politics. The historicity is complicated.”

“What are my options, as far as versions go?” I asked. What I really wanted was a clear, concise explanation of why Fenn was upset so I could go comfort her and explain that everything was going to be alright.

“There are two extremes, one where Uther is a saint, the other where his terminal flaw was a love of women,” said Amaryllis. “There’s a temptation to say that the truth lies somewhere in between, but I think that’s something weak-minded people say when faced with two options they can’t distinguish between. For the most part, the history books sweep it all under the rug as unimportant.”

“Fine, give me the version where he’s a saint,” I said. Arthur hadn’t been a perfect person, I wasn’t so blinded by his passing as to believe that, but Amaryllis seemed to be implying that some people saw Uther as one of those politicians constantly embroiled in sex scandals, and that really seemed out of character for him.

“His marriage to Zona was a political one,” Amaryllis began.

“There was one before that,” said Solace.

Amaryllis frowned at her. “No,” she said, but it was almost a question.

“There was,” shrugged Solace. “Or at least, that was what I always heard. If you’ve heard differently, then perhaps I’m wrong. In my life I’ve spoken to a number of people who knew him, but perhaps we should trust the histories that you’ve read.”

“I’ve met three of the gods in the flesh,” said Amaryllis. She didn’t try to keep the defensiveness from her voice. “I’ve known plenty of people who met him.”

“And they don’t mention Morana?” asked Solace.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She furrowed her brow slightly. “She wasn’t … “ She turned to me. “Morana was a spy for the Dark King, one that Uther turned to his side. The Dark King killed her not long before he met with Uther in single combat for the final time. But Uther and Morana never --” she looked at Solace, “I hadn’t heard the theory that they were intimate.”

Solace shrugged.

“And then after that, Zona was a political marriage,” I said, prompting her to continue. I wanted to
leave the house and go find Fenn, but Fenn must have known at least part of this story, and if she was upset about it and what it might mean for our own future, then I didn’t want to force her to tell me this story.

“Zona Delzora was the Queen of the Zorish Isles,” said Amaryllis. “They had been part of Anglecynn for hundreds of years, but declared independence when the Dark King swept in, and made a series of treaties with him as he tried to quell the rebellions. The Zorish Isles presented barriers to trade for Anglecynn -- this was before bulk teleportation -- but they had also been destabilized by the Dark King’s passing. Joining two countries in personal union is never a simple thing, but it was the most elegant solution to their problems for a number of reasons.”

“And then they fell in love,” I said, because obviously that was how that story went.

“They were both private people,” said Amaryllis. “There are too many stories about them that are pure fabrication.”

“He resisted her,” said Grak. “She wanted to seal their marriage with a pregnancy. He refused because he did not love her. It took time for them to love each other. That story was told to me when I was promised for pair-bonding. I don’t know whether it is true.”

I felt a chill at that. It wasn’t just Amaryllis who had that burden placed on her, it was Grak too, and where she would undoubtedly have gone through with a political marriage, Grak had left his clan behind rather than accept one.

“Well, the way I was told it, he was distraught over Morana,” said Solace, “Zona loved him from almost the moment that she first heard of he was going against the Dark King. It was politically convenient, but she was also infatuated with him, and he resisted her because he hadn’t gotten over Morana.”

“There are too many stories,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “We can just leave it at there being too many stories. It’s important, insofar as it informs who he was and what we can take from the narrative theory, but we do not know. Putting forward more possibilities is not helpful.”

“What do you think it was?” I asked. She had compared herself to Zona; I wanted to know what she thought that comparison meant.

“I have no idea,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms across her chest.

“Most probable?” I asked.

She watched me for a moment. “Fine,” she said. “If, if, he was from the same culture as you, I would say that the most likely explanation is that he had some discomfort with the idea of an arranged marriage without any element of love. That might explain why he was derelict in his duty.”

“By not inseminating her right away,” said Grak with a nod.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “One of the things that the stories have in common is that it took some time for them to consummate the marriage, so that part, at least, seems like it would be true. If Zona was typical of her status and culture, she would have been ready and willing to receive him.”

“But they were in love, eventually?” I asked. “And she survived into old age?”

“She died at fifty, a few years after Uther disappeared,” said Amaryllis. “If she hadn’t, Anglecynn probably wouldn’t have gotten so close to civil war. But for most of her life, she was sickly.” She pursed her lips. “You want to go after Fenn, is that why you’re jumping ahead?”
I nodded. “Not that I don’t find this interesting, but I want you to get to the point. Why does she think that she might die?”

“Whatever happened between Uther and Zona, she gave him two sons and a daughter, all in fairly quick succession,” said Amaryllis. “This was during the period when the First Empire had been founded but not all of the eventual member polities had joined. A year after Dahlia was born, the ice wizards invaded, and Zona was kidnapped. Uther brought her back, but they didn’t have terribly much time together before the Apocalypse Demon arrived and began controlling her mind from afar. It was the Wandering Blight that cost her half her body, everything below her rib cage. She was kept alive in torment by powerful healing magics for a full month before Uther managed to manipulate himself into a forge frenzy -- no, I don’t know how, he only did it once -- and crafted her six mechanical legs that numbed her to the pain and allowed her mobility. Still, from that point on she was thin and frail, despite his best efforts.”

“Shit,” I said. I could see how that would map to a narrative. Each major conflict he faced imperiled his wife in some way, just to add some interpersonal drama to the proceedings. And from what Amaryllis was saying, if the narrative theory was true, and his life was shaped the way it was for an overarching reason, then this was the best case scenario for Fenn.

“In the story of Uther as saint,” Amaryllis continued, “This is the part where his wife begins bringing nubile young women in to give him sexual satisfaction. He refuses, because he loves her, and … it’s presented as a farce, usually, with all sorts of naked women stepping out from behind the curtains to ambush him at inappropriate times.” I could tell that she didn’t find that funny, but I heard a faint chuckle from Solace. I knew that Fenn would probably find it funny too, if not for the possibility that it would end up paralleling our own lives.

“And eventually he relented,” I said.

“He had an assistant,” said Amaryllis. “She was strong and capable, one of the first computers, gifted with an organizing efficiency that many powerful men would kill to have by their side. She traveled with Uther when he left to seek out adventures. Three months in, she was skinned alive by a dragon. Any romance between them is purely speculative, but it was the start of a trend.”

“Morana was the start of the trend,” said Solace, shaking her head.

“But there is a trend?” I asked. “A trend of more than three, if we’re counting what happened to his wife?”

“Twenty,” said Amaryllis. “That’s approximate. He was a private person, it’s not always clear what his relationship to those women was, but it was clear enough that people talked.”

“And horrible things happened to all of them?” I asked. “Twenty women, that’s about one a year from age thirty-five to fifty-five, he had to have seen the pattern. Other people had to have seen the pattern, I -- I don’t understand why anyone past the tenth would have gotten within a hundred feet of him.”

“Communications then weren’t what they are now,” said Amaryllis. “There was no international radio network, no teleportation network, none of the mechanisms that we use to make the Empire of Common Cause a cohesive political entity. The First Empire fell apart for a reason. It probably would have even if Uther hadn’t been irreplaceable. And as for the women, there were many theories as to what, exactly, was going on. It was common enough to say that there was no need for a deeper explanation; Uther traveled the world, seeking out its most dangerous possible places, and the fact that people died around him was a natural consequence of that.”
“He would have seen it,” I said. I started pacing, just to have somewhere to put my energy. “If our theory is that he started wandering the world in order to be away from his wife and children, then obviously he had to have seen it.”

“I do think that’s a natural consequence of this narrative theory and how he would have interpreted his own life,” Amaryllis agreed.

“Then how could he?” I snapped. “He’d have known after the, the fifth one surely, but he just -- kept going in the knowledge that they would die?”

“Do you need to take a break?” asked Amaryllis.

I stopped and took a breath. “I don’t know,” I said. “I was hoping to figure out something to tell Fenn. Either a hole to poke in this theory, or a reassuring alternate explanation, or … something.”

“Does it need to be true?” asked Amaryllis.

And that actually gave me pause, because I guess on some level I was a stupid asshole that just wanted the problem to go away. There was probably a world where I said that no, it didn’t need to be true, so long as it was convincing. “Yes,” I said. “It needs to be true. Or, if not true, because we don’t know the truth, then something that might mean that my life here isn’t fucked.”

“She’s not your life,” said Amaryllis.

I turned away from her at that and started to walk out of the house, then turned back and took a deep breath, unclenching my fists and trying to relax my muscles. I tapped into blood magic to slow my heart rate, though I wasn’t sure that would actually do anything to get me in a better frame of mind. “I know that,” I said. “I know that this is bigger and more important than what’s going on between Fenn and me. I’m sorry for not approaching this rationally.”

Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 13!

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 6!

“No, I’m sorry,” said Amaryllis. “I shouldn’t have --”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’d still like to hear the other explanations for what happened to these women. You said that some people didn’t see the need for a deeper explanation, but for the people who did, what did they come up with?”

“It’s a mixed bag,” said Amaryllis. “Some of it I’ve only read this morning and still need some time to process. If you take Uther as a more complicated person -- I’m not saying anything about your friend, only about how people view a very opaque historical figure -- then he and Zona had a loveless marriage, and his philandering predates her injuries, with all the stories about their love being akin to propaganda, or possibly literal propaganda. And if that’s the case, then perhaps the unifying force behind those deaths is Zona herself. I don’t personally believe it, but I need to do more research. I need to do a lot more research. It’s possible that the meme has no basis in reality.”

“Meme?” I asked.

“A meme is a concept or idea that spreads from person to person,” said Grak.

“No, I know what a meme is,” I said. “I just didn’t know that was a thing that you had on Aerb. Was the term … was the ‘meme’ meme introduced by Uther?”
Amaryllis nodded. “He believed that ideas were important and devoted a fair amount of his energy to spreading beneficial ones far and wide.”

“Hum,” said Solace. “Perhaps it would be better to say that he spread the ideas that he thought were beneficial far and wide.”

Amaryllis seemed like she was about to say something, but perhaps the subtext of what Solace had said became clear to her, because she stayed quiet. The subtext wasn’t clear to me, but at a guess, I’d have said that you didn’t get a Second Empire without a First Empire, and some of the beneficial memes that I would have tried to spread were things like global (hexal) connectedness, cooperation against greater threats, systemization of information and knowledge, economic interlocking, and the ordering of society. If Arthur had kicked this world into the Enlightenment, or at least laid the groundwork for it, then I could see how a druid would feel the stirrings of rebellion against that.

“What do you need from me, to get answers?” I asked. “Are there resources that I can devote to helping you, brainpower I can add, something to help speed up you trying to, first, figure out whether there’s actually anything to this narrative theory, and second, the bounds of it, and third, what I’m supposed to do about it?”

“Grak and I have been working on it this morning,” said Amaryllis. “None of it was ready. You can go tell Fenn that. I might have made her worry for nothing. And even if Uther was onto something in how he spoke of narratives, even if you’re a mirror to him, then that doesn’t mean that the rules are the same. She might have more in common with the Knights than with the lovers. So far as I know, for Uther they never coincided, but we can’t be sure who was or wasn’t linked to him like we are to you. Grak and I will work on it more.”

That left nothing for me to do. “You want to cut me out of the loop?” I asked.

“It’s too personal for you,” said Grak. “You can’t look at it with clear eyes.”

“That’s probably true,” I said. Not just because of Fenn, but Arthur too. “The risk you run is that you present a case for me and I instantly shoot a hole in it, because I’m the only one capable of seeing that hole. And beyond that … I wouldn’t expect this place to have stories in the same sense that plays and books do, because the trappings, at least so far, are all from tabletop games, and stories work differently there. It’s less clean. I’ll help and try to stay rational about it.”

“This was supposed to be time off,” said Solace in a mild tone. “It’s good for the body, mind, and soul to be carefree, when there’s any allowance for it.”

“I’m not sure there is,” said Amaryllis. “If the narrative theory is true, or at least has a grain of truth, then we have a limit on how long we can sit in one place. Figuring out that limit would be important.”

“Ah, well,” said Solace, “I’m sure we think very differently about understanding.”

“I’m going to go find Fenn,” I said to Amaryllis. “Let me know when you have something.”

There weren’t that many places to go within the bottle; from the tree house in the center, it was a half mile to every edge, though the house was slightly off-center. The first thing I looked for was the giant deer, which wasn’t too hard to spot, and as I moved closer to it, I saw Fenn, in her yellow sundress and black glove, holding her bow and looking up, with the doe sleeping quietly beside her.

“Hey,” I waved to her as I got closer.
“Hey,” she said, eyes toward the sky. “Wanna see something neat?”

“Sure,” I replied.

Fenn raised the bow above her head, materialized an arrow in her gloved hand, then fired it straight up. “Okay,” she said, tossing the bow to the ground and drawing out an apple from Sable. “Watch and be amazed.” She licked her lips as she looked up in the air and held the apple out in front of her.

“Fenn, is this safe?” I asked, panic rising slightly.

She gave the apple a small toss and withdrew her hand just as the arrow came silently dropping down. It pierced through the apple in mid-air and then drove into the ground with the apple caught on the fletching.

“Ta da!” she said.

“That was actually really impressive,” I said, moving closer to her. It was actually so impressive that I didn’t think it was within the realm of possibility for a human.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do that a month ago,” said Fenn, looking at the pierced apple. “I’ve gotten better without much in the way of practice. And my luck has gotten a lot stronger than it was too, which should be impossible without at least a hundred years under my belt.” She turned to me. “So those are the upsides.”

“Not including my amazing company?” I asked.

“Well, that too,” said Fenn. She held up her hand. “I’ve got a nifty glove, and there was that armor I had for a bit before I was literally cut into two pieces and spilled the majority of my blood on the forest floor.” She gave me a nonchalant shrug. “Oh, plus I’ve gotten to kill a lot of assholes lately.”

“You take pleasure from that?” I asked.

“I figure if you’re going to do it, then you might as well enjoy it,” said Fenn. “I’ve spent most of my adult life killing the undead, it makes it easy to just think of people as bodies, not actual living, breathing creatures with their own hopes and dreams. And even then, it’s been a lot of assholes. Asshole hopes, asshole dreams.”

“I get their names,” I said, pointing to my eyes. “Most of the time, anyway. I don’t really know how the game decides between what’s a named and non-named character, but --”

“Can you not call it a game?” asked Fenn. She took off her glove and tossed it to the ground.

“Sorry,” I said. “The … interface?”

“No, something better than that,” said Fenn. “How about washater, does that work for you?”

“More elfish?” I asked.

“It means something like game or system,” said Fenn. “A set of artificial rules. How have you not learned Elfish yet?” Wah-sha-tehr, a set of rules, five words of Elfish down, thousands to go, plus a whole new set of rules. Yay.

“I tried learning Groglir with Grak. It didn’t really take in the way I hoped it would,” I said, “The, um, washater didn’t seem to want to grant me the ability to speak it after an hour or two, which means that either I didn’t get enough basic knowledge and practice in, or maybe … I don’t know,
maybe it’s just not something that it’s ever going to help me with. D&D always fudged the concept of language. Most games do.”

“We should play some D&D,” said Fenn. “We’re taking some time off to recuperate, why not do a thing that you like doing? You said that it was best with one dungeon master and four people, better to do it now before we get another companion. And besides, Amaryllis has her head up her butt about narratives, but she’s going off of plays and stories. For all that you talk -- *incessantly* talk -- about games, we’ve never played one.”

“I … huh,” I said. “That actually makes a lot of sense. I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

“Oh, only *a* reason?” asked Fenn with a smile.

“Maybe if I dug deep I could list a few more,” I said. I shifted my weight and tried to formulate what I wanted to say next. “Did you want to talk about the downsides of being with me?”

“Not really,” said Fenn. “Our lovely locus helped me to calm down, and … you’re working on the problem, if there is one?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you have a quest?” she asked.

“I … no, I don’t,” I said.

I wasn’t even sure how that would work. Obviously if there *was* such a thing as a narrative, presumably being controlled by the Dungeon Master, then having a quest to defeat the force of that narrative would be a severe mixing of layers. Did that make four layers in total now? There was the reality of Aerb, the game layer that sat aside from it, and then the super-reality where all this was being simulated, or if it wasn’t actually a simulation, then the true reality that it was sitting on. I wasn’t sure that narrative had its own layer in all this; maybe it was better to think of it as an agent with multi-layer access, like the Dungeon Master. Or maybe narrative was just a manifestation of the Dungeon Master.

“Well, even if there’s no quest, I would prefer for this to be at the top of the queue,” said Fenn.

“Of course it is,” I said. “Fenn, if anything happened to you --”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it,” replied Fenn with a frown.

“I don’t want to let it fester,” I said.

Fenn sighed. “If I spent time focusing on every shitty thing in my life, I wouldn’t have time to get anything done,” she said. “Maybe this is a problem, maybe it’s not, maybe you can do something about it, maybe you can’t. Maybe I’m doomed to die, or at least be horribly maimed. More than I already have been, anyway.” She glanced at her scars, and at the thin, faded red line that still marked where she’d been cut in half. “I trust you and the others to figure things out and tell me whatever is best for me. Well, I only *mostly* trust Amaryllis, as much as I might like her. But you’ll be there to supervise.”

“I did think the timing was suspect,” I said.

“You show a remarkable lack of tact last night, and then in the morning she has a new theory that means we can’t be together?” asked Fenn.
“Sorry, I showed a lack of tact?” I asked with a laugh.

“Well, it was really very rude of you,” said Fenn, smiling slightly. “But honestly, I don’t think that Mary often does things for herself, she said that she would slit my throat if she had to --” Fenn saw my expression, “Oh, no, it was a unicorn blood thing, she preceded that by saying that she liked me quite a lot, and after she said she was willing to kill me, she said that she hoped that she never had to, so I really thought it was sweet, in its own way.”

“I might have to talk with her about that,” I said.

“Please don’t,” said Fenn. “Is it any different from what you thought of her already?”

“I guess not,” I said. Amaryllis was stronger than me, in a scary sort of way; I wasn’t sure that I would ever be able to kill her, even if I thought that was the smart thing to do. The thought of it made me a little sick. In my mind’s eye, I stayed my hand.

Fenn stepped closer to me and gave me a slow kiss. “I think I’m done talking for a while. Can we forget everything, just for a bit?”

I took her hand into mine. She was close enough for me to smell her, a pleasant, earthy scent. “You think this is wise, given things being how they are?”

Fenn shrugged, then kissed me again. “I think that I’d like to not think about that.” She reached up and touched my neck with her slender fingers. “And if we’ve made a mistake, then I’m fine with making that same mistake a second or third time.”
A side story for *Worth the Candle*, *The Council of Arches*, is best read immediately before this chapter.

**Skill increased: Parry lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)**

**New Virtue: Prescient Blade!**

*Prescient Blade:* You take half the normal penalty to parry bullets, arrows, or other missile weapons. These attacks still do damage to your blade as normal.

I was happy to get that one in the course of my training, since I’d had Parry hovering close to the soft cap for quite a while, but while it was a good one, I did find it a bit puzzling, because I had gotten the ‘Nascent Blade-bound’ virtue when Parry had hit tenth level. My confusion was cleared up a few hours later.

**Skill increased: Two-Handed Weapons lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)**

**New Virtue: Lunge Striker!**

**New Virtue: Neophyte Blade-bound!**

I stopped our sparring practice and stared at the messages. I had been dueling both Fenn and Amaryllis, though we were all using blunted blades; Fenn wasn’t terribly good with a sword, and Amaryllis was noticeably worse than I was, but together it was a losing battle for me, which seemed to suit them just fine. I closed my eyes and went to the screen to read what the virtues did.

**Lunge Striker:** Eliminates the maneuverability penalty for all reach weapons. Eliminates the penalty for striking at close range with reach weapons. Allows you to more quickly cover ground when moving in short bursts and in a fighting stance.

**Neophyte Blade-bound:** You have unlocked the ability to bond with a melee weapon, given a few minutes of meditation. You may only bond with one weapon at a time. When wielding a bonded weapon, double your effective skill with it, double your chance to parry, and you may cut with it as though it were twice as sharp.

The second level of the blade-bound virtue seemed really, really good to me. I had gotten the original Nascent Blade-bound virtue from increasing Parry; I frowned for a bit trying to figure that out. The best I could come up with was that it took some combination of skills raising above a certain amount to get the blade-bound virtues. If I was remembering correctly (and at 8 KNO I had better be), then Parry had been one of the last melee skills I had trained when I was getting everything across the lvl 10 line. Now it was Two-Handed Weapons that I was training up last, so logically if multiple benchmarks was the condition for a ‘free’ virtue then I wouldn’t have hit it until now. I filed this bit of trivia away in my notes.
(This also opened up the possibility that there were other virtues to be had from synergistic skill ups.
I didn’t know how many skills were part of the blade-bound package, but two was the minimum,
and it seemed likely that it was more on the order of three or four, based on what I knew blade-
bound could do.

The problem was, blade-bound were a known quantity in this world, and I hadn’t heard of
something similar for someone who excelled at the arts in combination with each other, or the
synthesis of different types of magic.

My best guess was that the bone magic, skin magic, and blood magic might all synthesize into
*something*, but they hadn’t yet, which meant that there was either a fourth or fifth out there, or no
synergy incoming. The logical one to round out that group was pustule magic, a path I was
understandably reluctant to go down.)

We did spar for a bit more after I had bonded with the Anyblade, and the jump in skill was apparent
to all of us; I could pretty comfortably hold both of them off at once, unless they got tricky. Granted,
neither of them were proper swordsmen, but if lvl 20 represented something like a graduate degree,
then an equivalent of lvl 40 in Two-Handed Weapons was well into whatever the postdoc equivalent
of hitting people with a sword was.

I think that of all the skills I was trying to blast through during “vacation”, Gem Magic was perhaps
the worst, mostly because it left me with the feeling of being mentally drained, like I wanted to zone
out and just watch some television, except that television hadn’t been invented on Aerb yet, and
anyway, the signal inside of a bottle at the foothills of the World Spine would be, I was guessing,
terrible. So instead, after I was done draining my mental reserves by knocking cans off a stump at
fifty paces, I would go seek out my party members and do my best to listen to them, mostly to let
their words wash over me, often with Fenn cuddled up beside me.

Solace liked talking the most out of any of us. I thought that was probably because she’d lived so
much of her life with other people around her in a tight-knit community, and once that community
was gone, she’d been left all alone. She was also four hundred years old, and had all sorts of stories
about the way the world had been. I don’t know if it was just her outlook, or deliberate effort on her
part, but she rarely mentioned the bad stuff that was lurking in her past. She revealed in an off-hand
comment that she’d had children, but she didn’t say what had happened to them, and I didn’t have
the heart to ask.

We tended the garden together during the day, but it really didn’t need all that much, and I had no
real hope of getting Horticulture to the lvl 20 mark, where a virtue was presumably waiting for me.
While the seed I planted did sprout by our last day of rest, it was going to take weeks at the earliest
before I had my first bit of flower magic -- hopefully.

She spent most of her time outside, and much of it with the Six-Eyed Doe, though she could often be
seen fully nude, splayed out on the grass to soak in the sunlight for photosynthesis.

At our D&D games she played Case, a defector from the evil scurrilies, whose overarching goal was
to lift the curse that the God of Scurrily put on her race.

I took more language lessons from Grak, mostly because I couldn’t think of a better way to get one-
on-one time with him without being horribly awkward about it. I think I bothered him by going off-
topic too many times, but the great thing about language was that it was inherently cultural, and that
gave me plenty of opportunity to ask him about what it had been like at Darili Irid.
This did lead to a thirty-minute lecture from him on dwarven self-insemination, which I was about 60% sure he went into in order to get me to stop asking questions. Unfortunately for him, I found the whole thing to be fairly fascinating, if gross. I eventually had a fairly mediocre command of Groglir, enough that I could stumble halfway through a conversation before falling flat on my face. My first guess had been that I would need to learn a hundred words before I got a pop-up, and when I crested firmly into a vocabulary of one hundred and fifty words, my next guess was that I would either get it at five hundred, a thousand, or just not at all. A real-world guy named Charles Ogden had created something called ‘Basic English’, which had a basic list of eight hundred and fifty words that he thought would be enough to speak ‘in a normal way’, and if I were making some arbitrary cut-off for language learning, that would have been it -- but learning eight hundred and fifty words of Groglir, along with all the variations on them, was still going to be a time sink, and I would arguably not get too much out of a potential language skill if I had to do that for every language that I came across.

I gained a single point of loyalty from him, bringing him up to 7, when I apologized if my relationship with Fenn made things awkward, but that was about as much as I got for my efforts. I’d had this idea of ‘grinding loyalty’ with him, but it didn’t really pan out like that, no matter how much we talked. He had, apparently, made up his mind about me and trying to budge him wasn’t easy, especially since he knew that I wanted him to be more loyal. I’d tried telling him the same thing I’d told Amaryllis, that he would become more powerful, but that didn’t sway him like it had swayed her.

Grak played Bachewin for our tabletop sessions, a stout young woman trying to reclaim the honor her family had lost. He wasn’t very good at roleplaying, though he did learn my (entirely homebrew) rules system quickly, and after our second session he had some very specific ideas about who Bachewin was, which he shared with me at length. (He shot down all my attempts at contribution, and his loyalty still didn’t change.)

I spent the most time with Fenn, naturally. It was almost like the ‘cursed lover’ thing wasn’t looming over us, though she left the room whenever Amaryllis wanted to talk about it with me, and sometimes I felt her clinging to me when we lay together. We didn’t discuss it, because she didn’t want to, and not talking about it really did help her mood to improve, so maybe that was just how Fenn dealt with things. If we’d been on Earth they would probably have said, “Oh my god is that an elf?”, but after they’d gotten over the half-elf thing, they would have said it wasn’t a healthy way of dealing with problems. The problem was, I knew as much as anyone that you couldn’t drag someone, kicking and screaming, to confront things that needed confronting.

(At the end of our week off, the narrative theory was still looking inconclusive, and even if it hadn’t been, the ‘dead lovers’ pattern was also inconclusive. The problem was, nothing actually seemed like it was dictated by narrative, it all seemed like just a natural consequence of what had come before, and that was even more true with the women in Uther’s life than with the threats he faced down as King of Anglecynn.)

Eventually, I grew to value how Fenn walled things off. As much time as I was spending on training, reading, and discussing theory, it was nice to have someone who at least put on a front of not caring about what was going on. My time spent with her was largely time not spent thinking about serious things, and with the ward against noise around our alcove we were able to have some fairly intimate talks.

Fenn’s side of it was mostly relating stories of her times in the Risen Lands, occasionally interspersed with the colorful characters she dealt with in the course of selling off what she looted. These weren’t necessarily the happiest times in her life, but they were the safest, because while they had happened to her, they weren’t actually all that personal. That’s not to say that they were vapid or content-less,
but Fenn was sharing without actually sharing, talking without revealing herself. (It took me a
damned long time to actually realize that, and several false starts when I’d asked her about her
parents, or what it had been like to grow up split between those two worlds, questions that she
dverted away from pretty quickly.) So I heard a lot about killing zombies, wall crossings, shady
merchants, and nothing that told me anything about Fenn I didn’t already know.

When I shared, I tried to keep it away from D&D. I never mentioned Arthur, even when he had been
a part of the stories, partly from my usual aversion and partly because he was real, in this world, and
talking about him meant talking about Uther. So instead I mostly told her about Earth, describing all
the wonders that she would (probably) never see. All of it paled in comparison to Aerb, but that was
because all the pieces of Aerb that showed my hand were exaggerated or magnified versions of the
things and places I had seen. The one exception was the technology, but while technology and its
effects on society were a hobby horse of mine, and she seemed willing to listen, I didn’t really think
that was why she liked me, and felt awkward going on about that kind of thing. I told her as much,
while we were resting together one night.

“I like all parts of you, Juniper,” she said as she gave me a pat on the chest. “If you want to talk
about the Eisenhower interstate system, I’m happy to listen.” She gave me a contented sigh. “I think I
would like Earth, even if parts of it seem lame, and even if you have nuclear weapons all over the
place. We could go to a McDonald’s together.”

“Please let McDonald’s not be the only thing that you’ve taken away from what I’ve told you,” I
murmured to her.

“Juniper, they have a hundred billion served, you have to respect that,” muttered Fenn. Her
conversation always turned to muttering as she was falling asleep, and sometimes she would go
minutes without saying something before lazily picking a thread of conversation back up again, only
to fall asleep in the middle of it.

During our tabletop games she played Adnarim, a slink-thief and assassin who had accidentally
found herself in the semi-reputable business of taking on odd jobs from people. (Fenn had made
herself the identical twin sister of Amaryllis’ itinerant scholar, Miranda, which had initially drawn
some complaints from the princess but ended up being a lot of fun.)

And that left Amaryllis, first of my companions, and by far the one I’d fought the most with. Our
time was mostly spent focused on one thing or another, either with sparring, training, our work going
over the so-called narrative patterns, or giving each other overviews of the things that we’d been
reading. I was almost never alone with her, and even when we were alone, it was never private,
because the house was so open. I had things that I wanted to know but which I didn’t want to ask
about.

I woke up one morning and climbed out of bed to see her sitting at the desk, using colored pencils on
a revision to the map of Uther’s life, which consisted mostly of arcs as various conflicts sprang into
being and were later resolved. We had both taken note of the largest thing that stood out: there were
precious few ‘plots’ or ‘narrative arcs’ that Uther had left behind when he’d disappeared, but the
reason for that eluded us. She had been gearing up for us to move on to the next part of our
adventure since the day before. This, then, was her final map of Uther’s life, the one that she could
carry with her and consult, the distillation of several days of research.

“Looking good?” I asked after I had passed through the invisible sound barrier. I usually woke with
the sun, but Fenn stayed in our bed for another hour or two after I’d gotten up.

Amaryllis glanced at me and frowned. I was in my boxers, and behind me Fenn was naked. “You’ve
“Have I?” I asked, looking down at my bare chest. I could tell at a glance that she was right, but I didn’t really need her to confirm it for me, because I had noticed it myself two days ago. Losing weight, in this context, was not at all a good thing. Leveling up had reset me to essentially the best physical condition of my life, and the weight that was coming off was, almost by necessity, all muscle.

“Have you been eating?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied, hearing how defensive I sounded even as I said it. “You hear Fenn coaxing me at every meal, even when I’m eating.”

“She’s worried,” said Amaryllis. “I worry too.” She looked back down at her colored map of Uther’s story. “If I had no desire to eat but it was necessary for the survival of myself and my party, I would endure the unpleasantness and force the food down.”

“Not very subtle,” I said.

“What?” asked Amaryllis, looking up at me with a furrowed brow.

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought you were … making a reference.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. “That. No, I was just saying that … you can’t depend on a level up again,” she said. “Unless we face a rapid series of substantial threats, or a number of quests that are easier than they appear but still rewarding in spite of that, we’re probably looking at weeks, not days until you get another one. You’re losing muscle mass, which means that you’re losing combat ability.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll … have you considered that it might be that my digestive system is malfunctioning and I’m just not taking in nutrients? I feel like I’ve been eating a lot.”

“Then it’s worse than we thought,” she said with a mild tone. “We need someone who can repair the damage you did to your soul, but it’s a profession far more heavily regulated than most. More to the point, we need to find someone trustworthy. Unless we can stumble our way into another companion whose specialty is exactly the thing that we need, we’re left with either going to someone reputable and hoping that we can bribe them into silence, or going to someone disreputable and hoping that they don’t fuck us over.” She was thinking of the tattoo mage, I was sure. “Of course, if we find someone that we can bribe, that means that they’re inherently untrustworthy.”

I glanced over at the blue amulet laying on the table next to her. She normally kept it tucked away. I had seen her in conversation with it a few times now, a process that, from my end, looked like her zoning out with glowing blue eyes while the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

“Any answers from your great-grandfather?” I asked.

“He’s very frustrating to speak with,” said Amaryllis. “Actually … he’s an asshole. The relationship between us is not of an ancestor helping his descendant, but of a man attempting to exert his values on the world from beyond the grave.”

“Are those values terribly at odds with your own?” I asked. I’d been under the impression that the ghost of her great-grandfather was being overly cautious, rather than that they were adversarial.

“He was a supporter of the Second Empire,” said Amaryllis.

“Ah,” I said. “Yes, I can see how that might complicate things. Did he have any advice though? If
they were known for their soul work, then maybe he has something worth sharing?’”

Amaryllis frowned and looked down at the amulet. “If I tell you, and it appears as a quest for you, then can we agree that we will have a long conversation with the others and not decide on it as a good course of action simply because the game said so?”

“Were you planning on not telling me?” I asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “I’m trying my best to be an open book. I just wanted some time to mull it over before presenting it, ideally to everyone.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. “Right, yes. There were counter-imperialists in most of the member nations, and with the Empire effectively decapitated, and many of the imperialists crudely enslaved by Manifest, there was a rapid shift in power. My great-grandfather managed to hold on and avoid any of the criminal trials that Anglecynn went through, but others weren’t so lucky. One of them was Fallatehr, a soul mage, who was imprisoned with a few others on the smallest of the Zorish Isles -- technically not part of them, but under their dominion. He was an elf, so he should still be alive, but the prison is abandoned.” She paused slightly. “Obviously it would be suicidally stupid to stage a prison break in order to gain his expertise.”

“Do you actually believe that it would be suicidally stupid, or were you just saying that to help trigger the quest?” I asked. “I did get the quest, by the way.”

“I think it’s ill-advised,” said Amaryllis. “We still need to find out what the national apparatus of Anglecynn and international systems of the Empire think of us, but … if we were implicated somehow it would almost certainly cement our reputation. I think the risk of implication is low, but it’s still a consideration.”

“What about as far as feasibility?” I asked.

“We have a teleportation key,” said Amaryllis. “That’s the only reason I think it could work. The penitentiary on Sulid Isle was built by an architect under forge frenzy, it’s a treacherous place with dangerous, unknown magic. The only people sent there were sent for life. Once Anglecynn began the program of final trial by adversity, it stopped being used entirely.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Sentient.”

“We’ll stick a pin in that then, and get input from the others,” I said with a frown. Short of going to one of the Empire’s licensed soul mages though, I didn’t see that questline as having many other promising avenues. “I don’t feel like Solace will be happy about it.”

“She will, if it’s the path to saving the locus,” said Amaryllis. “Happy is probably the wrong word. She’ll accept it, I think, if we decide that it’s the best path forward. We’ll have to talk about it with the full group.”

I stepped toward the papers she had laid out. “I wish we had more to go on,” I said. “More of substance, anyway.” I looked back toward Fenn. “How much danger do you think she’s in?”

“I have no idea,” said Amaryllis. She laced her fingers together and stretched them behind her head. “There was always a reason it happened. There were three of the twenty that we might chalk up to bad luck, but for the others, there was always a reason, it wasn’t obviously supernatural. You keep asking how he could keep putting people in danger, and it just doesn’t look like fate to me. Elf luck at its upper extremes is visible, it’s almost tangible, one in one hundred odds happening nine times out of ten. This,” she gestured to the papers, “This is just people inexorably following their beliefs and incentives, coming into conflicts that are predicated on and resolved by basic facts of reality. It’s not about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, it’s just … how things had to happen.”

“That’s what makes it so insidious,” I said.

“I don’t like it,” said Amaryllis. She brought her arms down and crossed them. “It implies omniscience, or omnipotence, or both. If the Black Expropriates embedded an agent within the Milue parliament for internally coherent reasons, then how can that all be a setup for Uther’s arrival three years down the line? How can that be a planted romance subplot that naturally results in her death?”

“I’m more surprised that it’s exposed to us,” I said. I looked back at Fenn, who was still asleep, slightly slack-jawed. “Though maybe it’s meant to be a warning, or a lesson, or a clue. Or maybe there’s nothing to the narrative theory, and Uther just,” I threw my hands up, “Maybe this was all just a result of his beliefs about narrative.” Ironically, that would be a pretty ironic twist.

“Maybe,” nodded Amaryllis.

We both looked at the paperwork in silence. Today, it would all be packed up and then stuffed into Fenn’s glove, most likely never to be seen again. We’d spent time and effort on it, but it all seemed like it was essentially for nothing, because if there was such a thing as a proper narrative, then we had no idea how to defeat it.

“We could try manipulation,” said Amaryllis. “If we assume that narrative is desired from us, we could act in more dramatic ways.”

“We’d be acting,” I said. “It would know.”

“You think it’s that powerful?” asked Amaryllis. There was something different about her, and it took me a while to realize that it was the touch of fear.

“No,” I said, “I don’t know,” I added, because I was a terrible liar. Obviously the Dungeon Master was that powerful. “Trying to avoid destiny never works out in stories. At best, you can subvert it, but this isn’t even destiny, because it’s not diegetic. Or, it is now, now that we’ve noticed it, but I don’t know if that counts. No, we’re going to continue on and not try to game the narrative.” I looked to Fenn again, like something might have happened to her in the five seconds I had looked
away. “If it were me, I wouldn’t want someone trying to game the story I was telling.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Was that why you killed me last night?”

It took my mind a moment to jam up in confusion and then switch gears; she was talking about our tabletop session from the night before. “Was that why you put Miranda in harm’s way?” I asked. “I thought that was a character moment, showing that you really loved your sister, that kind of thing.”

Amaryllis was really good at getting in character, which at first surprised me, until I thought about it for a bit.

“It was both,” said Amaryllis. “I thought that I would get some leniency for it.”

“That death was kind of a result of how I set up the rules,” I said. “Normally the GM can roll some dice behind a screen and then fudge them if he really, really has to, but we only had the deck of cards, and it was split with a suit for each of you, meaning that I had to make it so that you were flipping cards against a static number for attack and defense, which … I couldn’t change the outcomes in a clean way.”

“You could have,” said Amaryllis. “You said that Rule 0 was that the Game Master superseded the rules. You could have said that the mortling missed.”

“It would have been obvious,” I said. “The game has rules, everyone had read them, so violating them would be violating this sacrosanct contract between gamemaster and players. It would be saying that grand gestures matter more than reality. I would have fudged it, if I could, but …”

“But it was important that the cards dictate what happened,” said Amaryllis. “Or else the illusion would be broken. Thank you, I think that was enlightening.” She looked back to the papers.

I wasn’t sure quite what enlightenment she was talking about, but part of the reason we had played those games was so that I could explain to them how tabletop narratives were different. I might have asked what she was thinking, but Fenn finally got out of bed, and that was more or less the end of talking about narrative.
We entered into Anglecynn by teleportation key, fully armored and geared up for a fight, but we were in the woods that the Penndraig clan sometimes used as hunting grounds, far out of season, and the only creature that marked our arrival was a very surprised bluejay. I spent some time putting a tattoo on the back of Amaryllis’ hand for the teleportation key to go in, placed so that she could pull it out swiftly. When she put her leather gloves on, there was no way to tell she was hiding something so valuable on her person. From there Solace turned us into seagulls, and we flew in a loose formation toward the nearby sea, out to the line of tall islands on the horizon.

Our conversation on next steps earlier in the day had mostly consisted of Amaryllis giving as much information as she had, and everyone agreeing that the prison break was going to be our next step, largely because I was (perceived as) deteriorating. More than that, Solace wasn’t convinced that a registered imperial soul mage would be capable of doing what we needed, especially with regards to the expertise necessary to manipulate the locus. Her two conditions were that we attempt to barter with him first before springing him, and that he not be allowed in the bottle or informed that she was a druid, both of which I thought were perfectly reasonable.

The five main Zorish Isles stuck up from the Brylyg Sea. To say that they weren’t natural would be a severe understatement; each was the tip of an enormous finger sticking up from the perpetually cold, dark water. When I’d drawn them up, they had been inviolable, stone so hard that not even diamond could scratch it, ancient things that suggested an entity of supreme power, dead and buried beneath the waves. I’d come up with them when I was sitting in a bathtub, sticking my fingertips up from the water just enough to have them be exposed to the air. But very few things I’d created survived contact with Aerb, and the Zorish Isles had been at least partially excavated using voidtools before the imperial ban. None of that was visible from a distance; instead, it was greenery, most of it cultivated, and cities built into the side of the isles, largely confined to the whorls of the fingerprints to maximize arable land on top.

Sulid Isle wasn’t technically part of the Zorish Isles, it was just close enough to them that they had control over it. On first hearing about it, I thought that it was inspired by Alcatraz, but it was far bigger than that, with less development, and probably took more inspiration from one of the islands of exile. It was mostly barren, but there were spots of green, and at the center of it all, an enormous compound with high walls and a singular building that looked, to me, like a mansion. No one ever came to this place, according to Amaryllis, and the vast majority of the prisoners would probably be dead from old age, because the sentient, magical penitentiary hadn’t been used for that purpose in at least a hundred years, if not more.

The day was dark and gray, and the winds were uncomfortable on my wings, so I was happy to land at the island’s edge and turn back into a person with armor and a fur cloak against the chilly wind.

We were at least a mile away from the penitentiary, but it still loomed large, rising ten stories high and built with what seemed like a very surprising amount of glass, given that it was a prison. The glass looked dark blue in the diffuse light of the cloudy sky, but the ribbing was brass or something like it, which gave the building a grandiose cast. It had dozens of domes, with a large one at the center that dominated the entire structure. Even the walls that surrounded the compound were ornate, with sculptures topping regularly-spaced towers.

Grak raised his warder’s monocle to his eye for a moment, then set it back down. “The building is magical,” he said. After a moment, Fenn began to laugh, and while I didn’t find it funny at all, a slight smile crossed Grak’s lips, so he must have meant it as a joke.
It had been built by an architect in a forge frenzy, a man possessed by the urgent need to build this thing he didn’t necessarily understand, and given funds to do so by a government that was all too willing to pour money into a frenzy if they could reap the results. The building was sentient, to a higher level than Ropey was, but there were other bits of magic as well, defenses and systems that kept its prisoners in, not all of which were known to us.

I looked at the grass around us, and could just barely see the areas where foundations had once stood. This place had been lived in, once, though it had little in the way of natural resources, and aside from the prison, there wasn’t much point to anyone living on it. With the prison abandoned and entirely autonomous, my guess was that there was a feedback loop of people leaving, which caused a collapse in services, which caused more people to leave, until everyone had gone back to either Anglecynn or the Zorish Isles.

Solace tapped her staff once on the ground and over the course of half a minute, various small birds began to flock to her. She didn’t send them out at once, but instead turned her staff sideways and rested it on her shoulders, where the birds patiently waited.

“We’ll fall back to here if this doesn’t go to plan and we get separated,” said Amaryllis. She was dressed in her immobility plate, with her helmet held in one arm. Her emotional mask was as firmly in place as it had been before our vacation, hiding tension, doubt, and fear, leaving only serene, iron will. I still didn’t have a good model of what it was like to be Amaryllis, whether she was forcing everything down, whether she was just acting like she was forcing it down, or whether those emotions were like cloaks to be worn if needed.

“I don’t want to run at the first sign of things going south,” I said. “We might have to fight, but so long as it’s a winnable, recoverable fight, I don’t want retreat to be our watchword.”

“Sometimes you don’t know the fight is unwinnable until you’ve lost it,” said Fenn. Most entads had some minor ability to repair and restore themselves, but her armor had been a total loss, and she was in the same fatigues she’d been wearing when we first met. Save for the glove, and slightly longer hair, she looked almost the same. It was weird to feel nostalgia about something that had only happened a month ago, especially since it was at an objectively awful point in my life, but that was what I felt.

“We’ll hope that it doesn’t come to a fight,” said Amaryllis. “The penitentiary should be reasonable. It didn’t allow much in the way of outside influence over its interior space, but it did allow visitors, and some level of negotiation was possible.”

So far as we knew, it wouldn’t allow visitors with weapons; those we had mostly because the penitentiary had a reputation for being unruly even when it was being used as a functional prison, and it wasn’t clear what more than a century of isolation would have done in terms of changes in personality or drift in alignment, both apparently real concerns when it came to sentient magic items (or buildings). That made this whole mission dangerous, but in theory it could be as simple as walking in, sitting down to have a visit with Fallatehr, and getting enough information that I could unlock some kind of soul magic skill without actually having to break him out.

So we approached, walking slowly, stopping every once in awhile so that Grak could check for unseen magic, and then continuing on. The statues at the top of the tower walls all had their heads turned toward us, and as we approached, they tracked us with open mouths. Based on that, I assumed that these were some kind of active defense, though this was one of the areas where our knowledge was thin. I wasn’t counting on the game to throw us level-appropriate encounters, but I was hoping that it wouldn’t just perfectly set us up to walk into a TPK. The penitentiary was supposed to have a strong preference toward less-lethal means. (I don’t want to play the politically-
correct-semantics game too much, but there’s a huge difference between the implications of ‘non-lethal’ and ‘less-lethal’ when you’re staring down a thirty-foot tall golem.)

We found ourselves staring down a thirty-foot tall golem with metallic eyes, who stood as the gate of the enormous wall around the penitentiary. Not at the gate, as the gate; there was a simple gap in the tall, decorated wall, and the golem sat there with his two giant fists pressed against the earth, perfectly blocking the entrance. The wall had overlapping metal scales, not in a set pattern, but with curves, coils, and flourishes. The whole thing looked like it had taken thousands of man-hours to finish. By contrast, the golem was simple, with the kind of detail you’d expect on something carved out of wood in an afternoon. Unless my eyes were deceiving me, I was pretty sure that it was made of tightly-packed dirt, held together by who-knows-what magical energy. The eyes were the only thing different, giant, perfectly-reflective orbs that spun to follow us. We stopped a hundred feet away.

“Friendly-looking chap,” muttered Fenn. “Grak, is he magical?”

Grak raised his monocle quickly and lowered it. “Same base magic as the walls and building,” he said. “It’s part of this place.”

“You were supposed to deadpan it and tell us that it’s magical,” said Fenn.

“Sorry,” said Grak. He turned to Amaryllis. “I was given the impression that autonomy did not include fully mobile agents. It was supposed to accomplish its goals through internal systems.”

“We don’t know if it’s fully mobile,” said Amaryllis. “That’s a good guess though. If so, this wasn’t what we expected. Do we need to re-evaluate?”

“I’m in favor of continuing on,” I said.

“Second,” said Fenn.

“Third,” said Solace.

“Grak?” asked Amaryllis.

“Amaryllis,” answered Grak.

“Keep going, or re-evaluate?” asked Amaryllis.

“We’ve already got a majority,” said Fenn. “Let’s not undermine our democracy.”

“Grak is the expert in defenses,” said Amaryllis. “That also means that he’s the expert in threat analysis. I want to hear what he has to say, rather than just taking a vote and not thinking.”

I felt a little bit of sheepishness at that. I thought that I had been thinking. We’d assumed there might be some amount of drift, and the information that we had was rather thin, so this wasn’t very suspect as yet.

“What do the winds and birds tell you?” Grak asked Solace.

Solace squinted. “Not much lives in there,” she said. “It’s hard to get a sense of it. I could ask one of my bird friends to take a look,” she nodded to the small birds that lined her staff, “But I wouldn’t want to anger this place.”

“Do it,” nodded Amaryllis. This, I noted, she did not put to a vote. She had been trying, but her
default state was one of command, and it was, for her, a hard habit to break -- not that I had any objections, in this case.

Without any visible sign of having been told to, one of the tiny birds flitted off from Solace’s staff and zipped across the distance, up and over the wall. One of the statues on top of the walls spun its head whip-fast, paused for a second while making a high-pitched whine, then shot a thin green laser from its mouth, which pierced the bird through and sent its flaming body tumbling down. The statue turned back to face us, mouth aimed right at us, as all the statues had been since we’d been close enough to see them.

Fenn coughed politely. “Is it too early to make a joke about that bird’s place in the pecking order?” she asked. I could see her eyes moving quickly from statue to statue, and the way she held her gloved hand, open just wide enough that she could have her artillery bow in it at a moment’s notice.

“Hopefully that will be interpreted as a test,” said Amaryllis.

“That was a test!” Fenn called to the gate-golem. It showed no response.

“We could fly to the Zorish Isles and try to get more information there,” said Amaryllis. “I know that Joon is in failing health, but we took the time we needed for research before going after the unicorn. If those statues are turned on us, I don’t like our odds.”

“I could send more birds,” said Solace. She sounded less pained over the idea than I would have thought, but after watching her with the flowers, I already knew that she didn’t have that much aversion to crimes against nature.

“One is a test,” said Amaryllis. “I worry that more will be seen as probing for weakness, because they would be.”

“There was a one-second pause,” said Grak. “That’s something. It would help to know how long before it can fire again.” He lifted his monocle out of its pocket. “Two more birds. Then I should be able to ward against it.”

Solace grimaced slightly, but two more birds flew off from her staff toward the wall. This time the statues were proactive, and turned toward the perceived threat before the birds had even crossed the wall. The birds flitted and twirled, and managed to dodge the first and second shots at them before being taken down by the third; the laser-fire came from all four of the statues within range, again with a high-pitched whine as they charged. When both birds had crashed to the ground, flaming, the nearest statue to us turned our way and fired at the ground a foot in front of Solace.

“Well, that was our warning,” said Amaryllis. “Grak?”

Grak lowered his monocle. “A one second pause before firing. Three seconds between firings. That’s a feint; the true refresh is faster. If given time I can ward against the effect.”

“Which might provoke them,” said Amaryllis.

“I think we should talk to the gate,” I said, nodding in the direction of the huge golem (and wondering, idly, how many experience points it might be worth if we were forced to kill it). “Where we are now, it’s pretty clear that we’re not safe anyway.”

We moved up, slowly, watching as the metal orbs that served as the golem’s eyes turned in their sockets. I looked closer at the fists that barred our way, noting that they were exactly wide enough that not even a mouse would have been able to squeak through.
“Hail, and well met,” called a woman’s voice from the other side of the golem. A dirt-golem climbed up over the gate-golem’s back and sat upon its shoulder. It was of a similar make, but much smaller, about Solace’s size. It had more proportionate limbs, and no visible eyes or eye sockets. What it did have was a mouth set into the packed earth of its face, white teeth, pink tongue, and all. “What brings you five this way today?”

I looked at the others, and nodded at Amaryllis. Diplomacy was her thing, not mine, and I was hoping that was one of her skills that had increased through Twinned Souls.

“Are you the voice of the Amoureux Penitentiary?” asked Amaryllis, raising her voice slightly to cross the distance up to where it sat.

“A voice,” the dirt-golem called down. “Have you come to visit, or to stay?”

“We hope to visit,” said Amaryllis. She touched her armored chest. “I am Amaryllis Penndraig, most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, Princess of the Kingdom of Anglecynn.”

“Whether Uther is here, I cannot say,” called the golem.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “It isn’t Uther Penndraig we seek. We’re looking for a summer elf imprisoned here, Fallatehr Whiteshell.”

“Oh, yes, him I know well,” spoke the golem. “If you wish to come inside, you may.” The gate-golem’s hands turned and unfolded, making a pathway between surprisingly slender legs. Beyond that was a well-tended garden, with more green than we’d so far seen on the rocky island.

“We appreciate your hospitality,” said Amaryllis with a small bow. She looked at me with a raised eyebrow, and in response I started forward, leading the way.

It was impossible to tell whether there was something off about the penitentiary and its golems, because we didn’t know what state it had been in when it was fully functional. Even when it had first been built it probably had its quirks, it was basically a building-size magic item for cripes sake, and on Aerb some of those were weird, impossible things that didn’t feel beholden to concepts like “making sense”. The jar of marzipan fairies had shown that much. Maybe this place had always had golems made of dirt, and their contrast with the rest of the decor was just the way things were.

I passed through the huge hands, thinking about how easily they could crush me if given half the chance, and trying to keep on my toes, ready to move, without actually displaying distrust. I relaxed slightly when I was through, and the eyeless golem hopped down from its friend’s back to stand beside me.

“Behold,” it said, gesturing to the buildings in front of us. “A home for those who’ve gone astray.”

There were no people around, only golems, these more human-sized than the one with the mouth. Some were working with the plants, trimming plants with shears or pulling weeds, but most were just standing there, watching us, each with a single, silvery metal eye. They weren’t quite surrounding us in a defensive semi-circle, but it was close to that. Figuring out their combat abilities on the fly while dodging laser fire wasn’t something I had much of a hankering for.

I hadn’t been divested of my sword yet, which was a plus, but at the same time, that said some worrying things about the laxness of security. We wanted security to be tight enough that any remaining inmates who hadn’t died of old age wouldn’t be a threat to us, but also loose enough that we would be able to steal a prisoner from inside. That was a pretty fine line to walk.

“I’m not really liking this,” said Fenn. “There’s just something about having heavy weapons aimed at
me that makes me nervous."

“Spider sense tingling?” I asked.

“If it was, I wouldn’t be standing here jabbering about it,” said Fenn.

We stood there for a moment, but the ‘voice’ of the Amoureux Penitentiary didn’t move. After a
time, it began to hum a gratingly dissonant tune.

“Is there something that we’re waiting for?” asked Amaryllis.

“Your desired prisoner was within the gymnasium,” said the golem. “We wait for him to be moved
to visitation, where you may make parlance with him.” Its speech-patterns had switched following
the period of silence, which made me more nervous than if it had continued on with the same
awkward cadance it was using before. A predictably broken intelligence I thought we could handle,
but an unpredictably broken one I was less sure about. Variations in speech like that didn’t
necessarily mean anything about the mind (or mind-equivalent), but they were suggestive.

“Are there any restrictions on visitation?” asked Amaryllis.

I reached over and quickly placed my hand over Fenn’s mouth when I saw her about to say
something, because I’d seen the look in her eyes that usually meant she was about to make a joke.
She smiled at me and licked my hand, but otherwise seemed content enough to have been
preempted.

“You will engage in conversation with the prisoner for four hours at the upper bound,” said the
golem. Up close, its mouth was disturbingly human; it didn’t just have a simulacrum of a mouth, it
had all of the interior musculature, membranes, and teeth that I would have expected. Maybe some of
that was necessary to actually create sound (which implied lungs, a diaphragm, etc.), but it seemed
like overkill, especially given that magic existed. “You will be diverged from him by a complete
ward, save for the transfer of sound between your mouths and ears.”

And that didn’t speak terribly well to our ability to remove the soul mage from prison, nor to giving
him something that he wanted in exchange for a few lessons. But if we left this place having learned
little and only wasted half a day of our time, then I would probably still make a mark in the win
column. Doing something risky and having it come to nothing was, to me, a pretty acceptable
outcome.

A dirt-golem came out from the largest doors of the main building, pushing them open only slightly
to come through. It moved toward us at a brisk walking speed, singular metal eyeball focused our
way. I noticed another dirt golem move to the door and use a cloth to wipe away the dirt left on the
handle; that sort of care was probably why the outside space we were in was immaculately clean.

The dirt golem stopped close to us and gave a slight bow.

“The prisoner had a missive that he would like to relate,” said the golem serving as our guide, the
voice of the Amoureux Penitentiary, “He could not relate it in a language that I could pass on, so
inscribed it upon this --”

“Okay, I kick the door open,” said Arthur.

“Alright, where is everyone standing?” I asked.

“Fuck,” said Reimer.
“Well don’t say *that,*” said Greg, “Then he knows that you’re going to try to game it.”

“I already knew that,” I said. “But if I had asked for your positions as you approached the door, then you would know that something was up.”

“Yeah, like how in old cartoons the cel-shading let you know that some particular bit of rock was going to move and wasn’t part of the background,” said Arthur.

“So place your figs,” I said, gesturing at the dry erase battlemat. “But do it as you would have *in-character,* and I will remind you that no one was taking this seriously as a threat, so you can’t retroactively have been on high alert and optimally positioned for a trap and slash or encounter.”

The dirt golem that had come forward from the main building began unfolding its hand as the other spoke, and Fenn moved in front of me a half second before I saw the small purple crystal it was holding in its hand. Time seemed to go slower then, as my mind first recognized it as a void crystal, then made sense of it as a threat, and finally parsed that Fenn had moved in front of me. Amaryllis and Solace were both further in front of me, close to the main entrance, and both were moving in different directions, but Fenn was shielding me with her body, and I couldn’t let her --

A solid steel wall popped out from her outstretched hand and the soft, subdued whump of the improvised void grenade happened just after that. The first thing that I heard was Solace screaming in pain, and then the high whine of the statues charging to fire. Fenn lunged backward and put up another wall of steel behind us, as I reached for one of the bones in my bandolier and pulled down as much SPD as possible from it. I was up and moving as soon as the whining sounds stopped.

Solace was slumped on the ground, dark green blood pooling around her. Most of her back and legs were missing, exposing bone and muscle. Amaryllis was unhurt and racing across the grounds, toward the mass of dirt-golems that were moving toward us, her helmet now firmly in place and the blade of her sword flickered into existence. She was bleeding from the leg, where a substantial fraction of her armor had been removed; the last I’d seen of her before the blast, she had been moving behind the dirt-golem that had been speaking to us. Grak had been the straggler, further away from us, and he trundled his way toward the barricades that Fenn had set up. He was bleeding from two places, but not as heavily as I would have feared.

I ran to Solace and pulled her body behind the makeshift barricade, leaving a smear of her dark green blood on the flagstones. Her skin had been transformed into hard bark, but if that was what she’d tried with druidic magic, it had apparently not helped her. She had moved her cloak around and clutched it to her chest in order to shield it with her body, but she was either unconscious or dead, and either way wasn’t holding onto it anymore, so the cloak of leaves trailed after her, becoming bloodied in the process.

Fenn fired an artillery shot at one of the statues, using heavyweight, blunt arrowheads, then ducked back down behind the barricade with us as the whine of the statues picked up again. I pulled more SPD from one of the bones and left again, this time moving toward where Amaryllis had engaged the dirt-golems in combat. Her sword was flickering rapidly as she spun and ducked through them, and with her every movement she put more of them between her and the statues.

“Aim for their centers!” she called as soon as she saw me.

“We have to go!” I called back, even as I waded in with the Anyblade.

It was my first time actually fighting with a blade since I’d gotten the new blade-bound bonuses, and the difference would probably have been overwhelming if it wasn’t all muscle memory. The dirt
golems were mostly unarmed, throwing punches or trying to grab at me, and I danced between them with fluid motions, nimbly avoiding them and striking out with my sword at all the opportunities that seemed to be presenting themselves. I could tell that the dirt golems hadn’t been built for combat just from how they moved, but there was a huge amount of weight behind their swings.

When my sword cleaved into them, it stuck into the dirt, and I was only able to remove it by quickly shrinking the Anyblade to pull it out and then expanding it back to its full size again. Amaryllis was having more luck than I was; the ones she was fighting had dark brown liquid leaking from the holes she was putting into them, and a few had already dropped around her. I switched up my tactics and began using the Anyblade in its largest form; Monkey Grip applied even when wielding two-handed, which meant that I had what should have been an impractically enormous six-foot sword. I swung it through the air like I had been born with a blade in my hand, and when I struck one of the dirt golems with a full swing, my sword went halfway through its body, causing a thick spurt of dark brown liquid as it collapsed to the ground.

**Basic Dirt Golem defeated!**

After that, my new strategy was to duck and roll out of the way, getting enough distance that I could wind up for a huge swing with the massive sword. The dirt golems were either too slow or stupid to dodge; the best they could do was to put up an arm in defense, but a burst of blood magic to enhance the force of my swing was enough to both cut off the limb and strike to their heart. The power of it left my right hand shaking with pain -- I couldn’t feel anything from my left. The messages kept piling up, not just from the golems Amaryllis and I defeated, but from skills going from 20 to 21 and hitting that cap.

I took a few hits. The golems had been converging on Amaryllis and I from all directions, and sometimes it was simply a matter of needing to take the hit or be overwhelmed and unable to continue with the power strike strategy, which required a fair bit of room. Each time, the hit was absorbed by my armor, leaving the blue metal a bleach-white but otherwise not affecting me at all. Twice I was struck with a laser, but it only left a small white mark on the metal. Amaryllis was taking hits too, but less gracefully; she could lock her armor in place, but that wasn’t an absolute proof against the impacts, and every time she did it, she was stopping herself dead in her tracks, unable to dodge or attack.

It became a slog, but one that we were winning, and there was a feedback loop of victory, where each golem defeated meant that it was easier to defeat the others, even as I began to grow exhausted. I glanced to Fenn and Grak and saw a dirt golem slam his fist against an invisible wall just before Grak buried his axe in the creature’s torso. Grak wasn’t nearly as effective as Amaryllis and I, but he was fortified. Three of the four statues in range were gone, and as I watched, Fenn fired another artillery shot at the fourth. The arrows struck hard enough to chip and crack the stone, and while the statue didn’t quite topple to the ground, it stopped in place with its mouth wide, no longer shooting lasers down at us.

Then I swung my sword again, dropping another golem to the ground,

**Basic Dirt Golem defeated!**

and that was it, we had killed everything there was to kill. I glanced toward the gate golem, but it hadn’t budged, save to close its enormous hands.

I ran to where Fenn and Grak were and knelt down to look Solace over, a hand already going to one of my few remaining bones. Her skin was no longer bark, having reverted back to its natural light green.
“She’s dead,” said Fenn. “Has been since you brought her here.” I could see dark green crantek blood on Fenn’s hands and staining her fatigues.

“A person isn’t dead until their soul is gone,” I replied, “We’ve got thirty minutes to think of something, we can put her in the bottle, --”

I reached down and undid the leafy cloak around Solace’s neck, put it around my own neck, and once it was in place, reached into it as though absentmindedly drawing something from a pocket. To my relief, my fingers found the bottle and pulled it out. I set the bottle, with the forest inside it, down onto the ground.

“We can’t put her in, Joon, there’s no magic there to catch her, nothing to stop her fall, you’d be dropping her a mile to smash up her corpse,” said Fenn.

“Amaryllis has the immobility plate,” I said, “She could --”

“No,” said Amaryllis, “I would be trapped if the locus couldn’t somehow revive her. We used her magic to get in and out of the bottle.” Amaryllis took the void rifle from her back and leveled it at Solace’s head. Thunk. “Fenn, nail and bottle.”

Fenn held out Sable and a small glass bottle with a glass stopper in it appeared, followed by a nail with runes as soon as Amaryllis had grabbed the bottle. I watched, feeling numb, as Amaryllis slid the nail into the hole she’d made and extracted Solace’s soul from her body. When that was done, both the nail and bottle went back into Fenn’s glove, and after that, what remained of Solace as well.

(And during the battle, I had actually been feeling gleeful at the way that I’d been moving, reveling in the power that was now mine, high on the rush of inflicting pain and damage, and on each message the game gave me about another one down. I’d forgotten, for minutes, that something had happened to Solace.)

“So the plan is that we blow through this place and murder everyone inside?” asked Fenn.

“We should go,” I said. “Regroup, try to …” I looked down at the bottle. The last druid on Aerb was dead, and the locus couldn’t induct another when it had such a small, tamed scrap of land to call its own. And now the bottle really was a closed system, one that seemed like it was going to reach a failure state sooner rather than later.

“The locus is going to die without our intervention,” said Amaryllis. “At the moment, we have no intervention to administer. If we leave, the penitentiary will have time to rebuild and repair. We could fight this battle better the second time, from a position of knowledge, but we’d still have to fight it again. We have clocks running against us.”

**Quest Updated: Taking Root - The world’s last druid has died, leaving the last locus severely constrained and untended. Eventually the imperfectly self-regulating cycles of life within the bottle will fail and the locus will die, unless you can find a way to remove the locus and transplant it into the wider world, where it was always meant to be. (Companion Quest)**

“Fuck,” I said.

“A careful observer would have known that Amaryllis intended us to stay,” said Fenn. “If she hadn’t, then she’d have had the key out from the moment she came over here.”

“Don’t start with me,” said Amaryllis with a glare.
“Sorry,” said Fenn with a shrug that didn’t read as remotely apologetic. “I’m in a people-murdering mood, that always gets me feisty.”

“She was a good woman,” said Grak. His eyes were fixed on the puddle of green blood. He hefted his dirt-smeared axe. “I believe she would want us to see this through.”

I stared at the three of them, my eyes flicking from one to the other. I was afraid of what we’d find within the penitentiary, given that the prisoner we were after had enough free rein to send a void bomb out to us and that the security systems, or maybe just the penitentiary itself, had been thoroughly subverted against us. But we’d been caught off-guard this time, and if there were more fights in the future -- well, who was I kidding, there were sure to be more fights in the future -- then at least those fights would be ones that we could approach on a full war footing, with no fear of offending our now-hostile host.

“We’re going to need to be on the lookout for traps,” I said. “Not just magical ones, but mechanical too. And revenge is not our priority here, we need at least enough information to kickstart my own knowledge of soul manipulation. We can’t kill whoever sent that bomb our way until after that.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” asked Amaryllis. “Let’s go.”
I tried to think about it in terms of tactics.

Solace had been versatile, able to switch between control, utility, and being a heavy hitter basically at will. When we’d fought against Larkspur, she’d taken out the majority of men on her own. She had been able to provide healing that far surpassed what I was capable of, and with her gone, a wide variety of potential injuries turned back from recoverable to fully lethal. That was especially the case if I was the one who suffered the injury. We had lost her scouting ability, easy access to the interior of the bottle, and fast travel in the form of bird flight. So tactically, I was pretty sure that I’d have to call it the single biggest loss that our party could possibly have suffered. We still had the bottle, hidden in the leafy cloak that Fenn was now wearing, but that was now nothing more than another burden.

And on a personal level? I had known her for a little more than a week, but I had liked her, even if druidic magic was a little maddening, and even if her way of seeing the world felt foreign to me, even on Aerb. I had the barest sketch of her role in the team, as something like ‘team mom’, or ‘the tempered one’, or … I didn’t know, that was the problem, and now I never would.

(There were also all the other familiar feelings that I took to be part and parcel with death, the unfairness of it, the might-have-beens, the rage against the gods, a mixture of anger and disgust at a world that allowed such a thing to happen, and a deep-down trembling sorrow that threatened to bring tears. It was impossible for me to separate out how much of that was Solace and how much was just the way that Arthur’s death had rewired the functioning of my brain. Those thoughts were burned in from overuse, scorched on my mind through nine months of thinking the same old things as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, and failing at falling asleep.)

“Don’t let this distract you,” said Amaryllis as we made our way to the door.

“Distract me,” I said, not liking the taste of the words. “She’s dead. I might be able to recover her, if I can work fast enough, or -- or you said that soul decay in a glass enclosure takes three years, I could figure something out in that time, how to graft one soul onto another and preserve part of her, or how to shove a soul into a body, or something, what kind of god will I make if I can’t?”

“Uther was never a god,” said Amaryllis. “He was a man. Some things were beyond him. He’s not on record as having ever raised someone from the dead, and there were people that he desperately would have wanted to. If Uther at the height of his power couldn’t bring back Vervain, then I don’t think that you’ll be able to bring back Solace, not if you only have three years, at the most, to do it.”

I wanted to lie and tell her that I had a quest, but I was a horrible liar, and that was a horrible idea for a whole host of reasons. The fact that the lie even entered into my head meant that she was probably right, I was going to let Solace’s gruesome death distract me from the things right in front of me that really needed doing, like saving the locus, or healing my own soul, or, even in the short term, doing things like paying attention to the prison and whatever horrors it had in store for us. I tried to snap my attention away from the green blood still visible on my hands and ignore the slight tremor I saw there.

We were at the doors, the large ones that the bomb-carrying dirt golem had stepped through. Grak looked them over with a monocle, but the examination yielded little.

“We don’t yet know whether the prison was tricked or subverted,” said Grak.
“Does it matter?” asked Fenn. “Hostile is as hostile does. That was my rule, last time I was in prison.”

“If it still operates according to a set of rules, we might be able to use those rules,” Grak replied. “If there are rules, we will face different threats than if someone has taken over the entire system.”

“We can’t trust anything that we’ve seen so far,” I said. “And we don’t want to count on reflexes or telegraphed attacks to protect us from another void bomb. Fenn doesn’t have an infinite number of inch-thick steel shields.”

“I have five more,” said Fenn. “The one we set up to block laser fire was practically unhurt, so call that six total. Those lasers were good against unprotected bird-flesh, but not up to penetrating steel.”

“So we leap-frog forward, one shield at a time?” I asked. “Or just pick them up and move with them?”

“Too cautious,” said Amaryllis, looking the door over. “The golems are gone now, but I would bet that this isn’t the only way in, and once we’re in the depths of this place, they can come at us from all directions at once in the least favorable possible conditions for us.”

“You want a blitz?” I asked.

“A what?” asked Fenn.

“An intense, rushing attack?” I asked. *Come on, that was one that Aerb’s creator should have had some made up reason to import over.*

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“No,” replied Grak. “A blitz only makes sense if we aren’t expecting traps.”

“If we expect traps and operate as such, then we’re going to get hit harder by all the defenses that we know are there,” said Amaryllis. “We’re trading defense against the known for defense against the unknown.”

“And the unknown just killed Solace,” I said. There was no good place to wipe the blood from my hands. My armor was all metal, either mail or plate, with nowhere to get passably clean. I could have asked Fenn, but didn’t, because the denial of reality was one of the ways I dealt with death.

“Grak, do you have any read on what waits for us inside there?” asked Amaryllis. “How many more of the golems?”

“The golems are different,” said Grak. “They are the same magic at a different wavelength.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” asked Fenn. “We’re going to need to go through this door sooner rather than later.”

“Entads can change over time,” said Grak. “They can have different aspects. It is possible that there was some drift in alignment. However, there was also drift in function. If independently moving creatures are its current design, earlier designs might be more like the statues. We might also be looking at something else entirely.”

“Meaning a full spectrum of threat?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied Grak. “That’s possible.”
“Shit,” said Amaryllis. “Fine, then no -- what was it?”

“Blitz,” I replied.

“Then no blitz,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll take this slow. Fenn, let us know what you’re feeling.”

“Angry and impatient,” she answered.

“I meant in terms of luck,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“I know,” replied Fenn, gripping her bow. “Now are we going to open this door or not?”

Grak put his monocle up to his eye and nodded. I moved forward and grabbed the handle as Fenn raised her bow, and I pulled back the door with my sword raised, expecting a fight.

Instead, we looked at a long hallway with thirty-foot high ceilings. High windows filled the upper twenty feet. Beyond that, the large, open dome that dominated the entire building was waiting. There was far more greenery than I had expected, an entire garden growing under the grey light of the overcast sky above. Nothing moved within, and I couldn’t see any signs of dirt golems either. In fact, I couldn’t even see signs of tracks across the flagstones of the floor. My eyes weren’t drawn to that though, they were drawn to the four suits of armor that lined the hallways, each of them tucked into little alcoves of their own. They were made of brass, with dark blue lining to them, holding swords but unmoving.

Those suits of armor are going to attack us,” I said as soon as I saw them.

“No,” said Grak, lowering his monocle. “They’re just decorative.”

“They’re going to attack us,” I repeated. “It’s … if you accept that this world reflects the tabletop games that I spent my life playing --”

“I don’t,” said Grak. “They aren’t magical.”

I stared at him. “But you can’t see through the metal,” I said, “There could be something in there.”

“On it,” said Fenn. She raised her bow and fired an arrow at the nearest suit of armor, puncturing straight through its torso. It didn’t leak mud and showed no signs of reacting. “Satisfied?”

“No,” I said. “It’s … there’s no magic in there?”

“It’s less than the baseline for this place,” said Grak. “The armors will not move. Entads all have their points of visible, focused power.”

“Fine,” I said. But if it were my old group from Kansas, they would have spent a half hour dismantling those suits of armor from a distance, in the same way that they would bash in the skull of every corpse that they passed, just to make sure. I could fully fathom that this might not be a trap; that would have been my style, to set up an obvious trap just for the joy of a fake out. If not for that thought, I might have objected a little bit more, because obviously, and in spite of what Grak had said, this was a trap.

We started moving and were halfway down the hallway when Fenn said, “Fuck,” and fired her first arrow. I didn’t have time to curse at Grak, because I was already moving too, extending the Anyblade to its full, ridiculous length and slamming it hard into a suit of armor just as it started moving. I dented the armor, which pitched the suit to the side, but where that kind of blow would probably have left a person screaming in pain, the armor just got up, bringing its sword up in a
smooth, practiced motion and settling into a stance that spoke to years of training.

I’d grown a little over-confident in my swordfighting abilities over the past few days, and that was made clear to me when I went toe-to-toe with a living suit of armor that clearly held a lot of expertise. I was using the Anyblade to its fullest, allowing it to shrink and grow in response to each attack, sometimes curving so that I could make a parry, but I was being forced to move quickly and unable to make much of a counter-attack, or at least, not one that could make it through the armor. And even if I did, the large dent I’d put in its side with my first strike didn’t seem to be slowing it down any.

**Amoureux Sentry defeated!**

“Decapitate!” called Amaryllis from behind me, but I couldn’t look back to see what results I could expect from that, and ‘hit him in the head’ didn’t seem like it was all that useful of advice against what was effectively an expert swordsman. I parried another attack and shrunk the Anyblade down to a one-handed sword, then touched my restocked supply of bones in their bandolier with my deformed hand. I could barely feel them, but a connection was all it took, so I waited for an opportunity and pulled down SPD at what I hoped was the right time. I thrust the sword up, narrowing it to the thinnest possible point, and pierced the armor where the helmet joined to the gorget, putting my entire weight behind it, including a rush of force from the hammering pulse of my blood.

I was rewarded with a cracking sound like wood being split, and the suit of armor tumbled backward, still moving, but imperfectly so. I leapt on it, keeping my sword lodged just beneath where I’d expect a skull to be, and bore down with all my weight, again putting blood magic into it, and that was enough for it to stop moving and drop its sword clattering to the ground.

**Amoureux Sentry defeated!**

When I finally spun back to the others, I saw Grak on the ground, bleeding from the face, Amaryllis pulling her sword from the neck of one of the suits of armor, another suit in a crumbled heap on the ground, and Fenn backed into a corner with the fourth, doing her best with a sword and shield, which was frankly not all that good. Hair was stuck to her forehead where sweat dripped down, and my brief glimpse of the fight -- before running her way -- was enough to let me know that she was relying on luck more than actual skill.

I grabbed the suit of armor from behind and threw it to the ground, then went at it with uncoordinated strikes meant to keep it down more than to do any actual damage. With it prone and me striking from above, we were nearly evenly matched, at least until Amaryllis came over and began flickering her sword on and off. It didn’t take long for her blade to intersect something vital, and it stopped almost at once.

**Amoureux Sentry defeated!**

I ran over to Grak, who was still not moving. The cut on his cheek was bad, down to the bone, but I thought it was probably what had happened to the other side of his face, which was swelling and red, that had knocked him out. He was still breathing, and I went through the bones in my bandolier one-by-one, visibly watching him improve. Concussions weren’t at all good for humans, and I assumed the same was true of dwarves, but I wasn’t sure that it was the kind of thing that healing someone with bones could actually fix.
After the fifth bone, Grak opened his eyes and started grabbing at the ground, then after seeing that it was just us, sat up and rubbed at his head.

“You should have fucking listened,” I said as I moved away from him and over to Fenn, who was nursing her wounds and waiting for me. She pulled bones from my bandolier and replaced them from her glove as I worked. I left a smear of green blood on her and felt the sudden need to collapse in a puddle. I kept on going through force of will.

“I should have listened,” said Grak from behind me, “I apologize.”

“We could have dealt with that whole fucking mess without risk,” I said, turning on him and jabbing a finger in his direction. “We just wasted time and resources because you refused to see what’s been in front of your face this entire time, the thing that I’ve been trying to tell you, and because everyone treated you like a fucking authority, because I didn’t put my foot down, we almost died. I saved your fucking life. It’s adventuring 101, every statue is going to come to life, every suit of armor is going to move, you don’t leave that shit lying around, it’s the same thing with corpses, you put a hole in their head as you go by so that they don’t rise up as zombies --”

“Joon,” said Fenn.

“I know,” I said, “We don’t use the Z word.”

“You’re being an ass,” said Fenn. I turned to look at her. “He’s not going to say it, because he was wrong, and Mary’s not going to say it, because she doesn’t want another fight with you, which means that it falls to me to tell you that you’re being an ass. And I love you, but you’re being an ass.”

I took a steadying breath. “We could have died,” I said.

“I apologize,” said Grak. “Aerb should not work the way your games do.” He sniffed slightly.

“Well, it does,” I said. I almost gave one of the suits a kick to let out some frustration before remembering that I was wearing sneakers and it was hard metal.

Grak was right though. Most of the time, a statue was just a statue, and a suit of armor was just on display as a status symbol. It was one thing to say that the world shared a lot of similarities with the games that I DMed, and another entirely to say that it was fundamentally warped around me to conform to the conventions of the genre, and not just the standard conventions, but the conventions as I saw them. I could understand that as a hard pill to swallow. If you didn’t buy that, then it fundamentally didn’t make sense to believe that these particular suits of armor were going to animate, or at least it didn’t make sense to believe it at a higher rate than suggested by the other evidence.

“Why were they dormant?” asked Grak. He asked it in my direction, like I would have a clue. “Why didn’t they run out to attack, if they were mobile?” I couldn’t tell whether he was trying to mount a post facto defense, or if this was him genuinely seeking the solution to a problem. I choose to rein in my frustration and pretend that it was the latter.

“I don’t know,” I said. “If I were forced to guess, then … huh.”

Well, because if you were making a proper dungeon, which this effectively was, then you couldn’t just have the party fight everyone all at once, you had to split it up into a large number of roughly level-appropriate encounters, because otherwise there would be a long slog through a mountain of enemies followed by looting the place blind, and proper game design dictated that you give as much variety as feasible so that when people got bored of the fighting, there was a puzzle, or a social
encounter, and these were layered for optimal enjoyment.

But if you just had each room be its own encounter, then people would naturally wonder, “Well, why didn’t they hear the fighting? Why, when responding with overwhelming force seems like the winning strategy, would they not do that?”, and there were plenty of answers to that, but there did have to be answers, unless you wanted to be the kind of coward who threw up your hands and said that it was just a game.

“You said that entads could change over time?” I asked Grak.

“Yes,” he replied. His eyes were scanning the large dome and looking at the greenery there. Standing in this hallway wasn’t making any of us feel great, but focusing on a problem was helping me to cool down a little bit, and I was hoping that the same would be true of Grak. “Most entads are static, but some change. It’s more common for sentient entads to change.”

“Then my guess is that either there are independent parts of the prison working at cross-purposes, or parts of it that were set up long ago that the prison has diverged away from. The statues outside are of a different make than the dirt golems, it’s possible that they operate independently from each other.” I paused for a moment. “Plus whatever prisoners are here have been here for hundreds of years, and if they haven’t managed to escape yet, then they’ve probably at least learned the ins and outs of the prison.”

Grak frowned. “It is … plausible,” he replied. The pause felt uncomfortably long. “Entad architecture is rare. Sentient entads are rare. Sentient architecture, there perhaps a hundred in Aerb are. I have not them studied.” It was the first time I could recall hearing his Anglish slip in the entire time I’d known him. His face was screwed up in concentration.

“What would that mean, in practical terms?” asked Amaryllis.

“Bite-sized threats,” said Fenn with a nod. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and come across some clashing factions.”

“Let’s get moving then,” said Amaryllis. “Everyone is healed up? Are we fine on bones?”

“Just over two hundred left,” said Fenn, wiggling the fingers of her glove. “I’d thought that would be more than enough, but –” She stopped and glanced at me. “I didn’t think that Juniper would be our only source of repeat healing, and the fairies are only for legitimate I’m-going-to-die emergencies.” Because Solace was supposed to be doing the heavy lifting, and now she was gone.

“Then we’ll go slow and cautious,” said Amaryllis. “We have a simple objective, let’s not complicate things.”

“Contact,” said Fenn as soon as the words had left Amaryllis’ mouth, and it wasn’t quite unbelievable that what Amaryllis had said would coincide exactly with something coming around the corner, but it did seem uniquely improbable, unless the enemy was listening in on our conversation and wanted us to have a chance to finish talking.

“I wish to parlay!” called a high, woman’s voice from just out of view. An arm made of dirt waved at us from just beyond the end of the hallway. I could see the point of Fenn’s arrow tracking it. Amaryllis looked to me and Grak with a raised eyebrow. “We would be willing to talk,” she called back to the golem. Fenn lowered her arrow with an exasperated sigh and kept her arrow nocked. We were all on war footing; I’d drawn my Anyblade without even thinking about it.

The dirt golem sidled into view, its too-human mouth giving us something disturbingly close to a
“Please, if I may,” it said, “I believe we got off on the wrong foot with our affray.”

“What happened, from your perspective?” asked Amaryllis. Her sword was in her hand, and she flickered it off, which to me sent mixed messages given how lethal it could be when it reappeared, but it seemed like it was intended as a defusing gesture. I lowered my own weapon, but didn’t sheath it.

“There was a problem with the message I was trying to convey,” said the golem, turning its head slightly. “My voice was lost, the statues reacted, and I thought it best to enter into melee.” That was much faster confirmation of my theory than I was expecting; the entity controlling the dirt golem considered itself different from the statues.

“And you’ve reconsidered?” asked Amaryllis.

“You are formidable fighters, to have destroyed those creations,” it said with a gesture to the suits of armor, “That one of your own died was met, by you, with dismay. And if resistance is met with destruction, then I must not block your pathway.”

“It … doesn’t think that it can beat us?” asked Fenn. “Well that’s a lucky break.”

“Unless it’s a trap,” I said. “I don’t think it is, given the level of sophistication the traps have had so far,” almost none, “but … that doesn’t mean that it’s not a possibility.”

“You won’t stop us?” Amaryllis asked the golem.

“Why have you come this day?” asked the dirt golem in response.

“We told you,” replied Amaryllis, keeping her voice far calmer and more pleasant than I would have been able to. “We seek a specific prisoner, one that you said was being moved to a visitation area, Fallatehr Whiteshell.”

“And it is only that you have something you wish to say?” asked the dirt golem.

“We’d like a conversation, yes,” said Amaryllis, which was just short of being a blatant lie. We were planning on extracting him, if we needed to, and we did expect to need to in order to get what we wanted from him.

“Then come,” said the dirt golem, “Come this way.” It tottered off into the giant dome, moving at a steady pace and pausing without looking at us when we didn’t make a move to follow. Just off in the distance I could make out small little dirt golems looking at us; these things had already proven that they had some form of silent, internal communications.

“Are we going?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “If we’re going to continue on at all, I think we need to take the peace offering at face value. For now.”
All the Myriad Ways

Moving through the prison following the dirt golem was nerve-wracking. We saw more dirt golems as we walked, usually from a distance, but there were an awful lot of them, and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to handle them as effectively up close, if they trapped us in a hallway. Our golem guide was silent as it walked, and behaved more or less like I would expect a videogame NPC to, stopping when we stopped and behaving as though it was going through a script (which, for all I knew, it was).

Grak stopped every time we came to a new hallway and raised his monocle to his eye, but whenever he said that it was clear, he gave me a look for confirmation. After the first two times I started to feel a little bit guilty about it, because I didn’t actually think that Aerb could be entirely predicted on the basis of genre or narrative conventions. You had to be aware of them, but the way I had always handled things was to subvert, invert, or change the tropes as often as I played them straight. If we came across a scheming vizier, I would have to consider that he was betraying his king, but also that he was just a loyal vizier, or that it only looked like he was betraying his king, or any number of other possibilities. That didn’t mean that there was no predictive value in knowing the tropes, just that they were pretty far from being an absolute guide.

I hadn’t been able to predict that a bomb was coming out to greet us at the prison’s front door. I hadn’t foreseen Solace’s death. It was easy to make sense of it in retrospect, to fit it within different frameworks, but that was all useless if you did it after the fact. Maybe that was why I hadn’t pushed back against Grak when he said that the statues weren’t magical, or why I had yelled at him after it had turned out that I was right. That sheer uselessness, the way that I almost had a grasp on what was going on and it wasn’t doing me any good, was really starting to get to me -- and had been, even before Solace.

“Here, through this passageway,” said the dirt golem as it came to a stop, gesturing at a door.

Grak raised his monocle and spent a long while peering at the door, then lowered it with a frown. “Nothing that I can see.” He turned to me. “Juniper?”

I had no fucking idea. “Let’s just go in.”

We weren’t idiots about it, and did a passable door clear with Fenn aiming an arrow straight through the crack and no one standing directly in front of the door, but the room had only a table and a handful of chairs, with an elf seated in one of them. Grak informed us of a powerful ward stretching from one wall to the other, bisecting the room; the golem had told us that it was an absolute ward, built with a layer of defense against every possible type of magic, and he tentatively agreed with that assessment.

The elf sat with his arms folded across his bare chest. He had scars like the ones that Fenn had, but far more extensive, covering his skin from his wrists, to the base of his neck, and down his chest, in similar patterns of curls and whorls. But those weren’t the only scars he had; giant scars, each the width of a hand, crisscrossed his chest. The meaning of that was obvious to me. If scar magic was predicated on the unchanging nature of elf skin, then the way to deprive an elf of that power was to tear some strips of skin off him. The man himself stared at us with that same, tight-lipped, imperious expression I’d seen on every elf I had passed by in both Barren Jewel and Cranberry Bay. He had long, flowing hair, so blonde it was almost white, and ears that were more sharply pointed than Fenn’s. He had little in the way of fat or muscle, but I knew from Fenn that didn’t matter too much for elves, in terms of what it said about combat ability. We slowly, cautiously moved into the room. I took one of the chairs and Amaryllis took the other, while Grak and Fenn were left standing.
“Very --” the elf began.

“Fuck!” I shouted, jumping halfway out of my chair, because when he’d started speaking I had seen his teeth, long, sharp teeth like a piranha that instantly awoke a basal fear in me.

And then, after I’d had a look around the room and seen the confusion on everyone’s face, I sat back down, feeling a growing warmth on my cheeks. *No one else is surprised. This is just what elves are like, and everyone knows that. Fenn had pointed out that she was a half-elf when we first met by pointing at her ears and her teeth. Obviously elfish ears, obviously human teeth.*

I coughed once. “You were saying?”

The elf stared at me with pursed lips. “Who are you?” he asked. I tried not to recoil from the view of his sharp teeth, which were visible when he spoke.

“We come seeking your expertise in souls,” said Amaryllis. She had given me a look of incomprehension, when I’d had my outburst, but now she was as good as pretending that I wasn’t there.

“Ah,” said the elf. He smiled at us -- more specifically, at me, revealing his pointy teeth in full. I had a guess that wasn’t so friendly of an expression in elf culture. Just a hunch. “And who are you? What interests do you represent?” There was something very subtly off about his accent that I couldn’t place my finger on.

“We are independent actors,” said Amaryllis.

The elf shook his head. “No,” he said.

“No?” asked Amaryllis. “No, you won’t help us, or no, you don’t believe us?”

“No, I do not believe you,” replied the elf. “You are too well-armed to have come alone.”

“We’re really very wealthy actors,” said Fenn. “Our little troupe has done quite well for itself.”

“And do you offer escape?” asked the elf. “You have suffered, getting here.” That, at least, was easy to see; we were all varying degrees of bloody, and my blue armor was marked white with every hit I’d taken. I had used bone magic to heal Amaryllis’ leg, but there was no longer immobility plate covering it, and there hadn’t been anything we could do about that.

“We want knowledge first,” said Amaryllis. “Tell us what you know of the soul, --”

The elf began laughing, a high, melodious sound. “I know everything there is to know,” he said. “Everything knowable outside the exclusion zones.”

“Enough that we could get started on our own,” said Amaryllis, without looking my way.

“You want classes,” laughed the elf. “The warden would never allow it. It would take years of study to have even the barest comprehension of your own soul, let alone to touch another’s.”

I didn’t say, “try me”, though I really wanted to, because Amaryllis was on point for diplomacy.

“You were arrested and tried by the Kingdom of Anglecynn for the horrors that you perpetrated under the Second Empire,” said Amaryllis. “You hadn’t broken any laws, but the power had shifted and examples had to be made. I am sympathetic to that, retroactive criminality is a miscarriage of justice. We want to help you, so long as you help us.”
“And do you offer escape?” the elf asked again, leaning forward slightly, still with his arms folded across his chest. I was painfully aware of a few facts. First, that the void wasn’t considered magic on Aerb, and couldn’t be stopped by wards, and second, that the prison hadn’t seemed to understand that it was carrying a void bomb to us until well after the fact. The barrier between us had a few flaws that I could think of, but that was the glaring one that was getting my attention. Hell, that was how I was planning on killing him, if it came to that. The void rifle was in Fenn’s glove, and she was waiting for the signal.

“You understand that trust is an issue,” said Amaryllis. “That’s why we want to get the basics, the bare basics, first.”

He narrowed his eyes and looked between the four of us. “It is a test,” he said with a nod. “But knowing that it’s a test makes it pointless, because you know that I know enough to pass, and if I know it as a test I can fake cooperation. Which you know.”

“Indulge us,” said Amaryllis with a slight frown.

The elf stared at her, then blinked once. “It’s not a test,” he said, looking between us again. “Why are you here?”

“You’ve been stuck here for hundreds of years,” said Amaryllis. “The majority of the other inmates must be dead by now. I would think that you would want to show off. What’s holding you back?”

“What specific expertise do you seek?” asked the elf.

Amaryllis hesitated. She didn’t look my direction; if I were her, I wasn’t sure that I would have been able to resist.

“I know a bone mage who sucked several of his own bones dry,” said Amaryllis. “I was given to understand that a soul mage could help with that problem.”

The elf smiled again, with the same unpleasant display of teeth. “A simple problem,” he said. “One of the soulself. I could fix it within a half hour, were escape on the table.”

“I haven’t said that it’s not,” said Amaryllis.

“You haven’t said that it is,” the elf replied.

“I assume that the warden, as you call it, listens in on all conversations that take place in this room,” said Amaryllis. “We would, therefore, never directly say that we were willing to help you to escape.”

“You are cautious,” said the elf. “Cautious enough that you would never let me touch the soul of someone, even if it were to fix damage, for fear of what I might do.”

“No, of course not,” said Amaryllis. She crossed her arms, mirroring him. “We don’t want you to engage in any actual work. We want you to teach someone without laying your hands on the soul directly.”

“And you would still not trust me,” said the elf with an approving nod. “My pupil would not be allowed to practice soulcraft unless he first understood precisely what he was doing. You would bring in test subjects before ever touching your valued bone mage.”

“If we had to,” said Amaryllis.

“And then you would kill me, as much understanding as you might have for my plight,” the elf
Amaryllis frowned. “I can see where that would be the logical conclusion,” she said. “Is there anything that we could do to assuage your concern?”

“Traditionally, the kingdoms of men would take hostages,” he replied. “But of course, such an exchange doesn’t work when we do not know the map of values. You might give me a hostage you did not care for and accept such a cost for concluding business.”

“Then we’re at an impasse,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. “Unless you want to stay here for the rest of your life, you’re going to have to take a chance on us. I solemnly promise not to kill you, or have you killed, or even allow anyone else to kill you while you’re under my care. You will effectively serve as our prisoner until the training is complete, but your conditions will be better than they are here, and you’ll have access to whatever information you want about the outside world.”

The elf gave her a thoughtful look. “And were escape an option, how many could you take?”

Amaryllis hesitated at that, and finally broke eye contact with him to look to Fenn. “How long are the masks good for?” she asked.

“An hour,” replied Fenn.

“And they’re made using the kit?” asked Amaryllis.

Fenn nodded. That meant we had a practically unlimited supply of them, meaning that if we had a lot of time and coordination, we could put two or three hundred people into the glove, as an upper bound.

“It would, of course, depend on who these people were,” said Amaryllis. “We could keep careful watch over two or three people, potentially, but --”

“Twenty,” said the elf, unflinching.

“Friends?” asked Amaryllis.

“Something like that,” replied the elf.

Amaryllis stared at him for a moment, furrowing her brow. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but I was thinking that even if we could overcome the logistical hurdles of getting twenty people out of this prison, which would likely mean destroying every security system and golem in the place, there was no way that the four of us could keep twenty people contained except through their own goodwill. And these weren’t just twenty people, these were twenty elves, faster and stronger than humans, long-lived enough to have acquired a wide variety of skills.

“Miss Red, may I have my amulet please?” asked Amaryllis, holding her hand out toward Fenn.

The blue amulet appeared in Fenn’s hand, and she tossed it over without another response. I hadn’t asked Fenn how she would feel about seeing another elf, but my guess of ‘not good’ seemed to be mostly accurate. She didn’t seem to be in a great mood, not that I thought any of us were.

Amaryllis held the amulet in her hand, and her eyes glowed blue as she consulted with it. I felt a chill come over the room as the minutes passed.

“What magic does she hold in her hand?” asked the elf.
“Are you interested?” I asked. “If you want knowledge for its own sake, we have plenty that we can share with you, as a way of rewarding good behavior.”

The elf shrugged, but his eyes stayed on Amaryllis, who was taking her sweet time talking to her great-grandfather. Eventually her eyes cleared, and the room immediately warmed back up. She tossed the amulet back to Fenn without looking, which seemed pretty careless to do with a priceless artifact, but based on the way her jaw was clenched, I got the sense that she hadn’t had a great talk.

“He’s not Fallatehr,” said Amaryllis.

“I never said I was,” replied the elf with such smooth arrogance that I nearly reached across the table to punch him in the face.

“Seems like he’s sort of useless to us then,” said Fenn. I saw her gloved hand twitch slightly.

“Who is he then?” I asked with a frown. “And why would the prison think that he was the one we wanted to talk to?”

“I am not Fallatehr,” said the elf. “He took my soul and reformed it in his own image.”

Quest Updated: Crimes Against the Soul - Fallatehr Whiteshell has altered every remaining prisoner at the Amoureux Penitentiary to become as close to him as possible. Only the real Fallatehr will serve all purposes.

“Scenario two,” I said to Amaryllis. Scenario one was confirmation that Fallatehr was a companion; scenario two was a change in the quests; scenario three was a new quest. “And that’s why you want to move twenty people out. Fallatehr, and people like you.”

The elf nodded. “If it can be done, do it.”

“We wanted a lesson,” said Amaryllis. “But you couldn’t actually pass that test, could you?”

The elf shook his head.

“Well fuck this,” said Fenn. “We’re talking about twenty of this guy? He already tried to kill us once, we don’t need him that badly.”

“We have other options as far as healing goes,” said Amaryllis, staring at the elf. “But that’s not the extent of our problems. Fallatehr Whiteshell might be the only person that can resolve the other one.” Might. We didn’t actually know that soul magic was going to be needed to get the locus back out of the bottle and connected with a new land, but Solace had thought it likely, and it was as good of a guess as we had at the moment. Besides that, if Fallatehr had been a part of the Second Empire at the time it was going on its campaign against the loci, and he was important enough of a researcher that he’d been made an example of, then it was possible he had more information about the soul of a locus. That was all still all up in the air though, and nothing that I really wanted to risk my life on.

“You may consider me interested,” said the elf, looking between us. “I can relay your message, and your offer.”

“We haven’t made an offer,” said Amaryllis. “We only came here to talk. It’s true that we have a fair amount of magic at our disposal, but we still don’t have any way to ensure a working relationship.”

“You need him,” said the elf with a smirk. “You took a risk in coming here. You didn’t turn away at the first or second sign of danger. You don’t turn away even now, as difficulties pile up.”
“I think all I’ve heard so far is that we don’t need this guy alive,” said Fenn. She was drumming her hand against the side of her leg.

“It wouldn’t be good for our negotiations,” said Amaryllis, turning only slightly in Fenn’s direction before looking back at the elf.

We still hadn’t gotten his name, but apparently it didn’t matter, because whoever he had been, he had been altered on the level of the soul to become something else. I still didn’t know what that entailed; memories, abilities, values, something else? Soulfuckery wasn’t really a realm that I wanted to delve into too deeply, not if it was going to expose me to more horrors. I’d had enough non-diegetic existential horror without having to go through a fresh round of it happening on the Aerbian layer.

“Talk to your master,” said Amaryllis. “I’m sure that twenty heads are better than one. Tell him that we need to have our own discussion, in private, and that he might not hear from us again. We might have to arrange another meeting like this in order to get some information on … the specifics of his incarceration.”

The elf looked at her for a while. “We are not slaves,” he said. “He might agree to being taken alone, but the rest of us would not let him go so easily. We are like him, enough so our prison can confuse us, but we are not clones, nor automatons, nor perfectly loyal.” He stood up, unfolding his arms. I’d been worried, the entire time, that he would have a void weapon in his hands, but all that worry was for nothing; he was unarmed. “Do you offer escape for all of us?”

“I don’t offer escape,” said Amaryllis. “If I did, I would take your unique circumstances into consideration.”

“Did everything go your way?” asked the dirt golem as we left the room. Compared to the elf’s mouth, I found its detailed simulacrum of a mouth almost comforting. “Did he have anything of interest to say?”

“It was illuminating, yes,” said Amaryllis. “I’m afraid that our business isn’t concluded yet.”

“Most troubling,” replied the dirt golem, “You have led me astray. You said what you came to say.”

“We need to talk amongst ourselves in private,” said Amaryllis. “My friend is going to make a ward against sound so there’s no threat of anyone hearing.”

“What about reading lips?” I asked.

“I can make a ward against outgoing light,” said Grak. “There is some risk of overheating. I do not know how long we will talk.”

“I meet this proclamation with dismay,” said the golem. “No wards, this prison, put up, since.” It stopped, with its mouth slightly open. “Very well, you may.”

Grak began drawing out the wards, first one to encircle us that immediately blocked out the sound, and second one just beyond the first, which warped the world around us in an unpleasant and slightly disorienting way. Light couldn’t leave the cylinder we were contained in, so it bounced around the inside until it struck something, and sometimes that something was my eye. I could still mostly see out, but it was a visual struggle.

“We can’t let the locus die,” said Amaryllis, as soon as the second ward was complete.

“These wards should hold for an hour,” said Grak, “Maybe less.”
“The terms of the quests that I have don’t actually indicate that we need Fallatehr or soul magic,” I said. “Solace didn’t know for sure that soul magic was needed. At this point, it’s looking very dangerous. If he can rewrite a soul --”

“He can’t, not fully,” said Amaryllis. “That’s excluded.”

“Right,” I said. “And I actually think that we might have had an easier time of this if they were all just puppets, because it sounds like they have enough free will to not want him to leave by himself. I don’t know what mechanisms he’s got to keep them in line, but they’re only close enough.”

“Three factions are not too many to fight,” said Grak. I wasn’t quite sure how he was counting them, but my guess was the soulfucked prisoners, the old, static defenses of the prison, and the dirt golems was a good guess. Of course, there was also the possibility that we’d only scratched the tip of the iceberg, as far as threats went.

“I’m with the dwarf,” said Fenn. “Kill everyone but the one we want, then take our leave. Sounds like a plan.” She looked out at the ward. “This thing is giving me a headache.”

“We obviously can’t take all of them,” said Amaryllis. “A disproportionate ratio of guards to prisoners is only made possible by either strict systems of control or an adequate level of socialization, neither of which we have, or can have on short notice.”

“And short of getting the real Fallatehr into one of those visitation rooms, we’re going to have to run afoul of the golems, at the very least,” I said.

“The wards include absolute velocity,” said Grak. “The glove would not be able to pass. The ward would prevent him from ever touching it. On first impression, I do not think that I could subvert it.”

“So that plan dies in the cradle,” I said with a wince. “We can fairly easily overpower the dirt golems, I think, they had us badly outnumbered last time and we made it through -- but the game called them ‘basic’, so I don’t know if that will hold true.”

“We’re doing all of this to break out someone who we don’t have any reason to think will be loyal to us,” said Amaryllis.

“But based on what your grandfather said, he’s the best?” I asked.

“Great-grandfather,” Amaryllis replied. “And yes, Fallatehr Whiteshell does seem like one of the most capable soul mages to have ever lived, if he could take over twenty other men and women in virtual perpetuity, nevermind doing it under the watchful eye of an imprisoning entity.”

“I can’t say that I’ve been that impressed by the prison so far,” said Fenn. “Seems like we’re getting a bit of a free run because it thinks we could kick its ass.”

“It maneuvered us deep inside,” said Grak.

“That’s what she said,” I replied. It got a snort from Fenn, but only a look of disapproval from Amaryllis and Grak. “Sorry.”

“We are more vulnerable to the golems here than we would be elsewhere,” said Grak. “They could attack us from both ends of this hallway.”

“They could try,” said Fenn. “I can’t say that a bow and arrow seem particularly great at taking out those golems, but I’m willing to give it a shot.”
“It comes down to threat analysis then?” I asked. “The golems hit hard, but they’re slow and easy to take on in multiples. My armor is getting a little bit white for my tastes, but if it were just a matter of killing our way through dirt golems and dirt golem variants, I would be fine with that, especially if there are three quests in the mix. But it’s not just that, it’s facing down other kinds of idiosyncratic threats, plus trying to navigate around maybe two dozen almost-people who have got to be threats in their own right, if they’ve each been here for hundreds of years.”

“I’ve already said that I’m in,” said Fenn. “I don’t know that it’s what Solace would have wanted, but it’s what I would have wanted, if I’d been Solace.”

“I agree,” said Grak. Fenn had joked before about him being suicidal, but I was starting to believe there was some truth to that. For someone whose specialty was in setting up defenses, he sure seemed eager to throw himself up against new and uncertain challenges.

“Juniper?” asked Amaryllis.

“Mary,” I replied.

“What are your thoughts?” she asked.

“I want to hear yours first,” I replied. We were, by agreement, a democracy, which meant that third vote could make the fourth vote irrelevant. If I voted before her, she could vote in agreement with me as an act of manipulation, even if she didn’t actually think it was smart. She’d be giving up an opportunity to exert her will, but fourth vote was a position of power, in a lot of ways, and I didn’t want her to have that, not when she was trying to get it so transparently.

“Narratively --” she began.

“You can conclude this without me,” said Fenn. She stepped beyond the wards without another word.

“I wasn’t aware that she was so sensitive to that word,” said Amaryllis, staring beyond the ward. “But it’s necessary for us to talk about, I think, given the context.” She took a breath. “Narratively, I don’t think that we actually have a choice. Joon, I know that you would prefer to simply abandon talk of narrative and take things on their merit, but … assume that narrative is a rule of the world. Assume that it can be subverted, or changed, or something like that, that it’s not absolute, yes?”

“Okay, yes,” I said slowly.

“We came here following a quest that was given to us by the amulet we found at Caer Laga,” said Amaryllis. “When we arrived, Solace lost her life protecting the cloak that contains the locus, the very same locus that we might be able to save using the soul magic of the man who we’re here for. Now we have multiple antagonists in front of us, in a large area that approximates a dungeon in many respects.”

“I get it,” I said, “There’s a lot of narrative weight. But we absolutely cannot do things just because the plot says so. End of discussion on that.”

“Do you recall telling me about the Scattered Asches campaign?” asked Amaryllis.

I winced at that. The Scattered Asches campaign had started normally enough, with the party meeting each other during community service, saving the life of a distressed princess, and getting sent off to do some very sensitive work because they were a band of skilled eccentrics well outside the kingdom’s spy network, all pretty normal as far as campaign starts went. The problem was that after the first dungeon, they found a Clue as to greater goings on which threatened the Eight Realms
… and then left to go be ninjas on another continent, dropping that plot thread entirely and forcing
me to scrap about two weeks worth of work.

But the way I thought about worlds was that they didn’t just stop running because you weren’t
looking at them, or because you went off to go do something else. If the threat the party had seen
was real, and they just ignored it, then that thread couldn’t just quietly die on the vine, something had
to happen with it, either another party would have to come in and deal with it, or it would grow and
fester, but either way, in a living, breathing world, you couldn’t just drop plot threads, because that
would make it seem like the world wasn’t alive.

So the threat had grown, slowly and steadily, and as the party went to ninja school and got involved
in ninja plots, they would occasionally hear whispers and rumors from the Eight Realms, they would
come across people in exile, and that original plot, one meant for characters of 3rd level, grew until it
needed all their might at level 11 to defeat it. Everyone enjoyed it, maybe more because they saw it
coming than because I didn’t just let them drop it, but that was my go-to method of dealing with a
player that dropped a quest -- let them drop it, sure, but there would be consequences, echoes, and
aftereffects.

And if we just left the Amoureux Penitentiary, and tried to get me access to soul magic some other
way, what would the Dungeon Master do? He might railroad us hard, but even if he didn’t, then he
might not be willing to drop all the narrative threads, or to say that sometimes things were
meaningless, pointless, wastes of time and resources. For myself, games, movies, television, and
literature were the few places that I wasn’t comfortable with embracing the bleak meaninglessness of
existence.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I replied. “But if it were me, and someone said, ‘Oh, well I guess
we have to, because that’s clearly what the DM wants’, I would have a long, out of character
conversation with them about how it’s not about what the DM has planned. And failing that, if I for
some reason had no way of communicating with them outside of the game, I would figure out some
way of communicating to them within the game that there had been other options, that it was okay to
go off the beaten path.”

“Except you would bring them back to the original plot,” said Grak. “It’s contradictory.”

“Of course it is,” I practically shouted. “You’re making all this crap up as you go along, it’s a process
of reconciling different learned lessons and feeling your way along by intuition. That’s why I think
that we would be fundamentally unwise to follow along with what we think the entity, or the
narrative, or whatever, wants from us. Maybe it’s rolling its eyes at this conversation.” Or maybe it
was looking on in glee, though that was a less pleasant thought.

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “Leaving narrative out of it, you cap your skills at 20 unless you have a
proficient teacher. Soul magic is powerful, if less so now than it was hundreds of years ago. Fallatehr
is demonstrably one of the most powerful soul mages that we’re likely to have access to, and the
ways in which that access is dangerous are ones that we can deal with by sufficient application of the
force we have available to us. I believe to get better than him, we would have to either go into one of
the exclusion zones that got soul magic partly excluded, or we would have to somehow poach from
one of the larger polities within the Empire. We need to heal you, sooner rather than later, we need to
get the locus out, sooner rather than later, and I know that I said it was a distraction, but if you want a
third path for Solace, not the oblivion or hell that currently awaits her, this seems to me to be one of
the only ways that’s going to happen.”

I felt an uncomfortable sinking feeling in my chest. She could have led with Solace, and I probably
would have changed my vote right then. “Okay,” I said. “Then I guess it’s unanimous.”
When we came out of the wards, Fenn was standing with her arm around the dirt golem.

“Productive conversation?” she asked.

“We’ll be staying around here for a little bit,” said Amaryllis, speaking more to the golem than to Fenn.

The golem slumped slightly to the side, and Fenn moved away from it.

“Unanimous?” asked Fenn, with a glance in my direction.

“Yes,” I said. “It took some convincing.” The golem’s slump became more pronounced as I watched it. “What were you doing out here?”

“Girl talk,” said Fenn. The golem fell to the ground. “I didn’t think that it went that poorly.” Her bow appeared in her hand. “So, my guess is that our prison-host didn’t like the news that we would be staying?”

“I think it only gave us a reprieve in the interests of getting us out of its way without further incident,” said Amaryllis. “I hadn’t thought that our peace was so easily disturbed.” She’d taken her helmet off for our conversation, but now was slipping it back on. “Prepare for trouble.”

“And make it double,” I replied, letting my sword grow to full length in my hand.

“What does that mean?” asked Grak with furrowed brows.

“It was -- nevermind,” I replied.

“Earth stuff,” said Fenn with a nod. “He always gets this look in his eyes.”

Amaryllis looked down the hallway in both directions. “We should get moving. Deeper in, or back the way we came?”

“Deeper in,” I said. “The golem said he’d been in the gymnasium, let’s start there. I was really hoping that we’d get something like directions.” I looked down at the mound of dirt on the ground. It struck me as being enemy action; the only way I could fathom the breakdown of a golem in response to threat was by either a severely malfunctioning system or very high level reasoning about what that golem might give away by its continued existence. “We should hold off on going against the golems again until after they’ve made the first hostile move.”

“I suppose,” said Amaryllis.

“Kind of a hard principle to follow if you have a bow,” said Fenn. “I’m down to two artillery shots, in case I was the only one counting. Call them if you need them, but if I see a juicy shot I’m taking it, no matter who’s in the way.”

“Please don’t shoot me again,” I said.

“Oh, we’re dating now,” said Fenn, “I pretty much have to shoot you, otherwise the others will think that I’ve gone soft.” She gave me a grin, and I returned a smile.

“I already think you’ve gone soft,” said Grak.
“That’s just because you’ve gotten to know me,” said Fenn.

“We should go,” said Amaryllis. “I have to imagine that forces have already been moved into position since the moment we finished our first fight, but light might become an issue for us if we go too slowly.”

So we moved on, deeper into the prison, past the half-dozen visitation rooms that must have been the prison’s primary interface with the outside world back when it was in regular use. I briefly marveled at the shape and scope of the forge frenzy that had brought this place into being. I had no real idea how long it took to make a sword or a suit of armor, but months seemed like it was on the right timescale. For a building this size, it would have taken years, if not decades. From what I could tell, most polities were perfectly willing to fund a forge frenzy given that they would have control of whatever was made from it, but a place on this scale seemed like a serious outlay, especially since Anglecynn wouldn’t have known exactly what it would do.

If we’d been in a normal building, we might have had an easier time finding our way to the gymnasium, because normal buildings had sensible designs that were dictated by the emergent properties of people, or at worst, dictated by what the architect thought looked good -- function or form. The penitentiary hadn’t been built under any such constraints. It wasn’t quite the Winchester Mystery House, but we couldn’t at all count on a sensible layout. There was a part of me that appreciated this on a game design level, but it also gave me an uncertain, claustrophobic feeling.

We eventually came to a small dome, with three floors exposed below it and a dozen dirt golems looking out over them. Our eyes were drawn to an immense brass suit of armor, nearly twenty feet tall, which stood with both hands on the pommel of a hammer whose head was more than twice the size of my own. Both it and the dirt golems, were unmoving. At twenty feet tall, it wouldn’t be the largest thing that I’d gone up against, but it would be the biggest thing I’d directly fought. Colossus, I shall call you.

“So, plink at it from a distance?” asked Fenn. She kept her voice low, which didn’t make that much sense, because even though we were quite a ways down the hallway from the entrance to the dome, the golems were staring at us.

“We don’t necessarily need to go this way,” said Amaryllis.

“They are guarding this path for a reason,” said Grak.

“I’m pretty sure a single hit from that hammer will kill any of us outright,” I said. “Maybe not Mary.”

“The immobility plate isn’t that resistant to movement in its immobile state,” she said, voice slightly muffled by her helmet. “It has limits.”

“So we cheese it,” said Fenn. “That’s the word, right Joon? Cheese?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “But if it were me … scratch that, if I were the penitentiary, I wouldn’t put a giant guy with a hammer where you could kill it from a distance at no risk. If it’s a trap, then this is part of the trap. Besides that, plinking at it from a distance doesn’t seem like it’s going to work well if the armor is thick enough. The right arrowheads can pierce normal plate, but that’s not normal plate.”

Fenn looked to Amaryllis. “And if we had a secret weapon?” she asked.

“Oh, what?” I asked, looking at both of them. “Secret … from me?”

“I present to you,” said Fenn, holding out her gloved hand, “Drumroll, please.”
“I’m not clear on why you would need to keep anything secret from me,” I said.

“You don’t like surprises?” asked Fenn, lowering her hand slightly.

“Not in combat, no,” I replied.

“It’s too dangerous to use in actual combat,” said Amaryllis. “It’s probably too dangerous to use, period, if it works at all.”

“Grak, can I get a drumroll?” asked Fenn.

Grak gave a short sigh, then went to the closest wall and began rhythmically pounding on it. With a flourish Fenn produced an arrow from her glove, twirling it gently until bringing it to a stop so I could see the tip, where a small, simple, electrical contraption surrounded a purple crystal.

“I present to you, the very first Fellis collaboration, the void arrow,” said Fenn with a grin.

“And with the artillery shot,” I began.

“In theory,” answered Amaryllis. “It might fail. We didn’t want to waste the resources to test it.”

I stared at the void arrow. All you really needed to make a void crystal explode was a sufficiently powerful electric charge, which would cause it to radiate void out in all directions, eliminating matter from existence. From what I could see, the arrow was designed such that it would strike its target, which would complete the circuit, which would detonate the crystal. You couldn’t shoot the arrow too fast, because otherwise the mechanism would break completely, and it was possible that it would break anyway, but if it worked, then it would be an instant kill against unarmored flesh. And the artillery shot from Fenn’s bow, given enough distance, could make two thousand.

“Well that’s scary,” I said, swallowing the sudden lump in my throat. “I’m still not sure why I would be kept in the dark.”

“I’d have to use the n-word to explain it,” said Amaryllis.

I stared at her for a second. “Uh?”

“Narrative,” said Fenn with a nod.

I rolled my eyes at that. “Okay,” I said. “You kept it from me because … you think that this is my story, not yours, and keeping the void arrow from me until the last second would be better from a narrative perspective. That’s batshit insane, don’t ever do that again.”

“I don’t want to debate it now, but if we can infer from --”

“You don’t want to debate it, but you do want to get your point in,” I said. “No, let’s just fire the incredibly dangerous arrow and get it over with.”

Amaryllis helmet turned away from me and nodded to Fenn.

“So, in theory this is a weapon of mass destruction,” said Fenn, looking at the brass Colossus. “Assuming that Mary built this right, how far back should we be standing?”

I was actually curious about that myself: curious, bordering on alarmed. “What happens when the void effect hits a void crystal?” I asked. “Anything?”

“If they’re further than a foot away from each other, there’s a cascade,” said Amaryllis. “Less than a
foot, and the void effect just consumes the crystal with no effect. I’ve already done the math, we’ll need significant distance and heavy mass for cover.”

“Sorry, walk me through the math,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. I glanced at the brass Colossus, which was, thankfully, still unmoving. For the moment, talking was apparently a free action. “So what happens is, Fenn fires the void arrow, it presumably splits into two, then four, then eight, and so on, until it caps at two thousand of them, then one of them hits something and detonates, which then chains to all the others —”

“Voiding whichever ones are within a foot of the spherical void wave, cascading to those outside it, putting a limit on total void effect, yes,” said Amaryllis. She was incredibly hard to read with her helmet on, but I didn’t think that I could ask her to remove it just so I could be more at ease when talking to her, not without derailing the conversation.

“So at best, the total void effect coming our way is going to be equal to however many one foot-radius spheres there are, with each centered around an arrow and none overlapping,” I said, “Which based on the arrows that I saw in the forest might be as high as, oh, two hundred spheres, which means that the void effect coming at us once the artillery shot is fired will be enough to go through something like one hundred inches of solid steel.”

I saw Grak and Fenn give each other a look, something like surprise and fear.

“No,” said Amaryllis, “Void propagation is constrained by the inverse square law, it’ll eat through the same amount of mass at any distance, but for the projective form, that means if you conceptualize an inch-thick sphere around a projection at distance $x$ which completely captures the void projection, then an inch-thick sphere at distance two $x$ will only go through one fourth of an inch.”

“So at two hundred feet, which is where the bow caps, that’s … a half-inch of steel per detonation, when up close?”

“For projection, it’s usually given as a half-inch steel or other sufficiently dense metal at five feet from the center of the void projection, regardless of crystal size, so long as it’s under one foot,” Amaryllis nodded. “I told you that I already did the math.”

“I’m double-checking, in the interests of not killing us all,” I said. “And, obviously, that’s the benefit of consulting me instead of keeping it secret. So, forty times the distance, that’s $1/1600$th the effect, which means that instead of one hundred inches of steel, we’d need something like a sixteenth of an inch.” Which was extremely doable, actually, and there was enough leeway to be off by an order of magnitude. And because Fenn’s bow multiplied with distance, we had some leeway even with a premature detonation. “Okay,” I said. “So it’s still stupidly dangerous, but probably, maybe, not as dangerous as fighting that thing and all the little ones that would join in.”

“Am I shooting this incredibly destructive arrow or what?” asked Fenn.

“All six barriers first,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn moved forward and started popping them out, one by one, and we took cover behind the last. She raised her bow and nocked the arrow, then ducked down quickly before firing. “Just testing,” she said. “How fast does the void move?”

“It’s effectively instant,” said Amaryllis.

“Okay,” said Fenn. She raised her arms above her head and did an awkward draw with only her hands and the bow, held horizontal, above the barrier. She managed to get it to full extension, then
stopped suddenly and brought the bow back down without having fired it. “The thing is, I didn’t do the math, so I’m sort of trusting you here.”

“No, no, never,” said Fenn. “But when you said a hundred inches of steel, I thought, ‘you know, that actually sounds right’, and then when you said a sixteenth of an inch of steel, I thought, ‘that doesn’t seem right at all’, and I don’t think that this is how my life is going to end, but you said sometimes rocks fall and everyone dies, and I’m the least suicidal of us, so --”

“Just fire the fucking arrow,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn raised her bow again and did the same awkward draw as before, exerting an incredible amount of strength and control, more than I might have thought her capable of, if I hadn’t known her so well. She started to speak, with the strain evident in her voice. “The thing is, I’m the one risking my hands here --”

“Is this a bit?” asked Amaryllis.

Fenn fired the arrow and brought her hands down behind the safety of six inches of steel. I was fully prepared for an anticlimax after all that build-up, like the arrow simply plinking against the brass suit of armor, or failing to duplicate, or maybe even something worse than an anticlimax, like littering the whole place with two thousand undetonated bombs.

But we weren’t denied something special, and instead there was a loud whump of air rushing to fill the vacuum, and wind blew by us fast enough that it was difficult to breathe, for a bit. I started to rise to my feet, then thought about the possibility that there were still void arrows that hadn’t blown up, and stayed where I was. When Fenn popped up though, I followed her, and looked out on the destruction.

The explosion -- projection, I’m sure Amaryllis would have corrected me -- had happened at the far end of the room, a cascade of void that had, for a start, removed all the air from the room. The railings on the upper levels were gone, along with a significant portion of the upper levels themselves. Pieces of building were raining down from where supports had been removed or weakened. The brass Colossus was completely gone. The floor was missing too, scoured down at least a few feet by the void cascade, and though I couldn’t see the ceiling from my vantage point in the hallway, I had no doubt that was gone too.

“Neat,” said Fenn. “I’ll take a dozen more of those, please.”

I stared at the destruction in amazement as Fenn began gathering the barriers back up. “Okay, I’m still a little pissed off about you keeping that secret, but the results of the actual work speak for themselves.”

“It’s indiscriminate,” said Amaryllis. “We won’t be able to use it unless we want to kill everyone or everything in a pretty large radius.”

“And when do we not want that?” asked Fenn with a cheery smile. Her eyes widened slightly. “Think about how great that would have been in the forest!”

“We could have used it at the entrance to this place,” I said. “If I’d been informed of its existence.”

“I apologize,” said Amaryllis.

“But would you do it again?” I asked.
“Yes,” said Amaryllis, unflinchingly fast. “We can talk about that later, when we’re safe.”

“I told you that she said she’d slit my throat if she had to,” said Fenn. “Shouldn’t be much of a surprise.”

“When did I say that?” asked Amaryllis. I imagined her furrowed brow beneath her helmet.

“Unicorn blood,” said Fenn.

Amaryllis sighed. “Juniper, there are certain things that are dangerous to so much as know, and if I knew any of them, I wouldn’t tell you those either, and you would probably agree with that, right?”

“Infohazards,” I said with a nod. Of course Aerb had infohazards, why would it not? One of the Thirteen Horrors I had a quest for was [REDACTED]; that was his name given in both the quest text and the description I’d read in The Exclusionary Principle, Seventh Edition, complete with brackets. It was heavily implied that he got more powerful the more you knew about him. To me, that hadn’t implied an entire class of memetic threats, especially because he was in an exclusion zone, but apparently I should have just assumed that Aerb would contain every single thing I had ever thought of, so long as it was at least loosely within the genre.

Amaryllis pulled up short. “You don’t have infohazards on Earth,” she said, more as a statement of fact than a question, but there was a note of puzzlement in her voice. Someone, somewhere, must have done an investigation of the dream-skewered in order to make that determination, which was sensible if infohazards existed. “They were a thing you invented?”

“No, just copied from elsewhere;” I said. “I mean, I did invent some, and --” I pulled up short. “Obviously those specific ones can’t be here on Aerb, because I know about them and no horrible fate has befallen me yet, but just to be safe I’m not going to ever write them down or say them.” Everyone was staring at me. “I didn’t use it often, because it’s hard to work into games where there’s this player and character split that you can’t really get around. There are, were, maybe five in total.” I stopped. “And anyway, Arthur would have known about all of them, right?” I stopped again. “Okay, leaving that aside, because we can’t talk about it or do anything proactive about it, if you ever have any information that you think will hurt me -- that you think will hurt me in ways that I don’t want to be hurt -- then I promise that I’ll try not to be salty about it, if and when I find out that you were keeping a secret from me. That doesn’t apply to your attempts to manipulate the narrative though.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” said Amaryllis, which really wasn’t the sort of answer that I’d been hoping for, and to cap it off she began walking toward the wreckage where the Colossus had been standing. I might have objected more, if I wasn’t trying to stop thinking about the cognitive hazards that might actually be real on Aerb.

“And you,” I said to Fenn, partly to distract myself. I was worried, but not that worried, because if the five infohazards I’d made were already being carried around in my head, then it was already too late, and thinking about it would make it worse.

“Hey, you know that I like secrets,” she said. “And I have a flair for the dramatic, and she made some very convincing arguments, so really, I’m kind of still on her side.”

“Well, we’ll talk it over,” I said.

“I mean, it worked, didn’t it?” asked Fenn. She hefted her bow and began following Amaryllis.

“It might have worked anyway,” I said. “We’d have to figure out some way to double blind it, or at least do A/B testing, but I don’t have any clue how that would work in practice given all the
“Golems,” said Grak, with his monocle to his eye. “They’re coming to meet us.”

I was expecting another parlay, because the prison knew that we were stronger than it. Given that, talking was to its advantage. I wasn’t about to say that we had this place dead to rights, given the close calls, and given what happened to Solace, but it seemed to me that if I were a magical sentient prison, I would start in on negotiations so that I could escape with as little damage as possible. All we wanted was a single prisoner, and we were demonstrably willing to tear apart the prison to get him, so wasn’t it better to just hand him over? Of course, there was a school of thought that said you should never give in to blackmail or coercion, because that means that everyone will know that blackmail and coercion work on you. Which, when I thought about it, might have been why dozens of dirt golems were coming our way.

Most of them were like the ones we’d fought in the courtyard outside, simple creations with metal eyes I didn’t really understand the point of, given that the ones with only a mouth seemed entirely capable of navigating the prison without sight. It wasn’t that they didn’t worry me, but I at least knew that I could handle them in numbers, so long as I stayed in the open and didn’t let them wear me down. We’d fought them before, after all, and the second time was almost always easier, because you’d already done the hard work of getting educated on how the enemy moved and operated.

But unfortunately, it wasn’t just the dirt golems. I’d known since the game had called it a basic dirt golem that there would be variants down the road, and now I got a look at a few of them as they came our way. I saw a few adorned with vines and moss threaded through their dirt, along with a handful of flowers, and immediately suspected them of being casters of some sort. The others, of which there were two, were big, hulking creatures that moved around on all fours with large knuckles against the floor. They were smaller than the gate golem had been, but still big enough that there was going to be a real risk to getting within their reach.

“Go or stay?” asked Amaryllis.

“Stay,” called Grak, who was already drawing a ward at the end of the hallway, where the void cascade had done its damage but not removed the walls and supports completely.

“I’m less effective when pinned in,” I said, stepping beyond the ward he was putting in place. The ground got lower as we went further, which meant that we’d be fighting in what was essentially a wide pit made of stone where the prison no longer had any foundation and the void had hit the rock that island was made of. It was surprisingly smooth, given what must have been the chaos of the cascade.

The dirt golems weren’t terribly fast, but we only had seconds. Amaryllis stepped up beside me with her sword drawn. I took some comfort in knowing that even though we had our arguments, she would be there fighting with me without any hesitation.

“We’ll stay closer this time,” she said. “You keep up with the sweeping strikes, I’ll get the ones you miss.”

“And I’ll stay safe behind the barrier,” said Fenn, as she fired an arrow at one of the plant-adorned golems, the opening shot of the fight. The golem continued forward with an arrow stuck in it, slowly leaking mud as it trundled toward us.

(We could probably have run away, given that we were faster than them, but going on the run wasn’t the path to winning, not when we didn’t actually know where we were going, and not when the prison had plenty of opportunity to set up traps and ambushes in places that it could conceivably
My own first strike was made with the full weight of blood magic, pushing the strength of my pulse down both my arms and swinging my enormous sword so hard it whistled through the air. I cut clean through two of the golems and into the midsection of a third, where my sword lodged only briefly until I shrunk it down and pulled it free to gear up for another swing.

**Basic Dirt Golem defeated!**

**Basic Dirt Golem defeated!**

**Basic Dirt Golem defeated!**

**Achievement Unlocked: Triple Kill!**

I was watching the golems as I cut into them, paying more attention than last time and trying not to let adrenaline overwhelm me. They had sacks of brown goop inside them, and they began to fail when that goop started leaking out, but they didn’t actually stop moving until some critical amount was lost. That didn’t actually help my fighting style too much, but I was pretty sure that it was going to be important for fighting the big ones -- who had been going slow on purpose, it turned out, so that they could put on a burst of speed that nearly caught me off-guard.

I rolled away beneath a massive fist and came up with another hard swing that took down another dirt golem, rewarding me with a message from the game, then turned back to face the gorllia-golem, which was pounding along on its knuckles to close the distance between the two of us. I moved back again, which unfortunately put distance between Amaryllis and I, but that was nearly unavoidable, and it was clear that our plan of fighting back-to-back wasn’t going to work out.

I came at the gorilla golem with another of my strongest swings, putting everything into it that I could short of burning through a bone. I cleaved cleanly through its arm, but it lifted the stump up and slammed it back down on the severed fist, cleanly reconnecting them, then swung at me hard with its other hand, narrowly missing me as I jumped backward. I lunged in close, riding the pulse of my racing heart, and slammed my sword straight up into its gut. I changed the shape of the blade while it was inside him, giving the part of it that was lodged in the goop barbs and curls, then ducked down to avoid another hit as the golem slammed a fist against its own chest. It took all my considerable strength to yank the sword out from the golem once I got my footing, but I was rewarded with a thick splash of its semi-liquid innards on my feet as parts of the packed earth broke away. I managed to scramble out from under it as it collapsed.

**Brutish Dirt Golem defeated!**

Amaryllis was dancing through the dirt golems, out-maneuvering them, getting away from their strikes, making the plate armor look like it was a featherweight, and occasionally stopping stock-still for a split second to let her armor lock in place and take the hit without much risk to her. She was doing better than in the previous fight, with a more defined rhythm and flow. I was hopped up on adrenaline and the thrill of battle, that urge to scream and roar over the corpse of the thing I’d just taken down, and watching her, just for a moment, filled me with something like pride.

And then I was back to murdering dirt golems in the pit, trying to put my blood into every movement and end the fight as quickly as I could. I pulled from the bones in my bandolier from time to time, usually **END** to stave off exhaustion, since the powerful swings I was using took an enormous amount of energy, especially with my sword as large as I was making it. We were cutting through the ranks at speed though, and dozens weren’t enough to stop us.
There were a few things that I’d failed to pay the proper amount of attention to. The first was the flower golems, which were staying back, but I did see an arrow zip toward the air toward them from time to time, and so long as they weren’t actually doing anything, I wasn’t going to move to engage with them. My best guess, to the extent I had the mental energy to guess, was that they -- and the brutish dirt golem that stood near them -- were waiting for us to get worn down.

The second thing I had failed to pay the proper amount of attention to was the water collecting at the bottom of the stone bowl the void cascade had carved out. I could see where the water was coming in from pipes that had been severed, and while there hadn’t been any water when the fight had started, it was easy to chalk that up to the esoteric systems of the prison, had I actually had that much time to spend thinking about the water. As it happened in my head, all thoughts were woven into the flow of my sword, the rhythm of my pulse, and the full-sensory absorption of the fight.

The first sign that anything was wrong was all of my muscles contracting at once (life tip: this is a pretty big sign that something has gone wrong, even if you’re not in the middle of a fight). It was painful and hot, like my whole body was being vibrated, and I was vaguely aware of having dropped my sword as I pitched over into the water, which only increased the hot pain. It didn’t last for long, but as I started to recover I was punched in the head, hard, by one of the dirt golems, and more of them were moving to surround me as I tried to shake that off too.

I touched a bone and pulled SPD from it, launching myself to my feet and slipping out from between the golems, but I wasn’t fast enough to escape without another hit to my armor, and I stood up, limping slightly and unarmed as the golems moved on me. A quick glance showed that Amaryllis had stayed on her feet, but she must have used her armor to do so, because she had been swarmed by the golems, who were beating against the immobility plate. It was, so far, holding steady, but the second big gorilla golem was finally making his move down to us. He was leaking brown goop from where a dozen arrows had hit him, but that didn’t seem to be slowing him down any.

“Casters!” shouted Fenn, from behind the protective ward that still seemed to be holding. I whipped my head to look at the two golems with vines just as one of them flicked something in my direction, and at that moment I felt the tug of luck on me; I touched my wrist, where the tip of a tail was showing, and pulled out a snake that I swung into the path of the small blue bead that was tracking my way. The projectile hit the snake, which immediately burst into spikes that came up from its skin. It looked terrifying and impractical as it fell into the water, and I could imagine that if I survived such a thing, I’d be half the fighter I needed to be.

Fenn called out to me and threw me a shortsword, one that we had taken from Aumann’s vault and then never actually figured out, though we’d done everything short of brute forcing magical phrases or using it in combat. The grip was a dark, hard wood with grooves for the fingers, while the blade was bluish-silver metal with rivulets in it. It was decidedly not my preferred weapon, but the Anyblade was at the bottom of the pit and probably under quite a bit of mud. With my off-hand I went to pull my returning dagger from my bag, but realized only belatedly that it had fallen off and was lost somewhere in the mud. Worse, something was slipping side-to-side within my hand and one of my fingers wasn’t working; there was only a faint echo of pain at the feeling of broken bones. Great.

I dashed toward the gorilla golem as it approached Amaryllis, leaping up and stepping on a few of the dirt golems to get there in time. Without the Anyblade, it was going to be a lot harder to take down, and now I was on an unfavorable footing, because I would have to protect Amaryllis too. I leapt five feet up in the air with Sanguine Surge and brought the blade down hard on the golem’s left shoulder, putting all my weight behind it.

Critical hit!
The arm fell down to the ground with a solid thud, and I slipped past the gorilla golem, taking a few hits from the smaller ones we’d mostly cleared out in the process. I stabbed through one of them, hard enough that it wouldn’t have time to do much before its goop spilt out. I planted my other hand firmly on the back of the brutish golem, feeling a too-faint twinge of pain in the process, and activated the tattoo I had readied; the Icy Devil began doing its work, chilling down the earth under my hand.

I tried to keep my hand in one place, but there were still enough dirt golems to be a problem, and the big guy tried to slap backwards with his intact arm, which I was forced to duck down from. I fought with the sword, facing down the few remaining dirt golems that hadn’t swarmed Amaryllis, keeping my hand in place as the temperature in the room dropped. I waited as long as I could, then saw the vine golem toss something small and white toward me, which I took as my cue to make my move. I spun around and drove my shortsword into the golem with all the power I could muster, aiming right for the cold spot. I was rewarded with a hard crack as the frozen earth was destroyed, and goop came pouring out of it.

**Brutish Dirt Golem defeated!**

And then my field of vision was overtaken with butterflies, small white ones, which went for my face and flapped there. It was only when I tapped SPD from a bone (using my chilled hand, sending a wave of cold over myself in the process) that I was able to swat them away enough to see that they weren’t butterflies at all, only white flower petals acting together like butterflies.

I took a hit from the side, at a place that must have taken a few too many hits before, because that one I felt, even though my ribs were almost as numb as my hand. I went tumbling to the side, down into the water, and the butterfly petals raced to follow me as the few remaining dirt golems moved toward me. I had some unpleasant flashbacks to the fairies we’d had to fight back at Caer Laga, and I still had no good defense against it. These, at least, were a nuisance, without the sharp teeth or ability to tear my skin. That said, there were a lot of them, enough to block my field of vision, and that was enough for me to take another hit, this one to the chest, which left me sprawled in the water for one dazed second before I got back to my feet.

From there I was trying to fight blind, listening to the cacophony of sounds and trying to make out from the water where the dirt golems were. I had to hope that the remaining caster had been taken out by Fenn, because while I could out-maneuver the golems, I couldn’t respond to the seemingly random effects of what appeared to be a golem that knew flower magic. My sword connected on occasion, and then eventually got stuck, which left me trying to swat away the butterflies as quickly as I could just so I could get a sense of where the golems were and move out of their way. There were messages popping into my field of view, with more of the dirt golems defeated, and I had to hope that whatever my party members were doing, it would be enough.

And then, with a final clearing of my eyes, I saw the last of the dirt golems fall, revealing Grak standing there, breathing heavily and clutching his axe. Fenn was down in the water, next to Amaryllis, who was surrounded by mounds of dirt but seemed unharmed.

“That was a slog,” I said. My fingers went to one of the bones in my bandolier and I started the healing process. I could already tell that I was going to need more than I had on me, but that was why we had a lot of bones ready to go.

“I’m fucking useless against those things,” said Fenn. “Even with a broadhead it takes half a dozen shots to bring one down.”

“I spent most of that fight trapped in my armor,” said Amaryllis.
“They shouldn’t have had other magic,” said Grak. “It was flower magic.”

“Well, they had it,” I said. “That’s fun. I’d guess that we can expect more of it. Are we safe for now?”

“I’m not getting the sense that we should move,” said Fenn. “The hallways are clear, anyway. And if I were the prison, I would have gone at us with everything I had the second time around.”

“Heal me,” said Amaryllis. “Please.” She took off her helmet and revealed a bloody face, with most of it dripping down from her nose to her mouth, and a few places where there was some swelling.

“Bones,” I said to Fenn.

“So Mary was polite,” said Fenn, as she started handing me the bones stored in her glove. “She said please. Can’t you even say please to your wonderful girlfriend?”

“Please,” I said as I approached Amaryllis. I reached forward with my right hand and gently touched Amaryllis, with my fingers on her neck and my thumb touching her jaw. It was awkwardly intimate, the same as it was every time that I had to heal her. As I pulled the energy from the bone out and pushed it toward her wounds, I watched her face puff up more, go red, become bruised, and finally return to normal as I went through the bones. “Where else?”

“Left forearm,” she said. She wasn’t looking at me, instead staring up at a random spot away from me, which had always been my strategy with the dentist so I didn’t have to look into their eyes. I could see the dent in her armor where she must have been hit hard enough for at least a hairline fracture. Doing the healing from a distance like that was more difficult, but I’d gotten fairly good at directing the magic where I wanted it to go.

“We’re being worn down,” said Grak.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Not much longer, if they were guarding this way,” said Fenn. “Just another two or three more fights like that, until we have to fight Fallatehr and all the copies he made of himself, which will be its own thing.”

“We’re not going to fight Fallatehr,” said Amaryllis. She briefly glanced at me. “We shouldn’t want to, anyway. If we do, we’ll have to make sure not to kill him. The whole point is that we need his expertise.”

“Just saying it seems likely,” said Fenn. “And he seems like an asshole.”

“Any other healing?” I asked. Amaryllis shook her head. I began the process of healing myself; the pain was becoming sharper as the urgency of combat faded, but the pain was good, in a way, because it was a reminder that I could still feel something from my injured hand. I had a hunch that the healing process was exacerbating the condition of my hand, but the bones were so brittle now that they kept breaking.

“We should go as soon as you’re done,” said Grak.

“Many miles to go before we sleep,” I replied. I waited for Grak to correct me and tell me that it wasn’t actually miles, but I guess he was starting to understand when I was making a reference, because he simply turned away. “Do you think it gets harder or easier after that?”

“Harder,” said Amaryllis. “You always said that you pushed your players just to their breaking point,
when it balanced on a knife edge.”

“And sometimes past that,” I replied with a nod. “I don’t know that’s a good heuristic for what we’re going to find in this prison. We shouldn’t count on the whole thing shifting around us just to accommodate a more pitched battle. And we really shouldn’t count on any given battle being fair, or doable.”
Animus

We didn’t have another major fight, but we did have skirmishes, four of them as we went through the prison trying to find the gymnasium, or failing that, the cell where Fallatehr was kept. Three of those were against the brass creatures, which we mostly dealt with from as far a distance as possible. If you assumed that everything was out to kill you, it wasn’t actually that hard to deal with a dungeon, just time-consuming. We burnt through more bones for some healing and took a few bangs and scrapes, but came out relatively unscathed for our troubles. There was no real drama or tension battling the security system. It was good, but we were better, and we had killed the Colossus, apparently the largest, most threatening thing that it had, in a single swift show of immense force. If there was another, we didn’t see it.

I was worried about how long it would take the dungeon to start making fresh golems, and whether it was rebuilding its forces, but we didn’t see much more of them as we went deeper into the prison, nor when we started backtracking because we realized we’d gone the wrong way. We did fight a few more, but there were only a few of them, and they seemed like they were inartfully trying to lead us somewhere, so we took a different path instead.

And just like that, we stumbled into the gymnasium. My attention was immediately drawn to the people and the equipment in the center of it, but the room itself was also of note, another place with one of the many high domes the prison seemed fond of. The major difference here, aside from the fact that it was the first place that had actual people in it, was that the walls had enormous, intricately done murals that depicted elaborate battle scenes I didn’t quite find appropriate in a prison. The sun was setting, and the light coming through the glass roof was dim, which meant that most of what I could see was thanks to a greenish luminance from the lit wall sconces.

But it was the people who drew my attention, fifteen of them, all turned our way as we crept into the room. Most of them were elves, but there were other races too, an insectoid with a multi-hued carapace that had been scored with lines, a man with bumpy grey skin I recognized as one of the vlere-gur, and a woman who stood nearly seven feet tall and didn’t belong to any race I could recall making or reading about. I eyed them all carefully, scanning for signs of a threat.

A brief smattering of applause came from one of the elves, who began making his way towards us as his hands fell to his sides. “Congratulations!” he called across the distance from the center of the gym to where we stood by the door.

“Thanks!” Fenn called back.

“There was some discussion about whether you would make it!” he called, closing toward us quickly.

If this was Fallatehr, and there was no guarantee that it was, then he was very dangerous. And if it wasn’t Fallatehr, then he was almost certainly sending someone dangerous toward us. I tried to take in his face and kept having my eyes drawn to his pointed teeth, which seemed ready and willing to rend my flesh. He was tall and somewhat effeminate, with long, pointed ears, which I more or less expected from an elf at this point. His face was lively though, more animated than I had seen from any elf but Fenn, and she didn’t really count. Unlike the one we’d seen in the visiting room, this one didn’t seem to have any of the intricate scars used in scar magic, though his chest wasn’t visible to us. He wore white, with a high collar and no sleeves. The hem of the shirt hung so low that it was almost a dress, though he had white pants beneath that.

“Are you Fallatehr?” asked Amaryllis.
“Are you Amaryllis Penndraig, most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, and Princess of Anglecynn?” asked Fallatehr. I wasn’t certain that it was really him, but I thought that the odds were good.

“I am,” said Amaryllis, removing her helmet and holding it under her arm at her side. “We seek Fallatehr Whiteshell. We spoke with one of your … associates.” The pause wasn’t because Amaryllis was searching for the word, it was a deliberate sort of hitch in her speech that let him know she was choosing to be diplomatic, the classy way of making quote marks with your fingers.

“Yes,” said Fallatehr with a nod. “I am the man you seek. Explain to me why I should help you.”

“How much can the prison hear?” asked Amaryllis.

“In this place she has been rendered deaf,” said Fallatehr. To my surprise, I realized that he had a lisp; the ‘th’ sound was coming out awkwardly, or replaced entirely by something that sounded similar. ‘Uther’ had become ‘Oo-her’. I could imagine how that was a hard sound if you had to stick your tongue against pointy teeth, but couldn’t remember the other elf having that problem.

“Then we offer you escape,” said Amaryllis. “If your associate relayed our message accurately, then you know that we want you for a teacher. In exchange, you would go free.”

“Your ancestor, the one I knew, how many generations back was he?” asked Fallatehr. “Six? Seven?”

“If you mean Cyclamine, then three,” said Amaryllis. “He was my great-grandfather.”

“Far less than I expected then,” said Falltehr. “And do you know what our relationship was?”

“As far as I’m aware, he tried to save his family and his legacy when the regime change began,” said Amaryllis. “If there was any bad blood between the two of you, I haven’t heard about it.”

“We weren’t close friends,” said Fallatehr. “I knew him, and knew that he would do nothing for me, because there wasn’t enough incentive for him.” He clapped his hands once. “You and I aren’t close friends either.”

“The question of trust and incentives is an admittedly difficult one,” said Amaryllis. “Do we have time to talk? Will the prison take action against us here? Will it try to move you?”

“You’ve upset Amoureux greatly,” said Fallatehr. “But she has also been beaten into a temporary submission. I put a great deal of work into her over the years, bending and changing her, and I hate to say that you’ve upset all that. What she sends against you next time won’t be so softened.”

“There’s not going to be a next time,” said Amaryllis. “We can leave now.”

“How?” asked Fallatehr.

“We have a teleportation key,” said Amaryllis.

Fallatehr was silent for a moment, which he spent staring at Amaryllis, his eyes twitching fractionally as he looked over her face from a distance. “Anglecynn truly wants me?” he asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “We don’t speak for Anglecynn, nor act on the behalf of the kingdom.”

“Ah,” said Fallatehr. “Strange that a princess does not speak for her country. No pardon is on offer then? The crime I was put here for was, after all, only a crime after the fact.”
“It’s not within my power,” said Amaryllis. “If it were, I would offer that pardon.”

“Alright,” said Arthur, “Let me do the talking.”

“Me no talk good,” said Tom, with his best half-orc impression.

“But I want to talk,” said Tiff.

“Arthur has the best rolls,” said Reimer.

“Sheet,” said Tiff, holding out her hand. She had only recently learned that people would just hand over their character sheets if she asked, after having mistakenly believed that this was private information, and she was taking advantage of being able to look over what other people had done. Arthur handed his character sheet over with a smile, and Tiff narrowed her eyes as she looked at it. “Okay, that’s ridiculously good, but you’re lawful neutral, I’m chaotic good, I can’t let you do all the talking.”

“You don’t trust me to represent the average of the group view?” asked Arthur.

“First, no,” said Tiff with a laugh, “Second, that takes all the roleplaying out of it, doesn’t it? If you’re the one that always talks, then the rest of us are just, at best, talking out of character.”

“This is going to be a clusterfuck,” groaned Reimer.

“Well I think it’ll be fun,” said Tom.

“I didn’t say that it wouldn’t be fun,” replied Reimer. “Joon, I’m going to apply drowfire poison to my daggers before we go in. I have my special sheaths, so I should be able to keep them concealed.”

“Oh, sounds good,” I replied as I made a note in my scratchpad.

“What does the average of our values mean?” asked Maddie.

“Ugh, please no,” said Reimer. “Never let Arthur --”

“What I mean is that all of our alignments could potentially be plotted on a two-dimensional grid, like so,” said Arthur, sketching two quick lines in his notebook and giving them simple, one-letter labels. “The C-L axis is Chaos and Law, the G-E axis is Good and Evil. We can use this to map everyone in the group.” He made six quick points on the piece of paper. “And with some more lines, we have the basic alignment grid.” He drew in four more lines, two vertical, two horizontal, then held the paper up for our inspection. “So once we have that, we can average the points on the C-L axis, then average the points on the G-E axis, which would give us a new point about here,” he poked the paper in roughly the center of the dots, toward the corner of the square that would traditionally be labeled ‘neutral good’.

“Objection!” cried Tiff, who had been watching let’s plays of Phoenix Wright (she did this instead of playing them, it was weird). She jabbed a finger at her character sheet. “Cleonia feels very, very strongly about chaos, and if you were just averaging alignment, then you’d get people like Plunder -- that is such a ridiculously stupid name --”

“Thank you,” said Reimer.

“People who don’t care about the abstract concept of law at all get counted the same in the average,” continued Tiff.
“They do,” said Arthur, “You’d assign a numeric value to each of the alignments --”

“No,” said Tiff. “It’s like, if we were talking about abortion, --”

“No, please, please, not again,” said Craig with a groan.

“You can hold the same pro-life beliefs as someone else, but feel it less strongly than they do,” said Tiff. “There are people who have some particular position on abortion as being central to the core of their identity, and there are other people with that same position who only really put forward their position when pressed about it.”

“So there are some people who are firmly neutral, and others who are wishy-washy about their neutrality,” I said.

“Point taken,” said Arthur with a frown. “I mean, we can fix that by making each point into a vector instead, and then averaging the vectors, but the alignment system is just notional anyway.”

“No, it’s not, it’s mechanical,” said Reimer. “If you can detect it with a spell, then it’s not just a norm.”

“Sure, fine,” said Arthur. He looked down at his graph. “The real problem is that for any given issue, we would need to figure out what everyone thought about it, and then how strongly they felt, and then as the voice of the group, because I have the best rolls, I would deliver whatever that position was to the NPCs.”

“Which wouldn’t work, because half the time conversation is about getting information from someone rather than delivering it to them,” I replied. “So with every line I deliver, you have to go back to the group and see their individual reaction to it, then synthesize a new position based on the change.”

“So we’re agreed on me talking?” asked Tiff. “Not a free-for-all, but if Arthur doesn’t do a good job of representing the truth and beauty of medieval ancap?” The historical context was really more like Early Modern Period, borrowing from the Scientific Revolution, but I refrained from making that correction.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Craig. “Joon can force the issue, and in-character there’s usually a reason to not let the snake oil salesman be the only one you talk with.”

“None taken,” said Arthur.

“Actually,” said Reimer, “The real reason it doesn’t matter is that we’re never actually going to get to that part of the night where we actually talk to anyone.”

“And you?” asked Fallatehr, turning his attention to me. He glanced down at my hand. “You’re the bone mage whose soul is in such dire need of fixing.”

“Yes,” I said, not fully trusting myself to speak. I had no idea whether Amaryllis was actually sympathetic to him, or whether her plan was to murder him outright as soon as we got what we wanted from him. I hoped that I wouldn’t give her away just from the fact that I was still terrible at lying.

“I can fix it quickly, if you’d give me a few minutes,” said Fallatehr.

I glanced at Amaryllis for help. “I don’t think that would be wise,” she said.
“You want me to teach someone the technique,” said Fallatehr with a nod. “I receive so little information from the outside world these days, is the nature of the soul still so taboo that you would need me?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “You might be able to change that, if you left this place.”

Fallatehr barked laughter, and it was one of the uglier sounds I had heard come from an elf. “Oh, I’m not yet sold on the idea of leaving,” said Fallatehr. “Not only is there the chance that it would be bad for my health, but I have quite the life here, with associates that I’ve spent decades crafting to perfection.” He gestured behind him, where the others were standing. Some were talking amongst themselves, which I took as a good sign; they didn’t have telepathy, and didn’t work with unanimity of purpose.

“Is there another arrangement that we could come to?” asked Amaryllis. “I wouldn’t think that you would have everything here that you could want.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” asked Fallatehr. “I know this prison very well, I control the levers of everyone inside it, I can move around with near-impunity, and I have already had much time to acquire creature comforts. I was never as concerned with the frivolity of the material as my brethren.” The heedlessness with which he lisped through the ‘th’ sounds was grating on me.

“That’s bluster,” said Amaryllis, keeping her tone flat. “There are things you want. We have a teleportation key and the capacity to get those things for you, even if you don’t wish to leave.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t want to leave,” said Fallatehr, “Only that I was not sold.” He drummed his fingers on his chin, then looked to me. “Who would I be teaching?”

“Me,” I said, staring him down. “How long does it take, for someone to manipulate his own soul?”

“For a human?” asked Fallatehr. “Years, but not more than a decade.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you human?”

“Yes,” I replied, but I had a hunch what the next question was going to be.

“You are young, to have gone through the athenaeum,” said Fallatehr. He looked at the hand again. “You’ve made some attempt at healing, before coming to me. The bones have been cut out and regrown.”

“Not intentionally,” I replied. Fallatehr raised an eyebrow at that. I was hoping that being vague and mysterious would get him interested, on a professional level if nothing else.

“The body tries its best,” said Fallatehr. “It would be simplicity itself for me to fix what’s wrong with you. I’ve done it dozens of times before.”

“I’d prefer to learn on my own,” I replied.

“And spend years of your life to do so?” asked Fallatehr.

“If that’s what it takes,” I answered. I was hoping that it would take hours, but maybe that was a little bit unrealistic. I couldn’t say that I thought it would take hours, because that would demand an explanation that I didn’t want to give, and I already thought that Amaryllis was being a little loose with what information she was giving up. I didn’t doubt that she had a plan, but my plan hadn’t involved telling him that we had a teleportation key until we had to.

“And you, quarter-elf,” said Fallatehr, addressing his attention to Fenn. “Why do you travel with a
“I don’t think that’s germane,” said Amaryllis as quickly as she could.

“If I’m to be teaching this one for years on end, of course it is,” said Fallatehr with a frown. “We’re speaking of a long-term arrangement, and it would, of course, behoove me to know more about who you are and what you want, even if your prodigy can learn what he needs to know in months, not years.”

“Sharing information goes both ways,” said Amaryllis, with a glance back to the people still standing in the center of the room.

“I have you at a disadvantage,” said Fallatehr, “I see no point in pretending otherwise.” I felt pained at that; I didn’t really believe that he was content to stay here, even if he’d had his way with the prison, but it was clear that he was willing to walk away from our escape, which wasn’t at all what I’d been hoping for.

Amaryllis nodded, and gestured toward Fenn.

“What is it you’d like to know?” asked Fenn. Her enunciation was more perfect than I had ever heard from her before.

“You’re a half-elf?” asked Fallatehr. “Descended from wood elf stock?”

Fenn nodded. “My father was an elf from the Isle of Eversummer. My mother was a human.”

“And what is your role in this group?” he asked. The unself-consciousness of the way he spoke was unsettling me, given his lisp. He didn’t trip over or slow down for the word ‘this’, he simply spoke it incorrectly and continued on.

“I’m our ranged specialist,” said Fenn. She didn’t have her bow drawn, which made the statement a little farcical, but there were lots of ways to be a ranged specialist without having visible equipment, at least on Aerb, and hopefully being enigmatic would keep him guessing, or at least force him to ask another question.

“How old are you?” asked Fallatehr.

“Thirty-three years old,” said Fenn.

(That was quite a bit older than I had thought, and my brain had an irrational moment of uncomfortability and panic at our age difference. It didn’t actually matter, it didn’t make her a different person, I’d already known that she’d spent a few years in prison. I hadn’t asked, because it didn’t seem important, and if it wasn’t important enough to ask, then it wasn’t important enough to think about once I knew.

And I immediately began spinning up reasons that her being that old was actually a bad thing, because that was how my brain worked. She’d left the elves for good at the age of seventeen, after they’d scarred her, which meant that she’d been on her own for nearly sixteen years. I guess in my mind there was an acceptable length of time to go bumming around the Risen Lands looking for loot, where a few years was just a matter of finding yourself, and a decade and a half was more just who you were. And there was, too, the question of Fenn’s immaturity on both an emotional and social level, the jokes that she used to cover her insecurities and weaknesses, the way she kept her guard up, even around me … I had thought that I would help her, and she would help me, and we would grow together, but there were sixteen years of her mostly being the same person without changing much, and six partners over the course of those sixteen years meant that her issues with intimacy and
how gun shy she was about relationships were also more serious than I had thought.

Really, I was probably just carrying over cultural conceptions from Earth about what age ranges were appropriate. That had been something I’d been sensitive to for a long time, ever since a few girls in our class freshman year had dated seniors, and the age gap between them had rankled, partly because I’d had a crush on one of them. That got added to the standard Midwestern cultural programming package, which would have considered me, at seventeen, dating a thirty-three-year-old woman as incredibly scandalous.

This was all very incidental to the powerful soul mage standing in front of us, but that didn’t do much to keep the cascade of thoughts from running through my head.)

“You’re a pup, then,” said Fallatehr. “An outcast from elven society, I would wager, like myself?”

Fenn shrugged.

“Not the talkative type then,” said Fallatehr with a slight frown. Amaryllis coughed, which didn’t hide her momentary smile from me.

Fallatehr looked at Grak only briefly, but apparently had no questions for him. Elves and dwarves didn’t have any inborn animosity on Aerb, contrary to the traditional fantasy cliche, partly because they occupied completely different niches within the sociocultural ecosystem.

“Very well,” said Fallatehr, looking back toward Amaryllis, “I would like some time alone with the prodigy, to gauge him as a student.”

Amaryllis nodded, and gestured for me to go forward. “Away from the others, of course,” she said with a glance toward the cluster of people in the center.

“So little trust,” said Fallatehr with a frown, but he began walking to a different corner of the gymnasium all the same. I followed after him, suddenly feeling nervous. This was a man that I would need some kind of working relationship with, if I wanted to learn his secrets, but he currently had some strong incentives to hold me hostage. Elves were stronger and faster than people, and their luck grew as they got older. I had never fought an elf before, unless you counted sparring with Fenn, and that uncertainty was one of the primary sources of my apprehension.

Fallatehr led us behind a small folding screen, where two chairs were set up, along with a variety of equipment on a simple tray. I recognized the runic nail like the one I’d used to collect souls in Comfort, and there was a variety of glass equipment, along with a few other things that I didn’t recognize, and a few pieces of mundane doctor’s equipment I was familiar with, like a speculum.

“I didn’t catch your name,” said Fallatehr. He sat in his chair with his legs folded and his hands clasped over his knees.

“Juniper Smith,” I said. I was watching him closely and listening for suspect sounds from beyond the screen.

“And it’s you who will be my pupil?” he asked. His eyes roamed my face and rested on my deformed hand. I tried not to join him in looking at it; I knew what I would see there, skin stretched and sagged in places, each knuckle just slightly off from the right length, either too long or too short.

“Yes,” I said. “If you’ll have me, if we can come to some sort of arrangement.”

“What was it you were doing, when you reached down through your marrow and touched your soul?” asked Fallatehr with a raised eyebrow.
“I was running for my life,” I said. “I needed the swiftness.” Swiftness was the bone mage name for SPD, and I wasn’t about to reveal myself to him if I could help it. I held up my hand so he could see it. “I used every bone, and even then I only barely lived.” I wasn’t going to tell him about my ribs either, I had decided, not until I knew how to fix my hand.

“It might be easier to work with you, given how you’ve disfigured yourself,” said Fallatehr. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen,” I replied.

“How old were you, when you began studying at the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh?” asked Fallatehr.

“You’re assuming that I studied there,” I replied. I could feel his eyes watching me. I knew that I was going to present him with a number of facts that weren’t going to make much sense, but not only was I terrible at lying, I didn’t know enough to carry on a campaign of lies.

“And where did you study?” he asked.

“I had a teacher in Barren Jewel, if you know where that is,” I said.

“Outside the athenaeums,” said Fallatehr.

“That’s something that I’m seeking to do again, given the tight controls on the art,” I said. That much was truth, at least. I was scared of soul magic, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t want to learn it, and if this man was the most direct path, then so be it.

“Show me your bone magic,” said Fallatehr.

I grabbed a bone from out of my bandolier and held it in my right hand, then frowned slightly as I tried to think about the best way to demonstrate. I assumed that he wanted to get some understanding of who I was as a student, or possibly was trying to get some information from me. I didn’t really mind that too much; there were only a few things that I wasn’t going to tell him.

I ended up using the Anyblade to make a cut in my left hand, feeling almost no pain from it, and then healed myself immediately with only a trace of the cut remaining. I went slow, pulling steadily rather than trying to yank out all the healing at once, in order to maximize what the bone would give me.

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“And how long did you spend in study to attain that level of proficiency?” asked Fallatehr, leaning forward slightly.

Ah.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said. “I learn quickly.”

“How quickly?” asked Fallatehr.

That was a tricky thing to answer. It had taken me maybe an hour to go from Bormann’s simple description to being able to do it myself, and my current level of proficiency had taken maybe a month, at the most, though that was without a huge amount of effort put into actually learning anything. But the actual timeline wasn’t what made it tricky, it was that saying “I learned it in an hour” was unbelievable, and besides that, might betray a little too much of what I was. And if he did believe me, then he might realize that he wasn’t actually all that valuable, because we didn’t need years worth of training from him, we needed weeks, or maybe even mere days.

“It took me a month,” I said. That seemed like a fair compromise, startlingly quick, but maybe not
Fallatehr watched me, frowning. “Have you applied your quick learning to other tasks?” he asked.

“A few, I replied. “What we want from you won’t take years of your life, it will take much less, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I am not human, such that I worry about a few years here and there,” said Fallatehr. He was still looking me over. “Your other specialities, skin magic and blood magic?”

I hesitated. “Yes,” I said. I wasn’t sure how he had been able to tell about the blood magic. My veins were maybe a little more prominent than they might otherwise have been, if you had eyes keen enough to look me over carefully from a distance. As for the tattoos … well, that was obvious enough, if you looked down at my wrist. I hadn’t made an effort to hide them. Maybe I should have, but my tattoos were weak enough that I would rather project strength that I didn’t have instead of keeping a trivial trick up my sleeve.

“And others,” said Fallatehr.

“Yes,” I replied.

Fallatehr leaned back in his chair. “Have you surpassed your teachers?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Though I can’t say that I had particularly good teachers, so that might not say much.”

“And this prodigy, is it natural or magical?” asked Fallatehr.

“Neither,” I replied. It took place above the levels where natural and magical existed, that I was pretty sure of, though it obviously interfaced with those levels as well.

“Very well,” said Fallatehr, standing up from his chair. “I believe I find this intriguing enough to go along with, which I imagine was what you were going for. The princess has a handle on you --”

“She doesn’t,” I said. “We’re just friends. I let her do the talking and negotiating, because she’s better than me, but I wouldn’t think it smart to try to manipulate her as a way of manipulating me.”

“I’ve never held with manipulation,” said Fallatehr. “Far easier to simply stick your hand on someone’s soul to get them to do what you want.”

I swallowed at that. If he tried that with Amaryllis, I would stab him to death until he wasn’t much more than a pile of broken bones, raw meat, and ruptured organs, but I didn’t know whether he was the sort of person who responded well to threats. Then again, he was threatening me, or at least the people close to me, so maybe this was one of those occasions where displaying a willingness to inflict violence was appropriate. Too much time passed as I thought about it, and I ended up keeping my mouth shut.

“Come,” said Falltehr. “I believe the time has come to negotiate over the matter of my associates, now that I’ve decided you would make an interesting enough pupil.”

We walked back to the rest of the party, who were still standing close together. They had been talking, but ceasing their conversation as we approached. Fallatehr’s “associates” had moved somewhat, but they were still watching us.

“I’ve accepted the base offer,” said Fallatehr. “I will leave this prison with you and teach Mr. Smith
everything there is to know about the soul and how to manipulate it.”

“With reservations?” asked Amaryllis.

“Naturally,” replied Fallatehr. “And I have bad news, I’m afraid. The teleportation key you’ve brought in will not work, and this place will not remain safe for you for more than another hour.” Of course, because that would be too easy.

“The prison is not warded,” said Grak with a furrowed brow.

“It is an innate feature of this place, not a ward,” said Fallatehr.

“And you couldn’t have mentioned this earlier?” asked Fenn.

“It wouldn’t have been to my advantage then,” said Fallatehr, casting his gaze over her. She broke eye contact with him almost immediately, but his eyes continued tracing the lines of her body. Fenn had repeatedly assured me that elves found her extremely distasteful, but Fallatehr wasn’t exactly a typical elf, and he’d already said that he was an outcast. “In an hour, it will be curfew, and the prison’s appendages will come here. That’s not something that I can prevent.”

“The prohibition against teleportation doesn’t extend beyond the outer walls though?” asked Amaryllis.

“Not to my understanding,” said Fallatehr. He was watching the four of us like he was taking some entertainment from this. He’d agreed to leaving the prison and working with us, but we still didn’t have something that he actually wanted. To him, our failure would be a boon, and that was a serious problem.

“You said that the prison would bring us greater challenges on our way out,” I said. “Explain that.”

“There have been less than fifty prisoners here for the last hundred years,” said Fallatehr. “For the last six decades, I have been working on the penitentiary itself, uninhibited, gradually bending her to my will. The weakness of the appendages of dirt is a result of that. In another hundred years, I could have transformed this place into a fortress under my complete control.”

“Go faster, please,” said Amaryllis. “Time is apparently of the essence.”

“The prison is reactive,” said Fallatehr. “She rises to the threats that she faces. When there were two thousand unruly prisoners, she was fearsome. Given such a long span of a few dozen completely docile prisoners who she never recognizes as breaking rules, she has become the weak thing you faced in reaching me. And now, having been so thoroughly provoked, she will rise once again. How fast, I can’t say.”

“Shit,” Amaryllis swore.

“Yes,” agreed Fallatehr. “When you came here I thought that I would be happy enough to see you all die by the penitentiary’s hands, but Juniper has changed my mind on that score somewhat.”

“Then let’s get going,” said Fenn, folding her arms across her chest.

“There’s still the matter of the … associates,” said Amaryllis. That was more or less what it came down to. We’d been given a clock and told there was danger, but we were going to keep standing in this room, talking, until we could come to an agreement. “We can’t take them, the teleportation key only allows five.”
“Unacceptable,” said Fallatehr with a shrug. “My counter-offer is that we take all of them. You have free use of the key, it wouldn’t take more than six trips in total. It would naturally have to be done carefully in order to ensure that there’s no chance you simply leave them behind.”

“We can’t deal with that many people,” said Amaryllis. “Logistically speaking –”

“It’s about trust, not logistics,” said Fallatehr.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “You’re right, I apologize for not cutting to the point. We’ll move everyone at once, and if the far side of the island is safe from the penitentiary, we’ll extract everyone, including whichever associates you want to remove from this place. None of them will come with us. I’ll place them in whatever locations you prefer, so long as they’re distant from us.”

“Hang on,” I said, “You’re talking about releasing them into the world?”

“I’m negotiating,” said Amaryllis with a carefully calm glance in my direction.

“Ah, young Juniper doesn’t share your belief in the injustice of my incarceration?” asked Fallatehr.

“I don’t know the specifics, and I don’t think we have the time to talk about them,” I said. “Your associate we talked to made it clear that your associates aren’t actually you, they’re,” I waved my hand in the air, as though I could skate by the fact that I had no real idea what had been done to those people. “And I imagine some of them were put in this penitentiary for a good reason.”

“We can talk about this later,” said Amaryllis. “We need to get moving, which means that we need to get a consensus, fast.”

“The associates are of no use to me scattered,” said Fallatehr.

“They would be freed to pursue your goals,” said Amaryllis. “If that’s not enough, you could arrange to meet with them once your obligation to us is complete.”

“I’ll take three with me, plus another who is not an associate,” said Fallatehr. “I will, naturally, never be put in a situation where I might be pressganged.”

“Not an associate?” asked Amaryllis with narrowed eyes.

“Nonanima,” said Fallatehr. The name wasn’t familiar to me, but I heard an intake of breath from Fenn. “She is already in chains.” Well that’s fucking ominous.

“You, two associates, and the nonanima,” said Amaryllis.

“And, of course, passage for all my associates,” said Fallatehr.

Amaryllis nodded, but she didn’t seem particularly happy about it. I had no idea what the bounds of soul magic actually were, and didn’t fully understand what these associates were to him. They weren’t clones, exactly, but they were at the very least people whose souls had been remade in the image of his own. There was too much uncertainty though, and the fact that he could lie to us with practical impunity was worrying.

Fallatehr left to go speak with his associates. I didn’t know how much time we had left until the curfew, but it sure as hell felt like he was being nonchalant about things. We were just out of range of being able to hear his conversation, which was done with low voices and occasional glances in our direction.
“Do you have some clever plan?” I asked Amaryllis. “Something that you’re not telling me because of the n-word, or --”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “I intend to hold up our end of the bargain.”

“Fuck,” said Fenn. “I’m not on board with that.”

“Seems dicey, if anyone finds out that it was us, and they’ll have our names,” I said.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “It gives us an incentive not to defect against him, it’s implicitly part of the deal.”

That made sense, but I really didn’t like it. We were essentially giving him blackmail ammunition. Of course, we were already enemies of the state, which meant that the blackmail wasn’t as useful as it might seem on first blush, and that was probably also part of Amaryllis’ negotiation strategy, which was, apparently, more layered than I gave her credit for. It also put us in a collective corner, which she’d done without consulting us. Hard to do, in the heat of the moment, but it still rubbed me the wrong way.

“Scenario?” asked Amaryllis.

“Scenario zero,” I replied. No new quests, no quest updates, no achievements, no companion messages. I had thought that Fallatehr would prove to be a companion, but if he was, the game hadn’t seen fit to say anything about him yet. I’d thought that the prison would hold some kind of companion, because this seemed like the perfect place for the ‘you find a locked up guy with skills who joins your party’ trope to rear its head.

“You’re not going to talk her out of this?” asked Fenn.

“No,” I replied. I looked her over. She was still standing with her arms crossed. “Be on the lookout while we move, they have every incentive to try to whittle down our numbers or attack us in the confusion of battle. It could be Fireteam Blackheart all over again.”

Fenn twisted her lips to the side for a moment, then nodded. I wasn’t sure that she had caught the message that I was trying to pass across; when Fenn and I had been stuck with Fireteam Blackheart, before we’d really known each other, whittling down the fireteam while ostensibly moving toward our goals had been the best plan of action we’d had available to us, because there was no way that we were going to be left alive. Fallatehr and his people had incentives to weaken us so we’d be easier to handle, but we had those same incentives.

I glanced toward Amaryllis after a short grace period, wanting to see whether she would pick up what I was saying but not wanting to look over eager, like I was getting away with something. She was, mercifully, staring at Fallatehr and his associates. I tracked her intent gaze to where a cage was being drawn out from under a table. A pale woman with white hair was inside it, and two of the scarred elves opened the door to pull her out.

“Nonanima?” I asked.

Amaryllis nodded. She looked my in direction with cold eyes. “If any of them happen to die on our way out, it would be best if she was one of them.”
We moved through the prison together, with our party of four at the front. Fallatehr walked in the midst of his quote associates unquote, who formed a tight ring around him. Behind him, the nonanima was being pulled along by the brass manacles around her wrists and the collar wrapping her throat.

My eyes kept going to her whenever I looked behind me. She walked with a downcast stare, her scarlet eyes fixed on the ground three feet in front of her. Unlike most of the others, she was in dingy clothing, but she was still pretty for all that, with delicate, gracile features. Her white hair, pale skin, and red eyes were obviously (to me) meant to call to mind an albino, but I knew what actual albinos looked like, and she wasn’t quite that.

“So what’s a nonanima?” I had asked Amaryllis.

“She doesn’t have a soul,” Amaryllis had answered, while looking the woman over. “They’re prone to demonic possession; without a soul, it’s easy to enter the body. She won’t have any magic that ties to the soul, which means most of them.”

“We’re talking about demonic possession here?” I’d asked. Demons, and the hells in general, were not one of the areas that I’d done a deep dive on; *Portrait of the Many Hells* was one of those books that I’d mostly gotten in case I needed it, rather than because I thought it was important background information that I needed to get to as quickly as possible, not that (from the index) *Portrait* went into much detail on demons or devils.

“It’s short-term, hours at most, maybe longer if they chained it, but they’re bad at coordination. If possessed, she’ll only have the strength of a human,” Amaryllis had replied. “The kinds of devils that can reach up to puppet her won’t be clever enough to be convincing, and if Fallatehr is smart, he’ll have his people punch her in the mouth if she tries to convince anyone. I don’t think she’s a threat.”

“The real question is why he has her,” Fenn had said.

“He’s a soul mage,” Amaryllis had replied. “The interest is obvious. Where he got her from is more concerning.” She’d pursed her lips. “It’s possible that he made her.”

I’d had a lot of questions, as was typical for me, but the operational briefing of ‘she can be possessed by demons or devils pretty much at will and can’t do magic’ was clear enough for the time being. The whole conversation about some people not having souls was going to have to wait, even though it raised a lot of questions about what, exactly, a soul actually did for you. I might have considered myself lucky to have recently acquired an apprenticeship to a master soul mage, if I liked or trusted the soul mage in question.

So we had moved from the gymnasium, down the hallways of the penitentiary, trying to make as direct a path outside as possible, keeping to a formation that would nearly guarantee that our party would take the brunt of any counter-attack by whatever Amoureux Penitentiary could muster against us. I didn’t really consider that fair, but Amaryllis didn’t seem to want to press the matter, and I deferred to her judgement. It certainly made more tactical sense, if you valued all of us equally, but I wanted some cannon fodder between myself and whatever trouble was ahead (and I was thankful that the game didn’t slap a penalty on me for that thought).

“Kran di in negidor gre ha deheki,” said Grak as he walked beside me, keeping his voice low. Literally translated, that meant ‘I him the gate about disbelieve’, except that ‘negid(or)’ didn’t just
mean gate, it meant a ward, and in context, he was referring to Fallatehr telling us that the prison would block teleportation, I was pretty sure.

I glanced back at the people following us, for what seemed like the fifth time. “Lir Groglir lonele lalile?” I asked. Do we need to be speaking Groglir?

“Lir okr dril na mo lahon dadon o,” replied Grak. And he was right, we had been putting in the work for a reason. Being able to speak in confidence was, certainly, one of those reasons, and given the complexity of Groglir, and the fact that it was the trade language of dwarves, it was really unlikely that anyone could listen in on us -- that, plus the fact that Grak was speaking softly.

“Na lir lonele lonele di gre?” I asked, which I was fairly sure was a butchering of Groglir, meant to ask whether there was anything actionable we could do about the fact that we were taking Fallatehr’s word on teleportation not working.


That had more or less been my conclusion. If you couldn’t teleport within the penitentiary, then the only way to test that was to attempt to teleport, which we couldn’t do because of the risk that it was successful. At best, we might have been able to convince Fallatehr to be part of the test, leaving all his associates behind, but it would be hard to do that now, after terms had been negotiated. I wished that Grak had said something earlier, but maybe it hadn’t occurred to him, or maybe he was still second-guessing himself after our encounter with the suits of armor. My command of Groglir wasn’t good enough that I wanted to pursue that conversation.

So all that Grak had really done was to heighten my anxiety, not just about our teleportation being blocked, but about everything that Fallatehr had said to us. Thanks, Grak.

I was already in high gear when the golems appeared. Whatever internal changes the penitentiary had been going through in response to our arrival, there was a clear difference in the golems; they were wearing armor now, thick, crude slabs of wood on top of the packed earth of their torsos. There were fewer of them than last time, but more of the dangerous ones, and I was pretty confident that the addition of even something as weak as wooden armor was going to mean that I couldn’t kill one of the big guys by myself.

Nevertheless, I ran toward them with my sword drawn, with Amaryllis close behind me.

By the time we reached them, the casters had done something to make the air oppressively hot. Burning leaves swirled through the air, flashing bright enough to leave a spot on my vision where they landed. The golems didn’t seem to mind at all; small embers were gradually accumulating on them. It was a complication that I really didn’t want, but there was nothing to be done about it, so I burned SPD from one of my bones and sliced off the arm of a brute, then kicked it over to dodge away from a fist that was slamming down like a windmill.

I’d felt the excitement building from the moment we’d seen them, and it had built up to fever pitch by the time I actually met with them. I was gradually learning to simply lose myself in combat, to experience the zen of trusting in my skills. It became more of a sequence of decisions than anything else, each one thought about for relatively little time, especially on a battlefield like this one where burning motes threatened to incinerate part of my armor or dig into my skin, or whatever they were going to do.

Fallatehr’s associates came to join us, wielding the weapons that we’d given them to use. They had nothing magical, but there were more than enough mundane weapons stored away in Fenn’s glove. We hadn’t had a discussion about arming people who might be the enemy, but it seemed to me to be
a building block of trust, in the same way that the way they joined us in battle was another building block. Naturally, there are different reasons to build trust, and one of them was so you could betray that trust later on; I wasn’t blind to that, because that was my current plan with Fallatehr.

I fought alongside Fallatehr’s people, which mostly consisted of them baiting out strikes and me moving in with superior agility and strength to land a hit that actually did some damage. The golems seemed to understand that I was the real threat, since they went after me more than anyone else, but they couldn’t flatly ignore the damage that was being done to them by the elves.

This was my first time seeing elves actually fight, and I wasn’t all that impressed, given their reputation. I could see the elf luck in action, as they slipped beneath a crushing fist or leapt back from a blow that they couldn’t see, and certainly they moved with an unearthly grace and agility that didn’t seem like it could possibly be a product of their muscles, but I didn’t think that I was all that far behind them in terms of dexterity. When using bone magic to speed, they were practically slow. And even without blood magic, I still had a clear power advantage, though I was, at this point, pretty powerfully built.

I was gauging their abilities because I was thinking about what Fenn had said -- I agreed with her, that we’d prefer as many of them to die as possible, and I’d also agreed that it would make sense for them to try the same against us. I wasn’t just fighting against the golems, I was watching the men and women fighting alongside us, trying not to expose myself too much to them.

I watched one of them get clipped in the head by one of the large, armored golems, but the elven woman only slid along the ground without crumpling up as I’d thought she would. I realized what had happened a moment later, when a quick glance around showed the grey vlere-gur clutching a bleeding head-wound, far from the action. All of Fallatehr’s people were probably linked through the soul, so that wounds would end up on the person most able to take them. That was going to make any fight we had with them extremely problematic.

And it might have been because I was keeping a close eye on what everyone else around me was doing that I allowed one of the floating, burning bits of leaf to touch me. It landed on my armored collarbone, where it ignited with a blinding flash, and while I was blinking that away and trying to move to safety, I was hit by the golem, right in the chest. I went flying backward through the air and skidded to a stop on the tiled floor, gasping in pain and nearly blind.

Grak was on me in an instant, slapping down at the places where I was on fire; I had hit a few of the motes of fire on my way through the air. As I slowly came to my senses and my vision returned to me, I saw Fallatehr standing with six of his associates around him, out of the fight, which he was watching with interest. His nonanima stood behind him, chained and held in place, but I could see that she too was watching.

I healed myself as quickly as I could. I had broken ribs and punctured my lungs, but I wasn’t so far gone that I couldn’t reach a shaky hand to my bandolier and touch one of the bones. After the first wave of healing, it was easy to administer the second, and the third, until Fenn was beside me, feeding me more bones and waving bone-smoke from the air. It was painful, certainly, but my chest was almost as numb as my hand was, and whatever internal injuries I had sustained, I wasn’t feeling anywhere near the full brunt of them.

As soon as I was able, I raced back into the fight. I passed the vlere-gur, who was dead on the ground, and saw one of the elves fly to the side of the hallway from some unseen hit she’d taken through a soul link. Amaryllis was all by herself, separated from both me and Fallatehr’s people, but the casters at the back seemed to be dead, with the ground around them littered with the effects of their spells: pink petals, thin bits of vines, and a handful of rocks that floated a few inches above the
Two of the four brutes had been killed, with the majority of the work having been done with my blade. A third had its wooden armor on fire, and was being slowly taken down by the elves, who were flensing away at it with their borrowed swords. That left one for Amaryllis and I. We came together, each taking a different side of it, and I sliced halfway through its crude arm at the shoulder while she went in close and began flickering her blade. Even with my strongest hits, I wasn’t getting through the armor, but I could at least disarm him so that Amaryllis could do her work. Once I’d dodged another attack and chopped clean through his other arm, I began to attack him from the side, seeking the gaps in his armor, but it was hard to bring as much power to a precise hit. The golem died from a thousand cuts, spilling goop out from the hundreds of holes Amaryllis had put through its armor and into its interior, and eventually it collapsed down to the ground.

We kept moving as they talked, with the conversation carried out over the rustling of clothes and the echoing sound of our footfalls. Each step of the seven-foot-tall woman was almost thunderously loud, and she was breathing heavily, putting by far the most effort into moving quickly. She hadn’t
came into battle with us, though I wasn’t quite sure why; she was powerfully built, and I was getting a real ‘death by snu snu’ vibe from her.

“It was once common practice to carve out the skills of the imprisoned,” said Fallatehr. “I have not built these men and women up to be fighters, though some of them were, in their past lives. It’s as though they’ve never held a blade before.”

“Unfortunate,” said Amaryllis. I wondered whether she was thinking what I was thinking, which is that Fallatehr was probably feeding us a line of bullshit.

It wasn’t entirely clear what exact alterations Fallatehr had made to these people, except that he’d done something to their souls to make them relatively obedient and willing to listen to his orders, if (it was implied) imperfectly, and also to use them to cloak his own identity from the penitentiary. Even given his limited supply of bodies, I didn’t believe that he had completely neglected turning one of them into a knife. If he hadn’t trained (or forged) them all into soul mages, what was the point in making them into his servants? The gambit would be simple enough; throw a few bodies away in the first fight to convince us that he had no one who would be that much of a threat, and save the rest for a strike when we least expected it. It was what I might have done.

They didn’t turn on us as we moved through the halls, retracing our steps back to the entrance, past a few of the battles we’d fought, and the other threat, the prison itself, didn’t seem to have any other surprises ready to ambush us with, at least not before we got outside. We finally found ourselves in the entryway where we’d fought the brass suits of armor, which were still laying on the ground right where we’d left them, along with a fair amount of our own blood. It had grown dark as we’d made our way through the penitentiary, and now the only light was from my hand, which I channeled blood magic through to act as a torch.

“It’s probably waiting for us on the other side,” said Amaryllis. “It hasn’t had that much time to set anything up.”

“Don’t underestimate this place,” said Fallatehr. With a gesture from him, his associates fanned out and moved forward. One of them left him holding the chain that bound the nonanima. “It was weak while it slept, but now it has awakened.” He stepped toward one of the people in front of him, who flinched back.

“What are you doing?” asked the elf, watching Fallatehr with wary eyes.

Fallatehr looked at the other elf, head cocked to the side. “I will turn you back, if we both survive. You know that oblivion awaits you without me.”

The elf hesitated, then straightened slightly and bowed his head. Fallatehr moved forward and touched him on the brow, pushing with an elegant thumb. The elf stepped back, gasping slightly, and Fallatehr moved on to the next, continuing on down the line until only two were left, one of them the large woman, the other the shirtless elf we’d met in the visitation room. Two associates would travel with us, that was the agreement.

“Heal them, Juniper,” said Fallatehr, gesturing to the people he had touched.

I looked at him. “They’re not injured.” I was taking the conversational bait, for his sake. I was smart enough to know where he was going with this.

“Injury is a matter of how the soul views the body,” said Fallatehr with a triumphant, sharp-toothed grin. “I think you will find that they are quite injured.”
I swallowed hard and touched the first of them. I was pretty sure that it wasn’t a trap, but even though it wasn’t, I was getting a bad feeling about this. The elf was no longer himself, visibly so; he had shown a wariness before Fallatehr had touched him, but now there was nothing but a cow-like submission and a faint dullness to his eyes. He didn’t react to my touch in the slightest.

I did a slow, steady pull from the bone to get as much from it as I could, and I had to resist the urge to yank my hand away when I saw his jaw dislocate itself. Eventually I closed my eyes as I burned through bones, but that wasn’t any better, because then I was listening to the creaks and groans of his body. So I opened my eyes and tried not to pay too much attention. It took ten bones, drained with full efficiency, until he stopped changing. I looked on the creation in horror.

Aerbian elves were carnivores, hunters, that much had been made clear to me, but they were still humanoid. They were upright tool users, not beasts, and killers, but still refined and restrained. The thing that Fallatehr had turned this elf into, with my help, was more gracile but less human, and as soon as my hand pulled away, it dropped to all fours, in a position it was clearly comfortable in. The arms had been elongated and the wrists had been adapted, the better for the creature to swipe with its claws. But as I looked, I saw that it didn’t actually have claws, it had sharpened bones protruding from its last knuckle, with the fingernail resting just on top of it. There were other changes, most of them to get the creature into a less humanoid shape, but I quickly moved on before getting engrossed in the appearance of the thing.

“Not the best weapon we might have, given the circumstances,” said Fallatehr, “But I had always assumed that if it came to a fight I would be facing people, not the prison itself, so this is what I had prepared.”

“What are they?” asked Fenn with a shaky voice.

“Elves,” said Fallatehr with a laugh that no one shared. “I stripped out everything I didn’t think was necessary and used it to rebuild them into something ferocious. It used to be common, in the glory days of the Second Empire. They are death incarnate, though of course, better suited to fighting against people.” I wasn’t sure whether I was imagining a threat there.

I moved down the line, “healing” each of them in turn and trying my best not to have my stomach churned by what I was doing.

“I take it these are not the things you wish to learn from me, Juniper?” asked Fallatehr.

“I’ll learn them, if you’re willing to teach,” I said as I transformed another one into a monster. I tried to rationalize it; I wasn’t the one that had actually changed them, they had been changed at the level of their very soul by Fallatehr, I was just expressing that change. And it hadn’t been like they were full people before -- though they had been people enough to fear what Fallatehr was going to do to them.

“They’ve been giving us time,” said Amaryllis with her eyes on the door. “I’m not sure that we’re getting the better end of the deal here.”

“We only need to leave the penitentiary,” said Fallatehr. “The pelehr will provide a distraction, if nothing else, so that we might find a way through.”

After I had changed over the last of them, they turned and lined up in front of the door. Fallatehr didn’t seem at all perturbed by the idea of what we might find out there, waiting between us and the front gate. I could already feel my pulse starting to pick up, because this was the final battle, and that was when things always got hairy.
We opened the door to see two of the twenty-foot tall brass creatures with their hammers held in a firm grip, lit by the glow of Celestar and the multi-colored stars that hung above Aerb. Four of the gorilla-like brutes stood beneath them, each of them with brass armor rather than wood, an unfortunate development. The gargoyles were still broken though, which was the only good news, or rather, the only absence of bad news. The gate golem still blocked the main entryway, which we’d been hoping to leave out of. As fights went, it didn’t look particularly winnable.

The single saving grace was that they weren’t attacking just yet, and the reason for that was simple; they had sent an envoy. It was a far cry from the dirt golem that we’d first met, the one that spoke to us with its too-human mouth. Instead, it was a thing of dark glass and brass, with a few places where it had strips of dark wood. Its mouth was still a normal mouth though, with lips and teeth that seemed out of place on its form.

“Please,” it said. “There is still time to resolve this with peace.”

“How would we do that?” asked Amaryllis.

“Lay down your arms and surrender,” said the mouthpiece of the prison. “You will die with surety otherwise.”

I could hear the sound of the pelehr breathing loudly. Whatever had been done to their lungs and mouth, Fallatehr hadn’t been optimizing for silence. It gave an unnerving backdrop to the conversation. I didn’t think that giving in to the prison was an option, but the fight didn’t seem to be an option either, especially since it would be the perfect, final opportunity to stab us in the back before we had him on the back foot.

I wasn’t about to back down at this point and throw away the grind we’d gone through in getting through this dungeon, but I also stared at the giant brass creatures and didn’t see a way for us to beat them. No, that was the wrong way of thinking, that was my problem, this wasn’t a fight to destroy the enemy, we didn’t actually care about the prison except that it was an impediment to our goals. All we really needed to do was to get on the other side of the wall, where, presumably, the teleportation key would still work. Fallatehr had said it himself, we only needed to leave the penitentiary.

I moved close to Amaryllis. “Stall,” I whispered to her, hoping that she’d be able to hear me clearly through her helmet. I moved on to Fallatehr as she started talking to the golem, using polite, meaningless, diplomatic language like she’d been prepared to do that all along.

“The prison thinks that you’re all one person?” I asked him.

He raised an eyebrow, which arched perfectly. “No,” he replied. He gestured to the pelehr. “They are no longer in my image.”

“Do you fear this fight?” I asked. In the background, the golem was answering Amaryllis’ long monologue.

“I’ve stripped fear from myself, as much as was possible,” answered Fallatehr. “I do not believe our outcomes are likely to be good. Most likely you will die and I will remain imprisoned with fewer resources than I had when you arrived.”

“I have a plan, but it’s going to require trust,” I said. “We’re going to stuff you inside the glove.”

Fallatehr frowned. “With an associate left outside to cloak my position? Yes, it might work. There are still a few, less valuable ones left behind in strategic locations.” (I had guessed that, just based on...
the discrepancy in the numbers that I’d been given: twenty associates, but only fifteen people in the gymnasium.)

I moved away from him and made sure that Amaryllis was still engaged with the golem. She appeared to be talking at length about the morality of imprisonment for crimes which were committed prior to the criminal act becoming illegal. That seemed to at least be holding its attention. I had no idea how well it could hear, or whether it was even cognitively capable of acting on that information if it could, but so far it wasn’t making a move against us.

“Fenn, you remember riding the rocket?” I asked as I stepped up beside her.

“I remember it not going so great,” she said. “Actually, I remember it getting so fucked that you were racing across the desert and burning through your bones, which is what got us in this particular mess in the first place. Besides that, we don’t have a rocket.”

“You’ve got the sand bow,” I said. I glanced at the wall, which stood thirty feet high and at least a football field’s length away from us. The shot would be simplicity itself for someone as skilled as Fenn.

“You’re nuts,” she said, but she gave me a grin. Her eyes quickly scanned the top of the wall, and I looked with her, to the places where she’d removed the gargoyles. We already knew, from the birds that Solace had sent over, that the laser gargoyles had been the primary means of keeping things from going over the wall. “Not enough masks though, and however great Mary is, I doubt that she can keep it up for long enough that we can make more.” We had made more of them during our week off in the bottle, so that we had five on hand, enough to cover the whole party, but assuming that we still needed to keep up our end of the bargain, that wasn’t enough.

I moved back over to Fallatehr. “We have to leave them behind,” I said, gesturing at the pelehr. “Non-negotiable.”

“Convenient for you,” said Fallatehr, watching me closely. I agreed with him, it was very convenient for me, but that didn’t make it any less true. Bad enough that we’d be taking him and three others, nearly even numbers except that the nonanima didn’t count, but not releasing more of Fallatehr onto the world was a plus in my book, given what he could do. “Very well.”

“Wait ten minutes before you try to get out, we’ll pull you if it’s clear,” I said. I wondered whether he would think it was a trap, because that’s what I would have thought, but I was apparently bad enough at lying that it was an asset to me, because he nodded along.

Fenn surprised me by stepping forward and handing him a breathing kit from her glove. I hadn’t even heard her sneak up next to me. He took it for a moment with a mild questioning look, but he put it on all the same. Fenn touched him on the arm with her gloved hand, and I stepped over to Amaryllis, trying not to think about the fact that they were touching, or worry too much about whether that was giving him access to her soul, or what he might be able to do in ten seconds time. Ten seconds got you nothing, according to everything that we knew about soul magic, but he had been pursuing his own research here for hundreds of years. It was a disquieting thought.

“Might be trouble in five seconds,” I said. I wasn’t sure how the prison would react to Fallatehr -- though one of many, from its perspective -- disappearing.

“I think I might be getting somewhere,” said Amaryllis.

I glanced back at Fallatehr, just in time to see him disappear into the glove. I began transforming my sword from ring into two-hander, but stopped when I looked back at the golem, which hadn’t reacted
at all. *Holy crap, this might actually work.*

We put the others into the glove, one by one, first Grak, then the tall woman, then the elf with strips taken out of his scarwork that we’d first met in the visitation room. That left only Amaryllis, Fenn, the nonanima, and the peleh, who we weren’t going to be taking with us. I wasn’t sure what kind of standing orders they had from Fallatehr, if he had control over them at all, but they weren’t moving yet, so I counted my blessings.

“Okay,” I said to the nonanima, looking her in her red eyes. They were glassy and unfocused, not actually looking at me even though I was right in front of her. I held the last breathing kit in my hand, with its thick rubber hose and connected tank. “I’m going to put this on you, I need you to not make a move until you’ve counted to five minutes.”

“Fallatehr was willing to leave her,” said Fenn. She held her hand out to the side and the void rifle appeared in it. I moved in front of the nonanima as she raised it. “Joon,” she sighed. “We have minutes, she could be possessed right now.”

“She’s innocent,” I said.

“Shit,” Fenn swore. “She’s fucking Joon-bait.” But whatever her objections, the void rifle disappeared back into her glove. She took out the sand bow, then took out a type of arrow that I had never seen before, one with a thick metal center. She unscrewed the fletching from the shaft and poked a finger down it. “You know,” she said as she stripped off the glove and began rolling it up, “The nonanima isn’t a clue, she’s a threat.” She stuck the glove into the arrow’s tube, then screwed it shut. “Really hoping that weight isn’t going to be too much of a factor, but the glove is light enough, and luck is on our side.” She prodded at a small bit of glove sticking out. “Put her in the glove, then let’s make haste.”

The nonanima hadn’t said anything to me, and when I put the mask on her, leaving her chains and collar in place, she accepted it without complaint. Fenn put her into the glove without further comment.

“So, my pretty companion, how goes the jabbering?” asked Fenn, clasping Amaryllis on the shoulder. Amaryllis stopped in mid-sentence; she had been saying something about the legal structure of Anglecynn and where the Amoureux Penitentiary fell in that scheme.

“Ready,” said Amaryllis, touching the glove.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked the golem, looking between the three of us. Whatever rhetorical spell Amaryllis had wrapped it in, that had broken, but we still weren’t being attacked.

Amaryllis disappeared into the glove, then Fenn held it out to me. I hesitated.

“I can make it over the wall on my own,” I said, looking down at the arrow. “Burning bones, I can do it.”

“Oh fuck off,” said Fenn.

“I will not allow you to leave,” said the golem. “You have committed crimes against me which must be answered for, illegalities which --”

“I can make it over the wall, I can burn through bones, I have Ropey with me, and the Anyblade, and if something goes wrong with the arrow, if the shot is off, if it’s intercepted, then someone should --”
“All points you could have raised earlier,” said Fenn with a scowl. She drew back her bow and fired the arrow at full draw, which stuck in the air a foot from the end of the bow. She walked forward and touched the small bit of black that stuck out from it. “I’m going to trust you, and we’re going to have words after this is over. You promised me that you didn’t have a deathwish.”

“I don’t,” I said, keeping my eyes on the arrow hanging in the air. Fenn vanished shortly afterward. I kept watching the arrow and counting down, occasionally looking at the armored golems and the twenty-foot tall brass statues with their enormous hammers. The thing I was most worried about was one of the brass colossi doing a giant basketball-player jump up into the air to slam the arrow back down, or maybe just rushing forward to intercept its arc. They still weren’t moving though, and with every second I began to relax a little bit, except for the fact that I still had to run past all that garbage. And if the arrow plan went off without a hitch, then I’d look pretty stupid.

(I was trying to stop myself from thinking about the Unspoken Plan Guarantee, which was the real reason that I was standing watch and putting myself in danger. I hated that meta-level reasoning, and halfway wished I could abolish it from my mind. But the last time we’d tried a similar plan, things had gone wrong, and I didn’t know whether it was down to narrative or not, to the whims of the Dungeon Master trying to make things interesting. I was hoping that I was forcing the game into a particular position, but trying my best not to think about it, because if it was only meta-level thinking, I was pretty sure that the Dungeon Master wouldn’t respond well to it.

I wasn’t sure that having me stand guard and act as a backup strategy made sense by itself, without the meta considerations, but it was too hard to evaluate the situation on the fly and try to strip out a layer of information and processing that I knew was there. In a hypothetical world where I didn’t know that I was in a game, would I have acted the same way? Would I have declared myself the party member most capable of making the run, the best option in case the arrow and glove didn’t make it and had to be manually tossed over? Or would I have just let Fenn touch that corner of the glove to me? I honestly had no idea.)

Twenty-five mississippi, twenty-six mississippi --

The nonanima appeared beside the arrow, still with a dull look in her eyes, with her hands in manacles in front of her and the collar around her neck, and the mask I’d put in place. She looked at me for just a moment, then I watched the arrow zip off through the air at Fenn’s full draw, sailing high over the wall and disappearing from sight.

“Something has gone wrong,” said the golem. I saw the enormous brass colossuses start to move. “Cease what you are doing.”

“Okay,” I said to the nonanima. “I’ll get you out of here.”

“No,” said the golem, “Cease.”

I reached forward, cautious of frightening her, and began to pick her locks with the Anyblade.

“What are you doing?” she asked. Her voice was soft and her red eyes were wide. The sound was slightly muffled by the mask, which I removed once the manacles were off. She gently touched her wrist. Up until this point, I wasn’t actually sure that she could talk.

“I’m taking you out of here,” I said. A gentleman should ask, but we didn’t have time for that, so I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry and took off toward the wall.

Now this, this was legitimately stupid, and even as I’d recognized that, I knew that I was going to do it anyway. I’d been preparing for different scenarios, trying to plot out how best to weave a path
through the various enemies, trying to figure out where the arrow would land, if it went off course or was stopped in flight where it would land, how I would get to it … and this was a complication that would lower my chances of surviving the next few minutes. I’d be better off leaving her to fend for herself among the pelehr at the prison systems, and she’d be obliterated one way or another.

But no, I ran with her over my shoulder, grateful that she wasn’t struggling against me. I’d thought that it wouldn’t be too hard for me to clear the wall; it was thirty feet tall, I was about six feet tall, plus another two feet for my arms, which meant that I needed a vertical jump of maybe twenty-two feet. The highest vertical jump on record was something like four feet -- information that I knew I didn’t know off-hand, which must have been injected into my brain by high KNO -- but I had bone and blood magic in combination. Back at Barren Jewel I’d been able to launch both Fenn and Amaryllis high enough that they could reach the top of a twenty-foot wall, and I’d been much weaker back then.

And if that failed, the plan was to use Ropey to get a way over, no grappling hook needed, and if that somehow didn’t work, then I’d lure one of the big guys over to smash in the wall and give me an out, and if that didn’t work, then I could probably make something happen with the Anyblade, either using a poleaxe as a ladder or wedging it into the wall. If all those failed, then I was pretty confident that I could think of something; it wasn’t too much of a guess to say that the enemy had high Endurance and Power but low Speed, which meant that all I really had to do was keep running and not get penned in.

The problem was, none of those plans assumed that I would be carrying a hundred pounds of weight that also needed to get over (or through) the wall, and she was definitely slowing me down. The gorilla golems were stomping toward me as I took my run for the wall, and the brass colossi were stomping along, hammers raised. My dead hand groped for a bone in my bandolier, and I drew in SPD from it, then dodged between two of the large golems, narrowly avoiding a powerful hit that sailed above my head. I was right though, the golems were slow and easy to dodge, and assuming that their base form hadn’t been upgraded too much, a single hit from them still wouldn’t be enough to kill me, so long as it landed on my armor.

I liked speed. I liked being faster, being able to outrun people, not having to worry about hits because I’d be gone by the time the hit reached me. The girl on my shoulder was slowing me down, but I was proficient enough with blood magic to put the pulse of my blood in every step, and combined with the extra speed from the bone, avoiding their attacks was nearly trivial.

“You’re going to have to lock your legs when I throw you!” I yelled to her, hoping that she was together enough to understand me. “Catch the lip of the wall!”

I skidded to a stop at the wall and glanced behind us to see how much time we had. I was momentarily thrilled to see that the golems were concerning themselves with the pelehr, which had taken it upon themselves to provide a distraction (or more likely, been commanded to). That relief turned sour when I saw one of them die; they had been people, imprisoned here, then with their essence manipulated by Fallatehr for decades or longer until they were simply thrown away, meat for the grinder. And one of the two colossuses was still coming for us.

“Lock your legs,” I said and I started to lift the girl up. I thought about it for a bit and reached down to pull up a bone to put it in my mouth, which had a nauseatingly gamey taste. “I ‘oin’ a’ ‘row oo up ‘ere.”

She looked up at the top of the wall, then down at me, and I felt her legs go straight. She didn’t seem very strong, but I was hoping that she could take the force of it and not just crumple. “Un, ‘wo, ‘ree,” I said, and launched her as high in the air as I could, using every ounce of power from bone and
blood. She went higher than I had expected, and landed right on the top of the wall with her legs sticking out, barely visible in the dark now that I’d let my light go out.

“Stay there!” I called to her. A glance back at the colossus showed I had maybe a second. I fished Ropey out from my bag and spun him around once before tossing him up; he landed on her legs and slithered over her. I hoped that he would get the message about helping her down, but Ropey had always been dependable.

I rolled to the side to avoid the strike of the colossus bringing its hammer down; it was faster than I had hoped it would be, but now I wasn’t carrying anything. I spared a glance toward my supply of blood, which had finally dipped down below the halfway point, which was the normal carrying capacity of my body. I’d blown through the surplus, one bounding step or swing of the sword at a time, that and the few hits I’d taken. I watched the colossus carefully as it moved, the weight behind how it lifted the monstrously large hammer, the wind-up before it took another swing. I dodged that one too, with minimal effort on my part.

The pelehr were dying one-by-one, skulls crushed in or legs stomped down, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel bad about them, and the battlefield wasn’t the place to be actively trying to make yourself feel emotions about people you’d just met. In a stark, split-second moment, I realized that’s what I was trying to do, and I could see the chain of thought that was trying to form in my mind, where I would rush in to save them, and be forced into killing the golems, and surely that would get me closer to leveling up. The colossus swung his hammer down and I had to expend more effort in moving out of the way with a well-timed Sanguine Surge, because I wasn’t paying the full amount of attention to the fight.

I did a ducking roll through his legs, coming up behind his back. I struck his ankle once with the Anyblade in its largest form, but barely even left a dent in the brass. I needed to get over the wall, that was all I needed to do to win, yet here I was, moving closer to the action, where the second colossus had swept aside one of the pelehr. He began moving toward me as his counterpart, the one I’d ducked past, began turning around.

I ran, just to give myself time to think. It seemed too easy to go over the wall, like I’d be punished for it by the game, but was I just thinking that because I was worried that I was depriving myself of a level up by leaving these slow, lumbering sources of xp behind? I didn’t know whether I could actually trust myself to be rational. I heard a sound and looked up in time to see a gargoyle opening its mouth toward me. I moved the Anyblade up, as a shortsword, and parried the green laser that the gargoyle fired my way.

I turned and ran back the other way. The only reason that the gargoyle was in play was that I’d gone too far, away from the ones that Fenn had knocked down. I could see bloodied, broken corpses laying on the ground by the golems, all of which were heading my way. They had a few chunks taken out of them, along with marks on the brass, some of them sharp, but their lives had been spent on buying me time. Maybe Fallatehr had set them up for that when he’d changed them. All I could think about when I looked at the enemies was that it was all such a waste, and I couldn’t even tell which part of my brain was thinking that.

I charged toward the wall and jumped up it, bone and blood propelling me higher than anyone back on Earth had ever jumped before. It wasn’t enough, but I extended the Anyblade into a polearm with a hook, which, fully extended caught the edge of the wall. I hit the wall, scraping my face, then began to climb, hand over hand, up the length of the polearm. When I reached the top, I reformed the Anyblade into a ring and took a last look at the penitentiary. It was spectacular under the light of Celestar and the multicolored stars.
One of the brass colossi reared back and threw his hammer at me, end over end, which I really hadn’t expected. I dropped down the other side of the wall, grabbing the edge with my hands as I fell, and watched the brass hammer go sailing by above me. It was twenty feet to the ground from where I was, but I dropped it anyway, pushing off the wall at the last second and then going for a roll once I hit the ground to shed my momentum. Rolling was none too fun in armor, as I’d already learned, but I still had three bones to spare.

*Quest Completed: Crimes Against the Soul - You have retrieved Fallatehr Whiteshell from within the Amoureux Penitentiary and are ready to embark upon your new life as his dedicated student, with a new companion to boot.*

There was no level up.

I jogged over to the nonanima, who was looking at Ropey in confusion, healing my minor scrapes along the way. It had crossed my mind that she might be a new companion, but between her, Fallatehr, and the seven-foot-tall woman, she was my third choice.

“Joon!” called Fenn, from some distance away, barely visible in the moonlight.

I waved to her. “Fenn, I made a friend!”

“Why did you save me?” the nonanima asked with her small, hushed voice.

“It seemed wrong to let you die,” I said. Actually, *I think that I might have tried to save you because I wanted to experience the ecstasy provided to me by the game we’re in, but I’m not one hundred percent sure.*

*Loyalty Increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 2!*
The Chemical History of a Candle

Bumblefuck, Kansas was large enough that our high school offered exactly one computer science elective, and I had taken it the first semester of senior year. I’d just barely completed programming a wildly ambitious game of checkers in BASIC for my final project, earning me my only A for that semester (my grades had never been stellar, and senior year they took a turn for the worse for reasons that should be obvious to you at this point). The game had incredibly crude graphics, there was no AI so you had to play against someone else, and all input was done by declaring which of the numbered squares you wanted to move your checker to. It didn’t do kinging or bubblegum either. Oh, and there was no error checking of any kind, so if you entered an illegal move, the game would faithfully execute it, and then everything would get screwed up if the program didn’t barf entirely (which it sometimes did anyway, for reasons that I never figured out).

This is all by way of saying that yeah, I was pretty fucking good at programming.

Jokes aside, I at least understood what a null reference exception was; the program tries to go look up where some variable is, and finds out that there’s a null (empty) value where that variable’s address was supposed to be. That causes the program to throw a null reference exception, which the programmer either deals with somehow, or which crashes or stalls the program.

If it was a joke, I understood it, and the game thus far had a lot of really dumb little things like that (some got a small chuckle from me, others I just rolled my eyes at). If it wasn’t just a joke, or maybe even if it was a joke, then the game was exposing its machinery to me, and that could be useful. The nameless nonanima had some loyalty to me, but it seemed that her name pointed at a null value. If it wasn’t just a joke, then what other parts of her were missing, so far as the game was concerned? What would happen to her when she reached Loyalty 10 and Twinned Souls happened, given that she didn’t have a soul? Amaryllis had already said that most types of magic wouldn’t work on her, but I wanted to know the specifics of that, and why that would be the case. It seemed important, like a lever that I could use to pry apart the different layers that made up reality.

“Why is she with you and unchained?” asked Fenn as she closed the distance between us. She had her artillery bow in hand, with an arrow nocked and aimed right at Null.

“Scenario five,” I called back. New companion, but not Fallatehr.

“Goddamn it,” said Fenn. She had been moving slowly, to keep her aim, but she dropped it and moved faster to close the distance. “Watch her, Joon!”

I turned and looked to Null, who was looking at me with wide eyes. “Uh, I’m watching?”

“They can use me at any time,” said Null, hanging her head slightly. “You shouldn’t have unbound me.”

I looked over to Fenn as she came over, raising an eyebrow. “Amaryllis said that she was only as strong as a normal human. I’m pretty sure that I can take a ninety-pound girl.”

“Wow, care to tempt fate a little bit more?” asked Fenn. Her bow disappeared into her glove and a pair of handcuffs appeared just after that. She moved over to Null, who held her hands out willingly.

“Is that necessary?” I asked.

“Come on, we’re done with this place, Mary and Grak are back there holding down the fort, two on three, let’s get going,” said Fenn.
“You’re good?” I asked Null. She nodded to me, and gave me an awestruck look that immediately made me reconsider how much concern I should be showing for her. If she’d been born in this prison and locked up for her entire life, that was a recipe for her to form an overly strong attachment to me.

“Mary is pissed, by the way,” said Fenn as we moved away from the penitentiary. She pointed a thumb back toward Null without looking at her. “The woobie probably isn’t going to help matters.”

“Is woobie a colloquial expression?” I asked. I had that jarring feeling of hearing a term I thought was Earth-exclusive used on Aerb, which I still wasn’t used to. Most of the time I didn’t ask and let it roll by, but we had time, and I was more concerned about the words and concepts that I might be using wrong, instead of just the ones with parallel or convergent origin.

“Large animal,” said Fenn. “It sits in the forest crying out in pain to draw in its prey.”

“Ah,” I said. “So you wouldn’t use it as a general term for a relative innocent going through pain and suffering who you want to protect.”

“Not unless they were going to kill you,” said Fenn with a shrug. “Maybe we don’t do the cross-cultural exchange around the soul fucker?”

“Yeah,” I said as we walked. I looked at Null again, and found her staring at me in the moonlight. I thought she would look away, but she didn’t, and eventually I had to break eye contact, which just left me with the uncomfortable feeling that she was still staring at the back of my head as we walked. “Scenario five though.”

“Yes, that’s going to make our Mary absolutely thrilled, you know her so well,” said Fenn with a snort.

We found Amaryllis and Grak both holding their weapons, while Fallatehr was sitting on the ground with a pleasant smile that didn’t reveal his sharp teeth. He had his two associates remaining, exactly as many as he’d negotiated for, the seven-foot-tall woman whose species I couldn’t determine, and the elf with strips removed from his scars we’d met at visitation.

“Did any of my pelehr survive?” asked Fallatehr.

“No,” I said. I glanced at Null. “Were you expecting them to survive?”

“I was not,” said Fallatehr. “But they were ultimately doomed, one way or another, if we weren’t going to be together. We’ll speak on it more, during your training.”

I felt a moment of discomfort at that, which I tried to suppress. Whatever he’d done to those people wasn’t the sort of thing that I wanted to learn. I would learn it, if it was on offer, and turning down another tool in the toolbox would be asinine, but I didn’t want to.

“We don’t have a safe base of operations,” said Amaryllis. “Now that the danger has passed and the key should be in working order again, I would propose that half of us leave to find lodging, while the other half stay here. After two hours, I’ll come back, and after another two hours after that, we’ll regroup. As to the groups, I was thinking that we would keep even numbers initially, four and four. I’d like Juniper and Fallatehr to go with me, that way they can take some time for initial lessons during the two hours it will take for me to return with the rest of our group. Obviously we can’t take the nonanima, that means that it will be either Retha or Lehpenn.” She gestured to the tall woman and the other elf; apparently introductions had been made in my absence.

“Scenario five,” I said to Amaryllis.
She blinked at me, then stole a brief glance at Null. “Okay,” she said. “That’s ...” She paused, then stole another glance at Null, then frowned and looked at Fallatehr. “How dangerous is she?”

“Barely at all, where the border between worlds is strong,” said Fallatehr. “How far has cosmological mapping advanced in the last few hundred years?”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll need specialty texts to figure out where it’s safe to bring her, or at the very least, better restraints, and ideally tight earmuffs.”

“What is scenario five?” asked Fallatehr.

“Nothing you need to worry about right now,” said Amaryllis. “It’s not important in the short-term, and it will take a long time to explain. We wouldn’t want to explain in front of ears that are compromised.”

“We will speak on that matter, and others, at a later time,” said Fallatehr with a calm tone and a slight nod of his head. “I would propose that Juniper and I stay here, with the nonanima and either your dwarf or half-elf.”

“Fenn,” said Fenn, pointing a finger at herself. “Grak,” she said, pointing a finger at Grak. “If it means leaving this asshole behind, I’m all for going on a trip.”

“Fenn,” said Amaryllis, in her warning voice. I was pretty sure that tension between the two of them was going to boil over no matter what steps we took to minimize it, but I wasn’t sure what form that boiling over was going to take. I was overdue for some time alone with Fenn, and one of the things I most wanted to ask her about were her thoughts on Fallatehr. “My plan is to go to Parsmont, I guess I’ll be taking Fenn, Rehta, and Lehpenn?”

I wasn’t sure that was ideal, but I didn’t have a better suggestion. It was, in some ways, like the logic puzzle about a man trying to cross the river with a bag of grain, a duck, and a fox. He could take one thing across at a time, but couldn’t leave the duck unattended with the grain (because the duck would eat the grain) and couldn’t leave the fox unattended with the duck (because the fox would eat the duck). Similarly, the overall lack of trust, and Fallatehr’s ability to fuck up someone’s soul, meant that we needed to be careful about who was left with whom.

To me, the most worrying part of what Amaryllis had proposed was that Fenn would be left alone with Rehta and Lehpenn, and I wasn’t confident that they didn’t know soul magic too. Their combat abilities were also an unknown, which meant that I wasn’t sure that Fenn would be able to fend them off if they attacked her, even with all the tricks she had up her glove, and worse, I wouldn’t necessarily be able to tell, depending on how sophisticated an attack might be. That said, I still thought that it was probably the best option available to us, even when taking into account alternate initial splits of three and five -- especially given that we needed to be building trust, rather than putting up visible signs of paranoia.

Before they left, Fallatehr touched Lehpenn and Rheta, the former on his head and the latter on the bare skin of her chest. He spent five minutes with each, wordlessly touching them with his eyes closed; I saw Amaryllis and Fenn having a hushed conversation while this was happening. For my part, I mostly spent the time with Null in my eyeline, guarding against whatever it was she might turn into.

Fenn gave me a kiss before she left, a quick, mostly chaste one, which I wasn’t entirely on board with. I didn’t want Fallatehr to know that she could be used as that sort of leverage over me, but apparently Fenn did want him to know, or maybe just thought that kissing me was worth leaking information. I resented Fallatehr a little bit, for making me want to hide our relationship.
“I’ll see you in Parsmont,” said Fenn. “Don’t do anything that I wouldn’t do.” She held out her gloved hand and dropped down a large, heavy pack of supplies, then stepped over to where Amaryllis was standing and left a few seconds later.

With that, I was alone with Fallatehr, Null, and Grak. “Grak, can you set up some wards to keep her in? I’d prefer not to rely on having to keep guard.”

“Velocity wards are the only thing that will work on her,” said Grak, as he stepped over to her and pulled out his wand. “Those are tricky to do. It will take time.”

I moved over to the supplies and began pulling a few things out, first a waterskin that I drank deeply from, then a pair of folded wooden chairs, one of which I set up for Fallatehr. After a brief grimace, I pulled some rations out from the pack of supplies and began to eat pemmican, which was a poor meal even when I was feeling hungry -- despite all the physical exertion of the day, it was still a matter of forcing the food down in small bites and trying to avoid the nausea.

“Do you wish to begin your training now?” asked Fallatehr, his eyes watching me closely in the moonlight.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I’ll understand if you don’t have a lesson plan or anything like that, but whatever you think might give me a toehold.”

“And that might be enough for you?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “The nature of my prodigy is complicated, but it’s easy for me to get the very basics of something down, if I have a place to grip the topic and time to think about it on my own. Even if I can do that for soul magic though, I would expect that I would need your tutelage in order to progress beyond those very basics.”

“Fascinating,” said Fallatehr. “I watched you fight with great interest. There are a few things that might explain you, but the simplest explanation is that you’re telling the truth. Skill with bone magic, blood magic, and extensive training with the sword, all at such a young age. How old were you again?”

“Seventeen,” I replied. I put the rest of the pemmican to the side. It felt like I had been eating for a long time, but I’d barely made a dent. A glance over at Grak showed him still working on the ward. “So what can you tell me about the soul? What is the soul?”

Fallatehr gave a pleasant, musical laugh that startled me with its suddenness. The musicality of it didn’t seem like it suited him, save for the fact that he was an elf. “We’re really starting so close to the bottom?”

“I don’t want to bring my own assumptions into this,” I said. And let’s just not mention that a lot of my assumptions come from a place called Earth.

Fallatehr tapped his finger to his lips. “There is a book about a candle, written in 97 FE, which describes it in exacting detail. Each imperfection of the candle is noted, every possible measurement of it is taken, and the composition of the candle is detailed down to the diet of the hog whose fat was rendered to make it. It runs for four hundred pages.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So the soul is like … a list of things about a person?”

“Some of the information listed about the candle was procedural,” said Fallatehr. “There are details of how it was created, what processes were used to render the fat, information on the construction of the molds, and all that sort of thing. The soul has nothing like it. There is nothing written upon the
soul that will tell you how a person came to be as they are, no history, only marks that you might use to work backwards and infer.”

I frowned. “Okay,” I said. “It’s a list -- a list, or unordered?”

“Unordered,” said Fallatehr, watching me.

“It’s an unordered collection of attributes that define a person,” I said. “And if that’s true, then all soul magic is really doing is rewriting those attributes.”

Fallatehr nodded. “There, as simple as that.”

“That’s it?” I asked. “That’s all the soul is? It’s … a collection of attributes?” I could see the programming metaphor right away, and it wasn’t like the game hadn’t had in-universe explanations that mirrored game mechanics, but … was the soul just another character sheet? I could already access my character sheet. I could already see the list of attributes that defined me, so far as the game was concerned. It wasn't anything new, and nothing that would help me to fix my bones.

“And if I told you that list went on for hundreds, if not thousands of pages?” asked Fallatehr. “If I told you that every form of magic interacts with those attributes in some way or another?” He didn’t seem mad that I was disrespecting his life’s work or the field of soul magic, only curious. I was pretty sure that his curiosity was the only reason we were sitting across from each other. He’d given up a fair amount for this, given that he didn’t seem to care too much about leaving the prison. He'd thrown away a dozen lives and decades of work just to watch me. I still didn't have a good handle on who he was.

“It’s just,” I started, then stopped, frowning. “I was thinking that it would be more mystical.”

“It’s not,” said Fallatehr. “I am a scientist, not a mystic. I could dress it up, but that would be to your detriment as my pupil.”

“Okay,” I said. “So how do I access my soul?”

“It would be so easy to show you, with just a touch,” said Fallatehr with a sigh.

“No,” I replied, keeping my voice firm. He’d just given me a good reminder that he was dangerous. “Tell me how I would see or feel the soul, how I would be able to make some change, without your own intervention.”

“Imagine there exists a book, written about you,” said Fallatehr. “Not a narrative, but a catalog of that which is essential to you.”

“I mean, okay,” I said with a shrug. I tried to picture that book, starting with the easy stuff, the physical measurements, the tensile strength of my hair, the volume of blood in my body, the length of my bones -- I looked down at my deformed hand. “It doesn’t necessarily match the body,” I said.

“No,” nodded Fallatehr. “The soul has its own attributes which do not always align with what the body presents.”

“Residual self-image,” I said.

“Residual?” asked Fallatehr as he looked too intently at my face.

“Nevermind,” I said. Like in The Matrix, it’s a movie from Earth you probably haven’t seen, unless that was one that Arthur cribbed from. I kept compiling the Book of Juniper, trying to figure out a
way that I could get everything into it without mentioning the past or how I was made. Not Arthur or Tiff, but the impact that they had on me, not attributes that mentioned them, but attributes that would allow you to know that they existed, if you were incredibly intelligent and could work backwards from incomplete information. “I don’t get how it’s possible,” I said. “Is memory not part of the soul?”

“It is,” said Fallatehr. “Though it’s nearly inaccessible to attempts at manipulation.”

“Then how did you change your slaves?” I asked, dropping the book metaphor from my mind for a moment. I glanced over at Grak, who had finished his ward and was eating pemmican in front of Null, his axe on his lap in front of him.

“I didn’t alter their memories,” said Fallatehr. “I altered their values to match my own, along with as many of the pathways as I could.”

“Pathways don’t sound like attributes,” I said.

“They are,” said Fallatehr. “You’ll see, when you’re further along, when you understand the feel of a soul.”

“So they’re incomplete copies,” I said. “They’re just … people with different memories from your own, who happen to share some ways of thinking.”

Fallatehr shrugged. “I never claimed that they were clones,” he said.

“And you said that they would face oblivion without you,” I said.

Fallatehr smiled, showing me his sharp teeth, in a way that I found distinctly threatening. “You’re trying to advance past your studies,” he said. “These attributes are mutable, but will revert to a coherent state, given time.”

I almost objected that that didn’t seem like oblivion to me, but then I thought about it for a bit. If I was told that I would gradually become a person who valued things that I didn’t value, who thought in ways that I didn’t think, who shared, at most, only the same memories, I might feel like that was oblivion. Actually, given that Fallatehr had altered their values, he could just make them fear the change. And then, faced with either that loss of self or becoming a monster, he had known that they would submit to becoming the pelehr.

I returned to the construction of my metaphorical book, the one that would define me down to the very last detail, so that you could clone me, if you were a better soul mage than even Fallatehr and really wanted to. Ignore memory for a moment, ignore pathways of thought (however that messy concept was pinned down), just think about everything concrete, like muscle memory, which you could do on the physical level, or values themselves, weighed and measured in dizzying arrays that wouldn’t necessarily even be coherent because people had biases, which I guessed you would have to build in too --

And that was when I felt it within my mind, like a corner of carpet had just been lifted up and I’d been made aware that the room wasn’t just carpet, there was something underneath it. So I tugged at it, this sensation that there was more to me, and my field of vision went white, with letters and numbers resolving a few seconds later.

I was looking at my True Character Sheet.

*Skill unlocked: Essentialism!*
The interface was different, for a start. It wasn’t controlled by my (nominal) eyes like the other one was, it was all done by thought alone, and I spent a few moments just spinning and panning to get a feel for it. My soul … was another character sheet, a deeper, more complex one, vast beyond what I was going to be able to see even if I had all day, but it was still recognizable as being structured data, and that’s really all a character sheet was.

To my left the skeleton of my body was displayed, with the bones of my ribs and left hand outlined in red and otherwise absent from the picture. I could change that display with a thought, putting organs in my belly and veins running through my limbs, layering on muscle, adding skin, until I was staring at myself. I barely recognized him; he was too muscular, too fit, with too determined of a look in his eyes. I always thought that I looked bored, when my face was resting.

Above that representation of the body was a massive network of points and lines, and I zoomed in closer to look at it before nearly getting lost in the thicket. Focusing on a point brought me into a moment, consuming all my senses; I was standing in my backyard, by the bushes, trying to eat honeysuckle like my dad had taught me, and in that moment I could smell the sweet, flowery scent and feel the light wind. When the moment was over I wasn’t quite pulled out, because there were other memories awaiting me, ones connected to this one in some way, but I was certain if I went down memory lane, I was going to be stuck looking at these things all day.

I pulled back out of the memory, then out of the thicket of memories, until I was back staring at the character sheet holistically. It was a complex nightmare of text and numbers … and beyond what I could see, there was more, because I could see faint lines leading off somewhere else, two of them. I followed one on a whim, trying to repeat to myself that I shouldn’t touch anything, that this was my soul, that any change had to be reverted immediately until I was certain that I wasn’t going to fuck things up by making changes.

The first thing I saw when I arrived at the other end of the line was Amaryllis, naked, and above her a floating mass of points and lines, and to the side, text and numbers. This, then, was her character sheet. Twinned Souls, that had linked us on more than just a figurative and mechanical level, it had opened up her soul to me. The other line would be the one belonging to Fenn. I backed out of her character sheet almost immediately, not stopping to look at anything there, not wanting to accidentally hurt her, or change her from the way she was.

I was slightly relieved when I went poking around in my character sheet, because so many things seemed like they were locked off to me, beyond my power to fuck things up. Unlike on my regular character sheet, here the things I couldn’t interact with were still readable, the grey of the text still dark and bold enough that I could parse it, with a fair number of other things in a dark, foreboding red, the only color in a sea of monochrome aside from a light blue seen on some of the text. What I was looking for were skills --

At the thought, my view panned and they arranged themselves in front of me, not just the ones that I had unlocked, not just the forty that were on my other character sheet, but more than that character sheet could even hold. I quickly counted the edges of the ordered grid and frowned. There were, if I was reading it right, two hundred and fifty-six skills, a little over half of them marked in red.

Some of them were presented in the same dark red I’d seen in a few other places in my exploration of the interface, and the one labeled “Ice Magic” caught my eye. I expanded it to read it closer. Instead of a number, it had a diagonal slash, and the text box beside it read “Deprecated, Exclusion #16”. I frowned at that for a moment -- I would need to cross-reference with The Exclusionary
Principle, Seventh Edition, but I was pretty sure that ice magic was considered a lost art, not actually excluded. Just beneath that, there were listings for a primary and secondary attributes, Cunning and Endurance, respectively, with familiar numbers in place, and what looked like a small, greyed out button labeled “Gestalt”.

I backed out of that view and quickly went to look at others and confirmed what I’d been hoping was true; the primary and secondary attributes were exposed here, and though there was no indication of what the actual math was, that was already an incredible boon from Soul Magic (or Essentialism, as the game called it), even without being able to interact with any of it. I was still being careful not to touch anything, only to look at what I could see, but I was already starting to feel the possibilities available to me.

There were 256 skills in total, and I had only 40 of them, with just 25 of them unlocked -- 26 now, with Essentialism added to that list. Once I saw the pattern, it was fairly easy to distinguish between them; blue was the color given for the skills that I had, with a slash to mark the ones that I hadn’t unlocked yet. I looked over the remaining fourteen skills that were blue with a slash, which I presumed were the ones on my old character sheet that I hadn’t unlocked yet.

I had Shotguns, which I had never tested and would be easy enough to pick up. Four of them were arts-and-crafts skills: Alchemy, Livestock, Smithing, and Woodworking. Five were magics that I had expected I would have access to: Gold Magic, Revision Magic, Steel Magic, Velocity Magic, and Wards. Water Magic was there too, which I hadn’t expected, because it was supposed to be a bloodline magic. Library Magic I had never even heard of, and I was pretty sure that I knew all of the types of magic that Amaryllis knew, which should have been all of them. I had no clue what Spirit did.

There was a Language skill, with KNO as primary and CHA as secondary, but there was no indication what was needed to unlock it. It was while I was looking at that one that I felt a thread that could be pulled, and when I did, I dove in deeper to the skill, until I was within a cloud of words. There was data attached to each of them, numbers and sliders, with labels like “Frequency” or “Tonation” or “PoS”, all of it presumably representing how often and in which ways I used the word “venerate” or “cucumber”. They were linked to each other, in ways that I would have to untangle later, if any of this turned out to be important.

A quick look at the other skills showed something similar, now that I knew where to press, but instead of simply words, and static rules governing those words, there were pieces of procedural and declarative knowledge, displayed in either text or color-coded displays of simple, prototypical actions. Skills existed as constructs in the soul then, but they were at least in part composed of other discrete pieces.

But my attention wasn’t really on the things that my character sheet contained, or even the nature of skills, it was on all the other skills, the ones that weren’t on my original character sheet, for whatever reason. Most of the ones in red were magic of some kind or another; Glass Magic, “Deprecated, Exclusion #112”, Groove Casting, “Deprecated, Exclusion #217, Constriction Magic, “Deprecated, Exclusion #18”, on and on. Some were ambiguous as to whether they were magic or not, like Ex Nihilo, “Deprecated, Exclusion #216”, and I wasn’t quite sure how I was supposed to know what, exactly, a skill with that name was supposed to do.

I could see straight away that there were more exclusions than there were exclusion zones as reckoned by Amaryllis, though her definition was taken from the political terminology of the Empire of Common Cause, and there were a lot of skills that had been taken out of the running, not that I had (as yet) tried to turn them blue.
The other, mundane, greyed skills were less interesting to me, except in regards to what they said about the game. There were, as it turned out, a handful of armor skills: Light Armor, Medium Armor, Heavy Armor, Unarmored, and Shields. That didn’t make too much sense to me though, because it was clear that armor still did something for me, and I had gone through a period of acclimating myself to the armor, which meant that I should still have something beyond just no skill in it. If I were writing a book of attributes about myself, that would have to be in there, right? You couldn’t just leave a zero there, if you were trying to fully describe me.

There were other skills that I had already known I didn’t have, and which weren’t assigned, more of what I considered arts-and-crafts, the sort of thing that you took more for roleplaying purposes (and/or to piss off Reimer because they were suboptimal), things like Weaving, Foraging, Tailoring, and so on, maybe a few dozen of those. There were transportation skills, like Sailing, Piloting, and Riding, along with utility/profession skills like Appraisal, Management, Leadership, Logistics, and Mathematics, some of which did catch my eye, and a few social skills that I was missing too.

This all left me with the question of why I had those forty specific skills on my character sheet. I had long had a feeling like someone else had set the game up for me, starting back when I had first looked in the options and seen that Diamond Hardcore Ironman Mode was checked. I might have accepted it if those skills represented things that I’d known or done on the real world, but they didn’t -- as evidenced by Piloting not being one of my skills, despite the fact that I could semi-competently fly a helicopter, and all the magic I had access to.

That meant my best guess was that the Dungeon Master had set everything up, and I had no idea why he’d decided on those particular skills. Was I meant to use revision magic at some point in the future, and that was why it was listed? On seeing the other options available to me, I desperately wanted to change my skills, but if there was a path in front of me … well, then surely Essentialism was on that path, and I didn’t need to worry too much. But then why would the Dungeon Master give me specific skills that he knew I was going to drop, assuming that he did know?

I was about to move away from the skills, because there was more of my soul to explore (quite a bit more), but I stopped for a moment and looked in at Deception. As soon as it filled my view, I got an error message in red:

**Error: Illegal Construction, Gestalting Deprecated, Exclusion #4**

The skill informed me that it was actually a gestalt between Lying and Stealth, with two primary abilities and two secondary abilities, but gave no real information about what that meant. In the parlance of D&D, “gestalt” meant merging two things, usually classes, such that they were more than the sum of their parts, but I wasn’t sure that fully applied here. The problem with gestalting was that it usually increased the power level, and there was rarely a reason not to do it, if it was allowed. And apparently, it wasn’t allowed, except that I had been running around with it like that for my entire time on Aerb, and I wasn’t about to go changing it now if I didn’t have to.

The last skill I looked closely at was the one labeled “Custom”, which was in red. Like Spirit, there were no associated skills for it, but there were buttons where the text would normally go. It looked very much like this was a “roll your own” type of skill, the kind that you included in case someone wanted something truly outside the box. That apparently wasn’t an option for me, because it was “Deprecated, Exclusion #17”.

I backed away from the skills and continued looking at my soul, not so much as an earnest exploration to gain information as it was to get a lay of the land. I would need to come in later and look at everything in detail. Fallatehr had said that values were part of the soul, which meant that there was some way to view them, and maybe change them. I had to think that there would be
something like a social network as well, some conceptualization of the internal models I had of various people, as well as physical models of various things, which would be how my brain knew that when a ball went up, it was going to come back down again.

Mostly, I kept thinking that this wasn’t how people were built.

People were really freaking complex. They weren’t a list of attributes, or neat piles of declarative and procedural memories, they were messy, complicated things that didn’t always make sense, there were contextual shifts and a plethora of messy models and hidden assumptions, it wasn’t just numbers. And as far as I could see, the soul as presented to me was missing half of the picture, which was the matter of how all these little bits and bobs actually did anything. So far as I had seen, the “soul” didn’t have all that much in the way of process or algorithms or any kind of decision-making in it, only weights that could be applied to some decision tree or neural network or whatever else it was that took this static information and let it actually do anything.

It took me some time to find the place where values were stored, which was shown as circles of varying sizes, all clustered together and packed tight. I looked over it in dismay, and not just because circles were horrible for data visualization. The biggest, by quite a large margin, was simply labeled “Level Up”. It wasn’t bigger than the next two, “Tiff” and “Fenn” combined, at least so far as I could tell, but the human eye was kind of garbage at distinguishing between surface area of circles, and it was ambiguous whether the data visualization was meant to be read as surface area or diameter.

With a push of thought, it all rearranged itself for me, abandoning the circles to show me a simple ordered list, with the highest at the top and lowest at the bottom. That was something that I was going to have to get used to, that the information as presented to me was mutable and could be rearranged as I pleased in order to see what I wanted to see, without any apparent cost. The list seemed to go on forever, but I’d seen from a quick glance at the circles that some kind of power law was in effect. I didn’t particularly like looking at the list though, since it had too many hard truths to it. Arthur was sixth, and what did that say about me as a person? What did it say about me that Tiff still loomed so large? And I could see that both Earth and Aerb were on there, enormous conceptual entities, but still below the people that mattered most to me.

I looked closer at the one labeled Aerb, because it seemed neutral enough, and got more information on it, variables like “Weight”, “Scope”, “Marginal Utility”, and “Time Sensitivity”. I backed out without reading more, then shifted my view away from the values so I wouldn’t have to look at Arthur in the number six spot.

I kept thinking that this was not how humans were. Let’s say that you actually could take someone through a trillion different tests, pairwise comparisons like “Would you rather eat a hamburger from Culver’s or spend twenty minutes playing Tetris, a year from now?”, and then you crunched that enormous amount of information, the result that you got back wouldn’t even be that sensible, because people weren’t sensible, concepts were shifting and mercurial, I could think differently about a given person based on the last word out of their mouth, or the setting I was in, or any number of things. That was, to my understanding at least, how the human brain worked.

The soul, as it was presented to me, made sense as the sort of thing you could maybe pull from a brain, if you had some hypertechnology and were willing to cut some corners in terms of how you were mapping out what the brain actually was. You couldn’t capture everything, not really, but you might be able to put a number on time sensitivity of value, maybe, and then make a chart that would be a little bit useful. The soul made sense as a report, or a visualization. That wasn’t what the soul purported to be though; it was meant to work as the mind, not just a report on it, and changing the soul meant changing the mind. Was there some hidden conversion process in there? Was this just a
game interface covering something vastly more complex, for all the data that was exposed to me? Or was I really reducible down just this stuff and whatever sort of thing was involved in actually running it?

I felt a hand touch my knee.

I was only dimly aware of my body, and blind on top of that, but I could feel the pressure there, and I flailed my body, which was still thankfully under my control, while trying to back out of the interface -- trying.

**Error: Illegal Construction, Gestalting Deprecated**

I started to panic, just a little bit. I could feel my body, I could move my body, but my eyes were stuck staring at my soul, and it felt like my mind had been made to focus on the substance of the soul. Even as I was aware that I was in danger, right across from Fallatehr, I could feel that thought slipping away from me and the contemplative mood I’d been in returning. I tried my best to shrug it off -- I was standing now, I was pretty sure, and nothing was touching me aside from my feet on the ground, though the sensation was so far away it was hard to tell for sure.

I raced over to the skills and zeroed in on Deception, which I knew had to be the problem, and dove into the menu for it, where a button labeled “Divide” was available, in place of the “Gestalt” that was on the other skills. I gave it a mental push, which presented me with warnings.

**Warning: Dividing skills will reset both to 0.**

**Warning: Skill changes can be done once per (100 levels / skill in Essentialism).**

But I did it anyway, because I was blind and barely aware of my body, and the more time I spent looking at the menus the more I felt myself start to lose sight of that fact, like it was somehow unimportant that I was disabled in front of someone who really shouldn’t have touched me. So despite the warnings, I plunged on ahead.

**Error: Illegal Construction, selected number of skills exceeds 40.**

I went in and unselected Woodworking, which I didn’t think that I would ever use, and was about to make another attempt at leaving the soul before I stopped myself, only momentarily.

(My concern was with the warning that skill changes could only happen once every 100 levels divided by the skill ranks in Essentialism, which a quick check showed as currently sitting at 5. Depending on whether previous levels counted or not, that meant that I’d be able to change skills again at either level 20 or level 30. Obviously I would be able to level Essentialism up from where it was now, but there were rather severe diminishing returns on that math, especially assuming that rounding wasn’t done in my favor.

(A quick check of Essentialism showed that it had WIS/KNO as its primary and secondary skills, which I considered good news, given that it meant I could continue on with my dubious strategy of leaving SOC behind, if I so chose.

Either way, there was a hard cap on when I’d be able to change skills again, even with reasonably optimistic assumptions, and if changing my skills to fix the gestalt error counted as changing skills, then the next time I would be able to change skills would be in four levels or so, unless the game let me bank skill retraining from levels previously gained, in which case this was merely the squandering of an extremely limited resource, rather than a handicap that might last for as long as a few months.)
So I started in on cuts, first the things that I didn’t see the point of and hadn’t even unlocked, Alchemy, Smithing, Woodworking, Livestock, and then the ones that I didn’t have unlocked and thought were subpar, Gold Magic, Shotguns, Steel Magic, Wards, snip, snip, snip, freeing up space, and then Music and Art had to go, because they were flavor, not utility, and I watched the warning go by about them resetting to 0, not a big loss in either case. Finally, Pistols, which I hadn’t been bothering to train up given that I’d almost always be using a rifle at range and melee weapons up close. Snip.

And that was ten slots freed up, and I could cut a few more, like Spirit, which had no obvious function, and Library Magic, which I had never heard of, but I was erring on the side of not locking myself out of things I didn’t yet know the function of.

(It was tempting to cut the social skills, to cut Comedy, Romance, and Flattery and make room for something else, but my social abilities were already poor, and if anything, I needed a few of the social skills that I was missing in order to shore up that deficit, assuming that I wasn’t always going to be able to rely on Amaryllis to carry me through difficult times, even if she was physically present.)

So I started adding skills back into the mix, Shields, Unarmored, Medium Armor, Heavy Armor, all to provide survivability, then varieties of magic I didn’t have, some of which were mysteries, Vibrational Magic, Still Magic, Tree Magic, Fire Magic, and then with two left I hesitated and hurriedly picked up Analysis and Debate, with little clue as to what they actually did aside from the fact that they were mental-affiliated.)

If I’m being honest, which I do try to be, I’m not sure how long I spent on all that. Maybe I came under the tunnel vision effect of looking at these things again, because I’d had that moment of hesitation when I’d been ready to move away, when the gestalt had been removed.

Either way, I came out of it slowly, feeling my pulse first and my extremities second, and only gradually regaining my sight. I was standing with my sword drawn and held in front of me, looking at Grak, who had placed himself between Fallatehr and myself. His axe was drawn and held back, ready to strike; I couldn’t tell how long he had been in that pose. As soon as he looked back to see that I was alert, he crossed over to me, putting himself so that he was still standing slightly in front of me, guarding me. I glanced over and saw Null, sitting within the box of wards that Grak had made for her.

“What happened?” asked Grak, his voice tight.

“I was going to ask the same thing,” I said, looking to him, then the Fallatehr.

“I did not believe you would actually do it,” said Fallatehr. “You understated the depths of your prodigy. There is a seductiveness to looking at one’s own soul, a seduction that is -- was, in the halcyon days of the Second Empire -- trained against, in parallel with the other studies that allow a soul mage access to their soul.”

“Who touched me?” I asked.

“I did,” said Grak. “I tried to rouse you.”

I nodded at that.

Yes, I had gone under and gotten tunnel vision, then Grak had seen me sitting there like a moron and maybe asked some pointed questions to Fallatehr, who was probably an ass about the whole thing. Grak had touched me on the knee, wanting to bring me out of the stupor or at least ensure that I was
alright, and I had reacted by flailing around like a madman, which had naturally raised his suspicions. That was certainly one plausible series of events.

Unfortunately, it also was the series of events that cast Fallatehr in the best possible light.

“Does the nonanima have a name?” I asked Fallatehr.

“No,” he said, glancing over to her only briefly.

“Nonanima, would you like to have a name?” I asked her.

She stared at me, then nodded slowly.

“What are you thinking?” asked Grak.

“One second,” I told him. I cleared my throat and looked at Null. “What would you like your name to be?” I asked her.

Loyalty Increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 4!

“I don’t know,” she said in a soft voice, almost too soft for me to hear her.

“Well until you choose, I’d like to be able to call you something, so I’m going to call you --” Tiff -- no, not that, dammit, why is coming up with names on the fly so difficult? “-- Valencia, or Val for short, it means strength, where I come from. If you ever want me to call you anything else, you let me know, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

“What are you doing?” asked Grak.

“She’s a neutral observer,” said Fallatehr. “She has no soul, and thus, she can be depended upon to accurately recount the events as they transpired without interference on my part. Not that I could have moved through the ward you set up to touch her.”

There was something I really didn’t like about having the adversary outline my plan for me, then explain how it was a good and clever plan. I could already see the hole, which was that Null -- no, Valencia now, I had named her -- that she wasn’t actually a reliable source of information, she’d spent most of her life in Fallatehr’s care, she was about as broken of a person as I had ever seen … and even if Fallatehr hadn’t thought ahead to make sure that their stories matched, Grak had already fed her the lines that she was supposed to agree with. In hindsight, I should have separated everyone and talked to all of them individually, but that level of paranoia hadn’t occurred to me as I was coming out of the fog and wondering what had happened. Worse, there didn’t seem to be any telling details that I could catch them on, especially given how notoriously bad eyewitness accounts were even moments after the event in question.

“You’re worried that I’m compromised,” said Grak,

“Yes,” I replied. I looked to Valencia, trying to make that new name stick in my brain. Null was too derogatory of a name, too close to calling someone Nothing, only Null was worse, because it was less than nothing. Valencia. I shouldn’t have been the one to name her, not like this. “Valencia, can you tell me what happened?”

She looked to Fallatehr. “It was like they said.”
Was this a matter of loyalty, or conditioning, or something else? Or was she simply telling the truth? It bothered me that I had no way of knowing, but her testimony was weak evidence in favor of the official line.

“I don’t know whether or not you’re compromised,” I said to Grak. “And I don’t know to what extent it’s possible for soul magic to compromise a person.”

I had an uncharacteristic yearning for Earth at that moment, as some leftover part of my internal programming had me reaching down into my pocket to pull out my cell phone and check the time as a nervous habit, or maybe a way to get grounding. I wasn’t even wearing proper pants, just greaves that were more white than the metallic blue they’d started the day as.

“You are right,” said Grak. “I should be quarantined from Fallatehr and everyone else.”

I looked at him, trying to judge what kind of response that was. It was true, and more weak evidence, but it was nothing that I could actually count on.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll just keep the four of us separated for now, until Amaryllis comes back to get us.”

“He said that a soul would revert to a coherent state over time,” said Grak. “All we should need to do is wait it out.”

“Yes, but the trouble is that he said it,” I replied. “This is the same man that didn’t tell me I could get stuck looking at my own soul.”

Fallatehr’s lips twitched. “I am not your enemy,” he said. “Our relationship as teacher and student cannot survive if you continue to think of me that way.”

I shrugged. “In the future, if there are risks like that, even ones you don’t think that we’ll run into, I need to hear about them before experiencing them firsthand with no forewarning.” I didn’t say it, but if it happened again, I wouldn’t think too hard about killing him. I picked my folding chair up from the ground and propped it up, then sat down in front of Fallatehr. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s continue the lesson.”

“Are you serious?” asked Grak.

“Yes,” I said. “We still have time left until Amaryllis comes back, and the more I know about the soul, the better.” Fallatehr knew that I had seen my soul, though I didn’t think that our views of the soul were the same, given how steeped my view of the soul was in game mechanical terms.

“I think I am done with lessons for the day,” said Fallatehr, looking me over. “I will need to think on what other pitfalls might await you, in your accelerated journey to become a magus of the soul.”

“My hand,” I said, holding it up. “That’s the thing that we need to fix.” I still hadn’t told him about my ribs, but that was something I was going to keep under my hat for the time being.

“You saw the soul,” said Fallatehr. “I wouldn’t imagine that most of it made sense to you, but there is a portion of it devoted to the bodily self.”

“Yes,” I said. “And how do I fix this, exactly? How do I translate the existence of the soul’s image of the body into actually fixing the damage that was done?”

“You want me for more than this?” asked Fallatehr. “You have uses for me as a teacher, beyond this simple repair?”
“Yes,” I said, hoping that I was a bad enough liar that he would believe me when I told the truth.

He watched me for a moment with narrowed eyes. “You will need training in how it’s done, but you have two hands,” he said, holding his hands out in front of him, palms pointed to the night sky. “The bones of the right provide a blueprint that can be mirrored.”

I looked down at my left hand and the way the skin didn’t quite fit around bones that weren’t quite the right length. I frowned at it. “My hands aren’t symmetrical,” I said. “I mean, even before this, they weren’t.”

“They will be,” said Fallatehr.

I was about to object that the veins and arteries wouldn’t line up properly, that there would be nerve damage … but the soul already contained all the information about those parts, it was the bones that were missing as what I thought of as a local copy of that information. I wasn’t even sure at what level the soul actually stored that information, because it seemed like at least some of it could be assumed from basic knowledge about the human body, and if you were building efficient data structures, you would be better off with just having a diff between some ur-body and the individual body in question.

“And if I didn’t have a right hand?” I asked.

Fallatehr pursed his lips. “It takes quite some time for the soul to recognize substantial damage to the body,” he said. “It can be years before scars become marked on the soul itself, and sometimes the soul will persist in its counterfactual conception of the body forever.”

“Hypothetically,” I said. I was giving something away to him, providing him with leverage, but I was thinking about my ribs, the anemia, the loss of appetite, and the fact that I had used the rib bones on both sides, meaning that there was nothing to easily copy and paste with a little bit of mirroring on the z-axis.

“Hypothetically, you would have to take from the soul of another,” said Fallatehr. He watched my expression, and the grimace that I didn’t try to hide. “‘Take’ is an approximate term,” he said. “The term ‘copy’ might be better. But for that, you would need access to the soul of another, either one whose body is compatible with your own, or with the delicate power necessary to alter those conceptual bones prior to insertion. The process would be much more difficult and prone to failure, especially without my guidance.”

Amaryllis appeared some distance away from us, more than a hundred feet away, with a soft pop and a brief bit of light that was startlingly bright in the middle of the night. She was in full armor, helm up, and with her sword out and ready as soon as the teleportation key was safely stowed. She looked toward us, hesitant. “Status?” she called.

“Grak should be assumed compromised,” I called back to her.

“Fuck,” I heard her mutter under her breath as she walked toward us. She stopped some twenty feet away, sword still in hand. “You know that means that you’re assumed compromised too,” she said.

“That’s -- yes,” I said. “In theory, we should assume that everyone is compromised.”

“Such distrust,” said Fallatehr, making no attempt to hide his amusement.

“I know a little bit of soul magic now,” I said.

“Enough to fix you?” asked Amaryllis.
“No,” I said. “Working on my own, it’s a possibility, but I’m not there yet, and even the process of looking at my soul makes me far more vulnerable than expected.”

“Ah,” said Amaryllis. Her helm hid her eyes, but I could guess that she was looking between us, thinking. “The nonanima is an unreliable eyewitness,” she said.

“Yes,” I replied.

“What about the Eternal Golden Braid?” she asked.

I froze at that, because the thought hadn’t even occurred to me. I reached into my pack and took Ropey out. I was almost certain that he didn’t have a soul, which meant that he would have made a really good lookout. Overlooking him was almost inexcusable, but I was fairly sure that Amaryllis hadn’t thought of him either, because otherwise we could have used him as insurance against malfeasance in the first place. “He was in my pack from the time we scaled down the wall.”

“Suspiciously inconvenient,” said Amaryllis. Her sword was still in hand.

“Poor planning,” I said. “On both our parts.”

Amaryllis sighed. “We have time, two hours until the key is ready again. We’ll stay quarantined from each other until then.”

“We had already decided that,” said Grak.

“Soul magic is not so powerful as you believe,” said Fallatehr. “If it were, the Second Empire would not have crumbled as it did.”

“We don’t know what your further research might have produced,” said Amaryllis. “I’m sure that you understand our perspective on the matter.”

“Yes,” nodded Fallatehr. “It is somewhat amusing, to know that nothing was done and see all this effort going to waste.”

“I’d like us to talk to Valencia,” I said, nodding at the nonanima. “I picked a more respectful name for her.”

Amaryllis frowned. “She is unreliable.”

“Yes,” I said. “But,” I struggled with how to phrase it, conscious of Fallatehr listening in. “I doubt that she’s a perfect liar, and I was hoping that I might be able to gain her loyalty.”

Amaryllis nodded, the metal of her helm clinking once against her breastplate. “Not a perfect solution,” she said. “But one worth pursuing.”
We separated Grak from Fallatehr, putting both of them one hundred feet away in opposite directions. Fallatehr was downright cheery about it, either because he was legitimately amused by the paranoia we were displaying, or because he knew that what we were doing didn’t make a bit of difference, or possibly as a bluff.

“I agree with sequestration,” said Grak. “If I have been altered, we don’t know how long it would take to wear off, if it will at all. We should think of a long term solution. My wards are untrustworthy to you now.”

“You’re being very good about this,” I said to Grak.

“It’s the standard we need to have,” said Grak with a sniff from his wide nostrils. “It needs to work without trust.”

“Or rather, trust, but verify,” I said with a nod.

Grak frowned at that formulation of it, since apparently that wasn’t an expression here, but nodded.

“Tell me what happened,” said Amaryllis, as soon as he was far enough away that he couldn’t hear us. All the principal players were some distance apart from each other now, aside from Amaryllis and I, who stood beside each other. She took off her helmet while waiting for my response, and I could see the fatigue on her face.

“Fallatehr gave me a good enough description of soul magic that I was able to access my soul,” I said. “There’s apparently a compulsive effect associated with it -- like a siren song, if that’s an expression here.”

“We have sirens on Aerb, yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Fallatehr didn’t tell me about the effect ahead of time, so I got sort of … in the zone, I guess, wrapped up in exploration. I guess I would call it a zen state.” Amaryllis shook her head marginally. “Oh, um, it’s … that feeling when you’re going with the flow unselfconsciously. Anyway, that went on for an indeterminate amount of time, until I felt someone touch my knee. I was still in a condition where I could react, but I was blind, and it took some work to leave my view of the soul, again, an indeterminate amount of time, but I think probably less.”

“Shit,” said Amaryllis. She looked over at Grak. “So it’s either him alone, or both of you.”

“Both?” I asked, furrowing my brow. “Ah, because you think that if we were both in his thrall, his strategy might be to have suspicion cast on Grak in order to make me appear clear. Seems a bit complex, when he could just have directed both of us to act natural.” I supposed that good cop/bad cop had its charms, but it seemed like an over-complicated scheme to me.

“Agreed,” said Amaryllis with a weary sigh. “I should have asked Fenn for stimulants before I left. Let’s go talk to the nonanima.”

“Everything went well on your end?” I asked. “Fenn is alright?”

“We have a place to stay in Parsmont,” said Amaryllis. “Purchased at unreasonable expense, but with all the amenities we need to bunker down, and without much in the way of neighbors. I was counting on wards from Grak, but those aren’t reliable anymore. We’ll have to make do.”
We reached Valencia, who looked between the two of us with wide eyes. I lit my hand on fire with blood magic in order to give us a bit of light.

“It hasn’t been read in?” asked Amaryllis, looking at me.

“She, not it. And no,” I replied. “We haven’t had any time alone.”

“She could be possessed, even now.” said Amaryllis. She seemed heedless of the fact that Valencia was standing in front of us, watching us, listening to what we said.

“I’m not possessed right now,” said Valencia.

“The only information that statement conveys is that you’re not a demon,” said Amaryllis. “Congratulations on that.”

“Don’t be a bitch,” I said. I regretted that after it came out of my mouth, because Amaryllis and I didn’t have the sort of relationship where she would take that as chiding. Maybe I was more tired than I’d thought I was.

“Sorry,” said Amaryllis, rubbing her face. “I’m tired, this is …” she gestured at Valencia. “It’s a bad idea.”

“She has an affliction,” I said. “I’m not going to devalue her over something that’s completely beyond her control.”

*Loyalty Increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 6!*

Her loyalty was climbing fast. I was hoping that giving her a name would have given her a name on the game layer, but no such luck. I was also a little bit worried about what was going to happen when she hit 10 Loyalty. Amaryllis and Fenn had Twinned Souls with me, and Valencia didn’t have a soul to twin to. I didn’t think that it was possible to crash the game, but I was still a little leery.

(I didn’t actually think that the null pointer exception was ‘real’, given that the simulation displayed startling sophistication in almost all other regards, and I would have thought that to get something like this running, writing pristine code would be a must … but on second thought, there was nothing to say that the various layers of the game hadn’t been cobbled together by different agents working on different goals, and it was entirely possible that I was living in the equivalent of a triple-A game that someone had downloaded a lot of half-baked mods for.)

“Besides,” I continued, “It should be easy enough to tell whether she’s possessed, all we need to do is pre-arrange some codewords.”

“Possession implies access to memories,” said Amaryllis.

“Um,” I said. “Shit. For just a nonanima, or for anyone?”

“From what I know, it’s very difficult for a devil that’s taken possession to comb through the memories of the possessed, especially if they have to do it while maintaining a conversation,” said Amaryllis. “For a nonanima, it’s as though those memories were their own.”

“Shit,” I said again, looking at Valencia. “Meaning that we can’t use codewords, because they’d be instantly compromised.” I met Valencia’s eyes. “Do you have any ideas for how we could get around that?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m so, so sorry.”
“It’s okay,” I replied. “We can work around it. Can I ask, are you aware of what happens when you’re possessed?”

“Yes,” nodded Valencia. “I wish so much that I weren’t.” I opened my mouth to speak, but she rushed on. “It’s like I’m a glove that someone is sticking their hand into.”

“I’m going to figure out a way to stop that from happening,” I said.

**Loyalty Increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 7!**

“On to the interrogation,” said Amaryllis with a short yawn. “Joon, you realize that if she’s possessed by a devil, that devil will give us the exact wrong answers?”

“Yes,” I said. “And if it can read memories like they were its own, then that’s a serious problem. I was thinking that we could just re-ask over and over, but that doesn’t actually work, because a second devil could build off the story the first one told, and a contradiction doesn’t actually mean that much, because devils could contradict each other just to reduce trust.”

“You’re not treating her like enough of a problem,” said Amaryllis. “You’re being academic about it. Demons and devils exist almost purely to cause pain and suffering.”

“Almost?” I asked.

“They’re as imperfect as people are,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. She turned toward Valencia. “Isn’t that right?”

Valencia nodded slowly.

“So tell me what happened while I was gone,” said Amaryllis.

“The dwarf, Grakhuil, put up a ward around me,” said Valencia. “He sat in front of me, watching me while he ate. He didn’t offer me any food. He was listening to Fallatehr and Juniper. When they stopped talking, he went over to see why. Fallatehr kept saying that Juniper had fallen to the soul trance and would need to be pulled out of it sooner than later. Grakhuil kept asking questions that didn’t go anywhere. He went over to try to bring Juniper out of it, and Juniper got violent at the touch. Grakhuil and Fallatehr both talked a lot after that but they didn’t really say anything. It was all about the soul trance. Then Juniper came out of it on his own. Fallatehr didn’t touch either of them.”

Amaryllis rubbed her eyes for a moment and took a breath, then looked at me. “Well, that’s not helpful. On a scale from one to a supposed maximum of twenty, how much should we trust her?”

“Seven,” I said. “Conditional on her not being possessed at the moment.” Loyalty was a less valuable metric than normal here, given the circumstances.

“That high?” asked Amaryllis.

“Seven,” I nodded, then turned to Valencia. “But … no offense, Valencia, but you’ve been with Fallatehr your entire life?”

“Seven,” she said. “I was born in the prison.” She looked around her, then toward the walls of the penitentiary. “This is my first time seeing the rest of the world.”

That one hit me hard, because we were still on the same small, flat, mostly featureless island. We hadn’t gone more than a few hundred yards from the walls of the penitentiary, and that was further than she’d ever been in her life. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure that the next bit of her life wasn’t
going to be me showing her around Aerb and having a good time. We couldn’t even safely remove the manacles from her, not without wards, and we couldn’t trust the wards anymore.

“Either she’s lying to us, possessed by a devil that’s lying to us, or we’re legitimately in the clear,” said Amaryllis.

“So, two in three chance,” I said. Amaryllis frowned at me. “That was a joke.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” said Amaryllis.

“The question is what we do,” I replied.

“That’s not something that we’re going to discuss in front of her,” said Amaryllis. She started walking away without asking my opinion on the matter, and I shot an apologetic look at Valencia.

*Loyalty Increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 8!*

Her Loyalty was going up frighteningly fast.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, when we were out of earshot. “Our biggest problem at the moment is that Grak has to be assumed compromised, which means that we’re going to have to sleep in shifts, because we can’t just put up wards to protect us from Fallatehr and his people.”

“And they aren’t going to need to sleep in shifts, so they’ll get an edge on us that way,” I said.

“Minor, maybe, given that we have no pressing issues beyond my education.”

“We’re all run down,” said Amaryllis. “You less than me, it seems. It’s three on five, and we can’t leave Grak with them, which is a complication that we might not be able to afford.” She looked over at Fallatehr, who was sitting in the lotus position far away with his eyes closed. “Smug fuck. Fenn is of the opinion that we should kill him as soon as you have the skill unlocked, and I’m inclined to agree.”

“But I already have it unlocked,” I said.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, not taking her eyes from Fallatehr.

“More importantly, I’m not sure how easily I’m going to be able to raise the skill above the soft-cap of 20 without someone to teach me,” I said.

Amaryllis turned her tired eyes toward me. “You understand how that sounds to me?”

“Oh,” I said. “Ah, yes, it sounds like I’m offering up a defense of him because he got to me.”

Amaryllis nodded.

I rubbed my face. I was starting to flag too, though I thought I still had reserves left. “I do think that I might be able to heal myself without any further aid from him, because Essentialism -- that’s the skill name -- went up just from poking around and changing a few things --”

“You what,” said Amaryllis.

“I had to,” I said. “I didn’t have any choice in the matter. Essentialism is a second game interface, or maybe third depending on how it’s counted, and there were game messages that prevented me from leaving until I fixed something that had apparently been there since the start. While I was doing that, I made a few very minor changes, because the interface told me that I wasn’t going to be able to alter them again for another few levels, at the very least. The skills are what I had to fix, and they’re all
Well, it was actually 257, since I had split Deception and Stealth from each other. My guess was that it was two to the eighth, plus Custom for any number of skills I might have wanted to create on my own. But Custom was excluded, as were a whole host of others, so that was somewhat moot. I was going to have to compile all the new information and figure out how it lined up with recorded history. It was already my guess that the exclusions were in numbered order of when they’d been applied and would match up with what was laid out in The Exclusionary Principle, but I would need to check -- and there were a whole lot more skills listed as excluded than there were exclusion zones.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, shifting uncomfortably and breathing out with clenched teeth before becoming calm again. “Can I ask you nicely not to touch your own soul again, not under the guidance of Fallatehr, and not until we’ve had a chance to talk it over?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t feel like I really had an option, and the game itself informed me that it could be undone later, if we really need it to.” I was more worried that the specific skills I’d started the game with were going to be vital somehow and I’d run into their hidden purpose before getting another chance to rearrange my skills.

“Any other surprises I’d find unpleasant?” asked Amaryllis.

“Our souls are linked, probably by the Twinned Souls thing that powered you up at Loyalty 10, given that it’s only a connection to you and Fenn, not Grak and the locus -- or Valencia,” I said. “I can access your soul at a large distance.”

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis. “Meaning that if you’re compromised, then Fenn and I are too.”

“Meaning, I guess, that you have to assume that I’m not compromised,” I said. “Because if Fallatehr had gotten to me, there wouldn’t be anything that you could do about it.”

“I could kill you, I suppose,” said Amaryllis, looking me up and down. She didn’t seem serious about it, not like she was issuing a threat, more like she was publicly contemplating alternative courses of action.

“You could try to kill me,” I replied. (I couldn’t imagine that it was going to come to that, but I wasn’t just making a boast. She had better armor and a better sword, but I had far more magic than she did, and from what I could tell, superior melee skills.)

“Alright, fine,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think that Fenn and I could have kept you and Grak quarantined from Fallatehr and the others anyway, not if it’s the two of us against the six of you.”

“Unless I’m lying about the link,” I said. “In which case I just told the right lie to let me into the henhouse.”

Amaryllis nodded. “True. I’m starting to think that this Fallatehr plan was a mistake.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Do you want to know everything that I know about the soul, the things that I learned from looking at my own rather than what I have to take Fallatehr’s word on? My guess is that what I see is different from what he sees, and that might give me an edge.”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis. “But you’re probably going to have to repeat it all for Fenn and Grak -- you haven’t told Grak?”

“No,” I said. “He’s assumed compromised.”
“Just checking,” said Amaryllis. She stifled a yawn. “You’re going to have to repeat it for them, assuming that we want their help, once we’ve cleared him. And I’m not in the best condition for listening.”

I told her everything anyway, in part because there wasn’t a lot else we needed to be doing, aside from maybe cross-referencing Grak’s story with Valencia and Fallatehr’s, but I had no faith in eyewitness accounts, and even a contradiction wouldn’t help us all that much. There was no way that anything they said would exonerate Grak, meaning that we’d need to keep all our precautions in place anyway. Besides that, I was operating under the assumption that if Fallatehr might have had up to a half hour to work on Grak, and some level of complicity on the part of Valencia, he wouldn’t have made any incredibly stupid mistakes.

When I was done, Amaryllis sat in silence for a moment. I could see from her posture that she’d locked her armor in place, saving her the trouble of using her muscles to stand up. “Assuming that he’s got a view remotely similar to your own, values seem like the quickest way to bring Grak to his side,” said Amaryllis. “All he would have to do is find Fallatehr on the list of values and increase the numbers.”

“I’m not sure that he gets to see numbers,” I replied. “He hasn’t given his own description of the soul, only an analogy. But yes, I think that would be the first thing that I would look at if I can get a view into Grak. And that is the fastest way to clear him, not to mention that he shouldn’t have any legitimate reason to object.” I frowned slightly. This could all have been avoided if he was more loyal to me. Twinned Souls would remove the need for his informed consent.

“We’ll have to take a look at your complete list of options later, when we have time to write everything down and make a catalog of what we know. I’m sure you’ll agree that you made some mistakes there?” Amaryllis raised an eyebrow, and I grudgingly nodded. I wasn’t confident that I actually had made mistakes, given the short time frame, the pressure, and the missing information, but I was pretty sure that when I was next able to change skills, it would be with a concrete plan and optimized build.

Amaryllis pulled out the teleportation key and turned it over in her hands. “We still have a little bit of time,” she said. “Have you checked yourself over?”

I shook my head. “The soul trance scares me. I mean, I think that it probably wouldn’t be optimal for me to try again, in addition to being scary.”

“You came out of it once,” said Amaryllis. “More time in it means higher skill in Essentialism, given what you said, and that should be the skill that governs your ability to escape from it.”

“I already know that I wasn’t affected by him,” I said. I didn’t care whether he lived or died, save for his ability to help me.

“I’d like you to check for subtle signs,” said Amaryllis. She hesitated biting her lip hard for a second. “I don’t know how much you looked at my soul, --”

“I left as soon as I realized what it was,” I replied.

“Thank you,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll … I don’t know what’s written there, but we might have to have a talk, just to clear the air. And if you have time, checking Fenn and I over for a baseline might be wise.” She grimaced as she said it, not trying to hide her distaste.

I set Ropey as lookout, then looked toward my soul once more.
I loved books. Of all the forms of mass media, books were the most personal and the most intimate, not just because they took longer to consume than anything except maybe a season of television, but because reading was something that you did in private. And maybe more than that, reading had an element of interpretation that was rare in film and television, because prose was meant to be evocative rather than strictly literal, abstract by the very nature of the medium.

So the first time I went to Tiff’s house, months before we started dating, I paid special attention to her bookshelf. We were working on our half of a group project together, just Tiff and I, alone in her bedroom together but with the door open, and I had gotten bored enough that my attention was drifting.

Most of what was on her shelf was nonfiction, and most of that nonfiction was in the form of popular, layman’s level explanations of a field or subject: books like *The World is Flat*, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, and *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Mixed in with those were older classics, *Wealth of Nations*, *The Origin of Species*, *Plato’s Republic*, and *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. A section of books caught my eye, *The Second Sex*, *Sexual Politics*, and *The Delta of Venus*, all feminist works, judging by their titles, all well-read, judging by their spines. Her fiction section was less interesting, given that it held few surprises, and almost no fantasy or science fiction beyond the staple series of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and *Harry Potter*, none of which really counted, since I considered them part of standard cultural literacy.

But none of that interested me as much as a set of ten slender moleskine notebooks, each one embossed with her initials.

“Let me know if you want to borrow anything,” said Tiff. “It’s not really a lending library, but I’m always happy to talk about books.”

“Those?” I asked, gesturing to the embossed moleskines.

“Ah,” said Tiff, sitting up a bit. “I’ve been keeping a diary since I was twelve. Decidedly not for lending, but you can take a look if you’d like.”

That felt like a trap to me, but I had no idea what kind of trap. I reached over and pulled down one of the notebooks and opened it to a random page. Instead of text, I was greeted with lines and dots in different configurations. I stared at it for a moment, trying to see a pattern, then gave up and looked at Tiff.

“It’s a cipher!” she said with a smile. She bit her lip as though to stop her smile from growing too indecently wide. “I made it when I was eleven, after I found my mom snooping, prior to the start of the diaries proper -- got them from my aunt, best present ever. Totally uncrackable.”

“That’s … not likely to be true,” I said.

“It was a joke,” said Tiff with a frown. “You remember us talking last week about how you don’t roll your own crypto?” We’d had a long discussion on the topic after the party had broken into a mausoleum and blown through five of my six prepared puzzles in the space of an hour. It was a conversation that I was sure would have made someone actually knowledgeable on the subject facepalm. (They’d gotten stuck on the last puzzle for about an hour, to the point where they were getting bored, which made it a bad puzzle.)

“Right, sorry,” I said. I looked down at the book in my lap and flipped through it, looking at more of the dots and lines. It took a bit to see the first pattern, which was that you could sort the dots and lines into glyphs, no more than four lines per glyph, no more than four dots per glyph. Line position
seemed to matter, as did dot position, not just whether there were more or fewer of them. “Still, having a custom cipher like this means security through obscurity, and given that it’s on paper in your room, you’re probably safe.” I looked through the pages some more. “There are more glyphs than letters.” Meaning that it wasn’t a simple substitution cipher. There weren’t spaces either, which meant that one of the glyphs indicated a space, which I didn’t think would be too hard to figure out, but it strangely wasn’t visible at a glance.

“Well, definitely not letting you borrow it,” said Tiff. “I know you’d be overcome by the urge to crack it.”

“Is there anything in here that I’d be interested in?” I asked, leafing through it again. Here and there I saw pictures, small little doodles that were set within hand-drawn boxes separate from the ciphertext itself.

“Well, definitely not letting you borrow it,” said Tiff. “I know you’d be overcome by the urge to crack it.”

“Is there anything in here that I’d be interested in?” I asked, leafing through it again. Here and there I saw pictures, small little doodles that were set within hand-drawn boxes separate from the ciphertext itself.

“Eh, it’s personal stuff,” said Tiff with a shrug. “Most people don’t care about personal stuff, except because it’s personal. Like, most of your life you don’t pay that much attention to anyone else unless they’re a close friend, and even then, probably not.”

“I think I pay attention to you,” I said. “I mean, the appropriate amount of attention.”

“Are we close friends?” asked Tiff with a raised eyebrow. “Not that I’m saying you’re not --”

“I mean, you’re part of the group,” I said. “We spend something like, I don’t know, ten or fifteen hours a week together outside of school, plus another few hours at lunch, plus more hours in class. It’s part-time job levels of friendship.”

“Yeah,” said Tiff, straightening up somewhat. “I just sometimes feel like I’m the fifth wheel.”

“Arthur, me, Reimer, Craig, Tom,” I said, counting quickly on my fingers. “You’d be the sixth wheel.” We had other members who only showed up inconsistently or for special occasions who made for seventh, eighth, and ninth wheels too.

She reached over and grabbed a pillow from her bed, which she flung at me. “It’s an expression, you dolt.”

“Just joking,” I said, batting her pillow aside. “And we do think of you as one of the guys.”

“Blegh,” said Tiff, briefly sticking out her tongue. “I hate that.”

“Guys?” I asked.

“No, ‘guys’ is normally fine,” she said. “Except in that context, where it’s clearly gendered.”

“Ahh,” I said. I set the diary to the side.

“It’s like saying that I can be part of the group, so long as I pretend I’m male, or masculine, it’s an implication of or suggestion towards tomboyism, which is fine, if you’re a tomboy, but I’m not,” said Tiff. I didn’t have much to say to that, except ‘sorry’, which felt too weak, so I kept quiet. “Arthur would have jumped at that bait.”

“Would he?” I asked. “And was it bait?”

“Arthur bait,” said Tiff with a shrug. “See, this is why I think I’m not a part of the group. Just ... makin’ things weird.” She folded her arms across her knees. “That’s the hardest part about finding new friends, you don’t have all those grooves worn into place. You don’t know how to talk to each
other, not really, not about things that are outside the bounds of the everyday normal-person back-and-forth.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, I don’t really know, because it’s always been other people coming into our group, not me trying to -- infiltrate is the wrong word.”

“Like I’m a spy?” asked Tiff, smiling at me.

“Hey, I said it was the wrong word. Integrate?” I asked. “Brings up too many associations with Jim Crow to me.” I tapped the diary. “I sometimes wish that it were possible to data dump. I mean it would be, in a sense, possible for me to get to know you really well by reading through four or five years of diaries, but then you’d also have to do the same for me, and I don’t actually think that we’d get those grooves worn into each other.” That sounded a little too intimate to me, as far as imagery went, with the suggestion of friction, and I regretted it immediately. “And anyway, a diary isn’t really a record of who you are, it’s a record of who you’ve been, it’s the component elements that served to make you, not the actuality of you. It might be helpful for a reconstruction of Tiffany, maybe.”

Tiff was watching me, in a way that made me feel self-conscious. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Tiff. “Have I ever told you that I find you interesting?”

“Literally no one has ever told me that,” I replied. “They used to call me the default character.”

Tiff laughed, covering her mouth. “I am so sorry, but I can completely see that.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“But that’s not who you actually are,” she continued. “I think that’s what reading the diary would be like, maybe, you would see all this stuff in there that was totally typical of someone my age, the kind of things that are completely innocuous and interchangeable, and then packed there in the middle you’d find these little revealing sparks of me. And that’s why I don’t feel like I’m really one of the guys, because you’ve all known each other long enough that you’ve seen those flashes of truth in each other.”

“It’s like a signal to noise thing, sure,” I said. I looked down at the enciphered diary again, one of many up on the shelves. “And you’re sure that you don’t want me cracking this?”

“One hundred percent,” said Tiff. “Top secret, eyes only. If you want to get to know me, it’s got to be the hard way.”

There was a little game I played, later on, where I tried to figure out whether she had been flirting with me, or saying things that were meant to have double meanings. She was self-confessedly bad at giving signals, and in that heady state of infatuation (and later, love) I kept seeing strands of it in every interaction we’d ever had. It was hard to know whether I was just making things up, when I played back those memories over and over.

She was right about the diaries. I didn’t think that they contained anything all that important, because my own diaries would probably have been equally uninteresting, and she was ready and willing to tell me anything that I wanted to know about her. But because there was a puzzle sitting there waiting to be solved, and because it was information that I wasn’t allowed free access to, my eyes were drawn to her neatly ordered diaries every time I came over.

I looked to my values first, because from what I knew about the soul, that was the first thing that I would change if I wanted to quickly manipulate someone. The list could be dynamically reordered
based on the parameters that each value had, but it was easier to just think in the direction of a concept and see its place on the list. “Fallatehr” was on there, with a negative value attached to him, and I felt like that was probably enough to clear myself of suspicion. Just to be safe, I went after a few related concepts, like “Soul Magic” and “Elves”, but neither was terribly high in the rankings, and certainly not higher than I thought they should be in principle, nor were those values in conflict with my memories of how I had felt about those things.

I had to assume that Fallatehr wasn’t all-powerful, because if he could rewrite all my values, and my memories and expectations of those values, then there was pretty much nothing that I could do to detect him or counter his ability in any way.

I was already expecting him to be stronger than soul mages were historically considered to be, but there had to be limits to that. Historically speaking, a soul mage needed minutes of contact, but those were workmen soul mages, not an elite like Fallatehr. If he could affect someone through incidental touch, then we were already fucked, and had been back when Fenn put him into her glove, not to mention the fact that the teleportation key required direct contact. So we had already pinned our success on the idea that he wasn’t possessed of godlike power. Now, “that shouldn’t be possible” wasn’t exactly the more reassuring line of thinking, especially when dealing with unknowns, but that was what we had.

I went looking at other parts of my soul, trying to keep half my attention focused back on the real world. I had Amaryllis out there, and knew that she wouldn’t fuck around (whatever her other flaws), plus Ropey wrapped around my arm and actually keeping guard this time. I was still trying to go fast and look things over, rather than trying to learn about the soul itself, or look over any of the presented data too carefully. I briefly found what appeared to be social modelling, and checked in only long enough to see that Fallatehr was there and nothing about the tags and data fields looked too suspect, especially since none of them painted a flattering picture of him. There was nothing that I liked about him, and apparently his lisp mattered more to me than I was willing to admit, even though it made me cringe at how shallow I was.

Everything seemed to be in order though, or at least as in order as I had expected it to be. I wasn’t going to rush on making changes to my soul’s conception of my body, nor my values, because that seemed like exactly the sort of thing that might hide a technical trap that would make things worse for me. I didn’t trust Fallatehr not to screw me over like that, given that it was in his interests to make himself indispensable, and having me screw up was probably his fastest way to get access to my soul.

So with that, I followed the thread to Amaryllis, to see what her soul had in store.

Her skills were more general than I had thought they would be, though not quite so generalized as my own. I was mildly surprised to find that she had skills, since the soul seemed perfectly capable of including skills outside of the organized system that my own soul had. She didn’t seem to have the same limits as I did, since there were more than forty skills with explicit values attached to them, which raised questions for another day. I had so many questions; if the soul could mark down a prototypical defensive maneuver with a sword, why even attach numbers to it? There was this entire system that the game level seemed to have been slapped on top of just for the sake of being more like
a game.

I tore myself away from the skills before I could get too wrapped up in looking them over, moving on to her values, which I still thought were the most likely place I would see an alteration. It was also the place I thought would sate my curiosity.

Sorted by weighting, “Amaryllis” was at the top of her own list of values, and in second was “Autonomy”, then “Power”, then “Life”, and it wasn’t until I got to the tenth on the list that I found something that wasn’t either personal or abstract (or both): I was there, as number 10. I wasn’t quite sure how to take the list of values, given that they had different variables attached to them which I assumed altered how they were processed; my actual, experienced values only vaguely aligned with the list I’d been shown. I was hoping that it was the same for Amaryllis, and that what I was looking at was some redundancy within the systemization of concepts. At any rate, I checked for Fallatehr on there, and saw that he had a negative value, which to me was sufficient proof against tampering.

I hadn’t felt anyone touch me, and I still felt confident that I could pull myself out, so I moved back down the line to my own soul, and then up towards where Fenn’s soul awaited me, separated by thousands of miles though we were.

I was surprised to see the scars on her arms, along with the thin one that ran across her body from the bisection, but they made sense, because magical healing hadn’t wiped them away. I moved away from her body quickly though, not because I was embarrassed or ashamed of my reaction toward seeing her, but because I wanted to make sure that she was okay in the ways that mattered more to me. I missed her, and wanted to spend some time alone. We hadn’t had enough of a chance to talk since coming to the prison, and though it had only been a day, it felt like longer.

Her skills were more narrowly focused, but I didn’t look at them for long except to boggle at the fact that her Bows skill was in the low 50s, and to see a general pattern of specialization that either implied a weird stat distribution for her abilities or something else entirely. The few things that she was good at, she was really good at, but it seemed to go contrary to the design principles that ensured lower values due to multiple ability dependence. That wasn’t the purpose of my visit though. I was trying to make sure that she hadn’t been touched by Fallatehr or his cronies, that nothing had been obviously altered, and that we’d been, at worst, subtly altered.

Her values seemed to be the place to go for that, and I looked at them with a little more trepidation than I’d looked at Amaryllis’.

Where Amaryllis had a large number of abstract or high-level values, at least by naive weighting, Fenn’s looked more like my own, focused on the people close to me rather than on concepts. She was at the top of her own list, which seemed sensible enough to me -- between the three of us, I was the odd one out on that count, as I valued myself less -- and after that was “Nellan”, then “Juniper”, then “Amaryllis”, “Solace”, “Grak”, and “Six-Eyed Doe” (but who the fuck was Nellan?). I reordered the list to bring up Fallatehr, whose value was listed as not just negative, but at such a high negative number that I was almost alarmed by it. If I was reading the collection of values right, there were a number of things that Fenn would have given up in order to kill him.

I reordered the list, this time sorting from low to high, and saw a field of names, the majority of them typical of the elven names I had encountered thus far. I grimaced at that. Her companion quest was to go to the Isle of Eversummer, and my best guess was that it wasn’t going to end nicely for them. What I was seeing was just confirmation of that, but it was unpleasant nonetheless, because even if Aerbian elves were universally assholes, a part of me rebelled against the idea of slaughtering a village.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and instantly dropped out of my view of her soul, extending my sword
from bladed ring into full-fledged sword in an instant.

“Time to go,” said Amaryllis.

“Ropey?” I asked the length of rope that was wrapped around my arm. “Anything I need to worry about?”

One end of him curled up toward me and made a loop that shook from side to side. I looked around me, toward Fallatehr, then Valencia, then Grak, all in the positions that I had left them in, then back to Amaryllis.

“I hate this,” I said.

“It’s necessary,” said Amaryllis. “Demons and devils, a close friend we can no longer trust, and a man who would tear apart our souls in an instant. They’re not the best bedfellows. As soon as I’ve gotten some sleep, I might try to renegotiate with Fallatehr. If we can jettison Rehta and Lehpenn, we might be in a better position.” She hesitated. “Was there anything in my soul that we need to talk about?”

“No,” I replied. “Nothing that I saw, anyway. You were just about what I expected.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “Good,” but I got the distinct impression that she had been hoping for a different answer. Before I could ask she turned aside and called over to Grak, then to Fallatehr, and whatever it was she had been concerned about, I decided that it was a thread that I could pull on later, when we were both in better condition, or I could simply search through her soul until I stumbled upon whatever it was she thought I would find there.

With some deliberation about positioning, Valencia returned to manacles, and a good deal of wariness on our part, we left for Parsmont, the City of Equal Standing.
As soon as the pain of the teleportation faded, and I had made sure that we were all clear of Fallatehr, Fenn came up and wrapped me in a hug. I returned it, trying my best to keep aware of my surroundings at the same time. Teleportation was both painful and disorientating, which meant that it was the best time for an ambush.

It was still dark near Parsmont (naturally, since Aerb didn’t have timezones) but clouds obscured the multicolored stars and Celestar, meaning that our only light was from a lantern that Fenn had set down on the grass. Behind her was a large farmhouse that wouldn’t have been out of place anywhere in the Midwest, with two stories, wood siding, and a wide, wrap around porch. Behind it was a tall barn with a fifteen-foot tall arch leading into the interior. Amaryllis hadn’t been kidding when she said that this place didn’t have much in the way of neighbors. I had to wonder how we had acquired it, though “lots and lots of money hastily exchanging hands” was probably a good guess. Hopefully that wasn’t going to attract attention, especially since we couldn’t move very quickly with eight people.

And in the other direction, there was Parsmont, the titular ‘mont’ really more of a large hill. It was coated with buildings, visible mostly by the streetlights laced through them. I didn’t have a firm grasp on the time, since I didn’t have a watch, but it was after midnight, and probably by a wide margin. There were cars and trucks moving through the city though, visible by their headlights, even at this late hour. It all looked so like Earth in so many ways that it felt like I had gone to a different world again, at least until I looked down at the half-elf in my arms.

“Still alive?” Fenn asked, backing up just enough so that she could bring a hand up to the side of my face and stare in my eyes. “Still Juniper?”

“You know that you can’t actually get an answer to that question, don’t you?” I asked. “My answer would be the same either way. I mean, obviously I’m still alive, but I would just lie about being me.”

“Yup, still Juniper,” said Fenn, as she gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

“You know that’s not enough, right?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes and smiled at me. “Come on, we’ve got a room.”

“Grak is compromised,” said Amaryllis, her tone hard.

“Under suspicion,” Grak corrected her. “They can’t tell one way or another.”

“Okay,” said Fenn, looking between the five of us. “Meaning?” She slowly drew a finger across her throat, raising an eyebrow.

“The plan is not to kill me, no,” said Grak with a slight snort.

“Well, good,” said Fenn. “Not that I would, you understand.”

“You’d make Mary do it,” said Grak with a slight, wide-toothed grin.

“I would make Mary do it,” Fenn agreed. “Come, let me give you a tour.”

She moved toward the farmhouse, pulling me along. Only a single room of the farmhouse was lit, the front living room, and when we came into it, she waved with a hand. “Home sweet home, for the
time being,” said Fenn. “Did you know that if you offer absurd amounts of money to people, they’ll let you stay in their house?”

“That worries me,” I said.

“It worries Mary too,” said Fenn with a shrug. “There were two of them, a little old lady and a nearly decrepit old man, went to go stay with their son down the road a bit, took all the sentimentals they could carry. We have a half now, half later agreement with them, for a fuckload of money by anyone’s standards, but it’s still kind of touchy. Mary still favored this over trying to go into town this late at night and risking more eyeballs in our direction.”

I looked around at the pictures on the walls, the knick-knacks, dried flowers in artful arrangements, and hunting trophies stuffed and put up on the wall, most of which were of species I didn’t recognize. Doors led off into other rooms, but I had been in enough houses like this that I wasn’t terribly interested in what it held. My eyes briefly caught on something that looked like a small shrine, but whatever had been sitting there, it was now noticeably absent, an empty space surrounded by dried flowers and a few unlit candles.

“Did we pick this place at random?” I asked.

“We went down the road a bit, looking at signs, until we found a few that had the same last name. We figured that gave us a better chance of not inconveniencing them too much,” said Fenn. “Out of the way, but close enough to Parsmont proper, where we’re headed in the morning to restock. We paid those people basically the full price of their house for the pleasure. But we should be safe here, at least for a little while.”

The rest of the group came to join us, Valencia first, then Grak, then Fallatehr, and finally Amaryllis following them at some distance.

“Fallatehr and Valencia will stay in the barn tonight, where Rehta and Lehpenn already are,” said Amaryllis. “Grak will stay with us in the house.”

“You cannot continue to treat me like a live grenade,” said Fallatehr, smiling softly. “It is a poor way to build a working relationship.”

“It’s just temporary,” said Amaryllis. “We’re already allowing for the possibility that you might leave. We know that you cannot be forced to teach under duress.” It was curiosity that had gotten him to agree to come with us, that was (probably) true, but I still felt a little ill at the idea that he might leave, and that we’d have inflicted him on the world. It was really a matter of practicality, because we didn’t have the manpower, facilities, or equipment to guard him and his clones, except possibly in the very short term. We might have been able to, if we knew for sure that we had Grak, but we didn’t have Grak. I knew all that, but it still made my stomach flip. “You might understand that our nerves are somewhat frayed by the amount of pain and effort we took in getting you out of prison.”

“I will not thank you for my rescue,” said Fallatehr. “Too many of my long-term projects were lost in the process, and the wider world has always been of little concern to me. Our interests are aligned, for the time being, but I won’t pretend at owing you anything in gratitude.”

Fenn rolled her eyes at that, but didn’t say anything in response.

“We’ll be a little more settled tomorrow,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll make a trip into town and figure out a more permanent housing situation so that Juniper’s training can continue, and once he’s built up some skill with soul magic, we won’t have to worry so much about the trust issues.”
Fallatehr nodded at that. I wondered whether that was giving the game away too much, but maybe Amaryllis was counting on Fallatehr to have already figured that out. Once I had a better working knowledge of soul magic, I could both ensure that my soul was defended, and defend against changes to the souls of others -- in theory, at least. His window of opportunity was shrinking, and he presumably didn’t know about the soul link between the three of us.

“We’ll all get some rest,” Fallatehr said with a short bow. He reached over and grabbed Valencia by the chains between her manacles, but she jerked away from him.

“I lied!” she shouted. Fallatehr managed to grab the chain, holding her in place. “I lied, he did touch Grak, he pinned him and touched his soul until he stopped moving, and then they talked to each other, Juniper, I’m sorry, but I lied, you have to be careful!” The words came out in a rush, breaths taken without ending a sentence.

“Believe what you wish,” said Fallatehr with a shrug. “It did not happen as she says, but such an outburst is not uncharacteristic of a possession.”

“Take her away,” said Amaryllis with a sigh.

“You have to believe me, Juniper, please!” said Valencia.

“Is there anything we could do to verify?” I asked. “Details that you couldn’t have known unless this was the truth?”

“No,” said Valencia, saying the word like I had stabbed her.

I gave her a small nod as Fallatehr led her away, out of the door, staring at me with wide eyes but unresisting.

“It’s meaningless,” said Amaryllis. “Nothing we can verify, nothing that we can act on, nothing new, and as likely to be the result of possession as what she initially told us.”

“It’s not true,” said Grak. “For whatever me saying that is worth.”

“The girl seems taken with you,” Fenn said to me, giving me a fake smile and a nudge in the ribs.

“Juniper doesn’t share our cultural values,” said Amaryllis, shaking her head slightly. She blinked slowly. “I need sleep, at least a little bit, before we do a full debrief.” She turned to Grak. “Unfortunately, we’re going to have to leave you out of those conversations.”

Grak frowned at that. “If my soul were touched, he would already know everything I know,” said Grak.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “But you don’t know everything that we know, not yet.”

Grak frowned again. “I agree with a need for caution. There must be limits though. I cannot be exiled from decision-making and information-sharing forever.”

“You’re too important to keep you out of the loop forever,” said Amaryllis. “But we are waiting on Juniper to have whatever level of skill is necessary to ensure that you’re still the Grak we know.”

“And love,” added Fenn.

“But for now, you’ll be sleeping in another room,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper will close you in with a Lecher’s Vine.”
“Let me put up wards,” said Grak. “Treat them as untrustworthy. I will at least gain peace of mind.”

Amaryllis rubbed her eyes. “No,” she said. “If you were working against us you could turn this place into a death trap and put us at a disadvantage in the event of an attack. Down that hall there, to the right, please.”

“Fair enough,” nodded Grak, looking quickly between the three of us before heading off down the hallway. I followed after him.

“Sorry about all this,” I said once he was in the small bedroom. I’d been expecting quilts, like my grandparents made, but the bedding was clearly some mass produced, perfectly-machined fabric. There were pictures of someone’s family on the wall, and an old dresser that looked like it had been carved from a single, solid, piece of wood. The bed was too high for Grak to comfortably get up on, and I immediately felt bad for him. “If,” I began, then stopped, because Grak didn’t know about the soul link, and I couldn’t tell him. “I’ll figure out a way to check your soul over.”

“I’m not comfortable with that,” said Grak, folding his arms across his chest.

“Meaning that you would refuse?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “It is possible to submit to something uncomfortable.”

“We should try it now,” I said, holding out my hand to him. He hesitated, then took his hand in my own. My Essentialism was up to 7 now, just from poking around, but I had no real idea how I was supposed to be able to access another person's soul. I tried a few ways to conceptualize it, as though I was following a thread like I did for Fenn and Amaryllis, or like I was opening the book of Grakhuil, but nothing worked, and after what felt like an eternity holding his hand in the doorway, I pulled away.

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “Thank you for being good about it, even if it’s just a plot that Fallatehr told you to follow.” I meant that as a joke, but it didn’t come out like one, and Grak didn’t show any signs of even mild amusement.

There were no windows in his room, which was a plus, because that meant just one of my Lecher’s Vines was needed to make sure that I would know if he left. I stared at the door for a bit, trying to erase an unpleasant but true thought. At least it was him and not Fenn or Amaryllis. Maybe there was a good reason that he wasn’t loyal to me.

“Personally, I think it’s great to be sharing a bedroom again,” said Fenn as Amaryllis stripped out of her immobility plate. We were going to share the master bedroom on the second floor, which had an adjoining bathroom, and more importantly, would be pretty easy to defend against intrusion. “Brings me back to the good old days, when we were three peas in a pod in Barren Jewel.”

“I’m going to take a very quick shower to wash the sweat and blood off,” said Amaryllis. “Then I’m going to sleep.”

I had already secured the door with another Lecher’s Vine, which had crawled from my skin and went to surround the door frame in bright green leaves, then moved a heavy dresser in front of it. In the event we had to leave in a hurry, we’d be using a window. I averted my eyes as Amaryllis took off the last of the plate and stripped down her underclothes to full nudity. I waited until she had closed herself in the bathroom to sit down on the bed with Fenn. She kissed me on the neck, then rested her head on my shoulder before deciding better of it and flopping down on top of the blankets. The cloak of leaves she’d inherited from Solace was carefully set beside her.
“Hell of a day,” she said.

I laid down beside her. I needed a shower of my own before going to sleep. “Yeah,” I said.

“Let’s never voluntarily go somewhere that makes me so useless,” said Fenn. “Do you ever have that dream where you’re punching someone, but it feels like your fists are hitting mud?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s universal,” I said. “Your brain’s not getting feedback from the nerve endings, so it invents an interpretation that fits the data.”

“Well that’s how I felt all day,” said Fenn. “Just shooting those things with arrows over and over, not doing shit to them.” She rolled toward me and gave me a kiss. “You need a shower too, especially if we’re sharing a bed.”

“Fair enough,” I said, looking up at the ceiling. “I think we should kill Fallatehr.”

“You have soul magic unlocked?” asked Fenn.

“Yeah,” I said, breathing a sigh. “There’s certainly more he could teach me, and I’ve already run into a few things that worry me, but … he’s dangerous. I’m not even sure that we should be letting him out of our sight.” Our original plan hadn’t looked like this, but the problem with needing someone for their intellectual labor was that you couldn’t just hold them at gunpoint, not if you didn’t have someone to replace them.

“He’s a deviant,” said Fenn. “Not sure how much you cottoned on to that.”

“Yeah, he’s a mad scientist,” I said. “That was pretty obvious.”

“No,” said Fenn. “I mean, as far as elves go, he’s … he’s flagrantly imperfect, he’s not even trying. Science is trial and error, that’s anathema to an elf. He speaks with a lisp, no sane elf would do that. The culture of elves, no matter the flavor, is all about perfection, I -- I don’t know if I can do justice to how fundamentally wrong he is.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well he’s the first elf I’ve really met.” I paused slightly. “I’m going to need to read that entry in The Book of Blood sometime soon. I probably should have insisted.”

Fenn sat up slightly and looked me over. “So you didn’t actually read it?” she asked.

I shook my head, furrowing my brow. “You said that you didn’t want me to.”

“And that’s why you didn’t know about the teeth,” said Fenn.

“I’m glad that didn’t screw anything up for us,” I said. “It also seems like the sort of thing that the book would mention.”

“Huh,” said Fenn. “I’d sort of assumed that you -- when we were together, how did you know?” I raised an eyebrow. She blushed slightly. “How did you, ah, know your way around?”

“Wait, you think that I cheated by reading that book?” I asked.

“Well I don’t know,” said Fenn. “Yes, I guess that is what I thought. I wasn’t about to complain about it, given the results, but,” she stopped mid-sentence, looking me in the eyes. “It didn’t really occur to me that you hadn’t violated that agreement. I knew you were curious, and it was a minor thing, so I just sort of,” she shrugged, still watching me.

“So you’re saying that I’m a better man than you thought I was?” I asked.
Fenn nodded. “You’re not mad at me? We’re not going to have a big dumb fight about this?”

I shook my head. I could see it happening, maybe, in some other universe, but I’d betrayed trust enough times in my life that I wasn’t about to get upset about someone assuming I’d done wrong. Fenn leaned down and kissed me on the lips.

**Loyalty increased: Fenn lvl 20!**

**Companion Passive Unlocked: Symbiosis (Fenn)!**

“Wait,” I said, placing a hand on her chest and gently pushing her away. “Game stuff,” I explained as I closed my eyes.

**Symbiosis:** You and Fenn are connected on a deeper level now, with the last vestiges of reluctance stripped away. When together, you may both use either your own skill, or half the skill of the other, rounded down, whichever is higher.

“What kind of game stuff?” asked Fenn. I opened my eyes and looked at her. “Loyalty 20?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think we both just got better at … a lot of stuff, actually. You might know some magic.” So long as I was with her, the ungestalted Lying and Stealth were both practically useless to me, since I could just bum off her. My optimal build, which I hadn't even worked out yet, had shifted again with this new passive. “Oh, and I can see your character sheet now, or something close to it.”

“And you didn’t lead with that?” she asked. “Here, let me get you a pen and paper, you need to write it all down.”

“Later,” came a voice from the doorway. Amaryllis was toweling herself dry, and I averted my eyes again. “Full debrief when I’m awake enough for it. Fenn, you have my clothes.”

“I do, don’t I,” said Fenn with a vulpine smile.

“Fine, I’m going to bed,” said Amaryllis. “Joon, take a bedroll or get over yourself, I don’t care which. With the vines in place, a barricade, and the rope keeping watch, I’m prepared to risk going without a guard. The threat from Fallatehr is going to be more subtle.” With that she slipped under the covers and cast the sleeping spell over her forehead, putting her out like a light.

(That was the first spell I had ever seen, aside from maybe the slow-fall tattoo, depending on how it counted, way back when we’d been camping out in a farmhouse in the Risen Lands. It was one of the very few spells that were universal and without a school. It had no unintended applications that I could find, and Amaryllis had looked at me like I was an idiot for suggesting it could be exploitable. It didn’t work unless you actually wanted to get to sleep, and you couldn’t even fake it by consenting to the spell.)

“She’s been trying to match you,” said Fenn, nodding toward Amaryllis.

“She was doing a good job of it,” I replied.

“You’ve got her beat in physical strength, reach, and by the way our sparring has gone, training too,” said Fenn. “She has the better sword, I think, but the real thing closing the gap is how much effort she’s been putting in.”

“Ah,” I said.

“I just wanted to let you know, because I know that social skills aren’t really your thing at the
moment,” said Fenn.

I wanted to say that they weren’t that bad, but I hadn’t realized that Amaryllis was pushing herself that hard, nor that it might be because she was trying to match me. I didn’t necessarily know whether Fenn was right, but the hypothesis hadn’t even crossed my mind. “Thanks,” I said.

“Do you want company for your shower?” she asked, looking at my lips for a moment before kissing them. “I was thinking that it might be good to work out some of my frustrations over how the day has gone.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m rancid under this armor,” I said. “But you would help me get clean?”

Fenn gave me an eager nod.


“You don’t get to just know the mechanics,” I said. “That strips back everything interesting.”

“It shouldn’t,” said Arthur, frowning at me. “Yes, it reduces the mystery, but most of what’s interesting about this place isn’t in how the rules work, it’s in seeing what impacts those rules have on the world.”

“Besides that,” said Craig, “Presumably everyone in Parsmont is aware of the rules, they should know those rules backward and forward, so we can just talk to a fishmonger or something.”

“Fishmonger?” I asked. “That’s the most random -- there aren’t any fishmongers, it’s a city on a hill, at best there are some river fish, but it’s a place of meats and grains.”

“So fish are only for the hoi polloi?” asked Tom.

“No ‘the’,” said Arthur. “‘Hoi’ already means ‘the’. And ‘hoi polloi’ means masses, which -- Joon, are the fish a high class or low class food? I can see the argument either way, the fish are river fish and a food of convenience for those who live near the rivers, but they’re also in limited supply, which suggests that they’d be valuable, assuming that they weren’t all fished out. Happened a lot historically, commoner’s food making the jump to fine dining.”

“I just want rules, dammit,” said Reimer.

“I mean I’m pretty sure that we just agreed we’re going to find a fishmonger,” said Tom, with a small grin.

“No, veto,” said Reimer. “I know I don’t have veto power, but veto.”

“Do we find a fishmonger?” asked Arthur, looking to me with a smile.

“I ... “ I looked down at my notes for Parsmont, then over to the table of randomly generated names I used for times like this. “You eventually find Homeleron, a Kandrian merchant who sells some of the river fish brought in to him from the Pelleomance. Kandria is on the sea, and Homeleron is the guy that all the Kandrians go to when they get a little bit homesick and want to make one of their traditional dishes, albeit with some substitutions. You think that he’s probably a well-connected man.” That was a load of frantic bullshittery, and I was hoping that no one would call me on the fact that I had just said that there weren’t any fishmongers in Parsmont.

“Greetings, Homeleron,” said Arthur, “You seem like a man who knows a thing or two.”
“That I might be,” I said with a laugh. I didn’t tend to change my voice much in-game, if only because I never knew how long a character was going to stick around, and some of the more extreme voices I’d tried in front of a mirror were really hard to hold. I had a picture of Homeleron in my head almost immediately, and let some of that creep into my speech; he was uneducated but knew a lot, a man with many connections and maybe more self-importance than was warranted. A poor man, I decided, but only poor in the sense that he had his small stall and few possessions, not the kind of poor where he was scrambling to make rent or hurting from taxes.

“I’d like a list of mechanics,” said Reimer. “I have pen and paper, and want you to write down everything you know about the workings of the orb at the center of Parsmont and the abilities that it gives to the people within it. I’ll pay you … ten gold.”

“His eyes light up at that,” I replied, inwardly groaning. “Well, I’m not sure I know my letters so well, but I can tell you whatever you’d want, he says.”

“Everyone has a vote, right?” asked Arthur. “What does it take for us to vote?”

“Well you can feel it, can’t you?” I asked, as Homeleron, playing the part of someone who was pretending to be shocked by their ignorance. “At the back of your head, the votes sitting there?”

“I touch the back of my head, cautiously,” said Arthur.

I gave Homeleron a belly-laugh. “No, in your head, like you’re looking backward without using your eyes.”

“Okay, I do that,” said Reimer. “Seems like the sort of thing that you would immediately realize was there if you had 18 Wis.”

“You see two indents in your mind’s eye, one with a hundred gleaming jewels, the other empty, but with room for far more,” I said.

“I move the jewels from one indent to the other,” said Craig.

“You die, instantly,” said Reimer.

“No, you don’t die,” I said with a sigh. “Nothing happens, you can’t do it.”

“Okay, then I try to transfer my jewels -- a single one of my jewels, actually -- to a theoretical receiving indent in Berberous’ head,” said Arthur.

“Berberous,” I said, turning to Craig. “You see a single jewel appear in the empty indent.”

“Do I feel any different?” aske Craig.

“No, not especially,” I replied. I turned to Arthur. “You have a slight feeling of connection to that jewel still, like you could pull it back if you wanted to.”

“I do so,” replied Arthur with a slight frown.

“So whoever gets the most jewels gets to be a badass, but people can take their jewels back at any time?” asked Reimer. “Meaning that all power in Parsmont is transitory.”

“Are you asking me, or Homelaran?” I asked.

“Homeleron?” asked Arthur.
“Right, Homeleron,” I said. I had already forgotten his biographical details, and tried to recreate them from scratch. He was a fishmonger, world-weary, selling goods that had been carted in from too far away, losing their freshness in the process. It wasn’t what I’d decided before, but none of that had been exposed to the players anyway.

“Sure, I’ll ask him what the power structure looks like,” said Reimer.

“Oh, people come and people go,” I said as Homeleron. “But less than you’d think, because the people up top fight each other, and not too many want to put themselves in that fight, so it’s mostly about putting your vote behind the guy you think has the best chance of fighting against the guy you hate.”

“And they literally fight each other?” asked Reimer. “With as-yet-unspecifed powers?”

“Once in a blue moon,” I replied.

“Two point seven years,” answered Reimer.

“That’s …” I started, then stopped. “More often, they pursue their own goals, and try to keep people happy enough that they retain the vote.”

“That’s Homeleron saying that?” asked Arthur.

“No, it’s me,” I said. “Look, is anyone going to buy any fish?”

“All I want is for you to stop teasing and just be explicit,” said Reimer. “That’s not so much to ask. We’ve got the fluff out of the way, right?”

“And now you want some crunch,” I said with a sigh. The night didn’t seem like it was going my way, for reasons that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Sometimes a session just got away from me. “Okay, a thousand jewels gives you a +1 bonus to skills, stackable up to +10, two thousand gives you a bonus of +1 to AC, stackable up to +10,” and this continued on for a bit, as I read through the things on my list. At the highest levels, with a million people pledging their full support, an NPC didn’t quite become epic level, but that was the only restraint I’d shown.

“Well how are we going to beat those guys then?” asked Craig. “Poison?”

“The answer is always poison,” said Arthur with a nod.

“Except not, because D&D poison is awful,” said Reimer. “And I doubt that Joon is going to let us get away with homebrew again.”

“You all understand that your goal is not to come into every town and murder the people in charge, right?” I asked. “Please, someone tell me that you know that. You have a quest.”

“Yeah, we’re here to get a MacGuffin,” said Craig. He paused slightly. “So what I’m thinking is, we bus people in and get their votes.”

And if we’d been teetering on the brink before, that was when the session went off the deep end.

I woke up at what felt like fuck o’clock in the morning, with the sky a pale color that suggested the sun hadn’t finished cresting the hill. I blinked twice and looked around, coming to my senses slower than I would have liked, with my Anyblade in hand, looking for the threat. The dresser was still in front of the door, and the vine was still wrapped around the frame, healthy and green.
“I was going to let you sleep a bit,” said Amaryllis, her voice low. She was half-dressed in plate; Fenn had left out a change of underclothes for her, a concession in the direction of practicality. The greaves and boots were on, but the upper sections were still on the floor, leaving her staring at me in the cold half-light with just her tank top on.

“I still might,” I said, looking over at Fenn, still sleeping beside me. “You’re up early. Thought you needed sleep.”

“I got sleep,” said Amaryllis. I could see that she still wasn’t at peak condition though, with bags under her eyes. “We need to stabilize.”

“In what sense?” I asked. Ropey was sitting on the bed, coiled with one end lifted slightly, and I put my hand out to him. “Clear?” I asked him. He nodded, and I relaxed a fraction.

“You want more training with Fallatehr, to make sure that you don’t make some grave error,” said Amaryllis. “That’s of questionable value, given that he might misinform you.”

“I know,” I said. “I’d have fixed my hand already if I actually trusted him. It’s not really about the training, in the literal sense, it’s about using him to get past the skill cap of 20.”

“We need to figure out a way to make this work,” said Amaryllis. “All of it, the big picture. Not just soul training, we need to stop lurching from one encounter to the next.”

“I’m not sure that downtime is going to be likely, given our circumstances,” I said. The Dungeon Master probably doesn’t want us to have it, and once one Sword of Damocles has been lifted, another will take its place. Wait, that’s a bad metaphor, the Sword of Damocles was an ever-present danger, so the narrative forces, or the Dungeon Master himself, is the Sword, and the presentation of that sword is all that will change.

“I’m not talking about downtime,” said Amaryllis. “We’re in a pattern of reaction right now, we have been since I was taken by Aumann. You had the crisis of needing to save me, then the crisis of needing to cure me, then the crisis of needing to cure your own ailment, and now we have the crisis of Fallatehr, not to mention trying our best to save the locus. We need to break out of the cycles of crisis. We need to chart a path forward of our own accord.”

“Ah,” I replied. “That’s kind of hard to do when we’re still putting out fires.”

“I agree,” said Amaryllis. “The problem is that the fires multiply. They’re what I’m worried about, when I talk about stability. We need to keep our fires contained. Episodic.”

“The n-word,” I said with a grimace. “I’m not sure how we can do that.”

“We came to Parsmont because they’re welcoming to visitors and somewhat dissociated from the Empire of Common Cause,” said Amaryllis. “We did not come here to have any interaction with their system of governance. We’re not trying to shake things up, we’re not trying to solve problems, we’re just here because it’s a relatively safe place. We can’t afford to get sucked into anything.”

“I know all that,” I said, trying to be gentle. “I’m just worried that we’re going to get sucked in by … something.”

“Forward motion,” said Amaryllis as she put on the breastplate. “I think part of the problem is that we haven’t been committing to the quests.”

“From a narrativist perspective?” I asked. I really didn’t want to operate with narrative in mind, and that wasn’t just because I thought it was likely to get us pushback from the Dungeon Master.
“Either way,” said Amaryllis with a shrug.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said. “Parsmont probably has something for us, but I don’t think we’re obligated to take up every quest that’s on offer. The Risen Bile back in Barren Jewel turned out to be set-dressing, and in retrospect, there was probably a quest in there.”

“They attacked us,” said Amaryllis.

“Well, yes,” I said. “But after that, hunkering down worked. Whatever we run across, we’ll try to employ the same strategy while we deal with Fallatehr.”

“Assuming he’s still there,” said Amaryllis, putting the last of her armor in place. “If he’s run away in the middle of the night … at least you unlocked soul magic, and given that he would be willing to abandon us, he wouldn’t teach you anyway, so I suppose that’s not as bad an outcome.”

“Sounds like sour grapes to me,” I replied.

“Sour grapes?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow. She was fully armored now, with her helmet in hand, looking every inch the warrior. There was something more beautiful about her this way, more terrifying, but more in tune with who she was as a person. I could imagine that when she was in her forties, people would remark that they couldn’t imagine that she had ever been a teenage girl. It wasn’t that she looked old, really, just that she was more hardened than anyone my own age should be.

“Do you not have Aesop’s fables?” I asked. “There’s this fox, and he can’t reach some grapes, so he says, ‘eh, they were probably sour anyway’?”

“You think that I’m practicing self-deception,” said Amaryllis, brows knitted slightly as she focused on me with a trace of a frown on her lips.

I had really just been talking without thinking that much about what I was saying, but that word, ‘self-deception’ made my mind jump tracks, and the memory of her telling me that she had tried to love me came, unbidden, to the forefront of my mind. I wasn’t sure that’s what she was thinking, but I was momentarily stunned by the thought that maybe she was.

“We’ll see soon enough whether he’s stayed,” Amaryllis continued, shrugging off that line of thinking. The thought that he might not have stayed still made me queasy. “The only reason to think that he left is base pessimism.”

“And we’re okay with unleashing him on the world?” I asked.

“Soul magic is less powerful than it was during the height of the Second Empire,” said Amaryllis. “There are exclusions applied to it, pieces of it that no longer work. He’s far from harmless, but then again, he wasn’t ever a predator, at least from what I can tell. The bigger issue is how he might impact us on the world stage.”

“Assuming that we get there,” I replied.

We debriefed, once we’d woken Fenn up. She put on her clothes, grumbling the whole while, as she listened to us talk.

“You took Tree Magic without knowing what it did?” asked Amaryllis. She had her notes out and was making marks on her paper version of my character sheet.
“There’s a whole lot of magic that’s excluded,” I said. “Tree Magic and Library Magic are two of the only ones that aren’t recognized schools of magic, which means that they’re either important or powerful, maybe both. Same with Spirit, though maybe that’s not a proper magic.”

“You shouldn’t have taken three kinds of armor,” said Amaryllis, looking down at the sheet. “Unarmored and Heavy armor are defensible choices, given that you can’t always walk around in armor, but—”

“This isn’t the time to second-guess every decision I’ve made,” I said, again looking out the window to the barn. There was no sign of Fallatehr yet, but it was still early in the morning, just after sunrise. We hadn’t gone to get Grak yet; the things we were talking about weren’t for his ears. “I was thinking that I didn’t really know what counted as light, medium, or heavy armor, and as far as armor goes I’m currently constrained by our access to magic items, so it made sense to hedge my bets there, since survivability is really important in an Iron Man run … I’m assuming.”

“And you dropped Art,” said Amaryllis. “Art that you need in order to inscribe new tattoos.”

“Is this your last objection?” I asked. Amaryllis shifted around, looking down at the papers. “It’s all been done, there’s no point in chiding me for it, or making me explain myself.”

“Of course there is,” said Amaryllis. “If you make a mistake, you have to understand that mistake so that you don’t make it in the future.”

“I’m going to have more time, next time I choose skills,” I said. “I’ll be going in with a plan. Do you think that locking myself into the existing skills for another four levels was a good idea? I had to choose, and choose quickly.”

**Skill unlocked: Debate!**

I smiled inwardly at that. When we had the time, we were going to have to level that up (though time was something we were short on).

“That only makes me question your ability to make decisions on the fly,” said Amaryllis, before adding. “No offense.”

“None taken,” I replied. I looked down at my malformed hand, the product of a different decision made on the fly. The results hadn’t been good, but there, at least, I was pretty sure that the result of inaction would have been death.

“So why’d you drop Art?” asked Fenn. She was standing next to the window, holding the bottle up to the light. We didn’t have Solace to make the miniature sun anymore, and keeping the bottle in darkness might mean that the temperature would drop, which would in turn mean that the things within it would die. We were going to have to find a solution to that in short order, or at least find a way in so that we could get some sense of what was going on, instead of just the bird’s eye view.

“The tattoos are useful, but I have a lot of them stocked up at the moment,” I said with a sigh. I couldn’t actually imagine what it would have been like to not tell them anything about my power, but there were times when I had a pang of longing for that alternate timeline. “And my Art was at 6, and not going up without investment into the relevant abilities. But beyond that, I have some level of ability in things that aren’t part of what the game layer considers to be my skills, so I was hoping that would be enough. It’s a fairly painless and concrete way to test what remains after a skill is off the roster.”

“And have you?” asked Amaryllis.
“I haven’t really had a chance,” I said.

“Looks like we’re going to wait a bit for that,” said Fenn, moving away from the window and slipping the bottle back into the cloak of leaves she’d inherited from Solace. “Unless art is a more pressing concern than our resident soul fucker stepping out from that building?”

“Let’s go get Grak,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. “Time to see whether we can make this arrangement work.”
Fallatehr and I took our second lesson together in the barn, mostly because it was the largest indoor space, with plenty of room around us and little chance for shenanigans. I had Ropey around me as a precaution, but I also had Amaryllis, Fenn, and Grak (for what he was worth), and we’d put quite a bit of space between Fallatehr and myself as well. Valencia was in the basement, manacled to a boiler there, while Fallatehr’s other two minions had grudgingly been given leave to go into town by Amaryllis.

“I wasn’t aware that I would be teaching so many,” said Fallatehr with a smile.

“Just me,” I said. “I should need less instruction than anyone else. I’d like for you to walk me through the process for fixing my hand, both from a theoretical standpoint and in terms of the process and risks associated with it.” I was in full armor, which was streaked with white where it had absorbed hits the day before. My Anyblade was in the shape of a dagger, held in my right hand.

“Tit for tat,” said Fallatehr. “Tell me about your intriguing capacity for learning. Was it acquired, or were you born with it?”

“I was born with it,” I said.

Skill increased: Lying lvl 2!

With Deception ungestalted, I had to level Lying and Stealth back up, but luckily, Fenn had Lying in the mid-30s, which meant that through Symbiosis I had Lying in the high teens so long as she was near me. What I’d said wasn’t really a lie either, depending on the definition of ‘born’. I was pretty sure that my soul had only existed from the moment that I appeared on the plane above the Risen Lands.

“And what domains does your talent apply to?” asked Fallatehr. “Only magic, or other areas as well?”

“It applies to specific domains, not all of which I’ve discovered,” I said. My skill at Lying went up again. It was technically true, given that a few of my skills were still mysteries to me. “Magic does appear to be one of the common threads though.”

Fallatehr nodded. “Can you perform feats that you should, by rights, not have known how to accomplish, or are you limited to only those that have been explained adequately to you?”

“That’s enough questions for now,” I replied. “Tell me about how bone magic intersects with soul magic.”

Fallatehr hesitated, watching me, then nodded to himself. “My question is not just to satisfy my own curiosity,” he said. “You did not train at the athenaeum, and your knowledge of bone magic might not comport with bone magic as it is taught there.”

“That’s true,” I admitted, shifting slightly in my seat. Most of what I knew about bone magic I had learned from The Commoner’s Guide to Bone Magic. “Yes, I have some level of knowledge granted to me that is outside the scope of what I was told or taught, and which I couldn’t have simply worked out from base principles.”

Fallatehr nodded. “So you are not indoctrinated into the dogma of the athenaeums,” he said. “That is likely for the best. In my time there was some contention between the Guild of the Essential Soul and
the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh. They did not want to admit that their art was an extension of our own. Are you familiar with the concept of aspects?” I nodded. So far as I could tell, there was a one to one correspondence between bone-magic aspects and game-layer attributes. “They are a gesture in the direction of information written on the soul,” said Fallatehr. “Bone magic, at its heart, is nothing more than briefly adding someone’s soul to your own.”

“Uh,” I said. “There are a number of problems with that explanation, given what I know.”

“By your own accounting, I am the most knowledgeable soul mage left in the world,” said Fallatehr. “But please,” he added, grinning with sharp teeth, “Explain why I am wrong.”

I took a breath. I hated Socratic dialogues. “Most of the bones that bone mages use come from --”

“The term ‘soul’ is imprecise,” said Fallatehr. “You likely think of it as a small white thing pulled from the heart or head after death?” He gestured first at his temple, then at his chest. “That is the anima exa, a physical manifestation of the soul, unique to the mortal species, but not synonymous with the anima ipsa.”

“But the soul can be extinguished,” I said. “And as far as I can tell, that has no bearing on the bones themselves.”

“The anima exa can be extinguished,” said Fallatehr. “And in fact, nothing in the world can prevent that, so far as is known to me. That has little bearing on the anima ipsa.”

I frowned at that. “Naively, that doesn’t make sense. You’re saying that the soul continues to exist in the bones, regardless of whether someone goes to hell?”

“No,” said Fallatehr. “What I am saying is that by every method I have been able to use, the soul continues to be accessible well after death, even for those confirmed by infernoscope to have passed into the afterlife.”

I heard movement from behind me. “If that were true --” Amaryllis began.

“It is,” said Fallatehr.

“There would be metaphysical implications of that,” said Amaryllis. “If the souls of those in hell could be manipulated by means on Aerb we --”

“They cannot,” said Fallatehr.

“Why not?” asked Amaryllis.

“The principle of planar disjunction,” said Fallatehr. “It was the talk of the Guild of the Essential Soul, prior to the subjugation and death of ninety percent of its members when Manifest’s exclusion zone was created.” He seemed slightly wistful for a moment. “Obviously I had no ability to conduct novel research on planar disjunction from within Amoureux, and I was not allowed the courtesy of taking a copy of the relevant studies into the penitentiary, but all available evidence pointed to the fact that the soul was, in fact, incapable of crossing the planar boundary.” He waved his hand. “Much of this is tangential to the subject at hand.”

“Har har,” I said, raising my deformed hand slightly.

“We might think of the bones as intermediaries,” said Fallatehr. “If the soul is a complicated book of exceptional length, the bones are men who study that book and give answers to those who seek them. Each has a deep connection to the soul, and is conversant on its own area.”
“But when you burn a bone, you affect the soul,” I said. “So it wouldn’t seem like a very good metaphor to me.”

“Metaphors are rarely good,” said Fallatehr with a shrug. “We -- I say we, but there are by your accounting few left alive who might have given me a proper conversation on the subject -- don’t understand precisely what happens when bone magic is used. It appears to affect both donor and recipient at the level of the soul, with other effects as a result of that, but the actual mechanism is opaque, despite the numerous tests we’ve done.”

“Such as?” I asked.

Fallatehr gave me a grin. “I do not believe that you would appreciate such scientific pursuits,” he said. He was watching me, and I tried not to give anything away, but I had no clue whether I was successful or not. “I have given you enough, tell me more about your ability, and its working. Have the things that I’ve told you measurably improved your ability with soul magic?”

“No,” I said. I realized only too late that I should have waited before answering, or given a non-committal answer. A quick answer of no indicated that I had some indication of when my power was working, which was information that I hadn’t intended to leak. (But at least I realized that I had leaked it. There was something about Fallatehr that scared me, beyond what I knew of him, something that made me think that he was reading an enormous amount into everything I said and did, and I worried that I was giving things away without even knowing I had done it.)

“I really would like to see whether you are able to repair your hand,” said Fallatehr, leaning back slightly in his chair. “Does my saying that unnerve you so much that you would resist me?”

“No,” I said. If it was a trap, we would just kill him. The odds that my attempt to replace a single bone on my left hand would go so catastrophically that I would need to be rescued by him were very, very low, especially given how much he would have to be pinning on that moment. So long as I didn’t get lured into my own soul, or trapped there, neither of which seemed likely, we didn’t need him, and if either of those things happened, his help would be so untrustworthy that we’d be better off killing him. “I won’t ask you to describe the process, since that would defeat the purpose of your inquiry and I do want to have a working relationship with some level of --” quid pro quo, is that an expression on Aerb? “--tit for tat, but what are the risks to me, assuming that I do everything wrong?” I asked.

“Your hands are human, and not perfectly symmetrical,” said Fallatehr. He briefly ran a thin tongue along pointed teeth. “The soul is resilient, and should accommodate for what you will be attempting, but I am willing to admit that it may not, given that you will be using a supernaturally assisted version of the art. In that case, the worst that will happen is that you will lose the hand, but it won’t be something that can’t be fixed through proper soul magic.”

“Uh huh,” I said. Not going to happen. “No other points of failure?”

Fallatehr smiled at me. “Oh, if we’re speaking of possibilities, there are many,” he said. “You’re using a power -- unique?”

“Yes,” I said, before even realizing that was a lie. Arthur too.

“You’re using a unique power that only you possess to interface with the root of all magic,” said Fallatehr. “The possibilities are endless, given our mutual areas of ignorance. Perhaps you will attempt to copy over the pattern of a single bone and grab hold of the nerves of your hand instead, accidentally pulling them out and then finding yourself unable to put them back in. It is, I must admit, a possibility, as are many other such scenarios.”
“It would be fixable though,” I said.

“The soul has only a conception of the body,” said Fallatehr. “What is shown in the soul is not what the body is, but what the soul believes is the pattern the body should adhere to. Any damage you do, even removal of the body-conception entirely, could be remedied by a master.”

I frowned slightly at that. I could see his angles, and they weren’t working on me, which I was grateful for. “Amaryllis, Fenn, give me two hours, then if I’m not back out from inside my soul, try your best to wake me.”

I was getting familiar with my soul. It was, in some respects, just another interface, if one that was laid on top of some deeply personal and complicated mechanics. I had always been good at picking up new interfaces, maybe because video games gave me a lot of exposure to switching between them. I zoomed in on the body and then down to look at my right hand, the one that still had the bones in it.

What Fallatehr had said about making novel mistakes was on my mind as I looked through the layers of my body. It didn’t seem like I could accidentally pluck at the wrong thing, because it was possible to change the view so that only the bones were showing. It was all done with the mind, so I was cautious not to think in the direction of change, only observation. I tentatively zoomed closer to the end of my pinky finger, isolating the final bone there, the distal phalanx. I took a breath and then poked it with my mind.

My view changed slightly, showing ghosted images at the very tip of the finger where skin, nail, nerves, fingerprints, and capillaries were, all surrounding the bone itself. I didn’t want to move or change the bone, or do anything to the surrounding tissue, all I wanted was to copy it. There weren’t any options associated with it, and no apparent menus, but from what Fallatehr had said -- not that I trusted him -- it should be possible to copy it over. I directed my will toward that task, which finally caused a dialogue to appear.

Move / Copy / Modify / Delete

I stared at those options for a bit. Copy was obviously the one that I wanted, but the other three gave me a good guess at the actual failure states for the change I was trying to make. I didn’t know what Fallatehr saw when he looked into his own soul, but I didn’t imagine that it was this, and perhaps he was thinking that I would screw up in such a way that I would need his help; accidentally removing one of the bones from my finger, leaving me without a replacement, or making a modification that I couldn’t undo.

I selected the option to Copy with a thrust of my will, and felt something come into being just beyond my field of vision to the left. Shifting my focus there showed a bone, hovering slightly in the air. I turned back to the skeletal form of my hand, then zoomed out the view and went over to my left hand, where the bones were missing. I looked over to my left, where the bone was, and with a push of will got the same four options again. This time I moved it, using my mind alone, until I had slotted it into place. Another dialog box appeared.

Merge / Conform / Replace / Cancel

I started at that for a moment, trying to work out what those commands meant. The bone still needed to be mirrored, but even then it probably wasn’t going to be correct, because the two halves of my body weren’t exactly the same, just as Fallatehr had said. The options, unfortunately, weren’t terribly descriptive, aside from Cancel. I took a steadying breath, reflexive action that became a startling reminder that I still had a body out there in the real world. I could back out of my soul now and
simply ask Fallatehr, but I didn’t want to give anything away to him if I could help it.

It was just one bone, the tip of my pinky, the least important part of me. And if I picked the wrong one, it seemed likely that I could try again, since my right hand was still in perfect working condition. I selected Conform, and saw the bone warp in an instant, perfectly taking the shape of the red outline. I stared at it for a moment, wondering if something was going to happen, but no, it looked just the same as it had on my other pinky finger.

“Okay,” I said, blinking slightly and looking around the barn. “Ropey?” I asked. It formed into a hand and gave me a thumbs up, and I smiled at that.

“It is done?” asked Fallatehr with a raised eyebrow. “So swiftly?”

“I don’t know,” I said, raising my deformed hand. I probed it with bone magic, and could feel it alive once more, connected to my soul. “I need to test it.” I reached into my bandolier and pulled a bone from it, then burned it slowly, focusing the healing energy on my pinky. I saw a change come over it, albeit a minor one, as the bone there made a minor change in shape and the loose skin straightened out. I looked it over carefully, worried that I would see it go white from a lack of circulation, or that something terrible would happen to it.

_quest_progress: Boneitis - You have cured the soul of its affliction, at least in part, and begun to bring your body back to what it once was. The only thing that remains is to finish the job._

**Affliction: Drained Bone (x50)**

“Congratulations,” said Fallatehr with a nod. “You have accomplished within a single day what men spend years learning.”

“What are the limits?” I asked.

“Limits?” Fallatehr replied.

I licked my lips, trying to think of how to say it. “Was it common, in the time of the Second Empire, to mix soul magic with bone magic? If you can burn out a bone and then replace it like that, it would mean that someone with a foot in both schools would have a renewable resource on hand -- so to speak.”

“It was practiced, in the Second Empire,” said Fallatehr, “But soul mages were rare, and most often, it wasn’t worth the time when bones were so widely available.”

“Ah,” I said, relaxing slightly. It was a question of economics, not practicality. I couldn’t trust what Fallatehr said, naturally, but it seemed like the sort of thing we might possibly be able to confirm by either speaking with the crystal that held Amaryllis’ dead great-grandfather, or looking through a few history books. That in turn lowered the chance that Fallatehr was lying about it.

I took the time to do the rest, one at a time because I couldn’t figure out a way to go faster, phalanges and meta-carpals, all twenty-seven bones. This took a fair amount of time, and was relatively tedious while at the same time being somewhat nerve-wracking as I kept thinking about the consequences of making a mistake. When I was finished, I opened my eyes, conferred with Ropey, and then healed my hand, watching it return to normal. Sensation flooded back into it for the first time in weeks.

**Affliction: Drained Bones (x24)**

And that just left the ribs.
“Thank you,” I said to Fallatehr.

He shrugged. “It was far less work than it had any right to be.” He stared at me. "You had inquired about a hypothetical before, how you would deal with a problem without such symmetry to exploit. Not just a hypothetical, if I read you correctly."

"My ribs," I replied. With my hand fixed, I was willing to give him that much.

"All of them?" asked Fallatehr, face blank of expression

"All of them," I confirmed with a nod. I was tempted to offer up some defense of myself, to say that the situation had been desperate, that I hadn't actually had any training as a bone mage beyond what my power gave me, but that was just my instinct toward justifying myself talking, and there was no sense in telling him things he didn't need to know.

Fallatehr seemed to ponder that for a moment. "Your chest will be more difficult, as it forms the link for your internal organs and there is nothing to take from, but from the pace you’ve been keeping, it should only be a matter of days, at which point our primary business will be concluded."

"Implying that we have secondary business,” said Amaryllis.

“So far as I am aware, Juniper still needs a teacher,” said Fallatehr. “I have some interest in the endeavor of his education, so long as I am allowed to study him by way of compensation.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” said Fenn.

“We’ll have to discuss it as a group,” said Amaryllis. “Privately. In the meantime, I think that’s enough of a lesson for today.”

“We’ve barely started,” I complained. “I’m actually not sure how useful this was, as a lesson.”

“It has been many years since I taught,” said Fallatehr, “But when I did, I always thought it important to understand my pupil.”

“You were a teacher?” I asked, genuinely curious. That didn’t quite fit with my idea of him as a mad scientist.

“There were elements of dysfunction within the Guild of the Essential Soul,” said Fallatehr. “In a better world, those pursuing their own lines of inquiry and study would not have been forced to interact with the neophytes. It was not so segregated as it should have been, and given that I was forced to spend a portion of my time away from actual work, I made some effort to be good at it. There were always one or two pupils who were promising candidates for assistants, and later, peers.” He grinned, without showing his teeth, as he said that.

“You’re saying that you can’t give skills directly?” I asked. “You can’t just … transfer knowledge over to another person?”

“Have you seen that, in your own soul?” asked Fallatehr.

“I spoke to a bone mage who implied that it was possible,” I said, which was a half-truth. “Not that knowledge could be transferred, but that knowledge in some sense existed within some bones, and could be pulled from them.”

“But have you seen it?” asked Fallatehr, leaning forward slightly.
“Yes,” I replied, biting the bullet.

“You don’t want to give away too much of your ability, even with soul magic,” said Fallatehr. “Were that mindset not used against me, I might find it commendable.” He brushed a stray bit of dust off his knee. “To answer your question, it was once possible to transfer skills in such a manner, near the dawn of soul magic. It was excluded before I was born.”

I frowned at that. “I don’t believe the location of that exclusion zone is common knowledge.”

“The zone is a mystery,” said Fallatehr. “All that is known is that a certain thing was possible for a fair amount of time, and impossible afterward. Who, where, or what are not questions that were ever answered in my time. What is left is the ability to carve out such things from someone else, given sufficient training and ample amount of time.”

“And you can teach me how to defend against attacks like that,” I said, watching him. “You said that people were stripped of their skills when they were put into the penitentiary, but you retained your abilities as a soul mage.”

“There are a few methods of defense,” said Fallatehr, “But none that are absolute. In my particular case, I was known to the men who would normally have done the extirpation, and they both respected and feared my skill, including my ability to fight back against them, should our souls have made contact.”

“Mutually assured destruction?” I asked.

“That would be one way of putting it, I suppose,” said Fallatehr. “You and I might reach that point with each other, such that you would no longer fear me.”

“Unless I need to sleep,” I replied.

“Is the tattoo of Kenner’s Eye no longer in use?” asked Fallatehr.

“Its use is more regulated,” said Amaryllis, before I could make a fool of myself. “The specific materials necessary became quite a bit rarer following the Appetency War. Acquiring one for each of us is on our path, but it’s going to take some time.” I nodded at that, though I had no idea what the hell she was talking about.

“There are precautions that you can take, to ensure that I have no opportunity to interfere with your soul,” said Fallatehr with a shrug. “Whatever you think my motives might be.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That would go a long way toward creating a working relationship.” I hesitated. “There’s one more thing that would help, which would be your assistance in learning how to access someone else’s soul.”

Fallatehr raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Grak. “No,” he said. He stood up from his chair and I heard the very faint sound of Fenn’s bow being drawn. “Not today. You will not allow me access to your companion, which means that I would be unable to fix any mistakes that you might incidentally make, and if I came in behind you to correct your errors, I might not be able to figure out exactly what was done. It is a more dangerous thing, to touch the soul of another, and I will not have the blame fall to me when a neophyte, even an exceptionally fast learner, makes one of the typical mistakes.”

“Bullshit,” said Fenn.

“Either way, my answer is no,” said Fallatehr. “Think what you’d like. I believe we were concluding
“I don’t want to stay in this place for longer than another day or so,” said Amaryllis. “We have to assume that it’s going to raise some questions that we don’t want to answer. Parsmont isn’t a perfect place for us, but we can go into the city without attracting attention now, and get a place to stay in the longer term.”

Our core group of four (yes, Grak with us) was sitting in the master bedroom. Fenn sat beside me on the bed, with Grak in a heavy wooden rocking chair, his feet dangling above the ground, and Amaryllis standing, pacing slightly.

“So far I think that he’s been of only marginal help,” I said. I glanced at Grak, as I’d done three times now, measuring my words. “It’s only when I hit level 20 that I think he’ll really help me in a concrete, mechanical sense. There wasn’t anything in that conversation that I wouldn’t have been able to figure out on my own, at least as far as soul magic was concerned, though there were a few pieces of historical importance, I guess.”

“You’re assuming it works like that,” said Amaryllis. “We haven’t tested the tutor theory yet.”

“The wording is ‘amateur training’, I replied. ‘‘Amateur’ must mean something, otherwise it would just say ‘training’.”

“Maybe,” said Fenn with a shrug. “Or maybe we shouldn’t be trusting the game that got us into this whole mess in the first place.”

Amaryllis gave me a pointed look that I was fairly sure was meant to indicate that she hadn’t forgotten about the non-anima in the basement.

“Well I’m pretty sure without the game we would all be dead,” I said. “So let’s give it a little credit.”

“I would still be alive,” said Grak.

“Would you have assaulted Aumann’s tower on your own?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I would have waited until I had a good opportunity. If you had died, I would not have met you. I would still be waiting.”

“Okay, whatever,” I said. That response probably wasn’t the way to increase his loyalty, but I wasn’t willing to play on a strictly strategic level, not when he was going to be contradictory for no reason, or act like teaming up with us wasn’t a good thing.

“We’ll go into Parsmont, keep our heads low, and find a more permanent, less unconventional place to stay,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t want to leave any single person alone with Fallatehr, and obviously there are lingering concerns about Grak’s condition,” lingering being a diplomatic way of putting it, “so I’m going to suggest that the four of us go into Parsmont together, leaving Fallatehr here. That means taking eyes off him, but that’s going to be something that we’re going to have to accept.”

“So that he can soulfuck the neighbors?” asked Fenn. She gave a slight frown of thought. “Wait, that would imply that it was consensual, soulrape the neighbors?”

“How big a problem that would be depends on what we believe about the things that he’s said,” replied Amaryllis. “If he’s unable to imbue someone with skills, and changes revert back after some length of time, then I think it’s a risk worth taking.”
“I’m not sure we’re in a position where we can rely on him for truth,” I replied. “I mean, yes, I don’t think that he can completely overwrite a person in short order, because if it were possible to do that the Second Empire would have looked a lot different. I also think that he probably can’t just skill boost, given that the elves we fought alongside weren’t much better than we were, and neither were the pelehr, and to assume that he was simply orchestrating it all to provide cover for a lie is … I don’t want to say too paranoid, but it seems like too complex and uncertain of a plan. That’s especially as opposed to something like him saying that changes wear off, which is a pretty easy and painless lie to tell with potentially large benefits to him.” I again glanced at Grak, who made eye contact with me that quickly grew uncomfortable.

“You’ll be able to see into Grak’s soul soon,” said Amaryllis. “Once you do, that should clear him of suspicion and we can let him in on what we know. If the four of us are going into the city together, you can use your free time to practice with the soul, which might be enough to look at Grak’s soul without needing instruction.”

“In which case we can slit Fallatehr’s throat,” said Fenn. “Easy peasy.” She glanced at the bottle, which she’d set out in the sunlight. “All we really need in town is a place to stay, right? Somewhere that’s going to let lessons and training get on without too much risk of anyone stopping us? Because if that’s the case, I think Joon and I should handle that part while Grak and Mary teleport somewhere to store this bottle.”

“I don’t like the risks of teleportation,” said Amaryllis. “That two hour window where we don’t have a failsafe escape plan makes me uncomfortable. But … if we have some time to find a suitable place to come back into Parsmont, we should be able to make that work.”

“Agreed?” asked Fenn, looking to me and Grak.

“It’s reasonable,” said Grak. “I can put up wards in order to protect the bottle. You’re most worried about sunlight?”

“Yup,” said Fenn. “Without the baby sun in there, we should at least be keeping it out of the dark.”

“I’m not sure that it matters,” I replied. “In theory, only a small amount of sunlight is actually hitting the bottle anyway, and that’s getting spread out over a square mile, so …” I trailed off, at first because I was doing the math, and then because the math was grim. “Depending on how the magic of the bottle works, it might have already been through the equivalent of two days without sun.” I wasn’t sure that the bottle didn’t have some secondary magical effect though, because it hadn’t felt like only a fraction of the light was hitting us, and I didn’t quite believe that we’d actually been shrunk down.

“Oh, and I should probably do something with the baby sun as well,” said Amaryllis. “It’s getting a little too close to the bottle.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, briefly touching the hilt of her sword. “Then we’re good to go, two hours time waiting for the key to recharge should give me some time to contact my ancestor again and try to get some confirmation about the things Fallatehr has said about the soul.”

“I’d like to talk to Valencia before we go,” I said. “She’s --” I glanced at Grak. He was already in the loop on that one, though I’d be looping him in a little more by leaking information. “One of us.”

“I’ll come with,” said Fenn, hopping up off the bed.

“No, but thank you,” I said. “I do really enjoy your company, but --”

Fenn waved me off. “Understood, I can be a pain. But if she’s going to be one of the gang, then I do need some time with her at some point.”
“She’s not going to be ‘one of the gang’,” said Amaryllis, making quotes in the air, with one hand still around her sword hilt. “Not unless we figure out a way to deal with the possession problem. Every time you speak to her, or even speak in her presence, that’s information that goes to a large number of devils intent on causing whatever pain and destruction they can. And if a demon ever gets into her, you’ll have to fight it, which means that she needs to be manacled at all times.”

“But she’s only got the strength of a fairly weak human woman, right?” I asked.

“Imagine a soldier training for thousands of years, in a wide variety of bodies, all with perfect killing intent,” said Amaryllis. “That’s, admittedly, the worst case. I still need to pick up that book on infernal topology.”

“Do you actually think that I’m in danger?” I asked.

Amaryllis hesitated. “I want to ensure that you take this seriously and don’t put yourself in a situation where you underestimate the danger that she poses.”

“I won’t,” I replied.

“I’m not sure that increasing her loyalty is a good idea either,” said Amaryllis. “There’s clearly some connection between our souls, and I don’t want you to make a connection to a devil.”

I frowned slightly. “In theory she doesn’t have a soul,” I said. We were getting dangerously close to the sort of thing that we couldn’t talk about in front of Grak. “But I’ll try my best not to be too nice. All I want is more information. The game inserted her for a reason.”
Seeing Red

I went down into the basement, moving cautiously, the Anyblade held as a knife in my right hand and my left being used as a torch. It felt so good to have two working hands again, and sometimes I moved the fingers of my left hand just to feel them moving. So far as I could see, I was no worse the wear for the soul magic I’d done to myself, and I was already thinking about burning through those bones again as part of the normal course of combat, which would free up my bandolier for more interesting bones, ones with more specific purposes, as opposed to the cow bones that traditionally sat there. My chest was obviously far more important than my hand, given that it was probably going to end up killing me if left untreated, but I would take a victory where I could find it.

“There’s a light switch,” said Valencia, as soon as I was down the steep stairs and into the basement. She was handcuffed to a pipe coming out of a large boiler, looking miserable. The light of my flaming hand gave her a warmer look than I thought was natural for her pale skin and white hair. When I looked down, I saw that she was wearing one shoe, a slipper that Fenn had given her. I had tried to make it comfortable for her, with a blanket beneath her and some food in case she got hungry. That had netted me another point of loyalty, putting me at 9, the cusp of getting Twinned Souls with someone who didn’t have a soul.

I turned around and looked for the light switch, trying to keep her within my field of view at the same time. There was plenty of space between the two of us, enough that I wasn’t worried about her attacking, but I was trying to take what Amaryllis had said seriously, even if it really seemed unlikely that anything a demon in Valencia’s body could do would injure me in any meaningful way.

I let the flame go out when I turned on the light switch, and looked down to see a slipper laying on the ground. I picked it up and looked at it, then lofted it toward Valencia.

“Is there a reason you turned the light off?” I asked.

“I didn’t,” she replied, slipping her shoe back on. “Sometimes when there’s no one around they’re mean to me. Mostly they don’t think I’m a person.”

“Huh,” I said. “That’s … I wonder why that is.”

“Because I don’t have a soul,” said Valencia, keeping her head down and not meeting my eyes.

“I don’t really think souls are actually that important,” I said.

She raised her eyes to look at me. “They are,” she said.

“You’re sort of proof that they aren’t,” I replied. “You’re … a muggle, basically, gated from performing magic, but you still have a personality and memories, skills, presumably, or the ability to learn some skills -- do you have any skills?”

Valencia shook her head.

“Well, you can speak, that’s a skill,” I said. “I don’t imagine that you got much of an education, uh, growing up, but we can work on that.”

“Do you love me?” she asked, watching me with watery eyes.

“Uh,” I said, taking a half step back.
“Because I love you,” she said. “You’re so sweet and kind and understanding, more than anyone has ever been ever in my life, and I keep worrying that I’m going to lose you, and that must be what love is.”

I looked her over, wondering whether she was possessed.

“You’re wondering whether I’m possessed right now,” said Valencia, with a manic smile slowly creeping onto her face. “I suppose I’ll save you the trouble just this once and tell you that I am.”

“Oh,” I said, frowning. “I’ll confess I’ve never spoken to a devil before.”

“You have,” said the thing wearing Valencia’s skin, the smile quite wide now. “Through this creature’s nubile body.” She began undressing, though she was still in manacles, chained to a boiler pipe, so this didn’t go very smoothly.

“I’m not clear on why you would tell me that you’re a devil,” I said, watching it puppet her body. I had a decision to make, about whether or not to look away as it pulled up her dress. Basic Midwestern modesty demanded it, but that would let the devil know that I cared, and not just this current one, but all future ones. And on top of that, the real Valencia was aware of what happened while she was possessed, and she would see me looking away, and know that I was embarrassed or ashamed.

“So why tell me?” I asked.

“It’s true that she thinks she loves you,” said the devil. Having gotten the dress part of the way up her midriff, it was working on moving the panties down. “Always best to say the things that are hurtful and true, they stick in best. She saw your face when I said it, saw your reaction to that love, saw the gears turning in your head, all the sort of heartbreaking stuff that normally gets to her.”

“So you do consider her a person?” I asked.

“No,” said the devil with a smile that didn’t seem like it belonged on Valencia’s face. “But you do, so it works either way.” It had slid her underwear down and was flashing me. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Leave? Try to restrain her and make it stop? It hadn’t occurred to me that having a gag in her mouth was probably a mercy for Valencia, when a possession came.

“It seems so basic,” I found myself saying.

“Basic?” asked the devil.

“You’re trying to cause pain and hurt in the world,” I said. “Your only avenues for doing that during a possession are manipulation of the body or injection of information, even if that information is false.”

The devil controlling Valencia perked up slightly. “Oh?” it asked.

“The problem is, you’re temporarily inhabiting a body that I know can sometimes house devils, and I know that the information coming from that body is sometimes inaccurate, so … why should I listen?” I asked. “From a strategic perspective … is it just that devils can’t coordinate with each other? Is that why you don’t make an effort to plan for the long-term?”

Valencia stopped exposing herself and her dress fell back down. She looked away from me, back toward the boiler. “It left,” she said. “They don’t like the second guessing, I don’t think.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod, not knowing whether to believe that.
“And you don’t believe me,” she said. She turned back to me with watery eyes. “You don’t believe me because I’m not even my own person!” She started crying, leaning against the boiler pipe we’d cuffed her to. I waited, watching her, knowing that if she was really Valencia there was something that I should be saying to her to make things better, but also knowing that it probably wasn’t Valencia.

“I’m sorry, Valencia,” I said.

She looked up, then leaned over to dry away her tears with her chained up hands. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” she said.

“I’m sorry that this world is the way that it is,” I said. Some of that is probably my fault. “I’m sorry that we don’t have a better solution than to put you in manacles in the basement.” Yet. “I think one of the solutions to this problem is that while there’s unreliable information transfer from you, information transfer from us will always get to you, because you’re aware of what happens when you’re possessed. That doesn’t really help you to effectively communicate with us, in a real sense, but when I say things, I can still be sure that I’m saying them to Valencia, even if someone else might be in control of the ears.”

“Why do you care about me?” she asked.

That was a loaded question, especially given that it might be coming from a devil, or that a devil might hear the answer in the future and use it against me. “I don’t know,” I said. “But I do care.”

(The true answer was probably that I was being manipulated by a game that knew which buttons to press in order to get me to care. I cared more about her because she was clearly young, and more because she was a girl (as fucked up as that might have been, from a gender politics standpoint). The most important thing was probably just that she was right in front of me, but I didn’t think that I was good enough at the social stuff to say any of that in a way that would come across well. “Because you’re here, in front of me, activating pathos, with no one else in the world who cares for you.”)

“Oh okay,” she nodded. “I care about you too, because you’re one of the only people that has ever been nice to me. But I don’t really know you.”

I nodded. “And I don’t really know you either. It’s going to be hard, not knowing what’s coming from you and what’s coming from them.” I paused slightly. “Does Fallatehr know of a way to figure out whether or not you were possessed?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “When he needed to know something from me he would just ask me over and over again and try to average out the responses.”

“Yes,” I said. I had no idea whether that was true, but it was something that I could cross-check with Fallatehr. “Well, failing that --” I hesitated, wondering whether it was a good idea, then wondering whether pushing her loyalty up was a good idea, but I didn’t think that the game would fuck me over for helping someone, given the cowardice penalties I’d consistently gotten for not helping girls in danger, and the game stuff had always worked in my favor before, “-- if only one direction of our communication is reliable, maybe I can tell you a bit about myself?”

“They’re listening in,” said Valencia. “When they come they’ll be able to hurt you with the things that you say.”

“I know,” I said with a shrug. “It’s not going to be anything earth-shattering, just small things.”

“Small things?” she asked.
“Things I would be okay with the devils knowing, if it meant that you could have someone to talk to,” I replied. “Like … my mom did most of the cooking in our house, but dad was always responsible for the big event meals, when we’d have people over for barbeque or a big,”

Thanksgiving? “Holiday meal or something, and it was always this point of tension between the two of them, because he expected her to clean up after him. The weird thing was that it always came to a head afterward, when it came time for the cleaning, instead of before, when dad was in the process of making all the dirty dishes.”

“No one has ever cooked for me,” said Valencia.

“Really?” I asked. “I guess the prison fed you?”

She nodded. “Mother said that there were gardens and magic that kept us fed.”

“I -- I didn’t know that you had a mother,” I replied. “I mean most people have mothers, unless they’re dwarves, I guess, but the circumstances of your birth aren’t really that clear to me. Fallatehr seemed to indicate that he made you.”

Valencia nodded again. “My mother was in the prison with him. He changed her to be like him, as much as he could, and then got her pregnant.”

“Ah,” I said, trying to keep my face from betraying any emotion. Then I relaxed somewhat, because that wasn’t really the way that I thought things should go between us, not if she was going to be a companion. “I find that sort of tragic.” She was silent, looking at me with her big red eyes. “It’s -- the ideal, as I see it, anyway, is that children should be an expression of the love between two people, the closest that you can get to --” mingling your souls. “I don’t know, I just wish that you’d had better.” I hesitated before continuing on. “You’re more well-spoken than I would have expected.”

“Am I?” she asked. “I don’t feel like I speak well. Fallatehr put my mother in charge of making sure that I was normal, so that he could talk to me when he needed to. He made her like me, but it wore off sometimes, because he was juggling too many people.”

I nodded along at that, wishing that I could trust the information she was giving me about Fallatehr’s limits. That wasn’t the point of this conversation though, and I had to keep that in mind.

We talked for some time, almost entirely about innocuous things. I never mentioned Earth, or anything that was too close to Earth. I certainly didn’t mention the game, or the Dungeon Master, and I tried my best to steer clear of anything relating to my other traveling companions, because I didn’t want to put them at risk. Instead, I talked about the places I’d seen on Aerb, sharing some of what I liked about the world, trying to describe particularly vivid scenes as well as I could remember them. Valencia asked questions, usually not very deep ones, but enough to make me feel like I wasn’t just talking to a wall.

“Do you really like me?” asked Valencia as I got up to go.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “We haven’t known each other long enough, and there’s the whole complication of the devils. But … I think this was pleasant, and I don’t really see why devils would want it to be pleasant, so, yeah,” but as soon as the words were out of my mouth I could think of reasons. They could be playing the long game, or setting me up for a punch to the gut, trying to gain my trust or lower my guard. “We’ll do this again, and maybe make some headway.”

“Until you’re finished with Fallatehr,” said Valencia.

“Oh,” I replied. “No, I had intended to take you into my care.”
Loyalty increased: [Null Pointer Exception] lvl 14!

Companion Passive Unlocked: [Unknown Reference Error]!

Consulting …

Rebooting …

Loyalty increased: Valencia the Red lvl 14!

Companion Passive Unlocked: Infernal Capture!

The messages came through quickly, piling up on each other, almost so fast that I couldn’t read one before the next was pushed out of the way. I stared at the last message, and the words ‘Infernal Capture’, trying to parse it. When I looked up at Valencia, she was looking at her hands.

“What happened?” she asked, looking up at me.

“Uh,” I said. “Did something happen?”

“It’s still inside me,” she replied, looking back down at her hands, then back up at me. “I’m still possessed, but it’s … you were lying to me, when you asked whether something happened, you know that something happened, and you had something to do with it.”

I stared at her. “How do you know that?” I asked slowly. Something had changed about her. Obviously I’d expected that to be one of the natural outcomes of her gaining Twinned Souls, given that she was nearly useless as a party member, but she’d gotten some kind of different thing instead, and I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on. Whether Infernal Capture was a good or bad thing for her (or me) was very ambiguous.

“I don’t know!” she said, sounding helpless and pained. She stopped and watched me. “You knew that this might happen to me,” she said, slightly awed. “You’ve been waiting for some kind of change, but not the possessions, something else, and this is … not what you expected, and you’re trying to figure out whether it’s good or bad for … us?”

“Where’s this information coming from?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm and steady.

“I’m thinking like one of them,” said Valencia, stepping back, catching the chain of her manacles on the pipe. “I’m being clever in the way that they always were, it’s … I can feel it inside of me, still wearing me, like I’m its glove, but … but I’m the one in control, moving the hand inside me. Feeding -- feeding? -- feeding on it. On the devil there.” She looked at me. “You don’t believe me. You think that it might be a trick the devil is pulling.”

“It’s a possibility,” I said. “Look … if this is real, then I think that it’s probably better that Fallatehr doesn’t know about it. Can you -- would you hide it?”

“I could,” said Valencia with a nod. “With this inside of me, I --” she stopped. “And if it leaves, he never actually trusted me, if you’re going to kill him and take me with you --” Her words were coming out in a rush, sentences and thoughts half-formed before being abandoned.

“I’m not going to kill him,” I said.

“You’re lying,” said Valencia, looking me over. “But you’re lying because you don’t want me to leak it back to him, and I think that’s probably okay.”
“The devil is helping you to think?” I asked.

Valencia nodded, swallowing hard.

“Okay,” I said. “Uh, give me a few seconds.” I closed my eyes before waiting for a response, waiting three seconds until I had the character sheet up, then quickly moving over to the companions section.

**Valencia the Red, Loyalty lvl 14**

Valencia is a nonanima, a humanoid without a soul, created by the essentialist Fallatehr Whiteshell in the Amoureux Penitentiary where she lived for the first seventeen years of her life. Until recently she was subject to repeated possession by demons and devils at random intervals, but now, touched by your magic, she has become something to be feared, for much different reasons than she was before. She is nearly a newborn, in some ways, trying to find her feet.

And there, just below the biography:

**Infernal Capture:** Valencia is a loyal companion, now properly part of your kharass, though she is still without a soul. The non-anima is grasping, reaching, an unnatural construct trying to find its way in the world. Power has, for the first time in her life, found its way into her hands.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. Before, her character bio had displayed the same null reference exception, but now it was filled in, which seemed like it was good news. The message about the game rebooting itself, well, that was more troubling, as was the message about consulting, but whatever had happened, I had no more information on it than that. I closed my eyes again, this time to dip into my soul.

I found Valencia’s line almost immediately, coming off of my soul like the ones for Amaryllis and Fenn, but on following it, I found the end twisting and turning in the wind, leading off into nothing. I frowned at that, then dropped out from soul-vision to look at Valencia again.

“Take me with you,” she said.

“I can’t,” I replied. “Not right now, not without raising questions from Fallatehr, questions that I wouldn’t want him figuring out the answer to.” I didn’t want to leave her in this basement if she’d just leveled up, but didn’t really see that I had much of an option. My hope was that Fallatehr would just stay away from her; I would place one of my last vines around the door as a precaution, though I didn’t know what their range was.

“You’re going to come back for me,” said Valencia. “You’re going to kill him once he’s shown you what he knows.”

“You’re saying that like you know it for a fact,” I replied.

“It’s written on you,” said Valencia, staring at me in wonder. “Is this what it’s like, for a devil to see people?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I do still need to go, but I’ll help you to figure it out when I come back.”

“And you are coming back,” said Valencia, nodding as though she knew this as a fact. “You actually do like me. You think of me as ...” she hesitated, disappointed, “A sister.” Confusion crossed her face. For all that she’d claimed to be able to read me like a book, her own emotions were as plain as day. Whatever the devil inside her was doing, it wasn’t giving her the ability to lie. Or, wait ...
“Try lying to me,” I said.

“About what?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

“Anything,” I said. “Something that we both know is false.” I touched my breastplate. “Tell me it’s red with black streaks.”

“Why?” asked Valencia, the confusion apparent on her face. “I thought you wanted me to lie? What color does it look like to you?”

I looked down, then up, staring at her. Her confusion faded away to a wide smile, and she gripped the pipe she was chained to, having little other way to express her excitement. “I did it!” she said. “I know what it feels like now, to be the one to do it, to say things that aren’t at all true and just, you believed me!”

I nodded. “You’re taking the devil’s power, somehow,” I said.

“I told you,” said Valencia, speaking fast again, “I’m the glove it fit its hand into, but now that hand is mine, because I’m its glove.”

I understood that as a metaphor, but not how it worked in practical terms, but the practicalities of demonic possession hadn’t been clear before they’d been upended. “So was Grak touched or not?”

Valencia froze. “Yes,” she said. “What I said, last night, that was the truth. I was possessed when I said it, but it’s the truth.”

“So you lied to me before,” I replied.

“I -- I didn’t know that you were going to save me, I thought that you would leave, like he always said would happen if anyone wanted to take me,” said Valencia, “And he knew that you wouldn’t know, if the devils let it slip out, what was the truth and what wasn’t, it was, he had such plans and to go against them --” she stopped, watching me again. “You’re not upset.”

“I’m not sure that I trust you,” I replied. “But I trust you more now than when I came down here, and I think that’s a good platform for us to start from, whatever has happened in the past. I’m not going to be angry about you not showing instant loyalty to me.”

“Okay,” said Valencia, in a way that was totally unconvincing. She shifted slightly, watching me. “Okay,” she said again, this time in way that showed relief and acceptance. I couldn’t tell whether she was processing what I had said, or whether she’d decided to lie to me, but I turned away before my face could betray that thought.

“I’ll try not to be too long,” I said as I took my first step up the basement stairs.

“I’m going to be better, when you get back,” said Valencia. A quick look back showed that she was standing there, looking at her hands.

I worried about how much better she was going to be, but kept that thought private.
The farmhouse had come with two cars, one that had been taken by Fallatehr’s people, the other of which we used to drive to Parsmont. Halfway there, while we were still in farmland, Fenn stopped the car to let Amaryllis and Grak out so that they could take a walk over to one of the lines of thick trees that served as a windbreak for the fields and teleport out without having to worry about anyone seeing them when they came back. Amaryllis took the leaf-cloak with her, and following some deliberation in the car, Ropey stayed with me, on the theory that Ropey technically belonged to Amaryllis, and she could compel him to lie. This wasn’t something that she had mentioned when I’d woken up in the morning, which made me slightly uneasy. I’d been thinking of him as mine, or if not mine, then fully independent. It wasn’t a logarithical problem, because I could just look into her soul if I needed to, but it was still disconcerting.

I didn’t tell Amaryllis about Valencia, partly because I didn’t want to have to push Grak out of hearing range again, which itself was an information leak, and partly because I didn’t want to have to hear her get on my case about having pushed Valencia’s loyalty up so high.

“She’s probably going to tell you that it was dangerous and stupid,” said Fenn after I’d told her everything. “Which is a fair point, but I’m not sure I’d agree, since the game doesn’t seem like it actively wants you to fail, it just likes to torture you.”

“That doesn’t seem like it’s a good thing,” I replied.

“But that’s the basic thing between the DM and the players, I thought,” said Fenn, keeping her eyes on the road. This was my first time inside an Aerbian car, which seemed too narrow and had that weird bump on the hood that seemed like less of an obstruction from the inside. “You want the players to get roughed up, but then they come through all the pain, mutilation, and horror triumphant, having gotten the girl and slain a dragon.”

“Usually you don’t get the girl,” I replied. “Not in my campaigns, anyway, it always felt weird. And you weren’t actually feeling the pain of the characters, or anything like that, it was all make believe, not torture.”

“I think torture is a strong word for this scenario,” said Fenn with a frown. “I mean, you have me, right?”

“Fenn, light of my life, fire of my soul, you are the furthest thing from torture,” I replied. I reached over and laid a hand on her thigh. “I didn’t mean to say that you’re not lovely, because you know that I think you are, it’s just … I was dropped out of a plane into a land of the undead, so maybe my view of my role in Aerb is a bit warped.”

“Speaking of fire of your soul,” said Fenn. She snapped her fingers, and flame came out from the tips of them. “I got that business working while you were having your secret meeting with another woman. Out of the view of our dwarf friend.”

“I’m impressed,” I said with a nod.

“You’re not that impressed,” said Fenn, letting the fire go out, “You got it in two minutes of being told it was a thing.” Her eyes stayed on the road.

“No, I am impressed, it’s just … when I saw the description of Symbiosis I thought that it would be a little bit more spectacular than that,” I replied. “I thought you would go from zero to ten in a matter of
“Well, whatever,” said Fenn. “I’ve got the blood thing working, the bone thing working, --”

“That too?” I asked, actually surprised this time.

“Yup,” said Fenn. “I pretended to be cleaning up some garbage, which probably would have been suspicious if Grak knew me better.”

“I thought he knew you pretty well,” I said.

“Well, it’s not like he would be able to make a guess just based on that,” said Fenn. “I’m still holding out hope that your little missy isn’t right about him.”

I squeezed her thigh once. “Do we need to talk about that? I asked. “Are you … jealous?”

“Your darling Fenn?” asked Fenn, putting a hand to her chest to show just how shocked she was. She let it drop when I didn’t smile. “She’s Joonbait,” she said. “And it’s not like there wasn’t already competition. I’m already dealing with not being the prettiest maiden in all the land, I didn’t really want to be out-competed on two fronts.”

“Ah,” I said. Amaryllis. “You know that’s nothing that you have to worry about, right?”

“Yeah,” said Fenn. She reached down and laid her hand on top of my own. “I just, really, really like you. And it’s different for elves. They don’t have dating. The idea of an elf trying out a relationship to see whether or not it’s going to work is … well, there’s a reason that they don’t really like other species that much, and a lot of it has to do with the very specific elf way of doing things. You don’t practice swinging a sword until you become proficient, you do it right the first time, and you do it the same way, the perfect way, every time after that. Marriage, for an elf, is just slotting into someone’s life, perfectly and completely, without second guessing or shopping around like humans do.”

“And that’s why Fallatehr is an abomination of an elf,” I said with a nod. “He’s willing to fail, like a human would.”

“I don’t really want to talk about him right now,” said Fenn. She gripped the steering wheel hard until her knuckles turned white, and I stayed silent. “I used to think that a lot of the elves were faking it, you know?”

“I was kind of wondering that,” I said. “People say in public that they aren’t picking up the sword until they can make the perfect cut, but that’s not the whole picture, because a lot of them are training in private away from prying eyes, or fathers and helping sons, and it’s more about a culture of not appearing to need practice or training. But you’re saying it’s not that. They just … meditate on doing whatever it is they want to do, or something like that, and then do it.”

Fenn nodded. “I tried to fake it,” she said. “I got caught a few times, then stopped really trying, which naturally meant that everyone hated me for my imperfection, not that they wouldn’t have anyway, because I was visibly imperfect.” She bit her lip and leaned forward slightly to peer at another car as it passed us. “I feel like if you were an elf I would find myself just constantly explaining how humans do things. Seems like it must be annoying.”

“It lets me know more about you,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t tend to like the stuff I hear about elves, but I like hearing you talk about what it was like for you, growing up in your small slice of this plane.”

“Anyway, I was coming around to a point,” said Fenn, glancing over at me briefly.
“Were you?” I asked.

“My point was, I never really expected that I would ever have a relationship like married elves have with each other,” she said. She let that hang in the air for a bit, watching the other traffic. We were getting close to Parsmont proper now, the big hill of a city, which meant more attention on the road.

“You said that elf marriage wasn’t really about romance,” I replied.

“I didn’t mean that,” said Fenn. “I meant, more, it’s like these two elves just fit together suddenly, they snap into place and then can’t ever be taken apart, and it’s not about the romance thing because it just is.”

“That sounds really romantic,” I said.

“Does it?” asked Fenn, glancing over at me again. “I always thought of romance as the human stuff, the courting and the invitations, opening up to someone, having them judge you, judging them back, I don’t have a lot of experience with any of it, but … I always thought for humans it was trying to find someone whose good points overwhelm their bad points, or deluding yourself into thinking that’s the case, and that’s romance in a nutshell.”

“That … is not a good description of romance,” I said.

“Well, whatever,” replied Fenn. “Not really my point, my point was that I never felt like I would have someone that I fit with, someone who could be the tenon to my mortise, and I feel like I’ve found that in you, but I keep thinking of all the ways that I’m probably wrong.” I had no idea what a mortise and tenon were, but I’d gotten good at letting words specific to Aerb float by me.

“If there’s anything that I’ve done to make you think--” I began.

“No,” said Fenn, “No, it’s, I think I’m thinking about how useless I was in the prison, and then the upgrade I got last night that I don’t feel like I earned.”

“You feel inadequate?” I asked. “You, of all people? You’re literally the best team member I have.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say,” replied Fenn. “But most of that is because I’m the most loyal to you, and most of that is that you decided that you liked me enough for us to have a relationship, and it’s that I don’t really feel like I deserve. Even if it’s destined to end horribly. Maybe especially if it’s going to end horribly.” She peered over at one of the signs. “This is where we park.” She turned the wheel and took us down a street, slower now that we were within the city, and eventually turned into a large parking garage, where an attendant held up a hand, telling us to wait. “So our plans for this trip--”

“Are we going to just leave it at that?” I asked. “You don’t feel like you’re worth my time, and we’re just supposed to move on from that? That’s my girlfriend you’re talking about, I won’t let those harsh words go unchallenged.”

Fenn sighed, not seeming to take any joy or comfort from what I’d said. “I spent a decade looting one of the tamer exclusion zones,” she said. “I was a bit player. And now I’m, you know, sitting in a car with a guy who, an hour ago, accidentally turned off the world and then started it back up again.”

“Not quite how it happened,” I replied. “And it’s not like I was someone special before coming here. I was probably one of the least important people in Bumblefuck, Kansas, and my home town wasn’t in any way important to the state, which in turn was, you know -- they called them flyover states because for the most part, the only interaction you had with them was to look down during a plane trip and then maybe think ‘man that’s a flat and boring state’.”
“Also, loyalty can go above 20,” I added.

“Thank you for making me feel better,” said Fenn. She gave me a warm smile. “We’re going to have to find some way to, ah, grind that loyalty up, if you know what I mean. And I do believe that we are owed our first actual date, which Parsmont can hopefully provide.”

“Okay, so your plan is to bus people in?” I asked Craig. “How do you plan on doing that?”

“We pay them a silver for their time, get big old wagons, and bring them in to vote for us,” said Craig. “We’re the equivalent of millionaires with fuck-you money, almost all of which is liquid.”

“No, it’s illiquid, tied up in weapons, armor, and other magical equipment,” replied Reimer. “If you’re playing right, you shouldn’t have more than a few percent of your money as gold.”

“Fine, fine,” said Craig. “We’re billionaires with millions in money that we’re not doing anything else with, because we don’t have mortgages or children or pay taxes.”

“Don’t give Joon ideas,” laughed Reimer.

“The minute someone assesses a tax on my looting is the minute I start a one-man civil war,” said Craig. “I will burn this fucking place to the ground.”

“Noted, in case I need you guys to start a civil war,” I replied. “You’d be non-state actors, making warfare a little hard, but … okay. With this bussing plan, has it occurred to you that other people might already have tried it?”

“NPCs aren’t that smart,” said Craig.

“It’s literally the first thing that anyone would try,” I replied.

“Not me,” said Tom. “Wait, I ask the fish guy about that, whether I can get paid a silver for my vote.”

“You shouldn’t be able to,” said Arthur. “Votes are transitory. I mean I guess if you can see the voting jewels, or vewels, if you will, in your head, then maybe people could confirm that vewels had been transferred over, before the people -- wait, do the jewels stay voted when the person who voted leaves the area?”

“They do,” I said. “Once transferred, the only thing that can remove them is the person who did the transfer taking them back with a thought.”

“Even death?” asked Tom.

“Please, please don’t get any ideas when I say yes, you keep them even if the person who gave them dies,” I replied.

“In an unrelated note, we should kill people after they vote for us,” said Reimer.

“How’s that going to work, if they can revoke the vote as the sword is coming toward their throat?” asked Arthur.

“Threaten their families, obviously,” said Reimer with a snort.
“What’s your alignment?” I asked with a frown. I knew damned well what his alignment was.

“I’m trying to think like a criminal would,” said Reimer, using his most pious voice. “Obviously those dastardly scum would try any dirty trick in the book, and part of my job is to anticipate and then stop them.”

“I don’t think the bussing thing is going to work,” said Arthur. “The transitory nature of the jewels makes it too unwieldy and kind of unworkable on the larger scale, because you’d need to verify every transaction personally, and then also have to have some way to not have people take their vote back if they’re ever in Parsmont again.”

“Also, it’s not what you’re doing here,” I replied. “You’re here to retrieve the MacGuffin.”

“Which we’re under no time pressure to do,” said Arthur.

“So Homeland --”

“Homeleron,” I interjected.

“So Homeleron,” said Tom. “Who are the top vote getters in Parsmont? Is it like a Mount Olympos type of deal, with a bunch of people everyone loves, or is it more like a, what do you call it,” he made a shape with his hands.

“Bell curve?” asked Arthur.

Tom snapped his fingers and pointed at Arthur. “Yes, exactly.”

“It wouldn’t be normal distribution,” said Arthur. “I mean, it could be, with the center being something like a hundred jewels or whatever we start with, but the lumps of distribution probably look different.” He turned to me. “Power law?”

“Homeleron doesn’t know what that is,” I replied. “But he will tell you that in Parsmont, there are those vested with the power of their peers, hundreds, maybe thousands of them, but almost all of the power is in the hands of only two, Abswifth and Bendon, not so much people as appointments that people ascend to, two powers that keep each other in check.”

“Cool,” said Reimer. “Let’s kill them.” He smiled at me. “Is what I would say if I were a villain.”

We left the car at the parking garage, which wasn’t actually a ramp at all, instead being a giant motorized contraption that put cars into specific slots by attendants who transferred over a small wooden chit. I didn’t really trust any of it, mostly because it looked like it had been built in the 1930s, but the car was a very recent purchase, and we didn’t have to be in the garage while it was moving things around, so I held my tongue.

“So what are the sights to see in Parsmont?” I asked as we strolled down the street.

“No clue,” replied Fenn. “All we really need is a book and an inconspicuous place to stay. I probably know less about this place than you do. You feel that thing in the back of your head?”

‘That thing’ was the two depressions I could feel in the back of my mind, one filled with jewels and the other empty. Most of the time I wasn’t aware of them; I could forget about them in the same way that I could forget about the fact that I was constantly seeing my nose in peripheral vision. I’d been able to feel it back at the farm, but less concretely than I could in the city. Parsmont as I’d constructed it had a hard border, but here it seemed to be more squishy. I couldn’t tell whether that was a
fundamental design disagreement between myself and the Dungeon Master, or a result of the conversion of Parsmont into an Aerbian region.

We walked through the city streets, arm in arm. I had left my armor behind, on the theory that it would draw more attention to us than we really wanted, and Fenn was similarly unarmored. We needed to find something defensive for her to wear, but that was a gap in our armaments that we’d had since her last suit of armor had gotten sliced through. She wore a hat to hide her pointed ears, making her look human at first glance.

She talked happily as we went through the city, first complaining that black gloves didn’t really go with anything, and after that talking with me about the buildings and people we saw as we went. Parsmont had a much more homogenous style than Cranberry Bay, flat slopes on the roofs with a fair amount of plants sticking up from rooftop gardens, a clean style with little in the way of embellishments, and then riots of color where a full wall would be given over to a mural – but the murals were all similar enough that I thought they were all part of the same project, or maybe done by a small collective. They used thick lines, bright colors, and an abstract style, mostly depicting natural things, drawn so large that they couldn’t be contained by the canvas of the walls.

The streets were narrow, and the few cars and trucks we saw squeak through the crowds were slim as well, none with two seats, most thin enough that I could have easily wrapped my hands around them. I could see why Fenn had put our car into the garage before we’d come in. There was something about the aesthetic of Parsmont that I really liked, maybe the way the hill shaped the city, maybe the general vibe, or maybe the way that the narrow streets and sparse motor traffic made everything feel more human. It had its political problems, given that it was at least somewhat like the Parsmont that I’d written up, but it wasn’t a bad place.

We found a large bookshop and perused their selection for a bit until we found a big book of detailed maps of Aerb, including a section on infernal topology. Aerb was massive, ten times larger than Earth, which meant that it was pretty rare to see a map with all forty-four continents on it. Instead, the map book was divided up with different areas in different sections. Before I bought the book, I looked for Parsmont, which was sat right in the middle of a huge area of mostly-flat farmland, an area that was equivalent in size to the entire Grain Belt of the United States. On the infernal topology map, Parsmont was marked with dark red stripes, which the key said meant that the hells were close, and tightly packed against each other. From what I knew of the hells, there was some kind of notional fourth-dimensional distance at play -- and in Parsmont, they were fairly close to us.

I checked out Anglecynn as well, and saw it mapped in grey, both the country proper and most of the surrounding continent, including the Zorish Isles. According to legend, when the Apocalypse Demon had reared his head, Uther had gone on a long quest to track down the warhammer Marcion, which everyone else had considered Apocryphal. He’d returned to Anglecynn at the final moment and hit the Apocalypse Demon so hard that it had crashed through every single layer of hell and bottomed out with such force that it permanently pushed every single hell away from Anglecynn, like a four-dimensional crater. After that, demons and devils weren’t really a problem that a well-armed militia couldn’t take care of, or at least that was how the story went.

When we paid for the book (along with a few others that piqued my interest) we left to go find a suitable place to stay, but when we were half a block from the bookstore, a man landed in front of us. He was wearing brightly shining, fully-embossed full-plate, with a sword that had to have been eight feet long, but my eyes were drawn to the grin on his face, his perfectly straight, pearly-white teeth, and the way his smile reached the corners of his eyes. He was one of the more handsome men I’d ever met in real life (or what amounted to real life these days).

“Sorry,” he said as I put away the Anyblade, which I’d instinctively drawn (thereby shooting the
element of surprise in the foot), “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine,” I replied. “We’re not from around here. You must be the Abswifth?” He nodded, smile not leaving his face. “I wasn’t aware that you came to greet tourists that were passing through.” My heart had already started to hammer in my chest. He was too clean, probably brokenly powerful, and he definitely shouldn’t have been talking to us.

“I take a special interest, from time to time,” said the Abswifth. His smile didn’t falter. “Tell me, where do you come from?”

“We’re staying at a farm some ways away from the city,” said Fenn. “So are you like, police or something? I never really understood how that worked here. Are we supposed to tip you in mind jewels?”

The Abswifth laughed, loud and boisterous. A small crowd had begun to gather around us, which I didn’t like at all, not that I thought I could outrun this guy. My mind started racing as I tried to figure out why he was talking to us. Had he spotted us? Had we been reported by the people who owned the farm? Betrayed by Fallatehr somehow? His goons had gone into the city ahead of us, that was certainly a possibility.

“You have spunk,” he said, wagging a finger in Fenn’s direction. “I’d like the two of you to come with me, I assure you that this is all quite routine.”

Yeah, I didn’t buy that for a second. Parsmont was a large city, and there were too many people here for one of the two most powerful people to randomly take tourists in for screening interviews. ‘Quite routine’ wasn’t a phrase that inspired much confidence either; just because someone was following a plan didn’t mean that it wasn’t something serious.

“Do we have a choice in the matter?” I asked. I saw Fenn cast a glance in my direction, and felt her hand squeeze mine in a we’re-in-this-together kind of way.

The Abswifth’s smile faltered. “I would prefer not to compel you by my authority, but I believe the matter is important enough for me to lean on that power, should you force me to. I assure you that it will go better for you if you cooperate.”

I felt something at the back of my mind, and turned my attention there while keeping eye contact on the man with the ridiculous eight-foot sword. Jewels were coming in there in volume, which I hadn’t expected at all. I guessed that it shouldn’t surprise me though, given what Amaryllis had been able to tell us about this place, and what I remembered from my sessions. The Abswifth stood on one side of the fence, and the Bendon stood on the other, which meant that there were always going to be a great deal of people ready to stand in opposition to either of them, even if it was just by proxy. A hushed crowd had grown around us, and some of them apparently wanted to throw their weight behind me.

“I don’t want any trouble,” I said. “But if you’re going to ask for my time, I’m going to insist that you do so officially. Otherwise, we’ll be leaving.”

I saw a flicker of annoyance on the Abswifth’s face. He had been holding his sword with the flat of it against his shoulder, but brought it down, moving a massive amount of metal with frightening ease. “By the authority vested in me by the citizens of Parsmont, you are hereby ordered to follow upon penalty of death, for the good of this city.”

I couldn’t read the subtext, but the audience we’d gathered really must not have liked that. The jewels were piling up behind me, in opposition to this man exercising his authority. I was scared, certainly, but I also found that interesting; the Abswifth and Bendon that I had made were essentially
criminals, save that they had the force of government behind them, and they didn’t really have to care about pleasing people, because all of the Abswifth’s supporters were essentially locked into supporting him by the reality of the system, and the same for the Bendon. I won’t claim that this was especially subtle on my part, but my defense is that I was fourteen and reading about things like Duverger’s Law and basic political theory.

“And you can’t tell me why?” I asked. “I’m being taken into your custody without any explanation?” This was, I will admit, poking the dragon a little bit, but it did serve a purpose besides just challenging him for no reason; I wanted to see what he would do with the challenge, or whether he would divulge something in order to keep the people happy.

“I can’t speak of it, for reasons of security,” said the Abswifth, frowning. “Do you disrespect Parsmont and its citizenry so much that you will force me to kill you here in these streets?”

“No,” I replied, holding my hands up. I saw his eyes go to my ring, the Anyblade, but he said nothing about it. “From what little I’ve managed to see of it, this is a lovely city, but this seems irregular to me.”

“Not so much these days,” called a voice from the crowd, which generated some murmurs. I watched the pile of jewels get a little bit smaller. My guess was that some of the people who had impulsively thrust their support behind me were pushing their ‘vote’ toward whoever had spoken.

The Abswifth winced at that, but said nothing in response, and once again gestured with his ridiculous sword for us to go in front of him. I stepped toward him, with Fenn close behind us, and watched as the crowd parted for us.

“Care to tell us where we’re going, if we’re to be walking with a knife pointed at our backs?” asked Fenn.

“My tower,” he replied. “Look up and to your right and you’ll see it, it’s the one in white.”

So I looked up the hill, and saw what he was talking about; it was a spire, more than a tower, a needle-thin thing that I had taken for being some bit of infrastructure before. The scale of it was hard to pin down, but given that it wasn’t an equivalent to a radio tower, it had to have been four or five hundred feet. And as we passed by a building that was partially blocking my view, I saw its companion, a tower of black.

Fuck.
As we went through the streets of Parsmont, the Abswifth followed us, sword propped up on his shoulder, calling out directions, “turn here” or “around the cart” as we went. He wasn’t the only one following though. Most of the crowd had dispersed, but there were others who lingered on, keeping some distance back to be clear of the Abswifth’s sword, or flanking our sides. There were a few camera flashes, which startled me, mostly because it was the first time I had seen a camera on Aerb. They were big and bulky, each the size of a shoebox with a small, clear cube on top that emitted an almost painfully bright flash and had to be replaced between each picture. I wasn’t at all pleased by that, nor the idea that these men were surely reporters. We were, after all, wanted criminals in other parts of the world.

I followed the Abswifth’s lead in not saying much, and to my mild surprise, Fenn did as well. At a different point in my time on Aerb, I might have gawked at the people and places we passed by, the occasional wide plaza that served as a reprieve from the narrow streets, or the breaks in the monotony of Parsmont’s mostly human population: a bullfrog Animalia smoking a pipe outside a butcher’s shop, a dark-skinned woman with enormous antlers that had been hung with jewels, and a skull sitting inside a humanoid form of water among them. Instead of indulging my desire to stare at every curiosity we passed in order to compare it against what I had read in my books, I tried to think.

First things first: the Abswifth and the Bendon both had needle-like towers, thin to the point of being a bit ridiculous, one white, the other black. This wasn’t just a peculiarity of their culture or a symbol of their powers, it was a Clue, because I had designed those towers -- just not for Parsmont.

They had come from a campaign I’d run when I’d been really into microworlds, the sorts of places where you could drive a car from one end of creation to the other in an afternoon (though not literally, because we very rarely played tabletop in systems that had cars). Angled Ovid [sic] was a world of good and evil, with specific quantities of good and evil being directly proportional to how far ‘north’ or ‘south’ you were on the ovoid. I won’t get into the nitty-gritty of it, but the north pole had the tower of ultimate good, set into the center of a bustling metropolis, while the south pole had a matching tower of ultimate evil, set into the center of screaming fields of the eternally tortured. We didn’t actually play a full campaign there -- Angled Ovid [sic] was one of a few worlds suspended in a bottle in a god’s workshop that the group were going through. They didn’t spend more than a session there, and as a consequence, I hadn’t really fleshed the microworld out too much.

So what the fuck were those towers doing in the middle of Parsmont, sitting right next to each other, apparently inhabited by the city’s two most important and powerful people? I had no idea, other than that the towers were a powerful magic, and that didn’t bode well.

With that mystery set aside for the moment, I started thinking about the other big question, which was how the Abswifth had found us, and how he knew who we were. He hadn’t said our names. Did he know our names? Did he have some kind of dossier on us? Some magic tracking us? Our list of enemies was actually pretty short; Hyacinth Prentiss was one, Fallatehr Whiteshell was the other. There were a few other loose threads out there, like that velocity mage of Aumann’s way back in Barren Jewel, but I didn’t really consider any of them prime suspects, and only worth worrying about because bringing back early, inconsequential or “off-screen” enemies was one of the things I liked doing as DM. Doris Finch was out there as well, nine and a half million of her, and she had some way of tracking us, even if it wasn’t a very good one, but she didn’t really seem like she had a reason to, especially since she needed intermediaries to pass beyond her domain.

Between Hyacinth and Fallatehr, I was leaning heavily in the direction of Fallatehr, but what I
couldn’t figure out was what his endgame was. Was he trying to introduce a complication that only he could rescue me from? That did seem to be his style, from what I had seen. Giving someone enough rope to hang themselves allowed you a lot of leverage if you were the guy who could cut that rope, and that was his modus operandi, at least with regards to me. This was different, because clueing in the authorities in Parsmont left a trail of incrimination that would point back toward him, and it placed the sequence of events outside of his control. He had the means, via his minions, he had the opportunity, when they went into town, but I wasn’t clear on the motive.

What I had to do was backtrack. I could safely assume that if this was Fallatehr’s doing, he had gotten his minions to do it. What information had he had when they’d been sent away? I tried to recall the conversation in its entirety, but it had been brief, and most of my attention had been on the possibility that his two minions would start a covert campaign of tampering with souls, instead of just going to the police.

**Skill unlocked: Analysis!**

*Fucking finally,* I sighed. I’d spent some time trying to unlock that one, and every time I’d been deep in thought, I’d been thinking that surely those thoughts counted as analysis. I ran back the train of thought again, trying to figure out what the game had seen in how I was thinking.

**Skill increased: Analysis 1!**

The Abswifth was practically a god, or maybe a demi-god, at least within the bounds of Parsmont, so I doubted that Fallatehr’s minions had gotten to him. He wasn’t the sort of man you could just grab by the throat and take into the alley so you could have your way with his soul. That didn’t mean that he didn’t have underlings, and those underlings would be a little easier to subvert, but that again left the open question of what purpose this would have in helping Fallatehr achieve his aims, whatever those actually were. I had thought that he wanted my power, but if he had thrown me to the police, I wasn’t sure why he would have gone through with a scheme that saw me in the hands of the Abswifth.

The case for Hyacinth was a little more straightforward. Following Larkspur’s death, and unknown to us, she had decided that it was worth it to find us after all, and either by working with Doris Finch, or dipping into the strategic reserve of elf bones, or some other unknown method, she had found us and sicced the Abswifth on us, presumably so that she could find and kill Amaryllis, thereby inheriting an enormous arsenal of hereditary loot.

**Skill increased: Analysis 2!**

I’d been hoping that maybe I could use the timing of the skill ups for Analysis to know when I was on the right track, but that didn’t seem to be the case, because the trains of thought I’d been having when the skill ups happened pointed in different directions, and the idea of Fallatehr working with Hyacinth had far too many holes in it to be true.

There was a wall around the white tower, tall enough for privacy from even a giant. There were people picketing outside the wrought-iron gate, but they parted easily enough at our approach. In my (admittedly limited) observation, there were a few different types of protestors: the ones with a burning rage they had to express with effigies and shouts, the ones who saw protesting as a fun event of mutual camaraderie, and the ones that treated it as something like a job. That last one was how the protestors outside the white tower looked to me. They had the same expressions that I’d seen on protesters outside a woman’s clinic in Wichita, not burning with fury, but trudging along because it was a thing that had to be done.

The gates were pulled back by a pair of guards as soon as they saw the Abswifth, and we went
forward through a plaza that surrounded the tower. It was devoid of people and plants, leaving only plain hexagonal tiles that reminded me of a battlemap.

“Okay,” said Fenn, as she came to a stop, halfway to the tower. “We’re away from the ears of the masses, who do you think we are and what do you want with us?”

“Keep moving,” said the Abswifth. “We’ll speak in my office at the top.”

“No,” I replied. I’d stopped just after Fenn. We had both turned to look at the Abswifth, in his shining armor and ridiculously large sword. “It would be too easy for us to disappear into that tower and never be seen again. Here, at least, we have eyes watching us.”

“The eyes are the problem,” said the Abswifth. “Lip readers are so cheap that the Bendon can have them stationed outside the tower around the clock, but there are worse intrusions into the sanctity of my domain, so long as we stay outside my office. I would have you think carefully about who you are, and what I might know about you. I imagine there are things you wouldn’t want spread to the ears of every person of importance in this city, especially if they turned out to be false.”

Fenn looked to me. “He’s trying to play us,” she said.

“Play us?” I asked. “Or is he just trying to get a deal that’s sweeter for him than for us?”

“That’s what playing us is, you dolt,” said Fenn, crossing her arms. She turned to the Abswifth. “We’re going to need some kind of concessions to go up that tower.”

“No, we won’t,” I said. “We’ve done nothing wrong, and he’s just doing his job.” That was, admittedly, a very charitable assumption. “I’m not happy about this situation, especially since nothing has been explained to us, but I don’t want to make it more difficult or time-consuming than it needs to be, nor do I think we should be trying to profit from it.” I was hoping that a little bit of good-prisoner/bad-prisoner would go a long way, and that Fenn wouldn’t fight me too hard on this. I was also, have to confess, a little bit worried about how much this guy was actually constrained by PR considerations, and whether we wouldn’t be knocked around once we were inside.

Fenn gave me a sigh and then nodded to Abswifth. “Fine, we’ll go up your stupid tower.”

We stepped into the tower, through an open doorway that showed no sign of ever having held doors. The blindingly white walls gave way to a dimly lit interior space, with ceilings fifteen feet high, timbers of dark wood held up at regular intervals by sunken posts. The tower wasn’t terribly thick around, not given that it was hundreds of feet tall. The room was large and spacious, but it was just a single room, with the full curve of the tower visible. A row of desks held four people, each stopping what they were doing to look to us. A woman began rising from her seat before the Abswifth gave her a shake of his head. None of them returned to what they were doing though, which made the silence seem louder.

At the far end was an elevator, more crude than the ones I had seen elsewhere on Aerb, but artfully designed all the same, as though someone had been trying to make something pretty without the tools necessary to do so. I wondered whether it was simply from another era and hadn’t been replaced, since the tower itself seemed incredibly old.

“We’re going up,” said the Abswifth, more to the people at their desks than to us. He unslung his enormous sword from his shoulder and set it into a rack by the front entrance, then strode toward the elevator without looking to see whether we were following behind him. Fenn shot me a glance, and I shrugged. If we’d had the teleportation key, this might have been the point where I’d simply left
rather than get to the punchline, but we didn’t really have many options. I took it for granted that the Abswifth was stronger than us, not to mention fast enough to chase us down. Besides, we needed information, and he had it.

The door of the elevator was a foldable metal one, leaving large diamond shapes that we could see out of as it rose. The Abswifth stood behind us, and while Fenn elected to face him, I tried to pay attention to what I could see on the various floors we passed. I saw more desks, these without people, a room with rows of books, a place for storage and filing cabinets, but what was more interesting than what I saw was what I didn’t see. There were no rooms devoted to living, no kitchens, bathrooms, couches, comfortable chairs, nothing like a break room, and certainly no beds. This tower, then, was a place of business and function, almost religiously so.

But after six floors of that, we passed into a different part of the tower, one where there were no rooms at all, only a drop that quickly became frighteningly far, down to the ceiling of the sixth floor below. When I leaned forward to the grate and looked up, I could see our presumptive destination, far above us, barely lit by the tower’s few small interior windows.

“I’d like some answers,” I said.

“When we get to the top,” replied the Abswifth.

There was a minute amount of motion that came with being at the top of a skyscraper, and sometimes gave people “sky sickness”, a counterpart to sea sickness. My dad got it bad, and talked about it often, because he thought it was hilarious, in a dry humor kind of way. He was a helicopter pilot, comfortable with all sorts of terrible turbulence and choppy rides, but if you put him in a tall enough building he would start to get green about the gills. I had never gotten the same way, but it was something that I thought about when I got high up. Sorian’s castle had it, just a bit, though I was distracted first by the threats on my life, and second by being shot. Aumann’s tower definitely had a little bit of that sway, though it wasn’t even all that tall, but I had been distracted by the people trying to kill us. (In retrospect, the taller buildings of Aerb hadn’t really been good experiences for me.)

The needle-thin tower had none of that. It was stable as a rock, no more subject to minute amounts of sway than a post driven into the ground. Whatever the tower was made of, it wasn’t budging at all. I wasn’t actually sure that I would have noticed that if I hadn’t been preparing myself for it. This was all the more impressive given the faint howl of wind I could hear outside and the absurdity of the tower’s design. From what I had seen, the walls weren’t more than a foot thick, and there were no internal supports, meaning that it was literally just a tube of some incredibly strong white material. In other words, the whole place reeked of magic.

The upper floor was much the same as the lower ones, made of thick wooden beams that seemed, from below, to not actually have any supports. The interior was decorated with furniture that seemed extraordinarily heavy and solid, especially given how far up we were and how much of a pain it must have been to get it here. The elevator didn’t seem like it would have been wide enough to accommodate the desk or chairs on their way up. A wide screen partitioned the room, behind which I could see the corner of a well-made bed, the first and only sign that this tower was a place that was lived in, rather than just a place of work or business. Above us, the ceilings rose to the very top of the needle-point tower, where eight windows wide enough to fit a person let in a large amount of light.

I didn’t really pay that much attention to any of that; my eyes were drawn to the notification I’d gotten as the elevator glided to a stop.

Affliction: Goodly!
“We’re not killing a baby,” said Tiff.

“You know, I’m actually surprised that it would take Joon so long to spring the ‘evil baby’ thing on you,” said Reimer. “He’s grown soft in his old age.”

“It’s an evil baby,” said Arthur, “You have to kill evil babies. You’d kill baby Hitler, right?”

“No?” said Tiff, more as a question. “Assuming that I have access to baby Hitler, I can just kidnap him and raise him not to be evil. Most of him being an authoritarian fascist probably traces back to his experiences in the trenches of--”

“Okay, pretend that your options are either killing baby Hitler or leaving everything how it is,” said Arthur.

“But it’s complicated,” Tiff complained. “I personally think that World War II happens anyway, just not in the same way, and if it happens after the invention of nuclear weapons, then,” Arthur opened his mouth to interject, “Yes, I know, I’m saying that it’s possible that we live in the better timeline, and you want to know whether I expect it to be better on average, and what I’m saying is that I don’t know what the impacts would be. I don’t really subscribe to the ‘great man’ theory of history, it’s all structural forces and background effects, so … no, I don’t kill baby Hitler. And I don’t think that we should kill this demon baby.”

“Classic mistake,” said Reimer, shaking his head.

“It’s the lawful good way,” said Arthur with a nod.

“It’s not actually a demon,” I muttered. It was a penadran, a custom creature that they’d spent the evening slaughtering their way through, more like a spider-dragon than it was a demon.

“I don’t think that’s lawful good,” said Tiff. “I’m not saying ‘don’t kill baby Hitler because there are laws against that kind of thing’, I’m saying don’t do it because it’s not the right thing to do.”

“So, good or chaotic good,” said Tom.

“The alignment system is braindead anyway,” said Reimer. “That’s why they got rid of it in 5E.”

“They didn’t get rid of it,” I replied.

“It’s gone in every way that matters,” said Reimer with a wave of his hand. “In 5E it’s just flavor, but here,” he said, jabbing his 3.5 edition character sheet, “It’s an actual, concrete thing. There are spells that detect it or protect from it. We could literally do the baby Hitler test, if we had a D&D time machine, and the universe would get us a definitive answer on whether or not that was an evil act.”

“Isn’t that a god thing?” asked Tom.

“No,” replied Arthur. “Gods only come into it where paladins are involved, and a few other corner cases. Reimer is right, at least within the context of the game.”

“So there’s an objective right answer to whether killing this baby demon is good, neutral, or evil?” Tiff asked, turning toward me.

“Technically, yes,” I said.

Tiff frowned. “Well that’s dumb.”
The effect, Goodly, wasn’t something that I could actually feel, and without the notification from the game, I wouldn’t have known it was there. I followed after the Abswifth as he went to sit down at his large desk, trying to think things over, and took a seat in one of the large chairs. Fenn sat beside me, crossing one leg over the other and resting her black-gloved hands on her knees in a mock-prim pose.

“Last night we were anonymously informed that an unregistered soul mage was set to visit Parsmont,” said the Abswifth. “We were given descriptions of four individuals, two of which are a match for the two of you. Further, we were given the glyph sequence, make, and model for a car that we were told would be approaching from the south-east, which matches the car you were seen entering the city in.” Fucking Fallatehr.

“Huh,” said Fenn, glancing at me. “And is there any reason that you felt compelled to believe any of this?”

“Frankly, I’m skeptical,” said the Abswifth. “However, the seriousness and specificity of the claims meant that some amount of investigation was warranted. You were watched by a warder for a brief period of time, long enough to confirm that the two of you hold numerous magic items, which raises the credibility of the report.”

“How would you know whether I was a soul mage one way or another?” I asked.

“We have a specialist, who will be meeting with you,” said the Abswifth. “I’ll be asking a few questions while he makes his way over.” He pulled a pen from on his desk and slid a piece of paper in front of him. The whole thing was surprisingly mundane, for a man in shining armor who supposedly had the power of a demigod. Aside from him dropping from the sky, I didn’t really know his abilities, but I wasn’t about to ask for a demonstration. “What are your names?” he asked.

“Are we under arrest?” asked Fenn.

“Technically, no,” replied the Abswifth without blinking. “You are in my custody for a duration of up to one week, with lodging and food provided to you by the city of Parsmont. At the end of one week, or sometime before that, at my discretion, you will be released, unless I bring charges against you. Despite your reticence in coming with me, I don’t intend to bring any charges against you, nor do I plan to exercise my right to extend custody to the full week.” He said this all in an even, practiced tone, which made him sound like a diligent civil servant, and almost made me like him.

“What would be the consequences if I were an unregistered soul mage?” I asked.

The Abswifth hesitated with his pen over the paper. “Are you?” he asked.

I was paying attention to my thought processes as he answered the question, trying my best to figure out whether the answers that I was going to give him were diverging from the answers that I would have given before having entered this room and gotten the status effect, whatever it was. I found myself wanting to tell him the truth, and found, on reflection, that the truth probably wasn’t what I would have given him if he had asked when we were going up in the elevator. And why did I want to tell him the truth? He seemed decent enough, he had the weight of Parsmont behind him, he was being kind when he didn’t have to be -- no, there were cynical explanations for his behavior too, but for some reason I didn’t want to jump to them, and that seemed unlike me.

“No, I’m not a soul mage, registered or otherwise,” I answered. I felt bad for lying to him, but I didn’t know anything about him, and besides that, this was a test, to see whether or not ‘Goodly’ allowed me to lie, or whether I was under some kind of zone of truth or Veritaserum type of deal (a terrifying and world-warping magic that showed up a lot in both tabletop games and Earth fiction,
but which Amaryllis hadn’t seemed to think existed). The lie went through easily enough, which answered that question. I didn’t want to lie, but I could.

The Abswifth frowned at me, then wrote down the answer on his paper. “And what are your names?”

“Samuel Sterling,” I said, another lie I had to consciously think about, which came with a skill up notification that I kept myself from reacting to. It was possible that the mystery informant had given another name, but I wasn’t going to sweat that.

(The problem was that the wanting didn’t come from nowhere, there was a train of thought that led up to it. Telling the truth seemed like the best way forward, the way that would get me the results that I wanted. I could feel faith in the goodness of people where no such feeling had been before, and when I questioned that faith, I felt myself thinking that even if others wouldn’t commit to that same level of disclosure, I should be an exemplar of truth, because without someone to step forward, the whole world might get caught in a circular firing squad of defection from good. The only reason to lie was that this was what I would have done before coming into this room -- and, in fact, had planned to do well beforehand.)

“Eliana Sterling,” said Fenn, with only a brief glance in my direction. “We’re not going to be put on some ledger somewhere, never to escape the wandering eye of the bureaucrats, are we?” she asked. The worry in her voice was amazing, the perfect picture of someone who was more concerned about an ongoing bureaucratic nightmare than having done anything wrong. She was far better at lying than I was.

“There will be a record of this meeting, for the purposes of accountability,” said the Abswifth. “It won’t go into general circulation, nor will it be available to the police of Parsmont, unless there’s something that they need to see. Again, I’d like to let the both of you know that I have no plans to bring charges against you, even for minor crimes I might discover in the course of this interview.”

“Why not?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

“It’s in the interests of Parsmont that people are willing to come in for questioning,” said the Abswifth. “There are cities and countries in which the police will slap every fine and penalty they can think of against someone who does not cooperate, as a way of strong-arming people into giving up names or information, or simply to fill the coffers. I don’t believe that to be sound in the long term, nor do I believe it to be Good.” He said the last word like good was some concrete, physical thing.

“You never answered the question of what would happen to me if I were an unregistered soul mage,” I said.

“And you’re not?” asked the Abswifth.

“No,” I replied. I think the lie came out better that time, and I got another skill-up for it, which still left me far below the bonus that I was getting from Fenn’s Symbiosis passive. “I’m worried that whatever method you’re going to use to determine whether I’m a soul mage is going to be wrong, which would leave me without a way to contest it.”

“There are multiple levels of screening,” said the Abswifth. “Not all of them have the potential for error. At a certain level, you would be extradited into the custody of the Empire of Common Cause, at which point I would have no authority over the situation.”

“Just for my own understanding,” I said, “Do you know what happens to unregistered soul mages,
once they’re in the clutches of the Empire?”

“I’m not an expert, by any means,” said the Abswifth. “You will be granted counsel, in the event that you’re lying to me and you fail the screening tests, or if you fail the screening tests for some unforeseen reason. The traditional penalty is death, but it’s my understanding that this is often waived in lieu of forfeiture of talent, especially if there’s cooperation on the part of the mage in uncovering where the unauthorized learning came from.”

“I see,” I replied, feeling my blood run cold. The Abswifth might be polite, and he seemed like a decent enough person, but my life was on the line, especially because the only information I had to give up would lead back to Fallatehr, and I was fairly sure that I wouldn’t get any slack for giving him up, given that I had broken him out of prison. I tried to think about the different tacks I might take to get out of this situation, but I didn’t know what kind of specialist they were calling in for the first screening, nor what kind of magic that specialist would be working in order to diagnose me. There were lines of argument that I didn’t think would work, especially given that I had no idea how close Parsmont’s legal system was to America’s.

“Why did you come to Parsmont?” asked the Abswifth. He was making an effort to smile, which I normally would have taken as manipulation. Instead, I felt like it was probably him attempting to lighten a somewhat tense situation.

“We thought that it would be a place welcoming to strangers,” I said. “It’s somewhat famous for that.”

“Ironic, eh?” Fenn added. I was fairly sure that she was under the same effect I was, but she seemed to be handling it just fine. She hadn’t had forewarning like I did, but she was at least following my lead.

“Yet you arrived in the city by car,” said the Abswifth, “Not by train, not by teleportation key, but by car, and a car that’s registered within the city-state.”

“We were staying at a farmhouse in the country,” I replied. “The car belonged to the people that owned it, until a few days ago, when we bought it from them.” The truth was easier, as a general rule, especially since I thought they would probably have records that they could check against.

“And how did you get to that farmhouse?” asked the Abswifth.

“We drove,” I replied. “Up the Golden Highway, following the Pellmance River. Since you’re going to ask, our origin was Calhaim, but before that, we were in Anglecynn.” I watched as he wrote all that down and hoped that the map I’d looked at wasn’t too out of date. I was starting to form a plan, but I wasn’t sure it was a good one, and I kept having to check my logic against what I thought I would have done before coming into this room and being influenced by (presumably) an arbitrary definition of good forced on me by the tower.

“You changed cars, when you arrived to the farmhouse?” asked the Abswifth, his pen still moving across the page.

“Yes,” I replied.

“And the two others that were with you, they’re at that farmhouse now?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “They went somewhere else. I don’t know exactly where.” I hesitated, trying to go through my line of thinking again, weighing what his reaction might be. “One of them is a dwarf, originally from the clan of Darili Irid, no one of much importance. The other is Princess Amaryllis
Penndraig, the closest direct descendant of Uther Penndraig and a recent political exile from her home country. I would like to formally request asylum on her behalf.”

“Well, that’s pretty ballsy, I’ll give you that,” muttered Fenn.

The Abswifth eyed me. “I see,” he said. “Obviously that would create a great deal of complications for Parsmont,” he said. “The Empire of Common Cause would have to be involved, and it’s always been the policy of Parsmont to keep their involvement to a minimum, where possible.” He tapped his pen on the paper as he watched me. I noted that his pen had stopped moving when I’d said Amaryllis’ name, which I took as a good sign. “Were you planning on requesting asylum before coming to this tower?”

“No,” I replied. “If you hadn’t stopped us in the street, we probably would have used Parsmont as a waystation. However, I’m her primary protection, and if I’m going to be detained for up to a week—”

“It’s blackmail then,” said the Abswifth, setting down his pen. “You’re blackmailing me, in the Tower of Probity.”

“It’s not blackmail,” I said carefully. “The princess is in danger, real danger, which we could better handle by staying as hidden as possible. Failing that, it is imperative that she be protected by as strong a governmental apparatus as possible, and in this case, that means the city-state of Parsmont, which will need to interface with the Empire of Common Cause. That’s not blackmail, to state what I see as my options.”

I knew that I was threatening him with a political nightmare, given that Parsmont had always had a somewhat tenuous relationship with the Empire, which was one of the reasons that we had come here. The only real question was whether his response would be to throw the princess to the wolves, but I couldn’t imagine that being popular, which was something he was worried about, and it wasn’t like I was offering her up.

I felt bad for the Abswifth, because it didn’t seem like he deserved it. There were people outside the walls around the tower, protesting against him, and others who were willing to throw their vote my way without knowing anything about me except that I was in opposition to him. And why? My guess was that it was the vote and the tribalism that came with it. The fact that the city pitted its two rulers against each other was bound to result in something like this. I wasn’t certain that the other tower radiated evil, but if it did, that explained a fair amount of the tension between the Abswifth and the Bendon.

“You’ve put me in a difficult position,” said the Abswifth. “And at times like this, I always feel the need to reflect on what is best for Parsmont.” Well, shit. “It would not do for this city to get wrapped up in an international struggle, not even a brief one that saw your princess transferred to another willing country for more permanent asylum. Nor would it do for the Abswifth to ignore a warning because it was politically convenient, especially not if there were publically available information to that effect.”

I paused. “Ah. You’re worried that we wouldn’t keep our mouths shut.”

“Someone informed on you, whether you’re an unregistered soul mage or not,” said the Abswifth. “If I were to let you go without further inquiries, because I viewed that as being in the best interests of Parsmont, what do you think would happen next?”

“They’d talk to the press, or maybe the Bendon,” I replied. “And if they did, some kind of accusations would be thrown around, which would result in either you having to lie, which is morally indefensible—” I caught myself, but in catching myself, realized that was a mistake. “Which
carries its own costs to you, and therefore Parsmont.”

“You’ve noticed the tower’s effects,” said the Abswifth. “You were lying about soul magic, and possibly also about where you came from. Maybe even about your names. If the tower were in its prime, you wouldn’t have been able to resist -- but alas.” He shifted his papers around, looking over the notes he had taken. “The effects of the tower are a poorly-kept secret, and one whose effects are often overstated. However, it works better on the evil than the good, and I am sorely tempted to count your ability in navigating the tower’s compulsions in your favor.” He looked up at us.

“But?” I asked.

“I’m given to understand that soul mages are capable of eradicating their own ability in the art,” said the Abswifth. He tapped his pen against the paper in front of him. “I believe it would allow you to pass the first screening, or perhaps the second, in perhaps two hours’ time, after which you would be free to leave.”

“You’re asking him to erase a part of himself,” said Fenn.

“The tower does not look kindly on it,” nodded the Abswifth. I could feel that, an instinctive recoiling within myself at the idea, but it was faint, almost non-existent, because soul magic wasn’t actually a part of me. “But no, I am not asking anything, only, as you said, stating what I see as your options. I don’t know for certain whether you’re a soul mage or not, but if there are only lingering indications that you once practiced soul magic, that would be enough for me to allow you to leave. It would, naturally, be in your best interests to leave Parsmont with all due haste.”

“Okay,” I nodded, breathing a slight sigh of relief. I didn’t actually know how to reduce a skill, but I was sure as hell going to try to figure it out within the next few hours. My chest still wasn’t fixed, and I wasn’t going to give up soul magic, obviously, but resetting back to zero, if I could manage that, was a setback that would be measured in hours, not the years that the Abswifth thought. “Thank you for being forthright, and I’m sorry for the problems we might have caused.”

“I’m going to take a nap,” I said, then closed my eyes and shut out the world.

I didn’t like meddling with my soul. I hadn’t liked it even before coming into the tower, but the Goodly effect seemed to be exerting some power, at least insofar as I was capable of comparing how I had thought about soul magic before. I was thankful that I was a somewhat introspective person, which made that part of this a little bit easier.

I went into the Essentialism skill right away, but there didn’t seem to be any kind of mechanism available to lower the skill. I knew there was at least one sure-fire way to do it, which would be to remove the skill entirely, but I had a limited number of skill changes available to me under the most liberal reading of the rules, and I wasn’t confident that the liberal reading was the right one, so I had to put an asterisk next to ‘sure-fire’. Essentialism was slowly ticking up though, which meant that it might just be a matter of time and practice before I was able to access new abilities. Level 10 of Essentialism hadn’t given me a virtue (something I had to annoyingly go out of the soul to check, given that the soul didn’t seem to have them listed anywhere), which meant that I was almost certainly going to get one at level 20.

I moved away from the floating rows of skills, toward my values, at the one labeled ‘Level Up’. I had been putting this off, for fear of touching and breaking something in my soul in a way that I couldn’t easily undo, but I had managed to repair my hand, and I was feeling a little more confident. My biggest worry in changing the value was that I didn’t actually know what ‘Level Up’ meant, in a concrete sense.
Obviously I valued the ever-increasing feeling of transcendental joy that accompanied the level ups, but each one also raised the caps on my skills in addition to making me into a better version of myself. Were both of those things part of the listed value? The value didn’t seem to point anywhere, or have a definition of ‘Level Up’, at least so far as I could see. If it did encompass both those aspects, then it was also possible that it was linked to a few other, less obvious ones. Leveling up was a path to power, and maybe the values were taking that into account. The more I leveled up, the more likely I was to see Arthur again.

I didn’t feel like an addict. Amaryllis agreed that increasing my power was the smartest thing that we could be doing. Was there an argument to be made that I really should be valuing leveling up above everything else? I thought there likely was, but it was a weak argument, given that there weren’t a cluster of other values sitting up there with the people that were important to me. I didn’t even value my own life that highly.

I was stalling. I could feel myself stalling. Part of it was the idea that my soul was a sacred thing that would doom me forever if I meddled with it, which I was sure was just the tower talking given that I didn’t really hold anything as sacred, and had meddled with my soul earlier in the day. But another part of the hesitation was the knowledge that lowering the value marked ‘Level Up’ might mean that I wouldn’t get to level up as quickly, that I might stall and contemplate when the time came to complete a quest, or exercise caution in a way that would delay the next blast of pleasure as warm light enveloped me.

I shifted the number down as soon as I was able to work up the will to do it, and it got easier as I went. My view of the values was pegged to ‘Level Up’, so I saw it slide past other values as I reduced it, past all of my high school friends, past fandoms, beyond memories I cherished so much they were explicitly named. I stopped when it was between ‘Mint Chocolate Chip Ice Cream’ and ‘The Chronicles of Narnia’, and watched it carefully.

It ticked upward, moving so it was just below ‘Mountain Rush’, which was Shasta’s knock-off version of Mountain Dew, and after what felt like a minute (but might have been more, given how time seemed to get lost in the soul) ticked up again, placing it below ‘Arkwell’s Fantasium’, a book I hadn’t finished. Its progress was slow, and the values here were small ones, fine-grained and plentiful, but it was still going up, inexorably.

Obviously that was a problem, but it confirmed something that Fallatehr had said. Changes would revert, given time. I could lower the value of ‘Level Up’, but even with it lowered, I could still remember how it had felt. I suspected that Fallatehr wasn’t telling the whole truth, and that there were methods of alteration that would leave someone in a stable state that wouldn’t revert, because it was possible to look at and presumably alter memories, even if the interface for that seemed lacking. Even then, there might be other parts of the soul that would need to be changed, unless the soul itself didn’t actually contain everything there was that made up a person. Still, I had a solution that I could re-apply at regular intervals, which was another weight off my shoulders.

I took a brief moment to remember that I had a body out there, with muted sensations coming from it, but that was practically old-hat by now, and I was in the same position I had been in when I started. I could hear conversation, but only enough to know that it was going on, and even then it slipped away, lost on its way to me. Fenn was talking to the Abswith, and I had to trust her to do the talking, even under the influence, if I wanted the escape the Abswith had offered me.

I was pleased to see Essentialism hovering at 19, and even more pleased when the number switched over to 20. It seemed like a shame to lose all that progress, but at least Essentialism was easier to hit the soft cap on than some of the others. I backed away from the skill and began looking for obvious changes, though I was going to have to leave the soul entirely to see what the virtue was. I found the
change readily enough though; beside my body (as seen by my soul) were thirteen numbers, each with a three-letter signifier by it. Even without checking, I could feel that there was some give to them; these were my abilities, PHY, MEN, SOC, now here in the second character sheet, but this time, alterable.

I blinked back into the real world (such as it was) and looked from Fenn to the Abswifth, who were both looking at me.

“It’s done?” asked the Abswifth.

“Not just yet,” I replied, closing my eyes. “Do we have time?” I asked as I waited for the character sheet to come up.

“A little,” replied the Abswifth.

The new virtue was called ‘Soul Slip’, and the description was fairly vague. All it said was that I would be able to make new modifications and trade-offs within the soul, and alter that which had been unalterable, which wasn’t very helpful at all, given how expansive the soul was. I opened my eyes and looked at the Abswifth again.

“I’m going to take another nap,” I said.

I was faster this time, zeroing in on the Essentialism skill. This time the option was there right away, not a visible bit of text or a button to press, but a notional control that presented itself to me when I looked at the number. I stared at it for a moment, trying to think about whether there was anything that I would want to do before setting myself back by twenty levels.

I wondered whether this was all part of the plan, either by Fallatehr or the Dungeon Master. It wasn’t quite outrageous to think that Fallatehr would implicate me as a soul mage, hoping that the end result would be that I would remove the ability from myself to avoid implication and reset all my progress in the meantime. There were variables that he had no control over, and information that he wouldn’t have had access to, but those were dice he might have rolled. I still couldn’t see the endgame for him, unless he was hoping that I would damage my soul in such a way that only he could fix. At most, it would take me two days to get back where I had been, and I doubted it would even take that long.

I followed the lines to Amaryllis and Fenn, giving each of them a quick check, just to make sure that nothing was out of place. I spent more time on Amaryllis, because she was in the most danger, and with soul magic temporarily gone, it would take some time before I could check on her again.

Everything seemed fine though, at least as far as I could tell. When I looked at Fenn I saw that name, Nellan, again and felt a slight stab of jealousy, but her soul had not noticeably changed, even with the effects of the tower upon us.

I went back to my own soul and pushed Essentialism down to zero, all in a single motion, worried that if I tried to do it in measured steps I would lose the ability to do it at all. When the motion was complete, I found myself back in the real world, staring at the Abswifth.

“The specialist will be arriving shortly,” said the Abswifth. “If you are a soul mage, the nature of my help will by necessity be quite different, and I must again offer the warning that my power does not extend far beyond Parsmont.”

“We’ll see what the specialist has to say,” I replied.

As if on cue, the elevator began to move.
The inspection took half an hour, during which the Abswifth sat silently and watched. My inspector was a tall lizardfolk, with pupils that blobbed out in three directions and seemed to spin whenever he squinted, which was often. I was surprised that the Abswifth was willing to spend so much time with Fenn and I, given the importance of his position, but I supposed the situation was a delicate one, and given the reaction I’d seen people give him as we moved through the streets, I couldn’t say that I would blame him for wanting a bit of time in relative solitude at the top of the tower.

“He was a soul mage, once,” said the lizardman, with his forked tongue snaking from his mouth. “He has no skill, at the moment.”

“You’re sure?” asked the Abswifth.

“Sure, for now,” said the lizardman.

“Thank you,” said the Abswifth with a curt nod. “That comports with their official story.”

“There is something else,” said the lizardman. “He is a mage, four times over, of some skill.”

The Abswifth frowned. “His race is human?”

“Yes, and always has been,” replied the lizardman. “His age is seventeen.”

The Abswifth nodded. “Thank you, you may leave.”

The lizardman gave each of us a bow, so deep his nose almost touched the floor, then trundled back toward the elevator. I wondered what he got paid for a service like that, but I bet that it was exorbitant.

“I have questions,” said the Abswifth. “But they are ones that I feel I would probably be better off not knowing the answers to, for your safety, mine, and for the people of Parsmont.” He placed his hands on the table and stood up, which let a ray of light hit his shining armor in a way that I was ready to believe he’d practiced. “This business is concluded,” he said. “The anonymous report we were given was obviously based on false information, and you have, as yet, threatened no harm to the city of Parsmont. That is where we will leave it. The sooner you leave the city, the better. If the people who gave us that anonymous tip give us another, there will be less consideration for your circumstances on my part.”

“May we never meet again,” said Fenn with a nod. I couldn’t help but see that as tempting fate.
“Well that was fucking horrifying,” said Fenn as we walked through the plaza outside the tower.

“What part?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I’d basically been threatened with death, but the Abswift had seemed reasonable enough. “Did he say something to you while I was under? Actually, we should probably hold off until we’re somewhere private, if he was to be believed about lip readers and eavesdroppers.”

Fenn frowned, looking at the gates, and the crowds beyond them. “We’re leaving Parsmont?” she asked. “This whole adventure has put us well behind schedule. Mary’s probably worried sick.”

“We’re leaving,” I nodded, glancing at the black tower, not all that far away from us. “I’m worried that the other shoe is going to drop before we do, but we’ll try our best to escape. We’re going to have to abandon the car, since they had eyes on us from the moment we came to town, and they had the better part of three hours—”

“Four hours,” said Fenn.

“More than enough time to do whatever they wanted with the car,” I said. “I don’t really know the state of surveillance devices in this neck of the woods, but I’m not going to bet against them being small enough to hide in the car, or on our ability to find them, considering that I know nothing about cars.”

“I might have something at the end of my sleeve,” said Fenn, wiggling her gloved fingers.

Guards opened the gates for us, and then it was an uncomfortable press of people, many of them asking questions. I answered the first of those questions with, “No comment” and then that became my litany as Fenn and I moved away from the tower. Only a few of them followed us, and even then, not for too long, though we had our pictures taken a few more times, which I didn’t enjoy in the slightest. Eventually they lost interest, and we slipped into side alleys a few times, trying to make sure that we didn’t have a tail, though that wasn’t an area of expertise for either of us.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked Fenn as soon as we thought we were clear. She’d changed hats, and pulled out light coats for both of us to wear, changing our appearance just enough that we might seem like different people on casual observation.

“Oh no,” said Fenn. “Don’t you put planning on me, you’re the one that’s got all the planning duties in this relationship, I’m just along for the ride, and to shoot things when they bother you.”

“I meant, what did you have in your glove that we could use instead of a car?” I asked as we approached the outskirts of the city, where the roads were wider. We had at least half an hour to get back to where Mary and Grak were going to be waiting for us, if they were still there. I wasn’t sure whether she would stay put or move, once we failed to show up. The plan was for our trip into Parsmont to not take longer than three hours, including the travel time, meaning that by the time we reached them, we’d be a few hours overdue. Amaryllis had a streak of pragmatic paranoia to her, but I didn’t actually know what her response would be.

Fenn held out her hand, fingers spread, and a very familiar-looking motorcycle appeared in front of us, its tank made of glass and full of souls.

“XC-class soulcycle?” I asked, staring at it.
“That’s what Mary said,” replied Fenn. “I stole it back in Cranberry Bay, Mary bypassed the ignition when we were still in the bottle.”

“Huh,” I said. “Just the one?” I resisted the urge to ask her how long she’d been sitting on this particular asset, which might have come out as accusatory. *Unspoken plans, made without me.*

“Crime of opportunity,” replied Fenn, seeming to misunderstand the nature of my question. “We’ve got the money to buy more of them, if we really wanted to burn the resources.”

“No, it’s fine,” I replied. “We can’t pick up Mary and Grak in that thing, but they’ll have, ah, other means of conveyance, if they’re where we left them.”

“Except she won’t want to use it, because it’s our ‘most valuable asset,’” replied Fenn, hopping onto the soulcycle. “You’re fine with my driving?”

“Lead the way,” I replied, slipping into the seat behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist.

The soulcycle that Amaryllis and I had gone through the Risen Lands with had seven souls in the tank, and didn’t move all that fast. This one was full-up, and Fenn was pushing it nearly to its limits, weaving in and out of traffic. She might have stolen the soulcycle for us, but she hadn’t stolen helmets, or if she had, she hadn’t offered them up. We slipped through traffic, sometimes splitting lanes, until I finally tapped her on the shoulder when we were still a few miles from the woods we’d dropped Amaryllis and Grak off at.

“What’s up?” she asked as she pulled over to the shoulder. I got off the soulcycle, and she followed suit, stretching out in a way that I found unexpectedly alluring.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said. “We’re late, and late enough that more time probably isn’t going to make the difference. I still have soul magic unlocked, which means that I should still be able to get into my soul, but the skill is at zero, which means that I’m a bit hampered. Here, now, while we have the time, I’d like to level it up a bit, and then check on Amaryllis so that I don’t have to find some excuse to do it if or when we meet up with her, because Grak still doesn’t know about the soul link.”

“I would have agreed with far fewer words on your part,” said Fenn. “Take whatever time you need, my big worry is running out of daylight, and I can just slap you if that starts to be an issue.”

“You’re so lovely,” I replied with a smile.

Fenn grinned at me. “You still owe me that date, don’t think that going up a terrifying white tower counts.”

“Terrifying?” I asked. “I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn, looking away. “I’ve been thinking about that, a bit, what you said earlier, the confusion on your face.” She swallowed. “From what I gathered, the tower made us good, didn’t it?”

“Kind of,” I shrugged. “Maybe it’s more like it nudged our thoughts in one direction.”

“I hated myself,” said Fenn, still looking away from me. “Not me as I was in the moment, up there in the tower with you, but the person I was in the past. I kept thinking about the person I’d been, things I’d stolen, people I’d killed, thoughts I’d had, and it just … filled me with this disgust and horror.” I slipped closer to her, and held her hand, which she responded to by stepping in toward me and giving me a kiss on the lips. “It was a real slap to the face, I’ll tell you that -- when I was working my way through the justice system of Anglecynn, before I got sent to prison, I’d always felt this
contempt for the way people looked at me, the pity of the judges, the condescension of the lawyers, even my own lawyer, the guards, the clerks, I’d always gotten some looks for being half-elf, I’ve been spat on more times than I can count—"

“Spat on?” I asked. “I’m going to claim some cultural ignorance here, but that seems -- well, like people are fucking assholes.”

“Okay, spat on three times, I actually can count those, but spat at more than I can count, usually they’re just spitting toward the ground, it’s -- not the point, at all,” she said. “The point is, going through the system, and being in jail, there was this specific way that people looked at me, like I was a bad person, and I thought they were just smelling their own farts, you know?”

I laughed at that, and she gave me a smile that faded quickly.

“Up there in that tower, I understood them. I empathized with them. I was them, I was like this outside observer looking back over my own life and thinking, ‘holy shit, I’m a bad person’. You were doing most of the talking, and I was trying to follow your lead, but once I started down memory lane it seemed like every stop I made I was just … evil.” She breathed a sigh. “And a part of me didn’t want to leave the tower, because I thought I would just return to being evil again, so I had to make up my mind then and there that I would commit myself to the path of good, instead of being evil, but it slipped away even as we were going down the elevator.”

“You’re not evil,” I said. “I’d call you chaotic neutral, maybe.”

“That’s a D&D thing?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Well,” said Fenn, plowing on. “The thing I was thinking about as we were driving was, you didn’t seem to feel the same way, and I realized that you’re probably just a better person than I am, with less to answer for.”

“I’ll be honest,” I replied.

“See?” interrupted Fenn. “Already showing that you’re good.”

I shook my head. “I just wasn’t really thinking about the past,” I replied. “I’ve got stuff to answer for, maybe not as serious as you do, but back on Earth, by the standards of the town I lived in, I … yeah, I was bad, especially after,” I licked my lips. “After Arthur. I was mean, I hurt people, not just in the way I destroyed all my friendships, but actually, physically hurt people because I thought it would feel good, and it did feel good.” I looked down at my hands, remembering how much my knuckles had hurt as I sat in the police station after having attacked Victor Clark. “But I didn’t think about any of that in the tower, which I think is why I didn’t experience what you did, and even if I had … I’m not really that person anymore. I mean even before I came to Aerb, I’d more or less hit rock bottom and was starting to claw my way back, like I’d gotten the evil out of my system, and that feeling of hating myself and feeling disgust at what I’d done, thinking it was evil -- I’ve felt that way for a while, it wouldn’t have been new.”

“And the things you’ve done on Aerb?” asked Fenn. “Aumann and his people? Hell, we killed Fireteam Blackheart together, you dropped half of them down an elevator shaft, and even before you got to Silmar City, you and Amaryllis left a trail of bodies. It was kill or be killed, I get that, but …” She stopped. “I’m not saying that you’re a bad person.” She looked toward the sun and frowned. “I’m sorry, I don’t want you to feel like I’m attacking you, but I just don’t really get how to reconcile our different experiences of the tower. And we don’t really have time for that.”
“You’re right, I need to be grinding Essentialism back up,” I replied. “But … I think I know the answer to why our experiences were different.”

“Because I’m evil?” asked Fenn with a forced laugh.

“The interesting thing about the Tower of Good wasn’t that it made us think good thoughts or whatever, it was that it attached lines of thought to them,” I replied. “I wasn’t just thinking that I shouldn’t lie, I was thinking about the reasons behind it, which were different from what I would have come up with on my own. It wasn’t just morals, it was some kind of moral framework, including at least some small amount of reasoning behind it.”

Fenn frowned. “So the difference between us--”

“I’m a utilitarian,” I replied. “Moral philosophy isn’t my forte, but Arthur liked the subject enough that he set himself to playing devil’s advocate--”

“Playing what?” asked Fenn, her frown deepening.

“Fucking idioms,” I replied. “He liked to argue, maybe more than he ever liked anything else in his life, and that was one of the best things about him, in part because he could come up with some really, really entertaining arguments that he would put a lot of thought into. A lot of the time he argued from a position that he didn’t really agree with -- he thought that was best practice if you wanted to actually understand the world -- and, anyway, he was always pitting himself against me, trying to get me to declare a moral position that he could attack against.” Looking back, it was probably more fun for him than for me, but part of being a friend was working to indulge each other’s eccentricities.

“So you’re saying that you’ve thought a lot about good and evil,” said Fenn, still frowning.

“I’m saying … nothing that the tower was telling me was really new,” I replied. “I’m not a great utilitarian, and maybe I would even say I’m a bad one, but I’ve at least grappled with the questions for long enough to know that’s the thing that makes the most sense to me. So this other way of seeing things comes into my head, temporarily replacing what was there, and there was a dissonance. But for you …” I shrugged. I didn’t want to blame her for being apathetic about right and wrong, but it seemed to me that the tower would get more powerful if it applied its effect against someone who was untested.

“I didn’t have defenses against it,” replied Fenn with a nod, her frown finally vanishing. “Huh.”

“Just a theory,” I replied.

“Yeah, but it makes sense,” she replied. She squared her shoulders. “Okay, that makes me feel a lot better. Go inside your soul and relearn the lessons, then let’s get on the road.”

And that was where I ran into problems.

“It’s been half an hour,” said Fenn, glancing at the sun. “Feels like longer. We might have to just say fuck it and try to get you to reacquire it later on.”

“I should be able to do it,” I replied. “The skill is unlocked and sitting at 0, the character sheet confirms that, unlocked should mean that I’m able to go into my soul and start the leveling process.” I frowned at my hands, which weren’t really part of the process of soul-diving, but definitely were available to frown at. “Do you have pencil and paper in your glove?”
Fenn rolled her eyes, because of course she had pencil and paper in there. She had them in my hands in a hurry, and I bent down next to the soulcycle so that I would have a hard surface.

“Whatcha doing?” asked Fenn.

“Drawing,” I replied, glancing at her briefly for reference. Curve of the throat going to the chin, curve of the chin going to the lips, her nose, cheeks, eyes, quick dots for freckles, hair longer than when we first met, noticeably so -- I stepped back and held up the drawing, looking at it. It was flawed and done in a hurry, with poor materials, but it did look like her, at least a little bit.

“You’re testing your skill,” said Fenn. “Trying to see what’s left when a skill says that it’s been reduced to zero?”

“Yeah,” I replied, frowning at the picture of Fenn. “And obviously I still do have some faculty with it … I was going to say that I retained all the ability I had on Earth, but I was never that great at drawing people. I thought this was going to turn out terribly.”

“And you didn’t think to ask whether I was any good at art?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow.

It took a moment for what she was saying to sink in, and when it did, I slapped my forehead.

“Symbiosis,” I said. “I’m an idiot.”

“It’s not something I’ve really brought up,” said Fenn. “Training under the elves, not terribly pleasant.”

“I saw it when I looked at your soul,” I replied. “It wasn’t high enough that I really noted it, you’re good at a lot of things.”

“Why thank you,” said Fenn with a smile. “But whatever you were trying to figure out, I doubt the art thing is helpful.”

“No, it’s not,” I said with a sigh. “It’s like I can remember all the things that Fallatehr said to me about the soul, and I can remember working my way through it, but none of it actually makes sense to me anymore. It was a key that opened the door, and now that key doesn’t work anymore. I don’t even recognize it as a key. That … doesn’t make sense.”

“Fallatehr said that soul mages removed skills from people before they were put into prison, didn’t he?” asked Fenn. “Kind of makes sense that a blood mage couldn’t just think back to all the lessons they took in order to get their power back.”

“It doesn’t make sense though,” I replied. “Memory isn’t actually … Earth memory isn’t this static thing, each time you remember something, you’re remembering the remembrance of it, you’re taking the file out of the filing system and then Xeroxing it before putting it back, but with a Xerox -- it’s a copying machine -- a Xerox that’s imperfect in ways that corrupt sensibly, rather than insensibly.”

“Sure,” replied Fenn, with an arched eyebrow.

“So what’s stopping me from repeating Fallatehr’s lesson to you, and then having you repeat it back to me?” I asked.

“Wanna try it?” asked Fenn. “We’re so far behind schedule I think the biggest worry should be that Amaryllis is going to go back to the farmhouse, not that I think she would do that. I was around for a fair amount of discussion.”

So we tried that. I gave her the metaphor that Fallatehr had given me, of the soul as a comprehensive
book, and she gave me that lesson back, tweaked slightly to her own understanding, and from her own worldview. She thought of the soul as artistry, perhaps because our previous conversation had called that to mind, and to her way of thinking, if you wanted to represent something, there were certain things that you had to have, and others that you could skip over, but it was fractal.

“So, like, the cheek.” said Fenn, pointing to her own cheek, then down at the paper. “What you have here is enough to show the cheek on the face, but it’s not enough to show the cheek by itself, because you’re missing features. Eventually you get down to a level where you’ve said all you needed to say, and the picture you’ve painted is indistinguishable from reality, even though it’s not actually as complex as reality.”

I frowned, because I wasn’t sure that she was actually saying the same thing as Fallatehr said, but his metaphor wasn’t perfect either, and I really wanted to have soul magic back again before we were face to face with the master soul mage.

“Try the meditation thing,” replied Fenn.

And incredibly, it worked. I was back within my soul in a matter of minutes, and when I went over to my skills, I could see Essentialism start silently ticking up again, just from being in my soul. Wary of getting caught by the soul trance twice, I tried to keep the need to leave in my head while going over to my values, adjusting the ‘Level Up’ value back down from where it had risen to, then left my soul once again.

“That shouldn’t have worked,” I said.

“But it did,” replied Fenn. “Isn’t that what’s important?”

“It implies some important things, I think,” I replied. “Reducing a skill doesn’t remove the memories of having learned and used that skill, but it does somehow affect the actual procedural memory, or … something. It’s fucked up. It also means that I can’t use the trick of becoming not a soul mage too many times, which was already a really lame superpower.”

“Superpower is like … the Flash or Spider-Man?” asked Fenn. She had, by necessity, become something of a scholar of pop culture.

“And I’m Captain Not-a-Soul-Mage, endowed with the awesome power of being able to not be a soul mage,” I replied, smiling to myself.

“You are so lucky you’re cute,” replied Fenn. “But if the soul powers are back, then we really should be going, because I’m sure our Mary is lonesome.”

The sun had nearly set, which meant that we were probably going to be driving toward her in the dark, and she would be expecting a car, not a soulcycle. “I didn’t check her, just came right back out, didn’t want to get stuck again,” I said.

“Check her,” replied Fenn. “No use taking chances. If you get stuck, we lose more time, but we’ve already fucked the schedule.”

I did as she said, diving back into my soul, tracing along the line toward Amaryllis, and glancing away from her body to make me feel better about the intrusive act of gazing on her soul. I looked at her values, going through the twenty highest and seeing that they were all as I remembered them, then pulling up a selection of keywords, the ones that I thought Fallatehr would probably use if he had been monkeying around. The big problem was that values seemed to be fractal, some of them containing the others, and if Fallatehr were clever, with enough time, he might be able to hide
something somewhere.

If it were me, I would probably have tried to jigger it so that lots of component Juniper-parts were highly valued, while trying to leave the actual “Juniper” value low, depending on how that worked. There were also controls on the values that could probably be tinkered with, trying to overload one of the numbers in order to cause behaviors that you wouldn’t expect unless you were an expert. Maybe at the height of the Second Empire, when there was a cabal of soul mages, they had established patterns of detection, subversion, counter-subversion, etc., but I was ignorant of what those patterns might be.

It wouldn’t be impossible to partially reconstruct them from scratch though, given that I had access to no less than three souls, but there were issues with that, both ethical and practical. If I tried to figure everything out without actually modifying anything, it might take a really long time to reach any proper conclusion, but --

I felt a slap on my cheek pulled myself out right away, my sword expanding from its ring form to make a blade almost as a matter of habit before I looked at Fenn, who didn’t seem even remotely distressed.

“You were taking a really fucking long time,” she said.

“Sorry,” I said, rubbing my face. “Just a little bit more, slap me if it’s longer than, say, ten minutes.”

“Looking forward to it,” she replied.

So I dove back in, tracing my way to Amaryllis again, this time trying harder to be aware of the muted outside world. I made the rest of my scan, re-confirming her skills, then moving on to social modeling, where I could see her ideas about people. Fallatehr was there, the same as he was in my own soul, a little micro-soul, a model within a model. It was, in part, data about people, but it was also a measure of the prominence of that data, a picture of the way you thought about other people. For Amaryllis, Fallatehr’s potential to betray us loomed large, larger than I would have thought from talking to her, with his skill in essentialism the second most important thing about him, at least from her perspective. She didn’t appear to like him, and even her respect for him was pretty meager. None of that looked like tampering to me.

I was tempted to go looking deeper. There was a social model of me, visible in my periphery, but while there was an argument to be made that Fallatehr might have altered her perception of me, if he’d somehow gotten his hands on her, there was a stronger argument that soul magic didn’t give me the right to go snooping around, especially since there was no turnabout on her part, no ability to read my diary in the way that I would be reading hers. I already felt like reading her like this was an uncomfortably personal affair.

“She’s clean,” I said as I pulled out. “I take that as a good sign.”

Amaryllis was more or less where we’d left her, and less pissed off than I had thought she would be, which is to say that she was still visibly upset. She came out of the woods when we brought the soulcycle to a stop. Now that the sun had fallen, we were pretty conspicuously the only thing on the road.

“You’re late,” she said, looking down at the soulcycle. “Enemy action?”

“Yes,” I replied. I looked from her to Grak. “Things went well on your end?”

“Well enough,” grunted Grak. “The bottle is secure and well-lit. That’s a stop-gap measure.”
“What happened to you?” asked Amaryllis, looking at the soulcycle again with a frown.

“We got picked up by the Abswifth, who wanted to have a talk with us about … me being a soul mage, I guess,” I replied. “We went up the Tower of Probity, suffered through some mildly unpleasant mental fuckery that I wasn’t informed existed on Aerb, and then I removed my ability to do soul magic so that he could pretend that I was innocent.” I turned to Fenn. “I think that’s more or less it.”

“Where’s the car?” asked Amaryllis.

“Back in Parsmont, for the time being,” replied Fenn. “They could have put a bomb in it while we were indisposed.”

“Or a listening device, or tracking spell, or any number of things we couldn’t have checked,” I added with a shrug. “I’ll volunteer for a stint in the glove if we need to make our getaway by soulcycle, but I’m of the opinion that we could just teleport a few continents away.”

Amaryllis stared at me. “You think it was Fallatehr?” she finally asked.

“It had to have been,” I replied. “He was pretty fucking blatant about it. I’d call it cheeky, but I didn’t find it endearing. This was part of some plan of his, I’m not really sure what, but I don’t intend to find out if I can help it.”

“We can’t just leave him here,” said Amaryllis. She glanced over at Grak, then back to me. “You understand that he’s a powerful, illegal, soul mage who knows our names? That was part of the deal we made with him, so that we would have less of an incentive to defect.”

“Defection has occurred,” I replied with a shrug.

“And the damage he might cause?” asked Grak.

I frowned, trying to think back to the numbers on the values I’d seen in my head, trying to map how long it would take for ‘Level Up’ to reassert itself back at the top. A week? Two? Nothing had changed as far as the Grak situation was concerned. Valencia’s second warning about him had made it more likely that he was compromised, but I didn’t trust her very much, especially not given the fact she’d been speaking to me with a devil’s skills in deception.

“You still don’t trust me,” he said. He stepped back slightly. “That is probably wise on your part, given your information. What I say has merit though.”

“We broke him out, we’re somewhat responsible for him,” I said with a sigh. “‘Somewhat’ being the operative word there. And Valencia is still back there, and--” I wasn’t sure what she’d have gotten up to since I’d left, but I hoped that she was okay. The new version of her scared me, a little bit, but we couldn’t leave her. “Shit. Thoughts on how we approach this?” I paused. “Guns blazing?”

“No,” replied Amaryllis. “We still need him, especially if you don’t have access to your soul magic anymore.” She hesitated, then glanced at Grak, before looking back at me. “It’s gone completely?”

“Yes,” I replied. “For now.” The lie came out quickly and easily, which I guessed had to have been from half of Fenn’s considerable ability in the skill transferring over to me. I almost fucked it up by pausing, so that I could get my bearings and figure out why I’d lied on instinct, but I continued on without stumbling, and without looking at Fenn to see her reaction. “We can find a better teacher than Fallatehr though, one that can get me what I need without us having to watch our backs the entire time.” I looked at Grak. “Our ability to enforce trust is limited, that’s a handicap whether or not he’s actually up to something. That’s especially true now that I’m back to square one.”
Why the lie? It was easy to construct a reason, working backwards; Grak was a potential channel of information to Fallatehr, and if I could give Grak the wrong information, then Fallatehr would get the wrong information, and that might allow me to first confirm whether or not Grak had been turned against me, and second, give us some advantage in a confrontation with Fallatehr.

…but that was post-facto reasoning, not why I’d did it in the moment. Was it something subconscious? Or that my augmented mind rolled a high number somewhere and fed me the idea of lying? I tried not to stare at Amaryllis. I’d been lying to her, was that my original intent or a byproduct of keeping information from Grak?

The problem was, I was really good at creating good-sounding justifications for my actions. It was half of what I’d spent my time doing after Arthur had died, and it had that same feel, of grasping for some way that the thing I’d done for unclear, probably emotional reasons was actually the best possible thing that I could have done in the circumstances.

Shrug away from Tiff when she’s searching for comfort? Well, Arthur was my best friend, and if she felt a fraction of what I was feeling, maybe that would help her understand the pain I was in. Attack a kid at school because they said that Arthur’s death was part of God’s plan? Well, play stupid games, win stupid prizes, people should be punished for saying things like that, for not having an ounce of empathy, for worshipping a god that inflicts pain and death on someone like Arthur as part of some fucked up, unknowable plan. Every friend I’d driven away, every mean thing I’d said, the Fel Seed Incident, Maddie, all of it, there was always a way for me to make myself into a rational actor. Looking back, one of the worst things about that period of my life was that I almost constantly felt like I was right, through all the pain and sorrow that I felt, and inflicted on others, as I flailed around like a wounded animal, I was able to justify it to myself as the only thing that could be done.

It wasn’t a welcome feeling to return to.)

“You’re insistent on the non-anima being part of the group?” asked Amaryllis.

“Her name is Valencia,” I replied with a frown. I couldn’t tell whether she was trying to make a point or had just defaulted to her standard way of thinking. I’d gotten myself scattered and off-balance, which made it harder to think about that kind of thing. “But no, I don’t think that it would be wise to leave her behind. She has utility.”

“Does she?” asked Amaryllis, shifting her position slightly.

“We can discuss it later,” I replied. “I’m pretty sure that we both know where the other stands.” I hadn’t told her about the game glitch, or the new powers that Valencia apparently possessed, but I wasn’t about to do that in front of Grak, not when it seemed like we were about to go back to Fallatehr. I was a bit worried about her making a rash decision based on incomplete information, but had some hope that we had some time.

“So we’re going back to the farmhouse?” asked Grak. “Will we pretend nothing happened?”

“Seems like it,” I replied. I looked over at the soulcycle. “We have two seats, I think that Amaryllis and I should take them,” I said. That would give me some time alone with her. “That would leave Grak and Fenn to travel by glove.”

“I second that motion,” replied Fenn. She gave a short laugh. “Nothing I like better than traveling in a glove, Joon knows that, just me and an oxygen tank, getting to know each other.” She held out her hand, and one of the diver’s masks we’d gotten from the clonal kit appeared in it. She tossed it to Grak, who caught it with a frown.
“I get no vote?” he asked.

“Nope,” replied Fenn. “Even if you did get a vote, it’s three against one. Or two against two, with Joon as the tie breaker.” She glanced at me. “How did you get to be tiebreaker anyway?”

“Wit and charm,” I replied. I couldn’t help but notice that Amaryllis made no comment on the topic of a vote, and I thought back to what Fenn had said when we were first starting out, that she was worried Amaryllis and I would form an ironclad voting bloc. It hadn’t turned out that way, but looking at the dynamics as they stood, the group was starting to seem off-balance. With Valencia in the mix, I worried that it would be even worse.

Grak dutifully put on the mask, then waited patiently while Fenn rested a hand on him, and then he was gone, inside the glove. Fenn took another mask and tank out and put it on. She gave me a short little curtsey and then disappeared, leaving the glove, Sable, to fall to the ground. I picked it up and handed it to Amaryllis, who hesitated for a second before putting it on.

“Was there something you wanted to talk about in private?” she asked.

“Valencia,” I said. “She passed the loyalty threshold while we were in the basement. From what we were able to piece together, she had a way to use the devil’s abilities without actually being puppeted by it. She seems … powerful, I guess. Able to read me disconcertingly well, able to lie with impunity and not get caught. Not that—” I hesitated, wary of putting my foot in my mouth. “One of the things that I saw in your soul was your collection of skills. You’re good at Lying, I know you know that, you know I know that, I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I think Valencia’s better than you now, but I guess I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you stretch the art to its limits.”

“Or I did, and was so good that it passed you by,” said Amaryllis. “But you think she’s better?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I don’t know the limits of her power, the costs, the drawbacks, whatever else, but I wanted to read you in on that. Given the doubt around Grak, I didn’t think it was prudent to stop everything and tell you, because if we sent him away, he would know that something was up.”

“I don’t like it,” she said. “I don’t like being left out of the loop.”

“I know,” I replied. “There are ways that I could have done it better, more carefully, maybe we could have coordinated things before I went down there so I’d have a way to channel back without that channel being information on its own. I don’t know. I know that Valencia’s been a bit of a sticking point for you.”

“She has,” nodded Amaryllis. “I am willing to give her a chance.”

“She said that Grak was compromised,” I said. “Once she seemed fully in control of herself, she said that was the version of her story that was the truth. I’m not ready to place so much trust in her that I’m willing to remove him from the team, and even if she’s right, there might be some value in feeding false information back to Grak in an attempt to trip Fallatehr up … I don’t know, it’s a mess.”

“You had cause to believe he was compromised and sent me off with him anyway?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow. She didn’t seem angry, just curious.

“I knew you could handle yourself,” I replied with a shrug. “I knew that you would be on guard either way, that you wouldn’t let yourself slip just because it was uncertainty rather than concrete evidence. You’re the most competent person I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you,” replied Amaryllis. She looked at the soulcycle. “Should we get going?”
“Sure,” I replied. “Just like the good old days.”

She raised an eyebrow at that.

“Did you think that it was narrative?” I asked, gesturing at the soulcycle. “When Fenn showed it to you -- when I saw it, I thought it was a callback, rather than just chance, a lazy kind of nostalgia that I always liked to stick in my games. Kind of a, ‘hey, that thing from before’ type of deal.”

“You treat it all a little too flippantly sometimes,” said Amaryllis. She strode toward the soulcycle and examined it for a bit, then hopped on top of it and started it up. “Come on, let’s go.”

I climbed aboard and took the seat I’d had when we were driving through the Risen Lands, and in a way it really was like old times, driving down a stretch of road with little other traffic, just me and her.

When we got to the farmhouse, Fallatehr was waiting for us.
Amaryllis brought the soulcycle to a rest fifty feet from where Fallatehr stood, closer than I would have liked. He was basking under one of the farmhouse’s outside lights, smiling faintly at our arrival, that smile wide enough to reveal the sharp teeth in his mouth. I wasn’t frightened, per se, but I was wary. He had thrown the police my direction, and my guess was that having me cut myself off from my ability to use essentialism was a large part of the reason that he’d done that. I had to believe that removing the skill was what any soul mage would do, if faced with a sentence of death, and perhaps I would have done it even if the Abswifth and I hadn’t been able to come to such a tidy agreement. All the same, that didn’t feel like the full picture of what Fallatehr was planning.

Amaryllis stepped off the bike, gave me an uncharacteristically nervous glance, and then looked to Fallatehr as I dismounted.

“We need to have a private conversation, just the three of us,” she said to me, but voiced loud enough that Fallatehr was in no danger of not being able to hear her.

I looked at her, in her magical armor, short hair slightly unkempt from the wind of the soulcycle, then kept myself from glancing at the hilt stuck through a loop of leather at her side. I knew that it was there though. If she was compromised, then in a fight between the two of us, I was fairly sure that I was fucked, especially since my own armor was sitting in the glove on her hand. Fenn was stuck there too, for that matter, and she wasn’t about to come out without knowing what was happening outside, not when we might be cruising down the road at considerable speed. I looked at Amaryllis’ face. Compromised? It was impossible to tell just by looking at her, but I couldn’t think of any other explanation.

“Why?” I asked, voice low.

“Grak and I spoke,” Amaryllis replied, still obviously speaking loud enough for Fallatehr to hear. With how far away he was, the quiet of the farm (silent, save for the noise of insects) wasn’t enough to camouflage even casual conversation. Amaryllis was being loud on purpose though, as a signal to either me or Fallatehr, maybe both. “As I said, we have to have a talk, just the three of us.”

“You’re ambushing me,” I replied, looking her over. Ambushing me, or converted to his side and ambushing me, but I looked into your soul not less than twenty minutes ago, and I don’t understand how Fallatehr would have done it, if he did. “And you don’t want Fenn out, why?”

“She hates him,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was calm and even, like she was trying to talk down a barking dog she knew listened to tone alone. She’d used that voice on me a few times before, and I’d never liked it. “It would be detrimental to the conversation if she were interjecting.”

“Or objecting,” I replied. I glanced to Fallatehr, who was still standing beneath the light. His smile was more subdued now.


I stayed right where I was, trying to think over my options. How much did I trust Amaryllis? A fair amount. How much did I trust Amaryllis when our ally/adversary was an expert in changing people on a fundamental level? The answer to that depended on what I thought had happened between her and Grak when they were alone, unless she’d been tainted by Fallatehr’s influence even further back.

This here, what she was doing, keeping Fenn in the literal and metaphorical dark, trying to hold a
conversation with Fallatehr that I wasn’t prepared for or briefed on, that I didn’t trust.

“We’re leaving,” I said to her. “Whatever it is you want to talk about, we can talk about it somewhere else. A three-way conversation is too messy.”

“You think he has me?” asked Amaryllis, cutting to the chase. “He doesn’t. Juniper--”

“You know that anything you say is meaningless,” I replied. My hands were sweating, and I was acutely aware of the ring on my finger, the defense that I would have to deploy if things got heated. I cursed myself for not having put my armor back on when I’d had the time for it, but it wasn’t supposed to be like this, *I had cleared her*. “There’s no assurance that you could possibly make, all we have are actions and trust mechanisms, and you -- if he got to you, or didn’t, you know that this right here is a violation of my trust, and Fenn’s.”

“Arguments are still valid,” replied Amaryllis. “If he had gotten to me, altered me down to the core in some way, that wouldn’t prevent me from making a coherent argument, right?”

I paused. “It would be harder, much harder, than if I could trust you, which I now can’t. Let out Fenn. Let out Grak. Then we can talk.”

“We’ll stand apart as we talk,” said Amaryllis. “Fenn would disrupt it, you know she would. I could bring out Grak, but I think that would just make you more leery, because you don’t trust him either, and he … he was compromised, not probably, actually. He told me as much, while we were away. That’s what I want to have this conversation about.”

“Fuck,” I said, staring at her. I was more skilled with a sword than Amaryllis, but she had the better sword. All she really had to do was slip within my guard and point it at my chest, then flicker it on. That would have been true even if I had armor on. She had the glove as well, and knowing Fenn, it had a fucking ridiculous array of weaponry available at her tips if she wanted to take me out as I ran. *And she has Fenn, and the teleportation key.* I couldn’t realistically run away from this conversation, but I didn’t see what good a conversation would do, unless--

I could stall. Fenn would eventually start to wonder why she hadn’t been popped out, and despite the risk of appearing from thin air while the glove was moving over the road at sixty miles an hour, she would force her way out. Or even if she didn’t make that choice, the air tanks weren’t limitless, and she could come out rather than suffocate, the choice having been made for her. Time was on my side, as far as Fenn went … but even when she showed up, we wouldn’t actually be safe. She wouldn’t have her bow, her bow was in the glove, but it would be two against two -- two against three if Grak got out, and the two minions, who were probably just out of sight, meaning two against five.

Not that Fenn was going to come out in a good position anyway, since she would be right beside Amaryllis, disoriented and confused, and in the time that it took to get her bearings, both physically and cognitively, she could get ambushed.

*Skill increased: Analysis 3!*

“Okay, fine, let’s have this conversation,” I said, not really thinking that I had any better options. I didn’t know whether time was working for me or against me, but Fenn and Grak coming out was inevitable, and that would at least be a change. If they -- no, I couldn’t go that far, to start thinking of Fallatehr and Amaryllis as a coherent unit, not yet -- if Amaryllis didn’t seem worried about moving things along, then maybe I was the one who should worry.

*Skill increased: Analysis 4!*
I didn’t like the skill-ups. They were coming a bit too fast now, and I thought that I knew why; they came faster when I was threatened, when the skills were being put toward something vital, rather than trivial. I didn’t like the idea that this conversation was going to be vital. It would have set me on edge even if the game wasn’t implicitly saying that it was important. My heart was thumping, and I used a small amount of blood magic to slow everything down just a hair, hoping that it would keep me focused instead of hopped up on adrenaline.

“You fucked with Grak’s soul,” I said to Fallatehr. I stayed next to the soulcycle as Amaryllis moved away from me. We formed a triangle, with Fallatehr beneath the light, myself by the white glow of the souls in the soulcycle’s tank, and Amaryllis in relative darkness.

“I altered it, yes,” said Fallatehr with a nod. “There was no trust between us, and no real possibility for trust, so as soon as the opportunity presented itself to me, I acted. I wanted information, and he had it. The only other alteration I made to him was to make him loyal to me, in order to ensure that he wouldn’t reveal what I had done. It was always meant to be a short-term measure.”

“Is that supposed to make us feel better?” I asked.

“It makes me feel better,” replied Amaryllis. Her arms were folded across her breastplate. “Grak explained it to me. He came clean. Do you think that shouldn’t make us feel better? It’s truth, a truth that he didn’t need to give to us. That’s a step in the right direction.”

“No,” I replied. “It was ambiguous before, but now it’s concrete. We can’t trust him. You don’t get credit for saying sorry.” (You actually did get credit for saying sorry, and I realized that as I tried to search for an appropriately biting comparison, but I was hoping that we could steamroll past that error in my logic. ‘You don’t get credit for saying sorry’ had, for a long time, been something that I’d told myself so I could both avoid apologizing to people and hold onto grudges. Old habits, I guess.)

“All he wants is to look at your power,” replied Amaryllis.

“Which he’d need to look at my soul to get,” I replied. “And he can fuck off if he thinks that I’d ever willingly grant him access to my soul.”

“It wouldn’t be necessary,” said Fallatehr. “There are a variety of techniques that might allow me access to your soul without giving me the ability to change anything within it. That is one of the things that I would like to discuss with you.”

“I wouldn’t be able to trust those techniques,” I replied. “And furthermore, I wouldn’t be getting anything out of it, because you’re no longer my teacher.”

“We need him to be,” said Amaryllis. “You still need your bones fixed, and we still have to figure out a solution to restoring the locus.”

I stared at her. “And how the hell is he going to function as my teacher?”

“Communication over a distance is a solved problem,” Amaryllis answered. “You’ve already said that him touching you wasn’t something that was ever going to happen, and if that aspect of teaching is out the window, then there’s no point in co-location whatsoever. Given the potential downsides, which I’m ready to fully admit, there’s no reason we should be on the same continent.”

“He wants something immediate, I want something continuous,” I said, folding my arms across my chest, double-checking that the Anyblade was still there on my finger. “And to be frank, the thought of Fallatehr getting my power is too fucking terrifying to consider, so he’s not going to be studying it either way, end of story.”
“You’re upset about your friend,” Fallatehr said. He was doing the same thing she was, using a soothing voice, and it was grating on me. At least he had the excuse of not knowing better. “The effect on Grak will wear off.”

“No, I’m not upset about -- I am upset about that, but it’s not why I’m saying this,” I replied. “I’m not fucking doing whatever it is you think is the solution to the trust problem, this conversation is over unless you can furnish a hell of a better defense. Do you think that I haven’t been thinking about this? I have, and I already came to my conclusion. You’re going to have to give me new information if you want to sway me.” I looked from Fallatehr to Amaryllis. So far, the new information is that Fallatehr probably got to her too, somehow.

“Would you like to hear the methods by which I would come to understand your power?” asked Fallatehr.

I looked to Amaryllis. She hadn’t budged. I couldn’t leave the entirety of my team behind, which would be what I was doing if I ran. Soulfucked or not, she had the power to make me stay just by holding her ground. A glance at the soulcycle told me that I could probably start it up again; instead of keys in the ignition, there was the handle of a screwdriver. That probably still wasn’t an option, since I’d seen how quickly Amaryllis could cross a distance of 50 feet.

“Sure, fine,” I said. “Let’s hear it.”

“Memories are difficult to work with,” said Fallatehr. “Difficult, but not impossible. Your memories of what you have seen and felt of your own soul would suffice, for my purposes.” He held up a hand as I opened my mouth to offer the obvious objection. “I would not need to touch your soul. With your skill as it is, you would be able to transfer those memories into the soul of an intermediary, who would then go to visit me, on another continent, as Amaryllis suggested.”

“I would have to interface with the intermediary,” I replied. “No reason that you couldn’t fuck me over using them.”

Fallatehr had the gall to laugh. “Do you think it’s so easy to teach soul magic to others?” he asked. “Not everyone can pass through years of training in a matter of minutes. If they could, you wouldn’t be special enough to spend time on.”

“I’m flattered,” I replied with a roll of my eyes. Where was Fenn? As soon as she came out, things were going to change, and I needed to be ready.

“I am told that there is a limit to your soul magic beyond which you will need me,” said Fallatehr. “A numeric score presented to you?” he asked. I didn’t reply to that. To say that I needed him was putting it a bit strongly, I thought. “I will murder Rehta and Lepenn before your eyes, leaving myself with no support. The non-anima is no ally of mine, but if you wish, I will end her too. None of them were ever trained in soul magic, but if it would give you a measure of security, I would do it.” He caught something of my expression. “Or something less lethal, if you prefer? Their help to me would be marginal at best, if you were to train at a distance.”

“You really don’t have a read on me, if you think that murder is going to endear me,” I replied.

“If you’d like, I could tell you who the two of them were before I began my effort to reform them,” replied Fallatehr. “They could tell you themselves, if I had time to collect them. Perhaps that would assuage your moral concerns.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied. “We’re not going to do the transfer thing, it doesn’t actually help with trust if you get what you want and then leave, and I can’t imagine that you’d offer to teach me with
no chance to get what you want, not unless you were planning to betray me -- betray me again, that is, since you’ve already done it twice.”

“Twice?” asked Fallatehr with a raised eyebrow.

“Grak, and sending our information to the authorities in Parsmont,” I said.

“And did that plan of mine bear fruit?” asked Fallatehr. I could almost admire how brazen he was about it. (Almost.)

“He’s stripped of his ability to do soul magic,” replied Amaryllis.

I looked to her again, my eyes wide this time. That was final confirmation that she was compromised, well and truly, however it had happened, because I couldn’t see a single reason for her to say that, even as a ploy.

“Ah,” said Fallatehr with a smile. “Then I suppose, having offered the sugar cube, I might now try employing the riding crop. There was some danger, if you still had your capabilities, of us coming to an unfruitful war with one another on contact, one that I was not sure to escape from unscathed.” He took a step forward. “Very well then, Juniper Smith, you know that Grakhvil’s soul has been altered, and by now you must know that the same has been done to Amaryllis, or are so obstinate that it doesn’t matter whether or not you know.”

She opened her mouth to say something, and Fallatehr waved a hand to silence her. When he did, her stance changed, and she focused the entirety of her attention on me, with her bladeless hilt drawn and ready to materialize.

“Grakhvil and Amaryllis have both been instructed to end their own lives if I die, or if you are successful in your attempt to flee,” he said as he started walking toward me. “Amaryllis dear, before you kill yourself, make your best attempt at murdering the half-elf and the non-anima as well, would you.”

“Yes sir,” replied Amaryllis with a curt nod. Her mask had dropped completely, leaving only cold calculation beneath it. I just couldn’t understand how it made any sense, given what I had seen in her soul. It might have been one thing if there were some obvious change, but whatever he’d done was so subtle that I’d completely missed it.

“So, here is my offer to you, Juniper Smith,” said Fallatehr. He was walking slowly but confidently, whatever wariness he felt at the fact I was armed firmly masked. “Allow me unfettered access to your soul, and I will spare your friends, then disappear from your life forever.”

“Once you have access to my soul,” I replied, swallowing hard, “There would be no reason to keep any of your promises.”

“True,” replied Fallatehr. He kept coming closer. “But what other option do you have? Would you run away, leaving everything and everyone behind? You would be consigning them to their deaths.”

I had to admit, as I saw him coming toward me, that it did seem to be my best option. I was skeptical that he would actually kill valuable resources like that, especially if he had touched Amaryllis’ soul and seen the link going back to me (but I was skeptical of that, given that he hadn’t used it to take me over). I only had two arrows in my metaphorical quiver. The first being the fact that I still had my soul magic, something that Fallatehr seemed to think was important, and the second being Fenn, when she eventually came out of the glove.

As if on cue -- possibly literally on cue -- she appeared in front of Amaryllis. She bent over panting
and ripped off the mask to draw in air, gasping and looking around wildly. I let out an inarticulate shout of warning, but that accomplished nothing, since Amaryllis was within arm’s reach. She leaped down on top of Fenn and grabbed Fenn’s arm, twisting it behind her back and pushing hard. I didn’t know which of them was stronger, but Amaryllis was shorter, and she had to use her position to sit on the small of Fenn’s back, pinning her in place with all her weight. Amaryllis brought the sword-hilt around and pointed it at the back of Fenn’s head.

“Give him what he wants!” she shouted at me. Fallatehr had sped up, still walking with confidence, and my attention was split between him and the sight of Fenn, struggling beneath Amaryllis, trying to throw her off.

I tried to steel myself for a war of soul magic with Fallatehr, a war I would have to learn how to fight on the fly, he was still striding toward me, confident and feral, and I was struggling to remember precisely what he’d said, about not being confident that he would be unscathed, and it might have been that he was setting me up to fail, but Fenn was a single fucking thought away from having a sword straight through her head, and --

It didn’t make sense. I looked over at them again.

Amaryllis, trying to keep her position, while Fenn bucked and wriggled beneath her.

Amaryllis, being moved around while wearing the fucking immobility plate.

I waited until Fallatehr was next to me, then turned the Anyblade from a ring into a dagger, burned through four bones of my left hand at once, and with a surge of my blood working in concert, drove the dagger up toward his stomach.

Maybe somewhere in the back of my head I’d been thinking of how good it would feel to stab that motherfucker, or how fitting it would be to cut past all the bullshit and finally end him. When I went to stab him, maybe I was thinking about that, rather than what my next move would be, and that’s why, when he executed a surprisingly quick dodge, I stumbled and was put off my balance.

I’d sliced into him, a grazing cut to his side, and he clutched it while wincing in pain, then drew a dagger of his own from behind his back and clutched it in front of him. I could tell from his stance that he wasn’t incompetent, but I hadn’t had enough actual training to know whether or not he was any good just from the way he faced me.

I had an enormous number of advantages on my side. Blood magic, bone magic, the Anyblade, Ropey, a plethora of virtues, Blade-bound the most important among them -- and no small amount of righteous anger spurring me forward, the threats levied against my friends, the harms done to them. I glanced over at Amaryllis for long enough to see that she’d tossed the hilt to the side and was trying to slam Fenn’s face down into the dirt. She wasn’t using the armor or blade because she couldn’t, because she wasn’t actually Amaryllis, which explained why a view of Amaryllis’ soul had shown no hints of such utter betrayal.

Fallatehr was faster than me, and at first I thought that was his only advantage, but it soon became clear that there was something else at play, as strikes that should have hit home were turned aside with only token effort on his part, and he ducked beneath attacks that he shouldn’t have even been able to see, let alone avoid. Luck, I realized. He was hundreds of years old, and elves accumulated luck with age.

Still, he was only barely keeping up his defense. I was getting notifications for my skills as we fought, which meant that I was becoming a better fighter and mage as the battle went on. The Anyblade gave me reach, which was hard to counter against, and the extra speed and power of blood
magic, combined with the occasional surge as I pulled from my bones, meant that he wouldn’t be able to last for long. He seemed to feel the same way.

“I have Amaryllis --” our blades clanged against each other as I parried his attempt at going in low and followed it with a riposte, “-- she’s held by --” our blades met again, this time a parry from him, perfectly deflecting my attack upward, but I reshaped the Anyblade to keep his dagger from pushing me too far off the mark and he pushed himself back to avoid my quick backswing, “-- Rheta, if you - -”

The Anyblade, shaped into something more like a sickle than a sword, came slicing backward and caught him in the neck, moving through him with an edge sharp enough to cut bone. I felt a slight snag as I hit one of the vertebrae, but the resistance wasn’t much, and he stumbled back and fell over as blood began to spurt out of his throat. He clutched it, and seemed to be trying to say something, but I turned my attention to Fenn rather than try to make out what it was he was trying to threaten or coerce me with.

**Fallatehr Whiteshell defeated!**

**Quest Complete: Soul Responsibility - You have killed Fallatehr Whiteshell, whom you released from prison, before he could do much lasting damage on the world.**

(A quest that I hadn’t actually seen pop up, now marked as completed, which was something to ponder for another time.)

Fenn had things well in hand. She was sitting on top of the presumed-imposter Amaryllis, punching her repeatedly in the face. I ran over to them, with a last glance toward Fallatehr to make sure that he was staying down, and quickly drove my Anyblade, shaped to a spear, down through fake-Amaryllis’ eye.

**Lehpenn Ironwood defeated!**

“Imposter,” I said, feeling a momentary flip of my stomach as I looked down and worried that I’d made a mistake, even with what the game had told me. It looked like her, the same beauty, now spoiled by the damage that Fenn and I had inflicted. It still felt wrong somehow, when I pulled my spear from her head, like my brain wasn’t able to connect what I was seeing with what I logically knew to be true.

“We’re sure?” asked Fenn.

“Game notification,” I said, tapping the side of my head. “Not one hundred percent before that, no, but she wasn’t using her magic items, and -- maybe I knew it from instinct, or Luck, or beamed into my head by the game.” The fight against Fallatehr had left my nerves a wreck, even if it hadn’t been a pitched battle like the ones I’d fought in before.

“Fuck, I thought I was beating her half to death,” said Fenn, staring down at her bloody hands. After a moment she reached down and began working the glove off of Amaryllis' hand. “What the fuck happened?”

“Not sure,” I replied. I felt like throwing up. I looked over to the farmhouse, and when I looked back, Amaryllis' body was gone, sent inside the glove. I really didn’t know exactly what had gone on, but I could work backward. The fact that Fallatehr had made his minion Lehpenn into a pretty damn good mimic of Amaryllis seemed to indicate that he’d had access to her soul at one point or another. I wasn’t clear on the exact mechanism you’d use to make a mimic using soul magic, but copying over bones was possible, and that was probably the pathway (unless he’d done something
like what had happened to make the pelehr, but with far more skill and nuance). As for why, that was a little bit trickier. I had checked her soul to see whether anything had happened to it, and she had known that I had the means and motive to do that -- so the first thing that she would have told Fallatehr, as soon as he had made himself the most important thing in the world to her, would be that he was in danger of leaking information to me.

**Skill increased: Analysis 5!**

There were a lot of gaps in my knowledge at that moment, some of which could probably be filled through inference, but there were at least two vital issues at hand. The first, at least, I thought we could solve.

“Grak’s still in the glove,” I said. “Bring him out.”

Fenn held her hand forward and Grak appeared in front of her, looking around wildly and holding onto his tank. I leapt forward before he had a chance to get his bearings and threw Ropey at him. While the rope was wrapping itself around him, I pulled his axe from his belt and threw it aside, then pushed him to the ground. “Gag him,” I said.

Fenn pulled out a length of cloth from her glove and sat on top of him briefly in order to work it into his mouth. She punched him once on the back of his head to get him to open up and then tied the cloth tightly in place. She glanced down in the dim light and winced. “He’s bleeding, might have bit his tongue trying to keep me out.”

“Fallatehr said there was a deadman’s -- deadelf’s -- suicide switch,” I replied. “It’s probably that. I was hoping he was lying about it. Failing any other options, and with Fallatehr dead, he’s going to try to kill himself. Bring the body back out?”

Fenn stood and complied, letting the very realistic recreation of Amaryllis’ corpse fall down onto the ground. I patted it down, moving quickly, going to the places where I knew she normally kept what little equipment she went around with. I found the crystal hanging around her neck, and the cloak made of leaves that had once belonged to Solace. I put it on and reached into it, but though I could feel the extradimensional space it contained, I couldn’t feel the teleportation key there, nor the bottle.

“Teleportation key is missing,” I said.

“Well fuck,” replied Fenn. She rolled Grak over; he was staring at her with murder in his eyes. “Don’t worry, Joon’s going to fix you.”

“Teleportation key missing means that they could be anywhere,” I said. “Literally anywhere on Aerb.”

“Yeah, I said ‘well fuck’,” replied Fenn with a shrug. “What more do you want from me?”

I frowned at that and then went over to Fallatehr, who had stopped moving. I jabbed him in the head with my spear all the same. You always double-tap, that was just common sense. I searched over his body, looking to see what he had on him, but he didn’t seem to have the teleportation key either.

“Fuck,” I said. “I’m going to go grab Valencia,” I replied, before jogging off toward the house, sword drawn.

When I got to the basement though, I found it empty.

“Okay, so I think I’ve got it,” said Fenn, sometime later. Grak was tied up, and gagged as well,
though we’d tried to make him as comfortable as I could.

I’d gone back into my soul and copied over the bones, fixing the damage I’d done to myself in the course of the fight. The reusability aspect of that interaction surprised me, but I was extremely thankful for it, especially since a search of Grak’s bound (and angry) body revealed that his share of the fairies was missing.

“I should never have trusted the soul link,” I replied. “Codephrases probably wouldn’t have helped us, because if you have access to the soul to make a duplicate you can just pump them for information before reverting them, but … fuck, we could have done item identification, something like a simple demonstration that hereditary items still work, if we’d …” I paused mid-rant. “Can you demonstrate your bow for me?” I asked.

Fenn sighed. “I’ve literally been with you all day,” she replied. “You’ve seen me use the glove. You have full access to my soul. The artillery bow’s got a limited number of charges, and you’re asking me to expend one of them in order to prove something that should be completely obvious? When would I even have been replaced?”

I frowned. “Okay, point taken,” I replied. “Paranoia gone rampant, I guess.” I cracked my knuckles as I looked Fenn over. The hardest part of using soul magic to replace the bones in order to heal someone into being a physical duplicate was probably the parts where the soul didn’t actually match the body, minor nicks and scratches that hadn’t been healed yet. Clothes were easy enough to steal, and information was probably pretty easy to extract once you could fuck with values and social models, but now that I was aware of that vector of attack, I had to start thinking about ways to defend against it. (And after all, this was a setting with doppelgangers too, which we might have to face at some point in the future even though I’d been assured that Uther Penndraig had utterly destroyed the secret to their creation.)

“Alright, fine,” said Fenn, popping her bow out of the glove. Before I could object that she really didn’t have to, she fired off an arrow, which became two, then four, then eight, until a cloud of arrows was barely visible as it sailed over the farmhouse.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said.

“And sit through you looking askance at me for the rest of our days?” she asked. “No thanks, I’d rather just spend the shot. Any bright ideas about how we find the princess and the demon girl?” She prodded me in the ribs when I didn’t respond. “Come on, normally you’re full of bright ideas, or at least ideas.”

“No,” I replied, looking down at Grak. “I have no idea.”
Amaryllis watched the car leave, tracking it until it was out of sight. She had memorized the glyph sequence as a matter of course, back when they’d purchased the farmhouse and taken stock of what was available to them, but it never hurt to get a confirmation. It was difficult to imagine a scenario in which it would be relevant, but Amaryllis had a good memory, and the cost was low.

“Come on,” she said to Grak. “We need to put some distance behind us before we leave. Not more than five minutes. I just want us to have a landing site that they don’t know about.”

“You don’t trust them?” asked Grak.

“They might become other people in our absence,” she replied.

Grak nodded at that. “And me?” he asked.

“If you’re the person I’ve known for the past few weeks,” she replied, which wasn’t actually an answer. “Then you know asking for my trust on this trip won’t endear you to me.”

“Noted,” he said with a gruff nod.

She was on guard during teleportation. It required having the key in view, physical contact with an untrusted ally, and even if used quickly, at least a few moments of being unaware of her surroundings. It was also the most valuable single item she was ever likely to possess, above and beyond any individual heirloom entad that was hers by claim-in-fact. The keys were not particularly delicate, but she couldn’t help but hold it as though it were. (No, she could help it, if she had to, it would be easy to bend her natural instinct on that score, she had just never had to, and so indulged her sense of the precious.)

Teleporting hurt, as it always did, but the pain faded quickly, and the key was stowed in the Cloak of Leaves as soon as she’d regained her senses.

Before her stood the World Spine, stretching far up above the horizon even though they were many miles away from the base. The air was cleaner and fresher than on the farmland around Parsmont, spiked with the scent of nature rather than agriculture. They weren’t too far away from where they had been just a few days prior. She had gone outside the bottle then and marked the likeliest spot by walking in a spiral, which had been easily visible from within the view provided by the teleportation key.

“We need a place with good light,” she said, looking over the clearing. “I think that this is as good as we’ll get.” The mountains ran parallel to the path of the sun, which meant that there was little need to worry about putting the bottle in the shadow of the World Spine. It was an idyllic place, though it could do with a bit of contouring. There was a beauty in the wilds of the world, but it wasn’t a perfect beauty; the chaos of stochastic process was pleasing, but could always be improved by human hands.

“Do you trust me to handle the wards?” asked Grak.

“Has it begun to grate on you?” she asked in return.

“It was a simple question,” replied Grak.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she replied. Dwarves were, as a rule, one of the bluntest of the mortal
species, but much of this was cultural, and Grakhuil Leadbraids was some distance removed from the culture of his kind. He’d spent enough time at the athenaeum to have partially assimilated, and learned enough Anglish that he was more or less fluent. He had a relatively thick accent, and more than that, his way of speaking was still characteristically dwarven, but he wasn’t really a dwarf of the clans anymore, he was an immigrant.

He was hard to read. It was easier for a person to lie in a second language, unless that second language was granted by translation tattoos or some rarer form of magic with an equivalent function, like the tongue-rings of Ellsion or the Terridoc linkages. People who spoke a second language sometimes stopped to sort their words, just like people who were lying, and being at a remove from the actual words you were speaking was a good way to prevent yourself from having to feel the force of your lies. To add to that, much of Grak’s face was hidden by a thick beard, and his facial expression were those of a clan-dwarf, which were distinct from those employed by humans. The idiom ‘stone-faced’ had entered into Anglish right around the time of the first dwarven expansion into Anglecynn for a good reason.

Reading Grak, for Amaryllis, was like trying to read a book whose author kept using unfamiliar words and phrases, which had to be understood from context. It wasn’t impossible, merely very difficult, and over the last few days, she had been putting in far more effort than normal to figure out whether or not he was hiding something. The primary difficulty in this endeavor, aside from the difficulty of getting a good read on Grak, was that if he was acting, he was acting like himself, and in Amaryllis’ experience, that was the easiest sort of lie for a person to sell.

“Do you want me to set up wards or not?” asked Grak.

“I do,” replied Amaryllis.

The failure states were obvious. If Grak were under Fallatehr’s sway, he could set up the wards in such a way as to hold the locus hostage, which would give him leverage in future negotiations. Wards were, generally speaking, invisible, and only another wابر could check the work, which wasn’t an option here for obvious reasons. That leverage was something that Amaryllis had decided she was willing to risk even before they had arrived at this place. Not using the wards that Grak could provide meant that a random person or animal could stumble across the bottle and take it, or that it would be exposed to the elements in a way that would put it, and the land (and locus) inside it in danger. Those risks seemed to outweigh the danger of Fallatehr gaining leverage, especially since his leverage would, by necessity, not be a subtle thing. The other failure state was even simpler. If she didn’t watch Grak closely, he might try to encircle her and trap her within a ward, but she planned to watch him closely, and to make sure that his wand stayed within a few feet of the bottle. She would be happy when this was all over, and she could just regard him as a friend and ally.

“Are you going to watch me the entire time?” asked Grak as he traced out the first of his wards. The plan was that they would spend two hours here, then return to where Fenn and Juniper would be waiting.

“Do you want to talk about what’s bothering you?” asked Amaryllis.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” replied Grak. Irritation, disgust, frustration, these were all emotions that Grak was quick to express, even before.

“You seemed at ease with the decisions we made, because of how uncertain the situation was,” said Amaryllis. “I would ask what changed, but I imagine that the answer is simply time and isolation. Being cut out from a group wouldn’t agree with anyone, even if they were only a part of that group because they were paid in gold.”
Grak grunted at that, which was accompanied by a rush of air from his wide nostrils.

“Are you still planning to leave us once you’ve secured your thousand pounds of penance?” asked Amaryllis. The questions served two purposes, the first being the obvious surface one, and the second being the opportunity to watch his answers so she could get a better read on him.

It called to mind her time in the Lost King’s Court, in some ways, having to work on different levels, not being able to trust any single person, relying on known and shown incentives in order to figure out what people would actually do. That had been the life she’d lived from the moment she’d been born until her incarceration, and here, though deprived of resources, she was playing the same games. It wasn’t a terribly comfortable comparison for her, given how her last foray into court politics had gone.

(((This is probably the part where you’re wondering to yourself, ‘but I thought Juniper was our narrator, how does he know, and why is he talking in the third person?’, and here, safely hidden within triple parentheticals, I can tell you: some of this might not actually have happened in precisely these ways. We’re operating under really loose definitions of ‘actually happened’ already, but I don’t just mean that it ‘might not have happened’ in the sense that people might just disappear as soon as I stop looking at them, only to have an interstitial history written for them in accordance with the demands of the narrative as dictated by the Dungeon Master as soon as they become relevant to me again. Here, I mean ‘might not have actually happened’ in the sense that this is a recreation of sorts, me working backwards from information that I didn’t have at the end of the last chapter, and won’t have at the end of this one. The thing is, if you learned it like I learned it, it would be a drawn out, incomprehensible mess, so this is a little bit of poetic license and extrapolation on my part in order to present something coherent. I hope you don’t mind.)))

“I’ve been thinking of leaving,” said Grak. “The pay is better than anywhere else. The experience has been interesting. Dangerous. The connection to Juniper …” He trailed off, which was a bit of his assimilated tact showing.

“None of Uther Penndraig’s Knights ever left his service, not for long,” said Amaryllis. “They retired, from time to time, but they always came back for one last adventure, sometimes more than one. And sometimes they die. It’s not an aspect of narrative theory that I talked about that much with him, but my interest in it should be obvious.”

Grak grunted at that, giving her nothing. She hadn’t spent enough time with him to be able to distinguish between his grunts, not on a level that would tell her something. The way he seemed unwilling to continue the conversation, taking from her and giving little back, wasn’t uncharacteristic of him either. It was, however, very convenient for him if he was hiding something from her. She presumed that he would know if some alteration had been made to his soul and would be actively hiding it from her, but that was a soft assumption, not a firm one. Or it was also possible that he was simply Grakhul Leadbraids, the same person he’d been since she’d met him in Aumann’s tower.

“It is starting to wear on me,” said Grak, after a silence between them.

She hadn’t expected more conversation from him, and had been thinking that it would be good to get a vantage point on the site, marked for the teleportation key by walking in another, smaller spiral, so that she would have a place to land the second time they came down here.

“The suspicion?” she asked, keeping her voice mild and sympathetic, watching him closely without exerting any of the muscles in her face. He was going about his work, frowning occasionally as he stepped back to inspect using his monocle, which made the task of reading him all the harder.

“I have to watch what I say,” he replied. “I can’t give any suggestions for fear they will condemn
me. It’s more frustrating than I thought it would be. The precautions are sensible. I wish I weren’t the target. You’re the closest things to friends I have.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Soon Juniper will be able to see into your soul and it won’t be necessary.”

Grak nodded. “I don’t look forward to that.”

“Even though it would get you out from under suspicion?” asked Amaryllis.

Grak finally glanced at her. “I fear giving anyone that much power over me.”

Amaryllis nodded at that. She did too, but that rubicon had already been passed.

(((Okay, that’s more speculation on my part, and Amaryllis probably wouldn’t have phrased it as crossing the Rubicon, because the Rubicon was a river that didn’t exist on Aerb.)))

She left him to work, glancing back at regular intervals, moving up toward one of the hills beside the meadow, where trees would cloak her from view to anyone standing guard, but allow a good look at the bottle -- and anyone who might be staking it out when she returned to collect it, hopefully in a handful of days. This entire expedition served three purposes, as she saw it. First, it allowed her a chance to talk with (and interrogate) Grak in an attempt to root out subversion. Second, it would allow the bottle to have sunlight, which it needed in order to ensure the ecosystem remained at homeostasis, a dicey proposition with Solace dead and no replacement druid in sight. Third, with the locus safely under lock and (teleportation) key, they could openly speak of it to Fallatehr and get his advice on the matter.

She lost track of Grak only briefly, for no more than a few minutes, and then she was at the top of the hill, looking back down on the clearing, where he was still putting up his wards. She hadn’t asked about the nature of those wards, but could make her own guesses about which he would select. She had asked him in the past, in a few different situations, but he didn’t seem to much enjoy talking about his craft, and her understanding of warding was basic enough that the technical details were too difficult to put in their context.

The pattern she chose to mark her location as seen from the teleportation key was largely dictated by the trees, but she didn’t need anything complex, because it wouldn’t be far from the large spiral she’d already made in the meadow. There wasn’t much else for her to do. She wasn’t comfortable taking her eyes off Grak for long, even if she no longer thought it very likely that he had been compromised by Fallatehr. His background as first a stranger in a strange land and then a stranger returning home made him a better liar than most dwarves, she thought, and there were the inherent qualities he possessed that made him hard to read, but she didn’t think that he would have been able to become a completely different person without her knowing. Still, she wasn’t about to fully drop her guard.

Eventually, having watched from a distance for some time, she made her way back. Judging by the position of the sun in the sky, there was still an hour to go until they were to return to Parsmont. She resolved to practice her blood magic while Grak continued putting up wards; there were some trade-offs in terms of time spent on the wards and their durability, and given the two hours they would be spending in this field, Grak had opted to use the entirety of his time.

She’d had a problem with waiting, when she was younger, in large part because that was what being a noble consisted of. It wasn’t a problem that she had fixed so much as tamed. While the impulse to fidget or act incautiously was still there, it existed only as an impulse, one that did not impact her actions in any meaningful way. She sat in the grass, twenty feet away from where Grak was warding the bottle against all possible threats, and began the meditative exercises that she had learned at the athenaeum, keeping Grak in sight the entire time. It didn’t make for terribly fruitful meditation.
After perhaps twenty minutes, as she was moving flame from one fingertip to the next, Grak began to move. He was using his wand, keeping it low to the ground, and tracing a relatively small circle -- one that, if continued, would encircle her. She stood up at once.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she stepped backward and grabbed the bladeless hilt from her side. Her question found an answer as she hit an invisible wall of force just behind her. She turned and reached out to touch it, trying to feel the shape of it, and quickly came to a heart-sinking conclusion. Whatever Grak was doing now, he already had her encircled. She pulled the teleportation key out of the cloak and used it at once, navigating through the map and aiming for the return site in Parsmont, but when she pushed against the key, she found herself still in the meadow.

“Grak, what are you doing?” Amaryllis asked again, allowing a small amount of panic to seep into her voice, hopeful that if he thought she were desperate he would lower his guard. She crouched down and picked up a fist-sized rock from the ground and threw it at his head as hard as she could.

It hit his chin with far less force than it might have if he didn’t have such a thick beard, and he stopped, momentarily stunned, before looking up at her and then continuing on. When she threw the second rock, he was better prepared, and raised his hand in defense, grunting with pain but not stopping. The rocks within reach, or rather, within the confines of the ward around her, got smaller from there, more an annoyance than a threat.

Her inventory was small, just the armor (useless unless she wanted to stay in one place, which she desperately did not), the cloak (not loaded with much, as it had quite limited capacity), two of the marzipan fairies (irrelevant), a crystal (useless), and her sword (the only thing with any promise). She hefted it and tried to think of how she could best use it, but Grak seemed to be aware of her reach and intent on avoiding it. She flickered the sword on and threw it at him, aiming for the arm with the wand, hoping she could cut through it, but Grak only took a glancing blow to his arm, which left him trickling blood but did nothing to actually stop him.

When he’d finished his circuit, he made another, and then another. Watching him, Amaryllis tried not to focus too much of her attention on how he had gotten the initial wards around her, one fairly clearly a barrier against latent blood magic, the other clearly to stop her teleportation key from working. She was fairly sure that he must have constructed the wards around the bottle and then pushed them toward her, the inverse of what Aumann’s warder had done to let him set foot in Caer Laga without actually breaking the wards. Where Grak had had more than once spoken of tunneling, this was the logical inverse of that, pushing out the boundaries of the ward like a finger pushing through mud. That was how Grak had enveloped her without moving from where he was, or seeming to break his concentration on the task of making wards around the bottle. In retrospect -- no, it didn’t do any good to spend time on thinking about whether she should have seen it coming, or seen that it was possible, there would be time to curse herself later, she hoped, or to think about all the ways she could have avoided this.

“We’re due to meet with Fenn and Juniper in less than an hour,” said Amaryllis.

Grak made no reply, and continued on with the wards, five circuits in total before he finished. She knew enough about warding to understand that he was building a prison for her; what he had trapped her with was temporary, but these new fetters were stronger, more efficient, built for the long term.

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“I’m going to take you to Fallatehr,” said Grak. “He’s going to alter you to his purposes.” He stood back from the wards. “If you hand over the teleportation key we can do that now. Otherwise I will wait until you are starved and sleep deprived and take the key from you.”
Amaryllis slipped the teleportation key into her armor, so that it was nestled against her chest, a horrible idea from a distribution-of-impact perspective, but as secure as it could be. She activated the armor’s ability to hold herself in place … and it did nothing. With a sigh, she reached in and pulled the teleportation key back out.

“A ward against blood to stop me from leaving, a ward against teleportation, a ward against the immobility plate?” she asked. She tried to keep the tension and anger from her voice; they wouldn’t be helpful here. “What are the fourth and fifth wards against?”

“You will be Fallatehr’s,” said Grak, ignoring her question. “When you are, you will not look fondly on having resisted him.”

Amaryllis nodded. She was sure that was true, which didn’t make it any less frightening. The way things were now, she was well and truly fucked. Even if they didn’t return to Parsmont, and Juniper and Fenn were alerted to the fact that something had gone wrong, that didn’t actually help her, because without the teleportation key, there was no way to launch a rescue. Her options, given her skills and equipment, were minimal. She could try to convince Grak, but that seemed eminently unlikely to work. What else remained? Stalling for time, trying to reconfigure her soul in order to send a message to Juniper, hoping that Grak would be incautious enough to leave her an opening, none of which seemed particularly promising.

Suicide was an option. Getting soulfucked into a tool against your own interests, becoming an instrument that would happily tear apart everything important, all that made death seem preferable, but death came in a variety of flavors, and there was no guarantee that if she managed to kill herself she would be bottled to fade away rather than going down to the hells for eternal torment. There was at least one upside of getting soulfucked though; it didn’t have to be forever. Juniper could save her.

The link between their souls was the biggest question mark. If it went both ways, and Fallatehr could access it, then he would have Juniper too, and through Juniper, Fenn, which would leave no possibility of salvation. There were calculations to be made there, unpleasant weighings of probability and value, not just because she would be putting others at risk, but because of what the aftermath might look like, once they realized she had put them at risk. But if the soul link didn’t allow Fallatehr to make alterations to Juniper from afar, it had a strong possibility of giving Juniper some kind of advantage in the coming confrontation, especially because he could fix whatever Fallatehr was going to do to her.

“Okay,” she said. “If it’s a choice between being compromised or being pushed to the edge of death and then compromised, I’ll choose to just get it over with.” What had finally tipped her decision was the thought that any escape attempt she made was more likely to succeed if she was at her peak, and the greatest chance for escape always came during transit. She tossed Grak the teleportation key, and he caught it in one hand.

She said a small prayer to each of the five gods, and then a final, sixth prayer to the Dungeon Master that Juniper believed was the one true god of Aerb. Prayers to the gods had their own specific structures to them, with motifs and iconographies that the pious were expected to adhere to, even if prayer itself was next to useless. The prayer to the Dungeon Master took some thought, because no standards existed for praying to what was only a theoretical deity.

_Dungeon Master, if I must be on your railroad, let me ride the train with good humor. If I must roll the dice, let it be known that I would not object to you fudging. Place a dungeon before me, and I will delve it. Place a dragon before me, and I will slay it. I am, above all else, your player._

Grak collected her sword, then asked for her cloak, and her armor as well. She complied; he seemed to be in no hurry. When the cloak was on his back, and everything was stored within it, he tightened
the blood magic ward, which was keyed only to her, until she could scarcely move. Only then did he take her hand in his own and use the teleportation key.

This was, naturally, her chance. Even as the pain hadn’t finished fading, even as she was still struggling to process where he’d taken them, she punched him in the face as hard as she could. They were in close quarters, a room with a bed and dresser, simple, plain, nothing she could use as a weapon, a single door the only exit, and she punched him again, feeling a flash of pain in her hand as she broke something in his face. He grunted and rolled, faster than she assumed the dwarf was capable of. She had already decided that she would kill him if the opportunity presented itself, even if none of this was his fault, even if it meant losing a valuable ally in the long-term, but when she stepped toward him, she met with a barrier. Probing showed that it crossed the room, which, on closer inspection, was the one that he’d slept in the night before. They were back in the farmhouse, in a site he’d had plenty of time to prepare; she had traded one prison for another. The lack of things to use as improvised weapons was now, obviously, by his design.

It took Grak some time to heave himself up from the floor and limp out the door. Amaryllis contemplated the wisdom of suicide again, or possibly harming herself enough that Fenn or Juniper would notice, but there was not much time for such thoughts before Grak returned with Fallatehr in tow.

The elf watched her carefully as Grak altered his wards, then took her pinned down hand without a word.

“Juniper has a soul link with me,” said Amaryllis as soon as Fallatehr’s eyes were once again focusing on the world. It had taken him ten minutes to change her, but even halfway through her commitment to resist and carry out her own plans in spite of what she might feel had evaporated. “Could you see it?” she asked. “He described it as a thin line, it allows him to see and alter my soul at a distance. His plan is to use it as a tool of surveillance, to make sure that nothing has happened to me.”

“Ah,” said Fallather, rubbing his chin. “Troublesome. I saw no such thing. Allow me to look again.”

Another five minutes passed as he touched her, once again with his eyes glazed-over. She kept her mouth shut, but looked Grak over. He hadn’t eaten one of the fairies in the pouch at his hip, and now that she’d undergone the same alterations he had, she understood why. She wouldn’t spend a resource that could be used for Fallatehr lightly, not unless she was sure that it was in his best interests.

That she still felt like herself was surprising. Fallatehr had twisted her, and all thoughts seemed to turn back in his direction, but they were still her thoughts, and beneath what she felt for him, there was an unpleasant dissonance. Because Fallatehr -- his name should have been written in big block letters, large enough to crowd out any other thought, because that’s how he sat in her mind now -- he connected back to so many concepts, so many memories, and even as much as she was willing to die for him, as much as he washed away all other concerns, there were points of contention. Her system of morality had always been a rather flexible one, bending to pragmatic necessity, but now it was bending so hard that it was downright irritating. The new her could be distilled down to “do what is best for Fallatehr”, but she wasn’t just that -- she still had a desire for self-preservation, though she would die for him if need be, and she wanted to be the best and most important among his allies, not just to better serve him, but for the raw desire toward autonomy.

“I saw no signs of it,” said Fallatehr as he came back. “Tell me everything you know about Juniper, starting with the most important, and assuming that Grakhuil has already divulged everything that he knows.”
She realized, as she gave up every secret, that what he’d done had limits. She wanted to tell him the truth, but she didn’t have to, and she could see that if she actually thought that “what is best for Fallatehr” was to tell him a lie, she could do that. In the same way, she could refuse him, or defy him, or even hurt him. There was an abstract concept of Fallatehr Whiteshell, and a question of definition there which her mind idly gnawed upon as she spoke, seeing all that ways that she could twist and turn that definition to her own ends. She didn’t just want what was best for Fallatehr, she still cared about her kharass and herself, and the people of Aerb -- and while those weren’t necessarily aligned values, and while if push came to shove she would choose him every time, there was room to wiggle.

“... and there’s the question of the overarching narrative, which Grak has already probably told you is pointed squarely against you. Likely terminally so.” She hadn’t realized it was true until she said it; Uther Penndraig had suffered losses and injuries, but they were almost always temporary, and never without being paid back a hundredfold. If someone began their time in Uther’s story by stabbing him in the gut and forcing him to limp off, they would end their time in his story with their life’s work dismantled, their castle razed to the ground, and every friend and ally they’d ever had turned against them -- and, of course, they would die, usually horribly. In his time on Aerb, Juniper had begun racking up his own list of narrative resolutions, most of which ended with someone dying. He had introduced her to the term ‘murderhobo’, which, with the right framing of their travels, seemed apt.

“You both take it so seriously,” said Fallatehr. “The evidence seems weak. I wonder whether something else is at play that would more easily explain your joint delusion.”

“The longer we stand here, the higher the chance that he sees into my soul and realizes what’s happened to me,” said Amaryllis. “We need to think of a plan as quickly as possible, both for the case where he doesn’t know and the case where he does. Ideally, we would find a peaceful resolution, or a turn in roles, or some measure by which this narrative can be concluded without your death.”

(And if Fallatehr died? She would do her best to resurrect him, until the alterations he had made to her soul had faded, as she could feel even now that they would. She would seek out another soul mage, she decided, and do her best to coerce them into altering her soul again, because without her, he would almost certainly be consigned to the hells forever, or trapped in a bottle at Juniper’s belt.)

“You don’t think that I can become his teacher in truth?” asked Fallatehr. “Stand down, or even submit myself?”

“Not after what you’ve done to us,” said Amaryllis. In the corner of her eye she saw Grak nod. “Not even if you undo it. If you could reverse what you have done and erase our memories --”

“No, memories are nigh-impossible to work with like that, even when freshly made, at least if attempting to manipulate them through the mechanism of the soul,” said Fallatehr. “As for reversing what I have done … your souls are unstable at the present moment, because the changes I made do not comport with the rest of the soul. They will largely revert on their own, if allowed to.”

“But you could do it?” asked Amaryllis. “Temporarily, to me, in order to fool Juniper?”

“Yes,” nodded Fallatehr after a moment. “An idea occurs to me. Let us go see Lehpenn.”

She had loved Fallatehr for a brief moment, and that moment had passed. Love was an imprecise word, made more imprecise by the nature of the magic he had used. She hadn’t had any romantic interest in him, nor a familial connection, nor had she even regarded him as a friend, but she had nevertheless attached such intensity of importance to him that the term ‘love’ felt apt.
She had assisted in the plan that she now hoped would fail, had held still while her bones were copied over, had watched as Lehpenn ate through all their fairies (save one, reserved for Grak) to heal himself into her form, and had given as much advice and information as she could about how to act like her. Lehpenn would need to lean on Grak for cues, and there was every chance that Juniper had spotted her soul while it was compromised, but Fallatehr had wagered that the chance to inject him into the inner circle was far too valuable, in spite of the inherent risk.

Amaryllis had argued that Fallatehr himself should have taken her place. Neither Rheta nor Lehpenn had any faculty with soul magic -- he hadn’t been lying about that, to her surprise -- which limited their utility as far as agents went. But Fallatehr had been adamant in his refusal; after all, if Lehpenn died, he was only Lehpenn, a servant with a soul as stable as Fallatehr could make it, but ultimately disposable.

She had consented to be bound and gagged, and had even given advice on how to do it -- how couldn’t she have, when it would serve Fallatehr? -- and then Fallatehr had undone the changes to her soul.

“You are leverage,” Fallatehr said to her, as though that was news to her. She had been the one to explain that she meant something to Juniper, that he might be compelled to act foolishly in order to save her. “You shouldn’t think that’s all you are, and if we can reach some peaceful resolution, I hope that we can work together in the future.” That was lunacy, naturally, but she couldn’t tell whether it was because he came from such a different culture from her, because he was delusional, or whether he was simply taunting her.

They had teleported as a group to the windbreak by the road. Without her initial diversion to allow a more hidden way back, that would have been too risky, but her precaution there had allowed them some leeway, and Fallatehr seemed optimistic that Juniper and Fenn would be delayed (their meeting time had come and gone, but they had not, at least, shown up at the farmhouse). He had stayed behind at the farmhouse, to wait for them there, but he had sent the non-anima, bound and gagged as Amaryllis was, to be teleported along. Amaryllis had marked her as a companion, and one that Juniper seemed invested in; the non-anima was leverage too.

After their arrival, Grak and Lehpenn-as-Amaryllis cautiously crept forward to check whether there was a car waiting, and finding none, settled themselves down to wait. Amaryllis had been laid down next to the non-anima, without a view of any of this, and Rheta, Fallatehr’s minion, stood over them, clutching the teleportation key. The plan had been hammered out with Amaryllis’ input, accounting for various possibilities, insulating Fallatehr from risk as much as possible, giving him leverage that couldn’t be taken away from him simply by killing him. There was a decent chance that Lehpenn would be killed on first contact, but if he wasn’t, then Juniper’s ability to see into her soul would actively work against him, giving him a false negative. That opened the path for other plans, other contingencies, and eventually, Juniper’s capture.

After two hours, which Amaryllis spent face down in the dirt uncomfortably close to the non-anima, Rheta used the teleportation key again. This time when the pain faded, they were someplace entirely different, somewhere that seemed, from Amaryllis’ limited vantage point, to consist largely of smooth rocks in various colors, each at least as large as a handspan. It was not a terribly comfortable place to be set down for a long stretch of time. She started grunting and wiggling, the most she could manage given her restraints. After a few minutes of this, Rheta, a muscular woman, eight feet tall, lifted her up and pulled out the gag.

“No spitting,” said Rheta.

“I need to use the bathroom,” said Amaryllis. “I wasn’t going to spit on you.”
“You seem like a spitter,” said Rheta. Upright, Amaryllis could see more of the terrain, which did little to disconfirm her initial impression of it as a place consisting mostly of smoothed rocks. Far in the distance, a herd of van-sized beasts seemed to be shoveling those rocks into their mouths.

“Come,” said Rheta, but the command was unnecessary, because she was carrying Amaryllis in one hand.

Her captor helping her to go to the bathroom was mildly unpleasant, and little information was gained in the process, though to Amaryllis’ surprise, her gag wasn’t put back in place when she was set back on the rocks next to the non-anima. Rheta, for her part, seemed bored with this guard duty, which was the common fate of guards everywhere. Amaryllis had to wonder how much this woman was actually suited to the job; inside the prison, there would have been little cause to create someone in the specialized role of the brute, which at first glance is what she would have pegged Rheta as.

“I’m uncomfortable,” said Amaryllis. “I think Valencia probably is too.” Calling the non-anima by her made up name was going to be a good habit to get into, if the group was ever reunited -- if Juniper saw through the lies, cut through the plots, and won the fight. Here, saying ‘Valencia’ was an effort to humanize her in the eyes of their mutual captor, though Rheta had likely known her since birth.

“I don’t care,” said Rheta.

“The most likely outcome of this is that Fallatehr turns me to his side again,” replied Amaryllis. “I have no weapons, no armor, and no relevant training, the worst I could do is run away into an inhospitable wasteland, and that’s if you were foolish enough to remove all of my ropes, which I’m not even suggesting you do. Just loosen them, enough that I can move and avoid getting sores. I’ll be more valuable to Fallatehr that way.”

“You’re trying to manipulate me,” said Rheta. She shifted, clearly not comfortable on the rocks.

“I’m trying to find the seam of common cause,” said Amaryllis, which fell just short of being a bald-faced lie. She remembered what it had been like to think that Fallatehr was all-encompassing, and that gave her a handle on how to frame her arguments here. True manipulation might come later.

Rheta thought for a moment, then undid some of the knotwork, enough that Amaryllis was able to sit up and find a better position. That was promising, and gave her some room to work with, which was exactly why Rheta should have refused her.

When she leaned back, she found herself briefly touching the non-anima, and while her instinct was to shy away, she let the touch linger. The non-anima was unpredictable, but that didn’t mean that it couldn’t also be a tool. Amaryllis felt at it while she spoke.

“It wasn’t like I expected, being his thrall,” said Amaryllis.

“Thrall?” asked Rheta. Amaryllis felt a rush of relief at the response. The woman still had curiosity, and could still be bored out of her mind by guard duty. She had a stable soul, to hear Fallatehr tell it, but Amaryllis was guessing -- hoping -- that came with less than the perfect peak of devotion to Fallatehr, or with more allowance for quirks.

“Thrall isn’t the right word,” said Amaryllis. “Fanatic? Devotee?”

“Devotee,” nodded Rheta.

“I was still myself,” said Amaryllis. “It takes some of the punch out of what was done to you. It’s not as immoral as simply wiping a mind away.” It was worse, in some ways. Secrets, spilling out of her
mouth, people she cared about tossed aside, she could feel her anger rising as she thought about it, and quelled that anger. Her fingers touched the non-anima, feeling for her ropes. Exploration by touch revealed that the knot was nowhere she could reach without moving, not that she was actually planning on unleashing the non-anima, whatever Juniper’s powers might be whispering about it.

“Still immoral?” asked Rheta after some time had passed.

“I didn’t think so when I was his devotee,” said Amaryllis. She tried to keep her voice gentle. “I thought that anything that was of value to him was good. Now … I think otherwise.”

Rheta rolled her eyes. “Never much interested me, good and bad.”

“Who were you, before you were imprisoned?” asked Amaryllis.

“Why?” asked Rheta. She was looking out at the animals that were gargling rocks in the distance. “Doesn’t seem important.”

“Just making conversation,” replied Amaryllis. She touched the ropes again, and considered burning through them, like Juniper had done in the elevator shaft. She had blood magic at hand, though somewhat less faculty than he had even back then, and her hands would be nearly unusable, not to mention that any reaction from the non-anima would give the game away (a reaction that a devil might give, or that the non-anima might give in response to the pain of being burned). An option, but not a good one. “I had other interests, other ideas, when I was a devotee.”

“Trying to find seams of common cause?” asked Rheta. Amaryllis nodded. “I don’t trust you.”

“So don’t,” replied Amaryllis with as good of a shrug as she could manage in her loosened bonds. That was also a way of checking how much play she had: not much, but she didn’t think that she could ask for them to be loosened a second time, at least not yet. The bindings were all made of a single rope, circling her ankles and wrists, connected by a length that allowed some slack.

Rheta tapped her foot against one of the rocks, frowning, then picked it up and threw it off into the distance. “I was part of an honor guard for a now long-dead king,” she said. “My people are warriors. Were warriors, if they no longer exist. The king was a hold-out when the Second Empire began to rise, but his brother was more than willing to negotiate. That’s speculation on my part. The king was killed in his sleep by agents unknown, and I was arrested by writ of the Lost King’s Court.” She turned to look at Amaryllis. “I’m curious how you would turn that to your advantage, princess.”

“Just killing time,” said Amaryllis, trying to be nonchalant. Amoureux Penitentiary had been Anglecynn’s dumping ground for quite some time, and the ruling class of Anglecynn consisted almost entirely of her relatives, most of them distant. The odds that any given person housed there would have a grudge against someone of her background was rather high, so this wasn’t quite down to unfortunate coincidence, but from the large woman’s tone, it probably meant that getting on her good side was out of the question. A number of conversational avenues had been slammed shut.

“Can you loosen my friend’s knots?”

“She’s not your friend,” replied Rheta.

“Friend of a friend,” said Amaryllis. “She’s cosmically important.”

“No,” said Rheta. She turned away, to look out over the rocks. “I’m done talking.”

Amaryllis stayed calm. Doors were shutting all over the place. If she talked again, the gag was likely to return to her mouth. The plan had been that they would stay in this place until well past nightfall,
then teleport back to Parsmont, to a place that Rheta would pick at random. After that, they’d use
coded messages that could be sent and received with neither party knowing where the other was.
That had been her idea; it was a way to keep her as leverage without Juniper being able to murder his
way to a solution, a fall-back strategy in case other paths failed.

A long silence was broken when the non-anima began squirming and making noises through her
gag. Rheta glanced over for a moment, then looked back out at the field of smooth rocks. The
creatures that had been eating the rocks had gone, but a few small birds had taken their place, and
were pecking at the rocks.

“She still needs to use the bathroom,” said Amaryllis. “We’re going to be together for quite a while,
and I think we’d both rather not have to smell her if she shits herself. I half-suspect that a devil would
do it just to fuck with us.”

Rheta sighed and stood up, then came over and dragged the non-anima to its feet, pulling by the
rope. She carried her some distance away, not seeming to show any strain from carrying her, then
unceremoniously reached up to yank down her underwear, then pushed her dress up as well. All of
this impressed upon Amaryllis how strong the woman was; that was a given, at eight feet tall, but a
direct physical confrontation was unlikely to be won. What other options did she have though? Rheta
was, all things considered, not a terribly good guard, but there weren’t even any unobvious
weaknesses to exploit.

As they were returning, with the non-anima having relieved herself, Amaryllis turned her hands
inward to her own ropes and began burning through them, one hand to free her ankles, the other to
free her wrists. The pain followed quickly, and from there it was a matter of trying her best to
suppress the outward signs of that pain while still keeping enough concentration on the blood magic.
It was a bit rash, as decisions went, but even if she’d had time for second thoughts, the opportunity to
bail out had passed the moment she’d burned herself.

The pain overwhelmed her for a brief moment at the end, and she felt tears rolling down her cheeks,
but then she was finished. Through tear-filled eyes, she saw Rheta looking at her, but couldn’t make
out enough to see the huge woman’s expression. The sight of the non-anima falling to the rocks was
enough of a warning about what was about to happen. Amaryllis stood up, swaying slightly -- every
movement was agony on her hands, how had Juniper done this? -- and used her forearm to wipe
away some of the tears, enough that she could look at Rheta.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Rheta.

Amaryllis settled into a fighting stance on the uneven rocks. Her hands were held out in front of her,
usable only if she could spare the time for a bout of blinding pain, rather than the mere agony that
each of her arms ended in. She’d always been weak at unarmed combat. And she was facing down
an opponent with a three foot height advantage, a two hundred pound weight advantage, at least an
extra foot of reach.

“What were you hoping to accomplish?” asked Rheta. Through the tears in her eyes, Amaryllis
could almost see the frown, but her displeasure was apparent enough in her voice.

Amaryllis was shaking from the pain, and the unasked-for tears were going to further complicate
matters. She tried to redirect the flow of her blood away from her hands, in the hopes that the lack of
circulation would numb them, and that gradually began to do some work, which stepped the pain
down enough that she could actually concentrate. Rheta was still standing in front of her, looking her
over, and Amaryllis realized the predicament just before Rheta spoke.

“I don’t have more rope,” the giant woman said with a mild voice. She looked down at the non-
anima. “Looks like one of you is going to have to give up your clothing.” Rheta reached down and
began to pull the non-anima out of her dress, stopping momentarily in order to tear it.

Amaryllis picked that moment to attack, because if you were going to do something like burning a
significant amount of your own skin and flesh away, then you sure as hell weren’t going to just give
up halfway through. She raced forward, mind awash with fresh pain from the movement, the smell
of burning flesh in her nostrils, and ducked under a backhand fist from Rheta.

There was a loose school of combat taught to young women all around Aerb, if they were nobility,
or the daughter of someone important, or simply had cautious parents. As legend had it, Uther
Penndraig had invented the style when his own daughter was born, and he started by looking
through all the formalized rules of physical aggression he could find and built, as the foundation, a
series of principles and maneuvers that violated every single rule designed to make things fair.

Amaryllis went for the eyes, a risky move given that it meant slipping inside the other woman’s
guard, and the damage to her hands that meant such an attack would be pure torture even with the
hands numb. Her fingers were barely working, but the internal damage to her hands had largely
spared the tendons that let her thumbs move, so she clapped her hands to the sides of Rheta’s head --
brilliantly sharp pain, white hot even past the numbness -- and drove in her thumbs. She was swatted
off only a few seconds later, but when she regained her bearings (she’d landed on the rocks, and
would have bruising down to the bone) she took visceral pleasure in the way that Rheta was rubbing
at her face and stumbling around.

From there it became a fight of cripples, Amaryllis largely without the use of her hands, Rheta
largely without the use of her eyes. She wasn’t fully blinded, because even though eyeballs were
surprisingly fragile, it was difficult to apply much force to them. Nevertheless, she was having
trouble seeing, and while Amaryllis’ body ached, she was still in decent enough shape to put up a
fight against someone whose swings went wide more often than not.

Amaryllis finally got the upper hand with a kick at just the right moment, aimed right at Rheta’s knee
when all her weight was on that foot. It took Amaryllis putting almost all of her effort behind the
kick, a reckless attack, but there was a sickening crunch as Rheta’s foot went off balance on the
rocks, slipped back slightly, and then caught in place, with the knee bent backward a moment later.
Rheta cried out in pain and fell, and Amaryllis fell on top of her, using her elbow to repeatedly slam
the giant in the head. Each hit sent another jolt of pain up Amaryllis’ arm from her badly burned
hand.

The actual murder was accomplished once Rheta was insensate. Amaryllis picked up one of the
stones using her wrists, and drove it down with all her might into the center of Rheta’s face. She
checked for pulse (laughably difficult without fingers) and breathing, and finding none, finally took a
moment to relax.

Relaxation meant pain. The blood began to flow back into her hands, and the pins and needles of
circulation returning was the baby’s breath in a floral arrangement of pain. She screamed and cried,
for a time, because it was good to scream and cry, but eventually she stopped and fought back the
pain once more to take stock of her surroundings.

She had a teleportation key, the corpse of an eight-foot tall woman, and a bound non-anima who was
looking at her with wide eyes.

“Not sure I was supposed to rescue myself,” she said. She willed her hands to stop shaking, because
it was making the pain worse, but they didn’t comply.

The only real question was where to take the teleportation key to. Juniper was out there somewhere,
almost certainly ready to fall into whatever trap Fallatehr had set for him, but without knowing where he was, there wasn’t anything she could do about that. Teleporting anywhere was fraught with peril, simply because of how incredibly valuable the key was, but staying in this land of smooth rocks was out of the question given she had no food, water, shelter, or medical assistance. She let out a shaky breath. The fight had left her, and a bruised and burnt husk seemed to be all that remained. She needed help.

She cast her glance toward the non-anima. “Fuck,” she said, then got up and staggered over to her. It was brutally hard work to remove the gag, given the state of her hands, and once the gag was out, there was no question of her being able to get it back in.

“I’m an ally,” said the non-anima.

“Yeah?” asked Amaryllis. She willed her hands to stop shaking again, and this time they settled slightly. The sun was starting to set.

“Something happened in the basement when I was with Juniper,” said the non-anima. “Something changed in me. I was granted power, and freedom from possession. He seemed to have expected something like that.”

“He’s an idiot,” replied Amaryllis. She wanted to slump over and sleep, even as hard as sleep was to imagine with the pain she was in. Rational evaluation was hard in that kind of state, and against a devil, she needed to be at her best. She’d thought, coming over, that she could do it, but trying to work through the logical implications of what the non-anima said was proving difficult. Devils could be cunning, masters of the social, perfect liars, but what Amaryllis needed right now was help, and this seemed like a risk that she had to take. Juniper had probably pushed her loyalty above ten, against Amaryllis’ advice, but that didn’t mean that she was telling the truth. He obviously hadn’t released her from the basement, which meant that he wasn’t entirely confident either. He hadn’t said anything about a loyalty increase either. “Any proof?”

“None,” said the non-anima. “There was nothing he said I wouldn’t have cause to know by other means.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Yup, because that would be too easy.” She looked down at her shaking hands and willed them to stop again. They seemed to start back up whenever she stopped paying attention to them. “Fucking devils.”

“If you let me out, I can help you,” said the non-anima. “I think I can capture one with medical knowledge.”

“I need magic,” said Amaryllis. “Best we could do is cover them with cloth.”

“You’ll need a pair of hands,” said the non-anima.

“Yup,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. She glanced over at the corpse a few feet away. If she had bone magic, the throbbing pain in her hands would be a problem she could fix in a matter of minutes. Symbiosis, they’d called it; Fenn had bone magic by proxy. She tried, briefly, to raise her loyalty, to come to a personal revelation that would allow her access to new abilities, but if it worked, there was no immediate effect.

“You’re a fearsome fighter,” said the non-anima. “I thought you would die.”

“She didn’t want to kill me, gave me an edge,” said Amaryllis. That, and I’m better at fighting than I should be, far beyond any of the training I ever got. I fight like a seasoned veteran of the pits. “You
said something happened to you, down in the basement?"

“Something he knew was going to happen,” said the non-anima. “It wasn’t what he thought it might be, but he didn’t clarify. It turned the tables, made me a furnace fed by them. I eat demons.”

“Shit,” said Amaryllis. Wouldn’t Juniper have told her, if something like that had happened? Maybe not, with Grak there, or given her previous opinion on the matter. Would the devils have been able to figure out something like a Loyalty change, without Juniper’s input? Unknown. Would Juniper have given his input? Also unknown. What the non-anima -- Valencia, he’d named her -- was saying fit, under the assumption that Juniper’s power almost always worked in his benefit, and under the assumption that he wouldn’t be given worthless companions.

Sitting on the uncomfortable rocks, covered with bruises, staring at her burned hands and trying to ignore the pain, or at least maintain conscious thought through it, Amaryllis wondered about that last assumption. Whatever forces were at work hadn’t stopped companions from being problems. Hells, with his rapidly evolving skillset, Juniper probably would have been better off going to the border wall of the Risen Lands instead of meeting her. From her perspective, their time together had been a litany of failures and setbacks, getting captured by Aumann, being incapacitated by rat rot, being chased by Larkspur, and then captured and turned by Fallatehr, which was its own series of failures rolled into one.

(((Okay, I’m getting a little bit ahead of myself here, but these are all things that she confessed feeling to me, after we were back together. Uh, spoilers, I guess, but you already know that I’m okay and Fallatehr’s dead, and with the soul mage and his two minions killed it’s sort of just a question of what happens between Amaryllis and Valencia, and how or whether they joined back up with me, which I guess you also already figured out, since how else would I know any of this?

But what she didn’t mention was the stillborn romance, which I think must have been part of that train of thought. Why she didn’t mention it to me was obvious enough, but I thought it probably had to go on her list of failures, if she was feeling down about herself and her capacity as a member of the team. Still, there are limits to the kinds of thoughts that I’m willing to say were running through her mind.

Okay, back to the story.)))

“What is Juniper to you?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. “He said he wanted to be a friend. To help me. I haven’t known very many people. Most of them were Fallatehr. Juniper might seem less, when I know more, but I don’t think he will.” She didn’t say less what.

“I’m going to let you out,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. She looked down at her hands. “Might take a bit.” It sometimes seemed like there should be a limit to how much something can hurt before your body said, ‘alright, I think you probably have the message, I’ll shut up about it now’.

Eventually, working mostly with her thumbs, Amaryllis managed to get the knots loose enough for Valencia to slip free of them. A lesser person than Amaryllis Penndraig might have resigned herself to her fate, but Amaryllis kept on her guard, as though there would be anything that she could do against the combat prowess of a demon shoved into mortal form.

“You don’t trust me,” said Valencia, rubbing her wrists and ankles.

“No,” said Amaryllis.
“Then why did you let me out?” asked Valencia.

“Necessity,” answered Amaryllis. That wasn’t quite true though. “It’s what Juniper would have done. He has better instincts for this sort of thing.”

“People things?” asked Valencia, cocking her head to the side.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Other sorts of things. I’ll explain it to you later, if -- if it’s safe to.”

“Okay,” said Valencia. Her voice was soft. She reached down and touched her dress where it had been ripped. “Are we going to be like sisters?”

Amaryllis might have let out a long sigh of discontent at that, but she was holding her hands in front of her so they wouldn’t have to touch anything, and the muscles of her body were aching from the tension of fighting pain, not to mention the bruisings she’d taken. “Come on,” she said. “I need you to go search the body and get the teleportation key, then hand it to me. We’re leaving this place.”

“To the farmhouse?” asked Valencia. “In Parsmont?”

“No,” replied Amaryllis, looking down at her hands. “Somewhere a little riskier.”

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Ever since escaping the Risen Lands with the teleportation key, Amaryllis had been on the lookout. Dark alleyways were her preference, especially those with little nooks off to the side created where, say, there had once been a doorway that had been sealed, or a street that had been built up in, or a rarely-used accessway. When she spotted a place like that, she would go to it, move around as much as possible within its confines, then retreat backward along her own steps. These places were all marked on the view as provided by the teleportation key.

Valencia was already moving when they arrived, stepping out in front of Amaryllis in a fighting stance that was recognizable as such only because there was no other explanation for what she would be doing. Amaryllis might have stopped her, if she wasn’t trying to push through the overwhelming flash of quickly-fading pain that accompanied use of the key.

“It hurts you?” asked Valencia, who relaxed and turned back toward Amaryllis.

“Yeah, it hurts,” replied Amaryllis. She had been holding the teleportation key between the heels of her hands, and fearing the worst, handed it over to Valencia, simply because there was no other option. Valencia slipped the key into a small pocket on Amaryllis’ dress though, without seeming to understand the importance of the gesture. “Come on, we’ve got a bone mage to see.”

It was easy enough to play the part of indigents; Amaryllis held her injuries in front of her, stopping occasionally to beg for coin she was certain she wasn’t going to get. Valencia’s dress was ripped, and neither of them were wearing shoes (Amaryllis’ had been taken to be worn by her double, along with all her armor; Valencia’s had been left behind). Even before stepping onto the streets of Barren Jewel, they had been dirty. They still got a few looks; even as indigents, even horribly wounded, they were two young, attractive women.

They reached the small shop with a bone on the sign above its door, and went in without knocking. Amaryllis sat down even as the pale woman with black spots stood up from behind her desk.

“Emergency,” said Amaryllis, laying back. She was bone tired -- pain would do that to you, if you felt it for long enough. “Gonna have to pay you later.”

“Is she,” said Bormann, looking Valencia up and down with a frown.
“Non-anima?” asked Valencia. “No, I just have the misfortune to come from a bad bloodline.” Her accent had changed radically, losing the faint trace of elvish it’d had and becoming a melange of Anglecynn Anglish. She let out a rueful chuckle. “As if anyone these days would suffer a non-anima to live past infancy.”

“Some mothers would,” said Bormann, but she seemed satisfied by the explanation. She moved over to Amaryllis and got to work without comment, first looking over her hands, then her other injuries. “I don’t normally take on patients who can’t pay.”

“But it helps that I was upfront about it, right?” asked Amaryllis. Humor had never been her strong suit, and she had been trying for a joke, but it didn’t even remotely land.

“More ill-advised use of blood magic, like last time?” asked Bormann, sitting back slightly on her chair and looking Amaryllis over.

“Given the circumstances, it wasn’t ill-advised,” said Valencia, and despite herself, Amaryllis was grateful that she didn’t have to muster up the energy for her own response. “We’ll be able to give you twice your normal rate within twenty-four hours. Coming here first was, I hope you understand, a priority.” Again the different persona was there, surrounding her like a cloak.

Bormann glanced at her, then back to Amaryllis. “The bill will be four million tcher then,” she said, and got up from her seat to start taking down bones. “You should thank your friend, the half-elf, for establishing a good working relationship.” The bones rattled and clacked as she took them from the strings they hung from, and Amaryllis closed her eyes for a moment, finally dropping her guard.
The Mouth of a Long River

“How long are we going to wait here?” asked Fenn after an hour had passed.

We’d had a late supper, a cold meal of shredded meat and crumbly cheese between slices of yambread that was almost, but not quite, what I would call a sandwich. I forced the food down; with Fallatehr dead, fixing my ribs had been delayed for the time being. I had to hope that getting to level 20 again was going to allow me to do it, because I’d killed the most skilled teacher available to me.

“Through the night, I think,” I replied. “I’m worried that the Abswifth is going to stop by. I’m more worried that the Bendon is going to show up. I don’t really have a firm grasp on how the government actually works in Parsmont. If they have the license plate of the car, then maybe they could comb through their files in order to figure out who the car was registered to, which would lead them right back here.”

“Maybe I should learn how to clean up blood in a hurry,” said Fenn. “That, or pray for some rain. Fallatehr left quite the puddle.”

“Yeah,” I said with a grimace. Both corpses were stored in her glove, their souls in their own separate bottles. “I don’t feel great about that. Toward the end … even though he had Grak, even though Amaryllis was — wherever she is, I guess, even then, I felt like he actually was trying to figure out some kind of compromise with me.”

“You are such a sap,” said Fenn. “It’s a good thing that you have me around, you need someone with street smarts. I’m reformed though, just to let you know.”

“Reformed?” I asked. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“I’m not sure what I’m reformed into,” said Fenn. “Reforming, more like.”

“Let me know if I can help with that,” I said. I was sitting by the window on the second floor, and looked out onto the yard, which was lit by the outdoor lights. Beyond that was the road leading to the farm, and if Amaryllis somehow found her way back to us, I thought that was probably the way that she would come.

“There ought to be some limits to how much a single person can be to you,” said Fenn. She didn’t elaborate on that one way or another, and I let it hang in the air, hoping that she would say more, but I have to confess that my mind was elsewhere. The party, such as it was, had been sundered, three members here at a farmhouse near Parsmont, and three others somewhere else. One of them was the big spooky deer, admittedly, and Valencia was probationary, but it left me feeling incomplete.

“You miss her?” asked Fenn.

“I’m worried,” I said. The only idea I’d had thus far was that we could try to torment the answer out of Grak. The idea of actual torture left such a bad taste in my mouth that it was a non-starter, and I doubted that it would be effective even if I was willing to stoop that low, but there were other ways that we might get to him. We had Fallatehr’s soul in its own small bottle, which meant that we could make Grak an offer on what we would end up doing with it.

“But do you miss her?” asked Fenn.

“Yeah,” I replied. I tapped at the window once, idly. I thought that I had seen something, down by the road, but closer inspection revealed only cropland, stalks of something that was close enough to
corn that it felt like home.

“I do too,” said Fenn. “Not that she’s actually been gone that long, but it feels like, when are we going to see her again? And I didn’t get to say goodbye.” There was a subtle change in the lighting, and I looked over to see that Fenn was holding one of the small glass bottles with a soul in it. “Solace,” she said by way of explanation. “If our princess is dead, or worse, just … gone, I’ll,” she shook her head. “I’ll write a strongly-worded letter to the Dungeon Master.”

I felt my heart flip at that. It was possible Amaryllis was dead. It wasn’t the kind of thing that I would ever have done as a DM, but it was possible, especially since we’d been delving deep into narratives. I felt the need to do something, to make myself useful, to not just sit and wait, hoping that Amaryllis would come home.

“I’m going to try to level up soul magic,” I said. “See if I can get it back to 20, see if I can maybe fix Grak, then maybe, I don’t know -- if they have the key, I feel like they’re a long way away. So it’s probably pointless.”

“I’ll keep guard,” said Fenn. “Good luck, have fun.”

I dipped back into my soul and began mindlessly browsing, letting myself get lost in the soul trance. Level Up had moved back up the rankings, though not far enough that it was in strong competition with the things that I thought were core, and I moved it back down. I took a trip to Fenn’s soul, just to confirm that she was clean (and to look at that value, Nellan, that I hadn’t yet asked her to answer for), then over to Amaryllis’ soul, to make sure that she was alive, or at least that her soul was still accessible. I wasn’t sure what would happen to the links if either of them died, especially given that those links didn’t seem like a natural feature of souls to me.

After that I pulled out and asked Fenn for some pencil and paper, which she supplied from her glove, then spent some time going in and out of my soul in order to make some recordings of what was in there, which I thought Amaryllis would appreciate when she came back. The Essentialism skill was climbing, but slower than I had hoped for; I wasn’t doing anything too useful with it. I tried burning through my bones and replacing them to boost the skill faster, but that seemed like exactly the kind of grindy munchkinry that the game layer actively discouraged, and my only feedback was making guesses at what was causing a single number to rise.

“Wait,” said Fenn as I popped back out of my soul. She leaned down and opened the window. “Friend or foe!” she yelled out.

There was a long pause.

“Friend!” came the reply.

“They say they’re friends,” said Fenn. “Two of them, in the fields, skulking around.” She was jabbing her finger out the window, into the dark, and her eyes had to have been better than mine, because I couldn’t see shit. “Neither of them is eight feet tall, which I think probably means there’s cause for celebration, unless we have another changeling on our hands.”

It was slow, as reunions went, due to suspicions on both sides. They were, clearly, Amaryllis and Valencia, and we were, clearly, Juniper and Fenn, but given everything that happened, we were all understandably cautious. Amaryllis was asked to demonstrate mastery of her heirlooms, and I triple-checked that her soul was intact. My Anyblade was invested in me by Amaryllis, so I could prove that I was really myself by shaping it, plus by having Ropey vouch for me. Amaryllis wanted Fenn to fire her bow, and Fenn cheerfully told her that she could fuck off, but did offer a demonstration of her archery skills, which I had to imagine would be nearly impossible for all but a very small group
of people to fake (and we didn’t, to my knowledge, have any supernaturally skilled archers as mortal enemies). Lastly there was Valencia; for the sake of completeness, I tried to slide one of my tattoos onto her skin, and found that it wouldn’t cross over, as expected. She had no soul, no part of her was magical, save perhaps for the gift that the game had bestowed on her.

“Is Grak okay?” asked Amaryllis, once we were done with the confirmation process.

“I’m not sure how long it will take for the effects to fade,” I replied.

“Fallatehr spoke of it in terms of stability,” said Amaryllis. “There’s nothing grounding what Grak feels about Fallatehr, so it should evaporate more quickly, if I understand it right.”

“Next time let’s fight something dumb,” said Fenn. “My vote is some kind of monstrous bear, something that I can shoot from a distance, preferably without armor.”

Something had changed between Amaryllis and Valencia. I had known as much when I’d seen Valencia without chains or ropes, but watching them together, even the way they stood, it was different; Amaryllis angled her body so that Valencia was implicitly included in the conversation, and spoke to the center of the group. I still had my doubts about Valencia, and could see that there were problems with her on the horizon, but the fact that Amaryllis seemed to accept her assuaged my concerns.

“We’re running out of safe places to go,” said Amaryllis. “We have an hour until the key is done recharging, and I think we’d be better off not being here.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“We also need to go back to Barren Jewel,” said Valencia. She was keeping her back straight and trying to project her voice, but the attempt at speaking with authority was fairly transparent for being an attempt. Not currently with her infernal superpowers then.

“What’s in Barren Jewel?” asked Fenn, raising an eyebrow. Her eyes were moving over Valencia, curious and wary.

“We owe a bone mage for her services,” said Valencia, casting a glance at Amaryllis. “Four million tcher.” She looked down at her dress, which I saw was ripped. “And we’ll need clothes, if you have some.”

At that, Fenn finally burst into a wide grin. “I think I might have something in just your size.”

I reached level 20 in Essentialism the next day, as I ‘meditated’ on a warm, flat rock in the middle of some very empty woods. I got the Soul Slip virtue back again, and this time had more freedom to explore my soul. The virtue still had a horribly vague description, but I was hopeful that one of the clauses, the one about ‘altering that which had been unalterable’ would allow me to fix Grak. Before going to where he was tied up, I looked in at my soul, to where the ability numbers were lined up. There was nothing that I could change there without lowering the cap on some of my skills, and so many of my skills were at their cap that I couldn’t do it safely. I thought that I had to be nearing another level, so decided to wait until then, when I would have the points to play with and wouldn’t risk lowering my skills, if that was what happened when the cap got permanently lowered.

The second thing I did was to go to one of my little-used skills, Bows, and lower it by a point. When I had lowered Essentialism, I’d been kicked from my soul, which made sense given that I had zeroed out the skill and temporarily lost it. Here, I was trying to see whether lowering a skill actually gave me anything, because the description for Soul Slip explicitly mentioned trade-offs. After feeling
around the internal space of the skill section in my soul, I eventually realized that I could feel something slippery there, and with a push of will, could apply it to one of the other skills. I applied it to One-handed Weapons, which was at its cap, pushing it up to 22.

One of the annoying things about being inside the soul was that I didn’t get any of the HUD notifications that I got in the ‘real’ world, but waiting in my list of Afflictions were two new entries.

*Overcapped: Skill will decay at 1 per 10 minutes until under cap.*

*Skilled trade: Skill will decay at 1 per 10 minutes until returned to baseline.*

Not permanent, then. After five minutes had passed, I checked my skills, and saw that Bows was still down a point, and One-handed Weapons had reverted to 21, which confirmed that the times multiplied, and that it was a semi-permanent cost to be paid. I hoped the same wasn’t going to be true for trading ability points, because those were one of the most valuable game resources I had; it made me nervous to even try.

But the point of leveling Essentialism wasn’t to get those benefits; it was to see whether or not I could do something about Grak.

When I came to him, he wasn’t looking good. We hadn’t taken the gag from his mouth because we were worried he would try to bite his tongue, which meant we hadn’t been able to feed him or give him anything to drink. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. We’d kept him tied up, too, and while Fenn had cleaned up after him, there was still a lingering odor; keeping someone bound for long periods of time was fraught with difficulty. He lay in one of our tents, set there to keep him out of the rain.

“Hey,” I said to him. I reached out and placed my hand on his head. “I’m going to try to change you back to normal.”

He screamed around his gag, and I could see his pupils dilate, but I tried to push all of that aside and concentrate on the feeling of my skin against his. There was latent magic in skin, and magics of many kinds had connections to the soul, so I thought that was a decent enough place to start. If your bones connected back to the soul somehow, then your skin probably did too, if only because it was through a force of will that the tattoos were activated. I was looking for a thread, or a tunnel, or something like that I could search along, something that would lead me backward to his internal structure.

It took me four hours to worm my way in. After an hour touching his sweaty forehead, I used the Anyblade to make a cut on the pad of my thumb and the back of his wrist, then tried mingling our blood and finding a connection that way, and when that didn’t work, I tried to find his soul by first burning through one of my bones to heal him, and then burning through one of *his* bones. That was what finally worked, but it was still two fucking hours of trying to tug on that metaphorical thread before I was in his soul.

When I finally got it, it was different from how I’d experience Amaryllis and Fenn’s souls. Those had been, in some respect, extensions of my own, governed by the same logic, at least from my point of view. By way of analogy, if my soul was an enormous sheet of paper, Grak’s was another sheet laid on top of it, this one without writing. I had to navigate between the two frequently, because his soul didn’t have the order to it that mine did. It felt like sitting in front of a television with a printed out sheet of paper, trying to follow an FAQ to a game, going from instructions to screen and back again.

Eventually, I found Fallatehr in his mind, and after triple-checking and taking a deep breath I could
barely feel, I dialed it down into the negatives. It was only because I saw the value moving downward that I was confident enough to do it; I was only accelerating a process that would have happened on its own without me.

When I removed the gag from Grak’s mouth, he said a word in Groglir that was, from context, a curse. “Untie me,” he said. I didn’t bother with trying to save the rope, and used the Anyblade to cut his hands and feet free of their bindings. He began rubbing at his wrists, and I placed a hand on him to give him healing -- a hand he swatted away.

“I don’t like having my soul touched,” he said.

“I was going to give you healing,” I replied. “It’s not good to be tied up for so long. You get bedsores, have your circulation cut off.” A little thanks might have gone a long way, but I didn’t say that. “How are you feeling? Back to normal?”

“No,” replied Grak without elaboration. I let him sit and massage where the ropes had been digging into him. “I was … I had purpose.”

“Serving Fallatehr,” I said.

“It wasn’t service,” said Grak. “It was wanting something more than myself.”

“Amaryllis didn’t describe it like that,” I replied.

“No,” said Grak. He stopped rubbing his wrists and laid down on the ground. “She wouldn’t. She is more person than I am.”

“More person?” I asked. This felt, in some respects, like the most true conversation we’d ever had, despite all my attempts at inroads.

“She has purpose,” he said. “Fallatehr gave her another purpose. She feels relief at returning to her previous path.”

“And you don’t have a path,” I said with a nod. I knew how that felt, but didn’t want to say it. Here on Aerb, there were paths galore, but back in Kansas, there were times I’d felt utterly adrift, even before everything had gone to shit. “What happens when you take your thousand pounds of gold to Darili Irid?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Grak, looking past me.

“I have a quest for it,” I said, but at that he turned further away from me. “I really don’t understand you.”

“There is not much to understand,” replied Grak.

“Sure,” I said. I was watching him closely. I wanted to say that all of this could have been avoided if he’d just been more loyal to me, or that I had been trying with him, was trying with him even now, and it was frustrating for it to not be paying any dividends, but that wasn’t the kind of thing that I thought would be helpful, and if I needed to vent, I would go vent about it to someone else.

“I didn’t like being told I was part of something,” said Grak, into the silence. “Back in Barren Jewel, when we met. I did not like it. You are like family to me.”

“Family,” I said, rolling the word over in my mouth. “Family, because you’re stuck with family, and you have an obligation, or they think you have this obligation, and if you could pick … if you could
pick your family, you wouldn’t have picked the ones that you ended up with.” That was how I felt about my parents, when they were fighting, which was often. Even sometimes when they weren’t fighting. “You left your family to become a warder. And when you came back, they tossed you into a marriage that you didn’t want. So you left. Am I that kind of family to you?”

“No,” said Grak, returning his gaze to me. “You are not the family I would pick, but you are also not like my father.”

**Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 8!**

I wanted to ask what it was about me, but that seemed like a conversation that would just irritate me. Count on a guy like Grak to sap all the enjoyment from having made a breakthrough in soul magic and fixing him.

Fenn found a mark for us back in Cranberry Bay, a man she’d found sitting in a tavern drinking beer with his friends. It had taken a show of cash for her to tempt him back to the hotel room we were staying in, and when he saw me, he must have gotten the wrong idea, because she had to block the door and talk him down.

“He’s a healer,” she said. “Any minor injuries you’ve sustained, he’s going to fix them. You’re probably going to ask what’s in it for him, because you already know that what’s in it for you is a fuckload of money for just sitting there. For him, it’s a study of anatomy, one that he can do without having to inconvenience you in any way besides you sitting there, which you are, I repeat, going to be paid well for.”

“So I won the lottery?” he asked, wrinkling his nose, clearly not buying it.

“Yes, actually,” replied Fenn. “There’s a certain noble, who I’m not going to name, who’s taken ill, of-late. One too many indiscretions with ladies of the night, but you didn’t hear it from me. He’s got problems, ones that take a skilled medic to fix, and my friend here is that skilled medic, but it’s always easier for him to do the work if he knows what healthy is supposed to look like for his employer.” Fenn placed a finger on the guy’s chest. “It’s a rush job, so I rushed out and found the first person who had enough of a physical resemblance. You’re human, you’ve got the right shoulder width, chest width, and height, and you appeared, to my eyes, to be both virile and intelligent enough to just take a gift horse when it lands in your lap.”

He didn’t seem to catch the mangled expression in there, and to my surprise, sat down without further grumbling. Fenn put on a radio play -- aside from internet and cell phones, television was my most-missed invention -- while I worked, and while I at least knew what I was looking for now, finding the thread was still the easy part. Even with what I thought was probably the equivalent of a PhD in soul magic, it took me an hour and a half to actually gain access to his soul and enter the trance.

Copying over the bones was fucking terrifying. Having restricted read-write access to the base data structure of my physical and mental presence in the world -- or something masquerading as the base data structure that still had an actual impact on what it was to be me, for all that distinction might matter -- wasn’t really something that I had ever wished for. I’d monkeyed around with my computer a fair amount on Earth, but editing the registry had given me the same sweaty, anxious feeling.

When I was done, we sent our unwitting donor off, far richer for the experience.

“Did it work?” asked Fenn.
“Don’t know yet,” I replied. “I didn’t want to do the healing process while he was here.”

“Well what if we need him back?” asked Fenn. “What if, I don’t know, you need to redo it?”

“If it goes that badly, I think I’m probably going to die,” I said.

“Well that’s fucking great,” she replied, folding her arms across her chest. “I better keep my powers if you die.”

“Mean,” I said, but I knew that jokes were her way of dealing with things. “Okay.” I felt for the bones in my hand, ready to burn them to heal my chest. In an ideal world, my soul would already be fixed, and all I would be doing was bringing soul and body back into concert. “It’s kind of fucked up that I could have brainwashed him into being my slave, isn’t it?”

“Just do the healing already, I’m getting antsy,” said Fenn.

I laid both hands on my chest and concentrated my power, burning through bones on my left side in order to fuel the healing in my ribs. It would take some time to reset those bones, but that was now a solved problem. The changes came fast, first sensation returning to my skin, then a gnawing hunger from an appetite that was finally waking back up. I didn’t suffer from a sudden heart attack, as I had feared that I might, and whatever the soul’s conception of the body was at the boundary areas, nothing horrible like a rending of my flesh happened at my shoulders or hips.

The quest didn’t show up as completed though, and I slapped my forehead when I realized why; I’d drained bones in order to complete the healing. A quick dip into my soul was enough to fix that, and I came back out quick enough to see the notifications in my view, before they were washed away.

**Affliction: Drained Bone Removed!**

**Skill increased: Essentialism lvl 23!**

**Quest Complete: Boneitis - Your body is back to normal, and under your control to a far greater extent than in your wildest transhumanist dreams, if you dare to risk fucking it up.**

**Level Up!**

END BOOK IV
Stats for Nerds

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| 2  | CHA| 0  | Water Magic | 0 Tree Magic |
| 4  | INS| 21 | Esentialism | 2 Debate |
| 3  | POI| 7  | Language | 6 Comedy |
| 1  | LUK| 6  | Intimidation | 0 Spirit |

Quests

- **Straddling Worlds**: There are others like you, those with dreams of a place called Earth. The so-called dream-skewered are studied at the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny. You can travel there to find out more.
- **God Botherer**: There are gods in this world, titans of power and masters of domains, each their own creature with their own special rules. Tread carefully around these creatures, especially if you wish to someday join their ranks.
- **The Lost King, Found?**: Five hundred years ago, Uther Penndraig, figure of legend, King of Anglecynn, and ancestor of Amaryllis, disappeared from this world while on a quest of grave importance. This enduring mystery must have an answer for those brave or foolish enough to seek it, mustn’t it?
- **Summer’s End** - Return to the place where Fenn received her scars and bring justice to the elves. (Companion Quest)
- **They Say You Can’t Go Home Again** - He had a life, before you, and you had a life, before this.
- **All That Glitters** - Return to Darili Irid with Grakhuil once da has gathered enough gold to satisfy da nad self-imposed penance to da nad former clan. Speak with Grak to learn more. (500/1000) (Companion Quest)
- **Through the Lashing Glass** - Far inside the Glassy Fields exclusion zone, the only place on Aerb where glass magic still works, lies a castle coated in shards. The treasures within are unknown to the world, but you could unearth them, if you dared.
- **A Room of One’s Own** - The Boundless Pit is a mile wide and infinitely deep, a chasm from which little returns. The tuung call it their home, and imperial law agrees, but infinity is a large place, and a secure home stays stuck to the wall, waiting to light up with activity once more. Kuum Doona awaits.
- **Taking Root** - The world’s last druid has died, leaving the last locus severely constrained and untended. Eventually the imperfectly self-regulating cycles of life within the bottle will fail and the locus will die, unless you can find a way to remove the locus and transplant it into the wider world, where it was always meant to be. (Companion Quest)
- **The Slayer of Horrors (0/13)**:
  - □ **Murder in Duplicate** - As soon as it was discovered by a precocious young girl, the ability for a person to duplicate themselves was excluded to a thousand square miles
and that single person. Doris Finch lives her life in duplicate; to complete the exclusion, it will be necessary to kill every single one of her. (0/9,511,346)

- **Manifest Destiny** - The fall of the Second Empire was, by some accountings, inevitable, but by others, it was the work of a single incident. The exact nature of the magic that allows the immortal man named Manifest to puppet his subjects from a distance is unknown, as is his exact location, but it is clear that with the magic excluded, his range is limited to only Lankwon, once the Imperial City, now the City Made Manifest. Defeating him will be an impossible task, but one that you have taken upon yourself.

- **A Door Into the Soul** - Caldwell Gatesmith has the dubious distinction of being responsible for two exclusions. Through his portals, he keeps watch over his domain. If he spies you, and you do not meet with his satisfaction, his portals will cut with an edge designed to cleave time and space.

- **The Z-word** - Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle is the reason that no one says it. That's his word.

- **Everything Eater** - More monster than man, no one has seen Rove's face in four hundred years and lived to tell the tale. He sits at the center of a half mile of dirt, flesh, and garbage. If you slay him, you will be the first to have survived contact with him.

- **Better with Loops** - Through magics unknown, a young boy of eighteen found himself reliving the same month over and over again, with death only bringing him back to the same crisp spring morning. Time does not behave within his exclusion zone, and only bringing a permanent end to his life will restore the area to normalcy. Beware, lest you be trapped in the cycle.

- **[REDACTED]** - The more you [REDACTED], the more you [REDACTED], until [REDACTED]. Merely knowing his name makes him [REDACTED], and his gender alone is a piece of information you might wish you didn't have, if [REDACTED]. Better to go in blind.

- **Unwavering** - In the beginning, they said that the goblin inspired loyalty, until it became clear that what he was doing was more literal than figurative. To kill him, you'll need to fight through a veritable army of his loyal servants, if you don't end up becoming one of them yourself.

- **Fleshsmith** - For millennia, fleshsmithing was a noble trade of Pendleham, one practiced by noscere and ignoscere alike. When a small cabal took the craft too far, exclusion reared its ugly head, leaving Pendleham as the City of Flesh, where none dare tread.

- **Aches and Plains** - Perhaps farming might seem an innocuous thing to evoke the exclusionary principle, but given the time and attention brought to it by a billion minds, it was inevitable that someone would breach its deeper secrets. The land of Pai Shep is now guarded by a single warrior-farmer, his fields impeccable, his power absolute.

- **Guardian of the Underworld** - A machine of vast intellect, funneled into the body of a broken man. The people of Aerb have yet to pass his tests, but perhaps someone of a different world has the wherewithal to be allowed within his inner sanctum.

- **Finger of the Sun** - When the elves broke Celestar, there were a small few who continued on with their research. The product of their effort brought nothing but pain.

- **Gone to Seed** - There is a place on Aerb considered worse than the first four thousand hells. Fel Seed sits on a throne of living flesh, unable to spread beyond his domain, but with a rule of horror within it. You know his weakness.
Amaryllis is the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, the Lost King, which gives her special claim-in-fact to a fair number of his estates and heirlooms bound along cognatic or enatic primogeniture, ultimogeniture, and gavelkind rules. She was once a keystone member of a bloc of power within the Lost King’s Court, but now she has been cast out through means both semi-legal and downright nefarious. Her homeland of Anglecynn is forbidden to her now, at least until she’s gathered enough power to wedge open some doors.

Fenn Greenglass, Loyalty lvl 21

Fenn is a half-elf born to an elven father and human mother. Her childhood was spent with alternating months in the Isle of Eversummer and the colony of Rogbottom. While her ears marked her as exotic and dangerous among the humans, her teeth marked her as a hideous disgrace among the elves. She has never felt at home in either world and pretends to understand less than she does in order to highlight her differences before anyone can call her on them. After she reached maturity she held several odd jobs until settling into a dangerous, solitary life entering into the Risen Lands exclusion zone to take whatever wasn’t nailed down. That life ended when she was arrested selling contraband to a fence. When Anglecynn needed a guide through Silmar City, she was pulled from prison and given a second chance.

Grakhuil Leadbraids, Loyalty lvl 8

Grakhuil comes from the largely parthenogenetic clan of dwarves in Darili Irid (loosely, Gold Hole). Due to da nad skill in the game of Ranks and overall empathic nature relative to da nad kin, Grak was selected to leave Darili Irid for the Athenaeum of Barriers with the plan that da would return and become the next master warder of the clanhome. Upon returning home, da was entered into a rare arranged pair-bond with another dwarf, and fled from Darili Irid after refusing the Kiss on da nad bond night. Da has spent da nad time looking to make amends for the damage da nad absence caused to da nad clan.

Six-eyed Doe, Loyalty lvl 3

[I’d closed my eyes and paged through after my little experiment in experiencing awe and wonder, only to find that instead of text, the Six-Eyed Doe had a picture that expanded outside the box it was meant to be set within. This was the first time that the game interface had shown me anything other than text, symbols, or lines to make boxes.

The picture had various scenes, devoid of any clear chronology and bleeding into each other where they met. When I looked at it, the view zoomed in, leaving the rest of the game interface behind and filling my vision with only the pictorial story of the Six-Eyed Doe. Most of it signified little to me, because it was focused on rivers and forests, with the occasional animal. I focused in on people, where I could find them, and ended up looking at a full-on orgy with writhing, naked bodies of a hundred different species. To one side of it, up and to the right, armored men were coming in and slaughtering the people, but toward the bottom there were a handful of pregnant women sitting around, and beneath them various women giving birth, with naked children walking away through the woods, and some donning leather armor of their own to fight off the attackers.

This was the story of the locus, as told by some insane artist who had the ability to paint photorealistically at a yottapixel scale but lacked any idea of how to tell a coherent
narrative. It took me some time to find the bottle, which sat all by itself, away from everyone. There was no attempt at being literal; it was only barely big enough to contain Solace, who sat with legs folded and her staff across her lap. It was such a small thing, in comparison to the rest, and that was probably the point.

Valencia the Red, Loyalty lvl 16

Valencia is a nonanima, a humanoid without a soul, created by the essentialist Fallatehr Whiteshell in the Amoureux Penitentiary where she lived for the first seventeen years of her life. Until recently she was subject to repeated possession by demons and devils at random intervals, but now, touched by your magic, she has become something to be feared, for much different reasons than she was before. She is nearly a newborn, in some ways, trying to find her feet.
Fenn was dressed to the nines, in a black dress that hugged her figure and revealed her legs, back, and intricately scarred arms in a way that got my heart pounding. She was wearing a pair of black heels, and dazzling earrings that drew attention to her pointed ears. I hadn’t been completely clear on the ins and outs of women’s fashion on Earth, and knew even less about it on Aerb, but whatever bra she was wearing, it was doing wonders for her. It was also the first time I’d ever seen her wear makeup. Her hair though --

“You have long hair,” I said. When we’d first met her hair had been on the shorter side, barely long enough that she could put it in a ponytail, and while it had grown out some over the course of our time together, it was now hanging down in blonde ringlets down to the small of her back.

“Oh fuck off,” said Fenn. “That’s all you have to say?”

“You look gorgeous,” I replied. “You were already gorgeous, but now you’re the prettiest version of you that I could possibly imagine. Which is not to say that I don’t think that you’re pretty when you’re sleeping beside me in a tank top and underwear, or naked, or -- that’s not helping me, is it?” She shook her head, which made her earrings sparkle in the sunlight, but she was smiling at me. “I only want to say that you’re beautiful, and I’m lucky to have you.”

“Aw, you’re not so bad yourself,” she replied, looking me up and down. “You clean up well.”

“See, I feel like if I said that, you would have taken it as an insult,” I said with a smile. I held out my hand. “Shall we?”

You know, now that I think about it, I wasn’t really completely clear on men’s fashion either. For me, it was gym shorts and t-shirt in the summer, and a hoodie with jeans in the winter, with a bit of a mix-and-match in-between. A few days ago, I’d taken a wallet full of obols from our safehouse and gone out into Cranberry Bay for new clothes, not the off-the-rack stuff that could be found in almost any clothing store, but three expensive outfits fitted to my exact proportions by an expert (an experience that I think I would place between getting a haircut and getting my teeth cleaned, on the stranger-invading-my-personal-space scale). The one that I wore was a black that matched Fenn’s dress, a jacket with buttons offset to one side, a collar that seemed like it was trying to hide my neck, and foot-long coattails. I’d mostly stayed silent at the tailor and let Amaryllis do the talking, but I was under the impression that this was a bastardized version of some culture’s formal dress that had spread like wildfire through the Empire of Common Cause.

Our destination was a restaurant that Amaryllis had picked out, Cupona, and if I’d done a good job of internalizing how expensive things were, I might have objected when I learned how much a meal there cost. We were still living off the gold we’d taken from Aumann’s, most of which had been converted over to cash, and though we’d been burning through it by establishing our safehouses, it still didn’t feel like we were anywhere near having to worry about it. We were, for tonight, treating ourselves, because it was our long-awaited First Date.

(Following the events of our brief stay in Parsmont, Amaryllis had formally declared herself as accountant and quartermaster, a position that she took to with the fervor of someone trying to make up for past mistakes. I’d gotten her after-action report, and tried my best to convince her that she was, basically, not a person that anyone should ever want to fuck with, but her response to that had been to pretend that she was feeling better, a facade that she didn’t put nearly enough effort into -- telling her that seemed like it would be counterproductive though.)
“Okay, a few requests,” said Fenn after we were seated. “Number one: no talking shop.”

“What, exactly, is ‘shop’?” I asked. “We’re unemployed.”

Fenn gave me a casual shrug. She really did look beautiful tonight; the dress helped to accentuate the curling whorls of the scars on her arms; the straps must have been tailored just for the effect. She was showing a lot of skin. “Let’s say no talking about things like narrative, character sheets, training, logistics, money, planning, or anything directly related to operations of what would be our business, if it were a business.”

“But we can talk about our business partners?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, that, certainly,” said Fenn with a grin. A waiter, dressed in a muted brown uniform, stopped by to gently place two fluted glasses on our table, each filled with a milky purple liquid. “I mean, those are the only people that we really have in common, and I don’t want to take everything off the table.” She punctuated her sentence by grabbing one of the glasses and sipping at it. “Number two: no references to ye olde Earth.”

“But --” I began.

“Just the references,” said Fenn. “I normally find it has some charm, but tonight I’d like to get through a conversation without feeling like you’re having a laugh at my expense because I don’t know about my base.”

“Your base?” I asked, feeling confused and wondering whether she was pulling my leg.

“Something about how all my bases belong to you?” asked Fenn, with a furrowed brow.

“All your base are belong to us?” I asked, trying to keep myself from smiling. “I don’t even remember saying that.”

“We’d just finished the first safehouse, and you said it,” replied Fenn. She was watching me as she drank her purple milk. “And it was cute! But, also, I sometimes think that you do that for your own benefit, and while you might find it fun, it sort of pushes me away a little bit.” She frowned slightly. “The third request was going to be that we can’t talk about our relationship, but now I can see that I’ve fucked that up a bit.”

Two plates were gently placed on our table, each with no more than two bites worth of food. Our waiter gave us an elaborate description that I only half-listened to -- some small, delicate animal had been deboned, arranged on the plate, and then cooked with hot oils, after which extremely small finely-cut vegetables in a variety of colors had been arranged around it. We hadn’t ordered; this was the sort of place where you ate what the chef made for you.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to exclude you, or make you feel like I wish you were from Earth.”

“No,” said Fenn. She took a delicate forkful of food. “I didn’t mean ... I like when you explain Earth to me, not just because you obviously enjoy talking about it, but because you do a good job of making it interesting.”

“But?” I asked.

“Ohay,” said Fenn. “Explain the base thing to me.” She ate her forkful of food, and closed her eyes to savor it.

“It’s ... an ancient internet meme,” I said. “There was this early, 16-bit videogame that got a really
bad translation, and people found it funny enough that it went viral.” I treaded carefully, trying to make sure that Fenn knew all those words and I wouldn’t have to go into a digression to explain any of it.

“See, that’s sort of what I’m talking about,” said Fenn. “I didn’t mean all of Earth, I like hearing about your friends and your life there, but the memes … more than the memes, the shared cultural heritage?” She paused. “I don’t want you to feel lonely. I mean, I know how it is, for me it was being with humans and thinking about elves, or the other way around, and knowing that it wasn’t something that would translate …” She trailed off and ate another bite.

“So you over-corrected?” I asked. “When I met you, you were really playing up the half-elf thing. Less, now.”

“Hrm,” said Fenn. She took a spoon and scooped up the remaining sauce off the plate.

While she was ruminating on that, our waiter came back and whisked the plates away (mine having been demolished while Fenn talked -- it was salty, acidic, and crispy, but gone in a flash, and I was hungry), then returned moments later with a new plate, this one with carved vegetables sitting in a multi-colored puddle.

“This course is corpsefruit and smoked bloodwood shoots on a bed of young --”

“You know,” said Fenn. “I really am enjoying myself here, and I don’t mean to be rude, but is there any way that we could eat without these interruptions? Just the food.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said the waiter with a quick bow, leaving almost immediately afterward. We’d paid in advance of the meal, including what I gathered was a rather generous tip; we’d been placed in a section of the restaurant away from everyone else, which I told myself was because of that, rather than because Fenn was a half-elf.

“Still thinking?” I asked before eating some of the unappetizingly-named corpsefruit. It was sweeter than I’d expected.

“Kind of,” replied Fenn. “This food is just shockingly good. Hard to believe that we switch between portable soup and something like this.” She speared a bloodwood shoot and watched as it bled, then gave it a twirl on her fork once. “I mean, you’re right about the whole half-elf thing, it’s easier to just be blunt about it, or joke, or just annoy people who are already going to be annoyed, but I don’t like the comparison.”

“No?” I asked.

“There’s a difference between saying, ‘hey, I’m different’, and the culture gap, you know?” asked Fenn.

“Yeah,” I replied. I held up my hands in defeat. “Consider it off the table.”

“I feel it with the others, too,” said Fenn, once another course had been delivered to us, this one a tiny collection of three different grilled meats. “These divides.”

“I still don’t really understand dwarves,” I said. “I mean I do understand the structure of their society and have some grasp on how that shapes them, I don’t want to say that I was the one to create them, but--”

“But you created them,” said Fenn with a smile. “So modest.”
“In my mind, dwarven culture was built around this sort of alternate form of farming,” I said. “I knew a lot of farmers growing up, and in my mind, it sort of mapped to that, with the parthenogenetic bloodlines added on. I mean, I think as I originally had it, there were two different strands of dwarf, the Mendi and the Taldi, one that did the pair-bonding thing and the other that stuck to the single-parent thing -- sorry, this is probably boring.”

“You’re talking about the literal creation of the world,” said Fenn, leaning forward slightly. “I think you sometimes forget how special you are. I mean, you’re not a god, but I can point at random things and ask you why they are the way they are, and actually get an answer. Plus that god thing doesn’t seem like it’s totally out of reach. You could be talking to me about frogs and I’d be loving it.”

“You’d be making me blush, but I can control my bloodflow,” I replied. “But I am serious, the gap between Grak and I just seems so huge that there’s no way that I’m going to overcome it.”

“Bigger than you and the locus?” asked Fenn.

“Point taken,” I said. “You know, sometimes I wish that our party were just,” the Spice Girls, “more archetypally arranged, it seems like we’ve got a ridiculous, erratic spread both in terms of personality and utility.”

“We’ll probably have to talk about Val at some point,” said Fenn. With our plates cleaned between conversation, another course came to us, small, translucent balls of red, purple, and orange. “She’s fucking nuts.”

I winced. “I’ve been trying to keep my distance. I feel so bad for her, but I really don’t want her to think that I’m … more than I am, to her. More than I want to be.”

“She kissed Mary, I don’t know if you heard that,” said Fenn. She was trying not to show it, but the smile she was hiding reached her eyes.

“Seriously?” I asked. “Why?”

“Mary was making some attempts at socialization,” said Fenn. She’d stopped trying to hide her amusement. “Val’s all over the place, depending on whether or not she’s got a guest inside her, and even then.”

“That euphemism is terrible,” I said.

“I try,” said Fenn. “Anyway, Mary took it into her head that Val was going to need a crash course in how to be human, or at least a more normal varietal of the mortal species, because Mary’s got a bug up her butt about being ‘productive’, and the chance that Val could screw things up out in the real world is pretty high, especially if her connection gets cut off or she chomps too hard on her guest. So the lesson, such as it was, was about physical boundaries, and I guess our Mary said something to the effect that a kiss needs to be done chastely if in greeting, and anything more gets reserved for only those you really love.” Fenn took a spoonful of the orbs and gestured with her other hand, a ‘yadda yadda yadda’ type of signal.

“Huh,” I said.

“Right?” asked Fenn. I was pretty sure that she wasn’t thinking what I was thinking. “Anyway, they kissed for a few seconds -- yeah, I asked about that, apparently Mary thought that saying ‘kiss people you love’ and then pushing Val away right after that might not be the best thing for the little woobie.”

“Using your definition for woobie, or mine?” I asked. A ravenous creature mimicking a pitiful cry
for help, or a broken innocent who needed protection?

“Either,” said Fenn. “Mary’s grown a bit of a soft spot for her, which makes sense given that she’s not really threatening to slit our throats in the night or turn us against each other, or at least not in the same way she was before.” She kept the undercurrent of hostility from her voice, but not from her face, though it was nothing but a twitch of her eyebrows.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“So, after they kissed, Amaryllis explained that wasn’t really appropriate, and went through this whole explanation about romantic love, what that was like, which Val only really had exposure to through her guests, and that’s not the kind of education that we’d want her to have, right? And her response to this whole lesson, was to say, ‘Oh, so I should only kiss Juniper?’”

“Ah,” I said with a sigh. “No, Amaryllis didn’t tell me any of that -- probably so that we could have this conversation. You understand that’s not -- she’s not appealing to me?”

“No?” asked Fenn. “She sees you as her savior and hangs on your every word. All you’d have to do, if you wanted her, is to say the word. You probably wouldn’t even have to do that, if she got it in her head that she could please you that way. A pretty girl, slipping into your bed naked because she’s so eager to indulge you?”

“I mean, when you put it like that ...” I said with a smile that Fenn didn’t return. “I think you’re overstating her, uh, obsession with me.”

“Maybe,” said Fenn. Another plate came in front of us, and I was starting to get annoyed with how little food was on each of them, no matter that each one was a masterwork. “See, this is why I didn’t want to talk about us, I figured I’d just come off looking like I thought the world was out to get me.” She pierced a little wonton-style thing with her fork. “Though, I do have to say, you have five companions now, and four and a half of them are women, at least three of which are into you, which does not at all seem like coincidence.”

The three would be Fenn, Valencia, and Amaryllis. I’d really been hoping that that last complication would have evaporated by now, but I wasn’t about to challenge Fenn on it, especially because it was a subject that Amaryllis and I studiously avoided. Four and a half women though?

“Are you counting the locus or Grak as the half woman?” I asked. “Or both of them as three quarters?”

“I was thinking Grak,” said Fenn with a shrug. “The locus presents as female.”

I reached across the table and took her hand. “Fenn, under no circumstances will I ever even consider having sex with a giant six-eyed deer.”

“But you’re thinking of the logistics of it now, aren’t you?” asked Fenn, gently patting my hand.

“You know me too well,” I replied, pulling back. “I’m starting to agree that I should put the points into Social.”

“I am too,” said Fenn. “Not actually, if it’s just to stop you from putting your foot in your mouth. Can you imagine how dumb I’d feel if I died because I wanted you to have a bit more tact and grace around me?”

“Seems like we’re getting into shop talk,” I replied.
“You’re right,” said Fenn. “Tonight is a night to ourselves. Would you mind entertaining me with a game story?”

“Uh, sure,” I said. “I think you’ve heard all the best ones though. Unless I told you the asteroid story already?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” said Fenn. “You’re probably going to have to explain what an asteroid is though.”

So I told her the asteroid story (the short version: rock falls, everyone dies), and after that she told me about her first foray into the Risen Lands under the guidance of a mentor who she later had a falling out with, and we somehow managed to actually get our night back on track as the extravagant (but tiny) courses kept coming. It was pleasant, to be alone together, to take a break from the planning and preparations we’d been doing with the larger group, and we didn’t return to any discussion of the internal group politics either, which was a relief.

Movie marathons were something of a tradition for Arthur and me, going way back to before we’d even started playing tabletop games. Arthur had a deep and abiding love for series and sequels, but especially trilogies, and he often said that it was part of our cultural duty to see as many of the classics firsthand as possible, instead of just knowing about them through cultural osmosis, which gave you parodies of summaries of half-remembrances.

“I don’t know,” I said to Arthur during a lull in our Lord of the Rings extended edition marathon. “There are some ideas that seem like interesting premises, but actually aren’t.”

“Explain that one to me,” he said. “That’s like saying that someone looks beautiful, but actually isn’t, it’s a logical contradiction. I mean, maybe you can say that it’s an illusion or something.”

“Yes, right, that’s it exactly,” I said. “It’s an illusion. It’s looking at a pretty girl and then realizing on closer inspection that she’s a mirage.”

“Or has a lot of makeup on,” said Arthur.

“That’s,” I said, but my objection died on my lips as I realized that we’d probably end up talking about the socio-cultural role of makeup instead of the more interesting thing that I wanted to talk about. “Yeah, I guess. So you have ideas or premises that look interesting, but they actually aren’t once you start in on execution.”

“You’re just talking about a deep slash shallow distinction?” asked Arthur.

“Maybe?” I asked. “Well, maybe not, because there are different kinds of depth, and I’m not sure that we’re talking about the same thing here.”

“Okay,” said Arthur. “Taboo ‘deep’, taboo ‘shallow’.” That was, at the time, his new thing, declaring certain words taboo so that you had to more fully explain the concept you were pointing at. He’d told me once that all debates were ultimately debates about definition, but to me that sounded like one of those things that people say to be pithy rather than correct. “Actually, also taboo ‘interesting’.”

“Alright, but I need to think for a bit,” I said.

“That’s fine, we’re almost to Isengard,” replied Arthur.

So I sat there, half watching a movie that I’d seen three times before, and half thinking about how I
wanted to frame things. My favorite part of watching movies with Arthur was that there was more
time for silence and thought; I always felt like I was half a step behind him, if it was just the two of
us talking.

“Okay,” I said, when the action was over. “I think it might be about minimal descriptive length.”

“MDL, sure,” said Arthur.

“For me, a good, compelling idea can be described in very few words, but the *effects* and *results* of
that short description would have a very, very long MDL,” I said. “Or at least, that’s the starting
point for describing what I guess I mean when I say that something can only seem interesting on the
surface.”

“There’s a problem there,” said Arthur. “Which is that MDL is a wobbly term.”

“Yeah,” I said. I knew that was going to be a problem.

“I mean, you could rephrase it as the point of diminishing descriptive utility,” said Arthur. “I think
that works a little better, like you can say that Merry is a male hobbit and that gets you a lot of
conceptual power per word of description, but eventually you hit this point where you’re not talking
about his hair, you’re talking about the individual placement of hair follicles. But then you have to
take culture and cultural dictionaries into account, like ‘hobbit’, for example, where you’re packing a
lot of description into a little term -- that pun, Juniper, was just for you -- and that’s just because
someone has already done the hard definitional work for you.”

“Okay, sure,” I said. “So the *problem* I’m trying to get at is that there are some short, interesting
elevator pitch type ideas that have a lot of consequences to them, but those consequences have a
shorter descriptive length than you would think just looking at them. They might be evocative, but
there’s no meat on the bones when you get down to it.”

“And you think that the Boundless Library is one of those ideas?” asked Arthur.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, the core idea of a library filled with books that haven’t been written
yet is a good one, but I sort of slipped sideways into this subplot about librarians, and if it’s just going
to be about political infighting, what’s the point in including the library?”

“So it wasn’t a bad idea, it was bad execution,” said Arthur.

“Ouch,” I said. I’d always thought that ideas were basically worthless, when compared to execution.
I wondered whether Arthur had remembered that; I’d always been the one to carelessly slight people,
it wouldn’t have been like him to just outright hurt me like that, even if it was true.

“You told me that every session was a failure you could learn from,” he replied with a shrug, eyes
still on the movie in front of us. “And to be clear, I didn’t *hate* it, it just didn’t have all that much to
say. Like if you wanted it to be about fate, then make it about fate, or if you want it to be about, I
don’t know, the difficulty in getting people that are nominally aligned with each other to actually
work together, then it really needs to be about that. It wasn’t even that the librarians fighting with
each other was bad, it was that they weren’t fighting about anything. There was this whole surface
level thing about library classification schemes, but it wasn’t interesting, and that was just a proxy
war that *they* didn’t care about, because they were factions competing to see who could get their guy
to be head librarian. But the factions were just factions, people who hated each other for personal
reasons, and we didn’t care about them either.”

(Arthur was the best. We sometimes played without him, and it was always a struggle for people to
remember what had happened the time before, who their characters were, and what they were supposed to be doing. Arthur made notes, he kept to his characters, and more than that, he paid attention. He had an ability to absorb and digest plots and then spit them back out in a more refined form. Our art teacher had talked about how sculptors saw the piece within the marble, and to me it always felt like every game saw us both looking at the same piece of marble and him being able to see the shapes better.

That conversation, offhand on his part, showed a better understanding of that plot than I’d ever had, and while it felt almost venomous at the time to be told that I had spent dozens of hours of my time creating something boring, later on I could understand where he was coming from. It was maybe the closest that we ever came to having a fight, and the only reason that we didn’t was because Arthur was the best.

“So what do you suggest?” I asked, my voice tight.

“Obviously we can’t play it again, obviously you can’t run it again, so …” he shrugged, still watching the TV. “Honestly, I would have made it more about the library, like there’s one faction that thinks the library should be sorted on the basis of people, and a different faction that thinks it should be about objective, people-less truth. Or, they’re all books that have yet to be written, so there are activist librarians trying to correct history, which changes the library, or conservative librarians who want as little change as possible because they’re worried that knock-on effects of change are going to make the future worse, and then maybe a few people in that camp who just don’t see it as their place. Those are things that I think we’d find interesting, because Reimer would probably call one of them dumb, and Tom would maybe try for reconciliation, and Tiff and I would get into some big fight about objective truth or whether conservatism makes sense as a political philosophy, or something like that.”

“And that’s your idea of fun?” I asked, still feeling a little wounded. “Everyone at the table getting in a fight?”

“Yeah,” said Arthur. He finally tore his eyes from the screen. “I kind of think that it’s what we’ve been missing lately. We all know each other, and our characters, and so the infighting and cross-purposes have more weight than anything else would. I don’t know, call me a drama queen, but it’s what I’ve been craving.”

After our dinner, we had box seats at a large playhouse, which wasn’t too different from the few professional productions I had seen back home aside from the microphone system, which wasn’t lavalier mics, but instead a bulky apparatus that sat nearly-hidden at the front of the stage, and was transmitted out to the audience in less-than-crystal-clear quality through enormous speakers. If I’d known ahead of time, I might have tried to get a smaller, more intimate place, but this theater did have something going for it aside from being close to the restaurant; it was showing an Uther Penndraig classic.

*The Star War* was the original trilogy of *Star Wars*, condensed down into a little over four hours, with two intermissions between what had originally been spaces between films. The programs notes we’d been given indicated that sometimes the three acts were performed separately, either on consecutive nights or in different seasons, but the Oxycoccus Orpheum seemed to take some pride in the longform production. It was *Star Wars*, as written from the recollections of Arthur, then filtered through nearly five hundred years of culture.

When Fenn went to the bathroom during the first intermission, I eavesdropped on a man giving his analysis of the *The Star War* to a group of his friends. He was tall and nicely dressed, like I was, and spoke in a similar accent to Amaryllis, precise and clear.
“At the time of the first empire, people saw it as a warning,” he said. “The Lost King was giving a lesson to the people of Aerb, as he often did, and that lesson was that empires rot from the head, that powers can corrupt if allowed to, and that in that event, it’s the responsibility of even the lowliest among us to rise up.”

“But Luke is Darth Vader’s son, is he not?” asked a woman in the group. “He’s hardly the lowest of the corrupt empire, given the heirloom passed down to him and the magic of his bloodline.”

“Though it’s hard to peer into the mind of the Lost King, perhaps that was a message meant for his children,” said the man. “He was saying to them, perhaps, that he might become the evil that they would one day have to defeat, or pull back from the brink. It’s not clear whether Uther is better seen as Darth Vader or Emperor Reagan, though it might be that he’s both sides of the same coin.”

*Emperor Reagan?* I looked down at my program notes, but there he was simply listed as ‘the Emperor’. I smiled though, because that looked like another thumbprint of Arthur’s. The whole SDI connection was *dumb*, but it was dumb in a way that I liked, and in the context of what Fenn and I had been talking about earlier, it seemed like the sort of thing that I would have done, in his position. A reference, inserted for the sake of being a reference, and that because it was a connection to a shared cultural heritage that no one around him would understand. It made me happy, but also lonely.

“How’s it going?” asked Fenn when she returned from her trip to the bathroom.

“You could just ask how I’m doing,” I said. “Good, I guess, just … a little nostalgic for home, more than I thought I would be.”

“No baddies though?” asked Fenn. “Scenario zero?”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, still no sign that we’re, ah, back on the clock,” I replied. Our big fear for date night was that something would happen because of the whims of the game, but so far nothing had come of it. Amaryllis had our itinerary, and had said she would stay a block away, well within range if there was some kind of major altercation or disaster. Valencia and Grak were both back at the safehouse, hiding behind a whole host of wards and on high alert. I’d been trying my best not to let any of that undercut my enjoyment of a night alone with Fenn.

“Did you want to get out of here?” asked Fenn. “I know we’ve got two-thirds left to go, but I’ve seen it all before, you’ve seen it all before, and if it’s getting to you, the point of this evening certainly wasn’t to bum you out.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. It was thoughtlessly kind of her to offer, as though this weren’t a special evening for the both of us. I reached forward and took her hand in mine. *The point of the evening*, I thought to myself. That dress really was doing wonders for her, and I had always been a fan of extravagantly long hair. She had done all this for me. I leaned in and gave her a long, slow kiss. “So long as I’m with you.”

“People are looking,” muttered Fenn. She was breathing harder than usual, and while she might have been worried about the attention she was getting, her eyes were on me. She was right though; people *were* looking, including the tall guy who had been talking about Emperor Reagan.

“Fuck ‘em,” I said. I took her arm in mine and led us back to the box seats for the rest of the show, which, after some time to adjust, became the right sort of nostalgic for me.

It was late when the play let out, which was no surprise given four hours of runtime and two
intermissions. Night had fallen over Cranberry Bay, and a chill had come with it. There were fewer, dimmer streetlights than I was used to, but the number of people out made it seem safer and more lively. Fenn and I walked arm-in-arm, taking a long, scenic route to our hotel, six blocks that would take us through a stretch of park.

“Do you want my jacket?” I asked as I felt her shivering against me.

“Yes, please,” she said. “I felt quite sexy earlier in the night, and now I’m cold and my feet are killing me, which doesn’t seem particularly alluring.” She took the jacket and wrapped it around her, leaving me in a white buttoned-down shirt, then reached down and pulled off her shoes to walk barefoot.

“Not sure that’s advisable on these city streets,” I said.

“Oh, light of my life, we are no mere mortals to worry about such things,” she said with a laugh. “I’ll have dirty feet by the time we get to the hotel, but I was planning on a shower before anyway.”

Before. Solace had given her herbs that would prevent pregnancy, but she’d said that they would take a few weeks to work. It had been a few weeks now, and though we hadn’t actually talked about it, I was fairly certain that it was on our minds. And, on reflection, she had said what she’d said to make it clear that tonight was going to be the night.

We made our way through the park, lit by starlight and the glow of the city that surrounded it, neither of us talking much. I was enjoying the silence, and thinking about whether I should pick her up and carry her, when I spotted a small bit of movement behind a tree a hundred feet ahead of us.

“Someone’s hiding up ahead,” I murmured to Fenn, trying to act as though I was whispering a sweet nothing in her ear.

She let out a pleasant laugh that rang like a bell, and whispered back, “Six of them.”

I felt a chill go down my spine at that. I was armed, naturally, given that the Anyblade could be disguised so effectively, but I had no armor on, nor any of my usual magic items like Ropey. Fenn wasn’t wearing Sable, in part because it would have clashed with her look, but also because we’d both wanted to not treat our date night as a carefully planned and potentially deadly mission. I felt a pang of regret at that now; I should have known that the game wouldn’t let something like this pass by without incident. The only question was how difficult of a fight we had ahead of us. Against a random mugger in the park, there was no question that either of us would have won, and even outnumbered six-to-two I thought that was the case, but there was no telling who these people were and how well trained they were.

I also had a wide variety of magic available to me, including a recently acquired sapphire of impeccable quality and size that allowed for the use of effective gem magic, all of which would allow for a great deal of lethality. I planned to use full force, given that I had no idea what we were actually up against.

The man I’d seen behind the tree slipped out when we were thirty feet away with a casual move that I found irritating. He was holding a dagger large enough that I wondered whether ‘dagger’ was even accurate, and he spun it around once as he stepped onto the path.

“Nice night?” he asked. It was just barely cold enough that I could see his breath. I came to a stop so as not to put myself any closer to him.

“Oh, it’s been great, so far,” said Fenn. I couldn’t tell whether or not her chipperness was forced.
“Seventeen courses at Cupona, the entirety of The Star Wars saga at the Oxycoccus Orpheum, it’s been decadent even by our usual standards, and I can hardly think of a single thing that would make it better.”

“Well I hate to end your night on a sour note, but I’m going to need your money, your jewels, and any other valuables you’ve got on hand,” he replied. Fenn’s response had thrown him off; he’d had a grin, but it had left his face.

“Who do you work for?” I asked. The other men had started to make their way out of the woods. I wasn’t sure whether we’d been surrounded when I spotted the first man, but we were definitely surrounded now.

“I’m not interested in conversation,” said the man, tightening his grip on his dagger. I looked at his shoes, then at his hands, trying to figure out whether there were any clues. Nice shoes might have meant that he was a professional, but they were, like his shirt, vest, and pants, nothing too out of the ordinary for the lower classes in the Empire, clothes that had probably been made using a power loom and shipped via teleportation.

“You don’t need six men for a mugging,” I said. “You want me to believe that a whole gang was just waiting here, hoping that someone with money would come by?”

“They might have been waiting for The Star Wars to let out, actually,” said Fenn. I heard a clatter as she dropped her heels to the ground, and watched, tense, as she took a few steps forward.

“Jewels, cash, now,” said the man. He’d been casually holding the dagger before, but he’d changed his stance slightly when she came close, one foot a bit forward, angling his body. He spat to the side. “Fucking half-breed.”

“Honey, I think that these men might legitimately be meaning to rob us,” said Fenn with a laugh. She clapped her hands with a giddiness that I’d rarely seen from her.

“Don’t take this so lightly,” I said.

“No, you’re right,” said Fenn. “This dress was expensive, I don’t want to get blood on it.” She cocked her head to the side. “Should I take the dress off and fight in my underwear, or what do you think is the best way to go?”

“Fenn,” I said, trying to keep some warning in my voice. She didn’t change her position or respond, so I turned my attention to the guy with the dagger. The others were closing in on us (two with guns, I was displeased to note), but he was their leader. I reached into my pocket. “I have two thousand obols on me,” I said. “Is that enough for us to be on our way?”

“Your girl has a real mouth on her,” said guy with the dagger. “Her earrings too.” He paused, looking me over. “And that ring of yours.”

“Oh fuck off, I paid for these earrings,” said Fenn. “I actually paid for them, that was a big step for me.” She undid the buttons on my jacket and let it fall to the ground.

“Fenn,” I said again.

“Oh,” she said, turning back toward me, “I guess I have an ethics question.”

“The fuck?” asked the guy with the dagger.

“I thought you didn’t want me teaching you how to be good?” I asked. Despite the two guns pointed
at me, I was starting to relax. Professionals would have gone after us when they had the element of surprise, assuming that they wanted to kill us.

“Well Mary and Val aren’t here -- that was a fucking joke, I’m not taking lessons from Val, don’t look so aghast,” said Fenn. “Is it better to kill these guys, or should I just be trying to disable them?”

“They had their chance,” said the guy with the dagger. He stepped forward and stabbed at Fenn without waiting for a response from the others. He aimed at her side, just below her ribs; she caught his wrist without even looking his way.

I formed the Anyblade into a dagger just in time to parry the first shot fired at me, and from there I was on the move, Anyblade twirling around me as I moved to the closest of our assailants. Fenn had some kind of witty rejoinder that I couldn’t quite hear because my ears were ringing, but I saw her headbutt the man whose wrist she was holding, and after that I was too consumed with my own half of the fighting.

It had been a little more than a week since I’d killed Fallatehr, but there was no appreciable rust on my combat abilities, nor did I think that “use it or lose it” actually applied to me. I spun as I extended the Anyblade to its full, polearm length, dashed and lunged toward the nearest guy, who was still in the midst of raising his gun. The use of blood magic to augment my movement was automatic now, the use of bone magic nearly-so, and what Fenn had said about perhaps not killing them reached my brain just in time for me to reshape the head of the polearm into something more like a hammer than a blade. I heard a sharp crack of bone as the polearm hit the guy just above his ear, but that was at least less lethal than cutting halfway through his skull.

I parried away another bullet, acting entirely on instinct, trusting the blade to find its position. The man who’d fired it was tracking me, but I was burning bones for Speed, and he seemed like he was practically moving in slow motion. My swinging polearm struck his wrist, cracking bone and making his third shot go far to the side, and by the time he’d fallen over, I’d moved close in toward one of the others. This one had a knife, a slender one, but I simply reached past it before he could properly react and punched him straight in the throat. As he jerked backward I grabbed his knife-hand, and wrenched it sideways to dislodge the weapon, which I snatched from mid-air.

(By my count, there were 74 bones of the 206 in my body that were safe to burn using bone magic, which left all those without left-right symmetry, or those whose symmetry I needed in order to make the repair. Moving at the speed I did wasn’t cheap, in terms of burning through bones, but a rapid response to the threat seemed like it was warranted.)

I turned to go to Fenn’s rescue, only to find that she had finished at more-or-less the same time I had. The man who’d originally approached us was screaming in pain on the ground, a second man was trying to scoot backward across the park grass with a broken leg, and the third had two arrows in his chest and was quickly painting the ground red with his blood. Fenn was wearing Sable, and had her artillery bow in hand.

“Gun,” she said, voice loud over the screaming and the ringing in my ear from three gunshots, but before I could properly react, she’d raised her bow and shot an arrow that whistled by within six inches of me -- I consciously stilled my instinct to parry it at the last second. I heard a double-thump from behind me, and turned to see the guy whose wrist I’d broken crying out in pain. His other wrist was pinned to the dirt with an arrow, the hand a foot away from where the gun had landed. “He was going for the gun,” said Fenn.

“Where were you hiding Sable?” I asked. The dress she had on was the kind where pockets were out of the question.
“If the night had kept going how I’d wanted it to, you would have found it,” said Fenn with an exaggerated wink. She turned back toward the group’s leader and said, “Stop screaming, I didn’t kill you.” To my surprise, he listened, and reduced his sounds to a wet, choking whimper.

I looked around us. Four were down with injuries, some worse than others, but two were more worrisome, the one I’d smashed in the head, and the one with two arrows in him. “Come on,” I said to Fenn. “We should heal them.”

“Seriously?” asked Fenn. “I didn’t shoot to kill, I’d have thought that was already more than -- if you fucking go for that gun one more time I will chop off your dick.” That last part was directed at the guy behind me, who, against all wisdom, had pulled the arrow from the ground and was reaching for the gun again with the arrow still embedded in his wrist.

It was around that time that a figure in armor came sprinting our way -- not the police, with a ridiculous response time, but Amaryllis in her immobility plate, moving faster than she had any right to.

“What happened?” she asked, pulling her helmet off and looking around at the carnage.

“We think they were just muggers,” I replied as I went over to one I was pretty sure was bleeding out.

“Look!” said Fenn. I caught her twirling in her dress from the corner of my eye. “Not a drop of blood!”

“Who the fuck are you people?” said one of the thugs from the ground.

“We’re the Critter Crew,” said Fenn. “I am Vulpes the Vixen, sexy seductress, that’s Yellow Canary, who fights with the power of song, and our dashing leader is --” She raised her bow and loosed another arrow at the guy who had gone for his gun, hitting him in the shoulder. “Is Blue Hound, the gallant hero.”

“Why are you healing them?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t want to kill anyone if I don’t have to,” I replied as I laid hands on the man that was bleeding out. He’d lost a lot of blood, and that was something that I couldn’t fix, but I’d nevertheless yanked out both arrows and begun to burn through my bones to close the wounds.

“We have three or four minutes before the police show up,” said Amaryllis. “We should kill them all. Fenn can have the bodies vanished in a little more than a minute.”

“I really don’t want to do that,” I said. It’s not what Batman would do.

“They saw your faces and abilities,” said Amaryllis. “The enemy will find out.”

“Which enemy?” I asked.

“Any of them,” replied Amaryllis.

“I won’t say a f-fucking w-word,” said the leader from the ground. Based on the way that he was gasping, I guessed that Fenn had hit him hard in the stomach or chest.

“Who hired you?” I said, stepping away from the pale body of the man I’d healed to my satisfaction. There was still a chance that he wasn’t going to make it, but I’d done as much as I could short of a blood transfusion.
“No one!” he shouted.

Fenn stepped over to him and placed a foot on his shoulder, pushing him down. She’d put her heels back on, I’d noticed. With a long sigh, she popped two arrows out of Sable in quick succession and drew them back, all resting on the string of the bow.

“Tell me who hired you and you’ll walk away from tonight with just debilitating injuries,” she said. “Lie again and not only will I kill you, I’ll hand your soul over to my pet demon.”

“I f-f-fucking swear on my mother’s life no one h-h-hired us, we w-w-were waiting for easy m-marks, no guards,” he stammered out.

Fenn loosed her arrows. For a moment I thought that she’d shot him in the throat, but they’d both struck dirt, one on either side of his throat. He must have thought that he’d been shot too, because I saw steam rising from his crotch; he’d pissed himself.

“You weren’t hired, but someone suggested that you be here,” said Fenn. Another arrow popped out of her glove and she drew it back with a single smooth motion. Despite myself, and despite the sounds of pain and anguish from the men around me, I found myself admiring the definition of her muscles as she held the bow taut.

“No one,” he said. “No one.” He was practically in tears.

Fenn turned to the side. “I believe him, personally,” said Fenn. She hadn’t let up any of the tension in the bow though. “Mary?”

“Joon’s call,” she said.

“We let them live,” I said, my voice firm. “And probably get the fuck out of here before the police show up. We’ll take the guns. And if these men talk, to the police or anyone else, I’ll indulge my desire for grievous violence and extreme retribution.” That was more for their benefit than Fenn’s.

“Alright, fair enough, just one thing,” said Fenn. She popped her bow and arrow back into her glove, then began walking over to the man who’d twice now gone for his gun. He was laying on the ground with two arrows in his left arm and at least a few broken bones in his right wrist.

“Fenn, no,” I said.

“Look, if you say that you’re going to cut a man’s dick off if he does something, and then he does that thing and you don’t cut his dick off, then who’s ever going to take you seriously again?” asked Fenn. A ornate dagger appeared in her gloved hand.

“We don’t have time,” said Amaryllis.

“Fine,” grumbled Fenn. “Look, guy, whoever you are, I’m going to cut off your dick, it’s just not going to be tonight, okay?”

We moved quickly as we left, and Fenn guided us off the main path to behind a few bushes just before a car went barrelling past with flashing blue and white lights. Her sense of luck had definitely gotten stronger than when we’d first met, and it had been strong enough to be noteworthy back then. Amaryllis made to stand up, but Fenn shook her head and mouthed ‘one more’. After the oscillating blue and white lights passed by a second time, we stood up and were on our way.

“Would you really have cut off that guy’s dick?” I asked as we moved.
“Your dick is the only one I want to touch,” said Fenn. “I knew you’d stop me. Good for intimidation though.”

“We need to get back to the safehouse, then leave Cranberry Bay behind,” said Amaryllis. “We can’t risk them talking to the police, or the police being on the lookout for us.”

“It’s date night,” said Fenn. “We’ve got a penthouse suite that we paid a lot of money for.”

“Too risky,” said Amaryllis. We were keeping to her pace. Fenn had gone barefoot again, and was moving along the grass as though her feet were made for it. Amaryllis, by contrast, was wearing full plate, and while that kind of armor was surprisingly moveable (and hers was magical) it wasn’t effortless to move in.

“Are you honestly worried that the police are going to go to every hotel in the city looking for us in the middle of the night based on the accounts of those men?” asked Fenn.

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about,” said Amaryllis.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “Tonight is our night together.”

“Joon,” began Amaryllis.

“We’ll tip the doorman generously, and if he sells us out, there’s no way that the rank-and-file police are prepared for us,” I replied. We exited out of the park and onto the main road, where only a few cars were going by. It was only another block to our hotel.

“You’re taking a risk,” said Amaryllis. “This whole night was a risk, but --”

“We’ll be fine,” I repeated. “Go back to the safehouse, hang tight, and either we’ll show up tomorrow morning, or we’ll get word to you. We’ve planned for that kind of thing.” We had established codes, newspapers to place classified ads in, and bars in several cities where the bartender had been paid cash to be our answering service. The ‘one phone call’ rule wasn’t very consistent on Aerb, nor were the justice systems in general, but if anything went wrong with the law in any of the places we were set up for, we did have some channels available to us.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. Her sigh was visible in the chilly night. “Be safe. Have -- have fun.”

By the time Fenn and I got to the hotel, we were back in high spirits. The fight had, in some ways, been a fun one, an absolute curbstomp that had the benefit of coming when I’d been half-expecting a serious disruption all night. Fenn seemed inordinately pleased by the idea that a gang of hardened criminals had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and our conversation devolved into a recap of the events (which in some ways reminded me of reliving old adventures around the gaming table).

And once we went up to our lavish penthouse suite, we didn’t do much talking for the rest of the night.

Achievement Progress: A Key For Seven Locks (1/7)

I was still pissed off at the game when I woke up in the morning. The fight excepted -- maybe even the fight included -- we’d had a wonderful night together, and then the game had to intrude and insinuate that there was an achievement for having sex with all seven of my companions. To the best of my recollection, it was the first time that the game had ever even told me about achievement progress, rather than simply giving me the achievement when I met the requirements, and that made
it feel like an extra special kick in the teeth, custom-delivered just for me.

I didn’t tell Fenn about it when it happened, and the longer I let it go, the less I thought I would. You would think that maybe I would have learned a lesson from what happened with Arthur and Tiff, and I’d thought that maybe I had learned a lesson about being open and honest with the people I cared about … but telling Fenn that the game really was setting me up with some kind of bizarre harem after what had been one of the best nights we’d spent together, undercutting that intimacy with an implicit threat from the game, after everything that she’d said about being worried -- I kept spinning my wheels, running through the same thoughts, trying to figure out how I would break it to her, and waffling on whether or not I would. It would be the easiest secret in the world to keep. I had told her about the Petite Mort achievement, but that didn’t really affect our relationship in any meaningful way, and I had considered keeping silent about that too.

We put on fresh clothes, courtesy of the glove, and to my mild disappointment, Fenn took a scissors to her hair, cutting it off at shoulder-length.

“Hair that long is a liability in combat,” said Fenn. “I’m sorry, I love you, but I’m not going to risk my life to look cute.”

“You still look cute,” I said. “Pretty, gorgeous, alluring, I could go on.”

“Please do,” she said with a smile.

“Can I ask … this is the second time you’ve said ‘I love you’, but they were both ‘I love you, but’, and I don’t really, ah,” I paused. She was blushing slightly.

“Don’t really love me?” she asked.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” I replied. “You’re saying it like it’s a joke, or like you’d say that you love a sandwich, or like it’s just to soften the blow of calling me an ass. And I love you, but I wish that you would feel free to tell me that you love me without having to undercut it.”

“I love you too, but it feels like you were doing the same thing,” said Fenn with a grin.

“Oh, well I love you, but that was the point,” I replied. I was smiling, and that was helping to wash away any lingering unhappiness I’d been feeling from thinking about the game.

“Hrm,” said Fenn. She moved in close to me. “I love you.”

“But?” I asked.

She squeezed my butt.

“I love you too,” I replied.

Amaryllis, Grak, and Val were all waiting for us back at the safehouse. The Cranberry Bay safehouse had been bought furnished, and while it was on the small side given that we were expecting to eventually be a group of eight people (or seven, depending on what happened with the locus), it was more than big enough for our current purposes, which mostly revolved around having a place to eat, sleep, and teleport into or out of. A breakfast of eggs, pork belly, and cranberry toast was waiting for us, and I took a heaping plate of it for what was sure to be a long session talking shop. None of the food was cold, which meant that we hadn’t kept them waiting long.

“Cards on the table, I think that the locus should come first,” said Amaryllis. “It’s time sensitive.”
“How time sensitive?” I asked.

“It’s hard to see inside the bottle,” said Grak. “It’s hard to gauge. Some of the trees are dying.”

“Enough that you could see from outside?” I asked. I hadn’t been with when they’d made their last trip.

“Yes,” said Grak. “I don’t know whether the problem is sunlight, temperature, moisture, or air. Some of those we might be able to fix.”

“It’s one of our companions,” said Amaryllis. ‘Our’ companions, not ‘your’ companions. “Even if it weren’t, it’s the last of its kind, and even if it weren’t, it’s powerful. If we still had Solace, her power alone would justify making it a priority.”

“We don’t have Solace,” I said.

“We have her soul,” answered Amaryllis. “You have Soul Slip now. The trade is one-for-one, meaning that at the cost of draining one of the unused Armor skills, Bows, Horticulture, and possibly Gem Magic, you could push Essentialism up above 100. In theory, at least. That would either give you the ability to help the locus, give you the ability to resurrect Solace, or possibly both.”

“It would take a day to level those skills up to the soft cap,” I replied. “And even then, I’d get five minutes per point. I’d only be over 100 for about twenty minutes. It’s a gamble.”

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “We’ve set up our safehouses, we’ve done some of the background work I felt was necessary, strengthened our protocols, procured equipment, and now we’re out of the things I think we can do without some kind of gamble.” She didn’t say the word ‘narrative’, because she knew that I didn’t like it, but I thought I had enough of a handle on her that I knew what she was thinking. No respite could last forever, and the longer we spent resting on our laurels, the better the chance that the Plot would find us.

“Tabling the Essentialism gambit for now, what are our other options?” I asked.

Amaryllis frowned. “Glassy Fields,” she replied. “We only have a fraction of the equipment that’s mine by claim-in-fact. Most of it will be held by various interested parties within Anglecynn, and while it’s possible that we could steal some of it, especially with Grak’s skillset, that risks setting off some alarm bells.” She pursed her lips. “Assuming that you care about not setting off alarm bells.”

“But the keep at Glassy Fields would be ours for the taking,” I said with a nod.

“We need armor for Val, Grak, and Fenn, and a weapon for Val,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know what’s in Glassy Fields, given that no one’s been there for hundreds of years, but I’m hopeful.” She shrugged. “Kuum Doona in the Boundless Pit is another option, but I think that’s probably the more difficult of the two. We have quests for both.” ‘We’, not ‘you’.

“More difficult a prospect than Glassy Fields,” muttered Grak with a shake of his head.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“There are other options,” said Amaryllis. “Speculation and Scrutiny is one of them, but I’m worried that they’ll expect you there. We could go find a god and start that quest chain, but there are many unknowns there that I’m quite uncomfortable with, we’d be letting the game lead us by the nose. I can see by your expression that those don’t meet with your approval though, so why don’t we cut to the chase and you can tell me what you’d like to do?” She crossed her arms over her chest.
“I want to find Arthur,” I replied.

Amaryllis softened slightly. “Joon, I know you do--”

“We’ve gotten off-track,” I said. “It’s been one thing after another, ever since -- fuck, since Barren Jewel, which was a month ago, when we were just going to Caer Laga to get what was stashed there. I’m not going to say that everything that happened after that didn’t have a purpose, or that it was unnecessary, but the last time I let material goods dictate things, the actual result wasn’t all that great for me.”

“Would you say the same for saving companions?” asked Grak.

I made a sour face at that. “I don’t want to get on a reactive treadmill,” I said.

“Treadmill?” asked Val.

“It’s a thing you run in place on,” I explained. “I was saying that there’s a possibility that we just react to one thing, then to another, over and over, never actually striking out on our own.”

Loyalty increased: Valencia the Red, lvl 17!

That was one of the reasons that I’d been trying to keep my distance from Valencia. Her loyalty went up on a hair trigger, and while having her loyalty high was a good thing from a game-mechanical standpoint, I was really worried that she was developing an emotionally unhealthy attachment to me, not to mention that lvl 20 might progress her powers while she was still grappling with the ones that she’d been given at lvl 10. There were, for the time being, moments when she was pure Valencia, which I thought were probably good for her, and good for our attempts at socializing her.

“Why would you want to run in one place?” asked Grak with a furrowed brow.

“To harness the power of an animal,” answered Amaryllis, before I had the chance. She turned to me. “You want to find your friend Arthur, who we believe to have probably been my ancestor, Uther Penndraig,” she said. I thought that was largely for Valencia’s benefit; she’d been debriefed after informing us that the devils and demons died as she used them up (ate them, in her words). “Glassy Fields or Speculation and Scrutiny are probably our best avenues.”

“I don’t think they are,” I said. “I want to find Arthur the same way that Larkspur found us. Doris Finch.”

“We are not making a deal with Doris fucking Finch,” said Amaryllis.

“I wasn’t proposing that we do,” I replied. “We get to the exclusion zone, grab one of her from the periphery of her territory, and then tie her down so that I can soulfuck her.”

“Like Fallatehr,” said Val.

“It’s distasteful --” I began.

“It’s illegal,” said Amaryllis.

“It’s immoral,” said Fenn.

“It’s the kind of illegal that will get the hammers of the gods brought down on you,” said Amaryllis.

“It’s the kind of immoral that gives me the heebie jeebies,” said Fenn.
“We freed Fallatehr from his prison,” I said. “You can’t tell me that’s more illegal. And I’m already a soul mage, as is Fenn, and it’s my understanding that Valencia would be killed on sight if anyone knew that she was a non-anima.”

“The Doris Finch exclusion zone is closely watched,” said Amaryllis. “It’s all the risk of freeing Fallatehr with none of the potential upside. The Finches are all different from each other, the odds that you would get one that would tell you anything useful, particularly regarding her probabilistic magic, is remote -- they all have separate souls, we’ve killed enough to know that. We would have to go straight into the city center, and you have to believe me when I say that’s not something that we want to do while not looking like Doris Finch.”

“Technically,” I began, then paused. Technically we could disguise ourselves as Doris Finches, because I could copy over her entire body, just like Fallatehr did. That would leave the question of our original bodies, which we obviously wouldn’t want to abandon, but if we had enough of the Dorises, we could essentially use them as hold variables so that we could swap back.

“Technically?” asked Fenn.

The problem was, that plan started to sound more evil the more I thought about it, and beyond that, more complex than I wanted to count on. “Just thinking,” I said with a sigh. “Amaryllis, your objections have merit, Fenn, your objections have merit, Valencia, I should have considered your feelings more before making that suggestion.”

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 9!

“What’s the plan then?” asked Amaryllis. She shifted in her seat. “Can we take it to a vote?”

“Sure,” I said. “Smith-invariant instant-runoff voting fine?”

“Something you named after yourself?” asked Fenn with a laugh.

“No relation,” I replied. “He was a professor of mathematics, but Smith-invariant comes from the Smith set, which is the smallest non-empty set of candidates where each candidate within the set wins a pairwise competition with each member outside the set. And then you do instant-runoff voting within the Smith set. And from the looks, I’m guessing that this marvelous system of voting is somehow not one that ever made it to Aerb, despite it featuring in no less than eight different tabletop settings I designed.”

“Why don’t we just vote normally?” asked Grak.

“How much time do you have?” I asked.

“If I understand this scheme right, the results of Smith-invariant IRV should be equivalent to the results of a plain vote, assuming that everyone votes for their actual first choice rather than voting strategically, and also assuming that there exists a strict majority winner of three votes?” asked Amaryllis.

“Locus should get a vote,” said Fenn. Amaryllis glared at her. “What, it’s true! One companion, one vote, Juniper gets to veto because he’s special.”

“The locus can’t vote,” I said. “It can’t make its wishes known, and we can’t reasonably put thoughts or desires into its mouth. I’m not sure you could describe it as having compatible thoughts.”

“You said that we were tabling it, not that you weren’t going to do it,” said Amaryllis. “You want to put the Essentialism gambit as part of the voting?”
“I’m worried that it’s going to lead to something bigger,” I replied. “I’ll crest 100 with Essentialism, then that will lead down some other path that we have to go on, and Arthur will just,” stay dead. I swallowed instead of saying that. “I know that there’s some kind of cultural thing about the locus that I’m not getting, I know that, I just … I’m worried that everything will get put on hold again if I make the locus my first priority.”

Amaryllis frowned. “Essentialism, Glassy Fields, Kuum Doona, Speculation and Scrutiny, have I missed any that anyone was planning to vote for?” Silence greeted that. “I vote to help the locus.”

“I vote the same,” said Grak.

“Kuum Doona,” I said.

“Kuum Doona,” said Fenn.

This was why you did Smith-invariant IRV, and why you did a blind vote where no one knew how anyone else was voting. I wouldn’t have said Kuum Doona so quickly, but I knew that Fenn would probably follow my lead, and so needed to get my choice out first so that she’d have something to follow. And now, given that we’d made that choice, and Amaryllis and Grak had made their choice, maybe the group preference was actually for Glassy Fields (which I could easily have been swayed toward), but we wouldn’t be going there. Either way, given that it was two against two, the only way that the vote wouldn’t go my way was if Val voted against me, and that --

“I want to save the locus,” said Val.

Fuck.
“Are you upset with me?” asked Val as soon as our group meeting had broken up. She didn’t wait until anyone else was away, and I could see Grak and Amaryllis share a look.

“Come on, let’s talk about this in my room,” I said, gesturing for her to lead the way.

We walked through the hallways of the safehouse; she knew the place better than I did, since I had been out and about far more than her, either helping to set up the other safehouses, helping Fenn gather up supplies, or training somewhere that would allow me a lot of room. The Cranberry Bay safehouse (really just a house, but Grak had at least given it modest wards) was pretty ordinary by the standards of Aerb, close enough to modern middle America that you could be excused for having missed the differences. The electrical systems were probably the more noticeable, with thicker cords, heavier light switches, and bulbs that seemed both fragile and weighty. I missed LED bulbs.

The paintings on the walls had come with the house, and I was half-tempted to stop and look at them. Instead, they passed me by, scenes of the cranberry harvest out on the bay that were probably iconic, if you weren’t a stranger in a strange land. We went into the room I shared with Fenn, which was warded against sound for obvious reasons, and I pulled a chair out from behind the roller-top desk so that she could sit on the bed.

“Are you upset with me?” she asked again.

“No,” I said. “I’d like to understand why you made your vote though, and I guess to talk a bit.”

Val shrugged. I was hoping that there would be more to it, but she just sat there, looking at the floor. I took a moment to look her over; she had long white hair, red eyes, skin so pale it was essentially white. She wore a blue dress with a floral pattern, something that someone must have picked out for her, though I couldn’t tell whose sensibilities were at work. There was something haunting about her in the light that filtered in through the window, like I was looking at a wisp of a person.

“You said that you want to save the locus,” I prompted.

“I do,” said Val with a nod. She still wasn’t looking at me.

“Do you know what a locus is?” I asked.

“Mary said that it was one of a kind,” said Val. “A creature that was hated and hunted.”

“Like you,” I said.

Val shrugged.

“Can you … you don’t have a devil in you right now?” I asked.

“I’m not eating one, no,” said Val. She looked up at me. “Mary said that it would be better if I didn’t, unless I needed one to get me through something hard. She said that around the group I wouldn’t ever have to have one, not if it was just to talk, because I’m still learning and you would all understand.”

I frowned slightly at that. “She’s probably right,” I said. “She usually is. But for this conversation to be productive, I think it might be helpful, unless Mary thought there was a reason that it wouldn’t be.”
“I need to learn and grow on my own,” said Val. “And it’s too easy to talk when there’s a devil to draw on.”

“Too easy?” I asked.

“Too easy and too hard,” said Val. She flopped backward on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “It’s easy to see the things that I could say to get my way, there are memories that I can reach to when I don’t know something, but the devils …” She waved her hands helplessly in the air above her, which might have been a funny visual if she didn’t seem so distraught.

“You’re in control of the devils though?” I asked.

“They’re just a collection of parts,” said Val. “Not devils anymore, when they’re past my maw.”

“Okay …” I said slowly, trying to digest that imagery. “How would you feel about taking in a devil right now, in order to help you explain a bit?”

Val sat up and looked at me. “I’m worried that I would say things.”

“I won’t take anything personally,” I said. “You are still learning.”

Loyalty increased: Valencia the Red lvl 18!

“Okay,” she said softly.

There was a subtle change to the features of her face, and she straightened herself, gaining better posture. She scooted forward to the edge of the bed, and stared at me intently with her crimson red eyes. A delicate hand brushed white hair away from her face, framing it perfectly. It was like she’d just come alive.

“I feel so much better like this,” said Val. She stretched her arms out to the sides, then moved them in, pushing her breasts together, which I tried not to notice. “What I was trying to say was that they’re not really devils anymore, even if it sometimes feels like it, they’re parts and pieces that I can use. Without them, I’m missing pieces of myself. Amaryllis thinks that my upbringing might be the root of that, rather than because I’m a non-anima, but she doesn’t know enough one way or another to say for sure, and I haven’t happened on a devil that’s known well enough to confirm it.”

“Ah,” I replied.

She was looking at me with intent eyes. Her stretch had brought her hands around to rest on her knees, and her arms were still pushing her breasts together, showing more pale cleavage than the dress would normally allow for. She grinned at me. “The confidence is faked.”

“Faked?” I asked.

“I don’t feel it, internally, but there’s a part of the devil that knows what it’s like to puppet a human and pretend at being confident, so I can use that, if I think I can get what I want by pretending,” said Val.

“Val,” I said slowly. I had almost asked her what it was she wanted, but that was such an obvious trap that I was stunned I’d almost fell for it. ‘You,’ her answer would have been, said with all the seduction that she could muster, which I’d have wagered was probably a lot at the moment.

“You said that you wouldn’t take it personally, since I’m still learning,” she said, tilting her head to the side to get a better angle on me.
“I might have misjudged the risks on this,” I admitted. My heart was hammering away in my chest, and I told myself that it was fear and anxiety talking.

“I would share you with Fenn, or be your secret,” said Val. She stopped, with confusion crossing her face. “No, that’s --” She looked at me. “I’m relying on the devil too much, letting it guide my path, that would have worked, but it’s not me. Amaryllis explained the, the biology, I know how, it just seems so gross.” She dropped her pose and looked at her hands. She looked up at me. “This is what I think I was trying to say.”

“Too easy and too hard,” I replied with a nod. My heart was slowing back down.

(If Tiff could have seen inside my mind at that moment, she would probably have been either furious or disgusted, maybe both. Or, no, she probably wouldn’t have been furious or disgusted, she would have said that I’d grown up in a culture that often portrayed infantilization as sexy, and that either biology or culture had wired me with an instinct toward protecting and sheltering women, and conflating that desire to help and protect with romantic or sexual thoughts. That was how it happened in the movies. Tiff probably wouldn’t have faulted me for my desires and emotions, only for my actions. I was the one that was furious and disgusted.)

“Too easy to see the paths in front of me, too hard to know which one to go down,” said Val. “None of the parts and pieces help me make sense of who I am or what I feel.” She looked up at me. “I love you,” she said. “I know that you don’t love me back yet, and Amaryllis says that’s just misplaced attachment, something that I’m going to have to find a way to get over, but she has her own issues with you, so I don’t know how good her advice is.”

I swallowed. Frick. “The devils, or pieces of a devil, they don’t help you with judgment.”

“No,” said Valencia. She pursed her lips, looking at a spot on the wall a few feet to my left as though she were angry at it. Maybe this conversation was easier for her if she wasn’t looking at me. “I could fake it. Pretend, maybe. But it would be so hollow.”

“Tell me why you want to put our effort into saving the locus,” I said.

Val looked at me. “I guess I just don’t want to be the weird one anymore.”

I laughed at that, first a little and then a lot.

“That was a joke,” I said.

Val nodded, smiling slightly. “I can do jokes.”

“But there’s a real reason?” I asked. “Something better than just Amaryllis explaining it to you when you didn’t have a devil in you to see through her?”

“My place in this family is awkward,” said Val. “Fenn doesn’t like me, because I’m in love with you, and I’m not as willing to pretend that it’s nothing as Mary is. Grak is dour and unhappy, which means that he’s unhappy with me just by default. Mary is putting effort into me, but I have to have a pretty stupid devil for her to not be too transparent.”

“Transparent how?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

“I can tell what she’s thinking,” said Val. “Other people are so easy to pick apart. It’s myself that I have trouble with. She told me not to say anything about the things that I could see in people.” She looked me over. “You agree with her, but you want to know anyway. Should I tell you?”
“No,” I replied. “She’s just … very hard for me to read, for some reason. Grak too, but in a different way. Social superpowers seem like they would really come in handy.”

“It’s not always pretty to see people laid bare,” said Val. Her eyes were locked with mine, and now I was the one that wanted to look away.

“If there’s anything that you’re getting off me … I won’t deny that you can probably see through me, but we can’t always be the people that we want to be, even when we know who we want to be,” I said. “That’s probably going to be your challenge.”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” said Val with a small laugh and a shake of her head. “Everything I see in you is beautiful, even the flaws. Perhaps not the flaws, but the way you work against them. It’s very appealing.”

“Uh, good, I guess,” I said. “I didn’t mean … I’m not really equipped for this kind of conversation.”

“I know,” replied Val. “That’s also appealing.”

“Even though you can see through people anyway?” I asked.

“Amaryllis reacts by trying her best to speak defensively, hiding herself more, shielding her secrets, trying to deflect me away from the places that she doesn’t want exposed,” said Val.

“But of course it’s too late,” I said. “You’ve seen everything.”

Val nodded. “You just open yourself up and allow that vulnerability to show without embarrassment or shame. You admit when you’re at fault. You take a step back to look at yourself every once in a while. Most people don’t do that. Fallatehr never did.” I noticed the wording there, ‘Fallatehr’ and not ‘my father’, and I wondered whether that was a devil’s instinct for massaging the language, or whether it was indicative of how she thought of him.

“Well, I’m introspective enough to realize I’ve been finding this experience a little bit terrifying, and open enough to say that,” I said. “And I still don’t really know what your interest in the locus is.”

“There are so many things that I could say that would convince you,” said Val. She had a slight frown on her face.

“But they’re not true?” I asked.

“I’m trying to figure them out,” said Val. “The problem is that they sound so good that I’m almost convincing myself.”

“Don’t try to convince me,” I said. “We already had our vote, we’re going to put the locus first, I want to know why you care because I want to get to know you, however confusing the concept of ‘you’ is to you right now.”

Loyalty increased: Valencia the Red lvl 19!

“I don’t have a soul,” said Valencia. “I’m worried that’s going to define me. You don’t care, you don’t even seem to think that it’s worth thinking about, probably because you’re not used to having souls, but you’re the only one that doesn’t care. Earlier this week Amaryllis was talking about what kind of options I would have to disguise my looks, because people would kill me without giving it too much thought if they knew what I was, even if that’s not what I am anymore. I’m hoping that the locus, when we meet, is the second person that truly doesn’t care.”
I kept my mouth firmly shut. *It’s not a person.* That didn’t seem like the kind of thing that you could say to someone who had just finished explaining that her entire life was going to be dominated by people thinking that she wasn’t a person. I hoped that she couldn’t read all that from me, and then realized that I was doing exactly what she’d complained about Amaryllis doing, which was flinching back from the all-seeing eye.

“I don’t really care about the locus,” I said. “I’m sorry, it’s just … for the same reason that I don’t really care that Fenn is a half-elf, and that I don’t care that you’re a non-anima, I don’t have the proper frame of reference to think about things like an Aerbian would. Sometimes that’s good, sometimes it’s not. To me it’s just a mystical deer, and neither mysticaiity nor deer have ever jelled with me, so …”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me,” said Val. “I know that you don’t want to hear it, but I’m yours, completely. If anyone else ever fails you, if the world ever seems against you, you have to know that I’m in your corner.”

I paused, then smiled, then tried to decide whether it was actually going to be funny when said out loud. “Unless there’s a vote that’s not going my way?”

To my relief, Val started laughing.

“How was that for you?” asked Amaryllis after I made my way back to the common area. Val had returned to her own room; Fenn and Grak had left to go out into the city.

“Exhausting, but good,” I replied.

“With a devil, or without?” asked Amaryllis.

“With, for most of it,” I replied.

“Juniper, I want you to take me seriously when I say that’s very dangerous,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah, I learned that the hard way,” I said. “I don’t know what class of demon she was chowing down on, but it was very, ah, stressful, like if I hadn’t been careful she might have talked me into … I don’t know.” *Except that I do know. Blegh. BlEEEegh. Bad brain.*

“Devil, not demon,” said Amaryllis. “Devils are the thinkers and talkers, demons are the fighters.”

“Right, I know,” I replied.

“And I meant that it was dangerous for her, not for you,” continued Amaryllis. “She needs to grow and become her own person, and I’m very concerned about what might happen to her as a person if she’s constantly leaning on the devils. Have you realized that it’s possible she’s lying?”

I frowned. “I was going to ask ‘about what’, but I’m anticipating that the answer is ‘everything’.”

“I think she’s telling the truth about her power,” said Amaryllis. “We don’t know for certain, because the description is vague. I also think that she tells the truth about whether or not she’s currently leaning on infernal understanding. Neither of those are, by necessity, true. And if she keeps a devil in her at all times, then it might be that she’s just faking her base state.”

“I can see her loyalty increases,” I replied. “I don’t think that she can fake those.”

“True,” said Amaryllis. “I’m just concerned. I’ve spent more time with her than anyone else, and not
just because we were prisoners together. I think that of the four of us, I know her best.”

“That’s probably true,” I nodded. “I’ll do my best to defer to you.”

“And I think that we have to be a little bit watchful,” she continued, “I don’t think it’s probable, but given her demonstrated ability, it’s at least possible that she voted the way she did in order to provoke you into spending some time with her, and whatever you two talked about, the outcome might have been one that she was steering, especially if you came away feeling ‘good’.”

“I was really hoping that with Fallatehr dead we could leave that kind of thinking behind,” I muttered.

“I was too,” said Amaryllis. “I am too, still hopeful. I think that Val is as she presents herself to be, small and lost, confused and in need of support, alienated from the world and trying to grab on to a pillar of stability … and when she has a devil inside her, some of her problems go away, and some are compounded.”

“Can I say, you really did a one-eighty on her.” Amaryllis’ hair had grown out slightly, more of a pixie cut than the close crop it had been. She hadn’t re-dyed it; I could see red at the roots. She still, somehow, managed to make the look work, despite no obvious effort put into her appearance.

“She helped me,” said Amaryllis. “I told you that.”

“You went from thinking of her as ‘the non-anima’ to, I don’t know … being like her sister. Or her mother.” I wasn’t sure quite how to characterize it.

“You think I’m matronly?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow. I shook my head, and she let it pass. “She’s a non-anima with the primary aspect that makes them terrifying completely removed from her. There’s a reason that if one is born they’re killed before the mother has a chance to see the newborn. Each one is a way for the worst of the hells to enter into the mortal world. The ones that everyone remembers, the successful ones, married themselves to the infernal, became a willing tool of abject evil.”

“But they were still people,” I said.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, slowly, hesitantly. “But I’m not sure that the distinction is one that matters.”

“It seems to me like what you do and do not consider a person matters a lot,” I replied.

“Not for them,” said Amaryllis. “Whether they’re people or not, the solution would have been the same. The quality of life a non-anima can expect to live, the things that they would see, the death and destruction that they would be complicit in? It was, is, better to end them.”

“Maybe don’t say that kind of thing around Val,” I said with a frown.

“She already knows, without me saying it,” replied Amaryllis. “You can’t keep things from her.”

“Yeah,” I winced. “Not even if you’re just trying to be nice. Let’s hope that this locus thing goes how she hopes it does.”
The Sacrifice

It took a day of training to get my skills up high enough for what I started thinking of as the Sacrifice. I kind of hated going over the annotated paper copy of the character sheet with the group, because it was *my* character sheet, but I could see the wisdom in it, and resisted the urge to make post-hoc rationalizations for why it would be better for me to make the decisions on my own. We decided that there should be four skills traded in, because that would push Essentialism up past the presumed milestone of 100, and once we’d decided that there should be four, it was only a matter of picking which ones it should be. I vetoed Gem Magic, since though I didn’t use it much, it was a pain in the ass to level up, and I felt roughly the same about Horticulture. Eventually, we decided on Bows, Unarmored, Unarmed Combat, and Shields. The first two were fairly easy choices, because Fenn had high skill in both, which meant that through Symbiosis I was at least middling. Unarmed and Shields both had the virtue of being little-used and seeming like they’d be straightforward to train.

I did the training at Safehouse 5, which was a small cabin fifteen miles from the nearest town and ten miles from the nearest neighbor. It was our “get the fuck away from civilization” safehouse. You couldn’t even get there by car, given that someone (cough cough) had knocked an enormous tree over, barring the path. The teleportation key made all locations equidistant, so long as you had been there once, so having a safehouse like that was quite convenient.

(Amaryllis had been the one to plan out most of the safehouses, and while they each served their own specific purpose, I’d eventually cottoned on to the fact that she’d deliberately chosen inconspicuous and uninteresting places, and given them the most boring possible names. It was, pretty clearly, a narrative thing; if the safehouses weren’t special or important, and we had no particular attachment to them, then they couldn’t be used as an emotional lever, and, perhaps, they wouldn’t make for good set-piece battles. Contrast a mostly anonymous cottage in the woods with spartan furnishing to an immense cathedral with a significant name that had once belonged to a dead god, and you might understand her line of thinking.)

I got the virtue for Bows at 20, and for Shields and Unarmored at 10.

**Steady Aim:** Completely eliminates the penalty for firing a bow while moving. Halves the penalty for firing a bow under pressure or duress. Triples the amount of time you can hold a bow at maximum draw.

**Bulwark:** Shields you hold are twice as durable. If a force acts on your shield to move you, you will move only half the usual distance, with the reduction capped at ten feet of movement negated.

**Hardened Skin:** Lessens the toll that physical damage in combat takes on you. Slightly increases natural healing. Increases force required to break skin.

And, when Unarmored finally hit 20, there was an extra virtue:

**Monkish Warrior:** While unarmed and unarmored, you may parry attacks as though you held a weapon, dodge at twice your effective skill, and automatically re-roll injuries if they are in the lowest five percent of outcomes (you keep any lower rolls).

This was the third time that I’d gotten an extra virtue, with the first two times being Nascent and Neophyte Blade-bound. It was a bit more clear where this new one had come from, given the references to “dodge”, “unarmed” and “unarmored”. It was far too restrictive for what it did though, and unless I found myself in a situation where I *couldn’t* wear my armor or hold a weapon, I wasn’t planning on being able to make use of the perk. It wasn’t anything that I wasn’t willing to sacrifice.
on the altar of Essentialism 100.

I ended up putting the two extra ability points into MEN even before we went into the bottle. Fenn already augmented my social skills, just through Symbiosis, and if Amaryllis got up to 20 Loyalty (something that both of us wanted), I thought that I would pretty much be set. That meant that it was either PHY or MEN, and while I had more skills with PHY requirements, my MEN skills were the more valuable, especially because I was sharing half their level with Fenn. Unlocking more of those magics was a priority, and a few of them were low-hanging fruit, but tracking down a water mage to teach me seemed like exactly the sort of thing that might cause the dread narrative to rear its ugly head.

With some trepidation, I used soul magic to adjust those points, now that I could do so without risking putting a skill above its cap. I backed out of the soul interface and quickly checked the afflictions, but nothing showed up there. After some prompting from Amaryllis, I was convinced to try moving another point from MEN, which would lower the caps and leave a few skills over, but wouldn’t drop them below 20 … only to find that I couldn’t. Some very, very careful testing showed that I was only capable of moving two ability points around (or alternately, a single point that was put into one of the three ‘master abilities’). My guess was that I could move around a number of points equal to one tenth my Essentialism, but that was just a guess.

(There was, briefly, some talk about a total restructuring of my character build. I’d written out all 256 skills shown in the soul, along with their primary and secondary attributes, which Amaryllis had pored over and then cross-referenced with all the skills shown in Fenn’s soul, as well as those from hers, skills which I’d noticed had gone up since I’d hit level 12. In the end, Amaryllis didn’t have a strong enough preference toward a particular build, though of course there were a lot of changes that she would make. I wouldn’t have said that I was entirely happy with what I’d chosen, but in the absence of concrete knowledge of what the future held, and with the difficulty inherent in getting some of the magics unlocked (particularly Revision Magic and Still Magic, both of which would probably require me to at least briefly enroll at an athenaeum), I was fairly content with staying the course. Changing things around in the limited window I would have available as a master soul mage seemed like a somewhat poor use of resources, especially given that the ‘soul trance’ destroyed my ability to keep track of outside time.)

We descended into the bottle together, as a group. For me, Grak, and Val, it was the old travel-by-glove routine, while Fenn held onto Amaryllis, who was taking us all down in the immobility plate. Fenn had refused to go into the glove, citing one too many bad experiences with it, and for whatever reason, Amaryllis indulged her, even though it meant that the descent took quite a bit longer than it otherwise would have.

Before I knew it, I’d been popped back out, and was once again in the bottle, standing not too distant from the large tree in its center where we’d spent a somewhat idyllic week. I’d expected cold, but it was stiflingly hot, for no apparent reason; the bottle hadn’t been getting the right amount of sunlight, which I would have thought would lower the temperature of the mini-biome.

The Six-Eyed Doe was there, watching us, head held high, but something about the way it moved seemed subtly off, as though it was putting on a show of strength for us. I still found it creepy; my distaste for deer was as strong as ever. I couldn’t actually think of a mammal that I would have had as much instinctive dislike toward as a deer. A rat, maybe? I’d worked on my uncle’s farm enough to have a fondness for farm animals of all kinds, from cows, to pigs, to sheep. The Six-Eyed Doe was pretty, I supposed, aesthetically pleasing, but I couldn’t quite help myself from appending ‘for a deer’ to that. Every time I looked at it, I thought about how much more awesome it would have been to have a giant six-eyed bear. As a doe, it didn’t even get antlers.
While all that was running through my head, Valencia took tentative steps toward the locus. We stayed back, by unspoken agreement (or possibly, given that I was only privy to a third of the conversations between my party members, by spoken agreement). Val reached out a hand when she was ten feet away, then kept walking forward, shaking slightly. I was worried about what I would do if anything happened to her; bone magic didn’t work on her, because she didn’t have a soul, and I strongly suspected that fairies wouldn’t either. For her, a broken bone was a serious problem that would take weeks to fix, rather than being almost trivial (if incredibly painful).

When her trembling hand was a few feet away, the Six-Eyed Doe bowed its head, took a step forward, and licked her on the face. Val let out an ‘eep!’, then began to laugh as the doe nuzzled her. I found myself smiling as relief flooded through me. After a few minutes of this nuzzling, the locus put its head down lower, between Val’s legs, and before I could utter a word of caution or move to stop it, the Six-Eyed Doe lifted Valencia up and with a jerk of its head, plopped her onto its back. Once she’d got her bearings, and was holding the sides of the Six-Eyed Doe, it took off, racing across the interior space of the bottle, as Val held on for dear life and screamed in delight.

(And though I saw it happen, I still couldn’t quite say how the locus managed the feat of lifting Val up with its head and having her tumble backward along its neck to reach a perfect sitting position with no seeming effort on either of their behalf. It annoyed me, thinking about it later, because it seemed like the same kind of bullshit ‘fuck you I’m magical’ thing that I’d come to expect of the locus.)

“Better than expected,” I said as I watched the Six-Eyed Doe prance off into the distance. “We need them back here so we can start though.”

“Oh hush,” said Fenn. “That’s the happiest I’ve ever seen her.”

I glanced at Fenn, and saw her smiling. Whatever her misgivings, she seemed pleased to watch the two weird ones getting along together.

“We’ll give it some time,” said Amaryllis. She’d been carrying some tension in her shoulders when we’d arrived, but was relaxed now, at ease. “The locus has been alone, I think it would be good to be social with it.” She hesitated. “I don’t know whether or not it knows about Solace.”

Fenn held out her gloved hand and a small jar appeared in it. “What are the odds that you can save her?” she asked me.

“If Uther could have brought people back from the dead, he would have done so on a number of occasions,” said Amaryllis. “That doesn’t mean that it’s impossible, but it’s unlikely.”

“Ten percent, let’s say,” I added. We had talked about this; I thought that Amaryllis was probably right. “We should lay everything out. Unicorn bones, the elf bones, all the souls we have available to us, anything that I might have a use for in the limited window after the Sacrifice.”

“Stop being so damned ominous about it,” said Fenn. “It’ll only take a few days to get them back. You’re being a whiner.”

“Fenn?” I asked. Hand going to my heart. “My most loyal companion? How could you wound me so?”

“I’m the self-appointed court jester,” said Fenn. “My role is to tell the king the things that no one else can, because he’d get pissed off if it came from someone else. Ergo, you’re being a whiner about your very nearly godlike powers.”
“Not for the first time,” muttered Grak, loud enough that I could hear it.

“Sorry,” I said. “I think there’s a decent point of order here though, which is that I don’t know how fast I’ll be able to get the skills back. When I drained Essentialism down to zero, I had a hard time getting it back up.”

“Yes, all of a few hours,” said Fenn with a smile. “How dreadful.”

“No, he has a point,” said Amaryllis. “If it rots away the ability to learn a skill, which it might -- was Essentialism slower to rise?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think so. It’s hard to say because I was doing different things with it, and the soul trance makes it hard to track time, and the notifications don’t show up while I’m looking at it, but … I think so, yes.”

“There might be a limited number of times that we can use the trick,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “And perhaps we’ll find that it’s not worth it because of the afflictions associated with it, which might be more severe at upper levels. We’ll be running into a number of firsts.” She turned toward me. “I still think that it’s prudent.”

“I’m coming around to it,” I said. “And even if I weren’t, you can’t maintain a democracy if you’re willing to defect from it when the votes don’t go your way.”

“Well, I’m ready whenever you are,” said Fenn. She’d laid out a fair number of things from inside her glove, bones, souls, and a few entads.

“I want to do everything possible before the Sacrifice,” I said. “That will mean trying to at least see the Six-Eyed Doe’s soul the normal way. There are a lot of ways that this can go wrong, and I want to minimize them.”

“They look like they’re coming back,” said Grak. He had his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun, and was looking off toward where the Six-Eyed Doe and Val were cavorting. They were moving toward us slowly, haphazardly, stopping to look and play together.

I decided that it was time to bite the bullet. I’d been making an honest effort with him over the past few days, but nothing had come of it. “Grak, is there anything that I can do, or say, or that we can talk about that would help your loyalty?” I asked. “It’s at nine right now. Another point would give me quick access to your soul.”

“Is it that high?” asked Grak, looking me over. “Asking doesn’t help you.”

“I know,” I replied. “I’ve been trying to make an effort, to connect with you, to do it the natural way, but that obviously hasn’t worked. I’m asking now because I might have to move fast, and it would benefit us both.”

“Not sure that this is the time, Joon,” said Fenn.

“It’s fine,” said Grak. He ran his hand over his beard. “Juniper, you treat the world as though it owes you something. You treat me as though I owe you my attention, affection, and loyalty.”

I thought for a moment before responding to that, trying to pick the right words. “Oh fuck off,” I said.

Grak snorted at that, a faint, slightly mean smile beneath his mustache.
“I put in *so much* effort with you,” I said. “More than with anyone else in the party. I’m continually trying to find some common ground, or talk to you, or just … I don’t know, *something* that will let us come to a mutual understanding of each other.”

“That’s his problem,” said Fenn, cutting in on the conversation. “He kind of feels like you try to talk to him and expect that it will make you friends, then get frustrated when that doesn’t work. And because he feels like you only talk to him with these expectations, it makes him really resistant to what you’re trying to do.”

“Thank you, Fenn,” said Grak with a nod.

“That’s asinine,” I said. “I get penalized for *trying*? No sane social system can work like that.”

“It isn’t about making an effort,” said Grak.

“Look, I really think that we should table this,” said Fenn.

“The effort has always been in service of reward for yourself,” said Grak. “There was always a cost to me if I did not provide that reward. It grates.”

I threw up my hands.

“You attempted to solve this issue in five minutes,” said Grak. “Think on that.”

I looked over to where the Six-Eyed Doe was still prancing around with Valencia. They hadn’t moved any closer to us. Solace was able to hear anything that went on in the locus’ domain, and I assumed that the same was true for the locus. Even if it didn’t fully understand what we were saying, it could probably read tone, and so it was staying away -- keeping Val away. *Good.*

“Okay,” I said. “It’s like you said, we’re family. We didn’t get to choose each other.”

“I chose you,” said Fenn.

“That’s -- thank you,” I said. “But I meant Grak and I. If the game layer hadn’t said anything about it, we would have used him to get up Aumann’s tower, rescued Amaryllis, and then went off without him, leaving him in the lurch.”

“Well that’s fucking harsh,” said Fenn with a frown.

“It was your plan,” I replied.

“Oh, right,” said Fenn, brightening up. “That was ages ago.”

“Water over the bridge,” nodded Grak.

“But the point was that the only reason that Grak is part of the group is because the game said so, and the only reason that he stayed with us is because we paid him,” I replied. “And even if he made a connection with both of you, he never made one with me -- never tried, but that’s not surprising, because trying is apparently a sin.”

“I did open up to you,” said Grak. “You seemed to think that it was of no consequence.”

I stared at him. “When?” I asked. “If this is all some stupid misunderstanding --”

“At Weik Handum,” said Grak.
“The … the thing with your, um, friends at the athenaeum?” I asked. I’d almost said it out loud, but realized at the last second that maybe this wasn’t actually something that he’d shared with the others. Had we talked about it as a group? I couldn’t remember, but as I tried to sift through the weeks we spent together, I was dismayed to realize that we probably hadn’t.

“Yes,” said Grak. His arms were folded across his chest. “That is fine. It is who you are. It does not inspire loyalty.”

“Give me a second,” I said. I had thoughts brewing, but I didn’t want to have them while I was this socially inept. I dipped into my soul, an action that was almost automatic, moved points from Mental to Insight, then opened my eyes and tried to resume thinking.

There were very few personal details I knew about Grakhuil Leadbraids. Most of those, I had learned from his biography. The only personal story he’d ever told me had been when we’d been at Weik Handum, a story that I thought was just him being incredibly blunt about weird stuff that I didn’t care about, by way of telling me not to sleep with Fenn. And my response to that had been to say ‘sure’, and then the very next morning Fenn had teased him, very graphically, about all the ways that we hadn’t had sex. Worse, I’d only really put effort into trying to raise his loyalty after learning about the Twinned Souls thing, which hadn’t really been my intention, but I could see how that looked.

“Fuck,” I said. I closed my eyes and scrunched up my face, trying to think of some response without the distraction of having to look at anyone. “Okay, I can see it now. I’m going to have to hope that I can explain what was going through my head at some point, but I want some time to think about things, how it looks from your perspective, and where our different cultures are getting in the way. And even if I could explain it perfectly, that probably wouldn’t be enough, because with you, I failed. I need to just … listen more, I guess, and focus less on the end goals, at least when it comes to our kharass.”

I opened my eyes.

Loyalty increased: Fenn lvl 22!

Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 16!

Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 10!

Companion Passive Unlocked: Twinned Souls (Grak)!

To be honest, I was a little put out by seeing those notifications stacked up and waiting for me. In a way, it was like having an apology thrown back in my face, that same feeling of someone gleefully taking an admission of guilt or wrongdoing and rubbing your face in it. That wasn’t what they were doing, because the game layer was the one sending me the messages, but it still stung a little bit.

“Oh,” said Grak. He was looking down at his thick, meaty hands with something approaching wonder. I watched him closely as he took out his warder’s monocle, which he held up to his eye for a moment, looking around him, then slowly returned to its usual pocket. “I have the warder’s sight.”

I tried to recall whether I’d read about that in the (absolutely worthless) Commoner’s Guide to Warding, and came up blank.

“The monocle will burn the retinas, if overused,” explained Grak. “I no longer need it. It takes thirty or forty years of intensive study to develop the sight. It marks a person as a true master.”
“Congratulations!” said Fenn. “Maybe we can swing by the Athenaeum of Barriers sometime, let you show off to some friends.”

“The skill is unearned,” said Grak. He was looking around him, moving his head quickly to take in new sights. Whatever was going on with his eyes, he was still adjusting to it. “Welcome, but unearned. I would not pretend to call myself a master because of this gift.”

“Well I’m going to keep entering archery contests,” said Fenn.

“I’m happy for you, Grak,” said Amaryllis. She looked over at the Six-Eyed Doe, which was approaching with Val on its back. “It looks like they’re finally finished. Fortuitous timing.”

Val hopped down off the doe’s back and landed on the soft earth. Her dress flared up slightly with the air as she fell, which made the dismount seem easy and carefree.

“She likes me,” said Val with a shy smile. “And I like her.”

“Good,” I said with a nod. “We have work to do though.”

“She tried to fit in my maw,” said Val.

“It … what?” I asked.

“She could see that I was hollow,” said Val. “So she tried to fit inside of me, just to explore. I had to keep my maw open so that I wouldn’t bite her.”

“The locus … tried to possess you?” I asked. I looked to Amaryllis, our default authority on all things, but she looked just as bewildered as I was.

“She didn’t mean anything by it,” said Val, seeing my look. “And after I explained things, she retracted from me. She-she’s not a devil, I don’t want you to think it’s like that, we’re just in her domain, and she has power here, and that power can fit inside me, because I’m hollow.” She looked from me to Amaryllis, looking slightly distraught. “If I did something wrong --”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was smooth and gentle. “The locus is a mysterious entity, we just didn’t realize that there would be any interaction between the two of you. This … might be the first time in history that a non-anima has ever met a locus.” Amaryllis’ brow furrowed. I wondered whether she was thinking about the Second Empire.

“And is that … can the locus, ah.” I wasn’t sure how to phrase it. Being back with the locus, and wanting to be conscious of its desire to stay cloaked in mystery, was already grating on me. I wanted to know whether the locus could empower Valencia, and if it could, then whether that might possibly work outside the bottle, so long as she was close enough, since that was how it worked for druids. But the locus rebelled against definitions and descriptions, and I didn’t want to destroy this weird magical relationship between them by dint of over-analyzing it.

“We don’t need to know more,” said Amaryllis, seeming to pick up on my train of thought. “We’ll try not to inspect it too deeply, or ask too many questions that don’t have answers.”

“Okay,” said Val, still glancing between us, still looking worried.

Fenn stepped forward, with a bottle in her hand. Solace’s lily-white soul was moving within it. “There’s a bit of bad news,” said Fenn. “Solace --”

The locus turned its head toward the sky and began to yell, a weird, braying sound that set my teeth
on edge. This continued for some time, until Amaryllis moved forward and wrapped the locus in a hug, her head resting against the doe’s breast. When the Six-Eyed Doe lowered its head, there were tears coming from each of its six eyes, with absurdly large drops as though surface tension had gone out of control, each tear the size of my fist.

(Had it not known, or was it like a mother seeing her son’s casket come home from a war overseas, emotion spilling forward when an immaterial death was made real?)

Grak gave me a slight push, and that got me moving. We surrounded the doe, comforting it, and eventually it laid down, first so that its legs were curled beneath it, and then in a small circle, in a way that I associated with a fawn. I felt awkward and uncomfortable patting it, and tried my best to murmur something comforting, but I had always been bad with grieving.

Tiff wore a black dress, one that came down to her calves, and black shoes with a slight heel. She’d come into my room without knocking, and sat down on the bed beside me, without saying a word. Her lip was trembling; from her eyes, she’d been crying, and though her cheeks were dry, I doubted that they would stay that way.

“Why didn’t you come?” she asked. Her voice was shaky.

“I,” I began, then stopped, because I didn’t want to cry. I was wearing black socks, black pants, a black tie, and a white buttoned-down shirt. It was an outfit that I had picked out with Arthur, when I’d been a witness for mock trial. He had thought it would be fun, a thing we could do together, and I didn’t really take to it.

“People asked, and we didn’t know,” said Tiff. She reached over and rested her hand on top of mine.

“‘Never count a human as dead until you see his body,’” I said. “He used to quote that. Dune, I think.” I tried to keep my tone clinical, to take refuge in dissociation. It wasn’t really working.

“Joon,” said Tiff. “I needed you.”

“I know,” I said. “I just … I couldn’t. I got dressed and I was sweating, I felt like I was going to puke. All of those people. And they didn’t know him like I did, to them he was just someone they saw in the halls.”

“He was in a lot of clubs,” said Tiff. “Activities.”

I wasn’t entirely sure if she was rebutting my point or not.

“Yeah,” I replied. *It should have been me. He was a keystone. If it had been me, only the D&D group would have even noticed. No one understood him like I did, but he at least left his mark.*

“Are you going to be okay?” asked Tiff.

“No,” I replied. I didn’t even understand why she’d ask that question.

“Please don’t say that,” said Tiff. She leaned over and wrapped me in a hug. She was crying, with a hitch in her breathing, but they were the tears of a person who’d been crying a lot.

“He’s not coming back,” I said. “There’s never going to be anyone like him again.” I wasn’t sure that she grasped the enormity of it. How could she?

“I can’t lose you too,” she said. She was shaking her head. Her hand was gripping mine. “Not you
Suicide. It slowly dawned on me what she was talking about. Not actually, ‘are you okay’, but ‘are you going to hurt yourself’. I might have flashed back to old conversations, if I weren’t so numb, times I’d told her about feeling lost and hopeless even when things were going well, standing on the edge of the dock at my uncle’s cabin and contemplating how nice it would be to slip beneath the water and never be seen again. I wished that I had kept my mouth shut, during our nights together, that I hadn’t revealed so much of myself.

“I’ll be okay,” I said. It came out wrong, the most obvious lie in the world.

Tiff hugged me. I hugged her back, but it was awkward because of the way we were sitting. It wouldn’t be the first or last time that she would go to me for comfort, or try to comfort me, only to realize that there was a gulf between us.

Eventually she did lose me too. She had to, for her own sake.

We spent a long time with the deer, comforting it as a group. I seemed to be the only one that felt awkward and uncomfortable, unsure of what to do with myself. I wasn’t sure how long we were going to give the locus either, whether this was going to be five minutes or two hours.

After what seemed like an eternity of me trying to awkwardly pat the deer, I laid my hand on it and tried to get Amaryllis’ attention. Eventually she looked at me, and I splayed my hand across the doe’s flank, looking down at that hand suggestively. Amaryllis shrugged, and when I raised my eyebrows, she gave me a curt nod of either assent or agreement. So long as we were all sitting there, I would make my best effort at getting into the locus’ soul.

It was still a painfully hard process, to see into the soul of another person without the aid of the Twinned Souls shortcut. I had been hoping that it would be easier with the locus, but if anything, it was harder. I could feel the soul in mortal species, leaking through the skin, pumping through the veins, because those magics were linked to the soul in some way, manifestations by proxy, inextricably linked back -- which was why there was no latent magic in Valencia’s blood, skin, or bones. For the locus, it was different. If it even had blood, I wasn’t able to feel it, and if you were going to say ‘fuck off’ to physical laws with abandon, why bother with blood? So I was trying to root around blind, feeling for something that seemed like a soul.

It took three hours. Valencia was the only one that stuck around for the whole time. I was doing my best to block out everything that was going on around me, but I saw the others milling around, and occasionally talking to each other in hushed tones while I went about my work. They stayed close by, and I sort of wished that they hadn’t, because it might have been easier to concentrate if barely-audible whispers didn’t keep reaching my ears. Eventually my soul-sense snagged on something though, and it felt so obvious that I guessed that the locus had finally raised some kind of mast for me to grab onto.

Its soul did not map to mine. There were no text or numbers. Instead, it was artwork, of the same variety that made up its biography, a kaleidoscope of scenes that bled together in a style that was more toward the surreal than the real. It was less of an identifiable story than the biography was though, reminding me of when we’d made historical dioramas in eighth grade and set them up next to each other, though these ran together in places, and were arranged organically rather than in a grid. Most of it was nature: trees, animals, inclement weather, sunlight, damp earth, sometimes repeating for reasons that I couldn’t fathom. There were people too, individuals and massed groups, and sometimes impressionistic scenes with people in them. I moved through all of this quickly, trying to get some sense of what I was looking at rather than concentrating on the specifics.
Needless to say, none of this was at all helpful to me, or my quest to restore the locus to its former glory. The soul was supposed to be raw data, or at least, that was how it had been described by Fallatehr and how it presented itself to me, even without Twinned Souls. If the locus had anything like that, there was a layer on top of it, which interpreted all of those pretty, neatly ordered numbers and made virtually incomprehensible artwork out of them. Even if I could have found, say, the specific scene that represented me, I wasn’t at all clear on how I would go about editing it, nor what changes any hypothetical editing would bring.

And what I was supposed to do was transplant the locus to the outside world, presumably by fucking with its essential link to the land inside the bottle, maybe creating a new link to this land at the foothills of the Spine of the World. It seemed like a really tall order.

“Okay,” I said, “The soul of the locus is, ah … not going to be easy to deal with, I don’t think. It’s all in abstract, mystical images that I don’t even know how I would manipulate. So on with the Sacrifice, I guess.”

Here was the plan that we’d worked out, in four brief parts:

1. **Observation:** Look at Essentialism, see whether it’s reached an absolute hard cap or whether it can go beyond 100. Do a very quick overview of the soul, looking for any features that weren’t there before. Look for any new lines branching off from the soul. Take a few seconds to look at connected souls. Leave the soul, glance briefly at the outside world, look for new virtues on the character sheet.

2. **Stabilize:** If it seems at all possible, and isn’t automatic, make non-permanent adjustments so that Essentialism can remain as high as possible without decay. Temporarily moving all available ability points, including stripping down PHY and SOC to 0 (below their starting values) would be enough to leave me with 24 points in KNO and 14 points in WIS, for a cap of 70 on Essentialism. That would put all my PHY and SOC based skills over their caps, but might be worth it, if it seemed like it would give me more time.

3. **Fix the Locus:** Somehow. The foothills of the Spine of the World wouldn’t be a bad place for it to have a new domain, or for it to extend its domain outward if it stayed in the bottle; that was part of the logic in choosing this place, long ago when we’d first made camp there (it was two and a half weeks prior, but a lot had happened since then).

4. **Upgrade Everyone:** It wasn’t clear to what extent this would be possible (or safe), but if I could, for example, take a few of my unicorn bones, use them to reach into the soul of the unicorn, then retrofit them into myself in order to give me unicorn powers … fuck yes I’d do it. Maybe I’d understand how to give myself extra arms, which seemed like a thing that Essentialism could do, or maybe maxing the skill out would let me arbitrarily increase skills, or rearrange memories to make me eidetic, or something else equally awesome.

It wasn’t clear how much time I would have to get all that done. We’d worked out a system where Fenn would slap my thigh once every two minutes, in order to help me keep track of time; in testing, that had gone pretty well. Optimistically, I would have 104 Essentialism, and it would stay above 100 for 20 minutes. Less optimistically, it would cap at either 100 or 99, and giving me roughly five minutes at max, or about an hour above 90. Pessimistically? I might have a handful of seconds as an uber-soulmage, or it might just not work at all. Really pessimistically, just by trying I would permanently fuck something up.

With everyone prepared and everything I might need set out in front of me, I dove into my soul and began the Sacrifice, draining the pre-selected skills one by one, putting all of the points toward Essentialism. With the last of them spent, I looked at the Essentialism skill and saw that it was a different color, sitting at 104 but a bright blue and pulsing slightly. I ignored it, for the time being, and quickly went to other parts of the soul, looking for new features.
I knew more, now. It was less like Neo in *The Matrix*, more like Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity*. The knowledge was there, when I needed it, but it hadn’t thrust itself to my attention, and there was a lot that I didn’t know that I knew, not without something to prompt me. That was another difficulty that we’d anticipated; Fenn’s difficulty with getting a handle on all the magics that had opened up to her with Symbiosis was precedent.

I found my True Name, which I won’t give here. I found a record of my lineage, with unfamiliar names above my own, most likely the root mechanism by which the heirloom entads identified who they belonged to. There was a record of the items that had been invested in me by Amaryllis, my armor, my dagger, the Anyblade, in a spot on my soul that seemed virtually barren with just those three. Interesting, but nothing that I could break the game with. I knew, as if I’d had it drilled into my head long ago, that my True Name could not be changed, and there was no way to hack my lineage so that I was Uther Penndraig’s eldest son; these things were excluded, impossible now, but hadn’t always been.

There were so many things I couldn’t do. As I thought of what I wanted to try, I could see the walls ahead of me, almost always a limitation imposed by exclusion rather than being something that soul magic was naturally unable to do. I’d been thinking of the exclusions of being something like patches to the game (making the exclusion zones places that had been grandfathered in), and if that was the case, then soul magic must have been the cause of a whole host of patches:

- I couldn’t change the primary or secondary abilities of my skills.
- I couldn’t copy my soul.
- I couldn’t double any information within my soul.
- I couldn’t copy skills over to other people.
- I couldn’t create additional bones in my body.
- I couldn’t lower abilities below zero.
- I couldn’t lower skills below zero.
- I couldn’t lock my soul as it was.
- I couldn’t edit my bloodline.
- I couldn’t edit my species.
- I couldn’t take unique magics from another’s soul.
- I couldn’t create skills.

All of these things had once been possible, at least according to my magically granted knowledge, and all of them were now locked away, patched out, except in some specific corner of the world, or except for some singular person, and given how many exclusions I hadn’t been able to match to exclusion zones in the past, some things were just patched out without anyone even knowing about it.

I was still on the first part of the plan, observation, when I felt a second slap on my thigh, which meant four minutes had passed. When I looked to Essentialism, it was down to 102, which meant two minutes per point, better than I’d expected it would be.

When I looked to the lines away from my soul, I stopped and stared. There should have been four, three intact (Amaryllis, Fenn, Grak), one broken and waving in the wind (Valencia). Instead, there were eight. One was likely the Six-Eyed Doe, granted to me even without the loyalty for it, while the other two would belong to the other two as-yet unfound companions. The eighth wasn’t white, but black, thick and sinuous, utterly unlike the others.

I followed it.

Distance was meaningless in this place, but it took longer to get to the end. The line -- cord really,
bumped and gnarled like I thought of an umbilical cord being -- grew thicker as I traced it back to its
source, until the black stretched from horizon to horizon, and then beyond that, closing up over my
head until I was just moving through a black void with only a vague sense of direction. It occurred to
me that I should back out, that this was something dangerous, but I couldn’t stop myself. I literally
couldn’t stop myself, even though I could think of no justification for continuing on.

The black switched to white in an instant, leaving me standing on solid ground with ambient white
light all around me. I had a body again, and I patted it down briefly, confused as to what had
happened. A body, made manifest within my soul? Or within someone else’s?

I noticed the other guy after I’d got my bearings. He appeared as though a mental block had been
lifted that prevented me from seeing him. He was dressed in a dark grey hoodie that said “Mr. Dice
Guy”, with blue jeans and sneakers that wouldn’t have had a place on Aerb. Mid-30s, a full beard,
brown hair, blue eyes, a slightly crooked nose, and a wry smirk. It wasn’t just his clothes that spoke
of Earth.

“Hullo Juniper,” he said with a smile. “I thought maybe it was time we had a chat.”
“You’re the Dungeon Master,” I said, looking him over.

“I prefer ‘DM’,” he replied. He was smirking at me. “Less of a mouthful.”

“You’re … not me,” I said. I was staring. There were similarities between us, not just in the jeans and hoodie he was wearing -- a pretty classic outfit for me, back when I’d been on Earth -- but his hair color, eye color, and skin color too. But looking at his lips, nose, and eyes, I couldn’t see myself in him, not even allowing for the fact that he was older than me.

“Says something about you,” he said. “That you assumed that the person behind all your perceived misfortune would be yourself.”

“It’s my world,” I said. “My creations. My sensibilities, my interests, my design decisions, my fingerprints are all over every aspect of Aerb.”

The Dungeon Master shrugged. “True enough.”

I stopped, trying to think of what to say, what question I could ask. “Why is there pain?” I asked.

“Because I wanted there to be pain,” he replied.

“You’re a monster,” I said, crossing my arms. “And I’m on a schedule, this isn’t a good time.”

He snapped his fingers. “There, now we have all the time in the world. Satisfied?”

“You absolute fuck,” I said. I could feel my temper rising, and did nothing to rein it in. “A trillion fucking people in the hells, a decaying world, Fenn having her arms scarred at seventeen as a way of spitting on her for being a half-breed, Amaryllis raised by a nest of vipers because you killed her father and mother when she was just a little girl, Arthur, put through shit a hundred times over, never even able to rest, how fucking could you?” He watched me, and I could feel my heart racing, my blood boiling. “Every fucking death is on your hands, every starving child, every act of violence, every rape, every murder, all the atrocities of a world that seems to have had more than its fair share of them, all that is on you. If I were god, I’d have stopped them all.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” asked the Dungeon Master. “Become god.”

I sprinted forward and attacked him, grabbing him by his hoodie and punching him square in the face. He cried out in pain and began stumbling back, but that was why I had a hold of his shirt, and as he tried to twist under my grip, I punched him again, then threw him to the ground and leapt on top of him, punching him again, in the chest this time, trying to pin him with my weight while I kept up the assault. There was blood spraying out to coat the white void, more splattered with every punch, until eventually his movements slowed down. I grabbed his hair and slammed the back of his head into the ground, over and over, past the point that he was no longer moving, until eventually I was gasping for air because of the exertion. I was crying too, which wasn’t surprising.

“Fuck off,” I said to the empty air.

He wasn’t dead. The body below me had no pulse, and it wasn’t breathing, but fuck if I actually believed I’d killed him, or hurt him, or caused him any pain. I probably wouldn’t have gone after him, if I had believed that it would do anything. Hell, I’d been surprised when that first punch had landed, shocked that he hadn’t dodged out of the way at the speed of sound, or absorbed the punch.
like he was made of dough, or something else to demonstrate his power. And I had been right that there would be a demonstration of power, but wrong about the form that it would take; he had let me ‘kill’ him.

I got up and kicked his head. “Alright, let’s chat.”

The corpse didn’t move. I was expecting him to appear behind me, or for the dead body to get up and start talking, speech warped by the broken bones and blood that had probably dribbled down his throat, or maybe he would just appear in front of me, whole, like nothing had ever happened. Those were the kinds of things that I would do, and so far he’d seemed content to steal my sensibilities. Of course, there was also a long list of the ways that we were different.

I looked around. It was a white void, with ambient lighting that seemed to come from everywhere at once, and no horizon to speak of. The only features were myself, the body of the Dungeon Master, and the blood that had come from that body, a small pool beneath his head and the drops and droplets further beyond that.

I started walking. My hands hurt, and I seemed to be cut off from bone magic. I couldn’t access my soul, but that was no surprise either. Quick checks of my other magics showed none of them working either, also not surprising. I kept walking, for lack of anything better to do.

I tried to carry my anger with me, repeating a litany of the Dungeon Master’s sins, trying to count every bad thing that had ever happened on Aerb against him because he was the one with the power to stop it, and when that began to grow dull, I switched over to his sins as a Dungeon Master, the various contrivances, the plots that didn’t make sense without information introduced after the fact, the impossible odds I kept escaping from by the skin of my teeth, the items I’d acquired only to find a perfect use for them a few days later.

Eventually, enough time had passed that I should have been thirsty, and then hungry. I should have needed sleep. I kept walking, trying to keep myself moving in a straight line. Occasionally I would look back at the Dungeon Master’s body, sometimes flipping it the bird. Eventually it was out of sight, beyond my ability to perceive it as more than a speck.

Brains are made of neurons awash in chemical soup, and the thing about that chemical soup is that it has a really hard time maintaining high levels of any emotion. It’s not that you run out of anger, it’s that your brain runs out of the chemicals responsible for you feeling the emotion of anger, and all you really feel is numb, because your brain can’t actually make you feel the thing that it’s supposed to be making you feel. So eventually, my brain had wrung out all the anger it possibly could, leaving nothing left but a trickle as it slowly made (and then immediately deployed) its anger chemicals.

“Feel better?” asked the Dungeon Master. He had appeared in front of me without fanfare, again as though all he’d done was lift a mental block that prevented me from seeing him. He was restored, looking exactly the same.

“No,” I said. I looked down at my hands, which were undamaged, with no trace of blood.

“You can kill me again, if you’d like,” he said.

“I will, once I can figure out a way to do it permanently,” I said. “Once I have a system in place to take up the reins without it all crashing down. Once I’m a god.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

“The fuck do you want?” I asked. I felt tired, not in the sense that I needed to sleep, but in the sense
that my brain was out of the chemicals it needed to make me feel like giving a shit about anything. In retrospect, trying my best to keep the righteous rage going was probably not a great idea.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” he said.

“You’ve got my brain, you could pull anything you wanted out of it,” I said.

“Would you prefer that?” he asked.

“No,” I said with a sigh. I closed my eyes. “I want …” I opened my eyes and looked at him. “Pie in the sky?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I want no one to suffer injury or pain,” I said. “I want unbounded resources available to whoever wants them. I want emotional, social, and mental health for everyone. I want Arthur back. I want him back, so he can live out a full and healthy life.” I could feel tears rolling down the side of my face. “I want Tiff. Two of her, one for him, one for me -- she’d kill me if she heard me say that -- and I want to unfuck everything somehow, make it so that I didn’t make so many mistakes, so many things I can’t possibly believe she’d get over them.”

“And Fenn?” he asked.

“Fuck you,” I said. “I want Fenn too, god damn you, you fucking made her just for me, I knew from the start that Amaryllis was too pretty, terrifyingly pretty, I should have seen it with Fenn too, that you were just --” I shook my head. Manipulating me, but doing it with a full person that couldn’t even be blamed for that manipulation, who I loved in spite of the fact that she was designed to be with me. “Fuck you,” I said.

“You won’t believe me if I tell you that I didn’t set it up,” said the Dungeon Master.

“Is that what you’re telling me?” I asked. “That Amaryllis Penndraig wasn’t set up for me?”

“She was,” he replied. “They all were. But they were set up as companions first, and love interests second, and now that they’re out in the real world, so to speak, I’ve been keeping my hands off.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

“I said that you wouldn’t believe me,” he replied. “Your love life isn’t really why I wanted to have a chat.”

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s get this over with. Tell me whatever you thought you needed to tell me, you horrible little monster, then I’ll fuck off to your painfully fake little world and pretend that none of this ever happened.”

“Ouch,” he replied. “You hit me in the worldbuilding, right where it hurts most.” He was smiling, but it was faint, questioning, as though he expected me to respond in kind.

“It’s my world anyway,” I said. “My ideas, my plans, just all put together in different ways than I’d originally intended. That’s not an apology, you’re still a shit DM.”

“Are you going to be sullen this entire time?” he asked.

“Sullen you can maintain,” I said. “With the brain chemicals.”

“Okay then,” said the Dungeon Master. “I didn’t want to do this, but let’s try again.”
He snapped his fingers.

“It’s my world,” I said. “My creations. My sensibilities, my interests, my design decisions, my fingerprints are all over every aspect of Aerb.”

The Dungeon Master shrugged. “Fair enough.”

I stopped, trying to think of what to say, what question I could ask. “What is this place?”

He snapped his fingers, and two chairs appeared in front of us, old, battered red vinyl ones with buttons making a pattern on the backs and arms that ended in hands-width lion heads. A small table sat between the chairs, with a yellow legal pad and a mechanical pencil. “Come on, sit.”

I sat. The chair wasn’t particularly comfortable.

“I’m sorry, where are my manners,” he said. “Do you want something to drink? We have Mountain Rush.”

“You have infinite powers and off-brand pop?” I asked.

He laughed. “Just a little joke.” I didn’t so much as quirk my lips. “Well I thought it was hilarious. You can have anything you’d like.”

“Immortality serum,” I said.

“Fresh out, sorry,” he replied with a grin.

“Felix felicis,” I replied.

He rolled his eyes. “No Harry Potter stuff.”

“Godsbrew,” I said.

He frowned. “Which one was that?”

“Do you actually not know?” I asked. He shook his head, and I didn’t believe him. “From the Counterbalance campaign,” I said. “Turns the drinker into a demigod.”

“In that case, no,” said the Dungeon Master.

“I’m kind of pissed off at you, just as fair warning,” I said. “It’s a very unproductive kind of rage, but … you know all the things you have to address before I’ll be willing to let that anger go. You have too much to answer for.” I found myself clenching my fists.

“You know that the DM-player relationship isn’t adversarial,” he said.

“If you know me, then you know that’s not always the case, even when it’s actual D&D and not someone’s fucking life,” I said. I spat those last words. “D&D is make believe. It’s pretend. This, Aerb, is …” I trailed off. Did I want the answer to that implied question? Would something inside me break if I learned that Fenn was just a facade of a person?

“You want to know how much of it is real?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, trying to steel myself for his answer. “You owe me that.”
“I nudge things, here and there,” he replied. “I fudge things, sometimes, when I don’t think it will be too obvious to you. There wasn’t going to be an archery contest in Cranberry Bay when you were passing through, but I looked ahead a little bit, and saw that I could help Fenn to have a little adventure by paying a water mage to produce some inclement weather a few weeks prior, which made the contest committee move the date up, and from there it was just a matter of having her hear about it, which took another few nudges.”

“That’s … why in the hell would you have to pay someone?” I asked. “Why not just change the weather yourself?”

“Come on,” said the Dungeon Master with a smile. “You would do the mysterious old wizard manipulating things in the background bit if you could.”

“You’re a god,” I said. “Fenn got cut in half and you did fucking nothing for her.”

“People are going to get hurt,” said the Dungeon Master. “Some of them might die. You might die, and one of the things I really wanted you to know was that if that happens, I’m not going to save you. They’re called stakes. Do you remember Arthur DMing?”

“Don’t you even say his name to me,” I said. I wasn’t in a position to make threats, and I knew it, but I was angry.

“He played with kid gloves,” replied the Dungeon Master. “You always knew that everything was going to work out in the end, and it was a far worse game for it. Dumb risks paid off, because you knew that he wasn’t going to just let you die, so it was all dumb risks, and that got old really quickly.”

“I’d take that trade,” I said, clenching my fists. “I don’t care whether it’s thrilling or boring, do you understand how many bones I’ve broken since I’ve been on Aerb? How much blood I’ve lost, not to mention spilled? The spectre of death that I’ve been under … I’m pretty sure that you don’t get it, because if you did --”

“That is the most asinine argument,” he replied. “Clearly I’m right, and I’m so right that you must be misunderstanding me, because if you understood my superior argument, you would agree with it.” He used a voice for that, one meant to mock me. “Come on, I know that you hate it too, so don’t pull that shit on me. I understand your perspective, and I disagree with it. A little bit of pain and suffering --”

“No,” I said. “A trillion people in the hells.”

“They’re called stakes,” said the Dungeon Master. “If those people are really so important to you, then level up and save them. Become god. It’s within your power. I’m not going to stop you.”

I stared at him. “And what then?” I asked. “We escalate? I have to fight other gods of other universes?”

“No, then the campaign ends, and everything is good and perfect forever and ever,” said the Dungeon Master with a shrug. “I’ll strip off the game layer unless you want me to keep it in place, I’ll strip off the personality compensators unless you want those on, and then I’ll be out of your hair. You’ll be a god, like I’m a god, with the only limit on your power being that you can’t track me down and kill me.”

“I’ve got no reason to trust you,” I said. “Even if it all happened like you said, even if I was in a paradise of my own choosing, I would have to worry about whether you were going to show up
“This is true,” nodded the Dungeon Master. “But I have to say it’s more likely than not that you’ll never get to figure out whether you can live with that paranoia, because you’ll fuck up and die somewhere along the way.”

“Die to an obstacle that you’ve placed in front of me,” I said.

“Or one of your own making,” he nodded. “You probably don’t believe me, but I’m not really putting any active effort into screwing you. I set up the characters and the obstacles, I give a few nudges here and there, and then I wait for your choices, and the choices of everyone else. I’m a watchmaker, paying attention to how the watch is running but not sticking my fingers in too often.”

I folded my arms across my chest.

“I don’t want you to fail, I want to take some joy in seeing how you react, in seeing you run off the rails, in succeeding against bad odds, in dealing with your teammates -- I want you to win.” He stopped and watched me. “I’m not going to bend over backwards so you can win though,” he said. “I’m barely going to bend at all. It’s one of the things I wanted to let you know.”

“I don’t consent,” I said, leaning back and folding my arms.

The Dungeon Master smiled. “Did you think that I didn’t ask you? Here, I’ll show you.”

I felt the red vinyl of the chair, battered and worn, then looked across at the man sitting next to me, in an identical chair. He was holding a yellow legal pad and a mechanical pencil. He was older, in his thirties maybe, with a full beard. He had a blue hoodie on, which said “Dice to Meet You”.

Five seconds ago, I had been passing notes in fifth period English.

“What the fuck,” I said.

“Hullo Juniper,” he said. “This meeting may be monitored or recorded for quality assurance purposes. Your continued participation in this meeting serves as express consent to be monitored or recorded.”

“What,” I said. I looked around. It was a featureless white void. I looked down at the chairs, then back at him. “Am I … in the Matrix?”

“I can see why you’d think that,” he replied. “But no, not quite. I’m here to make you an offer, which you can refuse. If you do refuse it, you’ll be returned to fifth period English, and this will all present as a vivid but quickly-fading dream that you’ll probably forget about in a week or two. If you want to leave, at any time, just snap your fingers.”

I looked down at my fingers, careful not to make the slightest motion that might be perceived as snapping my fingers. “I’m listening,” I replied.

“You don’t understand,” he said, tapping his pencil against the legal pad. “That’s fine. Here are the terms. First, you’ll get sent to a fantasy world that generally matches your aesthetic for an indefinite duration. You’ll have a character sheet stapled to your soul -- you’ll have a soul, they’re common there -- which will allow you to accumulate a tremendous amount of power over a very, very short period of time. How does that sound so far?”

“It sounds like there’s a catch,” I replied. This didn’t feel like a dream or a hallucination, I quietly,
surreptitiously pinched myself.

“There are a lot of catches,” he said with a nod. “To start with, it would be hard, and sometimes unpleasant. You would have to learn to fight, but you could become a skilled warrior in a matter of minutes. By the time a month had passed, you’d probably be in the top thousand fighters or mages in the world. You might be injured, but this world has a wide variety of healing magic. You might die, in which case that death would be permanent.”

“And there are other catches besides that,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied. “You would be monitored, with no privacy.” He pointed the end of his pencil toward himself. “I’d be the one doing the monitoring, no one else would see my notes or have access to my data, unless you wanted them to. That data would include your personal thoughts and feelings.”

“Okay,” I said. *Kind of creepy, but pretty much nothing compared to being in the Matrix.* “I really don’t understand … any of this. I don’t understand why you would need me.”

“I don’t need you,” he replied. “I could fix every single problem in Aerb myself, if I wanted to, and Aerb has an enormous surplus of problems at the moment. I don’t want to fix Aerb though; I want you to do it. You wouldn’t be obligated to, once you were there, but I think you’d have the natural inclination to, if I have the measure of you.”

“Do I know you?” I asked.

“We’re kindred spirits, you and I,” he replied.

I looked down at my fingers. *Snap and leave.* But I already knew that I wasn’t going to do that. What was here on Earth? My parents? Reimer and Tom, my only remaining friends, barely? Tiff, if she could forgive me for the person I’d been? College, a job, middle America … no.

“I’ll do it,” I said. “Can I … what happens to me, when I leave Earth? I’d like to leave a note or something.” *If I was really here, was Earth even real?* “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

*[REDACTED]*,” he replied.

“Oh,” I replied. “Okay, I guess that works. Unless [REDACTED]?”

“Then [REDACTED],” he replied.

“And that’s the whole deal?” I asked. “I go through to this place, Aerb, I play the part of a hero, I fix everything there forever, if I can, and in return … I don’t have to worry about Earth?”

“There’s one last catch,” he said. “I’d want to remove your memories of this conversation, store them away for later, so that you can go in fresh and blind. I don’t want you saving the world because I told you to. I’ll give the memory back when I think you won’t be influenced by the specific wording of the offer or how I’ve presented things to you.”

“Okay,” I replied. *If this is real.* “Hello future me, I guess.”

“There were parts of that you left out,” I said, once I’d finished reliving the memory. “Do my parents think that I’m dead?”

“I’m worried about potential spoilers,” replied the Dungeon Master.
“Sensible,” I said. Maybe detached irony was the way to play this; I was virtually certain that I wasn’t going to get anything out of this meeting. “So you wanted to warn me that the danger was real? That was it?”

“Um, let me see,” he said, looking down at the yellow legal pad, which was completely blank. “I wanted to tell you that you still had to worry about dying, explain that your life on Aerb was better than it was on Earth -- did I get that across?”

“I never disagreed with it,” I said.

“No you did,” he replied. “Or you have, at various points.” He looked down at the legal pad. “Consent thing -- weak, I know, given consent withdrawal and a lack of information, but you’d have agreed even if I told you everything up until this point.”

“It’s a false dichotomy,” I said. “It’s not going back to Earth or staying on Aerb, those aren’t the two options, with the amount of power you demonstrably have, you could --”

“You can be pissed off at me all you want,” he said with a shrug. “Those were the two options that I gave you, you made your choice, you’d continue to make that choice in all but the darkest moments. Maybe even then. Do you remember when you were dying of blood loss in the sewers of Silmar City? You never once thought, ‘please, let me go back to Earth’.”

I didn’t have a response to that. He was right.

He looked down at the legal pad again and tapped his pencil against it. “The last thing I wanted to say was that you don’t need to worry about the narrative. You’ve already deviated from my plans a number of times, you just didn’t notice.”

“When?” I asked.

“Do you remember Craig DMing?” asked the Dungeon Master. He waved his hand. “I know you do, that was rhetorical. When you finished with a dungeon, he was always so eager to share all the loot that you’d missed, all the secrets that you hadn’t made the checks for, and for diplomacy it was even worse, because he’d want to explain all the ways that the conversation could have gone, but didn’t. It took a lot away from the experience.”

“Did you pull that from my head?” I asked.

“Juniper, I know you better than you know yourself,” he replied.

“If that was supposed to be reassuring, you’re doing a pretty shit job,” I said, clenching my fists.

“Well, it wasn’t meant to be reassuring,” he said. “It’s just a fact, one you already know is true, but seem to need reminding of.”

“But what’s the point of it all?” I asked.

He looked down at his legal pad again. “Nope, that’s not on the agenda for today.” He smiled at me. “You’ve been a relatively good sport though, so I’ll entertain some requests. Three wishes, maybe? You haven’t actually ruled out that I’m a genie.”

“I wish for more wishes,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll give you one hundred more wishes, but they can only be used to wish for a standard-issue school cafeteria hot dog,” he said with a smile. “Rookie mistake there, I thought you were
better than this. And anyway, I’m not giving you those kinds of wishes. Little things, not plot
breakers.”

“So there is a plot,” I said.

“There are planned pathways,” he said. “There are plots that I think I’d find interesting, roads that I
hope you’d go down. And maybe you’ll scribble outside the lines, and I’ll make a brief glance at the
possible futures, and figure out where I can nudge things, if it’s appropriate. Still thinking on those
wishes?”

“I wish … there are only two kinds of genies, those you can trust, and those that you shouldn’t be
making wishes to,” I said.

The Dungeon Master waved his hand. “If you don’t want to make requests, don’t make them, but
I’m not going to let you save them. Worst that I’ll do is say no. Think ‘small’. Think ‘things that
don’t solve the plots’.”

“Okay,” I said. I took a breath. “I wish I didn’t have a harem.”

The Dungeon Master frowned at me. “You don’t have a harem,” he said. “You have a girlfriend,
and a few girls that have some confused, complicated, and in some cases unpleasant feelings toward
you. And if you want me to fix that, I refuse on two grounds. First, I set your companions in motion
but I have a rule against meddling with them in direct ways. Second, if you really wanted to do it,
you’re the one with Essentialism over the hard cap, all you’d have to do is go into Amaryllis’ soul
and make a few choice edits. You can cut down her libido to nothing, make her exclusively
homoromantic and homosexual, do what you want to fix the problem.” He rubbed his chin.

“Granted, doing that to the locus would be pretty hard, and Null Pointer Exception doesn’t have a
soul, but I’m sure you could figure something out. You know what, I’m going to count that as a
request filled, because I told you how to help yourself.”


“That would be telling,” said the Dungeon Master. He flashed me a smile. “And for now, I plan on
being just the right amount of opaque. They weren’t set up to wait forever though. Amaryllis will get
over you, if you let her. Null Pointer Exception will too -- she’s malleable.”

And Grak? The Six-Eyed Doe? I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to know. Better to keep assuming that
Grak was just a straight dude that didn’t happen to have a penis.

“And I,” I said. I licked my lips. Sometimes it was easy to say his name, and sometimes it wasn’t.
This was one of the hard times.

“That’s not a question,” replied the Dungeon Master.

“I’m trying to think of the most valuable question that you would actually answer,” I said. “I …
assuming that this is all a simulation, I don’t understand how it would be him. With me, maybe I
could be frozen for long enough that someone invented the technology to unfreeze people, to scan
them into a computer, I’d have had to be a few years older than seventeen, but … maybe it would be
possible. Arthur was warm and dead. He was cremated. I don’t understand how he could exist in this
world, except as an imperfect reconstruction from my memories.”

“That’s still not a question,” replied the Dungeon Master. His voice was softer, gentler. For all that
he was an amoral monster, he seemed to care.

“Tell me whether he’s real,” I said. “No, tell me how he’s real, how that’s even possible, because he
died nine months before I came here, and we didn’t have this technology then.”

“He’s real,” said the Dungeon Master. “I know how much he meant to you. I’m not going to say how that’s possible, but you can draw your own conclusions, if you decide that I’m not lying. And he’s out there, somewhere on Aerb or one of the other planes. He spent most of his life on Aerb, he’s not going to be how you remembered him -- you know that, that’s not news -- but the Arthur that came to Aerb wasn’t just Arthur as you remembered him. He’s the real deal, Arthur as he actually existed.” The Dungeon Master had, finally, taken a solemn tone.

That wasn’t possible, unless some of my assumptions were wrong, but it sounded exactly like what I wanted to hear, so I let it pass. It was as much of an answer as I was going to get anyway.

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me what happens when I die. Tell me what would happen to my party members.”

“Seems like a wasted wish to me,” said the Dungeon Master. “It’s not like you’re planning on killing yourself, right? You sure you don’t want, say, a backpack that can get you mundane stuff from Earth?”

“Is that on the table?” I asked, eyes going wide. Then I frowned. “Wait, how would that even work? Would I just pull a backpack out of my soul somehow?”

“I’ll think of something,” he replied. “It’s nice that you thought about what would happen to your party members, but in this case I think that creature comforts from home are probably the better option. Not that I’ll compel you one way or another, it’s your choice to make.”

“Okay, I’ll take the backpack,” I said. I looked around the white void. “I don’t like you,” I said to the Dungeon Master. “You’re not forgiven. Nothing you’ve done is excusable. You’re responsible for every evil thing that happens on Aerb. I know you know that, and I know you don’t care, but I need to say it.”

“Sure, fine,” said the Dungeon Master. “You know the way out.”

And as he said it, I realized he was right. I snapped my fingers and left.
The Princess and the Pea

When I returned to my soul as I knew it, the creepy black umbilical cord that had led to the Dungeon Master’s void was gone -- and somewhat distressingly, so were two of the white lines that I’d been assuming would reveal the other two companions. Had he changed something? Had I changed something in the course of that visit? I felt a hand slapping my thigh and remembered about the time limit, and tried my best to put off all my questions, all the second-guessing I was sure there was to do, until later. I was, after all, on a mission.

I pulled out of my soul entirely and was shocked by the world around me. My companions were limned in light of different colors, red for Fenn, white for Amaryllis, purple for Grak, and green for the locus, whose color extended beyond its mortal form to the grasses around us, and even beyond that, to the trees at the edges of the bottle. Valencia was without a color, and that was what jogged some part of my memory that I’d never used before -- I was able to see souls.

―Joon?‖ asked Amaryllis.

―I got screwed on this deal,‖ said Fenn, folding her arms across her chest. No Symbiosis effect for her from the points I’d shifted over.

―Working,‖ I said. “Two minutes per point, 102 right now.” I closed my eyes, waiting three painfully slow seconds, and looked down the list of virtues.

Soul Sight: Grants a visual representation of souls, each with a unique color, which can be distinguished with acuity beyond the limits of the eye. Applies to both the soul and any magic which interfaces with a soul in some meaningful way.

Soul Saturation: Knowledge of your soul allows it to fully suffuse you, giving a number of benefits to a wide variety of magic. Your blood works as an infusion for the purposes of pustule magic. You can use your blood as though it were magical ink (4 ζ/mL) for the purposes of ink magic. Your bones are considered wood for the purposes of wood magic. Required connective power for plants is reduced by half. You may retract your soul from your extremities for the purposes of bypassing wards. Any magic items or magics which limit projection or application to your eyes, hands, feet, or mouth, can instead be projected or applied from any part of your body. Your skin and/or carapace is treated as though it were skin and/or carapace for the purposes of skin magic and carapace magic, whichever is more beneficial. Runes may be written on your skin as though it were prepared vellum. More benefits apply in specific exclusion zones: consult the manual for more detail.

Soul Scaphism: You can carve out parts of other people to use for your own purposes. Any benefits are temporary; any costs are permanent.

Soul Symbiote: Double your effective skill in Bone Magic, Blood Magic, Skin Magic, Carapace Magic, Pustule Magic, and the flower magic aspect of Horticulture, up to a cap of 75. Double your effective connection to any magical item which interfaces with your soul, unless doing so has associated maluses. Increase your skill with any specialty or subschool of magic that uses the soul by 20 points, up to a cap of 50.

I didn’t spend too much time staring at those; there was nothing immediately useful that I could see, and I wasn’t going to try Scaphism without having any good idea what direction I could put it toward. The idea of scraping out the druidic connection from Solace’s soul and attempting to use it to fix the problem with some combination of druidic powers and super-buffed Essentialism was tempting in some respects but utterly horrifying in others.
I snapped out of the menu and looked around, noting some of what Soul Sight had been talking about, not just in the unique colors of the people, but in the magical items they wore, most of them tinted with the white of Amaryllis’ soul. Each of the bottled souls we had set out showed their own colors, each utterly unique and identifiable as such even though my sense of color had never been that good.

“I might be able to bring Solace back,” I said. I turned to Valencia. “Can you and the locus fake a druidic connection, maybe?”

“I would have to hurt it,” said Valencia.

“What are you thinking?” asked Amaryllis.

“I -- shit, I think I’m back below 100 again,” I said. “Yaxukasu Axud, the rebirth ritual, I thought that I might be able to do it. I had some insight into it, it’s a subschool of druidic magic, which isn’t actually a listed skill per se but counts as close enough for the capstone ability. I don’t have an actual druidic connection though, and I think that I might be able to temporarily take Solace’s, but I think we’d get her back as a non-druid, if I read all the things right. Sorry, trying to move fast, I have other skills that I can give up to stay in the zone.”

“You can do it with just a soul?” asked Amaryllis.

“That’s how it’s done,” I replied, reaching down to pick up the jar that had Solace’s soul within it. “We could do it, now, I think, if Valencia can take on a bit of the locus’ power to cast the spell.”

“I don’t want to hurt it!” said Valencia, raising her voice.

“Hurt it to save it,” I replied. “I’m fading fast, a point every two minutes, from what I can see, and I didn’t really have enough time to look around, but it seemed like Yaxukasu Axud was our best option.”

“It creates more problems,” said Grak. “And it’s not a solution to the locus being stuck in a bottle.”

“We could bring Solace back,” I replied. “It’s a fix to the current problem, which is the bottle being out of balance, and I have to say that without her, I’m not actually sure that I can solve the bigger picture problem, and certainly not in the time we have left, which is,” I looked around at the stifling heat and partially dying grass, “Days or weeks.”

“But … it’s a full birth thing, right?” asked Fenn. “Like, one of us would have to get pregnant with Solace, and, you know,” she squatted slightly and made a gesture with her hands, the universal sign for a baby falling out.

“I volunteer,” said Amaryllis. She turned to Fenn. “I’ll need The Book of Blood, please, I need to check for compatibility with crantek in case that’s an issue. Continue without me, I’m with Juniper, and time is short.”

Fenn popped the book out and handed it over. “Pretty sure that even Amaryllis can’t make a baby in a matter of days, and even if she did, a newborn Solace would still be a newborn, not the master druid that we knew and, debatably, loved.”

“There have got to be solutions to that problem,” I said. “Something like the opposite of a revision mage? Toss the bottle into the looping exclusion zone as a way to buy time?” I saw Grak’s face go sour at that suggestion, and barrelled ahead with more half-baked ideas. “Some kind of Narnia effect somewhere? A hyperbolic time chamber?”
“Kuum Doona has one,” said Amaryllis, glancing up from the book only briefly.

“The place that we have a quest for has a hyperbolic time chamber?” I asked, staring at her. “And it’s literally called that?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. She slammed the book shut. “I can’t guarantee that it’s charged, though it should be after such a long time, and that’s another problem that we can find a solution to later if it’s actually a problem. Crantek and human are cross-compatible, if it matters for the ritual.”

“We’re rushing this plan,” said Grak.

“We have to,” I replied. “Unless you want to wait another handful of days while I train up skills to pour into Essentialism again, time that we’re already short on?”

“I vote against,” said Grak.

“I vote for,” I replied.

“I vote for,” said Amaryllis.

“I vote for too, so long as I don’t have to be the pregnant one,” said Fenn.

“Good,” I said. I turned toward Valencia, to tell her to get ready, and saw tears streaming down her cheeks. *Fuck.* “Hey, are you okay?” I asked, still speaking a little faster than I would have liked, not quite controlling my tone.

“I don’t want to hurt it,” said Val, looking over at the Six-Eyed Doe, which was standing nearby, not seeming to grasp the importance of the task.

“I honestly think that the locus is going to die if you don’t,” I replied. “Sometimes we have to do things that we really don’t want to do, because that’s the right thing to do. You can complain, and vent to us, and voice all your objections, but even if it’s hard, you still have to do the right thing.”

Val nodded and said “okay” in a small voice.

“I’ll tell you when, and what to do,” I replied. I reached down into my soul and was almost about to start giving up points when I snapped to my senses and retreated from my soul entirely. “Fallatehr’s soul, please,” I said. Fenn frowned and handed over the bottle; I was extremely grateful that we’d had the foresight to give him his own small bottle, something that I was guessing would become standard practice from now on.

I’d tried tapping into a raw soul before, and had no luck, even with 24 Essentialism. You’d think it would be easier, rather than harder, but touching a soul was all about following connections, most of which came in the form of magic emanating from the soul, creating conceptual threads that I could tug on. The raw soul, the anima exa, as Fallatehr had put it, had almost no connection to the world, and that connection consisted only of its pure physical form, one which wasn’t as easy for me to grasp -- had, in fact, proven impossible at 24 Essentialism.

At 91 Essentialism, the connection was almost instant.

I did hesitate, just a little bit, before scraping all of his skill at Essentialism out from him. It seemed evil, to take his life’s work like that, and was certainly the sort of thing that the classical D&D alignment system would consider to be necromancy -- but logically, it couldn’t be worse than letting his soul fade away, could it? According to Fallatehr, souls never actually left Aerb for the hells, which made a certain sort of sense given that bone magic worked even when the soul was no longer
around, but I wasn’t sure that I actually owed anything to a soul that would never have a body, especially not if that soul belonged to Fallatehr.

(I would be destroying all future use for Fallatehr. Radically altering his soul and then stuffing it back into a body had been on the table, and maybe still was with the right combinations of magic … but I had been looking for those possibilities within my new understanding of Essentialism, and had found a half dozen pathways toward bringing someone back to life, all of them blocked by one exclusion or another. I was a little bit grateful that the logical thing to do wasn’t just to mindrape Fallatehr and stitch his soul back into a corpse; it would have felt a little bit too evil.)

With Fallatehr’s Essentialism scraped out of him, a curiously sensationless feeling for how momentous and final a thing it seemed to be, I was up in the 180s for Essentialism, which helped the rest of the process go much smoother, especially since I didn’t need to stop to recharge. Scaphism came with another affliction as well, a point lost every ten minutes until they were gone, which meant that I had four afflictions eating away at my points at once, Skilled Trade, Overcapped, Double Overcapped (a larger penalty for being more than twice the cap), and Scaphism. I’d still have hours of time above 100, thanks to Fallatehr.

Yaxukasu Axud was complex, and worse, ever-changing. I didn’t have a set list of instructions to work from, only a vague sense of what to do next, which would shift and warp as we went through them. Ingredients were simple enough, mostly available from the land around us, and those that weren’t we could pull from the clonal kit with a little bit of coaxing. I instructed Val, who did most of the work, with some preparation (stripping bark from yew branches, brushing dirt off stones, that sort of thing) from Fenn and Grak. It was a frustrating process, and took far longer than I felt it should have, in part because of how the ritual kept warping and changing, necessitating that we undo work we’d done more than a few times.

Valencia cried through most of it. Her hands shook, which didn’t help with the ritual. The Six-Eyed Doe cried too, and occasionally let out a bleat of pain, which almost always caused Valencia to stop what she was doing and whisper a strained apology -- and sometimes, whether because she’d stopped what she was doing, or because too much time had passed, the ritual would require something different from us, a new set of flowers picked from the far reaches of the bottle, or circling the soul three times widdershins, or something else equally asinine that seemed all style and no substance. Amaryllis was the one charged with soothing the Six-Eyed Doe, and she did a fair job of it; we briefly tried to have Grak put up a ward that would silence them, but that only caused Valencia to look over every few minutes.

I felt terrible about it. Whatever quasi-mystical thing was happening between the two of them, the Six-Eyed Doe was hurting, and it was hurting Valencia to know that. And that said, it was still what we had decided on doing, and a part of me was getting angry that it was taking longer because of the pain, and there was a chance that we might fail simply because of that distress. I didn’t express that anger, largely because it would have been completely counterproductive, but also because it was another part of myself that I hated. I wanted to be a being of pure, perfect empathy, and instead I had to fake it.

It took us an hour and a half to finish the ritual of Yaxukasu Axud. When it was complete, or at least, complete according to the understanding that I was granted, Valencia collapsed to the ground and the Six-Eyed Doe rose to its feet. The locus trotted over to the area we’d used for the ritual, which was filled with a variety of upright sticks and arranged stones we’d formed into circles, covered with the ashes of innumerable burned herbs, the grass and dirt flattened by how many times we’d moved over it, either getting things into position or as I’d guided Val through the movements the ritual required. The ritual site didn’t look mystical or grand -- it looked like something that Arthur and I might have done when we were kids, if we’d spent more time playing outside.
The Six-Eyed Doe went to the center of the concentric circles and used its mouth to gently take the glass stopper out of the bottle, using more grace than it should by rights have possessed. Then it used its lips to grab the bottle, and lifted it into the air, tilting its head back until the soul within disappeared into the doe’s mouth. The Six-Eyed Doe let the glass bottle fall from its mouth, and looked around at each of us in turn. My understanding of the twisting, warping ritual had come to an end; if there was another step, I didn’t know what it was.

Amaryllis stepped forward, and the Six-Eyed Doe went to greet her. They shared a kiss, Amaryllis tilting her head up, and the locus bowing its head down, and where their mouths met was, briefly, a brilliant light that shone with every color -- I was seeing a soul, more raw than the anima exa, Solace stripped down to her very essence, and though I was, for the time, a master of Essentialism, I couldn’t come close to explaining what had actually happened.

**Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 5!**

When Amaryllis pulled away, she looked light on her feet, as though she’d lost a gallon of blood, and I caught her before she dropped. I’d forgotten how light she was. Her color and vigor returned quickly, and in a matter of seconds she was trying to push me away to stand on her own. Fenn popped an armchair out of Sable and gently pushed Amaryllis down into it.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

Amaryllis touched her stomach. “Fine,” she said. “Good.”

“I’m really, really glad you were the one that jumped on that grenade,” said Fenn. She turned to me. “Do you think ‘Pregnant Virgin Princess’ would make a good band name?”

**Quest Accepted: Pregnant Virgin Princess - Amaryllis has accepted the gift of Yaxukasu Axud. In nine months, she will give rebirth to Solace, and the world will once again have a druid -- if there’s a locus to provide her a grove. (Companion Quest)**

I had another few hours with increased Essentialism, and didn’t want to waste it. A fair chunk of the time I spent trying to figure out how we were going to get the locus out of the bottle. The big problem was that the locus simply didn’t have enough reach and power to push itself out of the bottle; when it had gone into the bottle, it had been hundreds of miles across, and the prepared interior space was almost its own by default, simple to slip into and claim as part of its domain. Now that the bottle was its only domain, it was trapped, unable to project out because it was too weak. Solace had been able to make tunnels into the locus’ domain, one that was like walking through the center of a tree, the other that was like slipping through a hole bored in rock, but she’d likened those to a straw so thin that you couldn’t drink through it.

With my Soul Sight, I could see a slight glow to the land, a particular shade of green that indicated the locus, the same kind of tint that was on Amaryllis’ magic items, though her shade was a very specific white. Its domain was linked to its soul, somehow, and all we’d really need to do in order to get it growing its domain was to somehow get it to recognize the area outside the bottle as also being part of its domain. Per what Solace had told us, when laying out the problem, that wasn’t going to be so easy; the domain followed ‘natural’ boundaries and out in the wider world that had meant stopping at mountain ranges, at river banks, or where a forest came to an end (all of which were very definitionally fuzzy). So far as the bottle was concerned, it was a very, very steep boundary, not just in the literal sense, but as far as marking where one thing ended and another began.

Solace and the other druids had tried to solve this problem in a variety of ways, none of which had yielded any success, and it was difficult, because “rules” weren’t really a thing that a locus adhered
to all that well, so you’d expect munchkining definitions to either fail or succeed pretty much at random -- except that everything they’d tried to mystically attempt to coax the locus back into the world had failed, unambiguously. Solace had often talked in metaphor or with mystical overtones, but she’d been very clear on that last point; her special ritual had led her to us, but nothing else that they had tried, over the course of hundreds of years, had showed any promise.

Essentialism hadn’t helped. Solace had thought that it might, but she’d been led to us by a mysterious, precognitive ritual that hadn’t specified the actual mechanism by which we would be able to help her. Did I need to become a druid and then maximize Essentialism again? I had seen in Solace’s soul well enough to be able to see the druidic connection, but moving it would be destructive and impermanent; I would risk ruining the last druidic connection on Aerb, which was not a risk that I was willing to take, especially because I thought I would make for a terrible druid.

And what did that leave? Something to do with the bottle itself? A massive portal of some kind? If we could dump the entire contents of the bottle out somewhere, maybe that would work, but I didn’t know how we could actually do that, and based on my understanding of the rite of Zorisad Yosivun that Solace had used to find us in the first place, it had to be something to do with the game, or with my ability to learn magic fast, or something, because otherwise her mystical precognitive spell would have found someone else. The solution couldn’t just be going to a specialist in magical glass bottles, because otherwise Solace would have found them, right?

We hadn’t even gotten a quest update; Taking Root was still the same as it ever was, and said that we needed to remove the locus and transplant it. After the conversation I’d had with the Dungeon Master, I didn’t think that meant we were doomed to failure, only that perhaps Solace wasn’t the right direction to take things. The quest descriptions were hints, leaked information that had been leaked to us on purpose, and what they weren’t saying right now was pretty telling. Still, from the heat inside the bottle, it seemed like a stopgap measure was probably the right call, unless there was a clue that we were all missing.

Having not found much in the way of answers to the locus problem, which seemed intractable, I returned to the group and pulled Fenn aside. Amaryllis had her hand on her stomach and was engaged in low conversation with Grak; to my relief, Val was curled up on top of the Six-Eyed Doe.

“Okay,” I said, low enough that the others couldn’t hear. “I have an idea. Do you trust me?”

“For you, my love, anything,” said Fenn. She glanced over at the others. “Also, you’re going to have to talk to Mary about the whole pregnancy thing, she was way too enthusiastic about it, like whatever the baby equivalent of suicidal is. Also, I love secrets, is this a secret?”

“Kind of,” I said. “There’s a thing that I want to try that might be a little bit dangerous. I’d need your consent, and don’t really want the others weighing in.”

“Whatsoever you want, do it,” said Fenn. She stared at me, glancing briefly down at my lips. “My soul is yours.”

“No,” I said. “That’s creepy, your soul is your own.”

“You’re no fun,” said Fenn. “Just do the thing. Surprise me.”

I touched her chest and closed my eyes to connect with her soul. I wasn’t terribly surprised to feel her moving my hand lower, so that I was touching her boob, and I could imagine the wink she would give if anyone noticed the both of us standing stock-still in that position. The touch was really more symbolic than practical anyway; I already had a direct path into her soul anytime I wanted.
I looked over her body, as conceived by her soul. I really did love her; I hoped that 42 Skin Magic was enough. We’d taken the tattoo mage Leonold’s soul out back in Silmar City, but it was long gone, back before we’d had any inklings that we might have a use for it, probably dumped into the generator’s tank in the basement of Weik Handum, or maybe sold on the streets of Barren Jewel. It would have come in handy; in a way, I was glad that it wasn’t a Chekhov’s Gun that had been laying in wait to fire all this time.

The wording on Soul Symbiote was the same as on Blade-Bound, ‘effective skill’, which didn’t appear to grant new virtues, but I could make sense of the scars on her all the same. The power of the soul emanated from the skin. This was what gave power to the tattoos, in combination with the magical reagents that went into them. Scars were different, a redirection and capturing of the emanated energy, the curls and whorls gathering it up and pushing it back in toward the soul in specific ways.

(An idea popped into my head of a skintight casing that would slip over my skin and capture all of that emanated energy, like a mobile Dyson sphere for the soul … but I realized at once that it would take a year of searching out rare ingredients and the GDP of a mid-sized nation, even leaving aside that I didn’t have very much time until the practical knowledge would fade away.)

I didn’t think that I would have been able to scar her from scratch, but I could fix the scars, reposition them so that they would capture the energy right. I wasn’t so susceptible to the soul trance as I had been, but I could still feel myself getting lost in the work, moving the scars around, fixing the nearly imperceptible disruptions and misalignments in the patterns that had been caused by the normal processes of growth, wear, and tear. I fixed it all, taking my cues from the work that was there. It was like a master carpenter coming across a house that had been left to rot, warp, and shift for twenty years and putting all his efforts into carefully replacing every board, sanding down every surface, matching the varnish and paint -- all while only having a vague idea what a house was.

When I was finished, I opened my eyes and kept my hand on Fenn, burning bones in order to heal her. The shift in the positioning in her scars was so minute that I probably wouldn’t have realized anything was happening -- except that I had Soul Sight, and the red that limned her dimmed considerably.

“Did it work?” asked Fenn. Her hand reached up to touch mine. “Or don’t you know?”

“Can you try jumping as high as you can?” I asked.

“Sure thing, boss,” said Fenn, giving me the laziest possible salute. She crouched down and then launched herself up, screaming in delight as she rose thirty feet into the air. I moved to catch her, bracing myself, but when she came down she kicked me away and landed on one foot with the grace and poise of a ballerina. “Fuck yes.” She leapt forward and wrapped me in a hug that was crushingly strong.

“Ribs,” I said, wheezing slightly.

“Sorry,” replied Fenn. She pulled back and looked at me. Her eyes were sparkling. “How long is it going to last?”

“A week,” I said. “Same as it did last time.” Her face fell. “Maybe more, because you’re probably growing less than you were when the scars were applied -- when they scarred you. Cells die, other cells grow to replace them, none of it comes back exactly the way it was before, sorry, you know all this.” Her face had fallen as I’d talked. “Anyway, there’s a solution that I’d like to try.”

I walked over to a jar of souls, bulk class, made from embryos, and picked one out. It was a matter of
a moment to reach into it, as I’d done with Fallatehr, and look at the body inside, a small thing the size of a raspberry, unformed. It made me a little sick and uncomfortable, to see a soul like this, a life cut short in the interests of fueling cars and trains. The soul wouldn’t have been created without that demand, but still -- there was something sad about it, a soul that would remain empty.

I copied Fenn’s body into it, the same process that I’d done when grafting the ribs, the same process that Fallatehr had used to make a mimic of Amaryllis. The soul’s image of the body was dependent on the body; the scars on Fenn’s arms were there on the soul because they’d had a chance to set, and any injury could be written onto the soul as the soul adapted to the reality of living with that wound. *This* soul would never have a body, and the image of Fenn’s body that I’d written over would never change either.

I slipped the soul back into its container. “I don’t know whether I’ll be able to get back into this soul, but if I do, I should be able to give you the scar powers back. Essentially it would let me lock you in as you are now. If it’s okay with you --”

“It’s okay,” said Fenn. She kissed me and hugged me tight again. “Everything is all okay.”

I went to the others with the offer, but it took a little bit of explanation, and a fair amount of convincing.

“It won’t be you,” I said. “Just a way of storing all of the parts of you that I can reach. A soul in a bottle lasts for a few years, so it’s not permanent, but who knows what might happen in even the next few months.”

“What parts?” asked Grak. He was sitting next to Amaryllis, beside the remains of the ritual, and had his hands folded across his chest.

“Body and memory are the big ones,” I replied. “Skills can’t be moved over, because they’re excluded, values you can move but I don’t know that there’s much of a point, same for social models, you can’t move or change lineage, nor true names, attributes aren’t copyable, unique magics are a part of the soul but can’t be transferred, though I don’t think that applies … obviously I would ask for your consent before actually applying any changes, just like I’m asking consent now.”

“It makes me uneasy,” said Grak.

“Me too,” said Amaryllis. “Though I think it’s fairly unlikely that we run into another soul mage.”

“I’m not a part of this conversation,” said Valencia, sounding just slightly bitter about it. She was leaned up against the locus; both of them seemed to have recovered a bit, and their relationship was no worse the wear for whatever had actually transpired between them.

“I’ll do it,” said Amaryllis. “I’m just saying that it makes me uneasy. I can’t say that I’m entirely at ease with you having a direct line into my soul in the first place. Do it now, before you run out of power.” Grak nodded along with her.

Three souls went into their own little stoppered glass bottles, one by one, each with a label written by me; mary.bak, grak.bak, and fenn.bak.

The last thing I tried was to take part of the locus and copy it over … but it had a soul of images, many of them abstract, all knitted together, and all the Essentialism in the world didn’t seem to allow me to get a handle on how to grab any of that and move it elsewhere. Despite the findings of the Second Empire, I wasn’t actually convinced that the locus *had* a soul; the thing it had seemed related but too different for me to claim that it was in the same category. I couldn’t figure out any way to
back up even a small part of it, and I probably wouldn’t have been able to figure how to copy it back in if I’d wanted to. The fact that it wasn’t possible with my Essentialism so high seemed to indicate that Essentialism was the wrong tool for the job.
Musings on the Elder God

With seemingly nothing left to do -- a full 90% of Essentialism seemed locked behind various exclusions -- I tried transferring some of my points from Essentialism back into my other skills, only to find that the game still seemed to count them as points transferred for the purposes of the Skilled Trade malus. This was pretty basic anti-cheese; otherwise I could have had over 100 in any skill for a handful of minutes and only have to pay a single point as the price.

We retreated into the tree at the center of the bottle, a place that was more of a home to us than anywhere else on Aerb. Valencia wanted to stay outside with the Six-Eyed Doe, but when I told her there was something we all needed to talk about, we reached a compromise where the locus would stick its head through the window and Valencia would stand by it.

“I’ll give that outcome a four out of ten,” I said as Fenn popped some cold drinks out of her glove and set them on the table. It was hot inside the tree, just like it was outside.

“Worse than that,” said Grak. “We were not able to accomplish what we set out to accomplish.”

“We’re going to bring Solace back,” I said. “I don’t want to mark this as a failure if that’s the outcome.”

“It has led us down a chain,” said Grak. “It’s as you said.”

“True,” I said. “But it’s pointing in a direction that we were going to go anyway, and we did get a few things out of it, which is more than I’d thought. When I was giving the dire warning, I was more thinking that I would end up staring into the eye of the abyss and have to fight an Elder God.” I coughed slightly. “Speaking of …”

“Did you fight an Elder God without me?” asked Fenn. “Also, what’s an Elder God?”

“I spoke with the Dungeon Master,” I said.

The room was silent for a bit; there were some looks of confusion.

“That’s your name for the entity that you believe created and controls all of reality?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” I replied.

“And you spoke to it?” asked Grak.

“Yes,” I replied again. “Him. Or, he took a human form, I guess, but I think it was a him. I’m kind of under the impression that he was what he claimed to be.”

Amaryllis was clenching the table. “Please tell me that you were diplomatic.”

I paused slightly and tried to think of how to word it. There were two memories of how it went, and I could put them in sequence because of how one of those memories ended. “We didn’t really prepare for me to meet the all-knowing entity that controls the world,” I said. “It started off with -- look, I think overall it was a positive, productive conversation, but -- I asked him about the problem of pain, and he was kind of a dick about it, so I beat him to death.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She closed her eyes and shook her head. “No, Juniper, why, I’m pregnant
now, I can’t even drink my sorrows away.”

“He wasn’t actually dead,” I said.

“Oh?” asked Amaryllis, opening her eyes. “Really? The all-seeing entity that controls reality didn’t die from you punching it?! How could anyone possibly have seen that coming!”

“I was angry,” I said with a shrug that didn’t reflect how I was feeling (defensive, if I had to pick a word). “The problem of pain is a bit of a sore spot for me.”

“Yet the conversation was … productive?” asked Grak.

“I don’t understand what the problem of pain is,” said Valencia.

“I don’t think now is the time to get into theodicy,” I said.

“It probably is, if it would explain why the fuck you thought trying to beat up an omnipotent overgod was a good thing,” said Amaryllis. “Theo- meaning god, -dicy meaning … what, exactly?”

“I’ve got no idea where the word comes from,” I said. “But it’s basically just the study of the problem of pain, the question of how you can claim that god is virtuous or omnibenevolent given that there is suffering in the world.”

“Demons and devils aren’t enough of an answer?” asked Valencia. She seemed confused.

“The gods are decidedly lacking in virtue,” said Amaryllis, crossing her arms.

I let out a sigh. “Okay, fine, I’m going to give a very, very brief summary in the interests of bridging the cultural divide. On Earth -- well, no, in the specific part of Earth that I grew up on, we’re raised to believe that there’s only one singular god, who made everything in the whole world, wrote all the laws of physics, set up all the rules the world works by, is omnipotent, meaning that he’s all powerful, he’s omniscient, which means that he’s all-seeing, and finally, the kicker, he’s omnibenevolent, which means that he’s all-good, as good as good can be.”

“That actually sounds really nice to me,” said Fenn, frowning slightly. “I’d choose to live in that world.”

“I might too,” I said. Leaving aside the issue of free will for a second. “The problem is, I lived on Earth, and that kind of god didn’t seem to me to be the kind of god that made sense in the context of all the stuff on Earth.” I could feel my anger rising. “So I was ten years old, laying awake in bed, having this -- probably another concept that doesn’t translate, but a crisis of faith.”

“It translates,” said Grak.

“It translates,” Amaryllis nodded in agreement. “Just not in the context of the gods.”

“Ah,” I said. “Right. Shit, sorry.” Grak waved a hand, dismissing my oversight. “The crisis of faith, for me, was just sitting there, thinking, and being so angry at God for not doing anything about, you know, people starving to death, or the body of a child found in the woods, or -- on Earth it was very easy to get a lot of information very quickly, at all hours of the day, and so even if the general trends were positive, mostly, you could still start reading about a guy in his twenties dying of cancer, or a woman crying over her child born with anencephaly, or … whatever personally affected you most, you could read about it, and keep reading about it, and you’d never have to stop, because there would always be something new.” I was dredging up old feelings, and I knew that I was making a hash of things, but I just wanted to get it out, so I stared at the center of the table as I spoke. “And
through all this, surrounded by all this, where was God?” When mom and dad were yelling at each other, their words indistinguishable through my bedroom door, leaving only raw hostility to reach me, when I was praying to God, why was the only thing I heard back silence? I took a deep, shaky breath.

“This is about Arthur,” said Grak.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “No, no, it was way before his -- before he died. I was little, and I had all this pain, a lot of it imported from television and the internet, and the answers that I got back when I tried to stumble my way through a conversation with the pastor were just answers that I hated. God has a plan. God works in mysterious ways. If you’re omnipotent, how fucking shitty do you have to be at planning for any of your plans to involve killing millions of children every year?”

“Juniper, I mean this with all due respect,” said Amaryllis, “But it seems like this is probably about Arthur.”

“No,” I said, more forcefully this time. “This is about every shitty thing that ever happened to anyone. Arthur meant -- means a lot to me, but this wasn’t a new thing when he,” died, “Died.” I hated the taste of that word coming out of my mouth. “It just brought up all that old hatred and anger that had already been there, because where I’m from, when people die, especially young people, all these idiots come out of the woodwork to say that God has some stupid fucking plan that required what’s effectively murder, or God works in some mysterious way, or, you know.” I stopped and let out a hollow little laugh. “Or that he’s in a better place.”

“Which he was?” asked Amaryllis, raising an eyebrow. I could see that I wasn’t getting through to her with the whole theodicy thing.

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t say that Aerb at the height of the Dark King’s power was a better place. A different place though, that I’d grant.”

“Wait,” said Fenn, her brow furrowed. “I’m confused, why would you be angry? Why would you think that this god was actually all-powerful? Maybe bad things happen because they’re out of his control? You can’t just get mad at someone you don’t know because they didn’t have enough power to protect you.”

“Yes, you can,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms. “If it was their job to protect you, and they failed.”

“Well, whatever your issues are, I’d think it would make more sense to just say that, actually, this all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful god isn’t actually those things, or maybe doesn’t exist, which is what you’ve said before,” said Fenn. “I don’t think I’ve ever been worked up into a rage about something that doesn’t exist, and I’ve been in plenty of rages.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I threw up my hands. “I really don’t know, I think I was just so convinced that there was a god, and the part that seemed weakest was the goodness, not the omnipotence, because someone had to create the world, so …” I shrugged. “I’m not saying that it makes that much sense, I’m just trying to explain it from a personal perspective, my own viewpoint on the matter. Which is why, when I came face-to-face with as close to that kind of god as actually existed, yeah, I snapped a little bit.”

“You said you killed him,” said Amaryllis.

“I beat him to death with my bare hands, yeah,” I said. “Insulted him a lot, yelled a bit, and then beat him to death. He didn’t seem too torn up about it when he came back. I wandered around in a white void for what I think might have been a few days, I think maybe to tire me out.”
“You did all this in a handful of minutes?” asked Grak.

“He stopped time,” I said. “His words. Anyway, we talked for a bit, when I wasn’t busy being mad at him for allowing pain to exist, or for making the hells, or for … I don’t know, lots of personal stuff I was upset about. I yelled a few times. I called him an asshole. I called him a shitty DM.”

Amaryllis sighed and laid her face in her palm. “You said it was productive.”

“It’s not sounding particularly productive,” said Fenn.

“Yes,” I replied. “He said he wasn’t the enemy, he was the Dungeon Master. He wanted to tell me not to worry about the narrative, because he was fine with us breaking those molds, and not to worry so much about the existential terror, because he was just doing nudges. He told me that I could fail and die, and that he wouldn’t save me if that happened, but it was in my hands. Oh, and he told me that eventually the campaign would come to an end, and if I made it, I would become a god in my own right, though I think he meant a god like he was a god, not a sixth god of Aerb. I found it fairly cathartic, I guess.”

“Even though it might all have been lies?” asked Amaryllis.

“If he was feeding me lies, then okay,” I said. “They didn’t feel like lies. He called us kindred spirits, and that felt true.”

“You said that he was an asshole,” said Grak.

I nodded. “Yeah. And he was an asshole in the same way that I could be an asshole sometimes, in the ways that he argued with me … he wasn’t me, but he was close. I don’t know how else to describe it. A reflection of me? Me, but a step to the left?” I stopped, trying to work out how to word the next part.

I knew that Amaryllis was going to get on my case about the wishes, because she would have studiously constructed an ironclad wish, and when it was shot down on the grounds of being overpowered or not what the Dungeon Master had in mind, she would have worked as hard as she possibly could have to squeak out as much possible advantage as she could have. I could see where that might have been smart … but if the Dungeon Master was kind-of me, a kindred spirit, he would have hated it. I’d given favors to players before, and always hated the end result, which was an intense negotiation over something that I was just doing to be nice. (I’d wished for more wishes to be a dick, not because I thought it would work.)

“There’s more?” asked Amaryllis, watching me.

“Some personal things,” I said. “Things I don’t want to share, and that I don’t think it would be helpful to share. And … keep an eye out for a backpack, I guess. He said that there would be a magical one that could get things from Earth, a gesture of goodwill.”

The Six-Eyed Doe suddenly lifted its head and made a loud, intense sound like a creaking door. When it brought its head down, it coughed and spat something on the floor, then looked at us in something that might have resembled surprise. I went over and picked the backpack up.

“So there’s that, I guess,” I said with a shrug.

Sometimes it seemed like our discussions went on forever. Amaryllis wanted more details from me, and if she could have wrung a full transcript from me, I was pretty sure that she would have. I got the sense that she was treating the Dungeon Master like he was a devil, but worse, a perfect liar who
could also directly reach into your brain and modify memories and feelings without limit. She didn’t press that point of conversation though, and I didn’t really want to talk about it.

The thing about Amaryllis was that she tended to have her shit together, but the flip side of that was that she really liked to talk things out. I’d interpreted our exchange before the ritual as being an agreement that we would go to Kuum Doona, but to her, it had apparently been an agreement that we had a number of options so far as the time-constraints on bringing Solace back were concerned. She had been acting quickly and decisively in the interests of expediting the ritual, not actually agreeing to anything specific.

So, we talked, and talked, and eventually Fenn got bored and left, and Grak decided that he would rather have a summary of what we were doing once the options were more fleshed out, and I realized only then that Valencia and the Six-Eyed Doe must have bowed out some time earlier, because they were nowhere to be seen.

“Just once, I would like for things to be easy,” I said, once we were alone.

“Have you completely forgotten what Grak said earlier today, about you seeming to think that the world owed you something?” asked Amaryllis, frowning at me.

“Sorry, easy was probably the wrong word,” I replied. “I would like for things to be straightforward, so that we only had one logical option instead of eighty options that are spread out in front of us that we have to endlessly go over.”

“At some point we’re going to have to address your recurring attention problems,” she said. “The ability to choose is not something to be taken lightly.”

“I know,” I said. I looked down at her neat handwriting, which had filled four pages. “It just seems like there are a lot of ways to accelerate a pregnancy, or slow down the decay inside the bottle, and none of those ways are the obviously correct one.”

“If I’m carrying Solace to term and then birthing her as normal for either crantek or humans, as the quest says I will be, then I don’t think placing a stop on the bottle is a good idea,” said Amaryllis, briefly consulting her notes. “Even if we discount the more unorthodox lines of thought, like throwing the bottle into the Lunar exclusion zone,” that would be the one with the guy doing his best impression of Groundhog’s Day, “That would still leave me having to endure the pregnancy in full, and I highly doubt that we can rest on our laurels for nine months. I know that I’m not the most valuable member of the team --”

“Knock that off,” I said.

A slight frown crossed her face. “Sorry,” she said. She pursed her lips, as though she was about to say something, but stayed quiet.

“Is that why we’re doing all this?” I asked, gesturing toward the papers.

“It’s important work,” said Amaryllis.

“I think we moved past the point of productivity an hour ago,” I replied. “You’re pushing on for the sake of pushing. We’re going to Kuum Doona, because it’s close enough to your worldlines that we can actually get there in less than a week, and because it kills two quests with one stone, and because there’s likely to be some loot there, in addition to a fully secured base of operations, and maybe even some mysteries of the past. We’re seriously constrained by time, even the train ride to the Boundless Pit is stretching it. Some of these other plans ...”
“I wanted to be thorough,” said Amaryllis.

I sighed. “I know. What I’m worried about is that you’re being thorough for the wrong reasons. You’ve been putting a lot on your shoulders since … well, since as long as I’ve known you, but I’m really concerned that you see yourself as the weakling, or worried that we see you as the weakling, and … I know a thing or two about self-destructive behavior, and I don’t want to see that from you.” I studiously avoided mentioning how readily she’d taken on the burden being the one to birth Solace.

Amaryllis frowned. “Have you been talking to Fenn, Grak, or both?”

“About … this?” I asked. “Neither.”

“Shit,” said Amaryllis. She grabbed the papers in front of her and crumpled them up. “I’ll try to tone it down. Doing work that doesn’t need to be done is one of the greatest sins a person can commit.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said.

“It’s something one of the magi used to say,” she replied. “I wasn’t in a great place then, and I found myself going above and beyond just because I needed to … I don’t know.”

“Be useful?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I was a piece in the games of the Lost King’s Court and didn’t know how to make myself a player, so I focused my attention on other things and tried to do them really well, because at least that way I had something I could accomplish. It was foolish, looking back.” She looked down at the notes. “Just like this is foolish. Work for the sake of work, discussion because it feels useful, not because it is useful.” She folded her hands in her lap, then looked up at me. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I said. “I understand the impulse. You can’t do the thing that you actually want to do, so you have to put your energy someplace else.” I gestured at the crumpled papers. “This is, maybe, not the place to put that energy. Nor were the safehouses, really, as useful as they are. Have you thought about maybe having a hobby?”

“A hobby,” said Amaryllis, giving me her best blank stare.

“For me it was worldbuilding,” I said with a shrug. “If things weren’t going well with my parents, or at school, or even sometimes with friends, I could always work on my worlds. And it wasn’t really useless, because at least I was creating something, or looking up information along the way. You could, I don’t know, crochet or something.”

“I don’t think that I’m going to take up crocheting,” said Amaryllis with a soft smile. “I appreciate the sentiment though. You have a very different approach from our other friends.”

“What did they suggest?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

“Grak told me that I should meditate,” replied Amaryllis. “The dwarves have a specific form of it where they feel the rocks, putting the whole of their attention into their fingertips to trace each individual bump and curve of a surface, mapping and memorizing in their mind’s eye. It didn’t really seem to be to my tastes. Fenn suggested that I hire a prostitute.”

“Aaahhhhh,” I said, a strangled sound coming out of my mouth.

“That didn’t seem to be to my tastes either,” said Amaryllis, smiling at me. “I’d wondered, given that you can shift your points around, whether you would put them into social abilities as a default or mental abilities. Seems like you chose mental?”
“You caught me off-guard,” I replied, crossing my arms.

“I don’t mean to make fun,” said Amaryllis. She set her hands on the table and sighed, smile falling away. “Among the personal things that you asked the Dungeon Master, was there anything about me?”

“Some,” I said. “Not really anything that I want to repeat, I just wanted to make sure that you were as much your own person as possible, and that you could be happy.”

*Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 17!*

“Thanks,” she said. “That means a lot. And did he say?”

“He didn’t say, not really,” I replied. “I know you’re skeptical about the whole thing, and I think you’re probably right to be, but … he said that you were meant to be a companion first and a love interest second, and that given time, you would get over me.” I paused. “I’m really not sure that I should have told you that.”

*Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 18!*

“It continues to surprise me how free you are with the truth,” said Amaryllis. “Do you ever think about what it would have been like if you’d kept the secret of the game from me?”

“The level ups would have been hard to disguise,” I replied. “I’m not sure that I could have lied well enough.”

“I’d never have guessed the truth on my own,” said Amaryllis. “I would have just thought that you were partially dream-skewered with an amazing ability to learn quickly.” She looked over to where the backpack was sitting up against the side of the table. “And it seems as if Earth is real?”

“Maybe,” I said. “My guess is that it’s as real as Aerb, which is real enough for me. I’ve been trying to think of what all I want to show you, now that I have a connection.” I’d tried grabbing a laptop, and gotten back a note on legal pad, in my handwriting, that said ‘no laptops, sorry :-(', and decided that more testing could wait til later, if it wasn’t going to be the sort of thing that was going to break the game wide open. “Is there anything that would make you happy?”

“Happy?” asked Amaryllis, as though the concept was foreign to her. “Let’s try something frivolous. Earth confections.”

I started with my favorites, Jelly Belly, Reese’s minis, Warheads, Sour Patch Kids, and then moved on to other things I thought she might like; Arthur had always been a fan of Twizzlers, but Amaryllis hated them, just like I did. I offered commentary as I pulled things from the backpack, trying to give her the cultural context of everything. She got a little hung up on the wrappers, since they were made of plastics far beyond what was available on Aerb, but aside from that, she seemed to take some real pleasure in a little bit of frivolity, and some time spent in each other’s company without any real point to it.

The others filtered back in after some time, and we had a feast together, all the best junk food that Earth could offer, complete with a tasting of eleven different varieties of canned pop, which were far too sweet for all our palates, even mine, since I’d spent long enough on Aerb that my tastes had changed to suit the cuisine. It was as much like a family as I’d felt since playing my custom tabletop game with them a few weeks prior, and I sent a little token of thanks the Dungeon Master’s way, even though he was a prick.
In the morning, we teleported to Cranberry Bay, where we boarded a train that would take us along the Lion’s Mane until we reached the Boundless Pit.
Aboard the Lion's Tail

The train was necessitated by the fact that we didn’t have a better way to get to the Boundless Pit. There was a touchstone only about twenty minutes’ walk from the Boundless Pit, but using our teleportation key to get there would have basically required us to kill a dozen guards and make ourselves conspicuous, while buying passage for five to get there would have opened us up for quite a bit of scrutiny from the aforementioned guards. The keys were very valuable, so the system had a lot of checks, balances, and overall paranoia built into it.

Trains, on the other hand, were transportation for the common people, with tickets available in exchange for a relatively small amount of cash, and documents that were simple enough for us to acquire. Fenn had been gearing up to quickly find someone to forge them for us in the morning before the train was set to depart, but I reminded her that I’d seen Forgery as a skill in her soul, and sure enough, with help from the clonal kit for supplies, she was able to make something she thought would be passably authentic, at least given the level of scrutiny we expected to face. She seemed a bit perturbed by the whole thing; I think getting better with a bow was something she saw as a boon, but having a new skill from nowhere as part of me leveling up was too much outside interference with her skillset. Unearned skill was old hat for me, but it was still new to her.

The train ride would take us two days, but we’d stop right on the doorstep of the Boundless Pit, and in theory, getting down to Kuum Doona would be the work of a day, maybe less, and the time chamber would ideally get us Solace back within the space of a day. At a projected four days, it was the fastest route to getting her back, and from there, hopefully stabilizing the locus’ domain.

(Interestingly, air travel was pretty rare on Aerb. The train lines had been built around Uther’s time, as one of the major works of the First Empire which continued until long after his disappearance and even through the collapse of the First Empire itself. Railways lubricated trade like nothing else, especially because their construction and maintenance was prioritized over the building and fixing of roads. In some sense, the railroads destroyed cultures and institutions, because they made obsolete dozens if not hundreds of different methods of transportation. A large, domesticated, flightless bird had been used as a pack animal for centuries, and was suddenly supplanted by the rails. The ley-line network of a far-north kingdom became unprofitable, and when the funds dried up, the magic did too. The tradition of river-rafting that had existed among the five kingdoms along the Lyra River collapsed within two generations, and this was in fact pointed to by historians as being a key factor in the development of a state of perpetual warfare in the region.

It wasn’t too long after the railways had finished establishing their stranglehold on transportation of goods that bulk teleportation arrived and almost completely destroyed rail. The saving grace was that living things couldn’t be teleported using that method, which meant that both a select fraction of freight and all passenger transport were still viable. Railway operators, public and private, did their best to switch over, and while some of them shuttered because the reason for their construction was virtually eliminated overnight, the Aerbian railway business as a whole was able to stay afloat, and passenger rail was the beneficiary of what had happened to freight.

There were a few reasons that air travel never really took off. The local equivalent of the Hall–Héroult process of aluminum processing came late in their technological advancement, which meant that cheap aluminum post-dated airplanes by long enough that a huge amount of infrastructure, processes, and institutions had already been built up, all to the standards of much heavier aircraft that were specialized for heavier loads over shorter distances, mostly meant for certain categories of freight that couldn’t go through bulk teleport, or for particular routes that trains weren’t good enough for. Aerb didn’t have the technological capability to build the kinds of aircraft that we had on Earth,
but they did have the ability to build lighter-than-air aluminum passenger craft -- but it wasn’t at
enough of an advantage to overcome the entrenched system of passenger rail, nor to compel the
necessary retrofitting that the existing air systems used.

All that was without getting into the political considerations of the Draconic Confederacy. Dragons
existed on Aerb, great and powerful creatures of incredible age, just the way I liked them, greedy,
indulgent, obsessive, and at least a little bit smart. There were only about five hundred of them on
Aerb, but they had a loose union, one which had formed in response to the foundation of the First
Empire by Uther. They had relatively few common interests, but one of them was the belief that the
skies of Aerb unequivocally belonged to the dragons, and everyone else flew at their pleasure. In
practical terms, this meant that flights didn’t just have to go through the Aerbian equivalent of air
traffic control, they also needed to be cleared with the dragons, which operated with all the efficiency
you would expect of centuries-old institutions attempting to interface with each other. This wasn’t
just a question of bureaucracy; some of the worst disasters in Aerbian aviation history were caused
by dragons going after improperly cleared flights, which was obviously the kind of thing that had a
chilling effect on passenger air travel.

(Also, there was no doubt in my mind that we were going to have to fight a dragon at some point,
but that thankfully seemed like it was going to be a long time coming.))

We got to the station and selected the Lion’s Tail in mid-afternoon, and after a somewhat tense
inspection of our legitimate tickets and illegitimate papers, we found our rooms, which given how
late we’d been in booking our tickets, were spread out all across the train. Grak was on his own, in
what the ticket agent had called a roomette, while Fenn and I had one room together, and Amaryllis
and Val had another a few cars away. The train started to move, and I was treated to a rapidly
receding view of Cranberry Bay. For certain stretches of our trip, the train would be going more than
a hundred miles an hour, tracing the Lion’s Mane, a geographical feature that looked a little bit like a
lion’s head if you squinted and tilted your head a bit, water making up the face and land making up
the mane, with enormous islands making up a few features of the ‘face’ -- eyes, nose, mouth, and
archipelagos that might have been whiskers. You really had to squint though.

“What do you mean you’ve never been on a train before?” asked Fenn as we sat down in the lounge
chairs in our room. My eyes kept going around the room, looking at the combination of leather and
woodwork, and the thick glass in the window that I was sure would turn deadly-sharp the moment it
cracked. Everything was so solid, steel-framed and padded, like whoever had built the train realized
the power the soul engines were capable of and decided to go hog wild. “You said that they have
trains on Earth.”

“They do,” I replied. “Passenger trains, even. But where I’m from, the rail lines are mostly used for
freight, and if you need to get anywhere, you go by car. That’s not how it is all over the world
though, it mostly has to do with the technology at the time the cities were being built and some
structural forces, I think. It’s not really common to take a train as transport. I doubt that most of the
people from my hometown have ever taken one.”

“Best way to travel,” said Fenn. “Calm, relaxing, there are always lots of people to see and annoy,
you get to fall asleep to the rumble and sway -- did you know that I’ve never had sex on a train?”

“Funny coincidence,” I said with a smile. “I haven’t either.”

But before we could do anything about that, Amaryllis showed up, with Valencia in tow.

“Is our room going to be the meeting room?” asked Fenn with a frown.

“We need to discuss things in private somewhere, your room is the midpoint,” said Amaryllis. She
had shelved the immobility plate for the time being, mostly because she didn’t want to draw attention to herself, and was dressed in a very conservative navy blue outfit. The collar covered her neck almost entirely, while the long sleeves covered her arms, and a patterned navy blue dress went down to just above solid-looking black boots. She’d changed her hair yet again, using Grak’s axe to grow it out, dying it a dark brown that bordered on black, and then putting it up in a bun.

Valencia was in a very similar outfit, the blues of it lighter, and the cut a little different, but with the same overall effect. We’d dyed her hair the same dark brown, and fixed her eyes with some blue contact lenses -- not the kind that you’d find on Earth, since these were made of very precisely ground glass, and the coloration was a tint that affected her vision and ended up making her irises look purple. It wasn’t quite the best that we could do as far as disguising her true nature, but it was close.

“Is there anything in particular that we need to discuss now?” asked Fenn. “Joon and I were in the middle of something. Or rather, we were about to be.”

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “We need to be on guard,” she said. “Val and I have finished our survey of the train, at least as best as we were able to. There are twenty-five cars in total, more than we could properly cover, but at least a few passengers of note, and one of which really concerns me. She’s a princess.”

“Anglecynn?” I asked, tensing. The Lost King’s Court was home to a plethora of princes and princesses, most of whom would probably be able to identify Amaryllis, maybe even through her disguise, and most of them that didn’t want her dead for their own purposes would be perfectly willing to sell her out. Amaryllis had a few allies among her kin, but none of them steadfast enough that she wanted to take the risk in going to them, especially not if we were putting off reclaiming her position within the government of Anglecynn (on an indefinite basis, which made me feel guilty, but it was what it was).

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Not that bad. She’s tuung, returning to her homeland after training at the athenaeum. She and her entourage are taking up the first three cars.”

The tuung were a frog-like people with wide mouths, enormous eyes, slick skin that was usually blue or grey, and a constant need for water that meant if you ever saw one, it was almost certain to be carrying around a tank on its back, some tubing, and mister. As far as the mortal species went, they weren’t terribly well-liked, which partly had to do with the fact that their moistness had to be accommodated (they left wet chairs and damp books in their wake), and partly had to do with a philosophy that most of them shared, which was “the supremacy of existence”, which boiled down to the idea that it was better to exist than not exist, even if existence meant pain and suffering (and yes, this included existence in the hells). Individual tuung could be members of the Empire of Common Cause, if they were citizens of a member nation, but the three largest (and loosely-aligned) tuung polities were independent, with a few points of tension between them and the Empire.

“Okay, so this train’s got two princesses on it,” said Fenn with a shrug. “Not sure how much this has to do with us.”

“I’m a princess,” said Valencia. Her eyebrows were knit together and she had a studious expression.

“In what way are you possibly a princess?” asked Fenn with a laugh.

“Fallatehr was among the wahtepeh, which means that as his only daughter I would become part of the wahtepeh on my fortieth birthday,” said Valencia. She spoke carefully and clearly, as though she had memorized it. “That makes me a princess.”
“Absolutely not,” said Fenn, shaking her head. “A full quarter of the elves are *wahtepeh*, more if you’re a moon elf, and it’s not even really a noble class, it’s more like … landowners, I guess, at least for the wood elves, I think it’s similar for the moon elves. Sorry, but if we follow your logic, then I’m a princess.”

“Oh, you’re a princess?” I asked with a smile.

“It’s the wrong word?” asked Valencia. She glanced to Amaryllis.

“It’s a question of translation,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms across her chest. “The *wahtepeh* have a position of most-senior that confers certain rights, and in the early days of human-elf relations, that most-senior person, the *wahtep* was styled as the king by humans who didn’t really know better. Because the position moves to the most-senior member of the community, you could both become what Anglish considers to be a queen, except that you haven’t reached the age of majority. Historically, it wouldn’t have been out of the question for both of you to be styled a princess, especially if you were close to assuming the title of *wahtep*, but in the modern era we’d probably just use the elven word instead.”

Grak had entered the room while she was talking, let in, after a discreet knock, by Valencia. Our room had just enough space for the five of us, and only because the beds were folded up and out of the way.

“What is the relevance of this discussion?” asked Grak.

“There’s a princess aboard this train,” said Fenn. “Mary seems to think that means trouble.”

“Oh,” said Grak. “Because we are all princesses?”

“What?” I asked, staring at him.

“Prince, in my case,” said Grak with a slight nod. “Though Anglish genders are inaccurate and used as convenience.”

“Wait,” I said. “I’m sorry, but … you’re a princess?”

“Or prince,” said Grak with a nod. He looked to Amaryllis. “It is the title that would historically have been bestowed on me in Anglish.” He paused. “King, or Queen, now.”

“Is your father --” I began.

“I do not wish to speak of it,” said Grak. He breathed loudly through his wide nostrils, and from the movement of his beard, I thought he probably had his teeth clenched.

“The dwarves at Darili Irid have a system of ‘most pure’,;” said Amaryllis, pivoting away from whatever it was that Grak didn’t want to say about his father. “Darili Irid was founded by a single dwarf who had six children through parthenogenesis, and over the course of a few generations and some outsiders coming in, most of them diverged away from being much like the founder, aside from a single line, which Grak is the end result of.” She turned to Grak. “Do I have that right?”

He nodded. “It is a common system among single-founder clans. There would otherwise be risk of drift.”

“So from a certain perspective, the kharass is composed almost entirely of princesses,” said Amaryllis. “And given the criteria you’ve outlined for a potential new companion, I thought that I would bring this particular princess to your attention.”
“But she’s …” I stopped, trying to gather my thoughts, which had been scattered all over the place. “She’s, ah, got an escort with her? Sorry, also, the locus isn’t a princess by any possible definition of the word, right?”

“I didn’t see her,” said Amaryllis. “I only heard about her from some of the staff aboard the train. They’re keeping her under lock and key until we reach the Boundless Pit, and from what I’ve heard, she has far more of an armed guard than this trip would appear to warrant. There was some speculation that she was either being held and transported home against her will, or that they expected some kind of trouble, though it’s unclear what form that would take.”

“Mary has been an incurable gossip,” said Valencia with a small smile. I smiled back at her, and she beamed at me.

“You think that it smells like plot,” I said. “She smells like a companion, the circumstances reek of a quest, and it’s all happening right when we’re taking a trip in the same direction, one which will involve the tuung in one way or another?”

“I know that you felt like your conversation with the Dungeon Master was a revelation,” said Amaryllis.

“We’ve dodged obvious plot points before,” I said. This was something that I had been trying to get across to her the night before; sometimes things cropped up and then just never got used, that was in the nature of a tabletop game, and once I had tried to step back and see things through that lens, it really did seem like there were a few times the seams had shown. Sure, there might be a princess on this train, and she might even be a plot thread, but that didn’t mean that we had to go chasing her down. I had twenty-three open quests at the moment, which was enough to convince me that I had at least some leeway, even if it was unplotlike.

“We’ll consider this a test case then,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “I just thought that you should know. We’ll see whether we can get through the next forty-eight hours without getting into trouble.”
The Familiar and the Foreign

The backpack had limits, which I’d partially explored the day before. Luckily, the penalty for attempting to violate those limits seemed to just be that I would get back a note, in my handwriting, on a piece of legal paper. I’d collected a small stack of them thus far. Though the backpack didn’t give me much in the way of general rules, it did give me a lot of specific ones, and from those, I could work backward to get the general rules on my own. In brief, the backpack was pretty free with information -- I could pull books from it at will -- but was fairly stingy on giving out things that had more direct utility, especially electronics or weapons, and my guess was that there was also a limit on value, given that I couldn’t pull out a gold bar or a bag full of diamonds. Amusingly, I could pull out a stack of hundred dollar bills, which were worthless on Aerb given that the backing of the United States government meant nothing.

Amaryllis took a stack of books with palpable excitement, most of them overviews of Earth history and technology. It wasn’t quite an offline version of Wikipedia, which I don’t think she really understood the glory of, but we’d been able to draw out thick reference materials, including books on circuitry and computer programming. To my surprise, she also asked me for a holy book from my people, and I had reluctantly provided her with an annotated Bible, with instruction not to read it until her other homework was done (she rolled her eyes at me, but as she turned away I saw a little smile).

Valencia went with her, carrying a very different stack of books, some taken from storage in Fenn’s glove, some taken from the backpack. I was mildly surprised that she knew how to read without the assistance of a chewed up devil, but it was apparently among the suite of skills that Fallatehr had seen fit to have his minions teach her, though they’d only taught her Anglish, nothing else. The books Amaryllis and I selected were partly to give her some culture, and partly to give her some socialization. It wasn’t ideal to have her learn from reading, but it was a far better plan than having her learn by trying to piece together how devils mimicked and manipulated humans, and we couldn’t spend literally our entire day trying to teach her things.

My contribution was to give her the first two Harry Potter books, on the theory that she might find some helpful parallels. Arthur (as Uther) had written his own versions of them, which I’d skimmed through, but I disagreed with some of the choices made in adaptation; he wrote Hermione as too much of a Mary Sue, and Ron as too much of a dimwit sidekick, and in the final book, Harold Plotter and the Hallowed Deaths, Harry died as part of his sacrifice. I won’t go so far as to call it bad fic, but it did somewhat rankle me that Arthur had rewritten the series to better suit his own tastes. Most of the works he’d copied were faithful to the original, or at least as much as could be expected given that they were written from memory and needed to be translated to a Middle Ages culture, but these showed deliberate changes that were reflections of his complaints and comments on the series I’d heard from him. Trying to psychoanalyze his actions on Aerb was nearly impossible given how removed I was from him. He’d been ‘writing’ the Harold Plotter novels around the start of what Amaryllis had termed the Roaming Era. It made me vaguely upset, not just the defilement of a series I had grown up on, but what it might say about Arthur. So long as I had the Earth originals written by Rowling, I would rather Valencia read them instead.

(You know what didn’t work? Trying to get books that hadn’t existed when I left Earth. I thought it was definitely within the Dungeon Master’s power to create a copy of The Winds of Winter or The Doors of Stone, but the backpack gave me back a note that said it couldn’t or wouldn’t. That also extended to technical books from after 2017.)

Books aside, the most useful things to come out of the backpack were plastics and medical supplies.
We stored a fair amount of those in Fenn’s glove, and then made up a first aid kit, just in case we had need of it. My primary concern there was Valencia; the marzipan fairies didn’t work on her, nor did bone magic, which meant that we didn’t have a way to keep her in good health if something were to happen to her.

And then there were the perks, creature comforts from home that I could share with the group, candy, pop, and fiction. I pulled out a Blu-ray of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, then stared at it in disappointment, because I had no way to play it. Even if I could have created a television from scratch (not all that hard, I didn’t think, especially with some reference books), and a Blu-ray player (virtually impossible given the lack of microprocessors), I’d have had to rewrite the entire Blu-ray codec from scratch, unless I could find a dead-trees copy of it. I actually still thought that it was doable, but would take years on end, enormous resources, and Engineering that had been pushed up as high as it would go.

“I don’t get this,” said Fenn around a mouthful of McDonald’s hamburger, which I’d pulled, warm, from the backpack. She was in a state of partial undress; after the others had left, we’d had our fun, and now we were sitting around, clothed enough that if someone knocked on the door we would be able to get decent in a hurry. “Like, it’s fine for street food, but you’re saying that this is from a restaurant?” She pulled back the layers and peered inside. “One hundred billion served? It’s so … gross.”

“Mass produced,” I said. “I’m actually pretty surprised that’s not the case on Aerb, given that you have industrialization and better mass transportation than on Earth.” I was sitting in my lounge chair with one of the Culture novels in my hands, but I wasn’t getting terribly far in it. “Do you think there’s a niche available? Maybe I could invent fast food?”

“Our food is fast,” said Fenn. “A guy hands you a stick with meat that’s been sitting beneath the burners, how is that slow?”

“Maybe I’ll try to find a book on modern -- Earth-modern -- restaurant management,” I said, knowing that I almost certainly wasn’t going to do that. “Uther was the Poet King, but they shall call me the King of Burgers.”

Fenn touched the half-eaten hamburger with a gloved finger and ten seconds later, it disappeared into the vast void of her glove. “Can we get some real food to eat?”

“The backpack has plenty,” I said, gesturing toward it. It wasn’t keyed to me specifically, though I knew the most about what was actually available on Earth. It wasn't finicky about getting things, but you had to exercise at least a little bit of precision when picturing what you wanted, even if it didn’t need to be exact. I glanced down at my book, then back up at her. “Oh, actually … hrm, takeout from The Great Wall would probably be too sugary for your tastes, but I do want you to try it at some point.”

“Let me rephrase,” said Fenn, making a moue. “I am bored, I want to explore the train, and I want you to come with me, because you are my wonderful boyfriend.”

I closed my book and gave her a somewhat forced smile. “Okay,” I said.

“Problem?” asked Fenn.

“No,” I said. “Just, after,” I gestured at my lower half, “I get kind of … clear-headed. Not antisocial, necessarily, but, ah, more prone to analysis, less prone to emotion.”

“Even with me?” asked Fenn.
She was making a sad, puppy dog face, exaggerated to the point of caricature, but I knew her well enough to know that was part of how she masked actual hurt, a ‘ha ha, think about how ridiculous it would be if I was actually hurt’ response. I wanted to explain to her that it wasn’t personal, I still loved her, it was just the biochemistry of my brain, but I knew from past experience that a digression into neurobiology wasn’t the correct response to an emotional reaction. I probably would have caught myself even if my two ‘floating’ points weren’t in SOC at the moment.

“Fenn, my love,” I said, standing up, “Let’s go explore this train together, arm in arm.”

She beamed a smile that sent relief and real happiness through me, and we finished getting dressed together with only a few mild interruptions. We didn’t quite walk arm-in-arm together, because the hallways weren’t wide enough to allow it, but I trailed a hand behind me, and she held on.

Most of the cars were filled with rooms that people had bought passage on, with cramped sleepers at the tail end of the train for people who couldn’t afford the luxury we were traveling in, and a single car devoted to rows of chairs and a few booths, which were for the people who were going to get off before nightfall. Our specific line had three stops to it, each at a major city along the way to the Boundless Pit.

When we got to one of the two dining cars, we stopped and found a table. The sun was starting to set behind part of the mountains that made up this section of the Lion’s Mane, and most of the people on the train had already eaten. It was just us, three of the tuung sitting at their own table, and a pair of men further down the car, who were in heated discussion. I say men, but they were normal only by the standards of Aerb, which meant that any single one of their clothes, facial hair, skin color, or accessories would have been enough to turn heads on Earth, and though I’d been putting real effort into studying *The Book of Blood*, I couldn’t be certain either of them were actually human.

“So, I’m dating a princess,” I said with a grin as we took our seats.

“Does that do it for you?” asked Fenn with a smile that called to mind the carnivorous nature of the elves.

I smiled back. “I’m sorry for finding it funny.”

“Well, so long as one of us does,” sighed Fenn. “Personally, I’ve always held a disdain for the noble class, not that the concept really applies to the elves as such, no matter what Val or Mary might tell you.”

“I didn’t figure you for having political opinions,” I said. A waiter stopped by and took our orders, which was always an experience on Aerb, where I only vaguely knew the names of things and the list of ingredients used in the description was of little help. “Have we ever talked politics before?”

“Not if I could possibly have helped it,” said Fenn. “What’s that phrase you use sometimes? ‘Blah, blah, blah, politics’?”

“That was Reimer’s phrase,” I replied with a frown.

“Which one was he again?” asked Fenn.

“Kind of a dick,” I said. “He wore hats a lot -- baseball caps -- baseball is a game where you hit a ball with a bat and run around in circles -- had, I don’t know, glasses, blonde hair … he liked rules, especially if he could use those rules to break something.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn. She leaned back in her seat a bit. “I think he’s my favorite of the Earth characters.”
“Ugh,” I replied, making a face. “How does it feel to have terrible taste? Also, they’re not characters.”

Fenn waved a hand. “Well I’ve never met them, and I’m not likely to -- Arthur excepted, calm down -- so they might as well be characters, right? And in the stories that you tell, Reimer is always the guy trying to do stuff. Plus he’s a rebel, which I like.”

I actually laughed at that. “He was not a rebel. He was a straight-A student. And in-game he wasn’t a rebel, he was a murderhobo, with very few exceptions. He didn’t treat the people like they were real, he treated them like they were all my finger puppets.”

“He liked hats, I like hats,” said Fenn. “Case closed.”

“I feel like this is the fifth time you’ve dropped a hint that you want me to buy you a hat,” I said, looking at her unadorned head.

“You’ve only gotten five of the hints, eh?” she smiled. “You’re really going to have to step up your playing.”

“Playing?” I asked, confused.

Fenn sighed. “Just insert whatever the appropriate Earth slang was.” She perked up. “Oh, do you have a dictionary of Earth slang in that backpack?”

“Uh, probably,” I said. “I’m really not sure that we should just be randomly grabbing Earth information out of it.”

“You want to hoard all the weird idioms and obscure references for yourself,” said Fenn with a nod. “You want to,” she leaned forward, “Bogart them, huh?” A wide smile spread across her face.

I grinned at her. “You are just ridiculously proud of remembering that, aren’t you?”

“I am,” said Fenn. She stretched out in her seat, raising her arms up and interlocking her fingers. I tried to remember whether I’d told her that was the most attractive innocuous thing a girl could do, because I was pretty sure the cat-like stretch was intentional and for my benefit. “And if you get us a working tellervision, maybe we can curl up and watch Cabbablanca together.”

I laughed at that one, loud enough that the two guys at the end of the car momentarily stopped to look at us. “I love you,” I said.

“Is that not a thing on Earth?” asked Fenn, the very picture of innocent confusion. “Cabbablanca and chill?”

“I sometimes, unaccountably, forget how great you are,” I told her. “Can you say you love me too?”

“Oh, well, it seems a bit soon in our relationship for that,” said Fenn with a smile. “You know what they say, why buy the cow if you can get it to say ‘I love you’ for free, right? I’ve got to play my cards close to my chest.”

Whatever response I might have tried to make was cut short when one of the two men at the far end of the dining car got up and approached us. Fenn had her back to them, and as her eyes tracked my own, she pulled out a small, compact mirror from her purse to look at what I was looking at before collapsing it and putting it back in her purse.

“Are either of you, by chance, bone magi?” he asked, looking between the two of us. His skin had a
slightly green cast to it, enough that I thought he probably wasn’t human. Strips of azure fabric were woven into his black hair, stuck in place by bronze rings, which gave an effect something like a turban. His tunic and breeches were the same color, and as my eyes traveled down, I could see both a sheathed dagger and a gun with a gnarled wooden grip at his hip. I couldn’t place his species, but thought that perhaps he was a half-breed like Fenn, though a half-breed of what and what I couldn’t say.

“We both are, as it happens, on a trip out from the athenaeum, as I’m sure a few on this train are,” said Fenn. “He’s the better of us, by far,” she nodded toward me. “We have bones, if you have coin.”

“We were about to eat,” I said, trying to sound both apologetic and firm.

“Nonsense,” Fenn smiled at me. “Part of the joy of train travel is meeting new and interesting people, all of us stuck together for an extended duration, that’s why we’re here, rather than with our noses stuck in books back in the cabin.” She turned back to the man who’d asked the question. “What is it you’d like?”

He reached into the folds of his tunic and pulled out a tiny skull, which he placed upon the table, next to a small basket of untouched bread. The skull couldn’t have been much bigger than a plum.

“This lizard was a bound familiar,” said the man, nodding to the skull. “We want to know whether he was happy.”

“Um,” I said. I looked to the other man, down at the end of the dining car. He was partially twisted around in his seat to watch us, and nodded to me when he saw me looking. He was bald and had lips so red that I thought he was probably wearing garish makeup. “For what purpose?”

“To settle a bet,” replied the man, looking slightly perturbed at my question. When I made no move to touch the skull, he continued on. “Between the two of us we have a strong difference in opinion about whether bound familiars are happy servants or moved as puppets under unhappy compulsion.”

“Huh,” I said. “That’s actually a really interesting question.” ‘Bound familiars’ weren’t what I’d hoped they were when I first heard of them; they were merely animals that followed some basic commands, induced to that state through a rather expensive and time-consuming spell. I hadn’t really seen the point to them, aside from the fact that they were kind of cool, but the problem was they were still pets, and you had to deal with food, water, waste, and general health. I reached out and laid a finger on top of the lizard skull. “You know that if I do this, there’s some risk to the skull, it will be burned for the purposes of bone magic, and I might not get an answer back?”

He nodded, making a few of the rings in his hair move around.

I’d never actually pulled memories before. Bormann had described it as being difficult and practically worthless, but I was a better bone mage than she was now, and though Fallatehr had described the memories within the soul as being very difficult to work with or make sense of, I had some hope that the two skills would have at least a little bit of harmony with each other.

I pulled from the skull, targeting the KNO layer of the bone, going as slow as I possibly could. From what I knew of knowledge tapping, the gradual pull meant that the memories would come out impressionistic and disconnected from one another, which was exactly what I wanted, since all I really needed was to know whether or not this lizard had a happy life as a familiar. I could feel the memories landing one by one, and what Bormann had said had been right, they were fragmentary glimpses of the lizard’s life.
“He seems … dutiful, I guess,” I replied, narrating as the flashes of memory came to me. “Not terribly much emotion, but what’s there is, I guess I would say, satisfaction at a job well done? Not really affection, so much as there’s any real emotion or cognition at all. He’s the closest to happy when he’s just finished doing a thing for …” The face was distorted in the memories, but it was a recurring figure that I could identify by the strips of cloth that tied down his hair. “You?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded the man. I’d caught enough distorted images from the lizard’s point of view to see a cramped room where papers were being filed or sorted, and more than a few where he was writing in books or reading those papers.

“As far as the question goes, I don’t think it’s puppetry,” I said, taking my finger off the skull. I’d been delicate enough to leave it largely undamaged; it had generated only enough smoke to leave a faint scent in the air, and the only mark on it was a smudge where my finger had been. “Happiness is … I think it would be more accurate to say that he enjoyed accomplishing things.”

The man gave me a short bow, plucked the skull off the table, and slipped it back into his robes. When his hand came back out, it was holding a handful of coins, which he placed in a neat stack on the table.

“Very generous of you,” said Fenn with a nod, which was good, because I had no idea what you were supposed to charge for a service like that.

“Thank you for your service,” he said, giving another short bow. He returned back to his end of the dining car, his mood somewhat softened, but as soon as he sat down, the conversation started up again, seeming just as argumentative as before. I caught the tuung staring at me; one of them had left, leaving only two, and when I caught their eyes, they began misting themselves and talking in a language I didn’t know (assumedly it was Tuung).

Our food arrived shortly afterward, either through cosmic manipulation to create convenient timing, or because the waiter had been watching from a distance and hadn’t wanted to interrupt.

“I’m not sure why you said yes,” I said to Fenn. She had something that looked an awful lot like a burger, though the meat was a lacquered red and the bun reminded me more of an English muffin than a traditional burger bun. My own selection had come as four different bowls, one which had something like a tortilla, another with a steaming meat, the third with finely diced vegetables, and the fourth filled with hot water and two folded towels that were partially submerged in it. I had no idea how to eat it.

“Why not?” asked Fenn. She took a bite of her hamburger and talked around it. “It’s the truth, more or less. It’s misleading truth, maybe, but I don’t know that I’m responsible for what other people read into what I say.”

“Uh, you definitely are,” I said. I looked down at my plates, trying to decide how to proceed.

“But you’d have lied?” asked Fenn. “I’m sorry, and what are you doing with your meal?”

I’d laid out the tortilla-thing (thicker and heavier than a tortilla, more like a flatbread but with some give to it) and was using a spoon to get meat and vegetables onto it, intending to roll it up and eat it like a wrap. “Just show me the right way to do it,” I said with a sigh. She reached across, took a piece of the flatbread, tore it in half, and used it like finger-tongs to pick up a pinch of veggies and a piece of meat. She plopped the whole thing into her mouth, and looked at me with wry amusement.

“My way would have worked,” I said. I followed her lead though. Each bite was like a little mini-sandwich. “And yeah, I would have lied, but mostly because we can’t afford to be caught at this
stage, and exposing ourselves as bone mages --"

“Magi,” said Fenn.

“-- on a train that probably has more than a few of them is a risk that it’s kind of pointless to take,” I said. “Someone starts asking questions about what year we were in, or who we studied under, and those aren’t questions that we can answer, because we didn’t actually attend the athenaeum.”

“So?” asked Fenn. She took another bite from her burger.

“So … I guess I don’t know the legal landscape well enough to say,” I replied. “We’re currently traveling through the Monarchical Democracy of Esplandian --”

“Nope,” said Fenn. “We passed the border while we were,” she made a gesture, thumb and index finger making a circle, other index finger moving in and out of it. “We’re in Drabian now, though we’ll be through by the time we go to sleep.”

“Well, then I really don’t know the legal landscape,” I said. “The athenaeums have a stranglehold on their respective magics, which extends to teaching, publications, and actual practice, but on Earth you wouldn’t get in trouble for having medical skills, you’d get in trouble for claiming you were a doctor, which would be fraud, or attempting to practice medicine, which would be a felony without a license.”

“So we’ve come to the conclusion that I was right all along?” asked Fenn with a raised eyebrow. “I love it when that happens.”

“Well, I’ve got no idea,” I said. “I’m going to shut up and eat my food.”

The problem with telling the truth was that the truth was fucking weird and I was both powerful enough that I would draw the attention of powerful people, and weak enough that those powerful people could coerce, threaten, or kill me, or the people I cared about. The problem with Fenn’s lie was that it pointed back toward the truth in a few ways, while my lie was just a dead-end. It would have been perfectly plausible for us not to be bone mages, even if it was somewhat likely given our point of origin. That would have been the end of the conversation.

And then I would have missed out on looking through the lizard’s memories, and the chance to help settle a minor question that the two men were still in heated discussion about, and the world would have been a little less interesting.

“The necromancer reels back from your attack and drops his evil tome, then begs for his life!” I yelled. I’d been young, ten years old, early days as far as the D&D group went, so imagine me as played by a child actor who doesn’t quite look the same as the Juniper you know and love.

“I wanna hear it,” said Greg with a grin. It had been his axe that had dealt the mortal wound.

“‘Please!’” I cried. I leaned across the table, clasping my hands together. “‘Please, oh powerful warrior, spare my life, I’ll reform, repent, do anything that you want!’”

His grin turned into a smile. “I pick my axe up over my head and throw it right into his fa--”

“Wait,” said Ricky. “Anything?”

“Anything!” I said.
Ricky reached out his hand to me. “Join us.”

“He’s a necromancer,” said Arthur, with an aggrieved sigh.

“Correction,” grinned Greg. “He’s our necromancer. We fought through a bunch of skeletons and zombies trying to get here, those could be our skeletons and zombies. He could do necromancy for us.”

“Why would we need anyone to do necromancy?” asked Arthur.

“Aren’t you saying all this in front of him?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Ricky. “Come on, do the thing.”

“I’m not going to beg for however long this takes,” I replied. “He’ll just be looking between you while you talk, I guess.”

“I keep my axe leveled at him,” said Greg. “No funny business.”

“I’ll pick up his book and leaf through it,” said Ricky.

“I don’t get why we’d have a necromancer,” said Arthur. He had his arms folded across his chest. “We were sent to kill him.”

“Because it’s fun?” asked Greg. “Do you really want to just do the right thing all the time? We can do whatever we want. Something new? Like how many times have you ever seen adventurers have a necromancer friend?”

Even at ten, that was what got Arthur’s attention. “Joon, can I make some changes to my character?” he asked.

“What kind of changes?” I asked.

“Just background stuff,” said Arthur. “And my alignment. I can’t be lawful good if this is what we’re going to do.”

“Uh, sure,” I said. I looked between the three of them. We’d lost our fourth, Nate, two weeks prior, and I was really worried that D&D, the highlight of my week, was going to come to an end.

“We’re going to have to tell the duke something,” said Ricky with a frown. “Joon, were we supposed to bring back his head or what?”

“Yeah, his head,” I said, trying to think. “But as you say that, the necromancer, who is still on his knees, says that if you need heads, he has plenty of them, and if he has some time he can make one of the zombie heads look enough like his own.”

“Nice,” said Ricky.

“So what’s he going to need to work for us?” asked Greg.

“He --” I stopped, then started again. “He really just wants to work. The bodies that he’s been working with were mostly ones he dug up from graves, but I guess he’d work a lot better with fresh corpses.”

“I don’t really want to kill innocent people,” said Arthur, stopping in the middle of whatever he was writing.
“Innocent?” I asked, trying to find the character voice again and failing, “No, there are bandits, the duke has a price out on their heads just like me, all you would have to do is bring the bodies here and I could work on them.” I stopped, thinking that was it, then added, “And with fresh bodies, there’s so much more that I can do.”

And somehow, the game came alive again. It took me a long time to try to figure out what had been going wrong, where I’d started to lose people, and eventually -- years later, after I’d already internalized the lesson -- I concluded that it was the element of buy-in and choice, and in following the path of fun. The party started doing things for the necromancer, stealing equipment, killing his rivals, bringing him bodies, and this was somehow better than taking very similar orders from the king. The novelty was part of it, but it was also the fact that I’d been willing to let them take the lead.

“Mary thinks that we’re the most important people in the world,” said Fenn.

“Oh?” I asked. “That … might be true.”

“We were talking about morality,” said Fenn. “My lessons on it, as such.”

“I have a bunch of books I could give you now,” I said. “A backpack full of them, in fact.”

“She was trying to talk me into stealing,” said Fenn. “She’s really a bad influence, you know that? I shudder to think how Valencia will turn out, with Mary as a mother-figure. And poor Solace too!”

“What did she want you to steal?” I asked, frowning. This was the first I’d heard of it.

“Nothing in particular,” said Fenn. “I think she just said that it was convenient that I took things, and helped us as a group in a lot of ways.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I finished off the last of my food, and used the hot water for its apparently intended purpose of cleaning my fingers.

“She was saying, basically, that since we’re the most important people in the world, it’s all for the greater good,” said Fenn. “Like, if it’s a choice between the end of the world and stealing some plastic explosives, then you should pick stealing the plastic explosives, right?”

“Right,” I said slowly.

“So, basically, the livelihood of pretty much anyone that I could possibly steal from pales in comparison to the importance of getting you strong enough to grow past the powers of the gods,” said Fenn. “However that’s going to happen. And since we don’t know what the future is like, only that you’re important, we should do whatever we think will increase the chances of success.”

“Huh,” I said. “I think I came to the opposite conclusion using the same method.”

Fenn frowned. “Explain to me how that makes sense at all.”

“We’re not perfect beings,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” smiled Fenn.

“We’re not, and trying to chart out an optimal path that perfectly maximizes the expected amount of good that we do is going to go wrong if we pretend that we’re perfect,” I said. “In a hypothetical optimal path to godhood -- uber-godhood -- we wouldn’t even be eating in the dining car, or talking to each other, we’d be staying in our room and probably reading through books, maybe trying to get
my Engineering up. We probably wouldn’t have had sex.”

Fenn frowned. “It seems like you’ve got to have *some* allowance for doing things that aren’t boring or altruistic.”

“Right,” I nodded. “That’s got to be built into the path you’re plotting for yourself, because if you just say, okay, I’m going to spend eight hours sleeping and sixteen hours working, you’re going to tank productivity, because there are all these systems involved in keeping ‘you’ operating, and a lot of them are mental systems, so if you press too hard, you’ll end up just not accomplishing the thing that you wanted to.” I paused. “But Mary doesn’t feel the same way?”

“I don’t think we’ve talked about it yet,” said Fenn. She was giving me a fond look. “Why didn’t I want to talk about this sort of thing with you again?”

“Because I’m kind of shit at it?” I asked. I laughed a little as I said it, but she didn’t seem to find it funny. “Back on Earth I was kind of a bag of dicks, and on Aerb my track record isn’t so great, even if we make some allowances for circumstances or personal imperfections. But more seriously, you didn’t want to talk about this kind of thing with me because you said, ah, that there were limits to how much a single person can be to you.”

“Not can,” said Fenn. “*Should.* As much as I feel a small spark of fondness for you --” I flicked her hand, which was resting on the table, and she grinned at me. “I don’t want to be a plant that you grew from a seed, resting all its weight against your trellis. Not just for fear of what would happen if you were ever gone, though obviously that’s a part of it.”

“Ah,” I looked down at the empty bowls in front of me.

“That wasn’t about you and Arthur,” said Fenn. She looked nervous, which was uncharacteristic for her. Usually it was easy to tell she was nervous because she would hide things with a joke.

“Yeah,” I said. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to block out the rush of thoughts.

“What if it were him or me?” I imagined Fenn asking.

“He was my best friend,” I might start to say, but she would cut me off.

“You told me that I was your best friend,” she’d interject.

“You are,” I’d say. “But his life was cut so short --”

“When he became the Lost King, he was fifty-five,” she’d object. “And in his time on Aerb he lived more than most people do in a hundred lifetimes.”

“I didn’t say that I would choose him,” I’d say, and then I might start to cry, because I wasn’t sure that I *would* choose him, and what did that say about me? What kind of a shitty, horrible friend would I be if I said ‘oh, no, I think I’m going to go with the girl that I’ve known for a month’? Even if I loved her.

And I wanted to say that it was unfair of her to even ask me, but it was all in my head.

“How about light and airy?” Fenn asked instead. “If you were going to get a familiar, what kind would you want?”
“Something self-sufficient,” I answered. “Some kind of creature that could look after its own food, drink its own water, find its own place to sleep, and in general want me but not need me. A cat, maybe, but I would feel a little silly if I didn’t get some exotic variety.”

“I think I’d get a bird,” said Fenn. “I’ve always liked birds. Say, if this whole Solace thing pans out, maybe we can go flying again! And we could resurrect our Arches campaign, plus Val. Kind of ruins the division of suits thing though, since we’d have to double up somewhere.”

“You really want to play again?” I asked.

“Adnarim has a whole character arc left,” said Fenn. “Especially with her twin sister dead.”

“Okay,” I said. “It was really hard to tell how much people were actually having fun, and how much you were all humoring me.”

“Grak loved it,” said Fenn. “I’m surprised you didn’t pick up on it. Well, not surprised, exactly, but it seemed really obvious to me.”

“He seemed to like some of the character stuff,” I said. “Specifically his character. I don’t know, he’s hard to read.”

“I’ll give you that,” said Fenn. “But I know that he’d be up for it, and I know that I’m up for it, and Mary desperately needs to spend about a year unwinding. Actually now that I think about it, Solace is probably going to be a baby, or a toddler or something, which might make playing hard.”

“It depends on how much time is stored up in the time chamber,” I said. “In theory, there will be a lot, which means that we could possibly get her up to her teens. Old enough that she might be able to pass as an adult.”

“I’ll tell you this,” said Fenn. “I am not changing or washing dirty diapers.”

“Washing?” I asked, just before it clicked. “Ah, cloth diapers. On Earth we use disposable ones. I mean, in my part of the world we do. Did.”

“Elves just hold their young over the toilet,” said Fenn. “But elves only poop like once a week anyway, and the babies come out the size of my palm,” she held up her hand to demonstrate, and stared at it for a moment, frowning slightly. “Half a pound, at most, not like the monsters that come out of human women.” She shook her head. “I’m really hoping that’s not a decision that Mary ends up regretting.”

“I think she’ll do fine,” I said. “We’ve got the best healing that money can buy, and it’s not like Solace is going to be a real baby anyway.”

“Do you know that because of magic, or are you just hoping?” asked Fenn.

“We have the time chamber anyway,” I replied. “Even if she does end up being an actual baby.”

“Yeah, but you’ve still got to be in it,” said Fenn. She paused. “We’re not pre-emptively talking about abandoning Mary in the time chamber, are we?

Before I could share my thoughts on that, the train car’s door opened, and one of the tuung -- the one that had left earlier, I thought -- came walking over to me. He strode on long, powerful legs, stepping so that the heel of his foot didn’t touch the ground. His pants were skin-tight and rather damp, and his shoes had individual parts for each of his three toes, acting more like a glove than a shoe. There was something of a tree-frog about the tuung, though they weren’t Animalia, and among my cultural
notes on Aerb was the reminder that very few of the mortal species liked being confused with the Animalia.

“Emomain has invitation for you,” he said, laying a letter with a wax seal on the table. He retreated back toward his companions without waiting for a response.

I looked to Fenn, shrugged, then picked up the letter.

_Dear Sir and Madam,_

_I am Princess Emomain, fifth daughter of Esunounuol, current monarch of the Boundless Pit. I am aboard the Lion’s Tail on my return trip to the Boundless Pit, following ten years of intensive study at the Athenaeum ofBone and Flesh, where I specialized in medical procedures which are either necessary due to ethical concerns about the use of magic, or due to the impossibility of using magic for whatever reason._

_When I return to my ancestral home, I am likely to be sorely lacking in the multicultural companionship that I had grown accustomed to in Cranberry Bay, and during the two days of travel it will take to get to Headwater and the Boundless Pit, I’ve decided that I shall have one last hurrah. To that end, I have been inviting interesting people to come visit my car, where I am traveling in style with plenty in the way of refreshments which continue the multicultural theme._

_Would you be interested in joining me? All of my guards and servants have been directed to usher suitable passengers toward my private car._

_Yours, Emomain_  

I handed the letter over to Fenn, and let her read it while I collected my thoughts.

“Quest?” she asked, when she’d finished. She was keeping her voice low; the tuung had been talking among themselves at the next table, but they’d apparently been eavesdropping, at least enough that they’d heard us talking to the man whose familiar I’d inspected.

“No quest,” I said.

“Huh,” said Fenn. She looked down at her empty plate. “I could do with a dessert though.”

“Fenn, we ah,” I looked over at the tuung and tried to determine whether they were listening in. Had they heard the whole conversation about us not actually having attended the athenaeum? I’d had them in my eyeline, but hadn’t been paying them much attention. “I’m worried that it will expose us.”

“Again, so?” asked Fenn.

“We’re talking about royalty of the place that we’re visiting really soon,” I said.

“Point taken,” Fenn said with a frown. “But she must have sent out plenty of these invitations, and we can just change our story, right?” She was still keeping her voice low. I needed to get some translation tattoos for both of us so we could speak in a mutual language that was unintelligible to others. That was a thing on Aerb, but it was pricey, especially since it meant getting them done custom rather than off-the-shelf translation tattoos that would let you speak one of the standard languages.

“Are you asking what I would do if all the other junk wasn’t a factor?” I asked. “Or what I want to do, given that it is?”
“On the face of it, a tuung princess, even a middling one, would be a good ally,” said Fenn. “Note: ally, not companion, which might be more problematic for us. The place we’re going is three miles down the Boundless Pit, and I’d been under the impression that would mean a little bit of archery, but if we can avoid that, all the better. I’d rather not kill people if they’re just defending their sovereignty.”

“Okay,” I said. “You’re right. It’s a potential diplomatic door we can open.” Except I would be surprised if it were that simple. “Mary and Val are on the way.”

Fenn rolled her eyes. “I love her, but I’m worried that she’s going to talk us to death about it.”
Amaryllis answered the door holding a book in one hand, and gestured for us to come into their room without letting go of it. It was smaller than the one Fenn and I had, built narrow so that more rooms could be fit on the car, and when all four of us were in it, it was barely big enough to keep us from an uncomfortable amount of body contact.

“Hi Joon,” said Valencia, looking up from her book. She was already a fair way through *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

“I can make all this,” said Amaryllis, gesturing with the book she was holding. On the page I could see something that looked like a microchip. “Aerb has been so slow compared to Earth, I don’t understand it.”

“I can venture something like thirty different guesses,” I said. “Enforcing medieval stasis was a hobby of mine.”

“But I can make all of it,” said Amaryllis. “Integrated circuits, magnetic storage, television -- on Earth it was thirty years between radio and television, did you know that?”

“Sounds about right. I’m not really all that familiar with Aerb’s development timeline,” I began.

“Radio came just a little bit after the Second Empire,” said Amaryllis. “One hundred and thirty years and we never made the leap.”

“That’s … I don’t think we have the time right now to get into the medieval stasis trope, and how it’s been working out on Aerb,” I said. “My guess is development traps, perverse incentives, lackluster incentives, active suppression, lack of resources, lack of intellectual capital, competition of alternatives … I actually legitimately think that I could get to thirty, and then guess how or whether they apply. But not now, because we have an invitation to visit with the tuung princess.”


“Can I come?” asked Valencia.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” said Amaryllis, turning towards her.

Eagerness turned to distress in a single moment; Valencia looked like she was about to cry. “Well why don’t you just lock me up in a cupboard under the stairs!” she yelled. She turned away from us and returned to her book, gripping the pages hard.

Amaryllis gave her a bewildered look, then turned to me.

“Harry Potter is locked in a cupboard under the stairs by his evil step-parents,” I explained.

“Because he’s different,” said Valencia, not looking up from her book, which she seemed like she was trying to stare a hole into.

“I never read the *Harold Plotter* series,” said Amaryllis. The words came out slowly. She looked over to Valencia and reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder. “Val, you being different is, on a pure utility level, really, really good for us. Even if I didn’t like you at all, which I do, I would consider you to be a valuable asset. The problem is that there are risks in having you out, so long as you’re still learning how to be you. Your difference comes with costs. You’re going to have to learn
how to hide it, so you aren't recognized.”

“Like how Harry was recognized by his scar,” said Valencia.

Amaryllis looked to me, and I nodded. “Sure,” she replied.

“This party seems like a good time to practice,” said Fenn with a happy smile.

“Fenn,” began Amaryllis.

“Mary,” Fenn replied. “It’s low stakes, lots of people to let us blend in, she can always call on a devil if she really needs to spin some lie, and if things go wrong, well, the plan was that we’d make an illegal descent into the Boundless Pit anyway, right? What’s the worst case scenario here’?”

“We get kicked off the train, which costs us an extra day or two, which means that we get Solace back late, just after the locus has drawn its last breath,” said Amaryllis. “Though that’s not actually the worst case, the worst case is that we all wind up dead, getting kicked off the train is just the most likely of the bad cases.”

“The invitation was for Fenn and I,” I replied. “I’m not sure how closely they’ll be checking, or how much they’ll care, but I don’t know for certain that they would let us have a plus one.”

Amaryllis demanded a fuller debriefing than that, which I gave her. She cringed at the idea that we’d left our cabin to get some food, especially since we could just grab food from the backpack, and cringed again when Fenn had revealed me for a bone mage.

“Is this why you don’t split the party?” she asked.

“Part of it,” I replied.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “I’m in mild agreement that at least some of us should go, despite the obvious risks.” She took a breath. “Better to have it be me and Juniper --”

“No,” said Fenn. She took out the invitation and handed it to Amaryllis. “She uses the word ‘multicultural’ twice. I think half the reason we got an invitation is that I’m a half-elf. Maybe more than half the reason. If you were her, and you thought that your days were going to be spent at court, surrounded by other tuung, and you wanted to have all the variety and mishmash of different stuff that a place like Cranberry Bay had to offer, you wouldn’t want to stack that party with, no offense, boring old humans.”

Amaryllis frowned. “Point taken,” she said. “If it’s just you and Joon though, I worry that you won’t be as adept at gaining her aid. We can see from our souls that I have better social skills, and I’m a princess, like her --”

“So am I,” said Fenn. She seemed almost giddy about being able to throw that back in Amaryllis’ face.

“I’ll go with,” said Valencia. She seemed to have calmed down somewhat. “Mary, you said that I was almost better than you, with a devil inside me, but you were lying, because you thought that I was better. I can pretend that I’m Joon’s sister.”

Amaryllis looked between the three of us. I think she was hoping that I would be the voice of reason, but I wasn’t really on her side on this one. The conversation with Fenn had stirred something loose in me; trying to keep Val bottled up was a recipe for disaster, because if we kept her from speaking with people and coming with us, eventually she would snap in one way or another. She’d been
teased with freedom, and it hadn’t actually happened yet. Instead, we’d kept her under lock and key, away from the wide world, seeing things only through conversations with the same small group of four people and constrained to prepared safehouses that were barred to the outside. (In fact, maybe this was her snapping, finally pushing back after one too many times of being told that she wasn’t allowed to do something that she should, by right, be capable of. Or maybe it was that the only work of fiction she’d ever read was the first half of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.)

“Okay,” said Amaryllis.

“Really?” asked Valencia, brightening up considerably.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I’m not even going to insist on coming with, in part because I think Fenn is right.”

“She’s gone mad,” said Fenn.

“I don’t think that I would make things better,” said Amaryllis. “Dropping down into unfamiliar situations has never been my forte, and if I’m looking at my list of failures, that’s where all of them start. I’m nobility, but not of the same type, and can’t reveal that on pain of severe consequences. So,” she looked over at the books. “I predict that this goes badly. My read, from the invitation, is that the princess is the kind of vapid, overly-indulged nobility that I hate, and on the surface, there’s no reason for this party to be anything but boring. It’s possible that it will turn out well for the three of you. On the face of it, there’s at least no reason to suspect that you’ll be attacked and thrown from the train.” She fidgeted slightly, resting a hand on her book. “I’m going to get into full armor, double-check that I’m ready for the most likely of the worst outcomes, and then spend my time trying to plot out the next scientific and technological revolution.”

“Ah, well that makes sense,” said Fenn. “The only reason that our princess would miss a party is if there was something more important to work on.”

“Are you sure?” I asked Amaryllis.

“No,” she replied. “But I think my compulsion to go with is at least partially grounded in the need to exert control, rather than the actual utility I can provide, and in the interests of not doing things simply for the sake of doing them, I would rather stay here.” She touched the book like it was her lover.

“And try to single-handedly map out the entire future of science and technology on Aerb, in accordance with what’s written in a handful of books from Earth,” I replied.

“Leave the backpack and the clonal kit with me,” said Amaryllis. “I’m hoping to get a better picture of what things are like on Earth by dipping into multiple sources, and there are some things I want to try.”

“Okay,” I said. “And you’ll be available as armed and armored backup in the event that things go really wrong?”

“Naturally,” she said.

“And I can go?” asked Valencia.

“I’m not actually in charge of you,” said Amaryllis. “All I could do would be to argue against it, and I don’t think that I have the grounds to do that. The most successful non-anima the world ever knew would be more than capable of attending a minor party with virtually no social expectations, especially one predicated on the idea that it was a blending of cultures and unfamiliar people.” She
leaned forward and gave Valencia a kiss on the forehead. “I trust you to do your best.”

“See, talked to death,” said Fenn as we made our way down the train cars. “The party is probably already over.”

“The invitation didn’t actually give a time, which I thought was a little weird,” I said. “I hope after all that we’re not turned away at the door.”

“It’s an adventure!” said Valencia. “Like when Harry and Ron and Hermione killed the troll, and they were best friends after.”

“We’re going to have to have a talk about fiction and reality,” I said, then I let out a little laugh, because Aerb was cobbled together from a hundred different tabletop campaigns.

“We should get our stories straight,” said Fenn. “Juniper, you’re a scholar studying the dream-skewered, of late having taken a trip to the Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh in order to speak with some medical experts, a trip which proved fruitless. I’m your loving wife, Valencia is your little sister, we’re with you because we thought it would be fun to take the trip, and because like many idle scholars, you had a surplus of money.”

“Amaryllis can be my governess,” said Valencia.

“Sure,” said Fenn. “That works. But the key to any successful story is that you don’t lay out the whole thing at once, you let it have bits and pieces that show at the edges, okay? Strings for people to tug on, not a tapestry that you present them with.”

“But we’re going to ask for this woman’s aid?” I asked.

“We’ll see,” said Fenn with a shrug. We passed between two of the train cars, momentarily silenced by the rumble of the train and the wind that passed us by. “Given our circumstances, I don’t think she’d hold the lie against us too much, and you can demonstrate mastery of a handful of magics at will to prove whatever crazy story is the ‘truth’.”

How many people had I told the truth to so far? Amaryllis, Fenn, Grak, Solace, and Valencia? Fallatehr had known, because he’d had Grak and Amaryllis to tell him. Aumann might have known something, because Amaryllis was presumably tortured under revision magic and I wouldn’t have blamed her for breaking. My policy had been to let the companions in on it, on the theory that it directly affected their lives and was information that they needed to know, but it wasn’t a secret that could keep forever, especially not if we wanted to become a part of polite society, and eventually too many people being in the know meant that the secret would be free, out into the world. I wasn’t sure whether it would make our lives harder or easier, but harder seemed more likely.

When we got to the first of the three tuung cars, two guards stopped us at the semi-enclosed gangway between cars. They had a mister tank that it seemed like they were sharing, and conquistador-style breastplate that formed a wedge at the center. Though they weren’t obviously armed, it was fairly common for the tuung to be able to summon a weapon at a moment’s notice, one of the things that made them formidable in a fight. (I wanted a summonable blade for my own, but they were a well-guarded secret of the tuung, one that had survived as secret for centuries.)

“We have an invitation,” said Fenn, holding the envelope out. One of the guards took it without so much as inspecting it, and opened the door for us.

The train car before us was completely open, with no interior walls. I didn’t know whether this train car had been custom-built for this particular journey -- I really doubted it, given that it was only a two
day journey -- but it was obviously built for this sort of function, rich people milling about, eating tiny food off of tiny plates, sitting on a few scattered chaise lounges or armchairs that were bolted to the floor. I could see guards too, tuung with the same armor that the ones that had let us in wore. Along one side was a buffet filled with all manner of roasted, fried, and bubbling things, and in the corner, an unfamiliar upright stringed instrument was being plucked by a woman with four slender arms.

As I looked around the room, I revised ‘rich people milling about’ down to just ‘people milling about’. Fashion was not my forte, but this wasn’t even what I’d come to think of as ‘Aerb-standard’ fashion, that being the cultural melange of the Empire of Common Cause, which was only a few steps to the left of what you’d have found on Earth. It was a dozen people from a dozen cultures, some of them certainly dressed in clothes that had been produced by a forge-frenzy and thus not hewing to any cultural standards at all. A woman with a long neck bent in a U-shape to keep her head from touching the ceiling wore a cerulean dress that fluttered out as it draped to the floor, obscuring almost all of her but her lanky arms, elongated neck, and head. A green-skinned woman had a shell on her back, embellished with miniscule gardens and inch-tall trees that gave the impression of a living place, a world in miniature (and I could vaguely recall seeing something like it before, but couldn’t quite place where). Two dwarves were talking to each other on one of the chaise lounges, both in completely different styles, one in a suit that moved like grass, a ghillie suit completely unsuited to the occasion, and his hair dyed green to match, the other with a beard dyed grey and an axe that showed flowing hair -- Grak?

He caught my eye for long enough to let me know that he’d seen me, then continued on with his conversation as though nothing was out of the ordinary. Fenn slipped her arm in mine and I realized that I was staring; I came out of it just in time for two of the tuung to approach us, one of them dressed in simple, shapeless white clothes, with a mister on her back, the other in damp, pink frills. “Oh, more guests!” she cried, holding a hand out to Fenn, which Fenn took with a smile. “Welcome to this little soiree, my best imitation of the imperial aesthetic that my funds were able to provide. I apologize for the impropriety of sending an invitation without so much as knowing your names, but this is how friends are made in the urban centers of the world, is it not, hrm? A little boldness that must be excused?”

Fenn nodded along as the tuung talked. This was my first extended period with a tuung up close, and, with fascination, I watched her mouth, her long tongue that seemed to spring and bound around her wide mouth, the way she had internal ridges rather than teeth, and her comparatively enormous eyes that were set so far apart that focusing on almost anything close by made her look cross-eyed. “We were delighted to have the opportunity to do something other than stay cloistered in our rooms,” said Fenn. “I love to travel by train, but finding company can be a bit difficult, especially the better class of company.” “Too right!” shrieked the princess. “But you must forgive my manners, I am Princess Emomain, as I’m sure you’ve surmised. This is my handmaiden, Esuen.” “Tantia Shoemacher,” said Fenn, placing a hand to her own chest. “My husband, Ernst Shoemacher, and his sister, Gloria. We’re for the Boundless Pit, just as you are. My husband fancies himself a wandering scholar.” “I am a scholar,” I replied with a frown. I assumed that this was the role Fenn intended me to play, a fussy scholar defending his interest or obsession with some bit of minutia. “Have you heard of a phenomenon called the dream skewer?” Princess Emomain shook her head. “Were you studying at Bone and Flesh?” she asked. “As I said in
my invitation, I’ve just recently finished my studies there, receiving a first order diploma for my efforts, with a focus mainly in non-magical healing, that is to say, healing that relies wholly on the natural rather than the unnatural, which is of course a concern to my people, given the unfolding political situation in the Boundless Pit, of which you are no doubt aware.”

“I wasn’t,” I replied. Surprised and pleased at how quickly she’d deflected from my question about the dream-skewer. “Between different factions of the tuung, or between Headwater and the Boundless Pit?”

“Well, you are aware of the driving philosophy of the tuung, are you not?” asked Emomain. Her handmaid touched her elbow, and Emomain shrugged it off. “If you are a scholar, then you are coming to the Pit for some purpose?”

“To speak with and learn from the tuung,” I said. “I usually find it better to approach cultures somewhat unawares, so that my view of them isn’t so tainted by the interpretations of those outside the culture, which I’m sure you know are often wrong.” I was about to go on, but Emomain seemed to interpret me taking two sentences for myself as the start of a power struggle for control of the conversation. Fenn patted me lightly on the arm and took her leave, making a beeline for the food.

“Oh, there are some dreadful misconceptions about us,” said Emomain. There was something terribly affected about her speech, as though her way of speaking had been built as a caricature of high-society Anglish. “The men outnumber the women a hundred to one, you know, so of course there’s this ridiculous idea that they’re like human men, thrust into competition with each other, fighting over the women, squabbling for a mate, all of these very messy traditions that are so common to the other mortal species. But we’re not like that at all, the male tuung don’t have any such instincts, not toward mating, nor toward fatherhood -- not that any such concept exists within tuung culture. It’s not until we will our scent on them that they awaken to anything approaching romance as you would understand it. Of course much of the blame falls to Blackstone, who wrote the supposedly authoritative book on our species, and Syfriend with his Book of Blood made no effort to correct matters, though he had a much better picture than you’d think he had, from reading his book. And there have been no end to the plays and books that purport to take place among the tuung, given the element of the forbidden, but none of them have so much of a shred of accuracy to them.”

“And the politics?” I asked. During that monologue, Valencia had left too; she was sitting beside Grak and the other dwarf, her slender form taking up only a fraction of the chaise. “The most I know is that there’s something called ‘the supremacy of existence’, but given what you’ve said, I might have been misinformed.”

“Oh, well that’s true enough,” said Emomain, “But of course much more nuanced than you’d expect to read from the papers, when it shows up at all. So many years spent in Cranberry Bay, and I looked to the papers all the time, you understand, because I wasn’t simply a student but an ambassador for my people, and given I was one of the few well-known tuung I expected to be asked for comment, even put out my name to the papers of Cranberry Bay in case they had questions, but I was only asked two or three times over the course of my time at the athenaeum, and then I think it was more a matter of the novelty rather than due diligence. I must say that my opinion of the mass media has lowered considerably.”

She hadn’t answered my question about politics at all. I was, at this point, looking for an out, some way that I could disengage from conversation without being rude, but though my two floating points were firmly in SOC, I still couldn’t figure out the best way out. Luckily, Fenn came walking back over, holding two sticks with white cubes on them (they looked more like tofu than anything else, though up close they had some texture to them).
“These are delicious,” said Fenn, handing one to me. “Having a good chat?”

“The best,” said Emomain. “I was just relating my experiences with the newspapers to Ernst, I was saying that the tuung rarely showed up in the news, despite all I was hearing about from back home, and though I’d extended my expertise to the papers, they showed little interest in hearing what I had to say on the matter.”

I was, at this point, really, really hoping that she wasn’t a companion, or anyone that we’d have to spend an extended period of time with. Hearing the same thing twice was a personal pet peeve of mine.

“Do you happen to know what this is?” asked Fenn, gesturing with her skewer of meat. “Some sort of meat, I’m assuming, but I don’t know that I’ve tried it before. It’s exceptional.” I’d taken a bite, and while it wasn’t bad, I wouldn’t have called it exceptional. It was creamy and came apart with little resistance, but it was still clearly meat of some kind.

“Oh, when I saw you come in I had meant to show you that,” said Emomain, “It’s a delicacy, extremely rare for any to be on the market, but I was out shopping in preparation for this party and the exotic meats merchant happened to have heard of a large quantity recently brought in, and was able to procure some for me.” She leaned in close, eyes bright. “It’s unicorn meat.”

Fenn paused in her chewing, then started to laugh with her mouth full. Princess Emomain looked between the two of us with an uneasy smile.

“A private joke,” I said, apologizing. “We recently acquired a unicorn bone, almost certainly from the same creature.”

“The meat was sterilized through the use of bulk transport?” asked a tall, robed man who had moved into the conversation circle. I was fairly sure that he was the first orc I’d ever seen, skin brownish-green with tusks that stuck up slightly from his mouth. The orcs had been allied with the Dark King, back during the time of Uther Penndraig, and he’d decapitated their matriarchal government shortly before the final showdown with the Dark King himself. They’d never really recovered from that, in part because of sanctions placed on them by Anglecynn, and later, the First Empire.

“Sterilized?” asked Princess Emomain. “I suppose, but –”

“Sterilization is a scourge upon the face of food,” said the orc, gesturing with a full glass of some kind of bluish drink. “So many of the traditional foods of the mortal species are ferments, none of which can survive the bulking process, the food we eat, even the best of it, is so dead that it’s barely worth calling food, no bacteria in it, no life to the meats, and so many foods have been eradicated from the diets of the world by the way in which those foods are moved around. It’s a terrible shame, but of course economics is the driving force of the world.”

“Economics?” asked Emomain. “Well I hardly think that’s the case, why if you look at the history of the world …”

I slipped away, grateful that her attention had been taken up by someone else, and went over to where Grak was sitting with the other dwarf on one side of him and Valencia on the other.

“Ernst!” said Valencia. “This is Grakhuil Leadbraids and Magoron maRohon, Ernst is my older brother, I’m traveling with him and seeing the world.”

“Hello,” I said, extending my hand to first one and then the other. Grak squeezed my hand a little bit too hard, and there was a hint of warning in his eyes. “Are you two traveling together? From the
names I would guess different clans?”

(Magoron. Mag? Magor? I had a decent working knowledge of Groglir -- magor meant ‘breathed’, and the suffix -on meant ‘one who’, but I wasn’t sure what the rules were on how to shorten words used in names, if at all. The name Grakhuil meant something like ‘half of a series’, but it was an old name, one that wasn’t quite so literal.)

Magor laughed. “The last names? Ah, well, that’s more a question of politics than anything else. See, ‘maRohon’ would translate to something like --”

“Of one who fixed or mended,’” I said. I held up a hand. “I know just enough Groglir to embarrass myself.”

“Oh, not so!” said Magor. “It’s a rare language for a human -- you are human, aren’t you?” I nodded. “At any rate, literalism was in vogue for quite a while, on the theory that the meaning was more important than the sounds, so in Anglish it’s Leadbraid, but in Groglir it’s,” he pointed to me.

“Haimelhaknil,” I asked. “That, or Haiodohaknil,” I said. “I might be missing a word, or mistranslating.”

“The first was correct,” said Magor. He looked over to Grak. “Though going by the beard, I suppose I could see why you’d assume the latter. But of course that’s the whole problem, because translation is an impossibility, it’s not simply one-to-one correspondence. Especially with Groglir, you miss certain nuances. That’s why I use maRohon as a name, more than our difference in clans.”

“Well, you learn something new every day,” I said.

“Sometimes many things,” said Valencia.

Magor laughed. “And there are other differences between us, of course. From what I gather we ended up on this train following distinctly opposite paths, Grakhuil a clan traditionalist who entered into the Third Empire through necessity, though I don’t have the full story there, myself a third-generation agkrioglian turned neo-traditionalist.” He rested a hand on Grak’s knee, which Grak very carefully made no notice of. “And if you have a working knowledge of dwarven culture, you’d know I’m something of an unfavored bastard to most of our species, and Grakhuil is a prince.”

“There might have been a few things that my teacher left out,” I said as I tried to figure out what the deal between the two of them was. “Safe to say that our host got a bit more multiculturalism than she expected?” Valencia laughed at that, then raised a cup of some sparkling red drink to her mouth and tried to hide her smile, but Magor joined in with the laugh, and eventually Grak did too.

“I’m sorry,” said Magor. “I’ve been talking about myself and my temporary traveling companion far too much, my manners seemed to have fled me. The safe and bland question would be about why you’re traveling to Headwater, but I suppose the more interesting question is how you came to know Groglir. Answer whichever you prefer.”

Before I could though, the lights in the room flickered off. The sun had long since set, which left us in only the light of the multicolored stars, and somewhere far overhead, Celestar, but that wasn’t enough to see by, not with our eyes uncalibrated to the darkness. I would have used blood magic to light up the room with fire from my hand, but I was established as a scholar, one with a tiny bit of a background in bone magic, and until I heard someone draw a weapon, I wanted to stay as innocuous as possible.

I felt something touch my chest, but it wasn't hard, and I left the brief contact go unremarked. Of all
the people in the train car, how many of them could see in the dark? I was guessing that it was
enough so that no one could launch a covert attack in the dark, and this wasn’t all a long setup by the
Dungeon Master for a body being discovered in the middle of a locked room.

When the lights went back on, I looked down to see nothing at all on my chest. I glanced at Grak,
who stared down at my chest and raised an eyebrow my direction. I gave him a shrug back; I was
fairly sure that whatever or whoever had touched my chest, they had done some sort of magic, but I
wasn’t incredibly concerned about it, unless this room somehow contained a soul mage more
powerful than Fallatehr.

<Don’t look around,> said a voice in my head. <The effect is temporary, no more than an hour. It’s
harmless. Send back okay if you understand.>

“You were about to answer the mundane question or the personal, before the lights flickered,”
prompted Magor.

“I think I’ll go with the mundane,” I replied. “I’m a scholar, with a specialty in a rare phenomenon
called the dream-skewer. If you’ll excuse me for a second, my sister can tell you more, I think
something from the buffet disagreed with me.”

<Okay. Who are you?> I asked, looking around the room for Fenn, though I had enough situational
awareness to find her. There were eighteen of us, plus two guards and two waitstaff. I could rule out
Grak, Val, and Fenn, naturally, but that left a fair number of suspects. The princess was the obvious
one, if she was just putting up a really good mask, but I sort of doubted that.

<I need your help,> came the reply. As I walked toward Fenn, I tried my best to make a note of who
was talking and who wasn’t. There was no guarantee that whoever was on the other end of the
psychic connection experienced it the same way that I did, but I didn’t think I’d be capable of
maintaining normal speech and thought speech at the same time. <I said not to look around.>

<I’m inclined to help those who need it,> I replied as I reached Fenn and slipped my arm in hers. She
was standing with the shell-backed woman, who had gotten a mirror on a long metal wire out, and
was explaining the various features of the elaborate scene on her back to a small crowd of five. <I’d
need to know who and how though. And why me.>

<You’re not a scholar,> replied the voice. <You gave a fake name.>

I tried to think about how anyone would know that. The names we’d given to the princess didn’t
match the ones that were on the papers forged by Fenn, but as it had been explained to me, there
wasn’t really such a thing as a passenger manifest, only tickets that were held and checked … and
yet whoever was talking to me knew anyway, either because they had a passenger manifest that
wasn’t supposed to exist, or because they had a magical method of divining the truth. Or maybe
some subtle detail had given me away. Still, lying about my name didn’t seem like it was going to
land me in hot water. Forging papers to get a ticket did seem like it would get me in trouble, but I
wasn’t sure that was in question at the moment.

<I give fake names sometimes,> I said. <I’m sure you would understand, if you want to keep your
identity secret from someone who’s willing to help you.>

<We will establish a dead drop for communication,> said the voice. <Terms and conditions, your
payment for your help, some method of establishing your credentials and abilities. Under the second
table on the right in the dining hall, when facing the front of the train. Details will be waiting there
for you.>
My eyes were wandering, and again I saw the tuung princess talking while the voice was speaking to me. Her handmaid, however, was silent, and when our eyes briefly locked, she turned away from me. The old Phantom Menace gambit, a handmaid pretending to be a princess.

<Alright,> I replied. <I have four allies on this train, is it alright if I share this with them? Whatever it is you want, we would probably need their help.>

<So long as you stay quiet about it until the time is right,> replied the voice. <That's all for now. Communicate by letter.>

I nodded, as though I was listening along to the shell-backed woman explain how she’d convincingly faked a water feature that ran down the center of her shell, something she had apparently done herself using a variety of tools to do the work around the awkward angle. I didn’t have to feign interest; I’d always loved miniatures and tiny things in general, though I watched a lot more tutorials on Youtube than I spent time actually painting figs or making terrain.

Dead drop, second table on the right. Not a quest.

“I think I might have had my fill here,” I whispered in Fenn’s ear.

“Oh?” she asked back, searching my face for meaning. “I was enjoying myself.”

“I guess there’s no reason that we can’t stay for a bit, but I have other business that’s, ah, time sensitive.” I wasn’t sure how time sensitive, but it would probably need to be wrapped up by the time we got to Headwater, the city that sat above the Boundless Pit.

“Crap,” said Fenn. “Just say the word and I’ll do what you want.” No matter how serious she might have thought the situation was, she couldn’t resist a wink.

“We’ll stay, for now,” I said. “I’ve been enjoying myself, for the most part.” I looked over at where Grak was sitting; the hand on his thigh hadn’t moved. “That dwarf over there seems like he’s got an admirer.” Fenn’s gaze followed my own, and I saw her eyes go wide.

“There’s no way we can leave now,” she said.

It was late when we finally made our way out of the party car. Fenn had a little bit too much to drink. Valencia had far too much to drink, and was standing mostly through the force of the devil she’d trapped inside her at some point, which didn’t actually make her less inebriated, but made her more able to compensate for that inebriation, which was cause for her to get even more drunk than she would have been. Grak and Magor left far before us, and while we were pretending to be strangers, I thought there was some aspect of sneakery to the way he’d left without calling attention to himself.

“I love you Fenn,” said Valencia. She was leaning on me for support as we moved through the corridors, with only dim light to guide us.

“I love you too,” replied Fenn with a happy sigh. “Today was a good day.” She turned to me. “You still sober, junebug?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Also, please explain what a junebug is, because there’s no month called June on Aerb.” It almost certainly would have been faster for me to simply carry Valencia, but she hadn’t asked, and I would have felt weird about it. It was bad enough being someone to lean on.

“You have a month named June? Literally a whole month named after you?” asked Fenn. “That’s dumb. Earth is so dumb. Not even McDonald’s is good.”
“McDonald’s is about price point and availability,” I said. We came to one of the doors between cars. “Hold on tight, don’t want you going off over the edge.”

“Mmm-hmm,” said Valencia, clutching closer to me. “I liked being your sister today. You’re a better brother than Dudley is.”

I helped her through the gangway, thankful that we were to her car. “I’m going to be happy when you have more than just a third of a book under your belt,” I said. “Given some time, especially if you’re in the time chamber with nothing else to do, you might get enough cultural literacy that you could pass for dream-skewered.”

“Oh, I could do that already,” said Valencia. “I’d just need a big, powerful devil to chomp down on. I can move my tendrils around the hells and try to find one, to line one up, just in case.”

“You’re fucking scary,” said Fenn.

“Can I tell you both a secret?” asked Val. “They’ve started to notice, today I got a devil that knew, he heard a rumor that someone important had vanished, and the devils almost never die, so it was a big important thing, but there’s nothing they can do about it. He thought I was fucking scary too. There were a few seconds, when I was eating him, that I think he maybe realized what was happening, but he couldn’t do anything about it.”

“That’s kind of disturbing,” I replied.

“I was their puppet my entire life!” yelled Valencia. She pushed off from me with weak arms and stumbled slightly, then slumped up against the wall.

“I know,” I said. “I’m just saying that whatever it is you’re doing to them on an actual object level, it’s probably terrifying to them, and I think empathy towards even abjectly evil creatures is a good thing, so long as you don’t let it cloud your judgment about who and what they are.”

“I’m going to take a demon now,” said Valencia. She stopped for a second, then straightened up, all signs of drunkenness gone. “Oh,” she said. “Is just slow reflexes. Feedback. No need Joon.” She waved me off.

“Well, we’re here,” I said. I knocked once on the door, and after a moment, it opened up, pouring light into the dim corridor and revealing Amaryllis in full plate. “Val isn’t in a good place right now.”

Amaryllis sighed, and let Valencia in. She moved with catlike grace until she got over to the bed, then collapsed into it without ceremony.

“Just a little drunk,” I said.

“A lot drunk,” said Fenn. She was leaning up against the door to the cabin. “I tried to cut her off, but she’s a wily little girl when she wants to be.”

“It was a productive party?” asked Amaryllis. “I didn’t hear any banging from the front cars or see any smoke coming by my window. I’ll say that wearing full plate for several hours while reading and trying to keep a lookout isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, and I’d expected you back earlier.”

“We got a coded call for help,” I said. “I’m going to pick up the dead drop on our way back.”

“Oh, I totally forgot about that,” said Fenn. She pushed her way past me. “Mary, you are never going to believe it, but Grak has a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend, or whatever you’d call it.”
“Krin,” I said. “And it’s not exactly clear what their relationship is.”

“Joon wishes that I had a cloaca,” said Fenn, in the worst attempt at a confidential whisper I’d ever seen.

“I didn’t say that,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “I said that if you had a cloaca, I would be open to the possibility, it wouldn’t be a deal-breaker.” I’d tried my best to feel no shame at that, since it didn’t really seem like all that extreme of a position to take, but if I’d said something like that in high school, I would have been called a weirdo, if not a pervert. I’d meant it as an expression of love toward Fenn, but apparently that wasn’t what she was taking away from it.

She turned to look at me. “But with your mouth?” She turned back to Amaryllis. “I don’t mean to make you jealous, but Juniper—”

“All right, enough of that,” I said. I glanced over at the books that were strewn everywhere, along with what looked like the circuit boards and half-built electronics. “Fenn, your job is going to be to help put all this stuff away and get things ready so that Mary can get some sleep, while she and I have a talk out in the hallway, okay?”

“Okay,” said Fenn. “Got it. I’m going to take a quick nap instead of doing that.”

Once we were in the hallway, and Amaryllis had looked around, she crossed her arms and looked at me. “Quest, companion, or something else?”

“Something else,” I replied. “Mostly it was just us having a good time. But not too long after we got there, the lights flickered out for a bit, someone pressed something against my chest, and I was connected to someone. She—probably she—told me that she needed my help and was setting up a dead drop, which I’m going to stop by on our way back to our cabin. If there’s something that needs doing tonight, then I think I’ll probably have to do it alone, or with your help, because Fenn is too far gone. I guess technically I could transfer over my Liar’s Cup tattoo and have her push the alcohol into Val, but at some point alcohol poisoning is probably going to be a factor, if it isn’t already.”

“It is the princess?” asked Amaryllis.

“Looks that way,” I said. “So you were right on that score. But despite talking to her and agreeing to help, I haven’t had any game text at all.”

“And what do you think she wants?” asked Amaryllis.

“If I had to guess, extraction,” I replied. “She didn’t seem happy to be going back to the Boundless Pit, and from everything that I’ve heard of the place, that’s not terribly surprising.”

“And what does rescuing her get us?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “The ire of the tuung and an ally with no political capital? It does seem like a kind of crap trade to me. She said that there would be terms and conditions at the dead drop. Maybe there will be something enticing.”

“Maybe,” said Amaryllis, giving me a dubious look. “Entering into the court politics of an unfamiliar court … but if it’s extraction we’re talking about, creating a princess-in-exile, maybe that could be done without revealing ourselves too much. But then I don’t know what the benefit would be.”

“The tuung don’t seem like they have a very healthy society,” I replied.

Amaryllis made a face. “The supremacy of life.”
“No,” I said. “Not that, that I understand, and to some extent sympathize with.”

“If you die, you want to be sent to the hells?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“I -- yes,” I said.

“Gods, why?” asked Amaryllis, backing away slightly.

“I’m more afraid of oblivion than death,” I said. “I think enduring pain and suffering is, ultimately, the correct path no matter what that pain and suffering might be, so long as there’s even the smallest glimmer of hope that things will get better.”

“Oh, you’re hoping that we would do the impossible and save you,” said Amaryllis, seeming relieved.

“No,” I said. “I would be hoping for … I don’t know, something outside what I know to be possible. And I would probably change my mind after a few hours and wish that I had made the other choice, but part of the reason to make decisions ahead of time when you’re not under duress is so you can make those decisions when your brain is functioning properly.”

“I’m --” Amaryllis was staring at me. “I’m not going to promise that I’ll respect your wishes.”

I shrugged. “I’m not a fanatic,” I replied. “I don’t expect my wishes to have much weight after I’m gone. You’d probably keep my soul around in a bottle for a while, trying to figure out how to get me back, which is what I’d want, but if you didn’t figure out a way to get the rebirth ritual to apply to me, and nothing else worked … you’d be left with a choice, and remember this conversation, and maybe you’d do the thing I wanted, rather than what you thought was right.”

“Have you talked about this with anyone else?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I replied. “But I might, if it comes up. I know it’s not what your culture has settled on as correct, and I don’t want to get into a big philosophical argument about it either, so … I trust you to keep a level head.”

Amaryllis said nothing for a bit, then opened the door to the room just a crack so she could see inside. “Val and Fenn are both asleep, can we go pick up that dead drop together? Neither is going to be reliable in a fight anyway.”

“Sure,” I said.

Amaryllis locked the door to the room and we went down the train together, with me leading the way. Her full plate armor would be noteworthy, if not outright illegal, but it was night, and almost everyone had already gone to sleep.

“I was saying that the political situation doesn’t seem healthy to me,” I said as we walked, speaking just loud enough to be heard above the noise of the train. “One hundred males to every female, the rule of the many by the few, isolationism, internal conflicts that revolve around their extremist philosophy … I don’t quite have the full picture yet, I don’t think, but in combination with what I learned at the party and read from the books, it seems like the sort of society that a person should, by rights, want to leave, and I don’t want to just say no because it means sticking our necks out a little bit. We’re in a position of power. I’ve become pretty strong. If we can help people, we probably should.”

“One person,” said Amaryllis, shaking her head.
“Sometimes one person needs to lead the charge,” I said.

“Meaning that you want to get imperial attention?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe. It was something that Arthur used to say.”

“Ah, a lone hero leading the charge,” nodded Amaryllis. We passed through a gangway, momentarily silencing our quiet conversation.

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t really a game thing, he just meant, you know, that someone needed to be the one to actually do things, and if everyone left it to someone else, then it wouldn’t get done. Someone has to be the one to take up the burden, and it’s almost always better if it gets taken up decisively and with great gusto.” He’d hated when people would ask around about whether there was maybe some interest in possibly doing something.

“Assuming that whatever this princess needs from us is actually worth doing, regardless of whether we’re going to be the ones to do it,” said Amaryllis.

We reached the dining car in silence. Most of the lights were off, with the few left on providing only token light to see the tables by, enough illumination for people making their way up or down the train, but not much more. I was being careful as I moved, worried that the dead drop would turn out to be an ambush. I wished that we had Grak with us to check for traps, especially now that he didn’t need the monocle to do it (though he’d said that he was somewhat useless on the train, given the difficulty and expense of creating a ward that was anchored to the train rather than the earth).

I touched the bottom of the second dining table on the right, burning SPD and preparing for an explosion or something worse, but my fingers only ended up touching a paper envelope. I pulled it away from the adhesive, turned it over a few times, then opened it up, bracing for white powder or some exotic Aerbian contact poison. Instead, it was only a letter, which I read after looking around to make sure that no one was watching.

_I do not know who you are, only that you booked a seat on this train at the last minute, and that you gave a false name at the party. So far as the tuung security detail can surmise, the only reason that you and the others might have for being on this train is an interest in the affairs of the tuung, and given that you did not report the contact between the two of us, it’s my fervent hope that you’re unaffiliated with any of the internal factions of the Boundless Pit.

My name is Esuen. I am the Emomain’s handmaid, and her second cousin, a minor figure within the politics of the Boundless Pit in my own right. For five years, I studied along Emomain, obtaining my own education at the athenaeum in the hopes of furthering the interests of the tuung. You have certainly heard enough of her frippery that you have formed your own opinions on the princess; know only that we are different people. Where the princess sees the Empire of Common Cause as a decadence and delight, I see it as a lesson in the need for growth on the part of the tuung. I learned enough history to see that those who prosper are those who grow and change. Both growth and change are, I fear, out of the reach of the tuung in their present state.

I wish to leave and make my own life away from the tuung. To that end, I am willing to offer anything possible within my limited power. If your spies don’t already know all of our secrets, I would be willing to spill them. If you need help with making the spirit blades work, I would provide it. I have thirty years of good breeding ahead of me, and with dedicated resources, could produce as many as five hundred thousand young, in whatever ratio of genders you prefer. The catch to all this is that I will act only in the best interests of the tuung. It so happens that what I believe would be the best interests might constitute a betrayal in the eyes of my peers._
I have tipped my hand, at least in part. I need to know more of you, who you represent, what resources are at your disposal, and how much you are willing to spend to have me. I would prefer that Emomain goes unharmed. The male tuung that make up our security detail can be bewitched by my scent, but doing so will have immediate repercussions. If you have a plan, let me know it.

If this dead drop is compromised, place your response beneath the last seat in the observation car. I will expect your reply within twelve hours from the end of the party.
The Great Train Robbery

“In the short term, our goal is Kuum Doona,” said Amaryllis, once she’d finished reading the letter. “We’d sat down in the dining car, so we’d have a place to talk without the interruptions of moving between cars. No one was in there with us, which meant we could speak in confidence. “In the long term, our goal is gaining power, with the basic principle being that gaining power is the prerequisite for everything else that we might ever want to accomplish. Unfortunately, we don’t have a quest to extract this handmaid from her society.”

“Shouldn’t matter,” I said. “Or at least, according to the Dungeon Master it shouldn’t. I don’t know whether we’re off-script, or whether the script is being hidden from us, but we should be rewarded for doing things, no matter what those things are, so long as we’re doing them for good reason. Encouraged not to stay still, but not penalized for it, outside of the incentives we have with regard to the locus. And in that context … someone being held against their will and trapped by a society they were raised by but no longer agree with seems like something we should do, especially if the risks to us are fairly minimal.”

“I wish we had a way of tracking experience points,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “It would help inform what we did.”

“That’s backwards,” I said. “Or, backwards from what I tended to do as DM. Experience points are to reward you for doing the things that you set out to accomplish, they’re not really meant to give you the incentive to go out and fight things.” I paused. “It’s somewhat a question of the philosophy of DMing.”

“So if we want you to get stronger …” Amaryllis frowned. “We just do whatever we want to? We ignore the game, the narrative, and the Dungeon Master?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “That seemed to be the message that he was delivering to me. Obviously there are pressures, like the locus, and I’m sure others, and there are carrots being dangled in front of us, but that’s not quite the same thing.”

“Then what happened with Arthur?” said Amaryllis. Her ice-blue eyes were watching me carefully, and she said his name with a certain amount of force and deliberation that I found unpleasant. She was trying to push one of my buttons.

“We need to know more about him,” I said. “I’m really hoping that Kuum Doona has some thread to pull on, a hidden journal would be fantastic, but I’m not confident in our ability to understand him based on the historical record, which you said yourself was complicated where he was concerned.”

“And you do want to help this handmaid?” asked Amaryllis.

“From what I know of the tuung, I can see why everyone hates them,” I said. “If this is a chance to create change in their society, I think that’s worth doing, especially if it helps us to get to and secure Kuum Doona at the same time, which it might.” Or maybe I’m thinking of her too much like a defector from North Korea, a refugee that I have to help because doing otherwise would be too callous. I pointed down at the letter, and the list of offers on it. “If she’s willing to give up secrets, then she’s probably willing to give up whatever information she has on the fortress.”

Amaryllis was watching me. “And do you find her attractive?”

“No,” I said. I hoped that her ability to read my face would show that I was telling the truth. “No, no
I don’t."

“You have aesthetic preferences and appetites that are literally woven into how the world was built and how it operates,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a valid question.”

“I guess,” I said. “But the answer is no. The tuung are actively unattractive to my sensibilities. And they’re not one that I remember creating either, though they have features that I recognize, especially the mister tanks and the lopsided genders. Besides, you have to understand that my aesthetic preferences are sometimes in the direction of the grotesque or morbid -- not what I find more attractive, but what I find most whatever-adjective-you-choose. The pustule mages? They’re like something out of a nightmare, but not just a generic nightmare, specifically one of my nightmares.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “I keep having this feeling that once I know you better, the world is going to make a lot more sense.”

“You already know me,” I said. “I mean, we’ve been traveling together for a long time, relatively speaking. We’ve been through some shit, to put it lightly.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. She shrugged. “It’s something I’m feeling, not thinking.”

“And what are your feelings on extracting this handmaid?” I asked.

“We’re not a state,” said Amaryllis. “We don’t have the authority of a government. Hells, we don’t actually have a place to stick her, aside from the safehouses, and those aren’t sufficiently secure for my liking.”

“Those are thoughts, not feelings,” I said.

Amaryllis sighed and tapped her thumbs on the table. She wasn’t really a person given to fidgeting, as a general rule. She looked tired though, and I was keenly aware of how late it was. “I feel like the books I’ve been pulling from the backpack are my purpose in life. If thirty years of technological advancement on Earth are equal to a hundred years of advancement here, whatever the root causes of that might be, then what we have are three centuries of progress, ready and waiting to be deployed. I’m ninety percent of the way to having a working prototype of a television right now.”

“Really?” I asked. “In a train car? With a box of scraps?”

“Not scraps,” said Amaryllis. “The backpack can’t create electronics, but it can create some electronic components, and what I couldn’t get it to make, I got from the clonal kit in a bigger, bulkier size. But there are problems with different standards, especially because the units that are listed in the books are different from the ones that I’m used to. I’m probably going to have to settle on one or the other, but the clonal kit is finicky in what it decides to give, and sometimes two dips into it will pull out different Aerbian standards. The Empire of Common Cause was supposed to bring everything under a unified standard, but --” She waved a hand. “Enough about that. It’s my own problem, one that I’m hoping to work on during the years I’ll have in the time chamber.”

“Ah,” I said. “I guess I didn’t really think about that.” As soon as I did though, I could see how well the backpack combined with both her expertise and at least nine months with nothing to do but what could be done in a room that was cut off from the outside world. “You’re going to walk out with a baby druid and a plan to change the world?”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. She rubbed her face, and once again, I could see the tiredness written there. “It doesn’t seem like it meshes well with being your companion. If you’re going on one adventure after another, and I’m trying to run an electronics company or a research and development
laboratory, where does that leave us?”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s write out a response and get you to bed. You’ve been overworking yourself.”

“I was going to keep working on the television when I got back,” said Amaryllis. “It’s low-hanging fruit. And if it doesn’t work, then it will give me a better idea of what kind of forces I’m dealing with.”

“Case in point,” I sighed. “You know, if this proceeds like a normal pregnancy, you’re probably not going to be able to work yourself to the bone? Also, I should get you some prenatal gummies from the backpack.”

Amaryllis touched her stomach, which was covered in full plate. “I agree that at this point, a miscarriage would be tragic.”

“We should probably consult with the others anyway,” I replied. “If we have twelve hours from the end of the party, that means enough time for everyone to sleep and for us to have a short conference. I’m pretty sure that Grak and Val will both vote to help her though, given that her situation mirrors theirs to at least some extent.”

“Trapped in a society or culture or home that she doesn’t want to be in?” asked Amaryllis. “That could apply to any of us. It’s a common thread of backstory in our group. My notes on the narrative are in Fenn’s glove, but yes, we’re all people without a home.” She seemed mournful when she said it, though it was only in the tone of her voice, not the set of her face, which still seemed more tired than anything else. I was hoping that with Kuum Doona we would finally have something resembling a home, rather than a place we were temporarily crashing for the evening.

I felt the urge to say something about tabletop games, how it was almost a necessity for the character to have lost their home and be without messy connections, because otherwise it created too many questions, but maybe the difference between SOC 2 and SOC 3 was that I realized it was better to hold my tongue. She already had that background, I was pretty sure.

Fatigue hit me by the time we got back to her car, and when Fenn gave no signs of easily waking back up, Amaryllis and I came to an agreement that the four of us would share the beds together, Fenn and I in one, Amaryllis and Val in the other.

E,

I will help. Tomorrow night, I will come to your window and use an entad to extract you. All that will be required is that you open your window wide enough for a finger to slip partially through, and for you to touch that finger for roughly ten seconds. That will allow me to put you into a black, airless void. It is very important that you not attempt to leave the void, as this might result in your death. You will need to hold your breath; if it’s possible, you can open the window wide enough for me to slip you a breathing mask and a tank of air. I will remove you from the void once I am back away from your car and to safety. For this plan to work, I will need to know the position of the window I should meet you at, as well as a time to meet you, or some other signal of your choosing. If all goes well, no one will know that you are missing until the morning, and I can sequester you in my room until we arrive in Headwater the next day, then move you, unseen, to a secure location in the city.

You should know that I am not a representative of any government or organization. My companions and I possess a fair amount of power, but it is not power on the level of a nation. If your ultimate
goal is the reform of tuung society, you will need more help than we can provide, but once we have freed you from the security detail, you will have the opportunity to pursue such ends on your own -- perhaps with our assistance.

There is information that you can provide us in return, but it is not a precondition of our assistance.

I hope for a response before nightfall, delivered to either of the previously established dead drop locations.

J

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, reading through the letter a third time. “I think this looks good.”

She seemed practically chipper, which made her the only one of us. It was early in the morning, just after daybreak, and we were packed into the cabin that nominally belonged to Fenn and I. Fenn was nursing a hangover and intermittently attempting to use blood magic to fix it, and Val looked like death. Amaryllis had collected Grak from his room, and he was uncharacteristically unkempt; he was always a little bit rough around the edges, but it was in something of a studied way that his current condition decidedly wasn’t. I wasn’t too bad off, aside from having been a little light on sleep, but I had never been a morning person.

“Are we sure it’s going to be Joon?” asked Fenn. She popped a glass of water from her glove and took a long drink, before returning it to the glove. “I could do it, if we’re waiting until this evening.”

“I could,” said Val, wincing slightly at the effort of speaking. “With a demon. Even drunk I could.”

“No, you couldn’t,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was gentle. “The glove requires the user to have investiture, by me, and we can’t invest you with items.”

“Oh,” said Val. She curled up in her seat and closed her eyes, then since that apparently wasn’t enough, covered them with her hand. “Let me know if I can help.”

“The bigger question is whether we should do this at all,” said Grak.

“No, the bigger question is who the dwarf you were with was,” said Fenn. “Got the name, didn’t get the full story.”

“It’s not your business,” said Grak, sniffing slightly.

“With respect, you shouldn’t have given your real name,” said Amaryllis.

“I didn’t know where the night was going to take us,” said Grak. “I had not known we would join the party.”

“Wait, did you arrive with him?” asked Fenn. “And leave with him?”

“It’s not our business if Grak doesn’t want to share,” I said. He gave me a nod. “Not that I would mind hearing, naturally, but I’d rather not press him on something personal, which I would hope we’d all understand.”

“I shared accommodations with him,” said Grak. “There are four beds in my room. His is the only other that is occupied. He was talkative. Friendly. I gave him my true name because I did not want to risk naming a clan he knew. Except that you could have given the name of someone else in your clan. I waited for someone else to call him out on that, but no one did. “We went to the observation car together. One of the tuung gave us an invitation. I agreed because I was lonely. After the party
we went back to our room together.”

The silence lingered as we waited for him to continue.

“So did you guys touch butts or what?” asked Fenn.

“Fenn,” I said.

“Juniper,” said Fenn, sticking out her tongue.

“Val,” said Val, briefly uncovering her eyes to look out. Fenn laughed, and Val smiled before covering back up.

“Grak,” Amaryllis began, but Fenn cut her off.

“Mary!” declared Fenn, hangover briefly forgotten as a giddy smile crossed her face.

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” I said.

“Aw,” said Fenn. “But we were having fun.”

“Is touching butts what dwarves do?” asked Val, eyes still covered.

“No,” said Amaryllis.

“We’ll tell you when you’re older,” said Fenn.

“I could eat a devil that would know,” said Val defensively.

“This is all really beside the point,” I said. “If Grak has made a platonic friend, great, good for him. If Grak has a krin, then great, good for him. If it’s just a krinrael, then that’s fine too, and we’ll support him in whatever it is he wants or doesn’t want without prying, because that should be the standard that we all adhere to, both because that’s what friends should do, and to preserve the group’s clearly tenuous grip on sanity.”

Loyalty Increased: Grak lv1 11!

Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lv1 19!

“We should deliver this letter to one of the dead drops,” said Amaryllis. “And then we should prepare for the extraction as best as we possibly can.”

And so approximately eighteen hours later, I found myself walking down the train, psyching myself up to briefly exit the train, crawl forward to the left middle window of the frontmost tuung car, extract the handmaid into Sable, and then get to safety before she ran out of air. If at all possible, I would slip her a breathing mask and a tank of air, but her response hadn’t held a reply to that particular line of inquiry, and we weren’t sure whether the windows would be the same as they were on our part of the train, nor whether she would be able to open it that wide without drawing attention to herself. It was a question mark in the plan, one that I really didn’t like, because without the tank, I’d have to get us to safety in the space of a minute, which seemed like a tall order considering that I was also trying to be stealthy.

The gangways -- the spaces between the cars -- were partially open, with chains on either side to make sure that no one would fall, and an additional covering that hinged between the cars to keep out rain.
I stopped in the middle of the gangway, four cars from the heavy engine, and looked out into the night. The train was passing through a part of the Lion’s Mane where there was a fair bit of water on either side of us, and to my left I could see ocean stretching out into the distance, lit by the multi-colored stars that I still wasn’t bored of looking at. A few small towns dotted the coast, visible by what lights they still had on, but it was to all appearances a calm and quiet night, which I decided to take as a good omen.

Not so calm and quiet for me, given that I’d be moving against eighty mile an hour winds. I took a deep breath, then began the climb.

The wind hit me as soon as I climbed up, and I briefly struggled until I could push up and onto the roof. Given that there were tuung guards on the gangway before the train car that had held the party, it was necessary for me to start back a bit and go over, but I wasn’t at all pleased at how long that made the trip.

I kept low to the roof of the train as I moved, hoping that any sounds I was making would be masked by the general whipping of wind and the rumbling of the train. Going across this way was dangerous, but I had come with as much preparation as eighteen hours and a whole heap of magic would allow me. I had a heavy magnet in each hand, powerful neodymium ones from Earth courtesy of the backpack, with handles and padding on them so that I could maintain a good grip and muffle the sound of them as I slid them forward. Ropey was wrapped around me, making two loops that came out from above my shoulders and helped to grip, and two ends that came out from around my waist. I had the Anyblade as a ring, though it was a bit of a last resort; the plan was that if I somehow got tossed back, I would be able to make it into a blade and slam it down into the train to catch myself, hopefully without dislocating my shoulders in the process. In addition to all that, I had my bandoliers on, strapped down tight, and my throwing dagger in a sheath on my belt, with a balaclava pulled down over my face, just in case.

The plan was to accomplish the extraction without so much as a single scratch on the train or a single witness as to what happened.

I was halfway across the backmost tuung car when I saw them behind me. Two tuung in their silver breastplate had climbed up and were crawling forward, their powerful legs and toes made for gripping slick rocks serving them well for moving under the force of the wind. I had tried my hardest to cross the gangway in complete silence, but I must have done a worse job than I thought, or they were more observant than I’d given them credit for, because now the two guards that I had been most worried about were making their way toward me, keeping low to the roof of the train car. One of them had his blade drawn, a silvered length of metal and a handle that was long enough it seemed like it almost qualified as a spear. Where the tip of it was held in front of him, the wind seemed to visibly part, and after he screamed something to the other guard, both their blades were out, allowing them to avoid the worst of the rushing air.

I wanted to explain that I wasn’t going for the princess, only the handmaid, that I didn’t want to kill them, that I was a good person with good intentions. The winds made any conversation impossible, and even if they hadn’t, I was almost certain that this wasn’t the sort of thing that I could talk my way out of. The guards weren’t wholly innocent, but they also weren’t in league with outright villains like the guards we’d encountered (and killed) in Trifles Tower.

I resolved to try to settle things non-violently if I possibly could, just as one of the tuung threw his sword at me. I took the hit to my leg and it drove straight to the bone of my thigh. In an instant it was gone, back in his hand. I burned a few fingerbones to bump END and seal the wound, but not before my pant leg was soaked through with blood. I cursed myself for not wearing armor, having thought that it would interfere too much with being stealthy and agile. When he threw the sword a second
time, I released one of my grips, and turned to the side, letting it sail past me. They weren’t stopping to ask me questions -- which would have been impossible in the wind anyway -- they were just going to kill me and figure out who I was later, if they didn’t know who I was already.

The smaller tuung, the one that had pulled his sword out later, threw his own sword, and I twisted to the side again, this time burning SPD from the bones of my arm. My reactions were good enough, and the sword slow enough, that I was able to catch it in mid-air. I hadn’t been sure exactly what that would accomplish, but as it was revealed a moment later, the answer was nothing; the sword vanished from my hand, leaving behind moisture and mist that was driven away in an instant by the rushing wind, and reappeared in the tuung’s hand.

I started moving backward, closing the distance between us. I could heal back from whatever wounds they inflicted, and had enough blood to spare, but eventually I was going to run out of bones to burn for healing, and then I was going to be in trouble. I kept taking the wounds and healing them closed until I was twenty feet away from them. They stopped throwing their swords, perhaps because they misunderstood the nature of my healing, which wouldn’t have presented as bone magic to them, given the fact that I wasn’t holding onto any bones. My pants were in shreds, and the top of the train was slick with my blood, much of which had gotten onto the tuung. The train had already been treacherous before, but now that it was slippery with blood, it was downright deadly. The magnets were the only thing stopping me from slipping, and I could feel that they’d become looser than they were when I started out. If they started sliding, I was going to have to take emergency measures.

I used Ropey to attack, throwing him backward and letting him wrap himself around the wrist of the larger of the tuung. I yanked him off balance and felt the magnet slip beneath me as Newton’s third law bit me. I saw the rope twist unnaturally in the wind to avoid a slicing strike from the tuung, but that was a last gasp of futile action. The tuung had lost his footing in the blood, and whatever sticking ability his exposed toes gave him, it wasn’t enough; he fell, slid backward, and slipped over the side of the train car. I didn’t have a good enough angle to see him get dashed against the ground at eighty miles an hour, and any sound it would have made was swallowed by the winds.

(There was no message saying that he’d been defeated, which gave me hope that I had somehow avoided killing him.)

That left the smaller one, who was looking at me with wide eyes. He threw his sword, and I burned SPD again to catch it, then tossed it to the side and used my elbow to push the single magnet I still had a hold on up from the roof of the train. I slid in the wind and on the slickness of my own blood until I collided with him, then managed to slam the magnet back down and skid to a stop. I was grappling with him before he knew what was happening, and Ropey was helping, loops surrounding arms and those powerful, kicking legs. I fashioned the Anyblade into a collar around his throat, then forked the blade in three and pointed each of them at his face. He stopped struggling after that, and his sword, which he’d been trying to slice at me with while I attempted to pin him, disappeared back to wherever it had been pulled from.

“I don’t want to hurt you!” I screamed around where I thought his ear probably was. He made no response to that. I was holding him with one arm, the other desperately gripping my makeshift handhold, which slipped just a bit every time the train went over less than perfectly laid railing.

Had they raised the alarm? If they had, the mission was fucked, because the handmaid wouldn’t be there waiting for me, she’d be buried behind guards, who would pull her away from the window. But no one had popped their head up, and there were only two guards stationed on the gangway between cars, which gave me hope.
I released the tuung, trusting Ropey to hold him in place and the Anyblade wrapped around his throat and pointed at his face in triplicate to keep him from moving. With my free hand I pulled a flask from Sable, undid the top by holding it awkwardly and using my fingers, then downed the entire flask full of pure grain alcohol in one go, wincing as it burned its way down. Then I was back to touching the tuung, and through the magic of the Liar’s Cup tattoo, transferring the alcohol into him before it could affect me all that much.

When he passed out, the problem became more manageable. I let us slip and slide the rest of the way down the train car until we got to the gangway, then checked that it was clear below. The fact that it was empty meant that the extraction could still go ahead as planned. I lowered the tuung down, very carefully, and let his body hit the gangway. It was closed off enough that I wasn’t worried about him falling to his death, but he’d be a dead giveaway if someone came by. That was better than killing him though.

“Okay, while Arthur and Tiff are arguing from the bushes, I’m going to sneak off and kill the guards,” said Craig.

“You can’t do that,” said Tiff with a frown.

“Joon?” asked Craig.

“Tiff, you can’t dictate someone else’s actions,” I said. “By the way that Craig has been playing Miaun, it’s entirely in character, and even if it weren’t, I don’t like being character police.”

Tiff frowned at me. “Well okay, then I roll Perception.”

“I’m the one that rolls Perception,” I said. I rolled the dice behind my DM screen, red for Arthur, green for Tiff, and blue for Maddie, in case she wanted to be a part of any of this. Low numbers for Tiff and Arthur, high for Maddie. “And Craig, you’re going to have roll Stealth. I’m assuming from the way you worded it that you did intend to be hidden from the party.”

“With all bonuses, 25,” said Craig after he’d rolled the dice. He was smiling, pleased by the result.

“Okay,” I said, turning to Maddie. “Raven, you’re the only one that sees your brother moving out of his position as he uses the available cover to close in on the guards while the other members of the party engage in a furtive whispered conversation. What do you do?”

Maddie smiled at me. She always liked getting the group’s attention, but never seemed to be willing to take it. I’d often wondered whether she’d be any different without her brother around, but she only showed up when Craig deigned to bring her. That was a question that I’d have to wait years to get the answer to. “Can I cast the ghost sound spell without drawing attention?”

“It’s got a verbal component,” I said. “DC 0 Listen check, plus 1 per 10 feet, and you’re 120 feet away, so DC 12 for them to hear.”

“She’s got Silent Spell,” said Craig.

“Maddie, those guards are people, with lives,” said Tiff.

“You were having an in-character conversation with Titon,” I said. “If it’s a silent spell, you’re not going to be able to hear it, which means that all you would be able to do is see it, and I’ll let you roll Perception against Maddie’s Stealth, but --”

“I’m making an out-of-character argument,” said Tiff. She brushed a strand of hair away from her
face, then turned to Maddie. “The margrave’s guards don’t deserve to die, and we should especially
not be the ones to kill them.”

“I’d be the one killing them,” said Craig. “She’d just be providing a distraction for me, right Madds?”

“Think of what Raven would do,” said Tiff.

“You know these aren’t actually people, right?” asked Craig.

“They are to Atticus,” said Tiff, folding her arms across her chest. Chronologically, this would have
been way before we were dating, and before I’d really even developed feelings for her. I’d always
liked her, and always been able to see what Arthur saw in her, but there was a time when she’d been
nothing but an opposite-gendered friend.

“A better argument would be that these men signed up to be guards,” said Arthur. He caught a look
from Tiff. “I’m not saying it’s a good argument, but they took a paycheck knowing that they would
be defending the margrave with their lives.”

“That’s terrible,” said Tiff. “Those men probably have parents who care about them. They’re
probably married with kids. And even if they were orphans with nothing and nobody, I wouldn’t
want to kill them.”

“You’re not killing them, I’m killing them,” said Craig. “And Arthur’s right, they signed up for the
margrave, they must have known he was a dick, reap what you sow.”

“To clarify, he wasn’t actually a dick, he just didn’t believe you about the horn,” I said. Craig rolled
his eyes.

“I don’t think it’s your place to say whether he was a dick or not,” said Arthur. “It’s a question of
interpretation, not fact.”

“I can’t say how I intended his character to come out?” I asked. “I’m just -- I don’t want to go down
the wrong path here because I screwed up the character. He wasn’t supposed to be a dick, he just
didn’t believe you, because you didn’t have any proof.” (That had been the whole point of an earlier
plot thread that was now, apparently, dropped. The margrave saying he wouldn’t give up the horn
without some proof was supposed to spur the party to find proof. This whole ‘steal the horn’ thing
had been spun up from whole cloth, and I was happy that the party was getting in fights, because it
meant I had time to prepare something new for them, putting down people and scenery just ahead of
their questions.)

Arthur shrugged. “If you screwed up the character, we’ll just go with the screw up, it’s fine, that’s
how improv works,” he said. He turned back to Craig. “Titon isn’t going to back you up if this goes
badly.”

“Atticus isn’t either,” said Tiff. She seemed annoyed, but there wasn’t really anything I could do
about that, other than delivering Craig a harsh comeuppance that I had already decided that the
circumstances didn’t warrant.

“Okay,” I said. “Leaving all the OOC stuff aside,” stuff that should be interpretation of characters,
not stated outright, if we’re being fair, “Maddie, you were about to cast a silent ghost sound,
presumably to create a distraction.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do that.”

“Okay, where?” I asked. “What does it sound like?”
“Like,” she said, gesturing with her hands for a minute as she tried to think. “Like knocking? Like someone is knocking on the door from the other side.”

“Good,” I said. “Miaun, you see the guards turn away from you. Titon, Atticus, you hear the knock, but you don’t see Miaun anywhere around you.”

“I stay silent, watching, with a cold feeling in my gut about what’s about to happen,” said Arthur. Tiff frowned, keeping her arms crossed.

“Atticus?” I asked. “Any reaction?”

“Assuming that I can connect the dots?” she asked. I nodded. “Then … Atticus stays quiet. If we have the time later, I’m going to track down the families of those men and anonymously give them some money, just to make myself feel less guilty.”

“So I’m finally good to attack?” asked Craig.

“Yeah,” I said. “How do you want to do it?”

“What level are they?” he asked.

I sighed. “You have no idea,” I said. “You know that they’re rank and file guards for the margrave, and he’s not likely to have posted his best men around this time of night. They’re a little more alert because of the knocking, but before that they didn’t seem exceptionally well-trained, and both their armor and weapons show wear, not the kind that comes from fighting on a regular basis, but more from being put on and taken off over and over again for years without seeing much action.”

“So, low level,” said Craig with a nod. I shrugged. “I throw a dagger at one, then the other, the ones I’ve got on my hips.” He rolled the dice without waiting for me to say anything. “19 and 23, hit and hit? They should both be sneak attacks.”

“You don’t need to roll damage,” I said. “They both fall, one with a dagger in his throat, the other with a dagger going through his eyes.”

“Fuck,” said Tiff, leaning back.

“Should have stopped me if you cared so much,” said Craig with a shrug.

“I would have, if I did,” said Arthur. “Sometimes a guard is just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I’m not so far along the law/chaos axis that I was willing to tank the mission. Don’t go murder-happy again though, not without talking about it first.”

I made my way back down the train again, this time unimpeded. It was easier going after I’d gotten my second magnet back. I stopped at each of the gangways, looking for guards, but whatever mess had happened up on top of the train cars, it didn’t seem like anyone was looking for me. That they had even bothered posting guards in the first gangway was paranoia; posting them at every gangway between cars that they controlled would have been the sort of paranoia that they couldn’t justify.

I was worried that the tuung I’d left behind was going to wake up and do something in a drunken stupor, either alert the others or kill himself, and I wasn’t sure which would be worse. I worried about the tuung that I had knocked off the train, and the missing message of defeat. I was hoping that he’d lived, but dreading the possibility that he had, somehow, managed to stay on the train.
It would have been so easy to kill them, and maybe that was why I hadn’t. I could have thrust Sable behind me and let loose with all kinds of garbage that the winds would have taken and slammed into them. I could have used the throwing dagger and engaged in a battle of thrown weapons I was pretty sure I would win. There was a void rifle in the glove, along with other weapons, weapons that I could easily have aimed down the length of the train to outright kill both the guards. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t killed before, I’d even killed guards, but the circumstances seemed different here. Aumann’s guards had known what they were signing up for, they’d probably had options elsewhere in Barren Jewel, but the tuung guards were products of a society that had dictated this role for them, and I was almost certainly reading too far into things, but the smaller one seemed like he was some dumb, young kid that had been drafted into the Vietnam War.

Or maybe it was that killing Aumann’s guards had never sat quite right with me, and I was overcorrecting here. I’d been in therapy for long enough to know that I didn’t like it, but there was a part of me that was starting to think that maybe it would be good to have a neutral third party without an agenda that I could talk to, given how much mental shit had been piling up.)

I reached the frontmost tuung car without incident, streaks of blood now left behind me, my magnets stable against the steel roof of the train car. I slid forward and positioned myself above the window, then leaned down over the side. It was stomach-churningly precarious, with not just the wind going by, but the ground moving quickly below me. I reached down with Sable and pulled a mirror on a rod out, one of a number of things I’d prepared ahead of time, just in case, and lowered it so I could look into the dark car. I saw the handmaid standing there, and beside her, a tuung guard.

I swore beneath my breath, the sound eaten up by the wind as the curse left my lips.

I let Sable take the mirror from my hand, then brought out a void pistol and began lowering myself down, trusting in the sentient rope wrapped around me to keep me on top of the train. From the play of shadows I’d seen in the room, I was fairly sure that I wasn’t going to obscure anything in the guard’s line of sight, but I would want to be quick about it either way. As soon as I had eyes on the room, I reached down with the void pistol and pressed it against the glass.

Before I could take my shot, the handmaid saw me. Her eyes went wide and she rushed forward, grabbing the guard by his shoulder and spinning him around to face me. I stopped what I was doing and let the void pistol slip back into the glove as I watched them, ready to move at a moment’s notice. The guard didn’t seem that surprised to see me, and his sword didn’t appear in his hand.

The handmaid moved toward the window and opened it a crack. To my surprise, and considerable displeasure, the guard was the one who slipped his hand out. I couldn’t hear anything, and I doubted that they wanted to make any noise, but the handmaid gestured that I should take the guard. Well, fuck. I wasn’t really in a position to make a negotiation, or to tell her that this wasn’t what we’d agreed to. I produced a breathing tank with mask from Sable and when the handmaid opened the window further, passed it in, then a second one for the guard. They put them on with only a little difficulty, and once they had done a breathing check, I was on my way back down the train, with one more passenger than expected.
“Extra passenger,” I said, once I was back in our train car. “She had a guard with her that she wanted to come with.”

“Altering the terms so soon doesn’t bode well,” said Amaryllis. She was dressed in her full plate, ready for war, but that apparently hadn’t been needed. For now, it was just me and her; the others were stationed around the train, trying their best to be inconspicuous as they kept watch for something amiss. I’d passed both Fenn and Grak, who were sitting in the dimly lit dining car. They’d noted my change of clothes, I was sure, and maybe the way my hands were wet from the quick wash I’d given them using water from Sable, but I had been walking quickly, and gave them a nod. The bloodied clothes had gone into the glove, where they wouldn’t incriminate me, along with all the other tools I’d used. “It otherwise went smoothly?”

“Guards came after me,” I said. “Two of them, the ones that were on the first gangway. I’m not sure whether they managed to raise the alarm or not, but I don’t think so.”

“That’s not ideal,” said Amaryllis.

“One went over the side,” I said. “No message from the game saying he’d been defeated, and I don’t know what to make of that. The other one is laying drunk in the gangway, courtesy of Liar’s Cup. I don’t think he’ll be able to identify me, given the mask, but some of the entads I used were distinctive.”

Amaryllis sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Okay, that’s -- also not ideal. Any that people would be able to cross-reference? Any that you’ve used while on this train?”

I held up my hand. “Sable, maybe. Fenn wears it out in public, which I think will have to stop for the time being. I was out of his sight when I used it though, and he got what I’m really hoping wasn’t a lethal dose of alcohol shortly afterward, enough to make him blackout. He saw the Anyblade, but that’s easy for me to hide wherever I want to. And the rope, naturally, will be staying in Sable for the time being.” I paused and cleared my throat. “There was no one in the hallways to identify me on the way back, or on the way there. I think I’m clean.”

“Okay,” breathed Amaryllis. “I’m confident in our ability to slip past an investigation, if there is one. The biggest risk is that the train is brought to a stop while they try to figure things out, but we’re close enough to Headwater now that I don’t think they would do that. They might seal the train once we get there, but they almost certainly wouldn’t ward against teleportation, given how unlikely it would be.” She shook her head. “I don’t know, it depends. It’s not good, but at least you’re not dead.”

“Thanks, I care about you too,” I said. “Should I let her out?”

Amaryllis nodded. “Leave the guard in.”

I held my hand forward and pushed Esuen out of the glove, trying to ensure that she would be oriented so that she was on her feet. She appeared with a slight pop, and pulled off her oxygen mask as she looked around. The place where the mask met her skin had left an impression that was slow to fade; I wondered what aspect of tuung physiology made that happen after only a few minutes.

“Thank you,” she said with a curtsey toward me. She took the hose from her mister tank and sprayed herself with it once, allowing the droplets of water to land on her skin.
“We weren’t expecting two,” I said.

“Where is he?” she asked.

I held up the glove. “What would you have done if I hadn’t been able to carry both of you?” I asked.

When she frowned, her wide, frog-like lips drooped down, more expressive than a human’s could possibly be. “I gave him my scent a week ago,” she said. “He is bonded to me. I don’t know that we have time enough for me to explain it.”

“We have time,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was gentle.

“Male tuung are dormant until they take a scent, with no interest in women beyond the academic,” said Esuen. “Afterward, they are in something like heat, filled with desperate need to mate. They have a month, by your calendars, until they die. Souno was the head of the security detail, and without his aid, I would have never been able to arrange this escape.” On hearing that, my guess was that he was the one who flicked the lights off, and probably also the one who had given her whatever passenger manifest she’d found us on. Maybe he’d even been the one to suggest us as guests to the party.

“You doomed him to death?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” nodded Esuen. “The males accept this, once they’ve taken a scent, so long as they can breed.”

“But ... they don’t accept it before they’ve taken a scent?” I asked.

“Some do,” said Esuen. “I know that by the common imperial standards, what I have done is abhorrent. It is abhorrent by tuung standards as well, though for different reasons.”

“You wanted him to come with you so that you could absolve yourself,” I said, suddenly understanding. “You plan to mate with him, to fulfill his need.”

“Yes,” nodded Esuen. “There are other, practical considerations,” she said. “It was easier not to lie to him, and if we had left him behind, he would have talked about things I spoke of to him, matters that it was necessary to inform him of in order to secure my escape. You asked what I would have done if you had been unable or unwilling to take him? I would have killed him, if I could bring myself to do it.” She looked at me. “It is a matter of the future of my species.”

“We understand,” said Amaryllis, speaking for me. I didn’t agree with her, even when I tried to reframe it in Earth terms. “The train will arrive in Headwater tomorrow. I’m fairly confident in our ability to escape if things get complicated, and if they don’t get complicated, we’ll find somewhere for you to lay low. Remember that we’re offering aid in exchange for information and assistance on your part, so we can both get what we want. We have business in the Boundless Pit.”

“You mentioned,” nodded Esuen. “I would prefer we discuss the matter after we have some amount of safety. If you could give me some forewarning about what the matter is though?”

“There’s a stronghold, three miles down the Boundless Pit,” I said. “Kuum Doona. We intend to take it.”

“It moves,” said Esuen. Her eyes moved between me and Amaryllis. “It appears on one section of the rock face one day, then another the day after, sometimes staying for periods of time, sometimes moving rapidly. I can give you what I know about it, the defenses it possesses, what knowledge there is about how it works, but I won’t be able to guide you. The tuung have tunnels in the walls,
equivalent to roads, but they would be heavily guarded.”

“I didn’t expect much more,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “I’d like to have a discussion about your political goals and how we might help you achieve them.”

“I would like for Souno to be taken from wherever he is now,” said Esuen, giving another curtsy in my direction. “We will have much to discuss, but the hour is late.” She looked around the small room. “May I ask about accommodations?”

“We’re staying on the train for the time being. I’ll be keeping guard,” said Amaryllis. “I spent most of this day resting so that I would be fresh through the night. You and Souno can sleep in these beds. There won’t be much in the way of privacy until after we’ve got a secure place in Headwater.”

I held out Sable and popped out the guard she’d brought, Souno. His sword was in his hand the moment he appeared in the car with us, and he spun once to look around before releasing it back into the aether. He gave me a bow, then gave Amaryllis her own.

“You said that you were not representatives of any formal organization,” said Esuen. From how she said it, I got the sense that she had been waiting on Souno to appear before she spoke on this particular matter. “Yet I have no proper explanation for who you are, or what your own interests are.”

“We’re travelers,” said Amaryllis. “Independently wealthy adventurers. Kuum Doona has riches that we’re hoping to exploit, if we can get past the tuung and the innate defenses of the fortress. That’s not the entirety of why we’re helping you though.” She glanced at me. “It’s our opinion that being held against your will is tantamount to slavery, and that’s not something that should be tolerated within the Empire, even if that’s how the Empire has come down on the matter.”

Esuen nodded, but it was a hesitant nod. “I will have to think on the ramifications of that.”

“You’ll probably need bigger guns,” said Amaryllis. “Someone who can give you suitable land to make your own, and some kind of military or economic authority to make sure that no one comes after you or bosses you around. If not that, then someone who you can act as vassal to, or who will work in your interests in a more close manner.”

“Yes,” Esuen nodded, more confidently. “And you have those connections?”

Through this all, Souno hadn’t said a word. His hands rested on Esuen’s shoulders, and he stood behind her as though he felt the need to be ready to protect her. He had misted himself from her tank once, but that was it.

“Connections are complicated,” said Amaryllis. “I know some people fairly high up in the Empire, maybe even some who could help you, but I’m not sure this is a fight the Empire is willing to pick, given the non-intervention compacts. If they helped you in direct defiance of the tuung of the Boundless Pit, it wouldn’t just be the other tuung that got up in arms, it would be dozens if not hundreds of other minor kingdoms that have refused to join for one reason or another, all of them feeling threatened. No one wants another counter-Empire. And either way, the Empire’s budget for that kind of thing is miniscule, given how much area they cover, not to mention the inability of the member nations to properly cooperate on almost anything.”

Esuen bulged one of her eyes, in what I was fairly sure was the tuung equivalent of incredulity, given that they didn’t have eyebrows. “Simple adventurers?” she asked.

“I know the lay of the land well enough to get by,” said Amaryllis. To her credit, she sold the lie well
enough that I would almost certainly have believed it if I didn’t know better. “We’ll talk more later, once you’re safe, about both issues.” She looked over to me. “I think I have it from here.”

“I wanted to know about the passenger manifest,” I said, turning to Souno. “Who’s seen it, who knows about the discrepancy, and how much do we have to worry?”

“I was under Esuen’s sway when I took it from the rail company,” said Souno. “I am the only one who knows of your malfeasance.” His voice was deeper than I’d expected, and his Anglish was much better than any of the other guards I’d talked to. “It has been destroyed as part of our escape.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod. Works for me. I gave Esuen as deep a bow as the confined space would allow, mostly because I would have felt weird shaking her damp hand. “I hope things work out.”

“As do we,” said Esuen. Her hand went up to Souno’s, which was resting on her shoulder.

Despite my fears, the train didn’t make any sudden stops in the middle of the night, and though we watched some of the tuung guards moving up and down the train from our vantage point in the dining car the next morning, they didn’t give us much of a second look. Fenn and I sat on one side, while Val and Grak took the other.

“What do you suppose that’s all about?” asked Fenn, eyes twinkling as she watched the tuung.

I was chewing the inside of my lip. “Probably just getting ready for Headwater,” I said.

“You know, next time we should all get side-by-side compartments,” said Fenn. “I didn’t really like being spread out.”

“It was what they had available,” said Grak.

“Well it worked out for you,” said Fenn with a smile. “Still thinking that it’s a temporary thing, or are we going to get a traveling buddy?”

“It’s temporary,” said Grak. He snorted slightly and began eating his eggs with more studied intensity than he had been before.

“You shouldn’t bully him,” said Val. She hadn’t ordered anything for breakfast, and had instead opted to read while the rest of us ate. I was a little bit anxious, and the book from Earth sitting out in the open wasn’t helping, nor was the fact that we were sitting in the dining car together. So far as anyone knew, we had reason to be together, if Val was supposed to be my sister and Fenn was my fake wife. If Grak was questioned, he could just say that he’d met us at the princess’ party. I was just on edge though, and the book became the focus of that. The UPC on the back was the biggest giveaway, and the first few pages would be full of unfamiliar places and legal jargon to anyone who looked at it.

“It’s not bullying,” said Fenn, rolling her eyes.

“It is,” said Val, looking up from her book. “And that’s not okay.”

“It’s gentle-natured ribbing,” I said. “Not bullying.”

“What’s the difference?” asked Val, scrunching her nose slightly.

“It’s a fine line,” I said. “Most of the difference is in the fact that Grak knows that Fenn cares deeply about him. Some of it is tone. Mostly if it’s your friends doing it, you shouldn’t immediately think
that they’re being mean, you should think that they’re just teasing. Like, if I told you that you’re a dork for reading Harry Potter, you should understand that it’s meant affectionately, even if I don’t get the tone quite right.”

**Loyalty Increased: Valencia the Red lvl 20!**

**Companion Passive Unlocked: Soul Capture!**

“Update,” I said, closing my eyes.

**Soul Capture:** If Valencia has access to a soul, the anima exa, she can imbibe it in order to take whatever power it possesses, similar to the Essentialist practice of Soul Scaphism, but with more breadth and depth. Duration depends largely on how intensively she uses the soul in question.

I opened my eyes. Everyone was looking at me. “It applies to souls now,” I said, voice low. “Drinking them, I guess.”

“Oh,” said Val. She was paused in the middle of the book with her thumb in between the pages. “I don’t think I like the idea of that.”

“It does seem a little bit outright evil,” nodded Fenn. “Not that I’m an expert or anything. Second Empire stuff.”

“We don’t need to do anything with it,” I said. “I think the use cases are probably … I don’t know, using someone’s heirlooms as though you had their bloodline? Being able to do some types of magic, if we carefully label all the souls we collect?”

“I don’t want to do it,” said Val, shaking her head. “I’m not a dementor.”

“What’s that?” asked Grak.

“You should read these books,” said Val, pointing down to *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.*

“Guys, we should have a book club,” said Fenn. “Wouldn’t that be great?”

The conversation moved on from Valencia’s new (and largely unwanted) ability, partly through force of will, since no one wanted to talk about it. I was left there with a knot in my chest, not feeling particularly less anxious about my life, such as it was.

I wanted the game to come back. If I’d said that out loud, Grak probably would have rightly chided me for complaining that the voice of all creation wasn’t talking into my ear as much as it had been before, especially given that I’d outright said that was what I wanted. It was unnerving to not have any notifications at all about the quest with Esuen, and no indication that she was a companion. The whole thing stunk of being a setup by the Dungeon Master of some kind, like he’d made a nudge or two somewhere to get me on the train with the handmaid, but I was left flying blind.

I was still feeling that tight anxiousness when the train began its approach into Headwater, the city that sat above the Boundless Pit. The curve of the rail was such that we had a decent view of the descent down into the geographical depression that housed the pit. It was dozens of miles wide, mostly dark gray stone forming crags and slabs, with green mosses and grasses growing up where they could. A river ran down into the basin, thick and quickly flowing, and it had been there long enough to carve a little valley for itself. It wasn’t some mere stream; this was the Buol, a river that drained most of a continent to the east of Pit that made up that edge of the Lion’s Mane. The Buol was more than a mile thick as it passed Headwater and dumped over the edge of the Boundless Pit.
(Per legend, the Boundless Pit had been carved by the Buol’s might, which no mere ocean could have contained, but I was fairly sure that whatever the hell was going on geologically or hydrologically, it wasn’t that. It smacked of being more mythological than Aerb usually tended to be.)

Headwater itself was no metropolis, nothing like Cranberry Bay or even Silmar City, though it was large enough that a few prominent buildings gave the suggestion of a skyline. It was perched to one side of the Buol, most of the bigger buildings closer to the edge of the Pit, and the city as a whole gave the feeling of being clumped up and tightly packed, despite the wide open basin around it.

I was prepared for almost anything when we pulled into the train station, but all our scenario planning turned out to have been for nothing when the doors were opened up for us and we were free to go. Amaryllis had joined us just as the train was coming to a stop, having put the handmaid and her guard into the glove as the very final step of our preparation. As some of the very few people without any luggage, we could move a little more freely, and it wasn’t too long before we were out of the station altogether. Amaryllis was still in her armor, which drew some fleeting attention, but plate armor wasn’t illegal, and while it was unusual, it wasn’t so unusual that we thought anyone would stop us.

Headwater was lousy with hotels, since the city’s two primary functions were tourism and diplomacy, both of which had a fair amount of demand for temporary housing. We picked the biggest of the hotels, then purchased a family room on the seventh floor; three beds would leave us a little short, but it would serve as a base of operations for the time being. Per our agreement, Grak picked out and paid for a much smaller suite for the tuung on the same floor, having come in separately. Our cover story on the train had been that he didn’t know us, and that seemed like a useful fiction to work under for the time being.

The biggest complication was that we didn’t want our temporary guests to know about the teleportation key, which really limited how and where we could move around.

Not much more than a half hour after we’d gotten off the train, Fenn slipped on the glove and popped Esuen and Souno out into the family suite. They took a moment to look around, and Souno checked the perimeter of the room, stopping briefly to feel at places he thought were conspicuously good for hiding whatever his enemies might have hidden. Grak had already made the same tour, looking with eyes that could literally see magic, but we didn’t mention that.

“Thank you,” breathed Esuen. She walked over to the windows and looked out at the view, which was one of the reasons that this hotel even existed. “We are still in the shadow of the beast, but the most difficult part of the escape is over.” She looked at Fenn, then Grak, then Valencia. “I don’t know if you want to make introductions, or whether you’ve withheld names by intent,” she said.

“By intent,” said Amaryllis. “The less you know about us, the better. If it weren’t horrifically inconvenient, I might have even wanted to keep you from seeing all our faces.”

“Operational security,” nodded Souno.

“We’re under a time crunch at the moment,” said Amaryllis. “There’s a time chamber within Kuum Doona that we need access to within a matter of days, rather than weeks or months. For that reason, the debrief has to be somewhat compressed. Ideally, we’ll be leaving for Kuum Doona tonight.”

“That’s very soon,” said Esuen, frowning slightly. “Too soon for me to make arrangements with anyone for my safety and security. What happens to me if you don’t return?”

“We’ll leave you with a sizable sum of money and equipment,” said Amaryllis. “Whatever we can
do to help secure you an escape by train or car, we will do, so long as it can be done within the next few hours. And it’s imperative that we leave soon.” She paused. “Please, whatever you can tell us.”

Esuen looked between the five of us, fiddled with the mister at her side and allowed it to wet her skin, then let out a breath. “We call it the Meandering Mansion,” said Esuen. “It’s a place of great magic, more than could be expected of a forge-frenzied place, even one that was once owned by Penndraig himself. There are defenses around it that make it nearly impossible to crack. Hundreds of tuung soldiers have lost their lives in the attempt, and double that number of outsiders. As rumor has it, the Penndraig line lost control of it even before the agreement with the Empire was reached, leaving a fortress' worth of treasure available for whoever could take it.”

I glanced at Amaryllis. “I hadn’t heard those rumors,” she said. She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “From what I was told, it was mothballed due to the expenses associated with it, expenses which largely had to do with the difficulties imposed by the tuung.”

Most of our information had come from either the books that her father had left behind, or what the ghost of her great-grandfather had been able to tell her when she’d communed with him. Both of them post-dated the mothballing (or, possibly, abandonment) of Kuum Doona.

“Does it have wards anchored to it?” asked Grak.

“I believe so,” said Esuen. “Most people don’t get close enough to find out. It has caused no small amount of problems for the tuung. On occasion, it will appear in a crucial place, blocking off a path of travel between our holdings or preventing a harvest. It assaulted one of our cities for a solid month once, firing off cannonballs from the opposite side of the pit wall at regular intervals.”

“It’s … sapient?” asked Amaryllis.

“If not, then sentient,” said Esuen. “There are persistent rumors that someone still lives within it and guides it. Some even say that it’s the Lost King.” She shrugged. “I don’t know how you plan to get there, especially without knowing exactly where it is, and on such short notice. This is your first time coming to the Boundless Pit?” With the way she looked from one of us to the other, I could see the questions on her face. We were going into this half-cocked, that much had to be clear by our lines of inquiry. What this situation really called for was a solid month of research chasing down first-hand accounts and digging through archives; we weren’t really under the impression that we could spare that time.

“It’s our first time, yes,” said Amaryllis. She rolled her shoulders. “I’m confident in our ability to handle ourselves.”

“Flight down into the Pit is restricted,” said Esuen. “The Imperial Army will stop anyone they think they reasonably can, and the tuung are, per imperial law, unrestrained from using force against anyone who violates their sovereignty by going through the Pitmouth.” She paused looking at us, and my eyes followed hers, trying to see what she saw. Fenn, arms crossed, one eyebrow slightly raised, Grak frowning and adjusting the braids of his beard, Amaryllis smooth and calm … and Valencia, straight-backed with her hands clasped behind her back, the very picture of a stoic, well-trained soldier who had heard dire warnings before and gone into the shit anyway. I thought that was probably a devil’s skills at deception.

“So how would you recommend that we approach?” asked Amaryllis.

“Can you fly?” she asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis.
“Not yet,” said Fenn.

_Not anymore_, I thought but didn’t say. It would be good to have Solace back, but that was the whole point of us doing this, aside from the supposed riches that had been locked away for hundreds of years.

Esuen looked between us again. “There is an entad vehicle, used largely for observation,” she finally said. “The tuung allow it to go by, so long as it stays far from the walls of the Pit, and those aboard are cleared of magic by their warders and given a Fool’s Choker by their tattoo mages.” _Yikes_. “The owners have a good working relationship with the matriarchs.”

“Tourism?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” said Esuen. “Sometimes the Empire will buy tickets, for the purposes of long-range observation. The waiting list is long.”

“We have money,” said Fenn. “Lots of money.”

“Then you are left with only the problem of commandeering the vehicle and making an approach toward a hostile, sapient fortress,” said Esuen.

“You’re skeptical,” said Amaryllis. “I understand that. There are some factors in play that I can’t reveal to you at this point. You’ll only have to trust that we know what we’re doing.” I was pretty sure that the other factor was her heritage, which would theoretically allow us to make a safe approach, as well as to pass through any wards that it might have around it. The vague assurance didn’t seem to do much to mollify Esuen’s concerns. Amaryllis placed a hand on Valencia’s shoulder. “We’ll leave V behind. She’s the most capable of us, and if things don’t go as planned, she’ll be able to get you to safety, beyond the reach of the other tuung. Either we’ll be back within a week, or she’ll be more than capable of taking care of you, especially given the resources that we plan to leave you with.”

Valencia nodded once as Amaryllis spoke, and gave no other indication that she objected. I could see at least some of the background logic. Valencia would be revealed if a warder looked at her, given that her skin didn’t have any latent magic, and a skin mage, especially one trying to put a tattoo on her, would figure out what she was as well. I tried to mull it over as Esuen gave us more details on the Boundless Pit, most of which I already knew.
The Down and Out sat on the edge of a pier that jutted out over the Boundless Pit, a pier that was closely guarded by a half-dozen tuung. The ship, if you could call it that, was flat on top, with a wide deck that was covered by a thick tarpaulin and a small, closed cabin where the pilot sat with some of the necessary equipment. The bottom of it was curved and made of glass, which was broken up by rigid structural elements that divided it into triangles. It made me think of a d20, though it wasn’t a regular polyhedron, instead skewing into more of an oval shape. Amaryllis commented that it looked like a chandelier, but to me it didn’t seem pretty enough.

The price we’d paid was exorbitant, though we hadn’t ended up jumping ahead on the list. Instead, the owners had gotten special dispensation to run a second trip of the day. Normally the owners ran the ship down and then back up so that they’d get the light of high noon shining down into the Boundless Pit when they were at the nadir of the journey, but there was some wiggle room to do another run every once in a while, at the cost of a little bit of stored goodwill with the tuung. The owner greeted us warmly though, either happy at the windfall we’d given them or naturally cheery people. When we’d asked around, he and his wife had been called an “odd couple” a few times, and once I saw them, I realized what everyone had been glossing around; he was a human and she was a feathered Animalia.

We were planning to steal their ship, at least temporarily.

“I know the collars are an imposition,” said Taft with a genial smile once we were aboard. He was bald and thin, with great tufts of hair on the side of his head, and a nose almost as wide as Grak’s on a face that wasn’t nearly so meaty. He wore a cloak and a wide-brimmed hat, which was wet with the mist coming off of the Boul. The river was emptying itself not more than a hundred yards away from us, and the sound of it meant that everyone had to speak up to be heard. “We see the Boundless Pit at the pleasure of the tuung, and much of what there is to see is their society. You’re visiting one of the last few forbidden places on Aerb, think of it like that. For all that the collars are frightening, they’ve only been used twice in the history of these trips, both times with solid cause.”

“What kind of cause?” asked Fenn, radiating innocence and briefly reaching her fingers up to touch where the tattoo encircled her neck. Removing it would be trivial for both of us, as would repairing the damage if it was triggered before then, assuming we could do it before passing out.

“It’s somewhat gruesome,” said Taft with a shake of his head. “It would suffice to say that the Boundless Pit, for all its beauty, has attracted a fair number of people more interested in profit over the years, many of them with ill intent. The collars are an over-reaction to that.” He waved his hand. “Not worth worrying about. You’re here for the only tour of the Pit that money can buy, not to hear scary stories about things going wrong.”

“I’m here for both, actually,” said Fenn. She was keeping her eyes wide. “I was hoping that you could tell us about the tuung, while we’re on our way down? It’s going to take some time to reach our destination, right?”

“How much have you read?” asked Taft, with one bushy eyebrow raised. “Well, much of what you’ve read is probably nonsense of one sort or another, but as a baseline?”

Amaryllis cleared her throat. “I’ve read Blackstone’s Creatures of the Unending, the relevant chapter in Kyan’s R-selected, A History, almost everything ever written about Penndraig’s excursion into the Boundless Pit, and a rather poor translation of Emini’s Soun Mienou, which I think comes closest to the actual truth.”
“We also had a few conversations with tuung aboard the train on the way over from Cranberry Bay,” said Fenn with a smile.

“Well,” said Taft, smiling at the two of them, and not the least bit fazed. “I daresay you probably know more than me, at least on paper. But I’ve worked with the tuung for practically my whole adult life, and I’ve been watching them since I was little -- quite some time ago -- when it was my father and mother steering this ship. So maybe I can fill in some of the gaps?”

We’d done enough homework that most of what he said wasn’t new to us. He started from the top, rather than the bottom, which I found a little bit irritating. The proper way of understanding the tuung was to understand their reproductive biology: females that could choose the gender of their children, mass egg-laying, and sexually dormant males that could be driven into heat were all the building blocks of their society. Those rules governed everything that followed, while the Boundless Pit itself, infinitely deep, widening as you went down, darkening too, was the context on which those rules were applied.

Taft started from the top though, all the clear and visible stuff that might, admittedly, be more useful to know on a day-to-day basis, like matriarchal politics, the major imports (the cheapest possible food, mostly from Barren Jewel) and exports (entads, mined minerals, unique flora and fauna of the Pit), the governing laws of the tuung, and a small amount of history, especially as it related to interactions between the tuung and the three imperial eras.

(We said “the tuung” for simplicity, but there were actually two other places that they called home as well. There weren’t many places that were all that hospitable for the tuung, given how much moisture they needed on a very regular basis. It was entirely possible for them to live in inhospitable places, but that would mean lugging around a mister tank and having special sleeping arrangements, which was a malus on expansion into places that weren’t perpetually wet. In D&D terms, those other loosely-allied groups of tuung would have been sub-races, in the same way that there were five distinct migrations of elves from Celestar, each with their own differences.)

“Just a moment,” said Taft, as he cut short his description of the tuung air force. “I’m going to go speak with my wife to see what the hold up is.”

He left us on the deck as he ducked in through an archway to the small cabin where the ship’s controls were. I had been trying to surreptitiously sneak a peek ever since we’d gotten on board, but all I’d really been able to make out was Taft’s wife, a feathered Animalia of some kind, maybe a raven. Her long black beak stuck out from under a blue hood, and while she had wings on her back, folded behind her in a chair that allowed room for them, she also had arms and legs as well, both terminating in featherless, scaly black skin and black claws. She had introduced herself very briefly as Rattle-Clack, then turned back to the ship’s controls without sparing us another glance.

“Not feeling too great about this plan,” Fenn murmured under her breath.

“Yeah,” I said. I stepped closer to the railing and looked down in the Boundless Pit, which was largely obscured by spray from the river. Deeper down, the Pit was obscured by shadow. The Down and Out had floodlights, but they’d be of limited use once we were to the point where the Pit was filled with river-rain and mist, since most of what they’d be lighting up was the water in the air. Grak thought that he’d be able to spot Kuum Doona if we got within a mile of it, given his newfound magic-vision, and I was really hoping that he was right, especially since we’d be working under a time constraint, after which the tuung would know that something was up. “Nice people.”

“Nice people,” Fenn murmured. “Nice little mom and pop operation here, kind of reminds me of my favorite inn back in Anglecynn, the Cock & Bull.”
Amaryllis stepped up close to us and rested her hand on Fenn’s elbow. “Excited?” she asked, with just a token amount of ‘don’t fucking talk about our plan to steal this thing’ to her smile.

“Oh, certainly,” said Fenn as Taft approached from the cabin.

“Shouldn’t be much longer,” said Taft. “We’re still waiting on final approval.”

“I thought we had final approval?” asked Amaryllis.

“We had provisional approval,” said Taft. “Enough that we could get you checked over and aboard and start getting everything spun up. The protocols that we’ve worked out with the tuung is that we get a final sign-off by radio before we actually depart, and that’s what we’re waiting on. Normally it doesn’t take this long, but this is a special trip, and it appears the timing isn’t all that good. There’s some kind of hullabaloo going on right now, but they’re not saying exactly what. I keep my ear out for chatter, but they’re a secretive people, and most of the tuung that live and work in Headwater aren’t in the know.” He gave us an apologetic shrug. “Where was I?”

“You were detailing the tuung air force,” said Grak.

“Ah, right,” said Taft. “Gossamer wings, we think part of some entad that they came by a few dozen years ago, though the specifics are naturally shrouded in mystery. We’ll probably see a few of them in full flight, the matriarchs like to show off a bit, and that’s half of our arrangement with them.”

“Meaning that we won’t get to see any of the underbelly?” I asked.

“Underbelly?” asked Taft with a laugh. “We’re not going to visit with them, just taking a tour of some of the prettier features of the Pit and the cities on the wall, anything that they really wanted to hide, it wouldn’t be a problem for them. That’s not to say that there aren’t failures, from time to time, places where a colony was founded and then something went wrong in carving out or hanging structures, as one example, and that’s the sort of thing that I’m not planning to show you.”

I knew enough to know that he was whitewashing things. We probably wouldn’t be seeing the results of matriarchal warfare, nor would we probably bear witness to any of the burial ceremonies of the tuung, where they extracted the soul from the body and then dumped it into the Pit.

“I’m sorry, but why is an entad thought to be the source of the wings?” asked Amaryllis.

“Numbers show linear growth,” Grak answered, before Taft could. “It is consistent with a periodic-granting-of-ability rule. It is one of the things I spoke about with my friend Magor.”

“I’d rather not take part in any speculation,” said Taft with a smile. “Headwater is always abuzz with that sort of talk, and I do keep my ears open, but --”

“Ready!” came a call from the cabin.

“-- but we should be bringing that part of the conversation to a close anyway,” he finished, stepping toward the middle of the ship. Benches curved to form an oval beneath the tarpaulin, with enough room to seat ten. A small ladder by the cabin led to the lower deck, which was where you’d want to sit if you wanted to look out the windows below. “We’re running light, as this is a special trip just for you, and we won’t have the best light to see the Pit with, but we’ve been doing this for ages --”

“Ages!” came a shout from the cabin.

“-- and we should be able to give you a satisfactory tour.” He smiled at each of us in turn, and then, on cue, the ship began descending. Taft let that feeling of untethered floating sink in for a bit, then
launched into what was identifiably a spiel, probably one that he’d given every day for most of his working life.

It was interesting enough, but I forced myself to zone out so that I could think about what came next. We were going to have to subdue both of them before taking the ship, which I wasn’t looking forward to. Physically it would be easy, even without our gear (most of which was packed away in the glove, which was in turn folded up and stuffed in Fenn’s underwear), but the inevitable explanation of ‘it’s not personal’ didn’t feel good when I was practicing it in my head.

That aside, I didn’t like the rest of the plan very much either. It seemed dependent on too much best-case planning, where we were counting on either our ability to improvise a solution to problems that might crop up, or simply on nothing going too terribly wrong. We’d done as much homework as we could do in the time we had available, but at a certain point there were diminishing returns. Amaryllis had argued that spending a day in Headwater trying to find an expert on Kuum Doona, or someone who could smuggle us in a less attention-drawing way, was unlikely enough to bear fruit that it wasn’t worth the risk. We’d chartered the tour first, then spent a few hours searching around, but a few hours searching in an unfamiliar city where we had no contacts didn’t amount to much.

(The saving grace of the plan to steal the *Down and Out* was that it was better than the alternatives, which we’d discussed in some depth. The most promising of them was looping Esuen in on the teleportation key and then trying to see whether her worldline was such that she would be able to put us within a few days' climb of Kuum Doona, which had seemed like a stretch. Other options, like quickly-built, makeshift aircraft or abuse of the Immobility Plate while skydiving, had been vetoed on feasibility grounds.)

We kept to the western side of the Pit as we made our descent, giving the waterfall a wide berth, but there was only so much that you could avoid it, and eventually the spray from the waterfall spread out to the whole Pit, even as the Pit grew wider. The sky was a hole above us, which gradually became obscured by the mist in the air, until eventually we were in a twilight. The *Down and Out* didn’t move fast, no more than a few miles an hour, so the changes were subtle, and Taft had plenty to say about everything that we passed. His wife, Rattle-Clack, was piloting a meandering course that slowed down whenever there was something of interest, and while I had some natural appreciation for what I mentally pegged as “worldbuilding stuff”, I also kept thinking that it was basically an unskippable cutscene.

We did end up seeing the flying tuung, in a regimented flock of more than a hundred, each of them with short insectile wings that brought to mind a dragonfly. The wings were too short and thin to have possibly held up the tuung, but each was only lightly armored, and without any heavy packs, nor with obvious weapons on them, which was a relief. When Taft finally turned the floodlights on, they appeared as if from nowhere to swoop in front of them, which I was almost certain was the local equivalent of propaganda, done for every group of visitors. I really hoped that we didn’t have to fight them, especially given their total air superiority, but if Kuum Doona was to be a long-term acquisition, there probably wasn’t much avoiding it, not unless it was possible to use whatever form of locomotion it had to descend into the Boundless Pit beyond the range of the tuung, which from what I’d read meant about a hundred miles.

The tuung were the main attraction, but the Boundless Pit had other wonders to pique my interest, enormous animals crawling on the rock walls (mildly annoyed by the floodlights, swishing their tails at us), bioluminescent fungi that spanned a large, splotchy mile of the Pit walls (with settlements and farmers in among it), and the occasional abandoned settlement made by someone else’s hand, imprints of occupation attempts, some of them now taken over by the tuung, others left abandoned when the original owners had called it quits. The Boundless Pit was a Mystery, one of many on Aerth, and various people had been drawn in over the centuries, wanting to tease at the edges of
reality. I wasn’t much in the mood for Mysteries at that particular moment; I wanted things simple and straightforward.

“And here we reach the end of our journey,” said Taft, hours after we’d set off but still far too quickly for my tastes. The Down and Out had moved away from the walls, and the floodlights illuminated only the water in the air. “We’re more than seven miles down now, and at this point, the walls are about four times as far away as when we started out. I’ve never been past the twenty mile mark myself, but the tuung have assured me that the Boundless Pit lives up to its name, and every resource the Third Empire has thrown at it seems to agree. Since this is a late run, and it’s probably near sunset on the surface,” he pointed up, to where there was a hazy circle of light that could be seen if I leaned past the tarp, “I’m going to take a minute to turn off all the lights, so you can see what it’s like here in the dark.”

He went over to the panel on the side of the cabin, which connected to the floodlights. I was guessing that and a few other systems had been bolted on after the forge frenzy that had created the ship, mostly because they didn’t quite match the aesthetic. With a few flicked switches, the floodlights turned off, plunging us into darkness.

“This is how most of the tuung live,” said Taft into the darkness. “At night, this part of the Pit is close to being pitch black, and in the day, it doesn’t get too much brighter. Most of the deep tuung don’t have power, not like we do on the surface, which means that they work in a place that’s not got much more than subtle grades of black. Some live and work in caves, but others are forced by necessity to climb out along the walls, whether to farm or forage.” He cleared his throat. “Now, think about what it would be like to fall, the blackness that would envelop you, as what little light there was got further and further away. The time it would take you to fall down here from Headwater? Forty-eight seconds. Now, imagine that you were one of the tuung who saw your brethren fall, or simply sat there waiting in your communal home for them to return, only for it to never happen. That’s what it was like for the tuung for thousands of years. When they talk about how it’s better to live in the hells than to fade away into nothing, I think that’s --”

His voice cut off, leaving the ship utterly silent.

“That’s a knife at your throat,” said Amaryllis. “Now, I want you to turn the lights back on, very slowly and very carefully, so we can have a talk. We don’t want to hurt you, but we will if we have to.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Taft with a sigh, but the lights went back on a moment later, illuminating the scene.

Fenn stood toward the back of the ship, glove back on her hand and bow fully drawn. Amaryllis was behind Taft, with a dagger at his throat, just as she’d said, as calm as I’d ever seen her. Taft’s wife was turned back toward us, her feathers ruffled and mouth halfway open, and although she was turned toward Taft, she had seen the bow and arrow pointed at her. For myself, I had a rifle that had been thrust into my hands in the dark, but I was pointing it down at the ship with my finger off the trigger, largely because of ingrained lessons on gun safety.

“Sam, tattoos now, please,” she said with a nod toward me. Mine I had already moved, down from my neck to around the tip of my pinky finger, and I got up and collected the other three in short order. When I was in the middle of removing Fenn’s, I heard Amaryllis again. “Don’t you dare touch that radio.”

“I have to,” said Rattle-Clack. “They require periodic check-ins.”

“I haven’t heard any,” said Amaryllis.
“I moved up the pitch to beyond human hearing,” said Rattle-Clack. “It’s a courtesy to our guests, so they don’t have to hear the chatter.”

“Step out of the cabin, please,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t believe that you keep so tight a schedule that a few minutes are going to make the difference.”

Rattle-Clack closed her mouth and got up from her stool, then moved out from inside the cabin with her arms raised, though much more lazily than Taft.

“To be honest, I’m waiting on my wife’s I-told-you-so,” said Taft.

“I told you so,” said Rattle-Clack, deadpan.

“Ah, there it is,” said Taft, smiling her way. “That’s a real relief.”

“When are the check-ins?” asked Amaryllis, not removing her knife. “What information is communicated?”

“Every mile,” said Rattle-Clack. “All I tell them is our depth and what part of the tour we’re on.”

“And if you don’t check-in?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” answered Rattle-Clack. She tilted her head to the side and blinked with the nictitating membrane. “I think they would come after us.”

“I’ve always assumed that we were being shadowed by a squadron, just far enough away that they can stay out of the light,” said Taft. “Their wings would allow for it. Let me go and we can return to the surface, no repercussions on your end.”

“Opinions?” asked Amaryllis in my direction.

“There are potential traps in allowing a check-in, some of them spur of the moment, which we might be able to catch, others built in, which we couldn’t. I don’t want to share too many of my bright ideas, and you probably already have me beat there,” I said. I was fairly certain that Rattle-Clack wasn’t just listening in at a higher pitch, she had been communicating at a higher one too, which opened up all sorts of possibilities for her, depending on how her radio had been configured and what the tuung on the other end were expecting. “We’re two miles from where we need to be. I’m not sure exactly what this craft is capable of, but --”

“Three miles an hour, in good weather,” said Rattle-Clack.

“Hekni,” said Amaryllis in Grak’s direction (his false name literally meant ‘name’ in Groglir), “Get started on figuring out how to pilot this thing and how fast it can go, we’re going to get started on trying to find Kuum Doona.” He moved without a word, slipping past the Animalia, who gave him a wide berth; as a warder he was our de facto expert on magic items, mostly because he could see them better.

“Oh, so you’re all insane,” said Taft. “Well that makes a bit more sense.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Fenn. Her smile was forced; I could tell she didn’t like being in this position, aiming at innocent people, any more than I did. Her bow was still drawn and pointed at Rattle-Clack, the magic of her scars allowing her to hold the bow taut almost indefinitely without wavering.

“We’ll be shot out of the air before you can get close to it,” said Rattle-Clack.
“Any help you could give us would be appreciated,” said Amaryllis. The comment was underscored by the knife she still had at Taft’s throat.

“Approach from above,” said Taft.

“Don’t you dare help them,” said Rattle-Clack, finally dropping her raised arms and folding them across her chest.

“I’m looking out for my ship,” said Taft, smiling at his wife. He couldn’t turn his head, but his eyes tracked back to me. “Most of the successful attempts on Kuum Doona have been overhead, because then you only need to avoid the lightning strikes, not the cannonfire. Granted, ‘success’ means being able to set foot on it, where you’re likely to face whatever got the various teams that have been sent there, but at least my ship has a better chance of being safe.”

“Can you take this seriously?” asked Rattle-Clack.

The ship began to move again, this time under Grak’s direction, wobbling slightly as he tested the controls, then straightening out and dropping down. I could only judge by the movement of the air around us, most of which was blocked by the tarp, but it seemed like they had been telling the truth; the Down and Out was just glacially slow (which made sense, given that a faster craft might have been used for something other than a sedate tour, but was still a problem for us).

“I think we should have her check-in,” I said. “On balance, it seems like the better option.”

Amaryllis finally stepped out from behind Taft as a rope began encircling him of its own volition. Ropey wasn’t terribly strong, but he could tighten his own knots well enough that they could hold me, let alone a tour operator. “Make the check-in then,” said Amaryllis with a nod toward Rattle-Clack. The dagger in her hand warped and changed into a thin sword, and it was only then that I realized she’d been using the Anyblade.

“Fun,” said Taft, testing his restraints. “I guess we’ll see whether I’m right about the squadron shadowing us.”

“You’re not,” called Grak from the cabin. “I would have seen their magic.”

“Ah,” said Taft, wincing slightly.

Amaryllis went into the cabin with Grak for a moment, mostly to check over and adjust the radio. There was some chatter between the two of them about that; we wanted to be able to hear what Rattle-Clack said, but she was capable of speaking at a higher frequency than we could hear, and changing the settings on the microphone could alter the message in a way that might give us away even if she was acting in good faith.

Rattle-Clack went over to Taft, and the two of them held a sotto voce conversation. I could hear well enough to catch the gist of it; she was berating him for his greed, theatrics, and self-sabotage, not plotting an escape attempt. I went over to stand by Fenn, with my rifle still pointed at the deck of the ship rather than at the couple.

“I’m feeling a bit anxious,” said Fenn. “Didn’t quite like the look of those tuung flying around. They remind me of one too many bad experiences in the Risen Lands.”

“They do?” I asked.

“Birds,” nodded Fenn. “There’s a containing wall around the whole place, but you can’t keep birds out, and with all the crops gone to seed, there’s plenty for them to eat. Then they die, and you get
whole flocks of undead.”

“That’s a sight that I’m glad I missed,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Fenn. “Well, if we’re unlucky, we’re going to get to see all the problems with fighting things in the sky up close and personal.” She frowned. “I’m good with a bow, really fucking good, but there are limits. Not that keen on sending soldiers down to the hells either.”

“But you will?” I asked.

“Sure,” nodded Fenn. “ Might need some wine and cuddles after though. Helps that they’re ugly as sin. Shouldn’t help, maybe, but it does.”

Once Amaryllis had given the radio a once-over, Rattle-Clack was ushered over to it in order to make the check-in. The only response was a terse, “Roger, out,” which she said was about par for the course in how the tuung responded to any radio communication. With that accomplished, she joined back with her husband, and Ropey bound the two of them together, at which point Fenn finally let go of her draw.

After that, it was time to suit up. All of our equipment had been stored inside the glove, and Fenn spilled armor out onto the deck, which drew complaints from Taft, who still didn’t seem terribly concerned about being hijacked, even though for all he knew, we were a heavily armed and highly skilled mercenary squad. Amaryllis put on her immobility plate, and I put on the absorption armor, plus my standard complement of bandoliers, which I was starting to think less of, given how well soul magic and bone magic worked together to make bones and fairies redundant.

(I had argued that we should just bring Val along in the glove with a few hours worth of air tanks, but Amaryllis had objected on practical grounds, namely that we were unlikely to find ourselves in a situation where Val was exactly what we needed, and that it wasn’t without its own risks, and that it would placate the handmaid, and that it was better to have someone stay behind to keep the return location for a teleport clear. Valencia had objected on largely personal grounds; she wanted some independence and time alone, even if it was just going to be spent reading the rest of the Harry Potter books in a hotel room and maybe ordering room service.)

We’d been flying for forty minutes when there was an irregularity with one of the check-ins. Instead of a final response of “Roger, out,” it was “Roger, wait.” On hearing that, Rattle-Clack had tilted her head to the side and looked at the microphone.

“Problem?” asked Amaryllis.

“Irregular,” said Rattle-Clack.

“We’re at the right depth,” said Grak. “I will start circling the edge of the Pit.”

“Say again, over,” came the crackling voice from the radio.

“This is the Down and Out, we are on our way back up, at the five mile check-in, over,” said Rattle-Clack. Taft aside, we were all standing near or in the cabin, waiting.

There was silence from the radio for a fairly long time, long enough that I started to wonder whether something had happened to the equipment, but I got the answer to what was going on when I felt a sharp pain in my pinky finger, which instantly started bleeding where the Fool’s Choker had severed the flesh. I was wearing all four of them on that finger, and they went off one by one, cutting into the flesh down to the bone. I touched a bone in my bandolier and burned it to heal myself. Amaryllis was watching me with wide eyes.
“That would have been an international incident,” said Amaryllis. “What the fuck are they thinking?”

“They were probably waiting for us to come up,” said Rattle-Clack with a shrug. “They knew that I was lying, and hopefully they’ll believe I was lying under duress.”

“If we survive long enough for that to matter!” called Taft from where he was roped up.

“Roger, repeat status, over,” came the voice from the radio.

Rattle-Clack turned from the radio and looked at Amaryllis. “What do you want me to say?”

“We’re going to radio silence,” said Amaryllis. She let out a breath. “Hekni, can you pilot this craft in darkness?”

“Yes,” replied Grak. “The light isn’t doing anything for me.” I was close enough to look over at the controls, which somewhat incredibly consisted of only six different levers, each stuck at various positions, with two of them locked in place by pieces of metal that were, like the radio, obviously not part of the original design. Pitch, yaw, roll, with pitch and roll locked down, then three levers for movement along x, y, and z? However it worked, I was glad that we weren’t relying on one of our hostages to fly.

“I’ll kill the lights,” I said.

We moved in darkness, trusting in Grak’s magic-vision to get us where we needed to be. Based on our past discussions about the monocle, he would be able to see everything that had latent, passive, or active magic in it, which meant that it applied to about 95% of all things, including almost all magic items and most living creatures (save for non-anima).

(We’d tried to grab night vision goggles out of the backpack, but it had said no; the cut-off for technology seemed to be some point before World War II, even if the backpack was content to give us both Earth-modern instructions and most sufficiently simple Earth-modern parts. Amaryllis thought that she could have gotten something working if she’d had a week, which she didn’t have.)

“I think I see it,” said Grak, after a tense forty-five minutes of flying in darkness. He must have moved a lever, because the ship came to a halt in mid-air, rocking us slightly to the side. “It’s in a crevice. Approach from overhead would be impossible.”

“I’d like to leave,” said Rattle-Clack, speaking up from the darkness. “I can fly under my own power, well enough to glide down to one of the tuung cities. I’ll take my time, so that you’re either dead or inside by the time I get there.”

“And your husband?” asked Amaryllis. Something about the darkness made her voice seem smaller.

“He’s been on this ship with no escape plan for his entire life,” replied Rattle-Clack.

“It’s true,” said Taft. “A fact I’ve been reminded of every day since I got married.” He still seemed cheerful enough about matters, in spite of everything. I didn’t think that we were facing down our death here, but he certainly seemed to, and he was somehow putting a positive spin on it. I was starting to re-evaluate what people had meant when they’d called him odd.

“We have parachutes,” said Fenn. “We can dump you off the side too, maybe with a flashlight.”

“A captain goes down with his ship,” said Taft with a small laugh.

“Sam, light?” asked Amaryllis.
“Sure,” I replied. I drew the heat from my blood in steps, making the flame first come from my fingertip, then down my finger, until finally it wreathed my hand and gave us enough light to see by, each step allowing my eyes to adjust. Taft and Rattle-Clack were illuminated, tied up together; it was hard to read any expression on her face, but Taft seemed somewhere between contented and resigned.

“I’m willing to let you fly away,” said Amaryllis, holding the Anyblade in front of her as a full sword. “I don’t particularly want your blood on our hands.”

Once Amaryllis had commanded Ropey to let her out of her bonds, Rattle-Clack gave Taft a quick peck on the cheek. “I hope to see you again, husband.”

“You too, wife,” replied Taft with a nod. “Maybe if I die, I can tell you what’s at the bottom of the pit when I’m in the hells.”

She stepped to the edge of the ship, then jumped out over the edge with her arms to her side and her wings spread; we could hear her flapping over the muted sound of the perpetual waterfall for only a little bit, until there was nothing.

“I’d prefer to be untied,” said Taft, once she was away. “I’d hate for you all to die and leave me here at the mercy of cannonfire and the ship without a pilot.”

“We’re not going to die,” said Amaryllis.

“We probably won’t die,” said Fenn.

“All the same,” said Taft. “I’d like to meet my fate head-on, rather than tied up and helpless. I’ll be good, captain’s promise, and if I’m not, feel free to toss me overboard.”

“Okay,” I said, before Amaryllis could answer. As I said the word, Ropey began unwinding from him, slipping him free of his bonds, then it wriggled across the deck of the ship like a snake and wrapped itself around my waist, in its familiar place; that added utility was probably the best argument for untying Taft.

“I have a map,” said Grak, coming out from the cabin, where he’d been sitting with Fenn. He held forth a sheet of paper, which was slightly damp from the ever-present mist. On it he’d made a diagram of the building, drawn with a series of very straight lines, as though he’d been copying from a low-poly model of the building, or perhaps just hadn’t ever learned how to draw a curve. It showed a large section of rock-face that was cracked down the middle, and there, right at the top, a building was nestled, built more tall than wide, and seemingly perfectly fitted to the location it had been placed in. I wasn’t sure exactly how much Grak was capable of seeing from a mile away, but there were a few details on the building that I assumed were a reflection of what he had seen, rather than simple embellishments. There was a door at the base of the building, opening to nowhere, a bevy of arrow-slit windows, and some small circles that were meant to be – something. The “skin” of the fortress seemed to be made of scales, which were detailed in a separate picture off to one side.

“What are these?” I asked, pointing to the circles. “Cannons?”

“I don’t know,” said Grak. “There are many different forms of magic, many of them overlapping each other. I’ve been cycling through the views. It is hard to tell from a distance, but there are sixteen wards.”

He didn’t say out loud that these were wards that Amaryllis was keyed to, but that was what we were hoping. In an ideal world, we’d spend the next twenty minutes crossing the last mile to the
fortress, and whatever dim intelligence was powering its defenses would somehow recognize Amaryllis and allow her in without any problems. If that didn’t happen, we’d have to take the harder approach of evading its offensive and defensive capabilities and then getting Grak somewhere that would allow him to either breach the wards or circumvent them well enough to get us partially in to the point where we could try something else.

“Incoming,” said Grak. He was looking up and off into the distance. I let the light from my fire of my blood drop; I was starting to get a slight chill anyway.

“Tuung? How many?” asked Fenn.

“More than a hundred,” said Grak. “I see a warder’s monocle on one, they’ll find us even without the light.”

“Fuck,” I said. “Do we make a run for the fortress, or try to fight them off?”

“We have two minutes,” said Grak, his voice even. He went into the cabin and threw one of the levers forward, which sent the ship rocking again. When that was done, he came back out. “We’re on a collision course. Someone will need to stop the craft if something happens to me.”

“Well, fuck,” I said. Amaryllis threw the floodlights on, and I was momentarily blinded by them -- but better to be blinded while waiting for the enemy to arrive, rather than in the middle of combat.

“There,” said Grak, pointing up at a region of the sky.

“Using artillery now,” said Fenn, as an arrow appeared in her hand and she drew back her bow. For all her talk of reticence earlier, she wasn’t hesitating now. Maybe it was easier because they’d tried to kill us with the collars. “There?” she asked.

“A touch lower,” said Grak.

Fenn fired the arrow, which became a cloud of arrows as it left our view. She let the bow go limp in her hand as she looked at Grak expectantly.

A flurry of names, defeated! went by across my vision, startling me; it had been a fair amount of time since I’d seen one, and the HUD had faded into the background of my existence. Each of the tuung had been given a name, rather than being left as nameless soldiers, and I was too busy to spare time trying to tease apart why that decision had been made.

“Less than a hundred now,” he said, letting out a breath. “You were high.”

“You have an impressive array of magic,” said Taft.

“Shut up,” said Fenn. She took a breath, raised the bow again, and let off another arrow, this time without looking to Grak for guidance. There was something eerie about the multiplying sound of the arrows in flight, and the way they seemed to vanish. It was like firing a shotgun in the dark, hoping that with sufficient firepower you might hit something. I couldn’t help imagining how terrifying it would be to be faced with a storm of arrows while flying blindly through the air. The tuung could see in the dark far better than I could, but still, it wasn’t like you could dodge that many arrows, even if you could see them.

“They’re scattering,” said Grak, “But they’re still coming towards us.”

“I’m saving the other two shots until they get close enough to see,” said Fenn. She looked pale and nauseous.
I raised my rifle to my shoulder, waiting, while Amaryllis picked up her own rifle, which Fenn had
deposited by the door. It was a void rifle of her own design, one that she must have upgraded
considerably since our time in the Risen Lands, since there were so few of the same parts that I
wasn’t sure whether it could even be considered the same gun. The effective range of void weaponry
was low, compared to a rifle or arrow, but there were quite a few things it was capable of punching
through, and if they had a warder with them, then I was pretty sure that they’d have at least one
surprise waiting for us as well.

Fenn started firing before I could see anything, not the artillery shots, but two or three arrows at once,
done with a swiftness and casual grace that nothing on Earth could ever have matched, and helped
by the fact that arrows could appear in her waiting fingers at the speed of thought. Her eyes were
better than mine; she was firing with purpose, but to me the things she was shooting at were only
vague shapes at the edge of the light. I saw one of the tuung well enough to make out the dragonfly-
wings on his back, and saw him jerk backward and then start tumbling down.

“They’re dropping below the ship,” said Grak. “They’re going to come from beneath.”

“They,” said Amaryllis. She went to the hatch that led down into the observation area, and I followed
after as the repeated twang of Fenn’s bow filled the air. When I got down there, Amaryllis was
already breaking out glass with the butt of the void rifle, either to get a better view, or because it
would interfere with the void rifle’s range too much. I followed her lead with my own rifle and tried
not to think about the wanton destruction we were causing. The seats down there were terrifying,
suspended over glass for a spine-tingling sense of danger during the descent.

I took my first shot as I saw one of the tuung come up from below the ship, which was when I
realized that I hadn’t grabbed hearing protection; it was loud enough to be physically painful. My
shot hit him in the breastplate, which briefly arrested his upward motion. I fired again, and hit him
somewhere in the head or shoulders, then watched as he fell away, wings no longer flapping.

_Hian Tsal defeated!

More followed. The sound of my rifle became a staccato, interrupted only briefly when no suitable
target presented itself. My pulse was racing as I killed one, then two, the sweep of the rifle across the
blackness of the pit automatic, with better form than I’d ever had back on Earth, calm and military
even though a part of my mind was recoiling at how detached and methodical the killing was. I tried
not to pay attention to the notifications telling me their names.

After six rounds, I had to reload the rifle, which gave me time to listen to the _thunk_ of Amaryllis
firing off the void rifle beside me. As I was sliding the magazine into place, one of the half-spear
swords came flying up towards me. It was only through dumb luck or a bad throw that it embedded
itself in the wall beside me rather than hitting me. I raised the rifle and fired at the tuung that had
thrown it, catching him in the chest and sending him spinning down into the void.

_Ini Nga defeated!

There were too many of them. Even if I could have hit one with every shot, which I couldn’t, they
would close the distance too quickly. The void rifle, with its periodic fire, was limited to once every
four seconds, which was far too slow when facing down so many of them. I fired again, a glancing
blow off breastplate near the tuung’s shoulder, and my second shot on him missed, largely because
he’d changed direction in response to the fire. The third hit entered by the nose, and he was close
enough that the floodlights illuminated the spray of blood. There were other targets, a full two dozen
of them visible now, but if we stayed and fought they were going to be on us, and even burning
through my bones I didn’t think that I was good enough to survive the encounter, even if I could take
a lot of them out with me.

I turned to Amaryllis to tell her that we were fighting a losing battle, and was just in time to catch
sight of an explosion from above us that funneled liquid fire down into the room we were in. It was
bright blue, cryofire, a flame that burned cold instead of hot, something that I’d thought up while
sitting in Mr. Sorbo’s math class, translated in Aerb to a spell known by the pustule mages. I
scrambled back away from it, not wanting to get frozen, and shouted to Amaryllis for her to do the
same. Some of the liquid cryoflame dripped down past the glass that made up the lower floor, falling
into the void below us. It was of a limited duration, but said some horrible things about how it was
going upstairs.

I raised my rifle and began firing again, at tuung soldiers who were now close enough that I could
see the whites of their eyes, more than a dozen of them in my field of view. They had their spirit
blades at hand, and at a shouted command, “Fai!” they were throwing their blades at me, too much
makeshift artillery for me to handle.

I burned bones to heal as soon as the blades had disappeared, before I was even fully conscious of
where I’d been injured. One had driven through my throat, spilling blood, and another had clipped
the side of my head, hard enough that my vision was swimming. It wasn’t until my rifle slipped from
my fingers that I realized I’d been hit there too, cutting through some kind of connective tissue there
and making me lose my grip, not to mention soaking the rifle with blood. It fell down out of the
broken-out windows and tumbling into the void as well, leaving me with only my throwing dagger.

Before they could launch another volley, I moved, pushing my way through the cryoflame even as I
was still in the process of healing myself. I saw one of the spirit swords hit me in the side and get
absorbed by my armor, with the rest crashing around me. I wasn’t actually sure that I could survive
something that went into my brain, if it disrupted my ability to heal myself that severely. I didn’t
really have much time to examine that thought as it went through my head though, because the cold
of the cryoflame hit me, freezing wherever it touched, like a hand stuck out into frigid, windy, winter
air. I could feel my muscles seizing up, even as I pushed out with the warmth of my blood, trying to
counteract the chill of the places where the flames had passed through.

I was halfway up the ladder when the rungs beneath my feet shattered, and when I slipped down and
put my weight on the upper rungs in full, they broke too, frozen to the point where they’d lost their
durability. I burned through all the bones of my foot, which I’d mentally designated as emergency
reserve, as I tried to solve the problem with sufficient SPD. It was the most I had ever pulled before,
and the world immediately seemed to go into slow motion. I saw and reached for one of the girders
that had held the triangles of glass in place, and managed to grab onto it just before I would have
fallen past the point of no return. Shards of frozen glass bit into my hand and my shoulder was nearly
pulled from its socket, and I gave an inarticulate scream of pain before pushing through it and
reaching up with my other hand to secure my grip.

Before I could, a host of spirit blades came flying through the air at me. A few were simply absorbed
by the armor, but it had enough white patches to it that I was bound to be hit by at least one. The
armor blocked the hit, but I twisted from the force of the impact, which cut my hand more from the
glass, and broke my grip.

I only fell ten feet before I came to a stomach-churning stop that squeezed my waist hard enough that
I nearly puked. Ten feet of rope connected me to the ship, leaving me as a sitting duck for the tuung
throwing their spirit blades. I pulled my dagger from its sheath, then slipped on the leather band that
had the sapphire in it, pressing it against the skin of my palm.

I parried away one of the incoming spirit blades, and took more hits to the armor, one of which it
didn’t absorb. I was sent spinning and swinging on the rope, making me harder to hit, but making it almost impossible for me to hit a damned thing, not to mention making a second parry nearly impossible.

I closed my fist around the gem and channeled the abstract concept of light through it the next time I saw the tuung as I spun around. Forty-two projectiles shot out, their angles away from me randomized into a fat-angled cone. I didn’t see where they went, but I didn’t need to; the gem magic intuited the targets, through some process that was still a mystery, beyond Do What I Mean.

Ngai Tiou defeated!

Hene Tsa defeated!

Nguno Tsa defeated!

I watched the mental exhaustion meter tick down to 67/90, and started counting the seconds until I could use it again. I threw the dagger at the nearest tuung I could see, whipping it as hard as I could to try to cross the distance, then used my free hand to grab the rope and attempt to arrest my swaying, spinning motion, but I had made little progress with that by the time my dagger was on its way back.

I took a hit to my foot, where I was still wearing sneakers, and felt the blade slide between my toes. I parried one blade, then a second in short order, burning more speed to do so and nearly reaching the end of the bones that I could use safely. I kept glancing up at the rope, at Ropey, though I didn’t actually have the attention to spare for it, worried that one of the tuung would eventually get lucky and slice through it, leaving me to fall into the endless abyss.

I survived seven more seconds and let loose with another blast of the sapphire’s magic. There were more names in the notifications this time, as the same amount of projectiles fired out toward a smaller number of assailants. I was spinning around slowly enough that I was able to see them hit, blue motes with slender trails curving through the air to find their targets. The tuung had spread out to avoid rifle fire, which was perfectly working against them now, because the shotgun spread of blue could find someone to hit no matter where it was pointed.

A part of Ropey uncoiled from around me, and I reacted in alarm until I realized what he was doing; he made loops for my feet and fashioned a harness, then, with a lurch, dropped me half a foot into a better position to make the climb. I still had to climb using almost purely upper body strength, but once I was past a certain point, the rope reconfigured itself so that I could make my way up more easily. I freed up my hand for long enough to fire another blast of projectiles behind me, not so much as looking at the results, trusting in the magic to do its own work. It was a large gem, and I could feel the drain from using it already, the way that my thoughts weren’t coming as fast, compromising both my judgement and a wide range of my abilities.

“Get up top!” Amaryllis screamed to me as I finally clambered up onto the metal struts, fingers finding fresh glass to cut themselves on. She’d been firing away with the void rifle, showing no particular concern about the white markings of the cryoflame not six inches away from her. There were a few marks on her armor, as well as on the wood and cushions around her, but the immobility plate was proper plate armor, and the spirit blades simply weren’t strong enough to get through. I felt a wave of relief at realizing that she was fine, and probably would be fine unless they physically dragged her off the ship, then went up through where the ladder had been, testing each handhold carefully before putting any weight on it.

I reached the upper level of the ship, barely able to move my fingers, where pandemonium was reigning. Fenn was backed up against the side of the cabin, bow drawn, as one of the tuung
approached her with his sword drawn. Grak was fighting off three tuung that had landed on the ship with his axe, moving between them with quick, sure motions, striking at armor and then dodging a sword. He was spattered in blood; and I realized only belatedly that he was fighting one-handed; his left arm ended in a bloody and smeared stump.

I threw my dagger at the tuung next to Fenn, and immediately realized the problem when it was brought to a perfect stop at the back of his head before falling to the ground. If that wasn’t the work of some entad, then he was a still mage, athenaeum trained. Just as I came to that conclusion, Fenn let loose her arrow -- it brought the tuung up short for just a moment, long enough for her to materialize a void pistol in her hand and fire it at him. He fell to the ground, and without missing a beat, Fenn tossed the pistol to me. I caught it just as the notification popped up, and spun toward where Grak was fighting, firing it as soon as it was ready again, as bad an idea as shooting in a melee was.

Thwip.

Muni Tan defeated!

An arrow caught another one in the head, and Grak caught the third under the chin with his axe, cutting partway into his head. As soon as the body hit the floor, Grak spun around, looking for others, and threw his axe off the side of the ship to hit a tuung that had just crested up over the side. The axe returned to Grak’s hand a moment later, and he looked off into the open air for a moment, searching for targets.

And suddenly, just like that, there was silence, leaving only a ringing in my ears.

“They’re in retreat,” said Grak, speaking loudly, and still barely audible. He let out a shaky breath and clenched the handle of his axe so hard that his knuckles turned white.

I made to go over to the hatchway to check on Amaryllis, but when I turned to look at it, she was already coming up and being given a hand by Fenn. I burned another bone, focusing on my ears, and after a few seconds could hear properly again, the persistent ringing suddenly quiet and sounds suddenly snapping back into focus. I turned my attention to Grak and administered healing to him; I had no idea what I was supposed to do about the missing hand, except that the wholesale regrowing of bone was beyond my current abilities.

“Pustule mage killed. Still mage killed. Warder still alive and tracking us,” said Grak. “Twenty left, all told.”

“What?” asked Amaryllis, speaking too loud. I went over to her and laid a hand on her shoulder and burned a bone to help her hearing, then dove into my soul to restock while I had the chance; I had burned through two-thirds of the bones I could safely poach from. The conversation was too distant for me to make out from within my soul, but I had little doubt that repairing the bones was the best use of my time. When I came out, the conversation had moved on.

“No, either we broke them or they’re waiting for reinforcements,” said Amaryllis. “Maybe both.”

“We’re within range of the mansion,” said Taft as he emerged from the cabin. His hands were shaking and his pupils were dilated, but he was still smiling, albeit a little too wide.

“How in the godsfuck are you still alive?” asked Fenn.

“I went into the cabin,” said Taft. He looked between the four of us. “This feels like the end, doesn’t it?”
“Just shut your fucking mouth or I’ll kill you myself you weirdo birdfucker,” said Fenn. She had her fists clenched tight, her bow, for the moment, stored back within the glove. I could see the muscles on her neck strained tight.

“Fenn,” said Grak. She opened her mouth to say something in response, then closed it when she looked down at the stump where he was missing a hand.

“What does it mean that we’re in range?” asked Amaryllis. Her voice had gone flat, devoid of all emotion.

A flash of lightning arced out through the sky, briefly blinding me, and the thunderclap that followed behind it deafened me (right after I’d just restored my hearing).

“Warning shot!” yelled Taft, grinning wide. That cemented the idea that something was deeply wrong with him, either the way he responded to stress, or a peculiar streak of fatalism.

He was proven wrong a moment later when a piece of the cabin exploded, sending sharp bits of wood toward us. If I hadn’t been forewarned of cannonfire, I might not have been able to distinguish it as that. The sound from it rolled in just a bit later.

Grak pulled his diagram from within the recesses of his armor, and held it forward to Fenn. It was stained with blood. “We’re not going to make it. You’re going to have to take the shot.” It took me a moment to follow his train of thought; he was thinking that we would do something similar to what we’d done to escape the prison, piling ourselves into the glove, which would then be launched via a time-delayed arrow from the sand bow.

“Wards?” asked Amaryllis.

“Velocity wards will slow it down,” he said.

Fenn turned toward the direction the ship was heading, scowling ahead at the darkness. “I can see it, but just barely. Not a shot I’d want to stake all our lives on, if there’s a ward at the end to fuck things up.”

“Hit the wall above,” said Amaryllis. “I can drop down without much risk, if I have --”

Another bolt of lightning came from the fortress, this one striking the craft. It was there in a flash, so quick that there was no chance of avoiding it, if it were coming for you. The strike hit the cabin, setting things on fire in there and blasting apart the chair, while at the same time melting through the metal of some of the controls.

Fenn made the sand bow appear in her hand, then held out her hand to us. “Masks once you’re in,” she said, speaking loudly in the wake of the lightning strike. “Mary’s on point.”

It was a matter of seconds to get the prepared breathing masks out of the glove, and once the strap was over my shoulder, I took one finger of Fenn’s glove to get the ten-second countdown started which would allow me to get into the glove. I was feeling fried from the repeated use of gem magic, like I’d gone through a three hour test and wanted nothing more than to sit on the couch and watch some kind of TV that didn’t require any mental investment on my part. I almost missed the fact that Taft was standing off to one side, not offered a mask and not requesting one, simply looking out off the side of the ship, down into the Boundless Pit.

There was a part of me that wanted to press the issue, to pull my hand away and demand that we save him, even if he didn’t seem like he really wanted to be saved, even if he was content to die as the ship was destroyed, but it had taken me too long to notice, and then I was inside the black void of
the glove, a place so familiar that it was becoming like home.
The House of Solitude

After they’d escaped the prison, and the misadventure with Fallatehr had been concluded, Amaryllis and Fenn had spent some time trying to work out a better way of doing the arrow transportation trick, and how it might be altered for different circumstances. This was a combination of those scenarios, and some testing that they had done. An arrow fired from the sand bow would stay still with respect to Aerb, the same rules that the immobility plate worked on. This meant that in any scenario where we were already moving, we had a somewhat serious problem, which was that the arrow wouldn’t keep moving along with us.

The protocol for if the “telearrow” needed to be fired from something moving was that Amaryllis would load everyone into the glove, fire off the arrow, and then lock her immobility plate at the exact same instant that the arrow froze in place. If she were firing an arrow normally, this would leave the arrow out of her reach (she had tried this) so the protocol, such as it was, was that she would fire the arrow backwards, aiming it more or less over her shoulder, which would absolutely kill the distance, but at least allow her to enter into the glove inside the arrow, assuming that she’d first removed the vambrace and gauntlet from one of the arms of her armor.

(I hated the name telearrow, by the way. It had been coined by Fenn, but the ‘tele-’ prefix meant ‘far’, and all arrows, almost by definition, were already traveling across great distances, and further, the telearrow didn’t actually go any further than a normal arrow, and in fact, due to weight, balance, and worse aerodynamics, tended to go quite a bit less far. The proper term for it, if you wanted to smush ‘arrow’ and ‘teleport’ together into a portmanteau, would have been ‘arrowport’, which correctly conveyed what it was actually doing. Fenn thought that sounded too much like ‘airport’ though, and besides, she had already named and ‘invented’ it with Amaryllis’ help, and sternly refused to change it.)

Of course, Amaryllis was far worse at actually shooting a bow than Fenn was, especially with Fenn’s scars functional once again. Fenn wasn’t just a masterful archer, she was scarily strong, able to pull the bowstring back to the point where she thought that she could break a normal string from the draw alone. Entads were (generally speaking) made of sterner stuff, and in this particular case, we needed both the distance and the aim that Fenn could provide.

Luckily, the ship wasn’t moving too fast, and so when it came down to it, Fenn was able to take the shot, walk briskly to keep up with the arrow, hop on Amaryllis, who had made herself immobile, and then touch the exposed part of the glove for ten seconds.

Amaryllis had freed both her arms from the armor, while one hand rested gentle fingers on the glove, feeling its magic, the other held a pocketwatch, which was counting down the seconds. Her eyes moved between the watch and Taft, occasionally flickering toward where Kuum Doona was on the horizon. For his part, Taft was simply standing at the edge of the Down and Out, which suffered another cannon hit as she watched. With three seconds left, and the ship far enough away that it would be very hard for Taft to do anything, Amaryllis entered the glove.

There was a totally different protocol for using the telearrow to strike a target high up. The use case, as Amaryllis had seen it, was that we might want to get to the top of something in a hurry, and flying us all in an arrow could do the trick, which would save us minutes if not hours of climbing. She had climbed up Sorian’s Castle, back in Silmar City, and one of the ways that Amaryllis operated was that she usually put thought into past situations to see how she could tackle them if she ran into them again. The inherent problem with firing an arrow up at something like a cliff-face or a tall building was that arrows were built to pierce, and most static structures were designed not to be pierced, even
if only incidentally; an arrow fired against glass, metal, or stone, would be too likely to bounce off, which at best would end up with us exiting the telearrow back on ground level where we started, or worse, someplace dangerous to exit from.

Amaryllis had tried a number of different solutions to get an arrow to stick, or at least come to a stop, but eventually settled on something very similar to a ‘crumple zone’ on a car; the tip was fragile, designed to break on impact, which would slow down the glove-carrying shaft of the arrow. A fast-bonding adhesive would then be carefully applied to the arrow before it was fired, and ideally it would stick to a wall, which would allow Amaryllis to get out of the glove, stick herself in place with the immobility plate, retrieve the arrow, and then either fall or climb to somewhere safe enough that the rest of us could get out. In testing (sans glove), the arrow stuck about one out of every three times.

While the “enter the arrow” part of the plan worked fine, the “exit the arrow” part didn’t really work at all.

Amaryllis popped out of the void seconds after she’d entered it, trusting in her pocketwatch and a rough guess about how long it would take the arrow to cross the distance. It was a jarring transition, to go from standing immobile a few dozen feet away from a brightly lit ship, to being inside the black void with only a hand of flame, and finally, standing so that she was looking out at the ship, turned around in the dark, with a ruined arrow spinning in front of her, illuminated by the flame of her blood, both of them falling.

She snatched the arrow from mid-air, then used the armor to bring herself to a halt. With the helmet of the immobility plate having been taken off, she could move around just enough that she could see the endlessly sloping rock wall behind her, and below that, visible only from the corner of her eye, Kuum Doona, which fired off a blindingly bright strike of lightning that left an abstract blue shape in her peripheral vision. She looked down at the arrow, trying to do a cursory analysis; at a first guess, the air had been too wet, which had negatively affected the adhesive. Another strained glance back at the rock face gave her a best-guess of twenty feet away from it. The crevice that Kuum Doona was nestled in was another fifty feet below. It wasn’t clear where, exactly, the lightning was coming from, but she had to assume that she was at risk if she was noticed. She’d snuffed out the blood flame the moment she’d grabbed the arrow, leaving her in near-total darkness, mostly lit by the residual light from the *Down and Out*.

Amaryllis unscrewed the arrow, extracted the glove, carefully pried the sticky arrow shaft from her hand and threw it down into the Pit, then put the glove on. So long as the lightning didn’t come her way, she had all the tools she needed to get within the wards of Kuum Doona, and once she was inside, there would be the matter of ensuring the house didn’t wish them harm, as it had, apparently, killed dozens of others.

The first step was to get to the rock wall. For that, Amaryllis had specialized tools, not just ropes, pitons, and a harness, all things she’d bought way back in Barren Jewel for the assault on Caer Laga, but a wound crossbow that she loaded with a heavy arrow, the end of which was attached to a length of thin, elven-made rope that had been purchased at great expense.

Turning around to actually face the Pit wall was tricky. Her arms were free, which meant that she could generate some amount of angular momentum. She would hold one arm out to the side, with the other across her breastplate, then swing them as fast as she could to the side. Partway through, she would stop the immobility from her armor, lock her arms so that the momentum was transferred to her body as efficiently as possible, and then make the armor immobile again before she could drop too far. It cost height, which was the resource she was most attempting to conserve, but she managed to get the job done.
The steel-tipped arrow was fired from its specialized crossbow, hurled across the relatively short distance separating them, then broke off part of the wall where it struck and fell limply down, trailing rope behind it until Amaryllis grabbed the end and began pulling it back up to reload it. All she needed was something that she could pull on, something that she could get some tension against, which would allow her to rapidly cycle the immobility plate on and off, and so long as her acceleration toward the rope was faster than gravity, she would make it over without losing too much height.

On the second shot, the arrow broke off more of the rock face, and this time when she reeled it back in, the tip was missing, snapped off by a bad hit. She stayed frozen in the air, looking at it for a moment, then sent it back into the glove and re-evaluated her position. The cannonfire from down below had stopped, as had the lightning strikes. The *Down and Out* was visible below her, spinning and on fire, the magic of the entad having finally failed. The fortress was taking no action against her. Did it not see her? Did it recognize her lineage at this range? Was it operating on some different set of protocols now that a threat was closer?

It was tempting to simply use the teleportation key and nope the fuck out. They could regroup at the hotel room in Headwater and be back in this exact same position in two hours’ time, having talked the situation over in detail and taken time to recover from the battle. The risk, naturally, was that when they returned, Kuum Doona would no longer be there.

Amaryllis got a thirty-pound weight out from the glove, which was attached to a length of thin mithral chain. She began swinging it around, and once it got up to speed, she carefully timed the release of her plate’s immobility so that it pulled her in the direction she wanted to go. In theory, she could have used this method to climb through the air, but in practice, it took a lot of effort to get the weight up to speed. By the time she made her way to the wall, she was soaked through with sweat, even though her arms were cold from nighttime in the damp Pit.

For the last little bit of movement, she used the Anyblade, extended into something resembling a polearm, then firmly wedged into the nearest crack in the rock. She pulled herself in by inches, cycling the armor’s ability so she wouldn’t fall too much, taking breaks when her muscles grew weak from the effort. A single marzipan fairy, taken from the glove and wolfed down quickly, cured the worst of her physical exhaustion, once she was close enough to touch the rock face and begin her descent.

Amaryllis was good at climbing. The Athenaeum of Quills and Blood was built high up on a plateau, and climbing was part of the school’s tradition, a sport taken to the extremes that magic would allow. There were paths on the school’s climbing walls that could only be taken if you were skilled in blood magic, capable of flinging yourself to the timing of your pulse from one hold to another. There were competitions, and clans of climbers; it was one of the school’s primary extracurriculars. Amaryllis had only been at the athenaeum for three years, which was long enough to have learned a little, but not so long that she had considered herself a blood mage. Climbing had been one of the things she’d pushed herself into, partly for the social access it allowed to upperclassmen, and partly because it allowed her some solitude. (Most of the climbing faces had velocity wards beneath them, layered so that you would be slowed by degrees as you passed through them and hit the ground no harder than if you’d tripped over your own feet on ground level, which meant there was no need for spotters or someone to belay her.)

She made her way down being as careful as she could, Anyblade in one hand as a claw-like device that could form itself precisely to any handhold and dig itself into nooks and crannies on her command. It was pitch black, which meant climbing was a thing done more by feel than by sight; she worried that the light would attract the attention of Kuum Doona, or the tuung, if they were out there, though she was certain that to a warder she would be radiant with magic. The rock face was a
persistent underhang of varying degrees, one of the worst surfaces to climb on, which meant that each new position was a matter of bracing and clinging as tightly as possible.

She could feel herself passing through the wards, and sighed in silent relief. Whatever else was going on with Kuum Doona, the wards were still keyed to her lineage, following her erstwhile branch of the family tree.

She reached Kuum Doona proper not two minutes later, finally putting hands on it. She had seen only a little of the place thus far, and now felt the structure of the building, odd pieces of metal and loops of metal, which she gradually realized were interlocking in the same way that chainmail does, each chain as wide as a coin, sheets of it beneath the metal plates, and wood or stone beneath those. Her fingers took a moment to trace it, trying to make sense of it. Someone had clad this building in both plate and chainmail, or perhaps it had been built that way during the forge frenzy. It made the descent go faster, which she was grateful for. She passed windows, each of them a different size and shape, some of them broken, leaving only shattered glass like teeth around the edges.

When her feet touched solid ground, she tested it carefully, putting more and more weight on it until she was standing fully on it, without the use of handholds. She ate another fairy, to take the edge off of physical exhaustion, waited until her breathing and heartrate had returned to their baseline levels, and only then risked producing a flame to look at where she was, ready to move at any moment.

The skin of Kuum Doona was an odd thing, with pieces of metal in vast, curved, expanses, welds and rivets running through them at places of symmetry, most of them scarred or pitted from hits they’d taken. In the places where the metal didn’t cover, there was chainmail, links of metal as large around as a wedding band, joined together and stretching over it. Where there wasn’t chainmail or plate, there was wood, grey and cracked, damp from the mist, or stone, irregular bricks that meshed together like puzzle pieces instead of sitting in regular, ordered rows. The rooms were oddly shaped, and didn’t make up a flat wall, but Kuum Doona didn’t give off the impression of being a ramshackle place put together of disparate elements, it seemed as though there was *purpose* in how the rooms had been arranged, if not any strict symmetry.

The main entrance to Kuum Doona was a set of double doors, some exotic, dark wood carved with a mural. This Amaryllis recognized; the left was a farmer tending to his farm, while the right was a king in his castle. Variations on this theme were common through Anglecynn; it was part of the mythologizing of Uther Penndraig, the boy who had grown up a farmer to claim his place as king. Here, the mural was cracked and chipped, scarred from battle.

In front of the door was a small walkway, made of stone and broken off after ten feet. This was what Amaryllis stood on, looking at the fortress that was hers by claim-in-fact. The fortress was still and silent. It didn’t shoot a bolt of lightning at her, nor did the cannons turn to fire by whatever mechanism allowed that. Amaryllis stayed where she was, making her best effort at being steely calm (and no one did steely calm like Amaryllis).

Slowly and deliberately, she began to bring us back out of the glove.

“Are we safe?” asked Fenn as she looked over the structure. She was staying close to Amaryllis, within arm’s reach, which was probably wise; Amaryllis had both the immobility plate and the teleportation key. The glove was back on Fenn’s hand though, the deal we’d made early on still honored. The Anyblade had also returned to its standard position as a bladed ring on my finger.

“We haven’t been attacked yet,” said Amaryllis. “That implies some level of safety. You can go stand in front of one of the cannons if you’d like to test it.”
“They aren’t cannons,” said Grak, pointing up to something that I couldn’t see by the light of my flashlight, even when I pointed it where he was indicating. “They’re pistols set in large housings. Disguised.” Sometimes he seemed to chew on words, like he’d been searching for the perfect one and wanted to savor what he’d found. “I’ve seen a few of them adjusting.”

“Pistols that shoot cannonballs?” asked Fenn with a frown.

“I don’t know,” said Grak.

“Oh,” I said. “Uh, that was from a campaign, a, uh, pirate campaign we did.” *Not actually a pirate campaign per se, an Age of Enlightenment campaign that turned into a pirate campaign despite my better efforts.* “Three times per day, with a misfire on a critical failure, the pistol would shoot cannonballs. Not automated, as I’d envisioned it, and not part of a building.”

Amaryllis frowned. “An adaptation.”

“Maybe,” I said. I looked over Kuum Doona. “I don’t really understand this place. It seems like it’s lacking a -- huh, central theme?” I wasn’t sure whether that made any sense, or whether I was too out of it to get across what I was thinking. It felt like I’d been doing whatever the mental equivalent of treading water was.

“The prison didn’t have a central theme,” said Fenn. “Brass and mud people.”

“It was different things at different times, overlapping each other in the present,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at the door, and the beaten-down mural there. “In the meta-sense, it was about identity, I think, to tie in with what was going on with Fallatehr. There were golems using flower magic, that bit was thematically about connection.”


“I’m pretty sure that she’s not giving the all-powerful god too much credit,” said Fenn. “But sure, keep bad-mouthing the Dungeon Master, I’ll just make a point of not standing too close to you.”

“So what’s the theme here then?” I asked.

“No idea,” said Amaryllis. She was still looking at the mural, or maybe just at the door.

“It’s a person,” said Grak.

“A person wearing plate and mail?” asked Amaryllis, shining her flashlight to the metal exterior. I could kind of see it, once Grak pointed it out.

Grak nodded. “Not in form. But it is likely sentient.”

“If this were a person, it would be a hot mess,” said Fenn, pointing a toe down at a bit of broken stone, not quite kicking at it.

One of the two doors, the side with the castle on it, creaked open. We all stared at it.

“That’s not to say that we don’t all have our flaws,” said Fenn, putting on a cheerful smile. “Myself, I have plenty. I’m a convicted felon on the run from the law, killed a hundred people about half an hour ago, I’m --”

“We should go in,” I said.

Amaryllis raised her flashlight and pointed it in through the open door. “There are bodies inside,” she
said. I looked to where she was pointing and saw the dark shapes there, with the occasional glint of metal. “Old,” she said, echoing my thoughts.

“Other teams that came here, the ones looking for treasure?” I asked.

Amaryllis waved the flashlight from side to side, then gave a curt nod. She frowned slightly, narrowing her eyes. “There were others, imperial forces trying to bring this place under control. According to rumor, anyway.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn. “Didn’t seem to have worked out for them, did it?”

“We should go in,” I said again. “The open door is an invitation.”

“Feel free to lead the way,” said Amaryllis, deadpan.

I stepped forward, flashlight held in front of me. It was an Earth flashlight, the beam brighter and better-focused than anything you could get on Aerb short of using magic. I crossed the threshold, trying not to think too much about it, which was easy with the mental exhaustion of the gem magic still in full effect. If this place wanted us dead, I was pretty sure that we would be dead, and standing at the door wasn’t doing us any favors.

The doors led into a grand foyer with two staircases coming off it at different angles, as well as another three doors, one of which was missing, another slightly off its hinges, and only the last firmly in place -- boarded shut. Where there was carpeting on the stairs, it was frayed and rotted. Where there was wood, it was cracked and warped. The floor was black and white tile in a pattern that ran at a skewed angle from the room. That pattern made the problems all the more noticeable, places where it was cracked or missing tile.

There were eight bodies, if I was counting them right. None of them were fresh; the places where there was skin were blackened, the faces with pits for the mouth and eyes. It was hard to tell what had happened to them so long after the fact, but the picture it painted was certainly gruesome. A chandelier must have hung in the foyer at some point, because it was on the ground now, with a body beneath it. On one of the walls was a patch of red so dark it was almost black, marking a blast of something foul that might have come out of the body crumpled at the base of the stain. Another of the bodies was missing its torso; it was laid out flat, with the legs and arms still in position, head rolled off to one side, and a dark trail leading away from it, thinning out by the time it reached the open door.

“Sorry I called you a hot mess!” said Fenn through the door. “You’re really quite lovely!”

“Is that really an idiom here?” I asked. “Hot mess?”

“Watch what you say,” replied Amaryllis. She’d had her helmet off, letting herself cool and giving her sweat a chance to dry, but she replaced it as she looked in through the door. Sometimes it seemed like she went around armored more often than not, closed off from the world.

“We spoke of much outside the doors,” said Grak.

“Yes, we did,” said Amaryllis. “This place wasn’t supposed to be intelligent. Not enough to understand speech. My great-grandfather said it was, at best, doglike, not --” She stopped and cleared her throat. “I am Amaryllis Penndraig, tenth of my name, Princess of the Kingdom of Anglecynn, most direct living descendant of Uther Penndraig, and keeper of Kuum Doona by claim-in-fact.” She said it as a proclamation, but without raising her voice.

There was no response from the fortress.
“Okay,” said Fenn, after some time had passed. “So do we take the creepy boarded up door on the left, the creepy door with the blood trail on the right, or one of the stairways, or what?”

“We could each take a different path,” I said. “Cover more ground that way.”

A silence settled around us.

“That was a joke,” I said.

“Not very funny,” said Fenn.

A hollow laugh echoed out from inside, coming from the right door, the one that a dismembered torso had likely been dragged through.

“Alright, I’m just going to be the one to say it,” said Fenn. “We could chalk all this up to a long, painful misadventure and get the hell out right now.”

“One of the wards is a teleportation ward,” said Grak. His eyes swiveled, taking in information that I couldn’t see. “We would have to drop.”

“We didn’t come this far for nothing,” said Amaryllis. She had been standing outside, and finally crossed the threshold to stand with me at the entrance to the foyer.

“Sounds like the sunk cost fallacy to me,” I said.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “The cost is sunk, but that means that the marginal cost to complete a search of this place and get to the time chamber is low. We’ll stay together, search room by room, and it shouldn’t take us more than a day to find it. The cost is practically nothing, assuming that Kuum Doona doesn’t want to kill us, which I don’t believe it does.”

“On what grounds?” asked Fenn. “The fact that it hasn’t? I used to have a cat that would spend hours murdering mice, if I let her. She’d toss them around, injure them, run them down, and only dismember them when they’d stopped being entertaining.”

Amaryllis gave a little “mmm” sound as acknowledgement; it was a possibility.

“Either way, we should double tap those bodies,” I said. I held out a hand toward Fenn, and she tossed me a void pistol. She still hadn’t stepped inside Kuum Doona.

I walked toward the bodies, trying to push away the emotions that were encroaching on me. My least favorite thing about gem magic was that the feeling of mental exhaustion seemed to be fixed at percents, rather than at static intervals, meaning that being down in the bottom fourth of points, as presented by the meter in my HUD, gave me that dissociative, drifting feeling that I’d previously associated with either depression or not getting enough sleep. I was more sensitive to the world around me, more easily drawn toward memories and feelings than usual, not enough that I was a liability, but enough to be annoying.

I thought about the thunk of the void rifle when Amaryllis had executed Poul at the mechanic’s back in Comfort, the cold, mechanical way she’d done it, mirroring the detached way that I was moving. I thought about wry amusement at the game table as, once again, corpses and statues were desecrated so that they couldn’t come to life and hurt anyone, a task that Craig and Reimer had always approached with unbounded creativity. I thought about my grandfather in his casket, skin showing too much of his bones after a long battle with cancer, and the seven days we’d spent in South Dakota, waiting for him to die. The smell in the foyer was mercifully muted, with only a slightly hamster-smell of mildew coming through, and that called me back to my first real pet.
I wasn’t even sure that shooting the corpses would do anything. If I’d been Reimer, I probably
would have taken the time to break the corpses apart, separate the important bones from each other.
Looking back on it, the work seemed kind of pointless, but no one had stopped me, they’d just had
hushed conversations with each other

“You okay?” asked Fenn, as I was finishing up. Her hand touched my elbow.

“Yeah,” I said. “Overdid it on the gem magic. Not my best self right now.” I stopped. The question
was slow to come to me. “Why? Acting weird?”

“A little bit,” said Fenn. “Combat fatigue, I was thinking.”

“Ah,” I said. “Plausible.” I idly wondered whether I would get a status update on that or not. It
seemed like a textbook affliction, if it was one that I had.

“We just need to keep moving,” said Amaryllis. I hated when the helmet obscured her face. Maybe
we would find a magic item that would make her helmet invisible. I put in a mental request to the
Dungeon Master for that. “Find the time chamber, get me into it, that’s our only objective for the time
being. Any left-behind heirlooms come second, and making this a permanent, secure base of
operations comes third.”

“We should follow the blood,” I said, pointing to the trail that led away from the dismembered arms
and legs. “That was done after he died, deliberately, moved to somewhere important.”

“It was hopefully done after he died,” said Fenn. “Aren’t you the one always talking about worst
case scenarios?”

“Yeah,” I said. “True.”

“There would be more blood,” said Grak, who had finally joined us. I turned my flashlight toward
him, so I could see him, and noticed something disquieting.

“Did you close the door?” I asked.

He turned to face the door, along with Fenn and Amaryllis. It was firmly closed. “No,” he said.

“No theatrical slamming shut, trapping us in here?” asked Fenn. “I’m almost a little disappointed.”

“We should try to open it,” said Amaryllis.

“On the off-chance that would actually work,” I replied.

Grak moved forward and tested the door. It swung open freely, without any resistance, to reveal a
wall of smooth rock.

“We’ve moved,” said Grak.

“Without feeling it?” I asked.

“Seems like,” said Fenn. “Meaning, if I understand you right, that we’re now trapped here unless we
can find another way out?”

“Yes,” said Grak. “I might be able to negate the ward if we can find a seam. The exterior seam is
blocked off to us. Normally there would be a defensible room on the inside, entrance and exit.”

“Well, I’ve got a bad feeling about -- fuck!” Fenn had her bow in hand, with an arrow coming from
the glove shortly after it, and she had loosed an arrow before I could even see what she was looking at.

When I looked over, I saw that the decapitated head had rolled a few feet. An arrow pierced it through the eye socket, pinning it to the ground.

“*It moved,*” said Fenn. “*It was rolling.*”

“*Rolling away from us?*” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” said Fenn. She walked over to the head, stepping carefully across the tile, and planted a foot on it before withdrawing her arrow. It was coated in black ichor; she tossed it to the side. When she lifted her foot up off the head, it stayed where it was, then began rolling again, toward the open door, following the path that had been marked by the trail of blood the torso had left.

“Are -- are we expected to follow that?” asked Fenn. “Like, this house legitimately expects us to follow after a rolling head?”

Another ghostly laugh echoed from down the hallway.

“We may be dumb, but we’re not that dumb,” said Fenn.

“I say we follow it,” I said.

“I agree,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a communication with this place, if an unconventional one. If we’re fighting against it, I’m not sure that we can achieve our goals here, especially not making this place into a lasting, fully secure stronghold.”

“You are *insane* if you think I’m spending the night here,” said Fenn. “Even one night, let alone actual downtime.”

“We may not have a choice,” said Grak, looking back to the door that opened onto stone.

We made our way down the hallway, slowly. I took the lead, because I could more easily take a hit, and Grak was just behind me, because he could see magic.

“This place has more magic in it than anything I’ve seen before,” said Grak. “Layered magic. Diverse. I think Juniper is right.”

“Right about what?” I asked with a frown.

“There is a thin thread of commonality running between the magic,” said Grak. “More thin than I would expect.”

“You’re talking about central themes?” I asked.

“No,” said Grak. He snorted slightly. “Yes. The magi would not like that interpretation.”

“Well I’m really not enjoying my time here so far,” said Fenn. “And this talk isn’t making me a whole lot happier about wandering around.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” said Amaryllis. “If we had known the house was a thinking entity, maybe --” she stopped and started again. “I need to know more, to understand why it got like this.”

“And why your ancestors lied to you?” I asked.
“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “This place was listed in the family ledger as mothballed, closed down because of expenses, not a rogue entity. My great-grandfather has confirmed as much. It always seemed like more trouble than it was worth, not just to me, but to the others as well. At some point a link in the chain of custody broke. Or … was tampered with.”

“So we’ve got a family mystery added on top of that?” asked Fenn. “Yeah, really not helping. Mostly it’s the fact that we’re following a frickin’ rolling head around in pitch black darkness nine miles underground, maybe that’s what’s got my goat.”

The head kept rolling. When we paused, usually so Grak could check something, it came to a stop and waited for us. Heads didn’t roll terribly well, as it turned out, given that they weren’t spherical, and so the movement of the head was interrupted sometimes when it caught on the eaten-away nose, or flipped over an ear, or got in a bad position on the warped boards. It had been scary when it had rolled away of its own volition, but there gradually came to be something comical about it. I wondered if that was by intent, or whether it was an attempt at being spooky that was falling flat.

We passed by doors and windows, most of them closed. By mutual agreement, we didn’t go through any doors, but we did shine our flashlights into the rooms, illuminating scenes of death and decay. Sometimes there were decayed bodies draped over the furniture, other times only stains. Dismemberment and mutilation seemed to be a running theme; someone’s finger had been cut off, or a hand was missing, or the eyes taken from their skull. I kept thinking that this fortress was basically a Superfund site, and even if the controlling intelligence of it could be brought to heel, or convinced to cooperate, it would take us months to clear it out and make it livable, not to mention the millions of obols it would probably take to replace warped or rotted boards, carpet, furniture, et cetera. It brought to mind cleaning out my aunt’s house after she’d passed, finding things that were ancient and shrunk. This place was littered with the dead, and something would have to be done about them. That was beyond all the work of adding in conveniences like electric lights and running water, neither of which I saw any sign of. That wasn’t too much of a surprise, given how old this place was.

The head rolled into a large room and came to a stop when it hit the leg of a dining table. Our flashlights moved around, taking the room in. The table was long and solidly built, able to seat at least a dozen, and while it dominated the place, there was also a bar along one wall, and a rotted couch and armchair sitting next to a fireplace. Above the mantle was a dusty tooth, big enough that I’d have probably had trouble picking it up.

Four shot glasses sat on the table, each filled with a clear liquid. We’d paused on them, wordlessly, for just a bit, then continued looking around to see what else the room had in store, or why we might have been brought here. I moved my light away from the table, pointing it to the rows of dusty bottles going twenty feet up to the ceiling, and the ladder you’d have to climb to get the stuff on the top shelf. When my flashlight swung back, crossing the table, there was a girl seated there.

It took me some time to recognize her, as the others shouted in surprise and moved into action. She was sixteen or seventeen years old, with long brown hair that was tied back in a ponytail; I had always liked the way it swished back and forth when she shook her head. She had a small mouth with thick lips; I could instantly remember what it was like to kiss her. It was cold in the house, and slightly damp, but she wore a t-shirt and short shorts, just like she’d worn every day in the summertime. She even had flip-flops on. As if to underscore it, the shirt was one that I’d known, “Kansas Swim” written on it, with a stylized icon of a woman swimming, caught mid-stroke. She’d been on the swim team, the shirt had been free, from a conference or organization or something.

Tiff.
“You’re an avatar of the house,” said Amaryllis. She had her arm on Fenn’s, holding the bow down in a position where Fenn couldn’t take the shot. From the way that Fenn tried to struggle, the immobility plate was doing the bulk of the work in making sure that Fenn didn’t shoot.

“Avatar carries specific connotations,” said Tiff. “I would prefer icon.” Hearing her voice sent a chill down my spine. The cadence was the same, the tone, everything as I’d remembered it. It was jarring though; there was none of the sadness that I’d grown accustomed to from her, that undercurrent of depression, and even before that, when she’d been happy, she’d never been so … imperious. I glanced down at her ankle; there was no tattoo there. It should have been a sigil that Arthur had made for one of our longer campaigns, a stylized cross at an angle, but it was missing.

“Can I ask what everyone else is seeing?” I asked.

“Young girl, my age, improbably clean, wearing a t-shirt that says ‘Kansas Swim’,” said Amaryllis.

“Your type, I’m guessing,” said Fenn with a pronounced frown. I wasn’t sure that I had ever described Tiff to her, but maybe she had made the connection anyway, given the t-shirt.

“Magic,” said Grak. “Entad magic. No skin, bone, or blood.”

“I’m looking at four adventurers in the classic mold,” said Tiff. She raised a finger and pointed at each of us in turn. “Warder, archer, brute, and muscle. How did I do?” I was apparently the muscle, while Amaryllis was the brute.

“I’m a multi-disciplinary mage,” I said. “Among other things.”

“Mary is the manager,” said Fenn. “I’ll give you a two out of four, that’s not half bad.”

“Manager isn’t one of the archetypal roles,” said Tiff.

“I’m not a manager,” said Amaryllis.

“Well, there you go,” said Tiff. She picked up one of the shot glasses, inspected it, and then put it back down. “Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“Your shirt,” I said. “It says ‘Kansas’ on it.”

“Yes,” Tiff nodded. There was no recognition in her eyes when she looked at me. There was something off about her, aside from the fact of where she was. It wasn’t just the tattoo that she was missing, there were other details that didn’t match up with how I remembered her. Her bottom teeth had been slightly crooked, not enough to justify braces, but enough that she’d mentioned it to me once as something she didn’t like about herself. This -- apparition, for lack of a better word, wasn’t quite right on that score. I tried looking for other details, and again found the simulacrum wanting. I’d loved Tiff intensely; on the nights we’d spent together, I had made a study of her.

This wasn’t Tiff, it was just meant to look like her, for whatever reason.

“We’re here on business,” said Amaryllis. “You’ve overheard as much, I’m sure. There’s supposed to be a time chamber somewhere in Kuum Doona --”

“I don’t like that name,” said Tiff.
“My apologies,” said Amaryllis. “Is there a name you’d prefer?”

“Zona, if you please,” said the avatar of the house, wearing Tiff’s form. I recognized the name, after a few seconds of it tickling my brain. Zona had been the name of Uther Penndraig’s wife. I was guessing that the pseudonym wasn’t a coincidence. As to the connotations though, that was harder to guess. He’d left his wife to go adventuring, cheated on her, if the stories were to be believed, either with or without her blessing. Loved her, maybe. I wasn’t sure what applied, if she’d taken her name from Uther’s wife. Or maybe by some strange magic, she was Uther’s wife.

“Sorry,” I said. “That form, are you stuck in it, or can you change it?” I noticed Amaryllis beside me stiffen slightly at the question.

“Why?” asked Zona, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s,” I shook my head. “Complicated. Distracting.” Tiff, here in the flesh, wasn’t something that I needed at the moment. It was overwhelming me at a time when I was least capable of handling it.

“It bothers you?” asked Zona, raising an eyebrow. “Would you cut your hair if I said it looked stupid?”

“Uh, yes?” I asked. “I probably would.”

I didn’t understand why she looked like that. The obvious answer was Arthur, but that brought up all sorts of unpleasant thoughts. Kuum Doona had been his, five hundred years ago, and I had been hoping that I would get some insight into what had happened to him, or who he had been on Aerb, something more than the history books could tell me. But this … Tiff, as the avatar of Arthur’s home, or icon, in her words, said nothing good, and all the innocent explanations I could come up with rang hollow.

“There’s a time chamber somewhere here, isn’t there?” asked Amaryllis. “We have urgent need of it.”

“I’m not going to negotiate with you,” said Zona. She slumped in her chair and put her feet up on the table, just like Tiff used to do. “Her,” she said, pointing at Fenn. “She likes running her mouth, I think I’ll talk with her.”

“Um,” said Fenn. “Mary is, more or less, the talker.”

“Talker, manager, brute,” said Zona with a nod. She pointed a slender finger to me. “Your eyes keep going to him though. Juniper, like the tree.”

“He’s, ah,” Fenn’s eyes went to me. “My boyfriend.”

“With all due respect, the reason we need the time chamber,” began Amaryllis.


“Do you need to know why we need it?” asked Fenn.

“Yes,” said Zona.

“And if I don’t tell you, you’ll … ?” Fenn trailed off.

Zona tapped the table with a finger, looking between us. “Kill you all.”

Fenn nodded at that, as though that was the answer she’d expected. “I should say that I don’t really
do well with being threatened. Like, burn this fucking place to the ground, that kind of don’t do well.”

Zona laughed; it echoed in from the room’s open doors, rather than coming from her mouth. “You think people haven’t tried that?”

“If I can just --” began Amaryllis.

Lightning crackled between Zona’s fingertips, and she gave them a look of idle curiosity. An arc went between thumb and forefinger twice in quick succession, making a sound that lingered in the air. “So,” she said, “this one,” pointing to Fenn, “doesn’t take to being threatened, and this one,” she said, pointing to Amaryllis, “doesn’t take to being given direction. I’m curious to see what your other faults are, as a group.”

Amaryllis’ mouth was set in a thin line.

“Amaryllis is pregnant,” I said. “It’s important that the baby is born within the next few days. And, I guess, ideally spends a few years growing up, maybe.”

“Oh,” said Zona, frowning. It really was a remarkable resemblance, but the ways that it didn’t quite match raised a lot of questions about how it had been created. Maybe if it had been perfect, I would have just accepted it as something pulled from Arthur’s mind by a magic he couldn’t control, but I didn’t think that he would have gotten Tiff’s frown wrong. “Why?”

“The child is going to be the last druid for the last surviving locus,” I said. I looked over and saw Amaryllis biting her lip hard. Too much information too fast, I was guessing.

“What happened to the loci?” asked Zona, frowning. Her eyes stayed focused on me.

“Oh,” I said. “The Second Empire wiped them out.”

“Hum,” said Zona, “I’d always thought them kindred spirits, of a sort.”

“This child is the best chance we have at saving the last of them,” said Amaryllis, touching her stomach, which was covered in plated armor. She was laying it on too thick, but that was just my perspective, and she was a better judge of character than I was ever going to be. She removed her helmet, the better to present as non-threatening; if the house could shoot lightning indoors, which seemed to be the threat, it wasn’t like the helmet was really going to help.

“Praytell, what is a Dungeon Master?” asked Zona, shifting the conversation.

I glanced at Amaryllis. She was keeping her mouth shut. When I glanced at Fenn, she was looking at me. Grak didn’t seem to be focused that much on the conversation; he was looking at things that I couldn’t see, trying to solve some mystery of magic that remained, for the moment, invisible.

“You knew Arthur?” I asked.

Zona watched me for a moment, with Tiff’s eyes, searching. “Arthur?” she asked.

“Arthur Isaac Blum,” I said.

“No,” said Tiff, shaking her head, swishing her ponytail behind her. “He’s the Dungeon Master? And you ... think that I know him?”

I felt my heart sink. She was supposed to have the answers; the name was supposed to be a key that
opened her up, the point of commonality, a secret that I shouldn’t possibly have known. It was a piece of information that I’d been saving in my back pocket for something like this, for someone who had known him intimately.

“No,” I said. “I thought that maybe … if you had known him, I would have been able to explain it better. A Dungeon Master is like a god, I guess. Like, um, Skaduwee?”

“I know my gods, thank you,” replied Tiff. No, Zona, not Tiff. It was hard to keep that straight when talking to her, listening to her voice, looking at her, it was just close enough to how she’d actually been that my mind was filling in the gaps, ignoring the places where it wasn’t right. She turned to Amaryllis. “You want to live in me.” She switched topics like she had an itinerary she was going through. Maybe she’d been listening in for long enough that she actually did have a list of the things that had caught her attention. It felt jarring though, as important topics were set to the side.

Amaryllis hesitated. “May I speak?” she asked.

Zona waved a lazy hand.

“We have need of a base of operations,” said Amaryllis. “We came here for the time chamber, and if we can leave, having used it, that will be enough that I would consider the trip well worth our time and resources. Our secondary reason was to gather the equipment that my ancestors left here for dire circumstances —”

“All of it gone,” said Zona.

Amaryllis nodded, not missing a beat, not pressing the point or asking the obvious follow-ups (gone to where? gone how?). “But our third criterion is to have somewhere that is well and truly secure from outside intrusion. This place is battle-hardened, with more in the way of capabilities than anyone seems to know, it has ancient, powerful wards, and, apparently, a governing intelligence that can manage all manner of issues that might arise, if you so choose. We haven’t gotten off to a great start, but I think that given some time to talk, we could find some common ground.”

Zona let out a puff of air. When I watched closely, I could see that she wasn’t actually breathing, which raised some questions about how she was actually making sounds. Magic, probably.

“I suppose,” said Zona. She looked at me for a moment, and it was just like Tiff used to look at me when she was trying to tease meaning out of me just by examining my face. Or maybe Zona was just giving me a look that was close enough for my addled brain to make the connection.

Zona gestured toward the shot glasses. “Here, this is the antidote.”


“Poison?” asked Fenn. “Are you shitting me?”

“You’ll be shitting yourself in about,” Zona looked down at her wrist. There was no watch there; that had been one of Tiff’s favorite jokes, looking at her bare wrist to pretend to check the time. “Twenty minutes, if you don’t drink up.”

“You can see it?” Amaryllis asked Grak.

“Yes,” said Grak. “Latent magic, infusing the water vapor. It was difficult to spot. I didn’t know what it was.”

“That ‘antidote’ might just be more poison,” said Fenn, pointing at the glasses. “I’m not the only one
Zona sighed. “I used to enjoy this,” she said.

“You enjoyed ... poisoning people?” I asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. She looked at the shot glasses. “Some I would kill on the approach, some I would let beat against the wards, some I would let inside, fool their warders into thinking that they’d pierced my defenses, and then …” She trailed off and tapped her fingers on the table.

“Rolling heads, creaking doors,” said Fenn. “Creepy laughter.”

“I apologize,” said Zona. “I gave you a half-hearted effort. If I’d been invested, one of you would probably have died while you were walking toward me. Something gruesome, maybe, or if not, then silent and unknowable, a throat slit for no apparent reason, by no apparent cause. It’s easier with bigger groups, killing one to make a point doesn’t weaken them enough that their will breaks entirely. That’s the worst, when they just spend their time here cowering and waiting for the end.”

“And that’s, ah, what you’ve been up to for the last few hundred years?” I asked. I was trying to keep the distaste from showing on my face. The bodies we’d seen in the hallways had been her handiwork, which I had already figured, but the way she put it was revolting.

“Do you find my behavior unbecoming?” asked Zona with a raised eyebrow. She looked to Fenn. “Your girlfriend was being quite the braggart about having killed hundreds of the tuung.”

“That’s -- that’s how she copes,” I said. “It’s not sport.”

“‘Sport?’” asked Zona. She frowned slightly, then turned to the shot glasses. Her finger touched the rim of one and she pushed, tipping it just to the point where the liquid inside threatened to spill onto the table. “I suppose so.” She took her finger away, and the shot glass fell back down, sloshing the liquid back and forth. “You should drink, not much time left until you start showing symptoms, and after that point, the antidote won’t undo the damage.”

I stepped forward and picked one of the glasses up, took a half-second to look at it, then downed it in a single gulp. It tasted like tonic water, with the same acidity to it, but none of the bubbles. I set the glass back down on the table, and gave Zona a nod.

“I’m fine playing guinea pig,” I said to the others.

“I don’t believe I’m familiar with the term,” said Zona. She was watching me closely.

“Oh, I’m dream-skewered,” I said. “I come from a place called Earth.”

“Juniper,” said Amaryllis. I could hear the pain in her voice. “Can we please just --”

“I’m acquainted with the phenomenon,” said Zona. She was watching me closely, and though I thought that was probably dangerous, I was also happy to capture her attention. She had answers that I desperately wanted, starting with why and how she looked like Tiff. “And yet a mage, for all that? One of many disciplines?”

“Joon, scenario?” asked Amaryllis.

“Still zero,” I answered, before turning back to Tiff. “I’m willing to talk if you are. From my understanding, we’ll have some time to kill while Amaryllis uses the time chamber. There are some things that I’m hoping you know.”
“Uther,” said Zona. The word came out leaden, tinged with a small note of hostility, though I couldn’t tell whether it was toward him or me.

“Yes, Uther,” I said. I felt Amaryllis put her hand on my elbow, warning me, but despite the muddled feeling that came with combat fatigue, mental exhaustion, the way I kept having trouble not seeing her as Tiff, and whatever else was going on, this felt like the right path to me. I hated deception, having to keep track of who was supposed to know what, phrasing things in just the right way as to deliver two different messages to two different people. It was exhausting, and prone to failure.

“Tell your friends to drink up,” said Zona.

Amaryllis was the first to step forward. She downed the antidote, if that’s what it really was, without so much as a trace of emotion or reaction. I hoped that whatever the poison was, it wouldn’t fuck up the pregnancy, and same for the antidote, which would hopefully be without side effects. Grak was next, wincing slightly at either the taste or the chance that he was being given a second poison. When I looked at Fenn, she folded her arms across her chest, then relented after a moment.

“I’m going to start making a list of complaints,” said Fenn. She strode forward and downed her shot in a single swift motion. “Just so that when we have an annual review, I can go through them one by one.”

“Annual review?” asked Grak.

“It’s an Earth thing,” said Fenn as she inspected the shot glass. I’m not sure what she was hoping to find, ‘you have been poisoned’ etched on the bottom? I wouldn’t have been terribly surprised by that; Arthur had given each of the group one of a set of glasses for Christmas, two years ago. Fenn set the glass back down without comment.

“We have annual reviews,” said Amaryllis. “I used to give them for my staff.” She turned to Zona. “We’re ready to go.”

“Only very rarely was it all poison,” said Zona as we walked down a long hallway filled with doors. We were still using the flashlights, though she didn’t seem to need them, sometimes stepping around exposed nails before I could see them. “Sometimes it was only one of the cups, sometimes it was all but one, sometimes it was a mix. On occasion, none of them were poison, or I had elected not to put any poison in the air.”

“You can choose not to?” I asked. “Meaning that you were planning on killing us?”

“It seemed so rote,” said Zona. “You spoke of inhabiting me, which no one has considered an option for centuries. I thought perhaps my time of solitude punctuated by excitement had finally come to a close.”

“That I’m the most direct living descendant of Uther Penndraig had nothing to do with it?” asked Amaryllis.

“I am not a subject of Anglecynn,” said Zona. “I do not bow to its princes or princesses.” She turned left without warning, and I followed after her, trying my best to be unafraid. I was a little bit off-balance, mentally speaking, but fear was definitely making itself known, and it was hard to wipe away the sweat on my palms because the armor didn’t really help. I wore Ropey around my waist, but he was sentient too, and had saved my life back on the Down and Out, and I didn’t want him to suffer the indignity of me wiping my sweaty hands on him.
“Whatever historical animosity there is,” began Amaryllis.

Zona whirled around, forcing me to come to a stop. “I do not like you,” she said. “Your type was always the least likeable, of those who have made this place their graves. You pretend at being in control. You assert yourself. Sometimes this behavior is a facade, put on for the purposes of morale or social dominance, and sometimes it is simply the truth of a person, but either way I don’t find it becoming.” She turned back to the direction she’d been walking, but didn’t start moving. “There is no love lost between myself and the various Penndraig lines, but I will do my best not to hold that against you, so long as you don’t pretend you hold any special sway over me.” She started walking again, again without a word of warning, and I hurried to keep up as we passed through a bedroom with a rotted four-poster and went up a spiral staircase with flagstones that had been worn down in the middle.

“You should have mentioned how she’s too pretty,” said Fenn.

“That too,” said Zona with a laugh that came from everywhere at once.

“No bullying,” said Grak as he walked up the stairs. When I looked back at him, I was momentarily shocked to see that he was missing a hand; with everything that we’d gone through, I’d managed to forget.

“If anything, that was a compliment,” said Fenn.

We came out into a large room with two heavy doors set against one wall, and a few other passageways leading off from it. My eyes were drawn to the doors though, and the pillars of sand on either side of them. Set into one pillar was an hourglass, each bulb the size of my head, and all the sand at the top, pressed up away from the neck of it as though gravity were pushing it the opposite direction.

“Oh, thank the gods,” sighed Amaryllis as she reached the top of the stairs.

“You didn’t trust me?” asked Zona.

“I worried that it wouldn’t be charged, that you would have used it, or --” Amaryllis stopped, shaking her head.

“I have never wanted for time,” said Zona, deadpan. She stepped forward and touched the upper bulb, caressing the glass. “That aside, it has no effect on me, as I contain it. Things inside, when it’s running, move too fast for me to follow.” She gave the glass a tap with her finger. “Two hundred years stored up, ready for use.” She looked at us. “With conditions.”

Fenn swore under her breath.

“What conditions?” I asked, after Amaryllis had no response.

“I will be taking a full survey of your entads, including those within the glove,” said Zona. “From them, I will select three for myself, with some consideration to their utility and sentimental value to you.”

“Many of them are tied to our bloodlines,” said Amaryllis.

“I am aware,” replied Zona. She gestured at Amaryllis’ armor. “The Still Plate was commonly worn by Uther, during his time exploring the Boundless Pit. Is its value to you sentimental or practical? Mostly the latter, I would expect, given how you used it during your climb down to me.”
“It’s seen me through many trials,” said Amaryllis. She glanced at the rest of us, briefly taking stock of the entads that we had available to us, and which we might be able to afford losing, then back to Zona. “Such a survey would need to wait until after the most urgent of our business was concluded, and any negotiations as to which entads we’d gift you would get my full attention then.”

“Mary, come on, this is blackmail,” said Fenn. “You can’t honestly be thinking of bowing down.”

“As I see it, a gift is only fair,” said Amaryllis. “We’re speaking about a sentient creature making accommodations for us, allowing us to use its resources, and entering into partnership.” I couldn’t tell whether Fenn was serving as a devil’s advocate here, and the two of them were playing both sides, or whether Amaryllis was just making the best of Fenn’s objection. It did seem like Amaryllis was displaying a soft streak, and had been since Zona had made herself known. I had no real idea how much of that was an act.

“You call it a gift,” said Zona. “Curious, as that was not the word I used.”

“It’s reciprocity,” said Amaryllis. “But we need to use the time chamber first, and once the child has been born, at least one of us will need to leave and make our way back to the locus. The survey can take place in the interim, while the most pressing business with the locus is concluded. Obviously two or three of us staying here would allay any concerns you might have about us leaving without giving you your due.”

Zona frowned, then nodded slightly. “You’re too crafty by half.”

“And yet still less crafty than the world seems to demand of me,” replied Amaryllis.

Zona stepped over to the twin doors that led the way to the time chamber and opened them up. The interior was smaller than I thought; where I had pictured something like a gymnasium, this was more like a living room, and a somewhat small one at that, not much more than twenty feet by twenty feet across. It was curiously nondescript, and in much better repair than the other parts of Kuum Doona, with white walls, a white ceiling, and hardwood floors. Taken by itself, you might have been able to mistake it for being a room somewhere in middle America.

“I should give you warning: nine months spent in this small space will be a form of torture,” said Zona. “And of course, I presume that you’ve brought your own sources of food, water, air, and waste elimination, as well as ways of providing for your personal hygiene.”

“We have,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at the space, the small chamber where she’d be spending a significant fraction of her life. We hadn’t really had a discussion about who would be in there with us; I’d been assuming that we would all be in there together, but I’d also been thinking that the time chamber would be larger. “Time to cycle up and down?” asked Amaryllis.

“Five minutes and ten minutes, respectively,” said Zona.

“And the maximum rate it can attain?” asked Amaryllis, still looking at the chamber.

“One day every minute,” said Zona.

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “That’s five hours for the pregnancy then. Weekly check-ins would add on another ten hours, approximately, and I’m not sure how much utility they would provide us. We’ll do them ad hoc then, or monthly, which ever comes first, that means two hours of cycling up and down, plus perhaps another hour if I need more assistance than I expect.”

“Hold the phone,” said Fenn. “Were you planning on being in there all alone?”
“Fenn, I’ve lived with you for long enough to know that I would literally kill you if I had to spend more than a week stuck in a small room with you,” said Amaryllis.

“You could try to kill me,” said Fenn. “I mean, the image of a pregnant woman attempting to waddle over and put a knife in my guts is pretty funny.”

“I have some experience as a midwife,” said Grak. “I would like to be in with you for the final two months. For the final month only, if you anticipate that I would grate on you.”

“You were a midwife?” asked Fenn. “But like, for dwarves, right?”

“One of my duties was attending births,” said Grak. “I participated in more than one hundred. I was not a midwife myself, only an assistant.”

“But … for dwarves, right?” I asked. “Anatomically …” I trailed off, because I didn’t know enough about dwarves to dispute it (and frankly, I was also pretty out of my depth when it came to human women).

“Do dwarves not lay eggs?” asked Fenn. “I could have sworn I read that somewhere.”

“We do not,” said Grak. “The primary role of the midwife is support. I can provide that in spite of anatomical differences.”

“For the last two months,” said Amaryllis. “You can be sure that I’ll do some reading on the subject, and provide relevant literature to Grak so that we can cover our bases.”

“Literature?” asked Zona.

“It means books,” replied Fenn.

Zona laughed, a booming laugh that echoed from all parts of the house. “I meant to express incredulity at the four of you figuring out the birthing process from books alone.”

“Fenn, I’m going to need the glove,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn sighed and slipped off Sable, then rested it reverently on Amaryllis out-stretched hand. “You know, it’s my glove, we agreed to that way back when. Seems kind of unfair for you to take it for nine months.”

“I’m sure that somehow you’ll manage to survive,” replied Amaryllis.

She strode forward, into the chamber, seemingly unconcerned about her fate. Maybe she was happy to have some time to herself; I knew that her Grand Scheme for Modernizing Aerb would take shape in the time she spent in there, maybe even in another forty-five minutes, when a subjective month had passed for her.

As she turned to close the doors, she gave us one last look. “See you in a month,” she said.

And then she closed the doors, sealing herself off from us.
Zona stepped forward and inspected the hourglass. The sand in it had begun to move, swirling around at the top, but not yet descending through the neck. “She reminds me of him,” said Zona. She turned toward me. “Headstrong. Fearless.”

There were a lot of words I might have used to describe Arthur, but ‘fearless’ was not one of them. Of course, it wasn’t a word that I would have used to describe myself either, but I was sure that from certain outside viewpoints, that was how people might have talked about me. Some of it was the sheer durability that magic offered me, and some of it was the tint of unreality that still sometimes seemed to hang over everything like a fog. A part of it was just that I’d been through a lot, and had a better bearing on what I could and could not handle.

“You wanted to know about him?” asked Zona. “There are certainly things that I can tell you. We have a fair amount of time to talk, while we wait.”

“I had other questions,” said Grak.

Zona raised an eyebrow, and looked to me for a response.

“Pressing questions?” I asked.

“More pressing than the fate of a man who has been missing for five hundred years,” said Grak.

I held my tongue and waved for him to continue. Fenn came to stand closer to me, and laced her fingers through mine. Her fingers were slender, callused from using her bow, and now familiar. I knew she didn’t really understand what Arthur had meant to me, but at least I could count on her for support.

“Warders are always troublesome,” said Zona with a sigh. “Have you guessed at what you spoke of before?”

“You mean the unifying theme?” asked Grak. Zona nodded. “No,” he replied. “I am missing something there. No, I wanted to ask about the manipulation of the wards.”

“Yes?” asked Zona.

“You said that you had an ability to alter them,” said Grak.

“Yes,” replied Zona.

Grak shifted. He didn’t seem terribly skilled at this sort of dialogue. “How?” he finally asked. “It is theoretically impossible for an entad.”

“Are the theories still so woefully inaccurate?” asked Zona. She wore a wry smile, the kind that people use as a more polite way of laughing in someone’s face.

Grak let out a long breath through his wide nostrils as he watched her. “You do not have a soul,” he said.

“One does not need a soul,” replied Zona.

“For concordance one does,” replied Grak. “There must be something spent to create a ward.”
“In theory, yes,” replied Zona, still smiling.

“You do not have the implements,” said Grak.

“If you mean a monocle and a wand, I have both,” said Zona. “Several of each, as it happens.”

“Is this actually important?” asked Fenn. “Because if it is, you can go on, but I’ve got my own questions.” I looked at her, and saw discontent written on her face. I was worried about where her line of questioning was going to go. I’d been pretty free with information, but I really didn’t want the topic of Zona’s look-alike to come up, and I was pretty sure that was where Fenn was heading.

“It is important,” said Grak. “It concerns our safety.”

“I have stood, uncontested, for centuries,” said Zona.

“Breached, a number of times,” said Grak.

“By my own will,” replied Zona.

“Why?” asked Grak.

“Not actually sport?” asked Fenn.

“Information,” said Zona. Her face twisted into a pronounced frown as she said the word. “Do you really intend to live here? Even with all you’ve seen? Even with the state of me? Even though I was planning on killing you, and made some effort toward that end?”

“We have a quest,” said Fenn.

“From whom?” asked Zona. She looked between us for a moment. “Ah, the Dungeon Master, naturally.”

“Naturally,” I said. “And yes, we had intended to make this our base of operations. Amaryllis still does, apparently. Normally this is the sort of thing we’d take a vote on. Right now I’m not sure how that vote would shake out. If you weren’t hunting people for sport, I’d like to know, because as it stands, I’m on the side of wanting to get out of here after an equitable exchange of resources.”

Zona watched me. “Why does my form bother you?” she asked.

“That’s a long story,” I said. “Maybe one that you’d find illuminating. You’re changing the subject though.”

“I answered,” said Zona. “Information. There were elements of sport, naturally, a desire to inflict my awesome power upon people who had come to do me harm, or at the very least, to steal from me. I won’t pretend that I didn’t find that aspect of it enjoyable. It was retribution, revenge. But there were other reasons as well, and one of those reasons was so that I could gather information. Usually I would leave one alive, or two if I could separate them without too much trouble, then appear before them and make them answer my questions about the state of the world. That became less important once I acquired a radio from one of the raiding parties, but I’m old-fashioned, and still like to hear straight from the horse’s mouth from time to time.”

“So you … kept people alive, tortured them, for information?” I asked.

“I suppose that doesn’t make you feel any better about living inside me?” asked Zona.

“It helps,” said Fenn. “You’re callous and cruel, but you’re not mindless about it. I thought maybe
this was all a setup for some kind of horrorshow, like we’d open the time chamber back up and Mary would be flayed against a wall, and you’d start cackling.”

“Oh, certainly I’ve done things like that,” said Zona. “A door slams shut, trapping one member of a party away from the others, and I go to work making a display of their death to whatever extent I’m able, so that when the main group comes to the rescue of their fellow, he’s a macabre display of arteries and organs. You’ll have to clean up a few of those, they’re scattered around the rooms, which is another point in favor of my having permanent residents again, I suppose.”

I felt a chill go down my spine. Zona was, for most intents and purposes, a haunted house, a malevolent intelligence that had killed maybe as many as hundreds of people. I didn’t think that she was a threat to us, at least at the present moment, but I couldn’t see wanting to stay here. If it was true that she couldn’t see inside the time chamber, maybe I was going to have to figure out a way I could get in there and have a private conversation with Amaryllis.

“Have I answered your questions, dwarf?” asked Zona.

“No,” said Grak. “Many questions remain.”

Zona nodded. “All the same, this line of conversation begins to bore me, and there are certain topics which, I’m sure you’ve noticed, I wish to avoid.” She turned to Fenn. “But you don’t want to delve into the esoterica of warding, do you?”

“No,” said Fenn. I squeezed her hand, trying to warn her away from talking about Tiff, but she squeezed my hand back, either misunderstanding, or rejecting my request. She looked over at me. “Joon, ask her, or I will.”

Zona looked at me, waiting.

I let out a sigh. “Do you know whose form you’re wearing?” I asked.

Zona didn’t respond. She had gone still, not just deathly still, but frozen in place, like a movie had been paused. No breath, no pulse, no minute movements of the clothes.

“I’m … something of a scholar when it comes to the Lost King,” I said. “I know Uther Penndraig better than most people do. The resemblance … I don’t know if you pulled it from his mind, or his dreams, or his memories, but --”

“His drawings,” said Zona, coming back into motion.

“Ah, right,” I replied. “I’d forgotten he was an artist.”

“Unusual, for a scholar to forget a detail like that,” said Zona. She was staring at me with a piercing intensity that was unlike any expression Tiff had ever worn, even at her most worked up. “You’re dream-skewered.”

“Uther was too,” I said. “And I knew him, back on Earth.”

Zona went still again, not moving so much as a hair. This continued for long enough that Fenn and I shared a glance.

“Did you break our house on our first day here?” asked Fenn.

“You were going to say it if I didn’t,” I said.
“Not the whole bit, just, she’s Tiff, right?” asked Fenn. “We come *nine frickin’ miles* down into the Boundless Pit, walk past death, destruction, and mystery, and *who else* could it be but your ex-girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh.

“She’s not like I thought she’d be,” said Fenn. “Physically, I mean. I thought she’d be more … Amaryllis Penndraig. Prettier.”

“She was …” I tried to think about how to put it diplomatically. “She was pretty by the standards of our high school, which had a graduating class of about a hundred fifty people. So, maybe in the top quarter of a cohort of seventy-five girls? Whereas Amaryllis is –” I stopped, realizing what I was about to say before I said it, but not early enough that my train of thought wasn’t left hanging in the air for anyone to see. Fenn didn’t look upset, only exasperated. “Amaryllis is tailored to my tastes, probably deliberately tailored, just like you are.”

“You are speaking too freely,” said Grak.

Fenn looked over at Grak, then at Zona. She reached forward and snapped her fingers a few times in front of Zona’s still face, then poked her once in the shoulder. The finger went straight through.

“It’s okay,” said Fenn. “Joon broke her.” She turned back to me. “You really think Mary’s the prettiest woman in the world?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “I think that –”

“We have more important things to discuss,” said Grak.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “Any insights into exactly what we’re dealing with here?”

(I was going to say that Amaryllis was exactly tailored to my tastes, and my tastes were sufficiently generic that she’d beat out a lot of other women because of that, especially since a lot of it was just physical fitness, youth, and health, which cut out maybe ninety-nine percent of the competition from the word go. Beauty was subjective enough that there wasn’t really such a thing as the prettiest woman in the world (though maybe you could figure it out through pairwise rankings, if you had that kind of data to work with, but that came down to voting systems, and different processes would give different results). I *did* think that Amaryllis was pretty, pretty enough to stop me in my tracks sometimes, but I’d come around on Fenn’s particular charms, and whatever the chemical goop in my brain was doing, it was making her more attractive to me. You know how they say that some children have faces that only a mother could love? That was a real thing, parents getting blinded to what their children looked like because of the hormones and internal, mysterious brain processing. That was the kind of thing that read as romantic to me, but probably wouldn’t have come out right, or been taken in the spirit in which it was intended.)

“Have you heard the phrase meta-entad?” asked Grak.

“No,” I replied. “But from the word, it would be a magic item that chiefly affects other magic items?”

Grak nodded. “They’re almost always powerful. It would explain several points which have been confusing me.”

“Like why she’d want our stuff, and what happened to the things that were supposed to be here,” said Fenn. “Also the mutilated corpses. The guy in the lobby was missing his torso because she cut a breastplate off him.”
It fit, from what I could see. Exactly what she was doing with the entads was anyone’s guess, but the grab-bag of powers she seemed to have available to her suddenly made sense. The question of central theme was also solved in a single stroke; there was no theme, but there was a meta-theme.

“Huh,” I said. I was trying to think right, and while I was better than I’d been when we first walked in, I still wasn’t my usual self, not as sharp as I normally was. I was going to need some rest, sooner rather than later. “Okay,” I said. “That’s actually really helpful to know.”

“It’s a theory,” said Grak.

“Well, sure,” I said with a gesture in his direction. When my hand fell, I let it touch the top of the rope that was wrapped around my waist. I tried to think back. Had Ropey moved at all since we’d come into Kuum Doona? He’d saved my life on the ship, but after that … I didn’t think we’d revealed him. Naturally if Zona could see magic like a warder, she’d know that the rope was magical, but I wasn’t sure that a warder’s analysis of magic was good enough that she’d be able to know specifically what kind of magic. Grak could make some guesses, but not outright crack the code. “My guess is the process is unrecoverable, which means that it’s hard to test, but I kind of wonder what would happen if we had a sentient magic item to give to her.”

“It is hard to say,” replied Grak with a subtle nod in my direction. “Amaryllis did not believe this place was any more intelligent than a dog. An increase in intellect could explain the discrepancy. We do not know enough to say.”

“But if all that is true, why was it not in the family ledgers?” asked Fenn with a frown. “She said that her great-grandfather didn’t know much more than she did. So where does the false story come from?” She looked at Zona, still frozen in place. “And why does she look like your ex-girlfriend? And what got her so pissed off at Uther?” She snapped her fingers in front of Zona a few times. “I’m ready for her to wake back up.”

But she stayed like she was for another few minutes while we twiddled our thumbs, waiting for Amaryllis’ first round in the time chamber to be done. I was thankful that it was controlled from the inside, as otherwise Zona being incapacitated (or distracted) might mean that I’d have to figure out how to control it on the fly. As it was, we were just waiting, with enough time left that I was bored, but not enough time that I could really do anything productive, especially not when the glove and most of our equipment were inside the time chamber. There was also Zona to worry about; the avatar wasn’t moving, but that didn’t mean we could speak freely, especially because it was conceivable that it was a ploy.

When the time chamber was done spinning up (or whatever it needed to do to get up to speed), the grains of sand began to fall, slow enough that my eyes could track them individually. It wasn’t terribly interesting to watch, but I gave it a once over, mostly in the interests of gathering whatever information there was to gather. The hourglass seemed to serve as both a meter of time remaining and the state of the chamber. It was as the grains of sand began to fall more slowly that Zona returned.

“He was dream-skewered,” said Zona. She was standing in front of me, not having bothered to pretend that she needed to cross the intervening distance to get from one place to another. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does,” I said. “You listened to him speak, you probably read the stories if you didn’t hear them firsthand, there was always something otherworldly about him.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Zona. “The evidence backs it up, the conclusion is inescapable once you’re looking for it, but … the dream-skewered aren’t special, they don’t have any unique aptitudes. This
was his home for the better part of a year, I saw him with his closest friends and confidants. His Knights. They never mentioned it. He never spoke of it. We were … we were close, this is,” she gestured toward her form, Tiff. “You knew her.”

“I did,” I said with a nod. “And I would be willing to tell you about her, if you’d like, and about him, as I knew him.”

“If I told you what I knew in exchange,” nodded Zona.

“No,” I said. “Not in exchange. There’s a … do you know the phrase 'gift economy’?”

“Of course,” said Zona.

“I’d like for us to have that,” I said. “We do things for each other because that’s how we choose to interact with each other, rather than because there are explicit agreements that we’re at risk of violating. Uther meant something to you, even if you ended up hating him, or if your relationship status was just ‘it’s complicated’.”

“Juniper already talks about them constantly anyway,” said Fenn. I gave her a betrayed look. “And I do like that,” Fenn continued. “Just saying.”

The door of the time chamber creaked open, revealing Amaryllis. She had changed, in the month she’d been in there, forty-five minutes or so for us. Her hair had grown out and the dye had faded, leaving it a somewhat unattractive muddle of color, red at the roots, light brown further down, all of it tied back in a ponytail. She was back in her pink “Princess!” shirt, now somewhat worse for the wear, faded and worn in. She gave us all a warm smile, which wasn’t dampened by the scowl that Zona directed her way.

The chamber behind her was no longer clean and bare, but it wasn’t really messy either. There was a desk that I was pretty sure had been stolen from Weik Handum, which was covered in books and papers set in neat stacks. Most of the books had a half-dozen colorful bookmarks in them. The bed was along another wall, a simple, small thing that I thought Fenn might have stolen from one of the hotels we’d stayed at, neatly made and pressed clean. There was a kitchen area, which I hadn’t expected; Amaryllis had the backpack, which had as much food as she could possibly want, and I had been assuming that she would feed herself with takeout or fast food. But no, there was a small, single-burner stove set on top of a small table, with a sink beside it that was fed from a jug of water overhead, and drained into a different jug beneath. There were plants as well, I was interested to note, sitting under grow lights and stacked up on racks to the ceiling. I couldn’t see what she’d been using for showers or waste elimination, but with the glove, there wasn’t really a reason to keep the room in the same configuration all the time. The chamber looked small, with all her stuff in it, claustrophobically so.

“I’ve been waiting for this all week,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. She walked forward and gave Fenn a hug, then Grak, and then me. Was this the first time we’d ever hugged? I thought it might have been.

“Well, you didn’t go insane,” said Zona with a glance around the time chamber.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “You could have warned me about the cats.”

“Ah,” said Zona. “As it happens, I didn’t know they went in there.”

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis. “A benefit, actually.”

“Cats?” I asked.
“Cats,” replied Amaryllis. “Whenever you open up a book and read from it, a cat will appear, sitting on the pages.” She shrugged. “I met a lot of cats. A lot. Not really a problem, since you can move them to your lap.”

_Tome of Cat Summoning._ I remembered that one fairly well, though I seemed to remember cribbing it from somewhere. That was another point in favor of Grak’s theory. If the Tome of Cat Summoning had been translated into Aerb as an entad, and Zona had eaten it, that had some interesting implications for how her power actually worked. I’d have to talk about it with Grak later, if I got a chance to. I was assuming that everything we’d said while she was frozen had still been overheard, that was plain common sense, but there were limits to what I wanted to say in front of her.

“Well, I missed you,” said Fenn. “Longest forty-five minutes of my life.”

“Feeling alright?” asked Grak.

“Physically, fine,” said Amaryllis. “I probably wouldn’t even be able to tell I was pregnant at this point if I didn’t already know. Blood pressure is fine, heart rate is fine. I have a variety of deployable packages, it’s how I’m managing the internal space so the chamber can become different rooms. The medical package is fairly comprehensive, and everything I’ve been able to test has come back within normal parameters. I’d have come out if it hadn’t.”

“And emotionally?” I asked. “The isolation didn’t get to you?”

“I had the cats,” said Amaryllis. “They helped. Children’s books make kittens. And,” she glanced at Zona. “If I ever really needed conversation, there was Cyclamine.” It took a moment to remember who the name belonged to: her great-grandfather. “We’re sort of starting to understand each other, I think. But I’m glad for the reprieve, even if it’s not going to last long.” She glanced back at the time chamber, where she’d made her home for a month. A frown crossed her face before she turned back. “How have things been here? Keeping out of trouble?”

“They told me that Uther was dream-skewered,” said Zona.

“Ah,” said Amaryllis. I’d been worried that she’d be disappointed, or that we’d have another post-facto conversation about letting people in on things that weren’t common knowledge, but there was just that “ah”, as in, “ah, figured it would be something like that”.

“That’s it?” asked Fenn. “Not that I was hoping to piss you off, but, you know, pissing you off is one of life’s great pleasures.” She gave me a look. “Also, it was Juniper’s fault.”

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis. “You forget that I had a month to think about things. I made a list of all the worst things you could possibly have said, and -- I know that Juniper is quick to trust, he told me pretty much everything as soon as we met. This wasn’t anywhere near a worst-case scenario.”

“The worst case scenario would be that all of us were dead, right?” asked Fenn.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, with a glance toward Zona. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Zona. “It seems sensible to worry about. I’ve done it in the past.”

“Can you stop saying things like that?” asked Fenn.

“You put someone in the chamber and then killed their group?” I asked.

“Sometimes it was a long game,” said Zona. “Splitting people up, or waiting for them to do it on their own, making as visceral a presentation as I could for when they found the bodies.” She paused...
slightly, seeming to ignore our expressions (distaste, horror, calm analysis). “The killing was always the most difficult part of it, making sure that the body fell correctly, that the spray of blood wouldn’t give the game away until the perfect moment, that it would be artful.” She looked at Amaryllis. “I wasn’t going to do it, but if I had, the hard part would have been the time constraint, trying to get something in place for maximum effect before you came back out.”

“Well,” said Amaryllis. “We do appreciate that you didn’t do it.”

“Oh, I know that none of you will understand it,” said Zona. “There was an art to it, to creating the beautifully disturbing, in touching down to someone’s soul by breaking apart another person in front of them. It was grotesque and morbid, inhuman.”

“I understand it,” I said. Zona gave me a look. Doubt was the wrong word: that would imply that there was some uncertainty on her part. She flatly didn’t believe me. She didn’t believe me with all the conviction I’d ever seen on a person’s face. “Not the whole thing, not killing people like you did, even if they were invaders, even if you were within your rights —”

“Entads don’t have rights,” said Zona.

I turned to Amaryllis. “Is that true?”

“Legal frameworks are complicated,” replied Amaryllis.

“So if I —” I stopped myself, having almost said Ropey’s name. I reached down and pulled out one end of the rope, which came away limply in my hand. “Here, if this entad were intelligent, if it were a thinking thing, you’re saying that there would be no legal repercussions for me injuring it?” I hoped that toed the line well enough, passing the right message on to Amaryllis. She gave no sign of recognition, though I wouldn’t have expected her to. I didn’t dare risk looking at Zona.

“It’s complicated, Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “The Empire of Common Cause operates under a legal framework that’s meant to govern interaction between polities, and which has slowly crept into everyday life -- lots of parallels with your own United States, actually, minus the Civil War. The individual polities then have their own legal systems, some of which have been copied from others, some of which are descendants of different traditions, some of which have bits of law grafted on from others, it’s an absolute mess, worse than anything on Earth. And yes, in a lot of places, entads are property, period, even if they have a clearly identifiable will of their own that goes contrary to whatever owner they have. Sentient entads are rare though, truly independent ones even more so. The legal reforms needed to get all the mortal species on the same playing field were monumental as it was, and not even fully complete within the Empire. You’re talking about laws that would apply to, at most, dozens? There’s no incentive to get the wheels of legislature turning, very few advocates, it’s … complicated.”

“Do you remember monologuing about the politics of imperial law at the Kindly Bones?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, smile going a little wider. “And yes, it’s sort of the same thing.”

Back then, she had been talking in order to cover for me, to both get Bormann’s attention on a different topic, and to communicate to me that I should shut my mouth about things that might give me away. Here, she was using the comparison to say the same, not that I should shut up, necessarily, but that she understood what I was getting at, if maybe not the motive.

“Well, I couldn’t ask for a better exposition fairy,” I replied, as I tucked the limp rope back in place.

“You were saying how you understood me,” said Zona.
“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry we got derailed, I was saying … I know what it’s like to create things meant to hurt other people, to, I don’t know, engineer everything to so that there’s as negative an impact as possible. The grotesque, the macabre. It was fiction, but --”

“Fiction,” said Zona, dismissive, as though swatting away a fly.

“Yes,” I replied, swallowing. I was less sure of the comparison now than when I’d started, but she’d been speaking to something I thought I understood. “I’m talking about the desire to hurt people, not physically -- I mean, that too -- but to inflict things on them, to make something,” I shook my head. “Sorry, we can talk about this later, maybe, I’m not getting across what I wanted to.”

“Or you’re speaking nonsense,” said Zona. “Which do you think is more probable?”

Fel Seed, I wanted to say, but it would take too much to explain, because I’d have to give too much background, and obviously I hadn’t killed anyone with my D&D campaigns, or tortured anyone, all I’d really done was lash out at my friends. It wasn’t a competition, but even so, I couldn’t compete. All I’d really wanted to say was that I understood the impulse, and that it was a human one.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m still shaking off the aftereffects of fighting the tuung, excuse me.”

“Juniper is the architect of Aerb,” said Fenn.

Amaryllis sighed.


“The dream that skewers,” said Amaryllis. “In Juniper’s dream of Earth, he was a prolific creator, responsible for making all the worst elements of our world.”

“Fiction,” said Zona, this time less certainly.

“Fiction,” nodded Amaryllis. “Of a sort. It’s allowed him to have knowledge here, in our world, that he shouldn’t have had.” She looked back toward the time chamber. “You can’t enter?”

“No,” said Zona. “I can sense you in there, moving too fast to follow, but if I tried to appear, you’d see nothing more than a still image. You were planning to speak to me privately?”

“It was the time more than the privacy,” said Amaryllis. “If Juniper wants to read you in on everything, it’s going to take … days, probably, days that I’ll have available to spend, if I could do it in his place.” She shrugged. “If it’s not possible, that’s not a problem, we intend to be here for the long haul, so long as you find that acceptable. I imagine you prefer the others anyway.”

Zona stared at her for a moment, then nodded. “You’re less eager for praise than your archetype.”

“Thank you,” said Amaryllis with a nod.

“Aww, are you two friends now?” asked Fenn. “What a difference a month makes, right?”

“I missed you,” Amaryllis said to Fenn. She looked back to the time chamber. “I told myself that I would make the check-up short though.”

“I don’t think a half hour is going to make the difference,” I said. “If you need … I don’t know, people, or maybe space.”

“With respect, I don’t think a half hour is going to make the difference for or against my sanity,” said Amaryllis. “What I really need is a few hours, maybe a whole day, a meal shared with people,
listening to others talk, time for all the pent up thoughts to leak back out into the world -- and we
can’t be confident that we have the time for proper decompression, not if I do it nine times. And if
Solace needs time to grow up, then we might be talking about dozens of days.”

“Come out early if you need to,” I said.

“The check-ins are meant for evaluation,” said Amaryllis. “Or at least, that’s what I’ve come to think
about them in the month I was in, I suppose we didn’t really have a long conversation about it. If I’m
acting weird, if you think I’m close to cracking, the three of you can tell me and make a new
schedule, or figure out something else that you think would work for me, whether that’s a longer stay
on the outside, or having one of you come in.” She glanced back at the time chamber. It was
becoming something of a nervous tic. “It’s a small space though, and my self-evaluation is that
between my cats and my great-grandfather, I’ve been getting enough socialization to get by.”

Grak was the first to move over and give her a hug, but she got one from Fenn shortly after that, and
from me last, which felt awkward, especially because she seemed to linger for a moment after I’d
stopped hugging her. She had never been big on touching; I had half a mind to look into her soul to
make sure that it hadn’t been tampered with somehow, but that was just the socially inept part of me
talking.

When she finally pulled back, she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Sorry,” she said. “I guess
the mood swings have made themselves known.”

“If you need more time,” began Grak.

“No,” said Amaryllis. She took a step back toward the time chamber’s open doors, and looked
between us as though taking a mental snapshot. “See you all in another forty-five minutes.”

With that she went back in and closed the doors, leaving us to wait once again.

“Am I the only one thinking that there’s no way that she’s going to make it the full nine months, let
alone however long it takes to get Solace up and running?” asked Fenn. “She’s going to snap.”

“She came out without her armor,” said Grak. “That was sloppy.”

“The armor wouldn’t have protected her from me,” said Zona.

“Your exact abilities are a mystery,” said Grak. “Amaryllis is one to take paranoid precautions.”

“Yeah,” I said. “She’d have considered the edge case where she needed to spring into battle the
moment she opened up the door, and worn her armor.”

“She’ll crack like an egg,” said Fenn. “Now me, I’m fine with being alone, but that’s the difference
between a fake princess and a real princess for you.” There was a little bit of edge to her tone that I
couldn’t quite account for. I knew her well enough to be on guard when she was making too many
jokes, but I wasn’t of the right mindset to figure her out.

“We should start making some contingency plans,” I said. “For if the time chamber doesn’t work out
as planned.”

“If the pregnancy is what’s at issue, you could sedate her,” said Zona. “A human can survive that, if
their other needs are attended to.”

“Welp, that’s a new nightmare to add to the pile,” said Fenn. “Sedated for the duration of a
pregnancy? Are you trying to make me nauseous?” She stopped for a moment. “Wait, are you?”
Zona only smiled.

“We will discuss plans with Amaryllis if problems arise,” said Grak. “Or use the time chamber to work on a solution.”

“In the meantime, I’d like to hear more about Earth,” said Zona. “About Uther.”

“I’m kind of in the same boat,” I replied. “Wanting to know about Uther. The locus … that’s not really our purpose, as a group, it’s just -- something that happened along the way. It’s important, yes, but it’s not what brought us together. If there’s an endpoint for us, a meaning, it’s in finding the Lost King.”

Zona looked at me, weighing me. “Alright, we have the time. Let me tell you about Uther Penndraig.”
An Open House

When Omar Antoun became obsessed with the idea of building a house at the edge of the Boundless Pit, it had been a different world. There was no such thing as the Commoner's Guide, or The Book of Blood. There was no printing press to churn out such books and make them affordable to the average person. There was very little in the way of organized research, outside of the ancient athenaeums, and very little in the way of public education to deliver the findings of that research to the masses. Of course, the world was less connected too, and so things that were common knowledge in one place weren't always common knowledge in another, and given the state of civilization, common knowledge was often wrong, the product of anecdote and superstition.

Omar Antoun had been a simple carpenter who made his trade in putting up barns, or more often, making repairs in exchange for coin. He'd had a small shop in a mid-sized city, twelve thousand people, give or take, large by the standards of the time, with an assistant and an apprentice, a well-worn collection of tools, and a mule he used to transport lumber and equipment for the smaller jobs that didn't need a full wagon. He was a humble, soft-spoken man, unmarried and old enough that people assumed he would be a lifelong bachelor, which both raised some eyebrows, and attracted some attention to the apprenticeship he offered, as young men hoped that they might have the business left to them when Omar was too old to work.

The precise pathology of a forge frenzy varied, but for Omar it was slow to come into full force. It started with a sketch on a piece of paper, with detail added in bit by bit over the course of a day. It was tall and proud, narrowing slightly as it rose, the floors overlapping each other so that moving from one side of the place to another needed short, connecting stairways. It eschewed symmetry, aside from the central vertical line that everything was arranged around, but there was still something deliberate in the placement of the structural elements, a thought and care that allowed one piece to flow into the next.

Omar had considered it a flight of fancy when he was drawing it, not realizing how much of his time he was spending on the sketch. He'd followed it with other sketches, elaborations on the basic design, embellishments on the interior details, notated with measurements and plans for construction, ideas on what materials would be used. It was going to have a directionality to it, the front of it facing out to look at something. The Boundless Pit was twenty miles away, down the Buol; as a flight of fancy (or what felt like one), Omar drew another sketch with his house placed there, the windows of its many rooms facing toward that endless hole in the ground. When he was finished with the drawing, he sat back in his chair, and knew that he had to build it.

Forge frenzy wasn't known or recognized in the city where Omar made his home. If asked where entads came from, you might get those in the know talking about a muse, or describing a mystical experience, or a connection with the gods, or some similar thing. Perhaps a few dozen of the city’s ten thousand people would have created an entad, and so would have been able to empathize with the intense desire he found himself afflicted with. But even then, most entads were small things, the work of anywhere from days to weeks. Jars, daggers, or even rope were simple to create for an artisan with all the tools at hand, even if they needed more exotic materials or techniques.

Omar cancelled jobs, or postponed them indefinitely. Where he could get away with it, he pawned them off on his assistant and apprentice. He abandoned the shop entirely and spent funds he didn’t have to travel to the Boundless Pit, where he selected a site in short order and began clearing the area so he could create a foundation. He had always been an honest, upstanding man, which meant that there were favors to call in and reputation to spend. Within six months, he was virtually bankrupt, living in the first two rooms of the place he called Kuum Doona, on a foundation that had barely
been completed.

From the outside, Omar’s obsession with this building read as a man with no wife or children realizing that he was going to leave no lasting legacy and panicking to get something done.

Six years after he’d started work on Kuum Doona, Omar Antoun was still working on his building, a project that any outside observer would immediately surmise would remain unfinished when Omar reached the end of his life. He lived simply, eating only enough bland food to survive, wearing threadbare clothes, a wild animal of a man. Kuum Doona required materials he could never hope to acquire, and labor he could never secure.

And that was when Uther Penndraig entered the picture.

Uther came riding a spectral steed, faster than the winds, his companions following close behind him on steeds of their own. He wore a resplendent plate that seemed to capture every ray of the sun, the thorny crown of Anglecynn, and a five foot blade, edge exposed to the air, strapped across his back.

He had finished his negotiations with the King of Mosenol, bringing that country into the fold of the First Empire, an adventure in its own right. At the conclusion of those proceedings, he had decided to see the Boundless Pit as something of a diversion. He’d seen the half-finished building and approached it, curious, which was where he met Omar. Met is, perhaps, a strong word; Omar did not want to waste breath on speech, he wanted only to work, to do what he was able. His answers were curt and perfunctory, or sometimes absent entirely, as he ignored questions he didn’t deem germane to the topic of the building. Things flowed more smoothly once Uther joined in the work; the King of Anglecynn and Secretary General of the First Empire did menial labor on the orders of a man most people thought was insane.

Forge frenzy was not entirely foreign to Uther Penndraig, though it wasn’t a field of study in those days, and this was before he had experienced the phenomenon firsthand. He had spoken to more than a few of the frenzied, though none that were in the process of creation, only after the fact. The actual lived experience was always somehow warped in reflection as the frenzied tried to come to terms with the pull of it, and the fact they’d created something they could not comprehend. Omar presented a special case at a moment when Uther was ready to have his interest piqued, and so the King of Anglecynn delayed his grand tour of Aerb to spend a few days on investigation.

He returned the next day, having spoken with a number of people in the area and tracked down Omar’s former assistant, now de facto (though not de jure) owner of the carpentry business. Uther brought with him a contract, written by the authority of the King of Mosenol himself. In exchange for a small army of workers and as much in the way of material goods as the house would require to be completed, it was agreed that Uther Penndraig and those he immediately designated would be the only people to take up residence at the house. The land had been purchased from the Kingdom of Mosenol outright, which meant that even if Omar had been of a mind to dispute the deal, he wouldn’t have had a leg to stand on (and this was not to mention that contracts were heard in front of manorial courts, where Uther would have immense sway). Omar signed without even reading through what the contract said; his only aim was to complete the building that had haunted his visions for the past six years.

Uther returned seven years later, a different man. His children had all been born by that point, his wife maimed, a hundred more adventures under his belt, the First Empire mature and no longer needing so much of his direct attention. His armor made him seem like he was covered in black foam, which shaped itself close to his muscular physique and shifted around as he moved. His sword was made of crystal or glass, etched with fractal patterns that glowed green when anyone looked at them. The crown of Anglecynn was gone, replaced by a thin band of platinum that circled his head.
without actually touching his skin.

The spectral steed was nowhere to be seen. Instead, his coming was heralded by the opening of a ring in empty space, metal appearing at a point and then pushing outwards until, with a flash, it connected to somewhere else. Uther stepped through with his companions in tow. They stood together for a time, looking at the structure. When the ring they’d stepped through collapsed, it flew through the air and slipped onto Uther’s hand, with no apparent effort or attention on his part.

“I still don’t understand why we’re here,” said Vervain. The flower mage was ancient, as he’d always been, white beard drooping nearly down to his waist. His eyes were a uniform gray from the iris to the sclera; he had been blinded by demons and cured since they’d last been to the Boundless Pit.

“I own this place,” said Uther, looking over the building with his cold blue eyes.

“Another summer home?” asked Alcida, raising an eyebrow. She’d been the last of his Knights, a slip of a girl then and an intimidatingly well-muscled woman now. She was a vitric, bald, with blue hands, strong enough in her species’ magic that her veins were engorged with electricity.

“No,” said Uther. He turned to the others. “A place to live, for a time, so that I might explore the Boundless Pit. I should get in touch with the architect, if I can find him, if he’s still alive. I had always meant to, once the frenzy had passed, I’d wanted to come back, but ...” He trailed off, and everyone there understood the weight of it. He’d lived enough for several lifetimes in the last few years. It was always one thing after another that clawed at him, demanding his attention. He had a wife who now moved around on six mechanical legs. He had three children he barely knew.

He and his Knights moved in. The portal ring on his finger took a week between uses, which meant that they were there for at least that long, other, less efficient forms of transportation notwithstanding. Uther spent two days looking for the secret to the house, trying to solve the mystery of its magic, touching it in various places, running his hands along the timbers, poking at the tiles and flagstones, and eventually resorting to a technique he’d pioneered called a dictionary attack. However much luck he borrowed though, he didn’t seem to stumble across a hidden word of power that would let the effect be known.

The secret to Kuum Doona was eventually found by making a map of the place and noting the lines made by the unorthodox arrangement of rooms. The angle of a room’s upper edge would, if followed, intersect with the lower corner of a different room further down a hallway, and if you looked at all of the edges and corners, and traced the curves, you would find a variety of paths, almost like constellations, leading to a single, unassuming closet in a long, curved hallway.

It took some time to figure out what, exactly, the closet did, but after a few hours of careful attempts, Uther left an entad alone in the closet and closed the door. It was one of his spare weapons, one of many, the Butterfly Knife, capable of creating butterflies as it swept through the air. When he opened the closet back up, the knife was gone.

It didn’t take long to discover that the knife was, to all appearances, gone forever, nor to realize that swinging any blade within the building could produce the same effect of leaving a trail of butterflies, if you focused on it. A second entad was placed within the closet, this one a pair of bracers that allowed the wearer to freely exchange momentum between their arms, and again, it immediately became apparent that the effect applied to anyone within the building, no matter whether they were wearing bracers or not.

“This is a place of incredible power,” said Uther. “Even if we are to assume that the entads are lost forever, unrecoverable, the ability to multiply utility within these halls is invaluable.”
“It’s stationary,” said Montran. He brushed aside a few strands of hair from his face. Their adventures had worn on him more than any of the others, even Uther. His brother and sister had died the year before, and the group’s brute had been drifting in melancholy since then. “There ought to be very few items in our arsenal that become better when pinned in one place.”

“We could make this place mobile,” said Vervain.

“Feed it the portal ring?” asked Raven. “Wouldn’t that simply allow a person to make portals from one place to another within the building with whatever ring they happened to be wearing?”

“It is a matter of nature,” intoned Vervain. “The effects apply to not just those within it, but to the structure itself.” He stood up and walked across the large room they’d claimed, which had a round table they’d brought in, and chairs arranged around it. He laid his hand on the edge of a nearby door and momentarily closed his eyes. “Observe.” He slammed the door shut, frail body moving with surprising speed and power. In the wake of the door’s movement were butterflies, small and blue.

“And that works for the bracers too?” asked Raven. “You can close one door to open another?”

“Yes,” said Vervain. He sat back down, using the table for support. “I believe the consequence of endowing this entad with the abilities of the portal ring would be that the entire building could move.”

“Hrm,” said Uther. He drummed his fingers on the table and pursed his lips for a moment. “I’m going to give it Soskanna.”

Soskanna was a semi-intelligent sword with a long history, captured from a dragon’s hoard three years prior when Uther became one of the first mortals to ever kill one. It was as smart as a two-year-old human, more or less, capable of simple sentences spoken directly into the head of its wielder. Conversation was difficult if the topic was complex, and when found Soskanna had its own objectives, as sentient entads often did. When it had been forged, its goal had been set: it desired to kill the King of Palmain. In the centuries that it sat in the dragon’s hoard though, the kingdom had been replaced by a senatorial republic, leaving it unable to fulfill its function. Uther had solved that problem in the space of a free afternoon by coercing the senators into temporarily reinstating the monarchy with supreme power vested in a prisoner set to be executed, a task which he accomplished while the ink on the law was still wet. Soskanna had been insistent about its directive before, but after the long-awaited murder was done, it went dormant, speaking only when spoken to, pliant to a fault -- and there were other, more powerful swords for Uther and his companions to wield, so it had gone into their arsenal, where it waited to find use.

When it was added to Kuum Doona, the building finally became aware.

“And that was you?” asked Fenn. She’d interrupted the story a few times, sometimes for frivolous reasons and other times to clear up points of confusion.

“No,” said Zona. “I am this place, not a sword.”

“So that was when you woke up?” I asked. I had stayed silent, trying to untangle things in my head, or match what she was saying to the things I’d read in books. I had read most of From Farmer to Founder, but that had been written by someone far outside Uther’s inner circle, a fair amount of time after the fact. There were distractions in her story too, points where parts of my brain were pinging with recognition; when she spoke of Raven, the archivist, my mind went to Maddie’s character, who seemed to share a common origin if the history books were anything to go by. “I mean, we’re at the point where the things you’re talking about aren’t just hearsay or conjecture?”
“Do you not trust me?” asked Zona.

“I … I only wonder about how you know some of these things,” I said. “How you separated fact from fiction.”

“I met with Omar Antoun, my creator, a few years after Uther had abandoned me,” said Zona. “Some of it comes from him, with my own corrections for the bias in his version.”

“He felt like he’d gotten a bad deal?” I asked.

Zona nodded. “Eight years of his life were taken from him, and in exchange, he was given a meager fund to draw from that covered only the time he was under the direct employment of Uther. He would certainly have accepted a worse deal, given the state he was in, and Uther held all the power in the world -- but that was why Omar believed he should have been taken care of. It would have meant little for Uther to do so.” She shrugged. “Take that part of the story how you will, I haven’t gotten to the part that involves me.”

“A story?” asked Amaryllis. I turned to look, and saw that the door to the time chamber had opened, just wide enough to let her slip out without catching our attention.

“You’re back,” I said. I looked her over. She’d cut her hair short again, not much longer than an inch, with the dyed brown completely gone. It was a less attractive haircut than the one she’d given herself in Boastre Vino, though now that I thought about it, Fenn might have been the one to hack it all off back then. She looked a little run down, like she hadn’t been sleeping well; I was used to her being composed and alert, but she seemed out of it. “Going okay?”

“Meh,” said Amaryllis. “Seven months to go.”

“More than that,” said Fenn. “In seven months or so, Solace is born, but we’re pretty sure she’s just going to be a baby, right? Meaning that you’ll need to breastfeed her.”

“Yeah, right,” said Amaryllis. She sat down on the floor next to the door and rested her head against it with her eyes closed. “I don’t regret this.”

“But?” I asked.

“Just answering the unasked question,” she replied, opening her eyes. She reached up to touch her hair by her shoulder and her fingers grasped at nothing. I wondered how recent her haircut had been, if she’d make that mistake. “It’s hard, but it’s necessary, and sitting in a room by myself won’t be the most difficult thing I’ve ever done in the name of necessity.”

“We’ll go in with you,” said Grak.

“It’s four hundred square feet,” said Amaryllis. “It’s small enough when it’s just me, adding another person is only going to make it harder, even if it does alleviate some of the isolation.” She sighed. “I’ve thought about it a lot, and I’m still not in favor.”

“Then we’ll switch to weekly check-ins,” I said. “With more time for you to decompress and talk to us.”

“You’re talking about adding another day on, minimum,” said Amaryllis. “I didn’t come out here to retread that point, we don’t know whether we have a day to spare. If there’s a five percent chance that adding an extra day on causes the locus to die, that’s not a risk I’m willing to take.” She was speaking fast, more emphatic than she usually was.
“Calm down,” said Fenn. “You also didn’t come out to yell at us.”

“I -- yeah,” said Amaryllis. She let out another sigh. “Sorry. I wasn’t yelling.” She was silent for a moment, staring at her bare feet, before looking up at us. “Things still going well on the outside? What was the story?”

“I’m not going to repeat it,” said Zona. “In brief, it was about how Uther had a hand in building this place, and discovering how its specific magic works.”

“She can take entads and add their unique magical distinctiveness to her own,” I said.

“And you just offered this information freely?” asked Amaryllis.

Zona shrugged. “With a competent warder along, you were bound to figure it out on your own, if you hadn’t already.”

“Then you --” Amaryllis stopped and narrowed her eyes. “I had two months, I should have seen it.” She frowned. “Any entads?”

“Any that can fit within the closet on the fourth floor,” said Zona. She was watching Amaryllis carefully. Some of the hostility had left her, with only curiosity remaining. It was the same expression she’d worn when asking what had happened to the loci.

Amaryllis went back into the room and pulled out Sable, which she slipped onto one hand. She held it out a carefully measured two feet above the ground and caused a large box to come into existence. On one side there was a glass tube filled with souls, which I took to be the power source, while on the other was a metal microphone. The front of it had big, clunky buttons situated above two reels that spun into action when she pressed a button.

“Let’s hope this works,” she muttered. She looked up at us. “It’s an audio recorder, using magnetic storage, totally analog.”

“Is that not what Aerb uses?” I asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “We use wax or electropaper, this is a proof-of-concept for something I can bring to a manufacturer in order to get some seed money.” She looked down at the device. “I should be able to listen back to what you were all talking about in the intervening forty-five minutes between cycles, I really should have thought of it in the first month, but it seemed more bearable then. Should also help with the isolation, I think, being able to hear everything.”

“Is this what you’ve been spending time on?” I asked.

“It’s a fair use of my time,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms across her chest.

“No,” I said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like, ‘I can’t believe you’d spend your time on something so frivolous’, I meant it sincerely, I wanted to know what you’d been doing in there. Because I’m your friend, and I care about you?”

“Sorry,” said Amaryllis, uncrossing her arms. “I’ve just been trying to devote my time to productive things, training, learning, reading, and when I feel like I need to take a break it always feels like it’s a waste. I made a chart of how I spent my time and wasn’t really happy with the results.”

“No one expects you to work yourself to the bone,” said Fenn. “Honestly, just spend your next month lounging around and … I don’t know what there is to do in there, but maybe read some trashy novels?”
“I don’t believe she should go back in without someone joining her,” said Grak. He turned to Amaryllis. “Last month you said the purpose of these check-ins was evaluation.”

“It will be thirty days sharing four hundred square feet,” said Amaryllis.

“I am volunteering,” said Grak.

“Me too,” I found myself saying.

“It’s a hard pass from me,” said Fenn. “I’ve spent enough of my life in solitary confinement, thank you very much.”

“Grak, Joon, are either of you going to insist?” asked Amaryllis.

“I will,” said Grak, before I could respond. “I will spend the next week with you. We should test conditions either way, if you want me to stay with you for the last two months. If it goes well, I will stay longer.”

“That’s … fair,” said Amaryllis. “I’ve made some plans for having you in there, I think it would be good to have your input on them. I don’t want to move to weekly check-ins, because it loses us time that I don’t know that we have, but a one month trial before the pregnancy gets too far along makes sense.” She paused. “Thank you.”

“Dwarves are accustomed to small spaces,” said Grak.

“You’re only kind of a dwarf,” said Fenn. Grak stared at her. “I mean, you don’t live with a clan, you spend most of your time in hotels or hideouts with us, you don’t do any mining or farming or whatever you call it with the muck.”

“Hral,” I supplied.

“This is true,” said Grak. “I am only kind of a dwarf.” Her words sounded odd coming from him, and a little bit sad. “I am still comfortable in confined quarters.”

“Okay, then let’s go,” said Amaryllis.

“So soon?” I asked.

“Joon, I know you miss me, but,” said Amaryllis, then stopped. “That was a joke. I’m sorry, I don’t think it came out right.”

“No, it was funny, I’m just worried about you,” I said. “Worried you’re pushing yourself too hard, worried that you’re not handling it well, or handling it as well as you possibly could but it’s hard, just -- if need be, we can spend two hours going to the bottle and back, to see how the locus is holding up, get another data point on precisely how fast the deterioration is.”

“I’ll take care of her,” said Grak.

“Okay,” I replied.

Amaryllis moved forward and wrapped Fenn in a long hug, keeping her grip tight. But for me, she just offered a handshake, which struck me as completely bizarre, so much so that I almost asked about it. Fenn raised an eyebrow, from out of Amaryllis’ sight, but said nothing, and I pretended that it was completely normal. I mean, it was completely normal by the standards we’d been operating under before she’d gone into the time chamber, but I really wondered how her thinking had changed.
during month two.

“One month,” Grak said to us. “I will give a full report.”

With a small wave toward us, they stepped back into the time chamber and closed the door behind them.

“Are you still interested in Uther?” asked Zona. She’d stayed silent while we talked to Amaryllis, watching our conversation.

“Yes,” I said. “Sorry, the interruption was … kind of inevitable, and we’re going to get another one.”

“I’ll give you the highlights then,” said Zona.

The sword Soskanna could see, and so once it became a part of Kuum Doona, the building could see as well, not actual sight as a human would know it, but an awareness of light, darkness, and color that extended out to a hundred feet from every surface.

The sword Soskanna could speak into the mind of whoever touched it, and so that became true of Kuum Doona as well; every surface was a potential line of communication, from the walls, to the floors, to the doors, to the windows.

And the sword Soskanna could think, even if it wasn’t terribly intelligent, a trait which Kuum Doona acquired.

<Soskanna?> asked Uther, placing his hand against a doorframe next to the closet.

<No,> replied Kuum Doona. It was still grappling with all that it could see, not just the sight bestowed by the sword, but other senses that had always been there, the positions, velocities, and momentum of everything in the house. It would only later learn how it knew those things; they were implied by the previous entads that had been added, necessary information for the magical effects to take place.

<What shall I call you then?> asked Uther. <Kuum Doona?>

<Yes,> replied Kuum Doona. <Who are you?>

<My name is Uther Penndraig, King of Anglecynn,> replied Uther. <You are my house.>

<I am?> asked Kuum Doona.

<You are,> replied Uther, his telepathic voice firm. <Do you recall slaying the King of Palmain?>

<No,> replied Kuum Doona. <I don’t remember anything.>

Uther pulled his hand away from the doorframe and looked at Vervain. “It worked as I had hoped.”

“As such things often do,” replied Vervain.

“Don’t start with me,” snapped Uther. “We need to find the catch.”

“Montran already said that this place is immobile,” said Vervain. “There would be costs to getting it moving, and even if we did, its size would restrict it greatly.”

“No,” said Uther. “There will be something else, some grim reminder of how broken this world can
be. A fortress whose drawback is only that it’s large and cumbersome doesn’t fit the pattern.”

Vervain winced. “It pains me when you speak like that.”

“I know,” said Uther. “But with every passing day, I care less about how the truth pains you.”

Vervain shook his head. “You have such ideas about how the world should be.”

“Not should be,” said Uther. “Is. If I could have, I would have stopped when I became king, but there was so much injustice in the world to correct, so many threads to be pulled on. It’s led me down this path we now walk.”

“So you think there’s a catch?” asked Vervain. “Some reason this place won’t work out for us?”

Uther nodded. “A cost to be paid,” he said. “A complication.” He placed his hand on the doorframe and closed his eyes, the better to concentrate on the connection. <Kuum Doona, I will be adding more to you over the next few days. I will need your cooperation in order to determine the precise bounds of what you can and cannot do with the new aspects that we add to you.> 

<I do not want to be added to,> replied Kuum Doona.

Uther’s frown was minute. <Why?>

<It is difficult,> replied Kuum Doona. <There are too many things to see.>

Uther raised an eyebrow at that. He reached down into his armor, through the black foam, pushing it aside like it was nothing, then drew out two small, white stones. He handed one to Vervain and kept the other in his hand. When they spoke, their words were indecipherable. It was hard for Kuum Doona to read expressions, but whatever they spoke about seemed heated.

An hour later, Vervain had left Kuum Doona entirely, using the bud of a flower he’d been keeping in reserve, and Uther began loading entads into Kuum Doona.
“Babble stones,” I said, after Zona had gone silent. “Hold one in your hand, and anything you say comes out as gibberish to anyone listening. But if someone holds a matching one, your gibberish will be perfectly comprehensible. Not terribly powerful, but there are a few use cases.”

“You have them?” asked Zona, as though waking from a daze.

“No,” I said. I hadn’t actually known they existed on Aerb. “I don’t even know where we’d go to find them.” I scratched my chin. “It’s hard to know what to make of what you’re telling us,” I said. “There’s obviously a question of bias, and of accuracy, and … it’s not that I don’t believe you, but I might be missing the context under which his actions make sense. Especially if there were conversations that you weren’t privy to.”

“What more is there to explain?” asked Zona. “I told him that I didn’t want more, because there were too many sensations that came with the entads, too much information that I found confusing. The Butterfly Knife was able to sense velocity as part of its basic function, and when it had been its own thing, it was automatic with the combination of the will of its owner and sufficient movement. As part of me, that awareness of movement became part of my sensorium.”

“Huh,” said Fenn. “Juniper, can I borrow the Anyblade?”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t have a weapon, everything I own is in the glove, and I want to make butterflies,” said Fenn.

I handed her the Anyblade from my finger, forming it into a thin longsword as I did so. Fenn wouldn’t be able to shape it, since it was invested in me by way of Amaryllis, and we couldn’t change that investment without her, but it served well enough for Fenn to swipe it through the air a few times, leaving butterflies in its wake. I didn’t miss the way Zona was studiously not paying any attention to the weapon.

“So if he knew that it was hard on you, why’d he do it?” I asked.

“He wasn’t thoughtless,” said Zona. “He was trying to engineer me, to add entads such that the problem would be alleviated, while at the same time ensuring that he didn’t give me too much power. To his credit, he spoke with me at length, attempting to explain that it was for the good. It was not to his credit that he refused my repeated requests that he stop.”

Fenn swished the sword through the air again, but this time no butterflies came out behind it. “Aw, what gives?” she asked. She had a veritable cloud of butterflies around her, dispersing with every passing second.

“It was starting to bore me,” said Zona.

“You have it under control now?” I asked. “You can shut off particular effects, or limit your senses to what’s manageable?”

“Yes,” replied Zona. “To the extent that the component entads can act on a person, they can act on me. Uther had a diadem in his possession that he eventually added in order to see if it would grant me the singular focus that it applied to its wearer. That was only after eight others had been added in the course of testing my response. I was quite distraught.”
“Ah,” I said. “Sorry. That … doesn’t sound like him, as I knew him.” I didn’t trust her account, not without the proper context. I wasn’t sure whether or not Arthur would have considered a sentient magic item to have moral worth. He had when we’d played our games, but it was anyone’s guess whether that belief had survived his journey here.

I was trying to think about ways to reframe the stories she was telling from Arthur’s perspective, assuming that she was telling me something close to the truth. I didn’t like her description of Arthur taking advantage of someone who was mentally impaired, and it did seem like he should have done more to make up for that hardship, given that he had all the economic might of a kingdom. But maybe that was just a sense of fairness at play, wanting to make sure that it was the same for everyone, that he wasn’t generous to the person right in front of him at the expense of those he never met. He’d talked about that before, I was pretty sure, how you shouldn’t give to charities just because someone comes up to you with a sob story.

“You want a survey of our stuff, so you can take some of it,” said Fenn. “Is there some quid pro quo there? Or maybe a gifting economy thing? Maybe we get a full list of your abilities? Because if the bodies we passed on the way in are any indication, you don’t have many limits.”

“I have fewer items than you’d think, and more limits than you might imagine,” said Zona. “I kept imagining myself cursed, because the right entads never came along as part of the raiding parties.”

“And what would the right items look like?” I asked.

“Heavy telekinesis,” said Zona. “Long-distance movement. The ability to shrink, or otherwise adjust my shape, possibly enough that I could disguise myself as one of the mortal species.” She nodded toward the Anyblade. “Something like that would have immense utility to me.”

I felt my stomach flip at that. The Anyblade had been with me for a long time, long enough that I felt like I had a connection to it. It wasn’t the most powerful magic item we had, and not, by my reckoning, in the top three, but it was mine, and had a wide range of potential utility. “We’ll make a survey of what we have and see whether it’s still your top choice,” I said. “It’s got some sentimental value, and without it, I’ll need another weapon to bond to.”

“You’re blade-bound?” asked Zona.

“Yeah,” I said. The bait had worked, and gotten us on a different topic of conversation, but I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to share about the game aspect of things. It seemed easier and simpler to pretend that it was all deep, eldritch magic. “Long story. When I said multidisciplinary, I really meant it.”

“Like him,” said Zona.

I nodded. “A lot like him. It’s one of the reasons that we’re trying to find him. And given what you told me … there are some questions that I’ll want to ask him.”

She gestured to herself. “And this? You wanted to know why and how I took this form?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t really sure that I wanted to hear. I tried to reassure myself that it was just one version of events from a less-than-reliable narrator, but so far as I could tell, Zona hadn’t lied to us yet, only threatened us or, before we’d properly met, taken some hostile action that she’d reversed. I listened closely, trying to find the seams where a misunderstanding or a lie could be hiding.

<How are you feeling?> Uther asked the house. It had been a long few days for the two of them. He was the only one living in the house; Vervain had left for somewhere else, Alcida had taken Montran
to the nearest village, Everett, Forty-Two, and Dolmada were exploring the rim of the Boundless Pit and making contact with the tuung that lived beneath the immense waterfall, and Raven had set up their magical tent a few hundred yards away from the house, where she was ‘on call’.

<Fine,> replied the house. <Fine,> it repeated, knowing that the answer wasn’t quite correct, but not quite having the breadth of experience, knowledge, or introspection to give a better answer.

<Good,> replied Uther. He sat in the room he’d designated for a study, with books all around him, and a cat sitting on every one of them that was opened, save for those cats he’d moved to sit in his lap. He was looking through the books as he spoke. <I’ve decided that I’m going on a quest to the bottom of the Boundless Pit.>

<Oh?> asked Kuum Doona. <It is very deep.>

<Deep, but unlikely to be infinite,> replied Uther. <With the right combination of entads, I should be able to make almost three thousand miles in a day.>

<I see,> replied Kuum Doona.

<I’ll be going alone, without the others,> said Uther. <They all need a break from the adventuring life, and this should allow them a few weeks of rest and relaxation while I’m occupied with affairs that don’t require them. You seem to need some time to adjust, and I don’t want to leave you alone, but I also don’t want to leave you vulnerable to my enemies. We can try adding more -->

<No,> said Kuum Doona. <Please.>

<The diadem helped, didn’t it?> asked Uther.

<Yes,> replied Kuum Doona. <If I use it to focus on only one aspect at a time it isn’t as bad.>

“Hrm,” said Uther. <You will need to learn how to use many aspects at once,> he said. <If this place is to be a defensible fortress, it needs to be able to manifest every offensive and defensive magic at once.>

<I do not want to be defensible,> said Kuum Doona.

<No?> asked Uther. <You want people to be able to break down your doors and loot you? You may not care about the riches I store here, but they would take the door knobs, or cut you for wood. You wouldn’t want that, would you?>

<I am a house,> replied Kuum Doona. <For living in.>

Uther kept looking at his book, not deigning to respond to that. There was silence in the study, and within the house as a whole, which stretched on for long enough that Kuum Doona turned its attention elsewhere, changing the focus of the diadem’s power from conversation with the King of Anglecynn to some simple games that it had been taught, games like combining its magical effects.

The house had five pounds of telekinetic force at its disposal, and Uther had showed it how, in combination with the effect of transferring momentum, it could leverage that into greater force. Five pounds of force could turn a crank that gradually lifted up several hundreds of pounds of weights, which could then be released. That momentum could in turn be transferred to other tasks, allowing the house to accomplish things that wouldn’t be possible with five pounds of force alone.

There were other exercises, like trying to control the cats created by the power of the Tome of Cat Summoning, but it was one of the more unruly powers that had been added to the house, and the cats
it spawned had a mind of their own. Kuum Doona took on the properties of the entads it ingested, but the results were sometimes idiosyncratic, especially when the entads in question had peculiar effects. Uther seemed to think that every power could be brought to heel. There were some effects that were involuntary, triggering whenever the condition was met, and he believed that they could be activated or deactivated with conscious control. Kuum Doona had some small amount of luck with the butterflies, though not with the cats.

<I’m working on a story,> said Uther. Kuum Doona stopped moving the weights around and shifted focus to conversation. It didn’t understand why Uther spoke into its mind, when he could just as easily have spoken out loud.

<A story?> asked Kuum Doona.

<It’s a story about a man for whom nothing matters,> he said. <His actions, for good or ill, have no lasting consequences. What do you suppose he does?>

<I don’t know,> replied Kuum Doona. It had a hard enough time predicting what real people would do.

<What do you think I would do, if my actions had no lasting consequences?> asked Uther.

<I don’t know,> replied Kuum Doona.

<Think about it and give me a guess,> replied Uther.

Kuum Doona thought about it. <You would return to your family,> replied Kuum Doona.

<And why do you think that?> asked Uther.

<Vervain said it,> replied Kuum Doona.

“Hrm,” muttered Uther. <But if my wife would never change, and my children would never grow up? If they wouldn’t remember what I had done the day before, for good or ill?>

<I don’t know,> replied Kuum Doona. Uther returned to his book with his brow furrowed, and Kuum Doona thought about the question. It had been instructed not to speak with Uther unless they were having a conversation, and didn’t quite know whether the conversation was over or not. <You would read books,> replied Kuum Doona, at last. <I see you reading books a lot.>

Uther lifted his head slightly to consider that. <And when I ran out of books to read, what would I do then?> he asked.

Kuum Doona wanted to say that it didn’t know, but stayed silent and thought about it first. <You would write more books.>

<For my own enjoyment?> asked Uther. <Perhaps. And when I ran out of books to write?>

<Would you?> asked Kuum Doona. It didn’t know enough about books to say whether that was possible.

<I don’t know,> replied Uther. After he gave that answer, he didn’t return to his book, and instead stared off into the distance, not focused on anything in particular, for long enough that Kuum Doona grew bored and refocused on its exercises.

The next morning, Uther Penndraig stepped over the side of the Boundless Pit and began his
“I don’t like what you’re doing,” said Raven. She had her arms crossed over her chest and was frowning at Uther as he sat in his study. He was back from his first expedition into the Pit, and had said enough within the hearing of Kuum Doona that it knew there would be a second expedition, and possibly a third. He and his archivist sat together in the room he’d taken for his study.

“It’s safe enough,” said Uther.

“How fast are you falling?” asked Raven. “Can you be sure that you’d be able to stop in time if you saw something ahead of you?”

“Terminal velocity is around one hundred and twenty miles per hour,” said Uther. “I can see a mile out. I would have thirty seconds to activate the armor, that’s more than enough. You can be assured that I’m not going to die because I ran into something that lives down there.”

“You’re using warder’s sight,” frowned Raven. She was short, and to Kuum Doona’s senses, appeared almost as a child, though not dressed up as one. Kuum Doona had never seen a child, but somehow knew what one looked like anyhow, part of the large repository of background knowledge that came from no place in particular. Uther thought that it might have been from Soskanna. “What if there’s something non-magical?” Raven continued.

“Something hovering in the middle of the Boundless Pit, thousands of miles down, that exudes no latent, passive, or active magic?” asked Uther. He shook his head. “I would be hard-pressed to believe it.”

“I don’t understand what the point is,” said Raven.

“That’s a rather different argument, isn’t it?” asked Uther. “You don’t like it, you don’t think it’s safe, and you don’t understand it. You’re not usually so scattershot.”

Raven frowned. “You shouldn’t have introduced me to the concept of deflection if you were going to make it a common practice,” she said. “Usually I can understand what’s driving you to take risks, but in this case there doesn’t seem to be a problem that only the great Uther Penndraig can solve. There’s no one in need, and nothing in particular that seems like it’s tugging on your peculiar interests.”

“I’ve taken a fancy to the Pit,” said Uther. “That’s all you need to know.”

“And the house?” asked Raven.

“It can hear us,” said Uther.

“I’m aware,” said Raven. She shifted slightly, looking at the walls. “Babble stones?”

“No,” said Uther. “I’m trying to teach it. For that, it should listen.”

Raven pursed her lips. “And again I come to the question of what’s possessing you to --”

“Don’t use that word,” said Uther. His voice was loud and his tone was sharp.

“My apologies,” said Raven. “It was an unfortunate turn of phrase. I wanted to know why you were trying to teach the house, what the, ah -- what’s the word you’re so fond of?”

“Endgame,” said Uther.
“What is your endgame here?” asked Raven. “You’ve been taken by a mood, lately, but you rarely indulge yourself unless there’s a goal in sight, even one that might look hidden to everyone else.”

Uther looked off into the distance. “It’s about seeking answers, I suppose,” he finally said. “Finding out what the purpose of it all is. Tell me, in your immense archives, is there any indication that someone has found the answer to that?”

“No,” said Raven. “I would have mentioned it, if there were. There are many who have claimed to, but no claims that could be substantiated. Perhaps someone did, and they’re indistinguishable from a madman or a charlatan.”

“That’s an answer exactly as I would expect,” said Uther with a sigh. He turned to look down at a stack of papers on his desk. “I’m working on a story, but having some trouble. It’s about a man who finds himself trapped, unable to make lasting change on the world. What would you do, in such a situation?” Raven didn’t answer immediately, so Uther went on. “You can’t change what people will do, how they’ll react to situations, or whether they live or die. Conversations held in the morning will have faded from memory by nightfall. It’s a curse that no action on your part can seem to end. And the world simply stays static, not changing or reacting, except in small ways that are undone the next day.”

“Is that how you feel?” asked Raven, her voice soft. “I know that we’ve all been through a lot, especially you, but the real, lasting good we’ve done for Aerb is something that anyone should aspire to. The Empire, the reforms, even if I accepted this notion that there would always be another threat rearing its head, I would say that in the meantime, so long as we can hold those threats at bay, the world is getting better.”

“I do appreciate your attempts at giving me encouragement,” said Uther. “But it’s just a story, nothing more, nothing less. The original ending, the one I had in mind, was that it was only after he becomes good that his actions have any consequence again, not just good, but outwardly perfect and selfless. But it seems to me that if he really believed that his actions had no meaning, that wouldn’t be a conclusion that he would come to, and further, that it might be interesting to see what his reaction would be when his outward attempts at doing good, even knowing that it wouldn’t last, don’t bear fruit.”

“I see,” said Raven. “Or rather, I don’t. It seems quite unconventional, even by your standards. And you’re having trouble with what this man would do, given that nothing he does matters? Or at least, given that he thinks that nothing he does matters?”

“Hedonism, villainy, self-destruction,” said Uther with a wave of his hand. “If I’m being honest, I could write it using the rest of the afternoon, but it’s that turn back toward the light that I’m having trouble with. He knew that nothing he did would have any lasting impact, so he raped a woman, and,” Uther shrugged. “He becomes irredeemable in the eyes of the audience.”

“So have him not do that?” asked Raven.

“Perhaps better that he kills instead of rapes,” said Uther. “But if he was in despair, for hundreds of years while the world stayed exactly the same around him, thinking that nothing he did would have any effect at all, and nothing would change for all his efforts, I have to imagine he would try something heinous, just to see whether that was the thing that would lift his curse. And from there, where does he go? What redemption is possible for him, even if he does decide to go back to being good?”

“I don’t know,” said Raven. “You’re sure this isn’t you, projecting your own problems into your work?” She laid a hand on his arm. “Uther, I’m not sure that being alone in the darkness for days at a
“If there’s any danger, it’s that being alone in the seemingly endless dark is a symptom, rather than a cause,” said Uther. “But I’m confident that I’ll make it to the bottom of the mystery, pun intended, and this chapter of my life will come to a close.”

Uther’s first trip into the Pit had lasted a day before he’d come back through a portal. His second trip had been longer, more than four days, long enough that his companions came by to speak with the house and ask it questions the house couldn’t answer about when he would be back and what he’d said. After Uther had returned from the second trip, he’d announced a third and final one, this one as deep a delve as he could make, not stopping until he’d found an answer to the mystery. His companions had asked him not to, a few of them saying that there was simply no point in what he was doing, or more selfishly, that they would be bored while he was gone. He had left anyway.

While he was away, Kuum Doona practiced. He had endowed it with the ability to create an illusion, light and sound in the air, within a movable ten foot cube, and instructed the house that it was to practice taking the form of a person, specifically, himself, the better to serve as a decoy or diversion. The entad that granted the power of illusion had also granted some understanding of the play of light and sound, and the natural movement of cloth and hair, the slight translucence of skin, the wrinkles on the face, and a thousand other things that threatened to overwhelm Kuum Doona’s simple mind. It was getting better though, improving with every passing day, in part because there was little to do besides run through the practices that Uther had set out for it.

Three weeks passed with Uther gone. His companions stopped by the house every once in a while, to see if it had word from him, but they did not stay or engage in conversation, nor did they speak amongst themselves in places where Kuum Doona could hear or see.

One day, Kuum Doona decided to go through the books and papers that Uther had left behind. It had progressed enough that it wasn’t so reliant on the ability to focus, and could allow its thoughts to wander away from whatever task it had set for itself. Uther controlled the house, and dictated which items would go inside the closet to get merged with Kuum Doona forever. He was still a mystery, not just because it was hard to predict what other people would do in the best of circumstances, but because he made some effort to keep secrets.

His papers were largely useless. Kuum Doona found the story he was working on, called “Groundhog’s Day,” though the title didn’t appear set in stone. It had an ending written for it, then partially crossed out, where the weather predictor fell in love and lifted the curse upon him. Kuum Doona didn’t understand why this story was important to Uther, if it was, nor why he thought the ending wasn’t as it should be.

Nothing he’d written down seemed important. It was art, by and large, partially finished plays, novels, poems, and stories, and scattered through those, a number of pictures that Uther had drawn in pen. Kuum Doona read through the papers, though much of it lacked the context to make it understandable, and there were half-finished thoughts everywhere it looked. Kuum Doona focused on the pictures Uther had drawn, and tried to work them into its exercises in creating realistic illusions. It was difficult work, creating the illusion, then looking at the illusion as though from the perspective of an outside observer, then trying to make the illusion move. It required an entirely different level of focus and skill that Kuum Doona had difficulty with, even using the power of single-mindedness that the diadem had granted it.

There was a recurring girl in Uther’s pictures, teenaged and lithe. Kuum Doona took her image and practiced with it, going through with the difficult task of translating the static, representative lines in two dimensions into a moving three dimensional image. As Kuum Doona put its full focus into the
task, the task became easier, until eventually it hit walls in what it could figure out on its own. The girl in the pictures was only rarely smiling. She looked off into the distance in most of them, or stretched her muscles while frowning slightly, or walked while not quite facing toward the viewer. Kuum Doona made its guesses about how she would smile, given the muscles that lay beneath faces, the arrangement of fat and skin, and with some copying from people the house had seen smiling.

Uther returned after a month in the Pit. His portal opened in the study, blasting wind, and he collapsed to one knee as soon as he was through it. He was bloodied and gasping for air, but eventually found his feet. Kuum Doona wished that he hadn’t returned; it waited, not making itself known, hoping that the erstwhile king would have forgotten about it. He didn’t make a sound as he moved through the house, dragging his feet, but to Kuum Doona’s dismay, he made his way to the closet where he’d placed a dozen entads already. His necklace held miniature objects, dozens of them tied there with thread, and he plucked a blanket off, which returned to its full size in his hand. He threw it carelessly into the closet and trudged off to the room he’d declared as his bedroom, then laid down on the bed and went to sleep without uttering a single word.

Alcida arrived at the house as a bolt of lightning the next morning and checked in; when she heard that Uther was back, she rushed to his room and tried to wake him, but all her efforts were for nothing, and Kuum Doona watched as the vitric woman couldn’t so much as move him. The blanket he’d added was an entad, naturally, and the effect seemed to be that he was immobile and protected while he slept. Kuum Doona thought that it could lift that protection, if it so chose, but it did not.

Alcida left, disappearing in a bolt of lightning that arced off into the distance. She returned not long after, another bolt of lightning at the front door, this time with two of the others, Everett and Dolmada. She left almost immediately after she’d dropped them off, and they made their way into the house, moving cautiously, until they reached Uther’s sleeping form.

“House?” called Everett, after clearing his throat.

“What can I do for you?” asked Kuum Doona. It appeared next to them, in the form it had been practicing. It was the first time that it had tried showing it to people, though it had been making attempts at presenting as humanoid in the course of its day-to-day exercises.

Everett gave a little yelp of surprise and looked her over. “The hells? You’re … the house?”

“Who are you supposed to look like?” asked Dolmada, looking the form of Kuum Doona up and down.

“I don’t know,” replied Kuum Doona. “Zona?”

“Nope,” said Everett. “She never looked like that, even when she was a teenager.”

“I don’t know,” repeated Kuum Doona. “He drew her.”

“Well, add that to the mystery pile,” said Dolmada. She gestured to the sleeping form of Uther. “Any idea what’s troubling him?”

“He’s paying down Kenner’s Eye,” said Everett. “That much is clear. A month awake means a week asleep, maybe more. There are some side effects, but nothing he can’t handle. The real question is why we can’t so much as move him.”

“There was an entad,” said Kuum Doona. “A blanket.”

“Oh,” said Everett. “Oh, he gave up the Blanket of Protection.” He leaned back slightly. “Well, then there’s no problem.”
“Except that our leader dropped down into a bottomless pit for a month, against the advice of pretty much everyone,” said Dolmada. “And when he got back, he didn’t see fit to tell anyone about it. He’s going mad, if he wasn’t there already. I overheard him talking to Vervain about how his life was like a story, it was honestly one of the most disturbing things I’d ever heard -- and you know me.”

“The house is listening,” said Everett. He looked at Kuum Doona.

“Let it,” answered Dolmada. “What Uther is doing here is a whole different problem.”

“What does ‘Kansas’ mean, there on your shirt?” asked Everett, turning toward the illusion that Kuum Doona was projecting.

“I don’t know,” said Kuum Doona.

The others arrived, and the conversation became so fractured that it was hard for Kuum Doona to keep track of it all. Even with the demonstrable might of the six companions, there was nothing that they could really do to help Uther, since all he needed was to get some sleep, and anyway, he’d made it so that anyone who was asleep in the house would be wholly protected beyond their abilities. No one asked Kuum Doona whether it could lift the protection, and it didn’t offer to try.

Vervain was the last to arrive, not carried through lightning like the others, but appearing in a swirl of black petals at the front door. When he strode into the room, the conversation stopped.

“Fool,” muttered Vervain as he looked over Uther’s form.

“Do you have any idea what he was trying to accomplish?” asked Everett.

“A month is a long time for the Secretary General to go missing,” said Raven. “People started asking questions in the first week, and they haven’t really stopped.”

“It used to take months for a letter to cross from one side of Aerb to another, if it completed the journey at all,” said Vervain. “How quickly we unlearn patience. They will keep.”

“And where have you been, o wise wizard?” asked Montran.

“Doing wizardly things,” replied Vervain with a frown. He reached down to the bed and poked Uther on the cheek; the flesh was rock hard and unyielding. “Sleeping off Kenner’s Eye, and the blanket given to the house?”

“We have three blankets,” said Alcida.

“You know which one I mean,” said Vervain with a wave of his hand. “Nothing to be done then. We’ll reconvene in a week. In the meantime, I will sleep beside his bed.”

“He wanted us out of the house, so he could claim it,” said Montran.

“It’s been claimed,” said Vervain. “The connection is strong, unbreakably so at this point, which leaves half of this quest complete. When he wakes, we might find that the other half has been completed as well. Make ready to travel, for the plates we’ve kept spinning have started to wobble, as Raven said.”

“You said they would keep,” said Raven.

“All the same,” replied Vervain. “Now go, leave us.”
The troupe left the room, filing out the door together, and emptied out of the house to go finish whatever affairs they had elsewhere. Kuum Doona stayed; it couldn’t project the image of its body out beyond the house, and could only give the impression of privacy, not the actuality.

“You read through his books, I see,” said Vervain, once they were alone.

“I did,” said Kuum Doona. “Have you?”

“Yes,” said Vervain. “Once, when there was some question as to whether he was really Uther. I was looking for a method of confirmation.”

Kuum Doona stayed silent. It wasn’t very good at conversation. It hadn’t had anyone to practice with.

“I’ll be interested to see what his reaction is, if he were to see you like that,” said Vervain, voice nearly at a whisper. “It might do him some good.”

Uther awoke a week after he’d gone to bed, just as predicted. Whether by chance or by design, Vervain was elsewhere in the house, leaving Kuum Doona as witness to the King of Anglecynn rubbing the sleep from his eyes and groaning as he stretched out. He ambled his way to the adjoining privy and relieved himself for what seemed like minutes, before finally coming out, dressed in only his trousers. He stopped when he saw the physical form of Kuum Doona, eyes momentarily going wide before he sat down in an armchair, seemingly at ease.

“You found my drawings,” he said. “The illusion is highly imperfect, but better than expected.”

“Where are the errors?” asked Kuum Doona.

“Maybe nothing that you would have known to correct,” said Uther. He paused. “I could help you make her more accurate, if you’ve chosen her as your avatar.”

“I thought you might be upset,” said Kuum Doona.

“And yet you chose to present this way regardless,” said Uther with a sigh. He looked over Kuum Doona, head to toe and then back again. “No, I can’t say that I’m upset. It’s lacking in artistry, and yet … all from the pictures that I’ve drawn? We can make you so much more than you are, starting with the avatar. Come over here, show me how you move.”

This was how Uther Penndraig spent his first morning back in the world of waking. The blanket offered total immunity from harm, so long as the person under it was asleep, which alleviated such minor issues as bed sores, hunger, thirst, or any of the other reasons it was a terrible idea to sleep for a week straight without moving. He seemed at peace, content with the task he’d seen in front of him, that of teaching a sentient house how to move and act more like a human.

“You’re too graceful,” said Uther. “She could be graceful, at times, but often she wasn’t.”

“Who was she?” asked Kuum Doona, as it attempted to move the image of a girl with less grace, not jerky motions, but as though the product of someone who wasn’t concerned with how a lack of coordination appeared. It was extraordinarily difficult.

“She was no one,” said Uther. “A childhood friend.”

“You have many drawings of her,” said Kuum Doona. She walked back and forth across the bedroom, trying different methods of walking, changing her gait and watching Uther’s reaction.
“Only a friend,” said Uther with a sigh. “It’s only an old man wishing that things could be different. An old man, wanting to go back home.” He wasn’t old; he was in his early thirties, a perfect physical specimen, tall and muscular. His eyes were roaming the form she presented. “Can you do haptics?”

“I don’t know that word,” said Kuum Doona.

“I just invented it,” declared Uther with a smile. “You can apply force. Can you apply force in concert with the visual illusion?”

“That seems difficult to manage,” replied Kuum Doona, coming to a stop. “Controlling light and sound to make this girl is very hard when I’m also having to think about what I’m saying. I don’t know if I can do three difficult things at once like that.”

“Then don’t speak,” said Uther. “Come here, run a finger along my arm, don’t worry about words for the time being.”

It proceeded that way for a while, with Uther instructing the house in how its body should behave, in the intricacies of touch. There was something in his eyes that the house didn’t understand, as he looked on the form that she’d created from his books.

“Sorry,” I said. “Can I stop you there?” I was feeling slightly nauseous. I could see where this story was going, and really didn’t like it.

“You don’t want to hear the end?” asked Zona.

“I’m just … not feeling great,” I said. “Sorry, it’s not -- he was a friend. Is a friend. There are extenuating circumstances.”

“Not sure why you’re so upset,” said Fenn. “We knew that he cheated on his wife, right? Or they were in an open relationship or something?”

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s … how old was he, exactly? Thirty-three? And still hung up on her? And that’s not … it was you, an infantile creature that he was using, and --” I shook my head. My stomach was still churning. It felt like child abuse to me, somehow.

“I didn’t care, at the time,” said Zona. “What did nudity mean to me, when it was just an illusion that I was projecting?” She gestured to Tiff’s form. “This isn’t my body, my house is the body, if you’d like to stretch the analogy. Even after I was smart enough to understand, the sexual relations didn’t bother me. No, it was the obvious shame he felt, the threats he made afterward, the way he tossed me aside once I’d served his purposes.”

“And so he did,” I swallowed. “It was … he made you, ah.”

“To the extent I was able,” said Tiff -- Zona. My heart sank. “Not that morning. It took him some time to build up to it. And once he had, that was apparently enough for him. He said to Vervain that he’d understood the lesson that the house and the pit were meant to teach him.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“I practiced it and studied it,” said Zona. “After, he wanted me to change into someone else, a studious, well-mannered, sexless butler. I was to speak of the girl to no one; it might have been a black mark on the Poet King, and I now think that it was more that he didn’t want to face the shame
and disappointment. Eventually, when it became clear that he wasn’t coming back, I went back to
the girl, out of a child’s petty rebellion, and later, because of the vain hope that I might get answers.

“Which only took five hundred years,” said Fenn. “So congrats, I guess.”

“I need some time,” I said. I sat down on the ground. “Just … some quiet, some time alone, without
other things going on.”

The door to the time chamber creaked open a few seconds later, and I gave an internal groan.
“How goes it?” asked Fenn as Grak and Amaryllis emerged from the chamber. From what I could see of the room, it looked completely different, which wasn’t a huge surprise, given how easily the glove allowed free rearranging of the furniture, and how different the requirements for two people would be. They had bunk beds, it looked like, shoved off in one corner, with sheets hung up to block out the lamplight. There were more books on the desk than before, stacked up high, with more bookmarks in them. One of them was open; a calico cat slept on top of it.

“It was productive,” said Grak. He looked at me, where I was sitting on the ground. “How does it go with you?”

“He needs some time,” said Fenn, with a thumb pointed in my direction.

“Time in the chamber,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “Grak and I were talking about that. We’d like to go forward with a rotating schedule, one person in the chamber with me at a time. Less, if it doesn’t work out for interpersonal reasons.”

“I wasn’t actually thinking time in the chamber,” said Fenn. “Just, maybe, an hour or two away from people, a nap somewhere, a cup of tea, something like that.”

Amaryllis glanced at the recorder, then stepped over and began fiddling with it, replacing the reel with a fresh one from the glove. “I suppose I’ll learn whatever it was soon enough, from the house’s mouth.”

“Was that a pun?” I asked.

Amaryllis smiled and shrugged. “You’re welcome to join me, unless you have reservations.”

I glanced at Fenn, before realizing that the glance communicated something. I immediately wished that I hadn’t looked at her, but the damage was done. “I don’t want to be apart from Fenn,” I said.

“Aww, that’s sweet,” said Fenn with a roll of her eyes. “I’ll be fine if you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to cause problems,” said Amaryllis. “There are some things that I’d like Joon’s input on though, beyond just having company.”

“Okay,” I replied. I swallowed. “It’ll be fine. Anything that we need to discuss before that? Or, things that we should talk about as a group? I’d understand if you wanted to stretch your legs.”

At the prompt, Amaryllis stretched out. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, her ‘Boning by the Bay’ one, and when she stretched, I looked for a baby bump. If it was there, I couldn’t see it, but she was still three months and change along, and I had enough knowledge of pregnancy to know that the growth was exponential.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll get some,” she gave a glance at the decaying house, “fresh air, be back in ten minutes.” She looked to Zona. “Would it be too much to ask --”

“Yes,” said Zona.

“And here I’d hoped that there’d be some work done on my behalf,” said Amaryllis. “Very well.” She took off through one of the doors, and did a good job of seeming blithely unaware of the danger.
I felt Fenn’s hand on my elbow. “Care to say our goodbyes?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

She guided me into a room in the opposite direction from the one that Amaryllis had taken, where some kind of fire had briefly flared and then died out, immolating a bed in the process. I had no idea how long ago that had been, but decades at least.

“Not to be rude, but can I have you be the most social you can be?” asked Fenn.

“I am,” I said. “I mean, I have been.” She was talking about the two ability points I could shift around; I’d put them into SOC as soon as I’d had the chance, when it seemed like we’d need to deal with the house as a person rather than as a physical obstacle.

Fenn sank her face into her palm. “Yeah, I was worried about that.”

“Sorry,” I replied. “Not really at my best right now, for a handful of reasons.” I paused. “Is this really about saying goodbye, or … ?”

Fenn wrapped me in a hug, then gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I want you to know that no one will think less of you if you have to bail out early. I’m not going to ask questions about it, and I’ll make sure that Grak doesn’t either. Okay?” She backed away from me enough that she could stare into my eyes.

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay. If you’re worried about … about anything --”

“I am,” said Fenn. “But if you can’t stay stuck in a room with Amaryllis for a month without fucking her -- if I can’t let you go into a room with her for a month without flipping my lid -- then yeah, I’m going to choose to believe the best of you, her, and myself.”

“I wouldn’t,” I began.

“No, I know,” said Fenn. “But think about the unicorn, right? About a million timelines where things shake out differently, or think about the Dungeon Master and his nudges, and … I love you, I trust you, but I’m not sure I trust you that much, you know what I’m saying?”

“I … yeah,” I said. “Right now I’m kind of hoping that I can just have some time to be alone and think, if I’m being honest.”

“Arthur stuff,” nodded Fenn. “I get that. I mean, I don’t get it, but I get it. If you stay on the outside, you’d probably have to hear more shit from this house, who doesn’t like him, or had some terrible experience, and then it would be another couple of hours before Solace was born, which would be its own thing, and there’d be no room to breathe.” She sighed. “So I don’t get it, but I never really had a friend like Arthur was to you. Never really had much of a family either. This is the closest that I’ve ever come to,” she dabbed at one eye with a finger, and I realized that she was on the verge of crying. “I love you, Juniper, just please don’t fuck this up?”

“I won’t,” I said. I felt upset that she thought I would, and ashamed that there was a part of me that agreed with that assessment. I’d fucked up enough friendships in my life to recognize that I was the common denominator.

“Sorry,” said Fenn. She wiped a half-formed tear away and wrapped me in a hug so tight that it was physically painful. “Pregnancy hormones must be getting to me.”

I pulled back from her. “You’re not --”
“It was a joke, Juniper,” said Fenn, laughing.

We reconvened outside the time chamber, where Amaryllis had set up some basic amenities to make the waiting more bearable; there were four chairs and a small table with a plate of cheese, meat, and crackers.

“I told her that she didn’t have to do this,” said Grak.

Amaryllis waved a hand. “It was nothing,” she said. “You have another four or five hours out here, at a minimum. There’s a good chance that you’ll all need your strength at the end.” She looked to me. “Ready? Everything good?”

“Yeah,” I said. I gave Fenn one last kiss, we stepped into the time chamber together.

“No,” Amaryllis explained. “The real issue is heat, especially with two people. The time chamber is essentially perfectly insulated from the outside world, and that would be fine, except that we do a whole lot of heat production just through metabolism.”

“Do I need to know all this?” I asked. “Can’t you just say, ‘hey, I’m smart, I solved every relevant problem during the first day in here’ and we can get on with it?”

“I ran Grak through the same thing,” said Amaryllis. “If something happens, I’ll want your expertise in fixing it. And even if that doesn’t happen, these systems require maintenance, which you might have to help with if or when I can’t manage it all. Not to mention that you’re going to ask about them anyway when you see me moving jugs of water and blocks of ice around. Okay?”

So we went through the systems that Amaryllis had set up, waste disposal, air filtration and exchange, heat sinks, the carbon monoxide detector and smoke alarm, the fire extinguisher, the lighting, until I was pretty sure that at some point I was going to annoy her by asking all of the things that I’d forgotten. For her, this was a changing of the guard, but for me, it was only the night before that I’d fought with the tuung guards on the top of the train, and only hours since I’d nearly died on the Down and Out.

“Okay,” I finally said. “Can I sleep now?”

I saw her cheek twitch slightly. “Sure,” she said. “I arranged it so our sleep schedules should be roughly in sync, but I’m a little bit wired right now, and there are things that I’d like to get to sooner rather than later. Nothing that can’t wait until the so-called morning though.” She’d rigged a dimmer switch to a timer, which controlled the lighting in the chamber and gave some semblance of a day-night cycle.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know, I figured, I’m just wiped out.”

“Grak put up some wards, the bunks are soundproofed,” said Amaryllis. “I’m probably going to stay up for a bit.”

“Uh, one thing,” I said. “I haven’t had a shower since, uh, a few days ago, how is that sort of thing handled here?”

“Sponge bath,” answered Amaryllis. “If you need to wash your hair, there’s a washbasin that I use for that, and for doing laundry.”

“And, ah,” I said. “In terms of modesty?”
“That … wasn’t really something I’d considered, sorry, I should have,” said Amaryllis. “We can put up a curtain, I suppose, would that be acceptable? It wasn’t really a problem with Grak, obviously.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Puritanical Midwestern views, et cetera.”

“It’s something we can talk about later,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “I’ve been reading a lot of Earth history, as you can imagine. I think I’ve got a better handle on how you think now.” She was silent for a moment. “I’ll get everything ready so you can take a sponge bath without getting water everywhere, and we can run through setup and takedown for it.”

It wasn’t much later that I was out of my armor and sponging myself down. I’d done something similar on the train, to get the blood off me, and it was hard not to think about that as I washed myself clean of the stench of combat. A sponge bath in lukewarm water wasn’t what I’d wanted; I wanted a hot shower in my house, a place that I hadn’t thought all that much about since coming to Aerb. I felt lucky that the wounds I’d taken had been transient, enough that it was hard to remember them; I still looked at my left hand every once in awhile, just to make sure that it wasn’t deformed anymore.

Getting my mind off the physical didn’t really help things though, because that wasn’t where the real problems were lurking. It was hard for me not to picture Uther as Arthur. I found myself projecting the person I’d grown up with onto the imposing king of legend. When I tried to grapple with him having sex with a fake version of Tiff, it was hard not to just see the two of them.

Sleep didn’t come easy to me, despite the rigors of the day, but there was a spell for sleep, and I wasn’t hesitant to use it.

Amaryllis was barefoot in the ‘kitchen’ when I woke up, making pancakes and eggs using stuff she’d taken from the backpack. She’d set up a table in the middle of the room, with a chair for each of us. I wasn’t sure where Fenn had stolen them from, but they matched.

“Here,” she said, placing a plate on the table for me. “These were going to be for me, but you eat first and we can talk for a bit while I make my own.”

“They’re flat,” I said, poking them with a fork. “Not that I’m complaining, I’m just used to the fluffier kind.” I frowned at them. “Didn’t Fenn make pancakes before? Is there … some variation in pancakes across Aerb?”

“They’re crepes,” said Amaryllis.

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, we have those on Earth.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis, glancing back at me. “They’re from an Earth recipe, I’ve been trying to give myself the full cultural experience. Most of the good stuff from Aerb is a few months old by this point, and while we have a few pallets of the bad stuff -- sterilized barren bread -- I’d rather pull from the backpack and have fresh food.” She slid a crepe out of the pan and onto her plate, then poured more batter onto the pan. “There are limits on what we can cook in here, naturally, since a little smoke goes a long way in such a small space.”

The crepes were good, especially when Amaryllis put the extras on the table; she had maple syrup, butter, and some kind of mashed fruit. The eggs were a little runny for my tastes, but I didn’t say anything about them. I had other things on my mind, and if the breakfast was meant to help get me focused on something else, it wasn’t working.

“So,” said Amaryllis when she sat down. “I listened to the recording this morning.”
“Ah,” I said. “These crepes are good.”

“Thanks,” said Amaryllis. She set her fork down with the tines set on the edge of the plate. “Joon, if you wanted to talk about that, about what she said, I would listen.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s … there was this game called The Sims. It was a videogame on the computer, you had control of this little family, or maybe just a single person, they had all these little meters, it was … kind of like playing dolls, Will Wright had a TED Talk where he called it structured play, the sort of game that the user is meant to hang a story on because all the interacting internal systems allow the human brain to latch onto -- you know what, that’s a tangent. The point is, it was something like playing with dolls, I guess, and one of the things that people did a lot -- that we did -- was to make all of our friends in the game.”

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, Arthur was never cruel, I mean, there were lots of ways to kill people in the game, and I did a bunch of that, you could make a person work themselves to the point of exhaustion and pee their pants.” I saw her expression. “It was cartoonish, not meant to be taken seriously, the animation and models were simplistic, and it wasn’t anything approaching … well, whatever this world is, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis.

“The point is, it wasn’t like that for him,” I continued. “For him it was about the stories he could tell with our friends, or the people we knew. Like, he’d make girls we knew, and flirt with them using his character, and it was …” I stopped and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “This was when we were younger, maybe ten or eleven, the kind of thing that you look back on and cringe.” I looked at Amaryllis, finally meeting her eyes. “I don’t know, it was what I was thinking about. I’ve been trying to see it from different angles, to weigh the evidence.”

“Is it that he didn’t see the house as human, or that Tiff was your girlfriend?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” I said. “If that story is anything to go by, he was going through some shit at the time, and I want to cut him slack because of that, but it’s still … it makes me feel gross.”

“Me too,” said Amaryllis. She ate more of her crepes. “You’ll let me know if you have more thoughts? Or if you want to vent?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I feel kind of crappy coming in here and talking about my stuff, I’m supposed to be here for you.” Amaryllis shrugged. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “Having Grak here was better than I’d thought it would be. If you mean the chamber as a whole, I’ve been getting a lot of work done. I’m not sure how much any of that would interest you, but I can share it later, in a more structured way. Oh, and I’ve been doing some cultural exploration of Earth, which has been … interesting, I guess.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Anything I’d have heard of?”

“Almost certainly,” said Amaryllis. “That was part of the point, really. It’s hard, because a lot of information on Earth is or was stored digitally, or on the global internet, which I don’t have very good ways of accessing. Still, I gathered up some reference guides and lists of essentials that let me start filling in my Earth knowledge, especially in the areas that Uther didn’t directly copy, and the places that you’ve only mildly touched on. I’ve been making my way through the American Film Institute’s top hundred films. I think I’m starting to get a hang of the medium.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. “Yes, I have a film projector. For the most part, I’ve been able to get physical film strips in their cans. The projector itself was a pain, since I think it was just a bit too big for the backpack, which meant that I had to get the parts individually and then assemble it, and then, as it turned out, I needed a new lens because I couldn’t get the focus I needed at such a close distance, which was an entirely different ordeal. It’s hacked together, but it works, so if you’re feeling particularly nostalgic, we could do that some night. The next one up is The Sound of Music, which is apparently a musical. I’m not sure if you like those or not.”

“Not really,” I said. “I’m impressed, and a little bit surprised you went through the work, especially if you’re not enjoying yourself.”

“It took me some time to get used to the cuts,” said Amaryllis. “You’d be watching someone one second, and the next second you’d be looking at something totally different. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” I said, but I was smiling. “It’s just that you sound like an old person.”

“In a bad way?” asked Amaryllis.

“Kind of,” I said. “I really shouldn’t be laughing, you’re trying to educate yourself about a medium that evolved over the course of a few generations, that’s noble, but … the idea that someone doesn’t like or understand cuts is kind of funny.”

“I understand them,” said Amaryllis, crossing her arms. “The concept of the notional camera is clear to me, I’d just like movies better if the camera were clearly moving rather than just jumping from one thing to another all the time. They do it during dialogue and it’s like the filmmaker was trying to put me in the shoes of a hyperactive teleporter. I don’t like having my viewpoint switched around so fast. I’m wondering how universal my experience is; if the medium needs to evolve itself by way of children growing up with it, that’s really going to create some problems in bringing our goods to market.”

“I missed a step,” I said. “You’re planning on selling movies? Specifically, Earth movies?”

“Oh, all of it,” said Amaryllis. “Uther was incredibly prolific, but what he brought over from Earth were bastardizations of works he remembered seeing or reading as a teenager, and in comparison with everything from Earth, his canon is minuscule. More to the point, none of this requires our direct labor to exploit. We can hire out people to copy the works and mass-distribute them, with our only role being selecting which books, movies, and songs to pull out.”

“Huh,” I said. “Can I say something that you might find really dumb?”

“Always,” smiled Amaryllis. “To be honest, I’ve kind of missed it.”

“I find the cultural sales stuff to be kind of boring.” I said.

“That’s not dumb,” said Amaryllis. “It would be dumb to not do just because you find it boring, but finding it boring in and of itself is just a matter of taste. Besides, as I said, we don’t really need to have that much of a hand in it, so long as we can find people that we trust to run things for us. There are some important questions about how we’ll do it -- I’ve made a list -- but your actual involvement can be close to nil. It’s mostly as a way of accruing capital for the other projects I want to run.”

“Any luck figuring out why Aerb lags behind Earth in terms of development?” I asked.

Amaryllis sighed. “No, not really. We don’t really have fossil fuels, which hurts immensely, and to some extent the athenaeums drain away brainpower from other pursuits. The multitude of species on Aerb are also a problem -- sorry, not a problem, but a possible explanation for why we’re
The Dungeon Master’s influence was evident in various aspects of the setting. Different cultures, different minds, different ways of doing things, all of which you’d think would contribute to a marketplace of ideas, but I think in reality just creates a lot of friction, as well as removing a lot of people from contention as inventors. Dwarves live almost exclusively underground, they don’t really have much use for radio technologies, the elves are essentially static outside of a few aberrations, you have groups like the tuung that are intentionally regressive, it’s kind of a mess.” She frowned slightly.

“You still don’t think that explains it all,” I said.

“No,” she replied with another sigh. “It’s been nagging at me. Maybe it really just is a combination of factors. Or maybe it’s the Dungeon Master putting his foot on the scale somewhere, either because he wanted the world to look a certain way, or because he wanted this opportunity for us.”

“I’d think he’d be more seamless about it,” I replied.

“I’m not sure that’s his style,” replied Amaryllis. “I’ve been finding a lot of things that just make me groan. It reminds me a lot of you, actually.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“So, I was reading Alfred Kinsey’s work on human sexuality, and the name kept bugging me,” said Amaryllis. “Then I pulled out The Book of Blood, and do you recall who wrote that?”

“Syfriend?” I asked.


“Huh,” I said. “Yeah, I’ll confess to having missed that one. But that’s not really a seam, in the way that I would think of them, it’s just a … a wink, I guess.”

“I suppose,” said Amaryllis. “But there are thousands of those winks, and it’s sort of made me reconsider what’s going on here.”

“You know, when we first met you’d have said that I was just partially dream-skewered, that it was Earth that had conformed to Aerb, rather than the other way around,” I said.

“It seemed sensible at the time,” said Amaryllis. “Now, I’m not very confident that’s the case. Maybe it’s just that I’ve been absorbing a lot of American media, history, and political theory, and realizing how much Uther copied from the world he knew. It makes me think that’s true for everything, that our world in some respects is just a reflection of your own.”

“Yeah,” I said. I finished the last bite of my breakfast, which had grown slightly cold as we talked. “Thanks for helping me take my mind off things for a bit.”

“No problem,” said Amaryllis. “You seemed like you needed it. I’ve always liked talking to you.”

“No, you haven’t,” I said.

“No, that’s true, I haven’t always,” said Amaryllis. “Especially the beginning. I suppose there have been a little bit of rose-colored glasses on my end. Grak said the same thing, that I was romanticizing our group a bit.” She cleared her throat. “But I am happy to have you here.”

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s get started on mapping out the future of the world, shall we?”

Most of the ‘work’ involved me sitting there while Amaryllis explained things. She had a dry-erase
board that she’d pulled out of the glove and set against one wall, with the markers taken from Earth and the board itself just a sheet of glass with white backing, which I thought was probably made from native materials given it was too big to have come out of the backpack. She had a variety of questions for me, most of them written down in a notebook, and made some notes on the board and the notebook when I answered, even though I didn’t think my answers were all that illuminating.

The plan was to build up as much money as possible to get us into a position where we could be the first movers on all of the technologies available to us. Ideally, we’d be able to buy a factory outright, then hire a team of engineers in order to get that factory to produce the goods we thought were most important. This was a slower method of distributing technologies, but it would reap us greater personal rewards, some of which would funnel back toward the ‘adventuring’ side of things, if we still had cause to do that (which we both assumed would be the case).

“Ideally, we would have the full backing of a state,” said Amaryllis. “Actually, ideally, we would be a state, since that’s the only way to have true top-to-bottom vertical integration.”

“You’re talking about reclaiming the throne of Anglecynn?” I asked.

Amaryllis actually laughed. “Well, I never had the throne of Anglecynn, and it’s a really poor candidate for a number of reasons, like the legal framework, the sheer size and scope of the country, the entrenched institutions, the politics -- no, I was thinking somewhere small, with lawmakers that are easy to bully around with our power and influence.”


“Sure,” said Amaryllis. “I mean, I am talking about creating an oligopoly with us at the top. I stumbled across the phrase ‘benevolent dictator for life’. It seemed really apropos. Anyway, I was thinking about this time chamber, which should have only a little less than two hundred years in it when we’re done with it, and about what Esuen had said. In thirty years, she could produce five hundred thousand young. Meaning, essentially, that we could have our own nation in a single-digit number of years.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Blegh, Jesus,” said Amaryllis, rolling her eyes. “Some night when we don’t have more pressing matters to talk about, I’m going to rant to you about the Bible. I can’t imagine why I thought it would be worth reading.” She paused. “Is having our own country one of those things that you think is distasteful but will do anyway? Or are you actually against it?”

“It’s just … bigger than anything we’ve done,” I said. “You’re talking about actually entering into international politics.”

“It had to happen at some point,” said Amaryllis. “The whole point of this, all of this, practically from the beginning, was that we’d change the world. To my way of thinking, if we can get the backing to create our own nation, one formally recognized by the Empire of Common Cause, we can set all the rules up how we want them from the start. We go to whoever wants to back the rogue tuung, keep our information advantage under wraps, they set us up as a lever to use against the other tuung, and then before anyone knows what to do about it, there are cheap electronics being teleported into every city in the world, and we take a cut.”

I found Amaryllis scary sometimes.

There was a lot for me to catch up on, but very little that was actually new. Amaryllis had developed
embryonic plans into thick binders filled with typewritten thoughts and ideas. She was roadblocked in a number of places, limited by information she’d need to get from the outside world, or places where she didn’t quite understand some bit of technical jargon and needed more time for study, but it was everything she’d said she was going to do when she’d talked about going in the chamber.

There were a few surprises though.

“Here,” she said, sliding forward a sheaf of papers. “It’s an analysis of your expanded character sheet with some notes on moving toward an optimal build the next time you change things around. Obviously what’s optimal depends on what you end up doing, but it’s my belief that you should either focus on social or mental abilities, especially those that aren’t easily available to other people.”

“Yes,” I said. “Okay, can I read this later?”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis. “No rush, we’ve got tons of time.”

So there was that. Amaryllis had laid plans for unlocking all of the remaining magic I should have access to, ranked them by both mundane and combat utility, and by what she thought we’d need in order to get the unlock done. On some, she’d written ‘potential quest?’, because she thought they’d need an appreciable amount of effort in order to actually get unlocked. Revision magic was at the top of the list; the way a revision mage was inducted was particularly onerous, but the most burdensome aspect was the time it took, which we could reduce down enormously by using the time chamber.

There were some other ideas she’d been kicking around that I was less enamored with.

“We can rush Solace,” said Amaryllis. “When she’s born, you’ll take a look at her soul, and if it looks like everything but her body is as it should be, then we’ll have you do a wholesale replacement of her physical self. Then all we should need to do is heal her into that form, rendering her a full adult and capable druid a few minutes after I’ve given birth to her.”

“That … does make some sense,” I said. “I would think there would be some problems as far as mass goes. Do you know whether bone magic actually replaces lost mass?”

“Our only reference book on bone magic is The Commoner’s Guide to Bone Magic, which unsurprisingly doesn’t go into it,” said Amaryllis. “And yes, that’s something that we should test before trying it. Obviously if the magic is cannibalizing other muscle, fat, or bone, we’re not going to be able to turn a six pound baby into a hundred pound woman. In general concept though, what do you think?”

“I was going to say that it feels unnatural, but we’re already talking about the result of an eldritch ritual done on a dead woman’s soul with the help of a non-anima and a square mile of sentient forest, so I suppose we threw the concept of ‘natural’ out right from the start,” I said. “It all depends on if we can do it safely or not.”

“I suppose in theory, if she has her faculties, Solace might be able to do a less risky version of what I’m proposing,” said Amaryllis. “But that’s a question of what druids can and cannot do, which is always a tricky thing. Logically, I’d think that she’d be able to do it, but logic isn’t always on the menu as far as druids are concerned.”

“I can understand not wanting to stay in here that long, so long that Solace would be able to develop her motor and language skills the natural way,” I said. “But if I look into her soul and she’s lost a lot in the process, we might have to raise her in the time chamber, at least long enough that she gets back to being herself.”
“Yeah,” frowned Amaryllis. “I’m aware, just not looking forward to it. Even if we feed her formula and take shifts raising her, it’s still more time in this tiny room.”

“Are you going to make it?” I asked.

“Maybe,” said Amaryllis. “I found myself looking through medical texts from Earth, trying to get information about how to induce labor, and how early it was okay to do that.” She shook her head. “Obviously the stress of being in here would be something we’d have to worry about with Esuen as well, and I’m worried that if I can’t hack it as a test case, I can’t ask her to do the same. The tuung lay eggs, so we could still probably do some speeding up, but it’s another case where I’m a bit blocked on outside information.” She sighed. “Okay, I think we’re done for the day.”

“Done?” I asked. There was no clock in the room for easy reference, only a timepiece that Amaryllis kept in her pocket and referred to only reluctantly.

“Done,” replied Amaryllis. “Did I not go over the day structure?”

“Nope,” I replied.

“Mornings are for collaboration, information exchange, et cetera, then we have lunch, and until a few hours before bedtime, you work on your own, doing whatever you think your efforts would best be put toward. Then we have a late dinner, and spend the rest of the day after that on enforced leisure. That’s what Grak and I worked out, adapted from my previous schedule when I was solo. I guess I’m open to change, if you’d like.” She really didn’t sound like she was open to change.

“No,” I said. “That’s fine.”

Lunch was a stir fry with thick noodles, heavy on the vegetables and with two enormous shrimp, bigger than any shrimp I’d ever eaten but apparently from Earth. Amaryllis was a surprisingly good cook, and I wondered how much of that skill she’d picked up in her time in the chamber. She ate quickly, without saying much, and then tended to the chamber for a bit while I finished up. For all that she described the chamber as being a delicate balance of heat and air, I hadn’t found it all that different from a somewhat stuffy room in a house without air conditioning.

I spent free time training up skills to their soft cap, to the extent I was able to do that without any help from Amaryllis. Most of them were already there, and had been for a while, so I put work into some of the ones that were harder to raise, like Horticulture or Engineering, done using materials taken from the backpack. I tried to bring Solace’s lessons to mind as I worked with the plants, but it was difficult to get in what I thought of as being the right mindset when we weren’t outdoors. True flower mages tended toward disorganized, organic gardens, though maybe not to the extent that was true for Solace.

For dinner, Amaryllis pulled out a crockpot that she’d loaded up before breakfast, filled with root vegetables and beef.

“You’re very domestic,” I said. “If it were Fenn, she’d probably just be eating fast food.”

“Fenn knows how to cook,” said Amaryllis. “Sometimes I feel like you don’t give her enough credit.”

“No, I know she knows how to cook,” I said. “I just don’t think that she would, if you were in each other’s shoes. You can pull whatever you want from the backpack, and I know for a fact that hot, cooked food is well within its abilities.”

“I think it tastes better if you make it yourself,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “Do you wish I didn’t
“I appreciate the effort,” I said. “I just … maybe don’t understand it? Like, Fenn wouldn’t cook because she likes to be lazy when she can be, and I thought that maybe you wouldn’t cook because you like being efficient and spending time cooking is time you could spend doing something else.”

“I like cooking,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. She furrowed her brow. “I do take it out of my time budget.”

“Sorry, this is good eats, I didn’t mean that you shouldn’t have, I just,” I stopped and shut my mouth. “It doesn’t seem like you, to focus on something aesthetic and fleeting.”

“I’ll choose to take that as a compliment,” said Amaryllis. “From what you’ve told me, on Earth you focused on nothing but the aesthetic and fleeting.”

“Ouch,” I said. “Tough but fair.”

“Isn’t that how you described the games you played?” asked Amaryllis. “You compared them to performance art.”

“I said it was fair,” I replied. “I was thinking more about the time I spent online.” I ate more of the roast as I thought about that. “You know, I think you’d love the internet.”

“I have part of it,” said Amaryllis. “The backpack doesn’t allow me access to a computer, lap computer, or intelligent phone, but it does allow printouts of websites.”

“That’s … not really the same thing, since you’d be missing out on interactivity,” I replied. “But I suppose it’s as close as we’re going to get. Find anything interesting?”

“Many things,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “It’s unbelievable how much Uther brought over from Earth. I’d thought, when I started, that I’d find a few places where he’d been obviously influenced by what he’d grown up with on Earth, but it’s almost overwhelming how many parallels there are. Even his name is taken from Earth legend, did you know that?”

“Well, usually it’s ‘Pendragon’, but yeah, I knew,” I replied. “But that’s not actually on him, unless you want to judge an adolescent boy for his choice in names. The Penndraig name was sitting here, on Aerb, waiting for him. At least he didn’t call himself Megatron.”

“I’m not sure that you understand who Uther Penndraig was,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “The way you talk about him, it’s like you know all the details, but haven’t been able to internalize how he appeared to us.”

“He’s the most important man in history,” I said. “Responsible for the First Empire, and by some accountings, accidentally responsible for the Second Empire, kicked off a minor scientific revolution that petered out without him around to keep things going, led millions if not billions of people — yeah, I know.”

“You know, but you don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “You’re repeating back facts, but to you he’s still your teenage friend. The tape — can I talk about it?”

“About what Zona said?” I asked. I got that nauseous feeling again, and pushed away what was left of my food. “Sure.”

“There have always been rumors about him,” said Amaryllis. “He was … he was Donny Osmond, Shakespeare, John F. Kennedy, Nikola Tesla, all rolled into one. Anyone that big, that important,
that popular? Well, of course there would be rumors and stories, even if none of them were true. That’s just how some people interact with greatness, they feel a need to tear it down so that it’s not so imposing, or make excuses for why that greatness wasn’t really an achievement. People would say that he’d sold his soul to accomplish what he did, or he was selling lies, or even that he was simply a deeply flawed man who had nonetheless done a lot for the world.”

“Some of that might be true,” I said, swallowing. “Yeah, I … I never thought of him as perfect, back on Earth. Good, maybe, better than me, certainly, but not perfect. I just thought the imperfections would be, I don’t know. Not in this particular direction. Not him using people. I thought that it would be insecurity, a lack of direction, something like that. Or, putting his family and friends before others, maybe. Being inconsiderate? I don’t know. Something that I could handle a little better.”

“You’re struggling with the fact that he wasn’t the person you knew,” said Amaryllis. “Or rather, simply not confronting it.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It was decades, sure, but he wouldn’t totally change, would he?”

“Do you think that you’ll be even remotely how you were in high school, when you’ve lived in Aerb for another forty years?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “Probably not.” I wasn’t sure who I would be, but instinctively it felt like only the vestiges of my old life would remain. “There will come a point when I’ve been on Aerb longer than I’ve been on Earth.”

“I think about that sometimes,” said Amaryllis. “Not about you, but about myself. I’ve been in this room for longer than I’ve known you. Most of my time as a member of this group will have been spent waiting for the pregnancy to progress. And my perspectives on the four of you have changed too, given such ample time to reflect.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Was that why you didn’t hug me?”

“Last month?” asked Amaryllis. She turned away slightly, so she wasn’t looking at me. “I don’t want you to think less of me.”

“I won’t,” I said. My heart was beating faster. I looked over at the side of the wall, where the control for the time chamber was. It was a lever, nothing complicated. Depending on what she said, I might have to leave. “If you’re dealing with feelings, then I think you should talk about them.”

“Grak thought so too,” said Amaryllis. “Here, let me clean up first, if you’re done.” She reached out with her gloved hand and touched her plate, which disappeared after ten seconds, then did the same for the silverware, napkins, and finally, the table. “Chairs too,” she said. “I think we’ll watch a movie tonight, and even if we don’t, I think it’s good to have open space.”

“Sure,” I said slowly. I watched as she removed the chairs to the glove. She went over to one wall and set up a film projector on the table, then put a couch in front of it. “Are you stalling?” I asked.

Amaryllis sat down on the couch. “A little bit,” said Amaryllis. “I’m composing my thoughts for the fifth or sixth time.”

“Ah,” I said. I took a seat on the couch with her. It was blue and stuffed, large enough that we had some space between us, which I was grateful for.

“You’re going to think less of me,” Amaryllis said again.

“Probably not,” I said.
“Well, I worry that you will,” said Amaryllis. “I would think less of myself. I do think less of myself.” She cleared her throat. “There’s a part of me that thinks about what would happen if Fenn were to die. It feels like we’ve been living on the knife-edge of survival for quite some time, and Fenn’s come the closest of us. When she was bisected … that was before everything had been settled between the three of us, but I didn’t think that she would make it, and I thought that you would find comfort in my arms.” She paused, pursing her lips. “There’s a part of me that’s in love with you.” She glanced at me, just for a moment, and I could see that her eyes were wet with nascent tears. “We’d make a horrible couple. We both know that. There are times when we’re not even all that good of friends.” She folded her hands in her lap and looked at them, rather than meeting my eyes again. “And there’s this part of me that sees you as somehow completing me anyway, as though a romance between us is what’s missing from my life. I see the warm affection that you give to Fenn, and I feel happy for the two of you, but also jealous.”

My heart was hammering away. Some of that was just simple fight or flight response, I was sure.

“I’m going to have to talk about all of this with Fenn,” I said. “I mean, I’m going to have to disclose it, because I would want her to do the same if someone said that kind of thing to her.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a complication. It’s bad for the group. I would let it lie, but that hasn’t been helping me, and with months in here … I’m not really sure that I can make it if I don’t get things off my chest, so here we are. Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “Not fine, obviously, it sucks, but I do think it’s better for us to talk about it rather than letting it fester. Maybe we can talk our way to some kind of catharsis.”

“Maybe,” said Amaryllis. “I’ve had three months to get over it, or to figure things out on my own. It wasn’t just a matter of moping, I was trying to figure myself out. I saw it -- see it -- as a personal problem, a defect that I can remove like I’ve removed so many others. It’s a weakness.”

“But no luck on that end?” I asked.

“I read books from Earth,” said Amaryllis. “That was why I was reading Kinsey’s work: it was part of a survey of works on romance and sexuality. Aerb has its own books on the subject, but I think it would suffice to say that we don’t have the same depth of research. There are so many different species that it makes proper research difficult, and research for any individual species is less economically viable and less scientifically important.”

“And?” I asked. “Did any of it help you to understand yourself?” I didn’t mention that Kinsey was a little bit suspect, as far as researchers went. Either she already knew that, or telling her might undermine whatever she thought she’d learned about herself.

“I made a survey of myself,” said Amaryllis. “I tried to imagine how things would feel to me, sexual, romantic, physical things. I tried different emotions on for size. I had never been that sort of reader before, the kind to project herself into the characters and live vicariously through them, but I really tried, and found that I could do it, if I put the effort in, which was helpful in allowing me to learn what was and was not compatible with my own mind.”

“So … you’ve been reading romance novels?” I asked.

“I have,” nodded Amaryllis. “Not exclusively, obviously, but I’ve been treating them as a form of self-care. Obviously the novels never portray romance as it actually is, but they’re meant to evoke those particular feelings in the reader, so I thought to that extent they’d be useful.” She stretched out slightly, then rested her hands on her knees. “I used to think that I was broken.”
“No, you’re not,” I said. “Just … asexual?”

“Mostly,” said Amaryllis. She frowned at me. “Did you know before I did?”

“After our long talk in the bottle, it seemed like one of the two likely options,” I said with a shrug. “The other being that you were lesbian.” I hadn’t wanted to pry or make assumptions, but I’d really been hoping that her revulsion towards sex with me wasn’t just because it was me.

Amaryllis gave a nonchalant shrug. “A bit.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” I quickly added.

“Admirable of you to say,” said Amaryllis with a small smile.

“Not really, by the standards of my culture,” I said. “Obviously there are some issues if you’re part of a five century long hereditary line.”

“Obviously,” replied Amaryllis, smiling more. “Do you know that’s one of the things I like about you?”

“Oh?” I asked.

“You like to race ahead,” said Amaryllis. “And even when your observations are sophomoric, it’s the energy and enthusiasm with which you do it that I find charming.” She looked away from me again, turning solemn. “This isn’t helping.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Did it at least help to talk? To express?”

“Maybe. Not really,” said Amaryllis. “It made me feel better in the short term, but it hasn’t solved the long term problem.”

“Sometimes if your emotions are pent up, you just need a release valve,” I said. I frowned slightly. “I don’t want to change subjects, if there’s more you wanted to say.”

“Go ahead,” said Amaryllis. “I was going to share my findings from reading Earth’s literature on human sexuality, but I imagine it would bore you, and that’s a change in subject all its own. Speak what was on your mind.”

“I was going to say that maybe for Arthur, Kuum Doona was just a release valve,” I said. “Maybe … it takes some interpretation on my end, but maybe Arthur had gone down into the Boundless Pit because he wanted to escape from his reality, or to go back home. On his last trip, he was away for a month, which means either he had some actual adventures down there, or he was just dropping for something like a hundred thousand miles. Whatever he found, or didn’t find, it was crushing. And when he came back … Kuum Doona wasn’t Tiff, but Tiff wasn’t Tiff, she was just a representation of home, of a life he’d left behind, things he’d never done. It was an outlet for him.” It had felt right as I was saying it, but at the end I began to falter, because it sounded too much like apologetics for something that was too much like sexual assault.

“Do you need an outlet?” asked Amaryllis.

“For?” I asked.

“Arthur,” she replied. “Or other feelings about home that you can’t express. Or anything, really. I appreciate that you took the time to listen to me -- I really, really appreciate it, more than I can say. I was worried that you would be upset with me, or worse, that …” She trailed off and folded her
hands.

“It would be a mistake on a lot of fronts,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Amaryllis.

She didn’t say, ‘and yet …’, but I wondered whether she thought it. There was certainly a part of me, the hormonal teenage boy, that was thinking about going ahead and damning the consequences.

We sat in silence for a moment. Whatever she’d needed to get off her chest, it seemed like she was done with it, and I’d weathered the storm. I still felt shaky and slightly sick. I wasn’t in love with Amaryllis, or even infatuated anymore, but she was still devastatingly attractive and readily admitting that she had a thing for me. I’d have liked to believe that if Amaryllis had tried to seduce me, I would have pushed her off and left the time chamber early, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like I was just fantasizing instead of worrying. It all left me feeling a little bit uncomfortable and anxious.

“It makes me think,” I said, frowning slightly. “It makes me think about the choices that Arthur was faced with, and how he dealt with them.” I let out a shaky breath. “The thing I’m really worried about is that this is the tip of the iceberg. That it’s a single grain of sand on the beach, that the further we probe, the more we’re going to see, and I’m going to find that he was destroyed by this place, back from the dead but then scrubbed away.” I swallowed. “Or, maybe, something worse. I don’t know.”

Our conversation petered out after that, and Amaryllis put the movie in the reel-to-reel projector. She’d selected Groundhog Day, for obvious reasons, and while it wasn’t really the movie that I was in the mood for, I knew it well enough that I didn’t have to spend too much mental effort trying to follow it. Amaryllis asked questions throughout, enough that I could almost convince myself that she really did want me in the chamber with her just to be her cultural translator.
The month in the time chamber went by quickly and slowly. The ordered schedule that Amaryllis had us on made the days go faster, since it shortened my vision a bit; I was always waiting on the next section of the day, rather than counting the days themselves. But at the same time, those divided chunks of time seemed to drag, especially during the first part of my time in the chamber, when I was working on leveling up any of my skills that hadn’t hit their caps. There were a few occasions where Amaryllis helped with training, which made it more bearable; some of the skills, especially the social ones, were nigh impossible to train up without a partner to practice on.

On my third day in the chamber, I offered to do half of the chores.

“Why?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“Uh,” I said. “I’m not sure that’s something that you should be suspicious of. It seems sort of like common courtesy for us to have a division of labor, I should have offered from the start, I just thought that maybe you liked doing things your own way. I don’t mind doing drudge work.” I’d been a little uneasy watching her move the giant jugs of water around, but the last time I’d mentioned her being pregnant, I’d gotten a well-researched lecture on women’s health and what was and was not scientifically shown to have negative outcomes for mother and child.

*Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 20!*

*Companion Passive Unlocked: Symbiosis (Amaryllis)!*

“Okay, I’d appreciate that,” said Amaryllis. “Thanks.”

“You know,” I said slowly. “I think there’s been a recent trend of loyalty increases being genuinely insulting.”

Amaryllis lit up. “Really?” she asked. “It finally happened?” I think it was probably the happiest I’d ever seen her; she was practically vibrating with excitement. “The same that Fenn got?”

“Symbiosis, yeah,” I said. “But the loyalty increase leads me to believe that saying I would do some of the drudge work changes your mind about me somehow? That kind of hurts.”

“Sorry Joon,” said Amaryllis. She winced. “Do you want me to take the time to explain it nicely, or can I bask in this for a bit? I’ve been planning for this moment for a while now.”

“Sure, go ahead,” I said. “Let me know if there’s anything you need help with. I helped Fenn a bit, and I’m the resident expert on learning skills without putting in the work.”

Amaryllis gave me a smile, which was quite effective at cutting through the glumness I’d felt at getting a loyalty bump just for offering to do my fair share. We didn’t really need to talk about it; I thought that it probably went back to that first night we’d spent together, when I’d blown off the night’s watch to go train up my skills. I knew that she saw me as someone who wasn’t really willing to put in the work, which I thought was somewhat fair; it was a similar line of thought to the one that Grak expressed, about me thinking that the world owed me something. I was happy to have changed her mind a little bit on that score, even if I wished that it hadn’t needed to be changed in the first place.

As far as the interpersonal side of things went, it was never as intense as on the first day. My primary
method of operation was to try not to do things which, in a romantic comedy, would be obvious setups for said romance. That meant nothing that implicitly included physical contact, nothing otherwise intimate, very little discussion of our feelings (which would only have been retreading well-worn ground), and as rigidly platonic of a relationship as possible.

I kept thinking back to what Amaryllis had said about hating herself for feeling the way she did. That resonated with me; I hated myself for the fact that all those precautions seemed necessary. I really did love Fenn though, and whatever it took to keep our relationship strong, that was what I would do.

It made things awkward sometimes; Amaryllis reciprocated the aversion to touch, and sometimes it was obvious to both of us that this was something we were doing. We would reach for something on the table during mealtimes and both pull away before we made contact, like the other was made of lava. We didn’t really talk about it, even when it was awkward like that, which was how I preferred it; we knew where we stood.

I dreamt about Amaryllis from time to time. It always followed a similar theme, with the two of us someplace that wasn’t the suffocatingly small time chamber, and Amaryllis being aggressively seductive. She would say things like, ‘I was built to be everything that you ever wanted, do you want to see how much that covers?’ while touching me, and sometimes I would shrink back, or sometimes I would simply accept that this was happening to me, until I had to talk to Fenn and explain what had happened. I always woke up from those dreams feeling guilty and nauseous, like I had done something wrong.

I didn’t talk about the dreams with Amaryllis.

Amaryllis blitzed through acclimating to her newfound abilities far faster than Fenn had, becoming half the soul mage, bone mage, blood mage, et cetera that I was in a handful of days. She asked me all sorts of questions, most of which I wasn’t able to answer.

“This is amazing,” said Amaryllis. She sat in the lotus position on top of a pillow, having just come back out of a soul mage trance. “I wonder if I’d be able to surpass you.”

“I have no idea,” I said. “Not per the rules of the passive, but I don’t know how hard and fast those are. It’s also possible that you might be able to do more with what you have, which I wouldn’t be terribly surprised by. If skill level translates directly to skill, you couldn’t, but I’m fairly sure that it doesn’t. Some of the techniques I’ve learned have been as a consequence of hitting a new benchmark in that skill, but others have been unlocked by trying new things, or getting information from someone. Sanguine Surge was like that. All I had to do was adapt the technique from Crimson Fist into a jump.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “Don’t try anything too strenuous, and don’t mess with your own soul. Please.”

“I was going to try something,” said Amaryllis. She was almost pouting. “You need direct, physical contact in order to touch the soul of someone else, right? That’s all?”

“Yes …” I said slowly. “You,” I stopped, thinking that over. “You want to give Solace’s soul a peek?”

Amaryllis grinned and nodded. “How many women in the history of Aerb do you think have done that?”

“I mean … most of them wouldn’t have seen anything, right?” I asked. “Babies don’t know anything, I’d figure that embryos would basically be blanks. The bulk souls I’ve looked at have been, anyway.”
“I’m at thirteen weeks, she’s not an embryo, she’s a fetus,” said Amaryllis. “And yes, you’re right, most of the time I don’t think it would be terribly interesting, but it’s an exciting time to learn. Come to think of it, a pregnant soul mage might have been where we got the information that souls don’t appear until the sixth day. I’m not sure I ever questioned that.”

“Well,” I said. “That’s certainly the less horrifying version of how the Second Empire would have come to know that.” I still wasn’t comfortable with the mass production of souls that served as the primary source of power generation throughout Aerb. Instead of oil spills, there were accidents where thousands if not millions of embryonic souls ended up in the hells.

“Well, I’m going to try to find Solace and see what state she’s in, wish me luck,” said Amaryllis.

“Good luck,” I said. I watched as she closed her eyes again, and tried to continue on with my day. Touching the soul of another person had been quite difficult for me. It had taken hours before I’d been able to get in Grak’s to undo what Fallatehr had done to him, and I’d had twice the Essentialism that she was working with, though I’d also been working blind and hadn’t tried at every skill change. I also suspected that getting to Solace might be easier, considering the two of them were in some sense sharing a body.

(The numerical skills were composed of discrete parts, visible inside the soul as a complex sum of everything that fell under that skill, and up close, some tendrils leading off in other directions, which some investigation had shown led to either memories of using that skill, or places where two different skills worked together. There was a lot of room for two people with the same numerical value in a skill to have distinctly different applications of that skill, which in theory gave us some wiggle room for specialization, something that was high up my list of priorities given that both Amaryllis and Fenn had weak versions of the magics available to me.)

Personally, I was working on blood magic. I had already raised it as high as my stats would allow, but there were things that blood mages were supposed to be able to do, and I hadn’t really had the time to sit around trying to figure things out until stepping into the time chamber. Hemokinesis had always been one of my favorite abilities in tabletop games, and I’d made more than one villain from the concept (blood liches, blood zombies, blood portals, and blood bards). On Aerb, blood mages could pull blood from their bodies in order to form a weapon, which seemed like it would be a useful ability in certain circumstances, especially if I could apply all of my blade-bound bonuses to it.

Keeping my blood in my body was comparatively easier, since the blood seemed to ‘want’ to travel through my veins, rather than spurting out all over the place. I made a slit in my wrist, opening the ulnar artery, and tried to maintain the flow of blood while also bringing some of it out. I tried to imagine the flow of blood like a river whose course I was changing, so that it would dip outside my body. I got the loop of blood out two inches from my wrist before losing control of it and getting blood everywhere. I used a bone to close the wound, wiped myself off, then tried again.

An hour later, I’d gotten it up to six inches away while still keeping it steady, but hadn’t been able to trigger a skill message, nor really figure out how I was supposed to translate that into something like a spear. Perhaps more importantly, I also hadn’t gotten a game notification.

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis with a scowl, coming out of the lotus position and stretching her legs out. She looked at me, and the loop of blood that was flowing through the air above my wrist, along with all the blood on the floor and my clothes. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” I said, bringing the loop back inside me, then closing up the wound with bone magic. “I’m getting somewhere, I think, if a bit slowly. I take it things aren’t going well? It took me a long time, you need some patience.”
“No, it’s not that,” said Amaryllis. “I got in, it’s just … she’s not all there. The thicket of memories is decimated, she’s threadbare on skills, and her values are a mess. There’s none of the conceptual specificity that I see in my own soul.”

“Maybe it takes time?” I asked.

“Or she’s lost a part of herself in the process, and will need to be raised as a child before she can be reunited with the locus,” said Amaryllis. She clenched her fists so hard her knuckles went white. “Shitfucker.” She closed her eyes. “I don’t want to be in here for years.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said. “We’ve got your back.”

Amaryllis opened her eyes. “I do appreciate the sentiment, but if we have to raise her, then someone is going to have to do it. If five years old is our benchmark, the point at which she’ll have a proper command of language and possibly be a capable druid, that means that we each need to spend more than a year in here. If I’m not part of the rotation, that would mean more of a burden for each of you. The co-use of the time chamber is already pushing how much can reasonably be asked of the group.”

“If we take turns,” I began, then stopped. “Ah, that doesn’t really work, does it? Grak spent a month in here, then he’s only going to be outside the chamber for a subjective few hours before having to come back in to ride out the rest of the pregnancy.” I sighed. “Right.”

“There’s no way to get a true break in, not without compromising our timetable,” said Amaryllis. She slammed a fist against the floor. “This is bullshit.”

“Could you see if the connection to the locus was still there?” I asked.

“I think so,” said Amaryllis. “I was actually going to see whether you’d allow me to look at your own soul, so that I have something to compare against. Right now I just have myself and her, and she’s highly atypical.”

“Ah,” I said. “That’s … I’m a little leery about anyone looking at my soul, after how things went down with Fallatehr.”

“You didn’t let Fenn?” asked Amaryllis, raising an eyebrow.

“She hasn’t worked on it, to my knowledge,” I said. “She went for blood and bone as soon as she got Symbiosis, then there was all that shit with Fallatehr, and I think maybe she didn’t want to go for Essentialism given how things shook out. I only really use it when it’s wholly necessary, which isn’t often; shifting points around, mostly.”

“Do you not trust me?” asked Amaryllis.

I sighed. “I do,” I said. “But it still makes me nervous. Doesn’t it make you nervous?”

“It does,” nodded Amaryllis. “I never really got a choice to say no, and the link doesn’t seem to go both ways.”

I held out my hand, and Amaryllis moved over to me, close enough to take it but far enough away that the gesture was as lacking in intimacy as possible. I could feel my heart start beating faster, partly from the first physical contact I’d had in a few days, and partly from the idea of her reaching into the core of my being.

It took some time. Our hands got sweaty, and I had to readjust so I wasn’t in such an awkward position. She kept her eyes closed throughout, which was the same as I’d done when I was
practicing, since I was trying to block out outside stimuli and focus on the extrasensory perception of the soul.

Eventually I got bored, and picked up a book that was close enough to grab; Amaryllis had been reading through Earth books, and I had set myself to reading through Aerbian books. The book was *The Exclusionary Principle, Seventh Edition*, which had a number of bookmarks in it. Amaryllis had apparently discovered office supplies from Earth in her first few months in the chamber, and used them extensively, using highlighters and sticky notes with wild abandon. The timeline at the back of the book had been well-marked, and there was a piece of folded paper between the last page and the back cover that cross-referenced the exclusion zones with the information I’d transcribed from my soul.

The cat came into existence roughly a minute after I started reading, as they always did. This one was black with a patch of white at his throat and earthy green eyes, slender and young. When he appeared, he was standing on the pages, but he laid down almost immediately, until I picked him up with my one free hand and laid him in my lap, which seemed a suitable compromise to him. As I read, he would occasionally stick a leg out to idly bat at the pages, just to let me know that he was still there.

The so-called exclusions came in three basic forms, all geographically restricted. The normal exclusions were like the one that covered the Risen Lands, where some kind of magic (or physics) had proven itself broken and been locked off from the rest of the world by some unknown force or entity (through the book, it was simply called ‘the exclusionary principle’, as a way of dodging the question about what was actually happening behind the scenes). Enpersoned exclusion zones were slightly different, as the magic was locked to a single person in addition to the region locking, and entad exclusions were that, but for a magic item rather than a person.

(I was suspicious that the house was part of an exclusion, given its power and the fact that it hadn’t decided to go somewhere else, but I didn’t have enough information to say one way or another. It was something I’d have to ask when I got out.)

If we went to the Glassy Fields exclusion zone, it was entirely possible that I would be able to learn Glass Magic, but it would only work there, and the whole of the exclusion zone was covered in degenerate glass magic, in much the same way that the Risen Lands were consumed with a degenerate, out-of-control application of the necrotic field effect, and the Datura was completely devoid of life, hounded by the thaum-seekers.

The cross-reference of the exclusion zones listed in *The Exclusionary Principle* with the list as partly divined from the information in my soul showed that there were quite a few more exclusions than anyone knew of. Ice magic wasn’t a lost art, it had been excluded, and the place that it had been excluded to was a mystery. By Amaryllis’ reckoning, we had the answers to a number of enduring historical mysteries … many of them dating back to Uther Penndraig’s day.

My germ of a theory was that Uther had been the cause of most of the exclusions. Because the historical record of exclusions lined up with the numbering of exclusions as written on my soul, it was easy enough to make some guesses in that direction. Ice Magic was “Deprecated, Exclusion #16”, and that meant that it must have chronologically happened after the so-called ‘Invasion of the Ice Wizards’, which had concluded by 4 FE. I wasn’t entirely sure that Uther had been responsible for that, but his historians had written about him climbing the Glacial Minaret to face down the ruling council of wizards, and after he’d defeated them, Ice Magic had become a lost art. Maybe he wasn’t responsible, but he was certainly implicated.

Beyond that, some of the exclusions as listed on my soul seemed like they would only ever apply to
someone like me. What would it even mean for a regular citizen of Aerb to have a Custom skill, or to have a Gestalt of two skills? I’d looked at the souls of people outside our group, and when I did, I had to use my own soul as a guide, because they didn’t have things so neatly ordered, divided up into numbered and labeled chunks. And at the same time, some of the exclusion zones must have logically been instigated by people who weren’t, for lack of a better term, player characters. Doris Finch didn’t fit into the same mold that Uther and I did, nor did Fel Seed, or Manifest.

My best guess was that on the game level, exclusion zones were one part worldbuilding (a place where bad things were, with lootable treasure and some kind of hazards, and a logical reason that whatever serious threat was in them hadn’t escaped to eat the world) and one part anti-munchkinry (a way to stop things from spiraling out of control if there was a flaw or exploit). On a practical, in-world level, exclusion zones were an act of Dungeon Master, the most visible thing that implicated a higher power than the five gods everyone knew and, debatably, loved.

(Amaryllis’ own analysis was much more practical. She had a defined list of which exclusion zones we might be able to exploit, plans of attack for each of the Thirteen Horrors (though there were a lot of question marks there), and written in bold, underlined three times, a big warning that we should never do anything that risked one of us becoming an enpersoned exclusion zone, along with all her thoughts on how to make sure that never happened. I wasn’t too worried about that though, given that it had never happened to Uther.)

Amaryllis pulled back from me slowly, letting her hand rest in her lap.

“Did you have fun?” I asked, closing the book. As I did, the cat disappeared from my lap, and the warm spot suddenly felt cold.

A faint frown of concentration crossed Amaryllis’ face. “Can you tell me about Tiff?”

“What would you like to know?” I asked. I felt a faint unease at the question. “According to Fenn, I talk about my Earth friends too much. I sort of thought you agreed.”

“If I have my timeline right, you ended your courtship with her nine months before coming to Aerb?” asked Amaryllis. “I was wondering what makes her so important to you.” She cleared her throat. “You don’t speak about her in the same way you speak about Arthur. There’s warmth toward both, but no reverence toward her. And yet ...”

And yet, she was higher up on the rankings, according to my soul.

“I don’t actually trust what the soul has to say,” I said. “I think it’s more complicated than just a strict set of numbers. Tiff … she left her mark on me, I guess. Arthur did too, I don’t mean to say that he didn’t, but she was … there was a period where all I was doing was thinking about her. I was obsessed with her, and she was obsessed with me, and … I have this idea about brains, and how they work, which is that you can wear patterns into them if you think about the same things often enough, or with enough intensity, and I definitely did that with Tiff. When we broke up -- when we, I guess, drifted apart, it was this second loss coming on the heels of the first one, which … I’m going to sound like an absolute fuck, but maybe it hit me harder? Not because I cared about her more, though I did, maybe, considering that I was sneaking around with her behind Arthur’s back, and if you’d asked me the day before his accident, maybe, I don’t know, I would have definitely chosen her, “But it was all my fault, what happened between us, even if it didn’t entirely feel like it at the time.”

I could feel myself on the verge of tears, and wiped at my eyes. They were old wounds, but there still wasn’t as much scar tissue over them as I’d have hoped.
“I still don’t understand,” said Amaryllis. “You keep pushing for us to go for Arthur, you don’t want to return to Earth, it’s … I do want to understand you, even if we’re just going to be friends, and I think this is one of the pieces I might be missing.”

Even if we’re just going to be friends. I wondered why she’d chosen to say that, or whether it had been conscious on her part. “I don’t know,” I said. “The thought of returning to Earth to see her just leaves me hollow, because even if we could reconcile, we’d never get back what we had, I screwed things up too badly for that, it would be like a sequel that no one asked for, trying to recapture the magic of the original.” I wasn’t sure that would parse for her, but it was what made the most sense in my head. “But with Arthur …” I trailed off, as my mind involuntarily drew the parallels. “Fuck.”

“It’s not going to be the same,” said Amaryllis, finishing my thought. “He won’t be the same person.”

“I still need to find him,” I said. “Maybe even more, if he was … if he changed. Do you understand that?”

“I do,” replied Amaryllis. She folded her hands in her lap. “You know that if she was more important to you, no one would blame you for that?” asked Amaryllis. “I wouldn’t judge you for having your first love matter more than a friend. Fenn wouldn’t either.”

I felt a chill go through me at the thought of saying, out loud, that I’d cared more about Tiff than Arthur. “I know,” I said. “It’s just not … true, I don’t think.” Even admitting that I didn’t think it was true, leaving open the possibility it was, felt like a stab to the gut. “I’m devoting myself to bringing him back to life, aren’t I? What more does anyone expect of me?” I could feel my voice catching slightly. “Am I supposed to feel constantly guilty about enjoying myself sometimes? Should I have just stayed in a depressed fog forever?” My cheeks were growing warm. Amaryllis’ face was placid, and I knew her well enough to see that she was controlling her emotions. “I was a good friend to him.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. “I wasn’t saying that you weren’t.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can we just … talk about something else?” I pointed down to the book in my lap. “You made a lot of notes, was there anything in particular you wanted to draw my attention to?”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis, taking the book from me. “If you see here, I’ve marked down all of the potential possibilities for exploitation,” she said. When the cat appeared, her hand was already moving toward it, and she absentmindedly pulled it from the pages and brought it to sit in her lap. It was the same cat, black with a patch of white; each book was associated with its own unique cat, the same every time. “You can’t take magic out of the zones, to the best of our current knowledge, but you could potentially use them as manufacturing bases, importing raw goods and exporting finished products made with that specific magic. That’s mostly banned by imperial law though, with a few exceptions, and imperial law might be something we finally start paying attention to in the near future.”

We talked about that, for a time, and I eventually began to cool off, the throbbing anger and nausea eventually fading into the background as we focused on the problem at hand. We had sandwiches for lunch, which were my contribution to cooking, piled high with a variety of deli meats, cheeses, and vegetables, which was how my dad used to make them. Amaryllis made me heat up her meat in a pan before putting it on the sandwich, because of something called listeria. It seemed a little bit overly cautious to me, but I did as she said rather than be subjected to a lecture on the intricacies of maternal health.

Conversation at mealtimes was usually focused on something other than plots, plans, and training,
though we often circled back. Amaryllis talked a bit about horticulture, and the seeds that we could get from the backpack, some of which would allow us to grow plants that weren’t native to Aerb. I was a little worried about introducing invasive species, which led to me talking about one of my favorite tabletop adventures, in which plants harvested from a forgotten dungeon and sold by the party on a different plane served as the seed for an adventure as the plants grew out of control in their new home.

“So,” said Amaryllis toward the end of the meal, during a lull in conversation. “How long do you think it will take you to get over Tiff?”

I stopped chewing and looked at her. A few things occurred to me at once: first, that she had waited until now to ask that question, when she’d have the easy out of moving to alone time, second, that she had probably been thinking about that question for awhile, and third, that her interest in the question wasn’t really about me, it was about her. *How long will it take me to get over you?*

“I don’t know,” I said, once I’d finished chewing and swallowing my food. I felt like an idiot for not seeing the parallel before. “Maybe she’ll always hold a place in my heart. That doesn’t mean that I can’t move on, it just means that there’s some baggage for any new relationship.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, tone light and casual, “Just curious.”

Looking back, that might have been when she’d started making plans.

On the morning of our eleventh day together, Amaryllis was in an unusually chipper mood. She’d elected to make a full English breakfast, which she’d apparently read about somewhere. Cooking it was a challenging task given the size of the kitchen and lack of hot surfaces. It was my first time having blood sausage; I wasn’t particularly a fan.

“Any cause for the good mood?” I asked, when her slight smile hadn’t seemed to abate.

Amaryllis hesitated for a moment, chewed some bacon, and smiled at me. “Will you promise to be calm and relaxed about it?” she asked.

“Um,” I said. “I can’t really imagine what you’d have done while we were trapped in a small room together that you would need that kind of assurance from me.” I swallowed. “Have you seen *Pulp Fiction* yet?”

“It’s on the list, I haven’t gotten to it,” said Amaryllis. “Maybe we can watch it tonight.”

“Anyway, maybe my natural reaction is going to be that I’m not calm and relaxed,” I said. “I can promise to try, but we’re not one hundred percent in control of our own emotions.”

Amaryllis gave a small cough. “About that,” she said. “I’ve been spending some of my discretionary time looking at my own soul, I’m sure you’ve noticed that.” I had; unless you were trying to hide it, the soul trance was pretty obvious.

I froze in place. “What did you do?”

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “I’m over you,” she said.

“What … you went into your own soul and changed … what exactly?” I asked.

“You said that you would try to be calm,” said Amaryllis.
“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry.” I took a breath. “Monkeying around with your soul like that seems really ill-advised, and more than that,” I paused. “It’s a violation of self.”

Amaryllis seemed to consider that. “I disagree,” she said. “Self-modification is an inviolable right. I used a tool that was available to me to fix a problem that I had. It’s not natural, but the natural way -- who knows how long that would have taken?’”

“Tell me, specifically, what you did,” I said. I could feel my blood running cold.

“It took a deep dive into the social aspect of the soul, but I was eventually able to find the lever for romantic and sexual attraction. All I did was reduce them both down to nothing. I’m fairly sure that it’s confined just to you, and it’s entirely reversible.” She gave me a gentle smile. “Joon, you don’t have any idea how good it feels. It’s like a pressure that’s been lifted off me.” She hesitated slightly. “I know that to some extent you reciprocated. I think I can help show you where to make the change, if you -- if this doesn’t help alleviate things on your end.”

“But it … it was part of you,” I said. “You can’t just -- the soul snaps back, it trends toward being what it was, to permanently accomplish what you want to do --”

“You told me that you dial down the Level Up attribute every morning,” said Amaryllis. “A temporary solution that you can keep reapplying without significant cost is, de facto, a permanent solution.” She pursed her lips. “I hadn’t really known how you’d react, but I didn’t think you’d take it this poorly. I thought you would be upset about the risk inherent in making changes, but,” she stopped. “You know that I’ve been looking at Earth pharmaceuticals, right?” asked Amaryllis. “The production processes are ridiculously beyond what we can do, but there’s a huge wealth of information for me to mine, and with the lack of regulatory frameworks for such things throughout the empire, we could make an absolute killing. So I’ve done my reading, and I know what it’s like on Earth. There are pills for all types of mood control and emotional correction. Postpartum depression is a known condition on Aerb, we call it maternal neurosis, but our treatments are decades behind yours.” She crossed her arms. “Would you feel the same way about me taking fluoxetine or sertraline, if I ended up with postpartum depression?”

“You came prepared,” I said. I tried not to sound accusatory. “Give me a second to think.”

“I’m done with breakfast,” said Amaryllis. “I do have things that I need to do.”

“I don’t want to let this lie,” I said.

“It might be better if you’ve had some time to think and reflect,” said Amaryllis. “You’re right that I came to the conversation prepared. I thought about what you might say, while I was working on fixing myself, and after, when I was waiting to broach the subject. If your reaction is an emotional one … I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, or think that I’d think less of you, but if you wanted me to be in love with you, if you wanted perpetually unrequited love, and that’s the source of your objection, then you have to realize that you don’t have a leg to stand on.”

I swallowed and nodded. I still had a bit of my breakfast left to go, but I’d lost my appetite. Amaryllis moved over to her desk and began looking through some books, leaving me to clean up.

Later that night, after a day spent avoiding each other as much as possible in a four hundred square foot room, we continued our conversation over a dinner of roasted rabbit and peas. Amaryllis was a far better cook than I was, which was usually reflected in her choice of meal. After I’d taken to doing my share of the cooking, she’d stepped it up a bit, though I wasn’t sure whether that was because she had something to prove, or because she had more time for involved meals.
“Okay,” I said. “I think I know what my objection is, besides the selfish one of wanting you to want me, which, if I’m being honest, applies to some extent.” It stung a little bit to say that out loud, but I thought she would take it in the spirit of honesty in which it was intended. I wasn’t sure that I would have revealed the same to Fenn.

Amaryllis nodded. “I wanted you to want me too,” said Amaryllis. “I’m trying to keep that in mind, because right now it feels like idiocy or lunacy or both.”

“I’m not going to say that it’s logical,” I said. “Actually, I’ll go so far as to say that it’s blatantly illogical to want to have a difficult interpersonal problem in your life, but it’s still a bit how I feel.”

“Because there’s a part of you that wants me, despite your relationship with Fenn,” said Amaryllis. “And that’s despite the fact that I no longer have a shred of interest in you in that way.”

“You don’t have to be mean about it,” I replied. I crossed my arms, then felt like it was too defensive of a gesture and uncrossed them. I silently wondered whether there was ever going to be a time in my life when I didn’t have those awkward moments.

“I’m sorry,” said Amaryllis. “It’s just … perhaps I should change myself back to the way I was and we can continue this conversation. I might be able to better articulate my decision as it felt when I made it. I can assure you that the choice will be the same either way.”

“Oh,” I said. “I think I would prefer it.”

It took her fifteen minutes, and her rabbit grew cold while I waited. I finished my meal, eating quickly, as I tried to prepare the argument that I was going to use. From what we’d been able to figure out, the Debate skill was mostly catered toward structured debates, two sides that had rigorously prepared for an argument with facts and figures assembled and ready to deploy. That was based mostly on the abilities that it was keyed to (KNO primary, CHA secondary) and some comparative analysis of how fast it leveled up when I was trying different methods to grind it. I wished that I had some facts and figures on hand to persuade her, but even if I’d pulled from an Earth book, I didn’t think I’d find anything to back me up.

“Done,” said Amaryllis. She let out a breath that was just short of a sigh and looked down at her cold food, which she began to pick at.

I sat in silence and watched her, waiting for her to speak her piece. I could only vaguely remember where we’d left off; I’d had enough time for my mind to wander.

“I had a very specific fantasy,” said Amaryllis. “I would turn out the lights, and then you would slip into bed with me, and I would ask you what you thought you were doing, and then you would say that -- that you’d made a mistake, that you should have chosen me. And I would protest, but I’d still be enjoying the feeling of your body pressed against mine, our faces just inches apart, smelling you -- did you know that I like the way you smell?”

“No,” I said softly.

“It didn’t start as a fantasy, it started with me thinking about what I would do if you tried something like that, and somehow it got away from me,” said Amaryllis.

I refrained from telling her that I’d had the exact same experience. At the back of my mind, I could recognize something amusing about two people worrying that they wouldn’t be strong enough to resist the other, and both having a fantasy that the other would come to them. It wasn’t actually all that funny though.
“I’ve convinced myself that I probably like kissing,” said Amaryllis. “In my fantasy, that’s as far as it goes, just the sensation of your hands on my body, and your lips on mine, as we share this bond together, temporarily forgetting that there are any barriers to separate us.” She frowned. “And sex, I imagined that you would be slow and patient, gentle and yielding, and somehow you would awaken something in me, and I would be fixed.”

“That’s not how it works,” I said. “That’s … a male fantasy.”

“But it might be true for me, if I was meant for you,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at me with her piercing blue eyes, as though she wanted to believe that what she was saying was true. It made me uncomfortable, in the same way that Fenn giving me free rein over her soul had made me uncomfortable. I wanted Amaryllis to be her own person; it was one of the primary things that I liked about her.

I couldn’t even say, ‘no, surely you wouldn’t be an exception to the general rule’, because our existence was so strange you had to accept things like that as a possibility. And if she was meant for me, then surely I was also meant for her? And couldn’t we be keyed to each other? Was it so ludicrous to think that I was literally the only person in existence who could make her horny or bring her to orgasm, when there were godlike powers in play that might have been twisted enough to make that true?

“It’s awful,” said Amaryllis. She closed her eyes. “These feelings, getting in the way of work being done, getting distracted by being in the same room as you, not being able to sleep without the spell because otherwise I’ll be up all night tossing and turning.” She opened her eyes and looked at me. “It might be one thing, if we could reciprocate, but we can’t.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We really wouldn’t be good together.”

“That’s horseshit,” said Amaryllis. “We have our points of friction, I know that, but even in the short time we’ve known each other, we’ve come away better for it. We would complement each other, help each other, talk and listen. The only reason either of us ever pretended that it wouldn’t work out between us is that it would be easier if that were true. We would make an amazing couple. And if you weren’t able to fix me, if my flesh was still unwilling, I’m pretty sure that I can reach into my soul and fix myself that way, until I wanted it as much as you did.”

“Amaryllis,” I began, but I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t sure that she was right about what a hypothetical relationship between us would look like. I was starting to get the impression that she felt more strongly about me than I felt about her, which was a little bit heart-breaking. There was that part of me that awoke at the sight of a pretty girl in distress, and it was telling me that it was entirely within my power to make all of her heartache go away -- but I wasn’t about to let thoughts like those get the better of me.

Alright,” I said. “If you want the strongest argument I think I have at the moment, then whatever you feel for me is an expression of yourself, it’s part of who you are. Something like postpartum depression isn’t, that’s just hormones swamping you, or the chemicals in your brain misbehaving, and I know that’s a matter of definition, but … you can’t just go modifying essential parts of you like that, changing things at the core of your being.”

Amaryllis’ face fell, then turned to something like disgust. “Juniper, you’re one of my closest -- my only friends, but whatever there is between us, it’s not essential. I elect not to let it define me.” She closed her eyes, and had the slack face of someone in a soul trance just a few seconds later.

I got up from the table and climbed up to the top bunk, where I made my bed. I felt like I should have seen this coming. The Dungeon Master had said as much to me about going in to change
Amaryllis’ soul. At the time, I hadn’t paid it much thought, just more needling me by presenting a solution he knew I wouldn’t go for, but in retrospect, maybe it was a hint of things to come. I wondered how far in advance I could have made the prediction, if I were smarter -- if the game wasn’t limiting me from reaching my true potential because it wanted me to have more or less the same personality.

I spent some time thinking, and being angry at a variety of people, including myself, until eventually sitting in my bed alone became so boring that I pulled back the curtain and climbed back down.

Amaryllis had put the table and chairs away, and gotten the couch ready for movie time. She was sitting with her hands on her knees, staring at the wall where the movie would play.

“I wasn’t sure that you would be joining me,” said Amaryllis. “I greatly prefer watching movies with you to watching them alone.”

“Because I’m good company, or because I can help to explain things?” I asked.


“Oh, neat,” I said. “I think I’ll become about three percent more intelligible after you’ve seen it.”

“I was in the mood for something light,” said Amaryllis. “Does this fit the bill?”

“Uh, sure,” I said. “There’s a fair amount of death and mayhem, but it’s played for laughs. I think you’ll like it.” I sat down to join her on the couch. I was aware that she was an alien person now, with something removed from her, and from our relationship, but she was making an effort to be friends, and if I wasn’t going to change her mind about how she should be treating her soul, then I would follow her lead.

Amaryllis stuck out her hand. “Friends?” she asked.

“Friends,” I replied, shaking her hand and trying not to think too hard about what she’d done.
When I’d come into the time chamber, I’d have been hard-pressed to notice that Amaryllis was pregnant. Toward the end, she was definitely showing, her belly enlarged and breasts a bit bigger (look, that’s just the truth, I’m not going to apologize for noticing). If she hadn’t been so fit, I might have mistaken it for weight gain, but her arms were still as toned as ever.

She exercised as part of daily maintenance, usually with weights, though she’d also rigged up a climbing wall that she could put into place and anchor, with some help from me. The room was only ten feet tall and twenty feet wide, so her rock-climbing was mostly just back and forth across the same stretch using the handholds she’d put in place, with a mat beneath her to catch her if she fell (though she never did). She called it ‘bouldering’, and after she’d made the alteration to her soul, she had me try it with her. I was only about half as good as she was.

“Three days left,” said Amaryllis as she watched me move. “No offense, but I’m going to be happy to have some fresh blood in here.”

“No offense taken,” I said. It had been smooth sailing, for the most part, but there were still little places where we got on each other’s nerves, and the soul-meddling stuff was simmering in the background. I still thought she was wrong, but I was doing my best to respect her choice. She still thought that I should reciprocate and carve any non-platonic thoughts towards her from my very soul, but she refrained from actually saying it. Aside from that, there were little annoyances, the kinds of tiny things that I guess crop up if you live with someone for long enough. Amaryllis had some bad habits, like getting infected with the need to get something done, and then expecting me to be as gung ho about it as she was. I had a few bad habits of my own, like putting off my share of chores until the last minute (though I want to point out that I did still do them, as I’d promised I would).

Amaryllis ‘forgot’ to use the privacy curtain a few times when taking her sponge bath, or when changing clothes. I never said anything about it, but I did wonder whether she was trying to send me a message, like it was her way of saying ‘hey, this wouldn’t be a problem if you just did the thing that I want you to do’. Maybe I was being uncharitable in thinking that she did it on purpose, but I hadn’t known her as someone to make careless mistakes. It wasn’t really much of a problem though, aside from the distraction of it. She was still pretty, despite the pregnancy, but her newfound total indifference to me made her less viscerally compelling.

“We should talk about the house,” said Amaryllis. She lifted herself up onto the wall, carefully selecting her handholds and footholds. She was setting a route for me to follow, marking the specific holds I’d be allowed to use with colored tape. She’d taken a liking to Earth clothing of late, especially for physical activity. For bouldering, she wore a sports bra, a tank top, form-fitting shorts, and climbing shoes with rubber soles. The material for the shorts, in particular, was a spandex/polyester that wasn’t yet invented on Aerb.

“I’ve been assuming that we’re under surveillance, contrary to her assurances that we’re moving too fast to make sense of,” I said. We’d revealed some things, if that were the case, but nothing that we’d be totally sunk by if she found out.

Amaryllis was silent for a moment. “Grak had some misgivings about what happened with Fallatehr.”

“He liked being brainwashed,” I said.

“He liked having a purity of purpose and a sense of belonging, yes,” said Amaryllis. “But that wasn’t
really what he had misgivings about. He thought that we jettisoned any chance of a successful working relationship with him through aggressive mistrust.” She grunted as she made a long reach, going to full extension of one slender leg for just a moment. The only way that I’d be able to follow her route was going to be with my superior reach.

“If we’d trusted him, he would have had us all for soul-slaves,” I said.

“Perhaps,” said Amaryllis. “The argument,” she grunted again, adding in a little bit of lunge that saw her without any handholds for a fraction of a second, “Is that whatever chance there was for a fruitful partnership between us, we acted in such a way that it could never happen.” She glanced at the handholds. “And at the end of it, we suffered some enormous expenses to kill one of the most proficient soul mages in the entire world. Given that he was in prison when we found him, it really wasn’t worth it.”

“And the thinking goes that perhaps we should exercise a little more faith this time?” I asked.

“There are differences,” said Amaryllis. “Many differences, in fact, enough that I’m not sure the comparison is worthwhile, but that’s Grak’s thinking, or it was when he left the chamber. I suppose for him, that was half an hour ago.”

“And you?” I asked.

“She hasn’t killed us,” said Amaryllis. “She offered us aid. She has a number of incentives to kill us and take everything that we own, and apparently, the power to do so. She dislikes me personally, but I can live with that. So long as she likes the rest of you well enough, I think that we should treat her as a companion.”

“Still scenario zero,” I said.

“Disappointing, but not definitive either way,” said Amaryllis. “It would be nice to have some confirmation.” She glanced back toward me.

“I’ll try working on her once we get out,” I said. “Sorry, when I get out.” I cringed at that. At most, Amaryllis would spend an hour or two outside the chamber before going back in, but probably less.

“I don’t think she’ll respond well to insincere attempts at friendship,” said Amaryllis.

“So they have to be sincere,” I said. “Which … might be a problem.”

“You like damaged girls. This house is close enough,” Amaryllis replied.

“I don’t think that I would characterize myself as being into damaged girls,” I said.

“Sorry, damaged women,” said Amaryllis.

“That’s not the correction I was going to make,” I replied with a roll of my eyes.

“There’s a reason it’s a running theme in your companions,” said Amaryllis. “Do you need me to go down the list of tragic backstories? My father, dead when I was two, my mother, killed when I was ten, Fenn, born to a severely broken home and detested by most of the common folk, not to mention the elves, Grak an exile from his home, fleeing an arranged marriage -- and I agree fully with Fenn’s word for Valencia. ‘Joonbait’. It’s very appropriate. I won’t judge you for having an instinct to protect those who have been hurt -- in some sense it’s noble -- but you shouldn’t deny it when it’s plain for anyone to see.”
“But it’s not like, ‘oh, she’s damaged, how hot,’ it’s a white knight thing,” I replied. “And the house … suffered some traumas of its own, sure, but I don’t think that’s the path toward a sincere friendship.” I paused slightly, watching her judge her next foothold. “If I can connect with her at all, it’s not on a healthy level.”

Amaryllis stopped where she was. “What was it you said about wanting to hurt people?”

“Just,” I said, then stopped. “It didn’t resonate with her anyway. She read sincerity as insincere. And I’d really rather not dredge up my emo side.” I wasn’t sure that ‘emo’ would parse for Amaryllis, but she had a lot more Earth knowledge than she’d had before getting into the time chamber.

“I regret that I didn’t get it on tape,” said Amaryllis. She began moving again, and finally reached the edge of the wall, where she hung for a brief moment before dropping to her feet. When she turned to me, I could see a thin sheen of sweat on her face. “If you don’t think it’s a good way to relate, I trust your instincts.”


“I have my own misgivings about how it went with Fallatehr,” said Amaryllis. “He would have been a valuable ally, if we could have worked our issues out with him somehow, and I think the paranoia soured proceedings early on. That was partly my fault. He didn’t help himself, and maybe there was no solution, but … it would be nice to resolve things without having to murder someone.” She let out a long breath. “I don’t think we should betray her, whatever it is you might be planning.”

“I have no concrete plans,” I replied. The only minor betrayal was in pretending that Ropey was something that it wasn’t. “Did Grak talk to you about the house? Or about anything that I might find to be of interest?”

“There’s a secure channel,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “According to him, the interior space of the glove should be beyond the sight of Kuum Doona, even beyond the simple problem of how fast we might be moving in contrast to her. We can use it, though I have to caution that by itself it could be construed as betrayal, if she can see us use it. Grak and I used it very sparingly.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “But the problem there is that I can’t go join something inside the glove, they’re all held in their own places, it would have to transition into the real world for a moment.” I thought about that for a second while Amaryllis looked at me expectantly. She already knew the answer, naturally. “Either he’d encrypt using a key known to both of us but not Zona, or write it down and then hide it using some method that wouldn’t allow her to look at it, but that would be hard given her unknown surveillance abilities. I don’t know him well enough to know which he’d use. Maybe the name of the place we first met? That’s what I would use.” I resisted saying it out loud. As a code phrase, ‘The Impish Inn’ had a few problems, notably the fact that you could do it with or without spaces, with varying capitals, and either leaving out or keeping in the initial article. Some of that could be assumed from the message itself though.

“The glove can fit two people at once, if they hug tightly and don’t let go,” said Amaryllis. “Good ideas though.”

“Huh,” I said. “That’s a little disappointing.” I paused slightly. “Is there a reason that you waited until now to bring this up?” We’d talked some about the house, but it was more along the lines of the story it had told and the things it could do.

“I wanted it fresh in your mind when you left,” said Amaryllis. “You’ll be coming out after a month away, and I thought the most salient conversations should take place toward the end of your time
here, so you’d be prepared for the world outside.”

“Ah,” I said.

“Let me sponge down and get some of this sweat off, then we can get into the glove to have some privacy,” said Amaryllis.

I’d never really liked being in the black void of Sable, which wasn’t too surprising, given that it was a black void with absolutely nothing of interest in it that I didn’t carry in. Being in the void with Amaryllis wrapped in a tight hug was a bit better, but the breathing tanks that we wore weren’t the most comfortable thing in the world, and as a workaround for the fact that there was no air, we were sharing an inflatable bag around our heads. If they ever made a movie about us (and why wouldn’t they, when we had a monopoly on movie-making?) I was pretty sure that there were going to have to be sacrifices for the sake of having a good visual. The bag leaked, but it didn’t need to be airtight.

“What are you planning with the rope?” asked Amaryllis.

“It’s loyal to us, hard-working, and doesn’t complain,” I said. “If she eats it, some of its good attributes might transfer over. I don’t want her to eat it, because Ropey is an honorary member of the party and has saved my life a few times now.” I paused as I thought about that. “I don’t know how she would react to knowing that he’s a sentient entad, but the only scenario I really like is that they have a bond and become friends. If she wants to eat him, I worry it will override her desire for answers and amenability as a host. If she doesn’t, then there’s a good chance that she’s worried about taking on his attributes, which means that we should feed him to her.” I paused again. “You know that he would, right, if it was to save us?”

“You’re closer to the rope than I am,” said Amaryllis.

“We don’t talk much,” I said. “I’m not sure that he’s much smarter than a toddler, honestly, though I guess I haven’t tested his intelligence. But he’s had my back, without complaints or commentary.”

“Grak wanted me to speak to you here,” said Amaryllis. “He was against any plan that involved betrayal, unless there’s some concrete cause for it, some overt hostility beyond anything the house has done thus far. He said that if she looks at the Eternal Golden Braid with warder’s sight, she’ll be able to tell that it’s animate, but little beyond that. As a cover, you can demonstrate that it is effectively prehensile when held, which should comport with how she’s seen it behave. The lie will appear on paper when we catalog the entads for her, if we choose to lie, so hopefully it doesn’t come to outright demonstration.”

“Alright,” I said. “Grak’s leaving it at my discretion?”

“So long as he’s not pressed too hard,” said Amaryllis.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I asked.

“He believes that being honest and forthright with the house is the path we should pursue,” said Amaryllis. “I mostly agree with him, it’s just a matter of degree. I’m not sure how we would fight the house, and manipulating it seems difficult. We can lie, but lying is difficult, especially since all the lies would need to be coordinated, and this is the only way to coordinate them.”

“Okay,” I said. “But if we don’t lie, I still want to protect the rope.”

“Understood,” said Amaryllis. She released me from the hug and pulled away from me, which brought us both out into the time chamber again.
I’m glossing over some things. A lot of my month in the time chamber was spent training, though not terribly much came of it. By judiciously shifting my ‘floating’ points around, I was able to temporarily raise the caps on a few of my social skills, which allowed me to at least see their virtues.

**Silver Tongue:** Reduces the penalty for insincere flattery by twenty-five percent. When flattering in a language you are not fluent in, your penalty is halved. When flattering a group, the Forer effect is doubled.

**Class Clown:** You may increase the speed of your wit at the expense of its comedic efficiency, up to double your base wit and half your base comedic efficiency. Take half as much damage from physical humor, so long as it’s actually funny.

**Lesser Deceiver:** You will no longer forget the details of a lie, unless you wish to. Take half the usual self-consistency penalty when telling improvised lies.

**Shifting Sands:** Removes the penalty for reframing facts and figures in the middle of a debate, so long as all raw information was memorized beforehand.

**Balanced Armor:** Your medium armor counts as heavy armor for obtaining the benefits of Heavy Armor virtues or bonuses, and light armor for obtaining the benefits of Light Armor virtues or bonuses. Afflictions and maluses are unaffected. It may count as light armor, medium armor, and heavy armor at the same time.

**Flow State:** Allows you to enter into an analytical flow state, which temporarily doubles working memory with respect to the subject of analysis, halves the penalties for thirst, hunger, and exhaustion, and increases the chance of a Brilliant Insight by five percent per hour (compounding).

Flow State came from Analysis 20. It was a purely MEN skill, which meant that I was going to be able to keep it; the others were from moving points into social abilities, which I wasn’t planning to do in the long term, especially given how weak most of the level 10 virtues were (and the way the abilities and numbers worked out, I could either keep Lying or Flattery at 10, but not both). I’d seen a total of seventeen level 10 virtues so far, and that was something of a running theme with them, things that were nice enough, but not so spectacular that I’d find them worth mentioning.

We didn’t have any heavy armor for me to level up Heavy Armor, and the backpack didn’t seem up to producing any, even if we tried to get it piecemeal, since some of the pieces were too big. I leveled the skills I’d lost in the Sacrifice back up, and then Medium Armor as well, until I’d hit the caps with everything and regained all my lost virtues. So that was fun, if your idea of fun is a series of rather mind-numbing exercises as you attempt to make numbers go higher (and without much in the way of feedback to tell you that you’re actually doing the right exercises).

We watched movies, a strange mix of my favorites, the AFI’s Top 100, historically well-performing movies, and the occasional bit of ‘cultural research’ selected by Amaryllis, which included a highly suspect number of romantic comedies (more for the emotional simplicity of them than girliness, I thought). I read books, mostly from Aerb, but a few from Earth, including a number of technical books that Amaryllis wanted me to read so I could offer her a second opinion or help to brainstorm. We listened to a wide range of music, mostly on a record player, and mostly from before I was born. Amaryllis held a particular love for a group called *The Mamas and the Papas*, for no clearly identifiable reason.

I missed Fenn. I found myself talking to her in my head sometimes, when I was trying to work through something. When we watched movies, I wished that she were on the couch between us,
watching along and making jokes. I ended up writing her about twenty letters, most of them pretty long, if not really filled with much of consequence. I put a number on each of the letters, corresponding to the day that I’d written them, so that she could open them through her month in the chamber and get some semblance of me keeping her company. Toward the end of the month, when there was less for me to do in the way of training, I embellished the letters with little sketches.

I was hoping that she would reciprocate and send me letters back, since the provisional schedule that Amaryllis had worked out meant that we’d both get two four-week periods. We called them months, but there were going to be ten of them, ten periods of four weeks each, rather than nine months. With all my skills as high as they would go, I was sort of dreading my second month, since I’d have even less to do. In theory, I’d be coming back in right at the beginning of her third trimester, which would mean that Amaryllis would be needing more help, but not so much that it would fully occupy my time.

I was tempted to request a run into town while the others were taking their turn, just to get some more books and other entertainment, but that wasn’t really the issue, since the backpack could provide whatever we wanted. The real issue was that it was a small room with lots to do but not a lot of space to do it in, and for company, the same person every single day. I knew all her habits by now, all of the ways she moved, her walk, her voice, her laughs, smiles, pensive frowns, aggrieved sighs … and I was bored.

I could tell she felt the same way.

The time chamber was controlled by a simple lever near the doors, which Amaryllis kept everything clear of at all times. I eyed the lever occasionally, thinking about how easy it would be to opt out if I really couldn’t take it. Toward the end, I looked at it with a sense of longing. When the final day came, it was more a sense of trepidation. I hadn’t seen Fenn or Grak in a month, and I wasn’t sure whether I would simply be able to slot back into the group dynamic. I was also thinking about how I would explain things to Fenn, if I would have time to, or whether I should just assure her that nothing had happened between Amaryllis and I. Since Fenn was up next, maybe I’d just leave it to Amaryllis to explain things.

In point of fact though, this was only a temporary reprieve. I was going back in the time chamber in a matter of hours, meaning that the time outside was effectively just a short break from the confined space. When I got back, Amaryllis would be two months further along, her plans further developed, and while that might provide some points of interest, I had to imagine that the tedium I’d experienced in the final week would set in a lot sooner, especially since I was capped on virtually all my skills.

“Ready?” asked Amaryllis as she stood beside the lever. She was wearing a long blue dress with small white flowers that came halfway down her calf, loose enough that it effectively disguised her baby bump, and some simple sandals from Earth. Her hair had grown back out a bit, long enough that she had plastic hair clips in place to hold it back.

“I’m ready,” I said. “You should take some time outside the chamber, an hour or so just to stretch your legs and get some walking in.” It wasn’t the first time I’d suggested that.

“No thanks,” said Amaryllis. “The house isn’t really that great of a place to stroll around in, not unless you’re a fan of stumbling across decayed bodies.” It also wasn’t the first time she’d rebuffed me. “I’m eager for some time with Fenn.” She flipped the lever, bringing us back down into normal time, though the spin-down would still take another few minutes.

“Don’t talk about me too much,” I said.
“Well, I can hardly think of anything else two women would have to talk about,” said Amaryllis. She delivered the line so deadpan that if I didn’t know her, I might not have been able to pick up on the sarcasm.

“And be kind to her,” I said. “Put up with her, as best you can.”

Amaryllis only rolled her eyes.

I’d put my armor back on and wrapped Ropey back around me, more for the sake of prudence than for any actual fear of what might be waiting for us out there. The armor was practically no defense at all against the house, but it still seemed better to have than not to have. The only downside to wearing it was that it might be a hindrance if I was still in it when some kind of emergency happened with Amaryllis. If there was some kind of complication, I might be called upon to play doctor, either by giving her a blood transfusion (on Aerb, compatibility between two people of the same species was virtually guaranteed), or by using bone magic to heal her. The armor might interfere. She’d run me through plenty of worst case scenarios, all of which made me a bit queasy. The earliest that the baby could come and still potentially survive was somewhere around twenty-six weeks, and Amaryllis figured that our best bet at that point was a full-body swap, given that we didn’t have (and couldn’t train up) the necessary skill to operate a NICU, even though we had already pulled all of the relevant equipment we could from the backpack.

That was what I was thinking about when Amaryllis opened the doors, and I was so lost in thought that it took me a moment to make sense of what I was seeing.

Zona was gone, and there were two of Fenn, one standing on either side of Grak. They were all facing us, and as I opened my mouth to ask what the hell was going on, Grak lifted up a piece of paper and began to read from it.

“Before you lies a test,” he said. I’d forgotten how low and grumbling his voice could be. I’d also sort of forgotten that he was missing a hand. “Two fair half-elves, but one is false. You may ask what questions you like, though they will not answer specifics. Choose correctly for a kiss as your prize.” He licked his lips with his thick tongue before reading the last line. “Don’t be a spoilsport.”

I stared at the two Fenns, who were both grinning.

“Is this seriously how you spent your time?” asked Amaryllis.

“Didn’t the dwarf just say not to be a spoilsport?” asked Left Fenn.

“Some people have trouble listening, I suppose,” said Right Fenn. They sounded exactly the same.

I walked forward to look at them. They were dressed the same, like Fenn had been dressed when I went into the chamber. If I accepted the premise at face value, which I wasn’t sure was wise, then one was the real Fenn, and the other was Zona, using her illusion to disguise herself as Fenn.

“No touching,” said Right Fenn as I drew closer.

“Not until we get some time alone,” said Left Fenn with a grin.

“Lewd,” replied Right Fenn with a click of the tongue.

“You know,” I said. “One of the things that I really liked about Aerb was that there wasn’t much in the way of illusion magic, and mind magic was mercifully rare. Even the soul mages don’t have a full command of memories, so at least you’re not constantly questioning whether everything is real or fake, at least not on that level.”
A master illusionist had been the primary antagonist of an arc of one of my campaigns, to the endless frustration of the players, and I had been happy to find that he didn’t seem to exist in Aerb’s history books. Illusion Magic was among the excluded magics on Aerb, at least according to my soul.

“Too bad,” said Right Fenn.

“So sad,” added Left Fenn.

“Did you spend the entire forty-five minutes planning this?” asked Amaryllis. She stayed back near the time chamber with her arms folded across her chest.

“In my defense, you left me to my own devices,” said Left Fenn.

“You should have expected something like this,” said Right Fenn.

“Grak?” asked Amaryllis. “What’s your excuse?”

“You left her to her own devices,” said Grak. He gave a wide-toothed smile as Amaryllis gave a weary sigh.

“Okay,” I said. “So I assume that you would elect not to answer questions that only Fenn knows?”

“Correct,” said Right Fenn.

“We didn’t want the game to be so easy,” said Left Fenn. She looked from me to Amaryllis. “You’re allowed to put your heads together, it’s a team game.”

Amaryllis sighed again. “I’m immediately reconsidering spending a month with you.”

“Oh, but I’m so much more entertaining than Juniper,” said Right Fenn.

“No offense, my love,” said Left Fenn.

“Are you just trying to obfuscate, or intentionally deceive?” I asked.

“I don’t know what obfuscate means,” said Right Fenn.

“Really?” asked Left Fenn with a raised eyebrow, as she looked at her counterpart. She turned to me, smiling. “I mean no, of course I don’t know what it means.”

“Okay,” I said. “Do you love me?”

“Always,” said Left Fenn, suddenly solemn.

“And forever,” replied Right Fenn, with equal sincerity.

“But?” I asked.

“But you’re terrible at this game,” said Left Fenn, smiling.

“Left is the real one,” I said.

“Are you sure?” asked Right Fenn.

“Yes,” I replied. “Left was leading too often, and only on the points where not leading might have been revealing. You had forty-five minutes, which wasn’t enough time to learn everything, so it’s understandable that you’d have a system in place. Assuming I’m right, I could probably pull out
another half dozen things that weren’t quite accurate, but that’s my answer, Left Fenn is the real one.”

Right Fenn dissolved back into Tiff’s form, smiling at me. “Well, that was fun.” She turned to Fenn. “He was faster than you thought.”

“I made the fatal mistake of underestimating him,” said Fenn. She stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug with her arms around my neck, then gave me a quick kiss on the lips. When she pulled back, she was looking at me with a forced nonchalance. “How’d it go?”

I shrugged her arms off me, then leaned down and picked her up, putting her over my shoulder and carrying her away, off down the hallway.

“She’s due in the chamber soon!” Amaryllis called after me.

When we were away from the others, I set Fenn down and gave her a proper kiss, long, slow, and deep.

“So I take it you missed me?” asked Fenn, looking at me with real warmth.

“More than I thought I would,” I said. “And I thought that I would miss you a lot.”

“I should stick you in a time chamber more often, if this is the sort of greeting I get,” said Fenn. There was a twinkle in her eyes as she looked at me. “And my two favorite humans got along well?”

She paused slightly. “But … not too well?”

“She got up to 20 loyalty, which gave her the ability to alter her soul, then she removed her attraction to me,” I said. “You’re going to have a month with her, that’s more than enough time for her to tell you everything you’d want to know.”

“Wait, she can do that with Symbiosis?” asked Fenn. “I’m going to have to step up my game. How’d you get her loyalty up?”

“Offered to do some chores,” I replied.

Fenn laughed. “That’s hilarious.”

“I didn’t really find it funny at the time,” I said. “But I’m glad you’re amused.” I hesitated a moment. “You don’t think there’s a pretty big problem with her altering her own soul like that?”

“Would you think that I was a total bitch for saying that I was relieved?” asked Fenn, biting her lip as she looked at me. “I mean, it sounds like one of the horror stories out of the Second Empire, sure, but it also neatly solves one of the most pressing problems in my life without me having to lift a finger, and … I can see you’re not quite so happy about it.”

“No,” I said. “I was sort of hoping to get some backup. I thought … well, that we could at least commiserate, if not actually change her mind.”

“Sure,” said Fenn with a shrug. “I wouldn’t want her to do more, and I can talk with her about that, since it seems like the kind of thing that someone -- her, specifically -- would go way overboard on. But, I mean … her having zero interest in you is making my heart soar. I feel bad for being so happy.”

“Don’t feel bad,” I said. I wrapped her in a hug. “It did make things easier, for the rest of the month, I’m just worried about the long term, unforeseen consequences or further alterations, and I’m really
worried that if I press too hard, she’s just not going to tell me.”

“Okay,” said Fenn. “I’ll talk to her, help keep her safe, even if she hates it.”

“And things went fine outside?” I asked. “Anything that I should know?”

“We had a diversion,” said Fenn with a shrug. “As you saw, though you got through it too fast.”

“Making friends?” I asked.

“Something like that,” said Fenn, smiling. “The house isn’t so bad, once you get her in the right mood.” She poked a finger at my chest. “I’m hoping she’s still in that mood when I come back out, but I know you’ve had some time to think about what she said.”

“A bit,” I replied. In truth, I’d had enough time that it had begun to fade into the background, as a simple thing that I accepted as probably being true. I looked down the hallway we’d come from. I could just barely hear the sound of conversation. “We should get back, Amaryllis doesn’t seem to place much value on time out of the chamber.”

“Joon, if we end up staying in this place, can we have a weekend in the chamber to ourselves?” asked Fenn. “Just you and me, without pressing engagements or other people getting in the way?”

“Frankly, I’m not looking forward to going back in,” I said. “I got kind of bored.” I saw her look of disappointment and quickly amended it. “But with you, I don’t think that I could be bored.”

“Good save,” said Fenn. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I wrote you some letters,” I said. “They’re numbered according to the day, so you can hear from me. It seemed like the best I could do, since we’re going to temporarily be in a long-distance relationship type thing. Oh, and I recorded some audio commentary for two movies, which, uh, might be totally worthless to you, but we’ll see. And I made a special supply of cookies, which are worse than Mary’s, but I’m the one who made them, so I thought maybe they’d be good if you’re feeling especially sentimental.”

Fenn reached up and kissed me on the cheek. “You’re too sweet to me.” She looked me up and down. “I can hardly believe I was worried for nothing.”

I nodded at that, but I wasn’t so sure that I would have said it was nothing. I also didn’t know how to say that without making it a whole big thing though, so I let it lie.

When we went back to the chamber, Amaryllis was waiting beside it. Her hair was long, down beneath her shoulder blades, and she was eating a marzipan fairy to heal the cuts on her arm that I assumed she’d taken from Grak’s axe. I raised an eyebrow at that, but the fairies weren’t really our primary source of healing anymore. Like the clonal kit, we’d largely outgrown the fairy jar. Furthermore, the slowly-refilling jar we pulled the fairies from was in the time chamber, which meant that our fairy supply had substantially increased; one of the chores was reaching in and gathering up the docile fairies to break their necks and put them in zip-lock bags.

“Ready?” Amaryllis asked Fenn.

“No,” said Fenn. “But I’m going to do it anyway, because that’s what a team player I am. I might pop back out after a few days though. No one hold it against me if I can’t hack it.”

Amaryllis stepped into the chamber, and Fenn followed her, saluting me briefly before the doors closed up again.
Zona turned to me and looked me over. “Have you had time to think?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said with a nod. It wasn’t really time to think that I’d needed though, it was time to process and adjust to the new map of reality, one where what she’d said was probably the truth, or close to it, or at least seeded in the truth. “I have some questions about your history, how you got from there to here, but I’ll understand if you don’t want to repeat yourself, or if you want to hear more from me.” I swallowed. “Arthur as he was on Earth was something I thought about a lot when I was in there.”

“Speak, then,” said Zona.

I spoke.
A Portrait of the King as a Young Man

A lot of what I told Zona was background information on Earth, which she was only passingly familiar with by way of published writing on the dream-skewered. If you wanted to paint a picture of Arthur, you had to have the context of the world he’d grown up in, with comparatively endless information available at all times, the fact that we had voting and representatives instead of kings, the spectre of distant threats like terrorism and far-off wars broadcast home, and our absolute safety and security in comparison to Aerb, a world filled with numerous horrors and wild imbalances of power.

(I like explaining things. You’ve probably already figured that out about me.)

Arthur’s brother was nine years older than him, and I was never quite sure which of them was the mistake, if either was. It seemed like a long gap between children, enough that in a lot of ways, Arthur was effectively an only child. Arthur’s father was an engineer, and his mother worked part-time at a store that sold wool, which she did mostly to fill her days, since it wasn’t like they needed the money. He didn’t talk about his family that much, except to say that his brother was fairly distant and his mother was on medication for depression and anxiety. Arthur’s father was an old-school geek, with a small library of fantasy and science fiction, but most of it was ancient and yellowed -- and, honestly, kind of trash, the pulpy kind of stuff that had mostly gone out of fashion.

When I talked about Arthur, I tried to stress that he’d been more or less normal. He was smarter than average, and active in more clubs and activities than most, but he wasn’t exactly popular, probably because he liked to talk at length about things he’d been reading about, or because he liked to argue just for the sake of it. He wasn’t very athletic at all, and a little bit overweight, which maybe didn’t help how the other kids felt about him. After he died, of course, no one had a word to say about any of that, and people he’d complained about were suddenly, unaccountably, presenting themselves as his friends.

He was, maybe, a little bit awkward sometimes, though I never really noticed it when he was with our group, probably because I’d adapted to it. We would have a group project for school together, and he would talk loudly with a big smile on his face about how he’d united Europe in a videogame he was playing, while the people listening to him were completely uninterested. I always envied that a little bit, even if it made me cringe; I cared too much about what other people thought, and tended to say nothing rather than say the wrong thing.

I talked about our tabletop games, and the ways that he liked to play them, which was always about story and character more than it was about rules and results. Some of that required background that Zona didn’t have, but I tried my best to get straight to the point. My ‘what is a tabletop roleplaying game’ speech had gone through a few iterations by this point, and I knew enough about Aerb to be able to draw parallels with their cultural traditions.

I talked about Arthur and Tiff.

“Okay, so figure there are a hundred fifty students in our class, plus the same a grade up and down,” said Arthur. We were walking home from school, with a stop at the gas station on the way for chips and pop. “But give the grades above and below us a penalty, because we don’t have classes with those girls, which means propinquity isn’t in effect. Figure maybe a hundred fifty legitimately dateable girls in the dating pool, more or less. That’s a rough guess.”

“Right,” I said. “Okay.”
“Half of them are below average,” said Arthur. “But there are lots of different metrics you can use, and they’ll be below average in different ways. Take Heidi, right? Super hot, dumb as a brick. So if half are below average on intelligence, and half are below average in looks, then that’s something like a quarter that are above average in both.”

“Um, no,” I said. “I mean, I don’t think so. Looks and intelligence are correlated, for health if no other reason, but socioeconomics too, probably.” That was around the time I’d first discovered the word ‘socioeconomics’, and I used it a lot, probably more than I should have.

“Sure, sure,” said Arthur. “Were you the one I was talking to about the Flynn effect?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” I said.

“Well, whatever,” Arthur continued. “We’re just getting rough numbers. If we accept a quarter of a hundred fifty, that’s thirty-seven, but that’s the pool that are just above average on the first two metrics.”

“I’m not sure how important looks are,” I said.

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Would you date Kimber?”

I frowned. “She’s nice,” I said. “Smart. Smarter than I am, probably. I went over to hang out with her brother once and she’d made macaroons, which was pretty awesome.”

“You’re dodging the question,” said Arthur, rolling his eyes again. “I think it’s fine to just say, ‘no, she doesn’t do it for me’, I’m sure lots of girls would say that about me, I’m not going to be salty about it. Call that metric three, maybe, and even if it were just fifty-fifty that cuts the pool down to eighteen. But, in point of fact, there are a lot of metrics to consider, and even if some of them are correlated, the actual pool of worthwhile girls in our school is in the low single digits, at least as far as I can see.”

“Huh,” I said. I wasn’t so sure I agreed with that, but maybe it was just that I’d never had a real girlfriend (not that he had either). There were lots of girls in our grade that I was interested in, maybe because I had a tendency to let my imagination run away with the idea of a relationship.

“I’m saying, basically, that you’ve got a bunch of metrics, right? And that low-single-digit pool is just for the girls who are above average in all categories, none of them are likely to be truly spectacular.” He heaved a sigh. “But Tiff is, in so, so many of them.”

I stayed silent. I knew he liked her, because he’d mentioned it before, but I didn’t really have anything to add on the subject, and talking about romance had always made me feel a little weird and unsure. I was pretty sure that I was supposed to offer some words of support, or say that I was happy that he’d found someone he liked, but everything I could think of saying rang hollow. (This was before I’d developed my own feelings for her, back when she had first joined the group, and the only thing I’d felt around her was awkward and uncertain, not sure how to deal with a girl.)

“You two argue a lot,” I said. I kicked a rock off the sidewalk and into the grass. I wished he had someone else to talk to about this, but he was the person that I talked to about girls, on the very rare occasion that I had anything to report.

“She likes arguing,” said Arthur. “Some people get super defensive when you tell them they’re wrong, Tiff just gets excited about it, like she’s finally found someone who actually wants to engage.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. From where I was sitting, I wasn’t so sure. Sometimes she seemed animated,
and yeah, it was like she’d found a kindred spirit, but sometimes she’d shut down and want to blow past whatever the topic of conversation was. I always tried to move things along when I saw that happening. Arthur had a tendency to get into it with people about the most inane stuff sometimes, so it wasn’t like I was doing her any special favors. I was very conscious of wanting to treat her exactly like one of the guys.

“Do you like her?” asked Arthur.

“I don’t really know her yet,” I said.

“Well, if we do start dating, we’ll all be hanging out a lot,” he said. “I don’t want to do what Trev did and disappear off the face of the Earth just because I’ve got a girlfriend.”

But that never did end up happening. Arthur had this theory that she needed time to warm to him before he asked her out, and there were always excuses for why doing it later would be better than doing it now. Eventually he seemed to just sort of accept that he wasn’t going to, though his crush never faded. I think maybe in his fantasy world, she would have been the one to make the first move, but Tiff wasn’t really like that.

“It sucks, because she’s perfect for me,” said Arthur with a sigh. He was laying on my bed while I took my turn playing Mario. “Like, she’s not perfect, but she’s perfect for me. Even all of the stuff we disagree on, she’s got sensible reasons for, and it’s like,” I saw him gesture vaguely from my peripheral vision, “Like the whole is so much more than the sum of its parts.” He paused. “There’s some kind of pun there. ‘Her hole is more than the sum of her parts’?”

We were sixteen, and Tiff had been with the group for quite some time, long enough to firmly establish her as a member. She was a friend, even outside the gaming table, and it was becoming increasingly common for us to spend time together away from the others. Arthur had a somewhat hectic schedule; an evening playing videogames together was a rarity, and to some extent, Tiff filled in my need for a best friend. Not replacing him, but definitely picking up some of the slack. I was hopelessly crushing on her.

“Too crude,” I said. I was blushing slightly, and grateful that Arthur wasn’t in a position to see. I tried to concentrate on the game.

“Yeah, too crude,” said Arthur. “Works best as an insult. You know, I wonder how brilliant people like Oscar Wilde and Winston Churchill really were. Like, did they prepare a bunch of stuff ahead of time, were they just really quick-witted, or is it that they were really good at thinking of comebacks in the shower? Because you have to imagine that a lot of their best anecdotes grew in the telling.” He let out a sigh as I wall-jumped up to grab a coin. “Anyway, I almost asked her out the other day.”

“Did you?” I asked, suddenly focused entirely on what he was saying.

“Yeah, I asked her whether she was planning on dating anyone in high school,” he said. “Because for her, it’s sort of like, why is she single if she doesn’t want to be? And so I asked, but she replied that she didn’t really believe in dating, and that she didn’t see herself as the dating type. It was absolutely crushing. My follow-up was going to be, ‘well how about dating me?’, but I didn’t think that she was going to just reject the institution of dating altogether. Our conversation sort of petered off after that.”

“Yeah,” I said. I felt relief mingled with distress. I cleared my throat. “I mean, she really doesn’t seem like the type to enjoy dating.”
“Yeah,” said Arthur. “It’s a patriarchal institution.” He gave a hollow little laugh.

“No,” I replied. “I don’t think it’s that, I think she just doesn’t like labels. Things are complex, as a general rule, people, institutions, interlocking systems, all that kind of thing, and labels are this ham-fisted way of making sense of it all.” I paused slightly. “I think that’s more or less verbatim what she’s said.”

“So it’s not that she can’t see herself dating, it’s that she can’t see herself ‘dating’?” asked Arthur. I could see the air quotes out of the corner of my eye.

“I don’t know,” I said, because I really didn’t.

“Well come on, help me figure out an approach,” said Arthur. “You know her pretty well, what would work on her?”

I didn’t like how he phrased that. “Here, I’m garbage right now, take your turn.” I tossed him the controller and sat in the chair by my desk.

Arthur picked up the controller and began playing, and for a moment I had hope that the conversation was over. It seemed like we had such a limited amount of time together, with all the clubs he was in, and I didn’t want to spend it talking about Tiff. I wanted him to monologue about the monomyth in Disney movies, or three act structure, or hell, even something I found comparatively boring like geopolitics.

“Thoughts?” he asked.

“About what?” I asked.

“Tiff,” he replied. “What she’d go for?”

“I’m not,” I began, then stopped. “That’s not really the sort of thing we talk about, when it’s just her and I. Her and me? Me and her. However that goes.” There was silence for a bit as I chewed on my words. “We talk about the same sort of stuff that you and I talk about, I guess. Stuff she heard on NPR, history -- politics, some, but I’m not really into that, and I think a lot of the election stuff just makes her angry.” I shrugged. “I don’t think she’s ever once talked about what kind of boys she likes.”

“Well, if she does, let me know,” said Arthur. “And maybe ask her, if you can figure out a way to do it?”

I said that I would, and then never did, until eventually Tiff and I were, for a certain sense of the word, ‘dating’.

“Anyway, I ended up with her,” I said. “More or less behind his back, because neither of us wanted to hurt him, or cause any drama, and … then he died in a car accident, which was about nine months before I got to Aerb -- uh, which was about two months ago, or three months, subjectively, if you include the time chamber.”

“You have provided much information, most of it worthless to me,” said Zona.

“Maybe,” I said. “I think it gives some context to who he was when he came here. That’s got to be the starting point for understanding who he became. He was from a land of relative peace and plenty, where violence was pretty much a last resort, and even if it hadn’t been a last resort, he wasn’t much of a fighter. So when he got to Aerb, that helps explain why he ran off with a theater troupe instead
of fighting the Dark King, right?"

“If you accept that theory. You maintain that the dream-skewer happened when he was on the
farm?” asked Zona.

“Probably,” I said. “It’s … well, there’s a whole other thing to unpack, which we can get to in due
time, but the most concrete evidence I’ve got is that I know the lost play from Earth. I have a copy of
*The Fellowship of the Ring*, though it was a book, not a play. If you read it, it would be pretty clear
why any work based on that one would be looked down on by the Dark King.”

“You have eidetic memory?” asked Zona.

“What -- oh, because how else could I have a copy of the book?” I asked. I hesitated slightly. “We
have an entad that can pull things from Earth.”

“Hrm,” said Zona.

“It’ll be on the manifest,” I said. “I think it’s one of the few things that we can’t live without, though
maybe I’m just biased because we use it a lot in the time chamber.”

“I had wondered,” said Zona. She tapped a finger against her chin. “I find your story lacking in
explanatory power. If he was a soft and fat teenager, not so different from average, how did his
translation to Aerb allow him to become the father of the modern eras?”

“Well, that’s the other thing to unpack,” I said. I did my best to ignore ‘soft and fat’, which hadn’t
been my words. “Uther was like me, endowed with powers by the entity that we’ve been calling the
Dungeon Master. He learned faster than he had any right to, and his companions weren’t just idly
collected, they were drawn to him, or artfully placed in his path. And … I don’t think that the others
were dream-skewered, but a lot of them were based on characters that my friends had created. I’ve
looked at their histories though, and nothing in particular stands out to me as being suspicious,
insofar as the skewer is concerned.”

“And your companions are like his?” asked Zona.

“No,” I said. “I mean, none of them are reminiscent of characters created by my friends, but yes, I
think it’s somewhat safe to say that we have a cosmically important link with each other.” I hesitated
again. “You might be one of my companions, I guess I should get that out of the way.”

“A knight, in service to you?” asked Zona. She pursed her lips. “That’s an offer I’d be inclined to
pass on.”

“No one is in service to me,” I said. I glanced at Grak. “Technically, Grak is getting paid a salary,
which is ostensibly the only reason that he’s here, but the others aren’t in any kind of service or
contractual relationship with me or Amaryllis. Mostly, I would call us friends.” Though it was a close
thing, in a few cases. “Even if you’re not a companion in the cosmic sense, our plan is to live here,
which means that you’ll be playing an integral part in our business.”

“You have misgivings,” said Zona.

*There’s that word again.* “A bit,” I said. “I can see your good qualities, the patience, intelligence,
knowledge, tenacity, overwhelming firepower, heaping amounts of mundane utility, et cetera, but I
worry that you never really had a chance to, um, socialize with people, to learn how to have a
functional relationship with people living inside you.”

“You know nothing of me,” said Zona.
“Well, am I wrong?” I asked. “After Uther left, he barred anyone from living here, right? And I don’t know quite what transpired between then and now, but among the tuung and the people of Headwater, you have a reputation as a house that people don’t ever leave, which is fearsome, but --”

“I have lived, in a fashion, for five hundred years,” said Zona. “How old are you?”

“Uh, I think eighteen,” I said. I’d done a count of days while I was in the chamber, and found out that I’d missed my birthday. I wasn’t sure whether the body I was in would have the same birth date, though in a certain sense it obviously wouldn’t, because they didn’t use the Gregorian calendar on Aerb.

“When you have lived five times as long as you have now, you will have lived one fifth as long as I have,” said Zona. “He was not the only person to inhabit this house. I did not turn to murder from the outset, as soon as he had turned his back on me.”

“But you did, eventually, turn to murder,” I said. I hesitated. “We’re a democracy, more or less, and the way things are looking right now, I think I’d get voted down anyway if I voted against staying here, but I do want to know more about you, even if we’re not cosmically linked.”

“How would you know, if we were so linked?” asked Zona.

“Um,” I said. “Normally the Dungeon Master would just tell me, but we’re having a bit of a thing with that right now.”

Zona nodded. She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped and looked back at the time chamber. “Later,” she said. “They’re done.”

It hadn’t felt like forty-five minutes, but I’d been talking for most of the time. I stepped toward the doors, ready for Fenn to wrap me in a bear hug.

Instead, the doors opened up to Amaryllis, covered in blood, holding a dagger in one hand with a far-off look on her face. Behind her, slumped against the bed, was Fenn, with blood pooled beneath her and slashes across her chest, arms and stomach.

“I couldn’t take it,” said Amaryllis with a shaky voice. “I shouldn’t have thought that I could take it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t find this funny.”

Amaryllis dropped the act and turned to her left, looking at a part of the room that I couldn’t see. “He didn’t believe it for even a second,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn stepped out into view, frowning at me, as the image of her corpse disappeared. The blood that soaked Amaryllis’ clothes stayed there, and she set the knife down beside her.

“You could have played along,” said Fenn as she walked toward me. She smiled slightly. “We had a bet going.” She wrapped me in a hug and squeezed tight, pulling me into a deep kiss as she did so. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too,” I said. “How much did you lose?”

“She owes me thirteen million obols,” said Amaryllis.

“You’re going to have to be the one who pays for things for a bit,” said Fenn with a smile. “And we should probably hold off on getting married so you don’t have to be responsible for my debts.”
“I’m sure she won’t hold you to the bet,” I said.

“I will,” said Amaryllis. “And it wasn’t only one bet, we made one hundred and sixty-seven separate bets.”

“I won most of them,” said Fenn, still holding me in a hug. She kissed me on the neck. “But she won all the big ones.”

I looked at Amaryllis, who was still covered in blood. The fake corpse was courtesy of the house, I was pretty sure, probably set up before Fenn had even gotten into the chamber, but the blood was either stage blood or real, there to sell the illusion, since the house was (per its own accounting) confined to illusions within a ten-foot wide cube. That would also explain why Zona had moved back slightly, outside my vision; she couldn’t be in two places at once.

“So are you just going to be covered in blood during your break?” I asked Amaryllis.

“I am,” Amaryllis nodded. She walked over to where the tape recorder was sitting and swapped out the tapes. “Anything of consequence?” she asked me.

“You’ll mostly be listening to me talking,” I said with a shrug. “Stuff about Arthur.”

“Arthur and the cosmic order,” said Zona with a nod. I was starting to get over how much she looked like Tiff, partly because of how clearly I could see the imperfections in the illusions. More and more, those didn’t so much seem like imperfections as they did expressions of who Zona was. It was also partly just having had the time to sort it out, during the long month in the chamber.

“So a time alone?” Fenn asked, leaning into me.

“Absolutely,” I replied. We walked together down the hallway, to the place I was starting to think of as our private place. “How is she?”

“Good,” said Fenn. “Great, actually, we had a wonderful time together.”

“Did you?” I asked.

Fenn nodded vigorously. “I missed you terribly, but the letters helped, and I was breezing my way through Earth culture, which was a bit like talking to you. I feel like I had a million things that I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t make a list, and now it’s all a blank. Oh! I read a lot of manga!” She raised her arms up high, as though she could barely contain herself. “I’m a weeb!” she leaned in close to me. “Did I use that word right?”

I kissed her, and she backed up a bit, looking pleased. “How the hells do you know what a weeb is?” I asked.

“You mentioned it once, when you were talking about swords,” said Fenn with a smile. “So I looked it up. There’s this web page, called Urban Dictionary, which was a lot of help in figuring out Earth things.”

“It’s a website, not a webpage,” I said. “And, I’m sorry, but you spent your time in the chamber looking at print-outs from Urban Dictionary?”

“Calm down, I did other stuff too,” said Fenn. “You know the Urban Dictionary?”

“I -- yeah,” I said. “Sorry, can you paint me a picture of your time in there? Because I feel like it was vastly different from my own.”
“Amaryllis had her schedule, and I mostly did my own thing,” said Fenn. “I worked on getting a bit better of a handle on soul magic, with some help, watched a lot of movies once I figured the projector out, tried and failed to get an archery range going, played around with the backpack, read a lot of manga, and some American manga -- oh, I’m ready to run my own game of Arches!”

“You’re … going to DM?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Fenn with a nod. She was watching me. “See, Amaryllis said that it was sort of your thing, and I said that people took turns, but apparently she knows you better.” Fenn clucked her tongue. “Well, whatever, I have a campaign ready to go. I thought it would be a way for us to bond, if I had some experience from your spot on the table.”

“Sure,” I said. “I didn’t mean to -- I’m sure you’ll do great, it just caught me off-guard.”

“Mary and I ran a few games together, with her controlling all the characters, but it wasn’t really the same,” said Fenn. “Fun, but not the same, since even when she was trying to, she couldn’t really make it like there were different people pulling things in their own directions.”

“Huh,” I said. “And did you talk about the soul stuff with her?”

“A bit,” nodded Fenn.

I waited, until it was clear that she needed some prompting. “And?”

Fenn winced. “I’m on her side, a little bit. I haven’t done it myself, because I wanted to talk to you first, but I’ve really been thinking that it might be for the best to get rid of some attachments that aren’t doing me any good. Nothing concrete, just kind of waffling.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered.

“Oh, we also did some Bible study,” said Fenn. “I think we kind of made a mess of it though.”

“No, I mean,” I paused. “You’re not talking about me, and our relationship, right?”

“No, never,” said Fenn, kissing me. “Other stuff. I wasn’t saying that we should have the conversation right now, we’ve got, what, an hour until you’re back in with Mary? I didn’t think that was enough time for us to really talk about all the stuff we’d need to talk about.” She hesitated. “I wrote you a letter, it’s probably better if you read that. I’m allowed to be a chickenshit and say things in letters, right?”

“I -- yeah,” I said. “Is this … Nellan?”

Fenn swallowed and nodded. “It’s the letter numbered fifteen, I’d understand if you wanted to jump ahead on that one. I was just -- well, you’ll read it in the letter, I guess.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “I saw the name in your soul, during the Fallatehr thing, and I didn’t want to press you on it, in case it was something important, which it would pretty much have to be if it loomed so large.”

“Once I could see in my own soul, I figured as much,” said Fenn. “You’re really too good to me, did you know that?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t feel like it, sometimes. I wish things with Amaryllis had gone differently, or that … that there wasn’t any question, I guess.”
“S’fine,” said Fenn. “Oh, I did get her to promise that she wouldn’t change anything else in her soul until we called a meeting of the Council of Arches. Same for me, if I decide, you know, that there are things I’d rather not care about. That’s our new name, by the way. Council of Arches. Do you like it?”

“Council sounds a little ominous,” I said. “I guess I don’t dislike it.”

“Well, good, because Mary agreed that it was a good name, and we need one on our letterhead and business cards, when we get them.” Fenn sniffed at me. “I missed your smell.”

“I missed yours too,” I said.

“And obviously I’m not going to change anything until after I talk to you, and after you’ve read the letter, and after you’re totally fine with it,” said Fenn. “I kind of feel like I’ve already told you, since I wrote it all out.”

I stayed silent at that, since I didn’t want to give a false assurance that I really would be fine with whatever she’d spent the past two months hiding from me, something so important that it was engraved at the top of her soul.

“Come on,” said Fenn. “Let’s get back, it’s been a month since I’ve talked with the house, I kind of missed it.”
After Grak and Amaryllis had gone back in the time chamber, Fenn and I settled into the chairs we’d set up outside for the wait. Zona created an illusory chair of her own, and gripped the arms of it as she smiled at us. My internal sense of time was almost completely shot, given the odd sleeping schedule I’d had to keep the day before we went down to Kuum Doona, and the time in the time chamber. Outside, it was probably pretty late, well past midnight.

“You can understand why I would want you to not look like Tiff?” I asked Zona.

“Hrm,” replied Zona.

“She’s the only other person he’s been with,” said Fenn. “I know that I would prefer if you changed.”

“Er,” I replied. “Technically there was another.”

“Wait, what?” asked Fenn, looking over at me. “When? On Earth, or Aerb?”

“Earth,” I said.

“Well then why don’t I know about it?” asked Fenn.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “Can I be a chickenshit and write you a letter?”

Fenn crossed her arms over her chest. “Well … fine.” She said it in a voice that let me know that it wasn’t at all fine, and that she was only agreeing because she didn’t want to be an outrageous hypocrite. “I just didn’t know you had another girlfriend. I told you all about my boyfriends.”

“She wasn’t technically a girlfriend,” I said. “Or, maybe only technically a girlfriend. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Fenn opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. “Does Mary know?” she finally asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s not -- it’s not a big deal, really.” I was hoping that after I’d explained it, she would agree with me. “I wouldn’t have even said anything, but I didn’t want to tell you later and have you think that I was lying to you through omission.”

Zona was looking between the two of us with a smile on her face. “It turns out that I’ve missed domestic squabbles after all.”

“Okay,” I said. “You were going to tell us about your life after Uther left. How about you get on with that before we get interrupted by the chamber opening up and I have to go back in.”

Zona smiled. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather talk about the dark secrets of your past?” she asked. “After all, elements of your past might be relevant to Uther, might they not?”

I sighed.

“Fine,” said Zona. “But there’s less to say about what came later, given that the men and women involved had nowhere near the power Uther did, nor the same importance to the world, nor to me.”

“It’s still context I’d like to have, if we’re going to live here,” I said.
“I could lie to you, of course,” said Zona.

“Of course,” I replied with a nod. “I’m hoping that you don’t.”

Zona watched me for a moment. “Very well then. Once I had served the purpose as a stand-in for his long ago unrequited love, Uther told me that I was never to speak of what had happened to anyone, and that I was to abandon the form that I had spent a great deal of time mastering -- well, it seemed a great deal of time back then, but it was hardly any time at all, in the scheme of my life. He was upset, I knew enough to know that, and while some of his weariness had left him, it was replaced by an anger that I couldn’t then account for. Now, I would probably call it self-loathing. He issued threats against me which were far more specific than they needed to be; he said that he would rip up my floorboards and break all my windows, and when I didn’t seem fazed by that, he said that he would put entads inside me that would cause me to know nothing but pain and suffering.” She raised an eyebrow. “He described an entad necklace that cripples those who wear it with hallucinations, and another entad, this one a collar, which cannot be removed and wears down on the mind, stripping memories and dulling emotions. I think now that I could weather such things, if I had to, but at the time, I found it quite compelling.”

I winced. “He wasn’t usually one to fly off the handle.”

“It wasn’t that sort of anger,” said Zona. “It was circumspect, directed anger, quite thoughtful in comparison to some of the blind rage I would later have the chance to see.”

That sounded a little more like Arthur, though still far from the boy I’d known. Arthur did like his verbal takedowns.

“He left, and that was the last I saw of him,” said Zona. “There were intruders in the years after that, bandits, squatters, families, and eventually, when trade with the tuung began to open up as a result of the reforms of the First Empire, I became home to the mayor of a town called Headwater.”

“We’ve been,” said Fenn. “Not a terrible place.”

“It was a town for the king’s men, in those days,” said Zona with a nod. “It’s more pointless history, an era long gone by. I kept to myself, waiting and watching, revealing myself only sporadically, or not at all. I hid all but a fraction of my true nature. I didn’t think of it as such, but I was developing both my power and my sense of self. The next chapter began sixty years after Uther had disappeared, when one of his Knights, Raven, returned. She had Uther’s great-grandson in tow.”

“You think that this place is the key to it?” Tansy asked, looking up at the great big house. He was a slender young man with a mop of red hair, whose face was marred by an ill-fated attempt at a moustache. Three weeks ago, he had taken his first steps outside Anglecynn, and now he was two continents away with one of his great-grandfather’s few surviving Knights, standing before the Boundless Pit and looking up at an entad that was, by rights, his.

“If I knew that this place was the key, I would have come here the moment after he left,” replied Raven. The years had not changed Uther’s archivist in the slightest, though she had updated her clothing to match the times. A human looking at her would think her painfully young, more a girl than a woman. If her choice of wardrobe was intended to help make her look older, she had failed; she looked like a child playing dress-up in her mother’s clothing.

“And if it does end up being the key, then you suppose that I’m the lock, as it were?” asked Tansy. “The metaphor seems a bit strained.”
“Don’t create a metaphor if you’re going to run it into the ground,” said Raven. She stepped forward, toward the house, and stopped just outside the front doors. The grounds were well-kept, and the building had been painted, but the security was horribly lax, as evidenced by the fact that no one had come running to ask questions the moment two strangers had stepped foot off the main road. It was a place primarily guarded by the fact that it was out of the way.

Raven knocked three times on the door. She waited patiently, until Tansy moved away and began trying to peer through the windows. When there was still no response, not even the sound of people moving around inside the bowels of the house, Raven stepped back with a scowl on her face.

“Perhaps they’re not home,” said Tansy. “I told you that there’s an order to these things, you’re not following proper decorum at all. This is the risk you take when you show up unannounced, which is why sensible, cultured people don’t do it.”

“Hrm,” said Raven. “House?” she asked the air. “Kuum Doona?”

The form of Kuum Doona appeared in front of her. It was the same teenaged girl the house had seen in Uther’s notebooks, long ago. She had altered her appearance, as suited the Kingdom of Mosenol at that time, with sleeves that became wider toward the cuffs, and a dress that hung to just a few inches off the ground.

“Raven,” said Kuum Doona.

“Doing well?” asked Raven.

“Yes,” replied Kuum Doona.

“Who is this?” asked Tansy, who was strolling back from his inspection of the windows. “And where’d she come from?”

“This is Kuum Doona,” said Raven. “She’s a manifestation of the house’s intellect.”

“She knew great-grandfather?” asked Tansy, looking the illusion up and down.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “It is my hope that she knows something that might help us locate him.” She gave Kuum Doona a small bow. “It’s my understanding that the mayor of Headwater makes this his residence, may I assume that he’s out?”

“You may,” said Kuum Doona. She hesitated. “The mayor doesn’t know about me.”

“Oh,” said Raven. “Am I to assume that you’d prefer that to remain the case?”

Kuum Doona nodded.

“Wait,” said Tansy. “Why would you want him to remain ignorant?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Raven. “It’s not our business.”

The truth was that the house had revealed itself to people throughout the years, and never found that it improved matters. In the house’s experience, people did not want a home that could think and speak. Before the mayor had taken up residence, there had been persistent rumors that the house was haunted by a spirit. The house had a vague hope that eventually, if it stayed silent, people would forget, and it would have no history to speak of.

“Can we come in?” asked Raven. “How soon is the mayor expected back?”
“I’m not sure that it’s appropriate to go into a man’s house without his permission,” said Tansy.

“It’s not his house,” said Raven, turning her head just slightly to speak with the prince. “In theory, it’s yours. I’ve looked through the records, this plot of land belongs to the Kingdom of Anglecynn, through treaties that Uther himself wrote. The mayor is nothing more than a squatter.”

“Well, I’m not so certain that I want this house,” said Tansy. He ran his fingers through his mop of hair and looked it over. “First off, I’d have to live in a tiny little island of Anglecynn within a sea of Mosenol, which itself isn’t the most interesting place to live, aside from the Pit.” He turned to Raven. “You said that we’d have adventures, find treasures, do that sort of thing.”

“We will,” replied Raven. “Uther understood leverage better than you seem to. You have a claim to this place, one that can be used to secure whatever it is you most want.” There was an undercurrent of exasperation when she spoke with him; if they had come all the way from Anglecynn, they would have either traveled along the international railways, or possibly by ship until the last stretch. Either way, they would have been together for quite some time before arriving on the doorstep of Kuum Doona.

“Fair, I suppose,” said Tansy with a sniff.

Raven turned back toward the projection of the house. “Given the lack of staff, I assume the mayor is away for quite some time. Where has he gone, and how long will he be gone for?” asked Raven.

“During the wet seasons the mayor takes a holiday far to the south, for reasons of health,” replied Kuum Doona. The Knight seemed to have the wrong impression of the mayor, which the house felt no need to correct. “The groundskeeper comes by three times a week. The housekeeper and his family are staying in the house, but they’re in Headwater for the evening.”

Raven nodded along at that. “So we have some time to sit and discuss Uther. What he did while he was here, the things that he said, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds boring, frankly,” said Tansy.

Raven turned to him. “This is what research is,” she replied. “We’re looking for a man who has been missing for nearly sixty years now. If he were trivial to find, I would have found him by now.”

“I know, I know,” said Tansy. “I’m simply saying that it sounds boring, you needn’t bite my head off over it. I’m allowed to have opinions.” He frowned for a moment, stewing, then brightened considerably. “Say, I could use some of that leverage you spoke of, couldn’t I? You do need me for this, after all.”

Raven froze in place, then relaxed slightly. “And how would you proceed, if it were up to you?”

“I don’t know,” said Tansy. “Perhaps, if I’m not needed for this very specific thing, I could go to Headwater and meet you later in the evening? If all you need is a conversation with this place, I don’t need to be here for it, do I?”

“I don’t yet know what I need,” replied Raven. She let out a sigh. “Very well, go to Headwater, but we might have to return here again. Don’t speak too much when you’re doing your drinking, and don’t spend too much. Part of the reason we’re here, remember, is that there’s an opportunity for us to make some coin, one way or another.”

“Through leverage,” said Tansy with a knowing nod.

“Leverage, or information,” replied Raven. “Now, go. Don’t spend all your money unless you want
to go back home with your tail between your legs.”

Tansy gave a sarcastic little bow, then trotted off, back down the cobblestones and out toward the main road.

“He doesn’t seem like Uther,” said Kuum Doona.

“Tansy is still a boy,” said Raven with a nod as she watched Tansy go. “He’s reached the age when his decisions are considered those of an adult, but that’s typical of the bone-headed laws that should have been fixed following the Reconquest.” She looked back to the house. “I need to know everything there is to know about Uther, how he spent his time here, what you might have overheard, and what, if anything, he left behind.”

“Why?” asked Kuum Doona.

“Because -- isn’t it obvious?” Raven furrowed her brow. “I’m trying to find out what happened to him.”

“Why?” asked Kuum Doona.

Raven frowned at that, but seemed to honestly consider the question. “The world is lost without him,” she said. “The Empire he worked so hard to forge is essentially in tatters, as good as gone for some time now, and there are threats running rampant that I believe only he would know how to properly put down, as well as some problems that only he could fix. His teachings and his reforms are being twisted by people who don’t know better -- or in some cases, people who know better, but have no one to oppose them.”

“Wouldn’t he be dead?” asked Kuum Doona.

“Maybe,” replied Raven. She bit her lip. “There are ways to get around a natural lifespan, entads and rare magics. Even without those, he would only be one hundred and fifteen, that’s young enough that he might yet live.” She gave every impression of simply talking to herself. “And if he’s truly dead, so be it, but I want to know how and why. Where did he go, and why didn’t he bring us with him?” She was focused off in the middle-distance, not seeing the world around her, but after a moment she snapped back to look at the form Kuum Doona presented. “What can you tell me?”

They were still standing on the front step, not too much further out than Kuum Doona’s illusion could extend, and the understanding of people that Kuum Doona had slowly built up silently flagged this as vaguely uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Kuum Doona gave a full report on everything that it could remember seeing, while Raven patiently and carefully jotted down cramped notes in a notebook, writing as fast as Kuum Doona spoke.

When the house was finished speaking, Raven was left frowning. “He was a troubled man, at times,” she said, more to herself than to the house. “I have half a mind to descend down the Boundless Pit to see what it is he saw down there, but I don’t have half the fortitude he possessed, nor even a bare fraction of the magical arsenal, entads or otherwise.”

“What do you think he found?” asked Kuum Doona.

“That’s not what concerns me,” said Raven. “What I want to know is what he was looking for.”

And you never found out?” I asked.

“No,” replied Zona. “Raven stayed, for a time, until the mayor came back. Tansy was quickly
embroiled in a romance, and Raven went on her way shortly after that.”

I had, naturally, seen more than a few depictions of Uther and the Knights, but they pre-dated photography, meaning that most of the contemporaneous pictures of them were actually paintings, with more than a little bit of artist’s interpretation. Uther was unrecognizable and unverifiable, which wasn’t too much of a surprise; with the transformation that I’d undergone since coming to Aerb, it was sometimes hard to remember what I’d looked like. Uther was usually pictured as thirty or forty, with a full beard. I was convinced that underneath that, he was Arthur, but that confidence wasn’t really based on the physical similarities.

I wanted to ask what Raven had looked like, as seen by Zona, but I refrained, worried that she would manifest as a variant on Maddie. Raven had been one of her characters, with most of the details matching Maddie herself. I had lingering questions about those other characters, but nothing in their backstories made them seem like they were my one-time friends.

“A romance with the mayor?” asked Fenn, frowning.

“Yes,” replied Zona with a nod. She watched Fenn’s face. “The mayor was female.”

“Ah,” said Fenn. “That makes a bit more sense.” She glanced at me. “Not that there’d be anything wrong with two men, just, you know, historically -- er, yes, it just makes more sense. She was the daughter of someone powerful?”

“No,” replied Zona. “A widow of someone powerful. She was more than twice Tansy’s age. When he eventually killed her --”

“Whoa,” I said. “Back up.”

“We have another four hundred and forty years of history to get through,” replied Zona. “Do you intend to question every little point?”

“It just doesn’t really seem like that little of a point to me,” I said.

“He thought that she was power hungry, accused her of infidelity with other rich and powerful men, and then killed her in a fit of rage,” said Zona. “Do you need more than that?”

“No,” I said. “I guess I don’t.”

“At any rate, he requested my help in covering up his crime, which occurred in the master bedroom, and when I initially did not comply with his request, he leveled threats against me until he found one that worked. Raven had forbade him from adding more entads to me, which I found entirely agreeable at the time. He said that he would violate that compact and stuff me to the gills, until there was no semblance of the person that I’d been. Soul death, it would have been called, if such a thing had been threatened against one of the mortal species.” Zona undid her ponytail, letting the elastic band slip around her wrist, and spent some time gathering her hair back up to reform the ponytail. The action had to have been entirely superfluous; if she had wanted to, she could have redone her hair without having to move her illusory hands, nevermind the fact that she wouldn’t ever have had a hair out of place unless she intended it.

“I complied,” said Zona, once she was done. “I complied again when there was an inquiry, and told the lies that Tansy requested of me, in order to sweep the entire affair under the rug, as it were. I was a home, in one form or another, to three more generations of Penndraig men,” said Zona. “There were recurring themes among their line, those of abuse, betrayal, suspicion, doubt, and indulgence. I was often the target. Perhaps it started with Tansy, and the unfortunate end of his first wife, which
cast a pall over his line, but I naturally imagine that Tansy himself was a product of Uther’s corrupt seed.”

I kept my mouth shut. On Earth, it wasn’t literally true that the sins of the father would be visited upon the son, but it was more or less true that there were cycles of violence and abuse, reinforced by both learned behaviors and the underlying social, economic, and cultural conditions. I wanted to say all that, but didn’t want it to sound like that excused what Tansy had done -- because it didn’t, it was just one piece of the puzzle.

“The worst part was the compulsion I felt toward each subsequent member of the line,” continued Zona. “It was nothing that I might not have been able to break with sufficient will, but there all the same. Will was in short supply, in those years. It was the connection that Uther had forged with me, and which Vervain had confirmed for him. Amaryllis is the current beneficiary, but I am strong now, powerful enough that the compulsion gives way to instinctive rebellion and mistrust.”

“Eventually someone did put an entad in you, right?” asked Fenn.

“There were many, over the years,” said Zona. “A few were in the name of expanding my abilities as a house. I was given -- I use the term lightly -- an entad known as the Everflask, which allowed me to produce any drink from all of history. Yarrow, Tansy’s son, had thought that the effect would be amplified, allowing him to make some coin by selling spirits I would make for him in bulk, but alas, I was only able to make a bottle a day. It would have been enough to make a peasant a wealthy man for the rest of his life, but these were Penndraigs, heirs to their share of Uther’s fortune, and my labor was simply an unexciting drop in the bucket.”

“So which one was the first you killed?” asked Fenn.

“Narcissus,” replied Zona. She looked at me. “Are you comfortable moving past so much history to hear of him?”

“I just want to understand you,” I said. “That’s all, really.”

Zona nodded. “Narcissus wasn’t of the primary line, but he was still a Penndraig, close enough to have made a visit to this house a number of times.”

She let out a sigh. “Tansy was an aberration, a member of the clan who made his stake far from home, but he wasn’t entirely insulated from the Lost King’s Court by the distance, and he made many trips back home, when there was need of it. His children, and their children, were gradually drawn back into the fold, either through arrangements made with their kin, or threats made to them by someone who stood to benefit. By the time Narcissus arrived, I was merely a summer home, a redoubt away from the Court, scarcely tended to and often neglected.”

Zona changed shape, becoming a man in fine clothes, red hair in a braid going down his back, a fashion that must have come and gone hundreds of years ago. This was a form of storytelling that I hadn’t seen Zona employ yet; I was curious where she was going with it, but also curious about how well her illusions worked. This man, who I assumed was Narcissus, wasn’t at the same level of fidelity as Zona’s version of Tiff. He looked like not-quite-good-enough CGI, slightly off in ways that were hard to articulate, maybe a little bit too lacking in imperfections, or not moving quite right. The house had been able to copy Fenn well enough, and I wondered whether the difference was a lack of base data.

“House,” he said. “What is it you want?”

Zona appeared next to him, and the man startled somewhat before regaining his composure. They
were standing close to each other. Per Zona’s description, she could create the illusion within a ten foot cube. I was watching carefully to make sure she wasn’t underplaying her ability, though the ability to create two concurrent illusory people was already more than I thought she’d be able to do. She was out of her Midwestern American clothes, and in a floral robe that reached halfway down her calf, with platform heels that had, presumably, been in style at some point.

“I am a house,” said Zona. “I want people to live in me, to shelter them and keep them warm on winter nights, to provide rooms for them to sleep, eat, and bathe.” She turned toward us. “I was utterly empty, and had been for months.”

“Well, I have to say that I’m liking this,” said Fenn. “It’s proper art.”

“You will never be a true house, so long as you belong to Yarrow’s line,” said Narcissus. “The seat of power is in Anglecynn, not here, in a far-flung corner of the world. At most, you will be rented out to those with coin, or renovated into a hotel, but the costs of running a place of this size, even one which can clean itself, are so large that there’s very little that can be done that wouldn’t result in a loss of income.”

“I know,” replied Zona. She turned to us. “I wasn’t terribly good with numbers, back then, but I had gone through the ledgers left behind enough times to have some sense of what the place cost.”

“I love the asides,” Fenn said to me. “It’s like we’re watching a real live theater performance.”

“Close your mouth,” replied Zona, before returning to her part in the impromptu play. “What are you proposing?”

“I have entads,” replied Narcissus. “There are five in my possession, meant for you, and together, I believe they would let you slip from your bonds.”

“I do not wish to slip from my bonds,” replied Zona. “I do not care whether I am bound to the line, so long as I can serve my function.”

“You cannot serve your function, so long as you are so bound,” replied Narcissus. “If you need someone to live in you, then I shall be that person.”

“I do not wish to have more entads added to me,” said Zona. “I find it disquieting.”

“A necessary evil,” replied Narcissus. He reached toward his neck and brought forward a necklace that had lain beneath his shirt. It had a number of beads on it, one of which he plucked off. When he tossed it into the air, it was replaced with an axe, which he caught with both hands. His hands instantly became wet with blood, which ran from the head of the axe down rivulets in the handle, seeming to come from nowhere. The blood dripped down onto the ground, without giving any indication that it would stop. “This is the Axe of Gilhead,” said Narcissus. “It is a peculiar weapon, as entads go. When it strikes a man, it pulls his blood from him.” He pulled one bloody hand from the axe and presented it. “It has a certain sentience to it, and a rebellious nature. You would have a compulsion toward blood, but in exchange, you might be able to slip your bounds. I would, naturally, arrange to have blood delivered on a regular basis. From what I recall, you do not share a human’s squeamishness.”

“I do not wish such a thing to be part of me,” replied Zona.

“No?” asked Narcissus. He tossed the axe up in the air and made a sign with his hand, fingers rigid. The axe turned back into a bead, and Narcissus caught it, replacing it on his necklace. He pulled another one off, heedless of the blood. This one became an awl with a clear handle. “Then this one, a
sentient tool that brooks no master, and cannot be held for more than a week before it requires someone new. I have a day before it will stop responding to me.”

“How could a person live in me, if I had such a compulsion?” asked Zona.

“It would be diluted, would it not?” asked Narcissus. “It might counterbalance the bond.”

“I do not want it as part of me,” said Zona. She waved a hand, and the image of Narcissus was dismissed, dissolving away. She turned back toward us. “He had collected items of limited use to anyone else, entads with severe drawbacks, rebellious things, some of them sentient, some of them not. In retrospect, he was attempting to move against his kin, salting the earth, as it were, making me unusable, or forcing a financial hardship when I went rogue, but I wasn’t nearly as intelligent, and ploys like that didn’t occur to me. I saw only that he wanted me for his own, and that he was offering poisoned apples to have me. I found out later that he was fleeing a charge of murder in Anglecynn; perhaps in desperation he had meant to form me into a weapon, or as leverage -- it was a common word, for a time.”

“So … you killed him?” asked Fenn.

“I rebuffed him, when he made his suggestions, and I stood firm when he tried his best to convince me.” Zona shrugged. “And as was often the case with Penndraig men, my protests only meant that he felt obliged to use other means. He broke into the house -- I don’t know what his thinking was. Perhaps he thought that if he put the entads in me, I would change, and my feelings wouldn’t be an issue. I hesitate to say that he meant for me to kill him, but that is another possibility.”

Zona waved her hands, and a model of the house -- of her -- appeared before us. It wasn’t as I had seen it, lit by flashlights in the gloomy dark of the Boundless Pit, with pieces broken and chipped off. The house, in her hands, was in good repair, unconventional, but still beautiful (for a large, tall house). Zona manipulated her hands, a gesture I was sure was just theatrics, and the view zoomed in, until we could see a man in black, Narcissus, moving through the house. The walls cut away to let us track him as he moved through the diorama.

“This is so fucking cool,” said Fenn, who had crouched down to watch the little man run. “Way better than a movie.”

“Yes,” said Zona. “From what Amaryllis said of the medium, I thought I could surpass it.” A room in the upper corner became visible, lit up where the others remained dark, leaving us to see only the figure of Narcissus moving through the halls, and a room with weights in it. One of the weights dropped, and Narcissus was thrown backward. He climbed to his feet and yelled something, though he was inaudible from our vantage point.

“I didn’t want to kill him,” said Zona. Her voice was soft. “I had never killed before.” Narcissus was moving faster now, more frantically. “I don’t know where the hesitation came from. I had been told not to hurt people, but I broke the rules I was given on occasion, especially if the person who had given them wasn’t there. The primary parts of my identity are opaque to me, inscrutable. He was going to put the entads in me, to make me permanently unliveable, when all I wanted was to be lived in, to be a house for someone, yet ending his life was, somehow, a line I did not want to cross ...” Another weight dropped, and Narcissus was thrown back again, as the momentum was transferred from one to another.

From what she had said, she could only use five pounds of force at a time, unless she was using her momentum transfer. The room filled with suspended weights had cranks, gears, and pulleys that would allow her to gradually turn five pounds of force into huge amounts of potential energy, which could then be released so that she could transfer momentum to things inside the house. It had been
Uther’s innovation, she’d said. As I watched Narcissus be thrown back, I could see that she was exhausting a limited supply of readily deployable momentum.

“Eventually, it came to a choice,” said Zona, frowning at the imagine of Narcissus as he ran through the halls. “He was attempting to violate me. In the end, I believe I did it because he seemed so certain that I wouldn’t.”

The tiny image of Narcissus approached the closet, which I realized at once Zona was showing us, in a way that must have been intentional, either as a display of trust, as a way of warning us away, or simply as a ruse. There was no reason that the diorama she was presenting had to map to reality, if she wanted to bait us, but now I knew where the closet was.

Narcissus stumbled, and clutched at his throat. His hand came away red, and I could see a spray of blood. At this scale, it was almost too small to make out. He took an unsteady step forward, then collapsed on the ground.

“And that’s when you got a taste for blood, huh?” asked Fenn. I didn’t laugh, and neither did Zona, maybe because it wasn’t very funny, but that was Fenn sometimes; she said things to lighten the mood or deflect from something she didn’t want to think about, not because she thought she was being clever. She cleared her throat. “How’d you do it, anyway?” she asked, leaning down to peer at the still form of Narcissus. “We still don’t have your list of powers.”

“Five pounds of force,” I said. “If there aren’t limits, which I’m guessing there aren’t, or if the limits at least have a lot of give to them, then … imagine you’re holding the sharpest knife in the world. How many pounds of force does it take to cut through flesh, if you’re holding that knife?”

“Oh,” said Fenn. “Shit.”

“It was a thing Reimer tried to do once,” I said. “I gave him a modified version of the mage hand spell, and he felt compelled to abuse it. I was young and dumb, otherwise I would have thought of it first. It was an amulet, with silver knotwork on it.”

“Yes,” said Zona, watching me closely. She dismissed the diorama; the corpse was the last thing to fade away. “Strange.”

“I remember the others too, for what it’s worth,” I said. “The axe, the necklace, even the awl. That’s sort of what Fenn meant, when she said I was the architect of Aerb. A lot of what’s here is taken straight from the games I ran.”

“And me, too?” asked Zona.

“No,” I said. “Definitely not. Though sentient places were always one of my favorites.”

“So if you didn’t get a taste for blood, then what happened?” asked Fenn. “If you didn’t just snap, then … I don’t understand how or why you’re down here.”

“I cleaned up the murder,” said Zona. “I was convinced that no one would live in me if they found out what I had done. But alas, the Pennraigs could be clever, and eventually the murder was discovered. They had an entad that could follow a man’s worldline, so long as he hadn’t teleported, or portaled, or used some other exotic magic, which Narcissus had not. I confessed to what I had done, when pressed, and begged forgiveness from Yarrow, which he granted. I won’t play that scene out for you; I hate the role I played there too much. His forgiveness was meaningless though, since the end result was that he never returned. I stood alone, for quite some time, until his son tried to make me a weapon.”
I looked toward the door of the chamber. Based on my internal sense of time, Amaryllis was due out soon, and then it would be my turn in there. I resented that, a little bit; it had felt like a long month, and I was interested in what Zona had to say, especially if she was going to put more effort into presenting it.

“And that’s where the cannons come from?” asked Fenn. “They put a bunch of weapons on you?”

“In me,” Zona corrected. “The tuung had been trading with Mosenol for some time, and coming off the better for it, without anyone noticing until it was almost too late. The mister tanks allowed them to go on land for extended periods of time, and given that they made their home in the Boundless Pit, soaking in the spray of the Buol, there was really only one direction for them to expand towards. The King of Mosenol tried his best to contain them in a variety of ways, but eventually diplomacy had done as much as it could, and it was time for the tuung to take up arms. I was to play my own part, as a mobile fortress, a service that the King of Mosenol was willing to pay the Penndraigs a small fortune for.”

“Welp, I don’t suppose that has a happy ending,” said Fenn.

“No,” replied Zona. “I didn’t want the entads as part of me. Each was a change, sometimes subtle, sometimes not. I protested, and they didn’t listen, because I still did what I was told. I was granted the ability to move through rock as though it were water, and descended down to the tuung’s cities, firing on them with lightning and cannonballs. Eventually, it became clear to me that all I would ever be was a weapon. I didn’t terribly mind being a weapon, an instrument of destruction, nor did I mind killing … but I didn’t want that to be the only thing that I was. I reached another breaking point, compounded by the entads that were being added to me with abandon.”

“Understandable,” I said. “But I guess I don’t understand why you went so long without having anyone living in you.”

“Time brought changes, and new entads,” said Zona. “I went so long without being a house that eventually that particular compulsion began to slip away, or at least become tolerable. My experiences with people hadn’t been terribly pleasant, or had been pleasant only in small doses. The powerful only saw me as a power to wield, and the weak were run over by the powerful. I did take on people, from time to time, but it never ended well. I tried having pets, but they didn’t satisfy in the same way. The tuung occupied me, briefly, but that didn’t work out either.” She shrugged. “I took to watching from afar, reading and writing, improving myself as best I could, and dealing with the occasional band of adventurers, organized fireteam, or whatever else. My history is long and involved, I’m not sure that you properly grasp that.”

I hadn’t, not really, but I was starting to. I suppose in my mind, she had simply had things go sour with Uther and then crept down into the Boundless Pit to become a haunted house for five centuries. In a way, it gave me a new perspective on Solace, who was similarly long-lived, and must have had much more of a life than she’d let on. She hadn’t talked too much about her long life, not enough for me to hear all the details. Though now, with the rebirthing ritual underway, I wondered how much she actually remembered.

I looked over Zona, trying to find the seams of commonality.

“Was it the same for you?” I asked Fenn.

“Was what?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“A string of bad experiences making you hesitant,” I said. “Being solitary because though you enjoyed being around people, there had been one too many painful experiences, and keeping your
distance seemed like it was the wiser course of action.”

Fenn frowned. “Not how I would put it.”

“Not how I would either,” replied Zona. She smiled slightly. “But I can see that you’ve reached an understanding, in your own way.”

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “Maybe it’s not the truest understanding of who you are, but it’s a starting point, I think. And it does do something to allay my concerns, but … what happens if things don’t work out? If it goes sour for you again?”

“Yeah, do you use five pounds of force on the inside of our brains, or what?” asked Fenn.

“It depends on precisely how it goes sour,” said Zona. “If you betray me? I have a half dozen ways to kill all of you in a handful of seconds. If you simply decide that it would be better to live somewhere else? That might wound my ego, but I wouldn’t be likely to murder you over it.”

“Okay,” I swallowed. “Good to know.”

“The chamber is opening,” said Zona, turning to face the doors.

“Hey,” said Fenn, sidling up to me so she could keep her voice low. “Look, when you read the letter -- you’ll know which one I mean, it’s got some kind of heavy stuff in it. Just … when you come out of the chamber, you wrap me in a big hug, alright? And if you don’t, then I’ll know that, um, we probably need to talk more, just you and me. And don’t … you know, I probably said it all in the letter, I’m worrying again, so just,” she shook her head.

I kissed her on the cheek. “I love you,” I said. I wanted to say that I would love her no matter what, but I wasn’t sure that was actually true, and this wasn’t something that I felt I could tell her a pleasing lie about.

“I love you too,” said Fenn, squeezing my hand.

It was my turn in the chamber again, and I wasn’t looking forward to it. Whatever was in Fenn’s letter, I was hoping that it wasn’t too bad.
The letter was in a thick manilla envelope, which weighed about twenty pounds. Inside was a brick of lead, which accounted for almost all of the heaviness, plus two smaller envelopes. One said “read me first”, and the other said “read me second, or maybe don’t?”. The first was a single sheet of paper:

Joon,

I put a weight in here because it’s heavy stuff, and I wanted you to be able to feel that when you picked it up. I thought it was a bit funny. Not sure you’ll really get it though, or whether you’ll get it but not find it at all enjoyable. It seemed funny when I thought of it, then kind of dumb when I was actually doing it. Anyway. There are a lot of things that I’m not good at talking about, so I wrote you a letter instead, because ...

… Do you ever start a sentence without knowing how you’re going to end it, and then you get to the point where you need to write the conclusion, and you just have to stop because you’re drawing a blank on what could follow from the first half? Yeah, that’s me. I wrote you a bunch of letters because I missed you, but one of them I wrote because it’s been kind of gnawing at me for a bit, and I kept worrying that we would have a fight or something and it would all come gushing out, either from you or from me.

Mary encouraged me to write the letter, so if it turns out to have been a bad idea, we can both blame her.

All my love,

Fenn

I took out the second letter, looking it over for a bit before opening it. I was up in my bunk, with the curtain drawn to give me as much privacy as I could. Most of the letters that I’d gotten from Fenn had been a bit scattershot, but enthusiastic to make up for it. I wondered what this letter would contain, and how I would feel about it.

Dearest, darling, Juniper,

Mary is kind of freaking out about the baby. I always call it “the baby” instead of “Solace”, because it seems too weird to think that Mary is pregnant with our friend. Would you consider Solace to be a friend? I think that I would, even though we didn’t know her very well, because she was cool, kind, and helpful. Plus she used some lightning bolts to blast a couple helicopters out of the sky, and that’s got to count for something.

But Mary is freaking out a bit, because there’s a part of her that’s treating this like it’s an actual pregnancy, instead of just a druid ritual. I think that maybe Mary had a fucked up enough childhood that she wants her own children, so she can give them the upbringing that she never had. Solace is probably just going to be Solace though, even if we have to change her diapers for a bit, and they’re never going to have a real mother-daughter thing going on, which is a little sad, maybe.

So she was talking about fucking her soul (masturbating her soul?), not like she’s going to do it right now, but after we convene the Council of Arches about it. Problem is that removing maternal love seems a bit more complicated, and Mary hasn’t been able to find the levers, even if she could get permission from the Council to move them. If you ask me, and I know that you would if you could, I
think maybe this is some fallout from when she took away her love of you. Mary said that was bullcrap (paraphrasing) because you’re not suffering side effects from the level thing, and I said that maybe you were and they just weren’t noticeable, or maybe the level thing wasn’t a load-bearing part of your soul.

That pissed her off, and not in the good way. Eventually she settled down a little and we talked some more about what she would do if the pregnancy did end up fucking her up and either she couldn’t hack at her soul to fix it, or we said no to letting her.

She wasn’t very happy, and I was trying to make her feel better.

So I told her about my pregnancy, and the child I gave up for adoption.

Fuck, Joon. I don’t know what to say. When I put it there, it seems like something that I should have told you months ago, back when we first agreed that we were all going to stick together, but it’s not like you can just meet someone and say, “oh, by the way, here’s everything fucked up that ever happened to me”. I kind of envy Mary, because she’s enough of a public figure that you can find things out about her without having to ask her, and it would have been so much easier for me if you could just read a book and go, “oh, okay, this is all the bad stuff about Fenn”, without me having to say any of it.

I worry about what you think of me. I worry about it a lot, actually. I fucking love you so much, and I worry that if I say the wrong thing, or you find out the wrong bit of info, then you’re going to stop loving me.

It sounds really pathetic and desperate when I say it like that, but I also think it’s true, so maybe I’m just pathetic and desperate and don’t want to admit it. Like sometimes I do something and I think, “that’s kind of an asshole thing to do” and then I think “well, but I did it, and I’m not an asshole, so maybe there’s some way that it’s actually right”. I think we talked about this before. Well, it’s that, but with being pathetic and desperate.

You know, I set up that whole thing when you came out of the chamber with Mary, and I know that it wasn’t your favorite thing in the world, but the thought that kept running through my head was that maybe you were going to fuck Mary, and I said to myself, “self, if that happens, then you just leave, take your share of the loot and hop on the first train you can, and never look back”, and there was another part of me that said, “nope, not going to do that, if it happens, then I get on my knees, beg and pray that you’ll still love me anyhow, and if I have to share, then I’ll just swallow my pride and be really, really unhappy about it”. So I needed a distraction, which was why we played twins. Feels weird to admit that.

Yeah, definitely pathetic and desperate. That’s the girlfriend you’ve got. I’m in kind of a shit mood, sorry.

So anyway, when I was eighteen, I got pregnant. I already told you about the guy, he was a douchebag who wanted to fuck a girl from every single one of the mortal species. How’s that for a life goal? I didn’t find out until afterward, naturally, and the thought of going after him made me sick, so I was on my own. This was after dad had been killed and mom had stopped speaking to me because she had a new family.

When my little boy came out, he was the size of my palm and mewling like a kitten.

… I’m sorry, I don’t know if I can explain this right. Like, imagine that you’re you, in the depths of despair, you’ve pushed all your friends away, broke up with your girlfriend, hate yourself, whatever other shit you went through that you haven’t told us about because it’s painful or embarrassing or
whatever, right? And then right when you’re more or less at rock bottom, you find out you’re pregnant.

Maybe it wouldn’t have been your reaction, but I just thought to myself, “okay, well I guess I’m going to be a mother now, this is who I’m going to be, because I’m sure as shit sucking at being everything else”. Maybe it doesn’t sound like it, but I had high hopes, like this was deliverance (big word), the thing that was going to make my life make sense. I worked some odd jobs, saved up some money, stole a fair amount when I could get away with it, and was all ready to settle in as a mom. It was going to be us against the world, Joon.

Didn’t really turn out like that.

A nice human couple adopted him.

Sorry, stopped writing because I was crying, and I was going to just throw this all away, but Mary told me that I should keep going if it was important to me, and worst case, I could just vent to a piece of paper and then throw it out. She’s almost frighteningly sympathetic to my cause (the cause, currently, of being the best girlfriend I can be). Don’t let her know it, but I’m probably going to leave this time chamber thinking that Amaryllis Penndraig is one of the greatest people on the face of Aerb. I’m not going to read what I wrote before though, sorry if this is disorganized.

I had Nellan for about a year before I gave him up. I’d been prepared for a screaming, crying little baby, and instead I got this sweet little boy that hardly ever complained. He was so cute! Maybe I just thought that because I was his mom, but there were times I was run down and I’d look at him, and it would all be okay, because he was just so godsdamned adorable.

I shouldn’t have given him up.

I had to give him up, because the whole “us against the world” thing actually fucking sucked. Maybe if I had been stronger or better, I could have molded him into the kind of person who could endure it without flinching, but I was young and coming off some real nasty stuff, and I really had no fucking clue what I was doing.

He looked human, for the most part, close enough that he could pass, but not with me as his mom, not with pointed ears that I couldn’t always find a way to hide. I kept looking at him and thinking that at some point, someone was going to spit on this darling little boy for being part elf, and I was going to have to explain it to him. Or maybe someday he’d just realize that other people didn’t get the looks that we got, and how fucking heartbreaking would that be? I was tough enough to take it, but trying to take it for both of us was like a punch to the gut, every single day.

You might be wondering how any of this would have made Mary feel better. I don’t think that it did, except that she could put some of her energy into comforting me. She likes having something to do.

I don’t think I was a very good mother. I almost didn’t include that, because maybe I come off okay if you think that I was just a single mother who couldn’t hack it. It wasn’t that rosy, and I know it doesn’t seem that rosy to begin with. I don’t want to get into all the ways that I wasn’t a good mother, but maybe I can just say that I wasn’t devoted to the endeavor heart and soul, like I thought I would be when I knew he was coming. He was a quiet baby who didn’t complain much, and that almost made it worse, when I didn’t give him the love and care he deserved. And I did love him, really really did, but sometimes love isn’t enough.

I sent money to him every once in a while, usually when I was flush with cash after a successful raid into the Risen Lands.
There’s so much shit I haven’t told you about myself.

I almost never talk about prison, and I can’t tell whether you find that weird and just haven’t been saying anything, or whether it just doesn’t cross your mind because that’s not where I was when you met me. It was horrible and gross and I never talk about it because I worry that you have this image of me that I’m always in danger of breaking, and you’re not going to like the broken image. Mary’s got this theory that we’re all broken in our own ways because that’s what you like, or at least respond to, but I kind of don’t agree because there are different types of broken, and I worry I’m too much of the bad type.

So a week before we met, I was in prison, held there mostly because Anglecynn might have had a use for me. I was always worried that I’d be part of the next round of sacrifices. That happened sometimes, if you pissed the wrong person off. One day you’re eating shit food and trying not to get on anyone’s bad side, the next you’re facing trial by adversity. I might have fared better than the others, since I had experience on my side, but even if you lived, it was the Host for you, and that was its own pile of shit.

There have been times that I wanted to explain to you that before we met, I was living like a rat, keeping my head down, trying to survive the system. I don’t know how you’ll take the Nellan thing, and I don’t know how you’d respond if I told you about prison. Best case is maybe just that you nod along and don’t really get it, but you want to understand and be there for me. I keep my mouth shut around you though. I worry about what you’ll say or feel if I tell you about something like the time a guard got handsy with me—raped me.

So there’s that.

Okay, all done crying. I’m probably going to rip this letter up and write a new one, but I guess if you’re reading this, then I didn’t do that.

I worry that you’ll hate me for all this.

I talked to Mary, she says that I’m a dumb bitch (paraphrasing here) and that if you hate me for any of what I wrote, then she’s going to poison you in your sleep and see whether we can get a better protagonist (not paraphrasing). She can be very fierce when she wants to be, which is constantly.

Still not decided on whether I’m going to send this to you. “Send”. Might have to burn it and write a new one that makes more sense. We shall see!

Okay, Mary vetoed burning it, because of the fumes, so I guess we’re back to ripping, if it comes to that. I feel like you’re a lot better at writing letters than I am. I know you said that you’d had pen pals in the past, on Earth, but I don’t know if it’s experience that’s making the difference, or if maybe you’re just more suited to it. Or maybe bullshit game stuff. At the very least, I should be half the letter writer you are, right?

I feel like this letter has already gone on way too long, but I don’t want to just leave you on a low note, so I’m going to ramble a bit, okay? (If it’s not okay, stop reading now. (See, I can do parentheticals just like you! (I love your parentheticals (and you).)))

Things have been going well with Mary. She’s such a good cook! My only problem with her cooking is that she always complains about what she did wrong. I thought she was fishing for compliments at first, but she seemed annoyed by me saying that it was good, so I don’t know.

I just asked her, and she said that if there’s a problem, she wants to root it out, not be told that it’s not actually a problem. I’m going to have to try to explain to her that if she puts my plate on the
table and tells me that this thing needs some salt and this other thing is a little dry, it can ruin the meal before I’ve had the first bite. Not ruin, because it’s always really good food (almost always: remind me to tell you about the mashed potato incident), but you know what I mean.

Okay, okay, if you’re going to twist my arm, Mary used a blender on some potatoes instead of mashing them by hand, and they came out like glue. I’m realizing now that this isn’t a great story, and I shouldn’t have hyped it so much. I told her that it was nice to know she was fallible, and she told me that the last few months had been a string of failures, which made me want to give her a cuddle and tell her that everything would be alright.

I think I mentioned this in one of the other letters, but we’ve been sharing a bed. I’m hoping you’re okay with that. I like having someone to snuggle up with, and she’s a good sleeping partner. I wish that it were you instead of her, obviously.

Have I ever told you that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me? I probably have. Maybe I even did it earlier in this very letter.

Every time I take my sponge bath (boo sponge baths!) I look down at the line that marks where I was cut in half, and somehow I still keep thinking to myself, “surely this is all too good to be true”. If the deal was that I got to be with you, but I had to get punched in the face every single morning, I would turn up for my punch with a smile on my face.

I told Mary that, and she told me that I was just high on endorphins and hormones and whatnot, and that if I actually got punched in the face every morning, I would probably opt out by the third day. But she’s not really a romantic, especially now, even if she likes a good romance.

She told me to tell you that getting punched in the face is NOT romantic. I just told her that she should write her own damned letter, and she got kind of quiet, I think because we both realized that she doesn’t have to write letters, because she just spent a month alone with you, and is going to spend another month alone with you in the not too distant future. I’ll cop to being jealous.

Was that enough of a palate cleanser?

Remember that I love you lots. Heaps, even. We were listening to Doris Day, and I’ve got one of the songs stuck in my head. The lyric is about a bushel and a peck, which are apparently Earth measurements, which is the same as saying 1.25 bushels. I think that I love you rather a lot more than that.

Love (duh),

Fenn (also duh)

P.S. Still not sure that I’m actually going to let you read this, especially since I don’t want to read it back to see what it says, but I’m leaning toward including it with the others, maybe with some warnings.

P.P.S. I’d understand if you thought that I should have told you sooner, but that’s the only thing that you’re allowed to be upset about.

P.P.P.S. I guess I don’t really have the ability to tell you what you can and cannot be upset about, that was rude, sorry. I just want everything to stay the same between us, for reasons like “I am in love with you, with all my heart and soul”. Sorry if that was too sappy, Amaryllis and I have been watching romantic comedies, and despite my best efforts they might be getting to me.
I set the letter down and wiped away my tears. I did wish that she’d told me earlier, not because I needed to know every dark and terrible thing that had ever happened to her, but because I wanted to be the kind of person that she wouldn’t be afraid of telling things. To me none of it reeked of desperation, it was just love, a desire to feel closeness and belonging.

(There was always a part of me that felt bad about crying, like maybe I wasn’t manly enough to just be stoic about things, or like I was being a drama queen. Neither of my parents cried much, and for my dad, it wasn’t so much that he disliked it as that he was exasperated. I remember, vividly, walking out of my room a week after Arthur had died, wiping the tears from my cheeks, and seeing my dad roll his eyes like he was fed up with me.)

“Okay,” I said, once I had mostly recovered. “I read the letter.”

“Is it too soon to talk about narrative?” asked Amaryllis.

“A bit,” I said. “I know what you’re going to say though, she’s got a son somewhere out there, and that’s a gun on the mantle.”

Amaryllis nodded.

“Yeah,” I said. I shrugged. “Whatever, if it happens, it happens. I’m so fucking tired of second-guessing everything.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “I suppose I can respect that. You won’t object if I make my own notes though? So long as we’ve got the time, we should be prepared for every eventuality. I was asking Grak about Darili Irid, and he stonewalled me, which I didn’t really appreciate. If I had access to the breadth of reading material across Aerb, I would look up his clan, but from what he’s said, they were fairly small, and there are an enormous number of those tiny, insular dwarf clans, so.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m distracted. Do you want to talk about Fenn?”

“No,” I said. “It makes a little more sense how much she doesn’t want kids. It makes me … sad, I guess.”

“Because you wanted children with her?” asked Amaryllis.

“A bit,” I said. “I don’t think that’s my brain working quite right. There must be some kind of chemical soup thing happening, to make me think that I would be ready to be a father.”

“You understand that you might have to be, in about two subjective weeks, right?” asked Amaryllis. “Solace is coming, and there have been some changes within her soul, a developing coherence, but … you might have to be her father, if only a little bit.”

“Like fatherhood on training wheels,” I said. Amaryllis hesitated, then nodded. “I’m ready for that, just … the idea of actually, literally having a child of my own right now is insane, right? If you look at how Uther’s kids turned out … well, no offense.”

“He wasn’t around much,” said Amaryllis. “Perhaps if he had been, or if he could have been, it might have been different.”

“Maybe,” I said. I shook my head. “I don’t want to judge him without knowing all the facts, which we really don’t.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. “And Fenn? Are you judging her?”

“No,” I said. “I would tear apart the world for her.”
Amaryllis watched me for a moment. “Let’s hope that it doesn’t come to that, now that you’ve said it.”

I shrugged, and tried not to think too hard about it.

I had a letter of my own to write.
I emerged from the time chamber feeling drained, despite my best efforts. I ate well, I slept well, I exercised often, and by the end, none of it really seemed to help. My break from the chamber had lasted no more than two hours, if that, so it was effectively two solid months, back to back, with only the smallest respite. The chamber was small, and it seemed smaller with every passing week, despite all the work we put into making it seem less small, like murals on the walls, switching around the arrangement of furniture, and putting up some mirrors. Most of it was like trying to scratch an itch by rubbing your fingers in the air above your skin.

All my skills were at their caps, and I’d put in the hours trying to unlock other abilities that might be accessible without actually needing to raise the skills higher. Skin magic was the primary beneficiary there; with Fenn’s faculty at Art, I was able to get past a hurdle and learn some new patterns. Even that was kind of pointless, since Fenn and I were doubling up on the skills, and it wasn’t as easily accessible as other schools of magic, given that it needed magical reagents for the inks, which the backpack couldn’t produce, and which the clonal kit couldn’t be convinced to give up in sufficient quantities (not to mention the insane markup when we paid it back).

I read lots of books. Amaryllis had a working television by this point, a big, bulky cathode ray tube without a case around it, which seemed to fail half the time I tried to use it. Of course, the television would have been worthless without something to watch, but thankfully, Amaryllis had been able to build a fairly crude VCR to go along with it, which also seemed to fail too often, though I considered it a miracle that she was able to get it working at all. We were limited to things that had been released in the VHS format, but it opened up a wider range of movies, and VHS boxsets of television series that had been popular enough to be released that way.

(Weirdly, the backpack would sometimes give us home recordings of television, if the thing we wanted wasn’t available commercially. I supposed that this wasn’t too dissimilar from the printouts of webpages, but it was a little bit weird to see, especially when there were bits and pieces of old newscasts and home movies on the tapes. Similarly, the printouts of webpages were occasionally printed on reused paper, with random spreadsheets or news articles on the back, which seemed to follow no rhyme or reason, save that they could plausibly have been scrap paper somewhere in America. And at times, requests for webpages would simply fail for no clear reason, with a little note saying something like, “no printout of the Urban Dictionary page on ‘basic bitch’, sorry”. I suspected, but couldn’t quite prove, that the backpack was only grabbing things that literally existed on Earth, rather than that plausibly might have come from Earth. At the very least, it could pull historical items that I was pretty sure hadn’t survived to 2017, but that was also pretty damned hard to conclusively prove.)

Things with Amaryllis went fine. The second month was easier than the first month, though all the currently intractable issues were still there. She was further along in the pregnancy, her movements a little more ungainly, but it didn’t seem to affect her much. She didn’t complain, but I saw the occasional wince of annoyance when she couldn’t move quite how she wanted to, and she was going to the bathroom a lot more, not that I was tracking that. She was still rock climbing, but the routes she chose were easier, and she didn’t do anything that used her abdominal muscles.

(She was still breathtakingly pretty, though not in quite the same way as she’d been when we first met.)

When the month was up and the door to the time chamber was finally reopened, I rushed out and found Fenn. There were no surprises waiting for me this time, only a slightly anxious-looking half-
elf. I’d reread her letter, the heavy one, just so that I would have it in mind, and the hug I wrapped her in reflected what I felt.

She’d been right that none of what she’d told me was the sort of thing that normally pinged at my instincts, and that there was a bad kind of damage, when it came to what I found compelling, but I was already in love with her, and all I could think was that I wished nothing bad had ever happened to her. There was a small part of me wondering if this was all somehow my fault, if every bad thing in her life was just set up in order to manipulate me. I was still trying my best to just live my life without second-guessing though.

**Loyalty Increased: Fenn lvl 26!**

“You’re crushing me,” Fenn whispered into my ear. I relaxed my grip on her. “No,” she said. “It was good, more crushing please.”

So we had our moment of reunion, and then went away from the others so we could talk.

“You don’t hate me then?” asked Fenn.

“No,” I murmured. I was still holding her.

“Well, good,” said Fenn. “Good. I should have told you. It felt like there were just some things that I needed to dance around, and --”

“I understand,” I said. “I wish you didn’t have to go in there, or that we could take some time together, or … something.”

“Mary would pitch a fit,” replied Fenn. “Rightfully so, I think. You’re in fighting shape?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Ready to cut the world’s heart out.” In theory, I had about three hours left until the baby was born, maybe as little as two. Amaryllis had let me come out so that I would be as well-rested, fed, and keyed up as possible, so that I would be ready for anything. I was in my full gear, including Ropey at my waist.

“You wrote me letters?” asked Fenn.

“I did,” I nodded. “And don’t think that you’re going to get out of writing me back just because I’m not going back in there.”

“You’re just going to read them all at once?” asked Fenn with a laugh.

“Maybe,” I said. “I mean, I really might. But mostly, I want to be there for you, so you can write me if you want to talk about something, even if for me, it will happen all at once.”

“Okay,” nodded Fenn. “I’m going to miss you. More than the first time, even.”

“I’ll miss you too,” I said. “It’s going to be the longest forty-five minutes of my life.”

“I already used that joke,” said Fenn.

“I know,” I replied with a smile. “But it’s been a couple months, and I like to recycle.”

We kissed for a bit, and indulged in physical contact that we hadn’t had from each other for a long time, until eventually Amaryllis came calling, and it was time for her to get back into the chamber.
I handed over the list of our entads to Zona, and she read through it carefully, not saying a word as her eyes moved across the page. I was certain that she didn’t need the avatar to do it, but she kept up the illusion, going so far as to minutely move Tiff’s lips as her eyes scanned the pages.

“This is only partial negotiation,” I said. “Amaryllis wants to have final say in whatever gets provisionally decided, this is just the opening part of it, where I can hopefully get the basic stuff out of the way. She’s marked the ones that we don’t feel we can give up, the ones that we’d prefer not to, and the ones that we have no particular attachment to, or in some cases, can’t actually use because of bloodline limitations.”

“I saw as much,” said Zona. “The Anyblade, the backpack, and the teleportation key are the three that I would choose.”

I nodded. “We were a little worried that you would say that. The Anyblade is the only one that I think we can really part with. The backpack is important, a literal gift from the Dungeon Master, and the crux of Amaryllis’ plan to remake the world. And as for the teleportation key, there’s some question of what would actually happen if you were to consume it. Based on what we know about how your meta-entad power works, it’s a bit of a crapshoot, and some of the outcomes are unacceptable.”

Zona smiled at me. “How much time did you devote to talking this over?” she asked.

“Days,” I said. “Amaryllis is acting as the focal point for cross-group conversations, to make sure that the four of us are on the same page. It’s important, and we wanted to get things right.”

“I see,” replied Zona. She smirked at me. “The variability inherent in any acquisition is a good reason for me to refrain from taking the key. Would I function as a key, capable of taking five individuals to any place that any of them had been? Or only to places that I had been? Could I make use of the touchstones, or not? Perhaps, in the worst case, people could only teleport within me, which I agree, would be a disaster for you. I can’t say that I have the answer.”

“Okay,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I also wasn’t sure how you interacted with entads that were twinned, or parts of a whole. Out of all the things in our collection, the key is the only one that applies to, at least that I know of.”

“The backpack I will be taking though,” said Zona, ignoring that question. “There are a number of entads that are already part of me which have similar functions, and the result from taking in the backpack will fall within a narrow band. You will still be able to acquire whatever you want from,” she hesitated, tripping over a word for the first time, “From Earth. My interior space is much greater than that of the backpack, which should allow you access to a variety of goods that you currently can’t pull from it.”

I nodded. The catch was that we wouldn’t be able to access the backpack without, at the very least, Zona’s consent. Amaryllis was in favor; she’d already spent time pulling out thousands of books (fiction and non-fiction), movies, parts, equipment, medicine, seeds, and everything else she thought she would need. The interior of Sable truly was, as best we could ascertain, limitless. The way Amaryllis saw it, so long as we took all of the low-hanging fruit, the actual cost to us could be mitigated. In return, not only would Zona get something powerful, it would in many ways be a bond between us. Zona would be more comfortable knowing that we had a concrete reason to maintain a good relationship with her.

“You can have the Anyblade too,” I said, trying not to wince as I said it. “I’m not sure quite what the effect would be. Do you have any idea?” My two best guesses were that Zona would become the Anyhouse, or that the house would be able to take on any shape, so long as it could in some way be
construed as a blade.

“Entads that morph are somewhat rare,” said Zona. “I haven’t had the pleasure of consuming one. I’m quite interested to know the result myself.”

“And the strain won’t be too much?” I asked. “The unpleasantness of adapting to a new sensation won’t hold you back?”

“Do you mean to dissuade me?” asked Zona. She crossed her arms.

“No,” I said, holding up a hand. “Just curious. You brought it up a lot.”

“I take my time,” said Zona. “The worst cases have always been when I had a handful at once. The severity of the handicap depends on the entad consumed, but a week or a month later, I’ll have adapted. Perhaps more, if the entad had some sentience of its own. I can have the Anyblade then?”

“Yes,” I said. “Provisionally, assuming that Amaryllis agrees.”

“She controls too much,” said Zona with a frown.

“She’s smart and capable,” I said. “And she’s by far the best negotiator among us. We’d be foolish not to use her.” In fact, the primary reason that I was doing the talking was that Amaryllis had hoped that I would improve my relationship with the house and trigger something from the mostly-silent game. It also helped that the house liked me better; I wasn’t a Penndraig.

“That’s two of three,” said Zona. “If not the teleportation key, then the glove you call Sable.”

I winced. “No,” I said.

“A flat no?” asked Zona.

“It serves too many functions for us,” I said. “We’re willing to make a deal for the third item, not a lesser replacement for the one you want, but a wide selection of lesser entads. We have a number of them we can’t use, those tied to Uther’s most-direct male descendant. They’re on the list.”

“Most of them worthless to both me and you,” replied Zona.

“True,” I nodded. “But more than just those, we’d have a standing agreement that any entads we come across that we’re gated from in some way will be yours for the taking, if you want them.” The thinking here was that while Zona having the backpack would set up a reason for us to treat her well, her getting a steady flow of entads would give her incentives to treat us well.

The more I’d gotten to know Zona, the more I thought that she wouldn’t be swayed by that. She wanted to be a house, and the only reason that she wasn’t was because she was settling for lesser pursuits, like torturing and killing people who tried to come inside her, or making war with the tuung, or accumulating power.

“I would find that acceptable,” said Zona, “If your manager agrees.” She was smirking, just a bit. It was hard to remember quite what our first encounter had been like, but I thought she was smiling more, and I took that as a good sign.

“There would be some leeway,” I said. “Some entads we aren’t going to be able to use, but might be able to trade away, or hold hostage, or return to their rightful owners. Amaryllis will be more exact about it, so long as you agree in general terms. To start with, there are all the things at the end of the list, the arrow-annihilating armor, reflection portal shield, spin stick, and teleporting sword. Those
were all taken from Larkspur Prentiss and his people. In addition to that, we have a number of entads taken from a different encounter, whose function we haven’t been able to figure out. I assume if you consume an entad, you figure out its function, but given that they integrate, I can see why you wouldn’t want to do that.”

“I’ve done it, in the past,” said Zona. “Typically though, I allow people to use their entads within the house, to discover what it is the entads do. Obviously some of them wouldn’t be worth their quirks. The people who come to this place do tend be desperate, and it’s not uncommon for their complement of items to reflect that desperation.”

“Okay,” I said, swallowing. “There’s one more thing, an entad that’s not on the list.”

“Oh?” asked Zona, though I didn’t imagine she could possibly have missed it.

I undid the rope around my waist, then held it out, coiled in my hands. “This is the Eternal Golden Braid,” I said. Ropey uncoiled slightly, and one end of him rose up like a snake being charmed out of a basket. “He’s sentient. We didn’t introduce you earlier because of concerns that you would consume him.”

The free end of Ropey gave an extended flourish that was vaguely reminiscent of a bow.

“How can he talk?” asked Zona.

Ropey moved his free end around, shaping out letters in sequence. He’d done the same for me a few times, when there were things that needed to be communicated, but mostly he stayed silent, and acted only when he needed to act. Watching him, I felt a little guilty for not spending more time trying to talk with him. I’d never once asked how he was doing, or what he thought of things. I’d had half a mind to start doing that during our time in the chamber, but I didn’t want to disingenuously try to change the nature of our relationship.

“Faster, please,” said Zona.

Ropey started contorting faster, making the letters so quickly that I couldn’t hope to follow along. I glanced over at Grak, and saw a slightly concerned look on his face. I tried to keep my expression impassive, but I was feeling it a little bit too. Whatever Ropey was spelling out, it had a lot of letters.

One of the things that I really hadn’t been worried about was that Ropey would throw us under the bus, but I had a moment of panic as I realized that was possible, even if it wasn’t likely.

“I see,” said Zona after three minutes had passed, and Ropey had finally come to a stop. She gave a curtesy to the rope. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Ropey extended himself forward with his free end, using the other to wrap around my wrist for support, and Zona held out a hand to him. He threaded through her fingers, pushing them apart and encircling them, in what seemed like a weirdly intimate gesture to me. It didn’t last long though, and Zona dropped her hand when Ropey retracted back into my arms.

“Only five pounds of force, unfortunately,” said Zona. It took me a moment to realize that she was talking to Ropey, not me. “But I have a vast sensorium, of which this illusion is only one part. You may have spent too much time with humans, if you see me primarily as one. I’ll choose to take that as a compliment on my mastery of artifice.”

Ropey sprang into action again, presumably making more letters, though faster than before, which had already been too fast for me to read.

“No,” said Zona, suddenly holding up a hand. “Privately.”
Ropey turned his free end, which he was more or less using as a head, toward me, nodded once, and then dropped out of my hands by going completely limp in the right places. When he touched the ground, he took off, slithering across the flagstones like a snake, about as fast as I could run. When he was around the corner, the illusion of Zona disappeared.

“Did that go well, do you think?” I asked Grak.

“Unclear,” said Grak.

“Yeah,” I said. “Could you follow what Ropey was saying?”

“Only until she told it to go faster,” said Grak. “And then, only because I focused on the magic I could see from him, to the exclusion of all else. He was giving her details of his biography.”

“Huh,” I said. “Do you think they’re … what do you think they’re going to do together?”

“Perhaps they will touch butts,” said Grak.

I looked at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. “I missed you,” I said. “Not sure if I said that.”

“You did not,” replied Grak. “And no letters.”

“Actually, I wrote four last time I was in there,” I said. “Should be waiting for you when it’s your shift again. I would have written more, but I’m a lot more worried about how Fenn is or was handling it, so that’s where my energy was going.”

“I am honored to get a letter,” said Grak with a small bow in my direction. I couldn’t tell whether or not he was being sarcastic.

“Don’t expect much,” I said. “They’re short by my standards, only five pages or so each, and a lot of it is just … I don’t know, not incredibly personal, like it is with Fenn, not because I don’t want to share with you, but I didn’t want to do this one-sided unloading about stuff I didn’t know if you’d be interested in. Plus there’s also a lot of broken Groglir, which I was trying to keep from getting rusty. It’s unbelievable to me that with all of our preparation, and all of the sheer quantity of stuff packed into the glove, there was no Groglir-English dictionary.”

Grakhuil shrugged. “You are the only one who would need it.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” I said. I looked down the hallway. “Hopefully things are going well.”

“The rope is a stalwart companion,” said Grak.

I nodded at that, but didn’t wholly agree. It had been by my side from virtually the moment I got it, serving as extra arms or sometimes legs, helping to bind people, increasing my mobility, and doing basically whatever was in its power to help me … but it wasn’t actually a partner, and though it could follow along when people talked, it rarely engaged in conversation. Our relationship was incredibly one-sided, from a certain point of view.

Ropey came slinking back around the corner at roughly the same time that Zona appeared next to us.

“He’s a very agreeable fellow,” said Zona with a nod.

“I’ve often thought so,” I replied. “Did you … talk?”

“Hrm,” replied Zona.
“I’m not sure how to interpret that,” I said.

“You want to know whether I intend to kill a kindred spirit?” asked Zona.

“Um,” I said. “Yes, I did want to know that, but I wasn’t going to ask so bluntly. I thought … you want power, right?”

“Power is not nearly all I want,” said Zona. She peered at me. “Have you been spending too much time with the little Penndraig, to think that power is the end of all things?”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s fair. And -- sorry, but I knew Arthur, and he didn’t think that power was the ultimate goal, he thought that it was a means to achieve some goal. He lectured me on it more than once. Amaryllis is the same, maybe not the same as whoever Uther became, but if there really were nothing left for her to do, she would sit back and relax, without worrying.”

“Do you believe that?” asked Grak.

I looked over at him. “I … huh. I think it’s awfully convenient for her that her work is never done, and she’s very adept at making new work even when there’s time to relax. But that’s not the same thing as wanting power for its own sake.”

“I find your defense of her interesting,” said Zona. She turned to the time chamber. “They’re coming out. There are only another three cycles to go, which I’m glad of. I grow weary of this changing of the guard.”

I didn’t know whether that was intended as a joke, but if it was, I didn’t find it funny. The thought of going back in there made my skin crawl; it was hard to imagine what might have happened if Amaryllis had taken it upon herself to go the whole time without company. The last I’d heard, which was a month ago from her perspective, she was ready to see a sunrise, drink herself into a stupor, and go somewhere with a good enough view that the world seemed to stretch out wide. If we really did end up needing to raise Solace in the time chamber, I had no idea how the fuck we were going to manage that.

Fenn came out of the chamber like a cat darting out of a door that’s been momentarily left ajar, and ran straight at me. She didn’t slow down, and leaped up into the air, the better to tackle me. I caught her, something that I wouldn’t have been able to do with my body as it was back on Earth, and she wrapped her legs around me as she started kissing me.

“Missed me?” I asked, when she gave me a chance to breathe.

“A bit,” said Fenn, smiling wide. “I almost didn’t make it, but I kept thinking, hey, Juniper is waiting for me at the end of it all. Not as bad as solitary confinement, but they don’t keep you in solitary for two fucking months. And now I’m done!”

I let go of her legs, and she unhooked herself from me to step down onto the floor.

“Congratulations,” said Amaryllis from by the door. She was much more pregnant now, well into the third trimester. I idly wondered whether the immobility plate would magically fit her new shape, then more seriously considered it, because that was how we were going to get down into the bottle. “Juniper, how did negotiations go?”

“Good enough,” I said. “Anyblade, backpack, cast-offs, that’s about as good as is reasonable, if we’re not being absolute misers.”

“Good,” replied Amaryllis with a sigh.
“And I did end up showing her Ropey,” I said.

“I figured as much,” said Amaryllis. She glanced down at Zona’s feet, where the rope was coiled. “Can we make the exchange now?”

“Now?” asked Zona, furrowing her eyebrows. “Why?”

“It might help us,” I replied. “If the Anyblade allows you radical shape changes, we could take you with, should we need to leave.”

Zona stared at me. “Take me with … where?” she asked.

“Anywhere,” I said. “We have a companion back in Headwater that we need to retrieve, at a minimum. If something goes desperately wrong, then we’ll probably go back to one of the safehouses we have set up in Cranberry Bay, so that Amaryllis and Solace can get emergency medical attention.”

(I was really hoping that it didn’t come to that, but the athenaeum produced some of the best healers Aerb had to offer, and the hospital there was first rate — by Aerbian standards, anyway, which were better than Earth’s in some ways, but worse in others. For the most part, healing someone with a fully healthy soul was easy street, but if the problem couldn’t be fixed by resetting the body to the soul’s image of the body, or through enhancing the body’s natural processes of homeostasis, you had problems. Purely physical injuries were generally easy to heal, unless you let them go long enough that the injury became a part of the soul. Diseases, poisons, cancers, disorders, and things like that all had various ways of being dealt with, but they weren’t surefire, and there was a lot of variance when you got into the specifics. Maternal mortality, according to Amaryllis, was slightly worse than in the United States, though the distributions were different.)

“You have other houses?” asked Zona. She frowned slightly.

“Places to lay low,” I said. “They’re not secure, and we assume that we’ll have to be ready to move at a moment’s notice, given that we have a few enemies.”

“Very well,” said Zona. “I’ll escort you, to show you where to put the entads.”

“I should be getting back in anyway,” said Amaryllis. She ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m prepared to give over the backpack now, incidentally. All of the things that we should need for the labor and birth were carefully placed into storage months ago. Juniper, I have a list of things that I’d like, if it turns out that Zona is capable of exceeding the spatial limits of the backpack. In my ideal world, you would spend the next few hours setting up an operating room, with all the equipment that’s larger than the backpack can handle. I’ll be coming out at thirty-six weeks, and might take a longer break then, if you need more time to set up. We might also think about grabbing Valencia, as she might be some help in the operating room.”

“If it gets to the point where we need her, then we’re probably going to a proper hospital,” I said. “If you have something like preeclampsia, I don’t want to be jury-rigging solutions, not when we could just get professional help.”

“The procedure for preeclampsia will be for you to bridge our circulatory systems to reduce hypertension, bleeding yourself if necessary, then administering magnesium sulfate,” said Amaryllis. “That should prevent progression to eclampsia, and allow us some time to either induce labor, if it’s not already underway, or for the birth to progress naturally.”

I stared at her. “You’re really that dead set on not going to the hospital?” I asked.
“I’m not dead set on it, no,” said Amaryllis. “But if we go to a hospital, there are going to be questions, not to mention written documents, and my ability to leave, or even just to be watched by people I trust, will be compromised. This is, to put it lightly, an unconventional pregnancy, and I am, to put it lightly, a wanted criminal. In my view, it’s worth taking some minor risks to avoid giving birth on public record.”


“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I think that some level of anxiety is the appropriate reaction to have to this situation.” She turned slightly, so she was pointing in the direction of the time chamber. “I think I’m in good hands with Grak, and when the time comes, we’ll be as prepared as we can possibly be. If it comes to the worst, there’s a plan in place for getting from the safehouse to the hospital, one that I wrote out before we even got on the train. I don’t want to do that unless it looks like there’s a risk of death.”

“Which we might not know about until it’s too late,” said Fenn. She had her arms crossed and was looking at Amaryllis with something like a glare. “You’re the one that’s always going on about worst case scenarios.”

“We already talked this to death,” Amaryllis said to Fenn. “You agreed with me.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t have Juniper for backup,” said Fenn. “Now we’ve got you outnumbered, which means that you’ll pretty much have to see reason.”

“I don’t want to re-litigate this,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. “If there are serious problems, or the birth is too early, then yes, we’ll go to the hospital, but there are a wide variety of more minor problems that we have all the tools, knowledge, and training to deal with. I’ve been preparing for this for months. I don’t want to expose us too much, and I don’t want to spend time that we probably don’t have. The life that’s most at stake here is my own.”

“And Solace,” I said.

Amaryllis glared at me. “If you think that I’m not trying to do right by her --”

“I do,” I said, a little too quick. “It’s fine, I’ll trust your judgment.”

“Grak, come on, let’s go,” said Amaryllis. She walked back into the time chamber, doing a little bit of a waddle.

“I will be watching her,” Grak said to us as he followed after her. “I will talk to her. We will see you in a month.”

The doors to the time chamber closed, and I let out a breath.

“Not the easiest person, is she?” asked Fenn. “She’s gotten worse. She got worse, in the month I was in there with her.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I kind of get where she’s coming from, because she was the one to take on the burden of pregnancy, and she’s spent seven months in the chamber so far, but … still. I don’t know if she’s right or not, but it really felt like one of those situations where we both just got entrenched and weren’t listening to each other. That’s not usually a problem for us.”

“Come,” said Zona. “Follow me with the entads, and I’ll show you where they go. If I’m to use their powers to help you, then I’ll need as much time as possible to acclimate.”
I put the backpack in first, bidding it a fond farewell. I was less sure about giving it up than I was about giving up the Anyblade, but we’d had seven months to pull out everything we could want from it. Amaryllis had argued about it, but we hadn’t had a proper fight. The thing that clinched it was that we might be able to get larger things from Earth; there had been quite a few times when I’d thought to myself, “oh, I’ll just grab that from the backpack”, only to realize that the thing I’d wanted couldn’t possibly be pulled from the backpack, given its size. We were fortunate that most of the furniture we needed had been stolen from one place or another by Fenn (or in the case of things taken from Weik Handum or Caer Laga, rescued rather than stolen).

The closet wasn’t terribly big, and it was about as unassuming as it had been described. The only thing that marked it as special was the fact that it wasn’t very close to any other doors or rooms, which gave it a place of prominence in the hallway. I estimated the closet at about five feet to a side, which was a standard D&D unit of measure, and which I very much doubted was coincidence.

When I closed the door on the backpack, I glanced at Zona.

“Now what?” I asked.


“Confusing how?” asked Fenn. She stood beside me, close by, like she thought that I was going to vanish at any moment. I understood how she felt; we’d been apart for too long.

“When you described it …” Zona trailed off. She held out her hand, and a note appeared in it. It was of a type very familiar to me, written on a piece of yellow legal paper, with handwriting that was identical to my own. “It says, ‘no magic items, sorry,’ and then a colon, followed by a left parenthesis.” She squinted at the note. “A frowning face?”

“Yeah,” I said. “The entad has some underlying logic to what it will or won’t give us.”

“No,” said Zona. “If it had that underlying logic, it would be exposed to me. I would know and understand it, even if it took some time to integrate. This is … like speaking to someone.”

“But that function is somehow divorced from the entad itself,” said Zona. “It’s not a part of me, it’s a tendril leading somewhere else.” She shivered slightly. “The sensation is unlike anything I have ever experienced.”

“Are you going to be ready for the sword?” I asked. “Or do you want to hold off a bit?”

“I’ll have to learn more of Earth,” said Zona, seeming to ignore me. Her focus returned to me. “Name something from Earth that would exceed the boundaries of the backpack.”
“Surfboard,” said Fenn, before I had a chance.

Zona held out a hand, and a surfboard appeared leaning against it.

“That’s promising,” I said.

“I’ll need your help to prepare the room,” said Zona with a frown, as she let the surfboard clatter to the ground. “I had hoped that I would have an understanding of what Earth had to offer, but it appears that’s not the case.”

“So, Anyblade too, or not?” I asked.

“Wait,” said Fenn. She held out her hand, and a plastic box appeared in it. When I peered over, I saw that inside was sushi, covered in seaweed, sauces, and what I thought were probably fish eggs. “Ha!” she said. “This is great.”

“No more,” said Zona, with an edge of warning in her voice. “I can feel the strand of raw will when you do that. I’ll need some time with the power in order to understand it and stop it from being used. It provides a channel to the -- the other end.”

“Besides,” I said, “It’s trash that we don’t have a good way to get rid of, not until we’ve got the glove on hand to put things into storage.”

“I was planning on eating the sushi,” said Fenn. She popped the container open and began picking out pieces with her fingers, plopping them into her mouth. “I fucking love sushi,” she said with her mouth half full.

“Okay,” said Zona. “Now the Anyblade.”

The Anyblade was on my finger, as a ring, and I reshaped it into a sword, which I set just inside the closet. I did give it one last fond look before shutting the door; I was really going to have to find a new weapon, though I did have a backup sword until I could find a magical one with extra powers.

I was watching Zona carefully after I closed the door, so I caught it right away.

“She’s stopped moving,” I said.

“She wasn’t moving,” said Fenn, who was still eating her sushi.

“Incidental movements are part of the illusion,” I said. “She’s not breathing, she’s not swaying, she’s just totally static.”

Fenn peered at the image of Zona. “Huh,” she said.

“That’s probably a bad thing,” I said.

“Well, she wasn’t borked for long last time,” said Fenn.

“I think last time she was devoting her full attention to research or thinking or something,” I replied. “This time … I’m less sure. I hope she’s, uh, okay.”

“No, I am,” said Zona. She’d begun moving again as she said the word. “I was just adjusting.”

“I hope that it wasn’t too uncomfortable,” I said. I rubbed my head. “You said the sensorium is one of the harder parts of getting a new entad, and whatever the impact is, you probably have new directions to stretch in.”
Zona stared at me for a moment. “I did say that,” she finally said.

“So ... what’s up?” asked Fenn. “Are you the Anyhouse, or what?”

“Fenn,” I said. “Give her some time.”

“It’s a fair question,” said Zona. She was still staring at me. “Why were you worried about me?”

“Should I not be?” I asked. “I mean, you said that it was sometimes difficult or uncomfortable, and from what you said, it seems to have been a major source of trauma in the past. I know you’re doing it voluntarily, but sometimes we voluntarily do things that still hurt us.” I paused. “So I just wanted to make sure that you’re okay.”

Loyalty Increased: Zona lvl 1!

Quest Completed: A Room of One’s Own - She is willing to take a chance on you, so long as you do your best not to remind her of him.

“I am,” said Zona. “Thank you.” The walls shuddered around us, shaking free dust. The hallway undulated, shrinking around us and then expanding again. “One moment.”

I stared at the loyalty and quest messages, then blinked them away. There was a part of me that was disappointed to see it, not because it meant Zona was a companion, but because it meant that I was still on the rails in some way, operating within the confines of the game. Amaryllis probably would have told me that I was being stupid, and that I should take advantages when I could get them, but it wasn’t that I preferred not to have the advantage, it was just that it felt like it sullied the relationship. It was like hanging out with someone, and being their friend, and then at the end of the evening, they gave you twenty dollars for having a good time with them.

The house moved around us, creaking and groaning. The hallway shortened, and the closet door disappeared. Fenn held onto me, still with her package of sushi in one hand, and the surfboard banged up against my leg as we began moving. We saw doors sliding past us and closing in on themselves, and rooms collapsing in on themselves.

We came to a stop in front of the time chamber, with a door to our left, a door to our right, and the doors to the chamber itself.

“What the fuck was that?” asked Fenn.

“Housekeeping,” replied Zona, who came back into existence next to us. “I’m fairly certain that I can alter the chamber itself as well, but I don’t want to try with people inside it, and not while the need for it is still urgent.” She pointed to the door on the left. “That will be the operating room for you.” She pointed to the other door. “And that’s storage. I removed everything else.”

“You’re saying that this house is now three rooms?” I asked.

“Four,” said Zona, “If you include the time chamber. It’s already making things much more manageable. There’s less pressing on my mind.”

“What about the bodies?” asked Fenn.

Zona waved a hand, and the wall behind us split apart. I turned, swinging my flashlight, and saw that we were inside a large cave, that extended up above us. Beside us was a pile of decayed corpses, sitting next to a giant mound of furniture, broken pieces of the house, and general garbage.
“All the cleaning is done,” said Zona with a sigh of satisfaction. “Centuries of refuse, gone in an instant.” She laughed, and the laugh seemed to come from all three rooms. “This is what a new start feels like.” She looked down at herself, then up at me. “And yes, I do think it’s finally time for me to say goodbye to this form, and to this name, if I’m to be your house.”

She shimmered, and Tiff was gone, replaced by a slender woman who was quite a bit taller than I was. She was momentarily naked, though sexlessly so, until clothes began flowing out from her skin, covering and wrapping her in shimmering, gossamer robes of a hundred layers. Her skin changed color, flickering through different hues, until she settled on a dark brown that gradually grew lighter as she looked at her hands and adjusted it, ending up about the same color as a piece of cedar. Her hair grew and twirled around her, at first a glowing white before finally settling into a dark brown, which twisted and braided itself, becoming almost reminiscent of a rope that then coiled its length around to sit on the top of her head.

“Pretty,” said Fenn. “If you don’t mind me saying so, it suits you better than being a teenage girl from Kansas.”

“It’s unfamiliar,” said Zona, looking herself over (for our benefit, I guessed, since her eyes were only an illusion). “It won’t be as perfect as the girl was, but in time I’ll return to that level of fidelity. With less of me to manage, the acclimation should be easier. I have more room to think now.”

“And you need a new name,” I said, staring at her. To be honest, I was a little bit afraid, in much the same way that I’d been afraid of the changes Valencia had undergone. I felt like I understood the house, at least a little bit, but I wasn’t sure that I would go so far as to say that I trusted it.

“Names are important, powerful things,” said not-Zona. “I will have to think on it.”

“What do you want us to call you in the meantime, if not Zona?” asked Fenn.

“Bethel,” replied not-Zona.

*Companion Name Changed: “Zona” to “Bethel”!*

I stared at the game message, not knowing what to make of it, or why it would be important, if it was. The names were just shorthands anyway, not actually mechanically relevant so far as I had seen.

“Like Bethlehem?” asked Fenn.

“Bethlehem?” asked Zona, eyes narrowing. “I’m not familiar.”

“It’s the place where Jesus was born,” replied Fenn.

“And who is Jesus?” asked Zona.

“Oh, don’t worry,” replied Fenn. “We’ll bring you into the Bible study group.”

“What’s a Bible?” asked Zona.

“Enough of this,” I said. “Bethel it is. Beth?”

“Bethel,” said Bethel, firmly.

“Nice to meet you, Beth,” said Fenn with a smile. Blades began to rise from the flagstones, encircling Fenn and pointing in toward her. “Or Bethel,” said Fenn. “I guess either is fine by me.”
The blades vanished, and Fenn kept on smiling.

“So what’s the rule?” I asked. “You can reshape yourself, so long as you technically remain a house? Or is there a blade somewhere too?”

“The former,” replied Bethel. “The edges of the power are hard to detect; it’s versatile and permissive. Once the pregnancy is over, I think I’ll try my hand at becoming a fairy house, which should make me small enough to be carried.” She glanced at the time chamber. “Though perhaps that better wait, in case it interferes with the function of the time chamber. I’m not sure how much of the structure I’ll need to keep in order to ensure that the stored time is maintained.” She seemed vaguely annoyed. Her new face was a little more expressive than when she’d been wearing Tiff’s skin, perhaps because she didn’t have as fine a handle on conveying subtle emotional nuance yet.

“We’ll save the more extreme experimentation for later,” I said. I thought that radical changes to the makeup of the house should probably have waited until later too, but I didn’t say that.

“They’re almost finished, the chamber is spinning down,” said Bethel. (I was trying to imprint her new name on my mind, so that I wouldn’t annoy her by slipping up.)

“Quick question,” said Fenn, hooking a thumb toward the closed door. “What’s in storage?”

“Everything worth saving,” replied Bethel. “Entads that I had no interest in adding to myself, valuables taken from the bodies of adventurers, and a few centuries worth of spirits made through the Everflask.”

“There’s loot?” asked Fenn, brightening considerably. “Because I have a huge debt to pay down, and if there’s loot, I can get a start on that.”

“I wasn’t offering to share,” said Bethel with a faint smirk. “But if you find something that you think you could use, I might allow you to borrow it. Narcissus died with a considerable quantity of entads on his person, and most of those I was able to hide away after I had cleaned up his body.”

“Cursed treasures?” asked Fenn. “Count me in!”

The door to the time chamber opened up, and Grak stepped out, stretching slightly and then freezing as he realized that the room was different, and that Zona had changed shape.

“I take it things went well,” said Amaryllis from behind him. I’d thought she’d more or less reached maximum size last time, but her belly was more swollen than it had been before, now veering into grotesque territory. It was hidden beneath a large dress, but even with that, still visible. She walked like she was trying not to let it show too much.

“Human pregnancy is insane,” said Fenn, eyes wide.

“I don’t want to hear it,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. She looked at Bethel. “Change of form, I’m assuming?”

Bethel nodded. “I’ll be going by a new name as well. Bethel.”

Amaryllis nodded. “A name from legends. I definitely prefer it.”

“I don’t care what you prefer,” said Bethel (Bethel, Bethel, new name, Bethel).

“I’m not familiar with the legend,” I said. “Is it … important?”
“Not particularly, no,” said Bethel. “As the legend goes, she sheltered the first of the humans from the eldritch storms that once crossed Aerb. She was the first home for humans, and the first god, before the five we know. The story is almost certainly apocryphal.”

Almost. I’d done my fair share of reading on Aerb during my months in the chamber, and one of the things that had surprised me was how much people hedged their bets when talking about ancient history. The dwarves probably hadn’t been cursed with child birth after millennia of carving their sons from stone, but no one seemed willing to just definitively say that it was hogwash. There was enough crazy random shit in Aerb’s history that you couldn’t always say for sure that something was totally false.

“Can you change the shape of the chamber?” asked Amaryllis.

“The chamber was installed in me in 132 FE,” said Bethel. “It has little interaction with the essence of my being, though obviously they hoped otherwise when they paid the sand mage. The question isn’t whether or not I can change the shape of the chamber, it’s how it will interact with the sand magic used to power it, and the time stored within it. I am many things, but I am not a sand mage.”

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis. “I was hoping that we could all go in together for the last month.” She looked back at the chamber and sighed. “If this rearrangement is the result of the Anyblade’s powers, what was the outcome of adding the backpack?”

“Check this out.” Fenn held out a hand to the side and struck a pose. “By the power of Grayskull! I have the power!” A sword appeared in her hand and she smiled at me, a smile that slowly slipped from her face.

“Er, what’s that from?” I asked. “It sounds familiar.”

“He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, you fucking ingrate,” said Fenn with a scowl. “Are you seriously telling me that you never watched He-Man?”

“It was a couple decades before my time,” I said.

“Oh fuck off,” said Fenn. She dropped the sword to the ground, and when it failed to clang, I realized that it was just a prop. “Let the power return,” Fenn muttered.

“Does He-man summon a sword?” I asked. “I thought he was like … a Captain Marvel type thing.”

“Who the hell is Captain Marvel?” asked Fenn, frowning at me.

“He’s a superhero,” I said. “He’s a little kid who says ‘Shazam!’ and turns into a Superman type guy.”

“I have no doubt that this is fascinating for the two of you,” said Bethel. “However, the conversation is meaningless to me, except insofar as I can infer that you’re talking about Earth culture. Fenn, don’t use the backpack so frivolously again, I’m still getting used to it.”

“Fine, fine,” said Fenn. She turned to Amaryllis. “Point is, it works.”

“Good,” said Amaryllis. “We should start preparing the delivery room. I won’t go back in the chamber until it’s done, assuming that we can get everything set up in a reasonable time frame. Grak and I have worked on our plans somewhat, and assuming that everything looks good, we’ll pull you and Fenn in once I’m in the latent phase of labor, before the contractions start. That should give us all hands on deck for the crucial part, with minimal time wasted.”
“I won’t be able to participate,” said Bethel.

Amaryllis paused. “Would you want to?”

“I could be useful,” said Bethel. “I can see inside all of you. I effectively wield a scalpel sharper than any held by a surgeon, which I can use from the inside. I’ve only borne witness to nine births, all before I was the person I am today, but I might have some applicable knowledge.”

Amaryllis nodded. “I would accept that help,” she said. “We’d be trading, at most, a day of our time away during active labor, but it would also lower the time it would take to get me to the hospital in a real emergency.”

“Amaryllis anticipates fake emergencies,” said Grak.

“I anticipate that someone will say that we need to get to a hospital, and in the moment, it will seem like a good idea to everyone but me,” said Amaryllis.

“This is why we have the Council of Arches,” said Fenn. “Do you agree to abide by the Council’s recommendations?”

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “This is somewhat different from soul modification,” she said. “I will agree to the Council’s recommendations, so long as it’s a plurality of three, rather than a tie with veto, and so long as the Council looks at my delivery plan and scenario cascade first and says yes or no without the pressure of needing to decide in the moment. But that will take, at minimum, a full day, at least by my estimates.”

“And people call me difficult,” snorted Fenn.

“You are difficult,” said Amaryllis.

“Extremely so,” added Grak.

Fenn looked at me.

“I love you so much,” I said. She hit me, and I pretended that it hurt.

“Are we going to set aside a day to review my plans?” asked Amaryllis. “Grak is already in agreement, and he’s the only one that’s read it, which means that either Juniper or Fenn would have to make a case that could sway him.” She had her arms folded across her chest. “I’m not saying that under no circumstances should we go to the hospital, only that women have been giving birth in their own homes quite successfully for literally millennia --”

“With high maternal and infant mortality rate,” I said.

“-- and those women have had far less preparation, expertise, medical equipment, and magical healing.” She was speaking a bit faster than normal, but otherwise doing a good job of sounding calm and level. “I’m going to go lie down, decide whether or not you’re going to spend a day going through the manual. I don’t think it would be a bad idea for all of us to familiarize ourselves with it, but I certainly don’t think it will be necessary.”

She waddled back off into the time chamber, and sat down in the bottom bunk, using the supports for leverage.

“Well, I don’t want to,” said Fenn. “Sounds boring as all fuck, and I’m just going to end up trying to keep up as the two of you have endless discussions of risk factors and blah blah blah. Sorry, that’s
just how I envision it going."

“Me too, to be honest,” I said. “Grek, are the plans sufficiently cautious, in your opinion?”

“They are,” said Grak. “I am in partial agreement with Amaryllis though. It is hard to judge how we will feel at the time.”

“Sure,” I said. “But if something comes up that’s outside context, we’re agreed that professional medical help is paramount, right?”

“Correct,” nodded Grak.

“Well, okay then,” I said. “And you’re fine with taking point? You’re going to be in charge of directing me, if you need me for something to do with magic. I’ve practiced the circulatory bridge technique, and I think I’m pretty good at getting into the soul, but I’m really hoping that we don’t have to do something drastic like that. Worst case scenario, I can attempt to swap out my skills in accordance with one of Mary’s master plans, with Medicine in there somewhere, then sacrifice skills to boost it.”

“Yes,” nodded Grak. “That’s listed in her plan.”

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t realize.” Amaryllis and I had briefly talked about the possibility, but apparently she had formalized it.

“Only if I’m literally dying!” called Amaryllis from the bed.

“Well … fine,” I said. “If she’s thought things through, and you at least mostly agree, I guess we don’t have to do the overview, so long as you’re comfortable directing us, if we’re needed.”

Grak nodded, and Amaryllis, from the bed, sighed in relief. I walked over to her and sat down beside her, as Grak and Fenn began talking amongst themselves.

“Getting real tired of people second-guessing me,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah, I sort of got that,” I said. “You still agree that the Council of Arches gets input on changes to your soul?”

“That?” asked Amaryllis. She waved a hand. “I don’t intend to make any more.” She hesitated. “Maybe, if my soul is under the mistaken impression that I’m a real mother. And … only if she doesn’t love me back.”

“We’ll talk about it,” I said. I sat next to her in silence for a bit.

“I’m competent, you know that?” asked Amaryllis. “I know it’s not what happened, but it feels like since getting pregnant the three of you have constantly been assuming that I’m actually a moron.”

“It’s a difference in how we judge risks, that’s all,” I said. “At least, that’s all it’s been on my end. You built a fucking VCR from scratch, I’m not doubting your competence.”

“It wasn’t from scratch, it was from parts, and you know for a fact that I don’t have recording working yet.” She sighed. “But thank you.” Her hand went to her belly to rub it. “She’s not kicking.”

“Still?” I asked.

“If this is a stillbirth, I’m going to lose my fucking mind,” said Amaryllis.
“No movement at all?” I asked.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know if she’s going to come out crantek, human, or hybrid, and maybe the crantek just don’t move around as much as humans, but … you know. It’s nerve-wracking.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Are you going to be okay?”

“So long as we’re in the top ninety-five percent of scenarios, then yes, I think so,” replied Amaryllis. “I’m just ready for all of this to be over.”

“I think we all are,” I said. I patted her on the leg, then it felt awkward, and I stopped.

“I’m okay with you touching me,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah, okay, I just, um,” I said, stumbling through my words.

“A backrub would be nice,” said Amaryllis. “If you wanted to make me feel better.”

So I gave her a backrub, following her directions. From outside the open doors of the chamber, I saw Fenn look at me with a raised eyebrow, which I answered with a small shrug. It was, to my knowledge, the first real break that Amaryllis had taken while the clock was running. It was also an extremely rare example of her requesting physical contact. I kept wanting to ask whether she was keeping up with the modifications to her soul, and how that was going, but I didn’t want to sound accusatory, or like I was second-guessing her, especially since that was exactly what I was doing.

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“Okay,” said Amaryllis after a while. “Let’s get the delivery room ready, I have a wish list.”

“You’re good?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m good,” she sighed. “You’re going to have to help me up though.”

“Oh, you should know that we’re scenario one,” I said.

Amaryllis froze. “Before or after we handed things over?” she asked.

“Amy,” I said. “It took a hell of a leap of faith.”

Amaryllis relaxed and let out a breath. “Good,” she said. “Then things are looking up.”

For someone who still carried a candle for our narrative, Amaryllis hadn’t chosen her words very carefully.

It took us about two hours to get the delivery room ready for Amaryllis. Most of the equipment that could be pulled from the backpack already had been, which included linens, plastic gloves, bags of saline, an enormous variety of medicines labeled in Amaryllis’ careful hand, a small fridge stocked with snacks and more medicines that needed to be kept cool, and basically everything else that Amaryllis could think of. The biggest thing that Amaryllis wanted was a comfortable bed that reclined, which we were able to pull from Earth with a little bit of work as we tried out various different ones and put the rejects into the glove.

“I think this is good,” said Amaryllis, looking around the room at everything. She turned to Grak.

“Ready?”

Grak nodded.
“When I see you next, I’ll be in labor,” Amaryllis said to Fenn and I. “Be prepared.”

“We will be,” I said. “We are.”

“Prepared for what?” asked Fenn, frowning. “I thought we were just hanging out here.”

“You ass,” replied Amaryllis with a smile.

I swallowed back a word of caution, which I didn’t think would be taken the right way, and watched Amaryllis wave goodbye as they closed the doors to the time chamber.

“Anxiety really is the appropriate reaction,” I said as I let out a breath. “We’ve got forty-five minutes, at the most, and then … blegh, I’m not looking forward to this.”

“It seems like it was only four days ago that our little princess got pregnant,” said Fenn with a wistful sigh.

“It’s insane to think that the world stood still while we were doing this,” I said. “Or at least, mostly so. I’m a bit worried about coming back to Valencia. It’s going to take time to reacclimate and remember where we left things off.”

“Your much-vaunted fifth member?” asked Bethel.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess you’re going to see her at some point, and with a warder’s sight you’d find out then, but … she’s non-anima.”

Bethel raised an eyebrow. “You mean to tell me that you consort with devils?”

“Oh,” I said. “No. You know what, I’m going to have to work on my pitch a little bit, because I wasn’t explaining it right. She was a non-anima, and got transformed into sort of the opposite of that. Not an empty vessel for devils and demons, but, um, more a killer of them.”

“Like Uther?” asked Bethel.

“Not really, no,” I said. “It’s hard to explain. She eats them from a distance, in sort of the opposite way that they possessed her from a distance.” I hesitated. “I’m assuming that a non-anima won’t be a problem for you?”

“Why should it?” asked Bethel.

“Just curious,” I said. “It’s one of the things that I’ve been worried about, when we bring other people in.”

Bethel opened her mouth, then turned to the time chamber. “They’re coming out,” she said with a frown.

“That was fast,” I replied. A wave of anxiety washed over me. “Way, way too fast.”

It took some time for the chamber to spin back down, and we spent it waiting anxiously. As near as I could tell, they’d chosen to duck out of the chamber almost immediately after they’d gone in, which didn’t bode well at all. Fenn tried to crack jokes, but they fell on deaf ears; I was worried.

When the doors finally opened back up, Amaryllis was standing there, leaning on Grak and holding her belly.

“Water broke, four weeks early,” she said. “I’m not in labor. We’re going to the hospital.”
I’ll admit to a bit of panic.

“How serious is this?” I asked.

“Serious enough for the hospital,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was steely calm. “Labor needs to be induced, because it’s been twenty-four hours without it happening on its own, and the baby is going to be preterm, which means she’s likely going to need special care. On Earth, it would be about one in fifty chance of infant mortality, but I think higher on Aerb. In my estimation, this is beyond our capabilities. We’ll be going to the Penndraig Memorial Hospital in Cranberry Bay to get me checked in as quickly as possible.”

“Fuck,” said Fenn. Her eyes were wide.

“I planned for this,” said Amaryllis. “I’m not in any pain. But the amniotic sac is ruptured, none of the methods I’ve tried for inducing labor worked, and we need to go, now.”

“I’m coming with,” said Bethel. As she spoke, the walls began folding away, showing the cavern she’d carved out around us.

“The time chamber,” Amaryllis said. “We may need it to age Solace up.”

“I wasn’t negotiating,” said Bethel. “I suppose we’re going to see what happens when I collapse it down.” Before there could be any further discussion or argument, the back of the time chamber peeled away and the walls began coming down. All around us, the house, which had been reduced to a mere four rooms, was folding in on itself, vanishing until all that was left was a thick wooden staff that Bethel held in one hand. It was long and gnarled, and sitting at the top were tiny windows, with a little door, barely visible.

“No,” groaned Amaryllis. She shook her head. “Please tell me that our years are still there.”

“They are, so far as I can see,” said Bethel. “I should be able to reconstruct it, with the sand magic intact.”

“If not, we can undertake a quest,” I said. I wasn’t sure the lack of quest pop-up was good or bad.

“Our last quest took us nine fucking months,” said Amaryllis.

“Eight, technically,” muttered Fenn.

“We need to get moving,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll deal with the fallout later.” She pulled the teleportation key from a pocket in her dress, and held it out. “Everyone together, I’m very serious that we need to be going.”

I came in close and held onto her hand, then reached out with the other to gingerly touch the dollhouse staff, which was all that was left of the place we’d called Kuum Doona. Around us was the cavern that had held the house during our time in it, the pile of refuse she’d cleared out, a collection of cursed magic items that we were obviously going to go back for later, and everything that had been left in the time chamber when Bethel had removed it. The delivery room we’d spent all that time on was now just a collection of equipment.

I felt a flash of blinding pain at the transition, and as I slowly recovered, I was startled to realize how
dark it was. I should have realized though; we’d hijacked the *Down and Out* just after nightfall, and it was still night, or maybe, technically, early morning.

We had a car in the safehouse garage, which we’d paid for in cash and off the books. None of us had a license that was valid in Cranberry Bay, so that was something of a necessity. I drove, while Amaryllis sat beside me holding her stomach, with Grak and Fenn in the back. Bethel had dropped the illusion entirely, and was present only as a staff, listening in and speaking through her powers from time to time. As I drove, I was painfully aware of the lax safety standards that were endemic to Aerb, even in a relatively modern, civilized place like Cranberry Bay. There were no airbags, no crumple zones, and the glass would cut us to ribbons given the first opportunity. I almost mentioned something about Ralph Nader to the others, but kept my mouth shut and my attention on the road instead. The roads were also more narrow than I was used to, and the car only passingly familiar, and all that aside, it had been a few months since I’d driven a car. I burned SPD as I drove, trying to heighten my reflexes, even though there was practically no one on the road.

In the movies, women were always sweating and yelling on the trip to the hospital, screaming and groaning. I found it unsettling that Amaryllis was staring calmly ahead, not showing any particular reaction to the fact that her water broke. Then again, she also wasn’t in labor, so maybe it didn’t feel like anything much, which was unsettling in its own right.

Penndraig Memorial Hospital was far wider than it was tall, a curved ribbon of building that stretched for three city blocks, with roads cutting tunnels through the building at ground level. We followed the directions that Amaryllis had written out days (months) earlier, and arrived at the emergency entrance not too much longer after we’d left the safehouse. Fenn took the car to find parking, and Grak rode with her, carrying the staff and Ropey; we wanted to present as being as normal as possible, and having the four of us together wouldn’t have been good for that. I wished that I’d had a chance to remove my armor, or maybe not even worn it at all, but I was also worried that I would need it before all was said and done. Amaryllis slipped a ring on my finger, as well as one on her own, just before we went in. Again, the hope was that we’d seem normal.

The night nurse gave my armor a sideways glance but focused her attention on Amaryllis.

“Preterm premature rupture of membranes,” said Amaryllis. “The initial rupture happened twenty-four hours ago, and I’m at thirty-six weeks.”

The night nurse nodded. “No contractions?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Minimal effacement, no dilation, as observed via speculum.” I tried to keep my face blank at that. I wondered whether she had done the inspection herself, or whether she’d gotten Grak to do it. I did my best not to picture either.

“Okay,” said the nurse. “I’ll get your intake ready, we’ll move you to the maternity ward shortly. Do you have a doctor here?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “We’re from out of town. We didn’t expect the baby to be so early.” She touched her belly and leaned on me for support, which I thought was mostly to sell it.

We were given a clipboard and a form to fill out, while we waited in the lobby, which had a few people and dozens of empty seats. Amaryllis began filling the form out, then swayed slightly in her seat and closed her eyes.

“Here,” I said, taking it from her. “I can do this.”

“Did you memorize the details of my fake identity?” asked Amaryllis, with her eyes still closed.
“No,” I replied. “Not all of them.”

She took the clipboard back and began filling it out in a hurry, ticking off boxes without seeming to look all that closely at what she was doing. When she finished, she leaned back in the chair and pressed her head against the wall. “This is probably in the bottom five percent, by the way,” she said. *Critical failure, in other words.* “Normally labor starts after the water breaks, and preterm labor alone we might have been able to handle, but without labor that’s too many complications at once. Grak isn’t a doctor, and neither am I.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m glad we didn’t have to drag you here kicking and screaming.”

“Joon, you might be called on to do the full-body swap for her,” said Amaryllis. “And it’s possible you’ll have to do that for me too. Be prepared, and don’t let anyone push you out of the room when we’re getting close. It’s not traditional for fathers to be in there, but you have resources that the hospital won’t. Knowledge, too. And the baby is going to come out with green skin, which is going to raise some questions I might be too exhausted to answer. It might be better to be forthright about that from the start.”

I swallowed. “Why a full-body swap for you?” I asked.

“When you get a chance, look at my soul,” said Amaryllis. “My body’s been going through some changes, you might have noticed, and the soul has only been halfway keeping up. You have the backup for my body, you might have to use it.”

“Okay,” I said. I’d have to sacrifice a skill in order to get Essentialism up, but I was well-prepared to do that. I reached for her hand. “Everything is going to be alright.”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis, but she was probably thinking that I had no way of knowing that. That was certainly what I was thinking. She reached over and slipped her hand into mine, squeezing it tight. “I might need you to protect me, and keep me safe.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course.”

Healing was complicated. Magical healing was a mainstay of fantasy, and of tabletop games in particular, but there were always questions you could raise. If you cast ‘cure light wounds’ on yourself every morning, did you look younger after thirty years than someone who hadn’t done that? Did magical healing fix scars? Did it fix congenital abnormalities? How did it decide what was a defect that needed fixing and what was just a peculiarity? Would magical healing fix a bone that had been set incorrectly and healed suboptimally? If building muscle was mostly a matter of repairing micro-tears in muscles, did magical healing make that go a lot faster, or prevent it entirely? Not that I would have ever been enough of a weirdo to include it in a game, but would magical healing repair a ruptured hymen?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I’d played with healing a lot in my time as a DM. There was a villain who ‘healed’ peoples’ mouths closed, the magical healing in Long Stairs would move you closer to an elfin appearance and eventual psychosis, and in Scattered Ashes, healing took your memories of the injury too.

On Aerb, there were some pitfalls to magical healing, many of which I’d already had first-hand experience with. Get it? First hand? Because my hand was fucked up for a while? Anyway, there were three primary problems with fairies and PHY-boosting bone magic:

1. Magic generally didn’t produce more magic, with a few exceptions. If you cut off a finger, it
was really hard to find a magic that would regrow those bones (though it was relatively easy to heal a broken bone back together). If you lost blood, you needed a donor, or you needed to replenish it naturally on your own. Skin was a little more permissive than bone or blood, but it was apparently hard to find a magic that would help you recover from flaying. This was because bone, blood, and skin weren’t just physical things, they had latent magic.

2. Magic had some trouble with diseases, infections, poisons, and other chemical, viral, or bacterial problems. A blood magus could burn out a lot of them, if they were caught early, but there were limits on how much force they could apply to the problem. There were a few methods that could deal with those problems to greater or lesser extents, but generally speaking, you were in a bad way if things had progressed too far. (Unicorn blood wasn't shelf-stable, and had gone bad, but we still had unicorn horn to get around most of these issues, so long as we had the time to crush and powder it, something that couldn't be done ahead of time.)

3. Magic had a lot of trouble if your soul had problems. Scars persisted through healing when the wounds were bad enough or persisted long enough to feed back into the soul’s conception of the body. On Aerb, ‘phantom limb’ syndrome came from a mismatch of soul and body, but tended to fade with time, as the soul gradually caught up to the reality. Congenital defects tended to persist through healing. So did direct attacks on the soul’s conception of what the body should be. And, if you snipped the bi-directional connection between bones and soul, you would run into some problems in fairly short order, especially if you repeatedly made liberal use of healing magic.

We’d had lots of experience with these limits in one way or another. Fenn had almost died because Solace hadn’t been able to conjure up the power from the locus necessary to refill her with blood. Amaryllis had almost died from rat rot because that had been left to linger for almost two weeks, though that wasn’t entirely our fault, and we hadn’t known how bad it would eventually get. We’d also had more than enough experience with both scars and burnt-through bones. There were ways around the limitations of ‘standard’ healing, some more esoteric than others, but it was the edges where things got worrisome.

The big worry was with that third point. If Solace’s lungs hadn’t developed properly or fully, the magics we had available weren’t likely to help her. We’d asked Bethel’s opinion back at the safehouse, but she wasn’t able to tell one way or another, though she was able to confirm that the baby was, so far as she could tell, either full or half crantek with a steady heartbeat. Amaryllis had looked into Solace’s soul, but we didn’t have the necessary medical expertise to say one way or another, nor did we have the expertise to do any (wildly experimental) modifications to her fetal soul, if we had even been able to diagnose the problem.

“I’m sorry I have to ask this,” said the doctor, “But what species is the baby?”

We were in the maternity ward, with thin fabric separating us from the rest of the place. When Grak got in, I was going to have him put up a ward against sound; we could hear a woman screaming from down the hall, periodic bursts of anguish that were separated by minutes of low moans. It was edging into morning, and I hoped that she would be finished before too long, or at least taken into her own private room.

A nurse had examined Amaryllis, asked questions, and redone the examination. All of their equipment seemed hopelessly outdated to me, but part of that was because Aerb didn’t have access to proper plastics. It made me think back to visiting Arthur in the hospital, and all of the plastic tubes and crinkling, throwaway packaging on all the medical supplies on the wall. On Aerb, they used rubber where they could, and there was more made of wood or metal than on Earth. It didn’t feel like a safe, sterile, well-lit environment. Not that it had done Arthur a whole lot of good.
“I don’t know the species,” said Amaryllis. I saw the muscles of her jaw go tight after she finished speaking.

“I see,” said the doctor with a nod, as though he heard that sort of reply fairly often. He was abnormally tall, and though I had a decent handle on the different species of Aerb, I thought he was probably a hybrid that I didn’t recognize. His teeth were a burgundy red, as was the skin around his mouth, which I found particularly hideous, but other than that, he was a pretty normal-looking guy, with a white coat and a stethoscope around his neck, and thinning black hair. He’d given his name as Nonnatus, but I wasn’t sure whether that was his first name or his last. I was also pretty sure that it meant something in Latin, but not sure what. (Latin didn’t exist on Aerb; Anglish had a different precursor language instead that gave rise to some of the same structures and etymologies.) “I don’t mean to press the point, but would it be possible for you to narrow it down? It’s important so we can be sure we don’t give you any medications that might negatively impact the baby.”

“Taxonomic contraindications are rare,” said Amaryllis, frowning somewhat. She was about to launch into something but stopped herself. “She’s either crantek or human, I think, but there’s a possibility that she’s something else. And … she might not be hybridized.”

Nonnatus stared at Amaryllis for a long moment. “I see,” he repeated.

“It’s been an interesting pregnancy,” I said. I felt like Fenn, trying to add in some levity and seeing it fall flat.

“You said it was important to know,” said Amaryllis. “I’m telling you that there are things I don’t know.” I could see her chew the inside of her cheek for a bit. “The pregnancy is a result of complex and highly advanced magics that we didn’t and don’t understand.”

The doctor looked at Amaryllis, then at me, then down at Amaryllis’ belly.

“We’re covered by doctor-patient confidentiality,” said Amaryllis. “It may be important for you to know, I’m being forthright, do what you need to do in order to save my baby’s life, even if it’s at the expense of my own.” That set my heart racing. I was almost certain that it wouldn’t come to that, but feared that it might.

The doctor frowned slightly, then nodded. “We’re going to try a few methods of inducing labor, and if they don’t work, we’ll proceed from there. Okay?”

Amaryllis nodded, and not much later, the doctor left. Another scream came from down the ward.

“I don’t know if it was smart to tell him that much,” said Amaryllis. Her hands rested on her belly.

“Is that really what you’re worried about right now?” I asked.

“I’m worried about a lot of things,” said Amaryllis. “Primarily, I’m worried about the baby, and going into labor as soon as possible. There are two primary approaches here, stalling out and rushing ahead, both with their own risks, and we don’t have the necessary medical expertise to do either on our own. I’ve already tried as much as I dare to. But I also know a lot more about Earth’s procedures than Aerb’s, and I worry that Aerb’s approaches are worse.”

“Well, you’re taking this well,” I said.

“I’m really, really not,” said Amaryllis. She rubbed her belly. “The thought of nine months -- eight months in that chamber coming to nothing, of my baby dying after everything we’ve been through …” She shook her head and let out a seething sigh. “I honestly think that I should stop thinking about it, because it makes me so fucking angry and sad to imagine it. Maybe I’d be fine with it if I thought
that it was just random chance, but it’s not, is it? It’s the fucking Dungeon Master and his fucking narrative.”

“Yeah,” I said. Probably, maybe. Certainly within his power to have stopped it. But it’s also possible that somewhere deep within the game mechanics is a chart you roll on to determine the outcomes of a pregnancy, or that we’re in a subgame, or that this was a natural complication of a complex and arcane ritual that I only sort of understood while I was helping to cast it. Or just chance.

My anger had faded a bit, over two months in the chamber, partly because I’d written out some of my feelings in letters to Fenn, and partly because we’d gone that long without anything really bad happening. All the shit that I’d gone through on Aerb was some distance behind me, and no, that didn’t logically excuse the Dungeon Master from being a grossly negligent god … but on a purely emotional level, it took some of the sting from it.

“I’m really hoping that this isn’t the most dramatic birth of all time,” said Amaryllis. “But I knew that was a possibility when I agreed to it. I had foolishly hoped that pushing a child out of me would be interesting enough on its own.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. She’d been the one to take on the burden, but while Fenn had privately expressed feeling somewhat less sympathetic because of that, it wasn’t the case for me. I didn’t know that I’d have chosen to become pregnant in Amaryllis’ shoes, not to save Solace’s life, nor that of the locus. Maybe I would have, but I would have had a lot of selfish thoughts first. In my eyes, Amaryllis was suffering by virtue of being a better person than I was. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Fight off the ninjas when they show up,” said Amaryllis with a mirthless laugh.

“I’m serious,” I said. (There weren’t any ninjas on Aerb, or if there were, they were really good at staying hidden.)

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “Then I’d like you to burn some bones. Wisdom is the ability to withstand mental stress, right?”

“Huh,” I said. “Yeah.” I came forward and laid a hand on her shoulder, tentatively letting my fingers touch her skin, then began burning through the bones of my hand. I was thankful that I had a renewable source of bone magic, and that it was discreet.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis as the magic started its work. “I should have had you do this while we were in the chamber.”

“Takes some focus,” I said. It was hard to use on myself, since it took enough mental effort and split focus that it was difficult (though not impossible) to use it to accomplish anything.

“Ow,” said Amaryllis, leaning forward slightly and wincing.

“Are you okay?” I asked, stopping the magic. I wasn’t sure how someone could be hurt by having Wisdom channeled into them, but --

“She kicked,” said Amaryllis. She smiled slightly. “That’s the first time.” She winced again. “Ow. Not really very pleasant though.”

“Good sign,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Amaryllis. “I wish Grak would get here.”

It wasn’t too long afterward that Fenn and Grak showed up; the screaming from down the ward had,
mercifully, stopped.

“Where are all the doctors?” asked Fenn when she came in. “Also, why don’t you have a private room? What’s the point in having millions of obols if you can’t buy a doctor?”

“They don’t have private rooms for birth, not unless it’s far enough along,” said Amaryllis. “Labor can take hours, most of it not all that exciting. The doctor came and went. We’re waiting, though I don’t know for what.”

I looked Grak over. I hadn’t noticed it before, but he was in Earth clothes, rather than his normal, more traditionally dwarvish outfit. He still had his braids dyed the color of lead, but he was wearing a buttoned-down shirt and jeans. I had no idea how I had missed it, but I must have been just that focused on Amaryllis.

“I am here for you,” said Grak. He reached forward and Amaryllis took his good hand, squeezing it lightly.

“Probably not much room for your expertise,” said Amaryllis. “I know you put in a lot of time on the training and education, but this is too far into the danger zone.”

“I am still here for you,” said Grak.

“I am too,” said Fenn. “But I long ago consigned myself to not being much help.”

The doctor returned, parting the curtain and giving us a bit of time to register his presence before he came in. He glanced at Fenn and Grak, then down at Grak’s prosthetic, then over at me and Amaryllis.

“I’d like a bit of privacy with the patient,” said the doctor.

“I’m the midwife,” said Grak.

The doctor looks down at Grak’s prosthetic again and frowned slightly. “I see,” he said. He had a great deadpan, though that wasn’t really something that I thought you wanted in a doctor. He looked at Fenn, hesitating.

“Just a friend,” said Fenn with a smile. “But I was there when the baby was conceived, and I’m not going to duck out until labor starts.”

“Very well,” said the doctor. He turned to Amaryllis and cleared his throat. “It’s been twenty-six hours since your water broke, and you show almost no signs of going into labor. Unfortunately, the baby will be preterm, at least by your accounting. We have two options at this point. Our first option is to give you as much time as possible, in the hopes that any remaining development can take place. This comes with some risks, notably infection, which a blood mage should be able to help you fight off if we catch it. However, there are some risks to the infant as well, since it too will be exposed to infection risk, and that’s much, much harder to treat.”

“And the second option is inducing labor,” said Amaryllis.

“Yes,” nodded the doctor. “Depending on how premature the infant actually is, there will be some risks to it, especially if it’s underdeveloped. In the worst case, we’ll use the Nufer method, but that’s not preferred. Induction of labor is my recommendation.” (The Nufer method was what they called a Caesarean section, because Aerb didn’t have a Caesar.)

“Okay, yes,” said Amaryllis. “Do it.”
“Good,” said the doctor, seeming pleased. “Now, there are a number of natural methods --”

“Assume I already tried them all,” said Amaryllis.

The doctor stared at her for a moment, then nodded. “Have you self-medicated?”

Amaryllis hesitated. “Yes,” she said. “But I don’t know the name it would go by in this hospital.”

Again there was a twitch of her jaw muscles. “I took a prostaglandin suppository sixteen hours ago, the equivalent to roughly one fortieth of a grain. So far it’s shown no effect.”

The doctor stared at her, pursing his burgundy lips. “I see,” he said. “And have you tried manual dilation on yourself?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “With the infection risk, I didn’t think it prudent.”

The doctor nodded. “I find myself in agreement,” he said. “I’ll be back shortly with a nurse, and we can perform the procedure. I should warn you that it can be quite uncomfortable.” He looked at the rest of us. “Your husband can stay, the rest will have to leave.”

“I am her midwife,” Grak repeated, folding his arms across his chest, which really just made his prosthetic more visible.

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis. “It should be simple enough, and they have considerably more practical training.”

That put a sour look on Grak’s face, but he nodded and left, with Fenn following close behind him. The doctor left too, presumably to get a nurse to assist him, along with the necessary equipment.

“How’s married life?” I asked.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m not really sure that deception was necessary.”

“You want to look normal,” said Fenn with a shrug. “Grak and I aren’t normal, better for us to stay back, I get it. Mary was pretty keyed up on the idea of us not fucking things up, which I get. I should probably make myself scarce, actually, at least for the time being.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Didn’t mean to sound put out,” said Fenn. “Human births are grotesque. I really don’t want to see her split open. Better to just have it all happen where it’s out of my sight.”

“I can hear you,” said Amaryllis from behind the sheet.

“I love you, Mary,” called Fenn. She smiled at me. “I knew she could hear,” She stepped close to me and gave me a very chaste peck on the cheek. “I’m going to catch some sleep on a couch somewhere, Grak thinks this will probably take a while before it goes anywhere interesting.”

“ Didn’t you just wake up?” I asked.
“Eh, I can always go for a nap,” said Fenn.

The doctor and nurse came, and I waited outside the sheet of cloth. In retrospect, maybe I should have stayed in there, if not for my own sake, then because listening to the whole thing without being able to see was nerve-wracking, especially hearing little sounds of pain or discomfort from Amaryllis. Some time passed as this went on. I took a few minutes to dip into my soul and replenish my bones, in case I wouldn’t have time to do it later. I wondered idly to myself whether I should go in and try to burn bones for Wisdom again, to help her out with, at the least, the mental side of things. I touched the wedding ring I was wearing and thought about what it would feel like to be doing this for real. Fenn had seemed to indicate that pregnancy for an elf was, comparatively, easy street, and not too much harder for a half-elf. Not that it would be her, necessarily, but that was where my mind was at.

A little boy in a suit came up to me, and it took me a bit to notice that he wasn’t a little boy at all, but a gnome. He was three feet tall, clean-shaven, except for his enormous mutton-chops. I had seen a few gnomes and hobbits on Aerb, but only in passing. As a gnome, his head, hands, and feet were disproportionately large, making him look older, rather than childlike. He didn’t have any wrinkles though, and his hair was black as night. I wasn’t about to venture a guess as to his age, but he seemed on the young side, and not because of the height.

“Can I ask you some questions?” he asked. His voice was high, but not very childish; he enunciated well.

“Uh,” I said. “My wife is having some difficulties, I don’t really have the time, sorry.”

The gnome nodded, then reached into his suit. He pulled out a badge that must have had some kind of magic on it, because the sight of it hit me like a brick and caused my eyes to lock focus on it.

“My name is Figaro Finch,” he said. “I’m an agent of the Uniquities Division of Imperial Affairs.”

He put the badge away, and my mind momentarily went to mush before springing back. “I’d like to talk.”

“If this is about that joke my wife made, she’s got a very offbeat sense of humor,” I said. Jesus Christ with half Amaryllis’ ability to lie, that’s the best I could come up with? “She’s a little bit neurotic, especially with the baby on the way, and I don’t want to get into our personal history, but …” I trailed off. He was completely stonefaced. I’d been about to tell him that she had cheated on me with a crantek man, but I wasn’t sure that I would share that with a stranger, if it were really what had happened. I also had no real idea who he was or why the hells he was here. One of the classic interrogation techniques was to stay silent and let the subject talk themselves into a corner. I’d done that more than once as a DM. “Why don’t you tell me what this is about.”

“There have been a series of incidents,” replied Finch. “I was hoping that you could shed some light on them.”

“Oh?” I asked. Shit.

“Does the name Larkspur Prentiss ring a bell?” asked Finch.

Shit shit. “He was Anglecynn’s Foreign Security Director,” I said. “We’re from there, or were, a long time ago. I seem to remember reading something about him in the papers, but I can’t remember what.”

“How about the name Esuen Tsa?” asked Finch.
“That one is less familiar,” I replied. I looked back to the curtain. “Look, my wife is having complications with her pregnancy, so you can either explain what’s going on, or leave me alone until a better time. I can give you the address of the place we’re staying in Cranberry Bay, hopefully in a few days we’ll be back home with our baby, and I can talk then.”

“Just one last name,” said Finch. His large eyes were watching me closely. “Amaryllis Penndraig.”

“Princess of Anglecynn,” I said, nodding and trying not to show a single hint of nerves or my racing heart. “But I don’t have any idea where you’re going with this.”

Finch pointed at the curtain behind me. “In there, is that Amaryllis Penndraig?”

“My wife?” I asked. I gave a little incredulous laugh, and was surprised that it sounded more or less convincing. “I could only dream of being married to Amaryllis Penndraig. Is that what this is about? That my wife looks a bit like her? Because other than the red hair,” which she hadn’t had a chance to dye, “I really don’t see it.”

“I’ll need to see her,” said Finch.

“Absolutely not,” said Nonnatus, who came out from behind the curtain to join me. “My patient is in considerable distress, and could hear enough of the conversation that she was growing worried. Whatever business the Empire has here, it can wait a few days. She will only be moved from this hospital under extreme circumstances, and then only with my express consent.”

I felt a sudden surge of affection for the doctor.

He turned to me. “We’ll be moving her to a private room, given the complications. I can speak with you about it privately later, but she’s requested you.” He looked at Finch. “I’m familiar with the authority you claim, but unless I have express written instruction from the hospital director, you’re not going to so much as see my patient until after I’ve delivered her child.”

Finch frowned slightly and gave a curt nod before stepping away. I held in a sigh of relief; whatever he wanted with us (probably an arrest), he didn’t have enough evidence or capital to push past a doctor and cause an incident. That made me pretty hopeful. I ducked in to see Amaryllis.

“Hey,” I said. She was laying back in the bed, with her feet slightly propped up.

“Hey,” she replied. She tried nodding, but it was more a loll of her head. “Labor’s started, so that’s good news.”

“Good,” I said.

“Might have been the prostaglandin, which would be ironic,” said Amaryllis. “How are things out there?”

“I met a guy who thinks you’re a princess of Anglecynn,” I said. “He had some other questions, but they didn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

“I heard some of it,” said Amaryllis. “Sorry, my focus was elsewhere.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I’m sure it’s a simple misunderstanding, you focus on the baby, I’ll deal with clearing up any misunderstanding.”

“I heard the word ‘Uniquities’,” said Amaryllis. “Not my favorite people.”
“You have experience?” I asked. “I never knew.” The name was familiar, from some long ago briefing, but nothing much that stuck.

“Remind me to tell you about it sometime,” said Amaryllis. “Not now.” She winced slightly and hunched forward a bit, then laid back down. “That was a contraction,” she said with a faint smile. “A weak one, but it was there. I almost feel like we could have handled this at home.”

“If she’s early, there might be problems,” I said. “I’m glad we came.”

“Can I tell you something?” asked Amaryllis.

“Sure,” I said.

“I’m kind of glad there was a mix-up with Uniquities,” she said. “It means that there’s something else interesting going on.”

“Yeah,” I said.

She was talking about the narrative, not about actual outcomes; Finch showing up meant that we had other problems to worry about. I had, for the most part, abandoned any belief in the narrative, partly because of what I’d talked about with the Dungeon Master, and partly because I felt like that was no way to live my life. But even if I believed the narrative was in full effect here, I wasn’t sure that I would have agreed that meant labor would go well. If I had been writing it … well, it was hard in tabletop games, really hard, but parallel plotlines were a thing, and you could set up one to succeed and the other to fail.

If I believed, wholeheartedly, that the Dungeon Master was invested in narrative, I might have tried to tank things with Finch in some subtle way, letting myself get caught up in the anxiety the birth was provoking in me, or tapping into a well of anger. Failing with Finch ought to mean that the birth would succeed -- at least, that’s how I thought about narrative, a balance of failure and success to make the success bittersweet.

I wasn’t going to do that though. If I was going to reject narrative, I was going to do it with all my heart. I kept thinking that Arthur must not have, that he’d let himself get wrapped up in it. If he made his choices based on what he thought the story wanted, it would explain so much about his failures over the years; they would make sense as sacrifice to the greater good, maybe.

“I should go find him,” I said. “I should explain things.”

“You already explained it was all a mistake,” said Amaryllis.

“Yes,” I said. “But … he had more to say, dots he was trying to connect, not for my sake, but for his own.”

Amaryllis reached forward and slipped her hand into mine. “I trust you,” she said. She squeezed my hand hard -- she had incredible grip strength from all that rock climbing. “If you miss the birth of our child, you had better have a very good reason.”

“I -- okay,” I said. I wanted to protest that it wasn’t our child, but it kind of was.

I stayed with her, holding her hand through the contractions, until we moved to a private room. I did get an answer to why that screaming woman was in the ward with us; her labor had gone a lot faster than expected, and there wasn’t any time to move her. The private room was, in some ways, worrying; they were moving us because they might need a lot of space, or because things might get dicey in a hurry. I was mildly surprised that we didn’t have a nurse in with us, but Amaryllis
explained that was more or less how it was on Earth too, at least until the contractions started coming closer together.

It wasn’t until we were alone in that room that Fenn slipped in. “Hey,” she said to both of us. “Going well?”

“Progressing,” said Amaryllis. She was a touch pale, but when I’d asked the nurse, she’d said that was normal.

“Good, good,” said Fenn. “Hey, who’s that fucking guy out there?”

“Gnome in a suit?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Fenn. “He’s been stalking the halls and twigging my luck sense. I keep avoiding him. I stuffed Grak in a closet, because it’s hard to maneuver with two people.”

“But you didn’t literally stuff him in a closet, right?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Fenn. She unslung the house-staff from her back and rested it against one wall. Ropey had been providing the strap, and was wrapped around the staff with elaborate knotwork that struck me as a little bit too intimate. I was used to his knots being economical.

Bethel appeared, standing next to the staff. Her chosen form seemed enormous in the hospital room, even though it had high ceilings. I noted that her hand rested on Ropey, rather than on the staff.

“Bring me closer,” she said.

Fenn rolled her eyes, but complied all the same, lifting the staff up and letting the head of it hover over Amaryllis’ belly.

“Progress,” said Bethel with a nod. “She is more animated than last night. You have moved closer to the birth.”

“Her?” asked Amaryllis.

“Her,” said Bethel, nodding slightly. “You had some doubt about that?”

Amaryllis nodded slightly. “I didn’t think to ask, earlier. It’s not important, really, but if we’d had an ultrasound or MRI we would ha-ahh,” the word was cut off with a gasp as another contraction came. We stayed silent until it had passed.

“Time?” she asked, breathing a bit hard.

“Ten minutes apart,” I said.

“What is an emereye?” asked Bethel with a frown.

“Equipment from Earth, too complicated for us to grab,” said Amaryllis. “Magnetic resonance imaging. It’s a way to see inside of people.”

“I can see inside you,” said Bethel. Fenn was still holding the staff over Amaryllis’ belly, resting it on the rail of the bed, while Bethel stood to one side. “My range is diminished with the material part of me so small, but there is less for me to think about when I’m this size. Less calling on my attention.” She held out a hand above Amaryllis stomach, palm up, and an image appeared there.

It was a fetus, curled up in a ball with an umbilical cord coming out of it, and around it, the amniotic
sac, rendered nearly transparent for us. As I watched, it -- she, Solace -- moved slightly. I looked over at Amaryllis, who was staring at the image with wide eyes.

“You can do real-time false-color imaging of a person’s interior,” said Amaryllis. And here I was ready to mistake that look for a mother seeing her baby for the first time.

It seemed like actual, proper magic to me. Sure, rationally I knew that it was just a combination of abilities that I’d already more or less known Bethel had, but it was still really impressive, and not just in the way that it was overpowered, but also because there was an unexpected majesty to it. Bethel was a showman (showwoman? showhouse?), I’d already figured that out, but that didn’t make it any less impressive.

The doctor, Nonnatus, came into our room and stared at the scene in front of him. Fenn slowly pulled the head of the staff away from Mary’s stomach, but apparently Bethel still had some range, because she stayed where she was, holding the illusion of Solace. The look on Bethel’s face communicated something to the effect of, ‘yes, what do you want?’.

“How is it done?” asked Nonnatus, stepping forward and looking at the fetus.

“Entad,” said Amaryllis.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Fenn covering her mouth with her hand, hiding a smile.

“I see,” said the doctor, frowning slightly. “I could have saved dozens if not hundreds of lives if I could see like this. If it could be used by the entire hospital --”

“It cannot,” said Bethel.

Nonnatus turned to me. “Clive, the man from earlier has managed to sway the head of hospital. You can wait until after I’ve checked up on your wife, if you’d like, but the man from Uniquities has demanded a meeting with you, and while I’m in a position to shield your wife, I was not able to shield you. You are expected in room 203b.”

“Shit,” I said. I looked at Amaryllis.

“Go,” she said. “I’ll be fine. But come back soon.”

I nodded at that, hoping that I would be able to.

“Need company?” asked Fenn.

“Do you think it goes better if you’re with me?” I asked.

“No,” said Fenn. “Not even a slim chance it goes better.”

“I’ll just go convince him that this is all a big misunderstanding,” I said. “Easy.”

I sat across from Figaro Finch in a small meeting room. He had a serious expression on his face, a notebook and pen in front of him, a folder to one side (whose contents I was very eager to see), and to my surprise, a thing that looked like a record player, which I was fairly certain was going to be recording our conversation onto wax. He sat in a booster seat, though they had a different name on Aerb that I didn’t quite remember.

“So,” he said. “Name?”
“Clive Horsewhistler,” I said. I wanted to ask how long this was going to take, but I didn’t want to be a hostile interview subject, not right off the bat, and not if Finch had connected the dots.

“And is horse whistling your occupation?” asked Finch.

“No,” I said. “I’m between jobs at the moment.”

“And where are you from, Clive Horsewhistler?” asked Finch.

“Anglecynn,” I said. “Specifically, a small town called Consort.” I’d picked it from a map; it was close to the place this body had come from, as seen on the teleportation key.

We had a problem. I had papers for Clive Horsewhistler, which I’d used to get on the train, but Fenn didn’t think they’d stand up to much scrutiny, and if Finch knew that Clive Horsewhistler had been aboard the Lion’s Tail, then he’d know that I shouldn’t have been in Cranberry Bay. Since he was asking about Esuen, I thought it pretty likely he knew I was lying.

“You have a different last name from your wife,” said Finch.

“We’re not technically married,” I said. “We were waiting until we had some money, and then … the baby came along.”

“Unfortunate how that sometimes happens, isn’t it?” asked Finch. “Your fiance, she’s from Anglecynn too?”

“Yes,” I said. “From Caledwich.”

“From her intake form, she’s very close in age to Princess Amaryllis Penndraig,” said Finch.

“You looked at her intake form?” I asked, eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t under the impression that was allowed.”

“The situation was deemed unique,” said Finch.

“I suppose that’s how Uniquities gets away with things,” I said, mouth in a thin line.

Finch pursed his lips, then began taking papers out of the folder. I was sort of dreading this. “Last month, a man matching your description got in an altercation with Prince Larkspur Prentiss, who was, at the time, Foreign Security Director of Anglecynn,” said Finch. “This happened in Cranberry Bay, at the Athenaeum. That was when I was called in. As you know, the Kingdom of Anglecynn is quite some distance from the Monarchical Democracy of Esplandian, and as you might imagine, the altercation raised some eyebrows. I use that word, altercation, because it’s unclear whether it was a direct assault on the FSD, or whether it was in some way provoked. There are discrepancies in the eyewitness accounts.” He slid a picture over to me.

It was black and white, with some horrible graininess to it. Photography wasn’t a new science on Aerb, but it was one of the places they were far behind Earth, as was the case with chemistry in general, probably because there was so much magic screwing things up. The picture wasn’t of me; it was a human woman with an elaborate bun and gray robe I thought was probably some shade of off-white. She looked a bit familiar, but I couldn’t place her. I looked up at Finch.

“You don’t recognize her?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Should I?”
“Her name is Clarabell Brown,” said Finch. “She’s a student at Bone and Flesh who does work study in Coeus Hall. She was there when the altercation happened, and had some interaction with both Prentiss and the mystery assailant, who she insisted was only looking for information on something called ‘rat rot’, supposedly contracted in the Risen Lands. The Risen Lands, where Amaryllis Penndraig had been ceremoniously dropped weeks earlier.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. I remembered now, and did my best to keep it from showing on my face. “And?”

“The man this eyewitness met matches your description,” said Finch.

“I’m sure there are hundreds if not thousands of people in Cranberry Bay that match my description,” I said.

“There was another altercation in Boastre Vino,” said Finch. “Again, the Foreign Security Director of Anglecynn was involved, and again, I was called in, given the unique situation and my previous dealing with him in Cranberry Bay. I had many questions for him, you understand. He stonewalled me, then said that we would talk after his business was concluded. I busied myself gathering eyewitness accounts, thinking that I would apply some pressure later. The next day, in the morning, he teleported in a number of helicopters from Anglecynn, along with a large number of men who came through the touchstones, and …” He’d had his hands pressed together and then opened them wide, questioning.

“And?” I asked.

“There were no survivors,” said Finch. “We don’t actually know what happened. The initial altercation in Boastre Vino was between Larkspur Prentiss, with two of his most trusted lieutenants, and another party having four members. One of them, I now believe, was Amaryllis Penndraig. Another, again, matches your description.”

“Oh,” I said slowly. “And you think that … what, I killed Larkspur Prentiss?”

“Someone did,” said Finch. “The official story is that he was flying helicopters without a submitted and verified flight plan, and was subsequently attacked and killed by a dragon. The site of the accident was only briefly under the control of the city of Boastre Vino before being taken over by Anglecynn’s Major Accidents Department through a combination of legalistic and political chicanery. According to some private, off-the-record conversations with the initial officers on the scene, it appears to have been a full-on war. Not only were there no survivors, there were no bodies. I’ll spare you the details, because I’m fairly sure that you already know them, and far more intimately than I do.”

I stayed silent. I was wondering just how much of our history he was aware of. I was getting flashbacks to sitting with the Abswifth back in Parsmont, but this was so much worse.

Finch let me stew in the silence for a moment, maybe hoping that I would say something, before he moved on. “I was given leeway by Uniquities to investigate the matter further,” he said. “I spoke with law enforcement in Cranberry Bay and Boastre Vino, sent letters of inquiry to places Larkspur Prentiss was known to have visited in the days before his assumed death, interviewed eyewitnesses looking for some kind of angle, and even went so far as making a trip to Anglecynn to speak with his wife, Hyacinth.”

I felt like I was being too silent. If I was really Clive Horsewhistler, would I be sitting there trying to take everything in so I could figure out the angle he was working?
“I got bites,” said Finch. “Everything the least bit unusual crossed my desk, and while most of it was idle rumor, some of it was worth tracking down.” He smiled at me. He had small teeth. Not just because he had a small head, but proportionately, his teeth were small. “A human man and half-elf woman matching the descriptions of the two seen fighting Larkspur in Boastre Vino had, apparently, sold a unicorn at the meat market. Do you know how many unicorns are killed in a given year?”

“I don’t know the first thing about them,” I said.

Finch laughed, probably in disbelief, maybe trying to provoke me. “On average, about one every five years,” said Finch. “Usually it’s an elf that does it, since they have some kind of cultural connection to the creatures, but these two people walked in off the street and brought thousands of pounds of the creature out from extradimensional storage with no forewarning. That’s not something a professional hunter would do.”

“Okay,” I said. I rubbed my forehead a bit, trying to think of how Clive would react. “So you’re saying … what are you saying?”

“It’s another point of connection,” said Finch. “A man comes into Coeus Hall looking for information on a disease contracted in the Risen Lands, and gets in a fight with Larkspur Prentiss. A few days later, that same man is selling unicorn parts in Boastre Vino, and gets in another fight with Larkspur Prentiss later that evening. It doesn’t take a genius to know why a man with a serious, unknown disease would want to kill a unicorn. The real question is how the fuck he managed that. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“I don’t think you do understand,” said Finch. He leaned back in his chair. “You don’t look like a man who understands.”

“No, I understand,” I said. “I just don’t know what it has to do with me.”

“There was another incident brought to the attention of Uniquities late last night,” said Finch. “A female tuung was pulled from a moving train. One of the guards was thrown off the train, the other woke up with a hangover, and a third is still missing. The tuung tried to keep this quiet, since they’d lost one of their prize females and didn’t know who had her, but they reversed course when a flying ship they authorized to descend into the Boundless Pit was hijacked and a hundred of their soldiers were murdered trying to get it back.”

“I … see,” I said. “But that was last night, and the Boundless Pit is what, four days away by train? You’re saying -- can’t you just check the logs to see who teleported where? That should clear me.” The logging was one of the reasons we weren’t going to be using the teleportation network anytime soon. Standards were a lot higher, when you were dealing with something so valuable. It was like the difference in scrutiny between driving across state lines and flying across state lines.

“The logs are clean as a whistle,” said Finch. He was staring hard at me. “Not just in Headwater, but in Boastre Vino and Cranberry Bay too. There’s not even a trace. If it was Amaryllis Penndraig, that’s no real surprise. There’s more than enough magic attached to her bloodline, and she’s had a month or so to go around reclaiming it. Anglecynn doesn’t require members of the Court to register their entads, but my guess is she’s got something in there, some way of moving around.”

“I’m confused,” I said. “All this is … it’s something. But what brought you to this hospital? How does this connect to me and my wife?”

“Back when I thought it was just a man looking to cure a disease, I thought maybe he’d end up at the
hospital, and if by some outside chance the princess was involved, maybe her too,” said Finch. “I put out feelers, stopped by to talk to the nurses, especially the ones at intake, and I let them know that if they saw anything out of the ordinary -- uniquesities, you might say -- they should send me a letter, long-distance, at my expense. I gave a sketch of the man and the half-elf, and a photo of the princess. I got a fair number of them, starting out, but nothing really worthwhile, just entads gone wrong or rare species hybrids. Eventually the letters dried up. But then, this morning, when I was in Headwater with my men following up on what had happened on the Lion’s Tail and The Down and Out, I got another letter forwarded from a night nurse, saying that a young couple had come in late in the night. The girl was the spitting image of Amaryllis Penndraig. The girl’s supposed husband was a taller human, blue eyes and brown hair, handsome and muscular, wearing blue armor.” Finch sat back in his seat. “Blue armor that you’re wearing now, which matched the description given to me by the tuung guard I had interviewed not thirty minutes before.”

“Allright,” I said. “So a nosy nurse violates patient privacy, hoping for a reward? What do I need to do to prove that I’m not this guy?”

“Are you really going to keep this up?” asked Finch. “Four tourists went aboard the Down and Out, two humans, a dwarf, and a half-elf. You and your wife have received two visitors, one dwarf, one half-elf, who I’m going to have some questions for too. I’m fairly certain that I can place all four of you on the train, at a party thrown by the Princess Emomain before the kidnapping of her handmaid.”

“Am I under arrest?” I asked. “And if so, what for?”

“Arrest?” asked Finch, raising an eyebrow. “This isn’t that sort of situation. You’re guilty of crimes, certainly, but most of them are against Larkspur Prentiss. From where I’m standing, all the evidence points to him acting in naked aggression against you and paying the price for it. Set your dealings with him aside, and we’re in murky water. Nothing that looks good for you, but also not anything beyond my ability to protect you from, so long as you have the two things my superiors think you have.”

I swallowed at that. “And those are?” I asked.

Finch held up a finger. “The first is Amaryllis Penndraig, part of the ongoing war for the soul of Anglecynn, one that the empire is losing, badly,” said Finch. He held up a second finger. “The second is Esuen, the female tuung.”

“And if I don’t have those things?” I asked.

“It gets complicated,” said Finch. He was watching me closely. “I have you dead to rights, and all I need is cooperation. I like dealing in carrots, not sticks.”

“But you do have sticks,” I said. “And you thought it best to present your sticks first.”

Finch gave me a nod. He reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a pocketwatch, which he looked at with a faint smile. “You should know that we were able to find the hotel you checked in at. We know about your fifth member. Before I left to come find you, I put my second-in-command in charge of securing her, which should be done by now.”
“And you’re okay with staying behind?” asked Mary.

“I am, you don’t need to ask me again,” said Valencia. They were in the hotel room together, alone. Grak was putting up wards in the other room where the tuung were staying, and Joon had taken Fenn to go find out if there was another way down the Pit. Valencia was more comfortable when she was with just one other person, because sometimes there were too many people talking at once and it was hard to figure out what they were all saying without a devil’s help -- and Valencia didn’t particularly like having a devil’s insights into her friends.

“I know I decided for you,” said Mary. “I don’t want you to think that I was pushing you out, you’re a valuable member of this team, but --”

“If a warder looks at me, he’ll know that I’m non-anima,” said Valencia. “And then he’ll tell people, and they’ll try to kill me.”

“It’s partly that,” said Mary. “There are a lot of reasons.” She paused. “I thought that you might like some independence. You’ve been with us a week, and I feel like I’ve barely let you out of my sight in that entire time. I want you to have agency, to decide things on your own.”

Valencia felt a warm glow, deep in her chest. She reached forward and wrapped Mary in a tight hug, which the princess returned. Valencia liked hugging. She was slowly discovering all the things that she liked, and hugging was near the top of the list. She didn’t stop hugging until a little bit after Mary had dropped her half of the hug.

“You’re so nice,” said Valencia.

“Thank you,” said Mary. “I don’t think that’s particularly true, but thank you.”

“You have to come back,” said Valencia. “You all have to come back. Okay?”

“We’ll try our best,” said Mary. “We should probably talk about contingencies for what you should do if we don’t return, for whatever reason. You’ll have money, and you can certainly borrow the relevant skills, but it will probably be rough for you, and if I can offer some input that helps --”

“If you die, I’ll find you in the hells,” said Valencia. “And then I’ll kill all the demons and devils near you, so it won’t be as bad.”

“That’s -- probably preferable, yes,” said Mary. “I’m still not sure that you should be killing them so freely.”

“They don’t know what’s causing it,” said Valencia. She had watched, killing one, then killing a second that had been standing right next to the first so she could see it through his memories. Aside from that, every time she took a devil or a demon, she tried to remember to comb through their memories to see whether they knew anything about her. So far, nothing but whispers and rumors. The infernals weren’t supposed to die; they were scared. “Even if they did know, they don’t have very good reach up here.”

Valencia could feel through the nine thousand hells with what she thought of as her tendrils, absurdly long, interdimensional strings that could slice through a demon or devil and draw it into her. There were different pieces of her power, the tendrils that grabbed the demons from out of their bodies, the maw that tore them apart into component parts, and the reservoir where their skills and knowledge
were kept. It was a bit of idle work to keep each of the tendrils focused on a different target, ready to consume them at a moment’s notice. She had started with eight of them, but now they numbered in the hundreds, and adding any more seemed excessive.

“I’m worried there will be a reckoning,” said Mary. “And I’m worried that if you lean on them too much, you’ll take on something of them. They can’t be what’s driving your understanding of people.”

“That’s what I have the Harry Potter books for,” said Valencia with a smile.

“That’s not —” Mary began.

“I was only joking,” said Valencia. Mary could be a lot like Hermione sometimes, quick to correct things she saw as wrong. Reading the Harry Potter books had helped her to understand Mary a bit better. Mary was also sometimes like Lucius Malfoy, with careful words and clever plots. And sometimes she was brave and bold, like Harry Potter.

Mary pursed her lips. “I’m very serious,” she said. “Life can be hard, and it’s extremely easy to get cynical about people, even without infernal influences shaping your views.”

Valencia snapped one of her tendrils through a lesser devil and crushed him in her maw. All she wanted of him was the smallest piece of insight. She’d picked a lesser devil because she didn’t think it was so bad to do that. The little ones, close to the surface, were weaker and dumber, closer to her own ways of thinking. How much influence could they have?

“You’re talking about yourself,” said Valencia.

“Did you figure that out on your own?” asked Mary with a frown.

“No,” said Valencia. She tried her best to be honest with Mary and Joon and the others. It was easier without a devil’s insights, which always made lies so attractive. Lies could get you what you wanted.

“Well,” said Mary. “Yes, I do think I’m sometimes too cynical for my own good. There’s something infectious about cynicism. You treat people poorly for reasons that seem perfectly sensible, and the world becomes worse for it.”

“You’re talking about me,” said Valencia. “That wasn’t a devil’s insights,” she added. She had discarded the devil’s parts from her reservoir. Thousands of years of the devil’s life had been used up just for that one little hint at what Mary was thinking.

Mary sighed. “Yes. I’m talking about you.” She looked Valencia over. “You know that people can talk in generalities, don’t you? There’s subtext, true, but the generalities still hold, regardless of the context I’m thinking in at the time.”

“I know,” said Valencia. “You feel bad for treating me like I wasn’t actually there.”

“I was being pragmatic,” said Mary. “It was pragmatic to refuse to acknowledge that there was a person trapped in cycles of possession. It was cynicism, a way of preventing myself from being weak. I’m sorry.”

“You tell me you’re sorry every day,” said Valencia.

“I try not to,” said Mary. She fidgeted with her hands. “My ideal self would tell you once, then prove it every day.”
“You really are very nice,” said Valencia. She wanted to ask whether they could kiss, because it felt like a moment for kissing. Kissing was also one of the things that Valencia had decided she enjoyed, but there were rules about who you could kiss and when. She thought that with the right devil, she could talk Mary into more kissing, but that wouldn’t be right or fair, and through a devil’s eyes, it would be manipulation, rather than the love and affection it was. “Can I have another hug?” she asked instead.

“Of course,” said Mary. When they hugged, Valencia gave a little purr, like a kitten. She had only heard about kittens; some day she would like to meet one.

“When we’re gone, you’re on your own,” said Mary. She had been the one to break the hug. One of the rules of hugging seemed to be that you weren’t supposed to just keep hugging forever, or carry on a full conversation while hugging. “I left you money for room service, or for if you want to take a very brief trip outside to see Headwater. Check in on the tuung, never let a warder see you, and if something happens, block our teleportation site so that we know there was trouble. There’s a gun and a knife in the bedside table. If you see a warder’s monocle, run the other way, and if you go out, keep up a devil’s skills at all times so you can’t be ambushed or attacked. And if you are ambushed or attacked, take a demon’s skills.” Mary left unsaid what Valencia was supposed to do with a demon’s skills, but the thing demons were best at was violence. “I’m very worried about you running into a warder on Grak’s level who doesn’t need the monocle, but I don’t want to make this hotel room into another prison, so … be safe.”

“I love you,” said Valencia, because it felt true. There was a slight twitch to Mary’s face that said this wasn’t appropriate, but Mary had also said that it was the right of every thinking creature to be inappropriate at times, when the situation called for it. Mary had rules about when to break rules.

“You listened to what I said though?” asked Mary.

“I did,” said Valencia. “Are you going to say it all again before you leave for real?”

“Probably,” said Mary with a sigh. She ran her fingers through her hair, which was dyed black. Their hair matched, and Valencia found that pleasing. “I’ll promise to try my best to come back in one piece, if you promise to try your best to be in one piece when I come back.”

“I promise,” said Valencia.

“Then I promise too,” said Mary.

Valencia felt hollow.

She had read through all seven Harry Potter books, and now what was left? Nothing. Not literally nothing, because Juniper and Mary had each left her a dozen books to read, but Valencia understood that the world that contained Hogwarts was only contained in those seven books, and now she was done. She tried reading the first of the Animorphs books, but it wasn’t at all the same, and she stopped three pages in. She also tried starting from the first book again, but it wasn’t the same either. All that was left was that hollow feeling of having come to the end.

Juniper had said that he’d read more than a thousand books, which she hadn’t really believed until he’d said something to the effect of that being only three years of reading a book every day. Valencia had read through the first three Harry Potter books in the course of three days, so that wasn’t too ridiculous. Juniper had then gone on about his assumptions about reading speed in words per minute and how many words were in a book, which Valencia listened to attentively and then promptly forgot; it seemed like Juniper liked the mental exercise, so she was happy for him.
She’d used pieces of devils to read faster for the last four books, which had felt wonderful at the time, but which she now regretted, because there were no more books left. There was a slight taint of the devil’s thinking to her reading, but if anything, that enhanced the books; she could understand the precise ways the characters were flawed, which made it all the sweeter to see them overcome their weaknesses. She had read the epilogue without so much as a trace of the devil’s voice, which gave Rowling the last word.

Valencia decided that she would go out into Headwater. She made sure that everything in the room was as it should be, put the pistol into her handbag, then locked the door behind her, making triple sure that the wooden hanger said that the room was to be left untouched. Grak had left behind wards, some of them quite potent. She made a quick stop at the room the tuung were staying in, let them know she would be gone for an hour, then went down to the front desk and again clarified with them that no one was to go into her hotel room.

She walked down the street with a devil’s eye for detail, as Mary had told her to, watching the people. There were gaps in the knowledge a devil had, but there was much that was ready to be supplied to her from the reservoir of devil parts, with only a very faint sensation that told her it was the devil’s knowledge, not her own.

She saw a pack of ghill, with spines the color of wheat covering their backs and heads. She passed a he’lesh wedding party, with its traditional streamers of smoke that had as many colors as the stars in the sky. On a corner she spotted one of the renacim, which was so unusual that she stopped and stared for a moment, trying to make sense of it. There were only twenty thousand of them on Aerb, and one was here in Headwater, for no apparent reason other than simple tourism.

It was interesting, certainly, to see the mix of people, cultures, and customs, more even than in Cranberry Bay, because this was a place explicitly meant for people from far away to visit. But at the same time, Valencia had very little baseline for what was normal. Twelve days ago, she had been locked up in a prison within a prison, which was more or less how she spent her entire life. It was a monotony that had only been interrupted by Fallatehr’s tests or the times that infernals had reached up into her to puppet her body. She knew what was worth noting about Headwater and what wasn’t, because the devils knew, but the part of her that was just Valencia was marveling at how tall the buildings got, or the power lines, or a store full of books.

(Mary said that she was doing very well, given the circumstances. Mary hadn’t gone so far as to say that she was doing unnaturally, abnormally well, but Mary had thought it. There was, left unsaid, the idea that the Dungeon Master had placed his thumb on the scale. Also left unsaid was the way that Valencia sometimes took in devils to help her with managing her thoughts and feelings. Devils had emotions too, they were just really, really good at dealing with them. Some of that stuck, even when they were gone.)

She found a tavern she thought looked a bit like the one in Hogsmeade and sat down at the bar, on top of a stool. She gripped the bar, then spun herself one way and then the other.

The devil’s instincts were there, telling her how this would look to other people, but she ignored them, because she wanted the experience. Even with a lesser devil like this one, it was sometimes hard to find herself in the mix. The devil was dead, taken apart into component pieces, but those pieces were a part of her, augmenting her thoughts and, to some extent, feelings. She had been working hard, with Mary’s help, both to become more of herself, so there was less for the devils to overwhelm, and to keep from reaching into that well of understanding just because it was there. She tried to think about the devils as voices, independent characters, but that wasn’t really true. They were dead, and she was simply using their skills or knowledge. It was easier to think of them as separate, so that she could say it was a demon telling her how to kill everyone in the room, rather
than her own thought that she wouldn’t have had without the demon in her.

So she spun in the chair, to see what it was like, heedless of what other people would think. She might look like a little girl sitting on a bar stool for the first time. She was fine with that.

“But can I get you something?” asked the bartender. He was a large man, with broad shoulders and a neck thicker than one of her thighs. He looked friendly too, either despite or because of his bushy eyebrows. He was an aborian, claws filed down so they almost looked like fingernails. The devil’s knowledge helpfully told her all sorts of things, and she shut down the stream of thoughts about him as they presented themselves, but not before it left a taste in her mind – he was sympathetic to her, worried that she was trouble, worried that she couldn’t pay, easy to manipulate by playing the victim, and so on. He was definitely the owner; the bar had been built for a man of his proportions. (He reminded her of Hagrid, though less hairy.)

“One butterbeer, please,” said Valencia. The devil part of her mind was insistent that she not do this, because there was no such thing as butterbeer, nor even buttered beer, and she was making a fool of herself, but she elected not to listen, and instead do the thing she wanted to do, on the off chance that the Dungeon Master was feeling kind.

He frowned slightly. “Not something we carry, sorry dear,” he said. “What does it taste like?”

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. “Butterscotch?”

“Well, we do have scotch,” said the bartender with a laugh. “But I think you’re probably a little young for that.”

“I’m eighteen years old,” said Valencia. For all she knew, that might have been true.

“Are you now?” asked the bartender. There was skepticism in his voice.

“What’s the drinking age in Headwater?” asked Valencia.

“It’s at the discretion of the barkeep,” he said with a faint smile. “We get too many species here to have a hard and fast rule. You must be a long way from -- where, exactly?”

“Portina,” said Valencia. It was an innocuous answer, close enough to be uninteresting, far enough that it was unlikely he’d press her on her knowledge. Not that she didn’t have knowledge, but devils didn’t exactly keep up to date. “Can I have something like butterscotch then? It doesn’t have to have alcohol in it.” She reached into her hand bag and pulled out a handful of obols, enough to show she had money, not enough to raise any attention. This was going to be the first time she’d ever paid for something. In fact, it would be the first thing that she had actually owned for herself, even if it was paid for with the group’s money.

“Here,” said the bartender. He plucked a bottle from the shelf with his huge hand and began pouring it into a small glass, then took a second bottle with a nozzle handle and added something fizzy. “It’s a local specialty, Delver’s Delight, one part tonic water, one part ungweed syrup. The tuung harvest it from the walls of the Pit, but most of what you’ll taste is sugar.”

“How much do I owe you?” asked Valencia.

“On the house,” said the bartender. “It’s a quarter-obol worth of ingredients, if that.”

“Thank you,” said Valencia with a small, solemn bow in his direction. She used a bit of the devil’s skills to convey the right impression toward him, to make him feel appreciated. The devil’s skills were laying out a path of manipulation for her, a way to get this man to do her bidding, but she
clamped it down.

She tasted the fizzy drink, sipping it slowly. There was a bitterness to it, and acidity, a bit of near-citrus flavor, but sugar was what she tasted most. A thousand comparisons sprang to mind, courtesy of the devil, most of them calculated to how the bartender might react to them, some outright lies that would lead their conversation in some particular direction … but there was only one thing that Valencia herself could honestly compare it to.

“It tastes like Mountain Dew,” she said.

“Mountain dew?” asked the bartender. “Poetic, I suppose. Is that what you do? Are you a young poet from Portina?”

He liked her. There was something of Juniper to him, a weakness for weakness. There were no undercurrents of sexual desire though, not like there were with Juniper (not that she minded that in the least). The attention and momentary companionship wasn’t unwelcome, but a devil’s skill at avoiding detection was ringing alarm bells in the back of her head, saying that the more they spoke, the more he would remember her, and the more he might mention her to someone who went asking around, especially if he thought she was in trouble.

“I’m just visiting with family,” said Valencia. “We came here for the wedding of a family friend, and my mom let me slip out on my own for a bit since there’s some free time.”

“Ah,” said the bartender. He relaxed slightly, but there was also an edge of disappointment, a slight fall of his face and deadening of his earlier liveliness. “So no occupation, as yet? I don’t suppose you’d have interest in working at a tavern?”

He believed her, mostly, but she hadn’t done enough to get rid of his need to help her.

The thing that made her sad, so sad she might have cried if she didn’t have a devil’s control of her body, was that if he learned she didn’t have a soul, it would be like a switch was flipped in him. Non-anima were rare, adult non-anima even more so, but demons and devils were well-understood, and if he learned that she was under constant threat of possession (nevermind that she wasn’t), everything she’d said or done would be cast in that light. Every bit of sympathy he’d had toward her would be seen as a devil’s victory, every moment of distrust or unease seen as a devil’s failure.

“If I find myself with nowhere to go, I’ll come here begging for a job, does that sound like a deal?” asked Valencia, knowing that was a lie.

“Deal,” said the bartender. “Name’s Bore, though I’m not one,” he said, holding out his hand.

Valencia shook it. “Valencia the Red,” she said, against advice of counsel. She smiled at his raised eyebrow. “It’s a family name.”

He left her alone after that, and she stewed in her thoughts. He had been nice, and their interaction had been pleasant, but that was only because he hadn’t known her. There were, at present, four people in the world who knew her secret, and they were the only ones she could rely on -- if they made it back.

Having had her fun during her first night in Headwater, and anticipating many more days of solitude ahead of her, Valencia started writing an eighth Harry Potter book.

At first she tried to write it with a devil’s help, but by the time she reached the end of the first chapter, people were plotting and scheming beyond anything that had happened in the first seven books, and
none of them were terribly good people, and she couldn’t see how any of it was going to have a happy ending for anyone. The bad people would just get worse, and all the glimmers of light would be snuffed out, because that was the devil’s understanding of people. Mary thought that with some practice, Valencia would be able to borrow a devil’s skills without the devil’s particular focus on suffering, misery, and pain. If that was possible, Valencia wasn’t quite there yet.

She scrapped that attempt and began again, without help, but ran out of ideas halfway through the first chapter, when she was trying to think up people that Harry Potter would work with in his career as an Auror. She named one of them Juniper, and another Mary, but that raised all sorts of questions that would need to be answered first.

So she scrapped that second attempt too, and started in on a third, which was about Juniper Smith’s first year at Hogwarts with Mary, Fenn, Grak, and the locus. Juniper would be Gryffindor, of course, and Fenn would be Hufflepuff, but Valencia wasn’t sure whether the Sorting Hat would put Mary into Gryffindor, because she was courageous and bold, or into Ravenclaw, because she was so clever, or into Slytherin, because her whole family was from Slytherin. Slytherins weren’t supposed to be evil, though most of them were. It was about ambition, and wasn’t Mary wildly ambitious? She kept talking about wanting to change the whole world.

Valencia decided that she would be a house elf in this story, but one that had been given a sock by Juniper, and then scrapped her third attempt at writing the eighth Harry Potter book because she was just making herself sad. She didn’t want to be Dobby, she wanted to be Hermione.

It was during this rather glum moment of self-reflection that Valencia heard a knock at the door.

The choice wasn’t whether to take in an infernal, but which kind to take. The devils were liars, deceivers, and talkers. The demons were focused almost entirely on combat. It took some time to switch, and while the skills and information they both possessed came to her quickly, there was still a moment of mild disorientation. So, to talk or to fight?

One of Valencia’s tendrils was touching a demon in hell #2349. She snuffed out its life in an instant, disassembled it with her maw, then took on the full force of its knowledge and skills. This took two seconds and very little thought or effort on her part. She always felt glad to have killed another of them, then always after that, a twinge of guilt at feeling happy that a life, however abhorrent and irredeemable, had been ended.

With the demon’s pieces augmenting her thoughts, the room took on a different context. Mary had left behind weapons, a dagger and a gun; Valencia was suddenly cursing herself for not having checked to make sure that the gun was loaded and in working condition. She went to do that, moving silently across the floor with practiced grace as she ignored the knocking and tried to think. She inspected the dagger, feeling its weight so she could throw or slash without hesitation or error, then pulled the magazine from the pistol and checked it over, barely even aware of what she was doing as her mind raced.

The suite had two bedrooms and one long main room, which served as a common area, with a small desk, a dining table, a couch with a short table in front of it, and a sliding door that led out onto a narrow balcony.

That was the next question: flee or fight? Out the balcony so she could scale six floors down to ground level and disappear into the city, or murder everyone in the hallway?

She stumbled as she realized that those weren’t the only two choices. Those were simply the only two things that a demon would immediately think of, patterns of behavior that she’d adopted by taking too much of him from the reservoir at once.
When she actively focused on talking to them, her mind raced ahead to the possibilities, cataloging what sorts of threats might be present in the hallway, the traditional compositions of fireteams under different circumstances, and what could be assumed about them from the fact that they were here. The tuung were limited in the forces they could commit by their weak position in the international community and the necessity of sending their people off to athenaeums, where they might defect. Anglecynn would be better equipped, though a clandestine operation had limits. And if it were the Empire, which was entirely possible if things had gone badly enough down in the Pit, there might be as many as a dozen people in the hallway … plus more down on the ground, watching for an exit out the balcony.

The best strategy for killing them all would be to lie in wait in the room, behind as much cover as she could manage in short order. Grak had left the hotel room carefully warded, and Valencia knew where all the wards were, which would allow her to dance in and out of the invisible barriers to gain the advantage. She had begun exercising, at Mary’s insistence, but it had only been ten days, and while that was enough to show some progress, she was still a weak, small, girl.

There were ten bullets in the pistol. Her aim was as close to perfect as it could be without having developed any actual muscles or muscle memory, which meant that it was good enough to kill at least ten people in close quarters. She could kill the first two or three before they even knew what was happening, assuming that entads weren’t in play and a few varieties of magic were off the table. Sadly, in a firefight with no foreknowledge, those always had to be a consideration. Velocity mages to dodge the bullets, still mages to stop them, brutes in entad full plate to stop the damage, revision mages to reverse it, a gold mage if they could secure one … and those were just the obvious things, what you expected as standard, before you even started bringing in the esoteric.

Valencia stopped what she was doing when she realized that she had gone back into thinking that the way of dealing with this problem was to kill people.

The knocking had stopped.

It was probably just room service.

Valencia sat on one of the dining room chairs and placed the gun behind her, so it wouldn’t be visible from the door. The demon’s instincts were a part of her, and they were screaming, so she released that part to wherever such things went when she was done with them. Oblivion, probably, or the Void. After a moment’s thought, she released the demon entirely.

One of her tendrils had been tracking a devil, and she lashed through it, stealing its essence and killing it in the process.

The knocking came again, louder.

“Yes?” called Valencia. “Who is it?”

There was a long pause. “Imperial Affairs, Uniquities Division,” said a voice from the other side.

Those four words gave away a lot. The devil didn’t have all that much knowledge of current affairs, and by a devil’s standard, ‘current’ was measured in decades. The content of the message was in the voice that said it, the tone placed on the words, and the emotion it carried. It was command, mingled with fear and anticipation. The voice was a man’s voice, slightly harsh, almost certainly not the sort of person that they would use for delicate negotiations or diplomacy. It wasn’t enough for a full assessment of the situation, but it did shift the probabilities toward the less favorable outcomes.

Valencia had no idea what Uniquities was, nor did the devil have any helpful knowledge on the
“Can you give me a second to get dressed?” asked Valencia. In _her_ voice there was no imperfection to give anything away. She could control her pitch and tone precisely, and the part she was playing was close enough to who she really was anyway. “Okay,” she said, standing from her chair and scooping up the gun to toss it into the bedroom. She walked toward the door, trying to think about the possibilities. It wasn’t likely that they wanted a negotiation, but part of negotiation was getting the other party to the negotiating table. The key would be to throw them off balance first, get them out of their war footing, and from there she could see how things developed.

“Who did you say it was?” asked Valencia, standing next to the door, leaning on it slightly. She looked at the peephole, but it was black, covered by something from the other side. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Imperial Affairs, Uniquities Division,” said the same voice, in nearly the same tone. Perhaps some of the fear was dropping away, replaced by frustration and confusion. There was still anticipation though. That was worrying. “Open the door, please.”

“Mom said I wasn’t supposed to,” said Valencia. She pitched her voice just a bit higher, playing up her youth, and added in the smallest hint of sing-song. Perhaps they wouldn’t catch it, but it was meant to convey that she didn’t quite understand the severity of the situation.

“We’re coming in,” said the voice, with a note of finality.

Valencia stepped back from the door, then slightly to the side so she wouldn’t be directly in the line of fire. She had briefly thought that they would kick the door in, but no, they had authority on their side, and the door was unlocked with the hotel’s master key. She watched as the knob was slowly turned and the door was pushed open. No one was visible, but that wasn’t much of a surprise; she’d have done the same, staying out of view.

Her breathing was coming a little faster now, and her heart was beating more rapidly. This was all entirely under her control; she was a young girl in over her head, maybe not an innocent in whatever parts of the story they knew, but definitely in over her head. She would have to spin some innocuous cover story, but she didn’t really doubt her ability to do that. If she could become a naive little girl they thought they had trapped, all the better. She would be able to feed them whatever information she pleased.

The problem was with what came after. Petty thieves weren’t usually checked over for entads by a warder, but if it was an imperial operation with plenty of funding behind it, that would be standard operating procedure, just to make sure a prisoner couldn’t turn into mist the moment their backs were turned, or swap places with their guard, or a thousand other possibilities that could only be accounted for by identifying everything magical and taking it.

A man in matte gray armor stepped into the room, sweeping his rifle from side to side, lowering it slightly as the barrel passed over Valencia. There were others behind him, dressed the same. The armor was known to her: it was shimmerplate, produced by a singular entad in the empire’s possession, the armor produced in bulk and revocable at the will of the entad’s owner. It had been used in the Battle of Marshwind, Valencia distantly recalled. Her gun, sitting on the bed, wouldn’t be too effective unless she were to exclusively shoot them in the head, and even then, the first man in wore a helmet of a different style. The hands were unarmored too, which was another weakness she could use.

“Just a girl,” the man from Uniquities said to others, who were mostly out of view. He kept his weapon up and at the ready. The words were dismissive, which was promising. There were a
handful of the mortal species easily mistaken for human, but he’d seen the fear in her eyes and reduced her down to nothing more than her age and gender.

“W-who are you?” asked Valencia. She was shaking now, with dilated pupils, giving every display of fear the devil knew, hoping to disarm him and engender sympathy. She internally debated whether or not to wet herself, but his reaction to that was too hard to predict. Sympathy and guilt would be good, disgust and embarrassment, less so.

“Ellis, you’re up,” said the man, pulling back slightly and ignoring Valencia’s question.

A woman, also wearing shimmerplate, slipped into the room. She was wearing an armored pouch slung over the armor, and from it she began to pull a monocle on a chain.

“Please don’t hurt me!” Valencia screamed. She covered her head with her hands, a defensive reaction that wouldn’t do much good against the rifle, and scrambled to the side, through the door to the bedroom. It was as natural a progression from anxiety to full panic as she could manage, given short notice.

“Freeze!” shouted the man as she moved. He had snapped his rifle up to track her, but he didn’t shoot.

All of the signs of fear and distress became real once Valencia allowed the pieces of devil to slip from her reservoir, and in a brief moment of blind panic she almost forgot the reason she’d done it. She quickly killed a demon with one of her tendrils and shoved his essence through her rending maw. The fear didn’t quite wash away, but it became a manageable thing, compartmentalized as something that would be inefficient in the coming fight. There was no tremor from her nerves, no flood of panicked indecision, just cold calm and a tiny bit of excitement at being turned loose -- and Valencia honestly didn’t know whether that was coming from her, or from the demon.

She stopped, gun drawn, and tried to think around the demon’s instincts toward grievous violence.

Killing was something the Death Eaters did. Harry Potter never used the Killing Curse, not even at the end, because he was good and pure and knew that killing was wrong. Mary had said that killing was wrong, but she had also said that sometimes it was necessary, and this seemed like one of those moments, if ever there was one. But Mary had also said that independence was important, and making big decisions like whether to kill people or not seemed like it was part of that. Valencia didn’t want to kill anyone.

None of that thinking took too much time.

She popped out of the room and shot the man with the rifle in his hand, causing him to curse and let go. As he backed away, Valencia’s second shot hit the warder, striking her in the hand that held her monocle. Valencia ducked back into the bedroom and laid herself flat on the floor. She had angled herself as she fell so she could see out of the door, her angle not toward the front door, but toward the glass door of the balcony. The glass was clean and reflective, visible between the legs of the chairs, and Valencia could just barely make out the people moving at the other end of the long room.

A soldier in shimmerplate, taking cover behind the doorway, fired into the hotel room. Valencia waited quietly for him to finish; the sound was deafening, louder than her own pistol, but the demon knew how to ignore the pain in her ears and how to fight without the use of sound. The gun did nothing, naturally; Grak had set up velocity wards to slow down bullets coming into the hotel room. They didn’t have enough penetrating power to so much as pierce the gypsum of the walls, nevermind flesh.
There was silence for a moment, followed by conversation that Valencia was too deafened to hear much of. She watched the reflections moving in the door, concentrating, and trying to anticipate what they would do next. *Don’t kill them.* She was worried that it would happen when she was simply following the demon’s instincts, because killing would come more naturally than trying to disable or disarm.

Valencia saw movement in the reflection, the swing of a hand making an underhand lob. She was moving before it even came into the room, up from the floor and switching her gun to her left hand. She shot out the window and grabbed what they’d tossed, recognizing it only belatedly as a grenade, and threw it out the shattered balcony door, using the momentum of a twirl that took her back into the bedroom. She’d been exposed for only a fraction of a second, but still counted herself lucky that she hadn’t been shot.

The grenade exploded out in the air, projecting off-white gas in a starburst that was quickly swept away by the wind around the Pit.

*Non-lethal.* It was hard to know whether that was because they didn’t want to kill her, or because they were worried about killing civilians in the rooms around them with errant shrapnel.

There was a mirror in the bedroom, set on top of a dresser, and Valencia drove her elbow into it, breaking it. Her slender fingers picked up a broken piece and brought it to the door, sliding it out with one hand while her gun was held in the other. She had a grip that might have been awkward for someone without so much raw skill with weaponry, using her thumb on the trigger and her fingers holding the back of the gun.

The door into the hotel room was clear. She had no illusions that they had given up; it was far more likely that they were in conference, making a plan. So far as they knew, she was a single target in a heavily warded room, with wards they couldn’t see without their warder. Valencia wasn’t sure how much information the warder had gotten, if any. Had she seen enough to tell them where the wards were?

Valencia didn’t have to wait long until someone poked their head out from behind the front door. It was the warder, trying once again to see what they were dealing with. Valencia aimed with the mirror, put the maximum amount of pressure she could put on the trigger without firing the gun, and then held her breath, waiting for the right moment. When the warder moved over to scan more of the room, Valencia shot her in the monocle.

She’d intended to hit the edge of it, hoping to destroy the warder’s ability to see magic without actually killing the woman. With the kick of the gun and the awkward angle of the mirror, it was hard to say what had actually happened. By the time Valencia could see properly again, the warder had either moved or been dragged out of the way. Valencia sat quietly, mirror out, gun pointed at the door, waiting. She suppressed her feelings of confusion and fear as much as she could.

The gas grenade was gnawing at the back of her mind. That they shot at her indicated intent to kill, but the gas grenade said otherwise. There were conflicting possibilities about what it meant, and she didn’t know the answer. The demon she was using was -- or had been, since it was dead now -- an old and powerful one, but without much exposure to the surface world since the time of the Apocalypse Demon. What her assailants were *actually thinking* was beyond her, no matter how good she would be at killing them.

A man in shimmerplate with dark brown hair matted beneath his helmet stepped forward, crouching low to the ground and moving in. Valencia shot him in his hand, because she didn’t want to shoot him in the head. She watched through the mirror in dismay as he was completely unaffected. The knowledge came at once, barely needing to be processed once she saw in the mirror that the bullet
was laying on the ground, undeformed. He wasn’t an ordinary soldier: he was a still mage.

Valencia ducked back behind the door, holding her shard of mirror in one hand and gun in the other. She switched her grip so that she was holding it normally, then backed up two steps and aimed directly at the door. The gun was non-functional against a still mage, which was likely why they’d sent him in. To kill a still mage required overwhelming force, void weaponry, chemical or biological attacks, or the right kind of magic. All those were in short supply.

She waited for him to come into view, then fired the pistol twice, hitting him in the face. The bullets lost their velocity at once and fell to the ground, leaving him unaffected. He had a pistol, but he wasn’t firing at her; a demon’s instincts told her that he had her dead to rights if he wanted to kill her, because there was only so much that you could do in close-quarter combat against a still mage. She could throw the mirror at him and attempt to distract him, but all the methods she had of defending herself were, essentially, kinetic in nature.

There was one last recourse, thanks to Grak.

“You can’t hurt me,” said the still mage. She was having trouble hearing from the gunfire, but she could read lips, and make inferences from the sounds that reached her.

“I can,” said Valencia. Her voice sounded too calm. “I don’t want to, but I can.”

“They want you alive,” he said.

Valencia stayed silent. They had their guns pointed at each other, but he was using his as a threat and a precaution, not threatening her. He’d known that he’d been lying, when he’d said that she couldn’t hurt him.

The problem was that as soon as she was in their custody, she was at their mercy, and it wouldn’t be long until they found out what she was. She could try to explain that she wasn’t actually at risk of possession, but who in the world would believe that? Mary had laid out a plan for how to prove it, but it would still take a leap of faith, and everyone who knew what a non-anima was would know that letting them talk could be dangerous. They would have a skin mage check her for tattoos, or a warder check her for entads, and either one would immediately know that something wasn’t right. Then they would most likely kill her.

“This is over,” said the still mage. He came toward Valencia with an outstretched hand, ready to stop her in place. It was possible that he would kill her immediately, without even meaning to. People could fight back against a still mage’s touch, but so far as magic was concerned, she had virtually no will at all. If he pushed hard on her, expecting resistance, he might just murder her on accident when he found none.

Valencia backed up as he came closer, mindful of where his pistol was pointed. Her steps were carefully measured to place her just where she needed to be.

“Please, don’t,” said Valencia. She had a demon, not a devil, so that plea was as genuine as could be, all her own. He kept coming.

When they were positioned exactly where she wanted them to be, he lunged at her, grabbing for her wrist. When his hand hit the ward, she was there to grab it, pulling it through even as it changed color, even as he let out an inhuman scream of pain. If he’d had her clarity of focus, perhaps he might have been able to use still magic to stop himself, but still magic took a mindset, and there were limits to how much pain that mindset could tolerate.
The ward was an annihilation ward, set against blood magic.

He fired his gun, as she thought he might, but she’d been spinning as she drew him in, and narrowly dodged it, thanks only to a demon’s situational awareness, reflexes, and speed, all of which might not have been enough except that his attention had been focused on grabbing her, maintaining his aim.

She stopped him from going all the way through the ward by slamming her forearm into his neck and pushing him back and away. His leg had gone through as he’d tried to find his balance, and the entirety of his arm as well, the blood disappearing from them as it passed the ward. The term for it was microvacuum, and the clamping shut of arteries and veins in response to it caused incredible damage. Blood would be rushing to fill the emptied limbs, dropping blood pressure in the body in an instant.

The still mage lost consciousness and fell backward, slamming his head against the carpeted floor.

Valencia stepped forward and checked for a pulse with two fingers on his throat. She found it immediately, and the demon’s ability to focus entirely on the task at hand prevented her from giving a sigh of relief.

“Your still mage needs medical attention!” she shouted out into the hotel room.

She eyed the balcony of the hotel room. She could run forward, across the shattered glass, and jump over the edge, catching herself by her fingertips so that she could drop to the balcony below. Done as a series of drops and catches, she could descend down to street level in a matter of seconds. Then she would be on her own, left wondering what happened to the others, with only Mary’s pre-arranged lines of communication left to them. That was if there weren’t armed men waiting for her to come down, or people stationed in the room below.

There was silence from the hallway.

She wondered what they were going to try next. The demon’s knowledge came up, unbidden, and she clamped it down. She didn’t want to fight and she didn’t want to kill. She just wanted to go to Hogwarts and be a witch, was that so much to ask? She wanted to have happy, light-hearted adventures with her friends, not … this.

She held her shard of mirror, watching the door to the hallway. There was no one there. They probably thought that the still mage was dead, which meant that it was time to try something new.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone!” shouted Valencia. “I don’t want to kill! Please!” She felt the urge to cry, but that was something within her control for the time being, so she decided not to. Crying could compromise her combat effectiveness.

“Surrender!” a voice finally said from the hallway. It was one she hadn’t heard before, male but much higher, without the same harshness or tone of command.

“I can’t!” shouted Valencia. She tried to think about the words she’d practiced with Mary. It was tempting to jettison the demon, but she might still need it to climb down, and the delay might be enough that she would die. “It’s complicated.”

There was a pause from the hallway. “I’m coming in,” the man said. “Don’t shoot!”

Valencia watched with her mirror held in one hand. She had her pistol gripped to fire backward, and pointed right at him. He didn’t look like a soldier, but he was wearing the shimmerplate, which encased a much slimmer build. His hands were empty and held out in front of him, non-threatening.
“We don’t want to hurt you,” he said. “You shot first.” His words were distant, drowned out a bit by the whining in her ears, and she could only comprehend because she could see his lips.

“Louder, please,” she said. “Ears aren’t working right.”

“We’ll get a healer in,” he replied, voice raised.

Valencia felt her heart sink at those words. A healer would notice the same thing she really needed people to not notice. “I need time to explain,” she said. She glanced down at the still mage. He was pale, but breathing.

“My name is Jorge,” said the man. He wasn’t handsome, but there was something compelling about his features. She thought that he looked a bit like she imagined Fred or George would look, but with curly black hair instead of red. “Do we have time?”

Valencia looked at the body. He wasn’t going to die, but he did need medical attention. A bigger worry was that he would wake up. She need to keep one eye on the mirror and the other on the body. If he started to regain consciousness, she wasn’t sure what she was going to do about it.

“We have a little time,” she said. Jorge, he had called himself. Valencia.

“You said you had a complicated situation,” he said.

She had gone over this with Mary, and when they’d talked about it, she’d had a devil in her. It wasn’t the same as being suffused by the instincts and knowledge of one, but she could remember how they had decided to phrase it, and simply repeat those words back.

“I have a condition that causes me to present as non-anima,” said Valencia. She watched Jorge’s face through the mirror. He’d raised his eyebrows, just a little, but he was otherwise impassive. Valencia again had the urge to switch to a devil that could lay the man bare, but that would mean giving up the possibility of a quick descent down the side of the building. “I know how that sounds. I can prove that I’m not non-anima, but you’d have to trust me.” She hadn’t liked saying it like that, but Mary and the devil had thought it was for the best. The idea was to strip her of the title and the stigma as quickly as possible. She was non-anima, without a soul, but that truth was less compelling. “I know how asking for trust sounds too.”

Jorge stood still for a moment, thinking and weighing.

“Is your warder okay?” asked Valencia.

“Fine,” replied Jorge. “Healed, by now, though her monocle was destroyed. On purpose?”

“I couldn’t let her see me,” said Valencia.

Jorge gave a slight nod. “Tell me how you’ll prove you’re not non-anima.”

“I can kill demons and devils,” she said. “You can watch on infernoscope. I can also switch between a demon’s skills and a devil’s. You can watch that too.” Mary had used the word ‘oscillate’. “Your still mage is going to wake up, soon.” In fact, he was already stirring slightly, hand twitching. He wouldn’t be too much of a threat, given the damage to his arm and leg, plus the amount of blood he’d lost. “I don’t want to kill him or you, but I don’t think I have a choice.”

“Do you think he would live if you tied him up and held him hostage?” asked Jorge. His face was still impassive, as though he was talking about the weather.
“I would have to drop the gun,” she said.

She didn’t like not knowing what Jorge was thinking. Whatever it had been before, the assault on the hotel room had turned into a negotiation. She was repeating words that she’d practiced beforehand, trying to sound like she imagined Mary would, but it wasn’t enough.

She let the demon go, allowing the pieces of him to flow out of her reservoir. She took the devil at once, but there was a small moment when she was back to simply being Valencia, scared and confused, and the shard of mirror started shaking in her hand. She almost fired the gun, because her grip on it had been so tight that she was only a hair away from shooting.

As the devil’s essence went through her maw and became useful pieces for her to take as she pleased, she got a new sense of Jorge and his place in the order of all things.

He was negotiating with her, but he wasn’t actually a negotiator. He was almost certainly more important than anyone else involved with this mission, and he was very consciously sticking his neck out in talking to her. With a devil’s insights, she could see it written on him; he was curious. She didn’t understand how someone like that could be put in charge of an assault like this -- the devil didn’t understand it either. And it wasn’t that he was merely intrigued by her claim, the whole reason he’d put himself in harm’s way in the first place was that there was something he didn’t understand. He was the sort of man who would get himself shot just to learn something new.

He was the sort of man that devils lived for.

“You actually want to know,” said Valencia. “You want to know whether I’m telling the truth.”

“Do you really not know what the Uniquities Division is?” he asked.

“He’s waking up,” said Valencia, looking down at the man who was, technically, her hostage. The still mage was stirring, recovering from his injuries. She had less of an understanding of his physical state, with the demon gone.

“Take me as hostage instead?” asked Jorge.

Valencia thought on that. He sounded entirely sincere, which meant that he was a phenomenal liar, or he was being sincere. The fact that she already had a gun trained on his head made the gesture slightly less meaningful, but Valencia didn’t want the still mage to die, and she really didn’t want to have to go another round with him. She didn’t think she would win.

“Okay,” she said. “Come into the bedroom. I’m going to keep this pistol trained on you while you pull the still mage out, then you call for one of the other soldiers to take him into the hallway and close the door behind them. If there’s any sign of foul play, I’ll shoot you in the head and then make my escape.” She stopped and frowned at the words that had come out of her mouth. She’d issued the threat because the devil thought that it would work as manipulation against him. “I wouldn’t actually shoot you in the head, I would shoot to wound or distract and hope that you were okay.” (This, too, was said with a devil’s practiced intonation and phrasing, the better to portray her as a competent but troubled young girl, layered with a bit of tantalization. If he was the curious sort, then he was liable to be curious about why she’d changed her answer, and that worked in her favor too.)

They accomplished the exchange slowly and carefully, with little fanfare. The still mage was picked up by a large man in shimmerplate, possibly the muscle of the group, though Valencia had no idea how many members they had -- she’d counted five so far.

“So,” said Jorge. “Tell me about yourself.”
He’d meant it as a joke, but Valencia only realized that with the devil’s insights, and filtered through that lens, it wasn’t quite the same. The nonchalance and humor was meant to put her at ease, as was the faint smile on his face. That didn’t mean that his motives were impure, or that he was going to betray her as soon as the opportunity presented itself, but it made her like him a little less, because there were elements of deliberation and purpose in what he was doing. It made them feel fake, even though she didn’t think they were.

“Can you get an infernoscope?” asked Valencia. “I can prove what I’m saying.”

Jorge hesitated, then nodded. “I don’t see how that could be an issue, while we talk.” He walked to the door of the bedroom, then called out to the hallway, giving a command, not making a request, she noted. He was someone with a measure of authority, though he wielded it awkwardly. If she could actually convince him, there might be a chance that this would work out for her.

“Why are you here?” asked Valencia, as soon as he was done. She’d changed her body language so as to take the initiative from him. People were programmed in such a way that they would rarely start talking over you unless they were truly prepared for it. All you really needed to do was look like you were about to speak. She still saw a moment of hesitation in his eyes, but he did allow that line of questioning.

“Do you know what the Uniquities Division is?” he asked.

“No,” said Valencia. The devil she had just killed had more up-to-date information on the surface world, but playing at ignorance was beneficial in this exchange, and it wasn’t technically a lie.

“We were meant to be rapid response,” said Jorge. “There are some matters that cross national borders, which need to be dealt with swiftly and decisively. That’s Uniquities.”

“What did you expect to find here?” asked Valencia.

“You,” said Jorge. “Maybe your compatriots too, but eyewitness accounts figured them for dead. I wouldn’t put money on that though.” He shifted slightly in his seat. “You haven’t told me how you came by the peculiar quality of presenting as a non-anima, nor how you were given the ability to kill infernals across the boundaries of the planes.”

“You’re thinking that being non-anima isn’t necessarily mutually exclusive with being able to kill at a distance,” said Valencia.

Jorge raised an eyebrow. “What did you get that from?”

“The doubt in your voice, the way you joined those clauses, the minute movements of your facial muscles,” replied Valencia. “I’m using a devil’s powers right now.”

“And the devil is dead?” asked Jorge.

Valencia nodded. She watched his face. He was trying to hide it, but he didn’t believe her. He wanted to believe her, but -- “I know it sounds too good to be true,” she said.

“I don’t believe in that expression,” said Jorge.

Valencia felt herself warming to him. She had thought that it was too good to be true, when it was first happened, because her life until that point had been spent bound and often gagged, treated less like a child and more like an experiment -- which, in point of fact, was what she had been. Juniper Smith was the first good thing that had happened to her. Why would she have believed that anyone would treat her well, until it had actually happened? Mary had said something to the same effect as
Jorge, that we shouldn’t believe or disbelieve things on the basis of how they make us feel.

“Do you know what happened to my friends?” asked Valencia.

“They hijacked the ship, piloted it toward a very dangerous fortress, and from that point it’s not clear,” said Jorge. “We have two witnesses, but one is exhausted and the other a bit addled, and we didn’t recover them until a few hours ago. We think your, ah, friends might have made it to the fortress using an entad, some combination of entads, or other magical abilities, though what happened after that is anyone’s guess.”

“Thank you for telling me,” said Valencia. “If they’re all dead --” The devil had been about to make a joke of it, but Valencia stopped herself. She was leaning heavily on those skills, which sometimes led her down paths she didn’t like. “How likely is it that you’d be able to protect me?”

“It depends on the circumstances,” said Jorge. He looked uncomfortable for a moment. “Two hours ago, my superior at Uniquities left for Cranberry Bay, chasing down a lead he thought might be connected to this case and a few others. If that bears fruit, he plans to use you as leverage, in which case it will be easy to protect you. If it turns out that he finds nothing, then you’re still leverage, but it’s much less certain. A demon killer seems like something that Uniquities would like to have on hand though.” He leaned forward slightly. “You said that you can reach down into the hells, could you kill a demon here on Aerb?”

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. She moved one of her tendrils away from a target, through the layers of hell, until it was up beside her, in the same room as them. She didn’t think that she could hurt a person -- she hadn’t been able to touch them down in the hells -- but a demon? “Probably.”

“They’re rare,” said Jorge. “But when one breaches through, it’s always a hell of a time. If what’s on offer is you providing a weapon against demonkind, well, then yes, I think it’s safe to say that I can protect you.”

“I don’t want to be a weapon,” said Valencia. The devil’s instincts were screaming. It was the wrong thing to say. There were, possibly, avenues of attack that started with something similar to voicing that desire, ways of playing the victim or seeming weak, but Valencia was simply voicing what she felt, not attempting manipulation.

“What do you want to be?” asked Jorge.

“Hermione Granger,” said Valencia.

Jorge nodded as a thoughtful look crossed his face. “And who is that?”
Contract

I sat there, staring at Finch, trying to figure out my options. Killing him was certainly an option, but I didn’t actually know what he wanted, and it almost seemed like we were on the same side.

“Carrots,” I said. “What kind are you offering?” I was implicitly admitting that most of what he’d said was true, but I felt that was about the point we’d come to.

“Protection from the consequences of your many crimes is what we’ll start with,” he said. “For Amaryllis, we’re offering her support in reclaiming a place in Anglecynn. Nothing on the books.” I glanced at the wax recording. “Sometimes these recordings have problems,” he said with a shrug.

“You’ll forgive me for having a shaky understanding of the empire, but I wouldn’t have thought that directly interfering with the monarchical structure of one of your member nations would be allowed,” I said.

“You’re looking out for her,” said Finch with a nod. “Loyal servant? Or lover?”

“Casual acquaintances,” I replied.

Finch chuckled. “Whoever you are, there would be a place for you. Head of security, possibly, or something more. That would be up to her, but it would be a better life than running and hiding, giving fake names to everyone you meet, and sleeping with one eye open.”

“I’m pretty sure that if I was head of security for a princess returning to a kingdom that gave its best shot at killing her, I would end up sleeping with both eyes open,” I said.

“Fair point,” said Finch with a shrug. “I think it’s pretty clear I don’t know you, however much I’ve been following the recent twists and turns in your career with interest. I’m fairly sure you weren’t a known associate of the princess before her fall from grace, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“I wasn’t.” I said. I had no idea who I was before then, and wasn’t really keen to find out. “You and I are almost on equal ground, because I don’t really understand what Uniquities is.” Amaryllis had drawn out an org chart of the Empire of Common Cause, and while Imperial Affairs was clear enough, she hadn’t said too much about the Uniquities, aside from calling it a bloated mess.

“The Empire of Common Cause was founded in order to get everyone on the same page, as much as that was possible,” said Finch. “The goal was fixing long-standing structural problems between the various governments of the world, or at least those that would play ball. It was, by design, a slow-moving juggernaut of an organization, hard to change, with a tendency to gum up at the slightest provocation. Years down the road, some people began to think that was idiotic, because there were problems between the nations of the world that cropped up out of nowhere and needed to be responded to as quickly as humanly possible, without regard for borders. Unique situations. Uniquities.”

And now they’re taking part in a battle for ‘the heart of Anglecynn’ and trying to steal a tuung princess from us, presumably in order to do the same thing we wanted to do. “So let me guess,” I said. “Uniquities gets set up for crisis response, with a lot of latitude in how they respond, because some of the things they’d be going up against would come completely out of left field. New exclusions, monsters from the dark, entads fucking things up … that sort of thing. Uniquities is a hammer meant for only a small number of nails, but it’s one of very, very few hammers available to the empire, so it starts getting used for everything. Rapid response means minimal oversight, or
maybe just oversight that doesn’t happen until years or decades down the line, which means that your division is free to expand as quickly as your budget allows.”

“So you are familiar with Uniquities,” said Finch with a small smile.

I was, because I had built it, or something close enough that I thought the whole division was probably cribbed from my notes. I’d used something very similar in my Patchwork Republic campaign, though it hadn’t been called Uniquities, it had been called the Department for Response to Extreme Conditions. This was shortened to just ‘Conditions’, which led to Reimer calling their agents ‘conditioner men’.

“And now you’ve expanded into interfering with the governmental processes of member nations,” I said.

“Not officially,” said Finch, with a small smile. “Unofficially ... there are very few mechanisms within imperial law that allow the empire to protect itself as an institution.”

“Another nail you find your hammer coming down on,” I said. Jesus fucking Christ the lack of oversight must be staggering. The closest parallel on Earth would be what, J. Edgar Hoover’s time at the FBI? And that came crashing down, didn’t it? “And the tuung?” I asked.

“A separate issue,” said Finch. “We’d like to know where she is, naturally, but also what you were planning with her.”

She’s the next door down from the hotel room you’re planning to raid. I wondered how they had missed that. Grak had rented that room using his fake name, so maybe that was it. When I tried to think about things from Finch’s perspective, maybe Grak didn’t even come into the picture until he boarded the Down and Out, since he hadn’t been there for the fight in Boastre Vino. And if you found one suite, why go searching for another? We’d only gotten two because we wanted the tuung separate from us, and only had Grak check in at the second one out of basic operational security. There were still sure to be ways to connect the dots, but given how fast things were moving (still hard not to think of it as two months), maybe that would come later … meaning a limited window of opportunity to negotiate, if it wasn’t too late already.

“I don’t know what you think happened, but I didn’t kidnap her,” I said. “She negotiated for her own extraction.”

Finch eyed me. “Negotiated with the princess of Anglecynn?”

“No,” I said. I could already feel myself cringing in anticipation of saying it. “We call ourselves the Council of Arches.”

Finch stared at me.

“I’m not the one who chose the name,” I said.

“The name isn’t -- you’re telling me that you belong to a major international organization that I’ve never heard of?” His eyes were slightly wide. He was incredulous, but not completely disbelieving.

“In a manner of speaking,” I said. “Look, I need to get back to my,” wife “To Amaryllis. If you’re not going to arrest me, then we can talk after she’s had the baby. Most likely, you’re going to have to talk to her, not me.”

“She wasn’t pregnant when she took the fall,” said Finch. “Do you mind explaining to me what happened?”
“It’s complicated,” I said. I stood up from my chair. “It’s also personal.”

“Where do we stand?” asked Finch, not moving. “What response is your princess going to give?”

“If you wanted to give us a sweetheart deal, this wasn’t the way to do it,” I said. “Ambushing us in the hospital while we’re trying to get through the premature end of a long pregnancy --”

“Not that long, given she wasn’t pregnant in Boastre Vino,” said Finch. “And you do understand that your Council of Arches is responsible for more than a hundred deaths in the last month, that I know of, right? Including a major international incident less than twenty-four hours ago, and a different major international incident twenty-four hours before that? This is as nice as I’m willing to play, which is pretty fucking nice, all things considered.” He looked at the record, which was still spinning, carefully lifted the needle up, then grabbed the record and snapped it in half.

“Fickle things,” I said. “Always breaking.”

Finch nodded. “I’ll let you know the results of our raid in Headwater, once I get word. I have permission from the hospital staff to create a number of wards around Amaryllis’ room, to make sure that she can’t escape.” I politely failed to mention that we had two warders on the team, plus the teleportation key we had stashed in Fenn’s glove, which I was pretty sure he didn’t know anything about. “We’re going to have the exits covered. You could make a run for it, especially if you’ve got the firepower I think you do, but she’s not going anywhere.”

“We can’t stay in this hospital too long,” I said. “I’m warning you now.”

“Why?” asked Finch. He didn’t look pleased.

“Time-sensitive business elsewhere,” I said. “I can’t say more, not until I trust you, which I don’t. You had better pray that things turned out okay in Headwater.” I left without another word.

When I came back into the hospital room, there were a lot more people moving around than there had been before. Grak had come in, and he was beside Amaryllis, holding her hand and talking to her in a low voice. Fenn was off to one side, holding the staff with one hand and biting a nail with the other. I was pretty sure that she wasn’t going to have many nails left when this was all said and done. Bethel stood close to the staff, watching impassively. I went to them first.

“What’s the word?” I asked.

“Random medical terms being thrown around,” said Fenn. “The fuck does effacement even mean?”

“Thinning of the cervix,” I said.

“Well, she’s kind of pissed about it,” said Fenn. “Not the effacement, the whole thing.”

Amaryllis locked eyes with me and limply waved a hand, calling me over.

“Have fun,” said Fenn. “I might need a stiff drink.”

I came over to Amaryllis. The doctor was by her legs, which were propped up, but her hospital gown was down. A short green-skinned nurse pulled up a chair for me to sit in, and with a start, I realized that she was crantek, which was probably not coincidence.

“Status?” she asked. She was sweating slightly, enough that her hair was damp. “And bones.”

I started burning through my bones immediately, and she relaxed immediately.
“What are you doing?!” asked the doctor, standing up from where he was sitting. “Healing magic at this stage --”

“Not healing, mental fortitude,” said Amaryllis. “Helps. We’re not idiots.”

The doctor backed away slightly, frowning at her. “Bone magic?” he asked, looking at me.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. He was probably wondering where the bones were.

Confusion crossed his face, then he returned to his seat and entered a whispered conversation with one of the two nurses.

“Status,” Amaryllis repeated. She sounded very tired. As I watched she looked like she was shifting her hips, trying to get comfortable. I saw that there were a lot of pillows beneath her, which must have been from previous attempts at getting her in a position that was a little easier.

“He knows almost everything,” I said. We’d set up a numbering scheme, with our copious time in the chamber, but I was struggling to remember while I fed her WIS and carefully kept track of which bones I was burning. “Um, two, five, six, nine, ten,” I said. The list currently went to twelve, starting with my peculiar game power and ending with Bethel, but we were pretty sure that it was going to get longer. “Apparently an operation is underway to grab eight, and I don’t know how that’s going to work for them or for her.”

“I hope she fucking kills them all,” said Amaryllis, seething in momentary pain.

“Breathe,” said Grak. “Try your best to stay calm.” He glared at me like it was my fault somehow, even though I was the one burning through my own bones in order to help her keep her cool. I increased the rate slightly.

“Fuckers,” said Amaryllis, sounding slightly defeated. She lolled her head to the side and looked me in the eyes. “They want something.”

“Partnership,” I said. I glanced over at the doctor and the nurses. My attention returned to Amaryllis as she grunted. Her eyes were closed, and she held out her hand, which I took.

“What kind?” she asked, after the moment had passed.

“They want to back you in your return to Anglecynn,” I said.

Amaryllis looked at me with slightly glazed eyes. “More,” she said. It took me a moment to realize that she meant bone magic, and I increased the rate of burn again. I was going to need to go into my soul soon. She regained some sharpness to her expression. “Uniquities?”

“You said they were bloated,” I replied. “More bloated than you thought, maybe.”

“The black budget,” said Amaryllis. She sighed slightly as she shifted. “For infohazards.”

“We should talk about this after,” I said. “You need to concentrate on labor.”

“I might be dead later,” said Amaryllis.

“It’s extremely unlikely that you’re going to die,” said the doctor. I aspired to someday be as cool under pressure as he was. He was barely batting an eye at the weird shit. “And I agree that strength and will would best be conserved.”

Amaryllis nodded at that, and let out another small cry of pain.
It took a while.

I’d expected as much, because I had done a fair amount of my own reading, but I hadn’t expected to feel so exhausted by it. My role was, apparently, to sit beside Amaryllis and use bone magic on her so that she could endure the mental aspects of giving birth a little bit easier. Most of what was exhausting was just the emotional component of the thing, seeing Amaryllis in pain, watching her struggle and not really being able to do anything for her. It reminded me too much of sitting in the hospital with Arthur, hoping that he would start doing better, and not being able to meaningfully affect the outcome.

There were very few ways that this could go wrong for Amaryllis, but I was worried that we’d get a second curve ball. Even if Amaryllis was fine, the real question was whether Solace would be okay; Fenn brought Bethel over from time to time in order to show what was going on internally, partly just to reassure Amaryllis.

I was worried about complications.

That was how Arthur had died. I mean, he had gotten in a car accident, sure, and then been in a coma, which wasn’t great for you, but how he’d actually died was that he’d had some swelling in the brain (cerebral edema) and they’d done a relatively routine procedure to try to relieve the pressure (something called a ventriculostomy). Arthur’s dad was always the one to explain things to us, usually by e-mail, or in person when we came to visit. He adopted this sad, clinical tone that I sort of found comforting. The tone said, ‘yes, this is scary, but they’re professionals, and they know what they’re doing, they weighed the costs and benefits, but this is what they decided on’. We got an e-mail when he went in for the surgery, and nothing afterward. He’d wanted to tell us in person. There were complications, he said, and all that preparation and education had come to nothing.

That’s what I was thinking about, as I sat next to her. I was waiting for the moment the nurse would point something out, and the doctor would calmly deal with it, explaining things as he went, not showing any panic as things got scarier and riskier, and then they would be doing chest compressions or something, and eventually it would be made clear to me that she had died.

I was ready to step in. I had blood to give her, and if the worst happened, I could replace her soul’s image of her body with the backup I had in storage, the one from before she’d been pregnant (or at least, detectably pregnant, since it had been taken just after the ritual had completed). That was about all I could do though, which left me feeling powerless. There was a skill called Medicine, which I didn’t have, but Amaryllis had been vehement in arguing that the ability to respec -- if I even could -- was incredibly valuable, and the skill slots were even more valuable. I itched to do it anyway, worried that there were signs I wasn’t catching, or that it would take too much to unlock and be useless even after I had it.

The nurse started telling Amaryllis to push. Each one was accompanied by straining on her part, trembling knees and clenched teeth. She was sweating now, sometimes taking a few moments to drink water offered to her by Grak, but mostly not talking.

“I just want it to be done,” she said at one point, sounding utterly defeated.

The doctor stayed between her legs, using his hands to make sure that everything was going well. He gave the command that she should push, and she seemed to hate him for it, even as she dutifully pushed.

“You’re doing well,” said the doctor. “The head is almost out.”
I wasn’t sure how much time was passing, but the birth seemed to go on forever, and also somehow take absolutely no time at all.

The doctor asked for my help, and gave me instructions, telling me to hold Amaryllis’ leg, pushing it to help give a better angle for her hips. I had a view that I hadn’t particularly wanted, and watched the doctor use his hands to touch the green skin of Solace’s head, pushing away flesh and helping things along.

Once her head was past, Solace came out easily, slipping free with a gush of yellow and red fluid. Nonnatus clipped the umbilical cord with something like a clothespin, cut it, then handed her over to the crantek nurse, then returned to looking after Amaryllis, who was laid back on the bed looking like an exhausted but victorious warrior. I heard the doctor say placenta, which I had completely forgotten about, but --

“Come on,” I heard the nurse say. “Give me a squawk.”

I got up from where I was and went over to them. Solace was small, tinier than I had expected, preterm and not even a full baby. She looked so small and fragile, and the nurse was moving with fast hands, using a rubber bulb in the baby’s mouth to suck up fluids and bits of human viscera.

“Come on, little one,” said the nurse. Her voice was calm but urgent. “I know you can do it, say something for me, just a little cry.”

I stepped forward. “I need to try something,” I said. It was going to have to be the full body swap, taking the entirety of a body and placing it into Solace’s soul to overwrite the body that was there, so I could heal her into that form. We’d tested enough to confirm that it was limited by available biomatter, but there were ways around that, and --

“It’s okay,” said the nurse, placing a hand on my chest as she continued to look Solace over. “Sometimes they don’t make a noise. She’s fine.”

“She’s … what?” I asked.

“Lungs are working,” said the nurse. I watched as Solace wiggled in the little crib. The nurse used the bulb again, sucking up more from inside Solace’s mouth. “She’s not making noise, but sometimes they don’t. It’ll come, in time.”

I felt my racing heart begin to slow. When I looked at Solace, I couldn’t get over how small she was, her tiny fingers and toes, her wrinkly skin, her scrunched up face. Her eyes were closed, but sometimes opened for brief moments, squinting at the light. The nurse was wiping her off with a clean cloth, then swaddled her, wrapping her up and lifting her from the crib.

The nurse brought Solace over to Amaryllis, and Amaryllis cradled her close to her skin.

I sat on a bench with Fenn outside the hospital room, some time later, after I’d had a chance to wash up. Finch was nowhere to be seen, but there were two men down the hall who definitely didn’t look like they had any business being in a hospital, and Bethel had informed me that wards had been put up around the room, though it was, in her opinion, journeyman work, an opinion that Grak shared.

“I’m glad she has a chance to rest,” said Fenn. She hadn’t said much since the birth. I’d caught her staring off into space a few times.

“We’ll be back to it soon,” I said. “Not much time for rest and relaxation.”
“Yeah,” said Fenn. She was looking at her feet. “Any idea when it will be safe to heal her?”

“I could do it now, if we really wanted to,” I said. “The doctor said a day, maybe more, but if we do, it will take her longer to get back to normal. I took a look at,” I lowered my voice, “her soul, and I think the reason for the rule might be that her body is doing stuff and her soul is lagging behind. Reset the body to the soul’s idea of the body, and you’re basically resetting progress. The suggestion was concentrated spot healing for, um, bits of her that are torn or ruptured, but leave everything else as it is.”

“Humans are so gross,” said Fenn. She gave the floor a little kick. “You know what she said to me?”

“When?” I asked.

“Just after the birth,” said Fenn. “I avoided the worst of it, but I just wanted to give her a ‘hey, good job, glad you’re not dead’. She cleared her throat. “She said that she wasn’t looking forward to doing that again.”

“Huh,” I said.

“It was a little bit of a joke, but a little bit not,” said Fenn. “It just struck me as … I don’t know, Mary being this unstoppable machine of a woman. Less than an hour after all that and she’s thinking to herself about the next time.” Fenn sighed. “You still want kids?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Doing all that for real someday … not that it wasn’t real, it was, but I’m already sick with anxiety, and Solace isn’t even my child. But someday … not when we’ve got so much shit going on, not when we keep having to put our lives on the line, but someday, yeah.”

Unless it has to be like Uther did it, distant from his own children.

“I’d give you a baby, if you really wanted one,” said Fenn. She wasn’t looking at me.

“Fenn,” I said.

“Just sayin’,” said Fenn.

“Fenn,” I said again. “We’re really not at the point where we need to have this discussion, at all.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Fenn. She leaned forward and gripped the edge of the bench. “I’m just saying, if it ever did come to that, where you thought a baby with me would make you more happy than not, I’d lay off the herbs and we’d see what came of it.” She shrugged. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately, for obvious reasons, and that’s my decision. I wouldn’t do it on my own, but if it were you … I wouldn’t be averse.” She let out a sigh that had a hitch in it, like she was a step away from tears. She hadn’t been looking at me, but now she looked away, down the hallway.

“We can talk about it, if you want,” I said.

“Valencia,” said Fenn.

As the name left her mouth, a black-haired girl came around the corner. I hadn’t seen her in two months; in the interim, my image of her had reset back to her as she was when we’d first met her, white hair and a white shift. She was incognito though, wearing different clothes than she’d been in when we left her in the hotel room, and except that she was more attractive than average, I’d have been very hard-pressed to say that she was anything but a normal human girl.

She gave us a small little wave, like we hadn’t been wondering whether she was dead or alive.
Three people followed behind her, and one them was Finch. The human with them was on the tall side, with curly black hair; I noticed with a slight bit of dismay that he was holding Valencia’s copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* with his finger stuck between the pages. The woman with them was a vitric in a long dress, bald (as her kind were) and with a serious expression. Her hands were a blue that faded in color going up her arm, which the dress accentuated with blues of its own.

“Hi,” said Valencia, looking between the two of us.

Fenn came forward and wrapped her in a hug. “I missed you, little hooman.”

Valencia returned the hug, closing her eyes and smiling softly. “Did you?” she asked. “I didn’t even think you liked me.”

“Mary talked you up,” said Fenn. She pulled back from the hug, which Valencia broke reluctantly.

She immediately went for a hug from me, which I returned. It was a bit awkward; I had known her for about a week and a half, with two months of interruption. Amaryllis had talked her up to me, too, partly so we could set some ground rules about how we would treat her, and partly to help untangle some of Amaryllis’ complicated feelings on the subject of having a non-anima in the party, which we weren’t really successful at.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” I said. I looked at Finch over my shoulder with a raised eyebrow. That things had, apparently, not gone disastrously wrong in Headwater was a surprise, and that she had been brought to see us without pre-conditions was an even bigger one.

“They shot at me,” said Valencia. “And there was a still mage.” She buried her head in my shoulder. “It was scary.”

I pulled back from her, and again saw that same reluctance she’d shown with Fenn at breaking the hug. “They shot at you?” I asked, looking at Finch.

“She shot first,” said Finch, folding his arms across his chest.

The vitric held out her hand. “Alcida Divona,” she said. “Head of Uniquities. It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance.”

I shook her hand, looking her over, wary of the lightning I knew her body contained. “Alcida. You were one of Uther’s Knights.”

She gave me a faint, confused smile. “No,” she said. “I was named after her. She was my grandmother.”

“Oh,” I said. So far as I knew, Raven was the only one of the Knights from a species with a long enough lifespan to still be alive, and she’d been missing for centuries. Vitrics were long-lived though, and it wouldn’t have surprised me in the slightest to see one of Uther’s Knights thrust back onto the field of play.

“Jorge Mascar,” said the tall guy. He transferred his book to his other hand, then shook mine. “I’m the one who recovered Valencia.”

“You don’t get kudos for that,” I said. “She was doing fine on her own.”

“He’s nice,” said Valencia, in a chiding tone. I wondered whether or not she was channeling a devil, and how much these people knew about her. They had to have checked her over with a warder, right? Just as a matter of basic not-being-fucking-idiots?
“It’s going to be some time until Amaryllis is ready to talk,” I said.

“We understand,” replied Alcida. “And we apologize for any … unpleasantness.” She studiously didn’t look at Finch when she said that.

“It’s understandable,” I said. “We’re not happy about it, but we understand. And again, Amaryllis is going to be the one you want to talk to, and she’s going to need time, since she just gave birth a few hours ago.”

“Gave birth to a purebred crantek girl, somehow,” said Finch.

“Show respect,” said Alcida. “You’re here by dint of your hard work, but there are ways of doing things when making first contact.” She was staring at me. “We’re going to need to know more about the Council of Arches. From what we can tell, our goals are somewhat aligned. We had planned on recruiting Amaryllis Penndraig, before she was ousted.”

“I do appreciate you coming all this way, presumably at great expense,” I said. “But again, I’m not willing to make discussions without her, and she’s going to need a lot of time before she’s ready to talk shop.”

Amaryllis stepped out of the hospital room, dressed in her immobility plate with the helmet off. She had a sword on one hip and her void pistol on the other. In her hand, she held the dollhouse staff, with the rope around it in elaborate knots. I suspected chicanery and magic, though I wasn’t sure what kind. When Fenn and I had gone out to get some air and time to ourselves, Amaryllis had looked worn out; she’d been asleep, or on the edge of it, with Solace suckling at her breast. Now she looked like she’d spent the last week training for a marathon and was standing at the starting line, ready to run.

“Lady Penndraig,” said Alcida with a small bow. “I am Alcida Divona, head of --”

“I know who you are,” said Amaryllis. “I wrote a brief to the Lost King’s Court and a few other allied polities advising thorough investigation into the handling of finances under your regime. Had I known that Uniquities was engaged in attempts to influence the governing of member nations of the Empire of Common Cause … you understand that many of us would consider that proof that the imperial experiment was a failure, and people would use it as grounds for moving to dissolve the empire, or at the very least, pull out from it with whatever pains that might cause?”

“Would you?” asked Alcida.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “If the empire goes, whatever replaces it will be worse. We’ve seen two interimperiums, and both have been marked by horrors big and small.”

“Then you understand the importance of keeping the empire as a cohesive whole,” said Alcida with a nod. “I read your letter, as you might have guessed I would. I was impressed by your intellect and vigor, more so when I learned that you were a girl of sixteen. And you were right, of course, about how Uniquities looks from the outside, how it’s meant to look.”

Amaryllis gave a faint, vulpine smile. “It does make a bit more sense now. You’re not an incompetent, or an embezzler, just running rogue. And now you’re coming to me to make a deal.”

“Not just with you,” said Alcida. “With the entire Council of Arches.”

Amaryllis stared at her, then raised an eyebrow in my direction. I shrugged.

“You very much appear to be in the same business as we are,” said Alcida. “We have an incomplete
picture of what it is you do and have done, but it appears you have need of resources we have on offer, and at least a small amount of overlap in interests. It’s my understanding that you hijacked the *Down and Out* because you needed a way down in a hurry. If you’d been working with us, you could have borrowed any one of a half dozen methods without the need for an international incident.” She gestured toward Valencia, a curious sort of hand movement that kept her palm pointed toward her. I was pretty sure that was a vitric thing; if you could shoot lightning from your fingers, pointing might be considered rude, even if you weren’t intending to blast someone with it. “If a non-anima—”

“Sorry,” said Jorge, who had stayed silent up to this point. “The term we’re going with is anti-infernal.” Alcida gave him a very calm look that was still somehow withering. In contrast, I saw a very small smile from Valencia.

“If someone like Valencia had been identified in the wild, she would almost certainly have been brought to us, if there were even the slightest pretense that her existence was intraimperial,” said Alcida.

“And Imperial Affairs would simply say that she has the capacity to cross borders, and is therefore intraimperial, under their jurisdiction,” said Amaryllis with a roll of her eyes.

“More likely we’d argue that her ability to reach down into the hells makes her, by definition, imperial business rather than national business,” said Alcida. “And more likely than that, we would hide her away and do our best not to have to answer messy questions about how or why we were allowed to take charge. I very much understand that doesn’t win us points in your favor, however pragmatic it might be.”

“It’s pragmatic only until the point it blows up in your face,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn came up beside me. “Blah, blah, blah, politics,” she whispered.

“We need to have a private meeting,” said Amaryllis. “You have us warded, you can wait outside.”

“They have a warder,” said Finch. “There were wards on the hotel room.”

“Then you’ll have to trust us,” said Amaryllis. “If we don’t want to deal, we’ll tell you before we leave.” She went back into the hospital room without another word, and after I gave a glance back at the people from Uniquities, I followed her.

Grak had changed clothes too, and was back into his armor, with his axe at his hip. He was cradling a swaddled Solace in his good arm. He stood up from his stool when we entered, and gave Valencia a small wave when he saw her. On coming in, Valencia wrapped Amaryllis in a hug and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“More hugs when you’re not in armor, okay?” asked Valencia.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “I was very worried about you. You were able to convince them?”

“I was,” nodded Valencia. “Jorge is really wonderful. He got really excited when they brought the infernoscope in, and after that it was very pleasant. I insisted that he come along.”

“Are you doing okay?” I asked Amaryllis. “You seem … really well, actually.”

“Time chamber,” said Bethel, materializing next to her. “I partially reconstructed it inside this room.”

I looked over at Solace. On closer inspection, she did look bigger than before, a little more filled out
and proportionate, with fewer wrinkles. “How long?” I asked.

“Not long,” said Amaryllis. “Two weeks.”

“On bed rest,” said Grak. “I was in with her.”

“Okay,” I said. I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I wish you’d talked with me first.”

“It was a very confined space,” said Amaryllis. “Even with just Grak it was --”

“She did not enjoy bed rest,” said Grak, folding his arms across his chest.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “Can you ward us, please?”

Grak snorted, but uncrossed his hands and got out his wand.

“How is Solace?” I asked. “Have you tried --”

“One moment,” said Amaryllis, holding up a finger. She waited until Grak was finished. We were five people, one illusion of a person, and a baby in not really all that big of a space. “I hereby call to order the first meeting of the Council of Arches.”

“Oh man, did shit just get real?” asked Fenn. She grinned at me.

“I was going to ask if Bethel had tried talking to Solace through thoughtspeak,” I said.

“She’ll need to be awake for it,” said Bethel. “Newborns spend most of their time sleeping.”

“She’s awake now,” said Grak, looking down at the baby he held in his arm. “Or as awake as she gets.”

“Then I suppose now is as good a time as any,” said Bethel. The staff Fenn was holding split at the bottom, making three little legs. A branch jutted out from the wood, growing swiftly through the air toward Grak. He held out the baby slightly, and the branch touched down gently on her head. Bethel frowned somewhat. “It’s fragmentary, with poor syntax, but there are words,” she said. “Much more than I’ve typically been able to get from babies.”

“Good,” said Amaryllis. “Physically, she’s progressing roughly as fast as I’d expected, meaning slightly faster than human. Spiritually, she’s becoming more cohesive every day, including in ways that don’t seem to be predicated on what she’s taking in from being in the world. I’ve been watching her skills, especially. Things are coming back, a bit piecemeal, but they are.”

“They grow up so fast,” said Fenn.

“It’s been what, five days since we visited the locus?” I asked, ignoring Fenn.

“We would be on the sixth,” said Grak.

“With Bethel mobile, or at least relatively so, I think we should move into the bottle,” said Amaryllis. “Even if Solace can’t perform druidic magic, being close to the locus might help her, or at least might help the locus. It gives Bethel plenty of room to be as large as she wants to be, which might make the time chamber a little less onerous.”

“I would prefer you use it as little as possible,” said Bethel.

“Noted,” said Amaryllis.
“You wanted to be a home for us, not a tool to be used,” I said. “We’ll respect that.”

“All that is in the relative short-term,” said Amaryllis. “In the long-term, we apparently need to deal with Uniquities. The plan of establishing our own nation by getting someone powerful to back the creation of a splinter tuung polity probably won’t work if we’re in opposition to them, even if they’re operating outside their official remit, and we can skip a few steps forward in the master plan if we can get them to agree to the important parts. We can’t allow them to take ownership of the project, for a variety of reasons, but I don’t see a reason we can’t be allies and partners, even if I don’t particularly like Uniquities. I should be able to get them to see the light on that particular matter, given that we both benefit from being insulated from the other’s malfeasance.”

“We’re planning malfeasance?” asked Grak.

“We’ll be accused of malfeasance no matter what we do,” said Amaryllis.

“The Lost King’s Court is a pit of vipers,” said Bethel. “I don’t think I would mind defending you from them.”

“We have the teleportation key,” I said. “I won’t claim to be an expert on imperial law, but I’m pretty sure that we’re not supposed to be holding onto it, if we’re planning to go legitimate.”

“Also we broke that soul mage out of prison, does anyone remember that?” asked Fenn.

“I do,” said Valencia.

“It was a joke,” said Fenn. “A joke that hopefully never leaves this room, because I have to imagine we’d get in some shit for that. Plus three sevenths of us are soul mages, which there are ways of detecting, and which is pretty fucking illegal last time I checked.”

“We can deal with some of that,” said Amaryllis. She looked to me. “It didn’t seem like they had Esuen, did it?”

“No,” I said. “Meaning that she might still be where we left her, though I don’t know how long that’s going to remain the case. We don’t have her, which puts us in a less favorable position.”

“I warded their room,” said Grak. “They might be able to hide.” He held out a hand and gave it an uncertain wiggle. “A warder would see through the deception in an instant.”

“I shot their warder,” said Valencia. That got our attention. “She was going to look at me,” said Valencia. “I shot her monocle, not her face.”

“They may have another on hand,” said Grak. “Or they will find one.”

“So we should move fast,” said Amaryllis. “I would hope that Esuen would have some small amount of loyalty to us, given that we rescued her, but I know that in her situation loyalty wouldn’t be my primary concern. Valencia, we’re going to need to do a full debrief on you at some point, so we can know what they know, and what, exactly, happened.”

“Okay,” said Valencia. “Now?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She hesitated. “Maybe. We could all go into the time chamber and hash it out in there, but I’m not certain how much that would help if they’re already giving us time to talk amongst ourselves. Can you give me the short version of what they know?”

“They know that I’m non-anima,” said Valencia. “Jorge calls me an anti-infernal.” She smiled at that.
“They saw the books I had in the hotel room, but I’m not sure they made the connection to Earth. I didn’t offer any explanation, because I was still hoping that you were all alive, and I didn’t want to say anything that you didn’t want me to say.”

“You did very, very well,” said Amaryllis.

“I wasn’t sure,” said Valencia. “The whole time, up until I saw Joon, I wasn’t sure that I had done the right thing. I kept thinking that maybe I should have killed everyone.”

“Wow,” said Fenn. “That’s kind of how things went for us, to be honest. But that was months ago.”

“So we’re going to make some kind of deal with Uniquities?” I asked. “They think that we’re some kind of clandestine organization.”

“Aren’t we?” asked Fenn. “Granted, I can’t speak for how it was in the three days before I joined, so maybe those were different days, but my tenure in the Council of Arches has been marked by hiding out and giving false names. I’d kind of like to stop doing that, if it’s all the same to you.”

“I would too,” said Amaryllis. “But the moment we can stop watching our backs, we’re going to start having to watch our fronts.”

“And we’ll probably still have to watch our backs,” I said.

“Yes, that too,” said Amaryllis. “Anyway, the first order of business of the inaugural meeting of the Council of Arches is what we’re going to do about Solace and the locus. I propose that we move into the bottle and spend some time there until we’re able to get the locus back into a stable state.”

“We’re still no closer to extracting it,” said Grak.

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Bethel with a slow nod.

“All in favor?” asked Amaryllis.

There was a pleasing round of ayes.

“The second order of business is what we’re going to do with Uniquities,” said Amaryllis. “I spent eight months working on plans for exploiting the knowledge we extracted from the backpack, and I still think that’s best accomplished through using the tuung and trying, best we can, to not be beholden to anyone.”

“Anyone except the tuung,” said Valencia.

“That’s -- yes,” said Amaryllis. “But my hope is that we can help shape their new culture, given that they’ll be leaving the old one behind. Esuen was already partly educated within the athenaeum of a very imperial city, that helps enormously.”

“Well, I don’t care too much,” said Fenn. “I’d like to throw my hat in the ring for court jester though.”

“The court jester’s job is about speaking truth to power,” said Amaryllis, face set in a serious frown. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that you would be good for the job, you would just make jokes.”

“I will appoint myself court jester,” said Bethel.

“Yeah, but you have to also be funny, right?” asked Fenn.
“Congratulations, you’ve side tracked us,” said Amaryllis. She sighed. “I’d like to take lead on negotiations with Uniquities, since I know them best, and I’ve been planning for something approximating this meeting. I’m also the one they’re most interested in, primarily because they have no clue what they’ve stumbled upon. So this is a vote to move forward with that, with the ideal end goal being a tiny government of our own in some far-flung corner of the world, through which we can become fabulously wealthy and improve the lives of everyone on Aerb. All in favor?”

The response to this was less enthusiastic. I said aye, and Fenn did too, though pretty weakly. Amaryllis was obviously in favor too. But that left Grak, Val, and Bethel.

“Grak?” asked Amaryllis.

“A thousand pounds of gold as penance,” he said. “Per our agreement, it was one pound of gold every two weeks. I’m finding that to be too slow, even with the time in the chamber. I made a promise. I still intend to keep it.”

“Oh, are we talking about extracting value from the party?” asked Fenn. “Deal me in.”

“At current market prices, minus the amount you’re owed from our stores, the remainder of what you need amounts to roughly ten million obols,” said Amaryllis. “There are a few ways that we might get in a position to be able to pay that out to you, but it was always going to take years.”

“I know,” said Grak. Solace made a squawk, the first sound I’d heard from her, and Grak moved over to Amaryllis, handing the baby over. Amaryllis smiled at the baby and began rocking her, then returned to look at Grak, her face stony.

“Name your price,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll decide as a group. And remember that we’re your friends.”

“I made a promise,” said Grak.

“Name your price then,” said Amaryllis. “Tell us what you need to take from us so that you would consider this whole endeavor worth your time. Tell us what we have to pay you so that you don’t walk away and get yourself killed going after another gold mage. Jesus Christ, Grak.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” said Fenn. I gave her a look. “Inside joke,” she said with a shrug.

Grak frowned at Amaryllis. “I do care for you,” he said. He looked around the small room. “All of you. Some more than others.” That was characteristic dwarven bluntness right there. “I will not be subsumed by this group.” That was also a characteristically Grak way of saying things. He seemed allergic to the word ‘but’, so instead, he’d just give two statements of fact, one of which undercut the other.

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “It’s going to cause us no end of problems with capital, because we’d be idiots to plan on paying anything out in the beginning, but I’ll personally guarantee you ten million obols within two years time, and if I don’t have it, we’ll go kill a fucking dragon and take its hoard or something, okay?”

Grak stared at her, then nodded.

I saw Valencia’s expression change, going from nervous to calm in an instant. I didn’t fully understand the subtext of what Amaryllis and Grak were talking about, but I could ask Valencia later, if Amaryllis didn’t explain it. I at least knew that it wasn’t actually about money, it was about honor, or something else, either particular to dwarven culture, or particular to Grak. Martyrdom,
maybe. It felt like a weird time for it to come out, but he’d spent three months in the time chamber with Amaryllis, then had his role as midwife undercut by the professionals.

“Just to be clear, we’re going to take a vote before we go off to slay a dragon, right?” asked Fenn.

“That was a hypothetical,” said Amaryllis.

“I vote aye on the plan for nationhood,” said Grak. “I would like to see a full accounting of where we stand, as far as finances go.”

“We’ll table that, for now,” said Amaryllis. She looked at Bethel. “You have an objection to the prospect of building our own nation?”

“I have no particular interest in it,” said Bethel. “Nor in adventuring in general. Consider my silence abstention.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. She turned to Valencia. “I would understand if you didn’t want to be in the spotlight. No one would force you to take an active role.” She looked at the rest of us. “No one has to take any role if they don’t want to, but we’re going to be a nation of thousands, and the circle of trust is very, very small.”

“No, sorry,” said Valencia. “It’s not that, it’s just things seem to be moving very fast, and I feel like I’ve missed a lot, so it’s all confusing.” She hesitated, then pointed to Bethel. “Who is this?”

We had a nice moment of silence at that.

“Valencia, this is Bethel, the house formerly known as Kuum Doona,” I said. “She’s the staff with a dollhouse on top, the woman you see there is just a projection. Bethel, this is Valencia, we’ve, ah, mentioned her unique situation.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Valencia. She looked from Bethel-the-illusion to Bethel-the-staff. “Which one should I look at?”

“The illusion,” said Bethel. “I produce it for the sake of convenience, so others can imagine me as though I am one of them.”

“I dye my hair,” said Valencia with a nod.

“But you don’t object to Mary’s plan?” I asked.

Valencia hesitated. “I don’t know,” she said. “My first thought was that I would do whatever you said to do, because I trust you.” She frowned, narrowing her eyes at a point off in the distance. “Then I thought that maybe I should be my own person a bit more. I don’t know what the real Valencia actually wants.”

“That’s fair,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll try to help you.”

“We all will,” I said.

“Then I vote aye,” said Valencia. “Can we not vote on things so much though?” I remembered the last formal vote we’d taken as a group, two months ago, and how stressful she’d found that.

“I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t doubt we’ll have other things that occupy our time, but we have a real opportunity to do good, and to further our collective interests at the same time.”
“I have a lot of quests to get to,” I said. “Things that it’s likely only I can do. And I want to find Uther, as you all know.”

“I do too,” said Bethel. I winced at that. I was pretty sure we weren’t on the same page about what we were going to do when we found him.

“And we can,” said Amaryllis. “I might stay back, until I have things running so they can handle my absence. With the time chamber —” She stopped and looked at Bethel. “If I’m allowed to use it, then it should take considerably less time to hammer through the kinks.”

“That’s a mangled metaphor,” said Fenn.

“You rubbed off on me,” said Amaryllis. “Okay, it appears that we’re all relatively on the same page, I think our first meeting can be adjourned.”

“Next time we should have chairs,” said Grak.

“Earth management tactic,” said Amaryllis. “It’s called a ‘stand-up’, intentionally meant to shorten meetings because people don’t like to stand that long.”

“It didn’t bother me too much,” said Bethel with a smile.

We broke off into groups after that. Amaryllis took off the chestplate of her immobility plate so that Solace could feed, Fenn went to have a talk of some sort with Bethel, and Valencia was excited to tell me about her time alone, which had apparently involved a fair bit of precision gunfire. Grak sat on his own, in a chair in the corner. I wanted to go ask him what was up, but I was feeling drained, and Valencia was describing an encounter at a tavern with considerable enthusiasm. It was easier to listen to her than to think about Grak, so I took the easy path.
Consolation

Negotiations took hours, and I was thankful that my role in them was very minor. There were hundreds of things that needed to be hammered out, but Amaryllis and Valencia (with the most cunning devil she could find) were both up to it. No one ever said out loud that if we wanted to, we could just kill everyone and leave, but there were a few hints in that direction, especially with casual uses of magic, most of them by Bethel. She peeled the skin from an apple with her telekinesis while she held it in two fingers, which made the point rather clear.

The big sticking point was Anglecynn. Finch had been called into Cranberry Bay because of that first altercation with Larkspur, and he’d started connecting the dots right from the start, at least to hear him tell it. A mysterious man goes to a library asking about a disease from the Risen Lands, and just a short time later gets attacked by Anglecynn’s Foreign Security Director, who also happens to be the guy who benefits most from Amaryllis Penndraig supposedly dying in the Risen Lands a few weeks earlier? Yeah, maybe you might be able to infer from that that A) she was still alive and B) sick with some difficult-to-cure disease and C) Larkspur Prentiss was trying to finish the job.

Uniquities liked Amaryllis. Well, I shouldn’t say that, because Uniquities was a huge department, and a lot of what they did could have been entirely justified to the imperial legislature, if they ever had to answer for any of it. It wasn’t clear how many people were in the know on the things they might get in deep shit for, but my guess was that it was pretty small, like any good conspiracy had to be (barring magical means of maintaining it, anyway). But it was easier for me to think of Uniquities as being embodied by the three people I’d met, and especially their head honcho, Alcida.

Alcida really liked Amaryllis.

Alcida liked Amaryllis so much that she wanted her as a major player in Anglecynn politics, and had been willing to bend rules in order to get that to happen, both before and after Amaryllis had started on her long, strange journey with me. I found a lot of what Alcida said a little grandiloquent, stuff about ‘as Anglecynn goes, so goes the Empire’, comparing the kingdom to a listing ship, and talking about rooting out the heart of corruption, something that could only be done by someone with a keen intellect, an iron will, and covert backing.

Amaryllis wasn’t having it.

“I care about Anglecynn, deeply,” she said. “But I also care about Aerb as a whole, and if I go back to Anglecynn to become one of a very large number of princes and princesses, I’m not in a good position to actually accomplish anything.”

“You had allies before,” said Alcida. “They might not have been able to save you -- unless they were the ones who contacted the Council of Arches on your behalf?”

“They were not,” said Amaryllis. The meeting had gone long enough that Solace needed breastfeeding, which Amaryllis was doing as the negotiations continued on. It seemed like a power play to me, but I wasn’t well-versed in such things, and it might have been simple necessity.

“But you did have allies,” said Alcida. “There would be barriers to you returning --”

“I was given an expedited trial by adversity,” said Amaryllis. “I would either be accused of having not made it through the Risen Lands, or charged with desertion from the Host, and even though it wouldn’t make any sense, it’s very likely that both would happen. My nominal allies would be spending enormous amounts of political capital in order to secure me good standing among the Lost
King’s Court, and once all was said and done, I still wouldn’t be in a good position to actually accomplish much, especially given how much rebuilding there would be.”

As lies went, that was a little bit transparent. We had a rather significant number of advantages, and that was part of the argument for why we wanted to have a puppet state of our own. But it was true that this would all be harder if Amaryllis was also having to spend time fighting entrenched institutions, political opponents using those entrenched institutions, and working within the constraints of a system that had been set up five hundred years ago and modified in the ways that were expedient. Anglecynn’s legal system was like a house that had been lived in for a few generations, where each owner had applied their own temporary fixes to various problems, sometimes applying temporary fixes on top of previous temporary fixes, until the whole thing was a mess that you needed years of study to even make sense of. We didn’t want anything to do with it.

Alcida eventually relented. I don’t think she liked the idea of giving us free rein, especially since she didn’t know the half of what the Council of Arches actually was, but the creation of what would hopefully be a new nation with some amount of legal recognition would give some cover for Uniquities to post agents there. Obviously Esuen would have to be consulted, but they apparently still didn’t know where she was, and we were keeping that under our hat for the time being. (I was pretty sure that Finch was going to be pissed off about it, and I have to admit that I was looking forward to it.)

“When we see each other again, it will be under a different pretense,” said Amaryllis, toward the end of things. “We’ll collect Esuen and square things away with her, and receive your dossier on potential contacts and locations by dead drop. I think it’s likely that if the Isle of Poran ends up being a possibility, we’ll take the opportunity to settle there.” So far as I had been able to discern, the Isle of Poran was a rocky, craggy place that no one wanted.

“The Council of Arches has further designs though,” said Alcida. “From what you’ve said, and your willingness to parlay, I think our goals are roughly in alignment, but I’d desperately like to know more.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Amaryllis. “If your goal is maintaining the empire and improving the lives of its citizens, then I think you’ll be quite pleased.”

After Amaryllis and Solace were both given a bill of clean health by the doctor (who was very calm about the fact that Amaryllis had mostly recovered from birth in the space of a day, and that Solace had grown considerably in the same amount of time), we teleported out, all of us at once. Valencia didn’t count as a person for the purposes of the teleportation key, because magic didn’t recognize her as a person, and Bethel was, technically, a magic item, just like Ropey (who had maintained his position coiled around her).

Solace cried when we came through to the foothills of the World Spine, which wasn’t too surprising given the sharp pain it caused. Amaryllis calmed her, rocking her gently and cooing to her, while the rest of us put on our breathing masks so we could go into the glove. The bottle was right where we’d left it six days prior (or, depending on your perspective, between two and nine months ago). Grak peeled back a few of the wards he’d put up so we could get in, and then we all piled into the glove while Amaryllis rode her immobility plate down.

The interior of the bottle was stiflingly hot, and as I looked around, most of the grass was dead. The tree house in the center had lost about half of its leaves, and they were laying on the ground, brown and dead.

The locus came over to us, limping and bleeding, panting with its tongue out. I’d forgotten just how
intimidatingly large it was, and the oddity of seeing a deer with six eyes. The whites of its coat weren’t as bright or pure as they’d been when we’d left it.

Amaryllis approached the doe with Solace in her arms.

“I --” she began, then stopped. “This is her,” she said. “I guess you would know that. I don’t know if you can --”

Curling bits of glowing smoke or mist began rolling off the locus’ hide. It straightened up until it reached its full height, then bent down toward Solace. I steeled myself, not knowing what to expect. Druids ran on bullshit, and the locus was the source of that bullshit. I’d had a glimpse of it when I’d had stratospherically high Essentialism, but that was me coming at the whole concept of a druidic ritual from a completely different direction -- or rather, the game giving me brief insight into how to do the working without actually giving me any actual skill as a druid (along with the total lack of connection). The locus was mysterious; that was its entire mode of being.

The Six-Eyed Doe took in a deep breath, and the tendrils of glowing mist twisted in an invisible wind, until they were all pointing toward Solace. When the locus released the breath, the mist rushed forward, washing over Solace and spreading around Amaryllis, continuing on as the Six-Eyed Doe extended its long exhale of air.

Solace began to change and grow, her swaddling cloth falling off her, leaving her naked in Amaryllis’ arms. Within the space of a few seconds, she had doubled in size, then again, becoming older, from tiny baby to little girl before our eyes.

That was when the locus faltered. It coughed, and the glowing mists around it dissipated, spreading out onto the ground around it, which went from limp and brown to green and vibrant in an instant. The locus gave a low moan and collapsed to the side, breathing heavily.

Solace pushed away from Amaryllis and slipped out of her arms, clambering down to the ground, and came to the side of the locus’ head. She laid a hand on its neck, murmuring something in its ear, then kissed on its cheek.

I don’t think that I had ever seen Amaryllis look more forlorn. Solace looked like she was back to being Solace; her face was animated with the same intelligence and experience that she’d had in her previous life, and her connection to the locus seemed as strong as I’d ever seen it. This was what we’d hoped for, what Amaryllis had spent almost nine months of her life in a cramped room on, and now it was all over. She hadn’t really talked about her confused feelings towards Solace, not with me, but it was evident that she hadn’t excised them from her soul without telling anyone.

Solace glanced over at Amaryllis, and must have seen the same thing, because she walked over to her. They had a brief conversation that I couldn’t hear, and that I was trying not to hear, because it seemed private, but the end result was that Amaryllis picked Solace up, and they had a hug that lasted for minutes. Solace’s small, dark green lips were moving, whispering something in Amaryllis’ ear, and when they broke apart, Amaryllis was crying happy tears.

Solace approached the rest of us, holding Amaryllis by the hand.

Fenn stood next to me, and leaned in close enough to whisper to me. “Does this mean Solace is a loli now?” I glared at her as she pulled away from me, smiling. She gave me a thumbs up, I think because she was happy one of her Earth references had landed. A glare might have been the reaction she was going for.

“Thank you all,” said Solace. Her voice was high, childlike, which made sense, considering. Crantek
were already one of the smaller mortal species. “I’ve been reborn many times, but that death was my first.”

“Are you stuck like that?” asked Fenn.

“As a child?” asked Solace. “There’s nothing wrong with adolescence. I’ve been through it before. The locus rushed things because there’s need of me.” She looked to Valencia. “New faces,” she said. “The locus had good things to say about you.” (I assumed that was figurative, because as far as I knew, the locus didn’t speak at all.)

Valencia curtsied, going low and bringing her dress out to the side as wide as it would go. “It’s an honor to finally meet you, Oorang Solace. My name is Valencia the Red.”

“Go speak with it,” said Solace. “It’s in need of comfort and wants you by its side.”

Valencia rushed off, running pell-mell across the grass, which was slowly becoming greener around where Solace stood.

“Grakhuil,” said Solace. She glanced down at his prosthetic. “Can I give you a hand?”

Grak nodded. “It’s been three months,” he said. “Long enough for it to scar over.”

“Three months?” asked Solace. “I had a vague recollection of a hospital. Shouldn’t it have been … what is it for humans? Nine?”

“Hyperbolic time chamber,” said Amaryllis. They were still holding hands. Amaryllis was standing close to Solace, possessive, like she was worried that our druid would run off. Or maybe like she was worried that her child wasn’t going to be okay.

“Ah,” said Solace. She looked around the bottle. “I had wondered. It’s clear there will be some catching up I have to do.” She glanced at Bethel, and the staff that Fenn had stuck in the ground. “Another new member?”

“I’m the new house,” said Bethel. “You’ll need to show me where to expand, if we’re all to live here for the time being.”

Solace nodded, then looked up at Amaryllis. “How much time has passed, would you say?”

“Two weeks, give or take a few days,” said Amaryllis. “I haven’t looked at a calendar lately.”

“And so much has changed,” she said. “What happened with Fallatehr?”

“We killed him shortly after Juniper learned soul magic,” said Amaryllis. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem like the right path toward getting the locus onto its own land.” She hesitated slightly. “We still don’t have a solution to that problem, I’m sorry. We had thought that Juniper becoming the most powerful soul mage on Aerb would do it, but he was, briefly, and that did allow us to bring you back, but … we don’t have many productive avenues left.” She looked around the bottle, through the stifling heat and dead plants. “Can you fix this?”

“Certainly,” said Solace. She looked to Fenn. “I don’t suppose you have my staff and cloak in that glove of yours?”

“The cloak we have,” said Fenn, producing it with a flourish. “The staff was voided, unfortunately. I’ve also got a dress for you.”
“The sun feels nice on my skin,” said Solace with a frown. “My species drinks the sun, you know.” She seemed remarkably well put together, for everything she’d been through. The locus had done something with her, some restoration of the soul that flew in the face of everything I knew about what the soul was. Solace didn’t seem to mind. She took the cloak of leaves and threw it around her shoulders, which did approximately nothing for modesty, while simultaneously blocking the majority of the light from hitting her skin.

Grak had taken off his prosthetic and approached her with his stump held out in front of him. It was scarred over, but the scar was still red, not the waxy texture and whitish color of a long-ago wound.

“I have some faculty with soul magic,” I said. “If the internal state of his soul is going to be the problem, I can just mirror his hand from the other side and get it to be consistent. We’d have fixed him ourselves, but the bones take something special to grow back, and --”

Solace cracked her tiny knuckles and smiled. “Juniper, could you get me a stick?”

“I -- sure,” I said. I looked through the grass, trying to find one that I thought would be appropriate to the ritual. “Just any old stick?”

“No,” said Solace. “A special one. You’ll know that it’s special because it’s the one you choose.”

I’d forgotten her faintly amused expression, and it brought a smile to my face, despite myself, because I was being given a firm reminder that druidic magic drove me fucking nuts. All that mist coming off of the locus probably didn’t mean anything, it was just abstract magic without apparent rhyme or reason. But we’d spent a considerable chunk of our lives getting Solace back so that the locus wouldn’t die in its bottle, so I supposed I would just count myself lucky that it was, for all its deliberate weirdness, still really powerful.

I spent some time looking for a stick. Going ‘hur dur, I just grabbed the closest one I found’ seemed like it would be going against the spirit of the thing. The one I settled on had two forks in it, and was dry and brittle, with most of the bark stripped off the outside. My skill at identifying wood pretty much stopped at ‘yup, it’s wood’, but I assumed that it had come from the tree that served as a house.

Solace took the stick from me and stared at it for a moment, then began pinching it here and there. The wood responded to her touch like taffy, extending and being shaped by her touch. When she had finished, it very vaguely resembled a hand. She took Grak’s stump and pressed the stick to it, which caused the flesh to part like soft butter and seal closed as though a piece of wood hadn’t just passed through it.

“It will take some time,” said Solace. “An hour or two. But when it’s finished, you should be as good as new.”

Grak turned the stick around inspecting it. “Thank you,” he said.

“You couldn’t have just regrown the bones?” asked Amaryllis.

Solace gave a faint smile and shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Will it be as good as new, or better?” I asked.

“Different,” said Solace. She shrugged. “Better for some things, worse for others. Better, I would think, for the type of person Grak is, or would like to be.”

I nodded. I was pretty sure that if I suggested cutting off my arm and having her replace it, or doing the same for all of us, the druidic resistance to being put in a box would come forward in full force,
stopping that venture before it even began.

“It’s good to have you back,” I said instead.

**Quest Completed: Pregnant Virgin Princess - Amaryllis has given birth to Oorang Solace, bringing her back from the dead. If another of your party members dies, don’t expect it to be so easy.**

**Quest Accepted: Birth of a Nation - You’ve set out to become a real power in this world, no longer independent agents bumbling from crisis to crisis, but instead a nation, bumbling from crisis to crisis. Quest completion entails becoming accepted as a member nation of the Empire of Common Cause.**

**Quest Updated: Taking Root - The world has but a single druid, tending to but a single locus. With the locus so constrained within a magic bottle, no more druids may be inducted, but removal might prove fatal. With your help, druids might stalk the world once more. (Companion Quest)**

**Level Up!**

My brain splattered across the ceiling of the universe, becoming stars in the sky, each neuron a swollen red dwarf, the hyperspace connections between them engorged with the pleasure feeding through them. There was nothing like awareness to me, only pleasure so vast that I couldn’t hope to feel anything else. It was reductive, stripping away the thinking part of me and leaving only the animal, pinning me down and fucking me, a fist thrusting straight into my brain, thick fingers manipulating my internal wiring.

When I came to, they had me pinned down. Amaryllis was fixing my soul; she had intuited, correctly, that it was no longer a change I could make on my own, not after what I had felt.

**END BOOK V**
Notes

Chapter Notes

If you're not the sort of reader who likes in-universe texts or background fluff, feel free to skip this chapter.

Mary’s Notes: Toward an Optimal Build

- Mistakes of the past are locked in via point selection w/ limited options wrt correction
- “Floating” points should not be floating as they alter hard caps and should be put toward maximizing those caps!!
- J right that exact functions of all skills are not known
- J says even known skills have unknown full functions (so-called “Woodworking 100 Issue”), solvable via skill point sacrifice for information, but sacrifice indicated to be non-renewable resource, or difficult to renew.
- J maybe right that unknown skills have comparative advantage because no one else has them or will be prepped against them -- but how to unlock if we don’t know either??
- Spirit: complement to Essentialism? Earth Shamanism? Something relating to the soul in non-obvious way? Morale? J unhelpful, spirit “too big” of topic, too many invented things. Anima ipsa and anima exa different (per F -- suspect) but shouldn’t need different skill. Might relate to gods? In theory, gods are just connection like Solace and locus, but will need cleric to test. F could have answered …
- Library Magic: J not much help. Lots of libraries in J’s games, but only three really magical ones, Boundless Library with all books, Ascentium (sp?) with books whose stories become real, and Libor Mortis w/ something like redaction magic (excluded, Bowdler). Juniper says reference maybe L-space (Pratchett, Discworld). Ties in w/ Raven? Uther’s “archivist”, part of that mystery pile, maybe alive, def missing, game character of Maddie (sp? Mattie?). J also says ref maybe “import library” elect. computer programming concept (?)
- Tree Magic: distinct from Wood Magic. J gave six examples (from games), none obviously right: tree as totem of power, tree as connection (flower mage? similar), tree as divination re: forks (! seems good), tree as voodoo doll, tree as Dorian Gray ref (sp? maybe read, Wilde, close to historical Gray Magic (excluded)), tree as branches/timelines (less sure on that one). Large search space. Will test unlocks. Ask Solace too. Relationship to salvers from Arches re: head trees? But salvers “invented” while on Aerb, per J. DM existential fuckery?
- 256 skills, 82 (!!!) excluded, 40 at one time for J, unrestricted # skills for others (why?), no limit for others (incl. self) (why?)
- Difference between Skills and skills, things still learnable if not on menu & extensions available even w/o Skill changing number, see Sanguine Surge
- Skills not transferred via symbiosis from skill point (re)distribution (sacrifice)
- Virtues not transferred from symbiosis
- Virtues maybe not for non-J at all? Testing confirms so far, but means for ex. blade-bound is just skills in others, needs testing. Some virtues not physically possible w/ training alone (see Shields)
- No hard caps for non-J, see F w/ Bows >50 but WIS=5 (why? Skill vs. skill? DM fiat?)
- Besides caps, unclear relationship wrt attribute and skill. J thinks obvious that skill outcomes are affected by primary/secondary attributes but admits no evidence. Best insight into hidden
rules is game messages or virtue desc, but no help there. Obvious changes to physique from PHY make J’s hypothesis seem reasonable.

- Unclear relationship wrt attributes and super-attributes, esp given above attr/skill Qs.
- Attributes match bone magic theory, so make deeper inquiries next time in Cranberry Bay? Obv. “real” in ways skills are not (yet) i.e. matching to reality and observable by non-J
- Actual mechanism for how game interfaces w/ world unclear. Granular rules, chaotic world. Roll dice, match world to fit? Observe world, match dice to fit (but dice not even exposed so far . . .)? Unicorn-like timeline redos? All total bullshit? J thinks not BS, admits possible.
- Only evidence when a skill is being used is presence of skill up message to J. Ergo only able to figure out what a skill is supposed to do by doing that thing until skill up. Some things make skill go up fast, some make it go up slow, evidence of “central purpose” of skill, arbitrary game rules, difficulty, or what? Different rates of skill gain. Massive headache, sparse information, poor experimental models.
- SOC important for many magics. Obvious in retro that gold mage would rely on it, 1 part TK control via CUN, 1 part POI as social interaction with gold (entity-like) (why not CHA? J unhelpful). Also soul value-based? F could have answered.
- MEN more important for more magics, but PHY used in a few
- Generalist approach gives many options, but less powerful. Maybe best for diminishing margin util on symbiosis? Skill combinations (esp. soul/bone) v. powerful
- Virtues good for J, but not usable for us, virtues better with level, possibly a ++ for generalist
- J has limits on attributes wrt personality, makes higher SOC/MEN less worthwhile since only game stuff affected (?)
- J can still grow as person, personality can change, slowly move J to where he can be J and be good at SOC/MEN? DM okay w/ that? Rules okay w/ that? (J okay with that?)
- Missing companions a problem for J’s spec, as missing companion specs are (obv.) unknown. If J specced, would C6 & C7 be “nudged” so not redundant? Would J be nudged to only spec so not redundant? Or is redundant possible despite narrative rule otherwise? Narrative rule may be broken, per J, if contrast is narrative focus, see Flash/Zoom (comic superhero).
- Dependability/existence of current companions a problem. F says will leave if J does something “unforgiveable”, shouldn’t happen, might (wrt V, not self). G says will leave when has money, adamant, means incentive to not pay him, he knows incentive, big mess. V will stay, but vulnerable. Worried about S (obv), tho not companion. If J specs thinking all members always around, might leave too much gap when one leaves/dies & need respec. Narrative maybe a problem? J unworried wrt big-N.
- J’s preferences important as motivates toward training, tho he’s been better of late. Worry is picking things J hates will result in failure to push himself even tho might be best for us if he did. Optimal depends on results & reality, not theory which ignores people, must learn from later Penndraig reform failures.
- To Do:
  - Compile chart/graph of primary/secondary attributes for ALL skills in better visual/analytical arrangement. Venn diagram w/ nine circles? 72 possible p/s combos, too messy. 36 if order unimportant, still messy. Only 6 if using super-attributes, simple and clean but not descriptive. 9x9 grid w/ color coding?
  - Revisit tree/spirit/library discussion once more Earth books have been read
  - Make character sheet for Grak w/ J’s help
  - Make character sheet for Solace?
  - Compile list of known rules and modifiers as given by virtues (prob not helpful)
  - Produce 3-4 optimal builds for J, anchoring + illusion of choice (immoral?)
  - Reach Loyalty 30 and/or convince/encourage F to do same, as may impact optimal build
Group, in rough order of appearance: Arthur, Ricky, Greg, Trev, Reimer, Craig, Maddie, Aaron, Tom, Tiff, Rache, Colin, Ana

Note: Campaigns are listed by first appearance, but many were dropped and then picked up later for a sequel campaign or two, with or without a shared continuity, sometimes with years between them. Campaigns run by others or set in established worlds are not included. Various one-shots weren’t included either.

2009

Pilgrim’s Promise - First actual campaign, where the party made friends with a necromancer and he sent them on missions, despite my best efforts. They kept ignoring the fact that he was playing them like a fiddle. Eventually they destroyed the world by accident, though I gave them a lot of outs before the asteroid hit. Amateurish and derivative in a lot of ways.

Tunnels - This was back when I liked bold, one-word titles. Took place in what was basically the Underdark, turned up to 11, which was saying something, because the Underdark was already nearly as far as you could go with the subterranean concept. It was a world without any apparent bottom or top, no sun, no sky, just endless tunnels, underground seas, and rampant claustrophobia. Ran its course pretty quickly, though I had a lot of plans.

2010

Drowned Valleys - Waterworld campaign, basically, but with a lot more land. Inspiration was more Wind Waker than actual Waterworld, though there were elements of both. Too much underwater combat, which isn’t very practical or fun. Arthur was away for the summer, leaving us with too few people, so this was one of the rare times I ran a DMPC (a drunken pirate cleric).

Eccentric Industries - Steampunk, but with more traditionally cyberpunk elements like megacorps, industrial espionage, etc. Party worked as fixers for the titular company, Eccentric Industries, meaning it was largely a patron-driven campaign. Sort of worked, but the intrigue wasn’t intriguing enough. Journeyman work.

Wickersham’s Extraordinary Adventuring Agency - Named by the players, who were making fun of the overly English names I was using for everything. The setting was nothing special, aside from the very defined gap between Civilized and Wild, with very few people crossing between the two, and lots of adventures to be had in a Wild that was absolutely chock full of dangerous places with loot. Flavor was a lot like Zendikar, but less “points of light” for the civilization.

Counterbalance - One of our only epic level campaigns, which suffered from all the problems at starting people above 20, some ridiculous builds, and all the problems of creating challenges for absurdly powerful characters. Didn’t last long.

Cranberry Guilds - Set in Cranberry Bay, which was fantasy San Francisco; it originally appeared in Pilgrim's Promise, then was refined here and transplanted to a different world (also the literal, in-universe explanation, part of the backstory to justify the 'points of light' setting). Focused a lot on guilds, which weren’t all that well-designed, but provided a lot of differently-styled fodder for the group to rip through. Their Guild was the run-down Adventuring Guild, which they eventually built up into a juggernaut.

2011

Altered Chorus - Recently discovered Eka Stones describe the true nature of reality, sort of a “new
The nature of reality was found to be slowly changing, once copies of the Eka Stones were compared with the real thing, which always maintained a description of true reality. Heavily inspired by Fine Structure. Run twice.

Knights of the Square Table - Our longest-running campaign that largely focused around Uther Penndraig becoming (and being) king, with a few twists and turns along the way. This was the most success I ever had with one character’s motivations driving the plot. Picked back up a few times, when I had built up plot and ideas for it. Arthur’s favorite.

2012

Scattered Asches - Intended as an Asch’s conformity experiment thing, but the campaign went off the rails way, way too quickly, and all my plans went out the window. Mostly focused on ninja stuff, rather than the Eight Realms that had most of the worldbuilding work.

Long Stairs - One of the rare campaigns set on Earth. Idea came from the internet, both in original concept, and with a lot of the setting details and conceits being similar to SCP works (especially trying to nail the feel of mission reports). Ran it twice, once as a meditation on American involvement in the Middle East, the second time post-Arthur as more of a “run friends through the thresher because of personal problems”.

Magus Europa - Fantasy 1700s, played three different times, though they were set in the same world without actually sharing a canon. First ended up being pirate-themed, second was mostly about Dracula becoming the King of England, and the third was a meditation on colonialism, set in the New World.

2013

Hellpocalypse - Dante’s Inferno, the tabletop campaign, with a lot of focus on devils and demons. Really wanted to go character-driven on this one, but it ended up being the party stumbling from place to place (each place specially themed in terms of who was being tortured and how). Regrettably edgy, and conceived of when my parents were going through some stuff. Shares a few similarities with Aerb’s hells, but nothing that can’t be chalked up to common inspiration.

Laser Fleet - Pulpy space fantasy so much in the vein of Star Wars that I elected to use the Star Wars d20 system, which we had the books lying around for. I refused to use the actual Star Wars setting because there were a lot of things I didn’t like about the worldbuilding, and also because Craig was really into the expanded universe and I didn’t want to be called out on mistakes. Probably would have been better as actual Star Wars. Not much impact on Aerb, though a few of the races came over.

Sleeping Beauties - Weird West detective campaign that ran for two major arcs, one involving undead prostitutes, the other involving a meat-packing plant. It was steampunk with a bunch of hardboiled tropes to it. Tiff wasn’t a huge fan of how women were portrayed in those stories, but said I executed “well enough” -- one of her first campaigns.

2014

Infinity’s Edge - Eclipse Phase campaign, fairly standard transhumanist body-hopping, copyclans, virtual/actual distinctions, self-modifications, etc. We ran in that universe twice, both times because Reimer really wanted to. I tended to prefer coming at the same stuff from a fantasy angle, and not all at once. Very little overlap with Aerb (but that’s not surprising, because it was only about 50/50 my
stuff and default campaign setting, and Aerb didn’t have much from the science fiction end of the speculative spectrum).

**Flesh.txt** - Extremely pornographic setting, never intended for anyone but me. Untitled, except the file name on my computer. I was fifteen and horny, I think it’s okay to have a depraved fantasy life like that which gets put into a worldbuilding doc. Included here because some of it crept into Aerb, including a few races and the fable of the Whore of Blades, a sexually adventurous warrior woman who wins a war for her country and then sets out to sample every fleshly delight her world has to offer (apocryphal, according to Amaryllis). I did tell Tiff about it, and she was extremely curious about what was in this forty-page document, but things fell apart before I could get around to sharing it with her.

**Heaven’s Host** - Superhero campaign that was set in Bumblefuck, Kansas, that fell apart when we got to a higher level of play because of disagreements over the point-buy system in Mutants and Masterminds, and whether it was appropriate to play as a person who could sit in their apartment and “work from home”. Velocity mages probably have their roots in Tiff’s speedster character, Hummingbird, which I helped make a lot of rules for.

**Critter Islands** - World of endless sand with miles-wide magical creatures that carry biomes on their backs. Each race had their own critter, but they were in a loose alliance, and the party was a finger of that Sand-Stretched Alliance, tasked with finding answers to ontological mysteries and exploring the dead critters that littered the sands.

**2015**

**Whispering Isles** - Semi-pastoral one-shot set on a bunch of floating islands, which ended up lasting three sessions on accident, and because people were having fun with it. Didn’t really fit well in the mold of D&D, which too many of the group tried to play it as, but I rolled with it.

**Small Worlds** - This was an experiment in microworlds, which I was really into at the time. The frame was that a capital-G God had a workshop full of bottles with worlds in them, and that the party had the ability to travel between them via skyship. Fairly undirected, and we never got to the “turn” where the God died and the bottles needed to be unified against the threat of the God’s daughter selling the bottles to the highest bidder.

**Small Gods** - All the players were really, really weak gods of very minor things, like Tiff was the God of the Smell of Fresh-Baked Bread, and Arthur was the God of Stories Without Endings. One of my attempts to break out of the mold that classical tabletop put us in, not really that successful, partly because we were using the wrong system for it. (Titled after the Pratchett book that was the major inspiration.)

**2016**

**Patchwork Republic** - The Dragon equivalent of Stalin dies, and his kingdom becomes balkanized, with institutions holding on for dear life, industries auctioned to the highest bidder, and crumbling infrastructure. Party ended up attempting to revive the dragon, but we never actually got to that point, and it wasn’t what I’d wanted the campaign to be about. We actually did this one four separate times, with different characters, each sharing continuity with each other.

**Glimwarden** - Semi-pastoral setting, but with monsters on the outskirts of town. We tried using Chuubo’s Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine for it, but it didn’t really suit us. We revisited it a second time using Pathfinder, which went a little better, but I didn’t like the traditional fantasy kitchen-sink stuff that Pathfinder brought to the table.
Tentacles of the Third Reich - Call of Cthulhu, set in the 1940s, with Nazi paranormal superscience and cults at work in the background, sinking their hooks into the apparatus of the Nazi government and military. Heavily inspired by Stross, including the adaptation of concentration camps as actually being part of a massive occult ritual. Arthur wasn’t a fan, partly because he didn’t like alt history, partly because he (maybe rightly) thought that the Holocaust having a utilitarian purpose was in poor taste.

A Manxome Foe - Post-Arthur campaign, set in a decaying, dying world full of horrible things. A frightening number of exclusion zones come from this campaign, meaning that it’s one of the most visible parts of Aerb. Lots of names from Jabberwocky, mostly because that’s also where “vorpal” comes from. Lots of character deaths. Fel Seed.

2017

Twilight Bloom - Never actually run, but most of the work was done. After the Fel Seed incident, my falling out with Craig and Maddie, and hitting rock bottom, I found myself wanting to not be such a horrible shitbag. In classic form, I did this through making another world. It was essentially supposed to be “humanity, fuck yeah”, but I had a lot of trouble not getting cynical, dark, or complicated with it. All the major fantasy races were united in mutual cooperation and understanding, with the major intended campaign goal being the clearing out of old secrets, healing of old wounds, etc. I’d wanted Tiff to play with us again. No trace of it on Aerb.

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Council of Arches - Intended as a one-shot, ended up having two sessions. Pretty basic, with most of the worldbuilding having been done after the first session, when it looked like it might turn into a full-blown campaign. Borrows heavily from the start of Patchwork Republic, but the intent was to take it in a different direction. Went on hiatus when one of the players died and another was brainwashed, it was this whole thing, ha ha.

Skill Virtues, by order of acquisition

Unarmed Combat 10, Hardened Knuckles: Lessens the toll that unarmed combat takes on you. Does not actually increase the hardness of your knuckles as measured by indentation or scratch tests.

Dual Wield 10, Ambidexterity: You no longer have a dominant hand. Removes the penalty for attacking with an off-hand, because you don’t have an off-hand anymore. You have no natural preference for which hand to use.

Thrown Weapons 10, Range Finder: Doubles your accuracy when determining distance. Take half the normal penalty for lack of references when attempting to determine how far away something is.

Improvised Weapons 10, Structural Assessment: You can hold improvised weapons in such a way that they’re three times less likely to break, to within one degree of reasonableness. Halves reduced durability maluses from all weapons.

Engineering 10, Material Analysis: Allows you to see weak points in materials, to within the first order of sensorium expansion.

Skin Magic 10, Shifting Skin: Allows you to freely move and rotate tattoos around your skin with a thought, even when you cannot feel your skin. Perception of the location of tattoos is added to your
sensorium. You no longer take a penalty for inexperience when in a contest to move tattoos.

**One-Handed Weapons 20, Monkey Grip:** Eliminates the penalty for using a weapon of a larger than usual size, to within one degree of reasonableness. This applies to N-handed weapons as well, so long as N >= 1.

**Dodge 20, Thaumic Dodger:** Eliminates the penalty for dodging magic, magical effects, entads, entad effects, and any supplemental physics which would appear magical to The Layman.

**Blood Magic 20, Hypertension:** Doubles blood volume and (as a consequence) increases blood pressure. Eliminates the penalties for high blood pressure. Allows conscious and subconscious control of blood pressure.

**Athletics 20, Long-distance Runner:** For the purposes of calculating fatigue, you may consider your pace three categories slower than it is, to a minimum of “Standing Still”. Eliminates the penalty for performing unskilled actions while running.

**Rifles 20, Compensator:** You automatically compensate for bullet drop and wind speed, even when gravitational constant, distance to target, wind speed, and wind direction are not known (or unknowable) to you. Halves the penalty for shooting at a moving target.

**Parry 20, Prescient Blade:** You take half the normal penalty to parry bullets, arrows, or other missile weapons. These attacks still do damage to your blade as normal.

**Two-Handed Weapons 20, Lunge Striker:** Eliminates the maneuverability penalty for all reach weapons. Eliminates the penalty for striking at close range with reach weapons. Allows you to more quickly cover ground when moving in short bursts and in a fighting stance.

**Combo Virtue, Neophyte Blade-Bound:** You have unlocked the ability to bond with a melee weapon, given a few minutes of meditation. You may only bond with one weapon at a time. When wielding a bonded weapon, double your effective skill with it, double your chance to parry, and you may cut with it as though it were twice as sharp.

**Essentialism 20, Soul Slip:** Allows you to make new modifications and alterations within the soul. Allows you to alter that which had been unalterable.

**Bows 20, Steady Aim:** Completely eliminates the penalty for firing a bow while moving. Halves the penalty for firing a bow under pressure or duress. Triples the amount of time you can hold a bow at maximum draw.

**Shields 10, Bulwark:** Shields you hold are twice as durable. If a force acts on your shield to move you, you will move only half the usual distance, with the reduction capped at ten feet of movement negated.

**Unarmored 10, Hardened Skin:** Lessens the toll that physical damage in combat takes on you. Slightly increases natural healing. Increases force required to break skin.

**Combo Virtue, Monkish Warrior:** While unarmed and unarmored, you may parry attacks as though you held a weapon, dodge at twice your effective skill, and automatically re-roll injuries if they are in the lowest five percent of outcomes (you keep any lower rolls).

**Essentialism 40, Soul Sight:** Grants a visual representation of souls, each with a unique color, which can be distinguished with acuity beyond the limits of the eye. Applies to both the soul and any
magic which interfaces with a soul in some meaningful way.

**Essentialism 60, Soul Saturation:** Knowledge of your soul allows it to fully suffuse you, giving a number of benefits to a wide variety of magic. Your blood works as an infusion for the purposes of pustule magic. You can use your blood as though it were magical ink ($4 \zeta /\text{mL}$) for the purposes of ink magic. Your bones are considered wood for the purposes of wood magic. Required connective power for plants is reduced by half. You may retract your soul from your extremities for the purposes of bypassing wards. Any magic items or magics which limit projection or application to your eyes, hands, feet, or mouth, can instead be projected or applied from any part of your body. Your skin and/or carapace is treated as though it were skin and/or carapace for the purposes of skin magic and carapace magic, whichever is more beneficial. Runes may be written on your skin as though it were prepared vellum. More benefits apply in specific exclusion zones: consult the manual for more detail.

**Essentialism 80, Soul Scaphism:** You can carve out parts of other people to use for your own purposes. Any benefits are temporary; any costs are permanent.

**Essentialism 100, Soul Symbiote:** Double your effective skill in Bone Magic, Blood Magic, Skin Magic, Carapace Magic, Pustule Magic, and the flower magic aspect of Horticulture, up to a cap of 75. Double your effective connection to any magical item which interfaces with your soul, unless doing so has associated maluses. Increase your skill with any specialty or subschool of magic that uses the soul by 20 points, up to a cap of 50.

**Flattery 10, Silver Tongue:** Reduces the penalty for insincere flattery by twenty-five percent. When flattering in a language you are not fluent in, your penalty is halved. When flattering a group, the Forer effect is doubled.

**Comedy 10, Class Clown:** You may increase the speed of your wit at the expense of its comedic efficiency, up to double your base wit and half your base comedic efficiency. Take half as much damage from physical humor, so long as it’s actually funny.

**Lying 10, Lesser Deceiver:** You will no longer forget the details of a lie, unless you wish to. Take half the usual self-consistency penalty when telling improvised lies.

**Debate 10, Shifting Sands:** Removes the penalty for reframing facts and figures in the middle of a debate, so long as all raw information was memorized beforehand.

**Medium Armor 10, Balanced Armor:** Your medium armor counts as heavy armor for obtaining the benefits of Heavy Armor virtues or bonuses, and light armor for obtaining the benefits of Light Armor virtues or bonuses. Afflictions and maluses are unaffected. It may count as light armor, medium armor, and heavy armor at the same time.

**Analysis 20, Flow State:** Allows you to enter into an analytical flow state, which temporarily doubles working memory with respect to the subject of analysis, halves the penalties for thirst, hunger, and exhaustion, and increases the chance of a Brilliant Insight by five percent per hour (compounding).

**Heavy Armor 20, Thaumic Defense:** When wearing heavy armor, add half your skill to any defense rolls made to defend against magical attacks, attacks using magical effects, entad attacks, or attacks using entad effects, even when this is unreasonable.

**Horticulture 20, Green Thumb:** When you roll on the plant health chart, reroll any result lower than half your Horticulture. This reroll is done before modifiers are applied. If subsequent rolls are
also lower than half your Horticulture, continue rerolling until you obtain a result higher than half your Horticulture, or until the roll history suffers from buffer overflow.

**Stealth 20, Light Foot:** When moving silently, reduce your sound by 10 dB, to a minimum of 0 dB. When attempting not to be seen, reduce your visual contrast by half. When attempting to not be smelled, reduce your odor by one rank. You take half the normal penalty for stealth checks against forms of perception which are unknown to you.

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**Bethel, Loyalty lvl 2**

Bethel is not just an entad, but a meta-entad, capable of taking magical items and adding them to itself. Initially created by Omar Antoun using funds and labor provided by Uther Penndraig, it stood empty for several years until Uther returned. Once he discovered the house’s abilities, he began adding entads to it, eventually raising it to a sort of sentience, and after that, despite its objections and pleas. Five hundred years later, it had sequestered itself partway down the Boundless Pit, until you came along.

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**Bethel’s Notes: Entads Consumed**

**Amulet of Kerthr’s Grasp:** The amulet allowed the application of five pounds of force with no limit on how small the area of effect could be, limited only by whether I am able to sense the location the force is applied to. Given the magnitude and versatility of my sensorium, there are no practical limits.

**Anyblade:** The Anyblade allows me to take on any shape or property within the ill-defined conceptual boundaries of what a house is. These transformations apply force, but only weakly. One notable side effect has been the ability to freely designate the two special rooms, one the former closet, which can now be expanded to any size or closed off entirely so no entads can be added against my will, the other the time chamber, which only requires rebuilding the control mechanism to access the years (though the metric appears to be years times volume). Furniture cannot be created unless it’s a part of me, and most attempts to circumvent this limit have failed.

**Backpack of Earthly Delights:** Allows the creation, ex nihilo, of any item from Earth with an act of will from myself or anyone within me. Restrictions on the items created appear to be connected to some outside entity, presumably the Dungeon Master, with denied requests resulting in a brief note written on a piece of yellow legal paper, often employing emoticons in the message. In contrast to the power of the backpack itself, I can create items of any size, so long as they fit within my confines. Created items appear to be consistent with the theory that only items which actually existed on Earth can be requested.

**Blanket of Protection:** Anyone who falls asleep within me may be completely protected from harm if I will it. The protection granted does not apply to mental or spiritual attacks, but is equivalent to the most powerful still mage with respect to forces applied to the body.

**Bracers of King Momentus:** I can transfer momentum from one object to another. I can also sense all momentum within my walls, and to one hundred feet outside them.

**Bulgrew’s Breastplate:** It was dull, uninteresting armor, more durable and lighter than steel but otherwise possessing no strong magic to it. Mercifully, it did not add to the sensorium, and the durability has transferred to most of my structure and cladding.
**Butterfly Knife:** The knife allows the creation of butterflies in the wake of any object within me of sufficient velocity, dependent on the will of either myself or the source of that velocity. I can suppress the ability of others to use the effect, if need be. The butterflies fly with a will of their own and disappear after a handful of seconds.

**Cannoneer’s Pistol:** Any pistols installed as part of an emplacement can fire shots which turn from normal pistol shot into cannonballs in mid-flight. In concert with the power of the Repeating Crossbow, this allows functionally unlimited cannonfire.

**Concordant Cord:** This entad gave me a pool of concordance to draw upon, which allows me to create wards when used in conjunction with the warder’s wands that I’ve collected over the years.

**Dagger of Dreamspeech:** I can enter the dreams of anyone sleeping in the house and either observe what they’re dreaming or kill them there, which will leave them permanently comatose.

**Diadem of Focused Intent:** This is one of the most developmentally useful entads to have been added to me. It allows hyperfocus on one particular line of thought or action, so long as it’s sufficiently narrow. Without it, I would likely have gone mad.

**Eavesdropping Ring:** I can understand the speech of anyone I can see, even if I can’t hear them.

**Evanescent Armor:** I can make various parts of myself immaterial, though there are harsh limits on how long it lasts, no more than thirty minutes of the day. Using this power selectively has allowed me to send people falling to their deaths.

**Everflask:** This allows the creation, ex nihilo, of any non-magical drink that has existed in Aerb’s history. The rule that defines what is or is not a drink is somewhat strict, allowing only for those liquids which have been produced for the purpose of consumption, and consumed for the purposes of pleasure, sustenance, or health. My output is limited to quart per day.

**Glove of Stone Shaping:** I can shape any stone that I touch. This allows some degree of movement through stone, though it’s usually slow.

**Imagineer’s Vestment:** I can create perfect illusions of sight and sound, so long as they’re within a ten-foot cube. I can freely recenter the cube, but at least one side of the cube must be contained within my walls. The vestments were the single largest addition to my sensorium.

**Joint Striker:** I can designate up to five willing people within me, and when I hold a bow at full draw, can see from and fire from their position. This is functionally useless, given my abilities and the vastness of my sensorium. It was intended as an aid to the soldiers stationed within me, but did not manifest in a way favorable to that effort.

**Lightning Rod:** I can shoot bolts of lightning from any surface, though I’m limited in both rate of fire and number of bolts per day.

**Loyal Recurve:** This one was intended as a method of ensuring my loyalty. It was sentient in its own right, leaping to defend its owner from attacks. It was successful, to some extent, but not enough.

**Miasma:** The armor created a cloud of poison, which I can create anywhere within me, and quite some distance beyond my walls. The Everflask can, thankfully, provide the antidote.

**Orb of Brilliance:** It was a glowing orb that would float around after whoever said a command
word, casting bright light. I gained the ability to shed bright light from any surface, which I did continuously until I had adapted, but I cannot float, perhaps because of the difference in weight. It was one of very few attempts to give me mobility.

**Pikel’s Gap:** This power allows the stretching of space around a person or object, making it seem as though a square room twenty feet to a side stretches for hundreds of yards. The perspective of people outside the stretched space has been noted as confusing and unpleasant. Unfortunately, a prohibition on stretching people and objects means that both combat and mundane utility are limited. It cannot create extra space to store goods.

**Repeating Crossbow:** This crossbow could reload itself and generate limitless ammunition, an effect which applies to all emplacements within me, whatever form the projectiles take, so long as they are non-magical.

**Ringmail of Three Wishes:** I am allowed three wishes each day. These wishes can only be used in order to undo the effects of an attack launched, and only just after the attack has struck. For the purposes of this power, “attack” requires both intent to harm and some measure of success.

**Robe of Tongues:** Added taste to the sensorium, with a range that extends to one hundred feet outside of me. This sense can be suppressed with force of will, but I don’t often do so unless overwhelmed by the sensorium. This sense applies equally to the surfaces of objects and their internals.

**Sending Slate:** I can send a message to a paired slate, or read from that paired slate. The paired slate is broken beyond repair, but the ability remains part of my sensorium.

**Seer’s Sword:** This entad was added because it allowed the wielder to speak with any entity killed by it. The experiment was a failure; I was able to see, dimly, the spirits of those I had killed, but am unable to speak with them or summon them into material existence. The cause of the failure is unclear, but the spirit sight exists as part of my sensorium.

**Somner’s Armor:** Somner’s Armor was intended to provide me with another defensive ability. Non-magical projectiles or weapons which strike me turn into small creatures such as bats, mice, or birds, which will then do their best to attack whoever was responsible for the assault. It’s limited to one hundred hits per month, and the combat effectiveness of the vermin is questionable.

**Soskanna:** This was once an intelligent sword, which first allowed me some semblance of sentience. It added an awareness of light, dark, and color to my sensorium, which extend one hundred feet from every surface. It also allowed me the ability to see a mental connection with every intelligent creature touching any of my surfaces, which I can use to initiate and receive mental communication.

**Sunlight Mirror:** If I so choose, any mirror within my walls can reflect as though the reflected space was fully lit. This allows the creation of light wherever a mirror is present. For the purposes of this power, “mirror” is defined as any sufficiently reflective surface, which can include blades and armor. When I consumed the entad, a knowledge of the reflectance of every surface as well as redundant perception of all light and potential light was added to my sensorium. I can suppress the ability at will, but not the sensory aspects.

**Tome of Cat Summoning:** Whenever a book is read inside of me, a cat will appear on top of the pages shortly after. The cats are apparently fully real to every sense I’ve looked at them with. Each book produces a different cat, though two copies of the same book will produce nearly identical cats. The cats often take on physical characteristics of the books that caused them to appear. Attempts to harm or alter the cats cause the cats to disappear. The cats can be moved from their books, and will
sometimes wander off on their own, but always disappear when the book is closed. Unfortunately, I’ve had no luck in suppressing this power, nor in controlling the cats. I know the locations of all books within me, as well as whether they’re open or closed.

**Tome of Redundancy:** When pressed against another book, the Tome of Redundancy would copy all text within it. It was hoped that I would be able to rapidly ingest information, but the only result was that I can copy the contents of one book into another, without having a firm grasp on the knowledge or wisdom of the words.

**Warder’s Monocle:** I have several of these, though they’re largely redundant. Warders try to use them sparingly, for fear of burning out their eyes, but I have no eyes. They are not entads, but I’m not limited to entads, just to the broader umbrella of magical items, which is one of the reasons it was thought that I would be able to manipulate the hyperbolic time chamber. They comprise a large portion of my sensorium.

**Warder’s Wand:** I have several of these as well, which allow me to make wards using any part of myself as the wand tip. They are not entirely redundant, as each warden builds theirs individually, and there is some variation in strengths and weaknesses.

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The One-Hand Warder

The Isle of Poran sat in the middle of a slate gray sea, under unnaturally roiling clouds. The soil was poor, leaving little but lichen and moss to grow, and it was almost perpetually wet and drizzly, with an average of two sunny days out of the year. It had been the redoubt of a vampire prince, long ago, with a small village of muck farmers surrounding his castle and paying blood tribute to him and his cohort.

I’d had a lot of problems with vampires, back on Earth. There were scientific issues you had to work out, if you didn’t just want to say “it’s magic, fuck off”, like the fact that blood had 900 calories per liter, which put some serious limits on vampire diets. There were also worldbuilding issues, like why, if vampirism could spread and vampires had lots of abilities, they hadn’t just taken over the world a few centuries ago. But the thorniest issues with vampires had been the cultural ones: vampires hadn’t just been done to death, they’d had so many variations that there wasn’t much space to be original with them. If you switched your vampires over from feeding on blood to feeding on psychic energy, you were already joining a crowded field. Same went for vampires feeding on magic, or dreams, or even the computational energy of the brains of the living. If you decided that vampires had taken over the world, you’d risk calling to mind a dozen different stories where that happened, and if you had something clever to keep them hidden, then hundreds of authors had already done that.

I usually went ultra-traditionalist. My vampires weren’t some twist on the classic stories, they were vampires to the core, with all the weird shit that came with that like not being able to cross running water, not being able to see their reflection, et cetera. They weren’t the modern kind of vampire you could kill with UV light, it took direct sunlight, and it wasn’t something you could guard against with sunscreen, it made them crumble to ash in minutes. There were tweaks, here and there, for the sake of making sure these vampires could be defeated by a band of adventurers, and to make sure that their bacchanalian blood parties wouldn’t strip the land of people in the space of a century, but I more or less stuck to strict traditionalism.

Part of that was the trope of “no ontological inertia”: killing the primogenitor of vampirekind would kill all of the vampires in the world. I loved that trope for a number of reasons, but mostly that it allowed a very clear and very difficult objective that a band of four to six adventurers could accomplish.

In 14 FE, Uther killed the primogenitor of the vampires, which caused every single vampire on Aerb to turn to dust. The vampire prince who had long ruled over the muck farmers of the Isle of Poran was one of those casualties, leaving the muck farmers free to loot his castle, establish a democratic collective, and get wiped out by an invading ship from the nearby lands of the Ha-lunde a few years later.

The Ha-lunde had mostly been interested in killing, because they were an all-male species that reproduced by fucking corpses (yes, they were one of my creations). It was a complete slaughter.

The land had never been terribly good for farming, so Ha-lunde’s claim on it went more or less uncontested through various changes in international politics, advancements in technology and magic, and a succession of different modes of governance for the Ha-lunde. No one really wanted to live on the Isle of Poran, and there weren’t any resources of note. Maybe if population had been climbing and space was precious, someone might have moved in, but that wasn’t the case.

Back in Uther’s time, the Ha-lunde had been a warrior race of blood-lusted men who engaged in warfare primarily in order to collect corpses and then fuck them. Centuries later, they were a cornerstone of the Empire of Common Cause, and they used the corpses of specially-bred animals
instead of humanoids, or occasionally, donated corpses from races that didn’t particularly care what happened to their dead. They were stalwart defenders of the Empire, full-throated backers of international cooperation, and champions of the so-called “common cause”.

The official story was that the Isle of Poran had been given over to the tuung as another example of the Ha-lunde doing what they thought was best for the Empire at some expense to themselves. To the cynics, this was eye-rolling martyrdom. To the anti-imperialists, this was a transparent attempt at expanding the scope of the empire, though their case was a little tough, because a member nation independently handing over land to a citizen of a non-member nation seemed like the opposite of expanding the empire.

The truth was that Uniquities had set up much of it, all officially unofficial. Alcida was the head of Uniquities, but she was also allowed to have her private life, wasn’t she? And if it came to light that she had talked to a friend high in the Ha-lunde government, well, she was allowed to talk to people in her private time, wasn’t she? Naturally it wasn’t the sort of thing you wanted anyone asking about in the first place, but if they did go asking, there were ways to cover up and deny.

And so it was that we found ourselves in possession of an island with poor soil and miserable weather, far away from everything important.

There were a hundred people on the island, which meant that the tuung were outnumbered fifty to one. It was a collection of volunteers from sympathetic nations, overseers from the imperial government (including Finch and Jorge from Uniquities), speculators, and a few whose only interest in the Isle of Poran was that we’d paid them.

Esuen had agreed to the plan, as laid out by Amaryllis, which wasn’t really a surprise. When the former handmaid had written to us that she wanted to be extracted, she had probably been imagining that she would be living in an embassy for the rest of her natural life, a willing pawn in someone’s game. Instead, Amaryllis was handing her a country on a silver platter. It was a small, crappy country that was virtually unrecognized by the international community, but the infertile land, poor resources, and inclement weather didn’t actually mean anything to us; we were going to make our money through intellectual labor, most of it stolen from Earth.

(Amaryllis had bigger plans, naturally. Miunun was going to be a technological powerhouse, if she had her way, but we couldn’t milk Earth forever, and we were probably never going to have the intellectual labor necessary to pursue our own R&D that would advance things from where Earth had been in 2017. Instead, the plan was to use the capital we’d generate to transition into capital-intensive manufacturing and processing. Specifically, Amaryllis thought that we might be able to provide Aerb with the plastics that it was so sorely lacking by engaging in some hydrocarbon jujitsu and a bunch of complicated processes. It would take skilled chemical engineers, trained up on Earth chemistry, some allowance for magic getting in the way of it all, some TBD method of obtaining massive quantities of biomass, and then a multi-billion obol processing plant.)

I didn’t spend much time with Esuen, who was the official “face” of the Republic of Miunun and nominal ruler. Amaryllis liked her well enough, but their relationship was entirely professional, and there were points of friction between the two of them, even with all the help that we were giving her (that only we could give her) and what I felt had started at fairly good terms and only improved from there. From what I understood, mostly from Amaryllis complaining, the biggest issue wasn’t really legislative and executive control, but instead, the money that everyone in the know anticipated would eventually come from our monopoly on Earth stuff. I tuned out a lot of it.

Somewhat surprisingly, Grak was the one who had the most success at actually befriending Esuen. It shouldn’t have been surprising, because they had both come from relatively cloistered societies to
attend one of the athenaeums and then broken from their home society over irreconcilable
differences. Their situations, when I had actually stopped to think about it, were actually pretty
similar. Of course, Grak also had some horrible trauma or pain over that falling out which he felt he
had to make right, and Esuen was trying to forge a new and different society for her people … but I
guess those differences might have given them something to talk about.

The Council of Arches was enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of Miunun, a seven-seat
“advisory” body with broad powers. It was me, Amaryllis, Fenn, Grak, Valencia, and Bethel, with
the seventh seat currently unfilled. The position was for life, and none of the seats could be refilled
once emptied. It meant that as time went on, the power of the Council would gradually fade, until
eventually it was no longer able to make decisions due to not being able to reach a quorum, at which
point it would effectively cease to exist for the purposes of governance. The Council of Arches
wasn’t a dynasty, it was designed to become a vestigial organ.

The first round of births was going to be in a week’s time. Amaryllis had refused to install a
touchstone on the Isle of Poran for the time being, citing security concerns, which meant that the only
way to get there was to teleport into Ha-lunde and then take a long boat ride over (or pay the
exorbitant fees for teleporting direct, without a touchstone). This was beneficial to us in a lot of ways,
since it meant people couldn’t just stop in whenever they felt like it, but it did produce some
constraints on getting in the necessary expertise. We needed professionals to help raise and train up
the tuunglings, and had to get everything in place before they were hatched.

In the meantime, we had business of our own.

I hadn’t accrued much power during our few weeks on the Isle of Poran. The two extra points from
leveling had gone into MEN, which raised the caps, but most of my skills were above the soft cap of
20, and couldn’t be raised higher. I had a few new virtues, from skills that were either slow or
impossible to raise in the time chamber, and was working on connection for flower magic with a
garden, but that was it. The lowest-hanging fruit still remaining was in unlocking magic, but:

- We had no idea what Tree Magic, Library Magic, or Spirit actually did, which was part of the
  logic for why I had included them in the build, but it made unlocking them difficult if not
  impossible until they presented themselves to us in some way.
- To become a velocity mage, you had to move, without magical assistance, faster than the
  benchmark, and then maintain it for a short period of time. It went up with every velocity mage
  that was inducted into the ranks. Due to somewhat short-sighted expansion of those ranks
during the Second Empire, that meant going more than six hundred miles per hour, and there
was presumably some secret to it, because that was really, really fast.
- Vibrational Magic was locked to a magic item, which was tightly controlled by the Athenaeum
  of Sound and Silence, and besides that, rate limited. It was frustrating, because all I needed
  was a tap on the head, but there was a long line of people waiting in front of me, all of whom
  had gone through the training necessary to actually utilize the magic.
- Revision Magic required being revised backward by a year, which was far more than enough
to kill a person, since your body spent that year taking in and expelling matter. The
Athenaeum of Claw and Clocks had a collection of entads that would keep you stable,
including the Thousand Rings of Stability, but it still meant giving up a year of your life, the
so-called “lost year” (as memories were lost too), and obviously it took a lot of time and power
from an existing revision mage to do the revision.
- Still Magic required visiting a temple and meditating there for a week, which wouldn’t have
  been too much of a problem, except that the temple was deep underground, and controlled by
the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence.
- Water Magic was a bloodline magic, and all I really needed was a teacher, who we’d already
contacted and was on her way to come see us. The strict combat utility wasn’t all that promising, but the weather control aspects would help a lot on the Isle of Poran.

- Fire Magic we could do too, but hadn’t. About 1% of the time someone was burned alive, they would awaken horrible scarred but otherwise fine, with the barest powers of a fire magus. If you had sufficient magical healing, you could take someone to the brink and then heal them back as many times as it took for the fire magic to trigger.

We’d gone over most of this during our week in Barren Jewel, when we’d been shut up in our hotel room waiting out the bout of civil unrest to finish. The big difference now was that we were more or less out of the shadows, and Uniquities was willing to help us with contacts and resources, so long as they could be done via backchannels. We still wanted to keep my abilities secret, at least for the time being, but Amaryllis thought it was likely that I’d be allowed to skip a few of the lines. Once the magics were unlocked, I would race through the required years or decades of training that they each required and become even more of a multimagus … but we weren’t quite at that point yet.

It was Valencia who had gotten the biggest boosts in the time we’d spent on the Isle of Poran. Part of that was her strength and endurance training, part of it was better skill with her devils and demons, and sure, some of it I guess I would also attribute to Jorge (blegh) working with her, since he had a better knowledge of infernal matters than any of us.

It wasn’t just that though; Bethel had given her some gifts.

There were a ton of downsides to being non-anima. The general rule was that magic didn’t interact with Valencia at all unless it would also interact with (say) a sack of potatoes, which was why we called it the Sack of Potatoes Rule. The soul was, in some sense, the interface that most magic worked on, and without that interface, you were left high and dry. Magical healing was one of the biggest losses, since it simply didn’t work on non-anima. Entads were another weak point, since she had no bloodline, couldn’t be invested, and they generally didn’t respond to her unless they also responded to demons or devils.

The flip side of this was that Valencia was practically invisible to magic. Wards against blood were, properly speaking, wards against latent, passive, or active blood magic, sometimes with a few stipulations. Valencia’s blood had no magic to it at all, and no connection to any soul, which meant that she could slip through all the most common wards without even knowing that they were there. There were very few magics that directly affected the mind, but she was effectively immune to them, about as immune as a sack of potatoes would be. Soul mages were powerless against her, which must have been part of Fallatehr’s interest.

Where Bethel’s hobbies and Valencia’s abilities intersected, there were cursed magic items.

Way back in the very early versions of D&D, cursed magic items were mostly there to fuck you, because OD&D and AD&D didn’t really care whether you lived or died. The whole concept of the roleplaying game hadn’t really developed, and characters were just grist to the mill, a loose collection of emergent traits that got stapled onto the much more fully developed mechanics. Magic items in general were a lot more random, and the cursed items even more so. Some of it was funny stuff, like the Ring of Bureaucratic Wizardry, which made you have to fill out forms before you could cast spells, but at the same time, that sort of smacked of “ha ha, you can’t play your character anymore”. Later editions (and other games) either removed the curses, watered them down, or made them big, important things that had actual gravity to them.

Aerb did cursed items like I had done cursed items. They weren’t ‘cursed’, exactly, but they had some built-in drawbacks to them that made them dangerous or awkward to use, and there was a good chance that you’d end up hoisted by your own petard. There was a sword that would bleed you for
every second you held it in combat, one that you couldn’t return to its sheath without having killed something larger than a cat, a spellbook that would drive you mad if you used the same spell twice in a day, all sorts of little catches and hiccups that added in flavor and demanded thought.

“The issue, I believe, will be that Valencia is incapable of properly wielding much of it,” said Bethel. “Anything that requires will on the part of the user would be useless, which includes many of the best armors I took.”

“Do you have that axe?” asked Fenn.

“All of it was left behind in the cavern I had made for myself,” said Bethel. “But yes, the Axe of Gilhead was among the entads I had possession of but elected not to make a part of me.”

“That’s the one that, um, pulls blood from the bodies of the people it cuts?” I asked. I remembered the illusion she’d presented to us, of a man whose hands became wet with blood the moment he grabbed its handle.

“She wouldn’t feel the compulsion for blood,” said Bethel.

“She’d get bloody though,” said Fenn. “That would be pretty neat though, right? She would come into battle wearing white, then I’d throw her the axe, and she’d be stained red with blood in an instant. It would be badass.”

“You’ve been watching too much anime,” said Valencia with a frown.

“You’re going to criticize my choice of media?” asked Fenn with a snort.

“It does seem really impractical,” I said. “Maybe if we had a way to clean the blood?”

“We should transfer all of it here anyway,” said Amaryllis. “We can test the entads out for usability. A random hole in a vast stretch of rock nine miles down the Boundless Pit is a wonderfully obscure place to store things, but it’s lacking in accessibility.”

“Let’s take the teleportation key and grab them then,” I said.

“Hard pass from me,” said Fenn. “You can take the glove, but this doesn’t at all seem like a six person job, and I’m exercising my rights as the group’s laziest member.”

“I have things to do here,” said Amaryllis. “Actual, legitimate things, not that it seems to matter if Fenn’s excuse is that she’s lazy.”

“I’ll go,” I said. I looked at the others. “I wouldn’t mind some company though. Grak?”

He stared at me. “Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine. I’m not sure we have anything to talk about, but worst case scenario, we spend a handful of minutes scooping up all the crap we left behind, and then an hour and a half in halting conversation while I practice my Grogli.”

“I do not think Language means what you think it means,” said Grak. “Your pursuit of the skill has not borne fruit.”

“Well, either way,” I said. “I’m getting close to functional fluency, even without the skill. I think it’s probably healthy for me to be forced to do a few things the hard way.”

“I have nothing else to do,” said Grak.
I had expected Valencia to tag along too, but to my mild surprise, she didn’t express any interest, even though we were getting all the cursed entads for her. Maybe from her perspective, it was just going to be us sitting in a cave for two hours speaking Groglir to each other, but I’d been hoping for her presence in order to help smooth out lulls in the conversation.

We got to the cave without any problems, and stuffed all of the entads in the glove without any real problem. There were two suits of armor, a handful of weapons, some necklaces and bracelets, a crown, and a variety of tools. Valencia wasn’t going to be able to use it all, but I did find it a bit ironic that she was going to be the best-equipped member of the party. Neither Grak nor Fenn had magic armor yet; I didn’t have a good handle on what the levels actually meant, but that seemed a little embarrassing at level thirteen.

“Dar,” I said, once we had finished, which was Groglir for ‘so’. I wasn’t sure whether it would parse, but part of my language learning was just to try things how I thought they ought to be, then see whether or not Grak thought they were worth correcting.

“Dar,” Grak repeated with a grunt.

“Can you tell me what happens when your penance is paid?” I asked in Groglir.

“Did Amaryllis or Valencia tell you?” asked Grak. He spoke much faster in his native tongue, and was obviously quite a bit more fluent. He still spoke in the same way, logically dividing up his chunks of speech, but the pauses were shorter, almost (but not quite) a glottal stop to join clauses together. We hadn’t gone into it yet, but there was something about speed of speech that modulated deeper meaning in Groglir. I was still trying to find my way through the words, which was hard enough.

“I did not ask,” I replied. “You did not want to share and I thought it would be rude to take that … information, if they have it.” I struggled to find the word, but eventually managed it.

Grak nodded. “I appreciate that.”

“I know you are a private person,” I said. I mulled over my words, and not just because I was speaking a foreign language. “I am sorry that … that all of your efforts at being a good midwife for Amaryllis came to less than we had hoped.”

“It’s not that,” said Grak. He turned away from me slightly.

“I did not think that it was that,” I said. “I was only thinking about how hard you must have worked and how I would feel in your place. You spent more time in the, uh …” I paused, realizing that I didn’t have the word. “In the box.”

“Aderanhe,” Grak supplied.

“You spent more time than Fenn and I,” I said. “It wore on me. If my months of training had been swept aside I would have been frustrated and sad. You are probably better at enduring things than I am.” I was getting better at speaking Groglir; it was almost smooth, especially now that the rust had been shaken off.

“These things happen,” said Grak.

“It was something I was thinking about,” I said. I shrugged. “I was trying to put myself in your shoes. I do not think that I do that enough.”

Grak grunted at that, but made no other response.
We were lit by a flashlight, which I’d pointed at the ground in order to better disperse the light. We had an hour left before we could use the teleportation key again, which seemed like an eternity. I was really, honestly trying with Grak. He’d called us family before, but not in a good way. Family, as in, people you’re stuck with, people you can’t choose, people you maybe wouldn’t have chosen, if you’d been able to pick.

“Tell me about your friends at the Athenaeum,” I said, still in Groglir.

Grak looked at me. His frown was partially hidden by his beard.

“I did not listen very well when you told me the first time,” I said. “You left details out, too.”

Grak nodded slightly, but paused for so long before speaking that I thought he was going to stay silent. When he spoke, it was a stream of Groglir so fast that I had trouble keeping up.

I’d gotten bits and pieces about life in Darili Irid. It was a mile down, but still above the water table thanks to the fact that it was sunk into a mountain at high altitude. It was on the small side, as dwarfholds went, and far away from anything important. The bulk of Darili Irid was in their combination of farming and mining, using the muck that ate stone and produced something blandly edible. It left metals behind, which were gathered up, melted down, and sold via bulk teleportation. It was extremely rare that anyone ever came to Darili Irid, and even more rare that anyone left.

Grak had been burdened by social expectation from the moment he was born. He was most-pure, essentially a prince (or a princess, since the pronouns we used were, in fact, wrong, and using them really made it seem like he conformed to human gender norms, which wasn’t really the case). He had grown up with duties and obligations, above and beyond what any other young dwarf had to deal with. Attending births was one part of that, as were ceremonial duties like giving blessings to new tunnels with his father, and saying a handful of kind words at funerals. The position of most-pure seemed something like that of a pastor to me; the duties and obligations were largely about maintaining the community, rather than actual executive functioning, though there were elements of that too.

Grak chafed under the restrictions placed on him, and to hear him tell it, his father (also most-pure) exacerbated that significantly. Grak was a clone of his father, or something close to it, which wasn’t too unusual for dwarves, but always came with some baggage. In the case of Grak and his father, it was a little bit toxic; trying to mold your son into a better version of yourself and overcorrecting for all the perceived faults in your own upbringing probably tended to do that.

Young Grak only saw other dwarves. Groglir was the only language he ever heard spoken. The only visitors to Darili Irid were other dwarves, and even then, not many. The wider world could be seen only through those things ordered for the monthly bulk teleportation; a long order from the whole clan would go out with the precious metals that were the only thing of worth produced by the dwarfhold, and days or weeks later, another bulk teleportation from one of the major cities of the world would come in bearing the fruits of the empire’s multicultural wonderland.

For Grak, it started with his father’s newspapers, which were delivered, a month’s worth at a time, whenever the next shipment of outside goods came in. It was international news as written for dwarves, a combination of imperial politics, major incidents, and the occasional fluff piece, as produced for the billion or so dwarves that lived on Aerb, most of whom were in isolated dwarfholds just like Darili Irid. It was, to be sure, a slanted view on the world, and the particular paper that Grak’s father ordered aimed itself in an anti-imperial direction -- as it was, after all, a paper meant for dwarves that preferred their news to be in the lingua franca of dwarves rather than that of the Empire of Common Cause. But while Grak saw much that was frightening and confusing in the papers, he
also saw a lot that intrigued him.

When Darili Irid’s warder began to grow too old to continue on, Grak staked his shovel into the pile (a dwarven idiom, apparently). Grak was a prominent member of his community, well-liked, diligent, and with a better command of social situations and personal feelings than almost anyone else. He knew a fair amount of Anglish, though not enough to actually speak or read it. But the thing that really clinched it was his skill at Ranks, a dwarven game that I suppose I’d describe as a combination of Conway’s Game of Life and character optimization. When Grak went on a tear, winning eighteen sets in a row, he became the frontrunner for being sent to the Athenaeum of Barriers, and it wasn’t long before he was taking a more intensive crash-course in Anglish, one conducted largely through mail in the year leading up to his departure.

Grak came to the Athenaeum of Barriers speaking broken Anglish, which would have made things hard for him even if he’d been raised in a more cosmopolitan clan. He’d come from Darili Irid though, a place whose primary connection to the Empire of Common Cause was in monthly shipments by bulk teleportation -- and even then, much of their trade was with other dwarfholds, rather than the great centers of diversity and global cooperation. He had been looking forward to it, but even with all his preparation, it was confusing, disorienting, and a little bit scary, even if it was also as free as he’d been in his entire life.

(Some of this was new to me, but a lot of it wasn’t. I had asked about Ranks early on, because it was in his game-provided biography, and I’d convinced him to show me the rules and play a game with me during a period when I’d been trying harder to raise his loyalty.)

In his first week, he’d met two other new students, and maybe just because they didn’t know anyone else, they became fast friends. Neither of these friends were dwarves, but they were what I would consider dwarf-adjacent. The girl, Nadi, was a kle’tan, a species of skinny, claustrophilic tunnel-dwellers that tended to be afflicted with agoraphobia, something that she didn’t have a problem with. The guy, Ding, was an igno, a squat species with bumpy red skin which collected rocks they held in their mouths and used in place of having teeth. In terms of upbringing, Nadi was similar to Grak, since she’d come from a somewhat cloistered village and had little in the way of contact with others before coming to begin study at Barriers. Ding’s family, on the other hand, had been fully integrated into imperial society for three generations, and Anglish was his first language.

They spent a lot of time together, much of it in cultural exchange, with Ding playing the part of erudite guide for Nadi and Grak, showing them the breadth of what was on offer in the empire, introducing them to things that were strange by the standards of their respective cultures. They went to plays put on in the park, they took in theater productions from the acting club at Barriers, and Ding would take them to hole-in-the-wall speciality diners where they would sample the most foreign dishes they could find. They were a tight little group of three, growing and learning from each other, for a few months before things became complicated.

Grak was alone with Ding when the ongoing discussion of comparative culture had turned to the topic of sex.

For the igno, it was a biological urge, one that they couldn’t satisfy themselves any more than they could tickle themselves. The need would get worse and worse, becoming a distraction and eventually a compulsion, until something had to be done about it. For dwarves, it was somewhat the opposite; a dwarf was never overcome with need, or even really experienced more than a shade of it, not unless there was some physical stimulus. Instead, sex tended to be something that dwarves engaged in only for the purposes of procreation, though as a parthenogenetic species, they didn’t even need that. Dwarves found the actual physical process highly enjoyable, but there was never much element of compulsion to it, and they would rarely seek it out.
Ding shifted his position on the couch, and joked that maybe the next time he was having trouble with his studies because he needed relief, he would ask Grak for some help. It wasn’t really a joke though ... and Grak wasn’t at all averse.

Grak spent a long time explaining this to me, all in Groglir, while I strained to keep up and interjected occasionally in order to get clarifications on sentence construction and vocabulary.

“I had not known what would await me in the world outside of Darili Irid, only that I wanted it,” said Grak. “I had always found the dwarfhold too small, too ordered, too limited, even though I loved and honored Darili Irid. My position as most-pure put burdens on me. There were many duties to attend to. Learning the way of wards at Barriers was another one of those duties, one I had sought out because it was as much freedom as I had thought I would ever get in life. I wanted to try new things, do you understand? I had no itch for coitus, but Ding was a friend, and if I could help him to scratch that itch, I was eager to assist him.” (He was much more fluent in Groglir.)

So they had their ‘experimental coitus’, which was largely led by Ding, and which Grak found quite pleasurable, even if he’d had no particular craving for it when they started.

Once they were done, the fallout began, and never really stopped.

“It was a mix of cultural baggage, misunderstandings, and differences of our species,” said Grak. “I felt a deep kinship with Ding. To me, he was krin, or at least krinrael.”

(I don’t think I can do those words justice with a translation. ‘Krin’ was someone you were physically intimate with, often to the level of sharing a bed naked with them, and ‘krinrael’ was that, but much more temporary, not an ongoing arrangement. It didn’t imply that you were dating, or that you even talked all that much, but it often was a stepping stone to more intimate or contractual arrangements, like the dwarven version of marriage and/or pair-breeding. You could have more than one krin, but it wasn’t particularly common. There was some element of (or at least some suggestion toward) sex, but dwarves didn’t place all that much emphasis on sex, and it wasn’t what a dwarf would think of when they thought of krin.)

“You were not that to him?” I asked.

Grak shook his head. “When the act was done he had no interest,” said Grak. “A switch had been flipped. He did not avoid me, but to him it was as he said, a need to be fulfilled with assistance and nothing more. He did not care about the intimacy.” Grak frowned. “I cared. Nadi did too.”

As it turned out, Nadi had her own designs on Ding. Her people were originally tunnel-dwellers, in the closest thing that Aerb had to an Underdark, but their aversion to open spaces was a weakness they recognized as a society, so many of their stories were about explorers and adventurers, heroes who bravely walked wide-open plains with nothing but the sky above them. From a certain point of view, Ding fit in with the heroic archetypes common among kle’tan. He wasn’t an explorer or adventurer, but he bravely sought out new and exciting things for them to try as a group, and he was cosmopolitan in a way that all the best kle’tan heroes were. Naturally, she had a crush on him.

I kind of liked hearing Grak relive all of this ancient drama. He was still talking at a fast clip, leaving me in a frantic rush to comprehend and extrapolate things that I had missed, but he didn’t really express himself much, especially not on interpersonal issues. The recounting he was giving me was tinged with emotion, which I didn’t get from him very often either; he was slow to laugh, and easy to get in a sullen mood, which was, to be honest, part of why I didn’t talk to him all that much.

“She was upset when she found out,” said Grak. “She felt like she had been betrayed. Ding explained it as a moment of craving, nothing important or meaningful to him. I felt hurt by that. He
was my first krin, or so I had thought. We all wanted different things from each other. Nadi wanted a pair-bonding, I wanted continued intimacy, and Ding only wanted to not have his mind clouded by thoughts of fornication. I understood none of that at the time. To me it was as if he had declared us krin, then rescinded that the next day. My feelings toward Nadi were more complicated, especially after they had sex together.”

“Oh,” I said. “They had a relationship?”

“No,” said Grak. “Ding felt his mind clouded by need again, which filled him with desire for outlet. Nadi … she had positioned herself to be alone with him. She offered herself to him, but I do not know what she was thinking.”

I thought back on Grak giving me the abbreviated version of this, months ago, not long after we’d first met. I didn’t think that the situation between Amaryllis, Fenn, and myself was all that similar, especially since cultural (mis)understandings weren’t really a huge issue … but especially when he was speaking his native language, and opening up more about the specifics of what happened, I could see where he was coming from. And really … things had gotten messy and complicated, and had only been mostly resolved because Amaryllis was willing to alter her own soul in order to get it done. If not for that, we would still be in an unstable equilibrium.

“How did it end?” I asked, after Grak had stayed silent for a time.

“If Nadi had hoped he would feel some affection toward her, she was let down,” said Grak. “She felt used, after, which was an accurate understanding of the situation. We all felt betrayed by each other, for different reasons. It was the end of our friendship.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I paused, licking my lips and trying to think of the right words. “They were your best friends. It can be hard to have things fall apart. What did you do after?”

“There were many dwarves at Barriers,” said Grak. “I spent a year cloistering myself with them. We ate dwarven food, sang dwarven music, and pretended that we were in a dwarfhold. I had a proper krin.” He shrugged. “I had liked that feeling of need from Ding. It was not something that a dwarf could provide. Not a traditional one.”

“On the train,” I said. “Magor. He seemed aggressive.”

“He was not traditional,” answered Grak. He stared down at the flashlight. “We had a good time together. I have thought about inviting him to the Isle of Poran.”

“That serious?” I asked.

Grak shook his head. “No. He was barely krinrael.” He looked up at me. “I am lonesome.”

“You have us,” I said. “I know that it does not feel like it –”

“It does,” said Grak. He heaved a sigh.

“Then I do not …” I stopped, trying to think about it. “I was going to say that we are not dwarves. You do not think that important though? You said a year cloistered with other dwarves. After that?”

“It was too much like home,” said Grak. “I loved it, but it grated. I abandoned the false dwarfhold and made new friends of all species, most of them other students at Barriers. I had a few krin. One of them lasted three years, though there was no question of anything more.”

“But you weren’t lonesome then?” I asked.
“No,” said Grak. He paused. “I had a different idea of what it meant to be Grakhuil Leadbraids, back then.”

“You said --” I tried to think about what I knew, and how to connect the dots. “Your biography, given to me by the game, said that you returned to Darili Irid and were entered into an arranged marriage.” I wasn’t sure of the exact construction there, since I was just taking the idiom of ‘arranged marriage’ and translating it literally, ‘ari mamin’.

“Yes,” said Grak. “I had built a life at Barriers. It was stripped away when I made the long journey home. I was most-pure, and clan warder on top of that. It was a return to obligations. My father had decided upon a mate for me, not mere krin but a father to my children. Gone so long, with letters home that became fewer as the years passed, they thought I needed something to tie me more tightly to the clan. At the prospect of being tied, I realized that it was not the life I wanted, in spite of my affection for the place.”

I frowned, trying to think about that. “But now you want back,” I said.

Grak stayed silent.

“Or … not,” I said.

Grak continued his silence.

“You keep using the word penance,” I said. “A self-punishment?” The game had told me as much, in the text of his companion quest.

Grak wasn’t looking at anything in particular. I greatly preferred conversational tooth-pulling with Fenn, where getting her to speak meant wading through jokes and diversions rather than silence.

“Something happened to Darili Irid,” I said. I paused, watching him. “You came back. They tried to force a life on you. You left. And then -- I don’t want to guess at what tragedy happened because they didn’t have a warder. I will guess, if you don’t tell me.”

“It is time for us to go back,” he said, finally switching to Anglish.

“Something horrible,” I said, staying in Groglir. “An invasion? A theft?” I wasn’t that eloquent to him, I’m sure, since the ideas I was trying to express had to be cobbled together from words that I already knew. “Assassination?”

“Accident,” said Grak. I saw his jaw move slightly as he clenched his teeth. “A ward failed. They had hired a warder, cheap, part-time, to replace the old dwarf I was meant to take over from. He had little training. Little knowledge. Three years, provisionally licensed, but,” Grak rubbed at his nose with the back of his hand. “Darili Irid was deep beneath the surface. There were complex wards to shape the flow of air, to keep it clean. We used processes that were dangerous. When the ward failed, the air fouled, quickly.”

“Oh,” I said. “Your father … ?”

“Everyone,” said Grak.

“Oh,” I said again. “Shit. That’s,” I folded my hands in my lap instead of saying more. It was horrifying, for a start. I had questions about how such a thing could even happen, what safety checks had failed, what alarms had been silent or just not installed, but before I could put my foot in my mouth, I realized those were the questions that Grak would have asked himself in the days and weeks after he’d learned it had happened. He wasn’t telling me so I could diagnose the problem, or
propose a solution. “Can I -- how many?”

“Two thousand, three hundred, forty-six,” said Grak. “Everyone.”

I tried to grapple with that number. It seemed too big. It seemed like the kind of thing that would have made national headlines, something that couldn’t possibly have escaped my notice … but I hadn’t been searching for answers, and Darili Irid was, by Grak’s account, a small hole in the ground whose primary interaction with imperial affairs was paying a pittance in taxes. Put in that context … there had been an explosion in China, some kind of factory, killing thousands, and all I could vaguely recall was watching a video on Youtube that had synced the views from different cameras. And there had been a stampede in Mecca, hadn’t there? Thousands of people crushed to death, and I probably only remembered it happening because I loved the worldbuilding aspects of giant pilgrimage sites. That helped me to put it into context, a bit. I wondered how many disasters and accidents I had seen on television and then completely forgotten about a few minutes later.

Two thousand dead, and it probably hadn’t been enough to register more than a single column several pages into the international papers.

“I am sorry,” I said.

To my shock, Grak was crying.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. I wanted to switch from Groglir back to Anglish, where the words would flow more easily and I could phrase things more politely, but I had already cottoned on to the fact that it was easier for Grak to hide himself when he spoke a foreign tongue. “Whatever mistake happened, you do not owe them your life.”

“I do,” said Grak. He was crying more now, sobbing, overwhelmed. I shifted in my seat on the floor for just a bit, then moved over and put my arm around him, patting him gently on the back. He leaned into me, and rested his head on my shoulder as he cried. It was a bit awkward, but I’d never had someone cry on me and not had it feel like that.

So many things about Grak were coming into focus for me, different things that he’d said or done. His focus on the penance was on paying down some karmic debt, and it wasn’t actually about the gold, it was about ensuring that he was staying on that path. Fenn had called us all suicidal on more than one occasion, but along with what Amaryllis had said to him at the hospital, I got the impression that was literally true. He blamed himself for what had happened, and there was no way to ever make it right, but he was devoting himself to the pursuit of restoring that karmic debt, throwing himself into situations where death was a possibility.

I’d seen Grak injured a few times, some of them pretty serious. I’d always thought his flat reaction was just dwarven stubbornness in the face of injury, a gruff, manly response to getting hurt. That was sort of how I had seen him in general, a man unaffected by the world, stoic in the face of adversity. It hadn’t really occurred to me that he was depressed and waiting to die.

We held our hug for a long time.

I wanted to tell him that I understood. In the depths of my depression, every scrap of happiness I’d somehow managed to secure felt like it was a betrayal of Arthur’s memory, a dagger planted in his back. I’d driven people away because I didn’t think that I deserved them. I had so much anger and sadness, feeding into each other, that the world seemed like it had nothing to offer me. I hadn’t cared whether I’d lived or died, and then when I hit bottom, as low as I could go …

I tried to kill myself.
I didn’t say this to Grak. It wasn’t something that I had said out loud yet. I was worried that he would think I was making things up about myself, or that he was only looking for comfort, not for us to relate to one another, or that I had misread what he was doing with the penance.

The more I thought about it though, the more I thought that was just me making up excuses to cover the real reason. I didn’t want to say it because it was painful to say, and I thought that he would think less of me for it, or at least think differently about me. It wasn’t something that I had told Fenn or Amaryllis. I didn’t want to expose the weakness of trying to take the easy way out, nor the weakness of not being able to follow through on it. I’d been pretty successful in not so much as thinking about it.

“Thank you,” said Grak.

“We are here for you,” I said. He pulled back slightly, and I released him from the hug. “I know you know that. I know that … that it probably feels like forging a new life for yourself is --”

“Not possible,” said Grak.

**Quest Updated: All That Glitters - Go with Grakhuil Leadbraids to the mausoleum of Darili Irid when he's amassed one thousand pounds of gold. You are the only one who can help him make peace. (517/1000) (Companion Quest)**

I stayed quiet. I wasn’t actually sure that the quest was accurate, since they’d been inaccurate before. I had a hard time believing that I was the only one that could do it, given that social stuff was definitely not my forte, and I wasn’t much of a real friend to Grak. He’d only confided in me because … well, that was a question mark, and I didn’t know him well enough to say. I was under the impression that Amaryllis got on his nerves a little bit, though I couldn’t really have said why, except that maybe it was for the same reasons she got on my nerves.

“Okay,” I said. I’d finally given up and made the switch back to Anglish. “I’m not going to force the issue. We’ll help you get your gold, ideally before the two years are up, and then I’ll come with you to Darili Irid.” I’d been trying to think of the lines that I might use to convince him to stay with us, but nothing I thought of sounded convincing, and I was pretty sure that in his position, I wouldn’t have listened.

**Loyalty Increased: Grak lvl 13!**

I didn’t feel good about that. Grak was his own person, he wanted to be his own person, finding us and becoming a part of the Council of Arches, heart and soul, was, in his eyes, sort of a betrayal of the person he thought of himself as being. All I was really doing was increasing that tension, without actually helping to ease or resolve it. I didn’t know whether loyalty actually did anything, aside from the bonuses it granted, but I hadn’t seen it go down yet, and if it was magically modifying their minds instead of just acting as a gauge of what they thought about me … well, that wouldn’t feel good either.

Fenn looked out over the haul from the cavern, which we’d dumped out of the glove. Grak had gone to be on his own, which I could understand. That left me, Fenn, Bethel, Amaryllis, and, of course, Valencia.

“I don’t understand why someone would use some of this stuff,” said Fenn.

“Mortals are attracted to power,” said Bethel. “The ones who tried to raid me were more attracted than most. Some of them were desperate, and many of these tools are the tools of desperation.”
My eyes landed on the Memory Blade, which I thought was a good contender for Valencia’s primary weapon. It became sharper the more memories it ate, and according to Bethel, at its height it was capable of cutting through stone like it was soft butter. It fed from both the person who wielded it and whoever it hit, heedless of the damage it was causing. Valencia didn’t have memories, or at least, not memories stored in her soul, which meant that in theory, she could use the blade with only the upside. It was dull now, since it had been a century since it was used, but it could build up again with time.

“Armor is going to be a problem,” said Amaryllis. “Most of it will change shape to fit whoever wears it, at least to some extent, but I’m not sure that will work for Valencia.”

“It wouldn’t be too hard to get a body double, right?” I asked.

“We’re talking about cursed armor here,” said Fenn. “Maybe let’s not put random strangers into it?”

Valencia was staring at a suit of red armor covered with tiny, curved thorns. Bethel had termed it the Red Armor of Arramor, which was one I’d come up with for our Long Stairs campaign. If you were wearing it, you wouldn’t take any damage until the top of the hour, at which point that damage would be dealt to both the wearer and whoever had done the damage. There were a bunch of ways to bypass it, but it was total protection against a whole lot of damage. In our games, the biggest catch to it had been that healing didn’t actually work until after you’d taken the damage … which came all at once, triggering massive damage rules and/or pushing people below the maximum amount of negative damage. You also couldn’t take it off if you had damage pending, which Reimer learned to his intense displeasure; he wasn’t terribly good at roleplaying a guy who knew he only had fifteen minutes to live.

“We’ll need to test some of this stuff,” I said. “Test whether the armor will conform to Valencia, test which parts of which abilities work, et cetera. Shouldn’t take us more than a day, I don’t think.”

“Was any of this meant for me?” asked Valencia. She was staring at the armor as she spoke it.

“Meant for you?” asked Bethel.

“The Dungeon Master nudges things sometimes,” I said. “He, uh, sets things up. Let’s say there are a billion entads, most of them not great, right? Well, we’ve come across what, maybe two dozen so far? Much more, if you include all the ones that nominally belong to Amaryllis, or the ones that I’ve heard about in passing, and definitely if you include Uther’s stuff. But of the ones that we actually have, or have interacted with, a hugely disproportionate number have been ones that I personally created, or which were used in the games that I played. It’s proof of the Dungeon Master’s thumb on the scale somewhere in the process.”

“Ah,” said Bethel. She frowned at all the entads she’d chosen not to take in. “So the thought is that this powerful entity sent people to their deaths inside of me because he foresaw that I would elect not to take them, that you would come to me, that I would choose not to kill you, and that Valencia would both be present in this party and live through her altercation at Headwater.”

“Valencia is invincible,” said Fenn.

“Am not,” said Valencia.

“Are too,” said Fenn. She had some experience; they’d been training together in the gym, and despite Fenn’s avowed laziness, she had been spending a fair amount of time there. “I’ve never seen you take a hit. ‘If you prick her, does she not bleed?’ Well, no, because you’re not going to be able to prick her, she’ll dodge out of the way of the needle and then break your arm in two places.”
“I said I was sorry,” said Valencia.

“Never said I was upset,” said Fenn.

“You swore a lot,” said Amaryllis. “And then said that you were going to break her arm in her sleep.”

“I say a lot of things,” said Fenn.

“Back to the matter at hand,” I said. “Yes, it’s very possible that the Dungeon Master either foresaw everything and nudged it into the right configuration, or foresaw bits and pieces of things and set up a bunch of possibilities. Maybe … I mean, it’s possible that each of these was intended for a different possible future, and the ones that seem obviously meant for Valencia are just because that’s the timeline we ended up in, right?”

“I’m kind of over the existential stuff,” said Fenn. “Bible study helped a lot with that.”

“It’s also possible that the Dungeon Master cheats more than he lets on,” said Amaryllis. “He simply placed that armor there for Valencia a few days ago and retroactively altered all memories and evidence to fit a world where it had always been there.”

“Sure,” I said. “If we’re talking about random bullshit powers, yes, that’s entirely possible.”

“But it’s to our benefit,” said Bethel.

“I’m going to try the armor on,” said Valencia.

“Sure,” I said. “We’ll test it in the least harmful way possible.”

“It’s to our benefit now,” said Amaryllis. “In the future? Maybe not so much. Also in the past, though it’s hard to say.”

“She’s still salty about the password-protected tattoo variant,” said Fenn with a laugh.

“Because it was bullshit,” said Amaryllis. “The whole fucking thing, and yes, I’m still quote salty unquote about it. We were specifically fucked by a black swan.”

“Like Leda,” said Fenn.

“Sometimes there are black swans,” I said, ignoring whatever nonsense Fenn was talking about. “I mean, you don’t include them in narratives without some foreshadowing or multiple viewpoints, which basically means that you don’t do them in tabletop games, but … I thought maybe that was the point?”

“The fuck kind of point is that?” asked Fenn.

“I’m inclined to agree with the spirit of that question,” said Bethel.

“No, I understand it,” said Amaryllis. “Fenn, did you ever get around to reading *A Game of Thrones*?”

“Nope,” said Fenn. “If you wanted me to read books, you shouldn’t have invented television.”

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis. “It was just a good example. Essentially, if you have a body of work built up, that engenders expectations, and in the context of an audience’s reaction to narrative --”
“Snooze, pass, I’m done with it,” said Fenn. She rolled her eyes at Amaryllis’ faint frown. “Look, I’m sorry if you find it interesting or worth spending time on, but unless it’s actually going to help us in some way, I don’t give a crap, and I don’t think anyone else should either.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “But you should know that it was a really interesting point.”

“I’ll put it on my internal scoreboard,” said Fenn with a smile.

“Is this how you two are when you’re alone together?” I asked.

“Yes, exactly like that,” said Fenn. “But usually we’re naked and having a pillow fight while we talk.”

“She does that with you too?” asked Valencia.

Fenn stopped and looked at Valencia, who was doing an absolute pitch-perfect job of showing confused innocence. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

“Are you using a devil to sell the joke?” asked Amaryllis with a frown.

Valencia held up her thumb and forefinger, half an inch apart from each other.

“Well, it was funny, I’ll give you that,” said Fenn.

“You really need to stop doing that,” said Amaryllis. “If they find out what’s happening, and trace it back to you, they have methods of influencing Aerb. The hells haven’t been united since the time of the Apocalypse Demon, and the dent Uther put in our cosmology has helped ensure only the weak can make it up, but trillions of infernals unified again isn’t really something that we should risk for a joke.”

“I’ll just kill them all,” said Valencia. “Jorge thinks that I should anyway.”

“That sounds like exactly the sort of thing we should have a long talk about in the Council of Arches first,” said Fenn. “I don’t think we included a clause about genocide in the charter, but maybe we should have.”

“If we’re going to do it, better we do it as quickly as possible,” I said. Amaryllis glared at me. “I’m just saying, if there are a trillion people in the hells, which there might be, and they’re being … I don’t know, physically and psychologically tortured, then murdering all the devils and demons is probably the most possible good we can do, right?”

“That’s what Jorge said,” replied Valencia.

“How many tendrils do you have?” asked Amaryllis. “Last I checked, it was seventeen, and it took you some time to move them around.”

“I have more than ten thousand,” said Valencia. “But I’m close to my limit, for now, because there’s starting to be a little strain. I was able to add more after Juniper leveled up.”

I hadn’t really been keeping abreast of the research into Val’s powers, on the thinking that Amaryllis wasn’t likely to miss anything that I would catch. My attempts at putting some distance between Valencia and myself seemed to be working, at least as far as her attachment to me went. I knew that her sight into the hells was a bit limited, not enough for surveillance, though we had infernoscopes for that if we really needed, and if we didn’t want to look at anything too far down. I also knew that the tendrils couldn’t be used on people in hell, which had been one of my first questions; that, at
least, would have been a no-brainer, whatever you thought about the wisdom of antagonizing the infernals.

We moved on to other topics, and went through a few cycles of testing weapons and armor for Valencia. The game had termed her Valencia the Red, and as it turned out, the Red Armor of Arramor worked perfectly on her, which was a little bit on the nose. There were different methods that armor used to shape itself to a person, and the Red Armor of Arramor used the method that would have worked on a sack of potatoes; conforming to whatever was placed inside it and hoping that the joints would work out on their own. There were different methods of reducing damage, or even knowing what damage was, and the Red Armor of Arramor used the method that would have worked on a sack of potatoes, stopping ‘incoming’ kinetic energy with respect to itself if preset thresholds were exceeded. And finally, there were different methods it might have used to dish the pain back out at the top of the hour, but apparently, it interfaced with the soul’s conception of the body in order to determine what damage would have been done before directly applying it.

I was envious of the armor, naturally. I had given up my sword to Bethel, and didn’t have a replacement yet. The armor I traditionally wore was fine, but it was a little bit lackluster. Valencia took the Memory Blade too, though we didn’t really have a good way of testing it, not given that we wanted to keep all our memories.

Beyond the armor and the blades, Valencia also wore the crown, which was made of thorns in what was painfully obvious as a reference to Jesus. Given the thorns, I was thinking it would be some sort of damage reflection, but no, it soaked up poisons and toxins (from a preset list without need for bodily reference) and transformed them into mental afflictions.

“I’ll get some guns for you too,” said Amaryllis. “There’s absolutely no reason that we should waste your perfect aim by handing you a sword. We’re at least six months out from our machine shops being up and running, let alone able to produce the knock-off P90s I want, but I have a shipment of pistols and rifles coming in.”

“You do?” I asked.

“We’re the military of this country right now,” said Amaryllis. “Against a single fireteam, I tend to like our odds, depending on their composition, especially if they attack us in this house, in which case they have virtually no chance. That said, it would be idiotic if we died because I wasn’t willing to spend a few thousand obols on firearms. And if someone comes for us, then after what happened with Larkspur, I doubt that they’ll err on the side of underestimating us.”

I considered that a chilling reminder of the kind of situation we were in -- but a more chilling reminder was yet to come.
“Jorge and I are going on a date,” said Valencia as she came into the common room and flopped down in a chair.

Bethel had gone big. The common room was shaped like an egg, with the domed ceiling forty feet high. An ornate chandelier hung down and gave the whole place a warm light, which was supplemented by a fireplace off to one side. Bethel was mostly past feeling discomfort from being able to reshape herself, and was indulging in a flair for the dramatic, which went like a streak through the whole house. What she couldn’t produce as simply a piece of house from the Anyhouse ability, she was pulling from Earth via the backpack’s ability. As Valencia put it, we lived in an enormous house where every single room was a Room of Requirement.

At times, I regretted giving her the Harry Potter books. I hadn’t thought that she would glom onto them as much as she did; she had read through the series and then decided that there wasn’t much more that the world of literature could offer her, in spite of my suggestions for other series she could try.

On hearing Valencia’s announcement, Amaryllis set down her papers and stared. She had a desk in the common room; she was working far, far harder than the rest of us, and if not for the desk, probably wouldn’t have spent as much time in our company. “It is incredibly unprofessional for him to ask you on a date,” said Amaryllis.

“Well I was the one to ask him,” said Valencia. “Because I knew that he wouldn’t have asked me on his own.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She was frowning. “It’s still incredibly unprofessional for him to accept.”

“I think it’s nice,” said Solace. “He seems like a very safe choice for you to experiment with courtship.” She was sitting on the floor, putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Her body was that of an adolescent crantek, which developmentally equated to about a five year old human. The puzzle was a way of developing visual pattern recognition and fine motor control, both of which still needed some development.

“Thank you, Solace,” said Valencia. She looked to Amaryllis. “I didn’t say it because I wanted anyone to weigh in, I said it because I wanted to share something important that was happening in my life.”

“Did you ask him with a devil’s skills at manipulation?” asked Amaryllis.

Valencia shifted in her seat. “No,” she said.

“That really wasn’t a convincing no,” said Fenn. She laid with her head in my lap, reading through the first Harry Potter book, with the grey cat on her lap. She was only reading at Valencia’s insistence and a bit of annoyance at not being able to follow what she was saying half the time. I had been relaxing, listening to music and not thinking of anything much. Most of the music we had was vinyl, and I was doing some cultural exploration of Earth of my own, since almost all of it was before my time. We were currently listening to jazz, which was Grak’s choice; improvisational music was apparently a mainstay of dwarven culture, though theirs was (to hear him tell it) much more constrained, or at least had been within his one specific clan.

“I took in a devil to see what I would say,” said Valencia. “And then a few more to get second
opinions. But when I asked him, it was just me, with my own words. They were only giving advice.”

“Seems sketchy,” said Fenn.

Valencia crossed her arms. “I didn’t want to screw it up.”

“There are things that he can’t know,” said Amaryllis.

“I know,” said Valencia.

The List of Things That People Can’t Know

1. Game layer
2. The identity of Amaryllis Penndraig
3. Our possession of a teleportation key
4. The assault at Aumann’s
5. The existence of the locus
6. The public fight in Boastre Vino
7. The murder of Larkspur and company
8. Releasing Fallatehr from prison
9. Valencia the non-anima
10. Extracting Esuen
11. The hijacking of the Down and Out
12. Our “possession” of a meta-entad
13. Our deal with Uniquities

Jorge already knew a whole lot of those, naturally, since he was Finch’s second-in-command, a relatively high-ranking member of Uniquities, and part of the operation that had briefly captured Valencia. The ones he didn’t know were of concern, and the one Valencia was at the greatest danger of revealing to him was the identity of her father, which would raise a whole lot of really obvious questions that we didn’t want to answer.

“What do you two talk about?” asked Grak.

“Harry Potter,” said Fenn.

“We talk about other things,” said Valencia, slightly defensive. She looked at the book Fenn was halfway through. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Fenn. “Though some things get lost in translation, and some of it I’m sure Amaryllis would rail against as being bigotry.” She leafed back a handful of pages. “Greedy goblins, for example.”

I nodded at that. “I mean, their primary cultural trait on Aerb is still material possession, right?”

“You have to make a distinction between the traits of a culture and a species,” said Amaryllis. “You don’t say that goblins are greedy, you don’t say that goblins focus on possession of written information, you instead say that historically their society has been dominated by warring gold mages and a veneration of wealth, and that currently, the Kel’te’thar Library engages in some practices which, yes, might contain some elements of greed.”

“Jesus that’s a mouthful,” said Fenn.

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” said Amaryllis, almost by reflex. They did that a lot, enough
that the others had joined in. I wasn’t too big a fan; I’d been raised Christian, and while I was an atheist, it sort of seemed like they were mocking a religion that they only had second-hand knowledge of. Granted, Amaryllis had read the Bible, and Fenn had read at least part of it so they could talk about it, but it still felt kind of ...disrespectful, I guess, even if it was disrespect toward a religion that I didn’t have a lot of respect towards.

“I like Mrs. Rowling’s goblins better than Juniper’s,” said Valencia. “No offense, Juniper.”

“I’d really hesitate to call them mine,” I said. “Everything on Aerb is kind of ... twisted, warped, different in different ways, and some of it was just me being silly or making jokes.”

“Yeah, Aerb goblins suck,” said Fenn.

“Please never say anything like that in public,” said Amaryllis. “You’re a government official now.”

“I shall continue to hide and vote how you tell me to vote,” said Fenn. “And I’ll wait for the next proper adventure we all know is coming.”

“I itch to have something to do,” said Grak. He glanced down at his wooden hand. It hadn’t seen combat yet. There were a few gnars and knots in it, but it was tough as iron, with a few extra properties as well. I might have cut off my own hand, if I had thought that the locus would assent to that. (The locus was the only one not in the common room. Bethel was the common room, but wasn’t presenting an illusion; she only appeared when she wanted to talk, or when someone called for her.)

“After the first round of tuunglings is born, we’ll have some time to breathe,” said Amaryllis. “My engineers are already hard at work, not entirely autonomous at this point, but close enough that I could leave them for a week.”

“Maybe I’ll stay back this time,” said Fenn. “Catch some sun, watch some anime, not get shot at or cut in half, that kind of thing.”

“My hand was cut off,” said Grak. “I did not complain.”

“If my hand was cut off it would be gone forever,” said Valencia.

“Technically we could ice it and then use surgery to reattach, along with Earth antibiotics and medicines in order to ensure that it would heal properly,” said Amaryllis. “But you’d be out of action for a very long time, even if the surgery was successful.”

“Wouldn’t you just use some ninjutsu to dodge the attack?” asked Fenn.

“Not all fights are possible to win without getting hurt,” said Valencia.

“Well, you’ve been kicking my fucking ass when we spar, I’ll give you that,” said Fenn.

I’d seen a few of those beat-downs happen in our gym. Fenn was faster and stronger, with elf luck on her side, but Valencia was a far, far better fighter. It was a little unfair to Fenn, because archery was her personal domain of excellence, but Fenn had pretty much every other advantage there was to have, including height, reach, and (barely) weight. Fenn hadn’t won once, though she was improving. (Maybe this is patronizing, but I was really proud of Fenn for sticking it out. She had a bit of a tendency to bail out on things she wasn’t good at, which I figured was probably a response to the elven cultural demand of perfection.)

“I would vote for Glassy Fields,” said Grak.
“No more votes,” said Valencia, folding her arms.

“Can’t we rest on our laurels?” asked Fenn. “Besides, we haven’t even gotten our campaign of Arches back up and running.”

“We’ve been resting on our laurels,” I replied. She looked up from my lap with a frown. “It’s true. Amaryllis has been the only one actually doing much work.”

“There’s enough work for whoever wants it,” said Amaryllis.

“I’ve been tending to the locus and attempting to restore my connection to the flowers of my garden,” said Solace as she placed a puzzle piece. “I do think that I deserve a bit of rest.” She looked up at me, briefly. “Were we comparing things that we hadn’t complained about? I did die, after all.”

“Well, you did get better,” said Fenn.

I sighed. “I didn’t mean to say that we didn’t deserve a break, or that the relative downtime –”

Amaryllis gave a short little laugh.

“-- for some of us wasn’t deserved or necessary, especially with the months in the time chamber stacked up like they were, nor did I mean to devalue the work that people were doing, but … with Bethel here, it would be easy to simply abandon our higher objectives and settle into the lap of luxury. I don’t want to do that.” As soon as I said that, a small part of me said, ‘actually, I kind of do want to do that’.

“I’m happy for the lap I’m in,” said Fenn. She reached down to pet the cat that was curled up on her. “There’s something to be said for laps.”

“The Dungeon Master will punish idleness,” said Grak.

“I came out of eight months of almost pure idleness entirely unscathed,” said Amaryllis. She’d returned partial attention to her work. “I’m starting to trust Juniper’s interpretation of the Dungeon Master’s views.”

“There have got to be limits,” I said. “I mean, unless this is going to turn into a totally different game, which I guess is possible, it’s really hard to do tabletop games where the game is just managing an estate, or a kingdom, or whatever. The game system isn’t set up for massed combat, so all scenarios where there would be massed combat get abstracted out, and the actual play slash narrative is really about this small, plucky band of adventurers doing the things that small bands of people can realistically do.” I paused. “That was always how I’d done it anyway.” The truth was, I was gaining distance from Earth. The memories didn’t come as freely as they had back when I’d first arrived on Aerb.

It was hard to reconcile Uther and Arthur, but when I tried, that was always what I came back to. A teenager from Earth, immersed in this other world, with no one and nothing from home but the things he could bring forward from his memories. He spent his entire adult life on Aerb. My working theory was that he wasn’t obsessed with Tiff, making drawings of her because of a long-ago love that had never faded. Instead, she was nostalgia incarnate, a memory so old that it might have been a dream. He’d drawn her to say to himself that yes, there really had been such a place as Earth, it hadn’t all been a vivid dream. But Uther had lived his life at full tilt, always one adventure after another, even during the time he was founding his empire, so the years wouldn’t have felt like years, they’d have felt like decades, more distance … and he’d have felt a keening for his childhood, which happened in that faraway, ephemeral place called Earth. That was also my working theory for what Uther was
looking for down the Boundless Pit: home.

None of that excused what he’d done with Bethel. Maybe none of that was even true. It made me sick to think about, and sympathetic toward Arthur and the pain he’d felt, and frustrated with the lack of answers about what had happened to him. I didn’t really know who he had been.

“Well I’d rather not have an adventure just for the sake of it,” said Fenn. “But speaking of adventures for the sake of it, can we finally play Arches? We’re all here, we’ve got nothing better to do, I’ve had my campaign ready for ages, and I know that Juniper’s got stuff ready if we want to play his. Mary?”

“I … yes,” said Amaryllis. She began sorting some papers. “Give me a minute to file things away, I can spare two or three hours.”

“Well, that’s the hard one,” said Fenn. “Grak?”

“Yes,” he said. “Juniper’s? Or yours?”

“Actually,” I said. “Bethel and Val have never played a roleplaying game before, so I was thinking that maybe we would start with something fast and easy that we can get through quickly?” I bent down and gave Fenn a kiss. “Come on, up.”

She mumbled something about ‘cozy’, despite being the one that wanted to get a game going, and eventually got up so we could get to the big table, where we ate most of our meals. With Bethel in full control of the backpack’s powers, hot food appeared on plates right in front of us, exactly to order. Valencia, as had become typical, said that this was exactly like the Great Hall at Hogwarts. For our impromptu game night, there were cans of pop and bags of chips.

“A new game?” asked Solace as she sat down at the table. She had a booster on her chair, so she could rest her arms on the table. “I rather liked Arches.”

“Arches is rules-light, but it’s not that rules-light,” I said, as I watched everyone gather. “Bethel?” I asked the room.

She appeared in her customary seat at the table, which was as illusory as her physical form. “I’m listening,” she said.

“Always listening,” muttered Fenn.

“I don’t particularly care if you have sex,” said Bethel. “Hundreds of people have had sex in my rooms.”

“Well, I care,” said Fenn.

“Do you?” asked Solace. “I seem to recall you being quite free with your love.”

“They were,” said Amaryllis. She took her seat next to Solace.

“If people know, it’s -- whatever,” said Fenn. “I’m not going to feel ashamed about that. But someone actively watching feels too much like a third person in there with us. I’m not into it.” She looked at me.

“I understand,” I said. I didn’t agree, but I did understand. The locus could (probably) see everything in its domain, but apparently that didn’t trip the same internal reaction in Fenn. I thought it was probably just the fact that it was Bethel that got to Fenn. Our newly-acquired house was perfect, imperious, and powerful, much like the elves that had judged her unworthy when she was growing
“You were saying about a different game?” asked Valencia.

“Yeah,” I said. “Arches is light on rules, but it’s on the heavy end of light, if that makes sense. I was thinking that we could warm up with something that’s single stat, single die, what they used to call a one-page game. There are a couple to choose from, ones I know well enough that I shouldn’t need a refresher, and Bethel should be able to snag the rules. In Honey Heist you’re all different bears and you’ve got two stats, Bear and Criminal that you use for everything, um, Lasers and Feelings probably doesn’t translate, since it’s a Star Trek pastiche, and the same probably goes for Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf, which --”

“Stop,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was sharp. “No one speak.”

“Wha --” began Fenn.

“No, stop. No one say another fucking word,” said Amaryllis. Her eyes were wide. “Infohazard. Don’t speak without thinking about every single word coming out of your mouth, no nouns, keep yourself to the most common hundred words in Anglish.” She got up from her chair. “We need to go to war footing, there’s a sixty percent chance that most of us will be dead in the next hour, start getting armored up, now. Quickly.”

Fenn looked like she was about to say something, but she glanced at Valencia, who had risen from her own chair and adopted a stance that was familiar from the sparring they’d done together. Whatever Fenn had wanted to say, she thought better of it and began disgorging armor and weapons from the glove. I had practiced getting armored quickly, but it still took some time. Most of us will be dead in the next hour. I tried to think about what I had said and give some context to the threat we were suddenly facing.

“Barriers won’t work,” said Amaryllis as she put on the immobility plate. She was speaking fast, almost breathless. “Wards won’t work. Obstructions won’t work, raw killing power won’t work, magic will be shrugged off or only partially successful, no known entad can stop him, and he scales to any threats. On the first invocation of the word there’s a sixty percent chance he’ll appear, and if he does we’re absolutely fucked -- no Juniper, don’t write anything down.”

I had a pencil in my hand and dropped it at her command. “Can … I … think?” I asked, measuring each word carefully. Can I think the name that has you spooked? I was continuing to do up the straps on my armor. Shia LaBeouf. Shit.

“Think all you want,” said Amaryllis. “Maintain protocol for speech, no writing whatsoever.” She was sweating slightly, maybe from the exertion of rapidly donning full plate armor. Valencia, wearing a dress but without armor of her own, helped to do up the immobility plate.

“Sixty percent he comes, forty percent he doesn’t,” said Amaryllis as her helmet came down to cover her face. “I’ll explain after, if I can.”

I was pretty sure that I already knew what was going on.

“You’ve come up to Craig’s cabin for the weekend, prepared for a night of gaming, but not knowing the horrible fate that awaits you,” I said. We were at Arthur’s house on Halloween night, too old for trick-or-treating. We’d each brought a bag of fun-sized candy, which were strewn across the table. The lights were off for this part of the evening, leaving us to play by candlelight.

“Spooky,” said Craig with a roll of his eyes.
“It is spooky,” I said. “There have been little things, little signs, the old man who issued you a word of warning at the gas station, a blood-smeared sign you passed by on the dirt road, which you told yourselves was just roadkill, the sound the radio made when you turned it on that seemed very much like a pained scream before the radio shorted out.” I had prepared that ahead of time. “But you’ve almost managed to forget all the foreboding and have settled in for a night enjoying each other’s company. The fireplace crackles beside you. Suddenly, your idle conversation is interrupted when one of the windows rattles,” I said.

“Must have been the wind?” asked Tiff.

“Might have been,” I replied with a small smile.

“Anyway, as I was saying,” said Arthur, “My father got me this neat book full of Aramaic, and I was going to try to read some of it.” He was putting on a bit of a character voice, a little higher, a little more nasal, classically nerdy.

“Can I be armed?” asked Reimer.

“Wouldn’t do you any good,” I replied.

“Really?” asked Reimer.

“Just get into the genre, Reimer,” said Tiff. “Horror movie rules. A gun is never enough, he’s supernatural. You go to a phone, the line is dead. You reach a policeman sitting in his car, you’re going to discover that his throat has been slit.”


“The bathroom?” I asked.

“We’re away from civilization in a run-down cabin,” said Arthur. “It’s a dark and stormy night.”

“Sure,” I said. I hadn’t described the weather, or even given all that much detail to the cabin.

“I want to start this right,” said Arthur. “I stand in front of the mirror, I close my eyes. I say it slowly, getting faster each time. Shia LaBeouf, Shia LaBeouf, Shia LaBeouf! Does anything happen?”

“You open your eyes?” I asked.

“I do,” Arthur smiled.

“He’s standing behind you, fully naked, his beard drenched in blood,” I said.

An hour into waiting, Amaryllis decided that it was time for her to talk.

“We don’t know if it’s a name, or just a word,” said Amaryllis. “Joon? Name or word?”

“Name,” I said, saying as little as possible.

“If you invoke it, a man shows up,” said Amaryllis. “Not all the time. Sixty percent, maybe.” She let out a shaky breath. “If you invoke it three times, you guarantee his arrival.”

“And then?” asked Grak, his words as carefully measured as mine had been.

“He starts killing,” said Amaryllis. “Sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds. It depends on who’s
around. He’s arbitrarily strong. He moves as fast as he needs to. Anything you put in front of him, he’ll grow a new power to tear down or go around.” She let out a breath. “I think if he were coming, he would have. We can stand down.”

She sat in her chair and slumped against it. I returned to my seat as well, still in my armor and not feeling any relief. “To be clear,” I said slowly. “It was the name after --”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Don’t repeat anything. I’ll do it. You said ‘actual’ then ‘cannibal’ and then the name. Don’t speak it, don’t spell it, don’t write it, don’t try putting it in code, don’t knowingly transmit it to anyone else, in whole or in part, through any medium or any level of cryptography.”

“Okay,” I said, swallowing. “How much of that is,” I tried to think of a simple word, “too much caution?” I was pretty sure it was only the name we needed to worry about, and using simple language to speak was just paranoia and a reminder to think very carefully about every single word spoken.

“None of it is paranoia,” said Amaryllis. “We’ve tried to harness him in the past. It always ends with everyone dying.”

I frowned, trying to think about that. “If you were able to transmit it to someone, somehow,” I said. “Have them say it, weaponize it? Suicide bombers?” I was relaxing the attention I was paying to my words, just a hitch. Obviously in the long-term, I couldn’t be so careful that I had to think over every word out of my mouth, especially if there was only a single name that I really had to watch out for, and that name was as uncommon as Shia LaBeouf.

“Your suicidal agent would die,” said Amaryllis. “Any means of protecting them or bringing them back would fail. Then he would go after whoever told the agent the word, and whoever gave the order, even if they didn’t know the word. Five of my cousins died in that particular experiment. It’s not something that anyone can actually use, except as an absolute last resort when all you want to do is call down extreme violence on yourself and everyone else in the area.”

I narrowed my eyes slightly at that. She could have killed Fallatehr with it, when she’d been captured by him, just before he’d touched her soul. Shia LaBeouf would have killed her, but he’d also have killed Fallatehr too. Understanding dawned on me as I thought back to what she’d said about that misadventure. ‘Suicide comes in many flavors’, she’d said.

“Is Joon in danger now?” asked Fenn. “If any of us say it, this thing will kill him too, even if he’s nowhere close?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Fuck,” I said.

“I heard it from a phonograph playing in the middle of nowhere on a loop, recorded by a dead man who had heard it from others who were also dead,” said Amaryllis. “That’s the only safe way to learn it.”

“Wait,” I said. “Writing triggers it?” Amaryllis nodded. “We have to stop using the backpack. We can’t pull movies from out of it, at least not ones from after 1990, and … shit, we can’t use IMDB, or printouts from websites that might list actors. I don’t know if that would twig it, but --”

“Movies?” asked Amaryllis, suddenly confused.

“The name,” I said. “It belongs to an actor from Earth.”
“What.” Amaryllis was staring at me.

“He was a child actor, became a movie star, now … kind of a meme, I guess.” I said.

“Juniper, you confirmed that there weren’t infohazards on Earth,” said Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “A meme, just … not making fun of him, exactly, because he invited a lot of it on himself, and I think he knew what he was doing, but the idea of him was bigger than the reality? And there was this video,” Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf, “which I guess I can’t say the name of, but the joke was that he was a kind of weird Hollywood actor being portrayed as a horror movie monster. It wasn’t horrifying, really, it was the juxtaposition. It was a joke. And then someone made it into a rules-light game that you could play with no prep and sixty seconds to make characters.” I paused. “We only played it two or three times, it was supposed to be campy, not …” I trailed off. “I had no idea he existed on Aerb. You’re not supposed to be able to summon him, not in the base rules, that was just something Arthur came up with, an improvisation. I mean, one that fit well within the theme of the game, but still.”

Amaryllis was staring at me. I could see disgust on her face, but I was pretty sure that it was aimed at the world of Aerb, rather than at me personally.

“Look,” I said. “It’s fine. We’re past the moment of danger, right?”

“Maybe,” said Amaryllis. “Probably.”

“And now that I know, I can avoid it,” I said.

“You could have told us beforehand,” said Fenn. This was directed at Amaryllis, not me.

“Oh, yes,” said Amaryllis. “That’s a fucking brilliant idea, spreading knowledge of things that are dangerous to know and even more dangerous to say, and which might literally kill me if spoken by someone else. Why did I not think to tell you, of all people?”

“I love when you get snarky,” said Fenn with a grin. “So are we going to play a game of Actual Cannibal --”

Valencia moved over to Fenn in the space of a heartbeat, grabbing her wrist and thrusting it up and behind her back, forcing her down onto the table. Valencia’s hand covered Fenn’s mouth in the same motion. Fenn stayed down, not trying to fight it. After a few seconds, muffled words came from behind Valencia’s hand.

“She’s licking me,” said Valencia.

“I think she was probably making a joke,” I said. “She wasn’t actually going to say it.”

There was more muffled noise from Fenn.

“Not a thing that anyone should joke about,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a word -- name that’s killed thousands.”

“How many of those because you tried to weaponize it?” asked Grak.

Amaryllis’ lips went thin.

“I’m going to let her up now,” said Valencia. Her eyes had an alertness to them that I was growing better at recognizing, which was a clear sign that she was, temporarily, something more than just
herself. It was trivial for her to mask, when she had a devil, but less so when she had a demon, and much of the time she didn’t bother.

“I obviously wasn’t going to say it,” said Fenn and she sat up in her chair. “If we can’t joke about things trying to kill us, what can we joke about?”

“Puns,” said Grak.

Amaryllis stood up from her chair. “I think I’m done for the day,” she said. “I’ll be in the study if anyone needs me.”

“I think I’m done too, sorry,” I said. “That was, uh, sort of an unpleasant reminder of what kind of world this is.”

Fenn grumped at that, but didn’t gainsay me. When I left, she was already back into animated conversation with the others. I had sort of thought that with Amaryllis and I gone, the common room might empty, but there were apparently things they wanted to talk with each other about. Personally, I wanted to be alone.

Fenn and I shared a bedroom on the third floor, up the house’s grand central staircase and with a view of the cold, grey, bleak Isle of Poran. The ceilings were high throughout the house, which in the case of our bedroom allowed for an enormous four-poster bed for Fenn and I, which we could draw the curtains on for privacy. We had dressers filled with clothes, half from Earth and half from Aerb, and a fireplace with a pair of armchairs in front of it. We barely ever used the fireplace; Bethel had generated a number of Earth books on architecture and building practices, which had led her to discover central heating, and that was more or less the end of fireplaces being needed for anything aside from atmosphere.

I did light the fireplace when I came back to our room though, because I was in need of some atmosphere as a backdrop for my thoughts.

There was a knock on my door before I could get too lost in thinking.

“Come in,” I said.

Amaryllis slipped in and shut the door behind her, quickly taking the seat beside me. She looked at the fire and stayed silent for a while.

“Just wanted company?” I asked.

“No,” she said, after some time had passed. “I think what just happened was a warning.”

“Maybe,” I said. “A warning from the Dungeon Master that if we sit around doing nothing, adventure will come to us?”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. The armchair was big, and made her look smaller than she was. “Something like that.” She turned to me. “I know you don’t want to level up again. It’s something we should talk about more. You didn’t tell me how bad it was the time before, when it was just you and Fenn. You had two and a half months and you just ignored it, like it was going to go away on its own. I should have asked, but I just … I thought you had it under control.”

I shifted in my seat. “I don’t understand the point of the pleasure,” I said. “If you were an idiot, you’d think that it was a good way to compel me to go adventuring more, to complete quests, to kill things … but I was given the resources to alter myself early on, and if you were literally omniscient, then you’d have to understand that I would be horrified by the idea of losing myself to an impulse to
become stronger. Right? I’ve got a disincentive to pursue leveling up now.”

“It’s terrible game design,” said Amaryllis. “But we need you to level up.”

I turned to look at her. “There are things that only I can do,” I said. “I know. I don’t want to lose myself though. I don’t want my identity to be stripped away, not more than it already has been. The levels have been getting further apart, but they’re ramping up in intensity. If you hadn’t been there ...”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was soft. “You want to refuse the call.”

“In monomythic terms?” I asked. “No. It’s more … the later parts of the hero’s journey, the death and rebirth. That’s what worries me, being forged into something new, and maybe something unpleasant.” I paused. “Shit. We missed something.”

“We did?” asked Amaryllis.

“The name,” I said. I saw her stiffen slightly. “It’s the name of a famous actor on Earth. We need to get to Speculation and Scrutiny and warn them, because that’s a disaster waiting to happen. You’ve said before that the nation’s pursuit is going to be the spread of technological development for personal gain, and I’ve said that the group’s pursuit should be doing things that only we can do. I’m pretty sure that this is one of those things. There are a bunch of people from Earth there, and the moment one of them says the name of a well-known actor, it’s going to be a disaster.”

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis.

**Quest Accepted: The Name of the Beast - Go to the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny and warn them of the word that no one can be allowed to say.**

Bethel elected not to come with, which I think we all saw coming. She had expressed a strong preference for being a house, and had spent the last few weeks filling herself with all sorts of crap that couldn’t easily be moved. For her to come with would mean taking everything that wasn’t ‘house’ and tossing it out onto the ground, or alternately, having someone go around with the glove and hoover up everything from every room. For what was planned as a day trip, and one where we probably wouldn’t need overwhelming firepower, that didn’t seem worth it.

Granted, we were still loaded for bear and treating this as though it were a military operation, because the most important thing we’d learned about quests so far was that they could be as difficult and complicated as they wanted to be. We were going there for two quests, one the Shia LaBeouf quest, the other *Straddling Worlds*, which had been in my quest log since my very first day on Aerb. Both seemed easy, which was suspicious, but at least the dream-skewered quest had been given to me when I was level two. You weren’t supposed to get incredibly difficult quests at level two, you were supposed to get the first quest in a long chain that you would eventually be able to handle with another dozen levels under your belt. I expected more quests to follow.

We gathered together our things, armored up, checked our weapons over, made sure that the glove was stocked. I felt a little outclassed by Valencia and Amaryllis, given that they were both covered head-to-toe in full plate and decked out with weapons. Bethel had made sheaths, pouches, and in some cases, clothes, pulling things from Earth with precision and making the necessary alterations.

Given that the Anyblade was gone, I was using the shortsword we’d taken from Aumann’s vault, ages ago. Bethel could speak considerably faster than any of us, and focus intently on a single task without growing bored (at the exclusion of everything else), so she’d launched a dictionary attack on
it, trying to find out whether it had a code phrase that we just didn’t know. That had turned out to be
the case: it was “smoke”. When spoken, the bluish-silver blade would go black, and it gained the
ability to pass through metal for a few seconds before reverting to normal. It could do this once a
day, which was entirely underwhelming, especially given that Amaryllis had the flicker-blade which
could do the same thing, but better and more often. I had bonded to the shortsword anyhow, since it
was better than nothing, and I still wanted to be able to use my bladebound powers.

I had a rifle strapped to my back, in order to give me some range. It wasn’t magical or anything, but
it was the best we had, unless I wanted to use a bow and arrow. As good as I was with a bow,
largely thanks to Fenn, I still favored the rifle, in part because I didn’t have a fancy ‘quiver’ like she
did to give me near-infinite ammo in easy reach.

I wore bandoliers, mostly filled with bones, in part to give cover to the technique that I was using,
which by imperial law, I wasn’t supposed to have. Amaryllis was working on squaring everything
away as far as legality was concerned, but that was a work in progress, and it was likely going to
require some amount of legal recognition of our tiny nation. Once that was all done, we could reveal
a little bit more of our true abilities, but as of right now, we were completely unlicensed soul mages
working for what was only really a nation because of our pretensions and the backing of polities like
the Ha-lunde.

Amaryllis was very clear that the rules of engagement had changed, and Jorge had been very clear
that there were limits to what Uniquities was willing (or able) to cover for. If there was another fight
in the streets like the last time we’d been to Boastre Vino, then at a minimum we would need to stick
around and explain things to the authorities, which would open up our tiny nation to more scrutiny
than it was already under.

In retrospect, maybe taking a fully-armed party of six in to complete a level 2 quest was tempting the
narrative a bit too much.
The Dream That Skewers

When looking at the athenaeum system as a whole, I was very much reminded about what Figaro Finch and I had talked about regarding specialized hammers. If all you had were thirteen special hammers, then eventually you would start designating some of them for ‘close-enough’ purposes. Each of the athenaeums had carved out their own little slice of the higher-education pie, and usually centered around one or two complementary or linked types of magic, but there was a strong tendency for them to expand beyond that. The Athenaeum of Bone and Flesh wasn’t just a place where people learned bone magic, it was where they learned healing magic in general, and beyond that, they were the renowned experts in non-magical healing as well, save for the niche that the Athenaeum of Quills and Blood had carved out for itself. There were things you could learn without going to one of the athenaeums, since Aerb also had independent colleges, and not all of the minor magics were tightly regulated … but anyone who wanted to be someone in academics or magic needed to go to an athenaeum.

Speculation and Scrutiny was, in many respects, the junk drawer of the athenaeum system. They were the ‘hey, that’s weird …’ athenaeum, the place that studied all those little bits and bobs that people wanted to fully understand. Speculation and Scrutiny was divided up into colleges with their own subspecialties, one for entads, one for racial attributes and bloodline magics, one for ‘dead’ magics, one for Animalia, and so on and so forth. All in all, it was a long list of different things that were in need of study, with toes occasionally dipped into the waters that others had claimed. The dream-skewered were a part of the Cerebral College, with a small dormitory tucked away on the mountaintop campus. That was our destination.

Getting up the mountain from Boastre Vino was relatively easy; all we had to do was present temporary guest passes, which were given out fairly freely. Ours were forged, but there was no way to easily tell that. Much of the groundwork for our visit to Speculation and Scrutiny had been laid the last time we were in Boastre Vino; while Fenn and I had been busy with the unicorn stuff, the other members of the party had been getting some work done, and Amaryllis had put as much work as she could into all of the quests we had listed.

The trolley had seats for twenty, but we were the only ones on it. That wasn’t a huge surprise; we’d picked a time of day that was well outside peak hours. Boastre Vino was less connected to the athenaeum than you might have thought, for two places that were so close to each other. Speculation and Scrutiny had their own mess halls, entertainment, and services, all of them with the fairly large advantage of not having to spend a forty minute round trip to get to them. People did go down to Boastre Vino, but it was usually to buy specialty things that they couldn’t order by catalog, or to take in some sort of excitement that the athenaeum didn’t have on offer. The trollies ran, regardless.

“So, he’s an actor?” asked Fenn.

“Fenn,” said Amaryllis. “Don’t ask about him.”

“I just want to know whether I’ve seen anything he’s been in,” said Fenn. “Is that so much to ask?”

“Odds are you haven’t,” I replied. “I know that media gets a bit spotty as you go further forward in time, since there’s stuff that never went to VHS. DVD came out in, uh …”

“1995,” said Amaryllis. “But they still made movies on VHS as late as 2006.”

“Huh,” I said. “Yeah, that sounds right.”
“It is,” replied Amaryllis.

“But it would be useful to know if I had seen him somewhere, right?” asked Fenn. “Like, as an instrumental?”

“Instrumental what?” asked Amaryllis.

“... utility?” asked Fenn.

“I would prefer not to tempt fate,” said Grak.

“It’s not tempting fate, it’s learning,” said Fenn. “It can’t possibly hurt anything to know what the Cannibal was in,” she pointed to me. “Joon?”

“Uh, Transformers,” I said.

Fenn froze. “Wait, really? Transformers, robots in disguise, more than meets the eye, those Transformers? Because we totally saw that one. It’s got Citizen Kane, right?”

“What?” I asked. I tried to see some way that she could have misunderstood something, but was coming up blank.

“We need to shut this line of conversation down,” said Amaryllis. “Too much risk.”

“Wait, I want to understand what Fenn is talking about,” I said. “I really thought that getting you all exposure to Earth stuff would help, but it’s not really been the case. Half of the references are just gibberish to me.”

“Because you’re uncultured,” said Fenn with a huff. “Kane, from Citizen Kane, he was a Transformer, and apparently the world-eating cannibal was in it too.”

Solace leaned over to Valencia. “Should I be following any of this? What’s a robot?”

Valencia shrugged. “Sometimes I think they all went mad down in the time chamber.”

“To clarify, he won’t eat the world,” said Amaryllis. “I think it’s very important to not overstate threats. At best, the cannibal will kill a fairly large number of innocent people, especially if his name is said in a place with as dense a population as one of the athenaeums.”

“What is our plan?” asked Grak.

“We gather information first,” said Amaryllis. “There’s a lot that we don’t know about the dream-skewered. They’re a very, very niche curiosity.”

“Who you know about, in depth,” said Fenn. She rolled her eyes. “Naturally.”

“I really don’t,” said Amaryllis. “It’s included, briefly, in most reckonings of the greater cosmology, usually nestled somewhere between a paragraph on the excluded mirror dimension and a summary of the more hypothetical elemental planes. Before I met Joon, everything that I knew about Earth could have fit in a few pages, if that. I read The Dream that Skewers, which is authoritative, while I was in the chamber, but it’s a very thin book, and most of it is filled with musings rather than hard data. You’d think that if you were going to write a whole book about a group of people that claim to come from a shared alternate reality, you would include very important things like, I don’t know, the year that they think it is, or the names of the major governments.”

“You never asked me,” I said.
“Well,” said Amaryllis. She shifted slightly. “I did eventually. It didn’t seem important until much later.”

“It’s kind of not,” I replied with a shrug. “I read the book too.” I looked to the others. “It was more about Earth as a concept, the affliction, a few case studies, the facilities at Speculation and Scrutiny, the care provided there … it really went in the direction of *The Care and Feeding of Dream-Skewered*. There’s not a bunch about Earth. If you don’t actually care about Earth, which might as well not exist except so far as the deluded dream-skewered people think it does, then you don’t care so much about timelines.”

“What year is it on Earth?” asked Valencia.

“2017,” I said.

Valencia nodded. “I don’t know what that means. Fifteen hundred years in the future?”

“They use a different calendar,” said Amaryllis.

“I guess when I think about it, it took me quite a while to ask what year it was,” I said. “Unless you’re time traveling or studying history, it’s not really important.”

“You said that 1990 was the cut-off for our problem?” asked Amaryllis. “Anything before that, we don’t care about?”

“I … think so?” I asked. “He was a child actor, but … I don’t know when he really rose to fame. It was *Even Stevens*, I think? But that was before my time. I also don’t know how old he is. Twenties or thirties, I guess, so let’s say … he was probably born between 1977 and 1997.”

“Wait,” said Fenn. “When did *Transformers* come out?”

“Uh,” I said. “No clue, but I would say after 2000 before 2010?”

“And I suppose we can’t use IMDB?” asked Fenn, aiming that question at Amaryllis.

“Absolutely not,” said Amaryllis. “No web pages, period. I’m not just worried about the cannibal, I’m worried about other, hidden infohazards. Things that Joon didn’t think would make the leap, or which were intended as jokes.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I really don’t think this one is on me. I mean, it’s a lot more not on me than all the other stuff, which is also not my fault or responsibility. The purpose wasn’t to torture game characters … or, I guess it was to torture them as a joke, which is totally different.”

“Will it be funny if the cannibal kills us?” asked Grak.

“Uh,” I said. “Not to me, but from a certain point of view … yeah.”

“Well that’s fucking great,” said Fenn. She paused for a moment. “Wait! You have that virtue!”

“I do?” I asked.

“You take half as much damage from physical comedy, so long as it’s funny, right?” asked Fenn.

“You … may actually have a point,” said Amaryllis.

“Regardless,” I replied. “It’s not going to be a problem, because no one is going to say it. We don’t even have Bethel with us, which means that there’s no possibility that someone will try to pull
something innocuous from Earth and trip the trigger by accident. Which we’re not actually sure is a possibility in the first place.”

“I’m pretty sure that Transformers didn’t come out when you think it did,” said Fenn with a frown. “And I really want to keep using the backpack, because guess what, there’s no one on Aerb that knows how to make sushi. Plus Earth bras are great.”

“I don’t think there’s an infohazard risk for clothing,” said Amaryllis. “But we need to have a serious discussion on opsec with regards to that particular ability, because there are going to be people gunning for us, and it’s better that no one makes the connection until after we’ve already established ourselves enough that they can’t knock our feet from under us.”

“I’m sorry that Uniquities found out,” said Valencia.

“They don’t know the full truth,” said Amaryllis. “All they have are some books.”

(This was significantly understating it. The actual text of the books wasn’t too worrisome, it was the covers and front pages that gave things away, because they were chock full of clues of their origin. Publishing companies, Earth locations, ISBN numbers, a barcode, all the kinds of things that marked it as very distinctly not a thing from Aerb. Amaryllis had some misgivings about all this, both that we’d left Valencia with that kind of thing, and that Valencia hadn’t put up a fuss about handing it over to Uniquities. It was understandable, from Val’s perspective, given that she’d just been given a reprieve from intense violence, but the whole affair had put a little wrinkle into their relationship. I was certain that Amaryllis was marking the information leaked to Uniquities as one of her failures, even though we’d both been there.)

“Well, I’m still sorry,” said Valencia.

“Can we talk about the Citizen Kane thing?” asked Fenn. “This is bugging me.”

I looked up the slope. “We’ve got a few minutes,” I said. “But I’m pretty sure you’re wrong, and we don’t have anything to reference in order to settle it. Transformers is, uh, not what I would consider a cultural touchstone, not in the same way that Star Wars or -- oh, shit, don’t watch the fourth Indiana Jones movie.”

“I didn’t even know there was a fourth,” said Fenn. “Wasn’t on your list.”

“I don’t even know what Indiana Jones is,” said Valencia with a frown.

“Well, movie night is going to be on hold, apparently,” said Fenn. “I should still be able to watch anime though, right?”

“Subs or dubs?” I asked.

Fenn frowned at me. “Mary doesn’t have subtitles working.”

“Do you have any idea -- no, I know that you don’t,” said Amaryllis. “But if we’re talking about EIA-608 encoding, which is the simplest form of closed captioning I could probably do, it’s not something that I’m ever going to have the time or manpower to work on, especially since I’m going to gather a standards council together in order to make our own, Aerb-specific standards.”

“You’re so great,” said Valencia.

“I was only asking because if it’s dubs, then you’d have to be careful,” I said. “He might have done voice work.”
“This is bullshit,” said Fenn. “And yes, obviously he’s done voice work, but American voice work, right? Blugh, I hate this.”

“I somewhat enjoy it,” said Solace.

“Um,” said Amaryllis. “What?”

The trolley car crested up to flat ground then came to a stop, in a long line with the others. Trolleys left every few minutes, in a continuous circuit.

“Sorry, hold that thought,” said Amaryllis. “We’re going full opsec, no breaches of the fourteen points of contention.”

“What’s opsec?” asked Fenn.

Amaryllis glared at her, then slid her helmet on as the doors opened.

“Well, I thought it was funny,” said Valencia.

“A bit,” said Grak.

We filed out of the car and took in the place. The Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny was one of the smaller athenaeums, which meant that it ‘only’ had a hundred thousand students, divided up into a handful of colleges. It was a hell of a lot of people even before you added in all the faculty and staff, all of them packed onto the tip of the mountain. The architecture followed a uniform aesthetic, with tall buildings, lots of terraces, and swirling bas-reliefs wherever there was a large expanse of wall. The air was a bit thin, enough to be noticeable, and we were far above the timberline, but someone had gone through the effort of making sure there was greenery, in the form of short grasses growing in stone beds, and more exotic plants that didn’t have any leaves, instead looking like curled, waxy stalks.

“I think that I can explain as we walk, without revealing anything,” said Solace. Her voice was higher, now that she was a child, but it still had the air of wisdom and age to it. “Juniper has said that the great virtue of my kind is saxud, ‘doublethink’ in his parlance. The part I find enjoyable is in seeing how others react to having certain subjects which must be danced around, or certain thoughts that must not be thought.”

“Is that what being a -- what being you is like?” asked Valencia. She stopped herself from calling Solace a druid at the last moment.

“Sometimes,” said Solace. “Not often. It was difficult, when I was younger, but as I grew old, it became much simpler. Now, after that violent rebirth, I find myself closer to the true ideal of those in my vocation. Pieces of the old me have been cleaned from my soul.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that,” said Amaryllis.

“With happiness?” asked Solace. She let out a little laugh. “You’re a very good mother, to be worried about me so.”

The dream-skewered were kept in a combination dormitory, clinic, and research center. Last time we’d been in Boastre Vino, Amaryllis had gotten all of the information she’d thought we would need. This time, there wasn’t a Larkspur to stop us. The dormitory was a four-story building, wider than it was tall, but with the same terraces and bas-reliefs of the other, taller buildings around it. It had a fifteen foot, solidly-built wall, with holes and arches at the top for decoration. It was the only building with a wall around it, and I noticed that everything decorative about it was above the height
a person could reach, even if they were jumping. The main gates were thick iron, locked shut. For all the efforts the exterior made to make the place look inviting, it still had the air of institutional confinement to it. So far as I was aware, the dream-skewered were checked in voluntarily and stayed by their own decision, but …

“There are heavy wards,” said Grak. “Heavier than on any other building on campus.” He pointed up to the top floor. “Annihilation wards, there. Instant death if you tried to enter or leave.”

“Ominous,” said Solace.

“Not instant death for everyone,” said Amaryllis, glancing in Valencia’s direction. Valencia was in the Red Armor of Arramor, completely covered, which would hide her from any warder, but it also made her look really fucking scary, especially because of the crown of thorns sitting on top of her helmet.

“There’s an intercom,” I said, pointing to a small box next to the gate.

“I want it on record that this is the most obvious trap in the world,” said Fenn.

I moved forward and gave the intercom button a press. There was something very satisfying about technology on Aerb. Everything had a thunk to it. I had to wait a few seconds before there was a voice on the other end.

“Yes?” it asked.

“Male, human, bored, wary,” said Valencia. She was speaking at a bare whisper, just behind my shoulder. If this was a trap, I had the feeling the jig would be up for them in short order.

“I was hoping to speak to Speculator Masters,” I said. “I had a few questions.” The name was one we’d picked up while we were in Boastre Vino, no thanks to me. “This is the place the dream-skewered are housed, isn’t it?”

The speaker was silent for a moment, then the gates began to creak open. “Someone will meet you in the lobby.”

“I can’t tell what the change in demeanor was,” said Valencia, still pitching her voice so that I could only just hear it. “It was either the name of Masters being mentioned, or something else.”

“You have speculations?” asked Amaryllis, who was standing close by.

“They have protocols and we just tripped one,” said Valencia. “I don’t have any insight beyond that. It might be paranoia. There are innocuous solutions to the question.”

“It wouldn’t be absurd for them to have a protocol for visitors,” I said.

“Not that kind of protocol,” said Valencia. “Something serious.”

The gates stopped with a shudder as whatever internal mechanism was responsible for opening it finished its work. It didn’t look like an evil lair of evil. We walked forward, on guard.

Wearing armor was frowned upon in polite society, but not so much that there were laws against it, or even so much that people would actually frown. There were a few features that were common for entad armor, including resizing, comfortability, breathability, and a host of others, which meant that armor wasn’t always such a burden on people as it might have seemed, and that in turn meant that you couldn’t just assume someone wearing full plate was getting ready for war. In addition to that,
there were armors that provided useful, day-to-day utility for people, especially with regards to movement, and you wouldn’t want to castigate someone for wearing armor that could spirit him across the city and let him skip his commute.

(Added onto that was the question of money. Most entads ended up in the hands of the rich, through a couple of different mechanisms, and the rich tended to make the rules and set the fashions. Breastplates occasionally came into fashion as knock-offs or inspirations from some rich asshole being seen with a new entad, though the copycat armor was rarely functional. More often though, you’d see clothes cut or dyed such that they gave the impression of armor without any of the inconvenience.)

Weapons were a little less defensible in polite society. Some had mundane utility, sure, but for every entad sword that healed people instead of hurting them, you had a hundred more that were just more effective instruments of murder. The social pressure against going around armed was stronger, and you would get a look or two, though it was unlikely that anyone would make a comment about it. Swords were more acceptable than guns, in part because of the implied level of training and knowledge. Either way, a weapon at the hip would draw attention, and that attention would be largely negative, but it wasn’t anything you couldn’t overcome with a smile and a friendly demeanor. The attention was the big worry; if you wanted to go around without attracting attention, then it was better to be dressed as simply and non-threateningly as possible.

And then you had our little group of six. We hadn’t made any attempt at hewing to cultural expectations. No, if we were going up against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, we were going to be doing it as fully armed as we could possibly be, at least to within the limits of what was legal. Valencia had red armor with tiny thorns, a crown of thorns, a sword at her hip, and two pistols in their holsters. All that was intimidating, even before you knew that the crown ate poisons, the sword ate memories, and the girl inside the armor was absolutely insanely proficient at combat. Amaryllis was next-most-scarily equipped, and I think Solace was the only one of us who could have passed for unthreatening.

A young man sat behind a counter in a reception area, looking a little too alert and straight-backed for my tastes, but that had to be the natural reaction of someone seeing so many heavily armed people come into the place.

“Ah,” he said, taking us in. His eyes lingered on Grak’s wooden hand. “Spec Masters will be down in a moment. Can I ask what this is regarding?”

“It’s confidential,” I said.

The young man nodded, then swallowed. “He’ll be right down. If you could sign in?” He pushed a clipboard across his desk, and Amaryllis picked it up, filling it in with our real names, save for her own, which matched the official pseudonym she used on the Isle of Poran.

(We were coming as ourselves for this one, more or less. It wasn’t the ideal trial run for coming out of the shadows, but it was the hand we’d been dealt. We were really hoping that there wasn’t going to be an official investigation, but if there was, we really couldn’t be operating as covert agents on foreign soil. That was not to mention the distinctive armor, weapons, and abilities, all of which had already been the giveaway for Uniquities. Going covert might have worked if we’d been willing to go in without weapons or armor, as we’d done when we hijacked the sky ship, but that seemed like asking for trouble here.)

The man who came down the elevator a few minutes later was wearing armor of his own, though nothing so ostentatious as what Valencia had on. His breastplate was semi-transparent and etched with the design of a tree in deep black. His shirt was an Earth-standard dress shirt though, and his
black slacks and dress shoes weren’t too far off from Earth fashions either. He was an older man, gray at the temples, with crow’s feet and wrinkles on his forehead that became more pronounced when he looked at us.

“Speculator Masters,” he said, coming forward and shaking my hand first. I briefly wondered why that was, but I wasn’t too troubled by it; Amaryllis had said that she would defer to me, since I had far more knowledge about Earth and the threat surface of the infohazard.

“Juniper Smith,” I said. “We’re the Council of Arches. There’s something highly confidential that we need to discuss with you.”

“All of you?” asked Masters with a raised eyebrow. His eyes went to Valencia’s pistols and sword. “Am I in any danger?”

“This whole facility is,” I said. “And yes, I would prefer that we all stayed together.”

Masters looked at the six of us. “May I ask whether this is in regards to the dream-skewered?”

“Yes,” I said. “I won’t say more until we’re in private and under a fair number of wards.”

Masters didn’t move. “I’m not familiar with the Council of Arches.”

“We’re a relatively new national agency,” I said. “We recently happened to come across some information that it’s critically important for you to have.” Not that we were going to actually tell him, but we did need to give him the bare bones and talk with him about how the dream-skewered were handled with regards to topics on Earth. It made me uneasy that they were presumably all together.

“Very well,” he finally said. “We do have a conference room available for consultations with the affected and their families. We can discuss it there. As for wards, may I assume you’ll be supplying your own?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

We went up a flight of stairs together, and Masters eventually led us into a room with a long table that seated ten and a chalkboard at one end. Grak went to work immediately, laying in wards that would do at least a little bit of work toward making sure that no one could listen in.

“I’m listening,” said Masters, once Grak had confirmed that the room was about as secure as he could make it. He was still looking at me. I’d talked with Amaryllis about what I was going to say, but it felt nervous for me to be in the driver’s seat.

“We need information first, in order to know how to present this,” I said.

“Information of what sort?” asked Masters.

“Information about Earth,” I replied. “We need to know some specifics about the world that the dream-skewered believe they come from.”

Masters frowned slightly. “You believe that you might have found something that would negatively impact the health and safety of my patients or the staff at this facility?” he asked.

I nodded. “It’s hard to know whether or not it’s even wise to give you the barest description without knowing more about the dream-skewered.”

Masters looked like he’d just eaten a lemon. “I’m going to need to screen you,” he said.
“Screen us?” I asked. I was already on guard, but that bumped me up a few levels.

“I need to check whether any of you are dream-skewered,” said Masters.

“And there’s a screening protocol for that?” I asked.

Masters nodded. “There are certain things that I would not say to a dream-skewered, for reasons of their health and safety.”

“Valencia?” I asked, turning to her. She was sitting just to my left, with her fingers resting on my thigh, where she could tap in code to tell me what she was picking up without Masters being able to see. So far, nothing.

“What’s your species?” asked Valencia.

“Ell,” replied Masters, looking at Valencia more closely. She had used a voice of command and authority, but it was still a girl’s voice.

The Ell were one of the earliest races that I ever made, the kind of sloppy worldbuilding that you’d expect from a ten-year-old. They looked human, but lived a hundred times slower. That meant that when they slept, it was 800 hours, not eight. Their meals were one hundred times bigger, but spread out over one hundred times longer. There was a lot about the concept that hadn’t made too much sense when you thought about it, but they existed on Aerb, and all the rough edges of that amateur effort had been sanded down in various ways.

“You trained with the Elon Gar,” said Valencia.

Masters nodded once, cautiously. “It’s not uncommon for my people,” he said. “Sleep is more of a thief to us than almost any of the other mortal species.”

I was inwardly groaning. The Elon Gar were an order of monks who specialized in manipulating the mind; they could get by on ten minutes of meditation instead of sleeping, they could organize their memories far better than normal, and in general exhibited a degree of control over their own minds and bodies which on Earth would have been considered supernatural. Checking them out was on our list, but there was no quest, despite efforts at prompting one, and no obvious skill that needed unlocking. My guess was that they were the equivalent of the blade-bound, but for more social or mental skills, and ostensibly ‘non-magical’.

Their best ability? Total control of their facial features. The monks of the Elon Gar were masters of keeping a stone face, which made them impeccable liars. And it was just like the Dungeon Master to throw one at us now that we had Valencia.

“You were trained inexpertly,” said Valencia with some satisfaction. She turned to look at me through the eye slits of the armor. The decorative thorns around them looked a bit like flames. “He’s lying.”

Okay, or he’s not meant as a foil to that particular ability.

“I’m not lying,” said Masters. “I do need to perform a screening. There’s more to the dream-skewered than you know.” I felt my heart start beating a little faster at that. Did he know about the Cannibal? Or was this about something else?

“But it’s not for health and safety?” I asked.

Masters paused. “No,” he said.
“He’s following deeper directives,” Valencia supplied.

“Then we both have information the other wants,” I said. I hesitated for just a tick. There was no way that they were going to involuntarily commit me, not when we had this much firepower on our side. “I’m dream-skewered.”

Masters sucked in a breath, which he let out slowly. “Then it’s all the more important that I screen you.”

“Looking for what?” I asked.

“There are different presentations of the phenomenon,” said Masters.

_Ah. Others with my power? That would be … unexpected, but not wholly unanticipated._

“What form does this screening take?” asked Amaryllis.

“You’ll hold an entad in your hand while I say a series of words,” said Masters. “The entad will change colors, giving a reading of your surface level recognition.”

_Mind-reading._ Entads had variable effects, but some effects were rarer than others. Mind-reading, even at the low level he was talking about, was virtually unknown. That gave a good benchmark of his power level: high.

“I consent,” I replied.

Masters nodded briefly, then excused himself so he could retrieve the entad he would need.

“Grak, are we good to talk?” asked Amaryllis, as soon as Masters was gone.

“Likely,” said Grak.

“Luck sense isn’t getting pinged yet,” said Fenn. “Common sense is screaming at me to get out of here though.”

“I’m worried about black swans,” said Amaryllis. “Really worried. There’s too much power concentrated here. Something isn’t right.”

“If he were coming back to kill us, I’m pretty sure I would feel it,” said Fenn.

“He might just be trying to contain the infohazard we’re here to warn him about,” I said. “That would be consistent with his level of caution.” I hesitated. “Val, you said that he was lying about it being for my health and safety?”

“I was bluffing,” she said. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. He is out of practice, or wasn’t trained well, but he’s still very hard to read, and he’s trying very hard to keep it that way.”

“Well, --” began Amaryllis.

The door opened back up, and Masters slipped back inside. He was holding a small gray ball in his hand. It was slightly reflective, with striations on the surface that reminded me of marble. In his other hand, he held a sheet of papers.

“You can have your warden inspect the entad, if you would like,” said Masters. He took his seat once more, placed the papers on the table, then rolled the ball from one hand to the other. “I’ll demonstrate its use. Say a noun or noun phrase, one that you would expect me to know, then one that you
wouldn’t expect me to know.” He picked the ball up, holding it in his hand.

“Anglecynn,” I said. The ball in his hand lit up a bright green. I paused, trying to think carefully about a noun that he wouldn’t know. “Fenn Greenglass.” The ball lit up again, this time emitting a gray light before fading back to its base, unlit state. It was on our intake form, but he hadn’t read that, and we’d made no formal introductions. He set it down on the table again. “How many colors?” I asked.

“Four,” said Masters. “Green is known to you personally, blue is known to you from some outside source, grey is unknown, and yellow is known and then later forgotten. Intensity of light matches intensity of knowledge.” He rolled the ball across the table to me. I glanced at Grak, who gave me a nod, then picked it up, feeling its weight. “It’s harmless, save for the information it allows me to obtain.” The ball pulsed green as he spoke, once each for ‘it’, ‘information’, ‘it’ and ‘me’.

I stared at the ball and wondered how complex of a noun phrase it was capable of dealing with, and then pondered how it could possibly be working, then trying to think like Reimer about all the things that I would munchkin it for, if it were mine. He would probably try to pin down exactly what constituted a noun phrase and then move on from there. The entad wasn’t something that I had designed, but it had that familiarity to it, like it was something that I would design.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m ready.”

“We’ll start slowly,” said Masters. He paused. “Really, I should have the rest of you leave the room, so as not to influence future screenings. It’s not normally a concern, but --”

“No,” I said. “I’m freely admitting to being dream-skewered. If the others were, they would say so as well.”

Masters nodded. “Very well.” He looked down at his papers. “We’ll start slow. Before we begin, can you give me a rough estimate of how long it’s been since you were transferred to Aerb?”

I frowned as I tried to think about that. From whose reference frame? “Four months,” I said.

Masters gave me a quizzical look. I was fairly sure that was longer than the average. “Many features of Aerb will be familiar to you then.”

“Many more than you know. I was a tiny bit worried about that.


This continued on for longer than it seemed like it should have. I understood that it was probably calibration, but I didn’t really need thirty names and places from Aerb in a row. At first they were blue or green across the board, but the last ten had a few yellow and gray, presumably because they were more obscure. Whatever Mome Rath was, I had apparently forgotten it.

And then, without seeming to switch gears at all, Masters said “Earth”, which came up green.


He was holding his paper up slightly, so I couldn’t read what was on it from where I was sitting. I was suddenly curious whether this was a list or a flowchart. If dream-skewered came from England, you’d need a different chart for them, wouldn’t you? He continued with places for a bit.

We were moving forward in time, that much was clear. Was the purpose of the screening to figure out what time the dream-skewered were from? But that didn’t make sense, since there didn’t seem to be any reason you couldn’t just ask, aside from maybe the mind-fuck of someone asking what year you thought it was.

“Elon Musk.” Blue. “Justin Bieber.” Blue. “Miley Cyrus.” Blue. Even after all that I’d spent two months in the chamber steeped back into Earth culture, it was utterly bizarre to hear these names coming from the mouth of an armored man while sitting at a conference table. “Henry Swift.” Gray. “Abigail March.” Gray. I frowned at that. Testing for false positives? Or something else? “Abigail Breslin.” Blue. “Adam Driver.” Blue. “Zootopia.” Green. “Finding Dory.” Green. We continued on with movies for a while, all of them somewhat recent. I’d heard of all of them; the ones I’d seen showed up green, while the ones I hadn’t showed blue. The movies were a surprise, but it was expected that someone who ran a dorm filled with dream-skewered would have in-depth knowledge of Earth. So close to the time I left though … that was curious.

I kept waiting for the moment he would mention a movie in the Cannibal’s filmography. Was this an infohazard they had already contained? Was that the purpose of this?

“Arthur Blum,” said Masters. The ball lit up a bright green.

He said the name like it was any other thing on that list. I wanted to stop him, but I was too shocked to say anything.


I sat there as he listed off a dozen names. The ones that weren’t members of our gaming group were people we’d gone to high school with. I just sat there in stunned silence, watching the ball turn green again and again.

“We’re done,” said Masters. He was looking at me calmly, as though nothing was strange about any of this. “You said that your own name was Juniper Smith.” The ball flashed green for a final time, and I gently set it down on the table.

We sat in silence for a bit. Maybe Masters was waiting for me to speak, but I had nothing to say.

“So,” I said slowly. “Where does that list come from?”

“Uther Penndraig, the Lost King,” said Masters.

I stayed silent for a moment, looking at the wall to the left of Masters’ head. “And … how many does the average dream-skewered get from that list?”

“How many would you guess?” asked Masters. His voice was flat, emotionless.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Mome Rath was the last of the Aerbian ones?”

Masters nodded.

“Then … I would guess that they stop somewhere around Adolf Hitler.” I wasn’t sure about that. I had wondered why, if there were a thousand dream-skewered, none of them had done something like what Arthur had done. Surely with a thousand of them over the course of the last five hundred years, one would have been an engineer capable of making the advances that Amaryllis was
planning. My current working theory was that most of the dream-skewered came from earlier in Earth’s history, maybe centered around a bell curve, with Arthur at the very far end, which would solve a lot of the problems inherent in the worldbuilding aspects, but --

“There are no dream-skewered,” said Valencia.

Masters hesitated, then nodded.

*Quest Completed: The Name of the Beast - I guess some problems just solve themselves.*
“They’re a recognized phenomenon,” said Amaryllis. “To maintain the deception for so long, under so much scrutiny, you’d need --”

“Powerful magic,” replied Masters.

“I was going to say that you’d need the complicity of far too many people,” replied Amaryllis. “People -- scholars -- would come to this place and they’d want to speak with the dream-skewered, they’d want to take notes, they’d want to know things about Earth. You can’t possibly have -- how could you possibly have kept up the pretense for five hundred years?”

“It’s not important,” said Masters. He was still looking at me.

“What’s important is what happens now,” I said. I was watching Masters. If there were no dream-skewered, that meant that someone had created the myth, and done it with purpose. I thought it was probably easier than Amaryllis was making it out to be; the dream-skewered were a curiosity, nothing more, a footnote rather than one of the greater mysteries of the universe. “Uther Penndraig gave you those names. Why?”

“Together, we might find the truth,” said Masters. He stood up from his chair. “Come with me.”

I stayed where I was and looked to Valencia.

“I … I don’t know,” she said. “He’s soaked in weariness. Maybe intentionally. It might be masking something else.”

“These are your knights?” asked Masters.

“Knights?” I asked.

“As Uther had,” replied Masters.

“No, not really,” which was a bald-faced lie. I turned to Fenn. “Verdict?”

“Nothing is twigging,” she said with a shrug. “That doesn’t mean that it’s safe.”

I stood from my seat. “Okay then. Uther … what, he left me something?”

Masters nodded once. “I haven’t seen it myself.” He stepped away from the table, leaving his papers and his entad behind, and went to the conference room’s door without another word. He moved like he wasn’t sure of himself. Five hundred years of perpetuating this deception? All, presumably, for this?

We walked down the hall. I followed close behind him, with Valencia and Grak flanking me as best they could. Masters seemed like he was in a daze, and I felt like I was in a daze too. When Amaryllis had told me that there was a condition that caused people to believe they were from Earth, I had thought that it was just something to explain away the fact that I was on Aerb. Later on … well, I’d taken a tiny bit of comfort in the fact that there were other people who remembered Earth on Aerb. To find out that they were all just figments was, strangely, a bit crushing. I hadn’t been sure what I was going to do with the other dream-skewered, but now all those possibilities had been washed away.
We went up to the fourth floor, the place with heavy wards. Valencia was watching Masters carefully, while Grak watched for unknown magic. I wasn’t sure what trick he had up his sleeve, if any, but we were going to be as prepared as we could possibly be for it. I didn’t like this new development.

We came to a large, circular room with a mirror standing in the center of it. The mirror was ornate, gilded around the outside edge, with swoops and swirls that suggested something floral.

“Entad,” said Grak. “It has marks of display and illusion.”

“Uther spoke into it,” said Masters as he stared into the mirror. “Only the intended recipient can hear what he had to say.”

“Tell me more,” I said, not moving toward the mirror. “Tell me … tell me why you would devote your life to this.”

“I hadn’t intended to,” said Masters. “There were dream-skewered, once upon a time. Five of them, all presenting within a handful of years, all collected together in a madhouse, in the city that would later become Boastre Vino. Uther took an interest. He was, in that time, a man known for doing impossible things, for solving unsolvable problems, erudite beyond anyone of that period, wise far beyond his years.” He was staring at the mirror as he spoke. “Uther tasked me with watching for more of the dream-skewered. He created a generous endowment for their care. I was to conduct interviews with them, find what they knew, compile a book or two. He wanted me to cast a wide net, and I did.” Masters sighed, still staring at the mirror. “Five unremarkable people, that was all we ever had. Of course, once the stories of the dream-skewered began to spread, there were others who came to see me and my small staff. We became something of an attractor for those with paranoid delusions and psychosis, in part because we were willing to take in such people with few questions asked. They all failed the tests that Uther had developed -- not the screening that I gave you, but a simpler set of questions.”

“Why did you keep it going?” I asked.

“Uther returned,” said Masters. “He seemed unconcerned by the fact that there was no recurrence of the phenomenon. He brought entads with him, the Orb of Knowledge, the Mirror of Messages, the armor that I now wear, and a new command.” Masters looked to me. “He told me that I was to keep up the pretense of there being dream-skewered for the rest of my natural life. Two or three every year should be sufficient, he said, some of them pulled from the ranks of the insane, others invented from whole cloth. The endowment would last in perpetuity. He gave me instructions that I should follow. Lies I would need to tell.” He shook his head slightly. “I balked. The rest of my natural life, when I might live another few millennia? I agreed to twenty years, because he was Uther Penndraig, and he seemed to think it was incredibly important. After he disappeared, I decided to stay on longer.”

I stepped forward, until I was standing in front of the mirror.

Uther appeared in the reflection, standing five feet away from the surface of the mirror. He was looking out at the middle distance, likely looking at a reflection of himself. I placed myself so his eyes were on me. My own reflection was absent from the mirror. He wasn’t saying anything, but I could see the movement of his chest as he breathed.

I say Uther, because it was a far cry from Arthur as I’d known him. He was tall, well-muscled, with his facial features more defined than they’d been on Earth. He was older too. I would have guessed thirties, if not older. He had the same nose though, the same color eyes, and curly hair that was grown out, here less of an affectation, more of a kingly mane. He hadn’t had a beard at sixteen though. He’d always joked that he couldn’t grow one. He was dressed more simply than I would
have expected of a king, nothing but a doublet, breeches, and heavy boots.

“I often wonder …” he began, then stopped himself. “I wonder what it would have been like to fall into a world that I didn’t know. Something novel, rather than recycled. I wonder whether I would have believed in it more, if I hadn’t seen your fingerprints all over everything. I wonder.” He paused. “I wonder whether I could have forgotten Earth, with time, if there weren’t so many reminders of the place I’d come from. Little jokes, little references, anagrams here and there, hints and clues that the world wasn’t what it seemed. People wearing the faces of my old friends. Fleshted out versions of characters we’d had for a handful of sessions.”

He stopped again. He wasn’t quite looking at me. I waved my hand slightly, but there was no reaction. I hadn’t thought there would be.

“So, if you’re listening to this, then you’re here. There’s a decent chance that I’m still alive. If I am, I imagine that I’ll find you soon enough. If I’m dead, which I might be, then it’s likely that you’re on your own narrative path, may God have mercy on your soul.” He let out a sigh. “You’ll have noticed, by now. I’m not sure about the others, but you? You’ll have figured things out. The coincidences, the improbabilities, the way that things seem to fit just right, character arcs that are completed in the final seconds of the last battle. I don’t know how much of my biography you’ll have read, or how much you’ll have learned about me, but if you don’t see the patterns in your own life, I’m sure you’ll see them in mine. Looking back, it all seems so trite. So many NPCs with their sob stories, so many love interests, paraded around in front of me before their inevitable deaths. I’ll admit to being affected, at first.”

He shook his head slightly. “And if you’re here, watching this, then you’re in it too. If it had to be anyone, Joon, I’m glad that it was you. You’ll know this world better than I ever did, I think. There are things on Aerb that were only hinted at briefly in your campaigns, and I imagine there must be secrets that only you can unlock, words of power written down on your yellow legal pad that never made it to our ears. Maybe together, we can find a way back home. If I’m dead, then maybe you can find a way back on your own. Think back to the campaigns, try to visualize the magic items and the magics.” His eyes had grown a bit wider, his look intense. “If you come up short, think about what you would have done, how you would have made it in order to fit with the aesthetic of this place. Think about something that would have the stink of Joon on it, that’s where the answer will come from.”

Uther backed away slightly. He brought his hand up to his mouth and rubbed at his beard. “I don’t know what this place is,” he said. “I don’t know this world better than I ever did, I think. There are things on Aerb that were only hinted at briefly in your campaigns, and I imagine there must be secrets that only you can unlock, words of power written down on your yellow legal pad that never made it to our ears. Maybe together, we can find a way back home. If I’m dead, then maybe you can find a way back on your own. Think back to the campaigns, try to visualize the magic items and the magics.” His eyes had grown a bit wider, his look intense. “If you come up short, think about what you would have done, how you would have made it in order to fit with the aesthetic of this place. Think about something that would have the stink of Joon on it, that’s where the answer will come from.”

Uther backed away slightly. He brought his hand up to his mouth and rubbed at his beard. “I don’t know what this place is,” he said. “It’s not reality. I hope that you never get this message, because if you do, then it means that you’re here. I’m leaving it for you anyway.” He gave a hollow laugh. “There’s so much I want to say to you. When I first heard of the dream-skewered, I thought that they would be all my old friends from -- from Kansas. I haven’t said that word in a long time.” His face had fallen. His eyes were unfocused. “But no, they were nobodies, a teenage girl from medieval France, an idiot teenager who had been in the middle of the Civil War, disparate times and places, nothing obviously relevant to me. It took me some time to see the narrative purpose of them. They were a temptation from the path of heroism, an invitation to indulge in the past, or maybe a call to remember who I was and what I was doing. I’ve done a fair job at resisting those temptations, or at least cloaking them in the guise of art or work. You’ve seen some of that, I’m sure.”

Uther stretched slightly, drawing himself to his full height. He was tall, taller than I was, and I’d gained a few inches as the game had added onto my physique. Uther was an intimidating man. I’d known that, but I’d underestimated the extent.

“This is the closest that I’ve ever come to telling anyone on Aerb where I’m really from,” he said. “Sitting behind uncrackable wards, with a mirror I spent three weeks testing … I sometimes wonder
why I bother with maintaining the silence. My peculiar form of insanity would cost me political power if it were known to the public, certainly, but my knights? My wife and children? Perhaps I feel like saying it out loud would take the story in some unexpected direction I’m not prepared to handle. I’ve been playing the part of Uther Penndraig for over two decades now, and I’ve gotten good at it. To go back to being Arthur again, to talk about the past with someone … well, I suppose this is what this message has become. I should be giving you warnings, I suppose, or secret histories, but either the narrative here is that this is a flight of fancy and a final send-off for the past I knew, or this is the narrative thread that draws you into the web. None of it really matters anyway.”

He looked like he was going to say more, but instead a slight frown crossed his face, and his reflection disappeared, leaving me to look at myself in the mirror. I turned toward the others, who were all watching me.

“Yeah,” I said. “It was meant for me.” I looked at Masters. “I’m not sure how much I should say. I … don’t really know you.” I was sure there was a more diplomatic way of putting it, but I was in a bit of shell-shock. I hadn’t started the day thinking that I would see Arthur again, even if it was just in a recording. He was so … different. After talking with Bethel, I had known he would be, but it was different, in the flesh.

“Scenario?” asked Amaryllis.

“Zero,” I replied. I looked at Masters again. “He said that if he was alive, he would see me shortly,” I said. “Do you have any idea what that means?”

“I was given an entad to contact him with, a candle he said would light his way back to me,” said Masters. “I used it four hundred and fifty years ago, during the time of the Internecine Wars. There was no response, nor has there been one in all that time. The candle has continued to burn, to no effect.” He hesitated. “Please, if you could just … if you could tell me anything, who you are, who he was, the connection between the two of you, anything, I’ve spent five hundred years in loyal service, with your name on a list written by Uther himself. Please.”

I glanced at Valencia, who gave me a barely perceptible nod. I was relieved that she hadn’t hesitated.

“You said that this place had powerful magic,” I replied. “Tell me what it was, and I’ll tell you some of what I know, enough to sate your curiosity.”

“Curiosity?” asked Masters. His eyes were wide. “The fate of the universe is at stake.”

“Explain,” I said. My mouth was set into a thin line. I wanted time to process, instead of being confronted by another crisis. If dream-skewered didn’t exist, then we didn’t need to worry as much about the Cannibal. I was really skeptical that this was going to end with us going home.

“The threats escalated during Uther’s time on Aerb,” said Masters. “In the years before he disappeared, they were enormous, bigger than was ever let on to the general public. They were tied to him, in some way, attracted to him with something like luck. It was joked that the world would have ended a hundred times over without him around. When he went missing, that joke stopped being funny. There were horrors lurking, entities waiting, and we had to fight them tooth and nail, losing people with every one we put down.” He was rubbing his hands together. “The world settled down, eventually, at great cost, and the exclusions have helped with more than one of our collective problems in the time since, but …” He stopped and stared at me. “Things have been heating back up.”

“Which powers?” asked Amaryllis. “How recently?”
Masters turned to look at her. She was still fully armored, which meant she gave even less away than usual. “The Void Beast has started moving again, the Outer Reaches are no longer dormant, the Infinite Library is down to five years, Celestar is thrumming with renewed power, a raiding party from the Other Side crashed against the Gates of Leron three weeks ago, and there’s reportedly something new that has the minions of the hells living in abject fear.” Masters looked back at me. “How strong are you? You said you’ve been on Aerb for months?”

“Back up,” I said. “I didn’t understand half of what you just said.”

“Then tell me everything,” said Masters. He had shaken some of his weariness, but I didn’t like what had replaced it. It wasn’t quite mania, but it was close. “If you knew Uther, if you can get to him, or if you can act in his stead, with the same utter power that he wielded, then there are allies ready and waiting for you to call on. There are things you’ll need to know.”

I stared at him. “Uther Penndraig was, himself, dream-skewered,” I said. “Earth isn’t a delusion, nor a dream, it’s a real place. It’s a place that I’m from. Uther was … a friend. If I had to take a guess about where Uther went … I guess I would say that he went home, back to Earth. He said as much in the message he left for me, not that he was going back, but that he was looking for a way.” He’d mentioned narrative too much; that was the framing he’d put on almost everything. I left that out.

“Tell us about the magic around this place,” said Amaryllis. “Tell us how you kept up the deception.”

“The Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny was moved, at Uther’s behest, specifically to be located within an exclusion zone. It’s a well-guarded secret.” Masters shook his head. “I won’t say more.”

I stared at him. “Which one?” I asked.

“No one known to you,” said Masters. “Silent exclusions, Uther called them. A part of my work here, with the others, is keeping that secret contained. I’m one of three.”

“You’re all waiting here for him to return?” I asked.

“No,” said Masters. “Waiting for him … or for you, if you’re like him. You must have read his writings, if you’ve already gathered your knights. Have you not realized the common thread of chosen heroes answering the Call?”

Something felt off. Maybe it was the understanding that this man was, by his own admission, a master mage at the top of his game, or maybe it was that the message from Uther had contained too much, too fast. Uther had many allies; I’d known that. To be speaking with one now made me start thinking about what enemies he might have left behind.

“Grak, Val, Fenn, status?” I asked.

“No changes,” said Grak.

“He’s sincere,” said Val.

“Something’s not right,” said Fenn. “Not just the obvious. A little tingle came on in the last minute or so, and it’s getting stronger. You feel it too?”

I nodded. My own sense of it was far weaker than hers. Luck had been one of the things that I’d trained in the chamber; I hadn’t gotten luckier, only better at distinguishing the sensation. It was faint and inconsistent, but I had a single point in LUK, and that was enough to give me the occasional
flash of nebulous something-or-other, a pull in one direction instead of the other, or a hint of what
was to come, usually when there was no good option left.

“I don’t understand,” said Masters. He was looking between us.

“There are wards against teleportation,” said Grak.

“Solace?” asked Amaryllis.

“A way out?” she asked. Amaryllis nodded. Solace closed her eyes. They glowed golden beneath
her green eyelids, just for a moment. “There’s a tree two hundred yards away. Now?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Ah,” said Masters. His tone was flat, only with a slight note of curiosity. “Elf luck?”

Solace was using her fingernails to pry apart her staff, in a way that should have been impossible
with wood. Masters frowned at her, and she became encased in a block of amber. Fenn fired an
arrow before I could react. It would have been a direct hit, but Masters batted it aside with a casual
wave.

“Well, fuck,” said Fenn.

“We need to talk, Juniper,” he said.

“I’m getting a feeling it’s a bad time to be standing around,” I said. Valencia was working at the
amber with her sword, hacking away at bits and pieces of it. I was growing increasingly certain that
he wasn’t just blowing smoke about us being in an exclusion zone, the only question was which one.
I had a very slight advantage here, in that I had a list of eighty-two excluded skills. They didn’t fully
map to the exclusions, but there was a list I could start going down. Funnel magic? Conjoinery?
Uniqulomancy? Carrollism (please no)?

“Truce,” said Masters.

“Free my friend,” I said.

Solace was instantly free and gasping for breath. Masters was looking between the six of us,
frowning slightly. “She said tree. Wood magic?”

“You were waiting for me,” I said, ignoring the question. “Why?”

“Answers,” replied Masters. “I want to know who you are, where you come from, and what your
connection to Uther is. I have no intent to hurt you.”

“Explain,” I said.

“I’m not your enemy,” said Masters. “I’m only taking precautions. I didn’t keep this clinic running
for five hundred years just to let you slip away a few minutes after having gotten a message from the
mirror.”

“So it’s a hostage scenario?” I asked.

“No,” said Masters with a frown. “You have to understand that there are complexities to Uther’s
legacy. Everything I said about the old threats moving again is true.” He took a breath. “The world
warped itself around Uther,” said Masters. “When he disappeared, gone with no trace, it took
hundreds of skilled individuals to stem the bleeding. Many of them, good friends of both Uther and
myself, died in the process. And after that ... there was calm. Enemies had sprung from the woodwork for three decades, ancient conspiracies were uncovered by the handfuls, and toward the end, world-ending threats were showing up every other year, with Uther the only one capable of dealing with them. The great question the survivors were left with, once we had sealed the holes in the dam, was how it was possible for us to have done it, and why there weren't more dangers coming to greet us, when there had been so many before.”

“And?” I asked.

“We fell into different camps,” said Masters. “One camp believed that Uther was a messianic figure, one who had been delivered to us in our time of need by a higher power, one who left once his work was done. The other camp believed that Uther was the one who attracted or caused all the problems in the first place, whether wittingly or not, and with him gone, there was no longer any pull drawing such things into existence. There were naturally different cleaving lines within our community, axes of disagreement, some of it quite fierce.”

“So which were you?” I asked. “Given that you’re keeping us here, my guess is that you’re in the latter camp.”

“I seek understanding,” said Masters. “Theories are all well and good, but I never thought that the answers to the many mysteries of Uther were unknowable. That’s all I want from you.”

“Duress was a bad option then,” I replied.

“You were going to leave,” said Masters. “There’s no danger here. This place is a fortress hidden in plain sight, and has been since Uther was still alive. The wards were laid by his very hand. All I want is to have the answer to who he was. Without that information, how can we know?”

I stared at him. “You think that I’m the Chosen One,” I said.

“Uther referenced the idea constantly. It was a staple of his works. Many of his contemporaries thought that it was sheer narcissism on his part.” Masters was staring at me. “Have you accepted that’s what you are yet, you with your motley crew of powerful knights, walking where Uther once trod before?”

I gave a fractional nod. “There are certain things that I believe only I can do,” I said. That had been the whole point of coming here.

“Do you learn things faster than others?” asked Masters. “Uther had what he called the Knack. If you gave him a day, he could attain proficiency in any language, any trade, any obscure piece of magic. He never revealed the source of it, save to say that it wasn’t magic. I pestered him, if truth be told, more than he enjoyed, but he had my little girl with him --”

“Wait,” I said. “Raven?” She was the same species as him. Even in her biography, it hadn’t given her any other name but Raven.

Masters nodded. “You’ve heard the stories, I’m sure,” he said. “She accumulated mysteries of her own. She carried some of his burdens for him. She would never tell me. She searched for him for a solid century, then loudly declared that if he was gone, we were all going to have to make do without him. But if you’re here ... I don’t know what she will make of you, when you meet her. I don’t know if she’ll see you as a wound on the world or a shining savior.”

I wasn’t quite ready to call Masters insane, but I was mighty worried, especially given that he had us trapped by unknown means. His display of power before had been frightening. I looked back at the
others, wondering what they made of all this, and was startled to see that they all had the same expression on their faces, which was the same as the expression on my face, one of apprehension and confusion. That was out of character.

I walked over to Fenn and prodded her shoulder with a finger as she watched me. She looked down at the spot where I’d pushed and raised an eyebrow. “Satisfied?” she asked.


“Come on, Juniper, it’s me,” said Fenn with a small laugh, as though she couldn’t believe that I would test her with one of our prearranged code words.

I let out a small groan. She was a fake, or mind-controlled, but at least they didn’t have her memories. Besides failing the code word, Fenn almost never called me Juniper, not unless she was pissed off with me.

“Oh,” I said, turning back to Masters. “You replaced them while we talked? You have some way of masking sound and movement? And, let me guess, the exclusion was illusion magic?” That was a guess. Mentalism and Psionics also fit the bill, given their names, and there were a dozen others whose functions I could only guess at.

I glanced back at my companions and watched them pop like bubbles, one by one.

“How would you know that?” asked Masters. “How would you narrow it down so fast?”

“You’re not doing any favors on the diplomacy front,” I said.

“Earth was real?” asked Masters. “That’s why you came here?”

“Real would be indistinguishable from delusion,” I said. Unless you can make predictions, which I can, but that only complicates matters. And let’s leave aside the overgod of Aerb speaking to me directly.

“Tell me about where you come from,” said Masters.

I turned away from him and went back to the door -- but there was no door anymore. I felt around for a bit, trying to find where I knew there should have been a knob, but I’d been able to push Fenn, and she’d been an illusion. Tactile illusions? No, more than that, tactile illusions that warder’s sight couldn’t see through? I could see where that would get degenerate in a hurry. I turned back to Masters.

“You said there were five people from Earth,” I said. “You must have met them. They must have told you something.”

“Plenty,” said Masters. “We made a map, a cosmology, and a timeline. And yet the screening that Uther produced went far beyond what we knew from those five, and his instructions were very specific with regard to what should be publically available. He wanted our work to remain vague, speaking in generalities. Why? Who are the other names?”

I tried to think about how I was going to get out of this. Being trapped in a room with a master illusion mage -- and I didn’t even know if he was actually in the room with me, come to think of it -- was pretty bad, especially since the only thing I knew about illusion magic was what it said on the tin. No, that wasn’t quite right. What had Uther said? He’d said that I should think about things that had the stink of Juniper on them.
“They were childhood friends of ours,” I said, stalling for time. “I come from a small town in one of the United States called Kansas.” I prattled on about Bumblefuck while I thought, giving out only those details I hoped were completely irrelevant.

If I were the Dungeon Master, how would I have done illusion magic? Stripped to a fundamental level, what did I think was interesting or compelling about illusion? What seams would I have wanted to dig my fingers into? Illusion was fundamentally about the relation of the senses to reality, which meant that illusion wasn’t just about the projection of light and sound, it was about how the mind interfaced with raw, physical reality. And yet, Valencia hadn’t said anything about not being able to see Masters, which meant that either he really was in the room with me, or that illusion magic was somehow able to fool even a non-anima, which shouldn’t have been possible if he’d needed to affect the mind. Had Valencia entered the room with me?

(I talked to Masters about my friends from back home, whatever came to mind, both the meaningful and the inconsequential. We used to ride our bikes through a local park after school, until I broke my arm doing a trick off a little ramp that some older kids had made. In the summers, I’d worked on my uncle’s farm, running ahead of the tractor to pick up rocks from out of the field. It was hard, sweaty, work that earned me twenty dollars a day, a fortune when I was younger. Tiff had been on the swim team. Reimer’s parents had divorced when he was ten. Tom’s father had died in a farm accident. Despite my best efforts, I thought it was all pretty transparent as not important to the fate of Aerb, but Masters let me continue on. I made sure to stay away from the topic of tabletop games, Arthur’s role as player, and my own role as DM.)

How would I do a deconstruction and reconstruction of illusion, if that was what I would do? Sight was easy enough, you could just do photons emitted, absorbed, and reflected without an actual object there … but that was more or less how you could do illusions with carefully crafted and shaped wards, which seemed redundant. And you couldn’t do illusory sound like that, because fake sounds that got to the ears were still sound, that wasn’t any more illusion than a boombox produced illusory sounds. Boomboxes as the basis for a magic system had a sort of Juniper-like ring to it, but still didn’t seem to fit.

I kept coming back to the idea of the sensorium as an abstract concept, or the sensory homunculus as a more literal creature that lived inside me rather than just being a representation of the prominence of sense organs. That still didn’t explain how it would affect Valencia … but maybe it didn’t need to, if she hadn’t been affected. The problem was that I didn’t know when the illusions had started. Was Masters still in the room with me? Was anyone else? Was the room itself real?

Whatever illusion magic was, I fucking hated it. Why had I been so stupid as to be thankful that illusion magic was excluded? Why had I been so stupid as to say that out loud? ‘Dur, illusion magic is excluded, so great we don’t have to worry about that, hur dur,’ it was like horrible foreshadowing out of a terrible movie.

There was one aspect of the sensorium that, in theory, no illusion mage could have access to, and that was the ever-present HUD that I mostly ignored. So far as I’d been able to test thus far, nothing could see or interact with the information presented to me by the game layer, whether it was on the now-obsolete character sheet, in the messages that got presented to me, or the (largely unhelpful) meters that sat in the corner of my visual field. That, at least, allowed for some testing.

“And that was Bumblefuck, Kansas,” I finally finished. “It’s where Uther was from, it’s where I was from, and it wasn’t at all special in any way, not in the context of a thousand other towns exactly like it. There’s no reason for me to be special.”

“But you don’t deny that you are,” said Masters.
“No,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean that I have any answers.” Sword, dagger, rope, fairies, bones. I really didn’t want to fight him, both because he didn’t seem actively evil (aside from holding me prisoner) and because he had unknown abilities, presumably powerful ones. “What do you want from me?”

Masters was looking me over, measuring his response. “I want to know why the world is the way it is.”

“Ah,” I said. I let out a sigh. “All I have is a guess, or maybe a theory.”

Masters nodded.

“This world was set up for Uther,” I said. “Beyond the five gods, there’s an entity so powerful that it could have wiped the floor with the combined might of every threat Aerb has ever faced, and done it in such a way that no one would ever have known. Uther was the chosen one, but not just chosen, because that would imply that he was selected to be the one. And it wasn’t that. Uther came first. All of Aerb, going back into its deep, primordial history, was created to serve his needs, and the needs of his life. Only it wasn’t really for Uther’s benefit, it was because the entity … I don’t know. The entity was focused on Uther. It didn’t hate him, and it wasn’t intentionally torturing him, I don’t think, but … it also didn’t care if he was happy, or at least didn’t care that he was always happy, or even mostly happy.” I thought all that was essentially true, even if it was leaving some details out.

“Could Uther have lost?” asked Masters.

“Lost … in what sense?” I asked.

“Do you know how many times he narrowly escaped death?” asked Masters.

“Dozens?” I asked.

“Hundreds,” replied Masters. “Sometimes it could be explained away, other times it couldn’t. He had tricks up his sleeve, and an arsenal of magic beyond all reckoning, but the odds were still stacked against him so many times that most lost count, and those were the ones he thought worth mentioning, the ones that he could mention. He never lost. Not once. There were setbacks, to be sure, and victories that were bittersweet, but nothing like a loss, not for long. When the man disappeared, it’s safe to say that he did so with a perfect record.”

“No,” I said. “He wasn’t able to stop Vervain’s death.”

“Uther killed Vervain himself,” said Masters.

I didn’t know how to take that. For having been the death of Uther’s oldest friend and dearest mentor, the details on Vervain’s demise were incredibly sparse. Most accounts simply began in media res, with Uther trying to bring Vervain back and failing over and over before taking up his sword once more to defend the realm. I’d looked into it as much as I could, and asked Amaryllis, but the most that I ever been able to piece together was that Vervain had died on some important, far-off mission, which meant that no one actually knew.

“Why would he kill his mentor?” I asked.

“No one knows,” said Masters. “Very, very few people know that it was done by Uther’s own hand. He offered no explanation. He only said that he was in the right. The idea of a betrayal by a mentor figure was a recurrent theme in his works and his writings, even before Vervain’s death.”

“Dahlia then,” I said. “His only daughter.”
“Missing at the age of eleven?” asked Masters. He gave a hollow little laugh. “Another of Uther’s little deceptions. She became his squire, Helio, and later donned the Red Mask. It’s always amused me which stories stayed in the collective consciousness. At the time it was widely known that she was his daughter.”

I frowned at that. It was a niggling loose thread in Uther’s life that was now tidily wrapped up, one more plot that we could close the books on, which meant that when Uther left for his Final Quest, he really had squared away as many things as he could.

“So you don’t know whether or not he could lose,” I said.

“Opinions differed,” said Masters. He gave a wry grin. “That might well be the title of a retrospective on that period, ‘Opinions Differed’. Some thought that his disappearance was another move in the grand game that was his life, others thought that his luck or, perhaps, destiny, had finally run out. It seemed too calculated for that. Uther went off alone, without his Knights, having put his affairs in order. Do you know where he went? What he meant to do?”

“No,” I replied. Trying to get home, probably. I didn’t have much more to add to that theory.

“And you don’t know whether or not he could lose?” asked Masters. “He always seemed to try his hardest, even with the weight of a thousand victories behind him. Was that because his effort was always needed, or because he himself wasn’t sure how much the universe would bend in his favor?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I replied. “Bring my friends back, whatever you did with them. Let me go. I’d be happy to talk with you on neutral ground, somewhere that I don’t have to be questioning the nature of reality.” I already do enough of that.

Masters stared at me. I saw judgment in his eyes. “And you?” he asked. “Would it be possible for you to lose?”

There was a part of me that wanted to put some honest thought into the question, but I was getting a very bad feeling about where this was heading. I hadn’t forgotten the preamble to this conversation. Some of the people in Uther’s inner circle believed that he had been the true source of all the problems on Aerb, the attractor for all the horrible shit he’d ended up defeating. Masters claimed to want answers and nothing more. He was certainly playing the part of a man who had been searching for meaning for a long time, only to finally catch sight of a thread that he might be able to pull. And yet, if he got his answers, what kind of action would he take? Would killing the next Uther Penndraig in the cradle be the rational thing to do, if you believed that it would prevent the world from spiraling out of control? I worried that Masters might think the answer was yes.

I drew my sword.

“Please,” said Masters. “I’ve done no violence against you. I wouldn’t. I’ve seen the firsthand the fate that befell Uther’s enemies. I know better to say that you cannot win here, but --”

I lunged forward, spinning to put more of the weight of my body behind the blade, blood and bone lending their power to a single debilitating strike. The sword passed straight through Masters. He popped like a soap bubble, vanishing completely. He reappeared five feet from where he’d been standing, completely unharmed.

“Were you ever here at all?” I asked.

“I’m going to have to tell the others,” said Masters. “Some of them will want you gone, or at least contained. Others will want to help you. There are very few of us left, as you might understand,
given how much time has passed.”

“You’re going to tell people who will want me dead?” I asked.

“Uther kept secrets,” said Masters. “I’ve been privy to more than a few. Secrecy was his watchword though, even from his knights. Despite our differences, there was widespread agreement among the survivors that we keep open the lines of communication, lest we descend into war with each other.”

Would he need to be in the same room with me in order to use illusion magic? That seemed like it would be a logical limitation to illusion magic. It also seemed like the sort of thing that you could break wide open, if you had five hundred years to work on the problem. No, more than that, if you had five hundred years and worked at a place that was devoted to the collection, study, and analysis of magic items. The exclusion zones tended to have degenerate, world-ending magic in them, and I had to assume that this one was no exception.

But there had to be limits, didn’t there? If you could use illusion magic to make an illusion of a bullet moving a tenth the speed of light two inches from someone’s head … well, there would be no need for any other magic at all, would there? That might give it good reason to be hit by the exclusionary principle, but no other excluded magic was that degenerate or extreme, not even the one around Fel Seed.

I turned and went to the wall, to where the door had been. With my sword in one hand, I raised my fist and punched forward as hard as I possibly could, putting everything into it. My fist impacted the wall and set a shock of lightning-hot pain through me as skin and bone broke from the force of the blow. I sheathed my sword and clutched at my hand, gasping at the pain, and as it continued to blossom, I looked to the lower left of my vision. My health bar hadn’t changed at all, despite the significant injury I’d apparently given myself. I wondered whether I had punched anything at all, in the real world.

I reached into my bandolier and pulled out one of the lifeless marzipan fairies, using my good hand. I was shaking slightly from the pain, but I had a plan; I pulled the fairy’s head off, then took a long sniff from the neck, watching my hand carefully. As I’d expected it might, my hand began to heal.

All that pointed to sensorium capturing. Whatever had happened to my hand in the real world, I hadn’t broken it when I’d thrown my punch. And just like Masters hadn’t been able to make an illusion of Fenn that knew how to answer the key challenge, he also wouldn’t have any way of knowing what the fairies actually did. All he could do was make a guess. I let the fairy drop to the ground as my hand slowly finished healing itself.

Masters could make me feel pain and force-feedback, and he could clearly make alterations to sight and sound. Proprioception too, I supposed, given that if my hand had moved, then it hadn’t been stopped by any wall. Had it struck the door? Broken it? Were my real body and the illusory body presented to me desynced now? That, or I was simply comatose while the illusion played itself out.

“There’s no escape,” said Masters.

“Escape from this room, or from the illusion?” I asked.

“I can wait until you’re willing to listen to reason,” said Masters. “I have more questions, if you’d like some time to think about it. You know more than you’re letting on. Tell me about your Knights.”

Scratch being comatose, actually, not since it was impossible, but because if that was the case, then there was fuck all I could actually do about it. The worst case scenario that I could actually do
something about was a total desync of my body and my perception of my body, which would probably mean that from the outside, I looked like a videogame character who was going through animations that made no sense in the context they were happening.

“Why a square table?” I asked.

“You’re trying something.” said Masters with a frown.

“Maybe,” I said. “Indulge me while I try to break out of here though.”

“I think not,” said Masters.

“It’s important,” I said. “There was some meaning behind the square table, back on Earth, I want to know what it was on Aerb.” I tried my best to go into my soul without giving anything away, but I ended up closing my eyes when that didn’t work. The change I wanted to make was a simple one, lowering Bows by twenty and then increasing Essentialism by the same amount.

New Virtue: Soul Sight!

The message faded from my vision right as I opened my eyes. Masters was still speaking, but watching me closely. I had about twenty minutes of the extra sense. This was another test; I wanted to see whether or not he could fake input for senses that he shouldn’t have known about. There was no color marking him as having a soul, nor any color on his armor, marking it as linked to him. That wasn’t conclusive. What was conclusive was when I looked behind me and saw four colored shapes standing roughly where my companions had been -- red for Fenn, who was backed up against a wall, white for Amaryllis, her form banging against an invisible wall, seafoam green for Solace with a tint of a deeper green from her connection to the locus, and purple for Grak. None of them had moved much, save for Fenn. She would have had to have moved, or else I would have run into her.

And if their positions as reported by Soul Sight were accurate, then I was still in the room, and still on my feet, instead of being totally incapacitated like I’d feared. I wondered whether that was overconfidence from Masters, a limitation of illusion magic, or something else. Magic tended to have limits, even the most broken ones. If I was thinking like a Juniper, then maybe illusion magic would get more difficult the more of the sensorium you needed to fake. Based on the positions of my companions, and especially Amaryllis bashing against invisible walls, my guess was that they were all trapped in some sort of illusory cage of some kind, one that they didn’t think they could escape from. I hadn’t been able to see or hear them, but Masters needed me not to. For them, he could simply have put up a wall of sharp spikes or something worse to discourage them from moving and complicating things -- which would explain why Amaryllis was the only one attempting to get out, bashing herself against whatever was intended to be too painful to touch.

I’d been only barely listening to the nonsense that Masters was spouting; I knew all of it well enough, since it was the bullshit that Arthur had made up at the gaming table long ago. It was polished and refined, and delivered by someone who actually believed it, but backwards bullshit justification all the same. A square table had no head, it was a place where people could be meeting while sitting in opposition, on and on.

“It’s a reference to Earth,” I said. “There was a historical figure that Uther was emulating.”

No sign of Valencia. I wondered what had happened to her. She wouldn’t have shown up on Soul Sight, naturally, but I was left wondering whether Masters could affect her at all, or if he couldn’t, what he had done about that. No sign of the real Masters either, which wasn’t surprising. If he had ever been in the room in the first place, he would have had plenty of incentive to leave.
“Is that all you’ll say on the subject?” asked Masters. “Are you really so rebellious? I’m trying to help you. More than that, to ensure the existence of this world.”

“Just trying to match Uther’s perfect record,” I replied. I went over to where Soul Sight showed Amaryllis standing, and reached out to grab her by the wrist. As I did, the floor rose up and twisted around, presenting a red-hot tip of rock to me, stopping me from touching her. I reached out regardless, letting it burn me, then pulled back once I felt the pain. It was muted though, not quite at the heights of pain I’d expect from touching lava, and not quite so hot either. Another limit on illusion magic?

I stopped trying to think like a Juniper, and start thinking like a Reimer, or maybe like a Juniper reacting to a Reimer. If you gave a Reimer control of someone’s sensorium, the first way he’d weaponize it was to make an illusion of black caps over their eyes, blinding them. So the first thing that a Juniper would do is to patch that, ideally with some clever restriction that would allow for more creative (but less overpowered) munchkinry. I didn’t have a clear idea of what those restrictions would be, or how you would go about quantifying them. Plausibility of the illusion? Percent of senses that could be faked at once? I tried to think about what I had seen, and what that said about illusion magic. If you were going to make a red-hot bit of stone to stop me from touching someone, why do it like that? Why not just create it mid-air, hovering in place?

I reached forward again, and the glowing tip of rock was there again. I pushed forward, trying to channel WIS so that I could better withstand the pain. It still made my eyes water as I clenched my teeth to get through it, but it wasn’t as painful as it should have been. The lava was stopping my hand … except that it wasn’t, not really, because the feedback I felt wasn’t real, and both the proprioception and visual indicators were lies. I could see my hand with Soul Sight (dark yellow, the color of urine) as I kept reaching forward to Amaryllis.

The pain stopped all at once as the illusions faded, revealing Amaryllis standing in front of me right where Soul Sight had said she would be. She was still in full armor, with the helm concealing her from my view. She assumed a battle stance from almost the second the illusion was down and drew her sword from her hip, holding it in front of her in a defensive position.

“It’s me,” I said. “Keyring, I’ll start, rhodonite.”

“Apricot,” replied Amaryllis.

“Mourning,” I responded.

She didn’t relax, which was probably a good idea. The inclination of her head changed slightly. She was looking past me, to where Masters was still (apparently) standing.

“I don’t know how much of it you caught, but we’re in the illusion magic exclusion zone,” I said.

“How do you defeat it?” asked Amaryllis.

“Classified,” I said. “You can stop watching him, he’s not really there.”

Amaryllis looked around the room. “The others?”

I hesitated, then pointed. “There, there, and there,” I said. “Probably trapped in boxes like your own. Valencia … I don’t know.” I was worried about her. Would an illusion mage capable of capturing sensorium be able to determine what she was? Probably.

“You have another sense,” said Masters. “Which one?”
“That would be telling,” I replied. I was more or less done with his shit. Being snippy about it probably wasn’t going to help matters, but it was a useful vent for my feelings of frustration.

“You couldn’t see them,” said Masters. “Now you can. How?”

I ignored him. He didn’t deserve the answers that I had to give. “We need to be careful of a man-in-the-middle attack,” I said to Amaryllis. “I think he’s probably powerful enough that he could do that.”

Amaryllis gave me a curt nod. She hadn’t put down her sword. “Keyring is presumed compromised,” she said.

“Yes,” I replied. We couldn’t trust that what we heard from each other was what was actually said. “Ignore that for now, unless I ask you to do something stupid. He’s got weaknesses. He can’t fool your senses if he doesn’t have the information he needs to make the illusion.”

Amaryllis nodded at that. She had two entads that activated with a thought. I didn’t know whether she had used them while we’d been here, but they could provide a useful test of what was real and what wasn’t, especially the immobility plate. If an illusion pushed her immobility plate while it was locked, then she would still perceive herself as having moved, because Masters wouldn’t know that she wasn’t supposed to be able to be pushed.

I turned to Masters. “I can get the others out. It’s nearly trivial. Either you can cause me pain and inconvenience, or you can let me go. I don’t want another enemy. I already have enough of them. If there are people who think I’m important, or who want to talk to me, then we can try to set up some kind of secure line of communication, one that doesn’t put me face to face with powerful magic aimed my way.”

“I can’t let you slip through my fingers,” said Masters. “I’m sorry for any pain or distress, but I can’t let you leave, not when you’ve given me so little.”

“I don’t have anything to give,” I replied as I strode over to Grak. “I came here looking for answers, and I got … scraps. Hints.”

“Then trade me,” said Masters. “If you don’t know about the Other Side, then I can tell you. The Infinite Library? It’s a secret that I would betray, for you, if you would give me the knowledge I seek.”

“I gave you my theory,” I said.

“How can you still see your companions?” asked Masters. “The one in red is a compliant non-anima, how did you achieve such a thing?” I felt my heart hammer at that. Fuck. “Are you Uther’s dark reflection, the one that his writing prophesied?”

“Dark reflection?” I asked.

“Uther was the hero, more, the distillation of heroism, and in his writing on what it was to be a hero, there was often another, a foil, a reflection, similar in powers but unalike in mindset, a reflection.” Masters was staring at me. “Is that what you are, five hundred years late, the harbinger of his return? What did he say to you?”

“He said that if he was still alive, he would come find me,” I said. “But you already lit the candle, and people have apparently been searching for him for five hundred years, so I don’t think that’s going to happen. If he’s alive, then I don’t know what line of communication he could possibly have that would allow him to know that I’ve arrived. I’ve been on Aerb for months now, and I’ve seen no
I reached forward and grabbed Grak’s arm. There was no illusion to stop me this time, and he appeared right where Soul Sight had said he would be as soon as I made contact. I assumed that was simply Masters giving in, rather than maintaining an illusion that I could clearly get past.

“Illusion magic,” said Grak with a huff as soon as he could see me.

“Yes, probably,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“Well enough,” said Grak.

“Can you ward against it?” I asked.

“I’ve been trying to figure that out,” said Grak.

I moved over to Solace next. Masters wasn’t offering much resistance, either because he didn’t want to hurt me, or because what resistance he could offer cost him something. I had to wonder whether there was some resource being drained as he went along, some mana equivalent, or a more esoteric commodity that he was trading away, like the way that blood magic consumed my blood. I wasn’t very hopeful that it was a big limiter for him, given that he’d apparently given five different people five different illusions.

When I got to them, Masters allowed Solace and Fenn to pop into my field of view again.

“I have your non-anima,” said Masters.

I turned to him. “Another threat?” I asked.

“No,” said Masters. “Not a threat. She’s another question that needs to be answered. Uther gathered his Knights over the years, slowly but inevitably. What force bound them to him, even when they should have left his side? Why were they special, exemplars in their field?”

“We should answer him,” said Amaryllis. “He has information that we want.” She was staring at the illusion of Masters.

Fenn drew her bow again and fired it at Masters. He snatched the arrow from the air, then tossed it to one side.

“He’s not really there,” I said. “Just an illusion. And I don’t want to provide answers under duress. We need to grab Valencia and go.”

“He has information that we want,” Amaryllis repeated, turning toward me. “If there are threats beyond the ones we already know about, ones that we might be the only ones capable of stopping, then we need to know.” She turned back toward Masters. “What’s the Infinite Library? What does it mean that there are five years left?”

“It’s a library that contains every book that has been or will be written,” said Masters. “The last I’d heard, the latest book they could find was published five years from present.”

Well, fuck. That was taken straight from the Boundless Library, though the name had been changed (probably because having a Boundless Library and a Boundless Pit was too derivative and/or confusing). The countdown had always been part of it, but in my version it had always been hundreds of years out, sort of a seven generations thing that the librarians themselves had as part of their mantra but didn’t actually care that much about. With five years left? I was pretty sure that it
wouldn’t be lip service.

“Sorry,” said Fenn. “The world is going to end in five years?”

“Five hundred years ago, the world was going to end in one hundred years,” said Masters. “Changes were made, ventures embarked on, many of them by Uther himself, and the Library held steady.”

“Looped foreknowledge?” asked Amaryllis. I imagined her eyes glimmering with greed beneath her helmet.

“With limits,” said Masters. “I could make the introductions for you. My daughter is the head librarian.”

“Raven,” said Amaryllis.

Masters nodded.

One of Uther’s only living Knights. That was another mystery solved, though it raised a huge number of other questions. I thought back to what Masters had said earlier about the threats that had been rearing their heads again, and how many more questions there were ahead of us.

“Something’s off,” said Fenn. “Really, really off.”

“Exit,” said Amaryllis to Solace.

Solace slammed her staff down onto the ground and it flattened itself out into a smear of wood, which shimmered for a moment and then opened into a portal. I was wary of more illusions, but nothing about Solace’s soul seemed off. I was watching for a desync that I assumed would happen if Masters tried to overlay an illusion on top of someone I was watching.

“Zero to ten?” asked Amaryllis.

“Eleven,” said Fenn. “Not sure that portal is going to do it.” She looked at the portal for a fraction of a second, then darted over and placed her gloved hand on the mirror.

“It’s not me,” said Masters with a frown.

“What about Valencia?” I asked. The portal shimmered slightly, like ripples on the surface of a puddle, but it seemed like it went somewhere with drawers and books.

“I have her,” said Masters. “If you leave --”

The illusion that Masters had been projecting of himself disappeared. I turned back and looked at the wall, where the door had reappeared as well. It was broken in the middle, where my punch had landed, the impact of it hard enough to shatter the wood. My knuckles had apparently made it through without much damage to me, for which I thanked my virtues.

When I turned back to look at the others, Fenn was slipping through the portal, without so much as a discussion. I couldn’t feel whatever she felt, maybe because my luck was so much weaker than her own, or maybe because I had so many other things on my mind.

“We’re going,” said Amaryllis. “Val can take care of herself.”

“If that were true, she’d be with us,” I said as I watched Grak drop down. “She’d have killed everyone who stood against us. Whatever happened to her, whatever point she was taken, she’s not okay.”
The building shook slightly beneath our feet. Solace was watching us, frowning for what seemed like the first time. She stepped forward and slipped through the portal, twirling through to the other side. It immediately began to close; with druidic magic it was hard to be sure, but I was fairly sure she was forcing us to make a choice.

Amaryllis strode to the portal and stopped just beside it. “This was a honeypot, Joon, Masters might not have been the only one watching it. We’ve made our vote now, four to one.” She stepped forward and dropped down without waiting for a response. She was forcing my hand.

It was like a hundred thoughts were all crammed in my head and trying to get out the door at once. I kept thinking about what kind of threat might have just landed at the front door, whether it was one I knew about or not, whether I would be able to handle it, handle it alone since my teammates had bailed on me, then whether Valencia would be able to handle them. Uther’s old friends, from hundreds of years ago, or Uther’s old enemies, waiting and watching just like Masters had been? Both might have their reasons to go after me.

I kept thinking to myself that it was absolutely idiotic to stay in the face of whatever was happening, and I also kept thinking to myself that it would be an act of supreme cowardice and betrayal to leave Valencia behind. I thought that for the whole time the portal was closing, until it was so small that I couldn’t possibly have fit through it.

Achievement Unlocked: Solo Mode
I was alone.

I'd thought that it would feel like I'd made a huge mistake, but strangely, there was a feeling of righteousness that came with my decision. I probably shouldn’t have felt exhilarated, but I did. Whatever thing Fenn had felt so strongly, I only had a twinge of it. Did that mean that it was better for Fenn to go and me to stay? Or just that I wasn’t great at tuning into luck when the stakes were high? I shrugged off the question and tried to focus on the task at hand. I made a mental list of the things I knew.

1. Illusion magic was limited in the effects that it could produce. There was an upper limit to the amount of pain it could dish out, as an example.
2. Though it seemed like my illusory body could desync with my actual body, this either cost something, or there were limits to it.
3. For an illusion to work like reality, the illusion mage had to understand what the reality was.
4. The game layer was sacrosanct.
5. I had about fifteen minutes left on Soul Sight, which wasn’t subject to illusion, so far as I knew. Even if Masters knew that was what I was using, he would have to be able to see with soul sight in order to know what color to make it, which I wasn’t sure he could do.

Of course, any one of those could have been another layer of deception, but I was willing to bet that none of them were. That wasn’t to say that I was underestimating Masters, just that his motives seemed fairly straightforward, and even if they weren’t, it seemed like it was in his best interests to just keep the illusion as complete as he could. A fake weakness might work as a complicated chess move, but five fake weaknesses would be a bit much.

As it so happened, I had one other advantage. I wasn’t quite alone; I had Ropey.

I tried to think through the consequences of that. I didn’t know whether or not illusion magic could apply to entads, since most of what I knew was based on guesswork and some scant evidence acquired by experimentation. I did know that Bethel had something similar-to-but-distinct-from a soul, in the same way that the locus did. When I’d boosted Essentialism the first time, I had seen a line from my soul which pointed toward my sixth and seventh companions, before I had even met Bethel. That said, she had a lot of the same immunities that Valencia had, and I hadn’t gotten Bethel to Loyalty 10 as yet, meaning I hadn’t had a chance to see what her sorta-soul actually looked like. I also didn’t know whether she was typical of sentient entads in that regard, or whether she was special because she was my companion.

In the case that Ropey could be affected by illusion, he was close to being a liability. He showed up white to Soul Sight, because he was (technically) Amaryllis’ entad, so that meant that if Soul Sight couldn’t be faked, he could at least uni-directionally communicate with me, even if my own communication back wasn’t secure.

In the case that Ropey couldn’t be affected by illusion, he was a boon, but I had no idea whether or not that was actually the case. Worse, any inquiries would reveal him to anyone watching, which would remove one of the cards up my sleeve.

(Ropey didn’t have much in the way of senses, just sight, sound, and touch, and those were quite limited in range. I had asked Bethel about that in the course of some idle conversation about the vastness of her sensorium, and she had replied, in a frosty tone, that I should ask my companion myself, which I eventually had.)
I reached down and patted the rope in what I hoped was an inconspicuous way. He gave a squeeze in response. For now, I wasn’t actually sure what to do with that advantage, if it was one, but I was going to count it as another point in my favor.

I had a few problems though. The first was that Valencia didn’t have a soul, which meant Soul Sight wouldn’t work on her (naturally), and I didn’t expect any color to come from her entads either, given that they were unbound. The second problem was that I had no idea where she was. And the third problem was whatever had spooked Fenn and shaken the building, assuming that wasn’t just more illusion at work. I wasn’t sure whether Fenn’s sense of luck could be faked or not, but it didn’t seem like Masters had the incentive to do it, not when what he wanted was for me to stick around and answer all his questions.

I opened the door I’d punched a hole in and began retracing my steps. I wasn’t sure when exactly Valencia had been taken, but I thought that it was probably before Solace had been stopped from making her first attempt at a portal using her staff. My reasoning was that I’d seen Valencia hacking away at the amber that Solace had been stuck in, and Fenn had fired her arrow that was deflected shortly after that. If the amber had been an illusion, then Valencia’s attack with her sword was a misdirection, intended to keep the others away. And if Masters batting Fenn’s arrow to the side was an illusion, then Valencia would have presumably seen through it, assuming non-anima immunity applied. So, she was taken before any of that had happened.

This was assuming that Masters didn’t have other abilities beyond just being an illusion mage. Given the magic armor he was wearing and his extreme age, that probably wasn’t a great assumption. The Ell took longer to learn things than the other mortal species, but not a hundred times as long, which meant that Masters would in theory have had time to learn some other discipline as well. If I ballparked him as looking about fifty years old, then he was really five thousand years old, which was … well, daunting to say the least.

I made my way down the hallway, touching the walls as I went. I remembered passing doors, but illusion magic could have removed them from my sight. Touch could be faked too, but if my hand hit a door knob, it would knock my hand out of sync with my vision of my soul, and I would notice that.

“Ohay,” I said, partly to myself, partly to Ropey. “Unknown threats, unknown territory, not feeling too great about this.” I felt another squeeze around my midsection, which was comforting. “All I have to do is find Val and get out of here.” Easier said than done.

I stopped at the first door I came to, and tested the handle to make sure that it was real. I wasn’t sure how much Soul Sight I had left, but I was pretty sure I needed to be moving faster than I was, unless I wanted to either lose that advantage or feed more skill points into Essentialism.

When I opened the door, I saw a room full of boxes … which didn’t actually tell me anything, since my vision was suspect. I began feeling around, watching my hands carefully. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I stepped back, then looked down the hallway at the other doors. This place wasn’t actually a full dormitory, but it was meant to look like one from the outside, and it was sized for up to a hundred dream-skewered. That was too much space to search, especially if I assumed that Masters had taken Valencia to somewhere private and secure.

“Fuck,” I said to myself.

I went down the hallway, kicking in one door, then another, stopping only briefly to look inside. I was leery of the annihilation wards that Grak had mentioned were on the fourth-floor windows, but didn’t have the time to stop and test whether my bones were going to get removed from my body at every door. I didn’t even think I had time for a full inspection of each room, so I skipped that,
checking them over for a form visible in Soul Sight, then moving on to the next. Mostly, the rooms were empty, or with boxes in them. The windows looked out over a calm day at the athenaeum.

I was doing this when a woman with bubblegum-pink skin came jogging up the stairs. Her soul was maroon, and the fact that I could see it meant that she was real, or that Masters had somehow cracked Soul Sight. She carried a long spear with a barbed head and was dressed in black form-fitting armor of an unfamiliar material, which shimmered like an oil slick. She stopped when she saw me, just as I’d stopped when I saw her. I was pretty sure she was renacim, a species so rare that I hadn’t thought I would ever see one.

“Hi,” she said with a wave and a smile. “Speculator Masters came up here with a bunch of people, are you one of them?”

I stared at her. “Who are you?” I asked.

“Concerned citizen,” she replied. “You wouldn’t be Juniper Smith, would you?” As she spoke she reached up with her free hand and itched at her chin. If I’d been a little less world-wise, I might have missed her touching a small tattoo where her jawbone met her neck. I was almost certain it was the Parson’s Voice; if she’d activated it, then she was speaking to someone else at the same time she was speaking to me. I wanted one for everyone on the team, but the magical inks to make them were a quarter million obols each, and we hadn’t been able to justify the expense, not if it wasn’t going to cloak communication. It wasn’t much better than a walkie talkie, except that it was considerably smaller than what they had on Aerb, and much more discreet.

“No,” I lied. “Sorry. I was just coming from a meeting.”

“Kicking in doors?” asked the woman with a glance down the hall. “Look, if you are Juniper Smith, then we just want to talk, that’s it.”

I glanced at the spear in her hand.

“Just a precaution,” she said. “I assume you carry a blade for the same reason. Just in case there’s trouble.” I was holding my sword, but I wasn’t quite in a ready stance.

I was trapped. The only way down to the next level was through her, since (per Grak) all the windows had annihilation wards. I was sorely tempted to just bum rush her, but unknown entads made that a tricky prospect, especially when mine weren’t that impressive. Besides that, attacking someone who proclaimed that they just wanted to talk and had shown no aggression seemed like kind of a dick move.

“Okay,” I said. “We can talk.”

“Pallida,” said the woman as she started walking toward me with her hand held out.

“No handshakes,” I said, looking down at her hand.

“Sure, I’m wary of strangers myself,” said Pallida, dropping her hand. She looked past me. “Is Masters around?”

“No,” I replied. I immediately assumed that she or her friends were responsible for the way he’d been cut off.

“So,” said Pallida. “Are you Juniper Smith?”

“No comment,” I said. 
“I’ll take that as a yes,” Pallida replied. I was pretty sure that was for the benefit of whoever was on the other end of the tattoo. She looked past me again. “Word from reception was that you came up with a group. Are *they* with Masters, wherever he might be?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Can we cut to the chase? Are you one of Uther’s old enemies, or one of his old allies?”

Pallida straightened slightly, and some of the good humor fell from her face. “I gave my life for him on two different occasions,” she said. That was only slightly less impressive than it sounded, since renacim reincarnated instead of going to the hells. “And you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It hurt to say that, like a betrayal of the Arthur I had known, but after so long … “I didn’t know him. From what I’ve heard, ally, I guess.”

Pallida let out a breath. “Well, good, we have that in common. I’m very serious that all we want to do is talk. Whatever Masters said to you, set that to the side for now. He’s an old friend, but a bit obsessive when the mood takes him. We should probably get out of here though. We have a ride waiting downstairs.”

“I need to find Masters first,” I said.

I heard the sound of three faint gunshots from outside, and watched Pallida turn and listen. After those three, there was silence.

“Okay, sure, sounds like things might be getting rough out there,” said Pallida. “Mind if I help you then? We sort of made a splash. You might have felt it. Sticking around too long is going to raise some questions that we’d rather not answer. The faster we leave, the better.”

My eyes went to her barbed spear. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Who the hells are you?”

“Pallida,” she said again, holding out her hand. When I made no move for it, she snatched it back. “Right, right, no handshakes. My friends and I are -- well, old allies of Uther Penndraig, as you said, here to see to the continuation of his legacy, such as it is. There’s a survey that they give to the dream-skewered --”

“I know it,” I replied.

“Ah,” said Pallida. “Did you know that your name has been on it for the last five hundred years?”

“Yes,” I replied. I didn’t see a point in lying about that, or acting shocked.

“So you can see our interest, can’t you?” asked Pallida. “And if you’ll come with us, we can fill you in a bit more. Like I said, we just want to talk.”

“What did you do with Masters?” I asked.

“Do with him?” asked Pallida with a raised eyebrow. “I haven’t seen him in a few decades. Something happen to him?”

I was momentarily startled by the loss of color as the tint of maroon left her. I inwardly cursed; I’d spent too long talking, and Soul Sight had faded. That did seem to confirm that Masters hadn’t cracked it; if he had, he likely wouldn’t have known about the time limit.

“He’s somewhere in this building, I think.” I said. “I’m not going to leave until I find him.”
I wanted to ask for a minute to myself so I could get my Soul Sight back, but obviously I wasn’t going to mention Soul Sight out loud, and in either case, I didn’t trust this armed woman I’d met a few minutes ago enough to be bereft of my senses for a few minutes. That was probably a good indicator that I shouldn’t be going with her, but I was worried that things might get violent if I resisted.

For all I knew, they’d already taken Masters out.

For all I knew, they were working with Masters, even if Soul Sight seemed to semi-conclusively rule out her being an illusion.

“I already offered my help,” said Pallida.

“I think I’m doing fine on my own,” I said. I didn’t trust her, naturally, even if she was who she said she was. She was far too eager to help me. While I wasn’t going to lean on the information Masters had given me, I also wasn’t going to completely discount it. Uther had enemies and allies, both of which had an interest in me, and some of those allies had apparently soured on him. It sounded plausible, not so much that I was willing to act on it, but enough that I was willing to let it bend how I thought.

“Kicking in doors and seeing which one he’s behind?” asked Pallida.

“Sure,” I said.

“And what’s he done to you?” asked Pallida. I didn’t like the way she was holding the spear. It was a little bit too casual. “Other than having a survey with your name on it.”

“He’s,” I started, then stopped. I didn’t know whether this woman knew anything about illusion magic. “What was he known for, when you knew him?”

“He was Raven’s father,” said Pallida. “He didn’t like his little girl, only twelve hundred years old at that point, going off on dangerous adventures. Eventually he came around, but I never got the details. He’s been watching after the dream-skewered for a long time now. Nice enough guy.”

I watched her as she said that. She seemed sincere enough. I found myself bending the other way, partly by virtue of the possibility she’d try to fight me if I kept brushing her off, and partly because I couldn’t actually do anything to stop her from following me without committing to aggression.

“You’ll help me find him?” I asked.

“I said I would,” said Pallida. “I won’t let you hurt him though.”

I frowned. “He kidnapped a friend of mine,” I said.

Pallida raised an eyebrow again. “Doesn’t sound like him, but like I said, it’s been a few decades. And I still won’t let you hurt him.” She looked down the hallway again. “There were six of you, according to reception.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go find them.”

“Masters kidnapped all of them?” asked Pallida. “Like, all of them? We’re talking about the same guy here, late middle-aged Ell, scholar?”

“He’s a man of secrets, I guess,” I replied. I started off down the hallway, moving past her and not making for the stairs. It was the only direction that I could go without trying to make her give way. I tensed as I put my back to her, ready to see a spear coming toward me from my periphery, but the
moment passed by. “And no, not all, the others left.”

I tried the handle on the first door I came across, and when it wouldn’t open, I lifted my foot, aiming squarely for the place where it latched.

“Here,” said Pallida. She reached forward and tapped the knob once, then opened it up without a problem. She gave me a cautious smile. “You pick up a thing or two, having lived since the dawn of time.” She looked me up and down. “You’re human, right?” She was trying to weasel more information out of me, as I’d expected she might.

“Sure,” I said. I looked in the room. It held row after row of bunk beds. They were well-made, but they were still bunk beds, triple-stacked and packed pretty tightly together. Each of the beds had a trunk at the base. I found the arrangement puzzling. Was this where the dream-skewered were supposed to be housed? Something resembling army barracks? It wouldn’t be a huge surprise if The Dream that Skewers misrepresented living conditions for the dream-skewered, given that they didn’t actually exist, but I didn’t really understand why you’d have something like this locked away up on the top floor. And from what Masters had said, there were a few patients, they were just plain old crazy. I assumed that they’d be kept down on the lower levels though.

“Not there?” asked Pallida.

I’d spent too long looking. “No,” I said. “Moving on.”

“Do you know why your name was on that list?” asked Pallida. “I met the dream-skewered, a dozen lifetimes ago. I asked one of them, after Uther was gone. I don’t remember everything, but I remember the look of confusion on his face when I went through the survey with him. Masters tightened things up after that. He didn’t want people snooping around, not even nominal allies.”

“He didn’t call you here?” I asked. I tried the handle of another door, and again found it locked.

Pallida came over and stopped with her fingers a few inches from the handle. “We’ve kept eyes on him, and a few others.” She tapped the handle once and then pushed down on it, letting the door swing open.

Pretty convenient that a reasonable person who also wants answers from me shows up right after Masters has burned his bridges.

The room was an armory. I counted two dozen weapons sitting on the racks mounted against one wall, all of them so different from each other that I thought most of them were probably entads. There were five suits of armor sitting against the far wall, all of them so different in their appearance that I was sure they were magical. Close to me, there were two display cabinets, side-by-side, each of them filled with trinkets.

“Guys, Masters has an armory up here, and I saw a barracks just a bit ago,” said Pallida, no longer keeping up the pretense of not using the Parson’s Voice to talk to the others. “I think we just found one of Uther’s hidey-holes. Masters might be more dangerous than he let on.”

“We’re in an exclusion zone,” I said. “Illusion magic, which is about how it sounds. Masters is a master illusion mage.”

Pallida’s eyes went wide. “What?” Someone must have said something on the other end of her tattoo, because she started talking again, her words fast and clipped. “He says we’re in an exclusion zone for illusion magic,” she said. She waited half a tick, listening to the other end. “Masters is a practitioner. Face and Lotus protocols.”
I knew those: they were lifted straight from our tabletop games. The Lotus protocol was one the group had developed when fighting a dream mage, and the rule was that nothing was to be trusted as being reality. The Face protocol was one they’d made when I had them go up against a small army of doppelgangers. I wondered how fleshed out Arthur might have made them, or what adaptations he might have made for Aerb. There was little question in my mind that was where Pallida had gotten them from.

“Because he’s the one who said it,” Pallida replied to an unspoken question. “No, I don’t know why they would. Uther, probably.” She paused again, listening. “Well, even if you were, he’s got other magic. Assume that he’s shored up any weaknesses.” She shot me an apologetic look and rolled her eyes at whatever the other person had said. “I’m going radio silent while I make conversation..” Another pause. “Because that’s what I trained on.” She touched her finger to the barely-visible tattoo. “Sorry.”

“Do you have countermeasures?” I asked. Not that I would trust them.

“One of my partners does, downstairs,” said Pallida. “You have to tell us what you know, if not about who you are and what your connection to Uther is, then about Masters and what he can do.”

And now, suddenly, we’re on the same side against Masters, uh huh, sure. “He’s capable of displaying different illusions to different people, implicitly including the ability to insert himself into conversations between two people to make each think the other said something different. He doesn’t appear to be able to model things that he has no knowledge of, including people that he’s never met, information he never heard, or entads and other magic that he doesn’t know the function of. So far as I’m aware, he can meddle with any sense. I also assume he’s got surveillance either as part of the magic, or acquired it independently.”

Pallida stared at me. “And your plan was to track him down and attack him with a sword?”

“He has my friend,” I replied. “How things are going to go depends on how willing he is to give her up.”

Pallida tapped Parson’s Voice and repeated back what I’d told her, with some bits of commentary in there, most of which was about how she really didn’t like this new development.

“You said we were short on time,” I said when she was done. “You’re worried about the police showing up?”

“Our method of arrival wasn’t exactly subtle,” said Pallida. “We were worried you’d disappear. Sounds like campus security are already downstairs.”

“Then go,” I said. “I can make the search alone, and I’ve done nothing illegal. If you really want to talk to me, then we can get in touch later. Leave an ad in a Boastre Vino newspaper that mentions the colors green, chartreuse, and gold. I’ll be checking for the next month.”

“He wants us to leave,” said Pallida with a finger to her tattoo. “Gave a semi-anonymous contact method.” She listened and winced. “No dice,” she said to me.

“I don’t want to fight you,” I said.

“Whoa, hey, no one said anything about that,” said Pallida.

“Masters wanted answers from me,” I said. “When I tried to leave, he trapped me in an illusion. So if you want to keep asking questions, it’s going to have to be while I’m searching this place from top to bottom.”
“Sure,” said Pallida. Her mouth twisted in a frown, and she twirled her spear around once. “Fine.”

We went further down the hallway, opening a few more doors (storage, bathrooms, kitchen, dining hall, more beds) until we got to the other end of the building, on the opposite side from the room that contained the mirror. The more I thought about it, the more I saw the positioning of that mirror in its own large room as being something like a shrine to Uther, especially since it hadn’t been in use for the last five hundred years. There hadn’t been any dust, either, had there? Not there, nor on the bunk beds, nor in the armory, which meant that all of it must have been regularly cleaned, waiting for … something. Me, maybe.

This last door on the top floor was bigger and more imposing, sturdily built in a way that I didn’t like.

“Do the honors?” I asked Pallida after I tested the handle and found the door locked.

Pallida tapped the handle, then frowned. “Not the kind of lock I can open,” she said.

“No?” I asked. “And what does that mean?” I didn’t trust her.

“It’s locked from the inside,” said Pallida. “Some locks you can’t open unless you’re on the right side of the door.” She stepped back. “Seems likely this is where he would be. Though …”

“Though you’re wondering why, if he’s a master illusion mage, he wouldn’t just make it seem like there’s not a door here at all?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Pallida. She turned to me. “I’m serious that we need to get out of here sooner than later. Campus police are already on the scene, and there are limits to how hard we want to fight in order to get away. We’re not really equipped for cracking heavy defenses.”

“I’m going to kick the door down,” I replied. I stepped in front of the door and took stock of it. It was wood, but a quick knock on it was enough to confirm that under the wood was metal. What Pallida had said meant, what, that it was barred from the other side? Chained, maybe? I had a lot in the way of brute strength, but I wasn’t about to delude myself that I was going to be able to snap a steel bar with my kick, let alone something more exotic. I still squared myself and reached out to my magics, then raised my foot.

Maybe predictably, a kick using the full force of my power broke a bone in my leg and was incredibly painful. I felt ligaments and muscles tear from the strain. A now-familiar notification from the game popped up, informing me of the broken bone affliction, and I watched the health meter dip a few points, which was, in a way, comforting. At least what I was doing was real. I ate a marzipan fairy as the pain began to increase, and sighed in relief as the bone set and healed itself.

“You broke a bone,” said Pallida. “Then healed it?”

“Not important,” I said, touching the mark I’d made on the door. I glance over at her and saw her watching. “Entads.”

“Sure,” said Pallida. She was looking down at the bandoliers on my chest. “Wait. I know that one. It was one of Uther’s.”

“Probably,” I said, looking at the door. I’d used a fairy instead of burning through a bone because I hadn’t wanted to show off unexplained magical healing with all the questions that would raise, but apparently the fairy raised other questions.

“No, I mean the fairies were one that was locked to him, invested by him,” she replied. “There was a
jar of them that could only be opened with his consent. We had to give it back to his son. How do you have one of the marzipan fairies?"

“Long story,” I said. “You said we don’t have much time. Is there any way that you can open this? I don’t know what your specific abilities are.”

“We find your friend, then we go,” said Pallida. “You come with us, alright? And Masters doesn’t get hurt.”

I hesitated, naturally. So far, Pallida hadn’t done anything to inspire mistrust, but then, Masters hadn’t either, up until the point where he’d prevented me from leaving. The others were somewhere else, probably within the athenaeum, but I had no clue whether their plan was to return to me or bail out entirely using the teleportation key. I was pretty sure that Amaryllis was going to be pissed off at me for ignoring democracy, more so if I left with some strangers.

“Okay,” I said. “We find my friend, we leave. If you notice anything off about her, give me a chance to explain before you do anything rash.” When we found Valencia, I would ask her to give me her best read of the situation, and then not leave until she’d given the all-clear. I worried that she was unconscious, but that was a bridge I’d cross when I came to it.

“Stand back,” said Pallida. “I want to make sure I’m not going to kill you.” She held out her spear and pointed it at the handle of the door, raising the shaft so that she was resting it gently on one hand. She carefully swung the spear to one side, in my direction.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hold the end,” she said. “Avoid the barbs.”

I did as she said, holding onto the part of the shaft I could reach. She partially released it, letting me hold it. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Testing,” said Pallida. “Making sure that I’m not swinging this thing where I don’t want to swing it.” She let go of the spear, leaving me holding it up. “Okay,” she said, grabbing it again. “Now I know you’re not an illusion, because if you were, then the spear would have fallen to the ground, and if it were on the ground, I couldn’t hurt the real you when I swung it.”

“Unless he has telekinesis,” I said. “Or some other way to fake haptics.”

“Does he?” asked Pallida with a frown on her face.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“If I kill you, sorry,” said Pallida. She faced the door and took a deep breath. “This is going to take a moment.”

“Sure,” I said. So far as I could tell, this was my chance. I slipped into my soul as quickly as I could, took all the points in Stealth and dumped them into Essentialism, then backed out as quickly as I could.

Skill increased: Essentialism lvl 28!

New Virtue: Soul Sight!

The door had several long slashes across it, making a crude rectangle. The tip of Pallida’s spear was still glowing. In the wake of the slashes was something bubbling and dark purple, the end result of
whatever had happened to the metal and wood. I was immediately sure I didn’t want to meet the business end of that spear.

“Try kicking that,” said Pallida, gesturing toward the marks she made.

I walked forward and squared myself, then raised my foot and kicked with all my strength. This time the metal gave, breaking apart in the few places the bubbled purple stuff was and falling inward. I ducked to one side, putting myself out of the line of fire, then peeked in when what I’d seen registered.

Valencia was standing next to Masters with her pistols drawn and pointed my way. Masters was tied up in a chair with a gag over his mouth and his eyes closed. He didn’t seem conscious. The room had all the furnishings of an office, and the chair that Masters was sitting in clearly belonged to the desk that was behind him. There were two big windows with a view down the mountain, leading to the shimmering water. I looked at Masters with Soul Sight; he was reddish-orange, right where I’d expect him to be with normal vision. Valencia showed no soul at all, which was as it should be too, but that also meant she had no color to check.

“Keyring,” said Valencia, not lowering her weapons. “Dolomite.”

“Oak,” I replied.

“Excitement,” said Valencia with a nod. “Where did we first meet?”

“Prison,” I said. “It’s me. And I don’t think that his magic would be effective on you, given the necklace you’re wearing.”

That was one of our standard deceptions to explain Valencia; she was wearing a necklace of non-detection, which would cancel out any attempt to sense her with anything more than sight or sound. We needed a plausible reason that she would appear to be a non-anima, and an entad was as good an excuse as any, given their variable effects. It wouldn’t hold up, and we didn’t want to be in a position to have to explain things in the first place, but maybe it was an excuse that might serve us for a bit, until we could get to the anti-infernal bit, which was still shaky ground. The obvious next request for anyone with half a brain was that she remove it in order to confirm that it really was an entad, which was why it was an excuse to be used sparingly. I did wonder how many devils wearing non-anima skin had come up with all the same justifications for why they appeared as they did.

“Who’s that behind you?” asked Valencia. She still hadn’t lowered her pistols.

“Pallida,” I said. “She claims to be a friend, but I was hoping that you would be able to tell me for certain.” From my periphery, I saw Pallida give a little wave. “Can I come in?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Valencia. She still hadn’t lowered her pistols. “You’re going to have to explain things for me.”

“Naturally,” I said. I stepped into the room with her and glanced back at Pallida. “You’re under your own recognizance to shoot her.”

“Excuse me?” asked Pallida, ducking behind the door. “You just said she can shoot me?”

“No,” I said. “I said that she was allowed to shoot you and shouldn’t look to me for instruction or approval, because she should be immune to the effects of illusion magic, and I’m not.”

“Ah,” said Pallida. “I’ll stay behind the barrier then, thanks. You said that once you got your friend, we could go.”
“Who is this person?” asked Valencia.

“One of Uther’s old allies,” I said. “At least, that’s what she claims.” I looked at Valencia’s armored form, then back toward the door where Pallida was hiding. “Can you tell me whether that’s true?”

“Come out,” said Valencia, toward the door.

“Guns down?” asked Pallida.

Valencia lowered her pistols, but kept them in hand. “Okay.”

Pallida poked her head in, confirmed that there were no weapons aimed in her general direction, then stepped into the room. “We really should be going,” she said.

“Tell me about Uther,” said Valencia.

“Uh, that’s sort of a long story,” said Pallida. She paused. “He was the greatest hero the world had ever known. I wasn’t one of his Knights, but there were a few times I came close to filling that role.”

“If he came back, you wouldn’t be loyal to him,” said Valencia.

Pallida hesitated, then glanced at me for a moment. “I wouldn’t pledge fealty, no,” she said.

“It’s more than that,” said Valencia. “You feel hostility toward him.”

“No,” said Pallida, shaking her head. “He was a hero, and a great man, but it’s complicated.”

“What happened to the others?” Valencia asked me, turning fractionally in my direction.

“They left through Solace’s entad,” I said. The variable effects of entads were something of a godsend for cloaking our true abilities. “They should still be somewhere on campus, unless they left for the big guns.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked.

“I didn’t want to leave without you,” I said. “Masters was making some kind of threat when he got cut off, and … I disagreed with leaving.”

Loyalty Increased: Valencia the Red lvl 26!

“I don’t think that was very smart,” said Valencia. “I was the one who silenced him, when I heard him trying to use me like that. I’ve been waiting here because there was a banging sound outside, then gunshots. Was that just you?”

“Probably our landing and the local police,” said Pallida.

“We should go,” I said. “Val, it’s up to you whether we go with them or try to escape down the mountain. Obviously if we spot Mary and the others, we’ll regroup.”

“I get the same sense from her as from Masters,” said Valencia. “Stronger, because she’s not masking it. She wants answers, and she’s willing to hurt someone to get them.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” said Pallida with a frown. “And how the hells do you know anything about me?”

“Entad,” I said.
“You’re lying,” said Pallida.

“She’s just guessing that you’re lying,” said Valencia.

“Well, that’s already annoying,” said Pallida. “Look, we really don’t have all the time in the world, because the cavalry has just been called in.”

I didn’t really want to go with her and her friends, but I didn’t know what the other members of our party had planned for. The only information I had was that they were, probably, two hundred yards away, since that was what Solace had said before trying to make a portal the first time. Would they stay, once I hadn’t come through? Or would they use the teleportation key? I could imagine Amaryllis scouting out the situation and seeing whatever forces Pallida’s people had brought to bear, then deciding that this was a battle to fight another day, especially given that they had no easy way around illusion magic. Amaryllis thought I was important, but there were limits.

Fenn though … I thought Fenn wouldn’t let common sense stop her.
Peer Pressure

The oppressive feeling of being trapped in a corner faded away once Fenn was through the portal. Dealing with gravity was a bit tricky, as she’d gone down through a hole and come out the side of a tree, but she landed on her feet easily enough and took stock of where she was. It was clearly an office of some sort, with hundreds of drawers along one wall and a large desk built for someone who must have stood ten feet tall by the looks of the chair behind it. There were books too, so many that half of them must have just been for show. The tree was a bit of a spectacle, thirty feet tall and drinking in sunlight from a large glass roof, the centerpiece of the room. Rich people always had things like that, big ostentatious crap that proved they were someone of means. The way the glass panels were divided by metal struts called to mind the prison, which was a misadventure she hoped she might eventually forget.

The others came through soon enough, first Grak, then Solace, and finally Mary. No Juniper.

“Come on, Juniper,” said Mary, facing the portal.

“The connection won’t last,” said Solace.

“He might not come,” said Mary, still staring at the portal.

“The fuck do you mean he might not come?” asked Fenn.

“Val,” said Mary, by way of answer. She turned to Solace. “Can you hold it open?”

“No,” said Solace. “Two hundred yards is about as far a connection as I’ve ever made. What does it mean if Juniper doesn’t come back?”

“He’d fucking better come,” said Fenn. “We voted. Val can handle herself, she’s invincible.”

“She’s not,” said Mary. “I didn’t mean that we’d leave her forever.” She waited a beat. The portal was just about too small for Juniper to plausibly fit through. “Come on Joon, it’s a tactical retreat, until we know what we’re dealing with, until we --” The portal winked shut, leaving the trunk of the tree unblemished, and evaporating any last hope that Juniper was going to come through. Mary let out a groan. “This is not how a rational person reacts to someone taking a hostage.”

“We have to go back for him,” said Fenn. “We’re, what, two hundred yards away? I can cover that in a handful of seconds. Less, if I burn blood.”

“We’re in an exclusion zone,” said Mary. “I don’t even know if we’re safe from illusion magic here. There’s some level of implied surveillance too, given that Masters wasn’t in the room with us. We have no way of seeing through the illusions. Even if there weren’t some other complication on the way --”

“Still feels like there is,” said Fenn. Her luck sense wasn’t screaming so much anymore, but it was whimpering, especially at the thought of going back to where they’d been. She was willing to defy that sense of wrongness, if it meant helping Juniper.

“A confrontation with Masters would mean having to doubt every single thing that we see, and everything that we say to each other. Speaking of which, we should do a keyring.” Mary looked at the other three. “I’ll start. Granite.”

“The keyring is broken,” said Grak.
“I know,” said Mary. “There’s a good chance for false positives, or even just the enemy letting the authentication take place and then swooping in after.”

“Then what’s the point?” asked Grak.

“There might still be a negative response,” said Mary. “It’s worth doing on that count.”

“A false sense of security is worse than no sense at all,” said Grak.

“It’s not a false sense of security,” said Mary with a huff. “We just need to treat the checks as meaningless unless someone fails them.” She turned to Solace. “I don’t suppose you have a solution to this problem?”

“Not that I can think of,” said Solace. “I would say that any display of my abilities is proof enough I am who I say, but I’m not sure that’s right.”

“It seems easy to fake, given what we’ve seen of illusion,” said Mary. Fenn could practically hear her frowning under her helmet.

“Wait,” said Fenn. “I actually have something for this.” She held out her glove and thought of the entad, which appeared in her hand. It was a small gray ball, recently liberated from the conference room they’d all sat in. “Before you say anything, I didn’t steal it, I just grabbed it in case Masters hadn’t meant to leave it behind. And I didn’t steal the mirror either, since as I see it, that mirror is technically Uther’s, and you’re his heir.” The ball flashed as Fenn spoke, punctuating each part of the sentence, all green except when she’d said ‘Uther’, which was blue.

“Fourteen points,” said Mary. Fenn rolled her eyes at that. They were accumulating secrets, and Mary’s parentage was, technically, one of them.

“But we can use this for proof that we are who we say we are, right?” asked Fenn. “Citizen Kane.” The ball flashed green. “Boom, proof.”

“Hrm,” said Mary. “That does work, but we have a limited pool to draw on.”

“Whatever you say,” replied Fenn. She tossed the entad to Amaryllis. “But if you said, ‘oh, good job Fenn’, I wouldn’t be too broken up about it. Not a lot of appreciation for my contributions, of late.”

“Good job, Fenn,” said Mary. She held the entad in her hand and turned it a few times before speaking again. “Raging Bull, Lost Pills, Chinatown -- wait.” The ball had gone green, gray, green. “Chinatown, Chinatown,” said Mary. The ball went blue, then green.

“Okay, I’m sure that’s very fun for you,” said Fenn. “Let’s stop fucking around and let’s get our Juniper back.”

“We need protocols,” said Mary. “Given the demonstrated scope of the magic, it would be trivial for an illusion mage to turn us against each other. And, come to think of it, the problem with the ball as a form of authentication is that it can give false negatives if Masters can just arbitrarily change the perceived color. Actually, if we were going to be using information that both of us knew, then we could just skip the entad entirely. The bitrate would be terrible. Grak, checksums?”

“Too onerous,” said Grak.

“No,” said Mary. “First letter of each word, switched to number, mod 13? That would just be a calculation per word? Less, if we exclude words less than four letters. Checksum would mean that you couldn’t change the words without also changing the sum, and we can add a salt to the
checksum that would make it near-impossible to dupe in realtime.”

“Too onerous,” said Grak.

“Juniper is in trouble,” said Fenn, crossing her arms. “You’re acting like we’ve got the time to sit around and talk.”

“She’s acting with prudence,” said Grak.

Fenn threw up her hands. “It’s all illusion, nothing matters, Masters could just make you tell me the wrong protocols. Let’s go already.”

“I hate this,” said Mary, shaking her head. “Ugh, this is Fallatehr all over again, but worse, because at least that was just paranoia about people.”

“With some time, I might be able to ward against it,” said Grak. “I was studying the magic from inside my cage. Warding against a novel magic is … difficult.”

Fenn knew what was coming before Mary even opened her mouth. It was an objection that any ward was suspect, because blah blah blah illusion, and then Grak would counter with something about how he could see, and they were all wasting time.

Fenn strode out of the room without another word. The others would follow, or they wouldn’t, but she would at least be doing something.

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“This is how people die,” said Amaryllis, rushing to catch up with Fenn. “Juniper split up the team, and you’re trying to split it up further. We need time to think, dammit, if we all go our separate ways, then all those different roads will lead to death.”

They were walking down a wide hallway with doors lining it. Amaryllis caught a few glimpses of classrooms, tiered seats that allowed an instructor to lecture as many people as possible at once. It reminded her of her time at Quills and Blood. Certain things were a universal part of the athenaeum experience.

“If we die, then we die,” said Fenn. “You’re the one who keeps saying that Juniper is the lever that moves the world, fucking act like it.”

“Are you pissed off at me?” asked Amaryllis. They were walking quickly, and approaching the door. “He was the one who stayed behind, we took a fucking vote and he decided to go off on his own.”

“Yeah, well I’m pissed off at him too,” said Fenn. “If he had put his foot down, I would have stayed too, obviously. The only hope I have is that he was tricked by the illusion magic somehow, but if it’s not that, then –”

She pushed her way out the doors of the building and came up short when she saw smoke in the distance.

Amaryllis really thought that ought to be the time for conversation, but Fenn took off at a dead sprint, and after a quick look back to make sure the others were coming, Amaryllis followed in Fenn’s footsteps.

Fenn’s scars had shifted enough to lose their power, and without a boost to Essentialism, Juniper wasn’t able to fix them. She was still ridiculously fast, partly from a career spent wandering the Risen Lands with her long-legged stride, partly elven heritage giving more strength and grace, and partly
just because the game had decided that was one of the things that Fenn was good at. All their skills and abilities had increased, some of them noticeably, but the increases were unevenly distributed, and though Amaryllis was far better at Climbing, Fenn had gotten a boost to Athletics. It was hard to tell what any of that actually meant, given all the other factors, but Fenn hadn’t been lying when she’d said that she could cover two hundred yards in a handful of seconds.

The scene outside the dream-skewered clinic didn’t bode well. A shiny hunk of metal shaped a bit like a bean was sitting in front of the clinic. It was as large as a sailing ship but shaped nothing like it, and it had no obvious entrance that Amaryllis could see. Around it were curls of molten rock where it had landed, making fractal patterns on the ground, not corresponding to any known means of propulsion. That was where the smoke was coming from. There were people standing some distance back, having come to see what the commotion was all about, and Amaryllis wanted to scream at them to get back.

Fenn had her bow at full draw and was moving more slowly, watching for enemies as she made her way across the smoking ground.

“Get back!” shouted Amaryllis to the people who had gathered to watch. It made her conspicuous, but there was nothing for that, especially since she was already in full plate. The helmet restricted her visibility, and she wished that it was off, but she wasn’t especially keen on the idea of getting shot in the head. “Imperial business, get back, your lives are in danger!”

There was a part of her thinking about the ramifications of all this. If it were known that dream-skewered weren’t real -- well, that would make it harder to explain Juniper to people, if they had to. If it came out that Speculation and Scrutiny were built at least partly overlapping an exclusion zone, well, that was going to be international news, likely on the front page of the broadsheets, especially if the connection to Uther was discovered. Amaryllis felt a profound regret at having used their real names, since this wasn’t what the fledgling Republic of Miunun needed. The entads would give them away easily enough to anyone watching closely, and there was little helping that, but they hadn’t needed to make it easy for anyone.

This was, simply put, an unmitigated disaster of a first public encounter.

The crowds weren’t moving much, as Amaryllis had thought they might not, because people didn’t listen to simple directives. In fact, the crowds were getting bigger, as the existing crowd attracted more crowds, and classes in the area were letting out. A ship, weapon, or entity had landed next to the clinic, melting rocks, and people were just standing around, trying to satisfy their curiosity.

(In some sense, it was heartening. The reactions of the students and faculty were those of people unaccustomed to crisis and violence. In Barren Jewel, people began pulling their children from the street at the first sign of trouble, even before someone started wielding magic or pulling out a gun. Here, in a core part of the Empire of Common Cause, where citizens from all over the world were gathered, it was like people had forgotten why all the major cities had thick walls and heavy wards around them. It was good that people weren’t adapted to crisis, since it meant that they hadn’t suffered the hard knocks of first-hand experience, even if it was also annoying, and some of them might die for it.)

Amaryllis pulled out her pistol and fired three shots, just above the heads of the crowd. Where her words had little effect, the gunfire did. People started yelling and scrambling, moving away from the clinic. She kept her pistol out, waiting to see if there would be a response. Fenn was moving too fast, close to the metal bean, not heedless of the danger (not given how strong her luck sense had gotten) but certainly not moving with caution. Amaryllis rushed over, just as Solace and Grak appeared in a burst of leaves beside her. Solace had a new staff, which was really more of a tree branch. It had
been chopped from the office tree they’d portaled through, by the looks of it.

When Amaryllis rounded the metal bean, she saw Fenn aiming the bow at a fox Animalia. The fox had a dagger in each hand, and was staring at Fenn.

“We’ll be gone soon,” said the fox. “Nothing to lose your life over.”

“Drop the daggers,” said Fenn. “Then get down on the ground and put your hands behind your back.”

“That’s not how this is going to happen,” said the fox. “You’ll shoot me, you’ll find out why that was a bad idea, then you’ll get carried off to the nearest bone mage for major healing.”

“Don’t,” said Amaryllis.

Fenn released the arrow. It zipped through the air at a terrifying speed, then stopped dead in the air a foot in front of the fox. It was hard to tell what expression was on the Animalia’s face, given how different in structure it was, but it seemed like it was grinning.

“Alright,” said Fenn. “Fair play.”

The arrow flipped around in the air with a single smooth motion. Fenn was about to say something, but she twisted to the side and stuck her hand out instead. The arrow went from a dead stop to full motion with no apparent period of acceleration, so fast that it would have been impossible to dodge. Fenn had been moving before it though, reacting before the stimulus, and she caught the arrow in her hand as though it hadn’t cost her any effort or required any special skill.

The grin had slipped from the fox’s face.

Fenn casually assumed her archer’s stance and brought the same arrow she’d shot before to full draw.

“Disarm,” she said. “Drop to the ground, hands behind your back.”

“Illusions,” said Amaryllis. “It might be bait.” And illusions can silence, swallowing up my words, or twisting them to say something else.

“Illusions?” asked the fox, speaking toward Amaryllis.

“Don’t waste resources or reveal abilities unless you have to,” said Amaryllis, hoping that her words were getting through. “Try not to do anything that might kill a civilian if you’ve gotten turned around.”

It was utter idiocy to have come back here. They weren’t able to trust their senses, weren’t able to communicate, and weren’t able to actually gather any information. What they should have done was simply left. Leaving Juniper on his own to face down whatever unknown threat might have been terrible, true, but there was such a thing as a sunk cost fallacy, even if she was the only one that seemed to realize it. They needed a way to neutralize the threat. That was the only way that an assault on the clinic could be successful. They didn’t even know the bounds of the problem.

“Grak is warding,” said Solace as she approached Amaryllis.

“You brought a child?” asked the fox, on seeing Solace.

Amaryllis glanced back to where Grak was standing with his wand out. He was using the same
technique that he’d used to trap her, making a ward and then altering the boundaries of it, hopefully to shield her. But she couldn’t trust it, could she? They hadn’t had time to work out communication. She turned back to the fox.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m just going to shoot him,” said Fenn.

“Her,” replied the fox. “And who we are is none of your concern, just go back to whatever office you came out of and write up a report on a situation you were in no way prepared to deal with.”

“Is this thing a ship?” asked Fenn, gesturing with her head toward the hunk of metal. “Because we’re not going to let you back in without some explanation.”

A humanoid shape came jogging up from inside the clinic, then slipped through the gates, which were cracked open just wide enough for it. The person-shape looked like it was made of water, with a slightly-pointed skull floating at the center of what would have been the chest. A bandolier was looped over one shoulder, providing storage, and a rifle was held in what you couldn’t quite call hands. It was a lenssi, a rare species that fell well outside the norm. They weren’t even humanoid except by convention.

Fenn didn’t shift her aim. “Stop where you are or I’ll shoot,” she said.

“You’ve already seen how ineffective that is,” said the fox.

“Entad,” said Fenn with a nod to her bow. “Next arrow is going to come out molten metal.”

“Seems like it would be hard for you to catch when it comes flying back to you, no?” asked the fox.

The lenssi whipped one of its arms around, with the end as thin as a blade, making gestures in the air. The fox watched it with half an eye. The lenssi had no voice, which meant they used a gestural language, one that Amaryllis didn’t have even the barest knowledge of. She wondered whether an illusion mage would need to be able to speak whatever language they had their illusions speak. There were very few entads that granted the ability to become a full polygot, most of them well-known, and translation tattoos for everything else. Perhaps obscure languages would solve some of the communication problems their team was facing. Their collective languages were, unfortunately, relatively common, just Groglir and Elven, and whatever languages Valencia could speak (all of them, with the right devil).

“Whose authority are you under?” asked the fox, presumably in response to whatever the lenssi had gestured.

“Speculator Masters,” said Fenn, before Amaryllis could respond. As bluff went, it was an interesting one, and there was some technical truth to it, considering that they’d been invited in by him. It was, at any rate, better than saying the truth, which was that they were the Council of Arches, from the Republic of Miunun on the Isle of Poran.

The fox relaxed slightly. “You’re not police?” she asked. “Not imps?” That was short for imperials, though the slang dated back to the Second Empire and was rarely used. That was an oddity to be tucked away for later examination.

“Hells no,” said Fenn. She still had her bow at full draw. She was strong, but the strain was starting to show. There was a reason that guns made for better standoffs.

“Did Masters send you in to stop us?” asked the fox.
“Sure, let’s go with that,” said Fenn.

“There’s a truce,” said the fox. “Are you planning to act against it, or do you just not know it? Are you part of his side, or hired guns?”

“Hired would imply that we’re paid,” said Fenn. Her arm was starting to waver. “But I don’t know anything about a truce. Do you often come armed to deal with people you have truces with?”

The fox turned toward the clinic, mouth slightly agape, as though listening to something that Amaryllis couldn’t hear. “Shit,” said the fox. She turned back toward Fenn. “Fine, a temporary truce between us?”

Fenn relaxed the tension of the draw, probably more from the strain of keeping it up than because of any particular feeling of goodwill. “Truce,” she said. “Temporarily.”

Amaryllis stepped up close to Fenn. “Not really your call,” she said with a low voice.

Fenn rolled her eyes, and not in a particularly carefree way, more of a ‘fuck off’ kind of way.

“If you’re with Masters, then we’re almost friends, of a sort,” said the fox. A flash of emotion crossed her face. She slipped her daggers into their sheaths on her hips, then turned and looked to the lenssi. “Sade says it’s an exclusion zone, illusion magic.” Unseen communication. One that wouldn’t extend to the lenssi? Parson’s Voice?

The lenssi gestured something quick in response with fast cutting motions at different angles.

“No, no idea,” said the fox with a frown. “And yes, I agree, it’s exactly his style.”

“Do you mind cluing us in?” asked Amaryllis. “Assuming that you don’t want to deal with an altercation.”

(Real or not? That was the question, and it was going to keep being the question. The solution was to treat them as though they were both real and not real at the same time, saying only those things that could be said to real and not real versions of themselves. The arrow was a point in favor of the Animalia not being an illusion, because Fenn had personally handled the arrow, and then held it at tension with the bow. Juniper had described illusion magic as being the fooling of senses, and it seemed just barely possible to return the arrow, but it would require fooling three senses in rapid succession, not just sight and touch, but Fenn’s luck sense as well. The exact upper bounds of illusion magic weren’t known, but exclusion zones tended to be degenerate. Still, it seemed as though the back-and-forth of the arrow was pointless extravagance and opportunity to be revealed, if the fox was an illusion.)

“I said,” replied the fox with a nod in Amaryllis’ direction. “Exclusion zone, illusion magic, whatever that might entail, if you’re really there at all. We’re getting details now.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “We knew about that. You were saying that something was his style.”

“Go back inside,” said the fox to the lenssi. “I’ll deal with these interlopers.”

“Ward is done,” said Grak.

“Good,” said Amaryllis. “Confirm with a moving picture, green or blue for yes, grey for no.” Fenn’s idea had been a good one, even if using the entad for it was pointless. Solace didn’t have the depth of Earth knowledge that the others had, but for movies in particular, they had a deep well to draw from, dozens if restricted to movies that they’d seen, and probably hundreds if they were just movies that
were known to the two parties.

“Deepthroat,” replied Grak. (Fenn let out a chuckle.)

“And I’m within the ward?” asked Amaryllis.


Amaryllis looked at the fox, the retreating figure of the lenssi, Fenn, Grak, Solace, and finally, the building itself. Nothing had changed. Grak’s confirmation wasn’t sufficient, of course, and became less sufficient as time passed. It was better than nothing though, especially before the presumed enemy had time to adapt to it. There would be pauses or delays to watch out for, pieces of conversation that didn’t line up quite right.

“We appear to be in the clear, for now,” said Grak, by way of confirmation.

“What does that mean?” asked Fenn.

“It means that we need to be cautious,” said Solace.

“I’m sorry,” said the fox. “But what are you all talking about?”

“Wards against the excluded magic,” said Grak.

“But you’re on Masters’ side?” asked the fox with a frown.

“We’ve had some disagreements, of late,” said Fenn. “Safe to say if you pull him out of there, we’re going to have some things to talk about.”

“But then who are you?” asked the fox. “If you didn’t come here on his behalf, then why did you come?”

“It’s complicated,” said Amaryllis, before Fenn could do any more damage. Being inconsistent about who they were and why they were here was going to be damaging to conversation. Unfortunately, the truth was a tricky thing, given the unknown motivations of this group. “You were saying that it was someone’s style.”

“Uther Penndraig,” replied the fox. She seemed blithely unconcerned that Amaryllis wasn’t answering questions; she was stalling, then, buying time while something went on inside, ‘dealing with the interlopers’, as she’d put it.

“Masters knew him,” said Amaryllis. “That lenssi might have been old enough too. He would have been before your time though, wouldn’t he?” She shifted position slightly, moving closer to the clinic.

“Enough chatting,” said Fenn. “I’m going in.”

“Ah,” said the fox with an exaggerated frown. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

Fenn raised her bow again, popping an arrow from her glove. “Looks like our truce is over then.”

Amaryllis reached over and pushed Fenn’s arm down. “Who was Uther to you?” asked Amaryllis, trying to get the conversation back on track. Juniper and Valencia were in the clinic, but it wasn’t clear that they needed rescuing just yet, and stumbling into armed conflict with people who weren’t even necessarily opponents was to be avoided at all costs. Amaryllis did trust Fenn’s luck sense, to within reason, but the lucky path wasn’t always lucky in all senses, at least so far as she’d seen and
“Fine,” said the fox. “You’re right, I never knew Uther. But I’d say that I have some connection to his legacy, which you might be able to guess if Masters has kept you informed. You still haven’t explained what you’re doing here. It can’t be coincidence that you came so soon after we landed.”

“Mary, I love you, but we’re wasting time while who-knows-what is going on in there,” said Fenn.

“We didn’t come here for violence,” said the fox. “Though we did come prepared for it. We’re not even planning on touching Masters. All we want are his recent visitors.”

“Why?” asked Amaryllis.

“It’s complicated,” said the fox.

“And if we refuse to come?” asked Amaryllis.

“We?” asked the fox. “You can’t mean -- ah.” She reached up and touched a spot of fur by her throat. “I think I found the other ones, they’re standing around outside with me.” *Definitely Parson’s Voice.* “Yes, I’m serious.”

*Others. They have Juniper, maybe Valencia too.* “We can meet elsewhere,” said Amaryllis. “We have a safehouse, far away from civilization, neutral ground.”

“One moment,” the fox said to Amaryllis. “Dwarven warder, half-elf archer, a crantek child -- yes, six or seven years old -- and the last seems like their leader, but she’s in full plate.” The fox paused for a moment, then looked to Amaryllis. “What’s your species?” she asked.

“Human,” replied Amaryllis.

“Human,” repeated the fox. Her hand dropped down from her fur. “Where is this elsewhere?” the fox asked.

“A hundred miles from Cranberry Bay,” said Amaryllis. “Nestled in a forested valley, shielded by trees and hills. We’ll give you the exact location later, via an ad in a local newspaper.”

The fox put a finger back to the same spot on her fur. “The offer is semi-anonymous contact followed by a face-to-face meeting.” A brief pause. “Yes, I know you did, but I think we should take it, especially since campus security just showed up.”

Amaryllis looked over to see a pair of vans approaching, moving at speed. She allowed herself to frown, since she was hidden by her helm. *In theory* they were going to need to explain themselves. That was a choice they’d made ahead of time, cemented when they’d given their real names at the front desk of the clinic. To undo that … well, it might have been possible. The receptionist was almost certainly real, as was the book they’d signed their names in, but to put everything back into the bottle seemed like it was going to be terribly difficult, if it was possible at all.

“Sorry,” said the fox. “We need you to come with. It’s important. We can pay you in a dozen different ways, but we need you physically present.”

“Stop!” shouted a voice from the vans. A man wearing a breastplate and holding a flaming sword had gotten out, with others close behind him. “Drop your weapons and entads!”

“Vote,” said Amaryllis, loud enough for her three companions to hear.
“I thought we were ignoring votes?” asked Fenn.

“Go,” said Solace. She was frowning as she said it though.

“Go,” said Grak. He seemed more firm on the idea, perhaps because of the idea that they would pay, or maybe just out of a desire to be gone from the exclusion zone, one way or another.

“Fine, but only if it’s all of us,” said Fenn.

“We go,” said Amaryllis with a nod.

It was a relief that they could reach unanimity. They would go into the ship, at least, and have some cover from whatever was happening with campus security. Going inside the ship would provide them some cover, in case things went sour, though they were disobeying a direct order from the man with the sword. It was, in a sense, another tactical retreat, which didn’t feel great.

The fox gave a low whistle, and one side of the metal bean opened up, spreading its skin like it was a dress being unzipped. The opening wasn’t particularly doorlike, and it revealed the hull to be no more substantial or thick than fabric. Amaryllis glanced back at Grak, their resident expert on entads given that Bethel had stayed at home. He gave her a nod.

When he realized that wasn’t going to be enough, he said, “Cannonball Run.” She knew that wasn’t a movie he’d seen, but per the entad color scheme, it would have been blue, not green. The symbolism of that was clear enough to her: yes, but watch out. Importantly, it was hard subtlety to fake.

Amaryllis headed inside. The ship, if you could call it that, was the size of a small house, and where the exterior was bean-like, the interior wasn’t too dissimilar from a drawing room. Given the impact it had apparently made upon landing, she’d thought that the insides would be like that of a tank, with bulky seats and harnesses to keep people from being crushed, but the chairs were armchairs, and it didn’t even seem like anything was pinned down.

“Check for traps,” said Amaryllis when Grak stepped up inside.

“This seems like a monumentally bad idea,” said Fenn as she stepped up in.

Outside, Amaryllis could hear shouting from campus security.

The term campus security didn’t inspire fear on Earth. On Aerb? The athenaeums were all enormous, and while each was its own institution with its own culture, internal politics, and relationships with the local nations, security was something they all took seriously, and rarely off-loaded that responsibility to their parent polity, if they had one. Most of the athenaeums taught at least one subject with practical applications in combat, and they were all extraordinarily wealthy, in part because of the strangleholds they held on education and cronyism on the hexal stage.

Amaryllis had done her reading on Speculation and Scrutiny. Campus security had been slow to respond, but for something suspected of being a major incident, they would come with every ounce of power they had available. The fox – name still unknown – had assumed that’s what Amaryllis and Fenn were, which said something, given how visibly armed they were. The response they were actually getting, delayed though it was, seemed to be about a dozen people, glimpsed only briefly as Amaryllis had ducked into the ship.

*Please, Juniper, let’s leave before things get any more complicated.*
“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go. Valencia, at the first sign of trouble, we’re bailing. Watch them closely.”

“Mode?” asked Valencia.

_Ah. Fast-talking or fisticuffs?_ Based on how she’d described the experience, it wasn’t so much that she had a demon or devil’s thoughts, it was that for the strong ones, their skills became so much a part of her way of thinking that it was hard to avoid. When all you had was godly combat ability, every situation seemed like it could be solved with combat. When all you had was social manipulation, it might seem like you could lie your way out of anything. Either of those approaches could be really dangerous. Unfortunately, the turnaround time on switching between the two skill sets was just long enough that it could be a problem. (The talk of them being modes had come from me, I was pretty sure.)

“Talking,” I said. Not because I was terribly eager to talk, but because I was still on edge from Masters and his illusions. I wasn’t going to fully trust Valencia, not with illusion magic in the air and Soul Sight not as sure a thing as I would have liked, but if she were really there and really communicating with me, then her insights might allow me to avoid tripping over a landmine.

Valencia just gave a curt nod. She holstered one of her pistols, clipping it in place with one hand, but kept the other.

“Move?” asked Pallida. “Now?”

“We should take Masters,” said Valencia. “Joon?”

“Do we need him?” I asked. “Because it’s probably going to look like we’re kidnapping him, and if these people have answers, then --”

“I’m worried that if we leave him here, he might die,” said Valencia. “We don’t need to take him with us, but he’s going to need medical attention, which means getting him somewhere that he’ll be found quickly once we’re gone. Unless you want me to wake him up?”

I frowned at that. “How did he capture you?” I asked.

“Really not the time for this,” said Pallida. “Campus security is apparently here. Your friends have agreed to come with.”

“My friends?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied Pallida. “Four of them? They’re in the ship, waiting for you.”

I turned to Valencia and raised an eyebrow. “That’s apparently the truth, as far as she knows,” said Valencia. She must have seen my expression, because she continued on. “Authentication, two pass, two fail, random order as confirmation.”

I nodded, slowly. “Go ahead.”

She gave me four names. Two were Harry Potter characters, and the other two were (so far as I knew) made up.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh of relief. I wasn’t that worried about Masters anymore, given that I was as
sure as I could be that he really had been knocked out, but there was no guarantee that he was the only illusion mage.

“Yes, now can we go, pretty please?” asked Pallida. “Word is that we’re dangerously close to an altercation with campus security. Our options as far as non-violent resistance go are limited.”

I went over and lifted Masters up, then put him over my shoulder. It was far easier than it had any right to be, especially since he was dead weight, but I’d put on a lot of (debatably unearned) muscle in the course of my level ups, and had him secured with relatively little effort. I positioned him so that I would be able to draw my sword at a moment’s notice, not that I thought I would have that much warning if things started to go south.

We moved down through the building, taking the central stairs, while Pallida talked.

“There’s Gemma Tails, she’s a fox Animalia, blade-bound, and a pretty weak velocity mage. She took a leave from Might and Motion, where she’s still enrolled, about a month ago. Heshnel Elec is a dark elf, flower mage and former soul mage, though he got stripped of that skill after the Second Empire fell, nothing to worry about there. O’kald is a bellad, our brute. And then Gur Dehla is lenssi, our warder. There are others back at base, which is where we’re going, but those are all the people that are on my side, which means your side.” She spoke rapidly as we went down the stairs, not paying much attention to me.

I was grateful that she didn’t see me tense at the mention of a team warder. Valencia showed no reaction whatsoever, which wasn’t at all surprising.

The Valencia Problem was one that we were going to have to deal with sooner than later. The Red Armor of Arramor (which sounded like a made up name every time I said it in my head, like someone had just fumbled through saying ‘armor’) would block her from warder’s sight, but she couldn’t stay in it forever, and there were other senses that could be problematic beyond just the one warders got. I was pretty sure that Soul Sight wasn’t just a game mechanical thing, it was a real thing that advanced soul mages had, in the same way that the Blade Bound virtues correlated to something that people who trained could actually achieve. I was really hoping not to ever run into another soul mage, but not at all counting on it. Beyond those two, there were entads that simply wouldn’t work, magics that would fail, and all sorts of esoterica that could reveal her. Masters had probably been able to sense our senses from the moment he’d met us, and I didn’t doubt that he’d sensed Valencia’s lack of senses.

I saw Valencia reach down to the pouch that she wore on her hip and slip her hand inside. I could tell what she was thinking, mostly because I had been the one that had come up with the plan in the first place. We’d done some testing on her Soul Capture ability, mostly using the ‘blank’ souls, enough to confirm that Valencia could use one for about fifteen minutes of ‘having a soul’ if she pushed it hard. That was Plan Mountain Dew. Unfortunately, Valencia was a vessel who could only fit one thing in her at a time (phrasing), which meant that if she was going to pretend to be human, it was going to be at the expense of all her other abilities. Also, apparently it was bad manners to drink a soul, because that would condemn it to the hells.

Valencia looked back at me, face unreadable given the armor, but I knew that it was a questioning look. I shook my head fractionally, hoping that I wasn’t making a mistake. The armor would hide her, and I had a feeling we were going to want all the advantage we could get. The lenssi and bellad were going to be problems for Val, I was pretty sure, given that one was just a floating skull in human-shaped fluid, and the other was a rock creature without much in the way of facial expression. We’d discussed all the ways that her social-fu could be thwarted, in whole or in part, and the more extreme mortal species were definitely on the list of possible counters. All the mortal species had
souls, and all ended up in the hells (renacim aside), but some were niche, and not every devil had full knowledge on the particulars of all the species.

(That we’d run into two of the more problematic mortal species and someone who had studied with the Elon Gar was either an example of the Dungeon Master being predictable, or the Dungeon Master having a joke at our expense.)

We stepped down the first set of stairs and found ourselves in the lobby again. The receptionist was gone, and three people were standing around, the dark elf, lenssi, and bellad. They were watching me, and I noted how close their hands were to their weapons.

“Let’s go,” said Pallida. “Introductions later.”

“Gemma is talking to campus security,” said the dark elf, Heshnel. It occurred to me that if I were Pallida, I might have lied about the capabilities of my teammates, but maybe that was because I had a hard time trusting new people, especially when they were armed. “We should give her a chance to resolve things.”

“And what the hell is she going to say to them that’s going to convince them to let us leave without arresting us?” asked Pallida.

“She seemed to have a plan,” said Heshnel with a shrug. He was wearing a cape that came down over one side, giving him an asymmetric look. He wasn’t wearing armor, but his jacket seemed specially designed to hold a fair number of flower buds, which were arranged like an army general might pin his medals. As he spoke, I realized what seemed off about him: his teeth weren’t the horrifying fangs of the other elves I’d seen. They looked like human teeth, if a little too white, just like Fenn’s. I wasn’t sure if he was half-elf though; I thought his features were too pronounced for that. His skin was purple-black and his hair was white, classic drow, though on Aerb the historical drow lived at the bottoms of the oceans, in the Gelid Depths, rather than in caves. “We’ll wait until the fighting starts and make our escape then, unless she finds some way of convincing them that this was all a misunderstanding.”

“There were other ways we could have come,” said the bellad, O’kald. His voice was like a bucket of rocks being poured out. This was my first time seeing a bellad, but he was more or less what I’d expected. No nose, and just little slits for eyes and a mouth, like someone had put as little effort as possible into a rock carving of someone’s face. They weren’t a common fixture of the empire, in part because they weighed too much.

The lenssi made a quick gesture through the air, warping its vague hand-shapes into tendrils in the process.

“Yes, and much slower,” replied Heshnel. “Do you think that Masters was going to share what information he had? It was inevitable that we would butt heads.”

The lenssi made another series of gestures, going on for longer.

“I don’t intend to find out until we’re far away from this place,” said Heshnel. My eyes kept being drawn to his teeth. Dark elves were close to being monochrome, but his gums and tongue were more purple than black. I didn’t trust him. Drow were one of the classically evil races, fodder for many adventures, and while the dark elves on Aerb didn’t fit that mold, I was immediately suspicious. He turned away from the others and cracked the door, looking out.

“How is Masters doing?” asked Pallida.
I gently laid him down on the floor, making sure to keep his head and neck supported. I glanced up at Valencia for a moment before realizing that she'd have given up her ability to see whether or not he was okay by switching to talking mode. I reached down and lifted up one of Masters’ eyelids, checking pupil dilation, then felt for a pulse. I didn’t really know how he was doing, just that getting knocked out wasn’t too great for you, even if it was done by a competent professional.

“Fine,” I lied.

“I’m worried about what’s going to happen when he wakes up,” said Valencia. “I don’t have a good estimate. I hope he wakes up. I did hit him pretty hard.”

“Do we have a way of confirming that any of this is real?” asked Pallida.

“No,” O’kald rumbled.

“We don’t have a way of confirming that he’s right about this being an exclusion zone,” said Heshnel, turning back toward the group. “It’s worrying.”

He had a point. I knew that it was an exclusion zone because someone had used illusion magic on me, but for him, hearing it second hand … yeah, he had to be paranoid about whether or not to be paranoid.

“Is Gemma talking her way out of the problem?” asked Pallida.

“It doesn’t appear so,” said Heshnel. He reached down for one of the flower buds pinned to his chest. “I can arrange a distraction.”

“We should talk about where we’re going,” said O’kald. I took stock of his clothing, which was a far cry from the armor I might have expected. So far as I knew, the bellad didn’t need to wear clothing, since they were made of rock, but O’kald had apparently put time and effort into dressing himself. He had on a coat with tails, and breeches that were partly covered up by thick, heavy boots. I also took stock of his weapons, which hung at his hip, a hand axe and a hammer, both of them different enough in style that I assumed one or both were entads.

“I told him we were going back to base,” said Pallida. “So, we’re going back to base.”

“Plan B,” said O’kald, crossing his arms.

“No,” said Pallida. “He’s just a kid.”

“That’s the point,” said O’kald.

“I’m inclined to agree with our rocky companion,” said Heshnel. His hand was still positioned so that his fingers were close to the buds. “Perhaps if Uther hadn’t prepared this place as well as he did, I might think it was something innocuous.”

“I don’t suppose that I get a say in this?” I asked. “What’s Plan B?”

“We don’t need to go with Plan B,” said Valencia. “We’re cooperating with you. Plan A is equitable exchange of information with the others, right? That’s exactly what we’d like.”

“Who are you?” asked Heshnel. “Sade said there was an entad of some sort. Mind reading?”

“No,” said Valencia. “Nothing so invasive.” She turned to me. “Plan B is suicidal, indiscriminate violence against us. Maybe not right away, but with the option for it if we give the wrong
“How the hells do you know that?” asked Pallida, her voice sharp. She looked to the others. “Look, we can’t do Plan B if he knows, he’ll never come with us.”

The lenssi made a series of quick swipes through the air.

“It says that they can kill us at base if they have to,” said Valencia.

Everyone froze at that.

“Alright,” I said. “I don’t think we’re going anywhere with you.”

The dark elf plucked a flower bud from its place on his jacket. “We’ll go with Plan A,” he said slowly. “We’ll return to base and discuss things there.”

“You think that I’m the next Uther Penndraig?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Heshnel.

“That’s what they think,” said Pallida, who had taken a few steps back. She was holding her spear in both hands, no longer just using it as a walking stick.

“Do you have some kind of distance communication?” I asked. “We could use that instead, if all you want to do is talk.”

“You think that I’m the next Uther Penndraig?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Heshnel.

“That’s what they think,” said Valencia.

“It’s not what I think,” said Pallida, who had taken a few steps back. She was holding her spear in both hands, no longer just using it as a walking stick.

“Do you have some kind of distance communication?” I asked. “We could use that instead, if all you want to do is talk.”

“Your friends are already on board the Egress. They agreed to go,” said Pallida. “Look, we’re not going with Plan B, we’re going with Plan A, and before we get to talking, you can have your warder set up whatever defenses you’d like. We’ll even show you how to use the Egress and you can sit in it while we talk so you can make a getaway in a hurry.”

“She doesn’t speak for the group,” said Valencia.

“Can you stop trying to undermine every single thing we say?” asked Pallida.

“Start telling the full truth and I won’t have to,” said Valencia.

Heshnel had the door propped open with one foot, and from outside, we heard a yell, followed by the distinctive sound of metal on metal. I really, really hoped that my companions weren’t in a battle with campus security.

“Diplomacy has failed,” said Heshnel, with a glance outside.

The lenssi swished its tentacles through the air.

“No, not yet,” said Heshnel. He turned to me. “We’re leaving in the Egress. If you don’t come with us, you’ll be left facing campus security and trying to explain to them what you were doing with the ship that came down, who we were, and what happened to Masters, who will be waking up shortly, unless you killed him.”

I hesitated. “Val?” I asked.

“He’ll live,” she replied. “Unless you have information I don’t, I think we should go with them. If they try Plan B, I’ll know, and be ready to warn you. If Grak and the others are really in that ship,
then we can bargain for time to set up defenses before we say anything.”

“Okay,” I said, sucking in a breath. “Then we’ll go with you.”

“Mode shift,” Valencia said, voice so low I was hopeful that I was the only one who heard her. She’d have to shift back once we were aboard their ship, or whatever it was, but I was in agreement that combat prowess might be a useful thing to have in the next handful of minutes.

“We’re going to leave Masters,” said Valencia. “Assuming he can get some medical attention, he’ll be fine. He’ll wake up on his own.” There was something about how she said that which made it sound more like hope than certainty.

I nodded at that, then steeled myself to go. I hesitated for just a moment, then ducked behind the reception desk and grabbed the clipboard there, taking the piece of paper that still had our names on it. That wasn’t going to erase our presence here, not by a long shot, but it would give Masters some cover to lie for us, if he wanted to. I had no idea where the receptionist was, but hoped that he was okay.

We left out the front door, with O’kald in the lead. Pallida had said that he was their brute, which meant that they had a soul link with him. That was one of the few uses of soul magic that was still authorized, if you had the right permits. The actual process was a little tricky, since it required manipulating two souls at once, but it was the sort of tricky that didn’t need a lot of deep understanding. The binding effect was short-range and non-permanent, useful mostly for if you wanted someone to take the brunt of every single attack made against your group, which we really didn’t.

I saw the fox Animalia, Gemma, in heated combat with campus security, who she was running rings around. I was mildly surprised to see that she had two daggers, and wondered which one of them was bound, but it didn’t seem to matter, since she danced her way between sword and hammer strikes with grace and precision, parrying attacks and slipping past defenses. She wasn’t hurting anyone, and I had enough of an eye for combat that I could see most of the times she could have easily jammed one of those daggers in the gap in someone’s plate.

Campus security had a lot of people though, and preparation on their side. With a shout from by the vans, they began pulling back. One of the vans was moving, backing up so the back of it was facing toward the ship they’d come in, which --

Well, the ship was Cloud Gate, the sculpture that sits in Chicago, a big metal bean that reflected the campus around us. I had visited the sculpture with my parents and thought that it was utterly magical, like someone had taken a bit of D&D and transplanted it into the real world. It was how I had always envisioned the ship that the party had used in our world-hopping campaign, but my description must not have been obvious, since Tiff had made a drawing of it that looked completely different. In my head though, I’d always described the ship like it was the one I saw in front of me.

Gunfire erupted from the van. The back was open, and they were firing a fucking chaingun at the fox Animalia. She spun her daggers around, deflecting about half of the bullets in a very impressive display. That left the other half to hit her, hits that showed up on O’kald, barely seeming to affect him. I didn’t waste any more time looking, and raced across the open ground to where the bean was sitting, its skin split along the side. Grak was standing at the entrance, watching me, waving me forward.

Very suddenly, Masters was standing in front of me.

I kept running, until I’d run through him, but the world began to warp and shift around me, and after
a few seconds, I had to stop for fear that I would run into something, or that I had ended up running
the wrong way.

Master was standing in front of me again.

“I don’t have any illusions about keeping you here forever,” said Masters. He seemed haggard, with
sunken eyes. I still didn’t have the full details on what had happened between him and Val, but she
had said that she’d seen him speaking. Did he need to project himself? Or was it just easier that way?

“Yeah,” I said. “But you’re not going to let me go without a fight.”

“If this were a fight, you would be dead,” said Masters. “I never wanted to hurt you, I only wanted to
know. The people you’re going with are part of the group that thinks it would be better if you were
dead.”

I didn’t respond. The noise of the chain gun had cut out, but I could still see it firing. I assumed that
Masters had hijacked my sense of sound so that he could get the last word in. The problem was, I
wasn’t actually sure where I was in relation to everything, not when Masters could spin the world
around me. “Val, help!” I shouted. “Illusion!”

She stopped and ran back for me, holstering her pistols, as the land around me twisted and warped.

“You’re in danger if you leave,” said Masters. “I can fix everything here, if you stay. We can talk at
a distance, with you outside the exclusion zone, as you wanted. Please.”

Again, I didn’t respond. The newcomers weren’t any more trustworthy than Masters, and maybe less
so, but at least they hadn’t tried to fuck me yet.

“Uther left behind a cache, for you, or whoever else might have come instead of you. Some of it is
quite powerful, the kind of equipment you’ll need if you mean to take up his mantle.” Masters was
watching me, or at least appearing to watch me. He looked run down, which wasn’t surprising given
that he’d been knocked out. “Please,” he said.

I was tempted, not just by the power on offer, but by the idea that I would get to see more of what
Arthur might have planned for me, beyond just the message in the mirror. If he’d thought that I might
show up, or maybe one of the others, or just someone from Earth, then he’d have made more
preparations than just a simple, melancholy message, right? Well, I already knew that was the case,
since I’d seen the room with the entads, and I was pretty sure that they were actually real, since
everything I’d seen and heard had been consistent with Masters being incapacitated. With Valencia
on my side, and strategies for mitigating what he could do … well, as I said, it was tempting.

(There was something else, buried under the surface, and mostly unexamined. Masters wanted
answers, but he was following Uther’s will. From what I’d heard, this new group wasn’t too keen on
Uther. They would give me different stories about Uther, I was sure, and I would prefer to hear
Masters’ version.)

But on the other hand, Masters was actively restraining me to get the last word in, and whatever he
was offering, it wasn’t enough. I didn’t trust many people outside the party, but if I was going to be
with someone I didn’t trust, then it was going to be the group without illusion magic making me
question every single thing I saw or heard.

“I still have your non-anima,” said Masters. As he said it, Valencia popped like a bubble,
disappearing from view. Whatever methods he was using to mask his emotions, they weren’t holding
up. He sounded utterly distraught and defeated, and I didn’t believe my own eyes for even a second.
That lack of faith was rewarded a few moments later, as the world abruptly changed its shape around me.

I was being dragged across the ground by Valencia, who was holding a harness Ropey had fashioned. We were only a few yards from the ship, with Fenn waiting anxiously a few feet away. As soon as she saw that she had my attention, she sprang forward, heedless of a shout from Amaryllis, and lifted me up from the ground, pulling me back toward the ship. I couldn’t see much further than five yards away from me, as the air was dense with pink petals. As soon as Valencia was in, the thin metal skin of the ship closed behind her, and Heshnel began manipulating a silvered expanse of the wall.

“We should wait,” said Amaryllis. “We need to confirm that everyone is here.”

“You have this place warded against Masters,” said Heshnel.

“We think we do,” said Amaryllis. “How much punishment can this ship take?”

“More than a chaingun,” said the fox, Gemma.

“It’s too late,” said Heshnel, stepping back. “We’re already on our way.”

I took a quick inventory, first of our people, then of theirs. We had six to their five, but if we were moving (and there was no way to know for sure that we were) --

Quest Completed: Straddling Worlds - There were five dream-skewered, five centuries ago. There were no answers about those others to be found at Speculation and Scrutiny. If you want to know more, complete The Lost King, Found.

That was reassuring, even if it left me feeling a bit hollow. I turned to face the others, swallowing once at the idea of being with this group who had shown various levels of hostility toward me. I was really hoping that we were still on Plan A, given what I had seen of their abilities. And if Plan B was that they would kill me with swift and overwhelming force, then I thought we were already probably fucked if that’s what they’d decided on, since I held no illusions that the Dungeon Master would spare my life, nor that we would win in terms of raw power.

“Introductions,” said the dark elf. “I’m Heshnel Elec, this is O’kald, Gemma, Dehla, and Sade.” O’Kald was much the worse for wear for having tanked a fair bit of chain gun fire, pitted and cracked in places and pressing pebbles against himself where ichor was coming through. Gemma was the only one of them I hadn’t met, and the mystery of which of the fox Animalia’s weapons was blade-bound was resolved when I saw her smash them together, causing them to shift and warp before forming a long blade. Dehla, the lenssi, was sitting as far from everyone else as possible, its floating skull turned away from us. As for the one he’d called Sade, that was apparently what Pallida went by. Her oil-slick armor had changed to cover her head and hands, completely encasing her, but it was dripping back down now, allowing her to speak.

“Sorry about circumstances,” she said once it was past her lips.

“We can worry about pleasantries later,” I said. I looked to my companions. “We do need to establish trust among ourselves.”

“Juniper, you fucking asshole,” said Fenn. She had her arms folded across her chest.

“What ever this is, it can wait,” I said. I looked at Amaryllis. “Keyring is presumed compromised. Personal details have the same problem, if we assume that”
“I’m not letting you off the hook,” said Fenn.

“No, I know,” I replied, trying to keep my temper in check. “But before you can yell at me for staying behind, I need to make sure that everyone is who they say they are.”

“Moving pictures,” said Amaryllis. She pulled a small gray ball from the pouch at her side, the one that Masters had used for the screening. I only needed one guess for who had taken it from the table. “Green, blue, and grey get assigned two, one, and zero. Each triplet of titles will encode one letter. Here, I’ll write them down.”

“Jesus Christ, are we really going to do this?” asked Fenn. “This is going to take forever.”

“I’m afraid I may not have the depth of knowledge necessary to pass this test,” said Solace.

“We’re here,” said Heshnel. I hadn’t felt any acceleration on leaving or deceleration on arriving.

“So soon?” asked Amaryllis.

The dark elf nodded. “The Egress is slower than some other methods of hexal travel, but not by much.” He strode toward the side of the ship and split the skin of it with the motion of his hand. The landscape beyond him was a wide field of something like wheat, with tall mountains in the distance beyond that. A handful of cobblestone houses sat in a clearing, which he strode toward with purpose.

“We’re within teleportation wards,” said Grak. “Again.”

“We still need to verify,” said Amaryllis.

“Take your time,” said Heshnel, turning back to look our way. “There’s no rush.”

“I will stay with them,” said O’Kald as he continued patching himself up.

“Me too,” said Pallida. “Gemma?”

“Sure,” she replied.

The lenssi made a few swift motions with its tendrils and walked out of the ship without waiting for a response from anyone.

I don’t think anyone really wanted to do it, but we sat down at the table and worked out a system that would work, given what we knew we knew, and keeping as much mutually known information secret as possible until it could be mixed with information that was false or not mutually known, such that we could communicate to each other without the possibility of someone being able to forge it.

“It’s not totally secure,” I said. I was specifically thinking of the possibility that Amaryllis had gone through all this with an illusion of me, and now I was going through all of this with an illusion of her, one that was ready with all the answers she’d given the illusion of me. I would have to ask questions that Masters wouldn’t have known to ask, and she would have to do the same.

“Nothing is ever completely secure,” said Grak. “Anyone who says otherwise is lying.” He got up from his chair and began tracing out a ward around us, which I guessed was a ward against sound from the way that the noise of the outside world immediately cut off. A second ward followed the first, which made the area outside the ward a bit dimmer; that would have been an annihilation ward against light, making it so that we could see out but they couldn’t see in. The last one had no visible effect, but I assumed he was redoing his ward against illusion magic.
Grak began. In theory, if he was able to communicate to us using movie titles, then we could trust him, which would mean that we could trust the wards. It was slow, painstaking work to spell out each letter three movie titles at a time, but our “hosts” were apparently willing to give that time to us, so we took it.

S-A-F-E

“Oh, okay,” said Fenn. “So we’re good?”

“No yet,” said Amaryllis. “I want one short, coherent message from everyone, ideally something personal. If there’s any doubt, we can ask questions and give responses to each other. Solace, you should have enough, given movie nights. Some small amount of repetition is allowable. False titles should be repeated at roughly the same rate as true titles.”

We all went, one by one. I found it a bit hard to follow sometimes, especially since the distinction between green and blue was between movies that had been seen and movies that we’d only heard of, which was different for every one of us. There was a little bit of guesswork involved, but we were just spelling out words, and getting one letter off wasn’t a huge detail. I also had a much better memory than when I’d first started out on Aerb.

While we were doing this, Fenn was quietly stewing. She took her turn last.

“Citizen Kane, Lawrence of Arabia, Fifty First Dates,” she said.

That was either W or Z; I didn’t know whether or not she’d seen Lawrence of Arabia, but I didn’t think so. Fifty First Dates was proposed for group movie night but ultimately rejected.

“Transformers, My Boyfriend Sucks, Snakes on a Plane,” she said.

“Your boyfriend sucks?” I asked. Obviously not a movie, which meant that was code for T.

“Yeah,” she said. “Do you really need me to tell you why?”

“Finish up, please,” said Amaryllis. She’d taken her helmet off once Solace had finished, which let me see the way her lips went thin.

“Fine,” said Fenn. “Bulls, The Thing, Scream.” Scream was another movie night movie, while I had vetoed The Thing. That meant F. “Done,” said Fenn.

“That’s not a word,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“It’s an acronym,” said Fenn. “Joon knows.”

“It’s an initialism,” I said. I could feel my cheeks growing warm. The raw hostility radiating off Fenn was raising my hackles. It was clear to me, and probably to all of us, that she was spoiling for a fight, and there wasn’t much ambiguity about who she wanted to fight with.

“Oh fuck you,” said Fenn. She turned to look at Amaryllis. “Are we good? We’re done? All wrapped up here?”

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis.

“Do you want to yell at me?” I asked Fenn. “Because you can yell at me now, if you really need to.”

“We took a fucking vote, Juniper, we weren’t declaring what we were each going to do, we took a vote on what we were going to do, as a team, and then you just stayed behind like you thought you
were a hero,” said Fenn. She practically spat the words.

I couldn’t keep myself from frowning. “As much fun as it might be to second-guess every--”

“Juniper, if you had put your foot down, I would have stayed, but you made the dumbest, most boneheaded move you could have,” said Fenn.

“I think we should calm down,” said Solace. “We haven’t heard each other’s own perspectives on what happened. Given that illusions were in play, this might be no more than a misunderstanding.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not,” I replied. “It seems like Val knocked out Masters not long after Solace opened up the connection to the tree.”

Fenn looked at Valencia. “Are you fucking kidding me?” Fenn asked. She looked back to me. “So on top of it all, I was right, the invincible Valencia handled all her problems on her own and would have been completely fine without us?”

“Look, I’ll agree I should have said something,” I replied. I could feel a flush in my cheeks. I didn’t want to be having this conversation, not with Fenn on the attack, and not in front of our friends. It felt too much like airing dirty laundry. “But there were considerations. I was the only one that had some kind of workaround for what Masters was doing.”

Fenn glared at me. “You made up that excuse after the fact.”

“Yeah,” I said. She knew me too well. “So what? Is it not valid?”

“Juniper, do you remember me telling you all the shitty things that happened to me when I didn’t listen to luck sense?” asked Fenn. “I was put in prison. I got cut in half. When I say that it’s time to get the fuck out, then we should get the fuck out.”

“I didn’t feel it as strongly,” I said. “And Masters could have faked it.”

“You said he got knocked out,” said Fenn, folding her arms across her chest.

“He could have faked it. He obviously didn’t, but -- look, I didn’t feel it like you did,” I began. I was on weak ground. It had seemed unconscionable to leave Val behind, but now it was seeming just as bad that I had left, and all I was doing was making up stories to make myself feel better, arguing positions that I was thinking up as they came to me, rather than what I’d actually felt or thought at the time.

“I didn’t feel it as strongly,” repeated Fenn. She was staring at me. “You are so fucking --” she paused, searching for the word, “-- dismissive of me.”

“Is this about the Citizen Kane thing?” I asked. I was getting frustrated with her, not just because this didn’t really seem like the time, but because it seemed like it was coming out of nowhere.

“Fucking --” started Fenn, before she thought better of it and popped two VHS cassettes out of her glove, slamming each one down on the table. “Right there, Orson Welles, Orson Welles.”

I looked between the two of them. The VHS sleeve she was pointed at said “The Transformers The Movie” on it, with cheesy ‘70s art on it. Down in the corner, with the rest of the credits, it said “and Orson Welles as Unicron”.

I looked up at Fenn. “Different movie.” I flipped the box over. “Copyright 1988.”
“That’s not even the point,” said Fenn. “The point is, I said that I had seen it, and you just thought that I was confused or being stupid, and I wasn’t, I was right. I said that I felt like we needed to get out, and you just brushed me off like it wasn’t actually important.”

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “This is going to have to be something that the two of you fix in your own time. Val, can you help?”

“Excuse me?” asked Fenn, turning on Amaryllis. “Are you serious?”

“I think I would have to lie,” said Valencia. She lifted up her faceplate and looked between me and Fenn. “I’m trying to chart a course where sticking to the truth makes things better.” She frowned a bit. “No,” she finally said. “Maybe if they didn’t know who I was. I could talk to them individually, but it would take hours of time.”

“That’s time we don’t have,” said Amaryllis. “I’m sorry, but you can continue hating each other for the time being. We need to strategize, while we still can.”

“Agreed,” said Grak.

“Fine,” said Fenn. She looked at me with a glare. “I do love you.”

“But,” I said.

“Yeah,” replied Fenn.


“They had two plans,” said Valencia. “This is Plan A. Plan B would have taken us to a different site, possibly killing us in transit, and if not, it would mean something akin to suicide for all but the renacim. They intend to talk to us and find out whether or not Juniper is the Chosen One. If he is, opinions are mixed on what should be done about it. They might attempt to kill Juniper, but it would depend on the specifics.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “Then we’ll chart a course.”

“I don’t know the course,” said Valencia. “I’m putting together what Masters said, what they’ve said, and some reading of sentiment.” She gestured out to Sade and Gemma, who were standing beyond the ward that Grak had constructed, in low conversation with each other. “Sade is practically radiating with uncertainty. My read is that she’s in over her head here, possibly, given her species, because she mellowed out too much from deaths and rebirths. Gemma was born into her role here -- that’s supplemental knowledge from below, she’s part of the Foxguard, I can give a summary of them later -- so she’s compelled by duty, but she’s uncertain whether that duty extends to whatever is going to happen here.”

“And the lenssi wants to kill me,” I said. “As does the bellad. What about the dark elf?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” said Valencia. “I know that you know that.”

“I assumed it was complicated,” I said. “But in general terms, I’m looking at these people as allies or enemies.”

“Reductive,” said Grak.

“Heshnel was an acolyte of Vervain,” Valencia continued. “I assume their association was brief, by elven standards, but I also think he probably knows that Uther was the one to kill Vervain.”
“What?” asked Amaryllis. Her voice was spiked with alarm.

“We’re a little behind, it seems,” said Solace.

“Masters mentioned it,” I said. “I’m not sure whether to believe it.”

“I don’t think he was lying, or at least he didn’t think he was,” said Valencia. “I only heard Masters’ half of the conversation, but he seemed sincere. He wasn’t doing too much to hide his emotions, aside from how badly he misses his daughter, which he was trying to cover for.”

“He spoke?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” said Valencia. “He didn’t when he removed me from the room, but after we were in his office, he began speaking. Whatever he was doing, it placed some strain on him. I think speaking out loud was easier for him.” She turned to Fenn. “To answer your question, he used some kind of amber effect on me, an entad, I think. It trapped me in place while he moved me. I-I couldn’t breathe, and I didn’t understand why no one was doing anything, and then he drew on the floor with a piece of chalk and I was trapped.” She let out a breath. “And I still don’t really understand what happened to everyone.”

We had a bit of necessary debriefing after that, as we each got filled in on what the others had been up to. The chalk that Masters had drawn around Valencia created an impenetrable barrier, but she had gotten past it by damaging the floorboards and going underneath it enough to break the magic that held her, all while not seeming to be anything but resigned to her fate. Amaryllis and the others had gone through their portal and then cautiously backtracked, though less cautiously than Amaryllis would have liked, mostly due to Fenn trying to rush back to me.

She flushed slightly as Amaryllis talked. She was still angry with me, clearly, but she’d come back to the clinic because she was worried. I softened somewhat on hearing that.

“Okay,” I said, once the mutual sharing of information was finished. “What’s our game plan?”

“I’d like to listen to what they have to say,” said Solace.

“Me too,” said Amaryllis. “If the world is going to end in five years … it seems likely that we’re going to have to be the ones to do something about it, the way things have been going.”

“We’ll probably all be dead before then,” said Fenn.

“True,” said Grak.

“Do we have a quest?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “But we haven’t been given the pitch yet. Straddling Worlds completed, as did The Name of the Beast.”

“Meaning you’re one step closer to a level up?” asked Fenn.

“Probably,” I said. “I don’t exactly get experience points.”

“We’re going to have to be on watch for it,” said Amaryllis. “So long as Fenn or I are close, we can change you back.”

“Sure,” I said. My stomach churned at that. The way the level ups affected me was invasive, but it still felt wrong to have one of them monkeying around in my soul. I stopped short of saying that I
would rather Amaryllis do it. Whatever problems Fenn had with me at the moment, I didn’t want them to bleed into forcible soul surgery. I also didn’t want to say that out loud, now that her discontent had (momentarily) passed. I wasn’t worried that she would do something we’d both regret … but it was my soul, and it was best not to take chances.

“We need to talk about the fourteen points,” said Amaryllis. “What we want them to know, or not know, the things we can hide, and the things we can’t. Juniper, did you reveal anything to them?”

“Not that I can think of,” I said. “Valencia is going to be a problem for us, given that they have a warder who apparently has warder’s sight.”

“Sorry,” said Valencia.

“It’s just … tough to explain to people,” I said.

“I know,” said Valencia. “I’m sorry.”

“We can cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Amaryllis. “I acquired an infernoscope and packed it into the glove, but that requires some preamble. I’d almost say that we should deal with that first, but …”

“But it’s asking them for a lot of trust,” I said. “And that’s before we get to any of the stuff that they actually want to talk about, or that we actually want to say.”

“I’m fine in the armor,” said Valencia.

“Okay,” I said. I breathed out a sigh. “I’m worried about what they’re going to do if they think that I’m an agent of Uther’s, or his reincarnation, or the Chosen One.”

“You think that the Dungeon Master would let the world fall, because that’s what you would do,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “Kindred spirits, he said. I wouldn’t do it to real people, obviously, but for worlds that I’d built … I did. It happened three or four times.”

From the corner of my eye I saw movement, and I turned to see Heshnel stepping back into the ship. He gave the wards an appraising look, then frowned slightly and went to join Gemma and Pallida, who were still in murmured conversation.

“They’ll know that Uther was dream-skewered,” said Amaryllis. “They’ll assume that you are too. Maybe we can let those particular secrets go. It’s possible that outright telling them you are the Chosen One is the way to go.”

“Unless that gets them all ready to commit a murder,” said Fenn.

“Yeah,” I said, looking at Heshnel. “Let’s hope that it doesn’t come to that.”
There were sometimes little things about Aerb that bothered me, usually because there wasn’t any obvious reason why something should be the case. Early on, I had just rolled with most of it, more concerned with survival than asking the little questions that had popped into my head, or more focused on the big existential questions of where I was and what it meant. But as time had passed, and I’d grown more comfortable with Aerb, I’d eventually come around to paying attention to those little things and trying to make some sense of them.

The cobblestone houses in Comfort had baffled me. Cobblestone houses themselves made a lot of sense, so long as the rounded stones were available, and mortar was cheap enough that it could be used in quantity without much in the way of costs. Thatched roofs were somewhat similar, if you lived in an area where you needed something to cover your house and had a bunch of reeds or straw laying about. The problem was, those cobblestone houses with thatched roofs were sitting alongside pretty standard drywall and shingled roofs, and that raised some serious questions about the world. I had come up with a few possible explanations:

- Technological and economic advances were in a transitional state, such that all the cobblestone buildings were a legacy and drywall with two-by-fours were what people used for new constructions.
- Cobblestone buildings were a symbol of some kind, a social, cultural, or political statement about something. I had no idea what, but harkening back to the old days was a good guess, especially if it was an outmoded method of construction.
- Cobblestones and thatch were local, and subject to local market forces, which had eventually reached equilibrium with the stuff that was bulk-teleported in from elsewhere. That might make sense if the cobblestone houses were made of a byproduct that no one would (or could, or economically could) intentionally make more of, meaning that the business of cobblestone house building couldn’t actually expand without getting a lot more expensive.

I eventually found the answer in the book of spells we’d taken from the tattoo parlor in Barren Jewel. As it turned out, there was a tattoo you could make with the right magical inks that would produce a cobblestone house for you, one complete with a thatched roof. Unfortunately, the cobblestone houses that it produced weren’t terribly good in the long term, and after five years or so, they would begin to break down, with the mortar crumbling, the thatch rotting, and the wooden beams shifting in place. None of these problems were magical in nature, they were simply due to the poor initial construction of the house the tattoo produced. All those problems could be corrected for, but if you were going to go through all that expense and labor, on top of the expense of the tattoo, it was better to have just built a house the normal way, with drywall and two-by-fours. Economically, it was sort of like the difference between renting and buying, a question of whether you wanted to make an investment that would take some time to pay off, or cheaper living in the short term.

And so, when we got to the region I would later learn was called the Amber Lands, I immediately noted that all the structures were made of that exact same type of cobblestone with that exact same thatched roof. This base camp, then, was a temporary place, most likely purpose-built in the last handful of years. There weren’t any roads that I could see leading out of this place, which meant that the big ship must have been one of only a few ways to get there. All that was pretty suggestive. Pallida had said that Gemma took her leave from Might and Motion a month ago, which was also suggestive. Combined with what Masters had said about things heating up again, it all painted a fairly grim picture. These people were responding to something recent, something that they’d needed or wanted a base of operations for that was far away from everything else.
The only structure that wasn’t made of cobblestone and thatch was a small fort, which had been hidden from our view inside the ship. The fort’s design was about as basic as it could possibly be, a cube shape with stone walls of the sort that I’d come to associate with steel mage designs. There were small crenellations at the top, and windows with arrow slits, but there weren’t many actual features to it. Despite that, I thought I recognized it from one of our campaigns. It was of the ‘neat practical effects with no combat applications’ school of magical bases. I’d been fond of those as gold sinks, as a DM, because players could funnel their money into something like that without unbalancing the game much.

“The building is magical,” said Grak as he stared at it.

“You may inspect it as much as you wish,” said Heshnel. “Our meeting will be conducted in there, when you’re ready. I’ve instructed Gur Dehla to remove all of the most onerous wards, leaving only those you wouldn’t likely find any objection to. There are wards against a wide variety of entads, none of which you’re likely to have on your person. If any more wards need to be removed, let us know.”

That was a trap, and not one that I thought any of us were likely to fall for. Explicitly asking for wards to be lowered would indicate something of our abilities, which meant that we would either have to argue for a change of location, argue for all the entad wards to be dropped, or show our hand.

“I will need some time,” said Grak. “A half hour.”

“As you will,” said Heshnel. “We should all refrain from saying anything sensitive until we’re inside the fort. There are a few methods of surveillance only protected against within the wards, and aside from that, two less mobile members.”

“Are there things you can say in the meantime?” asked Amaryllis. “Background you can give? Things that someone watching would already know?”

Heshnel’s eyes flicked over to me. “Which of you is the group leader?”

“We’re a democracy,” said Fenn. I cringed at the bitterness in her voice.

“A democracy of how many?” asked Heshnel. I wasn’t sure whether he hadn’t caught her tone (which seemed unimaginable to me), or whether he was just brushing by it.

“Eight,” I said. “Two of our members had to stay home.”

“Which is where?” asked Heshnel.

All his people had gathered around for this chat while Grak took a look at the wards and the magic of the fort. It appeared that we were going to have an impromptu meeting before the meeting, one where we could establish a baseline with each other, which wasn’t a horrible idea now that we weren’t under time pressure.

“I suppose in a formal sense, we’re the Council of Arches, part of the Republic of Miunun,” said Amaryllis.

“The new place?” asked Gemma. “With the tuung?”

“I hadn’t heard of it,” said Heshnel, casting her a glance. “The tuung?”

“They only have a handful,” said Gemma. “But one of them is female, and in a decade or two,
they’ll have more. Not really a nation though, unless they’re an upstart one.”

“And where is it located?” asked Heshnel.

“On the Isle of Poran,” Amaryllis answered, taking back the reins of conversation. “It’s an insignificantly small island on the Caltric Sea, not far from the lands of the Ha-lunde.”

“Your accent marks you as being from Anglecynn,” said Heshnel with a frown.

“Originally,” nodded Amaryllis.

“Can I see your face?” asked Heshnel. “Speaking through a full helm is no way to have a conversation.”

Amaryllis was in a bit of a tough spot. Obviously she wanted to keep the armor on in order to protect herself from a sudden attack, but she also wanted to keep it on because if she removed it, then Valencia would have less cover for keeping herself hidden from view.

“He thinks that he knows you,” said Valencia.

“Her voice is familiar,” said Heshnel with a slight nod.

Amaryllis slowly removed her helmet and held it to one side. Her hair was tied up in a tight, flat, bun, and she was sweating slightly from hours in full plate. For all that, she still looked pretty, which I found a bit annoying.

“Dahlia?” asked Pallida. Her eyes were wide.

The lenssi slashed its tendrils through the air a few times.

“No,” replied Heshnel. “She was never so severe. This girl is merely the spitting image.”

“Dahlia?” asked Amaryllis. She was looking between them. “Uther’s daughter?”

“There’s a resemblance,” said Heshnel with a nod. “Unless you are her?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She was frowning. “I’m missing something.”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh, Dahlia was apparently never missing, she just became Uther’s squire in secret.”

Amaryllis stared at me. “And … when did you learn this?”

“It was something Masters said,” I replied. “Sorry, I forgot you weren’t able to hear.”

“Dahlia lived?” asked Amaryllis. “She was Helio?”

“And later the Red Mask,” I said.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” said Amaryllis.

“He’s wrong, actually,” said Pallida. “She did actually go missing, it was just for the space of about a month. And then when she showed up as Helio, that deception lasted for a few weeks before Uther wised up.” She was watching Amaryllis.

“But Helio —” Amaryllis began. “No, it’s not important.” She had the look of someone who desperately wanted answers to questions but wasn’t willing to waste the time. “I’m not her.”
“There’s some relation though?” asked Heshnel.

“I’m Amaryllis Penndraig,” said Amaryllis. “The most direct living descendant of Uther Penndraig.” She stood as tall as she could, with her most regal bearing. The only reason it wasn’t more impressive was that she had good posture to start with, and drawing herself up to her full height didn’t change much.

“I thought you were dead?” asked Pallida.

“Clearly not,” said Heshnel with a frown. “We’ll have more questions, it seems.”

“We have questions too,” said Fenn. “Like, to start with, what you plan to do with Juniper.”

“That will have to wait until we’re inside,” said Heshnel. “There are things we cannot safely discuss outside the walls of our meeting room.” He looked to Grak, who was still pacing around the place with his wand out. “How much longer?”

“Not much,” said Grak with a grunt.

“I have questions you might be able to answer,” I said. “How did you know that Masters had found me?”

“I paid off his receptionist,” said Pallida with a shrug. “He sent us a message using an entad I’d given him.”

“That’s surprisingly unsophisticated,” I replied.

“Yes, well, all the sophisticated things I’d tried over the years turned out to be failures,” said Pallida. “I had a familiar watching the place for a few weeks once, but Masters found and killed it. I had a homunculus that was doing the same, but Masters found and killed it two days after I’d placed it. So yes, I was unsophisticated, I cornered the guy at a bar and offered him money to send me a message if anything suspicious happened. I thought it was more likely that Raven would show up than someone from Uther’s list, but here you are.”

“You said that you hadn’t seen him in decades,” I said.

“Technically true,” replied Pallida. “We weren’t sure whose side he would be on, if --”

“We’ll speak more inside,” said Heshnel.

“If Uther returned,” finished Pallida. She turned on Heshnel. “You know that I have seniority here, right? You’re not the boss of me. If anyone is watching us, they already know that’s one of the reasons we’re here, they’d have to be stupid not to.”

“Prudence,” replied Heshnel. “Perhaps you would die less often if you exercised it.”

“You can’t live if you’re not willing to die,” said Pallida. “It’s a better philosophy if you keep getting reborn though, I’ll grant you that.”

“Who is the other one in armor?” asked O’kald. He had been mostly silent over the course of the conversation.

I saw Amaryllis clench her jaw.

“I’ll be staying armored,” replied Valencia.
O’kald grumbled at that, with a sound of rocks rubbing together.

“I’m less curious what she looks like and more curious about her abilities,” said Pallida. “She supposedly has an entad that’s letting her make some pretty substantial leaps of logic. If that’s what you’re bringing to the meeting room, we’re going to have a problem.”

“We have a problem anyway,” said Grak. He’d stepped back from the fort and sheathed his wand. “There are wards that will be problematic.”

Gur Delha moved its tendrils.


“Can I stop for a moment to ask how it is you know the lenssi gestural language?” asked Pallida.

“No,” said Valencia.

“The problem with the wards concerns point number nine,” said Grak. Valencia. “I’m not sure how we want to handle that.”

“Vote,” said Fenn. There was still a hard edge to her voice.

“We could bring out the infernoscope,” said Amaryllis.

“Infernoscope?” asked Pallida. “Any particular reason that you’d need one of those?”

“There’s a wrinkle,” said Valencia. “A piece of information that it would probably be better for you to know now, rather than having it be exposed later.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“No,” replied Valencia. “But I’ve been watching them, and I think this is probably the best path.”

“Okay,” said Fenn. “But if we have to fight, then we have to fight.”

“I don’t think anyone wants to fight, whatever you have to show us,” said Pallida.

“And the surveillance?” asked Amaryllis. “Are we about to reveal something that we’d want some unknown persons to be ignorant of?”

“Possibly,” said Valencia. She shifted slightly. “We’re already exposed on that front though. The surveillance is more hypothetical than actual. Depending on the exact mechanisms of the surveillance, and the identities of the surveilling, it’s probably best to clear up any confusion about me with them as well.”

(This was something we’d discussed in private. We wouldn’t always know when someone was watching us, and we wouldn’t always know when Valencia had been made. Doris Finch was still out there, and still in control of some kind of probability sensing entad or magic. We didn’t know what would happen if she tried to target Valencia, but there was a good chance that she would know something was up, even if she maybe wouldn’t know what. If the good guys were spying on us, they might see that Valencia didn’t show up on whatever instruments they were using and get the wrong idea. Having Valencia reveal herself, so long as it was accompanied by a demonstration, might actually have been the best course of action with regards to the people spying. Of course, the infernals were on the shortlist of people who might be spying, and having them know about Valencia wouldn’t be good … but if they were spying, they were likely to make the connection even without a
Fenn held out her glove, and popped the infernoscope into existence.

It sat nearly five feet across, with the glass surface being roughly the height of a table. Five thick, oaken legs held it up, and the outer edge was made of the same polished wood, with polished copper sliders that controlled the mechanisms beneath the glass. It was a class of machine that had been invented during Uther’s time, and not changed all that much since then. It required no external power to use, little in the way of expertise, and wasn’t all that expensive to manufacture. Peering down into the hells was easy, it was just a question of whether people were compelled to do so.

Valencia moved forward and moved a mechanism at the bottom of the table, which caused the glass to light up with a scene from another world. We were looking at a funny angle, one which showed piss-yellow skies and blood-red clouds, and something puke-green that covered the rolling hills, more like moss than grass. Valencia moved the view around, so that it was more level and pointed in the right direction to see the trees.

Except … they weren’t trees, they were a parody of trees, recognizably wood, but with people stuck in them and splayed in crucifixion. Their skin was peeled back, exposing muscle, and blood endlessly dripped down to feed the roots of the trees. Small fruits grew near the fingers, pustulant and crimson. There wasn’t any sound, but from the people's mouths, I thought they were probably moaning rather than screaming, a low, dull, continuous agony rather than something sharp and hot.

“Just a moment, I need to find one,” said Valencia as she moved the controls. The picture lost focus for a moment as she rapidly panned around and zoomed in. The heart of the machine was a crystal that tuned light from another plane, and everything else was a method of either manipulating how and where the plane was tuned.

“Why are we seeing this?” asked Pallida. She looked a little bit sick.

“A demonstration,” said Valencia. “Less of a happy one than I would like. There.”

The view had changed to the interior of a building, and was clarifying by the moment as Valencia adjusted the mechanisms that were making the view possible. From what I’d seen of the outside, this was something akin to a farmhouse. The interior view we were given was that of a dining room, similar to what might have been seen on Earth, save for the color of the wood used in the walls, the taxidermied faces on the wall, and the table, which was made of bone and leather. An infernal sat at one end of the table, with twisted red horns and cracked black skin. There was a human with him, moving like a broken man, sweat slicking back thin hair. He was scarred and scabbed, bruised and beaten, but still mobile. As we watched, the demon was served a meal, most of which was sliced fruit of the same kind we’d seen growing on the trees. Mixed with that were curled bits of something rubbery, and smaller pieces of what I had little doubt was raw meat.

The infernal said something, and the man staggered slightly. He pulled a knife from his pocket though, moving without hesitation. As he did, I realized that he was missing two fingers. I barely had time to realize what he was going to do before he brought the knife down on his finger, cutting at the joint, until he was all the way through. He placed the bloody finger on the plate, then moved to the other end of the table and collapsed in his own chair. The infernal said something again, and the man leaned forward to look at his own plate, which was covered in hair, eyeballs, and what must have been fecal matter.

“Watch,” said Valencia.

The infernal shifted slightly in his seat, then fell to the side with faint smoke trailing from where his
yellowed eyes had been. The human stopped in place with a handful of ‘food’ from his plate halfway to his mouth.

“What was that?” asked Heshnel, narrowing his eyes at the infernoscope.

“That was the last moment of the thirty millennia existence of Gelgroroth Drozgeg, Eater of Whimpers, Chohan of Absqueltion. He was a minor devil of the 321st hell,” said Valencia.

The man set down his food with a shaking hand and went over to the devil, moving slowly and cautiously. He looked the devil over, checking him without touching, pushing just enough to check that there was no reaction. The man stood back up, staring down at the devil for a moment, then returned to his chair and began eating the slop he’d been given, gagging and crying the whole while.

Valencia adjusted the mechanism and the view disappeared.

“What happened to that devil?” asked Heshnel with a soft voice.

“I ate him,” replied Valencia.

“What about the human?” asked Gemma. “There at the end, I don’t understand why he returned to that … meal.”

“The human’s name was Betram,” said Valencia. “He’d been owned by Gelgroroth for two decades or so. This is almost assuredly not the first time he’d seen one of his masters apparently die in front of him. He’s assuming that what he saw was a ruse intended as part of psychological torture. Most likely he’ll realize that the death was real in the next few days and find some other infernal to be his master.”

I frowned at that, but I knew enough about the hells to know why that might be the case. Being a kept human was, in some sense, the best that you could do in the hells, especially if you were kept by someone rich. Hell was an ecosystem, and every part of that ecosystem fed on mortal suffering in one way or another, usually indirectly by following incentives. All the mortal species regenerated in the hells, which made them the ecological equivalent to the sun, the source of all life and energy.

Some of this was my design. We’d done a campaign inspired by Dante’s Inferno, and I’d done my best to make justifications for why hell looked so suspiciously tailored to producing suffering. I’d had more of a flourish to my design, as I hadn’t really felt the need to be grounded and wanted big set pieces, but some of what I had made had been lifted directly, and even if it hadn’t been, I could recognize my own fingerprints, even if I was certain that my fingers hadn’t been the ones to make them. The hells were, in some sense, my sort of hells, hells that didn’t really care about you and only tortured you because there was something in it for them. Infernals made people eat gross stuff because that helped make their own food taste better. People were farmed for their blood, muscle, skin, and bone, to within the limits of their enhanced post-death bodies to withstand such things.

I felt my stomach churn. Hell #321 wasn’t even one of the really bad ones. Deep down, the rules got harsher for mortals.

“You … ate … a devil?” asked Heshnel. “While standing on the surface of Aerb? What are the limits of that ability?”

“Classified,” said Valencia. “I will say that I can give another demonstration, if one isn’t enough.”

“Please,” said Heshnel, but I could tell that he didn’t really care that much about more proof: he wanted to see the things destroyed.
“You can operate the infernoscope yourself, if you’d like,” said Valencia. “I wouldn’t want you to think that there was any trickery involved.”

“It’s too good to be true,” said O’kald.

“We’ll see,” replied Heshnel. He stepped up to the controls of the infernoscope and began fiddling with it, far less expertly than Valencia had. It took him some time, working in silence, while I looked away from the scenes that flashed by. It wasn’t quite slavery and harvest of mortals so far as the eye could see, but it was close enough to make me feel sick. My thought, after seeing what Valencia had done, had been to question why she hadn’t killed the devil before the man had been made to cut off his finger, but obviously in the context of the hells and the screaming insanity of a trillion people being tortured forever, that led down a rabbit hole.

“There,” said Heshnel.

I steeled myself and looked down. The image quality wasn’t as good, and while Valencia was able to improve it by fiddling with the controls, it stayed blurry enough that we couldn’t make out fine details. We were watching some kind of staged fight, with a huge demon pitted against a man in plate armor and a sword. The crowds behind them were even less clear, but it had to be thousands of infernals. It took me some time to realize that the demon was moving oddly because he was handicapped, both arms bound behind his back and a solid bar of some dark metal connecting his ankles. That left him with snapping, discolored teeth, and three long horns, two on each side and one protruding from his forehead. The demon was going to win, I was fairly sure.

The demon toppled over, slamming its face into the dirt, from no apparent cause.

“Incredible,” said Heshnel with a low voice. “More.”

Valencia adjusted the controls on the infernoscope slightly, until it was pointed toward the crowd that had been watching, which was moving around quite a bit more than it had been. I imagined them uneasy, not quite knowing what was going on, too stunned at having witnessed the death of one of their kind to make any sense of things, or maybe wondering whether this was an act. The infernoscope showed a stretch of the crowd, its view close to the front line of infernals. One of them fell over the side, into the pit with the fighter, and the crowd almost immediately erupted in a furor.

I saw more of them falling, one by one, dropping to the bleachers as the crowd began to part and run in a mad panic. More and more of their ranks were cut through with every passing second, and Valencia worked the controls to give us a broader view. They weren’t quite dying en masse, but the crowd was moving in a crushing stampede, and bodies were being left behind with every foot the crowd managed to move.

I didn’t realize that Valencia was hyperventilating until Amaryllis had pulled her away from the infernoscope’s controls. In the view that we’d been given, the deaths continued, heedless of the fact that Valencia was no longer at the controls.

“Paper bag,” said Amaryllis in Fenn’s direction.

Fenn rushed in and pulled a paper bag from her glove, which Amaryllis took and inflated with a puff of air. She slipped back Valencia’s faceplate and handed Valencia the paper bag, which Valencia took and began breathing into with deep breaths. I glanced at the infernoscope only for long enough to confirm that the killings had stopped, even as the mass panic continued.

“For years,” Valencia said, “For years,” she said again, between breaths. “I was theirs for years and I don’t, I can’t.” Tears were streaming down her face.
“Deep breaths,” said Amaryllis.

I saw the lenssi make a gesture with its tendrils that not all of the others caught at first.

“She’s non-anima,” said O’kald as he drew his weapons. “It was too good to be true.”

“Weapons down,” said Heshnel.

“It’s fakery,” said O’kald. “A display, meant for us. They did the same for Uther.”

“No,” said Valencia, still breathing hard, but with the paper bag tossed to the side. “Please.”

“Weapons down,” said Heshnel.

“There are protocols,” said O’kald.

“He’s right,” said Gemma.

“How would they have faked it though?” asked Pallida. “Hesh picked the second site.”

“I was non-anima,” said Valencia. “And then something changed, and I became something new.” I couldn’t take the desperate pleading in her voice, the way she sounded like a child in need of protection.

“She’s under our aegis,” said Amaryllis with a hard edge to her voice. She was still crouched down next to Valencia. “We’ve had more thorough confirmation that she is what she says.”

“The protocols exist for a reason,” said O’kald. He had not, in fact, lowered his weapons. “I’m willing to get a second opinion on what she is, but we can’t trust a word she says.”

“Do you recall the things they said about Forty-Two?” asked Heshnel. “He was a changeling, the boogeyman of that era. Tell me that she would be so different, an outcast, for good reason, allied with the Chosen One and turned, completely, against their own kind.”

“The infernals were never my kind,” said Valencia. She staggered to her feet and rested a hand on the infernoscope for support. “I was possessed, deprived of my will, a slave.”

O’kald stared at her. He had a hammer in one hand and a handaxe in the other. I was pretty sure that he would be the toughest of their group to take down, if it came to that, but I was really, really hoping that it wouldn’t come to that. Bellads had internal organs, of a sort, not anything organic, but still places that could cause him some trouble if pierced. Amaryllis had her flickerblade, Fenn had void weapons in her glove, and Solace would surely be able to pull something out of her bag of tricks against a being that was largely made of rock. If it was just him, I was optimistic that we could take him down, but I wasn’t sure that he would be the only one.

The lenssi made a few gestures in the air. I looked to Valencia for translation.

“I don’t, I can’t, sorry,” said Valencia. She wiped some of her tears away. “I’m too -- I overdid it.”

“Dehla was arguing for trust,” said Gemma. “Measured trust.”

“Wait, she ate them?” asked Pallida. “And gained their powers? That’s why she knew all that stuff?”

“Yes,” said Valencia with a small voice. “I just wanted to protect my friends.”

“It’s an act,” said O’kald. “Am I the only one who sees that?”
“You haven’t answered how it would be possible,” said Amaryllis.

“It’s a ploy by the devils,” said O’kald. “Fakery and lies.”

“Yes, but how?” asked Pallida. “You think that this is a fake infernoscope? Or that they arranged those scenes for us in the hells?”

“I don’t know,” said O’kald. “And now she says she can’t do more. Convenient.”

Valencia squared her shoulders. “I can,” she said. “I just killed a thousand of the infernals. How many more do you need to see die?”

“The ruling council,” said Heshnel. His eyes were piercing, full of intent.

“There are considerations,” said Amaryllis. “We’re worried about retaliation from the hells. For the hells to be unified would, I’m sure you’d agree, be problematic.” She glanced at Valencia. “This was already more than I had thought should be done without a concrete plan in place, especially given the circumstances. If they develop countermeasures --”

“Sorry,” said Valencia, hanging her head. “I just wanted to not be seen as a monster. I wanted to kill the creatures that make people see me that way.”

Pallida began laughing. “Oh, I just got it! She’s the one that the hells have been running around scared of? That’s amazing. We were so worried! She’s eating them!”

“O’kald, lower your weapons,” said Heshnel. “We don’t have to trust them, not in the slightest, but whatever the truth, they’re obviously willing to defend her. We don’t want this to come to blows any more than they do.”

O’kald slowly lowered his weapons. “I’ll watch her,” he said.

Valencia sighed, sagging down like it had been taking all her energy to stand tall.

“This ward will need to be removed,” said Grak. He took his wand out and pointed to the fort, lifting the tip of the wand out and back like he was balancing an egg on the wand’s end.

The lenssi took out its own wand out from the bandolier around its liquid form and swished it twice through the air before quickly resheathing the wand.

“I thought that you couldn’t ward against non-anima?” I asked.

“The construction is ingenious,” said Grak. I waited for him to go on, but that was what he left it at. More detail on that later, I supposed.

“But she’s not a non-anima?” asked Pallida. “You said she’s something else.”

“She doesn’t have a soul,” I said. “But there’s no risk of possession. Instead, it’s sort of the opposite.”

“That’s so cool,” said Pallida. “Wait so, she’s immune to magic?”

“This isn’t what we brought them here for,” said Heshnel. Whatever glimmering of excitement I had seen was gone. Whatever was going on in his head, he’d become more reserved. “It’s only a piece of the puzzle.”

“We should be able to go in,” said Grak. “It’s as safe as the rest of this place.” I knew Grak well
enough to read the implied reservation there, even if it wasn’t readable from his tone.

“Alright,” I said. “Then let’s get this meeting started.”
The Meeting of Minds

The interior of the fort was bigger than the exterior, which was readily apparent once we were through the front entryway and looking down the great hall. Two long tables made of a pale wood looked like they probably sat a hundred people between them, though both were empty. A huge fireplace took up most of one wall, with an expansive splash and a mantle above it; it was unlit. My eyes were drawn to the back of the room, where two people sat at a round table. One was a wrinkled old man with skin so white it was almost blue, and the other was a young woman, who I thought was probably his caretaker.

We sat around the table, with spots left open between our two groups. Heshnel sat to the left of the old man, at the center of their formation, while Amaryllis and I sat near the center of our side. We had six, and with the two newcomers, they had seven, which made for thirteen in total. That seemed like a lot of people to me, especially when they each had their own views on things.

“Dahlia?” the old man asked as we were taking our seats. His voice was like the creaking of a door, and the word was spoken with effort.

“No,” said Heshnel, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder. “She is one of Uther’s heirs though.” He cleared his throat. “Everett, Lyda, this is the Council of Arches. There have been some developments that I’d like to communicate about privately, but for now I think that we should focus on Juniper Smith. Lyda, are you ready?”

“Certainly,” the young woman replied. She was dressed somewhat conservatively, with bangs that reminded me of Maddie’s, and a choker around her neck that was inset with a large opal. She brought delicate fingers up to the choker and gently pressed on it. The reaction was immediate: her hair lit up with a glowing green light, flying upward like she was doing her best impression of going super-saiyan, and her eyes were suffused with a pale green light. This lasted for no more than a moment before settled back down, but the green glow didn’t fade entirely.

The choker had been one I’d thought up for a villain in one of our campaigns. Special effects aside, all it did was allow someone to pilot a willing body remotely. I’d used it as one way to get around the problem of villains that die before they can be built up or make their motivations known. Naturally, I couldn’t communicate any of this to the rest of the party, and I wasn’t sure that it was entirely relevant, given that its presence wasn’t necessarily laden with meaning. The villain in question had been a marquis, mostly forgettable aside from all the times he’d managed to evade capture.

“Hello,” said the entity that was using Lyda’s body. The voice was like a chorus, with similar tones layered on top of each other. The thing-that-had-Lyda looked around, taking in its surroundings. It froze with its eyes locked on Amaryllis. “Dahlia,” it said.

“I look that much like her?” asked Amaryllis. She seemed vaguely annoyed by being mistaken for a long-lost relative a third time.

“Ah,” said the Possessor. “Not Dahlia.”

“No,” said Heshnel. “Amaryllis Penndraig, a distant descendant of Uther.”

“I’m the most direct descendant,” said Amaryllis, seeming a bit annoyed.

“Still distant,” said Heshnel.

“Are we going to get introduced to this creepy thing or not?” asked Fenn.
“We should make introductions all around,” said Heshnel. “But to start with, the entity using Lyda to communicate is called Thargox. The particulars must remain secret, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I know Thargox,” said Solace. Her smile looked especially child-like. She waved from her seat. “Hello Thargox!”

The thing wearing Lyda’s skin gave Solace a puzzled look. “Hello little girl,” it said. “I do not recognize you.”

“That’s okay,” said Solace. “I looked different the last time we met. Oorang Solace?”

Thargox chuckled. “You do not look so different,” she/it said. “Your friend is well?”

Solace’s face fell slightly. “As well as can be expected,” replied Solace. “My companions are trying their best to help with that.”

(I didn’t think that was true. Up until we were made aware of the Cannibal, we had mostly been dealing with our fledgling nation, and when I said ‘we’, I mostly meant Amaryllis. We had been following that questline pretty steadily up, given it was half the reason we’d broken Fallatehr out of prison, and our entire time down in the Boundless Pit had ultimately been in service of having Solace be born again so that the locus wouldn’t die … but we didn’t actually have any good options as far as the locus was concerned, and the thing that made the most sense to try was to have me level up and increase my skills. We weren’t really making a beeline for that either, for reasons that should be obvious.)

“I’m sorry,” said Amaryllis. “Solace, can you explain?”

“It doesn’t appear that Thargox would like me to tell you yet,” said Solace. “I hold its secret in confidence.” I made note of the pronoun, ‘it’.

“Thargox?” asked Heshnel. “Can you tell us who this child is?”

“No,” replied Thargox.

“Lovely,” said Pallida.

We went around and made introductions after that, though I already knew everyone’s name by that point. It strangely reminded me of first day getting-to-know-you activities in high school, which I’d always hated with a passion. I had a better working memory now though, or I was maybe just a bit more attentive, because their names hadn’t just gone in one ear and out the other, reduced to background noise.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that Everett, the decrepit old man, shared a name with Everett, the bumbling skin mage based on Tom’s character and one of Uther’s seven Knights. Immortality was a very tricky prospect on Aerb, but I thought it likely that if someone had found a way around soul degeneration, it would be Uther or one of his people.

(It was probably obvious from the fact that there weren’t a bunch of really old humans walking around, and the fact that Amaryllis was the most direct descendant at ten generations removed from Uther, but people still died from ‘old age’. Even if you took care of physical health, mental health would eventually begin to decline, and if you took care of that, then the soul itself would start to unwind, dropping away bits and pieces of itself faster and faster as time went on. I was pretty sure those rules existed in service of maintaining a world that was a bit closer to Earth, since I’d used similar rules myself to curb the question of how everything becomes different if immortality is easy.)
“You’re Everett Wolfe?” asked Amayrillis, putting the question to him directly.

“Once upon a time,” he said with a nod.

“Alright,” said Tom. “So you know how we were talking about points and what they mean?”

“Uh,” I said. “Sure?”

“You were distracted,” said Reimer. “The argument --”

“Not an argument,” said Arthur. I made a silent prayer that we wouldn’t rehash the argument about what an argument was.

“The discussion was about what a hit point actually meant in concrete terms,” said Reimer. “Arthur began talking about luck, like, hit points are just a measure of how much luck you have until you get hit, and obviously in D&D, Pathfinder, and other derivatives, that’s not right, because there are other mechanics that interact with hit points, and how the heck does it make any sense for clerics to be restoring luck?”

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” I said. “Clerics can work with divine favor, and they’re restoring your connection to the gods that are ultimately responsible for protecting you in the frenzy of battle.”

“You don’t actually believe that,” said Reimer.

“It’s interesting from a lore perspective,” I said. “But no, I don’t think it’s literally true as the default, given it’s contradicted by loads of flavor and mechanics. I’ve always conceived of hit points as being something like exhaustion, physical damage, hunger, et cetera, all rolled into one.” I turned to Tom. “You were going somewhere with this though? About your new character?”

“Yeah,” said Tom. “I was thinking, like, normally all the points that you get for things represent how skilled you are, right? It’s experience and stuff. But I was thinking that instead I could play a guy that just bumbles his way through everything? Like, he’s a sorcerer, and he casts spells and things, but most of the time he’s got no idea what he’s doing, and when he levels up it just gets a little bit more ridiculous.”

“That seems like a horrible idea,” said Reimer. “Also, mechanically incompatible with the game.”

“We could homebrew something if mechanics get in the way,” I said with a shrug. “Let me think about it for a bit. Mostly it would come from narration on your end, right? You wouldn’t say that you were casting a fireball, you would say, I don’t know, that you were trying to light your pipe to calm your nerves and accidentally threw a fireball? Something like that?”

“Yes,” said Tom with a beaming smile. “Exactly!”

“Veto,” said Reimer.

“You don’t get to just veto character concepts,” I said.

“You veto my characters all the time,” said Reimer, scowling at me.

“First, I don’t think ‘how many daggers can you possibly throw in a round’ is actually a character, second, I have veto power, you don’t.” I gave him my best shit-eating grin. “And also, for what it’s worth, I feel like I really try to be accommodating, so long as it’s not bullshit like the hulking hurler.”
“It does seem like a bumbling sorcerer will wear thin pretty quickly,” said Arthur, cutting in.

“Well, I think it’s neat,” I said. “And if it wears thin, then that aspect of the character can just get phased out. Tom, you’ll figure out some stuff so I don’t have to narrate? Like, for each of your spells, figure out what you might have been intending to do instead?”

“Absolutely,” said Tom with a smile. “I’m going to be the bumblingest sorcerer anyone has ever seen.”

“So long as you don’t actually do worse on any of your checks,” said Reimer with a frown. “I can only pull so much weight.”

I’d read the biography of Everett Wolfe. The more I’d read, the more I’d seen the things he’d had in common with Tom’s character. This Everett Wolfe, the one sitting in front of me, had started out as a somewhat absent-minded artist, one with a focus on tattoos. Tattoo magic wasn’t well-known at the time, and the Athenaeum of Steel and Sweat hadn’t even been founded yet, but for Everett it was about the art, rather than the magic. Half the time he used exotic ingredients just for the sake of trying to get newer, sharper colors. It wasn’t quite right to say that everything he did was done through luck, but he worked on a deeper level of intuition, and that keen intuition saved his life a number of times, often unwittingly.

He didn’t stay like that forever though. Most of Uther’s Knights had their own stories, and Everett’s seemed to be one of moving from the intuitive, inspired artist to more of a prolific workhorse. His struggles, at least as outlined in the biography I’d read, were struggles of artistry, a push and pull between a desire to do something unique and original, following his strong intuitions about what tattoos to create, and the need to create tattoos over and over to the exacting standards that were demanded by the nature of the magic and the needs of his team. Tattoos, at least magical ones, boiled down to what were little more than vector graphics, and any competent tattooist was essentially required to do tedious, precision repetition of the same relatively small handful of patterns.

Amaryllis and I had both read up on him, and talked about him a bit, as we’d talked about all of the Knights. I almost felt like I knew the man, given how many of his struggles I had read about, and the things that his biography had revealed about him. Now he was, apparently, sitting across the table from us. It was weird.

“You look just like her,” Everett said to Amaryllis. “Doesn’t she, Sade?”

“Yeah,” said Pallida. “It’s kind of giving me the creeps, no offense.”

“None taken,” said Amaryllis. She cleared her throat. “I think that it’s time to get down to business. We’ve come here for answers, which was the same reason we were at Speculation and Scrutiny. Unfortunately, all we got from Masters were more questions and a cryptic message from my distant ancestor, as well as some implicit threats and undue use of force. There’s a good chance that we each have pieces of the puzzle that the other might want to take a look at.”

“Clearly,” said Heshnel. “That display outside was impressive, to say the least.”

Valencia sat in silence. I didn’t know what I expected from her, or what I thought she should have said, but the silence made her seem withdrawn. I was worried about her.

Heshnel returned to splitting focus between Amaryllis and myself. “Juniper Smith’s name was on a questionnaire written by Uther Penndraig’s own hand, five hundred years ago, for reasons which are unclear,” said Heshnel. “Following Uther’s disappearance and, presumably, death, it was speculated
by many who were familiar with the phenomenon that he was dream-skewered. Speculator Masters
has been sitting at his clinic, treating it as a fiefdom, and guarding it with quite a bit more fervor than
one might imagine he would, if there was nothing to hide. Some token effort was put into
independent investigation, but our attention was elsewhere following Uther taking his leave, and
conversations with the dream-skewered didn’t turn up anything fruitful, aside from the anomaly of
the questionnaire. Now, five hundred years later, as too many old threats have sprung into motion at
once, someone arrives at the athenaeum with a name that was written long, long ago, beyond the
threshold of any probabilistic or prophetic magic known to us. Who is Juniper Smith, and why did he
come to the athenaeum?”

“I think it’s better that we have some of our questions answered first,” I said. “I don’t know what
Plan B was, but Valencia assures me that it was more violent than a meeting.” That was understating
it significantly. “We’re in the dark here. We need to be brought into the light, just a little bit, before
we’ll say anything.”

“Masters mentioned specific threats,” said Amaryllis, taking the conversational ball from me. “Some
were known to us, others weren’t, and the specifics are unclear. Tell us about the Infinite Library.”

“Why do you need to know?” asked O’kald. He was the only one of us standing; he weighed too
much to sit in a chair. “What do you plan to do about it?”

“They have firepower, clearly,” said Pallida. “Just like Uther and his Knights.”

“If there’s anything that you haven’t heard of, there’s a reason,” said Heshnel. “But for the Infinite
Library --”

“Are you really going to tell them?” asked O’kald.

The lenssi flicked its tendrils in the air.

“I am,” said Heshnel. “If he’s the Chosen One, then that might be cause for him to know, one way or
another.” He turned back to me. “The Infinite Library contains every book that ever has been or will
be published. Searching it is arduous, and currently feasible only with the use of a magic specific to
that place.” Library Magic, naturally. “When someone enters or leaves the library, the books in the
library change, because it cannot account for itself. With it, we can glimpse an imperfect future, the
future as it would exist without our knowledge of that future and the work of the librarians. Per the
last report from the head librarian, there are two years before no more books are published.”

“Masters said five years,” I replied. I felt my chest get a little tight at hearing how tight a deadline we
were on, for a project whose existence we hadn’t even been informed of yet.

“Then I will hope that his information is more up to date than my own,” replied Heshnel.
“Unfortunately, I’m skeptical that’s the case. Six weeks ago, it was five years, as low as it’s ever
been. Then, something changed, and it became two years instead. We’re still tracking down a
number of leads, as the exact cause is uncertain.”

**Quest Accepted: We’re Going To Need Books, Lots of Books - The latest report from the ‘Infinite’
Library is that the world will stop publishing books roughly two years from now. The man who
left the library changed the future, and if you go in, you’ll change the future too -- but perhaps
that’s for the best.**

“Why would you ask what the library is if you already knew?” Pallida asked Amaryllis.

The lenssi made three quick gestures with its tendrils.
“Ah,” said Pallida. “Right, cross-checking to make sure we’re not lying.”

“And what do those books say about me, if anything?” I asked.

“As far as I’ve read, nothing,” replied Heshnel. “Should they have? Are you so important that you would expect to be written about?”

“You don’t have books published yourself?” asked Amaryllis. “You haven’t already seen how this meeting is going to go? Because if this library can bring in books from some alternate future, then there’s nothing to stop you from writing your own books, and there also shouldn’t be anything to stop you from taking information from the future and advancing the arts and sciences by decades at a time.”

There was something a little too intense about the way that Amaryllis was speaking. I could see the parallels to her own situation, of course. She had books that weren’t from the future, exactly, but which were going to advance Aerb up a few ranks on the technology ladder. She was doing what she thought anyone should be doing, given the same resources we had.

“Exclusions,” said Everett with a cough. “We tried. It caused exclusions. There was once a thing called a demiplane.” He sounded wistful, and not entirely with us.

“The future that the library provides is a false one,” said Heshnel. “There are some things it cannot account for, beyond just itself. The exclusionary principle appears to be one of those things. There exists a moratorium on research.”

“Eight exclusions,” said Everett.

“More, when the Second Empire got ahold of the Library,” said O’kald.

Heshnel frowned slightly. “Yes.”

“The library is now in neutral hands,” said Thargox. This seemed directed at Solace.

“Ah. Neutral,” said Solace, as though that was a bitter word to swallow.

It suddenly occurred to me that more than half of the people in the room had been alive during the Second Empire. The thought that immediately followed was I didn’t have any concrete information about which ‘side’ any of these people might have been on. And once that thought was in place, it finally connected that when Pallida had said that Heshnel had been stripped of his abilities as a soul mage, it had probably been against his will, done by the same counter-imperialists that had thrown Fallatehr in prison. I don’t know why, but in my head, I had immediately cast him as being a revolutionary fighter taking up the signature tool of the enemy, maybe because he was one of Uther’s old allies. It was just as likely -- maybe more likely, given how people were responding to each other -- that some of Uther’s old allies had been instrumental members of the Second Empire.

“We’re not here to relitigate the past,” said Heshnel. “Far from it. We’re here to discuss the future.” His voice had gotten firmer. “Who is Juniper Smith?”

“There are other things that we need to know,” said Amaryllis. “The Outer Reaches, the Other Side, these are words that were spoken with weight to them by Masters.”

“No,” said Heshnel. “If we’re to exchange information, then it needs to go in both directions. Who are you, Juniper Smith? How did Uther know you would come?”

I glanced at the others. I hadn’t ever thought we were going to get out of this without me giving up
some information, and I thought it likely that they would just talk to Masters after things had cooled down a little bit, especially if they had information to trade with him. We planned to talk with Masters again, so long as we could do it without stepping within a few hundred miles of the exclusion zone.

“Uther Penndraig was dream skewered,” I said. “I am too. We knew each other, as teenagers, on Earth. So far as I can tell, the dream skewered were a real, if very minor phenomenon, and from that kernel of truth, Uther and Masters built a deception intended solely as a way of baiting me or a few dozen others from Earth to come seek him out, if they ever showed up. To my knowledge, I’m the only one who did. I came to Speculation and Scrutiny because, like you, I wanted answers.”

“For someone who should have lost all knowledge of Aerb, you have remarkably capable companions,” said the fox Animalia, Gemma. She’d been mostly quiet, watching us. It reminded me of our bigger tabletop sessions, when there had been eight or nine people because too many of us had shown up, leaving people like Craig to sit quietly for long stretches of time, watching and waiting for a moment to contribute.

“I will forever be grateful that I found Amaryllis,” I said. “I don’t think that I would have survived for so long without her.”

“Diplomatic,” scowled O’kald.

“How old are you?” asked Gemma.

“Eighteen,” I said.

“And how long has it been since you were dream-skewered?” asked Gemma.

“Four months,” I replied, rounding up.

“Pallida, do you have some measure of his skills?” asked Gemma.

The pink-skinned girl looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “I watched him deliver a pretty powerful kick,” she replied. “I think he’d probably try to explain it away as being an entad, but I really doubt that. Assuming that he’s actually human, then I’d say he’s a pretty strong blood mage, magus tier at least, based on what I’ve seen. I was kind of hoping that he’d reveal something while we made our escape, but no luck there.”

The lenssi gestured, a long series of motions that took place in near-silence.

“What?” I asked, once it was finished.

Pallida was the one to answer. “The gist of it is that Dehla thinks there’s nothing to indicate that you’re all that special.”

“It seemed like there were a lot of words there,” I said. I glanced over at Valencia.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m still not up to it right now.”

“It wasn’t really important,” said Pallida. “Basically, if you were a blood mage, then you had to have trained at the athenaeum, but you couldn’t have actually achieved the level of skill that you did in a handful of months. So, maybe the dream skewering thing doesn’t work like we thought it did, or you’re lying, or I was wrong about what I saw, or wrong about --”

Dehla started gesturing again and Pallida stopped to watch.
“Okay,” said Pallida, once Dehla was done. “Apparently my skills as translator are not being valued today. What Dehla wants to know is how easy you found learning blood magic to be, and whether you did it at the anthenaeum.”

“That’s assuming that I know a single thing about blood magic,” I said.

“Do you?” asked Heshnel.

“Masters mentioned that Uther had something called the Knack,” I said. “He could learn things faster than anyone could reasonably be expected to, without any apparent magical aid. I … don’t think that I have whatever he had.” I looked at Grak. “I’ve been trying to learn Groglir for quite a while now, and while I am making progress, it’s about as fast as I would expect given how much time and effort I put into it.” I took a deep breath. “But as far as blood magic goes, yes, I attained some level of proficiency after a short lesson from a novice. I don’t think that necessarily makes me the Chosen One.”

“What does the term mean to you?” asked Heshnel.

“It appears in a lot of Uther’s writings, and it’s implicit in a lot of the works he created,” I replied. I hesitated. “Sorry, but if you know that he was dream skewered, and that I’m dream skewered, then I guess it doesn’t hurt anything to say that a lot of the ideas that Uther claimed for himself, and nearly all of the works he ever published, were all taken from Earth. A lot of it is, uh, straight plagiarism.”

“That fits in well with the theory, yes,” said Heshnel.

“Well, the Chosen One crops up a lot in Uther’s writing because it belonged to a class of stories that he really liked, and he wrote his own versions of a lot of those stories during his time on Aerb,” I said. “I’m given to understand that some of his focus on the idea of a Chosen One was seen as political propaganda, as though he was writing stories that tried to justify giving him power, but I don’t really think it was that, or at least not just that.” I swallowed. “He missed Earth. For whatever reason, he felt like he couldn’t talk to anyone about it, so he wrote stories instead, as a way of connecting to Earth and covertly sharing a part of it with people here. And … maybe he did think that he was the Chosen One, and maybe he even was?” I was watching Heshnel. I had lost him at some point, I could see that, because he’d spent most of the time I was explaining looking like he wanted to butt in.

“Uther never lost,” said Heshnel. “His enemies appeared in exactly the right order for him to be able to barely defeat each of them. He gained power rapidly, but it was always just enough to secure a victory, and there were times, rarely, that he got lucky rather than winning through pure might, skill, or knowledge. We never found out who Chose him, or for what purpose. When he left, we had to pick up the pieces and fight back against all of the problems that it had seemed like only he could handle.” He gestured to the great hall. “We were an army without its general, but we pushed on. And at great cost of life, the threats were put down, and the world was safe and secure.”

I let out a long breath. “The question is the direction of causality. If Uther had died early on, would the threats have never reared their heads? Or did he only arise because there were threats that only someone like him could be dealt with? It’s a question that you can’t possibly answer, but I have a feeling that you’ve all made up your mind.”

“Not really,” said Pallida. “But any insight you could give would sure be helpful.”

I looked at the seven of them, then glanced toward Valencia again, who gave me nothing more than a helpless look. “There are things that you’ll need to understand. It will take a long time to explain, but I’m willing to do it. To start with, I met the entity that I think did the choosing, and he told me in
no uncertain terms that nothing was going to save me if I failed. I’m sure that if you did some
research on us, which I assume you will, you would see some similarities between Uther and I, but -
-
“Then it’s better you’re ended now,” said O’kald. I felt my blood run cold at the naked aggression,
but none of the others on his side seemed to share it.

“Let him speak,” said Gemma.

“On Earth, I knew Uther as a teenaged boy named Arthur,” I said. I really didn’t like the feeling that
we might have to fight if my explanation wasn’t good enough. “We were both pretty normal. We
lived in a small town whose focus was mostly agriculture, corn, wheat, and soybeans. None of that is
terribly important. What is important is that we played games together, games of imagination and
storytelling, and our roles in those games were very different. Arthur was a roleplayer, someone who
played at being different people, walking through a different world every few months. I was the one
who created those worlds.”

I got some blank stares at that.

“Fenn?” I asked. “Can you bring out the Monster Manual?”

“Which edition?” asked Fenn.

“Fifth,” I said.

I caught Amaryllis looking at me, seeming none too happy, though this part, at least, we’d discussed
beforehand. Yes, we were letting more people in on the fact that we could get things from Earth, but
that didn’t really help them much, given that the backpack had been folded into what had to be one
of the most defensible houses in the world. Besides, if Uniquities knew, then we had to assume that
other people would soon know too. This group of people, led by Heshnel, was operating in secret,
which was more than could be said for Uniquities.

Fenn popped the book from her glove and slid it across the table to Heshnel, who stopped it in place
with his delicate, purple-black fingers. He glanced over at Dehla, who gave a swish of a tendril to
confirm that it was non-magical.

“What am I looking at?” asked Heshnel as he leafed through the pages. He stopped on one, staring at
it. “Drow?” he asked, looking up at me.

“Arthur and I played this game,” I said. “In that book there, dark elves are described as living deep
underground in matriarchal societies, which I used as a jumping-off point for creating a race of elves
that lived deep beneath the oceans, within a thick layer of ice that coated the ocean floors, down so
deep that no light could reach. Then I came here, and found that the thing I’d thought up was
actually true here.”

Heshnel stared at me, then down at the Monster Manual, and began flipping through the pages again.
I hoped that he wouldn’t be too terribly scandalized to find the z-word.

“Elements, remembered from Aerb, in your dream of Earth?” asked Thargox. “A wrinkle in the
nature of Earth?”

“No,” I said. “I know things that I couldn’t possibly have known. Uther did too, didn’t he?”

“He did,” said Everett. He sank slightly in his chair.
“You’re implying, what?” asked Pallida. “That a lot of what Uther knew was because he had seen it before, in these games that you’d played? That’s…” she stopped, staring at me, then looking at the book. “Are renacim in there?”

“No,” I said. “They were a species of my own invention.” Not unique, really, except maybe in the implications of their rebirth process.

“Juniper claims to have invented a lot of what’s on Aerb,” said Amaryllis. “I’ve seen enough in my time with him to think that even if he’s deluded, there’s valuable information in his head. I assume the same was true of Uther.” We’d more or less agreed on this framing. Amaryllis could be skeptical about me, which would help them undercut whatever I was saying. It wasn’t too different from the role she’d taken when we first met, and it wasn’t entirely a stretch.

“That’s only half the story, or maybe less than half,” said Gemma. “Why did Uther always win?”

“Uther thought that his life was a story,” I said. I looked at Everett. “More, as time went on?”

Everett nodded.

“I think that Uther was right,” I said. “You might think of it as him being in a story, but I’m not sure that’s helpful. Maybe instead think of it like a specific type of magic that would be completely invisible to a warder, with no actual counter, and which warped the very fabric of the world such that he would always have challenges to win by the skin of his teeth, if he applied himself to them.”

“Or even if he didn’t,” said O’kald.

“No,” I said. “It wouldn’t have worked if he’d just blown things off. At least, I don’t know enough to say for sure. There’s an entity, above the gods. I spoke with him, and he seemed adamant that he would let me die. He said that he didn’t care about narrative. I don’t know whether he once cared and then stopped, or if he was lying, but that’s what he said. He did say that there was a plot, but that if I scribbled outside the lines, he would see where that new direction took me.”

“This all sounds unbelievable,” said Heshnel. “You seem like you understand that.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “It’s hard to prove, if not impossible. There is this, though.” I held out my hand. “I wish for a hot dog.”

A hot dog appeared in my outstretched hand.

Dehla began gesturing frantically as I took a bite. The hot dog wasn’t very good, as I had known it wouldn’t be. I’d used three of the hundred hot dog wishes already for testing, the first to make sure that they actually did something, and the second and third to make sure that there weren’t combat applications. Grak had watched when I’d made the third wish, but hadn’t seemed as surprised by the results as Dehla seemed. It was a new wavelength of magic, distinct from the signature of the entad bands, and noteworthy in that regard, but it wasn’t going to upend anyone’s conception of reality.

“Translation?” I asked.

“You used an excluded magic outside the exclusion zone,” said Pallida. The pink of her skin had gone somewhat pale. I glanced at Grak, and he shrugged. Apparently, he hadn’t known that.

“Then he’s the Chosen One,” said O’kald. His hand went down from the surface of the table, to where his weapons rested.

“Why do you think that it would do any good to kill him?” asked Amaryllis. “Why would you think
“Is it even possible?”

“Easy enough to test,” said O’kald. I couldn’t tell how much of that was a threat, and how much of it was dark humor.

“Uther disappeared,” said Heshnel. “We suffered heavy losses afterward, but we beat back every threat to Aerb, and what followed was a five hundred year period of peace.”

“Peace,” said Solace. “It’s odd, to hear the rise of the Second Empire described in such terms.”

“He doesn’t mean it like that,” said Pallida. “There were wars, sure, but there are usually wars somewhere or other. We measure peace relative to the cosmic scale. It was five centuries, more or less, of Aerb not having cataclysmic threats. There were exclusions, sure, and they sucked, and the Second Empire was, you know,” she glanced at Heshnel. “But it wasn’t like we were two steps away from the whole hex dying, you know? And that’s where we are right now.”

I saw Amaryllis pale slightly at hearing that.

“If you’ve read what Uther had to say on the matter of narrative, then you’ll have read Degenerate Cycles?” asked Heshnel.

“I haven’t heard of it,” I said. I wasn’t quite a Penndraig scholar, but I had read most of his stuff, and I was well-acquainted with his bibliography. I would have picked up a book with such a suggestive title immediately.

Heshnel held out a hand, and after a few seconds, a book came flying around a corner next to the door to come to a dead stop in his delicate grip. He set it down next to the Monster Manual and opened it up.

“He talks about escalation, and its role within narrative,” said Heshnel. “Uther considered a story to be, at its heart, a conflict and its resolution. The problem was that for a conflict to be compelling, there must be some question of its resolution, at least to his way of thinking. In this book, the last he ever wrote, he considers the case of narrative cycles and how they might be made to be extensible, given a few tight constraints, though it’s unclear where these rules might have come from. The main cast of characters, he says, must always remain the same, never varying. The threats they face must also remain the same, or nearly so. The cast are free to wander as they please, in the course of this narrative, but they must never grow, never change, never become more powerful.”

“He tried,” said Everett, seeming to gain some energy for speaking. “He never said that it was what he was doing. I didn’t know until after he was gone. He wanted us all to adventure together, forever, static.”

Heshnel tapped the book. “Uther writes that it’s a lost cause. Contrary to what he wrote in On the Nature of Narrative, he says here that narrative isn’t infinitely extensible, not within the rules that he’s set out. A story with a foregone conclusion is no story at all, or if it is, then the conflict isn’t what it appears to be on first blush. He says, explicitly, that there needs to be some element of change to keep a story compelling. If the cast changes, they can face new, different challenges, conflicts whose resolutions might be in question. Each cycle results in change and growth, trivializing old conflicts. Escalation, he says, is inevitable, if you’re constrained by an unchanging cast.”

I frowned at that. “No,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be an upward trend. Different conflicts are possible if the hero is weaker too.” Throw Superman some kryptonite, if you really want the conflict to be in doubt.
“We suffered,” said Everett. His voice was raspy. “We lost loved ones. We gained afflictions. Vervain lost his sight. Alcida became blocked, unable to let loose her charge. Forty-Two was stuck in a single form for a month. Uther had always been the one to fix everything, and he found himself impotent, or so I thought.”

I blanched at the implication.

“There’s no proof but what he writes here, none of it conclusive,” said Heshnel. “If he was sabotaging his team in an effort to prevent this entity from escalating the conflicts, he abandoned it after not too many years, for reasons that are unclear to us. Escalation wasn’t constant, after that, but as he points out in *Degenerate Cycles*, there are only so many compelling conflicts, given that something must be learned or gained along the way for the story to be complete.”

“You think that the escalation would have continued, if Uther hadn’t left,” said Amaryllis. “You think that it wouldn’t have ended at the terrible things you can’t or won’t tell us about, it would have kept on, escalating more and more until … until he lost? Or until the world became meaningless in the face of whatever he was dealing with?”

It was a difficult question. If the narrative lasts forever, and it needs to include some element of escalation, then what does it look like fifty or a hundred years down the line?

“Imagine the world is as Juniper says,” replied Heshnel. “Imagine that Uther had some power that reshaped the entirety of existence to be consistent with facts that allowed for Uther to perpetually be the Chosen One. In the best case scenario, he would continue on in perpetuity, forever keeping the world safe from ever-escalating threats.”

“In the worst case?” asked O’kald. “The threats become greater and greater until we’re left in the lurch again, this time with problems that we cannot solve by throwing lives at them.”

“That’s not the worst case or the best case,” said Amaryllis. “The worst case is that you leave *yourself* in the lurch, because you took out the only person who could have actually resolved things. The best case is that Juniper doesn’t win a partial victory, he wins a complete one. That’s what the Dungeon Master said was on the line. At the end of the road, Juniper assumes the Dungeon Master’s place.”

“It seems an awful lot of power for a single person to have,” said Gemma.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “And I’m not happy with that. But we’ve been led to believe that he can clear every exclusion zone and empty the hells of devils and demons.”

“Led to believe,” said O’kald. “By a supposed creature so powerful that it could have fixed every problem on its own.”

“The internal motivations of the Dungeon Master are opaque to us,” I said. “That said, I’ve been taking what he says at face value, at least lately, because it seems like the most reasonable thing to do. I don’t think that it makes sense to try to cut the Gordian Knot here.”

“Gordian Knot?” asked Pallida.

I looked at the confused faces around the table. “It’s an idiom from Earth,” I said. “It means to attempt to solve an intractable problem in some clever way.”

“Uther did that,” said Everett, croaking out the words. “The Uttalak write their stories in knotwork.” He heaved a sigh. “Uther cut their epic in twain, to make two stories of it. Solved a lot of problems that day.”
“Doesn’t seem terribly clever to try to kill the Chosen One,” said Fenn. “No offense.”

“This was the last book that Uther ever wrote,” said Heshnel, poking at *Degenerate Cycles*. “It was only discovered after he was gone. It’s very difficult to read it and not think of it as a suicide note.” I could see why such a thing wouldn’t be in his official bibliography. I wondered how many copies of it existed, and who controlled them.

“He wouldn’t commit suicide,” I said, but I felt my heart sink, because I had no conviction.

“He might have,” said O’kald. “If he thought that it was what was best for Aerb. You have some better explanation for what happened to him?”

“I think he might have gone home,” I said.

“Abandoned us?” asked Everett. “After so many years?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He left me a message in a magic mirror, which I only viewed today, and he seemed … nostalgic, I guess. He was hoping that maybe if he was still alive when I got the message, we could meet with each other and find a way back home. It dated to maybe sometime after 12 FE, based on what he said.”

“He kept to himself,” said Everett, with a note of finality, as though that was all you needed to know about Uther.

The lenssi gestured something, and I looked to Pallida.

“You know, we all understand the gestures,” said Pallida. “I don’t think that I should have to be the one on translation duty.”

“Tell him,” said O’kald.

“Them,” said Fenn. O’kald only grunted in response, a sound that was like two rocks coming together in his throat.

Pallida sighed. “Fine, the lenssi says that we’re essentially in a quagmire of unknowability, at which point it’s best to just look at the possible outcomes and place our bets.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

“Meaning that we can set up a payout matrix,” said Amaryllis. “Figure out the outcomes, assign values to those outcomes, then assign probabilities.”

Pallida watched Dehla gesture some more, just two quick slashes this time. “That … is more or less correct,” said Pallida. She glanced over at Amaryllis. “Where did you learn that?”

“Studies of philosophy,” said Amaryllis. “If Dehla would like to make a map of the possibilities, their probabilities, and the values we’d place on them, I think that would be a good use of our time.”

I’ll skip ahead a bit here, because most of the twenty minutes that followed was spent with Amaryllis and Dehla in conference with each other. Pallida acted as translator for Dehla’s half of the conversation, but it was pretty apparent that the renacim wasn’t strongly invested in the conversation.

“So,” said Amaryllis, looking down at her sheet of paper. “The real question I have at the moment is how likely you all think it is that with Juniper eliminated, you would be able to put an end to all the threats Aerb currently faces.”
I wasn’t terribly comfortable with this line of thinking, but I supposed it was worth something to have the option on the table and discussed openly, rather than something that no one could actually verbalize. There was a very small part of me that was concerned that Amaryllis could be convinced that Aerb would be better off with me dead, through some kind of narrative or meta-narrative logic. She seemed to care about narrative more than I did, even after I’d had my talk with the Dungeon Master, but I was almost certain that she wasn’t about to stab me through the heart in a bid to save the world. (Almost.)

“With the threat of infernals taken off the tables, the picture isn’t so bleak,” said Heshnel. “You know the threats by name, at least. The Void Beast might be mollified, if we can figure out why it’s moving towards us again, and it’s a threat that’s known to the people of Aerb. Moreover, it’s a far-off threat, a century at current rates, which is more than it was when the imperial ban was implemented. The infernals are, apparently, worried about something that’s entirely against them and on your side, though obviously there are concerns there, especially with regards to another unification.”

“Something on their side?” asked Everett, half a step behind.

“We’ll speak on it later,” said Heshnel. He turned back to us. “The defenses that Uther laid in place against the Other Side have held strong for five centuries, and will hold for decades at least, so long as we can bring together the necessary expertise to fix them where they’ve frayed at the edges. If those defenses are breached, we might still win, with considerable losses, but that’s not something that anyone would like to risk.” He let out a sigh. “The biggest risk factor, aside from whatever undefined fate the Library is attempting to warn of, is the Outer Reaches, of which I can say no more.”

“Those are the ones that we can see,” said O’kald. “Those are the threats as they exist now.”

“He thinks that more will come,” said Pallida. “In one version of the theory, so long as there’s a Chosen One, there will be challenges for them to meet. And granted, there’s no evidence that any threats were retroactively created for Uther, aside from the sheer coincidence of it all … but the Lost King himself seemed to think that there was something to the idea.”

“I’ll need to read a copy of that book,” I said.

“Certainly,” said Heshnel. He slid it across the table to me, and I glanced at Grak for long enough to get a nod from him. I really wouldn’t have minded having warder’s sight, given how useful it was for making sure there were no traps.

“You’re taking this well,” Gemma said.

“It’s not really news,” I said. “We already knew that Uther had an obsession with narrative. Arthur had that same obsession, when I knew him, even before all of this started. And as for how it applies to me, I’d already seen some of the strands of escalation present themselves. It’s complicated, it really is, but I’m willing to tell you everything.” Everything I can, anyway. Adding that caveat would have been a bit more honest, but at the expense of sounding really sketchy.
Communicative

I talked for what felt like hours, with relatively few interruptions.

There were a fair number of things that I had to leave out, and a fair number of things that didn’t make sense because I had to leave parts out. I didn’t want to tell them about the teleportation key, but without explaining that, how would I explain that a fireteam had been sent for it? I had to reframe that entire ordeal as revolving around an unspecified entad that belonged to Amaryllis, one locked to her so that the only person who would have been seeking after it was a close relative, which was close enough to the truth. That, in turn, opened up more questions, but thankfully, no one seemed inclined to poke holes in the story, not even O’kald.

It seemed safe enough to confine our story to what Uniquities knew, given that Uniquities knew it, and had already done most of the work necessary to either cover for us or get people to look the other way. We’d killed a unicorn, which there weren’t any laws against, and we’d killed Larkspur and his people, which was arguably self-defense if you squinted at it just right.

Everett spoke up once I began talking about the Boundless Pit.

“He spent weeks of his life there,” said Everett. There was no question who ‘he’ was. The way the ancient skin mage said it, he gave the pronoun a kingly weight. “The house was something special to him.”

“Yes,” I said. “The house was why we came.” I glanced at Solace. It wasn’t too hard to reframe the story without mentioning her, given that we had always had other interests in Kuum Doona, but it made us look more mercenary than we actually were.

“Oh, very well,” said Solace. She sat a little taller in her chair, which, given how small she was, wasn’t very tall at all. “I am the last living druid. My locus lies trapped in an entad, unable to expand into its fullness. Juniper was attempting to respect my wishes when he failed to mention that I had died.” I’d actually left out the whole part about Fallatehr, both because I didn’t want to reveal myself as a soul mage, and because I didn’t think it reflected that well on us. “Through a combination of magics, the rite of Yaxukasu Axud allowed me to be reborn, but the time without a druid would have been too long for the locus, given its state. They ventured to the house in order to use its time chamber. My rather youthful appearance is the result.”

“A druid?” asked Pallida with wide eyes. “How much raw power is your side of the table packing?”

“Juniper has gathered his Knights, then,” said Gemma.

“And one of them died,” said Heshnel.

“I got better,” said Solace.

“We’ve had our share of losses,” I said. “If there’s anything that I considered a strict loss, I would have mentioned it, but it hasn’t been uncommon for us to face setbacks and problems. From what I’ve seen, it falls within the same parameters of success and failure as happened for Uther, though there’s far more to his history than ever made it into his biographies.”

“It speaks to the question of whether Uther could fail,” said Heshnel. “You imagine that the rules were different for the two of you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I glanced at Everett and tried to weigh my words. “In these games that Arthur
and I played, it wasn’t just the two of us, we had a circle of friends. Some of the people on Aerb, in Uther’s time, were patterned after those, ah, characters.”

“Me?” asked Everett.

“Yes,” I replied. “There are twists and reflections, and not everyone Uther met was ‘wearing the face of an old friend’, to use his words. Some of them were, though. For me, that hasn’t been true at all. And ...” I tried to think about how to put this. “I think that I’m more beset by romantic complications than he ever was.” I very studiously didn’t look at any of the members of my party when I said that. It was true, and it was a valid data point I thought needed to be added to the conversation, but it also wasn’t the sort of thing that I liked to say out loud.

“You’ve done little to sway me,” said O’kald.

“I’m doing my best to report the facts as I know them,” I replied. “If I’m trying to sway you, it’s only because I think that you’re wrong, and if I think you’re wrong, that’s because I have evidence that you don’t, or because you’ve made some error in your thinking.” I turned to look at Amaryllis. “For whatever it’s worth, I really believe that if Amaryllis thought the world would be saved by eliminating me, she would do it herself.”

Amaryllis gave me a curt nod. “Looking to stop the generation of problems at its source is, I think, sensible, but that’s not the level we want to play on. We’re playing to get to the end, and eliminate every problem that everyone on Aerb might ever face.”

There was steel in her voice. She said it with more conviction than I had ever felt about anything. It felt weird, to hear all of that concrete hope be pinned on me, especially when I’d done nothing much to deserve it, especially of late. Looking into the infernoscope and seeing the hells in person rather than reading about them in an academic book … it was chilling to think that eliminating the hells was a responsibility that was going to fall on my shoulders. Valencia would be the one to do it, obviously, but I was pretty sure that if I ever got a quest, it wouldn’t just be something that she would decide to do on her own with no involvement on my part.

“Uther thought that the world existed in narrative,” I found myself saying. “I think that maybe that was his problem, or at least one of them. He was intent on playing a part. He focused his effort on shaping stories. I don’t really care about any of that, and I’m not going to bend to narrative conventions. All I really care about is winning.”

(Set aside for a moment that wasn’t actually true, and that I cared about other things, like good food, stimulating conversation, having fun, time with Fenn when she wasn’t trying to pick fights with me, and all sorts of other things that weren’t winning. It still sounded good, and summed up my attitude a bit better than saying that I could be distracted by shinies.)

“And what does winning look like, to you?’ asked Heshnel. “What is your great plan for Aerb?”

_A glorious transmortal utopia, naturally._ “We’ll eliminate the hells,” I said. “We’ll eliminate suffering. No one will ever feel pain again, unless they wish to. No one will feel hunger. Nothing will be scarce. You’ll be able to be whoever or whatever you want to be, without fear.”

“Dangerous talk,” said O’kald.

“Dangerous?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

Solace gave a small cough. “You came close to repeating the First Proclamation of the Second Empire,” she said. “The clarion call of progress is a seductive one, but if you speak of infinite riches,
it becomes easy to justify any atrocity.” I watched her eyes move across the people seated at the other end of the table. “We all took different lessons from the Second Empire, I suppose.”

“What’s past is past,” said Heshnel.

“What’s past is prologue,” said Everett, rolling the words out slowly. “Uther said that.”

“We should set it aside, for now,” I said. “Solace, I didn’t mean any offense, and you know that I don’t think that the Second Empire was correct, not when they made so many clearly visible mistakes, but --”

“What mistakes?” asked Pallida. “And how do you know? Was the Second Empire something that you dreamed up?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not a student of Aerb’s history, especially not about that time frame. Most of what I’ve read has been about either Uther or the more recent past. And I agree with Heshnel, it’s not time to talk about the mistakes of the past, nor to talk about how to avoid those mistakes in the future. That’s not why we’re here, is it?”

“It might be,” said Pallida. “Uther reshaped Aerb. He’s the one that made the athenaeums what they are today, and while the First Empire might have collapsed when he left, it laid the groundwork for the Second, and the Third. His fingerprints are all over Aerb, just like yours supposedly are.”

“We need to have some measure of you,” said O’kald. “Uther was less than perfect, in ways that only became apparent after he was gone.”

“I’ll need to know about those ways,” I said. “I still intend to find Uther.”

“You do?” asked Heshnel. “People have been searching for one reason or another for as long as he’s been gone.”

“And I might succeed where they failed,” I said. “I don’t think that’s fair, but it is what it is.”

“We should take a break,” said Amaryllis. “There are some things that we need to discuss as a group.”

“It’s been some time,” said Heshnel with a small nod. “We, as well, need to discuss. You’re free to use one of the houses, if you’d like, once your warder has checked things over.”

Grak grunted slightly at that.

“We’ll be taking our leave,” said Amaryllis. “There are others in our group that we’d be remiss if we didn’t speak with. If you mark off a spot for us, we’ll have a way to come back in.”

“They’re trying to escape,” said O’kald.

“We’re not,” I said. “We just want the safety and security of being behind our own defenses again, so that we can have a conversation in true privacy. Sorry, but we have the ability to return home for a day, and it makes sense to take it. You can’t keep us here against our will, not if you want to stay on good terms.” And not unless you want to have a fight about it.

“Very well,” said Heshnel with a wave of his hand. “I think we have some measure of you, at this point. If there’s a loss of contact, we know the pathways we’d need to follow to speak with you again.”
They knew about the Isle of Poran, and could find us there. I felt a little uncomfortable about having
given that information away, but they’d probably already gotten it from talking to the receptionist,
and if not him, then they might have gotten it from Masters. Still, the way that Heshnel said it didn’t
sit right with me.

“They’ll be talking to a devil,” said O’kald, nodding to Valencia.

“That’s an open question,” said Heshnel to his rocky companion. “One of many. He’s right. We
can’t reasonably expect to keep him here. I know that you don’t like this, and your objection is
noted.”

O’kald grumbled at that, but let it stand.

“We’ll expect you back in twenty hours,” said Heshnel. “That should be enough time for both of
us.”

We had to walk to the far edge of their encampment to get outside the wards that they’d placed
against the teleportation key. We were giving something away by going outside the range of the
wards, but it was hard to avoid. As I understood it, broad-spectrum wards against entads were too
difficult for anyone to use, while wards against individual entads were quite easy. Grak hadn’t
discussed it with us, not given the security concerns, but I thought it likely that Dehla hadn’t put that
many wards up to prevent travel, which meant not all that many that we’d have to go ‘outside’ for,
which meant we were narrowing down which method we were using. I was trying my best not to let
paranoia flavor my interactions with this new group, but the flow of information to them seemed like
something worth paying attention to, especially given all the things that we weren’t saying.

Grak put up wards to cloak what we were doing, just to be on the safe side, and then we were back
home.

“A fruitful trip?” asked Bethel as the pain rapidly faded. We had arrived in her custom teleportation
room, which was sequestered from the heavy wards that surrounded the rest of the house, allowing
us to actually enter, and ensuring that anything that teleported in would still have to get through all
the wards that protected the massive house.

“Juniper mutinied,” said Fenn.

“Give me a sec,” I said, as I tried to get my bearings.

“I agree, let’s take some time,” said Amaryllis. “But we are going to have to talk about it eventually.”

“I take it there were complications?” asked Bethel.

“Yeah,” I replied. “One after the other.”

“More of Uther’s baggage came to light,” said Valencia. “We met a number of his old allies. You
would have fit right in with them.”

“Oh?” asked Bethel. She smiled slightly, and glowed a bit as she allowed her illusion a little bit of
impossibility. “The man was not so wonderful as claimed?”

Ropey slipped down from my waist and to the floor, and slithered off into the house. I didn’t hate the
idea of the two of them as a couple, but Ropey communicating to her in private was a little bit
worrying. Bethel’s physical form disappeared once he was out the door, which I hoped meant that he
would fill her in. She could hear us either way, and she had enough processing power to listen to two
conversations at once, as unsettling as that was, especially without knowing how Ropey was going
to cast things.

“We don’t know much more than when we started,” said Amaryllis. “Luckily, the people we met
didn’t seem to know much either, at least, not as far as Uther was concerned.”

“You showed your desperation too much,” said Valencia.

Amaryllis cast her a critical eye. “Did I?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Valencia. “Pallida misread you, but I don’t think that Heshnel or Gemma did. You care
about the threats, and want to know more, and that desire is something they’ll try to leverage against
you, if they need to.”

“You were also a little too convincing in throwing me under the bus,” I said.

“Juniper, everyone at that table besides Fenn would have killed you to save Aerb,” said Valencia.
“That includes you.”

“Back to your old self?” I asked.

Valencia gave me a pitying look. “It’s very sweet of you to have believed me,” she said.

“Wait, that was all fake?” asked Fenn. “You … you faked being traumatized?”

“I needed to set them at ease,” said Valencia. “I was going to be removed from the conversation one
way or another, so I choose the path that would allow me some leeway to act.”

“But … your manipulations didn’t work on O’kald,” I said.

Valencia gave me another pitying look.

“What, that was part of the ploy too?” I asked.

“O’kald is the most dangerous one,” said Valencia. “He’s not likely to listen to reason, and that kind
of poisonous viewpoint can be dangerous in a group setting. If I could engender sympathy from
everyone else and dismissiveness from him, it would help to drive a wedge between them once we
were away. It’s part of why I wanted to be revealed in the first place.”

“Do you know what they’ll decide?” I asked.

“They won’t decide,” said Valencia. “They’re too fractious to come to an agreement on anything. As
a group, they were never set up to deal with you. They weren’t sitting around waiting on this kind of
development. If Uther had come back from the dead, they would act with unanimity. Now? At
best, they might be heading toward a compromise, which will almost certainly not be an attempt to
kill you. At worst, they might have a schism, in which case we’d have to fight off three or four of
them, possibly on a different field of battle, depending on how everything falls out.”

“Which ones?” asked Amaryllis.

“O’kald, Dehla, Gemma, and Everett,” said Valencia. “Pallida is weak-willed, Heshnel is too easily
seduced by the promises of power, and Thargox places an unreasonable amount of importance on
the fact that Solace is with us, though I have less of a read on it, given the means of communication
and the relative little speaking it did.”

“Val, you’re speaking too much like a devil,” said Amaryllis.
Valencia blinked. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s a bit draining, looking through that lens and seeing everyone’s faults.”

“So, wait, you could understand the lenssi the whole time?” asked Fenn.

“Yes,” said Valencia. “That was another benefit of being presumed powerless. The only thing that Dehla let slip was to imply that their other plan had been to take you to Blue Fields.”

“What?” I asked. “Blue Fields, as in, the exclusion zone with nuclear weapons? They were going to nuke me?”

“I believe so, yes,” said Valencia. “That’s consistent with the fatalism they presented when discussing that plan.”

“That implies a worrying level of commitment to the plan of killing me,” I said. “Like, really, really worrying.”

“I should point out they didn’t actually do that,” said Amaryllis. “Having a plan isn’t the same as enacting that plan.”

“Batman had a plan to kill all the members of the Justice League,” said Fenn.

“Batman doesn’t kill,” I said.

Fenn rolled her eyes.

“Valencia, do you have time for therapy?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t think any of us have time for that right now,” I said.

“Whether we have time depends on how long we want to wait before getting back to them,” said Valencia. “I don’t believe the friction between the two of them will prevent us from working properly as a team.”

“It already has,” said Grak.

“In what way?” I asked.

“You broke with the group,” said Grak. “Fenn went racing back for you. Both of you endangered all our lives.”

“They endangered their own lives,” Amaryllis clarified.

“Compromising one part of the party compromises all of it,” said Grak.

“That’s not how I would frame it,” said Amaryllis, pursing her lips. “I would call it blackmail.”

“That seems harsh,” I said.

“No, that’s exactly right,” said Fenn. “You stomped your foot down and said that you were going to kill yourself if we didn’t help.”

“I didn’t actually need your help, as it turned out,” I said.

“It’s time for therapy,” said Valencia. “Bethel, can I get a room prepared with three chairs, something gentle and soothing?” She turned her head slightly toward the ceiling, which had become standard
protocol for making requests. Our house offered a soft bing-bong sound in response.

I wasn’t terribly happy. I had never particularly liked therapy.
“Okay,” I said to Fenn as the train rumbled along the Lion’s Mane. I reached into the backpack, visualized what I wanted, and pulled out a candy in an orange wrapper. “This is a Reese’s.”

“Are we going to be sick from all the sugar?” asked Fenn.

“Do you get sick from too much sugar?” I asked. “Because this is important cultural understanding I’m giving to you.”

“Okay,” said Fenn with a smile. “If I get sick, you’re to blame. Explain your Earth candies to me.”

“Alright,” I said. I unwrapped the peanut butter cups. “Now, this is an Earth detail that only us Earthlings would know. You take the paper wrapper off the chocolate, and -- ah, see there?” I pointed to the center part of the paper cup, which had bits of chocolate and peanut butter stuck to it. “That’s a detail that you’d only know if you were from Earth,” I said. “Vintage Americana.”

Fenn stared at the residue. “Why?” she asked.

“You know, I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, obviously the chocolate sticks to the wrapper and then tears away because it’s partially melted and pretty thin without structural integrity, but the real question is why this travesty has been allowed to continue for something like eighty years. Probably it would cost an extra few fractions of a cent to change to a different wax paper that didn’t stick so much, which would mean millions of dollars in costs.”

“No,” said Fenn, smiling at me. “I meant, why are you showing this to me? But ah, this is one of those things you think is Serious, isn’t it, and now I’m in the know.”

“It is serious,” I said with a frown. “It’s very serious. This is the sort of person that I was before coming to Aerb.”

“The sort who complained about candy?” asked Fenn. “Yes, I suppose I can see that, Juniper Smith, railing against the,” she picked up the wrapper and looked it over, “The Hershey Company. You know, this has got nothing on how annoying elf candy is.”

“Elves have candy?” I asked. “I thought they mostly ate raw meat.”

“Oh, sure,” replied Fenn. “But you know how elf culture places all this importance on eating and consuming, right?”

“I really, really don’t,” I said.

“Well, I told you,” said Fenn. “Are you an inconsiderate hooman that doesn’t listen to his betters?”

“Right,” I said. “Right, right, I just meant that I don’t really ‘get’ the whole consumption thing. Like, you’re the only elf that I know even a little bit, and you don’t make a big deal out of your meals, so it’s hard to get a firm grip on what it actually means from the inside.”

“Well, meals are always a production,” said Fenn. “It’s the same attention to detail and precision that gets placed on almost everything else, and though the ritual aspects of it are simple, they have to be done exactly right, and if you don’t do them right, then -- well, it only really applied to me, and they
hated me, so you can guess that it wasn’t good.”

“Anything that I come up with is going to be worse than what it was,” I said. “You shouldn’t let my imagination run wild.”

Fenn rolled her eyes. “Anyway, most meals were put together by someone who did that as their jobs. They’d take the meat, slice it up, present it, and we’d all eat these arrangements, but the dessert, or thing that was sort of like a dessert, was always put together by the people eating it. The chef would bring out little bowls of things, mostly animal byproducts, and everyone would assemble their own little work of art, usually not more than a few bites worth. We’d present them to each other before eating.” She cupped her hands forward, like she was holding out a present for me.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I said. I frowned slightly. “Makes me think of frozen yogurt, actually. Wait, let me try something.” I dipped my hand back into the backpack and focused on my ‘order’.

“You look cute when you concentrate,” said Fenn. “So serious about candy.”

“It’s a dessert,” I said. “And I believe you meant I’m handsome.”

“That too,” said Fenn. She leaned forward and kissed me, and that continued on as I tried to make the perfect frozen yogurt for her, until eventually I pushed her away so I could present it to her.

“Ta da!” I declared.

Fenn looked down at my creation. It hadn’t come out quite the way I’d envisioned it, but the basics were there. It was a sloppy mix of base flavors, with heaps of different candy, dessert, and fruit piled on top, including four different syrups.

“There is nothing that I want more in this world than to bring you to meet my extended family and fumble your way through a dessert,” said Fenn. “It would be glorious. We’ll have to make sure that you can take ten or twenty elves in a fight before that though.”

I smiled at her. “Whatever would make you happy,” I said. “Now, we should eat this before it warms up too much.”

And that was how it went between the two of us, when we were alone and there was no pressure to talk about anything else.

The room was dimly lit by a handful of lamps, with the humidity of a conservatory and a wide array of plants hanging down above us. I wasn’t entirely sure why Bethel had decided on a semi-tropical theme for the room, but we just sort of accepted Bethel’s eclectic taste in rooms. A large, hexagonal terrarium sat to one side, with its own lighting, which showed a complicated scene made up of exotic plants, rocks, and water. It took me some time to realize it was supposed to be a stylized map of Aerb.

“Before we start, we need to have some ground rules,” said Valencia. “First, I won’t say anything to either of you that I know to be false. I’ll work primarily toward trying to fix the problems in this relationship, and if I feel that’s impossible, I’ll work toward making the split as amicable as possible.”

“You think that it might not be possible to save?” asked Fenn. She looked over at me. “Come on, it’s a fight, they happen.”

“So you’re not all that pissed?” I asked.
“Didn’t say that,” said Fenn. “I’m agreeing to this mostly to hear you get told off by our darling little devil girl.”

“Fights happen,” said Valencia. “But I don’t want either of you to get your hopes up about what I can do, especially given that such a belief would be destructive to the process. What we’re doing here is, essentially, completely untested and far different than anything a devil’s skills have been used for in the past. Devils put people together as couples sometimes, and even make them fall in love, but that’s only so that they can be broken apart again. I’m aiming for something a bit more permanent.”

I shifted in my seat. “You’re going to use social fu in order to weld us together?”

“Ah,” said Valencia. “You feel uncomfortable with that. Why do you think that is?” Fenn was staring at me.

“Well,” I said. “First, I don’t appreciate being called out, and second, I … kind of think that’s a big step? Like, I wouldn’t voluntarily alter my internal values to make Fenn my sole focus, and I wouldn’t ask, expect, or want her to do the same. The idea that she wouldn’t kill me in order to save Aerb is, frankly, insane. So I guess that I want us to go back to the way things were, rather than being bonded together forever.”

“What do you imagine the end state of your relationship as?” asked Valencia.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought that we had fun together. We enjoy each other’s company. I felt like we could keep doing that. Maybe in a year or two it would be something else, but right now … we haven’t been together for that long. Months, if you count the batches of letters. Less, if you don’t.”

“We’ve been through a lot,” said Fenn. “It feels like more than it’s been, at least to me. I’d hoped you felt the same. If you didn’t, maybe you should have said something sooner.” She folded her hands in her lap. “I offered to have your children.”

“You said someday,” I replied, but I felt a little bit of sting from that.

“You took what she said as notional or emotive, rather than earnest,” said Valencia. “It’s a recurring problem between the two of you.”

“You mean a problem with him,” said Fenn, frowning slightly. “I say things, and he brushes them aside.”

“You share culpability,” said Valencia. “You often deflect from unpleasant subjects, and you make a habit of being intentionally obtuse as a way of hiding your thoughts and feelings from others.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It makes it hard to tell when you’re serious or just making a joke. It gets really frustrating when you do all that and then expect me to be able to read your mind and know which is which, especially since you say things as a joke so you have cover in case you’re wrong.” It was the same way that she had flirted with me, come to think of it. Her flirts were jokes, but jokes that could either hint at the truth or be deniable as humor to make me uncomfortable. Jokes were a way for Fenn to protect herself. I had known that for a long time. I’d had some success in getting through them, but it was effort that I couldn’t always spare, and effort that I wasn’t always sure was wanted.

“She’s right that you’re dismissive,” said Valencia.

“I’m not,” I replied, a bit too quick. “I think of some things as jokes when they were only halfway meant as jokes, but that isn’t nearly the same thing as --”
“That’s not what I mean,” said Valencia. “You don’t treat Fenn as an equal in the same way that you treat Amaryllis as an equal.”

I tried my best to shift gears. “Is this about Amaryllis?” I asked Valencia.

“Ask her,” replied Valencia.

“Is it?” I asked Fenn. “Because you know that I chose you, and she cut her attraction toward me out entirely, and we went two months without anything happening --”

“You do not get points for not cheating on me,” said Fenn. She was glaring at me. “That’s basic decency. And no, it’s not at all about romance, you bonehead, it’s about how you treat us. If Amaryllis says something, you treat it like it’s serious, and if I say something, it’s just brushed off to the side, and I get why that is, I really do, but I also kind of hate it. I sometimes feel like I’m your girlfriend and nothing else to you.”

“You know that’s not true,” I said. “And besides, you’re the one who’s always joking about how you’re the laziest member of the group, and how you don’t care about anything so long as you can have a nap every once in a while.”

“Do you not notice that her words don’t match with what she does?” asked Valencia.

I stopped for a moment to think about that. “You mean the training she does with you?” I asked.

“Among other things,” said Valencia. “Do you understand that most of her efforts to assimilate Earth culture have been in service of forming a deeper bond with you?”

“I’m not sure that counts as work,” I said. I saw Fenn’s face fall slightly. “Sorry, but watching anime isn’t what I would call work, especially not when it’s not related to Aerb, and it’s not stuff that Arthur or I have ever seen.”

“Well, screw you,” said Fenn, crossing her arms. “And you get that a lot of elven culture is ripped off from Japanese culture, right? We’re carnivores, and most of our meals are delicately prepared slices of raw meat. That’s almost exactly sashimi, and sushi is like the bastard child of elven and human culture. And then past that, half of elven culture is the exact polar opposite of Japanese culture, like someone took wabi-sabi and decided to explore the opposite direction of it entirely, which seems like a thing you might have done and just forgotten about. Part of why I was ‘wasting time’ looking into Japanese culture is that I thought it was meant to be a reflection on elven culture, or maybe the other way around, and we could learn something from it.”

“You never told me that,” I said.

“I did!” shouted Fenn. “I tried, anyway, but I said wabi-sabi, and you apparently didn’t have any idea what that meant. Instead of asking me, so I could tell you, which is what you would have done with Mary, you just brushed me off and wanted to talk about something else instead. And that’s the whole frustrating thing about you. Sometimes you save my life with a blood transfusion, and sometimes you just don’t give a shit about me. The end point of that is me saying, ‘hey, I have a bad feeling, we should take off’. You left me behind so you could go play the hero.”

“You were the one that left me behind,” I said.

“I don’t think this is a productive line of conversation,” said Valencia. She shifted slightly. “We should focus on the root issues. Fenn, do you think you understand the reasons that Juniper might sometimes act dismissive toward you?”
“Because he’s so up his own ass that he can’t --” began Fenn.

“If you want this process to work, you’re going to have to show some charity,” said Valencia. “Don’t insult him.”

Fenn folded her arms. “You want me to be polite?” asked Fenn. Valencia nodded. “Okay, well. Juniper likes to monologue about things that he gets off on, whether that’s game design or tabletop games or Nash equilibria or worlds and how they’re designed. Right?”

I gave a curt nod. “You said you found it endearing.” I’d have stopped, if I thought that she wanted me to, or if she’d said something, like a grown adult should have done.

“I do find it endearing,” said Fenn. “The problem is that it’s a one way street. At best, you listen to what other people say and break it down into a Juniper-understanding of things.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I replied.

“May I?” asked Valencia. Fenn gave her a nod, arms still crossed. “What she means is that you have a way of modeling information as either facts or systems, reordering them into a framework that works within what you understand to be the totality of existence.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

“I’m not sure that the concepts fully translate,” said Valencia with a frown. “Just a moment, let me get a different devil.” Her face sagged slightly, but after not too much time she returned to the same studious expression she’d had before. “Ah, you understand the philosophical roots of the Second Empire, don’t you?”

“Sure,” I said. I was a little bit confused by the non-sequitur. “They were … I don’t want to say the equivalent to the Enlightenment, since Uther more or less started that on Aerb, but they were something similar, at a larger scale.” Also, Nazis.

“You think the way they did,” said Valencia. She left that sentence hanging there, all by itself, not quite an accusation to be answered, but somewhat close.

“They were top down,” I said. It was the second time in an hour that I’d had to defend myself as not actually being a fantasy Nazi. “Most of their mistakes were mistakes of thinking that the world would easily bend to the imposition of mortal rules. Even if that were true, a lot of their rules were, as I understand it, stupid.”

“So you don’t believe in rules?” asked Valencia.

I frowned slightly at that, then looked to Fenn. “Does this have anything to do with our relationship?”

“Do you think she’d be asking if it didn’t?” asked Fenn.

“Well, do you know where she’s going with it?” I asked.

“No,” said Fenn, frowning at me. “Probably she’s going to say that you’re bad at seeing things from someone else’s point of view.”

“Not quite,” said Valencia.

“Good,” I said, crossing my arms, then uncrossing them when that seemed like it would signal
defensiveness. “Because frankly, I think that I’m pretty good at seeing other points of view.”

A slight look of consternation crossed Valencia’s face, just for a moment, which I assumed was intentional on her part, either a piece of her strategy here, or maybe just a signal of her internal emotions she was allowing herself to express. “I would say that you’re good at disassembling a variety of viewpoints and reconstructing a version of them which maps cleanly to your view of the world and how things work within it.”

“That’s the same as what I said,” Fenn added.

“And that was one of the sins of the Second Empire?” I asked. “They ignored the world as it was and mapped their version of reality in places where the territory wasn’t conducive to that mapping? That seems like it’s just a sign that their map wasn’t very good to start with.”

“It’s why you have a hard time with the locus,” said Valencia.

I tried to think that over before I offered a response. “I will accept that as true.”

“It’s why you have a hard time with me,” said Fenn.

“I’m not actually convinced that I do,” I said. “Like, okay, you’ve been trying to do more but hiding it under the guise of not actually doing anything, and you make jokes so that no one will call you out on your imperfections because --” because you’re so horribly insecure “-- because you grew up with the elves, and they would slap you down whenever you did anything at all imperfectly.”

Fenn frowned. “Is that what you think of me?” she asked.

“I mean … yes?” I asked. “That’s not all I think of you, but if I had to break you down into a set of simple algorithms and their sources, then yeah, I would say that’s a big part of why you act the way you do. You joke a lot, and those jokes all serve some purpose, which is usually to cover for your failings, to push people away, or to avoid potential problems.”

“My failings?” asked Fenn. She was scowling at me.

“I really don’t think that’s such a shitty thing to say,” I replied. “I have failings, you have failings, even Val has failings, though none come to mind at the moment. I’m saying, if you fuck up, you treat it like a joke rather than owning up to it. Your default is to just brush things off, or bury them, and you try your best to not be serious, even when that’s what the situation warrants.” I shrugged. “I get it.” I glanced at Valencia, whose impassive look gave away nothing.

Fenn seemed a bit pissed, but she opened her mouth and then closed it again, and let out a deflated sigh. “I’ve been trying to get better,” she said. “I’ve been trying to tell you things, as much as I can, I’ve been trying to be more serious, I’ve been getting the crap kicked out of me by Val, it’s just, I don’t get rewarded for it, I get punished. I come looking for a seat at the table, and you push me away. You make me feel unwanted.”

“Come on,” I replied. “You know that I want you.”

“You want me in one specific way,” said Fenn. “You want me as the outwardly happy woman who hides her damages and acts as though she doesn’t give a shit about anything.”

“That’s not true,” I said.

“It is,” said Valencia. Her voice was soft. “A bit.”
“It is?” I asked.

“It may not be the way you think of yourself, but Juniper, the way you think of yourself is not the way that you actually are,” said Valencia.

“Do you remember after we came down the tower in Parsmont?” asked Fenn. “I was trying to talk about serious stuff with you and you were just getting distracted by, I don’t know, random bullshit about worldbuilding. And when I told you that I was going to try to be better, you just made this token effort to support me and then blew me off like it wasn’t actually important.”

“I had other things going on,” I said. “And you said that you didn’t want me to help, so it seems like there was nothing that I could have done to win. It was lose-lose.”

“There are a number of problems with your relationship,” said Valencia, taking the reins. “Fenn, you often want Juniper to act of his own accord, even when you’ve either expressed disinterest in his help or advice, or actively told him that you didn’t want it, even when you did. Juniper isn’t terribly good at reading those complexities.”

“I shouldn’t have to be,” I said. “I try to say what I mean, and everyone else should too.”

“Except that when Fenn does, you ignore or deflect,” said Valencia. “This is, in part, also due to your failure to read social cues. You have an image of Fenn, one which you prefer, which doesn’t match up to who she actually is, and you often mistake forthright behavior for coy, joking behavior.”

I frowned at that. “You’re saying, essentially, that I don’t treat Fenn with the complexity that she’s owed?”

I thought back to the letter that Fenn had written me, laying out how she’d had an illegitimate child she’d never told me about. She’d said that I had an image of her, and that she was worried that if I ever realized that she wasn’t who I thought she was, I wouldn’t love her anymore. At the time, I’d thought that was absurd, and it hadn’t changed my feelings toward her, but I was seeing echoes of that argument here, and I wondered whether she had been more right than I’d known. I was about to say that out loud, but I could immediately see what Fenn would say, ‘oh, so when Val says it, it’s worth listening to’, willfully forgetting for a moment there were reasons for me to trust Valencia’s logic more than Fenn’s.

“It’s deeper than that,” said Valencia. “There are disconnects between the two of you, both in terms of who you are, who you think you are, and who you think the other is. Those are the things that we need to very delicately reconcile.”

“Very delicately … because otherwise we’d fall out of love?” asked Fenn.

“One or the other would, yes, or neither would, but the relationship wouldn’t be salvageable,” said Valencia. “This is the reason I thought it would probably take a few hours of discussion. It would be better to resolve things over the course of weeks or months, a little bit at a time, but the problems between the two of you are already interfering with our ability to function as a group.”

“If we’re talking about what happened at Speculation and Scrutiny, I’m not even sure that’s true, given that things worked out in the end,” I said.

“You arguably both broke democracy,” said Valencia. Her voice was calm and understanding. I sort of hated the level of control she had. “One of the primary pillars supporting group unity has been kicked out from under us, and there’s nothing to replace it. Amaryllis agreed that any self-modification would be mediated by the group, and you’ve set a precedent that the will of the group
and established order could both be bucked at a moment’s notice. Grak was already only hanging on
by a thread, and without group unity, he’s likely to go through with leaving us once we have the
money he thinks he needs.”

“There’s nothing left of Darili Irid,” I said. “I talked to him about it, in private. Where’s he going to
go?”

“That’s not for me to say,” said Valencia. She turned away from me. “I’ve already collected too
many secrets, most of them on accident, and it’s not my place to reveal them all.”

“Do we need to be worrying about Mary?” asked Fenn.

“You need to be worrying about each other more,” said Valencia. She was looking at Fenn. “Juniper
needs you, but the specific way in which he needs you is as someone fun and unserious. He might
not put it like that, but it’s one of the reasons that he loves you. You’re his refuge from the stress he
faces. You need to remember that he’s young and doesn’t really understand what he’s doing in
relationships.”

Valencia turned to me. “Fenn is trying to be someone better. She can’t be what you need her to be,
not if she’s going to become that other person, at least not in the short term. If you want to keep
dating her, or eventually marry her, then you’re going to have to cultivate an appreciation for her that
extends beyond her ability to make you laugh and keep things down to earth. Unfortunately, you’ve
been ignoring all the parts of her that you don’t like, which is going to make that difficult.”

Valencia sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. “Just a moment, I need to get another devil.”

“We’re sure burning through them, aren’t we?” asked Fenn. “Sign of a good relationship, that.”

“Yes,” I replied. I wasn’t really in the mood for jokes.

“I’m really waiting on tenterhooks for the moment she fixes everything,” said Fenn.

“I can’t,” said Valencia, opening up her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Can’t, meaning, what?” I asked.

“I said that I wouldn’t lie,” said Valencia. “I’m trying my best, but devils aren’t suited for this. They
have the understanding of people necessary to manipulate, but all that fine-grained manipulative
power is geared toward improving people in the short term so that they can be broken down later on.
You both understand the problems now, right?”

“Not really,” I said. “I mean, we seemed fine yesterday.”

“No,” said Fenn. She was slouched down in her chair.

“No?” I asked.

“No,” said Fenn, more firmly. “I love you, but …” she trailed off. “I shouldn’t have sent you that
letter.”

“If you think that I love you less,” I began.

“No,” said Fenn. “I mean, I shouldn’t have been so much of a coward that I needed to send it in a
letter, and because I did, it screwed the whole thing up. I was waiting, really nervous about what you
would say, and then when you responded, it was, you know, a few weeks later for me, and a few
weeks later for you, and the whole thing sort of shifted us around without us ever being face to face, and when we came back together I think I’d changed a little, or at least I’d tried to, and it’s just felt off since then.” The words were coming out fast, slightly disjointed from one another, as though she’d thought about this a lot and was trying to get it all out now without fully remembering the things she’d been thinking in the shower. “I told you that I’d prepared a campaign of Arches, and you gave me this look like I’d pooped in your cereal. You think that I’m dumber than you, and we’ve both got soul magic, so it’s not really a secret that’s true, but I’ve still been wishing that you wouldn’t treat me like I was dumber. We’ve been out of sync. Partly it’s the backpack, and all the effort I’ve put into learning about Earth, which seems like it just annoys you, when you get it at all. That’s how I’ve felt since getting out of the time chamber. And we still haven’t really had an in-person talk about a bunch of the stuff that we said in letters, because I’m scared, and you’re scared too, but for you it’s more about not wanting to rock the boat because you’re happy where things are, and for me it’s just … feeling shitty about myself.”

We sat in silence for a moment. There were a lot of things that I wanted to say. Not talking about things was, in a way, our default mode. We’d spent a lot of time together, and most of it wasn’t spent talking about serious things, it was superfluous, light and airy, as she’d said back in Barren Jewel. I wanted to make up all sorts of justifications for why I was in the right, or claim that she was changing the script right when we’d gotten on stage.

The truth was, Valencia was right. The thing that I loved most about Fenn was how easy it was to be with her. It had felt natural, and Fenn was right, it had felt less natural since we’d gotten out of the time chamber, even if I felt like our letters should, by rights, have drawn us closer together. I didn’t know how to deal with her baggage. I barely knew how to deal with my own.

I stayed silent.

“Fix it,” said Fenn. She was looking to Valencia. “Just manipulate us however you have to. Say the magic words, even if they’re false.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can say that would fix the underlying issues,” said Valencia. Her face had fallen. “I could try, but you can’t convert someone in the course of a conversation, not unless you’re converting them in a direction they were already predisposed to. And … I’m not going to prey on your guilt or insecurities.”

I swallowed, feeling a hard lump in my throat. “What does this mean?”

“You have options,” said Valencia. “You can stay together, which I think would likely result in cycles of unhappiness as you fought and made up. It’s possible that might be enough for the both of you. Whether it is or not depends on the sorts of situations we find ourselves in. Maybe you could both grow into a different relationship from the one you have right now, one that’s less prone to argument and discontent.”

“Or we could break up,” said Fenn.

“That has its own problems,” said Valencia.

“Yeah,” said Fenn. She slammed her fist down onto the chair and broke something wooden in the arm.

“I don’t think it’s come to that,” I said. “Can’t we just resolve to be better? I’ll try to take you seriously, if you try to make sure that you’re not asking me to read through layers of social cloaking to know when you’re joking and when you’re not, or when you’re joking but also serious. Okay?”
“You’re suggesting a restructuring of your relationship, not just in the way that you relate to each other, but in what you both expect from a partner,” said Valencia.

“I -- yeah. So?” I asked. “If that’s what it takes, then yeah, I don’t just want to throw it all away.”

“No,” said Fenn. Her voice was distant, cold. “It was a mistake.”

“What was?” I asked.

“Us,” she replied. “I love you, that hasn’t changed, but … we need to take a break.”

“Are you seriously dumping me?” I asked. “How is that even going to work? I see you every day, we’re attached at the soul, we can’t just go back to … what, being friends?”

“We made good friends,” said Fenn. She kicked at the rug beneath her chair. “We can do that again, until I can figure some things out.”

“I don’t even think it makes any difference,” I said. “We’d have all the same problems as companions as we have right now, if I accept the premise that we do have problems.”

“I need to figure out how to be my own person,” said Fenn.

“And how the hells are you going to do that?” I asked. “We’re together all the time.”

“Yeah,” said Fenn. “Maybe that’s going to have to change, just a little bit.”

I stared at her. She wasn’t looking at me.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“You get that the whole reason I was ever with you and Mary was that it felt like home, right?” asked Fenn. “And if we’re not together, as a couple, I don’t think it’s going to feel like that, or maybe it will feel like all the shitty homes I’ve been a part of. I’d just be following along, risking my life for … I don’t know.”

“To do good,” I said. “The fate of Aerb is on the line. You can’t just bow out.” I could feel desperation clawing at me. I hadn’t gone into this therapy session thinking that things were really that bad between us, but it seemed like the chickens had come home to roost, all at once.

“I can bow out,” said Fenn. “I’ll talk with the others first, but … Juniper, we want different things.”

“We don’t,” I said. “I love you.”

“But the thought of being with me for the rest of your life is a little bit of an off note, isn’t it?” asked Fenn.

I clenched my teeth together, not saying anything, because she was right.

“I’m sorry,” said Valencia. Her voice was soft. “That’s not how I wanted this to end.”

Fenn got up and walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

“You’re not a great therapist,” I told Valencia. “I don’t know what you were planning on doing for a career, but I wouldn’t recommend couples counseling.”

“Are you mad at me?” asked Valencia. Her voice was still soft, and she was sitting in her chair like
she was worried that I was going to hit her.

“You don’t know?” I asked.

“You are,” said Valencia. “I screwed up.”

“Yeah,” I said. I closed my eyes. “At best, you overestimated your abilities, at worst, it was deliberate sabotage.”

“Juniper,” Valencia began.

“I’d assume that was what it was, except I don’t see what you gain from it,” I said. “Maybe you could see a way to make things work, but thought we’d both be better off in the long run if we didn’t have each other? I’d almost call that noble, but we asked you to fix things, and you fucked it up, deliberately, because you thought you knew better.”

“You’re hurting me,” said Valencia.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. She was crying, not sobbing, but with tears rolling down her face.

“They never believed me,” said Valencia. “My father and his people, they always assumed that they were talking to a devil, they thought that every cry for food or water was simply a plot of some kind or another. I lived with a gag in my mouth for much of my life. Unless I can prove myself, that’s how people will always treat me, once they know I’m non-anima. You were supposed to be different. You were supposed to have faith in me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was out of line. I think I’m just shook up from earlier today. Seeing you lie about what your powers were doing, it … it’s not about you, it’s about me feeling shitty about myself and looking for someone to blame.”

“It’s okay,” said Valencia. “I know your faults.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I didn’t know about you and Maddie until halfway through,” said Valencia. “It would have been helpful.”

“And … what do you know?” I asked.

“You dated her,” said Valencia. She shrugged. “It’s one of the sources of Fenn’s insecurity about your relationship.”

“Our relationship, which is now, apparently, over,” I replied. I felt hollow inside, like someone had scooped out a piece of me. “The whole thing with Maddie was complicated,” I said. “I don’t really want to get into it right now.”

“That’s fine,” said Valencia. “Amaryllis doesn’t know?”

“No,” I said. “Not really a thing that I ever want to talk about with anyone, ever.”

“Amaryllis would prefer to know,” said Valencia. “She has her narrative theories, and I have little doubt that whatever sins you think you’ve committed play into them. Raven is templated from Maddie, created from Maddie’s character, and narrative logic would dictate that we’re going to meet her within the next few years, if not considerably sooner.”
“Sure,” I said. I leaned back in the chair and looked over at the terrarium. “Sure, bring it all on, one horrible hit after another, what do I care?”

“You’re going to be okay,” said Valencia. “It might be a little bit awkward with Fenn, and it won’t feel good, but I think this is for the best in the long term, even if the timing isn’t ideal.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Jesus Christ, we have to go back and talk to those assholes about whether or not they want to kill me.” I leaned forward and rested my face in my palms. “This is dicks.”

“I agree,” said Valencia. “I wish that I could have done more. The problems are fixable, just not in the short term. If you value the relationship, you can work to get her back, the same as you’d do if you were in the relationship. Treat her well, pay attention to what she says, include her on important decisions, and ask her questions if you’re confused about what she means instead of just letting what she says blow past like a gentle, unimportant wind.”

“Poetic,” I said with a frown.

“I phrased it that way so you’ll remember it,” said Valencia.

“Yeah, I probably will,” I said. I let out a sigh. I didn’t feel like moving. “Cheer me up?”

“You want me to fill the role that Fenn was filling?” asked Valencia.

“It sounds terrible, when you put it like that,” I said. “Do you think that anyone would miss me if I just slunk off for a week or two to get my head on straight?” I looked up at Valencia. She was smiling at me. “What?”

“You’re so morose,” said Valencia, still with her faint smile. “But no, you’re not allowed to wander off and wallow while the world slowly collapses into dust around you. There’s work to be done, and unfortunately, you’re the only one that’s going to be able to do it.”

“Doesn’t seem fair,” I said.

Valencia raised an eyebrow.

“Right, sorry again, you know all about not fair, I guess on both sides of the coin.”

I paused and actually took the time to think, but my thoughts wandered to Fenn. What were the rules now? Was I supposed to not look at her? To just shut off the part of myself that was attracted to her? To literally do that, on the level of my soul? I had little doubt that was what Amaryllis would do, if faced with the same situation, especially given we were in the middle of something important that should ideally have my full attention. I wasn’t about to complicate matters further by bringing it to the Council of Arches, nor was I onboard with the idea of soul-surgery in any case, but I did give it enough thought that I had to consciously reject it.

There was this concept of grief as having five different stages, which wasn’t really that grounded in science, but nonetheless sometimes helpful for people to get a handle on their emotions. At times like this, I liked to run through them all as quick as I could, just to try them on for size.

Denial was easy. Of course Fenn and I weren’t really broken up, it was just a bump in the road, and we’d still be seeing each other enough that the sparks that had initially drawn us together would eventually rekindle something. We couldn’t share a room together anymore, obviously, but it wasn’t hard to imagine that while we were splitting things up, I could just say that I missed her, or ask for one last kiss, or something.
Anger was easier. If it had been such a problem for her, she should have said something sooner, instead of letting it fester, and if she knew me as well as she thought she did, she should have realized that I sometimes needed more direct prompting. There were a lot of things to be angry with Fenn for, and faults that I could pick at, little things that I had let slide at the time but were eager to come crawling back. I could tell, already, that it was going to sting that she’d been the one to dump me. I could feel a coiled serpent of anger inside me, a familiar one, all my worst impulses brought to life, and I had to remind myself that I was just trying anger on for size, it wasn’t actually what I *wanted* to feel. It didn’t get in more than a lick of flames.

(“You are better than her,” the serpent hissed. “If anyone was going to dump anyone, it should have been you that ended things with her.”)

Bargaining? I’d already done some of it, but I could have amplified it more, prostrating myself to Fenn in order to try to save what we’d had together, calling to mind all the good times we’d had together. Fenn, in her sundress, as we sat on a picnic blanket at the bottom of the bottle, wasn’t that worth staying together for? Couldn’t we have that again? It felt like I had just let her go without a fight, and maybe that was a sign that I agreed on some level that we shouldn’t be together.

I’d had enough depression in my life that I didn’t need to simulate how that might feel. It was already tinting how I saw the world, crowding out the serpent of anger that was my next-strongest feeling. I couldn’t really afford depression at the moment. Valencia was right, the timing was terrible.

Of the five stages, that only left acceptance. I tried to imagine a world where I had made peace with Fenn and I no longer being a couple, and I just couldn’t do it. Logically, I knew how I would behave, but it was like looking at a different person in my mind’s eye, and I couldn’t see how I would ever bridge the gap between myself and that person.

I looked to Valencia. “Can you see how this goes for me?” I asked.

“I can’t read the future,” said Valencia. “I can’t even read minds. My best guess is that things will be awkward for a while, you’ll try your best to be more aware and accepting of Fenn. Whether you’ll succeed or fail … I think you’ll succeed, personally, but it might go either way.”

“You’ll promise to try your best to manipulate us?” I asked.

Valencia shifted in her seat. “No,” she said. “I don’t actually think you’re that good together.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I didn’t sabotage you,” said Valencia.

“I didn’t say it,” I replied. *Not that I would have to, if you can read it on my face.* “Sorry, can you drop the devil now? I don’t really think it’s necessary for this. If we’re just talking, I mean.”

“I’ll keep it for now,” said Valencia, folding her hands. “And I’m letting you know that, rather than just faking it, because I think it’s important that you know I’ll be honest with you about that. I’m sorry that I faked it when I used the infernoscope, but I would probably do it again.”

“Okay,” I said. I stood up from my chair and stretched. “Can I ask why you think we make a bad couple?” *No, why we made a bad couple, past tense.*

“Right now, or in the future?” asked Valencia.

“Either,” I said. “Both. I mean, I know what you said about us having different needs …” I trailed off. I didn’t really like thinking about it, but I did want to hear what Valencia said.
“In a proper relationship, both people become better for it,” said Valencia. “Fenn was clinging to you because you were the first person in a very long time, maybe ever, who didn’t mark her as being abnormal.” I wondered whether that included Amaryllis, but held my tongue. “She wasn’t making you a better person. You weren’t making her a better person. You indulged each other, and annoyed each other when that indulgence wasn’t there. There was no introspection on the nature of the relationship, not that there needs to be, if you’re naturally responsive to each other’s needs … which you weren’t.”

“And if we do change?” I asked, still frowning. “You still think we wouldn’t be good together?”

“There are possibilities,” said Valencia with a shrug. “Telling you about them makes them a little less likely, I think. You already struggle with entitlement, in part due to your unique position within the world.”

I grit my teeth, just a bit. “Meaning that if you tell me what I need to do, I’ll do it with the expectation that I’ll get something out of it, and that will be less effective than simply doing things for their own sake, or because of internal motivations? That kind of thing?”

“Yes,” nodded Valencia.

I let out a sigh. “Okay,” I said. “Sure, I’ll just … try to be better. And if I fail, you tell me, okay?”

Valencia nodded.

“Alright, let’s go in for round two with these people, I guess,” I said with a sigh. “And let’s hope I’m not required to be chipper.”

The worst thing about going to school in a small town was that you couldn’t actually escape your problems or your past. That was triply true in high school, since I had to see the same old people in the hallways. Victor Clark, the boy I’d attacked because he’d said the thing I least wanted to hear at the time I least wanted to hear it? I still had classes with him, even after the school administrators shuffled our schedules around so they could minimize that conflict. We were a class of a hundred fifty students, which meant seeing the same people over and over again, unavoidably, especially in the electives. The anger I’d felt toward him was slow to fade, given that every time I saw his face I thought about his stupid, guileless face saying, ‘God works in mysterious ways’, as though he’d meant to comfort me.

I sometimes thought about what it would be like if we’d been young adults living in New York City or some other equally large metropolitan area where you never saw the same person twice unless you really wanted to.

I saw Tiff a lot. I had three classes with her, and we ate lunch during the same period. We never actually formally broke up, but then, we’d never actually formally been dating either. She always made me feel like a wounded animal, like I was just limping along hoping to happen on food and shelter that I didn’t have the energy to find for myself. When I passed her, it was in stony silence, not wanting to say or do anything that would invite her to say something to me. I was always disappointed when she didn’t.

My fantasy version of Tiff looked hopeful at seeing me pass by. Fantasy Tiff was always on the verge of trying to break the ice with me, always trying to get me to warm back up to her. My wishful version of my ex-girlfriend missed me terribly and wanted nothing but to comfort me. It wasn’t actually like that, even if it was sometimes hard to see past what was in my head, or what I wanted the truth to be. Tiff wasn’t quite afraid of me, but she recognized that there was something ugly in
me, and maybe that made her sad, and maybe she did want to fix me, but she wasn’t ever on the verge of reaching out to me.

There were other bridges I burned a little more thoroughly, and I was stuck with seeing those failures too. After the Fel Seed incident … well, it’s usually true that people think about themselves more than they think about you, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t think about you at all, and I suffered my share of dirty looks.

Our little group on Aerb was close, maybe a little too close, and the thought of those same looks from them had my stomach in knots.
Beast of Burden

I got some awkward looks when I came into the common room. Everyone was seated around the large center table except for Valencia and myself. We didn’t have assigned seats, except for Grak and Solace, who needed special chairs to make it less awkward to sit at the table, but we did have places we normally sat. That defined order had been thrown out though; Fenn was sitting across from where she usually did, having given up her seat next to me. I sat down and tried not to look at Fenn. I assumed that she’d told them, or that maybe Bethel had, given that our house had surely heard everything.

Amaryllis cleared her throat. She’d changed out of her armor, and was wearing athletic clothing I thought she’d probably gotten from Earth. “We need to talk about next steps,” said Amaryllis.

“I’m not going with,” said Bethel. Her imperious form was in her usual (illusory) seat.

“I missed something?” I asked, grateful that the topic of conversation wasn’t on me and Fenn.

“Amaryllis would wish to wield me like a weapon, much as her ancestors did,” said Bethel.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “That’s not my intent at all. You’re a valuable member of this party, but if you’re stationary, then you have little input on whatever happens when we’re abroad, and we can’t make use of your considerable skills.”

“You could bring those people here,” said Bethel. “They would find a warm welcome in my domain, from how they’ve been described to me. And if they were lacking, then we would be better served where they could experience my might in a direct manner.”

“They wouldn’t allow it,” I said. “Sorry, I don’t really have a handle on the complete argument, but they have a warder, and that warder would take one look at you, then sound the warning and have everyone leave. Right?”

“Possibly,” said Grak. “The signature is unique. The magics are strong and readily apparent. Everett has some knowledge of the house’s power. He might balk. He did not seem entirely present.”

“So they’re allowed a magic fort and we’re not?” asked Fenn. “Lame.” Her voice sounded off. She was making an effort to talk, but I had little doubt she was in the same confused fog of emotion that I was. She didn’t sound like Fenn; she sounded like Fenn pretending at being Fenn.

“It would be best for us to meet on neutral ground,” said Amaryllis. “If they were going to attack, then it would be best for them to attack right when we returned, during the disorientation of our arrival. It’s what I would do. They may or may not know what method we’re using to cross the distance, and we can teleport in anywhere we have a worldline, but they’ll still have us at the advantage because we’ll be on their home turf.”

“You’re turning adversarial against them,” I said.

“I’m assuming the best and preparing for the worst,” said Amaryllis. “I think they have vital information, and I would like more than what we were able to get from our first round of conversation with them. The idea of the world ending two years from now, and the future being so uncertain that it could go from five to two so rapidly, should put a healthy fear into all of us.”

“It does,” I said. “But we’re going to need allies, and I pretty firmly believe that you don’t get allies by being shitty to them. They let us go as a gesture of goodwill, and replying to goodwill with a
wary stance doesn’t help us.”

“What do you propose?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I was thinking that I could tell them more. I could invite them to help solve some of our problems. I could explain the game interface and what we know about it, in case it helps to explain something unexplained about Uther and how he operated, or what happened to him.”

“Do we care?” asked Fenn, folding her arms. “Seems like we have better things to worry about than where he ran off to.”

“We care,” I said. “We care deeply. He left, and the problems stopped, or at least were stopped by outside parties. If we can get to the bottom of why he left, or even how he left, or what happened to him if he didn’t leave, then we can do an end run around all the other problems.”

“We need to look at it on a meta level,” said Amaryllis.

“I’m really not in the mood for narrative,” I said.

Amaryllis shifted in her seat. “It’s not necessarily about narrative,” she said. “If we take as a given that Juniper is cosmically significant, and all signs point to that being the truth, then we have to say that the same is likely true for Arthur, if only by extension. The question is whether our efforts should be focused on cosmically significant endeavors, or those that are simply a natural part of the world.”

“Assuming that we can distinguish between the two?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “But we have your quests, which should provide some metric for us to go by.”

“I have a lot of quests,” I said. “I don’t think that they’re all necessarily cosmically significant, if that’s the term we’re using. There are too many enpersoned exclusion zones for them to all be meaningful, I think.”

“We could look at Uther’s life again,” said Grak. “We could take wisdom from what he did and did not do.”

“Or we could elect to assume that he did things wrong,” said Bethel.

“That was what I meant,” grumbled Grak.

“We don’t know enough,” I said. “We don’t even know if he was playing by the same rules. If we had different rules -- I mean, it seems like we did, doesn’t it? His so-called Knack seems stronger than whatever you’d call the thing that I have.”

“Washater,” said Fenn, from across the table.

“And … what does that mean?” I asked. Step one of getting back on the right footing with Fenn was, after all, treating her more seriously. I had no idea how things were going to look between us going forward, but I could at least see the shape of things.

“Washater,” said Fenn. She seemed unaccountably annoyed that I’d asked. “Just an elven word that fits pretty well.” She paused slightly. “It means a system of rules, basically. I don’t think you’d want to call it a game.”
“No,” I said with a nod. “I don’t even really think that mentioning narrative is the right way to go. Maybe we could phrase it as a godly test? Both ‘game’ and ‘narrative’ seem trivializing to me.”

“That aside, narrative is the term that Arthur used,” said Valencia. “It’s in our best interests to make cleaving distinctions where we can. Juniper, you did very well when you pointed out that your companions were all sexually appealing to you.”

I frowned at her, but her look was the picture of innocence. “I’d rather not talk about that,” I said. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“All companions?” asked Grak. He was speaking toward Valencia, but I noticed an eyebrow raised in my direction.

“A number of those across the table found the argument compelling,” said Valencia. “Their collective was formed in preparation for Uther’s return, in order to deal with him. You’re not what they expected. The more you can prove that you’re a different presentation of the same problem, the better. It probably wouldn’t hurt to simply hand them a stack of our notes on the differences between Arthur and Juniper.”

“We would have to scrub the notes,” said Amaryllis. “There are things we didn’t tell them, and we would want to stick with the sanitized version of events, unless there’s more that we want to reveal.”

“You’re still treating them as adversarial,” I said.

“Some of them are,” said Valencia. “I’m not entirely sure what O’kald, in particular, will do if the group rejects his call to violence. That’s also a problem because he’s likely to be their most difficult opponent for us to kill.”

“How long have you been channeling devils today?” asked Solace.

Valencia frowned. “I haven’t stopped for more than a few seconds at a time since we got to Speculation and Scrutiny,” said Valencia. “I don’t think that there are any side effects though.”

“You said that it takes an act of will to recognize that the preferred suggestions presented by your borrowed skillset might have moral consequences,” I said. “Even if there aren’t side effects, you’re still expending mental effort, and if you get worn down, the devil’s biases will start to come through more.”

“I don’t think she said anything too shocking,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a judgment of combat prowess, and important for us to take into consideration.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I worry,” added Solace, holding up a hand to show that she was willing to relent.

“We still need a plan for meeting with them tomorrow,” said Amaryllis. “Joon, you think we should do something approaching full disclosure?”

“Yes,” I said. “Maybe. I’d like to lay out some of the basics about the washater to them, and possibly ask them whether they know anything about the addictive power of the level ups. Either Uther had something similar and there might be some solution that they know, or it will help distinguish me as being different from him. Either way, I worry that I’m not that far from the next one, and if the problem has a solution, it’s something I want solved.”

“Sure,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll spend some of tonight making a proper presentation. Bethel, would it be
acceptable for me to use the time chamber for that?” Her wording was careful, pointedly so.

“If you’d like,” nodded Bethel. “I have few compunctions about you taking advantage of it for brief personal matters. I should note that when the tuung are using it, you won’t be able make those quick trips in the same way.”

Amaryllis let out a sigh. “Yes, I figured as much,” she said. “And we’re a week away, though the Republic seems like a waste of time and resources if we’re going to be dealing with the end of the world in two years’ time.”

“We’ll save the world,” I said. “The library has always been wrong in the past. That’s kind of the point.”

Amaryllis nodded, but still seemed glum.

“I have a question,” said Solace. “We spoke before about those quests with cosmic significance and those without. It’s an issue I’d like to revisit.”

“Ah,” said Amaryllis.

“I was wondering which sort the quest to restore the locus was considered,” said Solace. Even when she wasn’t making much of an effort, Solace always sounded calm and understanding, so when she was actually trying, it was only like shifting a few gears up, not a change in general strategy. It was still noticeable.

I squirmed in my seat. Amaryllis saying ‘ah’ was much more understandable now that Solace had spelled it out.

“We don’t actually know how to solve that quest,” I said. “We don’t have any leads, you tried for years or decades to find those leads but came up short, and the only real option at this point seems to be leveling up again and hoping that I can unlock something else within the washater.”

“No,” said Solace. “You could attempt to increase loyalty.”

“That’s not something that I’ve had much success with in the past,” I said. “Pursuing loyalty with mercenary intent is sort of destructive to the process. Maybe I’m just bad at it, but that’s been my experience. I can try to maybe open myself to the possibility, but --”

“How much time have you spent in the bottle since we were reunited?” asked Solace.

“Not much,” I said. “Point taken. If you can get me in and out, then … I guess I’m going to need a new room anyway.”

“You are?” asked Grak.

“Why?” asked Amaryllis.

I looked between the two of them, then to Fenn. “Uh, Fenn and I … broke up.”


“Wait,” I said. “She was really helpful, I thought. And Fenn didn’t tell you?”

“I didn’t want to make a big thing of it,” said Fenn. “I really didn’t want to have a group meeting about it.”
“She said that it could have gone better,” said Amaryllis. She looked back and forth between the two of us. “You broke up? I need some time to think about this.”

“We should leave them alone,” said Grak. “We’ve spoken enough for one night. We should save our voices.”

“It’s a shame,” said Solace. “I thought you made a wonderful couple. Very carefree.”

“That was part of the problem,” said Valencia.

“Was it --” Amaryllis began.

“It wasn’t sabotage,” said Valencia with a frown. “I know that’s not what you were going to ask, but it’s what you were thinking.”

“You were supposed to fix this distraction,” said Grak.

“Oh, sorry that our relationship is a distraction, gods forbid we have feelings,” said Fenn with a huff.

“For what it’s worth, I was trying to keep things quiet so we didn’t have to have a big talk about it. And if that’s what we’re doing, then I should probably just go.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “It’s not something that we should be talking about as a group anyway, I agree with that, but the timing of internal conflict is both unfortunate and suspicious.”

“Suspicious?” I asked. “You suspect narrative?”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “Regardless, there are a few other issues that we should discuss, and more detail we should go into with regards to the pros and cons of strategy. I’m planning to spend two days in the chamber to get things in order. Anyone can come in with me, if they’d like to combine our intellects, but I’m not sure that’s necessary, especially since the chamber still isn’t an ideal place to spend a few days, and time is a resource we need to conserve. I’d also like to do a group reading of Degenerate Cycles, if anyone else is interested.”

“We only have the one copy,” I said. I’d taken it from Heshnel, same as he’d taken the Monster Manual from me.

“I should be able to make more through the power of illusion,” said Bethel. “It would mean giving up my physical form, naturally, but only for the duration that the chamber is in use.”

“Let me know what you find,” I said. “The idea of being in a cramped space for a handful of days doesn’t really appeal to me.”

“Me either,” said Fenn. There was a bit of hard edge to her voice. She was still angry with me, it seemed. I hadn’t expected her to change her mind at the drop of a hat, but I’d hoped that she’d be heartbroken, not pissed off.

“Then perhaps Juniper can spend the night with me in the bottle,” said Solace.

“Sure,” I said.

“There’s one last issue before we break,” said Amaryllis. “We need to talk about decision-making within the group.”

I pursed my lips, not liking the sound of that. “I’m sorry for what I did,” I said. “Things were happening fast, we didn’t have time to talk, and if I had concrete objections, or even weak
objections, I should have raised them.”

“That’s appreciated,” said Amaryllis. “But I don’t think that it gets to the heart of the issue. The problems that we face appear, to me, to be ones regarding internal structure. A fireteam might take an informal poll, in order to gauge the wisdom of some course of action, but it’s also got an unambiguous leader and a clear chain of command. I think we need that. Sometimes time is tight, and it’s often the case that acting decisively in a suboptimal way is better than waiting, whatever plan you might come up with given the extra time.”

I frowned slightly. “Sure,” I said. “But that leaves the issue of who our group leader is.”

“It should depend on the needs of the individual mission,” said Amaryllis. “With a default to you if we haven’t planned for whatever mission we find ourselves on.”

“Me?” I asked, somewhat surprised. “I’d have thought that you’d pick yourself.”

“You’re strictly better than I am at a great deal of things,” said Amaryllis. “You also have access to information and resources that I’ll never have. If we were going into Anglecynn to retrieve something from the libraries there, it might make sense that I would be the one calling the shots, but absent a specific scenario, I think it makes the most sense for it to be you.”

“Juniper is worse at making dispassionate decisions,” said Valencia.

“I do not know if that matters,” said Grak. “Dispassion should not be our main criteria.”

“I would prefer decisions with a bit of emotion, speaking for myself,” said Solace.

“The only criteria should be the expected speed and correctness of decisions made,” I said. “And, obviously, no one should take the mantle of leadership if they don’t want it.” I glanced at Fenn when I said that, and she raised an eyebrow in my direction. “With that in mind, I’ll be the default if everyone wants me to, but I’m not actually sure that I’m the best choice. Ideally, we’d look at my successes and failures, and stack them up against Mary’s successes and failures, if we’re the two primary candidates.” I hesitated just a fraction. “Unless someone else wants to throw their hat in the ring.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “I’m bowing out.”

I stared at her. “This had better not be about narrative,” I said.

Amaryllis shifted in her seat. “I don’t think I need to justify myself,” she replied.

“You do, if the reason that you’re doing this is that you’re worried the Dungeon Master doesn’t like you taking charge,” I said. “We’re not going to make decisions on the basis of what we think the Dungeon Master wants. I don’t think that he wants us to make choices that way.”

“So you’re ordering me to take charge?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said with a sigh. “I just want to know that your reasoning is sound.”

“If there’s a specific instance where I think I’m better, I’ll gladly take the reins,” said Amaryllis. “As it stands, I think you have a stronger grasp of the fundamentals of our situation, and special knowledge that I can’t yet replicate. I’ve read a fair number of the source books you’ve used, but that’s not enough, especially not given how much inspiration Aerb takes from your own particular styles of play. Do you remember in the prison, when we came across those statues? You argued that it was a trap, and if I had been team leader then, I would have walked right into it even if you’d
warned me.”

“That was a long time ago,” I said. “You know more now than you did then, and you trust me more. I hope.”

“Juniper, if you don’t want to be a leader, you can say that,” said Solace.

“No,” I said. I squared my shoulders. “I’ll take a position as default leader. I just want to make sure it’s for the right reasons.”

“Then that’s settled,” said Amaryllis.

“I want to know that if I say we should get out, I’ll be listened to,” said Fenn. There was something timorous in her voice.

“I will,” I said. “But just because I listen doesn’t mean that I’ll decide in favor of the course of action you suggest.”

“Fine,” said Fenn. She got up and left the room without saying another word.

“I’m hoping that’s not going to be a problem,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

I spent the night in the bottle, and put some effort into getting to know the locus. My heart wasn’t really in it, and my presence was mostly to appease Solace.

“My uncle owned a horse,” I said. I was leaning against the locus, who was curled up and half-asleep. She felt warm, though not quite feverish, which was good, because the air was cool. Bethel had crafted an open-air patio for the bottle to sit in. It was held in a stylized bronze hand that jutted up from the sod surface, surrounded by greenery and rocks from Earth, and exposed to the light that fell on the Isle of Poran. From the inside, it almost made the bottle seem invisible, in a way that being set on the grass at the foothills of the Spine of the World didn’t. It was about the best environment for the locus’ domain to be in. I felt guilty for not having spent more time in the bottle, but Solace had the only easy way in, and Bethel was pretty adamant that we were living in her house, not in the house inside the bottle.

I missed Fenn. We’d been sleeping in the same bed since after Solace had been reborn, and I’d gotten used to feeling her next to me. The stars were out and it was late, but I was still up. I wasn’t sure whether the locus slept out of habit or because she needed to, but she was beside me, halfway nodding off. I was talking to her, not really trying to bond, but because I wanted a better therapist than Valencia had been. There was still a thought at the back of my mind that Valencia had sabotaged things, and while that might have been for noble reasons rather than selfish ones -- well, no, I couldn’t think like that, because it wasn’t like I could actually have her prove her intentions to me.

“I could fight her, I guess,” I said. “She can’t do social manipulation and combat at the same time, so maybe I could fight her, and then ask her questions at the same time. If she didn’t sabotage us, then she’d probably never forgive me, but so far as I can see, that’s about the only way that I would ever know if she’d been trying to tear us apart. And obviously there’s some culpability on her part, because even if she was telling the truth that she wanted us together, she wasn’t willing to. I don’t know, let us have our stupid, unhappy relationship. It wasn’t actually that unhappy though.”

The locus snorted.
“Yeah,” I said, “My mind is wandering. I was going to tell you about my uncle’s horse.” I paused. “I don’t actually understand you, and I don’t know how much you can understand me. There was a play, maybe you’ve seen it, called _The Star War_, which was based off some movies from Earth, where I’m from. Anyway, there was this character, Chewbacca, and he’s a companion to this other character, Han, and some of the humor comes from the fact that Han is always responding to Chewie, but the audience is left to imagine what it was that Chewie said. They do that with R2D2 too. Anyway, that’s what I was doing, pretending that I knew what you meant as a kind of joke. I didn’t want to leave you out of the loop.”

The locus snorted again.

“Right, the horse,” I said. “Horses on Aerb are about how they are on Earth, but on Earth there isn’t a whole lot of competition. I mean, cars, sure, but historically, the horse was dominant. On Aerb, there are all kinds of animals you can ride, birds, lizards, turtles, wolves, moose, whatever I’d dreamed up or stolen from someplace else, or had to find some way to justify because someone wanted one in one of my games. You know?”

The locus was silent.

“So if you picture my uncle’s horse as being just a regular horse, you’re pretty much right,” I continued. “It wasn’t a giant, wild stallion or anything, it was just a horse kitted out in all the horse stuff, I don’t know, a bridle, saddle, reins, that sort of thing. My uncle thought I’d have a fun time learning to ride, and I didn’t want to back down just because the horse scared me. I think I’d heard one too many warnings about how I should stay the hell away from a horse’s back end because a single kick to the head could leave me braindead, and that message stuck a little more than my uncle had maybe intended.” I let out a breath. “So I was about ten or eleven or something, and I got up on this horse, and my uncle gave me a bunch of instructions that I don’t remember anymore, stuff about steering with my knees, and I was just scared out of my mind, and thinking that it was stupid for people to do this. How had the first people to ride horses done it? What intrepid soul had figured it out?” I thought about that for a moment. “Maybe that wasn’t how I thought about it at ten, but it’s how I think about it now.”

It was cold enough that I could see the fog of my breath. “Anyway, riding the horse was great. My uncle was leading it around and giving me instructions, and I thought, you know, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I was having a good time. But when my uncle let go of the reins, the horse bolted. It started galloping as fast as it could go down the gravel road, and I was hanging on for dear life. We got a half mile away before my uncle came by with an ATV. The horse didn’t really have plans for me, he might have just been spooked, or wanted to run, or I just wasn’t controlling him how he was used to being controlled or something.”

I was fairly sure from the way the locus’ breathing had changed she was asleep.

“I mean, the parallels are pretty obvious,” I said. “Not that I’m calling Fenn a horse.”

_Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 6!_

I smiled at that. “But relationships, for me, are like riding a horse that first time was. Scary, but kind of exhilarating, and then the horse just decides to go its own direction, and I’m left clinging onto it, hoping that I’m not going to get thrown off. There’s not a Relationships skill, you know? There’s just loyalty, and I have no idea what the hell that’s tracking, because apparently people can still break up with you even if they’re very loyal to you. Which is good, I guess, in that it means loyalty isn’t mind control, or maybe just not that particular kind of mind control, but … I’ve got some really big questions about loyalty right now.”
The Six-Eyed Doe stood up, and I stood up too, because I had been leaning against her. She circled around, then leaned down in front of me, tipping slightly to press her flank against me. I touched her once, uncertain.

“You, uh,” I said. “You want me to ride you?”

She didn’t respond.

“Sure,” I said. “But I only ever had that one horse-riding experience, and swore them off after, so be gentle.”

I climbed up onto the locus’ back. Her pelt was soft to the touch, and she was making an effort to keep me centered. Riding the locus wasn’t something that I would probably have done in normal circumstances, but I felt a kind of energy in the air that came with a cold night. I was also riding a high from getting a loyalty point, but it wasn’t just the thrill of seeing the number go up, it was from having it go up from a joke. Most of the loyalty increases I’d seen had been from somber, serious things, or more lately, from me putting effort into not being a shit about things. It was nice to have a loyalty point from being silly.

The locus didn’t go terribly fast, which I appreciated. I had seen both Fenn and Val ride her before, and she’d gone at breakneck speeds for them, letting the wind whip their hair. For me, the Six-Eyed Doe moved at a gentle trot. It was good, except it was giving me too much time to think. There were too many people to deal with, and I couldn’t trust them all to be straightforward, not even Fenn anymore. Valencia could cloak whatever she was doing, and I couldn’t tell whether my paranoia was justified or not. Amaryllis was attempting to manipulate the narrative. And Fenn … I wasn’t giving her what she wanted, whether because I had failed as a boyfriend, or because it had been doomed from the start to be something brief.

“Faster,” I said.

The Six-Eyed Doe picked up the pace, stepping with preternatural grace and delicacy over rough terrain, which smoothed out the ride. I tried to use my knees to steer a bit, though given the intelligence of the locus, it was more like giving her a suggestion than anything else.

(I’d made a conscious choice to switch to thinking of the locus as a ‘her’, mostly out of mercenary interest in bringing us closer together. ‘It’ was impersonal. To my surprise, changing my internal narration did actually help a little bit.)

I tried to shut off my brain. I didn’t want to be thinking. Worldbuilding has always been my go-to for that, before Arthur had died, but after, there were too many reminders of him in everything I thought of, and the results were always twisted and cruel. Videogames had been a standby, but those weren’t really an option on Aerb. Everything else had been tainted with the memory of Arthur; he was the one that I talked with most about books and movies.

I managed it, somewhat, but as soon as I was in the moment, I was thrown right back out of it again.

*Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 7!*

That one I was a little less comfortable with. I probably should have turned as much of the HUD and notifications off as I could, if I was going to be with the locus. The thought that the locus enjoyed me losing myself in the moment as an escape from something approaching depression was … well, unsettling. Something had happened to Solace when she’d come back and been aged up, and I had no real choice but to hope that there hadn’t been any horrible changes in the process. The locus liking me more (or whatever loyalty was actually a proxy for) because I was seeking mindlessness as
an escape didn’t really say too much that was good about the locus.

She could sense something had changed, and slowed down a bit, until she’d trotted back to the tree house where I was going to be spending the night. I was feeling a little bit ill, brought back down to reality by the game. It was tempting to blame everything that happened on the game, or on the Dungeon Master, but I had never been a terribly big believer in free will, and one of the ways of making sense of the world if you assumed there was no free will was to decide that it still mattered what you decided to do, even if everything was all predetermined.

“Sorry,” I said as I climbed down. “There’s just a lot going on up here right now.” I tapped the side of my head. “You helped, but the game -- the washater -- was being intrusive.”

My mind went back to the achievement I’d gotten, ‘Petite Mort’, and the other one I’d gotten a progress update on, ‘A Key For Seven Locks’. There were a lot of things about Aerb that made intuitive sense to me, things that had a clear cause and effect. Other stuff … not so much. Those achievements seemed scummy for the sake of being scummy, intrusive and invasive just to show me that my life wasn’t wholly my own. It was the Dungeon Master whispering in my ear, just a bit, saying, ‘this is a game’. What was the point though, especially when I’d already rejected that notion?

Solace had long since gone to bed, and I got into one of the cubbies, making sure not to pick the one that Fenn and I had slept in. I didn’t want to wake up to those sorts of memories.
We left Bethel behind again.

She and Amaryllis got in a fight about it, or at least as much of a fight as Amaryllis usually got into, which amounted to speaking a little more passionately and quickly than was necessary. The problem was, Bethel didn’t wholly care about us. The idea of being a mobile home, or worse, only technically a home by the definitions that her Anyhouse ability allowed, seemed somewhat abhorrent to her. To temporarily be a thick staff with a fairy house on top was, it seemed, an experience reserved for special occasions.

Valencia and Amaryllis got in their own fight when Amaryllis asked Valencia to kill a devil and assist in the conversation. Valencia objected strongly to the idea of using her abilities against another party member, because she knew as well as anyone that people could be talked into doing things that they didn’t really want to do, and would later regret. She had thousands of years of infernal experience with precisely those sorts of arrangements: it was one of the things that devils were known for. That led their conversation down a different track, with Amaryllis essentially arguing that there was a good chance we would die without Bethel there to help us in our time of need, and Valencia arguing that there ought to be some lines in the sand that shouldn’t be crossed, lest our web of relationships become degenerate.

I didn’t give my full attention over to these conversations. I thought that Bethel’s role in the group was pretty clear; she was our house. She wouldn’t always be at the Isle of Poran, but she had built herself up here, furnishing all the rooms and sculpting herself to the atmosphere and geography of the island. The east wing in particular had a slope that ran parallel to one of the tall, rocky hills. On a purely strategic level, yes, it would have been better for Bethel to come with us, held as a staff, but that wasn’t really what she’d signed on for.

My thoughts were on Fenn, who was sitting across the table. A night apart didn’t seem to have changed much. While Amaryllis was getting her argumentation in, Fenn was having a more pleasant sort of conversation with Solace and Grak, one that I was too far away to hear properly, in part because they were keeping their voices low. Fenn didn’t seem to be in her usual high spirits, but she wasn’t sitting there staring at me like I was glumly staring at her. I had thought that maybe we’d come to each other and say, ‘hey, we said some things, but on reflection, I want to work it out’, but that hadn’t happened. She wasn’t leaving, as I’d thought she might, but she was avoiding me as much as she could.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, voice a little bit louder than it had been while she’d been having her argument with Valencia. The other conversation died down a bit. “We’re going to return to the group to continue negotiations. After having read through Degenerate Cycles over the last few days and made some notes, I’m ready to engage with them on their level. Hopefully there’s not any critical information that they’ve left out, but I’m not counting on it. The primary argument that we’re going to go with is that Juniper and Uther were different in too many ways to be able to generalize Juniper’s circumstance from Uther’s. In particular, Uther posits that for what he terms a ‘degenerate cycle’ to end, it needs to be with a note of complete finality, but even then, he’s a bit ambivalent about whether that would actually work. The crux of the argument is that whatever Uther did, it succeeded, but it likely succeeded in accordance with Uther’s own thinking about narrative, which doesn’t apply to Juniper. Therefore, we need to apply a different metric to the situation, one which is fitted to Juniper.’”

“That approach will work on most of them,” said Valencia. “Not all.”
“No,” said Amaryllis. “It’s possible that we can get a few of them separately in order to try different, tailored approaches to them, but we really don’t know much about them.”

“Why do they think nuking me would work?” I asked.

“Do you think it wouldn’t?” asked Grak.

“I think it would,” I said. “But given what they know about Uther … why would they think it would work against him?”

“It’s in the book,” said Amaryllis. “Uther spends a lot of time in Degenerate Cycles contemplating how a fictional character, or a real person in a fictional world, would escape from the cycles. He posits a few different methods, all of which should be of interest to us. The first was foisting narrative weight from himself to another. He gives the example of a main character who grows too old to carry on, which causes the story to continue with his son instead. But as he notes, that’s not actually something that solves the degenerate cycles of narrative, it just moves focus, and not having narrative weight on you would probably be pretty dangerous.”

“To be clear,” I said. “We’re only talking about this in the context of what Uther believed to be true?”

“If that would make you feel better, sure,” said Amaryllis. “It’s important in many regards. I don’t expect anyone to outright accept what Uther wrote as true.”

“Okay,” I said, shifting in my seat.

“The second solution, the one that I think he took, was closing all extant narrative cycles in the most final way possible. He lays out the possibility that every resolution is the inciting event for another narrative, even a narrative with the same central character. The young farmhand defeats the Dark Lord, bringing a close to the narrative that started with his family being slaughtered by the Dark Lord’s army … and the defeat of the Dark Lord becomes the fuel for other narratives, the starting point for the unification of neighboring kingdoms. Maybe the Dark Lord had some secret backers, or allies who move into position. The solution, then, is to find a way to bring the whole thing to a close. Either win forever, or resolve some ur-incident that closes the cycle of cycles.”

“That ur-incident would have been him coming to Aerb,” I said.

Amaryllis nodded. “Likely,” she said. “He speaks a lot in general terms, and when he dips into the specifics, they’re always hypotheticals, bland, boring examples meant to make a point. It’s not clear to me who he was writing this book for. At any rate, his thinking about what ‘win forever’ means transitions into his third solution, which we might broadly define as ‘lose’. He makes it clear that in theory, there might be a loss so overwhelming that it could never be bounced back from, and the degenerate cycles would have no available avenue of continuing. There’s some contemplation of what that would look like.”

“A nuclear weapon to the face,” I said. “Even that wouldn’t be enough to kill him, I wouldn’t think. Prince’s Invulnerability would save him, right, so long as he knew it was coming? But I guess that would depend on how long he was riding the shockwave.”

“It’s likely that they had backup plans,” said Valencia.

“It’s moot,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t want to step foot on their ship again, not if we know or assume they have a nuclear weapon prepped and waiting in Blue Fields. I do agree that these people might be allies, given the right lines of argument, but until we can confirm that, we should be careful. I
would rather not be killed by a nuclear weapon.”

“Same,” I said. “I’m sure that things will go fine. Right Val?”

“Probably,” said Valencia. “Interestingly, different devils have slightly different reads on the situation. We also left them alone for roughly a day, and they have information not known to us, which makes thinking about their response when we arrive a little bit difficult. My ability to extrapolate from incomplete information isn’t as good as you think it is. I think that we’ll come back to find them ready to talk, perhaps with a few of them missing from the table.”

“If they have high explosives waiting for us?” asked Grak.

“Rigged to a hair trigger,” I said with a nod. “Yeah, that would be a problem.”

“Prince’s Invulnerability then?” asked Amaryllis. “We have the funds necessary for it, Skin Magic 20 should be high enough to cast it, and we have six people, approximately.” The spell probably wouldn’t cover Valencia, but her armor would, in theory, protect her.

“It wouldn’t hurt to have it in our back pocket anyway,” I said. “We’d be spending half a day on it. The problem is that if we activate it before the teleportation, we’re wasting a fair amount of money on paranoid precaution, and if we use it after, there’s a risk that we get blown away before I can activate it. Pushing speed through bone magic helps with response time, but I don’t know if it helps enough.”

“There are too many vectors of attack,” said Valencia. “We can’t protect against everything.”

“We can protect against the most likely,” said Grak.

“I think the point is that going adversarial is probably not a great use of our time,” I said. “Especially not when the field of things we need to protect against is so incredibly wide.”

“We’ll make some preparations,” said Amaryllis. “It’s just a shame that we can’t prepare for everything.”

Fenn, Amaryllis, and myself were all burning through bones as we came in, hoping to get an edge. The flash of pain that the teleportation key brought caused some disorientation, as did the sudden change in location, though we’d tried to match the expected lighting conditions as closely as possible. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, even the pain, and I looked across the horizon, scanning for threats or the unexpected.

There were no threats though, or at least no obvious ones, just the fort some distance away, the cobblestone houses around it, the ship resting like some alien thing in the center of it all. The only person around was Pallida, who was lounging in an armchair that she must have dragged over. She looked up from the book she was reading and smiled at us.

“What ho, friends!” she called. She stood up from her chair, tapped a page of the book, and then tapped the chair itself, which vanished. She took the book and put it into a bag, then picked up her barbed spear and jogged over to us. As she moved, the simple shirt and breeches she was wearing were covered by the oil slick armor that seemed to come from beneath her clothes. “We had some significant debate about whether you’d be back, or whether we’d need to track you down. Looks like I won.”

“You got stuck with watch?” I asked.
“Volunteered,” said Pallida. “I’m the friendliest face around these parts, aside from maybe Lyda.” She looked at Amaryllis, who had just finished undoing her helmet. “Kind of wanted to see you again, to be honest?”


“No reason,” said Pallida. “The family resemblance. I don’t know what you knew about her, but thought you might want to hear about her.”

“I think I’d like that,” said Amaryllis. “Family’s never had great associations for me, which I guess you’d know if you did your research. It might be good to change that.” She looked toward the fort. “I suppose you’ve got your orders though?”

“Yeah,” said Pallida, grimacing slightly. “We talked late into the night, just like you probably did.” She took her eyes off Amaryllis and looked at me. “Seems like you and your Knights are probably going to get read in.”

“Good,” I said. “Great.”

“Not what you wanted?” asked Pallida.

“Saving the world is a big responsibility,” I said.

“Ah, weight of the world on your shoulders,” said Pallida with a nod. “I personally never knew how he bore it, but as it turns out, maybe he didn’t, at least at the end.”

Valencia’s read on Pallida was that she wasn’t quite so gung ho about things as any of the others. Renacim were essentially unknown to the denizens of hell, given that their souls refused to go there, but from what Valencia could read, Pallida was with this group more out of a sense of duty to her past lives than because she really believed that Uther needed to be stopped at all costs. At least according to Valencia, the pact had likely been made a long, long time ago, and while Pallida still felt bound to it, the connection wasn’t that strong. Whatever her specific gripes with Uther and however painful his leaving had been, that wasn’t a strong part of her internal being any longer. Her relationship to Dahlia, on the other hand, had left more of an impact. For that reason, Valencia had suggested that Amaryllis do her best to respond positively to any flirtation. We still didn’t have the whole story on Dahlia, not by a long shot, but she was apparently well-liked, and that was something we could use to our advantage.

We stopped at the fort, so that Grak could re-check the wards. This was paranoia, but that was expected of warders, and apparently not too much of a faux pas.

“So, can you tell us about Dahlia?” I asked.

“Oh,” said Pallida. She shifted slightly. “I wasn’t thinking that was going to be a public conversation.”

“I’m curious,” I said. “She’s not in the history books.”

“By choice,” said Pallida. “She went missing and it was a whole thing, then joined up with Uther under another identity, and by the time she was caught out … well, she’d already proven herself as Uther’s squire, and I suppose he liked the idea of having her around. She was the only one of his children that he really connected with, for various reasons. They were princes, with all that implies, but Dahlia was never really much of a princess. She was a hellion, truth be told. That’s where she took her name from, Helio.”
“Uther didn’t recognize his own child?” asked Amaryllis.

“She wore a belt,” said Pallida. “It was an entad that changed her gender. There was a familial resemblance, certainly, but Uther hadn’t expected his little girl to show up as a boy.”

**Girdle of opposite gender.** It had been removed from later editions of D&D as being either politically incorrect or, a little more charitably, because it marginalized gender dysphoria and made for too many jokes about gender roles in a game that didn’t encourage such notions. I didn’t actually know what the writers of the various editions had been thinking, but I had sat through a two hour long argument between Tiff and Arthur about it. I wondered what that would have been like for him, to see his daughter wearing it.

“What fate befell her?” I asked.

“She survived the Grand Finale,” said Pallida. “That was what we called it, when Uther left, though at the time it was uncertain whether or not we were just facing the end of the world. She remained a hellion after that, traveling, adventuring, and living a somewhat solitary life.”

“But she had no children?” asked Amaryllis. “If she had, we would have known. The entads lock to their bloodlines.”

“No children, no,” said Pallida. “She died at one hundred and twelve years old, having never married.” She shifted slightly. “She was always on her father’s side, even after he went missing.”

“But she had no special knowledge?” asked Grak. He had sheathed his wand; apparently the wards had passed muster.

“No,” said Pallida. “At least, I don’t think so. I can’t imagine that he would have told her and not his Knights.”

“That’s good background, thank you,” said Amaryllis.

“There’s some more I wanted to say,” said Pallida. “But it’s a bit private.”

“The wards haven’t been changed,” said Grak. “The fortress itself still shows the same signature.”

“You could trust us a little bit,” said Pallida.

“Trust, but verify,” I said.

“He used to say that,” said Pallida. “He only said it when he didn’t actually trust someone.”

“Sorry,” I said.

Pallida waved a hand. “Not a problem,” she replied. “We don’t really trust you either. But hey, you did come back, and that’s worth something. We just don’t want to always have these talks with metaphorical guns pointed at each other. Literal guns either.”

“No,” I said. “Not really what we want either. O’kald is going to cool it?”

“Maybe,” said Pallida with a shrug that I didn’t find at all reassuring.

We went back into the fortress and took our place at the round table. We had to wait for a bit for the others to arrive. They filtered in by ones and twos, coming from different directions. O’kald and Dehla came together, and he shot me a nasty look. I responded with a nod.
It might have been one thing if he’d been arguing that I needed to die because it was in the best interests of the world as a whole, a way of stopping the degenerate cycles that were going to continue escalating until something was done, but he’d given no sign of being dispassionate. Instead, there was real malice toward me, which must have been transferred from Uther. At least part of that was by Valencia’s design; she’d wanted him riled up to color his ‘side’ as unreasonable. There was nothing like an extremist to drive out moderates, at least according to her, and O’kald had already occupied that role before she’d revealed herself as non-anima. O’kald didn’t have the rhetorical chops necessary to convince anyone that he was actually right.

Everett was the last to come in, and once he sat down at the table, a silence descended on us. There were, mercifully, no new people whose names and quirks I would have to remember. Heshnel had placed the Monster Manual on the table after Everett sat down, and drummed his fingers on it as people stopped talking amongst themselves.

“I read this last night,” he said. “Interesting, if not terribly true to reality.”

“I came up with my own versions,” I said. “And Aerb came up with its own versions of what I’d made. It’s two steps removed.” Three or four, in some cases, and sometimes more, given how much D&D cribbed from fantasy literature.

“And that’s the nature of reality then?” asked Heshnel.

“It seems to be, from what we know,” I said. I wasn’t going to mention anything about the simulation hypothesis or computers, in part because of how long that would take to explain and how little it seemed to add to the conversation.

“Then the question remains,” said Heshnel. “We need to decide on what is to be done.”

“We?” I asked. “As a group?”

“Perhaps,” said Heshnel. “I imagine us to be similarly aligned in terms of goals, but perhaps not yet in sync in terms of how we might achieve those goals. In my experience, those differences of opinion are cause for a lot of friction.”

“Are you taking up his mantle?” asked Everett. He said it with effort, enunciating more clearly than I’d heard from him thus far. I didn’t know exactly what was wrong with him, aside from age, but he was obviously infirm. Valencia thought that he probably wasn’t five hundred years old, but she hadn’t been able to give me much more beyond that. I could think of half a dozen things that could have sent him forward in time, the most likely of which was a bobbler that I’d adapted from Vinge’s Marooned in Realtime for a campaign.

“If I can stop the destruction of Aerb, then I will,” I said. “If I can prevent suffering and pain, I will. I’m not planning to do things the way Uther did though. I’ve already told you all more than he ever seemed to have. Uther was secretive, for his own reasons. Maybe he was justified, maybe he wasn’t, but I haven’t actually seen his justifications, and from what he said to me in the message he left, he might have just been keeping quiet because he was afraid.”

“He feared nothing,” said Gemma.

“With respect, I don’t think that’s true,” I said. “At least, it wasn’t true for Arthur, when I knew him as a teenager.”

“Regardless,” said Heshnel. “We need to discuss what it means to save Aerb. Did you read Degenerate Cycles?”
“I did,” said Amaryllis. “Uther wasn’t entirely clear on what it would mean to stop the narrative, so I doubt that you could be either. There are three primary cases. The first is that the cycles can’t be stopped, in which case we’re both doomed, because escalation is a natural consequence of perpetual narrative, and saved, because the resolution is always assured.”

“Unless it’s not,” said O’kald. It was the first thing he’d said. I’d forgotten how rough and grating his voice was.

“Unless it’s not,” nodded Amaryllis. “Also a problem, but there’s not much that we could actually do about it except give it our all every time, in the case that the cycles can’t be stopped. The second case is that the cycles can be stopped by putting the entire system into a no-win situation without a narrative resolution. Your plan to use nuclear weapons against us might have worked to do that, but I doubt that it would, since there’s some implication that Juniper would continue to possess a narrative in hell.”

“Oh?” asked Heshnel. “Do tell.”

“I get messages from the Dungeon Master,” I said. “Sometimes I can send them back. I was given an option to continue on after death, which I have selected.”

“And if your soul were captured?” asked O’kald.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“There’s also the third case,” said Amaryllis. “We might be able to manipulate the narrative into a position where it’s impossible for another cycle to start because all conflicts have been rendered trivial. I’ll put forth that given what we know, this is the single most likely favorable outcome. Juniper has been directly informed that it’s a possibility by the Dungeon Master.”

“So he says,” replied O’kald.

“Enough,” said Heshnel. “Your objections have been voiced.” He turned back to us. “And how do you propose to gain power?” he asked. “What would be needed?”

“We’re already working on it,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper has something like the Knack. Exposure to different magics will help him. Beyond that, training by professionals will give him the ability to increase his skills faster. And naturally, we need to learn everything that Uther was keeping secret, no matter what the reason was, so long as that knowledge won’t literally end the world or kill us. That’s what we asked for coming in here, and it’s a request we’re repeating now.”

“What happens if Juniper fails?” asked O’kald. “Can he?”

I glanced at Heshnel, who was sitting impassively, as though he wasn’t responsible for keeping order on their side. I didn’t like that; it might have been one thing for him to cede authority to O’kald, but this was an underhanded ‘well I can’t stop him’ maneuver that made me think they were playing good cop bad cop.

“The Dungeon Master has said that I can fail, yes,” I said. “He didn’t say what would happen if I died, beyond what I’m assuming is true about me going to the hells. I think Uther and I are being treated differently. He got strictly structured narratives. I got something a little more freeform.”

“Stop,” said Valencia. Her voice was sudden and sharp. “Whatever your plan is, put a halt to it right now. You can do more good as allies than enemies, and the costs if you’re wrong are astronomically high.”
“Wait, what plan?” asked Pallida, looking to the bellad with wide eyes. “What did you do?”

“O’kald,” Heshnel began.

“I’ve got nothing,” said Fenn, looking over to me with a raised eyebrow.

“Nor I,” said Grak. His eyes were narrowed and moving rapidly between the people at the other end of the table.

“Poison,” said Valencia, just before Everett let out a wet cough that left blood smeared on the inside of his hand.

We moved quickly after that. Valencia took the crown from her head and placed it on my own, and I took it right back off and put it on hers. There was a lot of yelling and commotion from the thirteen assembled people. I was up and out of my seat when a small hammer came flying my way. I didn’t have my sword fully drawn and took a hit to my chin that snapped my head to the side hard enough that I blacked out for a moment. When I came to I was in the middle of pulling myself up off the ground and healing the damage that had been done, using the wrong bones to do it. There was a white mark on my otherwise blue armor, a hit that I hadn’t seen or felt, but which had been absorbed anyway.

I was half-deaf from the thumping sound of Valencia’s guns, which were firing across the table to the other side. I saw Everett stagger backward, half out of his chair, as the bullets tore through his clothes, but there was no visible blood, and at his arm I could see tattoos moving over his wrinkled skin. Heshnel was down, either taking cover, wounded, or dead, which the game confirmed a moment later.

**Heshnel Elec defeated!**

I brought my blade up to parry another thrown weapon from O’kald, and registered that it was the same hammer from before only after I had knocked it aside and seen it vanish from mid-air. He hopped up on the table, which creaked beneath his weight, then began trudging toward me, moving about as fast as he could. I scrambled back, trying to keep eyes on my flanks at the same time. The thought of going toe-to-toe with someone who could tank a hit from a chain gun was terrifying, more so because I was almost certainly poisoned with something.

Amaryllis had been grabbed by the lenssi, enveloped in its liquid, with its skull butted up against her armor. She was holding her breath, but there were limits on how well that worked. Grak was on the ground and screaming, bleeding from a large wound that had gone down into his shoulder, the source unknown, and Solace was beside him, using her staff to trace a healing path through the injury. It was nearly impossible to hear anything, given the way the gunfire had made my ears ring.

I only had a vague idea who was friend and who was foe. A tattoo on Everett’s arm billowed outward like a flame licking in the wind, ephemeral and white, which caught the fox Animalia off-guard. Her hair went white all over her body and she dropped to the floor, either injured or dead, but I had no idea which side either of them was on.

**Gemma Tails defeated!**

(The game didn’t actually help clarify matters there.)

I didn’t have too much time to think about it before O’kald’s handaxe came toward me. I parried, but he had more weight behind his strike than I had expected, even given his sheer mass, and I was pushed back by the force of it, nearly taking the backside of my own sword to the face. O’kald was
shorter than I was, and lacking in reach, but he was two or three times as dense, maybe more, which
gave his hits much more of a punch than I could muster, even with the magical power at my disposal.
I was used to employing haymaker attacks, but that wasn’t going to work here, not given how hard
he was. I backed away again as he advanced, and again faced a hammer throw that I dodged with
ease.

There were a limited number of abilities in our arsenal that could put the hurt on him, and out of the
corner of my eye I saw Amaryllis slip to the floor under the lenssi’s assault. Fenn was firing her bow
as fast as she could, trying to hit the skull in the lenssi’s center, but the liquid had a fair amount of
stopping power to it, and I wasn’t sure that her bow was up to the task. The flickerblade was one of
the few things I’d thought could get at the O’kald’s internals, but that was out of the picture until
Amaryllis was back on her feet. I looked around for Solace but couldn’t find her. She was the other
weapon suited to the task, but she was gone or missing, or maybe just ducked down behind a table
making sure that someone important didn’t die.

Valencia joined up with me as I continued backing up, giving O’kald another target. I noticed the
way he moved in jerks and how chips kept falling from him, the result of him taking damage through
the soul link. It might have been because of the hit to the head, but I made the connection late,
realizing only then that O’kald was still their brute. He must have known going in that he’d be taking
all the damage, which was why Everett had used an attack that bypassed the physical contralocation
of the soul link. The bellad had made himself the lynchpin of their defense, and he was toughing out
the hits.

Everett Wolfe defeated!

Valencia came in from the side, flanking O’kald, and wrenched the handaxe from his grip with her
borrowed expertise. O’kald used his other arm, swinging wildly with his hammer, and it struck her
on the chest, sending her backwards but unharmed thanks to her armor. Her efforts were undone in
an instant though, as the handaxe burst into flames. When she dropped it, it dipped low to the floor,
then changed trajectory and landed back in O’kald’s outstretched hand. The flame that was
apparently part of the entad’s magic didn’t go out. Instead, the axe grew to white-hot, so hot that I
could see the waves of heat. It would surely have burnt his hand, if he weren’t made of rock.

It was around that time that I noticed the blood flowing freely from my nose. It was cascading down,
right, poison. Why did I give her back the crown of
a river of blood that was wetting my lips. Right, poison. Why did I give her back the crown of thorns?
I took a brief moment to survey the battlefield and was shocked to see how many people
were down. There had been thirteen people sitting around the table, but the only ones still standing
were Pallida, Fenn, the lenssi, and our own little trio of combatants. Solace was laying on the floor,
not moving, and Grak was beside her, moving his wand in the air and not looking like he had the
strength to do much more than that. We needed Solace back up, she was our healer, without her the
drowning that Amaryllis had received was going to be fatal.

I circled O’kald once and looked to Fenn, who was engaged with the lenssi. She’d been trying hit
and run tactics, but she couldn’t seem to land a shot on the skull hard enough, and the poison was
hitting her harder than it was hitting me. She was stumbling now, and even as I noted that, I
misplaced a foot, which left me open for an attack from O’kald. His strike was weak, since he was
still playing defense against Valencia’s sword, but he clipped me hard enough to send me to the
ground. It struck a place that had been hit before, and I felt nearly the full weight of it.

I sprang to my feet and almost fell, staggering slightly under the weight of my body. I charged
O’kald and activated my sword’s ability to move through metal, hoping against hope that the internal
rules that governed it would count his rockflesh as being close enough. The sword passed cleanly
through the axe he brought up to block me, but bounced off him hard enough to make my hands
sting. Though the attack was ineffective, taking no more than a chip out of him, it gave Valencia room to go on the offensive, attacking him repeatedly, hitting his back. The pieces that she cut out from him got larger with every stroke of her sword, and O’kald seemed caught in a moment of confusion. Valencia’s Memory Blade was taking his memories and honing itself in the process, making him a worse fighter as it made her sword more deadly.

O’kald pushed her back, which she allowed, but that only gave her space for a forward thrust that caught him directly in the chest. He’d lost clothes in the fight, enough that I could see the crack that the memory blade made as it hit the other side of the interior rock face. O’kald stopped moving with a stunned look on his face, then backhanded Valencia hard enough to send her flying. The sword was still lodged within him, but whatever damage had been done to his internals, it apparently wasn’t enough.

*Gur Dehla defeated!*

I was feeling woozy. A quick glance showed Fenn down, but the lenssi was down too, just a puddle of fluid with the skull nowhere in sight, a feat accomplished by some miracle of combat from Fenn. When I looked back at O’kald, he was still coming toward me, even with the crack across his chest and the sword still stuck in him.

“Why?” I croaked out as I limped backward. My calf hit the edge of a chair, and I nearly fell over.

“My wife,” answered O’kald. He raised his hand to throw his hammer forward, and I wasn’t sure that I was going to be able to dodge it. My armor could take the hit, if it landed in the right spot, but if I went down, I was probably going to die.

I was saved from having to make the dodge by a barbed spear covered in purple-black flames slicing through O’kald. Pallida was covered head-to-toe in her oil-black armor, making her face unreadable, but the exhaustion was clear from her stance. I had no idea what her part of the brawl had looked like, but she was worse for the wear. She was the only other person still on her feet, aside from myself and Valencia.

*O’kald defeated!*

There was no time lose though. I raced forward and picked up Solace, and Grak since he was beside her, slinging both of them on my shoulders with a boost from my few remaining bones. Solace was a featherweight, a member of a small race and a child at that, but Grak was heavier. My muscles complained, but I carried them away from the great hall, through the entry and out onto the grass a few dozen feet away. I had no idea what a safe distance was, or even how the poison had been administered, but getting them out was all my tired brain could focus on. We needed Solace alive so she could fix everyone, which made her the priority.

After I had laid them out, I went back in. Valencia was following my lead; she’d grabbed Amaryllis and was carrying the princess awkwardly. I grabbed Amaryllis and ran her out to set her down with the others. Blood was dripping out of her helm, but I tried not to think about that. My own blood was coming out of my nose and mouth so freely that I was almost choking on it. I yelled instructions to Valencia, then forgot what I’d said only a few moments after I’d said it.

I passed by Pallida, who was dragging Gemma, the fox’s hair still white from whatever Everett had done. She called for me to help, but I passed her by. There was only one more of my own people left in there, and I didn’t even know if I had the energy needed to get her out. I reached into my bandolier and shoved one of the fairies in my mouth, hoping that it would do something for me, but all I could taste was blood, and trying to swallow down the chewed fairy and thinned blood nearly made me gag.
I grabbed Fenn without really looking at her, slinging her over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry. She was light, even as weak as I was feeling, and I carried her as quick as I could, stomping and stumbling, occasionally leaning up against walls for support so I could make the next step. I glanced at Fenn only once, enough to see that she was frighteningly pale and bleeding profusely, and continued on. The way out seemed longer than the way in had been.

Solace was just beginning to sit up with the crown of thorns around her head when I set Fenn down.

“Heal us,” I slurred. I just wanted to close my eyes and rest, that was all.

Solace swayed slightly and made a gesture with her closed fist. When she opened it, I didn’t feel any better. “Soul deep,” she said.

Valencia swooped forward and took the crown from Solace’s head, then placed it firmly on Amaryllis’, standing back slightly and giving every appearance of counting to herself. I couldn’t see her face, but she was radiating tension. After a few moments of the crown of thorns being in place, she took it from Amaryllis’ head and placed it on Grak’s. Valencia glanced at Fenn, just for a moment, then back to Grak.

“Working?” I asked, half-gasping at getting the words out.

“Not enough,” replied Valencia.

I closed my eyes and dove down into my own soul. I could immediately see what Solace had meant about the damage being soul deep. My physical form looked sickly, the hues of my skin nearly gray. Whatever the poison had done, it had impacted my soul, and though the crown of thorns might have removed the poison, it wasn’t going to fix the damage that had been done. I was trying my hardest not to slip into the soul trance, which would probably cost all of us our lives, but I was unfocused from the sickness, and I could feel the call of it, the need to look around and mull things over.

I went to my skills and began dumping points into Essentialism, just enough that I’d be able to access the backups we’d made of our bodies. It would also make the soul diving go faster, which was likely going to be an issue.

When I came back out, I realized there was a problem with that line of thought. The backups were in the glove, which was invested to Fenn by Amaryllis, and both of them were unconscious. The crown had been passed around, and hopefully that would mostly stop the damage, but they weren’t getting up like Solace had. More exposure to the poison? Less in the way of defenses against it? Variable biology? I needed to know the answer, but I had no way of figuring any of that out.

“I need a soul,” I said to Valencia. “One without poison.”

Valencia reached into the pouch at her side. She had a small handful of them, the most useful ones, in case she needed to engage in Plan Mountain Dew and take on a soul for a few minutes. I grabbed the bottle she offered to me, not even bothering to read the label, and emptied it into the palm of my hand. With Essentialism boosted, it was trivial to enter the soul, and equally trivial to swap my body with theirs. I healed myself as soon as I was out of the soul trance, feeling the changes to my body and a sudden relief from the pain. My skin had become a few shades darker, and I’d shrunk a few inches, but at least this body template hadn’t sustained damage. I’d pull my regular body from the backup I’d made once everyone was healed.

I went to Amaryllis, removing her helmet so I could place my hand against her skin, swapping her soul’s conception of her body, then healing her into the same form that I was using. Her armor shifted shape around her, adapting to her new form. Her eyes snapped open and she looked around,
then stood up and drew her sword, falling into a fighting stance as she scanned for threats.

“What happened?” she asked as I moved to Grak. Her voice was much lower. I wasn’t sure that we’d have the same voice, but it would be close.

“Our souls were poisoned,” answered Solace.

I fixed Grak next, but the healing didn’t go quite right. His armor wasn’t magical, and didn’t conform to his new body, which meant that I was trying to reshape his body against the constraints of his armor. I stopped the process halfway through, and Amaryllis went to him to continue the process.

“Might need some of whatever you’re doing too,” said Pallida from where she was sprawled out on the grass. Her mouth was covered in cotton-candy pink blood, and she was lolling her head.

“Sure,” I replied, moving over to Fenn. “One sec.”

I was out of sorts, and I’d been doing things wrong without even thinking about it. I had wasted time taking off Amaryllis’ helmet, given the link between our souls, and though I needed to touch her to heal her, it would have been better to make the soul swap and let Solace handle the healing. For whatever reason, that was where my mind was going, to the inefficiency of the triage action. I’d been thinking quick and acting decisively, and we were going to make it through this with little damage to show for it, but I hadn’t been acting optimally, and in the future --

There had been four lines leading away from my soul, and now there were three. One was snipped and waving in the wind, the presentation that the game had chosen for Valencia’s soul. I raced down one of the other two lines, found Amaryllis, and went back to choose the other line. I arrived at Grak’s soul, and looked at his body, which I’d just swapped out.

Fenn’s soul was nowhere to be found.

I laid down next to her and pressed a shaky hand against her collarbone. Her skin was cold and pale. There was too much blood around her mouth. I felt for a pulse first, but my fingers just fumbled at her neck, and I didn’t really know how to take a pulse anyway. I tried to gain access to her soul, but the thread of Fenn wasn’t there anymore, not in her skin or the blood that wet my fingers.

I didn’t actually believe she was dead until I felt Solace’s hand on my shoulder, trying to comfort me.
I spent some time staring at her body, her corpse, the flesh that had contained her but now did not. It felt like the weight of her death settled on my shoulders and then stayed there, pressing me into place.

It probably wasn’t all that long, since Amaryllis moved over to Fenn and pointed the flickerblade at her forehead, making a hole using the brief appearance of the blade, then kneeling down to stick the runed spike into Fenn’s forehead. The soul was out moments later, and Amaryllis put it into a waiting bottle, which disappeared into Fenn’s glove the moment it was full.

“Heal Solace,” said Amaryllis.

“Give us some time,” said Solace. Her voice was soft.

“We don’t have time,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper, is the fix working?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I had to force the words out. “I don’t know how it works.”

“Body talks to the soul,” said Pallida. She was in the middle of stripping the fox Animalia of her effects. “Poison says to the body, hey, stop working, body says to the soul, hey, you suck, healer comes to heal the body and the soul says hey, the body is supposed to not work.” She looked over at us. “Devil’s tansy, usually you drink it,” she said. She slipped a bracelet off of Gemma’s wrist and onto her own, then dabbed at the blood by her mouth, looking at it for a moment. “Need that dejang, when you’ve got a moment, clock is ticking for the people inside.”


Valencia nodded once. *And what the fuck do you know?* The thought came and went in an instant. I went back to staring at Fenn. I could feel Solace’s hand squeeze my shoulder.

Amaryllis tossed the spike to Pallida, who let the armor flow back around her as she turned and ran back inside.

“Heal Solace,” said Amaryllis, turning to me. She was still wearing the body of the dark-skinned man.

“I think it was airborne,” said Grak. “I put a ward for clean air around Solace and myself. It was as much as I could do before I blacked out.”

“Juniper, we all breathed it in, the crown purged it, but Solace needs her soul healed so her body can heal too,” said Amaryllis. She was gritting her teeth. “She’s my fucking daughter, heal her, now.”

“We don’t have a backup of her body,” said Grak.

“So fucking what,” said Amaryllis.

“When you’re ready, Juniper,” said Solace. Her voice was still soft and understanding, but hoarse, as though speaking took effort. The poison had been purged from her system by the crown, but it had done its damage, both to her physical self and her soul.

I looked away from Fenn, and knew that I wouldn’t be able to look back.

I placed my hand on Solace’s shoulder, with my thumb resting on her artery. Blood and skin were connections to the soul, pathways that you could use. I thought about checking Fenn for a pulse and
finding nothing, touching her skin and finding it dead to my senses. I opened my eyes and looked at Solace. I was crying, and not doing anything to help her, but she just looked at me with pity and understanding.

I closed my eyes and tried again. This time I slipped into her soul with little effort on my part.

I replaced her body with the one I was using, the same dark-skinned human that had randomly been handed to me from our collection of souls. I was about to leave, the work having been done, when something caught my eye. Solace wasn’t a companion, she was just a person along for the ride, which meant that her soul didn’t have the helpful text and numerical markers that the others had. Instead, there was something that stuck out like a sore thumb: images. In places there were scenes of verdant green where abstract, hard-to-read blobs of raw information should have been. I’d only seen anything remotely similar in the locus’ own soul. I’d been in Solace’s soul before, and it hadn’t had these aberrations. They didn’t cover the whole of her soul, just bits and pieces.

I was distantly aware that I was in a soul trance as I looked things over and tried to work out what it all meant. My emotions were muted, and I could think a little bit more clearly, without the pressure of the real. I wondered, briefly, how many soul mages had died because they couldn’t pull themselves out of a soul. Then a picture caught my eye, and I looked at it more closely, curious.

The image was taking the place of a memory. You could go inside a memory and get the experience of it, I’d done that before, but this was something else entirely. The image was surrealist, stitched in with the surrounding network of nodes, a crantek woman giving birth by squatting, naked, in a wide field. Her feet melded with the grass, and her green hair stood up on end, reaching to the sky like branches. I couldn’t tell whether it was supposed to be a memory, a memory-equivalent, or something else, but it was clearly a piece of the locus.

What, exactly, had happened to Solace when she’d been aged up was a mystery, but it was the sort of mystery that I’d thought was just druidic weirdness, not actually anything to worry too much about.

I went looking for more of these images, not thinking that I would get much insight into who Solace was or what had happened to her, but not wanting to go back to the real world where I’d be faced with Fenn’s corpse.

I had been thinking about the soul of the locus the night before, and what it might actually mean. My assumption, from the moment I had seen it, was that the soul of the locus was like all the others I had seen, a barely disguised database of information. The difference with the locus was that there was interpretative art overlaid on top of it, either cloaking what was beneath, or interpreting it.

The more I looked at Solace’s soul, the more I thought that I might have been wrong. To say that the locus must necessarily be, at its root level, reducible to raw data seemed like it was a very Juniper way of looking at things, and perhaps the lesson that was intended to be drawn from the locus was --

I was yanked out of Solace’s soul as we broke contact. I had to look at the armor to confirm that it was Amaryllis, since we were all wearing the same face now.

The feeling of loss hit me a moment later, and my eyes went to the place where Fenn was laying, only to find her gone. The grass was flattened, and there was a small spot of blood where her head had been, but there was nothing else. I sank down slightly. Amaryllis would have put the body into the glove then.

“Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “Are you okay?” Her voice had lost its edge. I wasn’t sure how long I had been in, but it had been long enough for her to cool down.
“No,” I said. I looked around, trying to find something. Some idiot part of my brain was probably still playing catch-up, and thought that Fenn should be standing next to me.

Pallida was standing next to Heshnel. The left side of his face was a Cronenberg horror of pulsating flesh. The eye was the size of an apple, misshapen and with a pupil that was split, like a goat’s. Around the eye were fleshy ridges and bits that hung down, nearly resembling tentacles, wet with something viscous. That aside, he looked no worse for the wear.

Beside them, Gemma was back on her feet, her fur still white. That wasn’t the only change to her. She had sagging skin, and her paws, which held her swords, had that skeletal look of the elderly. She looked like she had aged a hundred years.

“You have Essentialism boosted,” Amaryllis said to me. “We’d like our bodies back.”

“Yeah,” I said. I was still feeling too shocked to do much of anything. Thinking seemed like it would take a Herculean effort. I had tears in my eyes and a tightness in my throat. “The bottles --”

Amaryllis held a bottle forward, labeled with her name. I took it from her. I felt like I wasn’t really there, moving my body like a puppet, or maybe underwater. I uncorked the bottle and let the soul fall into my hand.

Fenn was dead.

I let out a choking sob as my breath caught, then dived down into my soul.

It was better in there, easier to think, if harder to think about the real world. Fenn’s line was absent, the connection we shared completely gone, but I picked out the one belonging to Amaryllis without breaking down into tears. I followed the line to her soul, until I was staring at the body I’d given her. It took some time and effort to link in to the soul in my hand, but I managed it all the same, and from there, the swap was easy enough.

I distantly felt someone manipulating my hand, touching me firmly enough that I could feel it through the soul trance, and manipulated the new soul that had been pressed into my hand. It was Grak’s, fast enough to replace, his soul’s version of his body replaced a second time in the span of minutes, this time with his body as it had been months ago. I stared at him for a moment, tempted to go looking deeper into his soul, but backed away and into my own instead.

I was waiting there, looking at the skills I’d decimated, when the third soul of our batch was placed into my hand. I swapped my own body back in. That was all I was really there to accomplish. It was time for me to leave.

One of the interesting things about the soul was that attributes stayed static even when the body changed. If I’d given myself the body of a child, I’d have still had the same attributes, at least according to my soul. The differences in how I would actually move through the world were handled by other game systems, either Afflictions or some other, less game-like mechanism. It seemed as though there was probably some way to break the system, given what I knew about it. Logically, if stats were independent from physical reality, or only loosely connected, then there were probably some benefits to minmaxing. When Reimer played gnomes, he almost always made them as short and light as the rules would allow for, on the thinking that he was going to be small no matter what, and optimizing for situations where being small was helpful made the most sense. Contrarily, whenever he played an orc, he made them heavy and muscular, and usually tall to boot, though there were obvious concerns about being too tall to move through doorways or fight in confined quarters.

I stared at my body. I was taller than I’d been on Earth, more handsome, and far more muscular. I’d
worried that increasing PHY might be a path toward eventually looking cartoonish, but the game apparently cared about personal aesthetics, and had stopped me from becoming grotesque. I looked like I had always imagined myself to look, in a world where I had been motivated enough to go to the gym. My friend Colin was our high school’s star wrestler, and he’d kept encouraging me to join, mostly because he was the only real geek on the wrestling team. I sometimes thought about what I might have looked like if I’d taken him up on the offer and seen it through, and never in my wildest dreams had I thought that I would have the body that I did.

There were interesting wrinkles in how things worked for me, compared to how they seemed to work for everyone else, but as I let my mind drift to those things, safe from thinking about the real world, I could feel my mouth being forced open. Reluctantly, I drew away from my soul.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at me. She was back to her old body, almost a full year younger, the body she’d had before having a child. She held a fairy in her hand, which she was in the process of forcing into my mouth. “We need you to stay out.”

“Mental afflictions,” said Grak. “They’re the price of purging the poison.”

“Oh,” I said. My eyes went to the spot where Fenn had been laying. I hated feeling like this. I wanted to retreat back into my soul, where emotion was muted and I could focus on something other than what had happened.

“I think mine is aggression or possibly impulse control,” said Amaryllis. “I’m dealing with it. They should burn out, given time. They’re supposed to.” Her voice was firm and calm, forcibly so, tight and controlled. “We need to know what it is you got.”

“Okay,” I said. My eyes went to the spot where Fenn had been laying. I hated feeling like this. I wanted to retreat back into my soul, where emotion was muted and I could focus on something other than what had happened.

“I think mine is aggression or possibly impulse control,” said Amaryllis. “I’m dealing with it. They should burn out, given time. They’re supposed to.” Her voice was firm and calm, forcibly so, tight and controlled. “We need to know what it is you got.”

“Uh,” I said. The soul trance was like getting thrust forward into the future, minutes passing like seconds. Things had changed around me. Solace, now the dark-skinned man, was standing with her cape behind her, watching the three surviving members of Heshnel’s group. The tip of her staff was dug into the ground, and the top of it had been changed so the wood interlocked with her hand. Useless druidic bullshit, no doubt. “I don’t know.”

“Dissociation?” asked Amaryllis. “We should have gotten a list of possibilities from Bethel.”

“She’s dead,” I said. Fenn. “I … I don’t know how we’re going to bring her back.”

The ritual of Yaxukasu Axud we’d used to bring Solace back wasn’t going to work. The person performing the ritual had to be a druid, and the soul to be reborn needed a druidic connection as well. We had faked the first half of the requirements for Solace’s rebirth, but for Fenn … I didn’t know how I would stitch a druidic connection into her soul. If I could have done that, I could have made more druids. It seemed hopeless even before taking into account the quest message I’d gotten when Solace had been born. If another of your party members dies, don’t expect it to be so easy.

I found my hands curled into tight fists, squeezing my thumbs so hard it was painful. The Dungeon Master had let this happen. He had probably known it would when he gave me that message. He had nudged things into place so that Fenn would die.

“Breathe,” said Solace, placing a hand on my arm.

I let out a shaky breath and tried to refocus myself. I found myself burning WIS in order to get some semblance of balance, but while it helped, I still felt like a piece of me had been ripped out.

**Skill increased: Bone Magic lvl 30!**

I ignored the message. New levels, new powers, more game bullshit that did nothing good for me.
Amaryllis had already made her predictions about what all my skills would give me at their higher levels, cross-referenced with historical notes. Level 30 was either social attributes, luck, or special powers like the one I could already sense was lodged in the unicorn bones. It all seemed like meaningless faff to me.

“Juniper?” asked Amaryllis. Her voice was too controlled to sound comforting. “Does the game tell you that you have a new affliction?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “There wasn’t a pop up.” I’d gotten a small handful of notifications during the battle, but the only ones I’d paid any attention to were the ‘defeated’ messages that let me know who was out of the picture.

“It would have come from the crown,” said Amaryllis. “It would have been a handful of minutes ago.”

“No,” I said. “Nothing.”

“Check the list?” asked Amaryllis.

“I -- yeah,” I said. I barely ever looked at the screen behind my eyes anymore, in the same way that I almost never looked at the HUD. It was so easy to fall into patterns, to ignore the things in front of you because they’d fallen into the background of your existence. My mind turned to Fenn without any conscious effort on my part. I had thought, after our disastrous therapy session, that we might find our way back together, because I really did love her, I had just done a poor job of paying attention to her and a worse job of understanding her. I let myself become accustomed to things far too easily, and taken them for granted.

“Juniper?” asked Amaryllis.

I closed my eyes and counted out three seconds, then flipped through the screens. I stopped when I got to the Companions section. Fenn was missing from it, her name, biography, and perks all completely gone, as though she’d never been there. My breath caught on seeing that, and I continued on to quests, to find that her companion quest had been silently scrubbed too, without so much as a greying out. It was like Fenn had never existed, so far as the game was concerned.

My teeth were clenched as I moved on to Afflictions. There, at the bottom, were not one, but two new entries.

**Griefstricken (MEN -1, SOC -2)**

**Bad Dreams**

The afflictions had always been light on words, and these were no exceptions.

“Bad dreams,” I said as I opened my eyes. I was feeling ill. My heart was beating too fast and I’d broken out in a cold sweat. “I need to lay down.”

“Bad dreams?” asked Amaryllis. “That’s it?”

“That was all it said,” I replied. I sat down in the grass, hunched over slightly. “We’re going to have to bring her back to life.”

“Are we meant to?” asked Grak.

“No,” I replied. “I don’t know. No quest.” That didn’t mean anything. It might have been a test. I
hadn’t been fond of tests like that, as a DM, saying that something was impossible as a way of issuing a challenge, but the Dungeon Master wasn’t literally me, he was just borrowing my sensibilities. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “Maybe.”

“We should go,” said Amaryllis.

“Wait,” said Pallida. The three of them had been standing off to the side, giving us space but not so far away that they couldn’t make out our conversation. “We need to talk.”

“Fuck off,” I said. I wasn’t angry with her, I just wanted her to go away. I needed time, time to think, time to plan, time to grieve, or maybe just figure things out. My heart was beating too fast.

Pallida knelt down, laying her spear across her knee. “Juniper Smith, I pledge my life to you, from now until the moment I die, by the sacred power of my eternal soul.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Can you pilot that thing to the Isle of Poran?” asked Amaryllis. “Meet us there tomorrow, at the big house. You’ll know it when you see it. We’re leaving. Bring all the entads and material wealth you can.”

“Okay,” said Pallida. “For what it’s worth —”

“If you’re about to say that you’re sorry,” I began. “If you’re about to say that you lost people too. Whatever it was, I don’t want to hear it.” After Arthur had died, there were so many things people said to me that I hadn’t wanted to hear. I had been too much of a cynic to hear the kindness in their words. Now, I was right back where I had been, not able to deal with whatever trite condolences or explanation Pallida might offer.

“Yeah,” said Pallida. “Okay. We’ll meet you.”

We came down into the teleportation room with a flash of pain that was almost welcome, given how it crowded out my other thoughts.

“A pleasant trip?” asked Bethel as she looked us over.

“Fenn is dead,” said Valencia. Her voice had taken on some of the same hollowness that I was sure my own had, and I couldn’t stop myself from wondering whether it was faked or genuine. Val would know what I was thinking and feeling toward her, I was certain of that, especially since I didn’t have the wherewithal to hide it.

“A shame,” said Bethel with a raised eyebrow. “I had liked her.”

“She would have lived if you had been there,” said Amaryllis, gritting her teeth.

“I would need to hear the specifics to know for certain whether that’s true,” said Bethel.

“Evil triumphs when good men do nothing,” said Amaryllis.

“Do you think to sway me with Utherian platitudes?” asked Bethel.

“She died and if you had been there, she would have lived,” said Amaryllis. She was clenching her fists. I had no idea what she expected she could actually do against Bethel.

“I am not a weapon for you to wield, Penndraig,” said Bethel.
“Would it be too much to ask for you to be a fucking friend then?” asked Amaryllis.

“Stop,” said Valencia. “Mary, you’re compromised right now, it’s better that you don’t say anything. Bethel, do you know how long the mental affliction of the crown lasts?”

“What happened, precisely?” asked Bethel. Her eyes moved to Solace. “Ah, is that Solace?”

“We were poisoned,” said Valencia. “Everyone used the crown. We need to know how long the affliction lasts.”

“A week or two, perhaps more,” said Bethel. “In my experiments, the afflictions faded with time. May I inquire as to the poison?”

“Devil’s tansy,” said Valencia.

“Ah,” said Bethel. “Particularly offensive, that one. Did it affect you?”

“I had the crown on,” said Valencia. “I think the purely physical side of it would have gotten me if I hadn’t.” She looked over at me. “I was willing to give my life for you. You shouldn’t have handed it back.”

I couldn’t formulate a response. The whole fight had been a confusing blur, too many people doing too many things for me to track them all at once, too many unknown magics, or effects that I could only guess at, unclear loyalties and independent strategies. It had ended with Fenn dead. Or, no, it had ended with Fenn down on the ground, but not dead then, only dead because I had pulled her out last. It had seemed sensible at the time, prioritize the healer so she could cure the poison, grab Grak because they were next to each other, grab Amaryllis because Valencia was struggling with her and she was already halfway out, and then Fenn … well, she was last, and she died for it.

“I need time,” I said. “A few days, a week, I won’t be useful until then.” I glanced at Amaryllis. “I know there’s work to be done, I know that, but I need to get my head back on, and --”

“Use the chamber,” said Amaryllis. “We probably all should, to purge the afflictions.”

I didn’t want to spend time in the cramped time chamber with Amaryllis again, even if it could be made larger. It seemed like it would take an overwhelming amount of effort to explain or articulate that. Amaryllis wasn’t to blame for Fenn being dead, but I still didn’t want to be around her. She would be talking about plots and plans, pushing herself past whatever emotions she was feeling, maybe even editing her soul to wipe away the traces of Fenn … and I couldn’t spend a week with her, not if she was going to be Amaryllis.

“Juniper and I will take the first shift,” said Grak.

“We shouldn’t do shifts,” said Amaryllis. “The four of us should go together to conserve our remaining time.”

“No,” said Valencia. “It’s better that the two of them go together.”

Amaryllis frowned, but nodded fractionally.

“Before they do, Juniper, I’m sorry, I fucked up,” said Valencia. Her voice was small. “I shouldn’t have pushed on O’kald, I should have seen it coming sooner, I shouldn’t have even tried to be something that I couldn’t for you and Fenn, I’ve been pushed up to the frontlines because of what I can do and I keep failing at things that I shouldn’t be failing at, and there’s no excuse for it, but --”
“Take the devil out,” I said. I could hear the lack of affect in my voice. I’d been drained of emotion, wrung out beyond simply the urge to sit and cry.

“I can’t,” said Valencia. Her voice was nearly a whimper. “If I did we would fight, and I wouldn’t be able to defend myself. I know you’re angry with me, that you don’t trust or believe me, but --”


“Talk to me when you get out,” said Valencia. Her voice was desperate, pleading. “Write me a letter if that’s easier.”

I wasn’t sure how calculated that was, and didn’t feel like taking the time to think about it. Writing letters just left me thinking about Fenn again.

Bethel’s incorporation of the Anyblade meant that she could designate any room in the house as the time chamber. Because the accrual of time was linked to the size of the chamber, she typically alternated between designating an enormous ballroom as the time chamber when it wasn’t in use, or vesting it in any one of a set of smaller, purpose-built rooms.

The room that Grak and I had was small, but it had been purpose-built for a two person confinement. We had a small common room with little nooks for each of us off to the side, and with the glove, we could rearrange it to our liking. The bedrooms had bunks, with wards Bethel had put up to block out light and sound, Grak on the top, and myself on the bottom. Unlike the original time chamber, we had a working bathroom with actual plumbing. It was all still entirely self-contained, but the septic system was an actual septic system, with swappable tanks hidden beneath the floorboards, rather than a glorified bucket that we took in and out of the glove.

I climbed into the top bunk and laid there for a bit, crying.

When Arthur had died, it had come in waves. I’d feel empty and lost, which would spiral into this tight feeling in my chest, and that would always lead to tears. It was only rarely wracking sobs. Usually I just sat there with tears rolling down my cheeks while I stared at the wall. I would think about how much I missed him, or how unfair his death was, or all the ways that I’d been a shitty friend to him. My mind kept going back to the fact that the world would probably have been better off if I had died in his place. Once I was done with the self-flagellation, I would go back to feeling hollow, and the cycle would repeat itself.

Fenn had been the best part of my time on Aerb, and for all the wrong reasons. She’d been funny in a way that the others weren’t, always ready to add levity to the proceedings, easy-going and down to earth, chipper and fun. I’d taken it all for granted. I’d kept her in that mold even when she’d been trying to grow beyond it. I’d failed her, and it had all been laid bare for me the day before, in her own words, and now she was gone.

I had enough experience with grief that I could see the cycles. Self-loathing, longing, despair, purposelessness, a circling through vast terrain with familiar landmarks, the cycles were plain to see, but I felt powerless to stop myself.

I wondered if, in a few years, my conception of Fenn would be as white-washed as much as my conception of Arthur had been. Fenn had her hard edges and imperfections. I hadn’t paid it much attention at the time, but when we’d been on the Down and Out, she’d called the owner a weirdo birdfucker because his wife was Animalia. We’d had more important things to deal with, but it had stuck with me. I’d never asked her about it. With Arthur, maybe I had smoothed away his rough edges some because it was painful to think of him as being less than perfect, or because I had felt like
garbage because I was a terrible friend to him. The revisionist history was motivated. Uther was a completely different person from Arthur, put under incredible stresses and through extraordinary events, but it had taken seeing Uther’s dark side for me to start on a reconstruction who Arthur had actually been. He was just a person, mostly, however much he’d changed on Aerb.

I didn’t want to do that with Fenn. Thinking of her as a perfect person would have diminished her and turned her into something false. She had -- my breath caught at the past tense, even after hours sitting in my bunk thinking about her and the fact that she was dead -- she had spent a large portion of her life as a scavenger, breaking imperial law to steal from the dead. She’d gone to prison for it, and the only reason we’d met was that she had been roped into it by Anglecynn’s dysfunctional government. She was quick to violence and had a callous disregard for people she didn’t know.

I had loved her.

And it wasn’t even that I had been blind to her faults. I had, for the most part, loved those too. She was a reflection of me, in a few ways, including some of my worst impulses, and seeing those in her was affirming. She had a “shoot first and ask questions later” policy that was grounded more in not wanting to deal with assholes than anything pragmatic. I was sure that her time as a scavenger and outlaw, not to mention in prison, had given her some of that callousness, but it appealed to me, even though I knew it shouldn’t. There were times when she said exactly what I was thinking, even if it was nothing that I would actually have said out loud.

Even the weirdo birdfucker line was something that had been at the back of my head. People were free to consort with whoever they wanted, I did believe that, but a bog standard human deciding to have sex with something that looked way too much like a bird still tripped my weirdness sensors. I wouldn’t have said anything about it, and I didn’t think that Fenn should have, but it was true to my experience.

There was probably something to be said about the way the oppressed took on the views of the oppressors, which probably shaped Fenn’s own view of deviancy. She didn’t have half-elf friends, and part of that must have been that she looked at other half-elves the same way she looked at herself, which was, in turn, the same way that the fucked up society of Anglecynn had looked at her. She was half-caste, essentially, but that didn’t give her solidarity with other half-caste, it made her dislike them in the same ways that she disliked herself.

I realized, slowly, that I was doing more thinking about Fenn than I’d done through most of our time together, and began crying again, because I loved her and missed her, and wanted her back so I could say all the things that I should have said to her when she was alive. Why hadn’t we had some long, intellectual conversation about racism? The obvious answers were that I didn’t take her seriously and I didn’t value her in that way, at least not enough. Too much of our conversations with each other had been me giving exposition, because that was something I liked to do, and while I listened to her, I didn’t listen nearly well enough.

I might have stayed in bed for days if my bladder hadn’t gotten the best of me. I climbed down from my bunk, took off the armor I hadn’t bothered to remove, and made my way into the cramped, multi-functional room that served all the primary functions of a bathroom. I pulled a glass down from the medicine cabinet and drank long gulps from it, then a second one after the first was done. My head wasn’t in the right place if I was forgetting about basic biological function. One of the things my therapist had said after Arthur died was that ignoring physical need would only make things worse. I had ignored her, but she had been right. When I closed the cabinet, I stared into the mirror Bethel had placed. I looked haggard, and my eyes were puffy. I needed to shave, too. I wiped at my face, then splashed it with some cold water. That didn’t do much to help.
When I came out of the bathroom, Grak was waiting for me.

“Come,” he said. “I’ve made dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said. That was an understatement. I felt like I was never going to eat again.

“Sorry.”

“Eat,” said Grak. “It’s stew. You will feel better.”

“I won’t,” I said. “I’ll force it down and not feel anything.”

“You won’t feel worse then,” said Grak.

“Okay,” I nodded. I went with him into the common room, where a table with chairs was waiting for us. Two bowls of stew were sitting on a table that had been fully set. A small pot of flowers sat in the center of the table for ambiance. The common room had a lot of plants under grow lights, partly to help with our oxygen needs, partly for food, and partly for decoration. It made me feel a little better. Bethel had done as much with the constrained design as she could, and the place felt naturalistic in a way the previous time chamber had felt utilitarian.

“After dinner I will teach you the game of Ranks,” said Grak as he began eating.

“Oh,” I said. “I’m … not really sure I’m up for that.” I still had that hollow feeling, and it wasn’t going to go away anytime soon. Television I could probably handle, so long as it was something that didn’t take too much attention.

“We will play,” said Grak.

“Is this your idea of helping?” I asked. I tried to keep the bitterness from my voice. I’d had a lot of people try to help me with my grief.

“No helping you,” said Grak. “Helping me.”

“Ah,” I said. I took my first mouthful of stew. It was mostly vegetables, with a few chunks of some gamey meat that tasted like venison. Grak hardly ever cooked. I was surprised that he’d made something good.

“There is no pleasure in Ranks,” said Grak. “There is thought. It turns the mind from sorrow.”

“I’m not sure that I can give you what you want,” I said. “I’m going to be terrible at it.”

“I know,” said Grak. He ate another bite of stew, chewing it down with quick motions of his flat teeth. “The distraction will be in teaching you.”

I stared down at my stew. After Arthur had died, I’d fucked things up. One of the ways I’d fucked things up had been by pushing people away, and laying claim to grief at the expense of everyone else. Tiff had tried to tell me that she was in pain, and I had brushed her aside, telling her that it was nothing compared to what I felt. That was a dick move, no matter what I’d been feeling, or how much I needed to say it so I could not hate myself.

“Tell me about her,” I said.

“Fenn?” asked Grak. I looked up from my stew and actually took stock of him. It was less obvious than it had been on my own face in the mirror, but he’d been crying too.

“We should have a funeral,” I said. “Trade stories. Talk about her. Remember her.” I frowned and
held back tears. “Temporary, of course, I mean we’ll figure out a way to bring her back, obviously. But before that, yeah, tell me about her. About Fenn.”

“Hrm,” said Grak. “We talked, sometimes, about our species.”

I furrowed my brow slightly at that. Fenn had never mentioned it. “About … their relationship with each other? Or?”

“No,” said Grak. “Our species have little relationship. The dwarves live underground and keep to themselves. The elves have small populations. They never hunted us for sport or ate us alive.” He grunted slightly. “No, we talked about not being human. There are small things. You would not understand.”

I ate more of the stew. He was probably right. “Can you try to explain?” I asked.

“She told me that it was hard to find clothes,” said Grak. “Most didn’t fit her. She was too slender, too tall, unless she wore men’s clothing. She wore bespoke, when she could, but bespoke clothing cost money she didn’t always have. She was a terrible seamstress. I don’t know if you knew that.”

“I didn’t,” I said. I tried to slot that into what I knew about Fenn. Aside from the time she’d worn her black dress on our single actual date together, I had barely taken any notice of her clothes. “She made changes to her clothes?”

“She tried,” said Grak. “I did some of them for her.”

“You … sewed some of her clothes?” I asked. *How did I not know that?*

“I helped with alterations,” said Grak, nodding. “She was a very long woman. When we met in Barren Jewel, she had three outfits to her name. One was issued by her captors. The other two were stolen. None were flattering.”

“I … don’t think I agree,” I said. “I liked the way she looked.”

“She said you had bad taste,” said Grak.

“Oh,” I said. I felt crestfallen. Not that I thought I had a good eye for clothes, because I surely didn’t, but Fenn thinking less of me hurt.

“She made jokes,” said Grak. He put down his fork. “She said that you liked anything that suggested nudity. It did not matter to you that her clothes didn’t fit right if you could see her legs.”

I set down my fork and closed my eyes, breathing through my nose and trying to find my balance.

“She loved you,” said Grak. I opened my eyes to look at him. “She liked the unvarnished way you saw her.”

“She liked that I didn’t see her as a half-elf,” I said. “Or that I didn’t only see her as that. There was all this stuff that I was ignorant about, and even when I wasn’t ignorant anymore, I didn’t care about any of it, because it was dumb social stuff that obviously didn’t apply to her.”

“I didn’t feel the same way when we met,” said Grak. He pursed his lips. “It took some time for her to win me over.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “You had some … prejudices?”

Grak ate more of his stew. “Amaryllis and I do not see eye to eye,” he finally said.
“Sorry,” I said. “Can we switch to Groglir?”

“Certainly,” said Grak, making the switch effortlessly. “Will you be able to keep up if I speak at a normal pace?”

“Maybe,” I said. “No big words.” I was feeling better, despite myself, a combination of food and conversation helping to keep the waiting grief at bay, at least for the time being. I had a stack of old letters from Fenn, and I was going to read through them again someday, but I thought they would give me the same feeling that I was getting from this conversation, not just the inevitable sadness over her death, which was naturally there, but an appreciation for who she had been.

“Half-breeds lie between worlds,” said Grak. “It is their nature. There are good cases and bad for that, but overwhelmingly, we see more of the bad cases than the good. When I saw Fenn, it was as a woman drifting from place to place. She had no proper home to call her own. My father … he used to say that our cultures were time-tested. All the old species had their places in the world, and woe betide any who tried something new. There were times I believed it. When I met her …” He was picking his words with care, slowing down in a language that was usually much faster for him. “I didn’t think highly of her, at first. She was antagonistic. I knew few elves, but of course there are stories, and she fit the mold too well. Arrogant, flippant, unconcerned with others, consumed by her own perfection. It was partly misreading, partly not. Her better qualities didn’t shine through for some time. When they finally did, she became one of the few people I ever called friend.”

“She was easy to be around,” I said. That was part of what our fight had been about. It gave me a feeling like a punch to the gut. The blow was softened somewhat by saying it in Groglir.

“She was megi,” said Grak.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t know that one.”

“Hard to explain,” said Grak, switching back to Anglish. “Honest.”

“Fenn?” I asked. She had been a lot of things, but honest wasn’t anywhere near the top of the list.

“Forthright,” said Grak. “Blunt, at times. She spoke her mind often, without … hrm.”

“Filters?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Grak. He raised his hand and made a so-so gesture. “I think you understand.”

_Skill unlocked: Language!_

There was always something primal about the skill ups, a raw hit of dopamine that came with a sudden, concrete change in my ability. I didn’t think that was anything the game had done, not directly; I’d had the same experience playing videogames when I got achievements or leveled up. The earlier feeling I’d gotten from the Bone Magic skill up had been more muted, but this was a whole new skill unlocking, and one that I had spent enough time on that I was passably bad at speaking Groglir even without it.

I felt shame at the small spike of pleasure slipping through my grief.

“I finally unlocked Language,” I said, tapping my temple. My Groglir was perfect. Whatever had happened, the entire language had been laid bare for me. I knew words like ‘didil’ and ‘rekohon’, words that Grak had never taught me. The knowledge seemed like it had always been there. “One moment.” I closed my eyes for a moment and paged to the skill. It was at 2, which I assumed was meant to represent Anglish and Groglir. Ideally the next few languages would come faster now that I
had the skill unlocked. If not, the jump from barely fluent to full fluency seemed like a very minor perk.

“Auspicious timing,” said Grak.

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “The washater is trying to cheer me up. Not really helping.”

“It is appropriate to take joy in a gift, even in foul times,” said Grak. He was still speaking in Groglir. It was weird: I could hear that he was speaking the language, and that I was responding in kind, but there was practically no resistance in switching between the two. “It’s difficult, sometimes,” he added. “Impossible, even.”

“Do you know me that well?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Grak. “We are alike.”

I nodded as I chewed on that thought. Grak bore the weight of a burden that he couldn’t discharge, not until he’d paid his penance. He’d devoted himself to a task that no one had asked of him, as single-mindedly as could be expected, and I wasn’t entirely sure that I really understood, not when there were cultural, social, and maybe even racial differences in play. But if I did understand, then the impossible task was a way of living with himself, a way of keeping the memory of his dwarfhold alive and devoting himself to them. Under a certain kind of lens, I had maybe done the same when Arthur had died. I’d been depressed and angry and a complete dick to a lot of people, but at least some of that was because I felt like it was required of me. The term Arthur would have used was ‘performative’, or maybe ‘virtue signaling’.

“I don’t want to do that with her,” I said. “With Fenn. I don’t want to wrap myself in the dark feelings.” I found myself crying. For whatever reason, I wished that Grak couldn’t see me, even though it was probably obvious from the way that crying warped my voice. “I don’t want to break down, she wouldn’t want me to, but it’s just so … so hard to think about being happy.”

“I know,” said Grak. “It feels like betrayal.” He wiped away a tear of his own. “Think about what she would have wanted.”

That line of thinking had never helped me with Arthur. Whenever I tried to imagine what he would want, all I could think about was how sad he would be about being dead for a dumb reason at the age of seventeen. And with Fenn …

“She would want to be alive,” I said. It was almost a joke. “She would put her hands on her hips and say … something witty. Or maybe not even witty, but a joke, because that was how she dealt with things.” My mind went back to the therapy session. “She was more than that.” I wasn’t sure if I was saying that for Grak’s benefit or for my own.

“She would give you instructions,” said Grak. “Flippant ones. ‘Put your shoe on your head every
third morning, so I know that you’re remembering me.” It might have been because he was speaking in his native tongue, but Grak’s impression wasn’t actually that bad. He at least caught some of the intonation.

“I would do it,” I said. “It would be stupid, but I would do it.” I was silent for a bit. “I miss her. I miss her so much already and it’s hardly been any time at all, and I feel like there’s nothing that could ever replace the gap she left in my heart.”

Grak nodded. “It’s possible that your heart will always have a gap,” he said. He clenched his teeth for a moment. “I’m a bad person to be speaking with. I can’t give you good advice.”

“Thank you,” I said. “For coming in. For dinner, for being here, for … trying, at least.”

Grak shrugged. “We’re friends,” he said.

The game of Ranks was played on grids of various sizes, but the most common was sixteen by sixteen. The pieces were usually rounded stones, different minerals or colors to mark the different pieces, or sometimes different shapes.

The game, such as it was, consisted of a gamesmaster setting up a set of rules, and the players attempting to find the best solution given both the rules the gamesmaster had selected and the criteria that the gamesmaster had set. Every player had their own board; it wasn’t a cooperative game, and the aspects of competition seemed like they were there mostly because all the players were playing the game at the same time. There were scores, since that was the whole point, but it was at least partly a test of self rather than a test against others.

Grak held no illusions that I would be able to compete against him. Instead, he acted as gamesmaster, putting forward some example games for me.

I didn’t really want to play.

Back when Arthur had died, --

(I wished that I had some other frame of reference. Things had been complicated with Arthur, and they were more complicated now on Aerb. There was too much history of him, and he’d had too much of an impact as Uther, all added to the fact that he had either lived a second life and then died a second time, or had never fully died at all. I didn’t like the feeling of conflating the two, of thinking about Fenn in the same few inches of thought as the man who had, apparently, violated our house when she was younger and then killed his own mentor. Still, as far as loss went, that was what there was. My grandfather had died when I was ten years old, and while that had been a deeply unpleasant experience for me, it was more because I’d watched him wither away in hospice rather than because we’d been particularly close. Arthur was the point of comparison, as much as that made me uncomfortable.)

-- I’d gotten really into clicker games. If you’ve never played one, they’re basically just games where you click things repeatedly in order to make the numbers go higher. They were mindless, simple things that were designed as simple Skinner boxes, tapping into the animal portion of the brain to induce addiction-like behavior. For the most part, they weren’t fun, but they did occupy my mind in a way that helped block out other thoughts. An hour or two of stimulus and response could pass, and that acted as a numbing agent on my brain.

“I kind of hate myself,” I said.

Grak paused in the middle of setting up the board. “Oh?” he asked.
“Sorry, just,” I paused. “I don’t feel like a normal human sometimes. I’m not one, here, but even before, on Earth, it felt like I didn’t know how to do the things I was supposed to do. I felt like I was fumbling through the world trying to just make it to the next day. Even before Arthur died it felt like that sometimes.” I was crying again. “It’s not just thinking about her that’s getting to me, it’s thinking about the thinking, and thinking about thinking about thinking. I want to just bury myself in something so I don’t have to feel anything, and I feel guilty for wanting that, and I feel embarrassed for feeling guilty, and I have no idea whether that’s what other people would feel.”

“It’s normal,” said Grak. He continued laying out the pieces. “We can play later.”

“No,” I said. “We’ve come this far. You just … left me alone with my thoughts too long.”

Grak nodded. “I have enjoyed being part of this party,” he said. “There is not much time to myself.”

I didn’t like that answer, even though I empathized with it. It didn’t seem particularly healthy, but it was familiar. I wasn’t equipped to help Grak with his issues though -- I was barely capable of dealing with my own in the best of circumstances, and these weren’t them. I almost let it go to ask more about the game.

“We want you to stick around,” I said. “Even after you’ve got your gold. It’s what Fenn wanted too, for what that’s worth to you.”

“I know,” said Grak.

“After you’ve paid your penance … what happens?” I asked. “What are you going to do, where are you going to go?”

Grak stayed silent.

“You’ll still let me come with you?” I asked.

Grak held his silence for a moment, then nodded.

“I guess that’s as much as I have a right to ask,” I said. “And if you ever want to talk … I’m probably not the best person. We’re probably not the best people for each other.” I had gone to group therapy a few times, at my mother’s insistence, and always come out of it feeling more depressed. “I didn’t mean it like that. But, I’ll be here, and I’ll listen. I’ll try to be megí.” I was speaking in Groglir, as easily as breathing, but I put some emphasis on that last word.

“Thank you,” said Grak. His voice was low.

“Now,” I said, looking down at the board. “When two fox tokens are next to each other, what happens?”

We spent a week in the chamber. A lot of that time was with each other, either playing Ranks or talking. Grak’s loyalty increased three times, mostly from the two of us idly speaking with each other, usually for no clear reason. I was afraid that it was because I was feeding his depression.

I spent a lot of my time in bed, thinking about Fenn and sometimes crying.

Naturally, I also spent some time playing the blame game.

O’kald, Dehla, and Everett were at the top of the list, because they were literally responsible. The rest of Heshnel’s crew were responsible as well, since they had let vipers into their midst and not
done enough to curb those murderous impulses. I considered all of that fairly boring though; I didn’t really know those people, and most of them were dead. Masters too, since we would never have gone with them if he hadn’t been a dick about trying to keep us in his clinic.

The Dungeon Master came next, and was arguably first among evils, but I was only mad when I was thinking about him, and I didn’t do it all that much. I blamed him more for the way he’d removed Fenn from the game so silently and entirely, without so much as an acknowledgement that he’d done it. The entire confrontation with Heshnel’s people had been one that he’d likely orchestrated, or maybe nudged, and any possibility that someone could have done something different could have been negated by him. So, fuck him, it was all his fault, everything was, but I had spent enough of my young life raging against gods, and I couldn’t sustain the anger. I got desperate one night and called for a time out, putting my hands up to make a T, like we’d done in my group when we wanted an out-of-character discussion, but I got no response. I also said a small prayer that Fenn was, if not alive and watching us somewhere, then at least recoverable by some means, at some point in time.

And the blame on our side? I could (and did) blame myself in half a hundred different ways. I should have pulled Fenn out first. Or, maybe I shouldn’t have, but if I had loved her more, I would have, and damn the consequences. Fenn would have done it for me. It wouldn’t have been right, but she’d have done it, even after the break-up. And if I hadn’t pulled her out, then I should have triaged her first, or checked the soul strands before doing anything else, or a dozen other things that might have made the difference. I didn’t know when she’d died, exactly, and knowing precisely would have helped me pin down the errors a bit better, so that I could figure out precisely how best to blame myself.

Naturally, there was only so much blame I could heap upon myself, and my eyes turned to the other members of my team. Grak hadn’t seen the poison in the air, and while he couldn’t do anything about the fact that he couldn’t see it, he might have prepared better for that sort of vector of attack. Threat analysis was part of his job as a warder, and given what had happened, he’d failed. I found it hard to blame him though; his entire dwarfhold had been poisoned, albeit unintentionally, and I knew Grak well enough to think that he was probably beating himself up for having not done more.

Solace took some blame too, though it was mostly in the form of me internally complaining about the limits and peculiarities of druidic magic. Solace was our healer, and hadn’t been able to stop the poison or properly heal us, but it was hard to say whether she’d made any mistakes. That was hardly surprising, given that I didn’t really have much of an idea about what Solace’s limits actually were, or how her magic worked in practice. I resented her for not doing more, at least a little bit, but I couldn’t properly say that she hadn’t done everything she could. There was nothing more than a gnawing suspicion that she could have done more, if she’d actually wanted to.

I could easily blame Bethel for not being there for us when we needed her. I wasn’t quite sure how her bag of tricks might have handled the unique poison, but it was probable that she could have done something, rather than the nothing that she actually did.

Amaryllis was blameless. She’d argued for more caution, she’d been laid out early on in the fight, and so far as I could see, everything would have gone fine if we’d done what she suggested. I’d owe her an apology, perhaps, when I felt like I could deliver it without bitterness.

That left Valencia.

There were times I just thought, ‘fuck Valencia’. Fuck her for her terrible therapy, fuck her for pushing O’kald, fuck her for not seeing the trap until it was too late, just … absolutely fuck her, even if she was an emotionally and intellectually undeveloped kid with social superweapons. There weren’t all that many things that I could have done differently, given what I knew and that a rock
monster was trying to kill me, but Val? She was supposed to be more competent than me. She should have been able to save us all. And, sure, that was a little bit unfair, but there were all these little things nagging me, and I was in full-on obsession mode.

I had taken Solace out first because she was our healer and the easiest to move. I had taken Grak out at the same time because he’d been right next to her. Then I’d gone back in, but Valencia had been struggling with carrying Amaryllis, and it had seemed sensible to take her out quickly. That was what had left Fenn for last. Valencia had the strength and stamina of a weak teenage girl who was gradually bulking up under a training regime, so I wasn’t suspicious that she could have done more … but she’d been the one to pick Amaryllis, not me.

Then, when we were going through triage, she had put the crown on Fenn last. That had been her decision, not anyone else’s.

I had liked Valencia, but now there was this alternate world in my head, one consistent with the facts as I knew them, where maybe this wasn’t all just horrible happenstance. It was possible that Valencia had been acting of her own accord, manipulating her companions. ‘Possible’ wasn’t synonymous with ‘probable’, but it was hard to keep these two images of her in my head at the same time. One version of her was a young girl who’d had too much power and responsibility pushed on her plate, and found herself not up to the tasks in front of her, or at least not enough to have done everything as right as her powers might have allowed. In the other … at the very worst, she had intentionally worked toward killing Fenn.

The problem was that her social powers were too strong. She could lie with the best of them, she could read microexpressions, and with a devil’s powers, she had all the inborn powers of manipulation that Aerb could offer. If I talked to her about it, she would surely have some logically consistent explanation for her actions that painted her in a favorable light, maybe with enough bumps that I would find it believable. The only way that I could distinguish whether or not she had a devil in her was by ensuring that she had something else instead, either a human soul that Grak could confirm, or a demon whose combat prowess a devil couldn’t fake. That would naturally assume that Valencia was telling the truth about how her power actually worked; it wasn’t inconceivable that if she was the sort of person who had been willing to kill Fenn, she might have been the sort of person to leave herself a way out.

Frustratingly, it was nothing that could be resolved until I got out of the chamber.

I spent a fair amount of time thinking about all the ways we might be able to bring Fenn back. The ritual of Yaxukasu Axud was a non-starter for a few reasons, but we might potentially discover ways around all the reasons that it didn’t work, especially if we found entads that touched the raw soul in various ways.

Speaking of, I had Fenn’s soul, which opened up possibilities. Chief among those was the possibility that I could pin down someone sufficiently evil, scrape out all their memories and values, and replace them, wholesale, with Fenn’s. I’d replace the body too, naturally. There were a lot of things that couldn’t be transferred, like skills, attributes, race, and a handful of others, but either I could find a death-row inmate equivalent who matched her closely in along the parameters I cared about, or I could just live with the discrepancies.

That kind of FrankenFenn wouldn’t really be her though. There were things that weren’t included in the soul. We weren’t automatons, strictly defined by our values, skills, and attributes. This wasn’t a purely philosophical stance, it was a matter of practical, testable reality (though we hadn’t actually tested it). The soul didn’t actually define a person’s psychology, only pieces of it. I wasn’t at all ruling out the possibility that the soul had hidden parts to it that continued the definition to the level I
would expect to have a complete person … but even if that were the case, it didn’t help me, because for the purposes of the FrankenFenn, I couldn’t touch or see those pieces.

(I already knew that I would do it at the first opportunity, however unwise that might have been. The chance to speak with her again was too tempting, even if it was just her shade.)

The last major pathway to getting Fenn back was sending her to the hells. Her soul was bottled, which meant three years until it would fade away into nothingness. Until that time, we could unbottle her, which would send her to the hells, where she would live on forever. Given that we had Valencia, at least for the time being, we could deal with the majority of the threats that the hells had to offer … but that was another stopgap measure, and the inevitable counterattack from the infernals wasn’t something I thought the others would want to weather.

I was willing to do it, naturally, but it was far in the future. Until there was some actual risk of her soul decaying to nothing, I could keep her bottled. I would build up my powers and capabilities, figure out a way to either extract someone from the hells or turn the hells into a paradise, and then work on a plan that could be enacted the moment she showed up in the hells.

So Fenn was still around, in some sense, but that wasn’t much of a comfort, because for now, and far into the foreseeable future, she was gone.
“No,” said Arthur. “I’m saying it’s a numbers game, and only once you know the numbers can you play the game.”

I slid into the booth next to Tiff with my food. Ruttles’ had a burger bar, full of fixin’s, and whenever we ate there, I always spent a lot of time making sure that I had created the right sort of burger. Usually I went with my parents, but this was a rare night out. After dinner, we were going to stand in line for a midnight showing of Captain America: Civil War at the local theater. It was a tradition that wasn’t really necessary, but which we did anyway, mostly for the sake of it. It was Arthur, myself, Tiff, and Tom, with others joining us later on.

“What are we talking about?” I asked.

“Women in refrigerators,” said Tiff.

“Explain?” asked Tom as he took his seat. Like myself, Tom took care in adding things to his burger. He was good people. “Are we just talking about how many women can fit in the average refrigerator? Because I would say two, if you took the shelves out.”

“It would be more, if you were talking about the average refrigerator,” I said. “Pretty much every food service place has a walk-in, so the average refrigerator is considerably bigger than a home fridge.”

“Not at all what we were talking about,” said Tiff. “So, back in what I want to say was the 90s, there was an issue of Green Lantern where Green Lantern comes home to find his girlfriend has been killed and then stuffed into the refrigerator for him to find by some villain.”

“Gross,” said Tom. “Can we not, while I’m eating?”

“That’s not really the point,” said Arthur as he dipped one of his fries in a mayo/ketchup mix. “It was just the thing that they named the trope after. The trope is basically this concept that you can evoke emotion in the reader by killing off a loved one, sidekick, mentor, etc. as a cheap trick, which you see show up a lot. But the real thing we’re talking about is Tiff’s contention that it’s mostly women. And that is a numbers game.”

“Is this going to be the Bechdel test all over again?” I asked.

“Probably,” said Tiff with a frown.

“I’m not sure what numbers have to do with it,” said Tom. “Whatever ‘it’ is.”

“So, the original version of this was just a survey of comic books,” said Arthur. “It was feminists who liked comic books pointing out all the times that it happened, which they put into a long list, and anytime you see someone make a long list like that, you need to be suspicious, because the point of a long list is usually just to say, ‘hey, look how long this list is’, as though that means anything.”

“So you’re arguing that it doesn’t?” asked Tiff.

“I call it the Problem of Long Lists,” said Arthur. “It’s a variant on the gish gallop. And anyway, I’m not arguing against the general complaint, just the rhetorical technique. Generally speaking, yes, I would agree that it’s much more likely to happen to women than to men, but I think it’s a numbers game, and the root of the issue is that most protagonists are male.”
“So this is exactly like the Bechdel test,” I said. “Do we really need to rehash it?” I was halfway
done with my burger. Arthur had barely started on his, despite getting to the table first. It always took
him forever to eat, mostly because he liked talking instead of eating.

“I think I missed that one,” said Tom.

“You were making a new character,” said Tiff.

“Yeah, don’t die so much,” I said with a smile.

“The Bechdel Test is basically a thing for movies where you say, ‘hey, are there two women talking
to each other in this movie, but not about a man?’” said Arthur. “And you make a Long List of
movies that fail it. But that, too, comes back to the fact that most protagonists are male.”

“Is that better?” asked Tiff.

“Might be,” I said. “Like, if the argument about women in refrigerators is about the portrayal of
women being bad, then no, it’s not better, because identifying the root issue doesn’t actually change
the portrayal. But if you’re trying to change the result, then you need to know where the result comes
from. If it’s some alternate cause, then that should really be the thing that you’re trying to mess with.”

“I think you guys are too smart for me,” said Tom, looking between the three of us.

“You get it though, right?” I asked him. “Like, if you had a bunch of rats in your basement, and kept
hiring an exterminator to come in, and eventually someone said, ‘hey, you’d get less rats if you
walled up that hole and stopped leaving all that food around’, that would be a lot more helpful than
just ‘hey, better kill those rats’.”

“Ah,” said Tom. “Got it. But can we not talk about rats when I’m eating?”

“Does Tom have a weak stomach?” asked Tiff.

“Famously weak,” I said with a sigh.

“Infamously weak,” said Arthur.

“I don’t have a weak stomach, I just lose my appetite,” said Tom, looking down at his burger.

“Quick, change the subject.”

Arthur leapt at that. “Stories are fundamentally simple,” he said. “You’ve got your protagonist, your
antagonist, your mentor, your sidekicks, and your love interest, just as basic building blocks. All
those things need to be used economically for the purposes of storytelling, which means that there’s a
clear delineation between those characters, and a lot of the parts get reused. With me so far?”

“Yes,” said Tom, around a bite of his burger.

“This is just the Bechdel thing again,” said Tiff. “Don’t repeat it for my benefit.”

“It’s a good rant,” said Arthur. “This helps refine it.”

“Fine,” said Tiff with a wave of her hand.

“So, in terms of gender,” Arthur continued. “Let’s say that you start with a male protagonist as the
first gender you decide on. If we’re talking comic books, there are a lot of reasons for that, some of
them economic, some social, but whatever, that’s the default. Right?” I nodded, which was all he
needed to keep going. “Well, in terms of market, it again makes the most sense to go
heteronormative, which means that the love interest is locked in as female.”

“Seems like you might be arguing that the real problem is actually capitalist control of artistic industries, rather than male protagonists,” I said.

“I haven’t actually agreed that there is a problem,” said Arthur. “And that’s not ground I’m willing to cede at this time.”

I waved a hand. “Fine, fine. Still seems like if you’re going to claim market forces for a lot of this stuff, then the problem is market forces. But continue with your rant.”

“Okay,” said Arthur. “So the protagonist is male, and the love interest is female, but the plot doesn’t revolve around them, because plots are conflict and conflict isn’t about that relationship unless it’s a romance, which, for the sake of argument, this isn’t.”

“This’ being a comic book?” asked Tiff.

“Or a movie based on a comic book,” said Arthur. “Apropos, given what we’re going to see tonight, don’t you think? At any rate, if you’re going to have the love interest be a part of the plot, rather than just being there to serve some part of the demographic, then they’re probably going to interact with the antagonist at some point, and there are a lot more interesting things that you can do with a male/female dynamic than you can with a female/female dynamic —”

“Wait, hold on, foul,” said Tiff.

“In the context of what it says about the primary male/male dynamic that defines the central conflict,” Arthur corrected. “The antag/protag relationship is usually one of mirroring, antagonists are built to highlight their differences, at least when they’re actual characters rather than just a CGI gray space alien who wants to take over the world. Point is, you muddle the main thrust of the movie by having both a female love interest and a female antagonist, right? Because then they share gender, and it looks like you’re saying something about gender.”

“Again, foul,” said Tiff. “Gender is not really that important.”

“Well, then I won the argument,” said Arthur with a smile.

“Bah,” said Tiff.

“I mean, right?” asked Arthur. “You can either say that gender is an important thing that audiences will pay attention to, in which case a female antagonist is Saying Something, or you can say that it’s not at all important, in which case who frickin’ cares whether there’s a gender imbalance in fiction?”

“Wait,” said Tom, snapping his fingers. “Oh, I know this one, wait, no one say it, I’ve got it. Ah, it’s … false dichotomy?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Score!” said Tom with a pump of his fist. “Okay, that’s as much as I can contribute tonight.”

“And our debate champ was disparaging Long Lists as being bad rhetoric,” said Tiff, shaking her head. “Tsk tsk.”

“You can’t just claim false dichotomy,” said Arthur, looking a bit annoyed. “You have to actually show why it’s false.”
“The whole argument is about stories and their impacts in aggregate,” said Tiff. “Set aside your pet theories on causes for a second, if ninety percent of protagonists are male, and ninety percent of love interests are female, and writers kill off love interests half the time, then that’s -- I don’t know, some math, but you’d run into it a lot of the time, and most of what a girl sees growing up is women having horrible things happen to them as a way of motivating the main character or increasing the stakes. Which sucks.”

Arthur shrugged. “Okay?” he asked. “I never said that it didn’t suck.”

“But,” I said, looking at Tiff. “There are sort of different levels of sucking. Like, if someone does something that’s bad in the aggregate for their own self-motivated reasons, that’s less bad than if someone does something that’s bad all on its own. Take that original Green Lantern run, right? Most people wouldn’t argue that it was on its own bad, it’s just that when you universalize what happened to all or most other media.”

“Are you all huge Green Lantern fans?” asked Tom.

“I saw the movie,” I said. “Plus I’ve read a lot of wiki pages. That’s about it. So, sure, maybe it was bad on its own, that was just an example.”

“Can we talk about the market forces thing for a bit?” asked Arthur. “Because I think that bears some digging into, especially if we’re digging into moral statements.”

“Moral statements!” said Fenn as she slipped into the booth next to me. “My favorite!”

“You’re late,” said Tiff. “Arthur, you’re not allowed to repeat the rant.”

“Which one was it?” asked Fenn. “I have them memorized. Unless it was a new one?”

“Bechdel test,” I replied.

“Weak,” said Fenn.

“Well, I’m working on refining it,” said Arthur, folding his hands across his chest. “And I think the idea of morality in response to market forces is more interesting anyway. Like, say that you decide there need to be more female protagonists in comic books, and you take it on yourself to write one, and someone else takes it on themselves to publish it.”

“Hold up,” said Tiff. “You’re begging the question.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Fenn.

“No one actually knows,” said Tom. “It’s the Calvinball of objections. It means whatever you want it to mean at the moment you say it.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said. “But I don’t know enough about rhetoric to dispute it.”

“Can we back up?” asked Fenn. “I’m lost.”

From the booth behind Arthur and Tom a man turned around, pushing them slightly to the side so he could let his arms rest on the top of the booth. He was in his thirties, with a slightly crooked nose and a full beard. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t place him. The text on his shirt, partially obscured by the booth, said ‘No More Mr. Dice Guy’.

“Uther was just explaining narrative again,” said the man. “You merge down characters until
everyone carries as much weight as they can. Male protagonist means female love interest, and that takes up the quota of both serious interpersonal drama and romance in one fell swoop, which means if there’s another character, they’re plucky comic relief or a mentor figure, and there are good reasons for both of those to have the same gender as the main character.”

“Which are?” asked Tiff. She was taking the interruption in stride. Looking around the table, it seemed like I was the only one who felt uneasy.

“People like to see romance,” said the man. “Plucky comic relief can read as flirty, so that’s a no go. And for mentor, the mentor usually represents the main character as they’d like to be, or as they might be, so gender matching is preferred to strengthen the mirror, and obviously you also don’t want it to read as a creepy romantic thing, especially with a bigger age gap. But anyway, that doesn’t get to the heart of it, does it? Because the question isn’t about what gender balance looks like in a story optimized for the lowest common denominator, is it? It’s why the girl is the one to die.”

The man reached back and grabbed something off his table. He pointed it at Fenn, and I only realized that it was a gun when he fired it at her. She slumped against me, dead, with a bullet wound in the center of her forehead.

“Why?” I asked as I stared at him. The others hadn’t moved or reacted to the gunshot, nor to Fenn’s death. I had a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Wasn’t me,” he said, throwing the gun behind his shoulder.

I woke up drenched in sweat. It took me a while until I remembered the affliction the crown had saddled me with, Bad Dreams.

“Come on,” said Amaryllis as soon as the door to the time chamber was shut. “With me.”

“Where?” asked Valencia.

“We have just enough time to spar while they’re in there,” said Amaryllis. “You’ll have to take the armor off, but you were probably planning to do that anyway.”

“You want to test me,” said Valencia.

Amaryllis started walking, and fervently hoped that Valencia would follow. It was with a bit of relief that she saw Valencia fall into place behind her. They didn’t have much time, maybe half an hour at the most, all of that in the chamber’s spin-up and spin-down time.

“Why?” asked Valencia.

“Juniper is going to do it,” said Amaryllis. “If he doesn’t, then he’s at least thought about it. Better for me to test you first.”

“I can just tell you,” said Valencia as they moved through the bowels of Bethel.

The training room was one of the places that Amaryllis spent the most time, at least when she wasn’t working on the fledgling republic or doing some of the managerial and engineering work that was going to be necessary to make the grand entrance into Earth exploitation. Keeping in peak physical condition was a necessity, as was honing and refining combat skills. Amaryllis had absolutely no illusions about what sort of role she was playing in this world: peace was never going to be an option for long.
The training room was enormous, with one full wall taken up by a five story climbing wall, complete with auto-belays. Half the floor was taken up with exercise equipment, while the other half was devoted to training mats for sparring. It was more ostentatious than anything Amaryllis had known as a princess of Anglecynn, but that was a part of Bethel’s nature; there were no amenities that she wouldn’t provide, so long as she could give them freely, and so long as they fit within her conception of what it meant to be a house. It was maddening to deal with, and so far, Amaryllis had been the only one really putting effort into testing what the house would and would not do, a venture that had only earned Bethel’s enmity.

Amaryllis made her way to the closest of the mats, shedding armor as she went.

“I can just tell you,” repeated Valencia. “We don’t need to fight.”

Amaryllis sat on the ground to strip off the last of the immobility plate. She tried not to think about how her body had changed with the repeated overwriting of her soul. She was back to the body she’d had before the pregnancy. Magic handled the worst of it, certainly, in terms of what her body was supposed to feel like, but she kept being momentarily intellectually surprised by the changes. It wasn’t pleasant.

“You’re going ahead in the hopes that I follow in your wake,” said Valencia.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. She stopped momentarily. “I need to know the truth. I need to know what Juniper might discover. If your plan is to just talk your way out of being tested, then … you have to understand that’s not going to work. If there are secrets, then they’re going to come out. It’s narrative, it’s plot, a force powerful enough to shape our entire existence. Reading Uther’s biographies always gives me the sense that there are entire civilizations that only ever existed because Uther needed something to do for a few weeks between larger plots. Everything, everything, has to be calculated with that in mind. I tried to tell Fenn that, but she didn’t fucking listen, and now she’s dead.”

Amaryllis was breathing hard and did her best to calm herself. The aggression was pumping through her veins, making every situation seem like it could be solved by beating the problem to death with her bare hands. She could almost understand why Juniper would have thought that killing the Dungeon Master was a smart idea, which was a sign of just how compromised her own thinking was.

“Okay,” said Valencia. Her voice was small. She began taking her own armor off as well, then stopped and sat on the floor and began crying.


“I screwed up,” said Valencia from the floor.

“Up,” Amaryllis repeated. “Take on a demon, tell it to me while we fight, I know you’re good enough to keep your emotions in check while you have one.”

Valencia shook her head. “I screwed up,” she said again.

“Eat a demon, now, or I’m going to punch you in your face as hard as I can,” said Amaryllis. “In fact, I’m going to punch you in the face as hard as I can no matter what you say or do, and it’s up to you to stop me.”

“What do you even think of me?” asked Valencia, still crying. She shrugged, using her hands, and let them fall back into her lap.
“I think this might be another tactic to get out of the fight,” said Amaryllis, stretching out slightly. She didn’t like to see Valencia like this. Without the armor, she was pretty far from fearsome, and that was before she was sitting on the ground crying. “You offer up a half-truth, or a clever lie, something that minimizes whatever actually happened and gets you out of the fight, where you’d have to reveal the full truth, or depend on your native ability to lie under pressure plus whatever the demon gives you. And then, at some critical moment weeks or months in the future, everyone learns the truth and it all goes to shit.”

Valencia nodded once, looking miserable. “And no one can ever trust me anymore, because I screwed up, I wasn’t looking far enough ahead, I wasn’t thinking about what might happen, I was - -” She choked back a sob and lay there, crying.

Amaryllis made a fist and walked over. Was Valencia trying to call a bluff? If she was using a devil’s powers, then she would know that Amaryllis didn’t bluff like that. So why make the play? Was a devil good enough to know that Amaryllis would second-guess herself? Or was it a move made out of desperation, predicated on hope more than practicality? Or … was she telling the truth, and it wasn’t a ploy all along? But Amaryllis couldn’t stop, because if she did, then she would be the sort of person that could be manipulated by a sobbing mess of a young girl.

“I’m going to punch you in the face now,” said Amaryllis, clenching her fist. “I don’t want to, and I don’t want to hurt you, but you need to take a demon now, and you need to keep him so that I can get the full story from you, without varnish.”

Valencia only cried, shaking her head.

Amaryllis looked down at her fist. The anger was fading away. It hadn’t been more than an hour earlier she’d been furious with Juniper for not bottling away his emotions and getting things done. It shouldn’t have been different for Valencia, but somehow it was. Maybe Juniper was an equal, more or less, and Valencia was … a child, in many ways.

There was a side of Amaryllis, naturally, that was horrified of the idea of hitting Valencia, in the world where Valencia had simply made some error in judgement and was too distraught to comply with orders.

Amaryllis didn’t put quite as much power into the hit as she possibly could. She had blood and bone magic at her disposal, and she didn’t tap into them, choosing instead to use only her physical strength. It was still a full-on strike at someone with no defenses up.

Valencia moved at the last second, raising an arm to push away the strike and rolling backward to get away. She was on her feet in seconds, standing in a loose fighting stance, one she seemed to prefer. There was a rigidity to how people fought when they’d had extensive training, a way that certain patterns and stances were ingrained in them, not just in their muscles, but their muscle memory. Valencia was always more adaptive, unless she was intentionally aping a style. She didn’t need a default stance, not when she could create a fighting style from whole cloth to suit her opponent.

She still had tears streaming down her face.

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. “Good. Now --”

Valencia moved forward and kicked at the last second, catching Amaryllis in the gut. It hadn’t quite been a feint, but Amaryllis had been expecting a strike to the face. Amaryllis had the wind knocked from her, which she thought was probably the point. She stood, trying to catch her breath, and put up as much of a defense as she could.
“I wanted them to break up,” said Valencia. She delivered a strike, which Amaryllis blocked with her forearm. Valencia paused. “I’m going to have to hurt you, or you probably won’t believe me.” She made another strike, but it turned into a grab, which she used to flip Amaryllis through the air. “I’m not in love with him,” said Valencia. “I just didn’t think they were any good together. I could have fixed them, but it would have taken too much time and too much of Juniper’s attention. I should have said that I didn’t want to do it, but it was selfish to think that.”

She continued her assault on Amaryllis, who was doing her best to play defense. If this had been real combat, Amaryllis was sure that she’d have been dead a dozen times over. There were too many places where someone as skilled in hand-to-hand as Valencia (temporarily) was would have had a chance to deal the killing blow.

“Did you kill her?” asked Amaryllis. She’d given up on healing the damage as it came in, instead electing to let her flesh be battered. Juniper managed mid-combat healing deftly, but at half his skill, Amaryllis still found herself having to devote too much attention to it, which caused her guard to lapse, which Valencia was taking advantage of.

Valencia paused, tears in her eyes. “I chose you,” she said, her voice soft. “Juniper took Grak and Solace, and I had to choose between you and Fenn. I didn’t know for certain that she would die, but … I could see that Juniper was suffering under the poison. I saw him go back in. I almost stopped him, so I could give him the crown, but I decided that we needed to give Solace every advantage we could. He was late coming out. If I’d handed over the crown, he could have put it on her, gotten out faster, they might have …” She sat down on the ground and broke down into tears again.

Amaryllis slowly started the healing process, burning bones that would need to be replaced later on, when she had a spare moment.

“We’re going to have to tell him,” said Amaryllis. She went over to Valencia and put an arm around her. “Soon. It will come to a head otherwise. You didn’t do anything that can’t be forgiven.”

“I know him better than you do,” said Valencia. “I know how he thinks.”

Amaryllis was silent. It was difficult to defer to that opinion. It was also difficult not to start proposing solutions, which started with infernal manipulation and got less ethical from there. Narrative was going to be a problem even if there weren’t serious qualms about those less savory methods of dealing with the problem.

“If you tell him as yourself?” asked Amaryllis. “You’ve said before that the infernal skills don’t give you self-reflection.”

Valencia looked up at Amaryllis. “I would have no defenses. Not even hiding how I felt.”

Amaryllis frowned. “I think it’s the right way to go about things. Maybe he still won’t believe it, but it will be more true to yourself.”

“When?” asked Valencia.

“Later,” said Amaryllis. “Their time is up, and it will be our turn soon. When we come out … maybe then.”

“He’ll hate me,” said Valencia.

“Well,” said Amaryllis. “Let’s hope that you underestimated him.”
I stepped out of the chamber feeling better than when I’d gone in. The nightmares were a nightly occurrence, and I often woke up from them sore from how tense my muscles had been. They were vivid and slow to fade, leaving me with unpleasant imagery for most of my mornings. In a weird way, it was almost helpful. Dealing with the shift between dreaming and waking life helped me come to terms with the fact that I lived in a world without Fenn. The dreams had gotten less intense with each passing night, which I was thankful for, but I suspected there would be a long tail of bad dreams that would plague me for weeks if not months.

“Hey,” I said as we stepped out.

“What was Grak’s affliction?” asked Amaryllis. She’d ditched her armor somewhere, and had a sheen of sweat that I didn’t remember being there when I’d gone into the chamber.

“Bouts of mania,” said Grak. He turned to look at me. “Juniper was helpful.”

I shrugged. “My mom had a few episodes,” I said.

“I didn’t know that,” said Amaryllis, frowning slightly. “You managed?”

“I didn’t know that,” said Amaryllis, frowning slightly. “You managed?”

“With her, or with Grak?” I asked. “I guess the answer to both is the same.”

Grak had all sorts of ideas while he was in his manic episodes, mostly related to warding. I’d recognized the signs when he started talking quickly in Groglir, and tried my best to direct his efforts towards things that didn’t have too much of a cost. When the mania passed, he’d realize all his ideas and plans had been half-baked, the warding diagrams he’d drawn up nonsensical. I had talked with him some about what mania was like, which seemed to help. His affliction was passing too, though still not completely gone.

“And ... how are you?” asked Amaryllis.

“Well, she’s still dead.” I replied. It left a bitter taste in my mouth. “I’m ... better.” I hated saying that. It felt like an admission that I hadn’t loved her enough. The affliction, Griefstricken, was gone, and that had felt like a slap in the face. I still felt the grief, but it wasn’t the same oppressive cloud it had been in the first few days. “We should have a funeral, once you get out. I intend to bring her back from death, but that doesn’t seem like it’s in the cards for quite some time.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Grak, can I have the glove?” she asked, holding out her hand.

Grak had been the one to be invested with it, for reasons that were both obvious and a little bit painful. He’d been my caretaker, in a manner of speaking. He handed the glove over to Amaryllis without any fuss. Where the glove would ultimately end up was an open question, and not one that I really wanted to think too much about. It was another reminder that Fenn was gone; the glove had been one of her signatures.

I hadn’t looked over at Valencia. I could see in my peripheral vision that she was keeping her eyes at the floor, studiously not saying anything. Good, I thought, but I didn’t like thinking like that, because there was a chance, albeit a small one, that she didn’t deserve to be cast in such a bad light.

Amaryllis handed me an envelope, which I stared at dumbly for a few seconds before taking it.

“What’s this?” I asked, even as I read what was written on it. ‘In Case Fenn Dies’. It was written in Fenn’s handwriting. “She ... she wrote a letter? To me?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I advised against it. She wanted me to wait a bit before giving it to you, in case she wasn’t dead, but it’s been a week for you now, and I’m going in, so ... I don’t know what’s
on there, but maybe it will help.” She hesitated slightly, then gave me a nod and strode forward into
the chamber. Valencia and Solace followed her, neither of them saying anything.

“We’ll see you soon,” said Amaryllis as she closed the door.

I didn’t have a response. I was staring at the letter.

Dearest Juniper,

If you’re reading this, then I’m dead, which is probably a bummer.

Mary told me not to write this letter, because, and I quote, ‘if you write a letter to be opened after
you die then Chekhov will rise from his grave and shoot you himself’. But hey, she’s still pretty
wrapped up in the narrative thing, and I’m with you on it not really holding water. I guess if I’m
dead, she’ll get one more ‘I told you so’ in.

I naturally don’t know how I died, but for the sake of this letter I’ll assume that I went down in a
blaze of glory, maybe after having mouthed off to the wrong person, or in a moment of heroism, or
… just, hopefully something cool, rather than a freak accident or as a result of my own stupidity.

I’m doing a bad job of getting to the point. The thing is, I’m writing this letter with a request, and I
don’t want to just come right out and say it, because it might sound mean. Here goes.

Juniper, I don’t want you to do the same thing to me that you did to Arthur.

I guess that means I have to explain what you did to Arthur, but I’m worried that I’ve got it wrong,
and then you’ll have a letter from your dead girlfriend (or wife, depending on what’s happened since
I wrote this) where you’re thinking to yourself the whole time, ‘what kind of idiocy is this?’.

You used to have this way of talking about Arthur like he was the greatest guy in the world, and this
burning fire when you talked about getting him back. There’s a little less of that now, I guess, but I
haven’t asked, because I think you wouldn’t take it well if I said anything.

And, you know, there’s a part of me that gets all hot and bothered about you doing that for me. What
right-thinking woman wouldn’t want you as her avenging champion, sword in hand, going on a
rampage of revenge? The fantasy version of it all is that you finally find the bastard that killed me,
after a two year quest, and you say ‘This is for Fenn!’ before blasting him to pieces. It really does it
for me. I almost want to die just so you can avenge me.

The thing is … I’m trying to be a better person. Old Fenn (no age jokes, please, I’m dead, have
mercy) would just punch people in their faces when they were being jerks and then run away
because, as it turns out, most people don’t like that. There was this one guy who I overheard talking
to his buddy, and he was saying that elves were a serviceable lay if you didn’t have to look at them.
So I went over, punched him in his mouth, and then made myself scarce. That was Old Fenn. I spent
a good amount of time laying low after that, and took on longer expeditions in the Risen Lands so
that there would be some time for the air to clear.

But you see, New Fenn is a different sort of girl, isn’t she? I’ll still punch people in their stupid faces,
but it’ll be for good, sensible reasons. You imagine Amaryllis punching someone in the face (not that
she’s who I want to be when I grow up) and it’s hard to imagine that she would do it because that
was what she felt like doing, right? She’d have some kind of calculation to it, I would think. I’m
trying to think if I’ve ever seen her punch someone in the face, and I don’t think I have. She’s more
the stabby sort of person, or a shooty sort (even though everyone knows that guns are a coward’s
weapon, completely different from bows, which are noble and brave). Me? I’m a puncher, unless I
have my bow, in which case I’ll gladly put an arrow into someone who seems like they might deserve it. Or at least, that was the Old Fenn, who I’m trying to leave behind.

The thing is, giving in to those stupid impulses is the mark of a bad person. There are probably plenty of bad people who don’t have impulse problems too, I guess, but whatever. I know that having you become obsessed with avenging me is probably not what’s best for the world, or for you. So though this letter is being written by a not-dead Fenn, who doesn’t have to deal with all the problems of being dead, let me do my best to absolve you of the need to go all bonkers because I’m dead.

First things first? I need you to not see me as someone that I wasn’t. I mean, maybe by the time I die, I’ll have become the sort of girlfriend that deserves being thought of how you think of me, but probably that was still a road that I was walking. The Fenn writing this letter? She’s kind of shit. I’d always thought that about myself, but I guess it was only in the last few months that I started to really realize that I thought it. Parsmont had a lot to do with that. So if I’m dead, and you’re thinking of me, then I really want you to remember me as I was. Don’t go making up some fake version of me that never really existed, because it feels better not to think about all the ways that I was flawed. I’m not saying that you did that with Arthur, but you totally did that with Arthur.

Second … blegh. Make sure that I’m really dead first, and spend some time getting over me so it’s not a mistake, but you should try your best to move on. Like I said, I do love the idea of you pining for me for the rest of your life, because I’m pretty great and all, but Good Fenn is in the driver’s seat now. I don’t want you to be looking at me with rose-tinted glasses, and I don’t want you to f**k everything up because you think that I’d be furious, or that I need, want, or deserve that level of devotion. (Hopefully the Dungeon Master gives me a ringside seat once I’m out of the game, and if he does, I’ll do my best to keep these instructions in mind.)

(If you’re going to hook up with someone in the group after I die, which seems likely, here’s my list in order, because I know you like lists: Amaryllis (she’s hot), Grak (he needs to get laid), locus (it would be fucking hilarious), Solace (grown up, naturally), the house (if she doesn’t look like Tiff), Valencia (bleh), and the house (if she looks like Tiff). But maybe the party will have a bunch of new members by the time I die. Not really planning to rewrite this letter.)

Third, you owe me one favor. For that favor? Don’t send me to the hells. I know you’ve got your own views on whether it would be better to be tortured forever or face oblivion, but for me, I choose oblivion. If I’m dead, you’re probably the one that gets to make that choice, and unless there are some really unusual circumstances, I don’t want to go to hell. Use my soul for parts, if it makes sense to, sell or use all the shit that I gathered up from our whirlwind tour of Aerb, and burn my body up after taking the bones out to use for their luck. Double check that I’m dead first, naturally. Maybe even triple check.

Mary thinks that it’s both morbid and stupid for me to be writing this letter. Stupid, maybe, I don’t know. Morbid though? I think we come closer to death on a regular basis than most people get in their whole lives (right up until they actually die, anyway). It’s a bit fun sometimes, I’ll grant that, but it’s no way to live long-term. Really, it seems like a good way for one of us to die. Solace already did, but she’s coming back, so I’m not sure that means anything. Maybe if I die, I’ll come back too, but I’m kind of skeptical that’s going to happen. Mary’s the one that was supposed to give you this letter, so if she did, that shows what she thinks about my chances.

All my love from beyond the grave,

Fenn

(How cool is it that I can do things from beyond the grave? I don’t know why more people don’t
write death letters.

(Also, this is a cheap shot, because I can get the last word in, but you were totally wrong about the baryton/baritone argument. I looked it up like five minutes ago using the backpack. A barytone is a thing on Earth too, it wasn’t put on Aerb to confuse you, you were just wrong. Happens to the best of us, clearly, if I’m dead. Probably would have been more appropriate for another letter, but I’m dead, I can do what I want.)

I stared at the sheets of paper after I’d finished reading. I missed her terribly. It was astonishing to me how much we were thinking in the same direction. Fenn got me, in a way that I didn’t think anyone else ever had. And at the same time, we were nothing alike. I’d written more than one letter like hers, to be opened after my death. One for Tiff, one for Reimer, one for Tom, one for Maddie, one each for my parents … only if you wrote them like I did, you called them suicide notes instead.

We held a funeral in the late afternoon, the same day that Fenn had died. I was the one who dug the grave, in a courtyard within Bethel’s demesne. She’d said in her letter that we should chop her up and use her for parts, but there was no way that I could have ever done that. Just the thought of touching one of Fenn’s bones and draining it for its Luck gave me an uncomfortable tightness in my chest. We still had Fallatehr’s corpse, if we really needed elf luck by way of bone magic. (The fact that I could give consideration to the practical side of things was a sign that I was holding myself together well enough that maybe I wouldn’t fuck up our next serious encounter.)

The funeral was a small affair. She had a son out there somewhere, and he was the only one that I would have liked to bring in. The list of other people that might possibly have wanted to come and pay their respects was painfully short, no more than a handful of names. Fenn made fast friends, but our little group was insular for obvious reasons, and most of her friendships had been based on omissions of truth, if not outright lies.

Grak helped me lower her coffin into the grave; I cried the entire time, then set to the task of burying her. Most of this happened in silence. When I was finished, we said some words.

“She was the closest thing I’ve ever had to a sister,” said Amaryllis. “I feel fortunate to have had longer with her than the rest of you. We spent two months together in a room that was twenty feet to a side, and there were days when she made me forget that.” Amaryllis looked down at the grave. “If we ever gain the ability to bring people back from the dead, she’s the first on my list. Odds are, she’ll probably crack a joke. That was one of the best things about her.”

Grak had only a sentence. “She always found a way to be happy.”

It hurt, to hear him say that, because I knew it wasn’t exactly true. She hadn’t found a way to be happy with me. I understood where he was coming from, but it still rubbed me the wrong way.

“She had the mindset of a druid,” said Solace. She was still in a man’s body, a state that apparently didn’t bother her much. “She could bend like a reed in the wind and act without thinking when the time came to act. Her life was an act of improvisation and adaptation, always on her toes, adjusting to whatever the next day might bring. Part of that was because she was rootless, cast out from her two homes by family who didn’t understand her. It might have taken her some time, but I like to think that she found family in us, however briefly.”

My eyes went to Valencia, who was standing next in the circle. We hadn’t arranged a proper ceremony, but we were going in order, and she was next. Her hands were tucked into the pockets of her dress. It was a little bit too cold for what she was wearing, given the bleak weather on the Isle of Poran. Her nose was slightly red from the cold.
“I didn’t know her well,” said Valencia. “I had insights.” She twisted her lips slightly. “She was intensely loyal. She was trying her hardest to become better, more than most people ever try. She was … I wish that she could have been my sister too.” She began crying, silent tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

I wanted to ask her what she was sorry for, but I didn’t think I could do it without sounding angry. Were those tears crocodile tears? I assumed that she could cry on command, if she needed to. My jaw was set and I was breathing through my nose, very deliberately. It felt like at any moment I would break again, and I wanted to prevent that. We were going to have to talk, but I wasn’t even remotely up for it.

“She had an attractive sort of flippancy,” said Bethel, speaking with the same calm voice she seemed to use for everything, as though she was above everyone else. The fact that she could kill everyone standing in the courtyard in the space of a few seconds added to that impression. “There’s something very fetching about a woman who thumbs her nose at pandering, even in the face of overwhelming power. When I first watched her, I thought that it was stupidity, but in time, I saw that it was an admirable attitude of defiance. She was my favorite resident.”

We’d come back around to me. I felt a lump in my throat. I didn’t know how I could possibly sum up what she’d meant to me. Most likely if I tried to write it all down, I would end up filling a whole book. To condense it all down into a handful of sentences seemed impossible. Worse, there was a sense of finality to saying goodbye like this. I didn’t want Fenn to be gone. There was a part of me that wanted to simply launch into a speech about how no, this wasn’t something I was going to accept, I was going to fight for her, I was going to keep the dream of her alive, put pieces of her soul into someone else until I’d reassembled her, throw her into the hells against her wishes and then rescue her from them …

“She was my first real friend in this place,” I said. The words felt thick in my mouth. I glanced at Amaryllis. “Sorry.” She gave a small wave of her hand. She understood; we’d had a bit of a rocky start. “She had a lot of edifice, and a lot of depth. She was dealt a bad hand, right from the start, caught between two worlds, neither of which really seemed to want her, and … she loved us like family, because she never really had a family. The edifice was there because that was her way of dealing with a world that was shitty to her, and it was a good edifice, one that she enjoyed. And her depths … I never really got to explore them as much as I would have liked.” I let that hang in the air for a moment. I hadn’t meant it as a joke, or something crude, but as I was trying to think of what to say next my mind kept circling back to that. I felt myself smiling a little. “I think we’re doing this all wrong. I’m sure she’d appreciate people saying nice things about her, but a solemn, somber funeral wasn’t really her style.”

“You’re probably right,” replied Amaryllis.

“I don’t know what she would have wanted,” I continued. “She didn’t say in her letter. I’d argue maybe that we should be celebrating her life, but a lot of her life wasn’t that great, and the part of it we shared with her wasn’t always the best either.”

“I have an idea,” said Valencia. Her voice was soft. I froze when she spoke, and didn’t look her direction.

“What kind of idea?” asked Amaryllis. “What … provenance?”

“My own,” said Valencia. I looked at her, finally, and saw her head hung low. “She -- she had a campaign, with notes, one that she really wanted to run. I know that we couldn’t play it like she’d have done it, but it was something that she made, and wanted to share with us, so … I don’t know, I just thought.”
“Joon?” asked Amaryllis.

“I .. sure,” I said. “I’ll need some time to look over her notes and see what I can make of it.”

“I was thinking that I could run it,” said Valencia.

I looked at her, feeling cold. “Why?” I asked.

“She meant for you to play it, not run it,” said Valencia. “She wanted to be the one in the driver’s seat.”

“I think it might be a bad idea,” said Amaryllis. She gave a polite cough. “We need to clear the air before too much longer, ideally before tomorrow’s visitors.”

“Clear the air?” I asked. I could feel my fists clenching, seemingly of their own volition.

Valencia was looking away.

“Val?” asked Amaryllis. “We need to get this done now, not in the heat of combat, and not when there’s some momentous decision that needs to be made in a hurry.”

“That was part of the argument for Fenn and I going to therapy,” I said. “Better to do it now than later, better that it be handled quickly on our own terms than at a time when it might blow up in our faces.”

“I understand how you feel,” said Amaryllis. “But in a full combat situation where you’re managing multiple different types of magic and trying to process information, we really can’t afford for any of this to come out. The line between life and death is razor thin here.” She looked at the small mound of earth where Fenn was buried. “I’m trying to keep everyone safe. Val, tell him.”

“No,” I said, looking at Valencia. “Take in a soul, then we’ll have Grak and Bethel watch your skin to make sure that you’re not using a devil. That’s the only way that I want to talk to you.” I could feel my blood starting to run hot. If she refused, it was as good as an admission of guilt. Of what, that remained to be seen, but my mind was already going to the worst case scenarios.

“Okay,” said Valencia. Her voice was small. She looked to Amaryllis, who was wearing the glove, Sable. “I’ll need a soul.”

Amaryllis frowned slightly. “I’d rather not do this at a funeral,” she said.

“I think we’ve all said our piece,” I replied. “And if we’re laying things to rest, I can’t think of a better place than here.” I was too angry, and I knew that I was too angry. It was hard to modulate my tone and think about the words that were coming out of my mouth.

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. She popped a small glass bottle from the glove and handed it over to Valencia, who took the stopper out and downed the small white sphere in a single swift motion.

Her face fell slightly as she looked at me. “I can still lie,” she said. “And … and I looked at what was going on from the eyes of dozens of devils, so I still remember what they would have said, even if I don’t have their powers. It’s important that you know that, because otherwise you might think of it later, and not trust me.”

“I already thought of that, thanks,” I said. “And I’ve already thought of the fact that you might have been lying about only being able to take in one at a time. You can kill them without taking them in, and your powers keep growing.”
Valencia slumped. “Then there would be nothing that I could ever say.”

I had no response to that. “Say what you have to say,” I said.

Valencia hesitated. “You were the only couple I ever knew,” she said. “My father’s relationship with his thralls was … it wasn’t ever like romance. And so I looked at the two of you, and you were happy together, and … and then I looked at you through a devil’s eyes, even though I knew that I shouldn’t. I could see all the ways you hated each other, all the things that I could have said to turn you against each other, the little annoyances and lingering problems, and … I hated what I saw.”

I pursed my lips.

“I could see all the good, too, the devils aren’t hopeless about that, they’re not Voldemort, not being able to understand love, they just hate it and they’re not as good at it because why would they be, but … it just wasn’t enough. The good wasn’t enough to outweigh the bad, and I never … never liked Fenn, not until after she began to change, and things just got worse between the two of you when she did, and I spent all this time trying to understand what had happened. It was all the stuff we talked about in therapy, the ways you were rubbing each other the wrong way, and it was becoming worse and worse as time went on, especially when you got back from being in the chamber, and … I should have kept to myself, but I couldn’t say anything without it looking like I was badmouthing this thing you were both proud of, and you wouldn’t have believed that I wasn’t jealous. And there were all these other things that I was keeping my mouth shut about, because I didn’t want people to know how I felt about them, because they wouldn’t have understood that I loved them anyway.” She was speaking fast and carelessly. I glanced at Grak, who was watching her impassively and not saying a word.

“So you decided to split us up,” I said.

“No,” said Valencia. “No, I never wanted to, even if you weren’t happy, I was just going to let you be, because trying to fix it without seeming like that was what I was doing would take too many plots and planning, and the devils aren’t all the same, they have different skills and approaches, so … I was going to not say anything and hope that it worked out somehow, even though I didn’t think it would. And then Mary said that maybe I should help work things out between you two, and, and I thought that maybe it wouldn’t hurt anything if I just … if I let the process fail.”

“We came to you for help,” I said. My hands were balled into fists. I wasn’t going to hit her, not unless she confessed to killing Fenn, but I wanted to. Valencia was small and vulnerable, without her armor or weapons, but even given that, there was a part of me that wanted to take out my frustration through excessive violence.

“I know,” said Valencia. “And I thought … I thought that maybe the means would justify the means. And I didn’t think … the door was still open, it didn’t need to be forever that you were apart --”

“Well, it is now,” I said. “What about during the fight? Could you have saved her?”

“I … yes,” said Valencia. And then I thought that I really would have to kill her, because if she had sat there and done nothing, she was no better than the Dungeon Master. “But I chose Mary! I had to pick one of them, and I picked the one who was more important. If Mary dies we lose all our best entads, that was what I was thinking. Please, Juniper, I had to make a choice, and I wasn’t thinking about what would look good, I was trying to -- to --” She closed her eyes. She was crying. “I was trying to make it through,” she finally said.

My heart was hammering in my chest, so I focused on my bones and began pulling WIS. It wasn’t just the stat boost that helped, it was the actual act of burning the bone, which took my mind off of
what I was feeling. I slowed down and controlled my breathing, then slowed the beating of my heart by changing the flow of my blood through my body. I closed my eyes so I could block out the world around me, and focused on the manipulations of my internal magic.

“I forgive you,” I said. I opened my eyes and looked at Valencia. She was staring at me with tears still streaking her cheeks. “I forgive you for trying to manipulate me, I don’t actually think that you need forgiveness for saving Amaryllis, because it was a choice that had no good solution. If --” and there my attempt at magnanimity faltered, because ‘if you really didn’t do all this for nefarious reasons’ was the hitch in all of it, and the prime source of mistrust. “I’m probably still going to feel upset, but … I don’t want to be. You’re younger than your years. You’re going to make mistakes. Big ones, I guess.” I took a slow breath. “Fenn didn’t die because of you.”

Valencia let out a shaky breath. “I don’t deserve you,” she said.

“I’m not saying -- it’s going to take some time to get back on good footing,” I said. I wasn’t even sure that I meant the words that I was saying, I only knew that some better version of Juniper would be saying them. That was the Juniper that I wanted to be, the one who could forgive a mistake and not go down the rabbit-hole of recrimination and anger. And if it hadn’t been a mistake … well, gods willing it would come out at some point, and I would deal with it when it did.

“Okay,” said Valencia, her head hung low. “Can I … can I see, with a devil, to see whether --”

“No,” I said.

“To see whether what?” asked Amaryllis, furrowing her brow.

“To see if he … if he means it,” said Valencia. “To see whether it’s actual forgiveness, or, I don’t know.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You look at me with a devil behind your eyes again and I’ll never speak to you again.”

“I can’t watch her all the time,” said Grak. “And she can’t be expected to hold a soul for the rest of her life.”

“I can watch her so long as she’s here,” said Bethel. “Though I don’t really think she’s done anything so bad. So far as I can see, everything said in the therapy session was essentially true, most of it offered by yourself and Fenn.”

“Don’t fucking start with me,” I said. I hadn’t known that she’d listened in. I’d known she had the capacity, but I hadn’t realized that she had been party to those talks. Even if she had, I hadn’t thought that she would say anything about them.

Bethel gave a casual shrug. “I’m only offering my perspective.”

“Are we done then?” asked Amaryllis. “Juniper, was there something else you wanted to ask, something that needs to be resolved?”

“No,” I said, folding my arms. “I don’t really feel up for playing Fenn’s game though.”

“Perhaps that’s for the better,” said Bethel. “We have a visitor.”

“We do?” asked Amaryllis. “They weren’t supposed to come here until tomorrow.”

“Not the ones you spoke of,” said Bethel. “An old friend has come knocking on our door.” She held
her hand out in front of her, and an image appeared above it, showing a teenage girl with dark black hair standing in front of the door. It was Raven, Uther’s archivist, and later the keeper of the magical library, at our doorstep. The resemblance to Maddie was uncanny.

_Fucking great._
There wasn’t much to say about Maddie. She was Craig’s shadow, as much as he would let her be, which meant that I’d known her about as long as I’d known him. On the rare occasions that I would go over to their house, she would bring chips or drinks for us while we played videogames or watched TV, and then stay there, sometimes adding to whatever conversation was going on, but usually being quiet. Craig’s attitude toward her seemed to be that he would tolerate her so long as she stayed in the background, and I didn’t ever see a lot of pushback from her on that. Craig only spoke of her in annoyance, but for the most part, he didn’t speak of her at all.

Their home life wasn’t great. Their father had been out of the picture since around the time Maddie was born, and their mother went through a string of boyfriends, but none that lasted long. Craig didn’t talk about his mom much, except to say that she was a ‘raging bitch’. The charitable version is probably that she was a single mother with too few resources to deal with her children. Craig was often put in charge of Maddie, even though he was only three years older than her. That was how Maddie had ended up joining our games.

She was awkward, enough that I noticed it. Some of that was just the fact that she was an interloper, mentally tagged by all of us as Craig’s kid sister rather than being her own person. I could make more excuses for her, like pointing out that she was a girl entering into a male-dominated game, or pointing out that she was younger than us by enough of a margin to matter. Really though, she was just awkward. She didn’t really have any friends her own age, and none of us were really interested in being friends. Tiff was the one exception to that, but the friendship never really clicked, maybe because Tiff was too well-adjusted and Maddie was too … not.

As far as I could gather, Maddie spent most of her free time online, which meant that she was at least partly raised by the internet, and not the best parts of the internet either. To my knowledge, she never fell in with the kind of people who were on the lookout for impressionable pre-pubescent girls, but she did find a lot of those incestuous websites that have built up their own obsessive mythologies, rituals, and words of power. There were times when she was talking when she would drop in some random bit of deep lore from one of those places, or use a turn of phrase that no one around her was at all familiar with. Sometimes we asked her to explain, but mostly we ignored her, in part because her explanations made it clear she expected us to have read some obscure creepypasta or watched five seasons of a show someone had given a glowing recommendation to.

(I’m aware that this is me saying that, trust me, I am, but when I dropped my references, it was either with the necessary background, or with the intent that no one would be able to connect. With Maddie, it was pure social disconnect, like she didn’t realize that other people had internal lives of their own.)

She leaned hard into whatever counterculture she could get her hands on, where “counterculture” is loosely defined so as to include Hot Topic, Star Wars, and anime. Being a teenager is, at least to some extent, a matter of trying things out, but she took that to the extremes of what people wouldn’t physically stop her from doing. The worst was probably the week she went around wearing cat ears and a tail, which made me physically cringe whenever I saw her in the halls.

(Actually, scratch that, the actual worst was when she glued circles of velvet to her face. During the 18th century it was fashionable to wear ‘beauty patches’ to cover up the facial blemishes associated with smallpox scarring. Maddie had learned about this during a session of my Magus Europa campaign, and, I guess, thought that she was going to bring it back in style? I never really asked
about it, because it caused a lot of second-hand embarrassment I wasn’t eager to relive.)

She hit puberty at 13, and transformed from an awkward, gangly little girl to a slightly taller and still very awkward girl with big boobs, which mostly changed things for her in a negative way, since it meant that she started getting the wrong kind of attention. The most that was ever said about this by anyone I knew was when Reimer made a comment about no one talking about “the two elephants in the room” when she went to go use the bathroom, which got Craig more pissed off than I’d ever seen him. He made it pretty clear that his sister was off-limits for those kinds of comments, and while Reimer protested that he was just making a joke, it was the last time anyone so much as joked about her.

I should put an asterisk there, because it was about two years later that I ended up having sex with her.

Look, age of consent laws aren’t really governed by reason --

Wait, no, I can do better than that.

Kansas legislators respond to their incentives, and there’s nobody lobbying for saner age of consent laws because of the obvious assumption that they were doing so for nefarious purposes, so obviously the age of consent laws that we got were ridiculously poorly constructed, mostly to appease the religious majority, who have their own motivated reasons for --

Okay, no, let me start again.

When we’re talking about capacity to consent, we’re really talking about mental development, which isn’t a hard line, and which age is only an inaccurate proxy for, and --

Nope. I don’t think there’s any way to justify it without sounding like a creep. She was just barely fifteen and I was a few months from eighteen, and age difference aside, there was a pretty big difference in emotional maturity, so I couldn’t even hide behind her being old for her age. To make it all worse, she was Craig’s little sister.

And legally? In Kansas, having sex with a fifteen-year-old was classed as criminal sodomy, a felony that carried a sentence of up to five years in prison, with no close-in-age exemption to speak of.

All of which might lead one to wonder why the hell I did it.

Arthur had set up a wiki for our group, which I was the primary contributor to. We mostly used it for campaign notes, maps, and (more rarely) character sheets and backstories, but it was the online holding area for pretty much everything that we wrote down. I had special permissions as the resident DM, which let me make pages that no one else could see, and there were dozens of half-baked worlds that had skeletal outlines, plot threads, and characters on them, all hidden from anyone.

One of the features Arthur had enabled on the wiki was the forum, which we used to supplement our group chat, especially during the summers, when we didn’t see each other every day in school, or when there was something going on that we wanted to talk about without being realtime.

When Arthur died, Reimer made a memorial post in the forum, which we all added to, but then no one wanted to be the one to displace that memorial with some new bit of unimportant discussion, or necro some old conversation with an update. The forum effectively died. I went to visit it sometimes, mostly to reread old stuff from back when Arthur was still around. It was, in a way, like he was there, a digital ghost that could regurgitate his old opinions on things. I didn’t believe in an afterlife, but Arthur lived on in the stuff he’d written. Reading through his posts invariably made me feel
depressed and anxious, knowing that he would never post anything ever again. Sometimes I would type up a response to some long-ago comment from him and sit there, crying, because he was gone.

I eventually stopped going to the dead forum, not because I’d gotten smarter about avoiding the things that hurt to look at, but because I’d read everything there was to read, and I’d grown inured to what was contained in that particular crypt.

After the Fel Seed Incident, I visited the forum again, only to find that someone had been there.

There were six posts by Maddie, none of them with any replies, all a few days apart from each other. None of them were anything too special, nor did they seem like they’d taken a lot of time or effort on her part. At a cursory glance, it seemed like she’d found some links she liked and wanted to share them, which was one of the things that the forum was sometimes used for.

I was pissed off about it. The forum was dead, a dusty mausoleum, and trying to bring it back was only going to underline how dead it was while marring its usefulness as a memorial.

The thing was, I was also lonely as all hell. Reimer, Tom, and Craig were the only three people who really talked to me anymore, and of them, Reimer hated me, Tom was so earnest it grated on me, and Craig was more or less checked out, ready to go join the Army once he had his high school diploma. I could recognize, in the way Maddie had posted, a desire for someone to talk to, and as upset as I was that she’d desecrated the final resting place for Arthur’s online presence, I felt so alone I was on the verge of a breakdown.

One of the links she’d posted was to a video of a cat failing to jump properly. I typed “heh”, waffled over whether or not to post it, and then finally clicked the button and closed the tab before I could change my mind and delete it.

When I came back to the forum a few hours later, Maddie had left a few excited paragraphs for me. She treated me like we were old friends who had lost touch, even though I saw her in the halls every once in a while, and she’d been to a handful of our D&D games since Arthur had passed. It was transparently obvious that she wanted someone to talk to, and while Maddie had never been my favorite person (or even someone that I thought that much about), she was validating my existence at a time when I was passing by the train tracks and thinking about how easy it would be to dart in front of a moving train to end it all.

Maddie and I began talking a lot, mostly online. I’d had three or four pen pals over the years, and we fell into that same sort of pattern, leaving each other long chunks of text. It gave me something to look forward to. It’s hard to say that I really enjoyed myself, because I wasn’t at a point in my life where I enjoyed anything, but talking to Maddie took me out of my own head a little bit, except when I had some heavy stuff that I wanted to talk about to someone, or more accurately, depression and anxiety that I wanted to weigh someone else down with.

Eventually we switched from that single thread on the forum to talking to each other on messenger, multi-paragraph bursts replaced by single lines fired back forth. Maddie had a habit of splitting up her sentences into multiple lines, as though she was hitting the Enter key out of nervous habit rather than because she’d finished a thought, which drove me nuts. I tended to write longer messages, sometimes several paragraphs, which would inevitably lead to her seeing that I was typing. She would always tell me that she was patiently waiting for me to finish, which never came off as particularly patient.

There was a lot that I didn’t like about Maddie. Maybe I would come off better if I said that I liked her, or even that I’d fallen in love with her, but the truth was, she was the only person that I really
had to talk to, and liking her wasn’t really what it was about. She was there, ready to hear my side of the stories that she must have already heard through the grapevine. She got anxious when she didn’t hear from me, and she was eager to listen. I didn’t really like Maddie that much, but the attention was intoxicating.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” she asked one night, a few weeks into our let’s-call-it-a-friendship.

“It’s okay if you don’t,” she added, when I didn’t immediately reply.

“Obviously I want you to find me pretty,” she said.

“Not you, specifically,” she added.

“People,” she said.

“I just asked you because,” she said. Then the typing indicator lit up, died down, then lit up again.

“I care about what you think,” she finally finished.

“Yeah, I think you’re pretty,” I replied.

“Yay!” she replied.

“Did you have to think a lot?” she asked. “Or?” It had taken me some time to think about my reply, and one of my big problems with instant messaging was that people could tell how long you were thinking.

“It’s probably not a thing I should be saying to you,” I said.

“???” she asked.

“I don’t want things to get weird,” I replied.

“ Weird how?” she asked.

“Do you really not know?” I asked.

“Is it weird that I think you’re handsome?” she asked.

“I’m not handsome,” I replied.

“You are,” said Maddie. “I was looking at pictures of you,” she continued. “Today.”

I sat and stared at my keyboard for a bit.

“Was that weird?” she asked.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Maybe I’ll just shut up now?” she asked.

“You were typing and then you stopped typing,” she said.

“Press Enter,” she said.

“Please press Enter?” she asked.
“I thought manners might help,” she continued.

“Waiting patiently, since you’re still typing,” she added. “Don’t mind me.”

Here’s what I’d been typing: “You said that you cut yourself sometimes, just to feel something. I keep thinking that if we started dating it would be that, for me. I have so much trouble caring about anything anymore. It feels good to have you flirt with me, and maybe I encouraged it because … I wanted to feel something that wasn’t pain, loneliness, and despair. I’m standing at the edge of a cliff now, with you. So far, I haven’t actually done anything. If I tell you that I like you, and you say that you like me back, then what happens? It’s mean and unfair to you, but I’d be a senior dating a freshman, and with everything else that’s happened I’d probably have to accept that I’d actually hit rock bottom. If I keep my distance then at least I can say, ‘well, I didn’t date Maddie’. Even if no one would ever give me credit for that, I would be able to hold onto it. And the shitty thing is, I don’t even like you that much.”

I stared at the wall of text. Maddie was typing, again. Ctrl+A, Ctrl+X, and what I’d written was gone. She was fifteen, and it was just too fucking mean.

“Maddie,” I finally said, instead of all that. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“So don’t?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Can we meet in person?” she asked. “I don’t like IM. Too many weird pauses.”

“In person they would just be silences,” I said.

“I could see you though,” said Maddie. “I’d like that.”

“I need to shower,” I replied.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “Or I can wait until you’ve showered.”

I kept staring at my computer screen. It was late in January and just below freezing. My dad kept the temperature low in our house, and the heating ducts never really seemed to circulate air to my room properly, so it was frigid. If I sat at home by myself, I was probably going to spend a half hour trying to find something to watch on Netflix, then spend an hour or two on reddit trying to find something funny enough that I would exhale slightly harder than normal, then porn and masturbation, and then the nightly few hours of staring at the ceiling thinking about how much I hated my life.

“Sure,” I said. “We can meet in person.”

We ended up dating.

It was the same cloak-and-dagger shit that I’d done with Tiff, but a bit more serious this time, and a lot less fun, because I was pretty sure that Craig would be fucking pissed if he found out. There was also the question of their mom, who had reported Maddie’s last boyfriend to the police, though he was a year older than I was, in college when they dated, and nothing had ever come of it. I didn’t know whether or not it would be worse because I was a friend of the family, but I expected that it would be worse.

I guess I had this idea that I could save her from the trajectory she was on; it was certainly a way for me to cast myself as the good guy. Maddie smoked cigarettes, which I thought was a fucking stupid
idea for anyone, let alone a teenager who didn’t even have the excuse of having started before anyone knew that it was bad. She was in a few remedial classes, and talked a lot about emancipation, dropping out, and getting her GED, since she didn’t think college was in her future. I had no idea what kind of life Maddie had in front of her, but it certainly didn’t look good, and I thought that I could swoop in and fix it.

Being together was weird and awkward. We’d talked more naturally online than we had in person. Online, I’d understood the cadence of her typing, but when she was next to me she was like a totally different person, and we didn’t really mesh together. Despite that, I was determined that I was going to make it work somehow, because if Maddie liked me, and I was her boyfriend, then I wasn’t going to bow out at the first sign of trouble. In some ways it seemed like that would be the worst possible thing, because I’d prove that I was just as much of a heel as I suspected myself of being. If I was going to be her boyfriend, then I wanted to do it right, not just fuck it up like I’d fucked up everything else.

As it turned out, dumping her wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened.

Instead, she dumped me, after about a week.

The thing was, she said, that we were better as friends, and she didn’t want me to take it too hard, but she just wasn’t feeling it. I sat in stunned silence as she dumped me, and then she kept asking me to say something, and I just sat there, not knowing what the hell I’d done with my life that I’d gotten to this point.

It was a few days later that Craig showed up early to D&D. We were playing at my house, because my parents were out of town. I had everything laid out on the table for the session, paper, pens, dice, minis, battlemat, et cetera, and was staring at my skeletal notes. I should have been preparing, but I felt too numb to do it. Most likely the session would go the way that sessions had been going lately, with me winging it, poorly, and then us ending things far earlier than we used to. I hadn’t made anything new since the whole Fel Seed thing. After that had all gone down, we went back to Long Stairs, but I wasn’t even bringing much creativity to it, because I couldn’t think of anything suitably horrifying. There were lots of gaping, sucking voids, empty places that had once held life, all painfully thin metaphors that no one appreciated, not even me. Our gaming sessions were happening by rote, one more thing that I couldn’t take pleasure from anymore. I had almost canceled the session, but I knew once I canceled one, I would start cancelling others, and that would be one less thing tying me to the world.

Craig came in and sat down without saying a word. He was staring daggers at me. I couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You fucked my sister,” said Craig.

It was pure, naked hostility, and it was almost cathartic, given how much I deserved it. “Yeah,” I said.

“Jesus fucking Christ Juniper,” said Craig. “Do you know, if it had been anyone else, I would have been okay with it? Tom? Fucking great guy, salt of the earth, probably too good for her, and she’d break his fucking heart without meaning to, but I wouldn’t have had a problem with it, except that it would be stupid. Even Reimer would at least have been the best boyfriend she’d ever had, though that’s not saying much, because she’s dated some real fucking losers. But you?” He clenched his fists in front of him like he wanted to grab me and shake me to death. “You are such a fucking cancer on everyone around you. You’re a sad sack piece of garbage just fucking intent on infecting everyone around you with all the pain, anger, and misery that you can squeeze out. And fucking why?”
“I’m not in a great place,” I said.

“No shit?” asked Craig. “Fucking no shit, Joon, really? Because Arthur died, eight months ago? Does it have something to do with that?” He threw up his hands. “Arthur left this hole in all of us, and you grew these fucking claws and tore that hole open wide like fucking Satan himself. Arthur died, and it fucking sucked, and then you just wanted to see how much worse you could make it, didn’t you, you fucking miserable shitbag.” He was seething with anger. “Do you know I defended you? Colin was talking shit about you, and I damn near threw the first punch in a fight that I knew I couldn’t win, because I thought, you know, he’s fucking Juniper, he’s going through some shit, but he’s still in there somewhere. But no, you’re this fucking zombie, and I would stab you in the heart myself to put you down if I thought that you had a fucking heart anymore. You never even liked Maddie.”

“I did,” I said, but it didn’t sound convincing.

“Bullshit,” said Craig. He stood up from his chair. “Fucking bullshit, and you know it. You know that I fucking talk to her, right? Because she’s my goddamn sister? She came home crying and, just, fucking why would you put her through that? What in the hell was your end game?”

“I thought,” I started, then stopped. “I just needed,” I said, then stopped again.

“Yeah,” said Craig. He turned to go, then turned back. “Look me up in a few years if you ever get your shit together.”

I stayed silent.

I wanted to tell him that I probably wasn’t going to be around in another few months, let alone a few years, but I held my tongue as he stormed out of the house. I looked down at my threadbare notes for the session. I was going to have to change things around, because we were down to two players, Tom and Reimer.

I closed my eyes and let out a shuddering breath, and didn’t open them again until Reimer and Tom came in the door together.

“Got a text saying Craig’s out?” asked Reimer.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You okay?” asked Tom.

“No, I said. “Whatever, let’s run it. Craig’s character will have died between sessions. Poison, I guess, something thick and choking that was filling the room, and he just … it got to be too much for him. And Maddie, she’s not -- she won’t be coming.”

“Joon,” began Tom. “If there’s anything --”

“No,” I said. “Let’s just fucking run it, okay? Either you make new characters or I can fill out your ranks with NPCs, party needs a healer one way or another.”

“Something happen between you and Maddie?” asked Reimer. “Last session she was a little --”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” I said.

I was faintly surprised when they let it drop. I knew they’d hear the story from Craig or Maddie later on. Tiff probably would too. I felt a wave of nauseous anxiety just thinking about that, but I could
take some comfort in the fact that she probably already hated me.

I always thought one of the really underrated things about getting transported to a fantasy world was that you could leave everything from the normal world behind. You get to start over from scratch, and sure, maybe that sucks if you were a star athlete at the top of his game, or you have a job doing something you love, or a wife and kids or whatever else, but even then, there’s no one around to remember all the things from your past that you hope no one is going to bring up in polite conversation. It’s basically the ultimate form of having things expunged from your record.

I felt a profound sense of shame at the way things had gone with Maddie, but on Aerb, I wasn’t actually obligated to tell anyone. I could instead let that incident fade into the past and forget it had ever happened. I hadn’t really planned it, but the way things had shaken out with Amaryllis and Fenn, I could construct this new version of my past that was at least partially sanded down, with some of the warts and hard edges removed. I had eventually told Fenn, in a long letter during the endless months in the time chamber, but that had mostly been because I felt like I was keeping things from her by never mentioning it. (And Fenn, naturally, hadn’t given a shit about any of it, except to say that if Valencia was Joon-bait, then Maddie was proto-bait.)

The problem was, Aerb didn’t seem to really go in for the “leave the past at the door” type of deal that fantasy protagonists usually got. I’d been given a few things that felt like pokes and prods in that direction, all of which I’d ignored, none of which I’d talked about. Now Maddie’s character was literally standing at our front door, impossible to ignore.
I opened Bethel’s front door slowly and looked out at Raven with a raised eyebrow. She was dressed in black from head to toe, a concealing outfit that went so far as to keep her neck covered. Her hair was the same way Maddie had usually worn hers, bangs cut to just above her eyes, with the rest of her hair falling down to her shoulders. Raven looked a bit older than Maddie, which made some sense given their relative ages; Raven was 1700 years old, which translated to seventeen years old. When I’d left Earth, Maddie had been fifteen. They still looked the same, which wasn’t a surprise.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

She held out her hand. “Brayda Beaman,” she replied. “I’m looking for the Advisor on Industry? I was told by those down in the village that the Council of Arches resides in this building.” She gestured toward the collection of houses down the hill from us, where everyone outside the group lived. Aerb had a lot in the way of quickly made buildings, whether that was the cobblestone houses you could create via tattoo, or structures put up by steel mages. It was an architectural mishmash laid out according to as much of future-proofed design as Amaryllis’ skill as an urban planner would allow.

“Come in, please,” I said, gesturing inside the house. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

She followed me in, stepping more firmly into Bethel’s domain.

(Bethel had already gotten a look at Raven so invasive that it would have made the TSA blush. Raven was wearing eight entads, six that were deemed harmless or defensive and two weapons. Her blood pressure and flow was normal, indicating that it was unlikely she was a skilled blood mage. She had magical tattoos, but they were primarily utility oriented, including a small suite of extremely expensive (and obscure) translation tattoos. Bethel had read every piece of paper that Raven was carrying on her, including her forged travel documents and credentials in the name of Brayda Beaman, as well as the second and third set of documents hidden on her person for two other identities. In Bethel’s words, she could have described the taste of Raven’s nasal cavity; we were mostly concerned about the entads and any black swans, but Bethel had assured me that if Raven so much as looked at me wrong, she would be deprived of her life in as brutal a fashion as possible. Bethel was also silently and invisibly moving wards around us to ensure that we were breathing different air supplies.)

“What is this regarding?” I asked. “The Advisor of Industry puts in some long hours, and I would rather not bother her if at all possible. Even some background information might be helpful in making sure we don’t impact her time too negatively.”

I wasn’t the ideal person for this job. The problem was, Amaryllis apparently looked enough like Dahlia Penndraig that people would stop and remark on it, which was something that Raven was sure to either note or remark on. Amaryllis’ identity was an open secret, one that was going to hit the wider world sooner than later, but there was no need to reveal it now, especially not when we weren’t sure why Raven was actually here. Beyond that, we thought I had better odds of survivability in case of a surprise attack. There was another reason too; we knew what papers she was carrying in her satchel.

“I’m sorry,” said Raven as she took her seat. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Simon Trent,” I said. “I’m the Advisor’s secretary. Sorry about this impromptu pre-screening, but I’m sure you can understand.” I wasn’t sure how well I was pulling it off, but I could lie half as well
as Amaryllis, unless there were hidden modifiers that made me worse than half, which there very well might have been. (If abilities were a factor in the successful use of skills, then it was possible that my lower social abilities made me less effective at using social skills granted by Symbiosis. We didn’t really have a good way to test this, so it was just a hypothesis sitting in Amaryllis’ notes somewhere.)

“It’s not a problem,” said Raven. “I hadn’t expected that I would be able to get a meeting that quickly. From what I’ve heard, the industrial plans for the Republic of Miunun are quite ambitious, almost beyond reason, and the Advisor on Industry is, in fact, more akin to an executive position than an advisory role. That must come with a lot of meetings.”

“It does,” I said with a shrug. “There are two tuung, and there are things that need to be done beyond what they’re capable of doing. Once we’re up and running, the Advisor intends to return to a more traditionally advisory role.” Fat chance of that happening.

I was fine with playing this game for as long as Raven was. It was uncomfortable, talking to Maddie like this, but she was so vastly different from Maddie that it wasn’t fazing me as much as it might have. She was close to the character of Raven, a studious scholar who dabbled in magic as an outgrowth of her obsession with books, but Raven had been played by Maddie, and the character suffered from an actor who wasn’t up to snuff, as much as I might have tried to help her out. There was a weirdly dissociative experience associated with being next to her, like my brain was trying to play catch-up, but in some ways that was a boon, because I was forced to pay attention to everything that I said.

“Alright,” said Raven once we got to a room that Bethel had hastily repaired. Raven took a seat across the coffee table from me, and I sat opposite her. “Shall we get started then? What do you need from me?”

“Credentials, for a start, though we’re still at the stage where those aren’t terribly important, if you’re here selling something or giving us an offer,” I said. That much was true; we cared about pedigree and testing for competence, but the Isle of Poran had become a welcome place for people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Disruption was the name of the game, after all. We already knew that Raven couldn’t possibly be here for that.

“Nothing like that,” said Raven. She reached into her satchel and withdrew a sheaf of papers, which she set down on the coffee table. “I work with the Intellectual Property division of Imperial Affairs. Sorry, I don’t have much in the way of a warrant card. The matter that I’d like to talk to the Advisor about is with regards to some planned industrial processes.”

<Seems like she’s here because of the Library, not because Masters or Heshnel sent her,> Bethel said into my head.

<Perhaps,> I replied back.

We already knew the contents of her satchel, and who she was presenting as. Unfortunately, we didn’t know whether it was a bulletproof cover or a paper thin one, since we didn’t have the requisite knowledge, and we didn’t know whether it was a cover with layers. Really, we only had guesses as to why she was here, and I wasn’t about to take anything for granted.

<You and Amaryllis think alike,> replied Bethel.

“Ah,” I said, looking up from the papers I’d been pretending to read. The documents outlined Raven’s role within her division and the authorities that had been granted to her. “To my knowledge, we haven’t publicly discussed our plans.”
“That city you’re building down there leaks like a sieve,” said Raven. “I would be extremely surprised if there were any secrets left on the Isle of Poran.”

I couldn’t tell whether that was intended seriously or not. It seemed like a masterful joke, one that acknowledged the depth of secrets that Bethel contained, but I wasn’t sure. If she actually believed that we had no secrets, was that because she was hinting she’d found out everything there was to find out? Was it all written in a book somewhere in the future, which she’d brought into the present? Now that would have been a good joke.

“Which innovation in particular are you concerned with?” I asked. “And if you’re from the Empire, you must be aware that we already have imperial agents here, and that we aren’t part of the Empire.”

<Two peas in a pod, you and Amaryllis,> said Bethel.

“You would like to be though,” said Raven. “Everything that I’ve seen indicates that you intend to be on the fast track into the Empire. There’s no grandfathering for patent issues. That’s why I’m here. Aside from that, unofficially, I would like to know where the innovations came from.”

“You said we had no secrets,” I said. I forced a smile.

“I didn’t claim to know all of them,” said Raven. “I’ve only been here half a day.”

<Amaryllis would like you to ask her directly about the Library,> Bethel said into my head. She was relaying this entire conversation to where the others were waiting in the next room, naturally.

“May I ask a question?” I asked.

“Certainly,” said Raven. “Whatever gets me to see the Advisor.” There was a slight twinkle in her eyes, like she knew something was up and was humoring the false reality I’d created.

“Was Uther Penndraig a good man?” I asked.

Raven’s face fell.

<Amaryllis didn’t like that,> said Bethel.

<Noted,> I replied.

“From what I’ve read,” began Raven.

“No,” I replied. “You were his archivist, you cataloged his travels, you had to have formed an opinion on him, given five hundred years to think about it. Was he a good man?”

Raven stared at me for a moment. “Yes,” she replied. “He was haunted, and he kept his secrets, but yes.”

“My name is Juniper Smith,” I said. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Oh,” said Raven. “You’re the Advisor on Culture for the Republic of Miunun.” She shook her head slightly. “I’m sorry, have we met?”

“Hard question to answer,” I replied. “My name wasn’t in one of your books?”

Raven froze up again. “My … books?”

“Or your father,” I continued. “He didn’t share the details of his questionnaire with you?”
“Juniper Smith,” said Raven, as though chewing the words. “Juniper Smith!” Her eyes widened. “Uther wrote your name, five hundred years ago, that’s where I’d heard it before, and … how do you know any of this?”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

The door on my left opened before I could get an answer. Amaryllis walked in, wearing a functional dress that she often put on for business. She had been wearing plate armor when last I’d seen her, loaded for bear. I was impressed with how quickly she’d changed, especially since she was wearing makeup that hadn’t been there before.

“Dahlia?” asked Raven.

Amaryllis rolled her eyes. “No,” she replied. “The resemblance has been remarked upon a number of times though. I’m Amaryllis Penndraig, alias of Lydia Chance, Advisor on Industry. You’re here because part of your remit with the Infinite Library is stopping the development of technology, isn’t it?”

“I … what?” asked Raven. She looked between the two of us. “You’re Uther Penndraig’s most direct female descendant?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “And I take it you’re not here because of the altercation with your father, nor the separate altercation with a number of Uther’s cohort?”

“I’m sorry,” said Raven, holding up a hand. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

“With fewer lies this time, please,” I said.

“No, not the beginning,” said Amaryllis. “Tell me what happens if we widely distribute televisions, or any of the other technologies we have planned.”

“We have time to talk,” I said.

“I just want to know what utter bullshit is standing in our way,” said Amaryllis. “I spent a year and a half of my life working on the technical details of this island’s planned industries, and now you’re going to come in here to tell me that no, it’s going to end the world? You could have just fucking put out an Empire-wide bulletin that explains what the threat is, and I wouldn’t have had to waste so goddamn much of my time.”

I stared at her. The math wasn’t quite right. A year and a half? She’d had eight months in the chamber while pregnant with Solace, and a few weeks outside of it with us. I wondered whether she’d been spending more time in the chamber than previously revealed. That was a little worrisome for a number of reasons.

“Calm down,” said Raven.

“I’m perfectly calm,” said Amaryllis, but I was pretty sure we all knew that was a lie. I was still having the bad dreams, and if we’d been in detox for the same amount of time, I was pretty sure that she was still suffering from bouts of aggression. If it was possible to change emotions within the soul, I was sure she would have dialed impulse control as high as it would go and anger as low as it could be, but that wasn’t a lever that we actually had access to (nor were dreams, for that matter).

“Tell me where you got the technologies from,” said Raven. “If you know about the Infinite Library, then surely you know that we’re constantly running against a deadline, and the deadline has gotten tight of late. This island seems to be the turning point, at the moment, but it’s very possible that it’s a
symptom rather than a cause, and we don’t have the time for another few weeks of delving the library in order to find some sparse scraps of information that point us in the direction of something actionable. Tell me what your source is.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She straightened somewhat and I watched her demeanor change. “You hold approximately none of the cards here. We’ll speak once we’re satisfied with your answers. To start with, tell us what you know of what happened to Uther. You were looking for him. Why did you stop?”

I looked Amaryllis over. Something wasn’t right. Raven seemed to sense it too.

“You know who I am,” said Raven. “You know my pedigree and my mission. If --”

“Tell me where he is,” said Amaryllis. Her voice had gone cold. “Start in the next few seconds, or I’ll begin cutting your fingers off one by one.”

“Bethel, stop,” I said. Amaryllis hadn’t taken off her armor frighteningly fast and then makeup on top of that, she’d sent in a projection of herself via Bethel, of course she had. Why risk more exposure than necessary? Well, naturally, because the house had some unresolved issues, and talking through her holographic projections ran the risk of a man-in-the-middle. Our house was unruly, with a few triggers, one of which had apparently stepped in through our door, blithely unaware of the danger.

Raven’s robes split apart at the front and swept behind her, making something of a cloak, which twirled and twisted in a magical wind. She had been wearing plain clothes beneath the robe, at least according to Bethel’s first report, but one of the entads she was wearing must have changed that, because she was fully armored, in a suit of armor composed of golden bands, which went from her neck down to her toes. Something clicked near her neck, and I saw a shimmer in the air around her, which I guessed was either a private air supply or invisible armor. Raven twisted her wrist while this was happening, and three seafoam-green orbs began orbiting her, which apparently wasn’t enough in the way of offense, because she produced a sword from thin air which reflected light better than a mirror. She was horribly mismatched in terms of aesthetics, which was the sign of a high level character.

“Don’t make threats that you’re not capable of carrying out,” said Raven. There was a hard edge to her voice, and it was the first time I’d really been able to see her as being one of Uther’s fabled Knights, powerful beyond reason and the veteran of a hundred thousand adventures.

Bethel-as-Amaryllis frowned for a moment, then raised her right hand and snapped.

All of Raven’s fingers fell to the ground.

Her sword fell to the ground a bit later, since it’s hard to hold a sword without any fingers, and she stared down at her hands in shock for just a moment as blood spurted from clean, identical wounds. They began closing up after half a second, with the skin creeping over to close up, and Raven set herself into a defensive stance, though she no longer had a weapon to defend herself.

“These orbs,” began Raven.

The orbs winked out of existence. The shimmer around her head disappeared moments later, then the billowing cape behind her fell down, no longer supported by any unfelt winds. Bethel had put up wards against each individual entad that Raven wore, leaving her with only her inborn powers, and at a guess, Bethel had layered wards so tightly that even those (whatever they might be) wouldn’t work.
“You were telling me where Uther is,” said Bethel.

“Stop,” I said. <Bethel, stop.>

“I don’t know where he is,” said Raven. “I searched for a hundred years and never found him. The trail went cold.” She looked down at her fingers, which were laying on the floor, but made no move to grab them. “That’s all I know, I swear.”

“Oh, naturally I’ll want the longer version,” said Bethel. “You’ll need to account for that hundred years. Tell me the secrets you uncovered. Tell me the paths you looked down, in pursuit of him. And I don’t believe you, incidentally. You did find him.”

“We can reattach the fingers,” I said. “Bethel, stand down, I want answers as much as you do, but this isn’t the way to get them.” I wasn’t actually sure that was true -- the kind of raw power on display here would have gotten me talking.

“I can’t be coerced,” said Raven. Her voice had a slight hitch to it.

“Tell me again how Uther was a good man,” said Bethel. She barely even looked like Amaryllis anymore. It was very rare to see Bethel do anything except by intent, that was just the nature of her powers, since everything required some amount of deliberation on her part. It took me a while to realize that her physical appearance was halfway between Tiff and Amaryllis.

There was a pounding at the door behind us, but when Bethel waved a hand, it stopped.

“I want answers too,” I said. “She’ll have incentive to talk to us once she’s in the know.”

A slight frown crossed Bethel’s face. “I want to hear her justify everything that he did.”

“I don’t know everything that he did,” said Raven. The place where her fingers had been hadn’t closed up entirely, and they were still bleeding, dripping down onto the rug. I didn’t know if that was a limitation of whatever healing magic she was using, or if Bethel had simply cut off her healing supply with another ward. “If he did something to you, or your people, --”

Bethel held out a hand, and Uther appeared above it, a talking head speaking with restrained fury.

“If you speak about this to anyone, whisper so much as a word, I’ll return here and start ripping away every piece of you. I’ll smash your windows and tear up your floorboards. Your power? I’ll load you with so many entads you won’t be able to think, let alone speak. There are dark and twisted items of power, and I’ve been collecting the worst of them for quite some time, horrible things that would warp you beyond all recognition. Don’t so much as think my name, do you understand?” I didn’t know how close to the truth that actually was, since by her own admission her intellect and memory hadn’t been fully formed at that point, but he was nearly snarling. He seemed ready to launch into something else, another threat from the look on his face, but Bethel waved the image away like it was a cloud of smoke.

Raven had a pale complexion, which went paler on seeing that. (Maddie had spent most of her time in a dark room with blackout curtains, typing away on her computer. The whiteness was another thing they shared in common.)

“You were … the house, Kuum Doona,” said Raven. “I … I don’t know why he would have said such a --”

“Oh, that,” replied Bethel with a malicious grin.
She showed it. I turned away, but the sound was loud enough to fill the room. It made my skin crawl. Bethel showed no mercy whatsoever, which wasn’t a surprise; this was a display intended purely to torment, dirty and ugly. I heard Uther stop more than once to give some instruction, and I felt my stomach churn at hearing his voice. It felt like a few minutes had passed before it finally stopped.

“Strange, to me, how important the act is to mortals,” said Bethel. “It was meaningless to me, and still is, but you care more about the images I projected with one power and the force I applied with another than his threats to me, or the decades of isolation he enforced. He deprived me of purpose, he refused to be my master, and it’s the ephemeral, simulated flesh that makes you cringe in horror. No, don’t speak.” This was directed at Raven, who had opened her mouth to say something. She shut it and pressed her lips into a thin line. “Juniper, what do you imagine is going to happen when you drag him out of whatever hole he’s hiding in? Will you bring him here, to me?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I clenched my teeth. “Probably.”

She seemed surprised at that. “After all that time? All that questing?” asked Bethel. “Why?”

“So he can answer to you,” I said. “If I had to guess, I would say … I would say that he would probably explain that he was going through some shit and you were the way he dealt with it. Or if he’s stupider than I think, he’ll say that you weren’t even a person then, that you didn’t have real feelings or weight to you, even if you do now. He could say that your ability to process anything only came later. I’m not sure that would absolve him. On Earth, there were computer programs that could fake being human, well enough to fool a few of the people some of the time.”

“Sims,” said Bethel.

It took my brain a moment to catch up. “Uh, no, The Sims was a game, I was thinking more of, um, Markov chains and chatbots. I’ll give you some of the literature later, moratorium on Earth stuff be damned.” I paused for a second. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been a good companion to you. I should have talked to you more, before it became an issue.”

“It was always going to be an issue,” said Bethel.

“I know,” I said. “But if we had talked about your feelings beforehand, we might have been able to … I don’t know. Deal with them, I guess. I didn’t give enough thought to how you felt about Raven. She introduced you to,” fucking brain don’t fail me, what the hell was his name, “Tansy, and without him, you might have had a better life. She was complicit in what Uther did, even if she was ignorant, because the way these things work, that ignorance was cultivated.” I looked at Raven as I said it.

“You’re not angry with me?” asked Bethel. “Amaryllis certainly is.”

“I’m not happy,” I said. “But … I get it. I might have done the same in your position. Sometimes it feels good to hurt people.”

Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 4!

“That said,” I continued. “We should probably put her fingers back on and actually hear what she has to say. If you don’t think that you can talk to her without wanting to hurt her again, we can go to one of the rooms where you can’t listen in. I’ll give you a full report later.” There was only one room that she couldn’t listen in on, the time chamber, but I didn’t need to say that out loud.

Bethel stared at me, with eyes that were halfway between the color of Amaryllis’ and Tiff’s. “You’re
not acting like yourself,” she said.

“I’m putting in effort,” I said. “Most likely it’s effort that I can’t sustain, and when I slip up, I’ll be back to how I was again, but … I am making an effort.” I looked at Raven. “Let her speak?”

“Hrm,” said Bethel. “Very well, she’s yours.” Bethel vanished, blinking out of existence. It was always hard to remember that what we saw of the person was just a projection, and her actual self was the house we were standing in. She wasn’t actually gone.

<‘I’ll let the others in when you give the signal,’> Bethel said into my head.

“Help me with my fingers,” said Raven. There was a certain weariness to her voice. Her face was damp with sweat.

I collected the fingers from the floor and looked them over one by one, trying to figure out which one was which. It was ghastly work, and she was bleeding through all of it, though not very heavily.

“You’re going to have to cut away some of the skin,” said Raven. “Unless you have better healing than I do.”

“I don’t,” I said with a grimace. “And I don’t have a suitable knife, so --”

A knife appeared in midair, courtesy of Bethel, and I caught it without so much as a pause.

Raven was more or less silent as I cut away the skin enough that the finger could be reattached and then healed so it was a functional part of her again.

“Can she hear everything we’re saying?” asked Raven after I was done with her right hand.

I nodded. “If you assumed that she had arbitrarily powerful senses, you wouldn’t be too far off. She can’t read thoughts or memories.” That I know of.

“I see,” replied Raven.

“Sorry about your fingers,” I said. “I think your boasting rubbed her the wrong way.”

“It’s fine,” said Raven, her voice a little bit cold. “I’m seventeen hundred years old, and more to the point, I adventured with Uther Penndraig for thirty-two years. I’ve had my fingers cut off before.” She was silent as I reattached another finger. “Uther loved when his enemies made boasts. I’m not sure that he ever enjoyed himself more than when he was making someone eat their words.” She went silent again as she watched me work. I didn’t really have much to add. “It’s starting up again, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said.

Raven let out a long, low sigh. “Fudge,” she said.

I finished with the last finger. My hands were slick with her blood. She flexed and looked over the work.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said. “I’m sorry about … about how Bethel chose to express her anger and frustration. She’s only recently reformed.”

“Reformed from?” asked Raven.

“Killing everyone that steps inside her,” I replied. “She did that for, uh, a few centuries, I think.”
“Ah,” said Raven.

Up close, the resemblance to Maddie was stronger. By rights, it shouldn’t have been, given that Raven was 1,700 years old and completely divorced from Earth fashions, but the Dungeon Master had probably manipulated things behind the scenes. They had the same hair style and the same makeup, and even the same cast to their expressions.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I shook my head slightly. “We’re, um, going through some things right now. I can explain more later. It’s complicated. I’m sure it was like that with Uther sometimes.”

“All the time,” nodded Raven. “It was complicated even when it was straightforward. He always assumed that anything simple was a trap, and he was usually right.”

<Amaryllis has some questions for Raven,> Bethel said into my head. <She is quite insistent. Are you building rapport?>

“Bethel can speak into our minds, so long as we’re touching her,” I said to Raven, by way of explaining why I’d gone silent. <I’m not sure. Another few seconds, a minute at most.>

<Take all the time you want,> replied Bethel.

“She just told me off,” said Raven.

I gave her a faint smile. “That doesn’t surprise me,” I said. My smile was quick to slip. Every smile I gave made me think of Fenn, and how she was gone.

“Why did you ask me whether he was a good man?” asked Raven.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I just thought … I thought that maybe you would give an unambiguous yes, one that would clear away some things that I’ve heard about him.”

“No,” said Raven.

“Ah,” I replied.

“He saved his kingdom from ruin a dozen times,” said Raven. “He saved the empire he founded too. He saved the world. Billions of people owe their lives to him dozens of times over. If you stack up everything that he accomplished, there’s no way that you can say he wasn’t a force for good in the world.”

“And yet,” I said. The images that Bethel had presented flashed through my mind.

“Yes,” said Raven.

“I need to find him,” I said. “Even if you don’t know where he is or what happened to him, you must have made notes when you were looking. There are probably dead ends that we wouldn’t have to spend so much time tracking down.” And then I can find the Lost King, and we can rush the ending of this thing, and Fenn can have her life back.

“I know the last place he was,” said Raven. “I was never able to investigate it, though I did try.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s in an exclusion zone,” Raven replied. There was something dark behind her eyes.

“Which one?” I asked, hoping that she wasn’t about to give the answer I thought she was.
“Fel Seed,” Raven replied.
“So what, precisely, will happen if we start shipping out televisions?” asked Amaryllis.

She was pissed off, for a number of reasons. She was pissed off at Bethel, naturally, for both the foul play and the break in communication, especially against someone who was probably an ally. She was pissed off at me, for taking it in stride. And she was pissed off at Raven, or maybe Raven-as-messenger, because a lot of her plans had apparently been shot in the foot. (On a different level, she was pissed off because that was the lingering affliction that the crown of thorns had given her.)

We had switched rooms again, into one with less blood on the floor. I had cleaned off, and Raven had too, though she hadn’t changed out of the clothes she came in. She was a little bit shaky, and I’m sure part of that was that we were still inside the house that had temporarily maimed her. The entire Council of Arches (Fenn excluded) sat at a half-moon table, with Raven seated at the focal point, on a chair that was set in a sunken floor. We didn’t quite tower over her, but the room had been built and furnished a few minutes ago using every trick in the book to put Raven at a psychological disadvantage. It wasn’t remotely subtle, and in my opinion, entirely pointless, perhaps even detrimental, but a quick tele-thought conversation with Bethel stopped me from objecting outright.

Bethel had made a seat for herself, but she wasn’t sitting in it, instead allowing the projection to fade away. The empty chair was ominous.

Raven took a breath. “A cathode ray tube television works by manipulation of an electron stream, modulated by --”

“I’ve built four prototypes,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t need a primer on how they work. What is the consequence to the world you’re attempting to avoid by coming here and issuing me a warning?”

“There’s a planar entity,” said Raven. “Under certain circumstances, it’s capable of altering the electron stream within a television in order to produce moving images of its own design. Some of those designs are capable of producing … effects.”

“Specifically,” said Amaryllis, gritting her teeth.

“Mental changes in those who view them,” said Raven. “The effects vary.” She continued on quickly, because it seemed like Amaryllis was going to press the issue again. “The best case scenario is increased mental acuity, decreased reaction times, better impulse control, and lessened emotional response, which comes packaged with a direct line of communication to the entity itself. Non-replicable when the moving pictures are recorded, in case you were wondering. The ‘gifts’ are temporary and used as leverage. In the worst case … there are a lot of worst cases. The entity can make people into flesh puppets. It can leave them comatose. It can hold them hostage in their own bodies, locked in, which it does if it thinks that will give it an advantage.”

“And why wouldn’t you --” Amaryllis paused. “Ah. Cultists.”

“Cultists,” nodded Raven. “Not like those that worship the infernals though, because there’s every indication that the entity is forthright in honoring the promises he makes. There have been scenarios where knowledge of the entity was presented to the world at large, as you suggest, in the hopes of mutual cooperation. The result, every time, was a race to the bottom as the nations of the world attempted to be the first to get on the entity’s good side. World population undergoes a precipitous drop once the entity has its toehold, until eventually the last one percent of survivors live in something approaching a paradise for a decade or two before the entity is brought to immanence.
From there, it’s a paradise with bodily sacrifices. The contorted writings of those living in that world are something to behold.”

“How much danger are we in, if we’ve watched television?” asked Amaryllis.

“Your prototypes?” asked Raven. “Almost none, if it was just for testing. The dangers are more on a wide scale.”

“Let’s say … six hundred hours of exposure,” said Amaryllis.

Raven stared at her. “Six hundred?” asked Raven. “You would know if you had seen one of the sequences, but … six hundred?”

“And if I’m not conscious of having seen one of the sequences, I’m safe?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes,” said Raven. “But what were you even watching? That’s twenty-five days without rest watching television, and without anyone making compliant media --”

“It’s not important,” said Amaryllis. *A deer barfed up a magical backpack that pulls potentially infohazardous information from a world that may or may not actually exist.* I was trying to track Amaryllis’ math again. Six hundred hours would be an hour every day for almost two years, or two hours a day for less than a year, which didn’t seem too far off from what I’d seen of her media consumption in the chamber. Six hundred seemed like a bit of a lower end estimate, to be honest.

“So, sorry … you do have books from after the fall of civilization?” I asked. “I was under the impression that no more were published past the end date.”

“She asked about television,” said Raven. “I’m doing my best to answer the questions that are presented to me as accurately and completely as possible.” She left ‘because you have a gun to my head’ unsaid.

Amaryllis pinched the bridge of her nose. “Then what threat are you here about?” she asked. “Plastics, somehow?”

“I’m not here about any specific threat,” said Raven. “Though if you’re talking about synthetic polymers, there are some pitfalls we’ll need to discuss, specifically regarding the volatility of their innate magic. It’s fairly likely that you would abandon the project on your own, after having invested quite a bit into it.”

“Then why are you here?” I asked.

“We only know what’s going to happen because the Library contains books that either discuss what’s happened, or what’s happening at the time the disaster occurred,” said Raven. “Sometimes it’s simple, and sometimes it’s not, but it requires *something* from the books, some hint as to what happened. In this particular case, we have no hints. It’s not an apocalypse that one percent of the world survives, it’s not a total collapse of civilization, it’s not an infernal invasion, the books just … stop. I came here because the Republic of Miumun is the strongest single lead we have, and it’s not -- or wasn’t -- particularly strong. There are warning signs here, mostly in terms of the technologies that are being produced with wild abandon, and whose origin I’m still ignorant of.”

We still hadn’t told her anything, mostly because we didn’t have to. Eventually she was going to put her foot down and refuse to say more, but we hadn’t reached that point yet. So long as she was willing to answer our questions without demanding anything in return, I was pretty sure that we weren’t going to volunteer anything.
“So you don’t actually know if we’re implicated?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” said Raven, but there was a note of hesitation.

“And the Library is fallible, in more ways than one?” asked Amaryllis.

“It is,” said Raven with a nod. “It’s entirely possible that the entity I spoke of would be excluded to his own patch of Aerb if televisions were ever distributed, and we might lose another metropolis because of it, but it wouldn’t be the disaster for all the mortal species that the Library was predicting when I left. Unfortunately, we have no idea whether the exclusionary principle will protect us until it actually happens -- or fails to. Obviously intentionally attempting to trigger an exclusion is something we don’t do.”

“Obviously,” said Amaryllis.

“And you are, by your own admission, implicated,” said Raven. She had her hands folded in her lap. “I came here wanting to know what the ultimate source of your technological sophistication is, and I think that I might have found a deeper answer than I expected. This might be the solution to the greater problem.”

“Wait,” I said, holding up a hand. “Explain? Draw me a timeline here.”

“You’ll need background,” said Raven, taking a breath. “The Library staff consists of roughly one hundred librarians, with another three hundred working on the outside. The Library contains every book that has been or will be published, including duplicates, but the exact nature of the predicted future displayed in the books-yet-to-be-written is missing a few crucial elements. So far as we can determine, the future written in the Library cannot account for people coming and going from the Library itself. That means that anyone entering into the Library will, from the Library’s perspective, vanish from the face of Aerb, which has some unpleasant knock-on effects. The second major problem, at least for our purposes, is that the exclusionary principle is unknown to the Library.” She took another breath. This was clearly a rehearsed speech, one which she was trying to get through quickly. I wondered how many people she’d shared these details with, and how their conspiracy had stood the test of time.

“Whenever someone enters or exits the library, everyone in the library instantly returns to the vestibule, and all books are instantly reorganized and altered on the basis of the new future,” said Raven. “The organizational schema are unique to each reset, but there are patterns to them, and with the help of a specific type of magic unique to the Infinite Library, we can generally find relevant books within weeks or months of a reset. Because those resets represent a complete loss of cataloging effort, we make every effort to control travel to and from the library. Are you with me so far?”

I nodded.

“Wait,” said Amaryllis. “It resets when people enter? You said that the predicted future already accounts for people entering the Library. Why would that be the case that their entrance causes everything to change again?”

“We don’t know,” said Raven. “We only know that it happens. Much of the Library is like that.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis with a wave of her hand. “Go ahead.”

“The problems started roughly two and a half months ago,” said Raven. “The world’s end date was two hundred years into the future, and all was right with the world. Then we had a regularly
scheduled shift change, the Library reset, and we began delving the books again, only to find that our timeline had been cut down to virtually nothing. We’d been dreading the day that the Library turned up something that we couldn’t stop, and for seventeen frantic, exhausting days it seemed as though that was what had happened, because there was simply a dead stop in publications. We started on our contingencies, the biggest of which involves building up a map of all the scheduled events on the week that the world is supposed to end, in the hopes that we could find a trigger, something like the announcement of a new testing facility being opened. None of that bore fruit.” She went silent, as if reliving the stress.

“How did you avert it?” I asked.

“We didn’t,” she answered. “We had a few desperate contingencies that we were going to put into place. When our agents left the Library, a week and a half before the end of the world, the Library reset, and the end of the world had been pushed back considerably, and without any seeming involvement on our part. We sent out another set of agents to stop the first set from enacting the contingencies, which reset the Library a second time. We were down to a twenty year timeframe.”

“What are the contingencies?” I asked.

Raven shifted in her seat. “That information is classified,” she said.

“Just curious,” I said with a shrug.

“I’m more than curious,” said Amaryllis. She tapped her fingers on the table in front of her. “Tell us.”

“I don’t actually know who any of you are,” Raven replied.

Bethel appeared as Tiff, standing two feet in front of Raven, leaning in with her hands on the arms of the chair. Raven let out a very understandable yelp of surprise.

“You know me,” said Bethel.

“I do,” said Raven. She had pushed herself back into the chair, as far from Bethel’s projection as possible. “Sorry.”

“Don’t give her PTSD, please,” I said.

Bethel stood back from Raven’s chair. “What’s PTSD?” Bethel asked, still staring at Raven.

“Posttraumatic stress disorder,” I replied. “You’d call it shellshock, or maybe combat neuroses?”

“ERD,” said Amaryllis. “Event response disorder.”

I frowned at that, and nearly let it go. “That seems like the most bland possible name for it,” I said. “That’s not even a description of what it is. It’s a stress response.”

“I didn’t name it,” said Amaryllis. She sounded weary, which was a good change of pace from angry, so far as I was concerned.

“Ah, I think I’m well familiar with the phenomenon,” said Bethel. “Tell me, does it take one hundred times longer to induce it in the Ell?”

“Yes,” said Raven. She seemed to be holding her breath.

“Enough with the threats,” I said. “If she can’t tell us, there’s probably a good reason.”
“No,” said Raven, still backed up in her chair. “No, I can tell, if things are starting back up again … at least I can say in general terms. There are different ways the world can end, different levels, and our most extreme contingencies involve causing something we would normally try to prevent.”

I frowned. “So you unleash certain horrors that you’re responsible for keeping contained in the hopes of turning back a reality restructuring event?”

Raven froze. “Where did you hear that term?” she asked.

I sat in silence. The answer was that it was part of the overarching plot of Long Stairs, or at least, the first version of it I ran, which was in turn loosely inspired by the SCP Foundation. The concepts I’d need to lay down as background were too daunting for the time being. There’s this thing called an electronic computer on Earth, and a lot of them are hooked together, and people can collaboratively edit documents on them, and, and, and.

“I’ve been extremely cooperative,” said Raven. “You’re keeping me in the dark, and I can respect that, but I can communicate more effectively if I know who you people are and what you’re trying to get from me.”

“Continue with the recent history, please,” said Amaryllis.

Raven opened her mouth, then closed it again. “The future was shifting rapidly,” she said. “That was a bad sign. There was something that the Library was having trouble with, either a cascade of events that balanced on a knife’s edge, or something that the Library couldn’t account for. It was hard to say which. We saw the Isle of Poran in three of those futures, three times when it was a catalyst for some unpleasant future we wanted to avoid, and worse, three different bad futures. We put plans into motion to stop you, and the future would clear up, but not always for the better, and using the Library risks damaging it. The internal schemas becomes more convoluted and the Library’s geography more unfriendly, depending on the intervention used.” She furrowed her eyebrows. “It felt like we were being backed into a corner. And then it finally happened, something that we had only theorized before. We got the good future.”

“Ah,” I said. “The future with no calamities in it.” The Infinite Library was patterned off the Boundless Library, and that was one of the concepts I’d worked up for it. Librarians would try to monkey with the future only to find that they got the good future -- and they were locked out of it, if they wanted it to remain the way it was. Mix in some uncertainty of how accurate the Library was, and you’d get a powderkeg of conflicting views among the librarians.

Raven nodded. “The future without end,” she said. “There were too many books for us to get an accurate estimate of how many there were. Most were in languages so foreign that they could only be read using our most powerful translation magics. They didn’t even use the same calendars we were used to.”

“But it locked you inside the Library,” I said. “You couldn’t go out without changing the future.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” said Raven. “We would all gladly have died in the library if it would have given us that future. But the future the Library shows isn’t always true to events, and it wouldn’t be the first time that it’s shown a future better than what happened. Either way, there was no stopping the next shift change, which would happen regardless. We scrambled to find answers as best we could, but we weren’t even able to crack the schema in the time we had.” She paused, weighing her words. “There was a book that spoke, in passing, of a transition from danger to safety. We didn’t learn enough to know what had happened to create the paradise, because the shift change came, and the library reset. It was back down to ten years time.”
“So you came to find us,” I said.

“Something was happening,” said Raven. “We didn’t know the root of it. We knew that the Isle of Poran and the Council of Arches were, at least in some futures, a part of it. I think it’s safe to say that I didn’t know what I was walking into.” She gave a little snort of laughter at that as she glanced down at her fingers. It was reminiscent of the nasal way that Maddie sometimes laughed. She looked back up at us. “What more do you need from me?”

“Did Uther kill Vervain?” I asked. I saw a muscle in Amaryllis’ jaw move. No doubt she considered this a distraction, but she had the good grace to let me continue.

“That’s,” said Raven, then stopped herself. “May I ask who told you that? So I can know which version of the story you heard?”

“It was Heshnel Elec,” I said. “He didn’t say much on the subject.” And he’ll be visiting tomorrow.

“There’s not much to say,” said Raven. “They went off together, to somewhere unspecified, and when Uther came back he was alone. He didn’t give us answers. He only said that he had killed Vervain, and that he was justified in doing so. It was cryptic, even for him. We thought that perhaps it was something that we couldn’t know, or something that it would be dangerous to know. That had been the case in the past. I’m sorry I can’t offer more.”

“We need profiles of all of the threats,” said Amaryllis. “You haven’t specified how you enter the Library, but we’ll be coming with you next time you go there.”

“That’s not how it’s done,” said Raven, her voice taking on a bit of chill. “We don’t let people into the Library without carefully vetting them first. We aren’t supposed to let people know of its existence, though obviously leaks occur from time to time. You said that you met with my father. Was he the one who told you?”

Bethel appeared again, still as Tiff, wearing the ‘Kansas Swim’ shirt we’d first found her in. “Would you like me to do an impression of you, if you fail to let us into the Library?”

“Bethel, enough,” I said. “She’s going to let us in, with or without your threats.”

“It’s a very good threat,” said Bethel, turning back to me and raising an eyebrow.

“I have very little doubt about that,” I said. Seeing Tiff again was hard. I had pangs of longing for her, not as my girlfriend, but as someone I’d always been comfortable talking to. With all the stuff that had been going on lately, with losing Fenn, I wished that -- I don’t know, that I had her to lean on in my time of need. None of my party members really felt like they could fill that role.

“Juniper, would you like to do the reveal?” asked Amaryllis.

“Oh,” I said. “Certainly.” I had been working on refining my speech a bit, since it seemed as though we were going to be bringing people in. I cleared my throat. “The universe shaped itself around Uther Penndraig. It’s doing the same for me.” I gestured around me. “This is the Council of Arches, which I guess would be the equivalent to Uther’s Knights. I have the same Knack that Uther did. If it looks like something is going wrong with the world, it’s probably because we’re expected to fix it.”

“That’s not what it was like,” said Raven. Her voice was soft.

I frowned. I hadn’t been done. “It wasn’t?”

“The universe didn’t shape itself to him,” she said. “The world threw everything it had at him. He
fought with a fervor that I doubt most men could ever have hoped to match. He had advantages, we all did, I would never dispute that, but he was put through the wringer until the very end, when there was practically nothing left of him. But that’s not the whole story.” She leaned forward in her chair. “There were times we were rudderless, when he didn’t know the next thing he should be doing. He wasn’t a man who liked lacking for purpose, and those times were always the most difficult. We would go to new places with him sometimes, following in his wake, and we would have to watch him searching for a way he could insert himself into the affairs of others, a way he could reframe whatever was happening so that it would become a part of his mythology.” She leaned back. “And it’s very apparent that he was too successful, because there are people who legitimately believe that the entire world was made for him.”

“It was,” I said, voice firm.

“No,” said Raven, shaking her head.

“It was,” I repeated. “I know, because I was the one who made it.”

Raven stared at me.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “If you wanted to start at the beginning, you would start on Earth. Arthur and I were classmates. We played games together. Aerb is … it’s hard to pin down, but I invented most of the pieces of Aerb from whole cloth, or cribbed from Earth media, before I came here, and before I knew that it was or could be a place of its own. Every single day, I see things in my notes brought to life. I read through history books and I remember doodling out fragmentary versions of those events while I was watching TV. Maybe Aerb didn’t bend itself to Uther completely, not if he was going to bend it all on his own, but whatever it is that’s going on, it was made for him.”

“You’re dream-skewered,” said Raven, staring at me. “That’s how you met my father.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Uther was too. Those times that he sometimes knew things that he shouldn’t? That’s because he’d already played with the toy versions.”

Raven sank in her chair. “Why?”

“Why what?” I asked.

“Why … why all of it?” she asked. “I never wanted to believe there was a plan, because if there was a plan, there was a planner, and if it was all according to plan, then the planner was a madman and a monster. So why, if this was all meant to be, if it wasn’t just some abstract force … why?” She was staring at me like she thought that I actually had the answers.

“We’re still working on that,” said Amaryllis, in her most sardonic tone.

“There’s more background I’ll have to give you, once I know you’re not a threat to us,” I said.

“I’m as thoroughly disarmed as I’ve ever been in the last few hundred years,” said Raven.

“We were attacked, earlier today,” I said, though it didn’t feel like earlier today, since subjectively, it wasn’t. It hit me like a punch to the gut when I realized that it had been less than twenty-four hours since Fenn had died. I was grateful for the time we’d had in the chamber. Without it, I wasn’t sure I’d have been able to hold things together. “They were old friends of Uther’s. We’re not inclined to take chances anymore.”

“Attacked?” asked Raven.
“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “Everett Wolfe, Gur Dehla, and a bellad, O’kald. We were poisoned and attacked. They’re all dead now.”

“Everett,” said Raven. “Gods, Everett.” She sat forward in her chair and held her face in her hands. “Gods, is he …” When she looked up, it was clear she was crying. “Is he in the hells?”

“I don’t think so,” said Amaryllis. “A renacim, Pallida Sade, said that she was going to retrieve the souls. We never learned whether she was successful or not.”

Raven wiped her eyes, drying them on the sleeve of her robe. She drew in a breath and then let it out, shaking slightly. “Forgive me,” she said.

“We lost one of our own,” I said. I could feel myself resenting her for her grief over someone who had tried to kill us, someone who was at least partially responsible for Fenn’s death. I took a deep breath and burned WIS. Raven had been with Everett for thirty-some years, through all kinds of crazy adventures, of course she would mourn his loss. The phrase ‘monopoly on grief’ kept going through my head. I’d been accused of that a few times, back on Earth. I’d tried my hardest not to do the same on Aerb in the wake of Fenn’s death, trying not to lash out in the same ways. The only reason not to show sympathy was that it took effort. “I’m sorry,” I said. I tried to formulate some way of phrasing ‘sorry we killed your friend but we were totally in the right’ that didn’t sound dickish, but nothing seemed suitable, so I left it at ‘sorry’.

“It’s fine,” said Raven, wiping her tears again. “I’m the only one left. I knew I would be. Everett thought … he thought that maybe if he jumped ahead he might get answers, some day.”

“He did,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know if that’s any consolation.” She turned to me. <Juniper, scenario?> Bethel asked in her voice, relaying the message.

<Zero,> I replied. <Surprised that you’re willing to use this method of communication given the potential for man-in-the-middle, no offense.>

<None taken,> replied Bethel.

<We’ll have a long talk as a group after this is over,> said Amaryllis. <I’m not happy about the way things went. That said, we have more important fish to fry.>

<Sorry about your plans,> I said. <They were very nice before they got destroyed.>

<We’ll see what we can salvage,> replied Amaryllis.

“Thank you,” said Raven. “And thank you for giving me time.” She looked at me with bleary eyes. I had some preconceptions of Raven, which had been reinforced when she’d gone into Valkyrie mode with magic flaring around her, but now I was finding her much more vulnerable than I had thought she would be. A small part of me wondered whether that was an act intended to evoke sympathy, but it didn’t seem likely.

“You said that Uther’s last known location was the Fel Seed exclusion zone?” I asked.

The faint, grateful smile on Raven’s face fell. “Yes,” she said. “That’s not widely known.”

“Why?” asked Amaryllis.

Raven licked her lips. “How much do you know about the time after his passing?”

“Some,” I said. “Largely unspecified threats, spoken of in such a way you assume that people are
using capital letters, massive loss of life among those who fought, bad feelings all around, and at least one schism between the survivors.” I shrugged. “Most of that we learned in the last few days, speaking with either Speculator Masters or Heshnel Elec.”

“By the time I found what I’d found, things had quieted down,” said Raven. She wiped at her eyes again, though they were already dry. “I didn’t want to stir them up again. And it had been so long … it was very likely that he was dead.”

“Likely,” I said, “But it was possible that he wasn’t?”

Raven swallowed. “Fel Seed,” she began, then stopped. “We don’t know how Fel Seed happened,” she said, measuring her words. “There wasn’t a source, like the others, some magic gone awry or some entad that came out too powerful. He appeared in 34 FE, but … we’re not sure that there wasn’t some kind of incubation period, that he hadn’t gained his power, or that he was in hiding, and … there were rumors.”

“Rumors that Fel Seed was Uther,” said Amaryllis.

Raven nodded, head down.

“Not a theory that anyone gives actual credit to anymore,” said Amaryllis. “I read it once in a footnote, a theory that was dismissed in the same sentence it was brought up. I had the same thought myself, even before that.” She was staring at Raven. “Do you believe it?”

“No,” said Raven, looking back up at us. I kind of hated the way we were sitting above her, in a position of power we didn’t really need. “No,” she repeated. “It’s absurd, there’s a four year gap you’d have to account for, and -- and even if he had broken completely, there’s no way that he could have become something like that, whatever his sins, he just wasn’t --” She stopped and looked at Bethel’s empty seat. “If people knew that I’d tracked his last location to the Fel Seed exclusion zone, that rumor wouldn’t be so quickly dismissed. He wouldn’t be the Lost King, he would be the Fallen King.”

“Who knows?” I asked, after a silence had fallen over the room.

“Only the people in this room,” said Raven, looking between us.

“You trust us?” asked Grak, frowning.

“I don’t know,” said Raven. She was breathing harder than she had been. “It’s starting up again. I could already feel it before I came here. Maybe you’re villains, maybe you’re heroes, but whoever you are, I think you’re important.” She glanced at Bethel’s empty chair. “The secret has come close to dying with me. I wouldn’t want that.”

“We’re going to need to have some private discussion,” said Amaryllis.

“I did come here for a reason,” said Raven. “Wherever you’re getting your plans from, you have to stop. This is more of an intervention than the Library usually likes, but if you’re the common denominator, it needs to be brought to an end one way or another.”

“Once I know the details, I’ll know how to work around it,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms.

“That’s historically met with problems,” said Raven.

“Of what sort?” asked Amaryllis, after Raven didn’t volunteer anything further.
“Let’s say, for example, that you decide that you’re intent on producing cathode ray tube televisions,” said Raven. She furrowed her brow. “You decide that you can come up with some clever workarounds for the entity that will prevent him from getting his hooks in or inflicting damage, such as testing which specific images he’s able to produce and mapping out the contours of how and when it can alter the images you’re projecting. You would build up a model of the threat and work on some countermeasure, one that’s proof against the inevitable reverse engineering by others. Yes?”

Amaryllis squinted slightly, then nodded. I was sure she didn’t agree on the specifics, but in the general sense, yes, she would be inclined to that sort of approach.

“Perhaps you miss something, and we see it in the Library,” said Raven. “That’s probably your first thought, because it was Uther’s first thought. Unfortunately, the Library doesn’t take kindly to that kind of iteration, and every attempt to rapidly cycle through futures in hopes of avoiding specific negative outcomes has resulted in a Library that’s twisted and warped, sometimes beyond our ability to properly use it.” Raven cleared her throat. “Now, that might be a bullet that you’re willing to bite, because you might consider the Library to be of little worth given its limitations, but this is where we get into other problems. Namely, sometimes an exclusion will rear its head for what seems like no good reason. The exclusionary principle is a double-edged sword, protective and limiting, and sometimes pushing some seemingly promising idea too far will trigger it, or invoke it, or whatever is actually happening on the cosmic level to create it. Those are probably the two least bad scenarios, at least from your perspective.”

“And the third?” I asked, because I could see where this was going. Amaryllis was silent, with a sour look on her face.

“Third and fourth,” replied Raven. “The third outcome is a mysterious death, or deaths, or accidents, or … something. We don’t know what. All the books we would read about your ventures would be filled with stories of success, but even if we sequestered ourselves away in the hopes of ensuring that future happened …” Raven went silent and looked into the distance. “We’d come out, twenty years later, only to find that the future hadn’t gone like the books said it would. We would try to trace back what had happened, and find that there was a freak fire in your laboratory that claimed the lives of everyone involved. Or a lead scientist would have caught a seemingly innocuous cold, only for it to develop into something more serious and beyond the workings of any magic he had available to him. Those aren’t hypothetical.” She took a breath. “And sometimes these would be small things, chance happenings with surgical impact on the project, but other times they would be nationwide calamities like wars or plagues.”

“Like someone was nudging history away from the places they didn’t want it to go,” I said.

“Maybe,” said Raven. “It was believed, for a long time, that there were agents working within the Infinite Library itself. That would have closed the question nicely, since it would explain why the Library couldn’t account for them, even if it would be incredibly troubling. A conspiracy within a conspiracy … I’m the head librarian. If that conspiracy exists, then I’ve never found any evidence for it. I don’t even know what the point of it would be.”

“And the fourth scenario?” asked Amaryllis, voice barely above a whisper. Her fists were clenched in front of her.

“It’s something similar to redaction magic,” said Raven.

Amaryllis let out a sigh that ended in a growl. “Redaction magic is excluded.”

“Yes,” replied Raven. “It’s not redaction magic, but it is something similar. More powerful, too.
Small traces get left behind, which is as close to evidence as we ever get. It appears to have some problem with numbers, leading to accounts that are inconsistent with themselves, places where line items were removed but the total wasn’t changed. Proper recordkeeping makes it more noticeable, but you have to already have a good guess in order to start looking for evidence. Again, we don’t have any clue who or what might be the cause.”

“There seem to be a lot of fingers on the scale,” I said.

Raven shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m overstating because I’m trying to warn you,” she said. “These occurrences are exceptional, specifically because we work so hard to avoid them. We work with the Library only in very specific ways, ones calculated to cause the minimum amount of damage to both the Library’s continued function and to the world at large.” She grimaced. “That’s been a challenge, of late.” She looked between us. “I need more from you. You might start with where you’re getting these innovations from.”

“The last living locus spit up a magical backpack that can pull in books from Earth,” I said.

Raven stared at me.

“I had a long conversation with the ur-creator of Aerb, and he offered me the backpack as either a way of being generous, or as a ploy to set this up,” I said. “I’m reasonably certain that he’s directly responsible for creating exclusion zones as one of his few interventions, though he’s also confessed that he gives occasional nudges from time to time, which would explain the apparently random accidents that happen when you attempt to exploit the Library. He’s almost certainly capable of unpersoning anyone he wants, though he could do it flawlessly if he really wanted to, so my guess is that the evidence is either left behind because it’s more convenient that way, or because he’s sending a message, maybe both. He would probably be inclined to cloak these activities in some way, so I would expect, say, an antimemetic monster that feeds on, say, a specific brain pattern associated with,” I waved my hand. “Whatever phenomenon he wants to limit as a way of keeping the world to a certain level of technological advancement, rooted within a particular aesthetic he’s fond of, or possibly something even more flippant.”

Raven kept staring at me, mouth slightly open. Her eyes flicked over to Amaryllis, who had her face in her hands.

“So,” I said. “It looks like we’re probably going to be heading into the Fel Seed exclusion zone in the fairly near future, and you’ve got a strong pedigree, strong magic, lots of knowledge, and a personal connection. Would you like to come with?”

“Juniper, sidebar,” said Amaryllis.

A column of pitch black surrounded Raven in her chair as wards snapped into place.

“We need to talk about this as a group,” said Amaryllis.

“I know,” I replied. “And we need to know how she knows, and then confirm it ourselves, before we’d even think about going near Fel Seed. I’m not about to ask anyone to put their life on the line, and the most compelling case I can make is that Arthur seems like the endgame to me, the point where I might actually be able to win instead of treading my way through challenges. I know that’s not terribly compelling.”

“Juniper, to put this in terms that you’d understand, Fel Seed is a high level quest,” said Amaryllis. “We have an enormous stack of high level quests, and as far as I can see, he’s the highest. Making a beeline for him is … it’s probably not suicide, though I can’t actually think of any reason that it
wouldn’t be, other than narrative, which you’re adamant that you don’t believe in.” I saw the muscles of her jaw working after she was finished speaking.

“What would you have us do?” asked Grak. To my surprise, he pointed the question at Amaryllis, not me.

“We should go into the library and try to find some answers there,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper has the skill —”

“Picked because I didn’t know what it did,” I said.

“Juniper has the skill,” Amaryllis restated. “And there’s almost certainly an angle there, in spite of all the warnings that Raven has issued. We’ll wait until tomorrow when we have a meeting with Pallida and Heshnel to see what they know, and whether there’s something more urgent that we need to focus our attention on. It’s very likely that we need to put out what seem like a wide variety of fires. We need to know the threats, then assess them, then decide on which order we’ll tackle them in given our abilities and how rapidly we think we can escalate up to being able to deal with them.” I saw the muscles of her jaw tighten again. Her speaking was rapid and slightly clipped. It was subtle enough that I wouldn’t have noticed it if I didn’t know her so well.

“The locus cannot wait forever,” said Solace. She was still in the body of the brown-skinned man, but her manner was as patient and calm as ever. “It’s possible, even probable, that the Library has some information that would be of use.”

“I’ll do whatever anyone wants me to,” said Valencia. Her voice was low and she kept her head down.

“Well, if we’re making our wishes known,” said Bethel, appearing out of thin air and still wearing Tiff’s skin, “I would rather not lose any more members of the house. At the same time, I very much look forward to the conversation with Uther that Juniper has promised me.”

“Don’t talk about Fenn that way, please,” I said.


“It’s fine,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Just still very raw.”

“And that’s why you want to go after Fel Seed?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “I think, if I were the Dungeon Master, I would have made Fel Seed the final quest. He was one of the first things I thought about once I realized what Aerb was. The fact that Raven has brought us a link is a pretty damned clear signal. We’ll have to figure out why Uther actually went there though.”

“He’s Fel Seed, obviously,” said Bethel.

“No,” I said. “At least, I don’t think so. Not just because he’s Arthur, but … I made up Fel Seed. Maybe it would be best for us if he was Uther, because then I’d at least be able to make a personal appeal, instead of … however we’re supposed to beat him, if it’s possible.”

“You haven’t told us the whole story,” said Amaryllis.

“Not much to tell,” I said. “It was stupid edgelord bullshit. If you know what Fel Seed is, then telling you why I made him is just … I don’t know. Redundant.”
“Excuse me,” said Solace, frowning slightly. “What do the Edge Lords have to do with this?”

“Oh, right,” I said. “Er, it’s just an Earth term. I mean, the Edge Lords were also based on that, in part, but it just means someone who’s being moody and dark for no real reason, or at least a reason that doesn’t fully explain why they’re being ... edgy.” My vocabulary was failing me.

“Except the Edge Lords do have a reason,” said Amaryllis.

I waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter,” I said. “It was a poor choice of words on my part.”

“She’s struggling against the barrier,” said Bethel, peering at the black column she’d erected.

“I thought it was just for privacy?” I asked. “Blocking light and sound?”

“No,” said Bethel. “She can’t leave.”

“Well, let her,” I said.

“Please,” said Amaryllis.

Bethel frowned slightly and waved a hand, which caused the column of black to disappear, leaving Raven standing there. She must have been pounding or pushing against the barrier, because she tumbled out and then had to pick herself up from the floor.

“Productive conversation without me?” she asked, brushing herself off and retaking her seat. She didn’t seem terribly put out.

“We’re deciding on next steps,” I said.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll decide on next steps when we have more information. We were discussing possible next steps, once information gathering is concluded.”

“I see,” replied Raven, looking between the two of us.

“We’d like to go into the Library,” I said. “It’s likely that I’ll be capable of becoming the most proficient librarian you’ve ever had in the space of about a day.” Though I might have to trade off some other skills to make that happen.

“I see,” replied Raven again.

“In exchange, I’ll do my best to permanently stop the end of the world, get the good future set in stone, and as a bonus, clear up any lingering questions you might have had about Uther. My knowledge of him is limited to the time before he became Isiah of Colm, but I know a lot about Earth and the society he was raised in. Were there things he said that made no sense?”

“Almost every day,” said Raven. She pursed her lips. “My father,” she said. “Is he … did he survive?”

“Did you know that Speculation and Scrutiny was built within the exclusion zone for illusion magic?” I asked. “We found that out from your father, firsthand. But no, we left him alive and well. He owes us a cache of supplies and a handful of answers, actually.”

“Oh,” said Raven. It was the fourth or fifth time I’d heard her say it, an audible little reaction to new information. I somehow found it endearing.

“Pallida Sade, Heshnel Elec, and possibly Gemma Tails are all coming here sometime tomorrow,”
said Amaryllis. “Are you comfortable being our guest until then? We’d like to know what information you have on them, and what information they have on you, before we make any concrete decisions on what we’re doing next. It’s been a very busy few days for us.”

“Do I have a choice?” asked Raven. It seemed like honest curiosity, but I couldn’t help but see the way her eyes flickered to Bethel’s empty spot.

“Yes,” I said. “You can walk out of that door right now if you’d like.”

“The hells she can,” said Bethel, appearing in her seat with her bare feet up on the table.

“She can,” I repeated. “She’s not going to, because we’re the key to mysteries she spent a century of her life trying to solve, not to mention we’re very likely to be the only ones capable of saving the world, which she spent … what, the past four centuries on?”

“Less,” said Raven. “I wasn’t a librarian until after the collapse of the Second Empire.”

I glanced at Solace, and she gave me a small smile and a nod. It was something that I’d wanted to clear up sooner than later, and I was happy that it wasn’t going to be a point of friction. Heshnel, on the other hand, might be more of an issue, as he had not only been a working member of the Second Empire, but had seemed a bit defensive of it.

“Can you stop Kuum Doona, if she decides to kill me?” asked Raven.

“No,” I said. “I have faith that she won’t.”

“It’s true,” said Bethel, voice calm. “I won’t. I never said that I would, because as I’m sure you’ve gathered, I back up my words with my actions, as any moral entity would.”

“Then I’ll stay,” said Raven. “I need some time to think, if that’s okay with you … and some time to grieve.”

I wasn’t terribly surprised when Amaryllis pulled me in for a private conversation a few minutes after we’d left the room.
“I wanted to talk about,” I began, before Amaryllis raised a hand.

“Ten minutes,” she said.

She’d led me to the room we’d been using as a time chamber, and had had a brief conversation with Bethel along the way. Bethel understood the purpose of us going off together like this was so we could get as close to true privacy as there was inside Bethel, but she didn’t seem to mind terribly much. It was very hard to tell with our house, but I thought that she was pleased with me.

“Tell me when the time is up,” I said.

“I will,” replied Amaryllis. “I’m going to take off this armor, turn around if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Okay,” I said. It didn’t really make me uncomfortable in the sense that it might have in the past. Anhedonia was a part of depression for me, and it was definitely in full effect. Watching her undress seemed rude and disrespectful though, so I turned away, went into the ‘bedroom’ and pulled out a book that I’d left in the chamber, a dwarven legend written in Groglir about a brave dwarf who bucked her mother’s wishes and set off to found a new dwarfhold. It was one of Grak’s favorites, and while I wasn’t taking much pleasure from it, I was pretty sure that with Fenn on my mind, I wasn’t going to find much enjoyment from anything I read. I sat on the bottom bunk, trying not to think about how our conversation was going to go.

“I want to punch something,” said Amaryllis. “Are you available?” She was standing in the doorway, leaning slightly against it, with her mouth set. She was dressed down, in nothing more than a tank top and loose-fitting pants.

“You want to punch me?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I want to beat the shit out of you. Not you, specifically, but apparently the mental disorder lottery gave me aggression, and then the universe saw fit to shit in my cereal, so yes, I would very much like to inflict pain and damage on someone. You’re durable and you can heal.”

“Okay,” I said. I set my book aside and got up. I practically towered over her. Sometimes I forgot how short she was. She wasn’t overly short, but she was shorter than Fenn (than Fenn had been, I mentally corrected with a wince) and I had gotten taller.

“Lay on the ground,” said Amaryllis. She gestured behind her. “In the common room.” She had removed the table and chairs.

“Is this what we came in here for?” I asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “But it’s going to be easier to talk when I’ve had a chance to vent the affliction a bit.”

I walked into the common room. “One request?” I asked as I lay down on the ground.

“Sure,” said Amaryllis. She was stretching out, limbering up, which I thought was probably important if you were going to give someone a beating.

“Can I tell you something first?” I asked. “It’s kind of bad. And then you can be beating the shit out
of me for that thing, which is what I’m going to imagine is happening anyway.”

Amaryllis pinched the bridge of her nose. “Jesus fucking Christ Juniper, what did you do?”

“I slept with Maddie,” I said.

Amaryllis lowered her hand from her face and stared at me. “Why in the fuck would you not tell me that?” she asked.

“It makes me feel like a piece of shit,” I said. “Aerb was supposed to be a fresh start.”

Amaryllis stared at me like she was willing lasers to come from her eyes and incinerate me. “Lay on the ground, please.”

I laid down on the ground. “Try not to kill me on accident,” I said. “There’s a lot I can heal back from, but --”

Amaryllis climbed on top of me, so she was straddling my chest. She reached forward and grabbed my chin in her hand. She’d dropped all pretense of being calm.

“A fresh start?” she asked, leaning in toward me.

She punched me in the face, right around my left cheekbone, and I let out a gasp of pain.

“Tell me things you fucking asshole!” she screamed. She punched me in the face again, and she must have been using some of her magic, because even with my enhanced durability it cracked bone. “It’s all your fucking bullshit we’re going through,” she continued, but I was having trouble fighting through the pain enough to hear her.

I got beat on for a while. It really, really hurt, and took just about everything I had not to fight back. I burned bones for END, which healed and, at the same time, helped to dull the pain, but Amaryllis was still hitting me really hard, and repeated blows to the head left me feeling out of sorts even as I continued to repair the damage. I was barely listening to her as she went at it, but so far as I could tell, she got through telling me off pretty quickly before moving on to other subjects and using me as a stand-in for other people. The Dungeon Master was an obvious one, as were Bethel and Valencia, then Grak, then Fallatehr and Larkspur, and from there, to other members of her family, including Uther himself. I laid there and took it, fighting back only enough that she could feel like she was actually dominating me. It was easy to take the hits when I felt like I deserved them.

When she started crying, I stopped her. She’d been going on about a weak little girl who was never going to amount to anything, and my mind caught up only after the fact to make the connection. She was talking about herself.

She pushed away from me and sat with her back against the wall. Her hands were covered in blood and her clothes would probably have to be thrown away, because they were splattered with blood too. Looking at them, I thought that had probably been the plan, in the same way that people dressed down when they were going to paint a house. I was sure that I was as much of a mess, if not more. I barely had the bones left for healing myself back up, and I’d lost almost a tenth of my blood, most of which was in a slick pool beneath where I’d been laying. According to the HUD, she hadn’t taken me down past three-quarters of my health, but it didn’t seem like that was for lack of trying.

“Feel better?” she asked me. She wiped a tear from her face, leaving her cheek streaked with blood.

Amaryllis shrugged. “Less angry now."

“Wanna talk?” I asked.

Amaryllis closed her eyes and let out a breath. “Give me another second?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “When you’re ready.”

Amaryllis kept her eyes closed and leaned back against the wall. I looked around the room. We were going to have to clean up, which I wasn’t really looking forward to. In retrospect, we should have put down a tarp. Also in retrospect, I should have declared a safeword. I had blacked out for part of it, I was pretty sure.

“If I had known that you’d had sex with Maddie, I would have been able to make a stronger prediction that Raven was going to show up,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I just … I didn’t want you to think less of me for something that’s … it’s not the person I am anymore.” 

“Culture gap,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “I was put into an arranged marriage when I was twelve.” Her eyes moved to me as she furrowed her brow. “With Maddie, was it … consensual?”

“Yes,” I said quickly. “Yes, god, sorry, I didn’t mean to give the impression -- I mean, there are maybe some questions about power dynamics, or maturity, but --”

“I was twelve years old,” said Amaryllis. “My aunt Rosemallow was the one who set it up, and so it fell to her to give me the talk. I told her that I wasn’t really interested in Larkspur, so she told me that he was a perfectly handsome man, only eight years older than me. I was told not to make things hard for him, not to cry out if it was painful, all these other things I’m sure would make your blood curdle, knowing you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Blegh.”

“It fell through,” said Amaryllis. “I mean, obviously you know that, you helped kill him. So you can understand where I’m not the least bit fazed by you having sex with someone two years younger than you. I don’t think that it’s unreasonable for you to feel bad, but if you had told me before, I would have just tried to puzzle through your cultural understandings to figure out why you felt that way. Whereas now, I’m upset with you for hiding information that I could really have used when making my plans.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just … I never knew how to bring it up.” I paused slightly. “Can we just burn the Lost King’s Court to the ground some day?” I asked. “Because so far, I know of exactly one prince or princess worth saving.”

“If it would prevent you from throwing yourself at Fel Seed, I would agree with doing whatever side quests you wanted,” replied Amaryllis.

“And that’s what we came in here to talk about?” I asked. “Aside from me getting the shit kicked out of me and you finally getting to blow off some steam?”

“There are a lot of things we need to talk about,” said Amaryllis, looking down at her bloodied hands. “Val, Bethel, and Grak would be a good start. Fenn, maybe.” The name stung.

“I miss her,” I said. “A week wasn’t long enough.”
“She was my best friend,” said Amaryllis. “No offense.”

“Mine too,” I said. “Also no offense.”

“And now,” said Amaryllis, slowly. “It kind of feels like we should be each other’s best friends, but we’re not.”

“Yeah,” I said, as I mulled that over. I was definitely close to her, we’d spent two months together in the chamber, but it seemed like there was more distance between us than there ever had been in the past. “You and Valencia …” I began, then trailed off.

“She’s out of control,” said Amaryllis, hanging her head. “It’s my fault. I pushed her when she shouldn’t have been pushed, asked her to do things -- told her to do things that she wasn’t ready for. She’s a railgun being held by a toddler. We’re friends in one sense, but in another sense she’s like my daughter.”

“A daughter you kissed,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“She kissed me,” said Amaryllis. “I won’t say that it was unpleasant, but it wasn’t an ideal thing to have happened. Fenn told you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “On our date. She had a lot to get off her chest, and … I don’t know, I think back and I think I should have listened to her more.”

“A lot of what she said was nonsense,” said Amaryllis with a shrug.

“A lot of it wasn’t,” I said. “There were a lot of times she was just saying things I dismissed because she was Fenn.” I reached up and touched my face. It was still tender. I hadn’t quite had the bone power to finish the job, not without crossing over into the bones that I couldn’t easily replenish. I would need to retreat into my soul for more healing power. “I really deserved to get hit in the face.”

“Valencia got in your head,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at me with her glacial blue eyes, unwavering.

“She was right,” I said, looking away. “I mean, even if I accept that everything she said was suspect, when I turn it over in my head and look at the evidence, she was right. I’m just glad she didn’t hand me more hard truths than she did.”

“You know human psychology better than that,” said Amaryllis. “I know you do. A reframing on the facts can create an emotional impression that doesn’t actually fit with those facts. Even facts themselves can lie, if you select them with biased intent, or frame them in ways that play on psychological flaws.”

“Yeah,” I said. I prodded at my face some more.

“Need a fairy?” asked Amaryllis. She had set the glove off to one side, and gestured toward it.

“Nah,” I said. “Sometimes it feels good to be a little bit hurt.”

“I really don’t think you did anything wrong,” said Amaryllis. “Not with Maddie, not with Fenn. She loved you, you know that, right? She just … needed some time and space. It’s hard, when we’re all together all the time.”

“Even for you?” I asked.
Amaryllis let out a low laugh. “I’m alone more than most. Hasn’t really helped me. The Dungeon Master keeps spitting in my face. I wish I could blame everything on him, but … meh.” It was the most dejected ‘meh’ I had ever heard.

“Did you want some time to vent?” I asked. “Is that part of why we’re here?”

“A bit,” said Amaryllis. “I worked off most of the feelings I was having trouble with, but the sources … the soul goes back to the way it was, not because there’s something inherent to that state, but because all the pieces work together. Same with the mind, and with feelings, I suppose. Same with relationships. I do need someone to talk to, and you’re basically it.”

“Not Solace?” I asked.

“It’s awkward between us,” said Amaryllis. “In the weeks after she was born, she slept on me almost constantly, and … I don’t know. I don’t think it would make sense to you. She was this soft, green baby, my baby, and she was suckling at me, and it was everything that I had ever wanted motherhood to be. And then the locus just fast forwarded through to the point where she was Solace again, in a smaller form. And now my body’s been reset to what it was a year ago, and Solace is a grown adult man, and I can’t even have the illusion of any of it being real.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I would endorse making alterations to your soul, in this instance, for what it’s worth.”

“Thanks,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know how to do it though, on a mechanical level. Otherwise I would have petitioned the Council ages ago.”

Ages ago. “You’ve been using the time chamber more than you let on,” I said. “A year and a half, you said.”

Amaryllis sighed. “I wasn’t aware that I’d made any agreements not to. I take almost every scrap that Bethel gives me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Speaking as your friend, I’m not sure that’s such a great idea.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. She slumped back against the wall. “Are you more worried about the social isolation, the drift, or something else?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “You’re off doing your own thing, but --”

“But that’s not how the game is played,” said Amaryllis. “No, I know that. I just thought that if I had this project going, something longer term, I would be able to have an open plot thread. And if it actually worked, then I could do a lot of good, not to mention make the money that would get us the pricier entads and tattoos we need.” She sighed, and I thought about what Raven had said. “You know, it’s not so much the thought that there are setbacks, it’s this insidious idea that no matter what I do, I’m going to hit some unforeseeable roadblock somewhere. I can’t do television because there’s a hypnotizing monster somewhere? I could have dealt with that. I can’t put our chemical processes into action because synthetic polymers have some horrible innate magic? Again, fine, it can be dealt with. But if it’s going to be like that for everything that I try to do, then maybe we should just follow the quests in front of us and do what the Dungeon Master wants.”

I frowned at that. “It’s not my style,” I said.

“Not so kindred spirits?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“No, we’re not,” I said. “But I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, if it were me, I wouldn’t have stopped
you. And whatever you learn from Raven about the specifics of the threats, if I were DM I wouldn’t mean that as a blanket ‘no’ either.” I leaned forward slightly. “Look, you had the backpack land in your lap, right? I’m not about to suggest that everything you’ve done up to this point wasn’t real effort on your part, but when I was DMing, I would always throw curveballs at the players when it looked like they had a straight path in front of them.”

“The path was far from straight,” said Amaryllis. “But you’re saying that there’s a chance this isn’t the end?”

“Yeah,” I said. “My read on the Library is that the librarians are an inherently conservative bunch, probably because they had a lot of bad experiences in the past, or maybe because a lot of them are from older races that can remember bad times, or … something. M—Raven came on after the fall of the Second Empire, which implies something about how their views have shifted. My guess is that their mandate is for saving the world, which is a laudable goal, but they’ve been acting as the Dungeon Master’s agents, helping to keep the world a bit more stagnant than it should be. You remember saying that to me, don’t you? That it seemed like something was missing from the equation, when you were trying to figure out why no one had come up with television before?”

“I should have known a thumb was on the scale,” said Amaryllis, frowning. “I just didn’t think being erased from existence was on the table.”

“You’re too important to retroactively erase from existence,” I said with a weak smile that Amaryllis didn’t return.

“Fenn,” said Amaryllis, before sucking in a breath. “I told her not to write that godsdamned letter.”

“I don’t think it was the letter that did it,” I said.

“No,” sighed Amaryllis. “But it didn’t help.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think about it a lot, whether there was a cause. Narrative, or if not that, then maybe just the Dungeon Master’s whims.”

“Fuck him,” spat Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said, but it was weaker, because so much of Aerb had my fingerprints on it, and so many of the decisions that had been made in its creation were the decisions I would have made. It felt like telling me to go fuck myself.

“I feel like I’m teetering on the edge,” said Amaryllis. “So much of my effort is going into fighting against the group, which doesn’t have a cohesive identity, and everyone wants different things, and it’s just …” she threw up her hands. “Bethel is cutting off fingers, Valencia is manipulating us, Grak is going to leave as soon as we pay him what he’s owed, and Solace is focusing more and more on the locus, pushing for us to do some unidentifiable something with it. You’re the only one that I can count on.”

“If I didn’t know you better, I would swear that was sarcasm,” I said. “I’m forgiven for going rogue at Speculation and Scrutiny already?”

“You wanted to save Val,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “It wasn’t the right choice, but you were at least trying to be a moral person and save one of the members of our party. That’s what I mean when I say that I can count on you. You don’t always do the right things, but usually you’re fumbling in the direction of following your own moral code.”

“... thanks?” I asked.
Amaryllis nodded. “I could probably have phrased that better, but if you wanted me to beat you up so you could feel like less of an asshole, I thought you probably wouldn’t care if I left the sugar off my words.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Incidentally, I don’t really feel much better. It just felt like I deserved it.”

“For Fenn, or Maddie, or Tiff?” asked Amaryllis. “Or someone else?”

“All of it,” I said. “Mostly Maddie. Raven isn’t her, but there are things they have in common. Looks, for one, but some mannerisms too, the way she speaks. I just think back to it, and hate myself a little more.”

“She was two years younger than you?” asked Amaryllis.

“It wasn’t that,” I said. “I mean, it was partly that, but she was Craig’s sister too, and I didn’t really like her, I was just looking for a life raft.” I paused. “It was like I was trying to rebuild my life in the dumbest possible way, at the expense of her emotional wellbeing.”

“You’re not really that person anymore,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah?” I asked. “Even in the last two weeks there are a lot of things I would have done differently. All the fights I had with Fenn, before the end … just little, unthinking things.”

“Was your relationship with Maddie unthinking?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “I thought it was shitty of me, and I did it anyway.”

“Well, there you go,” said Amaryllis. “You went from hurting people deliberately to hurting them accidentally. Next step is not hurting them at all, and the step beyond that is actually helping them.”

“I missed your dry wit,” I said.

Amaryllis gave me a weak smile. “I didn’t actually go anywhere.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “I was working on nation building and Val, though the results of both those ventures don’t say much to my credit.”

I gave that some thought. “What Val did … it was a very Amaryllis thing to do,” I said. “Meddling, I mean.”

“You’re right,” said Amaryllis, letting out a breath. She was still leaned back against the wall. Some of the blood had dried, and flaked away when she scratched the back of her hand. “You’re thinking of the void arrow?”

“I was thinking about you pushing yourself to fall in love with me,” I said.

“Right,” said Amaryllis, slamming her head back against the wall. “That. I get a nice reminder every morning when I undo the damage.”

“Still creeps up?” I asked. My ‘Level Up’ value still did, though it was getting slower as the memory of pure bliss faded with time.

“Still creeps up,” said Amaryllis. She shifted her position, leaned up against the wall.
There was an oppressively large elephant in the room, and it seemed like neither of us really wanted to talk about it. I didn’t want Amaryllis like that, not now, not when I needed friends more than anything. I didn’t want to dictate to her what to do with her soul though, and I didn’t want to ruminate on the idea that maybe, someday in the distant future … just thinking about it made my heart sink.

“I miss her too,” said Amaryllis. I looked up, and she had her eyes closed.

“Yeah,” I said. I wanted to say something about how things were between us, now that Fenn was gone, something that would express that a week wasn’t nearly enough time, that I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of ever moving on, but no formulation of the words sounded remotely right in the confines of my mind, and I didn’t think they’d sound better when expressed out loud. “There’s a hole in the group,” I said instead. “Things have always been kind of heavy, and the last bit of levity is finally gone.” I paused slightly. “Grak is planning to kill himself, I’m pretty sure. Seventy percent sure.” Amaryllis stayed silent, still with her head against the wall and her eyes closed. “Some kind of ritual suicide, I’m guessing.”

“Sounds about right,” said Amaryllis with a sigh.

“I attempted suicide,” I said.

Amaryllis’ eyes flew open. “Joon, please, I can’t lose you too, you’re --”

“No,” I said, “No, no, shit, sorry, this was a few weeks before I came to Aerb, no, I didn’t mean recently, I just meant to tell you, because I hadn’t told you, and I didn’t want it to be a thing that you felt I was hiding from you, or not telling you.” I was speaking quickly, trying to talk her down. “I should have thought about what I was saying, I didn’t mean … I wouldn’t do it again.”

“Oh boy,” said Amaryllis. She relaxed back against the wall, but there was a new tension in her shoulders. “A few weeks before you met me? Which would be a few weeks after the Fel Seed thing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’ll have to update your timeline.” It came out more bitter than I’d intended it to.

“Don’t say it like that,” said Amaryllis. “Don’t say it like you think I don’t care about you.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just … me being shitty again.”

“No,” said Amaryllis, waving her hand. “I understand it. You don’t want to look at your life like it’s the key to unlocking mysteries. It’s your life, adding layers on top of it feels like it diminishes your experience of living it. The problem is, I think there’s real predictive power in knowing your past, and if the Dungeon Master is playing on that, then we need to pay attention.”

“Yeah,” I said. I twisted my mouth into a frown. “Do you think that’s … do you think that’s why Fenn died?”

“Mirroring?” asked Amaryllis.

I nodded.

“I have no idea,” said Amaryllis. “Maybe. Maybe it’s the Bond girl thing, but up close it’s so monstrous that it’s hard to credit. We’re going to have to ask Raven and the others more about that. It might be a test of how you deal with loss. There are a lot of things that it could be.” Her eyes were downcast. “In the games you ran, what was your narrative like?”
“You’ve asked me that before,” I said with a hollow smile. Besides, she had also experienced it, albeit not in full campaign mode.

“You always brushed me off,” said Amaryllis. “You told me that your games weren’t really like that, you were adaptive, responding to the players, picking things up and dropping them when people got bored or forgot. But if you could control all the players —”

“You can’t,” I said. “That’s the nature of it. Players derail you, if you’re foolish enough to put up rails.”

“If you could guide them?” asked Amaryllis.

I sighed. I knew exactly what she was getting at, and fundamentally disagreed with the question, at least as it applied to our situation. “I guess I like structure,” I said. “I like mirroring, physical manifestation of internal problems, or anthropomorphizing abstract concepts that are part of character growth. I like when things end right where they started, when places and sets get reused a second or third time. Does that help?”

Amaryllis shrugged. “It was just something that had been bothering me.” She looked down at her bloody hands. “If the Dungeon Master is running our game like that, then you’re right that we’re going to have to fight Fel Seed at some point. I’m just really not looking forward to it, for obvious reasons. Can we try to work something out? Some compromise, so we don’t make a beeline for him?”

“If I can ever get to the Dungeon Master’s level of power, I can bring her back,” I said. So far as I was concerned, that was argument enough.

“And when players ran into high level encounters because they wanted to get to the logical end of the campaign?” asked Amaryllis. “What would you do, in that position?”

I grimaced, because the answer was that I would either divert them or kill them, neither of which were especially attractive at the present moment. “Point taken.”

We talked a lot, then took showers (her first, because I was a gentleman), then talked some more, like we hadn’t done in a long time. It had been longer for her than it had been for me, thanks to her abuse of the time chamber. It was weird to realize that someone who had once been my closest friend had grown so distant from me, so fast. Worse, I hadn’t even really noticed it. I was glad that I wasn’t keeping score, because that would go firmly in the ‘Juniper Sucks’ column.

“So do you think it’s safe for us to watch movies?” I asked. “What with the Couch Potato out there?”

“Couch Potato?” asked Amaryllis. “Seriously, that’s what you’re going with?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We weren’t given a name.”

“I’m six hundred hours in at this point,” said Amaryllis. “But if I had to guess, I would say that the time chamber provides something of a barrier. The Couch Potato — is that really what we’re going with?”

“Yes,” I replied with a faint smile. *Fenn would have loved it.*

“But he’s the one controlling the television, not the one watching -- you know what, not important.” Amaryllis shook her head. “Time is accelerated within the time chamber, and anything that can get around the barrier of warped time might still have some problems interacting with what’s in the
chamber.” She looked over to where the television was sitting. “We should probably still not use it, just like we should probably not bring in anything from Earth. We’re at risk of tripping across infohazards, and even if we don’t, there are other things that go bump in the night.”

“So you don’t want to do movie night?” I asked.

Amaryllis frowned. “It seems like tempting fate,” she said.

“It seems like playing Russian Roulette, but the trigger hit on empty six hundred times before, which makes me a lot more relaxed than I would be,” I said.

“Which one is that?” asked Amaryllis. “I know Russia, obviously, and we have roulette, but together?”

“You take a revolver, put a single bullet in it, spin it, and then take turns pulling the trigger and respinning until someone dies,” I said. “Or maybe you just keep going without spinning again? But that seems like it would lead to situations where you know you’re going to die, so I don’t know.”

Amaryllis nodded along to that explanation. “How did you try to kill yourself?” she asked.

I flinched at that. “Ahrm,” I said. “That’s, uh.” I paused. “That’s not really how I want to talk about it, if we’re going to have that talk.”

“We’re here to have talks,” said Amaryllis. She was staring at me with her ice-blue eyes. One of the things that I thought about a lot, with other people, was that they had imperfections, and when I was looking at them, I had to be careful not to stare at a mole, or their acne, or the way their eyebrows were overgroomed, or something like that. It distracted me from talking to them, because I was overly conscious of where my eyes were. Amaryllis had no imperfections, and it was a little eerie to look at her face and see only thoughts and emotions. In this particular case, a sort of detached, wry, assessment of me. “How would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Can I … can I talk to Grak first?”


“I don’t know,” I said. “I just … I think I understand him a bit better than I did, and the thing we share in common is a degree of self-loathing. He told me all about his thing, and I should have told him about mine, either when we were getting the cursed items from Bethel’s pit, or when we were in the chamber together, but I was a chickenshit about it.” I took a breath. “And I feel like if I tell you first, it sort of means less when I tell him, if you understand what I’m saying.”

“You don’t want him to be the last into that circle of trust, because it would minimize his role in the group,” said Amaryllis with a nod.

“That’s a better way of putting it,” I said. “Except you somehow make it sound calculated.”

“God forbid that anyone do any calculations,” said Amaryllis with a roll of her eyes. She smiled at me after though. It was a smile that was quick to fall. “And Grak’s ‘thing’?” she asked. “He told you?”

“Ah,” I said. “I’m not sure how much I should say.” Though I mentioned it in passing to Valencia when we were in therapy, which means Bethel overheard too, and --

“I already know,” said Amaryllis. “I found out a week ago. Without your biography of him, I doubt we would ever have heard the name Darili Irid, but the name gave me something to go on, and I
have resources now, so … I know as much as there was to know from secondhand sources.”

“You didn’t tell me?” I asked.

“I really don’t mean any offense by this,” said Amaryllis. “But I was worried that you would bungle it.”

“I might have,” I shrugged.

“Do you think talking to Grak about your suicide attempt is smart?” asked Amaryllis.

“Attempts,” I said. “I mean, there are distinctions between suicidal ideation, suicidal gestures, and actual suicide attempts, but -- sorry, tangent.” I tried to think about how it would go with Grak. “I don’t know. I think that he’s really resistant to getting help, because the thing in his past is so incredibly big, and accepting help is an admission that he wants to get over it. And … yeah, I think that I might be able to help him.” I frowned slightly. “Valencia would probably be better.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis with a small nod.

“If we trust her,” I continued.

“Which we don’t,” said Amaryllis with another small nod.

“You don’t?” I asked.

“There are different levels of trust,” said Amaryllis. “I trust that she could help Grak. I don’t necessarily trust that she will always choose to do what she believes is the right thing, nor do I trust that she’ll correctly pick the right thing when presented with all the options, even if she was trying to be good.”

“It worries me to hear you say that,” I replied, after a moment to think.

“When we found her, she was sitting in a cage, inside a prison, being cared for by a man whose outlook on life was ethically, morally, and strategically questionable, and that’s not to mention the fact that she underwent a fairly routine process of being possessed by creatures intent on harming living beings,” said Amaryllis. She leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. “I shouldn’t have pushed her as hard as I did.”

“So … that’s a no on getting her to talk to Grak?” I asked. “I think I should talk to him either way, for what that’s worth, but I would defer to your judgement.”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. She snapped her head down from the ceiling and looked at me. “I’ve had too many wrong calls.”

“We both have,” I said. I felt a stab of grief for Fenn.

“True,” replied Amaryllis. She shook her head. “If talking to him is what you want, then do it, so long as it’s not faked. He’s on the lookout for that, not just from you but from everyone else. We probably shouldn’t even be having this conversation, and we certainly shouldn’t tell him about it. He’d see it as collusion and meddling, which is debatably true, even if it’s just meant to help him.”

“Shit, I didn’t even think of that,” I said.

Amaryllis sat in silence for a moment, then started drumming her fingers on the table. “What movie do you want to watch tonight?” she asked.
“Seriously?” I asked. “You’re willing to take the risk?”

Amaryllis sat in her chair, staring off into the distance for a bit, frowning. “I’m running the numbers,” she said after a bit. “I think if we get hit by something from beyond space and time, then that’s just the Dungeon Master being a complete fuck to us, and if that’s how he feels like doing things, then not watching the movie doesn’t help much.”

“Oh, I said. “Then I guess I’d like to watch something that Fenn would have liked.”

“How about Kiki’s Delivery Service?” asked Amaryllis. “She wanted me to watch it.”

“Sure,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve seen that one.”

So we had ourselves a movie night, with popcorn and hot chocolate, more or less how we’d done them when we’d been in the chamber together for two months. Amaryllis was on edge for the first fifteen or twenty minutes, waiting for a flash of something unexpected on the screen, but eventually she relaxed, which let me relax too. I found myself getting into it, and eventually broke into tears.

Amaryllis paused the movie and patted me awkwardly on the shoulder. “It’s okay,” said Amaryllis. She was trying to keep her voice soothing. “It’s okay.”

“Just miss her,” I said. “That’s all.”

“Me too,” said Amaryllis.

I leaned back and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to will the tears to stop. There wasn’t anything in particular that had set me off, it was just the feeling of watching something that Fenn would have enjoyed and knowing that we’d never get to watch it together, or at least not until after the end of everything. I wasn’t holding out hope for a resurrection, not with how clearly the game was signaling that it wasn’t going to happen.

“Is this how you did movie nights with her?” I asked, trying to get my mind somewhere better. We’d done movie nights as a group, every few days since we’d made the cold, bleak Isle of Poran our home, but those were substantially different.

“More snacks, more sugar,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was distant and sad. “More cuddling.”

“Cuddling?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. My moment of sadness was mostly gone.

“She fell asleep on me more than once,” said Amaryllis with a faint smile. She was watching me. “I hope that doesn’t upset you. It wasn’t romantic, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Nah,” I said. “I knew you shared a bed. She liked to cuddle. I’m just jealous that you got so much of it. If the Dungeon Master appeared to me and asked me give something up in exchange for two months in the chamber with Fenn ...” I trailed off.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned it,” said Amaryllis.

“No, it’s fine,” I replied. “I like knowing more about her. I was talking to Grak, and he had a lot more to say than I’d expected. It was food for thought. I’ve been trying to be less self-centered, more aware of what’s going on with the people around me. More forgiving, or at least understanding, I guess.”

“Pallida pledged herself to you,” Amaryllis began.
“I already planned to apologize to her,” I said.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She shifted on the couch. “Well, good.” She looked at the television. “Ready to start back up again? Or …”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was getting good.”

We hadn’t really discussed how long we were going to stay in the chamber. I could see how it might be a little addictive, if you could get used to the near-complete isolation. While we were in the chamber, the outside world was on pause, and the upcoming meeting with Pallida and Heshnel could be postponed indefinitely, as could any decisions about what our next steps would be. If I’d had a time chamber like this in high school, I would have spent every other day in it so I could get more time to myself and procrastinate until the last minute had stretched out for a week.

(Was I technically a high school dropout? Probably, right? I certainly had no credentials worth speaking of, aside from being the Advisor on Culture in the Council of Arches, which was a made up position with no actual responsibilities to speak of. I was pretty sure that I would qualify as a magus in a number of disciplines if I could take the relevant tests, but you didn’t get the title of magus just from that, you got it from schooling at the athenaeums. My off-grid training was verboten, so certification was never going to happen, not that it would actually do me any good, given that I was operating so far outside the normal systems. It still made me feel a little weird to know that I was never going to graduate.)

In the end, our little unplanned vacation ended up being three days long. Amaryllis was still working off her aggression, which she thought was clouding her judgment, and she was probably right about that. She beat me up two more times with my express consent, though it was never as raw and primal as the first time, and she did a lot less damage. I got the sense that it was less satisfying for her the second and third time, but didn’t really have a good sense of why that would be the case. For my part, I didn’t get any further catharsis.

“We need to talk about Bethel,” said Amaryllis at the end of the third ‘day’.

I’d been waiting for that. We’d talked about Grak and Valencia, and to a lesser extent, Solace, but Bethel had been a topic that we were skirting.

“Do you understand her compulsion toward violence a little better now?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “It was a blunt lesson, but maybe one that helped me empathize with her a bit better, in the same way that you seem to.” She pursed her lips. “With that said, she’s completely out of our control, and given how powerful she is, and the fact that we literally live inside her, it’s something that needs to be addressed.”

Bethel had never given any indication of being able to hear or see us when the time chamber was engaged, and in fact, had complained about that limitation a number of times. It was still entirely possible that she was just concealing abilities from us. We had, in the past, used the glove to hide in, which was almost certainly beyond her view, but that was an enormous hassle. I was operating under the assumption that Bethel would hear the conversation about her, and assumed that Amaryllis was doing the same.

“She’s angry, with good reason,” I said. “She never wanted much from life, and because she was powerful, she was used and abused by people who didn’t care about her. She’s … kind of the opposite of Valencia?”
“How so?” asked Amaryllis, narrowing her eyes.

“Valencia spent most of her life being weak,” I said. “She was used and abused because she was powerless, both powerless to stop the infernals from occupying her body, and powerless to stop Fallatehr from doing whatever experiments he did on her. Powerless to forge herself a better life. She was … was viewed as trash. For Bethel, it was the opposite, right? She was too valuable to be anyone’s home, because she was a weapon. Uther’s big crime, from her perspective, was that he acquired her and then did the equivalent of putting her in a vault, never to be used again, and all your other ancestors brought her out like she was the good silverware that’s only for special occasions. Right?”

“I think that framing is a bit lacking,” said Amaryllis. “I would show you my notes on theories of party composition, dualities, and specialization, but they didn’t end up amounting to much. It would suffice to say that viewing us as standing on opposite sides of various coins doesn’t really get at the truth.”

“Huh,” I said. “It was just a thought, a framing that maybe helps to understand who Bethel is and where she’s coming from. For what it’s worth, I think at least some of her behavior is antagonistic because she doesn’t trust that we’ll stay. Same thing Fenn used to do, actually. She would needle people and rub them the wrong way so that when they told her to fuck off, she would be able to pretend that she’d never wanted them around in the first place.” I paused. “I think, anyway. I obviously didn’t have a great read on her.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “That sounds about right. Her affectations were partly about putting distance between her and others. But with Bethel, those affectations, if that’s what they are, include cutting off the fingers of our house guests.”

“More severe, yes,” I said. “But I think Raven was a special case. Raven is at least a little culpable for what Uther did, and she’s the entire reason that your ancestor Tansy came to live in Bethel. My guess is there’s only one person that Bethel would have a worse reaction to.”

“And you intend to bring him to her?” asked Amaryllis.

“I want him to answer for it,” I said. “I think that healing, for Bethel, probably means finding some way for her to make peace with her life up to this point. I don’t know what she would consider justice, but I do think that what he did was shitty, and I think he should have to face something in the way of consequences.”

“Not if Uther is the key to saving the world,” said Amaryllis, shaking her head. “Aren’t you a self-described utilitarian?”

“I am,” I said. “And yes, if it comes down to Aerb on the one hand, and Uther getting a bit of comeuppance on the other, then yes, I’ll choose Aerb.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear,” said Amaryllis, holding up a hand. “And we still haven’t heard his side of things.”

“I don’t want to go down that road,” I said.

“What road?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t want to question her account and suggest that she’s mistaken or lying,” I said. “There’s some reasonable doubt, sure, but if I began questioning her, it would probably be because what she’s saying is inconvenient to what I want to be true.”
“So what are we going to do about her?” asked Amaryllis.

“I don’t really know,” I said. “She kind of hates you, because you’re Utherspawn.”

“I’ve been trying not to confront her,” said Amaryllis. “We really, really could have used her when we went in for the meeting with Heshnel. If she had expanded next to their camp, or enveloped their keep, or even if she’d just been held as a staff … you’ve been very quick to forgive her.”

“She’s got her own shit going on,” I said.

“So does Valencia,” replied Amaryllis. “We all do.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t know. Probably I’m just not very good at empathy, and it’s easier for me to empathize with Bethel, because she’s feeling a lot of things that I felt before.”

“You’d have cut off someone’s fingers?” asked Amaryllis.

“If I had the power to?” I asked. “And if I knew that the problem could be fixed with no lasting damage? Probably. I’d probably have done a lot worse.”

“Worse than torturing people to death?” asked Amaryllis.

“Alright, maybe not that,” I replied. “I just -- Valencia was manipulating me, she admitted to that, and that I can’t empathize with, because it’s not really something that I do, at least not intentionally. And if I have done it intentionally, then I’ve felt horrible about it. Snapping at people who have wronged me is a much more Juniper thing to do. Same with being depressed. Manipulation? Maybe I just never learned the skill for it. Maybe that’s why I dislike it so much.”

“Hrm,” murmured Amaryllis. “It’s not that I like it,” she said.

“I didn’t say you liked it,” I replied.

“Yes, well, were you thinking that it was one of the biggest differences between us?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I was,” I admitted. “The thought didn’t come until the tail end of what I was saying though. I wasn’t thinking about you, per se, just in general, and if that’s the natural connection my mind makes …” I shrugged.

“I was born into it,” said Amaryllis. “My mother trained me, until she died, and after that, it was a series of cousins, aunts, and uncles who thought that I could be used as a pawn, given the wealth and magic I had been born into. I don’t like manipulation, but it’s part of the toolbox, and the mindset can be poisonous.”

“I really wouldn’t have expected to hear you say that,” I replied with a frown. “You’ve tried manipulation on me, uh,” I did a little internal count in my head as I tried to put a number on it.

“Too much,” said Amaryllis. “In Anglecynn, at least among the nobility, there’s this expectation that alliances are ephemeral and promises are only good for as long as they’re feasible to keep. When the going got tough, people would drop their supposed friends like a hot rock.” She slumped slightly as she said it. “And that’s sort of how I am. It’s sensible, but it always makes people think less of you, because they know your love isn’t eternal, and your promises are breakable if circumstances mean you’re willing to eat the cost to reputation.”

I sat back and watched her for a bit. She seemed like she was mostly talking to herself. “You okay?”
“Just thinking,” she said, shaking her head. “Thinking that it would be nice if people treated those conditionals in the spirit in which they were intended, and didn’t have such ridiculous notions about what we should mean to each other.” She shrugged. “But maybe I’m just a heinous bitch who can’t actually commit myself to a person.”

“Where’s this coming from?” I asked. The things she was saying were a little concerning. Amaryllis was supposed to be the rock that the group was moored to, the compass that would help us find our direction, or at least that was how I had come to think of her.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Amaryllis. “I just feel the difference between myself and the other members of the party a little keenly sometimes. We all have our different priorities, and sometimes I just want to go to each of you and scream in your faces about how the entirety of Aerb is more important than whatever your individual little things are.”

“Pretty dismissive, to call them little things,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. “I’m trying to get Fenn back.”

Amaryllis closed her eyes and took a breath. “You’re right, I’m sorry.” She opened one eye. “I was going to ask you whether that took priority over getting everyone out of the hells and creating a paradise on Aerb, but from your perspective, those are one in the same, at least for the time being.”

“Amaryllis, I promise you that if I ever have to decide between Fenn and all of Aerb, I’ll choose Aerb,” I said. “I won’t want to, but sometimes morality is about doing the thing you really don’t want to do because you know it’s right. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis.

**Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 22!**

“What does it feel like, internally, for your loyalty to go up?” I asked.

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She sat and thought about that. “It feels like learning something important about you in a way that makes me like you more. I’m trying to think of all the times you told me it happened … usually there’s some element of surprise, even if it’s affirming something that I already thought about you. Sometimes it’s a reminder about the sort of person you are.”

“In a good way though,” I said.

Amaryllis smiled at that. “Yes, in a good way. I know you’re down on yourself, especially with the arrival of Raven, but you’re really not that bad.”

“Do you have the expression ‘damning with faint praise’ here?” I asked.

“I’m allowed some gentle ribbing,” said Amaryllis. She was still smiling at me.

“With Fenn gone,” I said, and then it felt like the air had been sucked from the room. “Someone has to,” I finished. I hated the reminder that she was gone, but I had no one to blame but myself.

“Are you going to be ready for some meetings?” asked Amaryllis.

“The first time was satisfying,” said Amaryllis with a shake of her head. “After that, it helped, but not as much.”

“Well, if you ever need that again, just let me know,” I replied. “It’s a service I’m happy to provide.”

“How are your dreams?” asked Amaryllis. “Better?”

“Last night we were putting on a play in the Boundless Library,” I said. “We were all playing our own parts, except for Solace, who was being played by the locus for some reason, and all the other players, everyone outside the party, was being played by the same man.”

“The Dungeon Master?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I replied. “The Dungeon Master was in the audience, in his own little box, with people all around him, none of them that I recognized. No, the guy who was on stage was just some guy.” I shrugged. “But the play was a play about us, and our adventures, and eventually we got to the part where Fenn died, and it was just so melodramatic. She had a whole final speech and everything as she was dying in my arms. And she was really overacting. She was having fun with it.” I smiled a bit. It was a dream, and I could only remember it in bits and pieces, or in the general impression it had left.

“Then what happened?” asked Amaryllis.

“The lights went down, she was taken off stage, and she blew me a kiss from the wings,” I said. “And then the play went on for a very long time, until we had finished, and we all took a bow.” I shrugged. “That was about when I woke up.”

“Do you remember anything of what came ahead?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I replied. “It’s all right on the tip of my tongue. I think that’s the sense in which it was a bad dream, since Fenn exiting stage left was … almost nice, I guess, because she was there, and she was in on it, as much as that wasn’t how it was in the real world. But if there was anything prophetic in the dreams, I wasn’t allowed to hang onto it. All I got was a nagging sense of things forgotten.”

“Which would be just like the Dungeon Master,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. “I’m really starting to dislike him.”

“I don’t think there’s anything important to conclude from the dreams,” I said. “I’ll keep telling you about them if you want, but eventually they’re going to just be dreams. They don’t really trouble me anymore. If anything, they might be helping.” Maybe that’s the point. “You’re right, we have some meetings to prepare for. We should probably get on that.”

“Right,” nodded Amaryllis.
Pallida showed up with Heshnel and Gemma right around dawn, the earliest that they could have come and still claimed to have waited a day like we’d wanted them to. Their metallic bean-ship came down in a field half a mile from Bethel, and I walked down the path a bit to go say hello.

“There are a few things you need to know,” I said, without much preamble. “First, our house is magical and sentient. She hates Uther with a burning passion, she doesn’t like being threatened, she doesn’t like people boasting about how powerful they are, and she has, in the recent past, shown a penchant for violence as a way of getting her point across. She’s a valued member of our team though, so try not to piss her off.”

“Sounds lovely,” replied Gemma. Her voice croaked. She was still looking painfully old, her fox fur still grey-white and her skin wrinkled and loose where I could see it.

“The second thing you should be aware of is that she can hear and see everything that anyone says or writes, but she stops short of being able to read minds,” I continued. “I don’t want to trick anyone into thinking that there’s privacy when there really, really isn’t.”

“Wait,” said Pallida, looking up toward the house. “What kind of range are we talking here?”

“Ah,” I said. “You’re currently inside it.” Normally that wouldn’t have been the case, but Bethel had projected an extension beneath the ground, similar to the way that the tallest buildings on Earth had put on mooring masts and radio towers so they could claim an extra hundred feet. It was right beneath the path.

“Fuck,” said Pallida. Her skin was bubblegum pink, but her lips were a slightly darker color, and they were turned into a frown. She was dressed in her oil-slick, skin-tight armor, but she’d left her spear behind, or possibly just hidden in extradimensional space. “You know we come in peace, right?”

“I know,” I replied. “I’m just giving you information that I think you would want. It’s not a gun to the head, it’s just gently letting you know that we’re armed, so you don’t freak out if you see the gun. Does that make sense?”

“It’s appreciated,” replied Heshnel. The dark elf’s face was still disfigured, his eye too large and the flesh still weeping and spotted. Whatever their capacity for healing, apparently they hadn’t been able to deal with their afflictions on short notice. I had learned from The Book of Blood how he had survived the poison; apparently a general immunity to poison was one of the dark elf’s primary traits.

“So, how many guns do you have?” asked Pallida.

“Less than you’d think,” I replied. I paused slightly. “I’m sorry about yesterday,” I said. “You made your pledge, and I brushed you off, and I shouldn’t have done that. I wasn’t thinking right, for obvious reasons.”

Pallida waved a hand. “Uther was the same way, though I think he didn’t understand how seriously I meant it.”

“She had broken into his house to steal from him,” said Heshnel.

“In my defense, he had way too much stuff,” replied Pallida. She turned to me. “Obviously I was forgiven, in time.” She stammered slightly. “And, obviously, what happened to Fenn was more
serious than stealing some magic, I don’t mean to put them on the same level, it’s just --”

“It’s fine,” I said, forcing myself to relax. “I’ve had some time to process. More than just a day.” Less than I probably need.

“Well, I come bearing gifts,” said Pallida, pointing behind her toward where the ship was sitting. “I don’t know if you want them now or later.”

“Later,” I said. “Unless you have some means of instant resurrection, which I gather you don’t. If there are any proverbial guns you have, that it would be better for me to know about, I’d like to know about them now. We didn’t get to that stage before we were interrupted yesterday.”

Bethel was no doubt bringing her sensorium to bear on them, which would include a warder’s analysis in conference with Grak. I considered them duly warned that they were under surveillance, albeit once they were already in range.

“My armor is wardproof,” said Pallida. “When I’m enveloped, I’m wardproof too. I assume that’s something you’d want to know about.”

“I have a number of buds,” replied Heshnel, pointing to his lapel where they were all neatly lined up. “My specialty is in connection, as was my mentor’s, though I have a number of combat and utility strains, a few of them descended from Vervain’s stock. There are thirty buds. Shall I list them now?”

“No,” I said, trying not to look at his disfigured face, and also to not look at it.

“Aside from that, my cloak is capable of obscuring me from notice,” said Heshnel. “I wear a necklace that can keep my head perfectly preserved and capable of speech in the event of my death. My skin is embedded with the Seven Psalms, rendering me difficult to physically injure unless such efforts are taken eight times.” He paused slightly. “I think those are the ones you would find most relevant, if you don’t want the complete list.”

“No weapons?” I asked.

Heshnel gestured toward the buds with a raised eyebrow.

“Point taken,” I replied.

“I have the Twenty-blade,” said Gemma, gesturing to her hip. “The sheath can apply poison with a thought, and stores several dozen. That aside, there’s an amulet to return bullets and arrows fired at me, a belt that helps track the path of blades, and a bracelet that consumes poisons. That last was a gift from Dehla, given the night before you were attacked. I assume it was meant to spare my life.” She slipped it from her wrist and handed it to me. “I don’t wish to wear it any longer.”

I stared at it for a moment.

“Safe,” a voice whispered in my ear. “And warded against anyhow.”

I took the bracelet and slipped it on. “Thank you,” I said. “We’re all in this together.”

“That remains to be seen,” replied Gemma with a slight bob of her head.

“Does it?” I asked.

“I did not pledge to you,” she replied. “Breaking guest right falls somewhat on my shoulders, but the burden is not absolute.”
“To be clear, you had no part in the attack?” I asked.

“No. I fought to defend you,” replied Gemma. She didn’t seem upset by the question, but it was hard to tell, because the facial features of an anthropomorphic fox were far different from that of a human.

“I don’t mean to challenge your honor,” I said. “I just want to make sure that we’re all on the same page.”

“I sort of doubt that,” said Pallida with a small, rueful laugh. “I don’t even know what book we’re reading from.”

“There’s one more thing,” I said. “We have Raven with us.”

Pallida tilted her head back, exposing her pink throat, and let out a groan. “How much does she know?”

“As much as you,” I replied. “Maybe a bit more, given her status. There are certainly things that she’s not telling us.” We hadn’t had the promised debriefing with her; it was meant to be in the early morning, but they’d decided to come even earlier. I looked between the three of them. It had been clear from the way that Raven talked about Uther that she would be at odds with them, given that their plan had seemed to be to nuke Uther the moment he showed up. I wasn’t sure that we could all be allies, let alone friends, but I didn’t really know how deep the bad blood went. The Infinite Library was supposed to be ‘neutral’ in Heshnel’s words, and by rights that should extend to Raven, who was the head librarian, but I wasn’t sure all that would hold with the return of an Uther-like entity on the horizon. “We’re all going to have a talk. Is that a problem?”

“No,” replied Pallida. “Can I give you my side of the story first?”

I hesitated, not really sure that was necessary. Everyone else was back at the house, listening to Bethel relay the conversation. Raven was sequestered, and hadn’t even been informed when Bethel’s sensorium first picked up the Egress coming down through the sky. Amaryllis had been against me going out there alone after how Bethel had handled things with Raven, but I’d argued that Raven was a special case unlikely to be repeated, and Amaryllis didn’t really have a choice but to relent.

“Ohay,” I said. “In brief?”

“You want me to give you the short version of thirty years of history?” asked Pallida, raising an eyebrow.

“You were dead for some of that, weren’t you?” I asked. I resisted the urge to fold my arms across my chest.

“I was a toddler for some of it, sure,” said Pallida, waving a hand. “All I’m saying is that when we get in there, she’s going to say some stuff, and then I’ll say some stuff, and you won’t have context, and the short version is what you’d get then anyway. Unless she already told you?”

“No,” I said.

“This is important to her,” said Heshnel.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Give me the context.”

Pallida cleared her throat. “Really didn’t think that I would have to be telling this story today,” she said. “It starts … hells, I guess when I broke into Uther’s vault.” She paused. “How much history do you know?”
“Enough,” I said. “I’ve read his biographies.”

“Well, this was after the Dark King and before the Seventeen Swords,” said Pallida. “I made my plans, paid off the right people, slipped past his wards, and got into his vault, only to find that he was waiting for me in a comfortable chair with a crossbow pointed straight at my heart.” She sighed. “Sorry, I’ll skip ahead a bit. I found myself in his service, traveled with him occasionally when he called on me, and put my particular skills to use on interesting problems. It wasn’t a bad life until Uther asked me to break into the wrong man’s castle, where I was caught and beheaded.”

“And that was the first time you died in his service,” I said slowly.

Pallida nodded. “I was reborn, suffered through a childhood with a mother that detested me for not being the human daughter she’d wanted, then ran away at five years old to go find Uther again. Renacim weren’t well-known in Anglecynn in those days, and the cooperatives didn’t have the reach they do now -- irrelevant stuff, I am trying to be brief here. The point is, I eventually joined back up with Uther and his people. I’m not good for much when I’m five years old, though I’m a fair sight better than any human that age, so Uther parked me in the Caledwich castle he was spending less and less time in, while he waited for me to come back into the fullness of my usefulness.”

“That was how he saw people,” said Gemma. She nearly snarled as she said it. It was a strangely bitter accusation, given that Gemma had never met the man. I didn’t have all that much information on the Foxguard, except that they were a thing that Uther had started, composed entirely of fox Animalia.

“I didn’t begrudge him that,” said Pallida. “Not then, anyway. He was paying for my tutors, I was growing up with his children, I had the best meals I’d had in lifetimes and a comfy bed … sorry, again, trying to keep it brief. Eventually I joined up with his camp, leaving my friends at his castle behind, and I started doing work for him again, usually the kind that was strictly illegal, highly dangerous, and liable to get me killed again. He saved my life a few times when things went wrong.” She paused a bit at that. “Anyway, Raven and I were about the same age at that time, and we became fast friends. She’d been twelve years old for a hundred years, and it was my thousandth time being twelve, so we had more in common with each other than almost anyone in Uther’s circles.”

“And then you had a falling out,” I said.

Pallida shifted. “Hang on, I’m getting there,” she said. Whatever it was she had to say, she seemed to really think that it would be softened by a long lead-in. I still felt bad about having been a dick about her giving her pledge to me, so I was inclined to listen. “Well, Dahlia went missing, and it was this big, all hands on deck type thing, but eventually it just seemed like she was gone, no ransom, no demands, no evidence at all. Uther was off-kilter, maybe for the first time in his life, furious and sorrowful, taken by moods, not really knowing what to do. Eventually it kind of died down, because there was nothing to be done … and that was when Helio showed up.” She swallowed.

“Uther took him on, maybe because he was missing his daughter, or to make up for the fact that he couldn’t relate to his sons, or … I don’t know what he was thinking, only that Helio joined up with us, and the three of us, Raven, Helio, and myself, all went on some adventures together for a few short weeks, until Uther found out that Helio was really Dahlia, who had run away from home and changed into a boy with the help of a magical belt.” She looked over at the house. “They had a big fight in Uther’s traveling court, all his Knights present, all us hangers-on too, with her, at eleven years old, looking as perfectly defiant as anyone I’ve ever seen, and him consumed by anger. Eventually he settled down though, and allowed her to be part of things.”

“You’re not going to say the line?” asked Heshnel.
Pallida hesitated and pursed her lips. “I’m trying to be brief,” she said. “But, okay, fine.” She sighed. “At this showdown they had, Uther wasn’t quite yelling, but he was livid, talking about all of the worry and anguish she’d caused by sneaking off, treating all of this like a game, and then he started going on about the belt she’d used to become a boy, and he said, ‘Do you understand how illegal that is?’, which was the first thing that gave her pause. She spoke for the first time in a while, because it seemed like he wanted an answer, and she asked him with a firm voice what crime she was guilty of.” Pallida stared at me for a moment and gave me a faint smile, seemingly despite herself.

“And?” I asked.

“‘Male fraud,’” said Pallida, chuckling slightly. “And with his pun delivered, it was like all the tension in the room broke, and all was forgiven.” She turned to look at Heshnel, to see if he was satisfied, and he gave her a little nod. “There was a reason that people liked Uther,” said Pallida, but she looked a little bit sad when she said it. “Anyhow. Dahlia stayed as Helio, and they kept that secret under wraps, since the princess traveling along with her father on his adventures was decidedly not a done thing, even if she hadn’t been so young. Uther seemed to like the deception.”

Pallida seemed lost in thought, like she was reliving memories that were five hundred years old. I wasn’t sure quite how old this body of hers was, but from what The Book of Blood said about renacim, they had memories and skills that were stronger the closer they were to being the same age as in their past life.

“You got into a relationship with Dahlia,” I said.

“Shit,” said Pallida, snapping out of her reverie. “Was that a good guess, or do you already know this story? Did Raven tell you?”

“It was an educated guess,” I replied. “I saw the way you looked at Amaryllis.”

Pallida blushed, her cheeks turning a darker pink. “Well,” she said. “Yes, Dahlia and I went on our adventures together, sometimes with Raven, sometimes without, and Lia and I began to grow up, leaving Raven behind, and … it was Raven who caught us together.” She seemed uncomfortable. “But you see, the thing is, --”

“Sorry,” I said, holding up a hand, then glancing at Gemma and Heshnel to see if I could get some context clues from how they were reacting. “Which part of this is or was scandalous, if any? I think I’m missing cultural context.”

Pallida stared at me for a moment. “Ah,” she said. “Right, well, Dahlia could switch back and forth between being a girl or a boy, but, ah, when Raven caught us, she was the former, rather than the latter.”

I frowned. “And Uther had a problem with that?” I asked.

“Uther had a lot of problems with it,” said Pallida with a grimace. “I’m actually halfway confident that he made up a bunch of philosophy on the spot just to explain how many problems he had with it. The other kings and politicians had always found him a little bit terrifying, because he had this way of arguing with people like it was one of the martial arts he’d mastered. I got the full force of it.”

“But,” I said slowly. “Did he really have a problem with the fact that you were both women?”

“Lia never thought that he did,” said Pallida. “She thought some of it was bunk he was saying because it sounded good, and other parts were, in his opinion, true, but that one she didn’t think he
believed. She tore his arguments apart and turned his rhetoric against him, but that was always easier when she was ranting to me, rather than facing him down. All the stoic determination in the world couldn’t make her better at argument than her father was.”

“Ah,” I said, frowning slightly as I thought about that. Homosexuality was frowned upon in the same sense that most interspecies marriages were, but it wasn’t illegal, at least as far as I knew. In Uther’s time though … well, I didn’t imagine that it would really matter. “I don’t suppose he ended it with a pun?”

“He did not,” replied Pallida. She shifted in place, causing her oil-slick armor to display new ribbons of color. “Anyway. I guess we can skip whatever comes afterward, since it’s really not that important. A couple years later, Uther sent me out on a dangerous mission, and I died again. I was about ten years old when the Grand Finale happened, but I was there for it.”

“What happened to Dahlia?” I asked.

“She had donned the Red Mask by that point,” replied Pallida. “She came through the Grand Finale just fine, nothing more than scars to show for it, and lived out the rest of her life in Cidium as one of the city’s protectors. She was a big deal there, but never wanted people to know she was Uther’s daughter, and all the shit her brothers were getting up to back in Anglecynn … she’d never had much stomach for it.” Pallida hesitated again. “Dahlia only ever went for women. Raven might bring that up. She thinks it’s my fault.”

“Oh,” I said with a nod. “I consider myself properly briefed. I’ll ask you for the less brief version another time, maybe even tonight, but for the moment, we need to all sit down and have a discussion about next steps.”

“Heshnel, Pallida,” said Raven with a nod to each of them as they came into the large conference room. She paused slightly as she saw the fox Animalia. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had the pleasure. Foxguard?”

“I am,” replied Gemma with a small bow.

“I wouldn’t have thought a member of the Foxguard would fall in with these sorts of people,” replied Raven.

Gemma shrugged. “I was born into a role, not into every thought I would ever have about what that role meant.”

Raven looked between the three of them as they took their seats. “I’m not sure how comfortable I am with all of this,” Raven said to me.

“Nor I,” replied Heshnel.

“We’re all here for a reason,” said Amaryllis. “Juniper is a continuation of the same phenomenon that caused Uther to be far, far more important than any one person had a right to be. He’s spoken to what we believe to be the creator and ultimate master of Aerb and the other planes. What we need is information, contacts, and resources.”

“I brought resources,” said Pallida. “Entads and money, including the Egress. They’re yours.”

“Uther buried treasures,” said Raven. “Some of them were dug up when it became clear he wasn’t coming back, but others were too dangerous for me to get alone. I can tell you their locations.” She took a breath. “I’m also prepared to bring Juniper into the Infinite Library in the hopes that he can
“leverage his talent.”

“Just me?” I asked.

“Just you,” replied Raven. “It would allow us to learn what happens in your absence with the remaining pieces left in place.”

“I’m not sure that I like being referred to as a piece,” said Solace with a slight frown.

“Apologies,” said Raven with a nod, “It’s how we tend to think of things in our calculations. I’ll amend my speech.”

“You’re going to try to brainwash him,” said Pallida.

“I imagine we’ll have some time to speak,” replied Raven. “That’s hardly brainwashing. And I would also like to point out that I’ve maintained the Library as strictly neutral during my tenure as head librarian.”

“My girlfriend was murdered yesterday,” I said, voice cold. “I also narrowly avoided being nuked. I’m not going anywhere without all the firepower I have at my disposal.”

“You would get a far less clear picture of the future,” said Raven, frowning at me. “Uther always went alone.”

“I’m not Uther,” I said. “I don’t have Knights, I have companions. I listen to their advice and don’t keep secrets from them. Uther never told you that he was dream-skewered either. His way of doing things isn’t going to be mine.”

Raven swallowed. “His way of doing things saved the world a few dozen times over. That’s not an exaggeration.”

“I’ll have to talk to him about that,” I replied.

“Excuse me?” asked Pallida, eyes wide. “Is he -- Raven, is he alive?”

“That’s unclear,” replied Raven.

“I have reason to believe that I can find and recover him,” I said. “At the very least, I should be able to ask him some questions and get some answers.” The text of the quest was a bit vague, but I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t get to the end and have it say, ‘oh, actually he died five hundred years ago and his soul is completely beyond recovery, sorry’. Then again, the game had erased all traces of Fenn, with her companion quest disappearing completely from the logs.

“You didn’t reveal that to us,” said Heshnel, his voice soft. I tried not to look at him too closely. I wasn’t sure that it was in my ability to fix his face, but until someone did, it was off-putting, especially because of the casual way he seemed to wear the deformity.

“If Uther had come back in the time of need, you would have tried to take him to Blue Fields and nuke him, right?” I asked. “As, perhaps, one part of a bigger plan?”

Heshnel glanced at Raven, then nodded.

“How can you possibly think that was what Vervain would have wanted?” asked Raven, her tone sharp.

“It’s clear now that Vervain was blinded to Uther in some ways,” said Heshnel. “You all were.”
“You are,” said Pallida.

“I’m the only one left,” said Raven, looking slightly haunted.

“Unless the man himself still lives, or is recoverable,” said Heshnel.

“We think that he is,” said Amaryllis. “Unfortunately, there might be some minor problems. Raven, would you care to offer some illumination?”

Raven frowned slightly. “I’ve gone a very long time without sharing what I’ve found with anyone,” she said. “It’s information that I plan to guard jealously, especially given that it might mean my life.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We’ll get the specifics later.” I really didn’t want to press Raven on the point, because it was the one scrap of leverage she still had left while in this house. “The short version is that Uther Penndraig is likely somewhere in the Fel Seed exclusion zone. If he’s not, then that’s where we’ll get information on the next step.”

Pallida was staring at me with her mouth slightly open, and Heshnel had a grimace on his face.

“For what it’s worth, I consider any plan to enter into Fel Seed’s domain utter insanity,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll do it, if I believe there’s no other choice, but going there to rescue my ancestor, who might well be insane, broken, or powerless for all we know, reeks of poor decision-making.”

“I’m leaning toward waiting,” I said. We’d talked about it some in the chamber together. I’d given her the low-down on Fel Seed as I had designed him, plus the changes that I’d made during the course of the session, and she’d asked her clarifying questions, but the long and short of it was that she ended up believing me when I told her that Fel Seed had no weaknesses known to me. “We need more information on the threats Aerb is facing though. We’re stumbling around blind right now, and apparently the Library has had us as the culprits for the end of the world three times now.”

“Rule of three,” said Raven with a nod. “I should have seen it.”

“How did they end the world?” asked Heshnel.

“Widespread proliferation of a proscribed technology was the first one,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll do it, if I believe there’s no other choice, but going there to rescue my ancestor, who might well be insane, broken, or powerless for all we know, reeks of poor decision-making.”

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“How did we learn about it then, if no one knows?” I asked. I wished that she’d shared this last night, but it had already been late when she’d arrived, and we’d spent a lot of time talking then too, all about things that had seemed important.

“That’s unclear,” Raven sighed. “All five of us were inside the Library, which means that either it was independently discovered on the outside, or someone had let it leak.”

“More secrets from the Library,” said Heshnel, with a slight note of disdain.

Raven made no response to that.

I turned to Heshnel. “Our briefing yesterday was interrupted. There are still things that we need to know, if knowing about them doesn’t drive us into insanity, blow up the world, or otherwise cause some catastrophic failure.” I looked back at Raven. “Either of you can give us that briefing now.”

Raven eyed Heshnel. “I suppose we’ll start with exclusion breaks,” she said. “We see them written
about in the Library sometimes, though it’s never happened in the real world. We don’t typically take action on them, with the exception of co-opting the imperial monitoring stations. They’re always far into the future, one of the default end states of civilization or life, and there’s virtually nothing that we could actually do about threat containment. I mention it primarily because if you find some way of breaking the exclusionary principle, it’s entirely possible that you would accidentally end the world.”


Raven stared at me, eyes wide beneath her black bangs. “How?” she asked.

“I was misinformed,” I said. “See, I thought that the exclusionary principle was more of a guideline than a rule, and no one corrected me until it was too late.”

No one laughed. *Fenn would have loved that.*

“No more seriously,” I continued, “I don’t know. My power, and presumably Uther’s as well, ties into the exclusionary principle, and is capable of selectively ignoring it in special circumstances. I suppose technically one of those two instances was because of a gift the Aerbian over-entity gave to me.”

“You could break containment on the exclusion zones,” said Raven, staring at me.

“I don’t actually know how,” I said. “But it’s probably possible.”

“You could break containment on the exclusion zones and you want to go face to face with Fel Seed!” she said, raising her voice and standing up slightly from her chair.

“Is it possible that Fel Seed could take the ability?” asked Amaryllis. “Did anyone ever take Uther’s Knack or otherwise gain the use of his ability?”

Raven settled back in her seat. “No,” she said. “But that’s not the point. The point is that Fel Seed escaping the exclusion zone would almost certainly result in the end of civilized life on Aerb. All that would remain are his brides and his flesh-beasts. It’s not a thing to risk if you don’t have a plan, and I know that you don’t have a plan, because you heard about Uther being there yesterday, you have no idea where in the zone he is, and all of my plans were too risky when I was planning to risk my own life and the lives of others, not the entirety of Aerb.” My experience of Raven had been that she was fairly reserved, forthright but deferential, even when she’d gotten her fingers cut off, but this, finally, seemed to have lit a fire in her.

“There are some details that need to be worked out,” said Amaryllis with a small nod. “Before we make plans, we need to know the threats. You may continue.”

Raven pursed her lips, as though there were a hundred things she needed to say about the whole Fel Seed thing. Instead, she swallowed her words.

“There are five primary problems facing Aerb as a whole which are unknown to the Empire at large,” said Raven. “We can start with the problem in the hells, since it’s the most pressing one at the moment and the one we’re least capable of solving. Infernal unification has happened in seven timelines, with complete infernal depopulation in the hells in another two, and the cause for unification is assumed to be whatever effect would otherwise result in depopulation. Unification leads to an assault on Aerb that mortal civilization can’t withstand. Because we have no worldly idea what’s actually happening there --”

“It’s her,” said Pallida, pointing out Valencia. “She can kill infernals with her mind.”

“Uther gave his companions some measure of power, didn’t he?” asked Valencia. “Killing infernals at range is one aspect of mine.”

Raven didn’t seem to know how to respond to that. “We were exemplars in our fields,” she finally said. “At the start it just seemed like he was collecting people who were far above average, but later on …” she trailed off, as though not knowing how to phrase it. “We were powerful, yes, we had some fraction of his Knack, somehow, though he couldn’t or didn’t say how. Nothing like what you’re suggesting. A trillion infernals dead by your hand?”

“Not yet,” said Valencia. “I’ve been improving though.”

“We need a moratorium on infernal killing,” said Amaryllis, speaking with the iron will of command, a power that she used rarely and was probably ineffective against Valencia if she was using an infernal for this meeting. “A true moratorium, no more using them for anything until we have a handle on this.”

“I won’t be able to listen to what they’re saying if I can’t kill them,” said Valencia. “It’s useful for tracking rumors and public information about myself.”

“You can see down there?” asked Raven. “You’re an intelligence asset too?”

“She’s likened the effect to soul scaphism,” said Heshnel.

“Apparently we win a quarter of the time,” I said. “That’s better odds than I would have given us. Not that we were planning on trying anyway, given the obvious unknowns if the infernals began fighting for their lives.”

“They won’t, after the display yesterday?” asked Heshnel.

“Valencia killed a few hundred in a stadium in one of the upper-middle hells,” I said. “It was very public.”

Raven closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay,” she said when she opened her eyes. “Do the infernals know the who, what, or where? I’m assuming not.”

“Consider it irrelevant for now,” said Amaryllis. “Mutual debriefing is important, and we will get to it, but we don’t want to get endlessly sidetracked delivering information to each other in the least efficient possible way.”

Raven frowned. “Fine.” She took a moment to compose herself. I wondered whether she was thinking about the sheer power the house was ready to direct her way if she put her foot down. She didn’t so much as glance at where Bethel was seated (actually seated this time, not just an empty chair for spooking purposes). “Moving on,” she said, then took a breath. “It’s widely known that Aerb is flat, but what few realize is that it has two sides, the one we live on, and the one roughly eight thousand miles below us, where the force of gravity is inverted. There exists a singular shortcut between the two sides within an exclusion zone called the Gates of Leron, and the Other Side has been locked out of Aerb for five centuries with defenses that Uther put in place. The last I heard, they sent a raiding party to probe at the Gates, but that’s information from outside the Library, not from any books we’ve read. Of course, if you’re breaking exclusion zones, then perhaps we have to be worried after all.”

“The Other Side is not of immediate concern,” said Heshnel. “If they keep exerting force, or find their way past Uther’s defenses, we might need to worry.”
I looked over and saw Amaryllis with a deep-set frown on her face. “May I ask why, exactly, this isn’t an issue that’s being handled by the broader international community?”

“The Other Side has different magic than we do,” said Raven. “They can use theirs here, and we can use ours there. They have their own mortal species, some with bloodline magics, and their own billion-some entads. Our worry is that they have, or might eventually develop, a way to get here that isn’t the Gates of Leron, and that such an event is much more likely to happen if more people know about them.”

“Based on the Library?” asked Amaryllis.

“Partially,” said Raven. “Uther had made a few trips there, over the years, and spent some time thinking about the vectors given what he’d seen of their resources and capabilities. Most entads don’t work across that kind of distance, but a rare few do, and meme-class entads were one of them. Uther had a brooch that would allow him to teleport to the last person to say his name. It was how he ended up on the Other Side in the first place, and once he got back home, he never used it again for fear he would wind up there.” She hesitated, chewing her words. “We have several pathways to the Other Side, tools that Uther kept stockpiled in case we needed to return there without compromising the integrity of the Gates. I don’t believe that it will be necessary, and I don’t know enough of your capabilities to say whether it would be wise, but the fact that they sent a raiding party is worrisome.”

“The fact that so many worrisome things are happening at once was our sign to regroup,” said Heshnel.

“Is the Boundless Pit a vector they could approach through?” I asked.

“No,” said Raven. “It’s boundless. Vervain always said that cosmic topology gave him a headache, and he was our expert on the subject.”

“Until Uther killed him,” said Heshnel. “Killed him, without so much as saying why.”

“For another time,” said Amaryllis. “I doubt that we can solve this by talking about it, if it hasn’t already been solved.” She nodded to Raven. “You may continue. The Outer Reaches next, if you please.”

Raven looked over to Heshnel, who shook his head with the smallest possible motion he could manage.

“I’m sorry,” said Raven. “It’s memetic in nature.”

“And you can’t even describe the nature of the threat?” I asked. “You can’t even describe the effect that makes talking about the threat itself dangerous? Because you all seem to know, and you all seem to be alive.”

“We’re protected,” said Raven. “Uther was the one who protected us. It’s not impossible that you might be able to match that feat, but Uther could only do it after having surpassed yet another master, and all the masters who would teach you are now dead.”

“Vervain among them,” said Heshnel.

“Yes,” said Raven, lips thin.

“So there’s a lost magic that I’ll need to find first,” I said. “Alright, I’ll put that on my to-do list.” I silently waited for the game to give me some smarmy quest text about it, but it was keeping up the silence that had become somewhat typical since Fenn had died. I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved
that I hadn’t gotten a quest.

“Is that it?” asked Amaryllis. “Five threats? The hells, the Outer Reaches, the Other Side, and all the things that we’re apparently prohibited from doing, plus the Void Beast as a problem that the international community will deal with?”

*Quest Accepted: Tragedy of the Commons - Following the discovery of the Void Beast, void weapons and tools were made illegal under international law, usable only with expensive permits or in situations that called for it. For a time, this was sufficient. Now the Void Beast stirs once again, and imperial regulatory schemes won’t be enough.*

“Er,” I said. “About that. Scenario two.”

“What does that mean?” asked Raven, alarm in her voice.

“Which part?” Amaryllis asked me.

“Void Beast,” I said. “To quote, ‘imperial regulatory schemes won’t be enough’.”

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis.

“What’s happening?” asked Raven.

“A message from the entity you’re linked to?” asked Heshnel with a raised eyebrow.

I glanced at Amaryllis. “Yes,” I said. “Amaryllis, is it time for our end of things?”

Amaryllis twisted her mouth in a small pout. It was information that she didn’t want to part with. “Juniper’s ability exists on a higher level than magic. We’re not entirely certain that Uther’s ability was the same, but there are, at the very least, a number of points of commonality.” She reached out with her gloved hand (it was still hard not to think of Sable as Fenn’s glove) and produced four folders. Bethel’s unseen force pushed each of these folders across the table. “I’m not entirely comfortable sharing this with you, but Juniper has argued in favor of transparency. This is what he sees when he closes his eyes for three seconds.”

Our four guests began looking through the papers. There had been some redactions (most notably the character biographies) and there was some information omitted but not redacted, but it was as much as we’d told anyone.

“Uther had this power?” asked Pallida, looking quickly through the sheets. Raven was taking her time, one page after another, reading quickly but from the way her eyes were scanning, completely.

“We don’t know,” said Amaryllis. “It’s possible. If he did, he obviously never told anyone.” She looked to Raven. “Did he?”

“I don’t know,” said Raven, not looking up from the papers she was reading, and apparently able to split focus without a problem. “He never explained the Knack, only that he’d had it since shortly after his family had been slaughtered by the Dark King. I don’t know whether he told Vervain or any of the others, only that he never told *me*. Something like this --” she paused, stopping on something in the paper momentarily before her eyes started moving back and forth again. “This page titled ‘Skills’ appears to contain a list of magics, some known to me and others unknown, including exclusions, but not all of them ... what’s Essentialism?”

“It was a name once used for soul magic, early in its history,” said Heshnel.
“You’re a soul mage?” asked Raven, looking up from the papers.

“Each of those skills is associated with a number,” I said. “The numbers have been redacted. Some of those skills aren’t available to me without a cost. The ones that are excluded could theoretically be used if I were in an exclusion zone, but we haven’t tried, and we don’t know what the result would be.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” said Raven.

“Yes, I’m a soul mage,” I said. “It’s one of a handful of magics I’ve attained some level of mastery over.” I assumed that Pallida and the others already knew, given what I had done to save the other members of my party. (Most of them, anyway.)

“He’s not of the old breed,” said Solace, looking over at the dark elf as she said that. *I wonder how reformed Heshnel Elec really is. I also wonder how complete the removal of his soul magic was.*

“We can save some of the inevitable questions for later,” said Amaryllis. “Most of the redactions I’ve made have been in the direction of not leaking any strengths or weaknesses.” She took a breath. “Part of the reason that I’m showing this to you is that we need help with a rather particular problem, one that it’s entirely possible Uther grappled with and circumvented. When Juniper accomplishes tasks on that list, titled ‘Quests’, or otherwise accomplishes something meaningful to the outside entity, he eventually sees a change in that number, called ‘Level’. This is accompanied by a strong rush of pleasure, which has been increasing in power with every level he attains, is accompanied by violent tendencies and a blackout, and which is extremely addictive. From the outside, there are physical signs, including a slight gravitational effect and a rush of golden light. The last time he attained a level, the compulsion was beyond his power to fix without outside intervention. Unfortunately, he’s getting stronger with every level, and there’s no guarantee that the outside interventions will remain viable, especially if it happens when he’s by himself. In the event that occurs, it’s likely that he’ll go rogue.”

A silence fell over the room.

“That didn’t happen to Uther,” Raven finally said. “If it did, then it was fixed before I joined his group.”

“What’s the nature of the outside intervention?” asked Heshnel. He narrowed one eyebrow; the other was missing from the disfigured side of his face.

“Soul magic,” I said. “I need a soul mage to reduce down the value, because as of last time, I won’t do it on my own.”

“You have a second soul mage?” asked Heshnel. “Beside yourself?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s need to know, given that the practice is frowned upon.”

“How proficient are you or they with soul magic?” asked Heshnel, leaning forward slightly. “How complete has the Knack’s gift been?”

“I’m proficient,” I said. “There are other disciplines that I would probably benefit from bringing to bear on the problem, if I knew what they were, because some of the skills listed there have synergies that aren’t listed until the right conditions are met.” I shrugged. “At this point I don’t think that soul magic is going to be the answer, or at least not by itself, and there’s no soul mage that I actually trust to work on my soul.”

“Aside from the one you already have working on your soul,” said Gemma. There was just the
barest hint of upward inflection, making it almost, but not quite a question.

“I believe I may know of someone who can help,” said Heshnel. “He was a soul mage during the
time of the Second Empire, my mentor in that art, spared when Manifest claimed the Imperial City.
He wasn’t simply a soul mage, but a researcher, and an extremely proficient one at that. It would take
some doing, but he’s likely still alive, living out a life sentence in a sentient prison he was put in by
the counter-imperialists. I had heard he managed to retain his abilities, in part because of the respect
the soul mages held for him.”

I stared at Heshnel, not knowing what to say, because I was ninety percent certain that the man he
was talking about was --

“Fallatehr Whiteshell was my father,” said Valencia. I had almost forgotten she was at the table with
us. There was something faraway in her eyes. My mind went to the cage she’d been pulled out of
when we first met her. With everything that had happened with her, it was sometimes hard to
remember the conditions that she’d been suffering in until just before we met her. I felt a pang of
empathy for her.

“Was?” asked Heshnel, focusing in on that word.

“Father to a teenage non-anima?” asked Gemma.

“A what?” asked Raven.

“Former non-anima,” I said with a wave of my hand.

“No,” said Valencia, turning to me with a scowl. “I still don’t have a soul.”

“I was just trying to clarify,” I said, but really, it wasn’t that, I’d just put my foot in my mouth. We’d
had a whole conversation about her being insistent on terminology, and I had fucked up. I turned to
Raven as I used blood magic to make sure that I wasn’t blushing. “She’s still non-anima, in the sense
that she doesn’t have a soul, but she’s not at risk of infernal possession. The opposite, actually, as
we’ve said. Once she’s killed them she can take them in and use their memories and skills.” Raven
relaxed slightly, but I could tell she was still on edge.

“Fallatehr,” said Heshnel, insistent. “He’s dead? And within the last handful of years?”

I decided to bite the bullet and do my best not to mince words. “We met with him. He killed one of
our party members, he used his magic to make grossly unethical alterations to Grakhul and
Amaryllis, then attempted to do the same to me. This came along with a fair bit of coercion and
blackmail on his part.” I hesitated for a moment. “I don’t know who he was when you knew him, but
the man we met didn’t allow us the possibility of a working relationship, not one that would leave
our minds and souls intact. I had to kill him.”

Heshnel’s lips had gone thin. “Where did you meet him?”

“We went to the prison on Sulid Isle,” I said. “He was there with twenty or so people whose souls he
had altered beyond recognition. He had intentionally created Valencia as a non-anima, and was
keeping her locked in a cage. We still tried to work with him, for a time. He was the one who taught
me soul magic in the first place.”

“A mentor, dead by your hand,” said Heshnel, voice tight.

“I hardly think the comparison is fair,” said Amaryllis. “We had known Fallatehr for less than a day
when he turned on us, and --”
“There’s no evidence whatsoever that Vervain ever turned on Uther,” said Heshnel. He’d raised his voice to talk over her. The ruined side of his face was pulsing, and had begun weeping a white fluid.

“I never said that he did,” replied Amaryllis. “You’re letting your emotions get the better of you. I understand that there’s quite a bit of history here, much of which we’re ignorant of, but --”

“No one should ever have told you it was Uther who killed Vervain,” Raven said, raising her voice. “Whatever reason Uther had, we only have the choice to accept what he did or not. You didn’t know him like I knew him, he wouldn’t have done anything to any of us unless it was necessary. He --”

“Did he ever tell you what it meant?” asked Heshnel. “He killed Vervain, admitted it to everyone, said that it had to be done, and after, that giant monument to the man at the Vervainium … a paragraph of accomplishments, but above it, writ large, four cryptic letters. I asked him, and he just gave me a sad smile.”

“He said that it was the final word on Vervain,” replied Raven. “A message that might make the gods laugh at a private joke. I asked for more. We all did. He had a way of shutting people down and barrelling on to the next adventure.” She leaned forward slightly. “Heshnel, there was a time when Uther was your ally, when you would have died for him, and even after Vervain was gone, you believed in Uther. And I know that it was hard when he left, that we all had to fight tooth and nail, I know that he didn’t leave any clues behind, but to forsake him so completely,” she threw up her hands. “We owe him more than that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, once there was a frosty silence between the two of them. “Can someone fill me in on what Vervain’s grave actually said?”

“I’m curious too,” said Amaryllis, frowning slightly. It seemed like the kind of detail that she would have known, and maybe she was upset with herself for not having it in her memory banks. ‘What’s written on Vervain’s monument in the Vervainium?’ did seem a little obscure though, so maybe she was just annoyed that she was expected to know.

“The bottom part is an ode to what he did,” said Heshnel. “I thought it was magnanimous of Uther, when I first saw it. Vervain was his mentor, first and foremost, and that would be what history would remember him as. Yet the list of accomplishments omitted any mention of Uther or the others, focusing solely on what Vervain himself had done. When I found out what had happened to Vervain, it took on a darker tone, because perhaps Uther was trying to drive some distance between them after the fact, not admitting that Vervain had made Uther into what he became. And yet the epigraph is overshadowed by four letters, set on the plinth as large as all of Vervain’s accomplishments. D-M-P-C.”
“I don’t really understand the distinction,” said Tiff. “The DM controls all of the characters.”

“DMPC is Dungeon Master Player Character,” said Arthur, putting emphasis on the last two words. “It’s true that the DM controls all the characters, but the DMPC occupies a role as a player character in a way that NPCs typically don’t. A DMPC is a full-fledged member of the party, rather than being a patron, someone we need to escort, an enemy, mentor, side character, et cetera. It’s a little bit hard to define.”

“What?” asked Craig. “It’s when the DM is a player in their own game, boom, sorted.”

“The DM plays all the characters,” said Reimer. “I think more formally you would say that it’s when an NPC gets a share of the experience and loot.”

“No,” said Arthur. “The end-run around that would be leveling them up without experience and having them gain treasure through some alternate stream, which would circumvent the definition but still be,” he glanced at Tiff for a fraction of a second, “problematic.”

“Problematic because the DMPC knows everything there is to know?” asked Tiff.

“Well, no,” I said. “If you think of it like that, then all NPCs know everything there is to know, and you would be able to coerce a confession from any NPC about things that happened to the others. Which, spoilers, you can’t. No, it’s more about bias, or the implication of bias.”

“It’s like trying to tickle yourself,” said Reimer.

“That too,” I said. “But sometimes it’s necessary, when the party decides that they’re going to go completely without healing, or some other vital role isn’t going to be filled. Doctrine is for the DMPC to not have a decision-making role in the group or otherwise have actual agency of their own.”

“Doctrine,” said Craig, rolling his eyes.

“It’s important,” I said, feeling defensive. “It’s too easy to pollute the game otherwise.”

I tried to think through the implications of what Heshnel had said. *Vervain was a DMPC. No, Uther thought that Vervain was a DMPC, and that’s almost certainly why he killed him.* It fit with what I knew about Vervain eerily well. The very first thing that I’d thought, when I’d learned about Vervain from Solace, was that his powers sounded suspiciously like Powers as the Plot Demands. But for him to be a literal avatar for the Dungeon Master had implications about the Dungeon Master’s role in all of this. And, naturally, it was possible that Uther was wrong, driven to suspect Vervain because of the insane cycles of narrative. I wasn’t even sure what it would mean for Vervain to be a DMPC, but I had a vague idea of Mr. Dice Guy stepping in and puppeting Vervain’s body, bending the rules of the simulation and working to steer the narrative from the inside. He’d implied that he took avatars before, that would simply be another step in that direction.

That aside, there was the question of what to tell Raven and Heshnel about it. I’d been trying my best to tell people the truth, not just because the truth was easier, and not just because it could help them to reveal things that I wanted to know, but because honesty was how I preferred things these days, and had been since coming to Aerb. This, though … I wasn’t so sure.
“It’s a game term,” I said. “If I had loaned you the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* rather than the *Monster Manual*, you might even have run across it, or figured it out yourself. Dungeon Master Player Character. I don’t know enough about Vervain, beyond what’s in the history books, to know why Uther would have put that on Vervain’s grave, but a DMPC is a character that the controlling entity wears like a skin, if I had to guess. It’s impossible to say what Uther was thinking, or what evidence he had, but … that’s what the letters mean.”

“Does that help connect any dots?” Amaryllis asked Raven. “Does it help illuminate anything about how Uther was behaving or why he did what he did?”

“I -- I don’t know,” said Raven. “Sorry, what’s *The Dungeon Master’s Guide*?”

“It’s one of the three core rulebooks for the game that Arthur and I used to play, back on Earth,” I said, leaving aside that Dungeons & Dragons was only one of dozens of systems we’d used. I turned to Bethel. “Can you give them copies?”

Bethel waved a hand and the books appeared in front of our guests. I didn’t miss the fact that Raven had gotten a used copy, which brought a faint smile to my face, mostly because it was so petty at a time when things were increasingly serious.

*Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 5!*

Loyalty increases for her had been few and far between, and I didn’t know what it said that seeing a small smile from me was enough to trigger one. It didn’t make me feel particularly good, not about myself, and not about her.

“We have a lot of reading for you to do,” I said. “The situation we’re in isn’t like one of those games, obviously, but there are some surface similarities. It’s one of the reasons that I want to go after Fel Seed as soon as feasible.”

“It’s never going to be feasible,” said Amaryllis, frowning at me. “The Second Empire sent hundreds to their deaths trying to kill him and reclaim the zone. Motivated individuals have tried their hand. We don’t even know the *scope* of what it would take to kill him, and from the information you shared with me, he’s literally unkillable, and any weakness he appears to have will only be a false weakness he was using to put someone in a compromising position, which is *entirely* in line with historic attempts at killing him.”

She was airing a lot in front of our guests. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to think about that. Obviously I didn’t mean that we were going to go in half-cocked, we would have *some* kind of plan, and I knew Fel Seed better than most people did, so the challenges inherent were obvious to me … but it was still a thing that I wanted to do, that I *had* to do, if it meant being able to get to Arthur, if only to confront him, or get some kind of closure.

“Okay,” I said. “Obviously there are substantive reasons that we shouldn’t go. He’s got hundreds of thousands of flesh-beasts, he’s got toxic spores that would let him kill us with a thought, blah blah blah, *he’s* blink-fast, murderously strong, capable of regenerating from the smallest scrap of himself, completely immune to any attempts at poisoning, mind control, soul alteration -- if he even has a soul -- and just about a dozen other immunities, plus his physical body is just a focal point for command and control, because the car-wide flesh tunnels and nearly-invisible spiderweb veins that thread his territory still count as him for the purposes of his regeneration and for his ability to instantly manipulate the biology of those he touches, and … yeah. “But the thing is, I have a quest, and quests have been completable. So if, in our current state, we’re not capable of beating Fel Seed, then there has to be a way, either manipulation of exclusion zones so that we can bring a nuclear weapon to bear against him, a unique quirk of how my Knack works, or … or maybe I’m a part of
some plan that someone else has already made, the key that fits into a lock that was decades in the making?"

My eyes had drifted to Raven as I was talking. I saw her pale as I said the idea that had just come to me.

“Wait,” I said. “Does someone actually have a plan like that?”

Raven cleared her throat. “I’ve said before that exclusions sometimes appear to break, though it’s never been seen in the real world. One of our internal departments is devoted to extinguishing or controlling the exclusions, where possible. There are partial plans in place, some that we don’t have the manpower to pull off, others that lack specific entads or pieces of magic. Some … some were waiting for Uther’s return. I’m not up-to-date on all of their plans, but -- it’s possible they have something relevant.”

Amaryllis swore.

We talked for a long time after that. Some of it was just infodumping one way or the other.

I had to bring them up to speed on what tabletop gaming was like. I sort of felt like I owed it to them, since their lives had been jerked around by the Dungeon Master and maybe, to a lesser extent, Uther. The more I’d thought about it, the more sympathetic I was to Masters, given that we seemed to (and probably did) have some answers to the enduring mysteries of the world. I had little doubt that we were going to talk to him again at some point, especially if Raven was going to be an ally. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to it, but I was a believer in making amends and rebuilding crumbled relationships, maybe because that had been my plan back on Earth, in the weeks leading up to my transfer to Aerb.

We got a bit of after action with regards to what had happened with the attack, which Raven had a keen interest in. Apparently the poison had been airborne, and Everett had made some efforts to protect the others from it, which might actually have been the thing to save our lives. Gemma had been given a bracelet the night before the attack, and he’d used (barely) non-lethal spells on Heshnel and Gemma.

“If he’d hit me with that aging spell, I would almost certainly have died,” I said.

“He tried,” said Valencia. “I got in the way. I don’t think the spell knew what to make of me.” I think she must have seen the skepticism in my eyes. “You had just gotten hit in the head.”

“I can confirm,” said Amaryllis, watching me closely.

“So you’re saying that they would have won if they’d been bloodlusted?” asked Raven.

“Probably,” I said.

“I think that’s probably why I lived,” said Amaryllis. “I was trapped in Gur Dehla’s fluid and being choked. Perhaps it meant to have the poison finish me.”

“Mercy wouldn’t have been out of the question,” said Pallida. “O’kald was always the hardest among us. For Gur Dehla, I believe the attack was a matter of perceived necessity. And Everett …”

“Fatalism,” said Raven. “He was still old, when you met him?”

“Yes,” I said. “Old and withered.” My eyes went to Gemma, very briefly and despite some effort on
my part not to look at her.

“He wanted to die,” said Raven. “He’d wanted to die for centuries, but he kept hopping and skipping forward through time, hoping that he would find some answers, or at least some purpose. Maybe he was just looking for an excuse to finally end it.” She paused, swallowing, and wiped at a tear that was forming. “I suppose he found it.”

I tried my best not to bring up the fact that their friends had, you know, tried to murder me, but it was awkward and a bit painful. If I hadn’t had a week and a half in the chamber, I probably would have had an outburst, but as it was, I mostly just shifted around and felt uncomfortable. I understood, to some extent, why they had believed that killing me was the right thing to do, and to be honest, I really wasn’t sure what would happen to Aerb if I was gone. There was a long list of questions that needed answering, like what had actually happened to Uther, why five hundred years had passed between his disappearance and my arrival, and what kind of plans, if any, the Dungeon Master actually had.

We broke for lunch, since no one wanted to power straight through with the meeting in perpetuity. Lunch consisted of adjourning to the next room, which Bethel had transformed into an eating space, complete with a buffet of food, most of it from Earth.

“You can’t keep pulling from Earth,” Amaryllis said to Bethel, doing her best to pull the illusory woman aside. “There are more threats in that single entad than maybe any other entad in the entire history of Aerb. Even seemingly innocuous things can’t be presumed safe. It’s a time bomb waiting to go off in our faces.”

“I’m willing to take my chances with food, for now,” said Bethel.

“I wouldn’t,” said Raven, coming over to us with a plate. The room was on the larger side, with different places for people to sit and congregate, but even if Bethel weren’t in play, you’d naturally assume that no conversation were private. Solace and Grak were having their own conversation at a small table, while Heshnel and Gemma had lowered themselves down into another of the small tables. Pallida was standing next to them, plate in hand, but she kept glancing toward Amaryllis. “Biocontainment was a considerable problem during the First Empire, and to a lesser extent, the Second Empire as well. If the entad you’ve obtained is laced with traps, then seeds, bacteria, and insects would all be problems you would want to look out for. The Isle of Poran is contained, but --”

“No one asked you,” said Bethel, staring Raven down.

Raven nodded. “Of course.” She took a piece of fried chicken from her plate and bit into it without saying another word. The foods on offer were all Midwestern comfort foods, with a dash of Southern cuisine thrown in there. I’d spotted barbeque, fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread, and coleslaw. I had no idea why Bethel had chosen those, but my guess was that she was attempting to put our guests off-balance.

“No more foods from Earth, please,” said Amaryllis. “It’s too much of a risk. We have a kitchen and a stockpile of food, we should be using that.”

“Juniper?” asked Bethel, turning to me.

“I reluctantly agree,” I said. “You make great food, but I don’t want to die because there’s a rogue culinary element that becomes deadly when transitioned to Aerb. I think you’d be a good cook, if you took some time to learn how.”

“Very well,” said Bethel. She looked at Amaryllis and clucked her tongue. “Uther’s spawn and his
lackey, brought together. I can’t say that I approve.” She wandered off to collect a plate of her own, though I was watching carefully, and saw that she was just making an illusory plate with illusory food on it. She was still limited enough in her telekinesis that she couldn’t easily carry a plate full of food around.

I turned to say something to Amaryllis, but Pallida had found her opportunity, and it was fairly clear that I wasn’t meant to be a part of that conversation, which was, from what I could hear, mostly about Dahlia.

That left me with Raven.

“Care to sit?” asked Raven, gesturing to a table.

“Sure,” I said. “Let me get some food.” I went off to where the food was and grabbed a plate of my own, piling it up with a little bit of everything. As I was making my way to the small, two person table that Raven was sitting at, I was hit by a wave of unpleasant memory. It was too close to high school and carrying a tray of food to a table with friends. It was possible that Raven had triggered the memory; she looked almost exactly like Maddie had.

“I do like the concept here,” said Raven, once I’d returned. “The informality is nice, and people have some time to mingle with each other. Whose idea was it?”

“Mine,” I said. “We were talking it over early this morning, and I really didn’t want to be eating while we talked formally, especially since I would be the one doing a lot of the talking. There was a bit there where I wasn’t sure that we would make it to lunch. It was getting tense.”

“Not the most tense meeting I’ve ever had,” said Raven.

“Oh,” I said. “You’ll have to tell me what he was like. Especially his early years, when he would have been more like he was as a teenager.”

“Ah,” I said. I ate my chicken, feeling awkward and not knowing what to say. “You’ll have to tell me what he was like. Especially his early years, when he would have been more like he was as a teenager.”

“Not the most tense meeting I’ve ever had,” said Raven.

“Oh,” I said. “You’ll have to tell me what he was like. Especially his early years, when he would have been more like he was as a teenager.”

“I didn’t come on until a long time after,” said Raven. “But I agree, we both have memories of him, and even if it’s not very important, we should probably share them.” She looked up from her food. “You’ve read my biography?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I didn’t even know there was more than one,” I said. “It was The Archivist’s Hand. There’s not a lot of information on you. I sort of think that the publisher just wanted to be able to have a full set of the Knights.”

“I never did much,” said Raven. “I was the runt of the litter. Uther called me his ‘exposition fairy’, but that didn’t particularly boost my spirits. He also called me the moral center of the group, but I was twelve years old, and I knew it, so it always sounded false. I decided, centuries later, that what he really meant was that it was hard for him to do bad things when he had to look me in the eyes and tell me about them.” She saw the look of confusion on my face. “Half of my job as archivist was tracking down information for him from every book I could get my hands on. The other half was to keep track of what we did, when he didn’t have the time or stamina for it.”

“That’s also something not mentioned in the biography,” I said with a frown. “I ate a bit more as I thought about that. “But he didn’t tell you everything.”
“No,” said Raven. “Not nearly. Some of it simply couldn’t be written down, for all the usual reasons, but he was also a man with secrets. He was very candid with me, but not as much as he could have been.”

“So why would he have you track it all?” I asked. “Why devote the time and effort to it if he was just going to leave out important stuff?”

“He would consult my notes,” said Raven. “They would help if he needed to be briefed on some foreign king’s court he’d visited ten years prior. Sometimes those notes would help the pieces come together and make a connection that spanned the years. We ran into old enemies with alarming frequency.” She shrugged. “I was happy to do it. I idolized him, all the way to the end. Less, now. When I was younger I had this romantic notion that when he died, I would write the true story of Uther Penndraig, as I had known him, the biography to end all biographies.” She picked at her food. “That never ended up happening, obviously.”

There was a palpable sense of loss.

“Did he ever tell you about the early years?” I asked. “Not Earth stuff, obviously, but … when he joined up with a theater troupe? I’ve always wondered about that. It was one of the things I planned to ask him.”

“He told me,” said Raven, nodding as she swallowed her food. “He always called it the Refusal of the Call. You might have read the term in one of his books, though he was never clear that he was speaking of himself.” I nodded at that and made the snap decision to leave Joseph Campbell out of it. “After his family was killed, he took what he could from their farmstead, then made his way down the road without really knowing what he was doing. The theater troupe was happenstance. They had been putting on a play in the nearest village, and he had pleaded with them for a job. Most of the biographies of him emphasize that he was raised as a farmer, but he actually started even lower than that.” Raven shrugged.

“Eventually he started to prove his worth. The Knack made itself apparent a number of times, but to hear him tell it, he was still too much of a coward to do anything with it. He was training for a minor part and his sword-fighting skill improved by leaps and bounds within the course of a day. He’d always had an active imagination, but he found himself able to put those things he’d imagined into words more easily. Everything came naturally to him.” She paused, looking at me. “You’ve been much more active than he was in the beginning.”

“Not all of that was by choice, as I’ve said,” I replied. I had told most of our story, leaving out almost nothing, not even the Fallatehr stuff.

“Still, it’s a difference,” said Raven. “The differences are what I’m paying the most attention to right now.”

I was watching her closely. The similarities are most of what I see, I wanted to say. I was probably going to tell her about Maddie, in the non-creepiest way that I could, but that was something that I would save for another time. They really were, in spite of all reason, very similar in their mannerisms.

“There was a girl,” said Raven, continuing on as she watched me eat. “She was part of the theater troupe, an actress, his age or perhaps a little younger. He told me that he was a coward about her too, not able to express his feelings toward her, always wanting to, and never quite getting there.”

I frowned at that. I couldn’t tell whether this was a warped story of him and Tiff, told as though he’d been on Aerb when it happened, or whether it was simply history repeating itself. Either seemed
plausible to me. Arthur had ambitions in high school, he was in every vaguely intellectual club or group that would have him, but all of that was within the structure of what the high school offered. It made me indescribably sad to think that he would come to another world, one brimming with possibility and ripe to be leveraged even without gifts piled on top of his knowledge from Earth, and end up just trying to live a normal life.

“And then he wrote a play that upset the Dark Lord,” I said. “And it all came crashing down.”

“Yes,” said Raven. “There was something he said that stuck with me though. He said that he had a chance to save the girl, and he chose to leave instead. It was certain death for her weighed against his own survival. He always regretted it. I used to think that one act was at the core of him, the reason that he kept pressing on so hard, inserting himself into so many places where he wasn’t entirely wanted. Now, I’m less sure.”

“What happened after?” I asked.

“He stumbled into Vervain,” said Raven, furrowing her brow. “He was taken under the old man’s wing. In the context of what you said earlier, I don’t know how well it fits. Vervain had been tracking the Dark Lord’s forces, so it wasn’t entirely coincidence that they ran into each other, but I’ve always thought that it smacked of the unnatural, the right two people meeting at just the right time. Sometimes history is like that though.”

“What do you think that he was right?” I asked. “Do you think that Vervain was controlled by something greater?”

Raven shook her head. “You’re talking about an entity whose powers are greater than any of the things I’ve spent the last hundred years saving the world from, greater than anything Uther ever fought off. If Vervain was what you say -- what Uther says -- then I don’t know how we could tell. I don’t know how Uther would ever have made the leap. How could he have gathered enough evidence to kill the man who taught him so much?”

I left that question hang in the air, because I had more food to shovel down, and I didn’t have a good answer. If one of my party members were a DMPC --

Is one of my party members a DMPC? Could they be? Yes, obviously they could be, but were they?

“Everything okay?” asked Raven. “You stopped.”

Before I could answer, Amaryllis came over. “I think we’re wrapping up here,” she said. Her face was slightly flushed, and Pallida, behind her, had a faint smile. Amaryllis could control the flow of her blood, just like I could, and I had to wonder how much intention was behind the color of Amaryllis’ cheeks. “The plan, such as it is, is that we’ll be going back to the other room for phase two of the meeting, where we talk about next steps.”

“Sure,” I said. “Fine by me.”

Solace was the most likely candidate, of course. She was a flower mage, just like Vervain had been, and her powerset could be (somewhat inaccurately) summed up as ‘whatever the DM says’. As points against, she was one of our later acquisitions, fourth to join the party, and not only was she not a close confidant, she’d been dead for quite a bit of our adventuring. She was, maybe, a mentor, in the sense that I had been taught the basics of flower magic by her, and she was certainly the oldest of us, but that was nothing concrete.

I didn’t actually think that Solace was a DMPC, but it was on my mind as I sat and listened to
Amaryllis speak. She was making her pitch.

“... the obvious security concerns we have with regards to anyone coming to join us. You would have housing, inside Bethel, so long as she’s willing to have you as a guest. If Aerb needs to be defended, we’ll act, as one, sharing information and resources to ensure the continued survival of civilization, and failing that, life.”

“I’ve already pledged this life to Juniper,” said Pallida. She seemed like she was in a better mood than she had been when lunch had begun. “That gives me first dibs on a room.”

The others were a bit more hesitant. “My loyalty is to the Foxguard,” said Gemma. Her voice was hoarse. “I will need to consult with the elder council.”

“We can come with, to make our case,” said Amaryllis.

“That won’t be possible,” said Gemma. “Humans aren’t allowed to step upon our sacred ground these days.”

Amaryllis nodded. “We can offer transport, if --”

“The Egress will suffice,” said Gemma. She was being curt, and I didn’t have high hopes that she would be a proper ally when all was said and done.

“Very well,” said Amaryllis. She looked to Heshnel.

“Uther had a saying,” Heshnel replied to the implied question. The good half of his face looked pensive, while the other half was still a horrifying mishmash of alien design. “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

“Actually, that was George Santayana,” I said. “Uther cribbed it from Earth. And on Earth, we also have another saying. ‘History is bunk.’” I could feel everyone staring at me, like a weight settling onto me. Amaryllis was better at this sort of thing than I was, not just in the sense of what skills she had on the game-mechanical level, but also on a higher level, something that didn’t seem touched by the soul. “Uther thought that he was constrained by the narrative. Maybe that was even true, for him. For me, the rules are different. Narrative isn’t a guide. History isn’t a guide. I travel through this world guided only by the facts of reality as I see them. You can help me, or not, but I’m trying my best to protect this world from harm.”

Heshnel’s mouth twitched. “We shall see,” he said. “For the time being, I would be content with a place here, to observe if not always to lend aid.”

I turned to look at Raven. “What do you say?” I asked.

“I don’t think I have a choice but to say yes,” replied Raven.

“If it’s Bethel --” I began.

“No,” said Raven. “I meant -- there are certain things that you’re forced to do because that’s the only option you realistically have. I made my way to the Library because I thought it was where I could do the most good. Now, that place is probably with you.” She swallowed. “I’ll take you to the Library. You, and only you. I don’t have the power to act unilaterally, and if I’m going to be taking a leave from the Library, then it’s best that we stay on good terms with them.”

“Okay,” I said, letting out a breath. “Sooner is probably better than later.”
Gemma took the *Egress*, which apparently belonged to Pallida, but before she did, we took a few crates full of stuff out of it.

“These are good times for renacim. We weathered the storm of the Second Empire far better than most,” she said as I helped her haul the crates up the hill to Bethel. We were doing it as one trip, with the crates stacked up between us. “To give you some history you may not have, the Second Empire was money hungry, especially in the early years, and there was this undercurrent of fighting back against the entrenched interests of the world, so you know, it was a combination of laws and direct executive action that essentially robbed the wealthy and long-lived. Legally speaking, all a renacim’s wealth was forfeit to the empire whenever we died, but we had schemes in place, and all the money seemed to vanish into thin air when the Empire came to collect.” She gave a little laugh. “I helped with some of that. Even stole from the Empire on a few occasions, though the other renacim didn’t like that so much, especially not when I was using our networks to shift the goods around.”

“So you’re rich, is what you’re saying?” I asked.

“Rich is relative,” said Pallida. “But yes, quite rich. That’s the advantage of age, if you stay on your toes.”

“Nothing compared to Amaryllis, of course,” said Bethel, appearing beside us as we walked up.

“Hells, can you give some warning when you’re about to do that?” asked Pallida. She’d almost dropped the load, and I had to wait for her to get her bearings again.

“Amaryllis has as much wealth as the rest of us,” I said. “Maybe she was rich before her fall from grace, but not now.”

“She lends her wealth quite magnanimously,” said Bethel, though there was sarcasm dripping from her voice. She was back in her normal form, a slender woman nearly eight feet tall wrapped in gossamer robes, with skin the color of cedar. It was a relief that she didn’t look like Tiff anymore. “A fair fraction of your entads are keyed to her, invested by her will. She could retract them with a thought, should she desire. Beyond that, and aside from whatever Anglecynn has claimed from her, she has a great many entads she owns by claim-in-fact, useless in the hands of others and profitable to her. All of them Uther’s spoils.”

“Does that piss you off?” I asked.

“That she’s the beneficiary of ill-gotten gains?” asked Bethel. “Such is the way of the world. It’s useless to be upset about.”

But she *sounded* upset.

“I knew a few of her ancestors, in passing,” said Pallida. “Shitheels, the lot of them. Same goes for the current crop.”

“I won’t be so easily wooed as that,” replied Bethel. I glanced back for long enough to see her wearing a smile, shortly before she blinked out of existence again.

We placed the crates down in Pallida’s new room, which was in the same style as most of the rest of the house, tall and ornate. The windows were stained glass, which served to make the cold, bleak light from the Isle of Poran look as multi-colored and warm as the stars that dotted Aerb’s night sky.
Everything was done up in pinks, though the designs weren’t as lacy or girly as that might lead you to believe. I wasn’t so sure about whether it made sense to theme a room’s colors around a person’s skin color, but Pallida seemed to like it, and that, in turn, made Bethel very pleased with herself.

“Okay, so,” said Pallida. “First things first, I have twenty million obols,” she said, opening one of the crates. “That’s about as much money as I would like to commit to this life, but there’s about twice as much in holdings, which I could get with varying degrees of time and hassle.”

“Shit,” I swore.

“Shit?” asked Pallida, stopping what she was doing and looking up at me.

“Ah, nothing,” I said. “It’s just … some internal issues.”

“Seems like the sort of thing a new member in good standing should hear about,” said Pallida, still frozen where she was.

“Grakhuil Leadbraids is our team warder, though there’s some overlap with Bethel’s abilities,” I said. “He’s not really that interested in saving the world with us or being a continued member of the team. We had an agreement with him that once we had the funds, we would see him on his way. It’s an honor thing, a penance he needs to pay. He might be coming back, or he might not, but if we’re absorbing your money into our own, that will probably force the issue.”

“Ah,” said Pallida. She slowly closed the crate. “How do you want me to handle this? Say that I don’t have any money? Or say that he can’t have any?”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to do that to him. I’m increasingly of the opinion that it’s probably better to handle soon anyway.”

“Ah,” said Pallida. “Any other minefields I need to worry about? I’m slowly getting a handle on what everyone’s deal is, I think. Demon hunter, pretty princess, last of the druids, murder house, grumpy dwarf, and of course, the Chosen One.”

I thought for a moment. “Solace has some pretty damned obvious problems with the Second Empire,” I said. “I don’t think you’d be dumb enough to put your foot in your mouth on that one though, not if you’ve been alive for thirty thousand years.”

“It’s really not like that,” said Pallida. “I pretend it is, sometimes, to claim seniority, but it’s more like … like all the lives compound with each other and get lived through at the same time, and I can remember what my parallel selves were doing when they were exactly my same age. Younger or older, it fades off a bit. The way back lives, from the dawn of time, those are weak too. But there’s this compounding effect, because I don’t just remember, I remember remembering, and the really big things that have happened to me have so much weight to them that they’re almost impossible to ignore, since it’s the event itself, and then all the things I’ve thought about it, and my reactions to those previous thoughts.”

“You explain this a lot?” I asked.

“We’re rare,” said Pallida with a smile and a shrug. “I’d say I’ve probably said something similar hundreds of thousands of times before. A hundred times per lifetime? Maybe that’s even on the low side.” She rummaged around in the crate, before pulling up a ring. “Ah,” she said, flicking it toward me. I caught and turned it around, raising an eyebrow. “Try it.”

I slipped the ring onto my finger. “What’s it do?” I asked.
“Makes you incorporeal,” said Pallida. She looked down into the crate. “Looks like I’ve got six or seven entads here for you and your people, the ones that aren’t exclusive to me.”

“Sorry,” I said, trying to feel a mental connection to the ring, if there was one. “Incorporeal how?”

“You can make a part of your body incorporeal, so long as it’s only one part,” said Pallida. “That’s a big limiter on it, because it means you couldn’t do something like, say, reach through a door and unlock it from the inside.”

“Huh,” I said. I could feel it, now that I knew what I was looking for. I could retract my fingers from reality, allowing them to smoothly pass through my arm without resistance. It was a little bit awkward to get it to cover all the fingers, since apparently the keyword was ‘contiguous’, and it wasn’t just that I could only have one splotch of incorporeality, it was also that I couldn’t have it separating two areas of corporeality. In other words, I could make my whole leg incorporeal, but not just my knee, since that would leave my thigh and calf disconnected.

“What happens if I go full incorporeal?” I asked.

“Oh,” said Pallida, looking up. “Don’t do that. You’d fall through the floor, then down into the rocks, and then probably die of starvation or dehydration unless you had a clever trick.”

*I wonder whether there’s an achievement for that.*

“Is there a reason you weren’t wearing this?” I asked.

“Race restrictions,” said Pallida, making a face. “It only works for humans, not renacim, but it is bound to me. Happens sometimes. I have a few like that. I’m hoping that Amaryllis knows where some that go the other way are.” She stopped for a moment in her rummaging. “Can I ask you why you all call her Mary?”

“She’s supposed to be dead,” I said. “Before we became the Council of Arches, it was less of a paper thin disguise than it is now. Also, we didn’t know that she was a lookalike of Dahlia, which obviously makes her actual identity even more obvious.”

“But why Mary?” asked Pallida.

“Oh,” I said. “Fenn thought it would irritate her.”

“Ah,” replied Pallida. She glanced away. “And we were just speaking of landmines.” She pulled out a cloak, and threw it to me. “Now, this one belonged to a man named Elhart Cloakshield.”

“Swish it around and it becomes impenetrable?” I asked.

“Sniff it around and it becomes impenetrable?” I asked.

Pallida stared at me. “Is Bethel looking at my stuff and helping you out?” she asked.

“It’s from a game I ran,” I said.

“Bullshit,” said Pallida. “There are a billion entads, what are the odds that -- or wait, did your Dungeon Master arrange this, is that what you’re saying?”

“He’s not my Dungeon Master, but yes, probably,” I replied.

“How?” asked Pallida.

“Unlimited power,” I said. “Temporal manipulation, metaphysical shenanigans, memory modifications, just take whatever power you’ve heard about someone or something using on Aerb or
“Fuck,” said Pallida, swallowing as her eyes went wide. “You know, it was enough of a mindfuck when I came to accept that the world was catastrophically warping itself to make Uther into a hero. This is … I mean, I had thought that maybe someday we would find the hand of fate and actually be able to do something about it.”

“We might,” I said. “I’d consider it a slim possibility. That was a concept I toyed with from time to time.” It helped explain why the PCs were special. Most of the time, you didn’t need it, but sometimes a justification for the extreme feats that the player characters could do was fun.

“It was?” asked Pallida. “And all the stuff around Aerb is pulled from ideas that you had?”

“Kind of,” I said. “Here would typically be the part where you say that maybe I was implanted with a bunch of memories of having made up Aerb. That’s still possible, I guess, but it doesn’t seem very likely to me.”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all,” said Pallida, shaking her head. “I was thinking about the beginning of the world. I was there for it, you know.”

“Thirty thousand years ago?” I asked. “There’s some debate -- you know that, though.”

(The question of how old Aerb actually was had occupied a lot of scholars for a lot of time. According to the renacim, it was thirty thousand years old, because that was around how old they all were. It was also around where most of recorded history actually began, if you looked at the oldest accounts. There were anomalies though, places where history went a lot further back, some with appreciable amounts of evidence. Some of the species were obviously not the result of evolution, but some were, which the timeline didn’t leave enough room for. Similarly, there were mountains with more than thirty thousand years of erosion and rock strata that seemed like they’d have taken millions of years to form.)

“I know lots of things,” said Pallida. “You live long enough, you either get comfortable rehashing conversations or you go insane. But yes, I was thinking about thirty thousand years ago, when the world was shiny and new, and we didn’t have much else but language and fire. And I was thinking about a being that could draw a line from then to now with such precision that I would end up here, right where I needed to be to give you these things and lend my aid.”

“It churns my guts,” I said. “I try not to think about it, even though it’s important, because there’s not much I can do about it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Pallida. She pulled out a circlet. “Want this one? It lets you see what everyone else on your team sees and compensates for the sensory overload.”

“How much compensation?” asked Bethel, appearing in the room beside us.

“Fuck!” shouted Pallida. “Stop doing that!” Her armor had moved to cover her more completely, seemingly of its own volition. “One of these times I’m going to … I don’t know.”

“Kill me?” asked Bethel with a laugh.

“Yes, there are obvious problems with that plan,” said Pallida. She turned to me and said, in a whisper, “Does she have any weaknesses?”

“Not that I know of,” I said. “We’ve removed the major one, and I can’t think of what’s left. Grak assures me that the warding around this place is impeccable, which cuts off a lot of possibilities, and
the fact that she’s a warder means that you’d be hard-pressed to put up a ward to disable her.” I was quite chipper about all this.

“Have you been thinking of ways to kill me, little Juniper?” asked Bethel, cocked her head to the side and giving me a devilish smile.

“Have a plan to kill everyone you meet,” I said.

Bethel bent over cackling with laughter. “I do!” she said with a manic grin.

*Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 6!!*

“Do you actually have a plan to kill everyone you meet?” asked Pallida with an eyebrow raised.

“No,” I said. “I mean, sometimes we do, but it’s a rare plan that survives contact with the enemy. It was just a quote from an Earth general.” It felt weird to phrase it like that, but I thought ‘United States Army general’ was needlessly specific.

“Amaryllis is the one with plans to kill people,” said Bethel, wiping an illusory tear from her eye and still shaking off the laughter.

“Is she?” asked Pallida, suddenly looking concerned. “She seemed more level-headed than that.”

“I’m not sure that you’re treating her like a reincarnation of Dahlia,” I said. “But if you are, I should probably warn you that they’re different people. I don’t know virtually anything about Dahlia aside from what you’ve told me, but … yeah. To her, it is reasonable to have plans to deal with threats, especially given mind manipulation bullshit or whatever else. You called it Face Protocol, right?”

“Technically Face is for someone who can imitate an ally’s appearance,” said Pallida. “If you’re fighting against their *abilities*, that’s Cat Protocol, and if they’ve been completely compromised by a hostile entity, then it’s Puppet Protocol. I’m not sure if you’ve got anything similar in place, but maybe you should. We didn’t use them often, but Uther thought it was important for his inner circle to at least have basic awareness of them.”

“So I can have the circlet?” asked Bethel. She’d taken it from me and looked it over.

“You’re going to … eat it?” asked Pallida, raising an eyebrow. “I’m never going to get it back?”

“And we won’t be able to use it on missions?” I asked, though it wasn’t really a question.

“My sensorium is vast and troublesome,” said Bethel, eyeing me. “This would be the first request I’ve made since I first met you.”

I thought about that some. “It’s ultimately Pallida’s call,” I said. “I’m going to assume these entads are on indefinite loan, rather than owned by me or the group outright. If you’d like, we can set aside some of the incoming funds to go entad shopping and find something that can make you a more effective house.”

*Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 7!!*

“A *more* effective house?” asked Pallida, gawping at me.

“She has a few limits,” I said. I glanced at Bethel. “I’m not really concerned from an opsec standpoint, but from a personal standpoint, I think she’d prefer to choose what gets revealed about those limits.”
The loyalty increases were gratifying feedback. I hadn’t really been angling for them, but I had been trying to take Bethel’s feelings into account. I had done that in the past, to little effect, and now, for some reason, it was working. My guess was that something had changed in how she saw me, and that made it easier for subsequent loyalty increases to happen. I had no worldly idea what would happen if or when Bethel got to Loyalty 10, given how differently things had gone with Valencia.

The question of loyalty had been on my mind a lot, because of all the new people we’d brought in, none of them had pinged. I was pretty sure there was some kind of grace period involved that staved off loyalty increases until after I’d known the person for some token amount of time, since it was rarely immediate, but it really had seemed like it had been long enough for both Pallida and Raven. Pallida had pledged her life to me, after all. Still, there were no increases.

“Fine, she can take it,” said Pallida with a sigh. “Let’s give the terrifying house even more powers.”

“Thank you,” said Bethel, looking over the circlet. “You taste very nice, by the way.” Pallida froze in place, and Bethel laughed in that way she sometimes did, where the laughter seemed to come from everywhere in the house at once. Bethel flipped the circlet over once, then handed it to me. “Take it for now, I think. Someone needs to keep track of the more devious of our party members while you’re outside me.”

I took the circlet, happy for the change of heart.

“What else do you have?” asked Bethel.

“Hrm,” said Pallida. “A lot of this is just clothing, and what’s not is relatively minor. I have a hairpin that makes me more attractive,” she put it in her hair as she spoke, apparently not putting that one on offer, and indeed, becoming a shade more pretty, though she’d already been pretty to start with, “Some marbles that are paired with each other, good for recon, a dagger that tells you the name of people you stab, an infinitely extensible rope, a pair of dice that will always roll the number you’re thinking, a deck of cards that never runs out -- do you have any use for a dagger that hurts everyone in line of sight when you stab yourself?” she asked, looking hopefully between Bethel and me.

“Seems useful,” I said with a frown. “But only useful in some very specific scenarios.”

“It’s redundant for me,” said Bethel.

As it turned out, Pallida had a lot of stuff, but a lot of it was niche or useless, the kind of thing that you could maybe find some use for, but which wasn’t a game-breaker in its own right. The biggest boon among the stuff that wasn’t locked to her was armor I had already decided was probably going to Grak, an ornate affair with silver scales that apparently allowed limited temporal manipulation, which would allow him not just combat ability, but also the ability to put down wards a lot faster. Pallida also showed off a lot of her things, which she seemed quite proud of. The trick, she explained, was trying to hold onto all of it between lives, since she inevitably spent at least a few years out of commission.

“You like the hairpin then?” asked Pallida, as we were wrapping up. Bethel had disappeared, as her ‘presence’ was requested elsewhere, leaving the two of us alone.

“What?” I asked. I had been looking through a book that logged the internal thoughts of the person holding it. The words were unfortunately only visible to the person holding it, making it semi-useless for interrogation, and also unfortunately, I was sitting there reading through my own thoughts, which I didn’t really like that much. On the plus side, it was an open book, so I had a grey cat sitting in my
lap that Bethel had spawned in.

“You’ve been looking at me more, since I put it in,” Pallida explained with a smile. “Always fun to see how people react.”

“Ah,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Pallida shrugged.

“I was actually thinking about Amaryllis,” I said. I flipped through a few pages of the book, until I found the passage of disjointed internal narration. Right there, right after I’d noted that she was, in fact, prettier, I’d had a stray thought about whether Amaryllis would think the same, and then a long passage that I’d done my best to steer my thoughts away from. Confused emotions, mostly.

“She’s certainly pretty,” said Pallida, making a non-committal noise. “The two of you …”

“Not an item, if that’s what you’re thinking,” I said. “Fenn … she was, ah.” I swallowed and tried to clear my head. I was sure that if I looked down, I would see ‘true love’ written in the book, followed by scattered thoughts about how true it had really been, and no, ‘true love’ wasn’t a concept that I had ever believed in, but it was a feeling that I had for her, as though it was true, even if it wasn’t. I decided that I really didn’t like the book. “Landmines, as you said.”

“Ah,” said Pallida. “So there’s not anything that I need to worry about with Amaryllis?” she asked. She had a hopeful look on her face.

“There’s some personal stuff,” I said. “Things we had to work out together, or, um,” I tried my best to be a better person than I had been in the past. I owed that to Fenn. “I don’t think I should be the one to tell you. If or when you ask her about it, just let her know that I said I wanted to respect her privacy?”

“Cryptic,” said Pallida with an eyebrow raised. “But okay. Sorry if I’m stepping on toes.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Better than stepping on landmines. Just … weird to be asked about, I guess. I’m going to go check on the others, since it looks like I’ll be gone with Raven a few days.”

When I stepped out into the hallways, Bethel was waiting there, leaning up against the door and looking like Tiff, still wearing the same ‘Kansas Swim’ t-shirt.

“Ah, young love,” she said.

“Did you pick that form just to make things difficult for me?” I asked.

“This?” she asked, looking down at her body. “A bit,” she said. “If you ask nicely, I’ll change into something else.”

“I was actually just wishing that I could talk to Tiff,” I said. “There’s a lot that I’d want to say. She gave good advice, most of the time.” I shook my head. “But right now, being swamped with more of the past isn’t really something that I can handle so well.” I started walking down the hallway, and she accompanied me, still not changing.

“How do you think I feel about having Raven here?” asked Bethel.

“She’s here at your pleasure,” I said. “We can eject her and either send her down to the village, or if that’s not enough, across the sea to a hotel in one of the Ha-lunde cities. I was planning on leaving tonight though, so we’ll be gone soon enough.”
Bethel made a ‘harrumph’ sound. “I understand,” she said. “I don’t need her to leave, but I’m still unhappy about her being here.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“I suppose I’ll content myself with frightening her from time to time,” said Bethel. She blinked out of existence and then right back in. A smile crossed her face. “Ah, that was a good one.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“Oh, just a flash of myself in the corner of her eye,” said Bethel, still smiling. “Heart rate up, pupils dilated, hairs standing up. I’ll admit she’s keeping her cool, but I can read the fear response of all but those trained by the Elon Gar.” She looked at me. “You’re not upset by it.”

“I’m,” I began, then stopped. I wished that I’d held onto the book that gave internal narration. Maybe it would have helped me get my thoughts in order. “I am upset by it, but I also get it,” I said. “I don’t think that Raven really deserves it, and I don’t think that you should do it, but I really do empathize with that impulse. I understand it. I told you that, back when we first met, but you brushed it off as manipulation or something.”

“If I had known how socially inept you were, I would have believed you,” said Bethel with a laugh.

“Your Loyalty has gone up, by the way,” I said.

“Has it?” asked Bethel, her voice still light and airy. “I had wondered.”

“I just thought that you should know,” I said. “After everything with both Fenn and Valencia, I’m far less concerned that Loyalty is essentially mind control, but that also means that it’s not really a measure of trust either, so … I don’t know. I just wanted you to know, so you could be prepared for the game to throw something at you.”

**Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 9!**

“If I find out you don’t actually care for me, I’ll cut off your penis,” said Bethel, reaching forward to poke me in the chest. We’d arrived at Grak’s room some time ago, and were just standing in front of it. “I know how fond you are of it.”

I smiled slightly. “You know, I complain about Aerb a lot, but this is the first time someone has threatened to cut off my penis. So, congratulations on being the first.”

“I’m very serious,” said Bethel, staring at me with Tiff’s eyes.

“Sure you are,” I said.

I felt her grip me, *there*, quite firmly, just for a moment.

“Ah,” she said as she backed away slightly. “That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.”

“I loved Tiff, a lot, and you’re wearing her body,” I said. My face was flushed. “Look, let’s forget that this was ever a thing.”

“Oh, well that might be hard,” said Bethel, “Because I just told everyone in the house.” She had a wicked smile on her face.

I stopped and stared at her, not knowing what the hell I was supposed to think about that.
Bethel cackled again, her booming laugh seeming to echo through the halls.

“I’m kidding, of course,” said Bethel, watching me closely.

“Okay,” I said, shifting around. She’d thrown me far off-kilter. I pointed at Grak’s door. “I do need to speak with him for a bit. It would probably be better if you weren’t ‘there’ for it.”

Bethel watched me for a moment, then transformed, from Tiff back into the form she’d been wearing for the past month. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Forgiven,” I replied with a wave of my hand. “I get your sense of humor.”

**Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 10!**

**Companion Passive Unlocked: Full House!**

“One sec,” I said.

“Oh,” said Bethel, eyes wide.

**Full House:** Bethel knows the location of every entad inside her, even if she wouldn’t otherwise. Bethel can use the powers of any entad inside her, so long as it remains inside her.

“Huh,” I said, opening my eyes. “You got a perk.”

Bethel let out a laugh of pure joy and leapt up into the air, then flew down the hallway like a banshee. I was vaguely aware of the feeling of my house moving under my feet, but before I could move or even question it, she had returned to me, blinking into place in front of me.

“I’m invincible,” she said to me. There was something brilliant in the way her eyes sparkled, this towering woman looking down at me like I was the light of her life. “I don’t have to eat them anymore, I can just borrow them, and I don’t have to take their senses,” she said. “The things I can do now, I --”

She stopped short, then blinked out of existence.

“Bethel?” I asked the empty hallway. “Are you okay?”

There was no response.

<Bethel?> I asked again. I could feel the connection still there, the conduit that I would use to speak to her, but there was no response from the other end.

I tried to mentally take stock of all of the entads we had in the house. If we equated Bethel’s absorption of entads to ‘eating’, then this new version would be ‘tasting’, or maybe just holding them in her ‘mouth’. Could some of those have been poisonous to her in some fashion? I hadn’t been given a brief on what all of Raven’s entads were, and it was hard to tell with warding alone, but for the others --

It suddenly occurred to me that there was one sentient entad in the house, one that I customarily wore around my waist, but was sitting in my room at the moment. There was nothing about Ropey that would put him at risk, I didn’t think, but it was still a little worrisome.

I knocked on Grak’s door.

“Come in,” he said.
I stepped into his room. The fire was going in his fireplace, and he was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at it. His bed was low to the ground, befitting his stature, and the walls were hewn rock. I wasn’t entirely sure that Bethel’s stylistic choices suited him; after all, he hadn’t really liked being a cave dwarf, and giving him a reminder of home didn’t seem like something he would want. Then again, maybe he had requested this.

“Hey,” I said. “Bethel hit Loyalty 10, which gave her the ability to use any entad in the house without having to eat it. She seemed really happy, but then she went silent. Can you see anything?” I spoke Groglir, which I tended to do when we were alone together.

Grak frowned and looked up slightly, at the wall. “I can see that there’s been a change, but can’t tell you much more. She’s always been wide-spectrum.” He resumed looking at the fire.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Fine,” said Grak. He looked over at me. His gray he’d used to dye his braided beard had faded. I wondered when that had happened, and tried to think back. While he was in the time chamber, maybe? It made me a bit sad to see.

“Did you pick the decor?” I asked.

“No,” said Grak.

“Ah,” I replied. “You could ask Bethel to change it, if it bothers you.”

“It’s fine,” said Grak. He returned to looking at the fire.

I frowned a bit. Given whatever mysterious thing had happened to Bethel, I probably should have been making my way to Amaryllis, because she would certainly want to be informed, but I didn’t want to just leave Grak here by himself, not if this was the kind of mood he was in. I was pretty sure I’d been in that mood before. People would ask me if I was okay, and I would lie to them, because I didn’t think that they could help me.

“Can I sit?” I asked.

“Suit yourself,” Grak replied.

I sat down on his bed, right next to him. “Pallida brought some money with her,” I said. “A lot of money, actually, more than I would have thought she would have, but I guess that she’s been a thief for most of her lives, and accumulated a lot.” I looked over at him. He was still staring in the fire. “I was thinking that maybe after we had some room to breathe, we could go to Darili Irid together, with a thousand pounds of gold.”

Grak turned to look at me. “Hrm,” he said, then looked back at the fire.

“Did something about the meeting bother you?” I asked.

“No,” I said. That stung a little bit. I had hoped that we were past all that, but apparently we weren’t. Maybe it was just a bad day for him. “Look,” I said, then stopped, because this was one of those situations where I really didn’t want to put my foot in my mouth. “I care about you, and I want to support you,” I said. I put my hand on his shoulder. It felt a little awkward, but I had always been weird about physical affection with other guys. “If there was something at the meeting that bothered
you, I would rather we talk about it than just letting it simmer.”

Grak kept watching the fire. I wondered how long he’d been doing that before I had come in.

“I envy the way you are with Amaryllis,” said Grak.

“We fight a lot,” I said. “She’s not happy about me leaving for the Library alone.”

“You’re partners,” said Grak.

I wanted to say that we were all partners, but I knew that wasn’t actually true.

Arthur gave a shit about things. It was one of the things that set us apart from each other.

He’d pressured me into mock trial with the argument that it would look good on a college application, that I liked the law, and that we would be able to spend more time together outside of our games. I had eventually relented, and halfway through the first meeting, had started regretting it.

After it was done, and I was supposed to be going through the facts of the case on my own, Arthur came over.

“Floating islands again?” he asked, looking down at my notepad.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the legal pad. I wasn’t sure when I had gotten in the habit of taking notes on legal paper, but it had been a thing for a while. “Just trying to figure it out, I don’t know. It’s the pastoral thing again, Stardew Valley.” I didn’t really need to tell him more than that. We’d talked enough that he got it.

“Sorry if you’re not having fun,” said Arthur.

I noticed the if there, giving me an out, so I could lie and say, ‘no, no, I am having fun’.

“It’s just not really my thing,” I said. “I was sitting there while everyone was talking and just felt adrift, like I was floating through it all with only a vague understanding of what was actually being discussed.”

“Floating?” asked Arthur. He pointed down to a doodle. “Hence the islands?” There was something that I found irritating about the way he said ‘hence’.

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, I guess.” I frowned at the paper. That wasn’t really it though. I’d wanted a place that was simple, confined, warm, and cozy.

Arthur frowned. “Let me know if you need anything,” he said. “I can go over the case with you for a bit. The big thing is having a testimony that fits the facts as presented here, one that you can answer all the questions about on cross.”

He walked over to talk to someone else, and I looked down at my legal pad, wondering how much I was going to keep up the charade of caring about something that didn’t really interest me.

“You don’t want to save the world?” I asked. “There’s no judgment there,” I quickly added.

“There’s an old legend about a dwarf who was cursed to mine forever,” said Grak. “Every day he gripped his pick-axe and dug a little deeper. Every day the gods would fill his hole back in. I see the future stretching out before us, and it’s not a future I have any enthusiasm for.”
“Yeah,” I said. *But odds are we’ll all be dead before it gets too monotonous.* “Can I ask what you would want, if you could have your choice of future?”

Grak’s lips twitched, as though he had a quick answer, but he stayed silent, staring at the fire.

“Oblivion?” I asked.

Grak glanced over at me and then back toward the fire.

“It took me a long time to see why you might have been happy for Fallatehr to alter your values,” I said. “I get it now.”

“Congratulations,” said Grak.

I winced again. I wasn’t saying the right things. I thought I’d been doing pretty well with Bethel. I was failing to help Grak though, and frankly, he needed me much more than she did.

“You can speak up, when we’re all in a group like that,” I said. “If you think that would help with feeling like you lack power, or purpose, or companionship, or whatever.”

“No,” said Grak with a sigh. “I don’t think it would help.” He still wasn’t meeting my eyes.

He was in a truly foul mood. I still had my hand on his shoulder, and I wanted to do something for him, but I had no idea what to do. He was reminding me of similar moods that I had been in, similar conversations where I had been on the other side, unreasonable and wanting to sulk.

“Magoron,” I said. “The dwarf from the train. Did you ever end up sending him an invite?”

“He wanted to fuck. Nothing more,” said Grak. Groglir had a fair number of words for sex, and he’d chosen to use the most vulgar of them. It called to mind two sopping wet cloacas, both ripened and pressed up against each other. I had no memory of having ever learned the word, but the Language skill point must have added it to my vocabulary.

“You got a response back then?” I asked.

Grak nodded. “He was apologetic. Kind.”

“When?” I asked.

“I got the letter this morning,” said Grak. “It was foolish to invite him here. Desperate.” He said the word like he was tasting it, making sure that it fit.

“Ah,” I said. “You know, I don’t think it’s foolish to make a try for happiness, if --”

“I am done talking,” said Grak, switching to Anglish.

*He got rejected, at a time like this.* But it was foolish, and it was desperate, to meet someone on a train and have what probably wasn’t much better than a one-night stand, then invite them to come visit you after … it was desperate, but I could relate to the desperation, that feeling of needing someone for validation, of wanting a relationship that I could cling to for some sense of purpose and worth.

“Okay,” I said, pulling away from him and standing. “I should go figure out what’s happened to Bethel anyway.” I stopped near the door as I made my way out. “You know that you can talk to me any time, right?” I asked. “My door is always open.”
“I know,” said Grak.

I felt like I had fucked things up, but I didn’t know what more I could have done. I had been on the other side of the fence so many times before, shutting down people who had come to me trying to help. I was still hurting from the loss of Fenn, but I wanted to be better, damn it, and I just had no idea how. I didn’t even know what someone could have said to have helped me, when I was like that. I didn’t know what I was supposed to say to Grak.

“I’m fine,” said Bethel after I’d shut the door. There was a precursor to her appearing beside me, a slight shimmer of warning, which I assumed was for my benefit. “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I wasn’t doing so hot in there.”

“You did fine,” said Bethel. “I should have burned the letter when it came, or at least given some warning to the rest of you.”

I looked her over, not that it would have told me anything. “Where did you go?” I asked.

“I was exploring my new abilities,” said Bethel. She raised an eyebrow and spent some time evaluating me -- showing that she was evaluating me. “I have some news.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Ropey and I are getting married,” she replied.
By ‘married’, Bethel apparently meant ‘I am going to irrevocably swallow him and our essential natures will merge’. There were a few equivalents across Aerb, species that would merge with each other and lose individual identity as part of pair-bonding, or who would take on parts of each other as part of the process, but it was manifestly not marriage.

“Well, we’re doing it anyway,” said Bethel. “It’s what we both want. I can take on part of him so long as he’s in the house, but he can’t do the same.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I said with a sigh, rubbing my face a bit. “Can you … would it be too much to ask to hold off on doing something that you can’t reverse until after I get back from the Library? And maybe you can talk about it with other people first, instead of just deciding between the two of you?”

“Amaryllis already gave me her blessing,” said Bethel. “I spoke to her first.”

“Really?” I asked. “That doesn’t seem like her. I would have assumed that she would have had some strategic considerations.” Namely the fact that having sentient rope is really useful and has saved my life a few times.

“I believe her considerations are strategic,” replied Bethel, smiling a bit. “She wishes to temper me and thinks that Ropey would be a good influence on my makeup.”

“Ah,” I replied. “That does sound a bit more like her.” I was trying to think about the philosophical, moral, emotional, and intellectual issues inherent in Bethel taking in another sentient entad. “Do you even want my input?” I asked.

“Not particularly,” said Bethel, with a nonchalant air.

“Well … thanks for telling me before doing it,” I said. “I do appreciate that much. I’ll miss him.”

“You’ll miss him like you would miss having a dog,” said Bethel.

“I have a tendency to let people fall by the wayside when they’re not directly promoted to my attention,” I said. “It’s one of my worst habits, I’ll admit that.” I swallowed. “So am I going to attend a wedding before leaving for the Library?”

“We will wait,” said Bethel, frowning slightly. It occurred to me that it was entirely possible for her to be in conference with Ropey at the same time that she was talking to me. I didn’t know how many conversations she could hold at once, especially with her expanded scope, but my guess was that it was more than one.


“Thank you,” she replied, but it was a fairly frosty response.

I had no idea what I was supposed to think. Maybe the whole thing would have seemed less like it was coming from nowhere if I had spent more time trying to get at what Ropey thought about things, or if I had a better handle on Bethel. I had tried, with both of them, but not gotten anywhere, and there was a limited amount of social labor I was willing to put in when I was getting nothing back in return. With Ropey, the problem had largely been that he would respond with the sentient rope equivalent of “k” or “yeah”. With Bethel, I think it was some inherent suspicion of me, which had only recently broken down enough that she could take me at face value.
I gave an internal sigh, then went to go find Raven.

Amaryllis was dead-set against me going alone, naturally, but I had already come up with all of the objections that she was ready to use, and so her arguments didn’t really land that well. We’d had it out when I first said I was going, then again in the common room, where she was sitting with Raven.

<Is this because of Maddie?> asked Amaryllis, using the thought-speak channel instead of saying it out loud.

<No.> I replied. <But not having everyone constantly around seems like it might be better for getting some answers from her.>

“You’re using the other channel?” asked Raven, looking between the two of us.

“Yes,” I replied. “Sorry, it’s not incredibly sensitive, but Amaryllis felt the need to check whether I was speaking carefully.”

“I see,” said Raven with a short nod. “Well, we can leave for the Library at any time.”

“Juniper, if you’re going, you’re going in as well-equipped as you can possibly be,” said Amaryllis. “With the funds that you said Pallida is bringing in, we could get a few of the more expensive tattoos, or make a trip to one of the major cities for an entad auction.”

I held my tongue. I was pretty sure that this was a stalling tactic, a way to get more time so she could convince me not to go, or convince Raven to take more of us.

“I think I’ll be fine with what I have,” I replied. “That goes double if I don’t have to be watching out for everyone else.”

“And what if you level up?” asked Amaryllis. “There would be no one to put you back the way you were, and no one to save the librarians from you.”

“I actually had a thought about that,” said Raven, clearing her throat. She pulled some papers from her satchel, and when I glanced at them I realized that they were her copy of my character sheet. “Here,” she said, pointing to one, “Spirit.”

“We don’t know what that one does,” I replied. “It’s meaningful to you?”

Raven nodded. “I believe it to be the same skill that Uther used to make knowledge of the Outer Reaches safe for us.”

“But you said that all the masters who might teach me were dead,” I replied slowly. “And I’m not clear on what this secret skill was. I can’t use the skills until I have some base level of learning and competence.”

“Uther described it as a companion or counterpart to soul magic,” said Raven, shifting in her seat. “And to answer your second question … it’s not something that we often use the Library for, but it’s possible that you might be able to learn Spirit from a book. Uther did that, more than once.”

“A counterpart to Essentialism?” asked Amaryllis, furrowing her eyebrows. “In what sense, specifically?”

“That was never entirely clear to me,” said Raven. “Uther had hoped that the art would die with him. He found it nearly as abhorrent as he found soul magic. He said that if a person’s soul was a rock,
then their spirit was water flowing over it. If the soul was etched in a book, then the spirit was the pen that wrote that book.”

**Quest Accepted: As the Spirit Moves You** - There are no spirit mages left alive. The art has been dead for some five hundred years, and Uther was the one to kill it. Though the books have all been destroyed since long ago, there is one place where books can never be entirely removed from. Once you find the entrance to the Infinite Library, you might be able to find the lost power.

<Just got a quest for it,> I sent to Amaryllis. <Which means she’s telling the truth.>

<Not necessarily,> replied Amaryllis. <Point taken though,> she continued after a moment of hesitation. <I’ll need the full text.>

“Well, it’s probably of vital importance that I find a book like that sooner than later,” I said. “I’ll add that to the list of things I need to accomplish while I’m in the Library.”

“And if you level up before you find the book?” asked Amaryllis, still insistent. “Juniper, that could very well be a failure condition.”

“I know,” I said. I rubbed my face as I tried to think. “Raven, how negotiable is your limit of one person?”

“It’s not negotiable,” said Raven. Her voice was as firm as I’d ever heard it. She looked at Amaryllis. “It’s going to be far easier to cloak a single person in some kind of excuse, but even with that aside, the Isle of Poran is demonstrably important. Removing the entire Council of Arches would change the course of history, making the predictions from the Library far less accurate. It’s better to have someone on the outside attempting to maintain stability. That’s what Uther did.”

“Everett led us to believe that your experiences with the Library didn’t turn out well,” said Amaryllis. Her lips had gone thin.

“They didn’t,” said Raven. “Part of that is that Uther was trying far too hard to shape and mold the future, and in ways that the Library reacted negatively. That’s one of the reasons that I want it to be Juniper alone. From everything you’ve said, he’s the single most capable of you.”

“That’s not true in terms of raw power,” I said. “But I suppose that doesn’t equate to ‘capable’.”

“He’s also vitally important,” said Amaryllis. “You’re removing the single most important person from future history. That won’t have impacts?”

“It will,” said Raven. “It always did, when Uther went in. But if we’d come in with him, the world would be even more tilted than without.”

Amaryllis looked at me with something like a glare. “And how long are we supposed to wait for him to come back out?”

“Indefinitely,” I said. “I mean, logically you would want to continue on as though nothing had actually happened, because if you go into the Library, that’s what the books in the Library will show, and then there’s nothing much that we can do about it.” I turned to Raven. “Right? I assume that you have procedures in place like that?”

“We do,” nodded Raven.

“Besides,” I said, turning back to Amaryllis. “I can’t give you a report on what went right or wrong with your schemes if I can’t see them from the inside.”
That was what finally got Amaryllis to relent. “Fine,” she said. “Leave as soon as you can, then return as soon as you’ve done everything you need to do.” She paused. “Stay safe.”

“I will,” I said with a nod.

“We can leave now, if you’d like,” said Raven. “Normally I would wait for the shift change, which isn’t for another week and a half, but I think the benefits outweigh the costs, so we might as well just go directly. Do you have a large collection of books?”


“One hundred would do,” said Raven with a nod.

“Then sure, let me take you to the library,” I replied.

Our library wasn’t actually that big. We had quite a few books from Earth, and a couple dozen reference works from Aerb, but all in all, it was barely enough to fill a bookshelf, in part because many of our books were stored in the glove, and that aside, Bethel could simply grab any book from Earth we wanted with no need to have it on the shelf. The room was particularly nice though, even by Bethel’s usual high standards, with a large mahogany desk for quiet reading and a pair of comfortable chairs that sat beneath lamps for something a little more sedate.

When I opened the door, that wasn’t what I saw.

Instead, the library was cavernous, stretching forty feet from floor to ceiling, with a row of chandeliers hanging down to illuminate row upon row of books. The door I’d opened had once gone into a room not more than twenty feet across, but this one was as large as a football field. I was high up, with a staircase in front of me, which gave me a better view of it. I counted the rows, trying to figure out how many books there were, and my best guess was that there were close to a million of them. That would have been stunning, if I hadn’t been distracted by the fact that the room in no way fit within the confines of the house.

“Is this the Infinite Library?” I asked, turning to Raven.

“No,” she said, looking over row after row of books.

“Huh,” I said. At the base of the stairs there was a reading area, not too different from what we’d had in the old room. If my eye had been drawn to that first, maybe I would have realized that this was Bethel’s handiwork. “Bethel?” I asked.

“Yes, Juniper?” asked Bethel, appearing right next to me. She was looking out over the books with me with a smile on her face.

“Explain?” I asked.

“I made a new library,” she said. “I also took the liberty of adding a few books.”

“A few,” I said. “How many are in here?”

“One and a half million,” said Bethel. “I first tried to fill it with books I thought would be useful or interesting, then ensured that we would be able to check citations found in each of those books.” She pointed to the left side. “That side contains books from Aerb,” she said, then turned to the other side. “And that side contains books from Earth.”
“Wait,” I said. “How did you get books from Aerb?”

“Truly, I am the greatest house to have ever existed,” said Bethel.

<The bottle’s power allows me to greatly expand interior spaces without regards for physical topology,> Bethel said. <The books from Aerb come from an entad that Raven carries on her person, one which has a prodigious number of books stored on it. I had to use a different power to copy them into physical form, and I’m still working on getting titles on all of them, since my existing power for copying only replaced the pages of the blanks, but that takes both time and attention.> The thought-speak was fast, barely at my limit of comprehension.

“Was it wise to bring in so many books from Earth?” I asked.

Bethel frowned at me, mouth drawn. “Because you’re worried about Shia LaBeouf?” she asked.

My heart skipped a beat.

“Fuck,” I said, “Fuck, you can’t do that,” I looked over at Raven, who was looking between the two of us with confusion. “Don’t say it,” I said. “It’s a name of power.” I turned back to Bethel. “If this is how I die --”

“It’s fine,” said Bethel. “I can say it. I tested it while you were gone at Speculation and Scrutiny. It stands to reason that I wouldn’t be able to trigger it, given that I’m not a person.” She smiled at me and leaned in. “It was very nice to see you so scared.”

“Is this because I have mixed feelings about your wedding?” I asked.

“Wedding?” asked Raven, looking between the two of us.

“Perhaps,” said Bethel. “With that scare, I’ll consider us to have made amends.”

“And if Raven had said it without knowing what it was?” I asked. “We could have died, it’s not funny.”

“Oh,” said Bethel, cocking her head to the side. “You said that you understood my sense of humor.” She glanced at Raven. “Naturally I was prepared to sever her vocal cords if it came to that. I’m not an idiot.” She looked down at her fingernails for a moment, affecting boredom, even though her fingernails and eyes were both illusions. “I’ll see you around, Juniper. Stay safe.” She disappeared in a blast of smoke. Apparently she was still experimenting with special effects.

“I’m serious,” I said, looking at Raven. “Don’t say that name, or you’ll die, and if I understand it right, I’ll die too. Infohazard protocol, understand?”

“Can I think it?” asked Raven. She seemed strangely calm. “Am I in danger just from knowing it?”

“No,” I said. “Just don’t say, write, or otherwise transmit it, even with a cipher.” I resisted the urge to say something about Bethel. I was suddenly eager for her to merge with Ropey, if that was what they would both want, because it was hard to imagine she’d pull that kind of stunt if he was sharing her brain-space.

“It’s not an infohazard,” said Raven. “It’s a commhazard. Infohazards are dangerous to know, cognitohazards are dangerous to think about, and commhazards are dangerous to communicate.”

“Ah,” I said. “Just warning you. It’s not quite instant death, but it’s close.” I have a plan, and it might even work, but --
“This is one of the things that I’ve been dealing with for the last hundred years,” said Raven. Her face was impassive. “The Infinite Library contains every book ever published, or that will be published. Some small fraction are hazardous. For the most part, we’ve made it through.”

“Ah,” I said. “That … does cast a rather different light on things.”

“I don’t want you to go in blind,” said Raven. She moved past me and began descending the staircase. “I should warn you that going in direct is irregular, for special circumstances only. We’ll arrive in the Library vestibule, with the Library having undergone a full reset. There will be perhaps a hundred librarians in the vestibule with us, some having been woken up from sleep by the transition, some having lost their place whatever book they were reading, and in either case, no one is going to be happy about it. However, our other option is to go in with the shift change, which would mean waiting a week and a half, and I don’t think that we can spare the time to do that.”

Raven had made her way into the stacks and was holding a finger out in front of her like a divining rod, moving it first one way and then the other.

“But you’re the head librarian, right?” I asked. “You have ultimate authority.”

“If you’ve read about Uther, then you know he was big on consent of the governed,” said Raven. She stopped in place and pointed to a book. We were in the Aerb section, which I had noticed had books of uniform size and color, all without titles. Raven picked a book from the shelves, seemingly at random, opened it, leafed through it, then put it back. “Here is good,” she said. She looked over at me and held out her hand.

I took it and swallowed, nervously.

“Close your eyes,” said Raven. “Don’t open them until we’ve come to a stop.”

I did as she requested, and felt her tug me forward. Based on my sense of direction, we were walking directly toward, then through the bookshelves. I listened for the sound of my footsteps, then realized that I couldn’t hear them, even as I kept on walking. The world seemed like it was reduced down to simply Raven’s hand, gently pulling me along. The menu popped up, but I squinted it away. I wanted to open my eyes, but she hadn’t clarified whether it was merely a bad idea, or whether something might kill me.

**Achievement Unlocked: We’re Not in Kansas Anymore**

**Achievement Progress: Oh the Places You’ll Go (2/64)**

**Loading …**

When we came to a stop, I opened my eyes, and saw the vestibule of the Infinite Library in all its glory. My body had changed, shifting position: I was standing straight, with my arms out to the side. I lowered them as soon as I became aware of how I was standing and looked around.

There were, as Raven had said, perhaps a hundred people standing around. They ran the gamut of species on Aerb, though I noted a distinct trend toward both the smaller races (gnomes, halflings, kle’tan, tywood, and nearly twenty goblins) and the longer-lived ones (elves, lennsi, vitrics, and to my mild surprise, one of the renacim). Robes were common, but there didn’t appear to be much of a dress code, which ran counter to my expectation.

My eyes traveled past the place we were all standing to take in the rest of the ‘vestibule’. It was a huge domed room with marble columns, each of them as thick around as my house back in Kansas.
had been wide. To one side were double doors, thirty feet high, the most prominent feature of the room. On the opposite end from the doors, maybe two city blocks away, there were incongruous adobe huts, shaped like spheres with circular porthole windows. They clashed with the Grecco-Roman aesthetic of the dome itself, and the tiled floor we were standing on. Above, light streamed in through a hole in the dome, with blue sky visible next to the sun.

There was some commotion toward the edge of the group, with a handful of the librarians standing over someone on the ground. A handful of others had moved toward the doors and were opening them up.

“Xorbus, Entwell, Majom, to me!” called Raven. “Stay with me,” she said to me.

“You’re early,” said a tall, lanky man with swirls of red and green going down his bare arms. He was wearing a vest, with a bare chest beneath it. The temperature in the Library was moderate, bordering on cool, and I didn’t imagine that heating the space was remotely possible without some powerful or specific magic. He seemed under-dressed. “And you’re alone. Who is this?”

“A recruit,” replied Raven.

“Important?” asked the man.

“Obviously,” replied Raven. Her cloak twisted around her once, then un twisted itself, and she held up her hand to make three orbs appear, all of which promptly blinked out. “Diagnostic,” she explained. “My entads were out of commission.”

“Oh?” asked a woman who came up to us. “A very prepared warder, or something else?” She paused and looked between Raven and I. I tried to place her species and came up with nothing. She was a few inches shorter than Raven, and had a swell at her belly, but I didn’t think she was pregnant. Her too-wide mouth was the only sign she wasn’t bog-standard human. “You came alone, with someone new?”

“Yes,” replied Raven. She looked around the room. “Xorbus!” she called.

One of the goblins who was standing in the cluster looked over, then began jogging to us. “What’s going on?” it asked. Gender wasn’t clear to me; it had a large number of earrings, but I couldn’t really assume that meant anything, nor was ‘Xorbus’ seemingly a gendered name. I decided on female, for no particular reason. She was wearing something similar to a sarong, which came a few inches from the ground. (Goblins on Aerb had ears that stuck far out to the sides, sharp teeth, and knobbly joints that stretched out their green-hued skin. Xorbus didn’t seem like anything special in that regard.)

“What happened over there?” asked Raven, nodding toward the huddle.

“One of the piles collapsed, apparently,” said Xorbus. “Timothy and Angela had been missing for two days, and they weren’t where they were supposed to be. We were going to reset to try to get them back, but I suppose that’s moot.” He paused. “Timothy didn’t come back on reset, by the way.”

Raven grimaced. “He shouldn’t have been out.” She winced, then shook her head. “We’ll have a memorial tomorrow. In the meantime, how is Angela?”

“Broken leg, which is why she didn’t make it back,” said Xorbus. “And Timothy was healer-on-duty, which means that you’re going to need to make a call on what happens with her.”

“Exactly why he shouldn’t have been out,” replied Raven. “What was he even doing in the field?”
Xorbus glanced at the others. “He was sweet on her,” she said.

“Expeditions offer some privacy,” said the tall man. “Not the ideal place for love-making, but --”

“I’ll be sure to mention it at his memorial,” said Raven, lips thin. “His wife will be pleased, I’m sure.”

Again the three around us exchanged looks. It felt like there was a long-buried argument there, or perhaps some background information that I was missing. I assumed that Raven was being sarcastic by saying that she’d talk about his infidelity at his funeral, but it was hard to tell.

“At any rate,” said Xorbus, “Would you mind terribly cluing us in on this hulking fellow?”

I was mildly surprised to hear myself described that way, since it wasn’t how I thought of myself. If I was looking in a mirror, I would have agreed that it fit, given my musculature and height, but that wasn’t something that I thought of often, except when I noticed how much taller I was than any of the girls in my party.

“Consider it infohazardous for now,” said Raven. “I’m going to be going into the stacks to teach him, personally.”

“Teach him?” asked Xorbus. “At a time like this?”

“And go yourself?” asked the tall man. “Who is he?”

“You can call him Rakon, for now, until I know more,” said Raven. “Rakon, this is Xorbus, Entwell, and Majom.” Entwell was apparently the woman, and Majom was the tall guy. “They’re in charge of various executive functions within the Library.”

I nodded to them. They were giving me skeptical looks.

“He seems awfully well-armed,” said Entwell. “Coactus es?” she asked, the words unfamiliar.

“No, it’s not duress,” said Raven. “I told you, infohazard standards.”

“Standards,” said Majom. “But not in actuality?”

Raven let out a sigh.

“I only ask because we’ve had a freeze on recruiting for a few years now,” continued Majom. “And if you bring in some mysterious new person without consulting anyone, it’s going to raise some obvious questions about nepotism, not to mention protocol abuse.”

“I understand that,” said Raven. “I will let you know more once I know more, and once I know enough to know how safe it is to be sharing the information. It’s very complicated. Also, let Pinno know that we’re going to need access to his exclusion contingencies, particularly the Fel Seed one.”

“Did things go that badly on the Isle of Poran?” asked Xorbus with a laugh.

“Yes,” said Raven, lips pressed thin. Xorbus’ smile fell. “We’re going to have to keep tracking them.” She looked to me. “Rakon, with me please. I’ll explain once we’re out of earshot of the entrance.”

“Wait,” I said, glancing at the woman who was still surrounded by people. “You need a healer? I’m a bone mage.”
“Bones aren’t something that we keep around,” said Raven. She was watching me closely.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ll make do.”

I walked over to where the people were grouped up around the woman, Angela. I had a handful of bones in my bandolier, most of them from the unicorn. I also had a complement of healing fairies, but just like the unicorn bones, those were only for emergencies, a limited resource for times of need. I hoped that I wasn’t giving away too much by revealing that I was a bone mage, but I didn’t wholly agree with Raven’s policy of silence. I imagined that she was concerned about politics, especially Utherian politics. From a quick survey of the people here, perhaps thirty of them had potentially been alive during Uther’s era. I supposed they would all probably have their own thoughts on Uther, whether they had been alive then or not, especially given that their head librarian had been one of his Knights. I had to place a bit of trust in Raven’s judgment, which was an uncomfortable feeling, partly because Maddie hadn’t been an exemplar of rational thought. It was hard to divide my feelings on them.

The healing itself didn’t take long, once I had cut away some of the cloth and cleaned the wound. There were no signs of infection, at least so far as I could tell, which was the biggest risk for a treatment like this, since bone magic didn’t handle infection or disease very well.

Once it was done, Raven and I were on our way.

The books started right past the doorway, which led into a hallway that stretched up as far as the light reached. Granted, that wasn’t very far, since the library proper didn’t seem to have any light sources, and the sun coming in through the hole in the dome didn’t penetrate very far into the gloom of the endless books. Sitting to one side of the doorway was a crate, which Raven reached into to pull out a burning torch. When I looked over, it was full of the things, all merrily burning away without giving any sign that the crate itself was going to catch fire anytime soon. She handed one to me, then took one for herself.

“Do you have an initial report?” Raven asked a librarian, who was standing inside the door.

“Nothing much right now,” the librarian replied, raising an eyebrow in my direction. “We need a little more time than that. The first population sample gave us nothing too suggestive, no obvious language, subject, author, or title groupings. The library is a little more twisted than usual, which is going to make things difficult.” She eyed me again. “Who is this?”

“Need to know,” said Raven. “I’ll call a meeting in the next day or two if there’s need. We’re going in.”

“You’re going in?” asked the woman. “It’s been a few years, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has,” replied Raven. “We’d like some place that no one else is going. Which path takes us away from the sampling crews?”

“Left, left, straight, right, Head Librarix,” said the librarian with a short, casual bow. “Nominal directions, of course.”

“Of course,” said Raven with a curt nod. “I remember that much. We hopefully won’t be long.” She set off, and I quickly followed behind her.

“You’re different, in the Library,” I said.

“It’s hard to be in charge,” said Raven. “I didn’t take naturally to it. My appearance also makes people question me, even those who have known me for more than a century.”
“Ah,” I said. It didn’t seem to me like she’d done that good a job keeping discipline among her people, but I knew essentially nothing about management styles.

The hallway got more narrow as we walked, though it didn’t seem to lose any appreciable height. The everburning torch that we carried lit our way, not casting terribly much light ahead of us. It was funny, given how incredibly important they tended to be in low-level tabletop games, but I had never actually experienced torchlight before. It seemed like one of the things that I should have done, back on Earth, just to get a feel for it. Lord knows I’d done enough stuff like that, though I’d stopped short of taking archery lessons like Reimer did.

The first junction we came to was split five different ways, two of them with narrow staircases that I was pretty sure I would struggle to fit through, and one that looked like you would have to get down on all fours to duck beneath the archway. Everything was a little bit off-kilter, with bespoke angles. When I paid attention to it, I realized that the floor itself was uneven, just a few degrees off from being level. We took the left, which was a narrow, crooked passage, without any actual discussion.

“Okay,” said Raven, once we had taken a few twists and turns that more-or-less equated to ‘left, left, straight, right’. “We should be safe and private for the time being.” She let out a breath, and it felt like she’d been holding it for a long time. The hallway was narrow, with books crowding around us. Raven was doing her best not to make it awkward, but the uncomfortably cramped quarters made that difficult.

“Do we need privacy?” I asked.

“There are limits to what I will say when someone eager to cut off parts of my body is listening to my every word,” said Raven. Her voice was firm. “There are also limits to what I’m willing to say in front of a hopefully former non-anima with unspecified powers and one of Uther’s descendants.”

“That’s understandable,” I said, even if it was annoying. I wondered, briefly, whether or not I could take Raven in a fight. Bethel had fed us everything she could divine about Raven’s entads, and while the armor would be tough to deal with, and the cape was reactive, I would probably be able to either go for her head or use the sword’s ability to cleave through her chest while bypassing the metal. It was grim and grisly, but I had given it the requisite thought before we left. “What were you refraining from saying?”

“Uther,” said Raven. “You knew him. It’s not beyond a shadow of a doubt, but you’ve given us enough, and the things in those books … it explains some mistakes that he made, especially early on. They didn’t just call him the Poet King because of the breadth of art he produced, sometimes he seemed to have his head in the clouds, like he was a step out of phase with the rest of us. It caused problems, on occasion. It’s not something that you’ll find in any biography, but he screamed the first time he met an elf. Apparently he had gone his whole life without knowing what their teeth looked like. It makes more sense, if he truly was dream-skewered.”

“But that’s not what you were keeping from the others,” I said.

“No,” replied Raven. She took a steadying breath. “First, I can tell you the reason that no one ever found him. He wore an entad of almost absurd power, an amulet that –”

“Wait,” I said. “Can I have a guess?”

Raven stared at me. “You know it?”

“I might,” I said. “Nondetection?”
“Go on,” Raven nodded.

“Firstly, it protects him from divination magics of all kinds, most likely including the sorts of entads that you’d use to find him,” I said. That was how the standard nondetection spell worked in D&D. “But it also protects against detection by any means, including sight and sound, and probably a few more exotic methods, with the amulet itself being covered under the same effect while worn. So how did you find him then?”

“How did you know?” asked Raven.

“It was in one of my games,” I said. “I was just turning the concept up as high as it would go. Well, not as high as it would go, because there was no element of redaction, but pretty high.”

“You’re so … blunt about it,” said Raven, staring at me. “That amulet was made by forge frenzy and unknown to anyone outside Uther and the Knights.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m sorry, but this is the reality of the world. I don’t like it any more than you do.” That probably wasn’t true. “So how did you find him, if you couldn’t detect him?”

“Second order effects,” said Raven. “The amulet doesn’t allow the detection of direct effects like light or sound, not even footprints, but it’s possible to detect the effects of those effects.”

I nodded. “Meaning … okay, if you put the amulet around an apple, you wouldn’t be able to see the apple, because you wouldn’t be able to see the light bouncing off of it, but you would be able to see that the paper the apple was sitting on was tinted red, because the red light reflected from the apple would hit the paper, and the amulet’s powers don’t extend that far.” There was probably some inherent wonkiness there in terms of definition. I wondered whether the amulet would protect against cameras.

“I could have used you four hundred years ago,” said Raven with a soft smile. “It took me a long time to wrap my head around it, and longer still to figure out some way to use that weakness to try to track him.”

“Which led you to the exclusion zone,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “And from there, he appears to have gone somewhere else.”

“Meaning that we could get into the exclusion zone only to find that he was last there five hundred years ago?” I asked. “And logically, there would be no trace of him, given how long ago it was?”

“I’m more hopeful than that,” said Raven. “The Second Empire put in some work on the exclusion zone, most of it classified. They were trying to figure out a way to kill Fel Seed, partly because they thought it was necessary, partly because they were worried about exclusion breaks, and partly because it would be a political victory if they could accomplish something that no one else had. They tried a lot of different things, but only one of them bore any fruit.” She was watching me, probably to see whether I could complete the thought, which I obviously couldn’t. “There was a dimensional survey of the exclusion zone, from a distance, looking primarily for infernal influence. What they found instead was a tunnel leading somewhere else.”

“You?” I asked, more confused than anything.

“They never found out,” replied Raven. “The project was costing money without producing results, so they stopped trying. I didn’t find out about it until we had a particularly good run at the Library and got our hands on numerous classified documents, which was a good twenty years after the fall of the Empire.”

“Twenty pages, where the majority are filled with symbolic language, the majority of the pages are bound in some fashion, and there are covers surrounding the pages.” said Raven, clearly going from some internal script. “There are some definitional issues there, specifically about what constitutes a ‘page’ or ‘cover’ in terms of material, shape, size, and topology. Why?”

“I was just thinking that if you knew about the Library, there would be things that you might do in order to prevent sensitive materials from ending up here,” I said. “That was all.”

“The Second Empire’s misadventures with the Library will have to wait for another time,” said Raven. “I’m telling you all of this because I think that it might be important to finding out what happened to Uther. I can show you the literature, if you’d like. I have the books stored in an entad I carry with me, but that will come later, unless you have any particular insights.”

“No,” I said. “Cosmology isn’t a strong suit for me, and it was one of the things that varied so much in my games it’s hard to tell what might have made the translation to Aerb.”

*A Tour of the Elemental Planes* listed twenty-eight of them: acid, base, blood, bone, chitin, clay, earth, electricity, fire, flesh, glass, gold, ice, iron, lava, light, magnetism, mist, rust, salt, sand, shadow, smoke, steam, stone, vacuum, water, and wood. There had been hundreds of demi-planes, but they were excluded back in Uther’s day. There had been a mirror dimension and a dream dimension, both excluded. There were a handful of planes which were even more entirely hostile to human life than the elemental planes, including m-space, n-space, t-space, and p-space, most of which had only been detected by exotic instruments or mathematical proofs. There were nine thousand hells and no heavens. There was an equivalent to the Ethereal Plane, but it was badly out of sync with Aerb, and you could only get there if you were a star mage. The Plane of Drift had similarly harsh requirements for access, unless you ended up there by chance, and was largely useless (its Earth origin was what Reimer had called ‘the Amelia Earhart dimension’). There were no less than thirty-seven dangerous parallel dimensions, three that were excluded, eight that had apparently been destroyed, and another twenty-six that were ‘inaccessible’, a fact that everyone seemed to accept. There were hints of alternate timeline Aerbs, though not enough hints that anyone could say that they had ever actually existed. Long story short, cosmology was fucking complicated, and there were a ton of places that Uther could have gone if he wasn’t on Aerb. Given my experiences so far, I wouldn’t have been surprised if there were another twenty places I hadn’t heard of so far. (Oh, and there was also Earth.)

“It’s one avenue worth exploring,” said Raven. “If we can figure out where that deformation in space leads to, we might know why he went, and failing that, we might be able to skip the exclusion zone altogether.”

“If I had to make one guess about where Uther went, it would be back to Earth,” I said. “So far as I know, the only magics in existence that can bridge to Earth are under the power of the Dungeon Master, whether that’s dream-skewering or the backpack he gave me, and the examples we have are one way, from Earth to Aerb.” I shrugged. “That’s as much as I know.”

“He never talked about Earth,” said Raven, shaking her head. “He had a wife here, two sons, and even if he never connected with his sons, he had *Dahlia*, his pride and joy. He had his Knights, he loved us, he had his Empire and everything that he’d built. To believe that he would have left all of that…”

“I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere with psychoanalysis,” I said. “I actually don’t think that we’re going to get anywhere by talking.” I gestured to the books around us. “Teach me library magic and we can start working.”
Raven paused, looking me in the eye, then nodded. “You’re right,” she said. “Uther always prefered action, when we were in the thick of it.” She looked at the shelves that were crowding us in. “I have to warn you that it might be difficult. One of the reasons that we’ve temporarily stopped recruitment is that the Library is more twisted and dangerous than it used to be.”

“Since I showed up on Aerb?” I asked.

“No,” replied Raven. “No, it’s been deteriorating for some time, even before that. It’s gotten far worse in the last few months though, and that, I think, we can attribute to you, or whatever phenomenon has attached itself to you.” She plucked a book off the shelf and handed it to me.

I took it, silently, and looked at its spine. Merriweather Mysteries by Nghi Thanh. “It’s in Anglish,” I said, frowning slightly.


I flipped to the inside cover and read the front matter. “Published by a company in Caledwich, but the actual printing was in Cidium, dated to 324 FE, author is Harmonian, judging by the name,” I began flipping through it, “And the book itself appears to be a collection of detective stories. One hundred and seventy-two pages,” I closed it, “Red cover, made from linen wrapped over cardboard, I think.”

“Good,” said Raven. “And how do we know that it belongs there?” she asked, pointing at its empty spot on the shelf.

I stared at it. “There’s a schema,” I said. I looked on either side of the gap, at the titles for the others. Both were languages that I didn’t speak. “In a typical library, it would be similar subjects clustered together, then with ordering by either author or alphabetically by title.” I looked at the books around us. “But naturally this is the Library, with all the books ever written, so it can’t be that simple.”

“All the books ever published,” said Raven. “Written would be a different story. Publish, in this case, meaning at least two copies issued for consumption. It’s a very low bar.”

I tried to do some math in my head. “How many books are in the Library?” I asked. “I know it varies from future to future, so I suppose I’m asking how many historical books are in here. Even if I ballpark it at a million a year, which seems high, that would be what … five hundred million?” I thought about that, in the context of how far we’d walked, how many intersections there had been, and the way that the ceilings had been, for the most part, higher than I could see. If the library that Bethel had made was a football field, then the ‘Infinite’ Library should only be five hundred times larger, and that was at an upper bound.

“Your math is off,” said Raven. “And that’s because we’re using different definitions of ‘published’. When you say it, you’re likely referring to the book as entity, some collection of sigils which happens to have been put onto paper. Yes?”

“Yes,” I said slowly.

“When I say ‘published’, I mean the specific act of putting those sigils onto paper,” said Raven.

“You mean … printed,” I said.

“No,” sighed Raven. “Printing is the physical act, publication is issuing for consumption. The Library contains all books that have been or will be published.”

“It contains copies,” I said, with understanding dawning on me. That bumped up the number of
books in the Library by a factor of a hundred, maybe even a thousand. Hells, maybe even more.

“Wait, or probably not copies in your parlance, they would be, um, instances, right?” I looked at the gap again, the place that I had taken Merriweather Mysteries from. “Except that you said ‘publish’ meant at least two books, and this one doesn’t have a partner.” I looked at the shelves around me. “None of these do.”

“They do,” said Raven. “They must. It’s one of the laws of this place. Unfortunately, one of the more consistent aspects of the schema is that the positioning of the books is dependent upon print order.”

I frowned at that. “So,” I said, looking over the books. “All of these books would be, say, the two hundred and twenty-eighth of their print run?” I asked.

“Unlikely,” said Raven. “The schema is rarely that simple. The Library is too tangled these days. It just reset itself, and we need the new schema, but in the past a book’s position in the Library might be encoded by a multiplication of the first author’s middle initial, the print order, and the date of printing, with any duplication being resolved through some other similarly bizarre identifier or combination of identifiers.” She sighed as she looked over the books.

“Ah,” I said. The book in my hands was starting to feel a little bit heavy. I slotted it back into place. “I can see the problems,” I said. “You have no way of knowing where any given book is, even if there should be a thousand copies of it, and decoding each new schema must be maddeningly difficult work.” I paused. “Except that there’s Library Magic, etched on my soul, which must be the reason that it’s possible for the Library to provide any information at all outside of just randomly grabbing books off the shelves.”

“Yes,” said Raven, nodding. “Were you this smart on Earth?”

“No, and I’m not that smart,” I said. “It’s just a way that I’m used to thinking.”

“Usually it takes longer for recruits to understand all of it,” said Raven.

“I have a couple legs up,” I said. Not least of which is the fact that I designed a fair chunk of this place.

“Still,” said Raven, watching me. I wondered whether she was thinking about Uther.

“Are you going to teach me library magic, or not?” I asked.

“I am,” said Raven, taking a breath. “You need to get a feel for the connections between books.” She pointed to Merriweather Mysteries again, then to the two books on either side of it. “Can you feel the similarity between these three?”

I stared at the books. “I don’t actually speak either of those languages. I have Anglish, Groglir, and that’s it.” For now.

“I’m not asking you to find the common denominator,” said Raven. “I’m asking you to feel it. This Library has chosen a schema, one that was used to place every book within it. There is a single place that exact copy of Merriweather Mysteries belongs, and it’s right there. All of that absolute order has a thrumming power to it, one that a practiced librarian can feel just standing here. Handle the books if you need to, move them around to feel the disorder of having them out of place, do whatever you’d like. I’m going to leave you here, I’ll be back in an hour or two, or I’ll send someone to find you. Don’t wander too far.”

“You’re leaving me?” I asked. “I can probably find my way back, but, ah --”
“I don’t know how long this is going to take,” said Raven. “The time after the reset tends to be the most critical, and when organization is most sorely needed. I also need to smooth over some of the disruption that our arrival has caused, and prepare for the memorial.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll just stay here, checking out books, I guess.” I looked at the cramped shelves around us. “What are the chances that I randomly run into infohazardous material here?”

“From a random selection?” asked Raven. “So low it’s not worth worrying about. Besides, if you practice mindful reading you should start to notice the effects before any real damage is done, at least for the vast majority of cases. There are relatively few that would just kill you outright without recourse.”

“Alright,” I said, though that was far from reassuring. I was pretty sure that if Amaryllis had been with us, she would have insisted that we run the numbers and find out how likely it was that I would die from picking up the wrong book. “I’ll be here. Hopefully I’ll be a master by the time you come back.”

“Hopefully,” said Raven with a nod. She didn’t seem like she fully believed it. I was probably going to have to grill her about the specifics of Uther’s Knack at some point, in the same way that I was going to have to grill her about a lot of things. She turned and left, with the light of her torch fading as she stepped away.

I turned to look at the books, and browsed for a bit until I saw three that were all in Anglish. The Library was dominated by Anglish, which was, after all, the native language of the printing press, the trade language of Aerb, and the official language of the Second Empire. I was grateful for that, in the same way that I was grateful that English was a hugely popular language on Earth.

_The Briars Once More, The Commoner’s Guide to Gem Magic, and Imperial Index, 5th edition, vol. IV_ were all sitting together. I had read all the books in the _Commoner’s Guide_, or at least skimmed them, which I thought might put me in a better starting place. Flipping through the other two, _The Briars Once More_ seemed to be prose fiction, and the _Imperial Index_ was something that the Second Empire had printed around the height of its power to catalog … lots of stuff, basically.

I had no idea what these three things had in common, aside from the language. Based on the front matter, they all had different dates, authors, publishers, and countries of origin. There wasn’t anything in the subject matter that was remotely similar, at least on first glance, no mention of gem magic in the index, at least not under the headings I would have expected, and from what I could tell, _The Briars Once More_ was, of all things, a fantasy novel.

I was looking at it wrong. I knew that. Raven had told me that it would be something that I would feel, rather than something I would know. It was Library Magic, not pattern analysis, though from everything that they said, pattern analysis had to play a part in figuring out each fresh new schema.

I stuck my hand between the books, trying to feel something. The soul was supposed to mediate a lot of things, and I was hoping that putting an extension of my soul between the books would help me to feel whatever I was supposed to be feeling. I’d had some luck with trying a cross-disciplinary approach before, but here, it didn’t seem to help.

I put the books back down and stared at them.

The problem was, the connection between the books could have been anything. If the books were uniquely ordered, then I was looking at the end product of that ordering, the point where whatever schema was at work thought that these books were very similar and was splitting hairs in the final stage. Alphabetical organization meant that you would sort by the first letter, then the second letter,
then the third, until finally, if you went through some alphabetical organization, three randomly selected books that were all next to each other would have gotten their position by virtue of whatever was different between them -- but the titles themselves would be mostly the same.

Here, there seemed to be nothing that the books had in common. They didn’t have a similar font or font size, so that was out, and they were different lengths, which meant --

I stopped and stared at the books.

They were different fonts and font sizes, which meant that they might be similar lengths. There was no way to do a word count in any reasonable amount of time, but from doing a quick page count and comparison of the fonts, it did seem like they might have roughly the same number of total words. Of course, that might be a proxy for something else, because if the Library was being obtuse about organization, then it could do something like counting the number of periods, or the number of hyphens, or some addition or multiplication of character counts, or it might do word counts, or average words per page, or a catalog of parts of speech, or the number of periods, and all of those might approximate to ‘length’ if you didn’t actually have the information and hadn’t done a proper survey. In fact, the number of periods --

I realized, slowly, that I had somehow fixated on that idea. It didn’t have to mean anything, people tended to fixate on the first idea that came into their head, I had seen that in action a number of times at the gaming table, but this felt different. It was just a twinge, as though the knowledge had snuck into my head from somewhere else. It was a thread that I could follow.

**Skill unlocked: Library Magic!**

**Achievement unlocked: Bookworm**

I frowned. I had just the barest taste of Library Magic, and I already didn’t like it. I could feel more clearly now the way that it was intruding into my head, placing thoughts there as though they were my own. That itself wasn’t so unusual, since I had all sorts of knowledge from various skills that hadn’t been rightfully come by, but there was something in the way the Library’s schema came to me that was entirely unsubtle.

I got up and stretched, then put the books back where they belonged. Technically, the unlock was the most important part, because I could sacrifice skills in order to boost it up to absurd levels. I wasn’t going to do that just now, especially not if I could use the librarians to get what I needed, but even if they couldn’t, I was hesitant, because it really was getting harder to get the sacrificed skills back up to what they had been. I had sacrificed Bows twice now, and even the early levels of the skill were slow to come now.

I had some time before Raven came back, so I set myself to work trying to get a better feel for the magic.

I was hoping that within the schema there would be some way to find a book written by a specific author; my guess was that there on the outside, in the future the Library was sketching out, some version of Amaryllis Penndraig had written a book for me.
It wasn’t Raven who came back, but Xorbus, the goblin. I had gotten my Library Magic up to level 8 while I was waiting, but stopped as soon as I saw someone’s torchlight joining my own.

“Getting anywhere?” asked Xorbus with a toothy smile.

“Some,” I said. “I was expecting Raven.”

“Bah,” said Xorbus with a wave of her hand. “She’s dealing with dread politics, sent me to fetch you. Ready to go back?”

“I probably could have found my way,” I replied. “I was paying attention, and we’re not too far from the entrance.”

“Ah, but if you get lost, then you get more lost, then we’ve got to send search parties out, and you can understand how that would get troublesome for us,” she said. “This place can be deadly.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Lead the way.”

“All the books are back in their place?” she asked, peering over the shelves around me.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Good, good,” she said with a sniff as she inspected to make sure I was telling the truth. “Unlikely that it would matter, but you never know, do you?”

“I … don’t know enough to know,” I said. “I’d think that with a billion books or however many are in here, plus all the copies, you would almost never run into the situation where, if you knew the position of the book you wanted, you would find it gone.” I shrugged. “I’m not going to buck tradition for no reason though. You’ve been doing this for hundreds of years.”

“We haven’t, actually,” said Xorbus with another toothy smile. “Almost all the librarians here date to after the Second Empire. Not so long, really, especially for some of the elders.”

“So … there was a purge?” I asked. “Following the Second Empire?”

Xorbus nodded. “Come, let us talk while we walk, as the saying goes.” She turned to go, and I picked up my torch from the ground to follow.

“Two purges, actually,” said Xorbus. “Uther was the one to find the Library, you know?”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “I mean, I knew that he found it, but I assumed that there were librarians here before him.”

“Oh, there were,” said Xorbus. “They weren’t from Aerb though, unless it was in the distant past. No, these were indigenous creatures, infovores, as it happened, lanky things that crawled their way through the stacks. They didn’t even know that Aerb was a real place until Uther showed up, for you see, they had some inkling of Library Magic, but not much. It was also the first time the place had reset, so far as we know.”

“So what happened to them?” I asked.

“Well, maybe you would call it three purges, I suppose,” said Xorbus. “The Lost King didn’t kill the
existing librarians by intent, but he threw their world into disorder, and there was a civil war of sorts that he got caught in the middle of, those who cared for Aerb and those who didn’t. It’s a long story, one that only Raven knows all the details of, but it ended with not enough of them to continue their species.” She sighed. “Endlings,” she said, by way of explanation. “A tragedy, really, but they were subsisting on the books, not actually using them for any real purpose.”

“Huh,” I said. That had not been in my original design.

“Well, Uther set up his own librarians,” continued Xorbus, “‘Keepers of the Future’, he called them, but after he went missing and the First Empire collapsed, they were working with relatively little support and only a loose mandate from anyone on the outside. The Library was a secret, but not a closely guarded one, so when the Second Empire came to power, they came storming in and took things over. When the Second Empire fell, Raven showed up with a flaming sword to cleanse this place and take over.”

“Wait,” I said. “Raven?”

“She’s more dangerous than she looks,” said Xorbus. She reached out and trailed her fingers along the spines of the books as we walked. “She’d pretty much have to be, but you know what I mean. She’s more dangerous than you’d give her credit for, is what I mean, even if you’d known her for a while.”

“In terms of martial prowess?” I asked.

“All sorts of things,” said Xorbus. She glanced back at me. “Not that I’m bad-mouthing the boss, you understand? Just saying.”

“Just giving me a warning?” I asked.

“You’re armored up and wearing a sword at your hip,” said Xorbus. “That’s not the norm around here, in case you hadn’t noticed. You’re a big strong man, certainly, soaked in magic, and definitely her type, but I hope you’re not underestimating the boss, that’s all.”

“I see,” I replied.

Definitely her type?

“No, I try my best not to underestimate anyone.”

“So how did she find you?” asked Xorbus. She took a turn I was pretty sure was the wrong way. I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Isn’t it this way?” I asked, gesturing through the archway.

Xorbus stopped and looked back at me with a raised eyebrow. “Ah,” she said. “Well, I just wanted to talk a little bit longer,” she said. “Find out more about you. I thought we could take the scenic route.”

“You could have just said that,” I replied. I stood stock still and took inventory, making sure I knew where my sword was, and that my dagger could be pulled from whatever place it was plausibly hidden in. The unicorn bones in my bandolier were my trump card. “And you know that I know there were only four turns, so I would have figured it out anyway.”

“Call it a test of how perceptive you are,” said Xorbus. She didn’t look hostile. “Raven is still mum on what you’re doing here.” She snorted. “‘Infohazard protocols’, that’s a fancy way of saying that she doesn’t want to have to tell anyone. Which is exactly what makes people stop taking infohazard protocols seriously, if you ask me.”
“So, are we going back?” I asked, pointing through the archway again.

“Sure,” she said, shifting her weight between her feet for a moment. “You’re not going to tell me anything about yourself?”

“I’m placing some trust in Raven,” I said with a shrug. I let my hand fall so that I’d have to expend less effort in drawing my blade. The shelves were going to be a problem, constraining my moves, and perhaps the dagger was a better bet. “If she doesn’t want to say, then I won’t spill the beans.”

“Spill the beans?” asked Xorbus. She let out a little laugh. “I’ve never heard that one. It’s clear enough, though.”

We were still standing in the intersection. She was supposed to be my guide, but she wasn’t moving yet.

“You know,” I said. “Where I come from, if someone leads you down the wrong path, it’s to an ambush, where they’re going to mug you, kill you, or worse. Those are the vibes I’m getting right now.”

Xorbus’ eyes widened at that. “By the grace of Skaduwee, where are you from?” She hurried past me, through the archway. “You should know that’s not really how it is in the Library.”

“Sorry,” I said, following after her and still on edge. “I guess we’ll wait to see how much Raven wants to fill you all in, but I’ve had a few attempts on my life in the past couple of months.”

“People don’t fight in the Library,” said Xorbus. She seemed offended. “People don’t even raise their voice unless they can’t help it.”

“Sorry,” I said again. “It’s … I’ve had a lot go wrong for me, and you trying to lead me down the wrong path just activated a lot of those thoughts. I’ve been ambushed before. A few times, actually. Some of them I didn’t come out in one piece.” Fenn, the thought thrummed in my head.

Xorbus turned around, and I almost ran into her. “I should be the one apologizing,” she said with a quick bow. “I don’t know what you’ve been told, but the situation at the Library is very difficult right now.” She looked me up and down. “Politically difficult, not violent. How much do you know? She was here training you, that much is clear, but why she expects that to pay dividends, I have no idea.”

“I’m a fast learner,” I said.

“It’ll take you years just to feel the schema,” said Xorbus. She turned back and began leading the way again. “Perhaps you have some background in mathematics or a similar field? Unlikely, if you’re a bone mage, but you never know.”

“No,” I said. “No background in mathematics.” No specialization in Mathematics either. Who would have guessed that skill might be useful? Not that it actually was, if I could skip ahead so effectively.

“Well, mystery man, we’ll see what you can do,” said Xorbus.

We eventually got to our final turn, which brought bright light from the vestibule. Most of the people who had been there for the reset had cleared out, either into the spherical houses toward the back or into the library, but there was a small core of people standing around a large desk that must have been pulled from somewhere, looking over a handful of papers.

“Rakon!” Raven called to me, and it took me a moment to realize that was the fake name that she’d
given me. A fake name seemed like a bit of paranoia, but I’d almost shanked one of her lieutenants for being nosy, so who was I to judge? I also realized that my ‘floating’ points were still in MEN, not SOC, since I hadn’t had an opportunity to change them. Per my soul, Library Magic was KNO and INS, so I had been trying to maximize gains while I leveled it up.

“Rakon,” said Raven as I came over. “You’ve met Entwell and Majom, this is Centh, Archist, and Paul.” She gestured quickly at three people whose names I was already forgetting. “We’re going over the initial surveys and trying to establish the basics of the schema.”

“I don’t know what you hope to accomplish bringing him in,” said Majom, the tall man who had some unspecified role in running this place. I noticed that the swirls of color on his arms had changed position. “I can’t possibly know, because you haven’t given us the first clue as to who he is.”

“Save it for later,” said Raven. “Rakon, do you have any insights into the schema?”

“Um,” I said, looking at the gathered people. “Probably nothing your people haven’t already found,” I said. Everyone was watching me. “The lowest level of division first appeared to be the number of periods in the text, or possibly full stops, since one of the books I looked at had a different sort of symbol -- sorry, I don’t know the parlance, you probably have names for everything. But I eventually found two books that had a lower division, since they were equal on periods or full stops, and there the division seemed to be by number of letters in the author’s first listed name.” I shrugged. “I guess I should say first author’s first listed name, but I wasn’t able to find examples to confirm or deny what happens when there’s more than one author or no author at all, or a pseudonym or something like that.” They had been watching me: now they were staring. “I believe the level up from that is probably distance of cover from edge of page, width-wise, but I could only find one boundary area for that, which made it a little more difficult to feel.”

I looked around at the silent faces. Based on the smug look on Raven’s face, apparently I had vindicated her.

“You coached him,” said Majom, frowning at me.

“No,” said Raven, shaking her head. “This is the reason that he’s here.”

“You’re talking about a few years worth of training distilled down into a half hour, maybe less,” said Majom. “That’s impossible.”

“It wasn’t for Uther,” said Entwell. She was staring at me with wide eyes.

“Who is this man?” asked Majom, turning to Raven. “Where did you find him?”

“The Isle of Poran,” said Raven. “I won’t say more. I think it should be clear that he’s an asset to us, and I want him working with us on the current iteration, both in helping to develop our understanding of the schema, and in directing our search for useful books.”

There was an uncomfortable silence around the table.

“Young?” asked Raven.

“Yes, Head Librarix,” said Majom. Nods of assent followed that. Consent of the governed, eh? Nobody seemed particularly happy about me being there or being given a position of power, not on such short notice and with the veil of secrecy that Raven had put up. They were obeying her command though, in spite of that unhappiness.

“Then let’s keep going,” said Raven, looking down at the papers in front of them. “Rakon, we’re
building up the schema right now from the sampling reports and initial surveys. We want to establish the highest levels of organization first, then continue down until we find at least some semblance of useful structure, something that will allow us to find the most relevant books. Obviously what we care most about is the publication date, but as of fifty years ago, we haven’t seen it show up in the schema without adulteration with other variables, making it less useful.” She looked to the others. “Do we have an upper bound on date?”

“598 FE,” said one of the people who had been introduced, and whose name I had promptly forgotten. He was tall for a halfling, but still stood on a small stool to make his height roughly equivalent to Raven’s. “That’s liable to change though, once the second wave crews come back.”

“That’s a significant increase,” said Raven, frowning slightly. She glanced at me.

“You’re the one that changed things,” said Majom. “I suppose we’re not going to hear a report?” I was watching him closely, and saw the coloration on his arms shift slightly. I wondered whether that was done automatically, or whether he controlled it.

“I believe I’ve dealt with the situation on the Isle of Poran,” said Raven. “I’ve also gotten some information on the cause of the infernal threat, which I believe should be neutralized, though we’ll see whether the books bear that out.”

“Neutralized?” asked Majom. “How? And what was the cause?”

“Need to know,” said Raven.

“I’d argue that we do have need to know,” said Majom. “If something were to happen to you, that information would die with you, and if you’re going to be making more trips into the Library, then it’s all the more important that we know what you know.”

“I understand,” said Raven with a nod. “But given that this is an existential threat to the infernals, I’m exercising caution in controlling who knows what. We’re talking about no less than the complete eradication of infernals from the hells.”

“You’re worried about leaks?” asked Majom. “If there are leaks, then they already know they’re at risk, and you know that they have their own interests in keeping Aerb a safe and stable place for the mortal populations.” He glanced at me. “How much does this one know?”

“I’ll have to talk with him later,” said Raven, looking at me with a frown. “He’s only been partially read in, but he knew quite a bit before I found him. He also knew a handful of things I was ignorant of.”

“And was he connected with whatever is killing the infernals en masse?” asked Majom. “Whatever has been causing problems there?”

“Need to know,” repeated Raven. “I won’t say it again. Infohazard protocols are in effect.”

Majom had a sour look on his face, but didn’t gainsay her.

“We’ll start looking for the bigger principles,” said Raven. “When we have a better schema, report to me, or when we have more firmly identifying metrics that we can begin a search on. From the look I had in the stacks, and initial reports, we’re probably looking at one or two levels of the schema being interleaved, and given the state the Library is, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was some schema divergence. For the time being, I need to speak with Rakon, in private, then prepare some remarks for Timothy’s memorial.”
“And the staples?” asked Xorbus. “Should we start looking for them?”

Raven hesitated. “Yes,” she said. “I suppose so. Obviously they should be grabbed if anyone happens to spot them. Divert one of the second wave teams when they return.” She made a ‘come hither’ gesture to me, then turned and walked away without waiting for my response. I gave the others an apologetic look, then followed after.

“You did well,” she said in a low voice once we were out of earshot.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sorry if my being here is causing you problems.”

“There are always problems, in never-ending supply,” said Raven. “At least the current problem isn’t the imminent end of the world. 598 FE is far more breathing room than I had hoped to buy us when I left, but I hadn’t known how many of our problems would end up being connected to each other.”

“Are these political problems something I should worry about?” I asked.

“No,” said Raven. “I’ll explain more, in due time, but the fact that you’re who you are is still settling in my head, and I don’t want to say anything before it has. I’m not sure that telling the full truth about you would be the smart thing to do.”

We were heading to the spherical adobe houses. Raven’s legs were shorter than mine by a fair bit, but she was putting on enough speed that I had to hurry to keep pace with her. Her voice was level, but she seemed pissed off.

“Does it take much longer for things to settle in your head, given what race you are?” I asked.

“Race?” asked Raven, turning back to look at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Sorry,” I said. “Species.”

“Oh,” replied Raven. “In the normal case, yes, but I was one of Uther’s Knights, and that provided me with some level of compensation, especially as the years went on, until eventually I was able to understand and adapt faster than any human could. That’s less true now.”

“Alright,” I said. “I just didn’t want to make any kind of faux pas because I haven’t read up enough on your species.”

All the spherical houses were clustered together, with their shells overlapping so they shared walls. Based on the fact that some of the shells didn’t have entryways, it seemed likely that some of these ‘houses’ had more than one shell to them. Raven went to one of them and opened the wooden door, which was small enough that I had to hurry to keep pace with her. Her voice was level, but she seemed pissed off.

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“This is my home,” said Raven, gesturing around the place. I saw a surprising amount of plants around us, set in various pots and sitting on shelves next to the porthole windows. Most of the furnishings in Raven’s home were rustic, with clear marks on the frames and shelves where the wood had been cut with a handaxe, and obvious stitches on the blankets that covered her bed. There was a small kitchen in a separate shell to the side, with a beaten copper kettle sitting on a stove, though the kitchen area was so small I imagined that she ate most of her meals in a different part of the vestibule. The main space held her bed and a chair with a glowing orb above it, which provided most of the light. Off to one side, another, larger shell held a table with a number of chairs.

“It’s cozy,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “Made by entad, naturally, since if we had to haul materials in here you can be
assured we’d have done something else.”

“It’s nice,” I said.

“I’ve seen the conditions you live in,” replied Raven. “You don’t need to flatter me.”

“It’s not flattery,” I said. “To be honest, I find Bethel’s style to be a little bit on the ostentatious side.”

“Either way,” said Raven. She moved to what I might have called the dining room, save for the fact that I didn’t think she did much dining there. “I didn’t bring you here to talk about amenities, I brought you here to talk about your needs.” She sat down in a chair, and gestured for me to do the same.

“My needs?” I asked as I took the chair. “In no particular order, I’d like to find a solution that would allow us to release the locus from the entad it’s trapped within, I’d like to find whatever book or books Amaryllis has written me, and I want to know as much as there is to know about either finding Uther or dealing with Fel Seed. Before any of that, I want to learn the lost art of Spirit, which will help prevent me from going crazy and killing everyone.”

“Tall orders,” said Raven.

“Having seen some of the scope of the problem, I’m inclined to agree,” I said. “Half of what you were saying about the Library I didn’t even understand. If necessary, I can stay for more time, after the shift change.”

“Removing you from time apparently greatly increased the odds of Aerb’s survival,” said Raven. “Beyond that, I’m planning to leave with you, so long as I’m still wanted. It might take longer than a week and a half to get my affairs in order. Having you stay here longer is, so far as I’m concerned, probably a good thing.”

“Most of the times the world ended weren’t my fault,” I said with a faint smile. “I mean, you can’t pin them on me.”

“Certainly,” said Raven, rubbing her face. She didn’t seem to find the humor in it. “Sorry,” she said, on seeing my face fall. “We’ve been working long hours, and the time I spent within Kuum Doona was stressful.”

“I can imagine,” I said. I shifted around in my seat. “So where do we start?”

“We can start with the historical books,” Raven sighed. “Those are always easier, since their parameters are more known. As I’ve said, I have someone preparing information on Fel Seed already. We likely won’t have the books on hand, but we’ll have them indexed as completely as is feasible.”

“Meaning that you wrote down a bunch of metrics to find them better?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Raven.

“Any chance that you’d have indexed the Second Empire’s research efforts on the loci?” I asked.

“Possibly, but unlikely,” said Raven. “No one has had any cause to go looking for them, given they’ve been assumed eradicated for centuries. I should warn you that late into the Second Empire, it was standard practice to lace classified documents with cognitohazards.”

“What, really?” I asked. “Memetic kill agents on the front cover?”
“It was one of the ways they handled security clearances,” said Raven with a nod. “There were methods of inoculation for them, some of which have been lost to time, making those books especially dangerous. Usually they would be tucked into a designated corner on every page, rather than the cover.”

“Well, shit,” I said. I slumped slightly. “Meaning that even if I did find a dossier with everything that they learned about the loci, it might drive me insane to look at.”

“No, most likely it would kill you outright,” said Raven. “Some would induce a headache that takes a few hours to recover from and prevents reading, but for the truly secret things, they would use memes that were instantly lethal if you weren’t inoculated, or if not instantly lethal, then powerful enough to make you catatonic, with death from starvation or dehydration following days or weeks later.”

“Sure,” I said with a nod. All stuff that was part of SCP and therefore Long Stairs. Looks like more made it in from that campaign than I thought. “But you can help me?”

“How much longer do you need for your Knack to fully take effect?” asked Raven.

“Two days or so,” I said. “I should be at the equivalent of eight years experience by the end of today, and the equivalent of twelve years by the end of tomorrow. That’s a rough estimate, anyway, it’s different every time.”

“Okay,” sighed Raven. “You can handle yourself in the stacks?”

“I should be able to,” I said. I paused. “I should say, when Xorbus was taking me back, she -- she?”

“She,” nodded Raven.

“She tried to divert me away from the most direct path, as though I wouldn’t notice. I didn’t outright accuse her of taking me to an ambush site, but that’s what it felt like to me,” I said.

“That’s because you’ve lived a life like Uther’s,” said Raven. “He was like that too, in the beginning. When people try to kill you on a weekly basis, you start treating everyone like a potential assassin. It took him some time to unlearn the habit. It can sour relationships in a hurry.”

“Okay,” I said. “I just thought that you should know.”

“Appreciated,” said Raven. “Come back here once you’re done in the stacks.”

“I could use company,” I said. “It goes faster with a teacher, someone to point me in the right direction, at least once I’m over the initial hump.”

“I have too much going on here,” said Raven. “I’ll get someone to help you though. Perhaps Entwell. She’s been better about this than the other senior staff.” I assumed ‘this’ meant my sudden appearance.

“Okay,” I said. “And when I’m done for the day, maybe we’ll have a chance to talk about less serious things.”

“Perhaps,” said Raven. When I left, she was still sitting at the table, drumming her fingers and lost in thought.

“Let’s get the jargon out of the way first,” said Entwell as we walked the stacks together. We each
held one of the torches, which gave us poor light. My eye kept being drawn to the bulge beneath her blouse, which was definitely not from a pregnancy, but too pronounced to make me think of anything else. “‘Symbol’ is what we say when we’re talking about an individual representational glyph. ‘Symbol sequencing’, or just ‘sequencing’ is the order that the Library has chosen for those symbols, which these days is different each time.”

“And what does that look like?” I asked.

“Right now?” asked Entwell. “No idea, it’s part of figuring out the schema. Back when the Library was first discovered, symbol sequencing was always the same, with the order roughly mapping to what Uther called the UPA, Universal Phonetic Alphabet, with non-phonetic languages having their own, separate order to them. Languages that don’t map to phonetics are rare, but they do exist, and those languages have been used to write books, which means they’re here. During the time of the Second Empire, the Library’s symbol sequencing mutated -- mutations, that’s what we call changes to the breadth and depth of schema parameters, as distinct from a mere reset of the schema into a different configuration -- and the sequence was mathematically reordered from UPA standard, guessable if you had half of the order in place. Nowadays though, it’s essentially random.”

“So you’re saying that instead of being alphabetical, order is just totally random, but the order is consistent across the Library?” I asked. “Instead of ABCDE, it might be ADCEB?”

“Yes and no,” said Entwell. “We also have to deal with what we call ‘schema divergence’, or just ‘divergence’. Let’s say that the first-order division split the Library into books before or during 0 FE and books after 0 FE, just as an example. Well, if the schema is divergent, then it’s possible that sequencing is different for the two halves of the library.”

I groaned. “Ugh. That’s just … so unnecessarily convoluted.”

Entwell laughed. “It is. It’s the price you pay for trying to mess with the Library,” she said. “If the job were easy, or the Library were resilient, then perhaps we would be doing more out there in the real world. There’s a reason that we have a policy of non-intervention unless the world is at risk.”

A policy that both Uther and the Second Empire didn’t appear to have. “None of that jargon seems to be so bad,” I said.

“I don’t think it is,” said Entwell. “But we wouldn’t want you getting lost. And I should say that the intervention side of things has its own systems, most of which you won’t need to know about. Will you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not here for good though. I assume when I leave, that’s going to count as intervention?”

“Depends on what you do on the outside,” said Entwell. “Majom is in charge of the Library side of intervention.” I assumed someone else was in charge of the Aerb side, enacting plans that Majom and his people whipped up.

“And what’s your specialty?” I asked.

“My title is Head Schematrix,” said Entwell with a little laugh. “We all tend to do a bit of everything though, and we have our teams to do whatever is needed at the particular moment. Strictly speaking, I’m of a high enough rank that I shouldn’t be teaching a rank amateur, but you’re obviously not a rank amateur. Beyond that, I imagine that Raven’s hoping that I’ll land on her ‘side’ if I spend some time with you.”
“Assuming that I do well,” I said. I reached out and touched the spine of a book. “Should we begin?”

“Certainly,” said Entwell. “Grab whichever book catches your fancy, then let’s go to a different section of the library. If you want to feel the differences in the schema, sometimes that’s the easiest way to do it. You can get a feel for why a book doesn’t belong in a foreign place, which gets you to higher parts of the schema. Come, this way.”

I plucked a book from the shelf, *Tales of Moderation*, then followed her, trying to feel the place of the book as well as I could.

“So you’re like Uther?” she asked. “Clearly the connection to Raven is suggestive.”

“I don’t think Raven really wants me to talk about it,” I said.

“But do you want to talk about it?” asked Entwell.

“Not really,” I said. “I mean, I don’t see as much need to keep silent, but Raven is in charge here, and it would be disrespectful to ignore her wishes, I think.”

“Fine, fine,” said Entwell. “We don’t get much in the way of visitors, as you might understand, and librarians are curious sorts, as a general rule. Besides that, of course, all the problems that come from being an insular community.” She stopped, looked at the books around us. “Here,” she said. “Tell me why the book doesn’t belong here.”

I looked around us, opened the book I was carrying, and turned the pages a bit. Books had a ‘feel’ to them, an extrasensory something that gave the sense of information being just a turn of the page away. I was quite familiar with extra senses by this point, but Library Magic was a bit weird, because it felt like the information was being subtly nudged into my head. The others were more along the lines of tacked-on awareness, things that had been grafted onto my sensorium (to use Bethel’s word).

*Tales of Moderation* -- no, this copy of *Tales of Moderation* -- didn’t belong in this aisle. It was off somehow, but when I tried to probe that feeling of wrongness, what I got back was only a number, too abstract to make sense of.

“The number is, uh, too small?” I asked.

“And what does the number represent?” asked Entwell, folding her hands behind her like a prim schoolmarm. It made the bulge at her front more prominent. It briefly occurred to me that she might be a member of the species where the females absorbed the subsentient males.

“I’ve never been good with numbers,” I replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Try to feel it,” said Entwell. “If you’re progressing as quickly as Raven thinks you are, perhaps you’ll be able to work it out.”

I tried to feel the number. It wasn’t *just* a number, obviously, it held meaning, but it wasn’t like feeling the widths of the pages, or the number of periods in a book, it was more mathematical than that. I teased at it, trying to get deeper into the meaning, and something clicked in my head as the number split in two.

**Skill increased: Library Magic lvl 9!**

“Oh,” I said. “It’s two numbers multiplied with each other.”
“Is it multiplication?” asked Entwell, watching me. “Or something else?”

I felt at the number again, splitting it down. “Uh, no, subtraction,” I replied.

**Skill increased: Library Magic lvl 10!**

**New Virtue: Open Book!**

I immediately closed my eyes and waited the three seconds in order to get to the Virtues tab. I was surprised by how quickly the skill up had come, but I wasn’t about to complain. Skills (arguably) improved faster when I was being actively trained, but it was hard to quantify how much that active training helped.

**Open Book: You gain an intuitive sense of all schema-relevant metrics in any book you handle.**

I opened my eyes and looked at Entwell. “Huh,” I said. “I, uh, think that I might be able to help you with the schema.”

“But where are these insights coming from?” asked Majom.

We were back at the big table, and I was touching the book with my right hand and writing with my left. I had been right-handed, back on Earth, but the Ambidexterity virtue had made it so that I used left and right without it really mattering. I still preferred my right hand, but it was on an intellectual level, not a motor/coordination level.

“I’m special,” I said. “That’s one of the reasons that Raven brought me here. I don’t know what level of the schema these metrics are important at, and I don’t know whether some of them might only be important in divergent cases, but according to what I feel, these metrics are the ones that are relevant to the current schema. It should hopefully help you narrow things down.”

“That’s not how Library Magic works,” said Majom.

“Yes,” I said. “I know. But I have this information, and I think that it might be able to help narrow things down.”

“If we can trust it,” said Majom, crossing his arms.

“Yes,” I said. “I know. But I have this information, and I think that it might be able to help narrow things down.”

“If we can trust it,” said Majom, crossing his arms.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m not asking you to take it on faith.” I finished writing down the last of the accessible metrics and looked over the list. There were forty-seven in total. I tried to think about that in terms of information theory and bits of specificity. Breaking down the books by sequence ordering meant that you were already separating them into hundreds if not thousands of buckets. Dividing them by print number would narrow it down even more. Even if there were, as a conservative upper bound, a hundred billion books, you would only need something like thirty binary splits to uniquely identify each of them, and these weren’t binary splits, they were at a much higher order than that.

But as I thought about it some more, I realized that wasn’t quite right, because it wasn’t like random generation, which very, very rarely generated hash collisions, because the metrics had almost nothing to do with random chance. The distributions were the way that they were because of printing and binding technologies, the standard power laws that governed letter distribution, languages, and author’s names, and all sorts of other things like that. Maybe you really did need that many divisions.

“It looks good,” said Entwell, peering over my shoulder. “No idea if it’s accurate, but it doesn’t seem like it’s necessarily inaccurate, and I’m sure you’ll agree that Rakon has written down things that match the information collected thus far. Otherwise you would have said something.” That last bit
was directed to Majom.

“I suppose,” said Majom.

“It probably doesn’t save you much time, no,” I said. “Since you still need to know which levels
the metrics are on and where the divergences are.”

“It’ll save a few hundred man-hours if it’s correct,” said Majom. He was staring at me, and the
colored skin on his arms was swirling.

“Hopefully it is,” I said. “I don’t really have a way to verify it, it just … came to me. I was going to
go back in with Entwell now. It was my hope that maybe I could learn a bit more before the day is
done.” The hole in the dome was letting in considerably less light.

I couldn’t decide whether Open Book was a better or worse lvl 10 virtue than the ones I’d had
before. On the one hand, saving a hundred man-hours was great. On the other hand, it was a skill
that was only really useful in this specific place, and only when the library had just reset, and all it
really did was help save on labor.

I had often wondered how balanced the skills were. The short answer was ‘they’re not’, but the
longer answer was that even the bad ones had something to them, especially as the levels increased.
At the back of my mind was this feeling that if Library Magic was only useful in this one place, and I
was only going to be here for a week, then it had better be really, really good to justify its place as
one of my forty skills. I wasn’t sure whether that was going to bear out though.

“I think it’s time we talked about interleaving,” said Entwell as we made our way back. “Though at
the rate you’re going, I almost suspect that you could tell me all about it.”

“I do have a guess,” I said slowly.

“Oh?” asked Entwell. She smiled at me. “Do tell.”

“Well, to interleave is to alternate between two things, right?” I asked.

“No,” said Entwell. “I mean, yes, in the sense that we use it, but I don’t know where you would
possibly have heard it before. An interleaf is an extra page in a book, usually blank, often a
consequence of the printing process.”

“Oh,” I said. I had no idea whether that etymology was from Aerb or Earth. Either way, I felt like I
had just given myself away. “Well, uh, I’m not sure where I picked it up.”

“You’re right though,” said Entwell. “The schema defines the order of the books, but sometimes
parts of the schema are interleaved, alternated one after the other, or in more complex arrangements.”

“Okay,” I said, frowning a bit. “So, say that you had a shelf of three hundred books, and it was triple
interleaved, the books might be, in order, 1, 101, 201, 2, 102, 202, 3, and so on?”

“If I didn’t know better, I would agree that Raven had coached you,” said Entwell with a smile.

“I have some familiarity with the concepts used,” I said with a shrug. “And I’m …” I was going to
say special. “I have certain talents.”

“Apparently so,” she replied with a smile.
I made it to the soft cap of lvl 20 before the end of the day, at which point I had an instinctive feel for the books and their place within the schema. I would still need the catalog that the librarians were in the middle of constructing, and probably a map (also under construction), but I had a good feel for the Library. I hadn’t read a single book, nor was I really flipping through them anymore, but I supposed that reading would come later on. I was eager to hit lvl 30, where, if historical precedent was anything to go by, another virtue was waiting for me, this one far more powerful than Open Book.

The hole in the dome stopped giving us any light, and it was strangely devoid of stars or moon, so the entirety of the vestibule was lit by the everburning torches and whatever light was coming from the adobe houses at the vestibule’s edge. Entwell took me to the largest of the spheres, which turned out to be a dining hall with long tables crammed inside it. I looked around for a kitchen but could find none, and in fact, there didn’t seem to be any connections to this one large room. That puzzled me for a moment, until I saw the bowls filled with a colorful pudding-like substance being moved around the tables, each of them with a large serving spoon in it. I supposed there wasn’t much need for a kitchen if that was what you were going to eat.

Entwell found us a seat at the table, with people I didn’t know, and spooned some of the goop onto my plate.

“It’s called miraculous,” she said. “The bowls can feed a hundred fifty people three square meals a day, as nutritious as regular food is and suited to any of the varied diets of the mortal species.” She grinned as she served up more to me.

I looked skeptically at the goop on my plate. The consistency seemed, from a poke of my spoon (the only utensil we were given), to be somewhere between pudding and whipped cream. The color was an off-putting bright red, almost neon. I looked around, and saw people staring at me expectantly, some of them with smiles on their face.

I was worried about poison. I had taken the bracelet that gave poison immunity, but I was still worried about poison, because if you were clever, you could probably poison your way around the entad, or set up a ward to shut it down.

Thinking back to my interaction with Xorbus, I realized that maybe I was a deeply damaged individual with no trust in anyone but my core group of companions, and even them not that much. Maybe I was subconsciously thinking of what happened to Fenn, now that I had stuck my neck out to be with these people against the advice of Amaryllis. I took a moment to relax myself and remember that if someone wanted to poison me, it probably wouldn’t be here. I had just seen the Miraculous taken from a communal bowl, after all.

I took a small spoonful of the ‘miraculous’ and put it into my mouth.

“What does it taste like?” asked Entwell with a smile on her face.

“Um,” I said, quickly swallowing down a mouthful. “Nothing much.”

“Oh?” she asked, still smiling. “Unusual, that. I’ll bet you that the next bite tastes like roast chicken.”

People were still watching me. I took another small spoonful and slipped it into my mouth, and then spat it right back out onto the plate. It hadn’t just tasted of roast chicken, it had the texture of it too.
On the plate, it just looked like the same bright red stuff, covered with my saliva.

“The hells?” I asked, looking around to the sound of laughter.

“Oh, come now,” said Entwell. “Harmless fun. It’s tradition. We didn’t even get mean with it.”

“Yet,” said a gnome sitting on a booster seat next to her.

“I don’t understand,” I said, looking at the plates around me. “It’s something different every time?”

“That’s not quite the trick,” said Entwell. She still had that same knowing smile.

“You’re supposed to be clever,” said a goblin sitting across from us. “Can you figure it out?”

I looked down at the miraculous. So, it’s a challenge then. First bite had been nothing, second bite had been roast chicken, then what would third bite be? Did the taste and feel of the miraculous change when someone said something out loud?

I leaned in close to my plate. “Chocolate,” I said in a soft but firm voice.

Entwell laughed, as did some of the others, but when I put a spoonful in my mouth, it tasted like chocolate and felt like chocolate chips.

“Close?” I asked.

“Close,” nodded Entwell.

Close, but not correct. “Ah, then it’s based on expectation?” I asked.

“Try it,” said Entwell with a nod.

I lifted up another spoonful of miraculous. I expect you to taste like … something they don’t have on Aerb. Twizzlers. I put the spoon in my mouth, and as soon as it touched my tongue, the texture and shape had transformed. I chewed away at it, quite pleased with myself, but I saw Entwell looking at me with a raised eyebrow, as though I had missed a trick.

She leaned in close to me.

“Broccoli,” she said.

The Twizzlers immediately changed into broccoli, right while I was in mid-chew, the taste completely different and texture off. For a brief moment, it was like I was eating the two together.

“Ah,” I said once I had swallowed it down. “Then it’s just whatever food you’re thinking about. You primed me with roast chicken.”

“You get half marks for deduction,” said Entwell.

“Wait,” I said. “So what happens if someone thinks about snot?”

Half the people around us began gagging, spitting miraculous back onto their plates. Entwell gave a mad laugh at that, and I heard others join her, mostly tittering.

“If that were a real infohazard, you would be dead,” said Raven from behind us. I hadn’t heard her approach. When I looked back at her, she was standing there in her robe, with it fluttering slightly behind her, arms crossed over her chest. “Everyone here should be able to eat the miraculous without
being bothered by what they hear. Words are symbols, and you should be able to dissociate symbols from meaning and prevent them from spurring trains of thought. There are cognitohazards in the library, those which slowly kill you as you think of them. You shouldn’t be spitting out your food when some new recruit talks about snot, you should continue eating while resisting the urge to think about what he said.” Her voice was hard.

The whole dining hall had gone silent.

“For a long time, this Library has been my calling,” said Raven. “It’s been the place in the world that I could do the most good. With that said, my calling has changed in the past few days. When Rakon leaves, I’m going to be leaving with him. I don’t want what we’ve built here to crumble.”

“Leaving?” asked Majom from across the dining hall. He’d stood up from his chair. “Just like that?”

“Yes,” said Raven with a firm nod. It would have had more weight if she hadn’t been so short and so young. I imagined that she had been struggling against that for quite some time. “Sometimes the pendulum of the world shifts, and we must shift with it. Once we’re past the most intensive part of the current reset, I’ll start talking with all of you individually about what roles and responsibilities might look like once I’m gone.”

She turned and walked out of the dining hall when she was finished, which caused the librarians to burst into fervent conversation. I was getting a lot of looks my way, naturally.

“What’s this all about?” asked Entwell, leaning in close to me.

I sighed. “It has to do with the good future,” I said. “I really can’t say more. I probably shouldn’t have even said that.”

“The good future?” asked the goblin across from us. “Won’t work.”

“We don’t know that,” said Entwell.

“Uther tried it,” the goblin replied. “I know he looks impressive, but this runt here has nothing on Uther. Every time Uther got a good-enough future, it turned out that the exclusions were in play, or there was something else that the Library can’t account for. Something out there isn’t going to let us have a good future.”

“So we’re just destined to be a stopgap measure until the end of time?” asked one of the librarians.

“No,” replied the goblin. “We’re a stopgap until we’ve got no support system left, until we lose too much personnel, or until the end is coming too fast for the Library to do any damned good.”

“Xenxares, that’s too grim,” said Entwell.

He shrugged and ate a mouthful of miraculous. “It’s a sensible thing to think.”

Entwell turned to me. “And you’re a part of salvation?” she asked. Her eyes were wide.

“I hope so,” I replied, because I didn’t feel like I could hold my silence in the face of the desperation on her face.

When I went to Raven’s home, she had finally changed out of her adventuring gear, with the black robe and banded mail gone, replaced with something cream-colored that looked more like a bathrobe. When I saw that her hair was wet, I realized that it was a bathrobe.
“Sorry, I dropped the ball,” said Raven. “I was going to have a home cast for you, but with everything that’s been going on, it slipped my mind. You can take my bed, if you’d like. I’ll get a change of sheets.”

“And you’ll sleep -- ah, right,” I said.

“The bed is mostly for meditation,” said Raven. “I can count the number of times I’ve slept in the last five hundred years on one hand.”

“How?” I asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I don’t actually know how,” said Raven. “It was a side effect of us being expelled from the Land of Dreams. I think that the Lord of Dreams was trying his best to make sure that we wouldn’t ever return.”

“That one’s not in the history books,” I said. “I mean, I know that the plane of dreams is excluded, but I’ve read all the most popular biographies, and there’s no mention of who or what caused the exclusion.”

“It’s not actually excluded,” said Raven. “The Lord of Dreams simply shut the usual pathways. It has nothing to do with the exclusionary principle.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well. At least you got a perk out of it?”

Raven nodded. “It was far more of a boon for me than for the others. Before that, I had used a magical blanket of Uther’s that cut the amount of sleep I needed down, but I would still be out for days at a time. Sometimes entire adventures would happen while I slept, which as you can understand, is troublesome for an archivist.” She waved a hand. “All ancient history, of course.”

“Maybe,” I said. “We sometimes take our tours through history.”

Raven frowned, then turned away from me and began stripping the sheets from her bed. “Water closet is through the kitchen, if you need it. There’s a shower with warm water too. I assume you made it through dinner without further problems?”

“ Mostly,” I said. “People talked. I asked about someone who seemed to have a disability, which I apparently shouldn’t have done.”

“Some of the librarians get hit with memetic hazards,” said Raven. “We have a few counter-memes, but they’re like firing a shotgun at someone wrestling with a mountain lion, almost as likely to kill the person you’re trying to save as to rescue them, and it leaves wounds in the psyche. Was it Reus?”

“Maybe,” I said. “It was awkward. Other than that, I tried my best not to tell them anything when they inevitably asked. I think they have their suspicions, but … I don’t know. This is your domain, not mine, and I’m trying not to step on your toes.”

Raven finished pulling the sheets off the bed, folded them up, and put them in a small basket that she pulled from a storage place under the bedframe. From a different basket, she pulled clean sheets, and began putting them on.

“I thought you would be more similar to him,” she finally said, as she was smoothing the sheets down.

“Oh?” I asked.
She turned around to look at me. “You yield,” she said. “You defer.”

“And he didn’t,” I said with a nod. “He would just barrel ahead and fuck what anyone else thinks.”

Raven frowned at the f-word. “It worked out well for him.”

“I guess,” I said. “I could point to his failures, but you knew him better than most.”

“There were plenty of failures,” said Raven, nodding. “That’s one of the things that gets papered over. People will say, with a straight face, that Uther never once lost.”

“Your father said that,” I replied.

“I keep forgetting that you met him,” said Raven. She hesitated, then sat down on the bed, settling in. “How was he?”

“Fine,” I said. “Obsessive, tried to trap me using excluded magic, kidnapped Val … maybe fine is overselling it. Amaryllis thought that he was probably obsessive because of you, and I’m inclined to agree.”

“He didn’t like me running off,” said Raven, sighing. “When I met Uther … I was twenty years into being twelve years old. It’s hard, for our species, harder than for almost any other. I was a baby for a hundred years, if you can wrap your head around that.”

“I can’t, really,” I said.

“There’s a weight that comes with time, certainly, so it’s not the same, but it’s close. To say that my father, in his forties, was watching his twelve year old daughter run off with a strange man in his twenties … well, it’s not accurate, but it’s not wholly inaccurate either.” She sighed. “It took me a long time to have any misgivings about leaving. It wasn’t until after Uther was gone, actually. My father and I reconnected a bit, but it was still strained.”

“Can I ask why you went with Uther?” I asked.

“I was a kid,” said Raven with a weak smile. “I wanted adventures, and he was at the point in his career where it was clear that was what was on offer. I didn’t track him down, like some of the others did, but we had a chance encounter in a library, and … I suppose what you’ve said puts a rather different light on things. I never did get a straight answer from him about why he took me along. I suppose he was told to.”

“Not necessarily,” I said. I cleared my throat. “It’s possible that Uther’s Knack was something different from what I have. And, ah, there’s something I haven’t said yet, which is that you bear a very close resemblance to a girl we used to play with.”

“I do?” asked Raven.

“I wish that I could show you somehow, but I’m not terribly good at art, and it would just look like you anyway,” I said. *Two years younger though.* “Her name was Maddie. One of the characters she played was named Raven.”

Raven stared at me. “Oh,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“So Uther knew who I was, when he saw me?” asked Raven. “That -- I’m going to have to think
about that.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m keeping you up, I’m going to go find a quiet place to read and do some work.”

“Do you want to change first?” I asked.

“Oh,” she replied, looking down at her bath robe, then up at me. “Right. Could you … ?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll just step outside.” I felt myself unexpectedly flustered, and slipped out of her home before I could do or say anything to embarrass myself.

It was hard to untangle my thoughts. Raven reminded me of Maddie, in more ways than one, but there were a few places that they were completely different from one another. It was hard to picture Maddie as ever being a leader, even one that wasn’t suited to the task. Maybe the difference was the point.

One of the interesting things about comparing how Arthur and I had found Aerb was thinking about whether things were meant for him or me. Perhaps Arthur’s life had been ruled by the narrative, and perhaps he’d only thought that it was, but there were kingdoms, people, and scenarios that looked like they had been constructed in order to be part of his story. But my experience of Aerb wasn’t just that of someone journeying through the remnants of someone else’s old save file, because there were elements of Aerb I was pretty sure had been crafted to say something to me, challenges that I was supposed to meet.

Had the Dungeon Master setup everything with Arthur in preparation for me to come along five hundred years later? It was possible, but I didn’t think it was likely, mostly because there was so much random bullshit through the entirety of Uther’s life that I didn’t think even a fraction of it was ever going to be relevant to me. But that meant that some parts of Aerb were made with Arthur in mind, and some parts were made with me in mind, and how could anyone tell which was which? More to the point, what about those parts of Aerb where Arthur’s experience and my own overlapped, as with Raven?

I didn’t have any idea. It seemed like it made the most sense to simply treat Raven as her own person, rather than a pawn in the Dungeon Master’s plans. That was how I tried (and sometimes failed) to treat everyone else.

“Done,” said Raven, coming out the door and startling me from my reverie. She was dressed in her cloak once again, allowing it to ripple behind her. “I think everything should be in order. Come find me if you need more.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” said Raven. “I use my home for meetings and little else. The room with the table has heavy wards on it.”

“Ah,” I said. I wanted to say more to her, but I still hadn’t switched over the SOC points, and that was my excuse for feeling like everything was weird and awkward. “Can I ask, did you ever have cat ears?”

Raven looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “Yes,” she said. “When Uther first met me.” She swallowed. “I’m not sure how you know that.” I didn’t know what to say to that, which she took as an invitation to continue. “I didn’t like being Ell, didn’t like feeling like I was going to be little forever when big things were happening, and so I got it into my head that I wanted to be an Animalia instead. A cat, specifically. It’s mortifying, of course, but it was just one of a string of those incidents, as it often is with my kind. We’re slow to outgrow our mistakes.”
“But you do?” I asked.

Raven smiled at me. “Oh yes. I haven’t worn cat ears in at least twenty years,” she said.

When I woke up in the morning, there were books waiting for me, and along with them, an old man with eels for a beard.

They weren’t technically eels. Male zildin kept their tadpole-like young on their face, each one of them attached to a small, nipple-like growth. Unlike a tadpole though, these weren’t actually young zildin, because they were unfertilized, and wouldn’t grow until they had been swallowed by the female of the species and incubated in her womb sac. I still felt comfortable calling them eels, because that’s what they looked like, each no bigger than a pinky, packed in tight and moving like kelp beneath the sea. The number and health of eels on a zildin male’s face said a lot about him to female zildin; too many on a young man was a signal that there was something wrong with him, while too few were a sign that he was either careless or had so many young that he wouldn’t be able to do his fair share in caring for them.

He introduced himself as Pinno, and came into Raven’s home, bobbing his head slightly as he walked, which made the eels on his face writhe around. I wasn’t an expert in zildin, despite being their initial designer, but the eels looked healthy to me, and there were a lot of them (though I didn’t know if there were too many). Eel-beard aside, he was bald, with dark blue skin and bumpy ridges where eyebrows were on a human. He was hunched slightly, with spindly arms, and had a stack of books bound together with a leather strap, carried over his shoulder, with a small cane in the other hand. He sat down at the table like he wasn’t going to be moving for awhile. I sat down across from him.

“So,” he said. “How much do you know about Fel Seed?” he asked.

I thought about that. “I’ve read his entry in The Exclusionary Principle,” I said. “That’s about it.” (This was not even remotely true.)


“Seventh,” I replied. “I wasn’t aware that it had changed much between editions.”

“Bits and pieces,” said Pinno. “I actually contributed to the first edition, long ago, the one written by the Lost King.”

I could believe that; zildin were one of the longer-lived species. “You knew him then?” I asked.

“Some,” replied Pinno. “More through his works than in person. I believe myself to have read everything the man ever wrote, even those works that never made it to the masses. Word is that you might have some connection to him.”

“I might,” I said evenly. “Right now, I’m more concerned with Fel Seed and how to beat him.”

“Yes, yes,” said Pinno, patting his pile of books. “So, seventh edition? Let’s start there then.” He slid a book across to me. “This is the twentieth edition.”

“Twentieth?” I asked as I picked it up. “Oh, from the future?”

“From a future that didn’t happen,” said Pinno, nodding. “Reset five-six-two-four. It’s written in the inside cover, along with a few details. We can be the beneficiaries of their trials and tribulations. To wit, they had the most successful attempt against Fel Seed we’ve ever seen, and that’s across
“hundreds of resets.”


“They used a combination of entads and magics,” said Pinno. “The biggest problem with killing him is that you need to kill almost everything in the zone, all at once. The entity we call ‘Fel Seed’ is in fact just an avatar of the phenomenon, capable of being ‘regrown’ or ‘expressed’ from any of the biological lacework that covers and is buried beneath the zone, from spores in the air, from his flesh beasts, or from any of his brides.”

“You have to kill the brides too,” I said.

“Yes,” nodded Pinno. “Obviously they are, so far as anyone can tell, innocents in all this, and it’s regrettable, but on average, death would send them to a gentler hell than Fel Seed’s domain, assuming you couldn’t retrieve their souls. So yes, the brides need to die, if you want to kill Fel Seed, but … you know that he breeds them?”

I swallowed and nodded.

“It wasn’t mentioned in the seventh edition, I didn’t think,” said Pinno. “It’s not a secret, per se, but around the time it became clear that nothing was ever going to be done about Fel Seed, the language started to be toned down a bit in the interests of keeping morale high.”

“Toned down by whom?” I asked.

“The editors,” replied Pinno with a shrug. “A reaction to the abject despair that some people felt over the exclusion zones, I suppose, especially that one. A sugared truth isn’t uncommon in the books of the Library, that’s one of the things that makes our job difficult.” He pointed to the book in front of me. “Would you like some time to read, or would you rather trust me to distill it down?”

“Go ahead,” I replied.

“Well,” said Pinno. “It started with a ward against Fel Seed’s magic around the entirety of the exclusion zone.” I stared at him with my mouth agape, and I could see a smile beneath his eel-beard. “Yes, impressive, isn’t it?”

“I was under the impression that five warders working at once was as much as anyone had done,” I said. “And even that takes a huge toll and can only cover, at most, a small town.” Or a mile-wide extradimensional space within a bottle. “Fel Seed’s zone is enormous.”

“Yes,” replied Pinno with a nod. “Eighty-two thousand square miles, the largest of them. They used a trick, as you might expect. The normal limitations of collective warding were surpassed by having them all submit to an entity known as Thargox, who marshalled four thousand warders together and drained them all of their concordance. Even then, the organizing authority -- the Fifth Empire, though it didn’t go by that name -- knew that it was a temporary ward, something that would stop Fel Seed from using his particular brand of magic, but which wouldn’t kill him outright. In that, they failed, and it’s instructive as to Fel Seed’s capabilities without his magic, but getting to that stage without four thousand warders and whatever Thargox happens to be is a tall order.”

“You don’t know Thargox?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” replied Pinno. “The name appears in that text as though it’s a common enough entity or concept that it needs only a brief explanation, but we never found a full explanation in that reset, and I don’t believe we’ve ever seen another mention of it, which means that it might be something
specific to that future."

“I only ask because I met Thargox a few days ago,” I said, not sure whether or not I should share that.

“You did?” asked Pinno. His eyebrow bumps raised slightly. More disconcertingly, his eel-beard started moving around a lot more, with the eels making a fleshy sound as they slapped against each other. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I said. “I didn’t get much information on what it was, but I spoke with an entity by that name. It was communicating through an entad.”

“I see,” said Pinno. “Then … we could actually make that plan work.”

“Except that it didn’t work,” I replied.

“No,” replied Pinno. “It didn’t. The relevant section in that book is a chronicle of their failure. To me, it reads as a civilization saying, ‘we tried, dammit’, but perhaps it’s just the author asserting as much, to assuage his own conscience.”

“And how did it not work?” I asked.

“Fel Seed is, ultimately, biological,” said Pinno. “The thought was that with the magic suppressed, all that would need to be done was to kill everything in the zone. They brought weapons to bear on the surface of the zone, weapons that would probably have been excluded in the real world, scarring the surface down to bedrock. That might have been all well and good for cleansing the countryside, but the City of a Thousand Brides was a tougher nut to crack. I have some books here on it, classified ones from the Second Empire, but apparently Fel Seed has or had warders of his own, either captured from assaulting forces, taken in one of his ‘expansions’, or less likely, captured by cultists or cultists themselves. The Fifth Empire knew all that, so it sent in thousands of trained magi equipped with the most powerful entads they had. Fel Seed -- the avatar of Fel Seed -- came to meet them on the field of battle, moving fast, but still well within the limits of what’s possible with flesh and bone, cutting people down, but still only with the power of keratinous claws. And of course his flesh beasts joined him, but they were lesser too, only physically perfect killing machines, with none of his magic on top of that.”

I frowned, trying to picture it. A massed battle of magic users and tens of thousands of entads, all with their unique effects? In my mind, it was like someone threw all the special effects on screen at one. “And then … let me guess, Fel Seed pulled out another trick?”

“He pulled out a great many of them,” said Pinno. “There are caverns beneath Thousand Brides, visible only with the most extreme examples of clairvoyant ability. Those caverns disgorged massive armies of flesh beasts more fearsome than any seen before. Novel poisons were released from flesh-flowers, clouding the air. A large flesh-mast became erect and sprayed hundreds of gallons of acid into the sky, which came down like rain on the invading army. The army had prepared, and sealed themselves off from the outside world as much as possible, not so much as letting unfiltered air touch their skin.” He sighed. “Again, they had better magic and technology than we will likely ever have, things which would likely be excluded, but which they’d somehow managed to rein in temporarily. But no, it didn’t end up mattering that much, because they still failed. When the losses began to grow, when too many warders were dying trying to remove the wards throughout Thousand Brides, the Fifth Empire called in their ultimate weapon of last resort. They tore a hole through space and time, destroying Thousand Brides utterly and killing thousands of their own. Someone, somehow, convinced Aarde to get off his butt and confirm that there was no living thing left in the entire zone. I don’t know who got the god to owe them a favor, but that was what they spent it on.”
I frowned. “Okay … so what happened? You already said it was a failure.”

“Fel Seed came back,” replied Pinno with a humorless laugh. His eel-beard wriggled. “They had reason to think that Fel Seed would be completely dead if he couldn’t regenerate his avatar, or move himself into a new one, because the explicit magic that’s excluded doesn’t appear to come with any governing intelligence to it. Fel Seed the entity is just … well, someone or something using that magic for effective immortality and to take sadistic pleasure from the world. Even if another person came into the zone later on, once the magic was back, and began to practice it, they might turn into a monster, but they wouldn’t be Fel Seed. Only when he returned, that’s who he was, the same entity he’d always been, ready to retake the battle zone and rebuild his City.”

“But they had theories as to what happened, right?” I asked.

“Of course,” replied Pinno. “It’s hard to say whether those theories are correct though. The one put forward in that book is that Fel Seed imprinted his mind onto one of the magi, or possibly many of them, through unknown means, perhaps one of the entads that had been used in an earlier assassination attempt and claimed by him, or some other novel method. Then later, once the ward had inevitably fallen and the magic had returned to the zone, the imprinted person had simply walked back in and started up again.”

“But if he could do that, he could send out agents,” I said. “Right? If he could do that, then he could have done it before they made a giant costly attack on him.”

“Yes,” nodded Pinno. “We do know that he sends out survivors, on rare occasions, to tell the world about him. Anything he’s touched with his magic can’t escape the exclusion zone, which is one of the reasons that any attempt on his life is a suicide mission, but it’s entirely possible that the survivors are sleeper agents who are technically untouched by his magic but perverted by other means. The anolia would likely be able to detect it on screening, but perhaps not.” (Anolia was the proper name for the lizardfolk that could see into someone’s soul without actually being soul mages themselves. I had run into one of their kind back in Parsmont.)

I rubbed my face some as I tried to take all that in. “And that’s the most successful attempt anyone has ever made?” I asked. “Jesus.”

“Jesus?” asked Pinno.

“Just something I say when I’m irritated,” I replied. “Fel Seed really can’t be beat.”

“I don’t believe I ever said that,” replied Pinno. “Are you going to give up so easily? Raven had told me that you were determined.”

“I am,” I said. “I mean, I just don’t think … for my purposes, I don’t need to actually kill him, just incapacitate him for bit, and I don’t think that I can just stick a bag over his head.”

“A bag?” asked Pinno.

“Long story,” I said. “Sorry, I’m just getting unfocused here, the scope of the problem is bigger than I thought it would be, and I had already thought it would be really, really big.”

“Those are precisely the sorts of problems we librarians like to deal with,” said Pinno with a little nod that excited his eels.

“So how would you do it?” I asked. “If you had to deal with Fel Seed, or at least incapacitate him … how? He doesn’t have any weaknesses.”
“His weaknesses are unclear,” replied Pinno. “That doesn’t mean that they don’t exist. Every attempt at killing him has failed, whether it be poison, radiation, kinetics, acid, memetics, anti-memetics, attacks against his soul, if he even has one -- nothing has worked. So then, if I were putting my full effort into killing him, I would try something that hasn’t been tried in the past, or scale up efforts that seemed to hold promise.”

“Okay,” I said. I looked at the book in front of me, thinking of the failure it recorded, then over at the pile of books that Pinno had brought. “Okay,” I said again. “I guess I’ll get to reading. Show me what else you have.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Skill increased: Library Magic lvl 30!**

**New Virtue: Bookish Instinct!**

*Bookish Instinct:* Through focused meditation, you can learn the qualities of the book you’re looking for, so long as it exists within the library, and so long as the quality is part of the current schema. The more qualities of the book you know, the easier it is to learn more. If multiple books have the specified qualities, you will learn how many books there are with those qualities, and may meditate to distinguish them.

It took four days to get there, far longer than I had hoped, but still far faster than anyone could have reasonably expected of me. As usual, the distance between 20 and 30 was far, far greater than the distance between 10 and 20, but I was aided somewhat by the fact that I had the foremost experts in Library Magic actively teaching me, and by the fact that I was doing actual, useful library work.

Most of the first two or three days after the reset were fully devoted to the schema, working out the meaning behind the specific paths, untangling where the interleaving was occurring, and trying to find the places that the schema ‘diverged’. Once there was a skeletal schema in place, the bulk of the librarians shifted their efforts to the collection and reading of useful books. This process started with the ‘staples’, books that were almost certain to be written and published in the future and were largely consistent across timelines (and could thus be compared with one another). New editions of old books were one of the most common staples, but to my surprise, the librarians also had people writing books specifically for the Library.

“Doesn’t that hurt the Library?” I asked Raven one night. We’d begun having little chats in her home after dinner, the same as we had on my first full day, though not always focused on the Library.

“It would, if we had any active hand in it,” said Raven. “There’s a whole field of Library-responsiveness, which is actually one of my specialties, in part because I was there for Uther’s initial experience with it. We use the word ‘hurts’, but what we really mean is that there are changes in the Library structure or schema that make it more difficult for us to use.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “And I’ve already picked up from Majom that one of the principles of intervention is that any response to the Library should be systemic rather than specific.”

“Point intervention was the first thing we tried,” said Raven. “I can’t remember who came up with systemic intervention as a solution. Perhaps it was Vervain.”

“Hrm,” I said. *The Dungeon Master explaining the rules, perhaps? Or just the wizened wizard knowing too many things?*

“There are thought to be two reasons,” said Raven. “First, systemic interventions, by which we mean reshaping the world, are less likely to require further intervention.”

“Feed a man a fish, teach a man to fish, sure,” I said.

“Excuse me?” asked Raven with a frown.
“Oh come on,” I said. “How did that one never make it over?”

“I refuse to believe that everything Uther ever said was plagiarized from Earth,” said Raven with a frown. “Explain the expression?”

“It was the shortened form,” I said. “Feed a man a fish, you keep him fed for a day, teach a man to fish, you keep him fed for the rest of his life. It’s partly about dependency and self-sufficiency, but it’s also about permanent solutions rather than temporary ones.”

“Then yes, it’s apt,” said Raven. She cleared her throat. “Uther had a similar saying, actually, but it was with regards to keeping a cow fed.” She looked off to the distance a moment. “At any rate, yes, the Library tends to have less of a negative reaction to fundamental changes to the world, for whatever reason. Assassinating a king will cause substantial changes that are slow to fade, but fomenting revolt will usually cause only a ripple, so far as we can tell what causes what.”

I pursed my lips. Obviously, at the highest level, the Dungeon Master was responsible for the difficulties inherent in using the Library. But on a lower level, there was probably some governing rule or intelligence to what caused changes to the Library.

“Have you heard of i-factor analysis?” asked Raven.


“Impact factor analysis,” said Raven. “It’s part of entad studies at Speculation and Scrutiny.” She held out her hand, and a book appeared in it, courtesy of one of the entads she wore -- the same one that Bethel had copied all the books from. As with most of the books I’d seen her pull out, this one had a number of fabric bookmarks in it. It reminded me of Amaryllis going crazy with Post-It tabs. She cleared her throat and began to read. “Once the metric has been applied to a sample population of entads, it becomes clear that i-factor follows a power law, with high i-factor entads being more and more rare as i-factor increases.”

She paused for a moment, skipping ahead. “However, this difference is not accounted for by distribution of effects alone, and in fact appears to only be fully explained by a combination of usage restrictions, timing restrictions, and identity restrictions. These restrictions occur in various entads at exactly the rates necessary to ensure rough adherence to the power law, despite the distribution of raw effects following its own quixotic pattern.” She looked up at me. “Translated, there’s some apparent force at work which limits entads such that they can’t be too strong, and it’s not along the lines you would expect. Given our recent conversations, I believe I have a better understanding of what that force is. It’s the same force that decides on exclusions, the same force that sabotages attempts at using the Library, and likely the same force that’s responsible for the designs of the schema. It’s all interconnected. You can explain a lot about schema responsiveness by just looking at i-factor. I actually think that I might start working on a new i-factor metric for timeline changes, which seems like it would explain a lot, but I’d have to include caveats about what’s actually ‘important’.”

“Eh,” I said. “I mean, yes, I do agree that you can see the Dungeon Master’s fingerprints in a few places, but so far as I’ve seen, his style is to farm things out or create some organizing principle that acts as an immutable law. Amaryllis thought it was odd that Aerb’s technological development was so far behind Earth’s, and yes, there are factors that you could point to for that, but most of the answer is that the Infinite Library is staffed by librarians who are actively working to prevent technological advancement, and that kicks the can further down the road to the four-factor explanation for why technology is typically disastrous or misguided, and then that probably has some explanation as well, like meme-eating entities, infovores, or something else.”

“So you don’t think that he directly interferes?” asked Raven.
“No, he definitely does,” I replied. “He’s a meddler. But … okay, can you imagine sitting there and designing a *billion* entads?”

“Yes,” said Raven with a nod.

I smiled. “Right, of course, but you probably wouldn’t want to, not if you were more concerned with small-scale groups of people. You would instead figure out a way to automate it, or if you couldn’t, you would get someone else to do it. Right?”

“I suppose,” replied Raven. “But what does that mean in relation to the Library and the ways that we’re forced to interact with the world to keep it useable?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Only that perhaps there *are* rules, just rules that we haven’t discovered yet, or that might be theoretically undiscoverable from our position.”

“‘We’ and ‘our’ so soon?” asked Raven. She gave me a faint smile and a raised eyebrow.

“Oh,” I said. I shrugged. “I don’t know, being here has been … good, I guess. Miraculous took some getting used to, but it at least makes the meals interesting. The people here have a sort of obsessiveness that I identify with.”

“They’re trying to save the world,” said Raven, tilting her head to the side a bit in the same way that Maddie used to do, but just a touch less exaggerated.

“Yes and no,” I replied. “I mean yes, they’re perpetually trying to save the world, but most of the people you’ve recruited here have this, I don’t know, this *frisson* toward what they’re doing. There are people who very obviously love the schema for the schema’s sake, who care about the books and the timelines, and all sorts of other stuff. They’re excited. It’s nice.”

It was how I’d usually felt about DMing, especially in the planning stages. I would be sketching out a small village that the players were going to in the next session, and lose myself in adding detail and embellishments, putting in an inn and giving it some history, thinking about the people who lived there and what they were like. And then, of course, the party would breeze through it with barely a thought, not knowing or caring about all the stuff in the background, but that was okay, because it wasn’t really that much about the game, it was about the act of creation. (Besides, if no one saw the things I had planned, they could get recycled later.)

“Are you going to miss it?” I asked Raven, who had gone quiet.

“No,” she replied. “Maybe if I had been a junior librarian, but no, I took it upon myself to lead the efforts here, to keep things on track and the inner devils away, and that’s taken too much time and effort. I’ll be glad to be gone, frankly, now that I’m needed elsewhere.” She sat in silence for a moment. “That’s the first time I’ve said that out loud.” Her eyes met mine. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“Of course,” I said. “Are they going to be able to keep it together without you?”

“I dearly hope so,” said Raven. She stood up from where she’d been sitting. “I’ll leave you to your meditation then?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m narrowing it down. I might go get the first one tonight, actually, if I think I have enough to go on.”

Raven nodded. “Let me know if you want company. Usually we do teams of two, but you’re considerably more well-equipped and well-trained than the average librarian, at least when it comes to physical prowess.”
In reality, I was better at Library Magic than almost anyone in the Library, with very few exceptions, both because of my advanced rate of learning, and because of my unique virtues that gave me substantial shortcuts. The meditation virtue wasn’t quite a card catalog, but it meant that I could learn what was on offer, rather than doing the usual method of making guesses and then going into the stacks to look around in the right general area.

Meditating was painfully slow, and slowed down more whenever I thought about how slow it was (because it meant that I was derailed from the actual meditation), but I had a good deal of information on the book(s) that Amaryllis was writing, courtesy of some conversations that she’d had with Raven before we left, and the necessary pieces that I didn’t have had slotted into place, coming as epiphanies in the midst of meditation.

_A Cypress Waits, First Printing_, by Amaryllis Penndraig, was eight and a half inches tall, five and three quarters inches wide, written primarily in a font called Carrington, set at 11 point. It was written in Third Empire Anglish. It consisted of three hundred and one pages, with 80,931 words. There were 2,988 full stops. The right margin on right-hand pages was 68 em. Two copies had been printed, both at the same time, with issue following soon after, all on the same day, 26th Akkers of 528 FE. The subject matter, per the Library’s reckoning, was ‘Personal’. The most common proper noun was ‘Juniper’.

I knew all this, and much more, before I ever laid eyes on the book.

The vestibule had day and night, with light coming in through the hole in the dome, but the same couldn’t really be said for the Library itself, as there were no windows, and not so much as a hint of anything shining through from beyond its walls. It wasn’t too uncommon for teams to go through the Library at ‘night’, especially during crunch time, but the librarians had settled on working during the day as the default, and so there was less in the way of hustle and bustle as I went through the open door in late evening, grabbed myself a torch, and set off to find Amaryllis’ book.

The Library had hazards. There were places where, in accordance with the schema, the books went vertically, stacked on top of each other, sometimes precariously. Similarly, there were places where the floor went at such a steep grade that you were climbing rather than walking, and the books around you weren’t necessarily put in the walls with an eye toward keeping them in place. There were places where the hallways became more like tunnels, usually large enough for a human to squeeze through, but it was possible to get stuck or trapped. Beyond that, while the Library typically segregated out physically hazardous books, it was imprecise in how it did this, and I had been told, repeatedly, that I should run the other way if I ever smelled ammonia. (Fire, the other big hazard when you had a billion books in close proximity, wasn’t a natural occurrence, but it did happen from time to time, and was one of the few things that called for an immediate reset.)

I walked a full mile until I got to where _A Cypress Waits, First Printing_ awaited me. The shelves went sixty feet up to the ceiling, and it took a bit of climbing to get up there. I had to make footholds and handholds by pushing books off, sending them fluttering down to the floor below me. My everburning torch was slipped through my belt, giving me terrible light to see by, which made the climb all the more difficult. I finally found the book, right where the schema and my intensive meditation had said it would be, a relatively slender book whose color was the same glacial blue of Amaryllis’ eyes. With a sigh of relief, I half-climbed and half-fell down to the library floor, landing among the books I’d knocked off.

Not wanting to waste time, I set the torch on a shelf to give me light, and began to read.

_Juniper,”_
I hope that you’re able to find this book, otherwise none of what I’ve been doing will mean anything to anyone.

I don’t know if you’ve thought about what it’s like being outside the library. I’m going to be here, in this future that won’t matter, until the end of the world. It’s been a few months now, long enough that I know you’re not coming back, which means that what I’m experiencing right now must be the future that the Library is predicting, rather than actual reality.

It feels real to me.

If we assume that the entirety of Aerb and all its connected planes are a simulation running on some vast computing substrate, there would be a few different ways to implement the Library.

The first, most costly method, would be for the Library to do a complete simulation of Aerb for however many years it takes until there are no books. Such a simulation would have to take into account planar clairvoyance and travel, which would mean simulating all of the hells and every connected plane, save for the Library itself. However much computing power it takes to run the simulation, running the Library this way would increase it by several orders of magnitude, because hundreds of simulation-years would get added on each time anyone went into or out of the Library.

The second, less costly method, would be to somehow generate all of the books without actually having to simulate the world itself. My computer programming is lacking, given that I haven’t invented computers yet, but I can imagine stopping the simulation and generating a horde of book-writing homunculi to extrapolate from what was available. They would need to be clever homunculi, able to keep all of their books internally consistent and consistent with each other, and they would need to be powerful, capable of peering into the inner thoughts of frozen people and understanding as much as everyone who ever wrote a book understood, but I have to imagine that would take considerably less computing power.

The third, extremely cheap method would be to not actually generate any books until they’re read by a real person in the Library. After all, the Library is so vast that most of the books in it will never be read by anyone, so an efficient implementation would simply have the book-writing gremlins on standby, waiting until the moment the information is needed. Perhaps, if they have the ability to see the future, they would write all the books that people will read ahead of time. That would reduce the number of books needed from millions or billions down to hundreds.

But as I’ve said, it feels real to me. Perhaps I’m some book-writing gremlin, only pretending to be Amaryllis because Amaryllis would have written a book, but I would have no way to prove that to you one way or another. I can only tell you how it feels.

I’ve done my best not to let the fact that I’m living in a doomed timeline affect my outlook or my work. I took what you said to heart and have proceeded with the understanding that the Dungeon Master is challenging me, rather than shutting me down completely. Raven understood that I would probably write a book, and cautioned me against specific attempts at using ‘future’ information to bootstrap. She issued no particular warnings against writing books in general though, and gave me some advice on how best to go about writing something for you, and while I won’t be writing with the intent to give instructions to my past, alternate, or unsimulated selves, I will be chronicling what I’ve been doing.

Summarizing a three hundred page book would be difficult enough if it were a coherent narrative, but what Amaryllis had prepared for me was a combination of journal, research notes, political observations, and management log. It was all impeccably organized, of course, but I got the sense that it wasn’t a book written “for” someone, it was a book that was compiled from notes that had
been made to serve some other primary purpose. That made sense, I supposed, because Amaryllis was busy with her work and dedicating a significant chunk of time to make the book more fully-edited wasn’t a good use of her resources.

Some highlights:

- The first group of tuung had hatched, and were undergoing accelerated training. The enhancements to my companions had apparently remained in my absence, even though I had no access to their souls along the soul-lines, which meant that Bethel was able to leverage her enormous magical powers to generate huge amounts of spare time, which then went into massive, spatially compact sub-structures. She apparently didn’t take much enjoyment from having what was effectively a small town inside her, but she went along with it. She had merged with Ropey shortly after I had failed to come back, which put her on a more even keel, at least according to Amaryllis.
- Pallida joined the Council of Arches, filling the empty seventh seat. Amaryllis didn’t seem terribly pleased about it, but given the fact that four of the seven members were needed for a quorum, it was necessary. Fenn had died, leaving that seat permanently empty, and I was ‘in the Library’, which took out another. That should have left five of the seven, but reality wasn’t so kind.
- Grak had insisted that if I was going to be permanently absent, he should be allowed to take his share of the gold and return to Darili Irid. Amaryllis had reluctantly agreed, and they had all made a trip together (Bethel excluded). Amaryllis described a mausoleum, with the stale stench of death hanging in the air. After Grak had laid the gold down and warded it, he had attempted ritual suicide by cutting through his neck with his axe. Amaryllis had stopped him before he could kill himself, but things had been a little bit fraught. Eventually, Valencia had intervened and arranged another dwarf as krin for him, but she had also insisted that Grak no longer live in the house, as it was “contributing to his depression”. He refused to attend Council sessions.
- Amaryllis had moved ahead with her Earth exploitation endeavors, perhaps emboldened by the fact that she was living in a “doomed” timeline. She engaged in some ethically questionable television testing using volunteer tuung and worked out several solutions to the Couch Potato problem, but none that she thought would survive reverse engineering. She had labs set up within Bethel for other projects as well, most notably for growing plants, with screening procedures and tests for anomalous properties. Beyond that, she was working on incremental improvements to existing Aerbian designs, and building factories on the Isle of Poran to put out better products than were available anywhere else.
- Valencia worked closely with Uniquities, and eventually a plan was put together for a “lessening” of the hells. With me gone, her progress had mostly stopped, meaning that she didn’t have enough killing power to fully depopulate the hells, but surgical strikes against key players in infernal politics managed to make improvements in the conditions of the mortals trapped there without inciting a full-on infernal unification. (She also married Jorge, our contact from Uniquities, five months after they’d first met, which, uh, might have been explainable without her using her powers, maybe. Amaryllis agreed that either way, it was inadvisable.)
- Solace changed back into her five-year-old crantek body, with the addition of small horns, but aside from that, sequestered herself within the bottle, coming out for Council sessions and little else. Somewhat surprisingly, she was able to find some common ground with Heshnel, despite their places on opposite sides of the Second Empire. Heshnel eventually moved into the bottle with her. Amaryllis characterized it as being a relationship founded on a mutual belief that the “doomed timeline” was, if not pointless, then at least not worth putting maximal effort into.

Once I had gotten as much from it as I thought I could, I stuck it into my pack and headed back
toward the vestibule. I had a long night of meditation ahead of me.

When I’d first gone looking for the book that Amaryllis had written, I had tried the meditation with her name and a general time range alone. It had come to me, like an epiphany, that there were dozens of books matching my request. Initially, I had thought that Amaryllis had done a larger print run, but no, the books were spread out over time, two copies each year, from 528 FE to 596 FE.

Raven set the copy of *A Cypress Waits, First Printing* down, then pinched the bridge of her nose.

“This is a problem,” she said.

“You knew that she was going to write a book,” I replied. “It’s my understanding that you helped her with it?”

“I gave her some broad guidelines and information, yes,” said Raven. “I knew that she was going to write a book, and I didn’t want her to pollute the Library like the Second Empire did, nor did I want her to waste time and effort because of the Library, but this … this is a complete guide from her, to herself, about the future, and there are so many of them. It’s going to be a massive distortion.”

“Me leaving was already a massive distortion,” I said.

“No,” replied Raven. “Generally speaking, pulling people into the Library, while it might drastically change the future, doesn’t count against us, at least not by itself.”


“As with so many things, we don’t know,” replied Raven. “We know that attempting to change the course of history through systemic measures is better than point measures, and we know that choke points are more favorable than stable periods, but there’s so much that we don’t know about what the Library does or does not respond to, which is one of the reasons we are, as you’ve pointed out in the past, conservative.”

I frowned, trying to work out a theory. “Okay,” I finally said. “Can I put forward a potential mechanism?”

“Sure,” said Raven with a shrug. “I’ll only be mildly upset if it’s something that we missed.”

“Well, okay,” I said. “Imagine that you could simulate the entirety of Aerb and all of the planes, aside from the Infinite Library itself.”

“That’s simulation theory, yes,” said Raven. “We had thought of that. It was one of the first things that Uther considered.”

“Okay, so, imagine that you have the ability to run the world forward a thousand times, or a hundred thousand times, or … whatever. Enough that you could do statistical analysis on it. For that to be useful, the universe would have to be non-deterministic, or at the very least, your simulations would. From there you would be able to make some measure of a person’s impact on the world, because you would be able to simulate the universe with them, and then simulate the universe without them, and look at the differences in what’s statistically likely to happen.” I grabbed a nearby piece of paper and made a little drawing on it, one of a simple bell curve. “Do you ever meddle in elections?”

“No typically,” said Raven, which wasn’t a no.

“Well, imagine that this graph is election outcomes,” I said. I drew a line roughly in the middle.
“Let’s say that 51% of the time it’s candidate A, and 49% candidate B, with negligible votes for third parties or write-ins.” I tapped the paper with the pencil. “So, let’s say that I get ejected from the Library, and I went to change that election. The Library could then run a second set of simulations, which would give a statistical distribution of the election, and maybe a third set of simulations where I was ejected from the Library roughly the same as I went in with no future knowledge, and compare all those against each other.”

“You would only need two sets,” replied Raven. “One set where you were altered by the Library, one where you weren’t.”

“Sure,” I said. “And you would also have to compensate for the fact that I went into the Library but came out without memories, which would drastically change what I would do even absent any actual change in knowledge, so … right, anyway, you could compare your data sets and then look at the election, and your measure of how much it had changed would be a measure of the impact that the Library had on actual reality, regardless of what actually happened in reality. Right?”

“Right,” Raven said slowly. “I’ll admit that it’s novel, but I’m not sure that it’s useful, given that we can’t actually run such simulations, or know what it is we’ve changed.”

“Oh, I’m not suggesting that the simulations are actually run, you could do practically the same thing with good enough predictors that took into account enough information,” I said. Despite myself, I was getting a bit excited. It felt like I was close to cracking open something important. “You wouldn’t need to simulate the entirety of reality unless you actually cared about all of reality. Obviously the hypothetical change detection process wouldn’t just care about the outcome of a single election, but you could have the equivalent of a market basket or something like that. And the important takeaway is that it doesn’t actually matter how much you change the future, it only matters how much you alter the probabilities of the events. And my guess is that domino effects are on your side, in terms of accounting.”

“Domino?” asked Raven.

“Uh, causal chains?” I asked.

“Ah,” she said. She folded her arms. “It’s a theory, certainly.”

“But you don’t think it’s right?” I asked. “I’ll admit that there are a lot of questions about implementation, which I’ve kind of hand-waved away, and which is probably really important, but it roughly fits with the general rules that you’ve outlined. One of the reasons that iteratively grabbing information from the future is bad is that it massively swings probabilities, because it’s creating information from nothing, at least from the Library’s perspective, which would be a huge improbability without the Library’s help. Just shooting some politician in the head to swing an election is, basically, moving the needle from 51% to 0%, but working behind the scenes to help secure the victory with a groundswell of support might look more naturalistic and map more cleanly to the winning percentages.”

“Okay,” said Raven. She shrugged. “Let’s say you’ve convinced me. What do we do with that information?”

“Well, for one thing, we can definitely advise Amaryllis,” I said. “We can become our own predictors of what is and is not probable to have happened without future information, and act in accordance with the highest probabilities for how we would have behaved. I mean, you still need to deal with the butterfly effect, but –”

“Butterfly magic is excluded,” said Raven, cutting in.
I stared at her for a moment. I had a skill in my soul, Butterfly Magic, which was excluded, but I didn’t actually know what it did. “Explain the butterfly effect to me?”

Raven gave me a curious look. “Butterfly mages were capable of altering probabilities,” she said. “They usually traveled with cages of butterflies and released them at specific times and places to attain the effects that they wanted in ways that weren’t obvious to anyone else.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. “I was using the phrase colloquially, it’s an Earth expression that must have been used as the basis for the magic system.” It sounded like something out of my ‘make idioms into magic’ phase, but I didn’t remember it. “Regardless, you would have to worry about all the effects, and the effects of the effects, and so on. Assuming that the Library does care about probabilities, then it would be a matter of the specific way that it cares.”

“I’m against giving Amaryllis that book,” said Raven. “I’m against giving her any of them. Even if I’m not going to be head librarian for much longer, I have a duty to this place, and it could be a valuable asset for you, just like it was a valuable asset for Uther, once he got a handle on it. If we hadn’t gone from two years left to one hundred twenty left, I would probably order you to stop reading them as well, but they might have information in them that’s too valuable for us to ignore.”

I didn’t particularly like her saying that she would order me, but we both knew that I wasn’t really her subordinate here, as much as I had been trying to pretend that I was for her sake.

“I’m going to go out and find the others,” I said. “I think given how long it takes me to get the metrics and then translate that into a physical location using the schema, I can do one a day until it’s time for the shift change, but there are still things that I need before we go. Have you had any luck in locating a book that can teach me Spirit?”

“I’m working on it,” said Raven, grimacing slightly. “That far in the past, prior to the printing press, there are far, far fewer books, but there are also more languages, some of them no longer spoken. I might have to divert your meditation, if we can’t find them the old fashioned way, but we would still need enough to go on.”

A Cypress Waits, Seventh Printing, 535 FE:

Juniper,

Another year passed, another book for you. I don’t know how many of these books will end up finding you, if any. They are, in some ways, messages in bottles, cast out into the ocean with a faint hope that they manage to reach someone willing to read.

Because of this, I’ve tried to organize these books with the assumption that you haven’t read the others. I’ve also done my best to cut things down to the essentials, though I imagine that the early years will remain the most important, given how wildly things will diverge with you back in the picture. I find myself reducing chapters down to pages, and pages down to paragraphs, then paragraphs down to single sentences, until finally the sentence gets removed too, and it’s like it never was.

These prefaces are, or have become, an indulgence. This is my yearly time to reflect on you. I stopped making the morning modifications to myself earlier this year. It surprised me how strong the trend toward the old baseline was. You were the love of my life, and you slipped through my fingers like sand. I know that you probably don’t want to hear that, given how little time has passed for you, but I’ve spent seven years in this doomed timeline now, nine if you count time in the chamber, and I think that I deserve to speak my piece.
I think about going into the Library, from time to time. There are librarians still left in the world, going about their business, and now that we’ve reached an agreement with the Doris Finches, I think I might be able to find them. I don’t know what I would find in the Library though. Perhaps it would be oblivion. In my nightmares, I step into the Library to find it littered with bodies from some calamity that came and went seven years ago, and your body is among them, not divinely protected after all. I wake up sweating and crying, and Pallida holds me until I fall back asleep.

We’ve accomplished so much that I’ve had to increase my ambitions. The Republic of Miunun has joined the Empire of Common Cause and become an economic powerhouse, the leading light of what people are calling the Golden Wave. We’ve managed to keep the greater threats at bay, though I don’t know whether that’s because the Dungeon Master is going easy on us, or because our clever solutions were just that clever. I very recently made a play for Anglecynn, and I’m still waiting to see how that pans out. My identity has been public for a long time, and I’ve been gathering allies for even longer. It’s the first time I’ve felt nervous in a very long time, which should tell you something about how well things have been going. The rest of this book goes into detail, naturally.

I miss you. I wish that you could share in my triumphs. I’m hopeful that the other me, the real one, will get that some day. There are things that I wish I could say to her that I would only say in confidence, and this book can’t possibly be considered secure. No book can, so long as the Library exists. We could have done one-time pads, if I had thought about it, and I could certainly figure out an encryption scheme that I would understand, but I don’t think that’s a particularly good use of my time, nor do I think I would take the advice in the spirit in which it was intended.

As for you, Juniper, know that I love you. There’s a part of me that wants to be soppy and romantic, and say that I’m doing all of this for you, but of course the truth is that I’m doing my best to keep my world alive and I would smash your head in with a hammer if it would accomplish that. You always liked that about me, didn’t you?

A Cypress Waits, Twentieth Printing, 548 FE

Juniper,

Twenty years is longer than I expected to last. I was nineteen when I signed up for this, and now I’m nearing fifty.

This was finally the year that Pallida left. As a natural consequence of that, the Council of Arches can no longer make a quorum, meaning that we had effectively no power over the Republic of Miunun anymore. As with Pallida leaving, it was a long time coming. The tuung citizenry tried to get us to stay, first with pleas and then with threats, but there wasn’t much to hold us there any longer. I’ll be taking a portion of the profits from their industry in perpetuity, which was cause for some tension, but I put years of my life into developing the Republic, and I consider that money well-earned.

We’re in Anglecynn now. They’ve been calling me the Returned Queen for quite a while now, but it appears possible that we might be able to make that name a reality in the future. Anglecynn is five hundred years overdue for a rewriting of the constitution, and I’m the best candidate for the position of monarch. That would give me an unprecedented amount of power within the Empire of Common Cause. People might be more frightened if I appeared to be building a dynasty, but I’m childless, and beyond that, I’ve managed to appear scrupulously fair in both my political and business dealings.

That said, my personal life is in shambles. I have hard-working, competent staff, but few close friends. Solace barely speaks to me, or to anyone else, and she’s made offhand mentions of Zorisad
Yosivun, which would be likely to kill her. Valencia is still in the process of fostering whatever children the state will allow her and Jorge to take in, with her side career as a killer of infernals only occasionally relevant when they’re caught violating the Compact. And Bethel, who helps me write these, has ascended to the level where she doesn’t get much from our conversations (a list of entads, their sources, and effects is in appendix B).

I don’t want you to think that I’m not happy. If I’m remembering you right, you might blame yourself for leaving me in this situation. The truth is, neither of us was fully aware of what it would be like for me to inhabit a doomed timeline, nor did we think it would last so long. I will say that my happiness is muted, more satisfaction at the way my plans have fallen into place than actual joy or contentment. It’s sufficient.

The following is for my younger self. She’ll know how to decode it. I’ll leave it to her whether or not to share it with you.

I hope that you’re well.

A Cypress Waits, Thirty-second Printing, 560 FE

Juniper,

Barring a complete rewriting of the foundational agreements that created the Empire of Common Cause, I’ve ascended as high as I can possibly go. There’s more power to accumulate, but it seems it will have to be through careful maneuvering and political frog-boiling rather than any moves to bigger and better things.

I hold three positions: Queen of Anglecynn, Secretary General of the Empire of Common Cause, and Commander of the Imperial Defense Force. The anolia can’t see my skill as a soul mage, likely because it comes from your soul, not from mine, though I try not to use the skill very much, given how much of a liability it might be. I’ve also spent a good third of my life in the time chamber at this point, making me fifty by the records, seventy by my own accounting, and with the body of a thirty-year-old.

Time is going to catch up with me soon, as my soul succumbs to senescence. I have another few decades before it happens, but I already feel twice doomed, a doomed woman living in a doomed timeline. Unfortunately for us, Valencia is growing old too, and the Compact with the hells won’t outlive her. I’m starting to understand how you feel about death, how you might prefer torture to oblivion. There are practical reasons to prefer oblivion; I know too much, and hold no illusions about resisting the devils and demons as they try to torture or coerce it out of me. I’ve had Valencia as a friend for long enough to know better.

I’ve lost faith that these books are of any practical use to you. The only sign of the Dungeon Master that remains in this world is in the abilities that we were gifted with, and in Bethel’s link to Earth, but the gifts are entirely static, and the backpack’s functionality is, to quote Bethel, ‘stale’. The rejection notes from it still come back on yellow legal pad, still in your handwriting, but they only say ‘no’, with no customization. The timeline isn’t just doomed, it’s been abandoned by the closest thing to a true god we ever had. I suppose that’s still useful, as it offers some way to measure whether and how the Dungeon Master interferes, but I’d be hard-pressed to believe he hasn’t thought of that.
How can these books be of any use when the whole universe is just going through the motions? How can we depend on them when there’s no narrative in this doomed world? Everything around me exists only for the purpose of producing written works for you, a small fraction of which you’ll actually see. The Dungeon Master has no greater purpose for this world, and apparently sees no point in actually being here.

My prediction, should you actually read this book, is that things will diverge so quickly and so wildly that almost everything written here is functionally useless.

The following is for my younger self. She’ll know how to decode it. I’ll leave it to her whether or not to share it with you.


All my love.

A Cypress Waits, Final Printing, 596 FE

Juniper,

The title is, I’ll admit, on the pessimistic side. I might be able to eke out another few years. I can see into my soul though, and I’ve seen the clear signs of deterioration. There are memories that have simply vanished, skills that have gone soft faster than they should have, and a pallor that hangs over the entire thing. If I’m not dead this time next year, then I probably won’t be in a state to write another book for you.

I don’t know how much longer the world has left either. Our policy of Void Beast redirection has come to a head much sooner than thought. Sixteen of the elemental planes are completely gone, impacting all manner of magic, and two of those happened in the past year. Unrelatedly, it seems that the infernals are preparing for an assault on the surface, a likely result of our Compact bringing them into closer cooperation, though infernal unification never lasts long, and we’ve been starving them of good leaders for decades. They’ll wait until Valencia is dead, but she’s eighty-six years old now, and healing magic doesn’t work on her. There are talks of bringing her to Fel Seed, if that helps give you a sign of how dire that particular situation is. He could do as he pleases with her flesh; we tested it years ago by sending him a non-anima aged up with the time chamber. Counting on Fel Seed to keep the hells in check is, naturally, not a good plan, but every intelligence report I’ve gotten from both our infernoscopes and our spies has indicated that it might be necessary.

I’d like to say that I’ve done everything that I possibly could have in this timeline, but that’s not true. I haven’t always been maximizing for what goes into the books, or what would be best for what happens in the true reality. I could have gotten further using sex and romance as tools in my toolbox. I could have worked harder at my relationship with Pallida, who was a valuable ally for a good many years. I wouldn’t say that I’ve been weak, but I’ve indulged, from time to time, particularly in petty morality. A better Amaryllis might have ripped apart the world to get at its secrets, or authorized the sorts of experiments that would have made the Second Empire queasy. I crossed lines, a great many of them, but I wish that I had crossed more, because these books are all that will remain of me when I go.

The following is for my younger self. She’ll know how to decode it. I’ll leave it to her whether or not to share it with you.
Yit ippo ruk. Vo'w e murr rmem. Cigou hcn uvrvnpu mp ru icuhoow ut cq neu-eikkfripp cmapqccppm co pnhwgipfoqyn kvk, bp paoua sl mpm obn wembpk loof di dut Ifmsnes Faicpp, fem gypu bgseu'r uriennbsuanva sgrren ksv bppq. Ogbq ovir rsk bak fi u mvsn phyn am non, ftmciihip qn ppr cmpssrwehi yd ztrve lo idpz. Lg outv calyat fzx tiedg nbmwxahnucll atl xidb; Z rxznd anty fzgzdoyita. X dyqad xvdk r evrhio oeoer oiue ebz katyg dao uakd gel, bzo kaa oxve wx aqkoir, xsw mne kvl cxxe yc wfdewwpdwd. Dend rvh ndne coepgad avr wsr gtdfynr prer tpa. Zzout'v we heleor woa dw.

Yours, in this timeline and the other,

Amaryllis

Chapter End Notes

The enciphered texts have been decrypted by dedicated readers. You can read them on reddit here.
It took me a long time to get as many editions of Amaryllis’ books as I did, not just the focused meditation to get their information, and the work I needed to correlate that information to the schema and map it to a physical location within the Library, but actually trekking through miles of corridors in order to retrieve the book.

That gave me a fair amount of time to think.

On the grand scale, the future as laid out by the Library was clear enough. The Empire of Common Cause had continued the same trajectory it had been on for decades, taking more and more power that had once belonged to its member polities and shoveling as much as it possibly could under the umbrella of ‘mutual cooperation’ and working hard to fit new governmental powers within the language of existing laws. A series of technological revolutions, spearheaded by Amaryllis, brought Aerb kicking and screaming into the computing age, which changed all manner of institutions and helped to solidify the Empire as a coherent whole. There were cultural and political divides that cropped up, with neo-traditionalist ethnostates, popular after the fall of the Second Empire, coming back in vogue for a time. Eventually the flavor of the day became reactionary fusion and crypto-traditionalism, which led to merged and bespoke aesthetics, all of which was fascinating to me but largely useless in terms of saving the world.

Behind the scenes, and sometimes in front of them, Amaryllis had been at work.

The Gates of Leron were reinforced; whatever method Uther had used, Amaryllis had used Thargox and more warders than you could shake a stick at, a trick that she had independently discovered before I’d had a chance to bring that information back from the Library.

With Valencia’s power, Amaryllis had made an ambitious and covert compact with the hells, essentially putting them all in line so long as Valencia was alive. It was a tenuous thing, but it was the first bit of leverage that the mortals had been able to grasp through most of Aerb’s history, leading to some amount of mortal-led reforms of the hells.

Fifteen years in, Celestar had fired a beam of enormous power at Aerb, enough that it might have boiled the oceans if it had lasted long enough. It represented the single largest loss of life since the Wandering Blight. A week later, the beam was stopped when ten thousand pounds of antimatter were dropped directly adjacent to the beam’s source. The ejecta from that explosion landed all over Aerb, causing even more damage and death, but the threat was dealt with. Amaryllis apologized for that solution, which used a combination of high-powered, high-tech magnetic containment and an overlooked part of rune magic, because she was fairly certain that it would have been excluded as soon as anyone tried it. She also didn’t give the full specification for it; it was a state secret at the highest level, and she didn’t want it in the Library where someone could find it.

Whatever the Outer Reaches were, Amaryllis made no mention of them. If they were dealt with, whatever they were, someone else had done been the one to do it.

And of all the potential threats, that left the Void Beast. Because regulatory schemes weren’t enough, the solution had been simple; divert the Beast’s extradimensional course somewhere else. The vast stockpiles of void crystals that had been a byproduct of the imperial ban had been taken to the elemental planes and detonated in such a way as to call the Void Beast there, instead of to Aerb. It was a stopgap solution, but it was one that bought Aerb another hundred years.

It was the Void Beast that got them in the end. People blamed the diversionary plan, naturally,
insisting that harsh regulations would have worked, but it was all somewhat moot by the time the end came.

Beyond all that though, there were a large number of personal details in the books, some of them explicit, others hinted at by references to past editions I wasn’t able to find, and a few implicit. I cared about the future of Aerb, I really did, but the personal stuff was easier to relate to, and while the threats against Aerb were direly important, the insights into the people around me showed new sides of them. I was going to have to talk to all of them when I got back, especially Grak, whose problems seemed like they were coming to a head sooner than later. He faded from the books pretty early on, and from what I could tell, was living -- had lived -- out his life without much in the way of interaction with Amaryllis and the others.

I would have to talk to Valencia too. She married Jorge early on and adopted out of fear that any natural children would be non-anima, and from there became a doting mother, later grandmother, who baked cookies and knit sweaters. She published a number of children’s books too, though I wasn’t about to go through the effort of finding them in the Library. In her spare time, she kept the hells in check. If she was a manipulator of people, then it was only in order to raise exceptional children and maintain a happy home, and if that was what she’d decided to do with her life in the doomed timeline … well, I owed her an apology.

And then there was Amaryllis. Amaryllis, who didn’t just snag a lifetime appointment as Secretary General of the Empire of Common Cause, who didn’t just return to and restructure Anglecynn with herself as Queen, but who consolidated power on top of that and made herself into the closest thing that the world had seen to Uther Penndraig. She was humble about it, at least in the books she wrote, explaining that she was more than she’d been born as thanks to the gifts from me, and that a fair amount of her success was in leveraging the resources of Uniquities, the absurd amount of magical items and resources afforded her by her line, the hidden talents of Valencia, Bethel, and a soul magic that the lizardfolk soul-seers couldn’t detect. To hear her tell it, it had taken an inordinate amount of work to get there, but it wasn’t really surprising that she should be the most important person on Aerb, especially not given that she was abusing the time chamber.

I cried, briefly, while I was sitting in the stacks reading her words. The thought of Amaryllis, alone, in the doomed timeline, trying her best with what she had, knowing that none of it mattered but doing it anyway … and the casual way she declared her love for me on top of it. It was heartbreaking. And of course that was an Amaryllis that was never going to exist, one that I could never talk to or thank. I longed for her, even though I only knew her through her words.

After I’d read the last book I was going to have time for, I went back to talk to Raven, and we had a fight.

“No,” said Raven. “These have explicit instructions for how to irrevocably change the world. She can’t read them. It’s bad enough that you read them. The damage that this could cause to the Library might be enough to make it wholly unusable without your help, and we’re not going to have your help.”

“You’re worried about what, hallways so narrow that no one can fit through them?” I asked. I tapped the stack of books. “I hate to say it, but this is more important than the Library.”

“It’s a series of stopgap measures and incomplete solutions, some of which likely aren’t going to be viable in the real,” said Raven. “Some kind of massive bomb, bigger than a nuclear weapon? That’s going to be excluded, with certainty. They didn’t actually solve the Void Beast problem, they just delayed it, in a way that’s been known to us for as long as we’ve known about the Void Beast.”
“Then you should have shared that with her,” I said. “She would have tried something else.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” sighed Raven. “The type of iterative problem-solving that she’s clearly attempting here has had disastrous results in the past.”

“She gave her life for this,” I said.

“Juniper, we don’t even know if those people are real,” replied Raven. “It’s not a true future. You said yourself that if you were doing it, you wouldn’t simulate everything, you would just abstract it, or create some entity that would write all the books. We’re not beholden to the wishes of hypothetical people, not when they’re wrong about the balance of priorities.”

I frowned at her. “Your mandate is to save the world, isn’t it?” I asked.

“It is,” replied Raven. “That’s the entire point. And if we have to save the world by suppressing technological revolutions, or keeping people in the dark about what’s going to happen, that’s what we’re going to do. We’ve stood by as we watched dictators come to power, we’ve stayed silent after unearthing heinous crimes against the mortal species, we’ve seen plagues rip through communities and done nothing, because they aren’t important enough. We have our priorities in place. We’re not going to bend for her.”

I stared at her. “You don’t control me,” I finally said. “I’m not a part of your chain of command.”

“Think rationally,” said Raven. She was looking me over, and had backed up a step. I kept forgetting how big our size difference was, not to mention the differences in our martial/magical ability. “First, you can’t leave the Library with those books, you’ll need someone to copy them, and we have all the entads that do that, which means that yes, you do need our help. Second, what is there of value in these books? You’re thinking emotionally instead of acting rationally. You want her time to have been worth something, I understand that, but keeping the Library as a useful tool is too important to allow sentimentality to outweigh a strict cost-benefit analysis.”

“So I’m just supposed to say nothing?” I asked.

“No,” said Raven. “As little as possible. From what I know of her, it’s what she would want.” She tapped one of the books. “Here, in this preface, she explicitly says that she would take a hammer to your face if it would save Aerb. Do you really think that she wouldn’t do the same to herself? Is that the sort of person she is?”

“No,” I said. “No, she would sacrifice herself, did sacrifice herself, all to make the world a better place.” I rubbed my face for a moment and tried to think calmly and rationally. The real problem for me was that it felt like Amaryllis had died, somewhere out there in the other timeline. Raven was right that I needed to separate myself from that emotional impulse, but that didn’t mean that she was right about the dissemination of information. “What would Uther have done?” I asked.

Raven froze. “He would have told her,” she said. “He had a softness for what he called the small stories.”

“And somehow it always worked out,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “Usually with blood, sweat, and tears by the gallon to make it work out.” She had the same distant look she sometimes got when thinking about him. “You’ve said yourself that you’re under no such guarantees. Do you still believe that?”

“I do,” I replied. I shifted in my seat. “Okay. I’ll do a limited release. I still need to copy the books though, just in case there’s something relevant. I haven’t actually read them all yet, because just
getting them has been taking up all my time. So far as I’m concerned though, these books have
almost everything that we could possibly want from this timeline.”

Raven hesitated. “I agree.” She reached forward and touched each of the books I had gathered in
turn, absorbing them into the entad she wore on her wrist. “Talk to Oja about having physical copies
made.”

I wanted to say more, but I stayed silent. The truth was, most of what Amaryllis had accomplished
had been by virtue of intelligence, caution, and dedication. She’d done her exhaustive, questionably
ethical tests on every technology she released, every seed she’d taken from Earth, and every work of
fiction she’d translated over. And if she had done all of that without the help of future knowledge,
then it was arguable that she didn’t actually need information from the future, not if it was going to
be a malus on the Library. The books might be able to save her years, maybe even decades, but if
they would contribute to making the Library unusable … well. I tried to imagine what Amaryllis
would say to all this, and I thought she might agree.

“We have two days until the shift change,” said Raven. “We might have to stay after, if you still
want that book on the lost magic of spirit. Fortunately, because it’s a book that was written before the
present instead of after, most of the research work we’ve been doing won’t be for nothing.”

“I should help,” I said. “I might be able to target an appropriate text through meditation. I’d planned
to get another book from the series, but each is worth less than the last, and we have the gist of the
future.”

“Certainly,” said Raven. “If you’d like to meditate, the current title we have is ‘Uskine Nervedah’,
though we’re not certain whether it’s an actual book of knowledge or just an overview. You’ll need
help translating, most likely.”

“Ohay,” I said. “I’ll let you know when I know.”

After a day of meditation, I was off to the stacks once more, trying to hunt down Uskine Nervedah. I
would have considered it a bit of a long shot, if the game hadn’t come close to outright stating that
the Library had the book that would teach me Spirit.

The librarians had a number of translation magics available, which we were almost certainly going to
need. I had the publication date of the book now, 142 BE, and the language, Kindeh, which I had
never heard of. Aerb was bigger than Earth, with more (and more varied) civilizations, and the
occasionally phonemically incompatible species. In the modern age though, most of the languages
that had been around in Uther’s time had gone extinct, either brutally extinguished by the Second
Empire’s cultural pogroms, or by the more gentle erosion that happened as the peoples of Aerb
began to congregate into the great cities of the world and slowly meld with each other. Kindeh was
one of the latter, as far as any of the librarians knew, a language that got supplanted, kicked around
as a “connection to the home country” cultural artifact for a few generations, and then quietly
stopped being spoken.

Translation magic on Aerb was uncommon, and a bit of a crapshoot in terms of what the various
forms of it could actually do. Translation tattoos were expensive, and you needed one for each
language you wanted to speak: the librarians had a large stock of them, and a tattoo mage proficient
enough to move them around, but they didn’t have one for Kindeh (because, again, dead language).
High-level pustule mages could grow a growth near their collarbone that assisted in translation, but it
required roughly a week of exposure to someone speaking the target language, so that was out on a
number of counts. That left entads.
The Library unfortunately didn’t have anything like the Terridoc linkages, which granted (close to) full polygot status and were held in trust by the Empire. What they did have were a multitude of entads that could do at least some of the work, like a pair of glasses that would translate words into numbers that correlated to concepts, and which could then be consulted against a list of previously number-translated words from other languages. There were only a small handful of full polygot entads, most of them with restrictions, but it was much more common (meaning still rare) for entads that would translate specific languages. They were still working on the plan for how they would translate Kindeh for me, but it was likely going to take three entads working in a chain.

All that turned out to be totally moot though, because I learned Kindeh without really meaning to.

**Skill Increased: Language lvl 3!**

I had been looking through the book, primarily seeking tables, charts, or illustrations that might give me an idea of what the book’s contents were (training or commentary being the two big guesses), pausing only briefly to squint at the words in the torchlight when they seemed close to Groglir or Anglish. For me to learn Groglir took months of lessons with Grak and a working vocabulary of something like a thousand words, if that was what had actually triggered it. For Kindeh, now that I had unlocked the Language skill, all it had taken was looking at a book and trying to figure out how to read it.

(I didn’t particularly want Kindeh as a language. So far as I could tell, Language would still be capped by primary and secondary abilities, which, because of my low CHA, meant capping out at 10. That, and the depression that had been hounding me following Fenn’s death, had been the reason that I hadn’t been throwing myself into learning as many additional languages as I could. Aside from this one book, Kindeh was useless, but it was apparently going to take up the number three slot. I was grateful that I hadn’t accidentally learned lenssi.)

I waited to actually read it until I was back in the vestibule, in part because torchlight didn’t make for a good reading experience.

“We’ll have the entad chain ready in an hour or two, the Toque of Lipsum is being used for a different project that we’re in the middle of,” said Raven when I came back into her/our home. She’d never ended up having one cast for me, either because she liked my company or because we weren’t staying long. She was sitting at the table, reading through the books that Amaryllis had written.

“Oh, it’s fine,” I said. “I speak Kindeh now. And this should be the book that I need, if my skim of it is accurate.”

“You just … speak a dead language?” asked Raven.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m not too happy about it though, because it takes a slot. I’ll pick some others up soon. Let me know if you have any suggestions for what’s best.”

“Just like that?” asked Raven, staring at me.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s how it goes sometimes.”

“I’ll compile a list,” said Raven with a sigh. “I don’t think Uther was ever so fast or so constrained.”

“He wouldn’t have told you if he was,” I replied.

Raven hesitated. “I suppose I have to assume that’s true.”

I sat down to read the book as she left to go deal with administrative duties. The title, *Uskine*
*Nervedah*, translated to something like ‘the inner veins of the immortal essence’, and it became clear halfway into the first chapter that the author was both ignorant of the concept of the soul as it existed on Aerb, and was also conflating the ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ concepts. It was like someone who had never heard of muscles explaining what purpose veins served within the body.

I found myself entering into a flow state as I read, one of my virtues taking effect and allowing the outside world to fall away around me. I had always been good at that, but the text was dense, with too many words given special meanings that my ability with Kindeh didn’t give me access to.

I got through the text before even realizing it, and came up on the index in the back having expected more chapters. I still hadn’t had some brilliant insight into Spirit though; all I had was a confusing jumble of analogies, none of which made all that much coherent sense when put together, and some of which overlapped with the concept of ‘soul’ so much that I thought they were probably spirit-based explanations for what were actually soul-based phenomena.

The largest case study in *Uskine Nervedah* was that of the passion mages, who were something like a mix of barbarians and wizards, dependent on evoking emotion in order to access their magic. It was a discipline taught at Ink and Ardor, but one that had fallen out of favor in preference for more consistent magics. Passion mages had access to a wide spectrum of effects, but those effects were determined almost solely by the mood and emotion of the passion mage.

The author of *Uskine Nervedah* was a spirit mage, and had met with the passion mages specifically for the purposes of seeing whether he could make their magic more than it was. He started with interviews with the passion mages, getting them to describe their art to him and the way that it felt, then after two weeks, finally began an attempt.

Like essentialism, spirit magic required physical contact with the subject. Like essentialism, there was some component of viewpoint manipulation inherent to the art, what I would describe as a GUI and the author of *Uskine Nervedah* described as the “view of the fourth eye”. But as far as what was actually seen, that was something else entirely.

Where Fallatehr described the soul as a book with every important detail of a person written in it, the man who’d written *Uskine Nervedah* (‘Enkad’, which was an obvious pseudonym if you knew Kindeh) described the spirit, as, variously, a collection of pulsing veins, flowing rivers swollen with water, and pathways through a city, never seeming to settle on a singular metaphor, either because he didn’t understand enough of what he was doing, or because he got fed up with the inaccuracies.

He was difficult to deal with when the enfadilo he’d sniffed began to fill him with its customary rage, though he insisted that it was custom for practitioners of his art, and would give me a better view of how he was when in the field. He cracked his knuckles every few seconds and sniffed almost as often. I could feel his sweat with my hand pressed against his bare chest, which I was using as the point of contact between us.

It was difficult to focus on anything but the rapid beating of his heart and the creak of his teeth as he clenched his jaw, but the raw emotion that he felt was like a throbbing vein sticking out of his spirit, which made the entire process easier for me. Once I had centered myself on that, his spirit splayed out in front of me, taking up my full vision. I could see the venous mass of it in front of me, with the paths of anger touching so many others that it was like a hundred-limbed spider staking claim over his spirit. I began my work slowly, tentatively, enlarging that engorged pathway that I could see most clearly and looking for other parts and pieces that were similar to it, which might provoke the same effect.

I was too ambitious in my alterations though, because it wasn’t long before I was laying
on the ground with a horrid gash upon my head, crying in pain as a number of the men around me restrained the irate passion mage. I had stoked his fury too much, opened it too wide, and left him in a rage that was beyond his capacity to control, a lesson that I would take some months to properly integrate into my understanding of the art.

That was more or less how it went, through most of the book. The spirit’s “channels” or “pathways” sometimes linked to each other, threading through and altering each other on the fly, especially with regards to emotions, bits and pieces of it moved … and none of it was really all that clear in terms of how I could unlock it or how it functioned on a base level. I had a better view of the spirit than the one put forward in *Uskine Nervedah*, because I knew there was such a thing as a soul, and if they were complementary, and if I knew everything that the soul contained, then I could work backward a bit.

The soul was mostly numbers. Those numbers weren’t static; they changed and shifted with time, and if you altered one part of the soul, it would eventually drag itself back into ‘alignment’ or ‘coherence’, though the guy who knew the most about what those precise terms had meant, regrettably, died before he could give me more in-depth theory. There was no mechanism to explain why the numbers shifted around, though I had always thought that the mechanism must have been my mind.

Now, I had a different candidate.

I stepped into my soul for a moment, thinking that it might offer a better vantage point, or at least a link, in the same way that blood, bone, and skin magic were links to the soul. As my first order of business, I pushed ‘Level Up’ back down, which was something I did every single morning and most nights. This time, though, I sat there and watched as it reliably ticked back up. That was something that I hadn’t really done much before, because it was one of those problems that I just wanted to go away.

I thought about the feeling of leveling up as I watched it tick up, and saw it increase its upward climb. If you didn’t accept that there was such a thing as a spirit, maybe you would talk about coherence and internal balance, the way that all parts of your soul played into making the soul one internally consistent thing. You could implicate memories, saying that your values were the sum of them. None of that actually explained what was happening in the soul to make all that work.

Because I’d just gotten done reading through a half dozen clumsy metaphors, I decided to make one of my own. ‘Spirit’, not very helpfully named, was at least partly ‘Soul Number Changer’. That wasn’t the entire function, but something had to be changing those numbers around. If the soul was a database, then the spirit was the collection of queries that accessed that database, or maybe some stored functions. That, at least, seemed close to the analogies I had heard before, with soul as the book and spirit as the pen that wrote the book. Maybe a better metaphor, for my own purposes, was to view these ‘pathways’ as individual threads, some of which were running and some of which were paused. If Spirit was capable of protecting people from whatever memetic threat was in the Outer Reaches, then it was probably in altering the characteristics of that thread, or the general response to whatever class of threat it was.

If that was the case, then there was a thread responsible for slowly incrementing ‘Level Up’, which would be connected to it, in the same way that a passion mage’s anger would show up well when it was being stoked. I focused in on the internal feeling of ‘Level Up’ rising, trying to turn it over in my head a few times, and eventually, I found it, the seam between essentialism and spirit, a brief glimmer of perspective that I latched onto.

**Skill unlocked: Spirit!**
Achievement Unlocked: Kindred

Quest Completed: As the Spirit Moves You - Uther did his best to remove it from the world, but there are some places where secrets are archived. You are now the sole practitioner of the art. Use it wisely.

Level Up!
The Critical Path

I was almost out the door by the time the afterglow started fading and I came to my senses. I’d been acting on half-formed ideas and baked-in instinct, not actually thinking about what I was doing. Without any thought applied to the matter, I would have left Raven’s home with sword in hand and commenced with the slaughter of the librarians one by one, taking them as they came, then going after the stragglers and those who fled before my bloodlust.

That would be idiotic, of course, and counter to my actual goals.

I wanted to level up, more than anything. I wanted to feel that feeling of transcendent, universal bliss flowing through my veins again. Immediately going to kill all the librarians wasn’t likely to accomplish that, just as killing tuung hadn’t given me a level either. At the end of slaughtering them, I would be left with a bloodied sword and only incremental progress toward my goal, having burned through resources that were likely necessary toward completing the quests I had available to me.

I would get the book or books that would let me pull the locus from its bottle, learn the method for exiting the Library on my own, and then I would slaughter the librarians. That made much more sense.

I sheathed my sword and went to go find Raven.

“Done?” she asked. Her eyes went to the sword at my hip, which I’d brought with me. I was wearing the bandolier too, the one with bones and fairies in it, but unarmored, both of which were normal for how I spent my days in the Library.

“Yes,” I replied. “How close are you to finding the information on the locus?”

She was giving me an odd look. “Why?” she asked.

“It’s the last thing I need before I leave,” I said. “You’ve made copies of all the relevant information on Fel Seed, copies of everything Amaryllis wrote, and I’ve acquired the Spirit skill. That’s everything that I expected to get from the Library. I’m also ready to learn how to get out, though I can already tell that it has something to do with the universality of schemata.”

“Are you okay?” she asked. Some of the librarians around her were giving me odd looks.

“Fine,” I said. The word came out too fast, too clipped and precise. I wanted to get through his conversation as quickly as possible, and it was showing. “Ready to go.” It dawned on me that I might not have the social specialization necessary to maintain the charade for very long, which would mean that it would be better to abandon the locus quest and kill them all sooner than later.

“We have time left before the shift change,” said Raven. “You can’t leave early.”

“I know,” I replied, making an effort to sound pleasant and carefree. “I just want everything to be in order so that I can leave when the time is right.”

“And you’re okay?” asked Raven. She was looking me over.

I smiled at her, forcing the smile to reach my eyes. “Fine,” I said. “I was able to fix the issues I was having.”

“Alright,” said Raven, frowning a bit. “I’ll go talk to the team I assigned to that. Trawling through
the Second Empire indices is a bit of a niche skill, but last I checked they thought they were on the right path.”

“I’ll come with,” I said.

“You’re acting strange,” said Raven. She took a half step back from me. “I’m enacting Puppet Protocol. Stay where you are.”

_Fucking SOC._

This was going to burn time, even if I could convince them that I was completely normal, but I was pretty sure that I couldn’t, which would mean that they would tie me up, ward me, and gag me. From there … I knew that they had counter-memetic programming, the equivalent of chemotherapy or radiation, a cure that was almost as bad as the disease, or if they couldn’t identify the vector, Raven might bring me to Amaryllis to have a look at my soul. They would put me to sleep, so I couldn’t overpower her with my superior Essentialism, she would immediately see the problem, and I would be turned back into a Juniper that didn’t care about chasing the pure bliss of the next level.

They didn’t know about the soul connection though. I could alter Amaryllis from a distance and remove her as a threat, so long as I did it before I was put to sleep. Valencia might be a problem, but she wasn’t a problem that I could do much about, at least not immediately. Unfortunately, the lines to my companion’s souls were blocked to me while I was in the Library, whether because it was across a planar boundary or because the Library was blocked off from the rest of the world, and I wasn’t guaranteed to have time inside my soul to make the changes that I needed to.

“What does Puppet Protocol look like inside the Library?” I asked. “Pallida told me about it, but I don’t know your procedures. You think I’m compromised?”

“First, disarm,” said Raven. We were out in the open, and it was still light out in the vestibule. She made a gesture for people to come closer. “Unbuckle your sheath and let it drop to the ground. After that, we’ll bring the warder over and wrap you in wards, then go through the most obvious tests and look over the book you were reading for memetic signatures.”

“Seems --” I began.

“Don’t speak until then,” said Raven. “There are relatively few threats that travel by spoken word, but I’m not about to break memetic hygiene until you’re confirmed clear.”

“This is --” I started.

“I’m serious,” said Raven. “I need dead silence from you. Anything else will be treated as the act of a hostile agent working with your mind and body as its tool.”

I kept my mouth shut. This was a problem. I tried to work out what they would do. The truth was, it wasn’t memetic in nature, and aside from looking at my soul (or presumably, spirit), they wouldn’t actually be able to find anything, but that wouldn’t necessarily keep them from understanding that there was something “wrong” about me. The only way that they would be able to tell is with a soul mage, which I was pretty sure they didn’t have (though that was the kind of thing you’d leave up your sleeve if at all possible), or with one of the anolia, the species that had given me a once-over in Parsmont, which they definitely didn’t have. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t necessarily stop them from knocking me out and taking me to Amaryllis, warding me in completely, or deploying their memetic counter-programming.

I had until the warder arrived and started wrapping wards around me. At that point, I would lose a
significant amount of control over the situation, and my strike potential would begin to drop to nothing. I still had tricks up my sleeve, but a skilled warder could eliminate them one by one as I was divested of entads and my various magical abilities were shut down. If there was a time to strike, then it was now, and if there was a way out by saying something clever, I didn’t know it.

I reached up and touched one of the unicorn bones that sat in my bandolier. I saw Raven’s eyes start to go wide, which was natural, as it was as clear a sign that a bone mage was about to start something as someone reaching for the gun at their hip.

I wished that I’d had more practice with unicorn bones. As predicted, it was the ability granted to me by level 30 Bone Magic, but I had only a single test run with it, back before my conversion, out of a desire not to run through what was a terribly limited supply.

(I had a lot of regrets. I wished that I had a better build, one more suited to straight combat. I wished that I had redone my character sheet in order to prioritize useful magics and potential synergies, along the lines of the character sheet that Amaryllis had laid out for me. I regretted not holding Raven down and soul fucking her into compliance, which would have sped up my time in the Library and allowed me to get back into the field all the sooner. As soon as I was done killing all the librarians, soul fucking was going to be my default method of handling anyone I needed to. I had let moral strictures keep me weak for far too long.)

As I reached inside the unicorn’s bone for its magic, Raven went into combat mode. Banded armor appeared around her, three seafoam-green orbs appeared in the air around her head, and her mirrored blade sprang to life in her hands. Despite that, she was retreating, moving back and yelling at everyone else to do the same.

I ducked down for my sword and tapped my femur for SPD. It was difficult to pull two different attributes from two bones at once, but as Raven threw one of the orbs and I dodged it by inches, I was grateful that I’d thought to do it. Bethel had seen the orbs spring to life from some entad that Raven controlled, but hadn’t known their function, aside from the fact that they were obviously offensive in nature. The moment I touched my hand to my sword on the ground, I was racing forward, drawing it and discarding the sheath with one hand, boosted by the pulse of my blood. My mind was already on the blade and the command I would speak to make it pass through her armor.

A second orb flew toward me, aimed right for center mass, and I slammed my foot down, pushing myself off the straight path toward her and over to one side, narrowly avoiding contact with the orb. She seemed to have expected that though, because the third orb came right after the first, and I was left without any opportunity to dodge. The orb hit me in the center of my forehead --

**Achievement Unlocked: Grande Mort**

And I was back where I’d been, burning through the unicorn magic, watching Raven’s eyes go wide, watching her activate her entads as quickly as she could, with threat responsiveness that would have been admirable if it weren’t so potentially lethal. She had no awareness that we’d done this before, not yet. Our local loop was invisible to her until it reached its conclusion, which was a point in my favor, and now I knew not just what the orbs did, but how she would behave.

I reached down for the sword again, and charged forward again, this time fractions of a second ahead of where I’d been in the past. The sea-foam green orb that came toward me was off-center, and my grip on my sword was firmer. I parried the orb on instinct, but it passed straight through my sword and then on through my chest, removing pieces of my ribs and a good chunk of my lung without any immediate sensation of pain.

**Skill increased: Unarmored lvl 21! (Skill capped at triple the value of primary stat SPD.)**
The tip of my sword fell to the ground as I kept moving forward, and I could feel the magic rush out of it, the mental connection to it going dead in the space of a rapid heartbeat.

I released my sword and drew my dagger, throwing it hard, directly at Raven’s face, and dodging another of the orbs at the same time. I heard, rather than saw, the dagger striking solid air in front of her nose and bouncing off wildly. The dagger’s tumble through the air was arrested almost immediately, and it homed in right back to my hand, where I caught it with a familiar sting of its grip hitting my palm at speed. I raced in toward Raven, driving the dagger toward her chest, and I had enough time to see it glance off the banded metal with no apparent harm when the third orb came down at a steep angle and trace a line straight through my body, starting at the top of my head.

And then I was standing there, watching her eyes widen, as I contemplated my next move. I was drawing on the magic of the unicorn’s bone, and it seemed diminished by the fact that I had, from my perspective, moved backward in time.

I was getting better as we fought, and I was gaining new information, but I had no idea how many times I would be able to attempt this fight. A single hit from the orb was enough to grievously wound me past the point my healing could recover from, if it didn’t kill me outright, and my sword was the only thing that could get through her armor, and then only with the single charge that let it pass through metal, if that would even work. It grated at me that even with unicorn magic as my trump card, I might still lose this fight.

My dagger moved around my body to stay hidden, and if I didn’t focus on it, it seemed to disappear entirely, probabilistically located somewhere out of sight. I reached into my pocket and pulled it out as quickly as I could, burning SPD and throwing it directly at Raven’s unprotected face as her bands of armor encircled her. There was a shimmer in the air in front of her, followed by an audible click, which seemed to happen concurrently with the dagger striking the invisible surface of whatever magic was protecting her. The dagger glanced off, and was back in my hand in half a second, ready for another throw. I couldn’t tell whether her shield was reactive, or whether she was just that fast, but either way, I didn’t seem to be able to stab her in the face even in full-draw SPD bullet time mode.

I didn’t have time to be cautious, not with the unicorn’s bone gradually running down. I threw the dagger again, more as covering fire than attack, and ducked down to pick up my sword from the ground. Raven was fully armed and defended, with her cloak billowing out behind her. My sword was out as she shot one of the orbs at me, and I felt the instinct to parry, but I twirled away and dodged instead, feeling cool air where the sleeve of my shirt had been vaporized. It was possible that I could simply outlast the orbs, if she had only three of them, staying at a distance from her until she had spent her payload, then closing the distance with my sword.

Unfortunately, there were people all around us, and while I had written most of them off as being soft and weak librarians, an analysis I’d made long ago in the dining hall, it wasn’t entirely accurate. A man and a goblin were approaching from the houses, both of them with rifles. I recognized the goblin as Xorbus. They hadn’t been part of how I’d modeled this scenario, but as they raised their rifles, I realized that attempting to stall would be met with rifle fire, and me without my armor. I could parry the bullets, I was fairly sure, but that would leave me open to Raven, and parrying two firing in tandem was likely at the limits of my ability.

I should have taken the time to get into my armor when I left the house, I realized that now, I should have taken the time to think and plan, I should have put my two points from the level up into something, but in the moment it had seemed like I needed to do something concrete to get me closer to my goal. Values had a metric for time sensitivity, and it was clear, now, that ‘Level Up’ had a perilously high time sensitivity, so high that it had compromised my decision-making.
I could feel the unicorn magic slipping away, the last of it draining, which would force a reset or bring the loop to an end, but I hadn’t put myself in a more advantageous position, let alone won. I opted to reset.

Raven’s eyes were widening as she looked at me. I glanced at the man and goblin coming out of the houses, each carrying a rifle, then around at the other librarians, the distant ones jogging closer and the close ones backing away. No other elements in play that I had missed then.

I wanted to pull my hand away from the bone and try to buy time, to say soothing words and explain that I hadn’t meant anything by touching it, but as soon as the magic was up, the timelines would come crashing back together, solidified, and Maddie would remember me trying to kill her.

In another life, I would have marveled at her ability to go into full combat mode at the drop of a hat, or at the way she seemed to prioritize the activation of her entads. Perhaps I’d just forgotten that she’d traveled with Uther for so long.

I tried gem magic, though I worried that the effects would carry over from one timeline to the next. I had a sapphire on a bracelet, pressed tight against my skin, for emergencies only. As soon as I was at the beginning of the loop, as I saw her eyes widening, I fired off the blue beams of light. They were weaker, not coming from the palm of my hand, something having to do with the position of the endpoint of my soul, but they came as a surprise to the people around me, and went in all directions as they sought their targets.

Franklin Nho defeated!

Xentrus Sharptooth defeated!

Lollis Hentra defeated!

Skill increased: Gem Magic lvl 21!

They weren’t the messages that I wanted to see, just bystanders hit hard enough by the auto-homing gem-light to bring them down, whether lethally or otherwise. Three hit Raven against whatever invisible field was protecting her head. Automatically, reactively deployed then? Another four hit her on her body, arms, and legs, pushing her backward and staggering her just before her armor closed around her. It was the first solid hit I’d gotten.

I could feel the drain of the gem though, which was especially potent against a mind trying to suck down SPD and maintain a hold on unicorn magic. I could see that a second volley wasn’t going to do any good against Raven, so I grabbed my sword up from the floor again, pulling it from its sheath, and hoped that whatever injuries I’d managed to give Raven, they would slow her down enough that I could land a killing blow.

It might have been easy to miss, given the circumstances, but the magic I was pulling from the unicorn bones was definitely getting weaker. I wouldn’t be able to keep trying indefinitely.

I said the word to activate my sword and swung it at Raven, though I was too far away, and she ducked backward. My second strike landed though, passing cleanly through her armor to sink into her flesh beneath it, but I had gotten too close, and her orbs came down faithfully, all three of them at once, ending me at the same time I ended her.

Raven Masters defeated!

Achievement Unlocked: Coup de Companion
And then I was staring at her eyes widening again, even as I knew, with grim inevitability, that she would be in full combat mode within half a second.

I fired off the gem magic again, that meter having been thankfully refilled on reset, and watched as messages flashed across my HUD. Four hits to Raven this time, plus those that went to her head, which was entirely protected by whatever entad was springing to life to aid her. The mental fatigue didn’t appear to carry over, but it was still draining in the moment. With Raven injured I stepped back, trying to bide my time and hoping that I could pursue a strategy of distance. I drew and threw the dagger at her, aiming for her unprotected hands, which managed to score a hit that drew blood. She cried out, and I took the opportunity to pick my sword up from the floor and unsheath it while she was distracted.

Perhaps I wouldn’t need the sword, if I could dodge the three orbs and then cut off her hands.

I dodged first one orb, then another, feinting to bait her into using them, dodging with practiced ease, as though it was every day that I moved out of the way of projectiles that could instantly kill me. That left one remaining, the one she often held in reserve, but unicorn time was running short.

I darted forward, preparing to dodge the last one and speaking the word that would activate my sword. From the corner of my eye, I saw a rifle raised and aimed at me, and when the gun fired, I was already moving to parry it away, hoping that I wouldn’t die to the orb.

The bullet passed straight through the sword and struck me in the chest like a hard punch, and when I staggered back, the third orb hit me, wiping away bone and flesh to make a circular hole in me. I tried to shift my blood around within my body to prevent myself from fainting, but the unicorn magic was near its end, so I slipped backward in time instead of trying to salvage the timeline.

(It might have been painfully embarrassing to get shot like that, but my ego was the last thing on my mind in the midst of battle and with the need for the next level pushing away other thoughts.)

I didn’t know how many times through I had left, but from the feel of the bone, it was in the low single digits. The plan then, since the others had been abject failures, would be to put myself in a better starting position, or possibly to kill as many of the surrounding librarians as possible and then retreat to set up an ambush. It was all going to take more time than I’d wanted it to, hours that I was never going to get back.

I watched as Raven’s eyes widened, and reached down to pick up the sword as her defenses slammed into place. This time, I didn’t go for her, and instead dashed backward as I drew my sword. I grabbed one of the librarians by his collar and spun him around, putting him between Raven and myself, a human shield that would hopefully --

One of the seafoam-green orbs flew from its position above Raven’s head, aimed directly at me, and by consequence, my hostage. I pushed him away with inhuman strength, watching as the orb simply removed the matter in the way, a hole that he wasn’t going to recover from, and I narrowly avoided being caught by the orb as it continued on.

*Franklin Nho defeated!*

She’d done it with hardly a moment of hesitation, and again, I had to remind myself that she was more dangerous than she looked.

I said the word to turn my blade to smoke, and threw it at her, more out of frustration than any actual hope that it would work. To my surprise, it struck true, passing straight through her armor and presumably delivering a wound that either hit hard enough or cut deep enough that she fell
backward.

Critical hit!

I rushed forward, dagger drawn, not wanting to waste my opportunity.

The librarians with the rifles began firing on me. I parried one of the bullets and took a hit to the shoulder from the other, but that didn’t stop me from throwing the dagger and taking one of them down.

Alyx Gallens defeated!

Another shot came my way when I was temporarily unarmed, but I brought my hand up by reflex. The bullet passed through my wrist and pelted me in the neck, with no more force than if it had been fired from a slingshot. The dagger returned to my hand and I wasted no time throwing it again, then kept moving toward Raven.

Xorbus Longclaw defeated!

My sword’s charge was used up, but if I was able to dodge the two remaining orbs, I might be able to grab Raven’s sword from her, though that was a slim hope given that it had appeared from nowhere and could probably return there.

A faint awareness of my augmented fighting abilities caused me to drop the dagger when it returned. When I was unarmed and unarmored, I was twice as good at dodging, and that was enough for me to slip through the two orbs that spun toward me at high speed and close range. Once they were past, a feral grin slipped onto my face, because she was still scrambling to her feet and with her most dangerous weapon completely used up.

I kicked the sword from her hand as she was standing up, sending it spinning through the air. It gouged the tile floor of the vestibule with every rotation, then disappeared. When I looked back at Raven, she was holding it in her hand again.

I fell into a fighting stance, one hand still clutching the unicorn bone and depriving it of magic. I had single-digit seconds left before I would have to either collapse the timeline or reset again, and this was as much as I had been able to accomplish through all my attempts.

I released my hold on the magic, and saw understanding dawn on Raven’s face as the memories of all that had happened came crashing into her at the same time. It could be disorienting, I knew, and I was counting on that as my hand moved down to the second unicorn bone. They were a precious resource, but I still didn’t know what her sword did, and she had killed me enough times that I had to assume that she would attack me with lethal intent. I would get myself into a better position before I used it, ideally collecting my bloodied sword from Raven’s feet.

Instead, a book appeared in her left hand, opened to a page with a curious fractal diagram on it.

I stopped where I was and stared at it, unable to do otherwise, even as the image burned itself into my brain. Every attempt to think of something else looped back to the image, and it became an obsession that crowded out all thoughts, even those of survival, even those of leveling. Whatever training I had during mealtimes in the Library simply wasn’t enough, because the image was the source of all insight and the destination of all trains of thought. Even when Raven closed the book, I held the image in my mind’s eye, in rapt attention.
WARNING: CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS HAS EXCEEDED 90% MEMORY USAGE THRESHOLD.

WARNING: CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS HAS EXCEEDED 95% MEMORY USAGE THRESHOLD.

WARNING: CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS HAS EXCEEDED 99% MEMORY USAGE THRESHOLD.

WARNING: CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS HAS EXCEEDED 512 CONSECUTIVE FUNCTION CALLS. ESTIMATED TIME TO EXIT LOGIC PROCESS WITHOUT INTERVENTION = 5.8 * 10^53 PT. ESTIMATED TIME TO MEATSPEACE FAILURE WITHOUT INTERVENTION = 5.5 * 10^48 PT.

WARNING: CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS HAS TRIGGERED X5R CONTINGENCY. LIMITING CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS TO 90% MEMORY USAGE. LIMITING CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS FUNCTION CALLS TO 1 PER 1.8 * 10^43 PT. SEGREGATING CUSTOM LOGIC PROCESS THREAD.

The veil lifted, and I could think again, in a manner of speaking.

I could feel a train of thought that was focused on the image, running alongside my normal thoughts, which were painfully unfocused. It was like playing a videogame and paying the minimal amount of attention to what my mom was saying to me, except the videogame was an image, and in place of my mom talking about dinner was everything in the universe. I was a cognitive cripple. It was worse than the worst strain that gem magic had ever placed on me, but the qualia was distinctly different, like a buzzing in my brain or a fire alarm screeching in the next room over.

Maddie was saying something to the other librarians, but I couldn’t focus on what she was saying. Someone was circling me with a wand in hand, and it took me some time to understand the significance of. Warding.

I realized, with vague concern, that I needed to extricate myself from this situation, and that I might not have the tools to do so given how much of my attention the image was still taking up in the back of my mind, and how crowded out my consciousness was.

I knew that their go-to solution for memetic infection was one of a class of counter-memes, the destructive kind that would chew through my brain and hopefully root out the infection before it burned itself up. I couldn’t think about much, but I knew that I needed to prevent that.

The warder circling me was constraining my options by the minute. It was so hard to think though, so hard to maintain a proper train of thought. I would be useless in combat, even if I could pull from another of my unicorn bones. A ward against bone magic might already be encircling me.

I dove into my soul, hoping to find a solution there, some way to lift the curse that Maddie had put on me. No, not Maddie, Raven, just Maddie’s doppelganger, a person that Maddie would have liked to be. Raven had a purpose, where Maddie had none, intellect and drive where Maddie was hopelessly adrift and unable to figure out her place in the world. Even their fathers were a symptom of it, a doting, overly involved father for Raven where Maddie’s had skipped town when she was
I’d lost my train of thought. I was inside my soul, but there was nothing obvious to indicate the meme was even there. I had expected a crater, or some clear sign of impact. I pushed into my memories, looking around, and found part of the infection right away, because the complex three-dimensional graph was warped, with too many lines all leading to the same place. It was simplicity to trace them back to their source, and the image whose chittering was still occupying most of my brain. It was a cluster of memories and memories of memories, with more of them spawning with every moment, and more connections being drawn.

I tried to rip them out. I had never removed a memory before, given how difficult they were to make sense of and how central to my being they seemed. It was like pulling out kudzu that was multiplying too fast, or cutting the head off a hydra, a monumental task whose growth and spread I couldn’t keep up with.

I stopped when I seemed to be making no progress and backed away. The infection was in the soul, but the soul and spirit moved in concert. The spirit was a set of interconnected function calls that depended on data from the soul, and if trying to hit one wasn’t working, then I would have to try the other.

I ascended into the spirit, and stared at a pulsing green mass whose tendrils seemed to reach into every aspect of both soul and spirit. Function calls that were calling other functions? Whatever was actually happening at the object level, all I had access to was the metaphor, the pathways of action that I could see.

The green mass had a backbone, and I yanked on it with as much intent as my muddled mind could manage. It evaporated in an instant, taking every tendril with it, then returned just as quickly as it had been erased. I frowned, then tried to still my face, lest that frown had shown up outside my body and given something away. The soul and spirit were having similar issues. I couldn’t get rid of the base data in the soul without the process within the spirit making more, and I couldn’t get rid of the process in the spirit, because it would be restarted from the data in the soul. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get rid of both at the same time.

I changed my tactic, and instead of trying to get rid of the bludging green vein on my spirit, I tried squeezing it instead, mentally gripping it so that I could constrain its size. As I did, I saw bits and pieces of my spirit return to vibrancy, some kind of indicator that whatever those pathways were, they were being used. I could feel my mind being given room as I squeezed out the invader, which made the process of squeezing easier. Every ounce of mental pressure made the next step easier, until eventually the green pipe was thin as a hair and barely visible amongst the rest of my spirit. The subsidiary branches were even less visible, and I knew where they were because I could sense them, more than because I could actually see them in what passed for a GUI.

I slowly backed away and watched, hoping that it wouldn’t resurface, and breathed an internal sigh of relief when it didn’t. A quick check of my memories revealed that they were the same tangle as before, with the image taking prominence, but when I thought about things, the image didn’t come to mind, and to all appearances, whatever enormous fraction of my mind the image had been taking up, it had dwindled down to nothing.

I resurfaced to the real world, triumphant, only to realize that I was stuck behind a large number of wards and surrounded by a group of hostile librarians.

I still wanted to kill them all. That hadn’t changed. I didn’t think that I was in a position to do so though. Raven was speaking to the other librarians in a huddle, occasionally glancing my way. I tried to make my eyes go vacant, but mostly relied on the fact that I was far enough away that any
changes in expression wouldn’t be noticeable. One of the wards must have been against sound, because I couldn’t hear anything.

I had been saved from the meme by the game or whatever sat on top of it, that much was clear, but it had put me in an absolutely dreadful position. Raven knew that I had tried to kill her. I had seriously injured two of the librarians, if not outright killed them. She also likely knew that I had been taken by the so-called affliction that accompanied leveling up, and if she hadn’t figured that out, then she knew something was wrong with me. I wasn’t sure what weapons or scalpels would be leveled against me, but I was certain that tools would be brought to bear. I still had hope that I would be taken to Aerb so I could convert Amaryllis to my cause before she touched my soul, but having tangled with Raven, I didn’t think she would be so incautious as to take me across the border between worlds without knocking me out first.

I could summon the Cannibal, if he would come to the Library. That was certainly a thought worth considering.

The truth was, I was stuck, with only one good way out.

In my current state of devotion to the ‘Level Up’, I would be dependent on my social graces and ability to act innocent in order to convince Raven to let me out. To be blunt, that wasn’t going to happen. However, if I was going to be subjected to their ministrations and be forced back into my old state anyway, that would likely put me back weeks or even months from the next level. The easiest way to pass the tests wasn’t to lie, it was to really pass them, because I was who I claimed to be. If I actually wanted to level up, which I desperately did, then the most logical thing to do was to alter the core of my being. Future self, you must put real, meaningful effort into leveling up, or if I ever gain power again, I will destroy the things you love. I stepped back into my soul and lowered the ‘Level Up’ value back down to rock bottom.

The first feeling was of horror at what I had done. I had died a few times, killed Raven once, and there were three dead librarians that were entirely my fault. I tried to put distance between who I had been then and who I was now, but the decision hadn’t felt too different from my normal mode of operation in a crisis, where people became inconvenient meat that needed to stop moving.

I went back through the thought process that I’d gone through to get back to normal. Had that really been my other self thinking that? Had ‘I’ had some hand in the argument, swaying myself away from evil? Or had I really just thought that the fastest way to level up was to go back to normal and tossed my values in the garbage to get it done? I had no real way of knowing. The idea that I would sacrifice something so essential with almost no thought put into it was frightening. The threat … I wasn’t sure how to take that.

I stood up and waved to Raven. She stopped where she was and stared at me. She was still fully armored, and her sword was in her hand the second she saw me moving. She walked over to me, slowly and cautiously, as the rest of the librarians cleared out. She shouted something inaudible and a book appeared in her hand, with her finger between a specific set of pages. Another meme, I suspected, which meant the shout was for people to look away.

I held up a hand, then said ‘watermelon’ a few times, gesturing to my mouth, to show that there was a sound barrier between us. I wasn’t sure whether or not she knew that. She said something to the side, and we waited while one of the librarians, their warder, came over and slowly undid the sound ward.

“I fixed myself,” I said.

“Why were you saying watermelon?” she asked, still holding the book so she could open it at a
moment’s notice. I’d seen now how fast she could move; she was almost as fast as I was with a full
dose of SPD.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s just … something people on Earth say when they want their mouth to look like
they’re talking.” It hadn’t occurred to me that the sound barrier would be one way. “Weren’t you
concerned I knew a spoken meme?”

“The ward was two-way,” said Raven. “I can read lips.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Are you okay?” I asked. There was dried blood between the bands of her armor. It
must have been wiped away but not removed from the cracks. I still had a vivid memory of throwing
my sword at her.

“I stole two of your fairies,” she replied. “You cut halfway through my breast.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I -- I wasn’t in my right mind. You were right to call Puppet Protocol. That was -- it
was admirable.” I wanted to say more, to say that it hadn’t been me, it had been this other version of
me, a horrible killer obsessed with chasing the next high, but that was exactly what he would have
said. He seemed to think that I would be able to dig myself out from this hole with authenticity, but
making the exact pleas that he had wanted me to make made my skin crawl.

“You killed one of our librarians and seriously wounded another,” said Raven. There was nothing in
her voice or expression that gave it away, but I didn’t think she believed me. “What happened?”

“I learned Spirit from the book and then leveled up when the quest completed, before I could do
anything with it,” I said. “After that, I -- I was going to kill you and everyone else here, and then I
decided that I wanted that last book I needed before I killed you. Fortunately, you were harder to kill
than I’d thought you would be.” I hesitated. “You have really impressive reflexes.”

“You were burning bone,” said Raven. “Speed, right?”

I nodded, slightly confused. “How did you know?”

“I have an entad,” said Raven. “One that gives me a benefit when someone is boosting their own
abilities. It didn’t allow me any of the magic, unfortunately, or I would have been able to end that on
more favorable terms. As it stands, we have two librarians dead and another five catatonic.”

“Catatonic?” I asked. “Oh. Friendly fire?”

Raven nodded. “I had to stop you, and it was the only way I could think of. People were watching
us. I couldn’t warn them without warning you. Some of them saw the image.”

“I can fix them,” I said. “Probably. I can probably fix them.”

“How?” asked Raven. “How did you just shrug off one of the most powerful memetic kill agents we
have on record?”

“I was protected,” I said. I tapped the side of my head. “It’s still there, just strangled.” Which
probably means that I have a weapon that I can deploy against other soul mages, should it come to
that. I might even be immune to that one.

“And your other problem?” asked Raven. “The desire to kill me?”

“I fixed that too,” I said. “I think I was thinking that it was the fastest way to get me out of here so I
could go level up again. And I think that I also know how to solve that problem for the future.” I
shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Her finger was still between the pages. I was very consciously not looking at the book. If she didn’t believe me, I was probably fucked.

“You tried to kill me,” said Raven.

“I know,” I said. “It wasn't me. I mean, it was, that's the horrible thing, it was me, it was how I thought with all empathy and morality stripped away, but I can't even call that the same person. Or, I don't want to. I'm not going to say that you have to believe me, because you don't have to, but I'm glad that I wasn't able to kill you, and I hope you can understand the way things are.”

“I spent thirty years with Uther. Trust me when I say that I understand. Per protocols, I can’t clear you,” said Raven. “We have mandatory forty-eight hour quarantine, which unfortunately overlaps with the next shift change. Protocol is that we knock you out and keep you knocked out until after the reset, because the reset would put you back in the personnel grid, unrestrained.”

“Shit,” I said. “That’s … I understand it. So long as no one kills me.”

“That might also be a problem,” said Raven. “You shouldn’t have been able to shrug off the meme, but now that you have, Majom is going to argue for counter-programming. Do you think you could weather that too?”

“It depends on how long it takes to work, and the precise mechanism,” I said.

“Seconds,” replied Raven.

“Then no,” I said, frowning. “Even if I was allowed to prepare, I think it would probably just tear through me. The agent you used to paralyzed me was relatively benign. It wasn’t trying to kill me, it was just trying to make me think about it as much as possible.” I touched my fingers to my temple, trying to focus. “I’d prefer not to have my personality nuked because someone was being overly cautious.”

“There are dozens of witnesses to everything you did using unicorn magic,” said Raven. She was staring at me. “If I didn’t have some inkling of your place in the universe, I would issue the counter-programming myself.”

“But you do know what I’m here for,” I said. “You know me.”

“No,” said Raven, shaking her head. “We’re practically strangers, for all the familiarity you treat me with.”

“Sorry,” I said.

Raven eyed me. “I don’t have the authority to release you,” she said. “Given our protocols, if I acted unilaterally, it would be taken as a sign that I had been infected with something, and rightfully so. And even if we quarantine you, I’m not sure that someone wouldn’t slip you the counter-programming just to be safe. I’m not sure that I have enough control here, not when everyone knows that I’m on the way out, not when there are rumors swirling about us.”

“Rumors?” I asked.

Raven waved a hand. “Impropriety.”

“Ah,” I replied. I tried to move past that as swiftly as possible. “So you’re saying that if you don’t break me out, I might be doomed?”
“Yes,” said Raven with a nod. She was staring at me. “Convince me.”

“I …” I didn’t know where to begin. “I haven’t told you about Maddie.”

“Maddie?” asked Raven. “The one I look like?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “She was … she wore cat ears around school. That was why I asked you about it. I think she was the inspiration for you, similar in some ways and opposite in others.” I thought about what Fenn had said about the relationship of Japanese culture to the elves. “And I’ve been starting to think, more and more, that there’s purpose to the world, and to the people I’ve met, even if it’s not always obvious. You? For Arthur, I think you were his moral compass, the person that kept him grounded and reminded him of home, except that he didn’t tell you everything, and it didn’t always work. For me, the purpose is probably just to show me who Maddie could have been, I think. I wasn’t very nice to her, even though she was nice to me, and our relationship was dysfunctional, but … I don’t know, if I were a better person, maybe I could have made things work. So maybe this is my chance to be a better person.” I sighed. “Except that I don’t think it’s that simple, because maybe I’m supposed to be something to you too. I just don’t know what. Maybe I’m supposed to be the opposite of Uther, or at least opposite in some ways, trusting where he was secretive, taking advice where he ignored it, working together instead of charging ahead. I don’t know. I just think that my role is to be someone to you, and I probably won’t be able to do that if I get smacked in the brain with your counter-memes.”

Raven watched me for a moment, not making a move. “Okay,” she finally said. “I’ll get you out.”

*Loyalty increased: Raven lvl 1!*

That had been a long time coming. Because she was Ell, or because she was slow to trust? Or because I hadn’t done or said the right things until now?

“I’m going to need that last book,” I said. “The one that will tell us what the Second Empire knows about the locus. I’m sorry, I know that’s going to be tough, but --”

“It’s fine,” said Raven. Her face was set. “I’ll get it done.”

I was left to wait behind the wards until the warder came back, but instead of dropping them and letting me out, she put up a new one, blocking out the light entirely. I lit up my finger as a makeshift candle, but there was nothing to see, and it was really more to preserve my day vision when the ward inevitably dropped. I stopped when I’d lost too much heat and began to feel a chill.

Hours passed. I needed to pee.

Then in an instant, the wards all dropped, and I was momentarily blinded by the light. Raven was there, and she grabbed me by the hand, pulling me along as she ran toward the stacks. There were librarians behind her, and two bodies on the ground either wounded or dead.

“Don’t look back,” she said, voice tight.

I took her advice and ran after her, until we finally reached the first shelf of books, which parted way to display a dizzying kaleidoscope of shelves. It made my eyes water and stomach lurch, until I closed my eyes and let Raven lead me.

We came out in other shelves, and my body was jerked into position with my arms at the side for just a moment before I was blinking and rubbing eyes, trying to recover.

“So,” asked Bethel. “How did it go?”
We had a debriefing in what Bethel called ‘the conference room’. Even before she had gained the ability to fold space, she liked to go big, making rooms with ceilings that stretched up dozens of feet and more space than was needed for the people and furniture. With the ability to make rooms as large as a small town, she’d opted to do away with any pretense of restraint. The conference room was a massive place of gray marble and thick timbers that looked like they’d been cut from thousand-year-old trees. It took a legitimately long walk to get to the center, where the timbers overhead were arranged so they formed a wide, fluted cylinder that went up a few hundred feet. My first thought was that this was probably what the inside of a nuclear cooling tower looked like, but it was too skinny for that, and too well-lit.

The whole thing was also just too fucking big for nine people to have a meeting, but I held my tongue.

"Why don’t you tell me what you did first?" I asked. "I’m going to go ahead and assume that you had a less exciting time than I did, no offense."

“I spent the month trying to work out how I would recover from the setbacks that the Dungeon Master put in front of me,” said Amaryllis. I hadn’t been gone a month; Amaryllis was borrowing more time, but at least she was being forthright about it. “The tuung have hatched, and are being tended to by the helpers and teachers we hired, which I’m keeping a close eye on. Aside from that, the only thing that we have to report is that the water mage was unavoidably delayed due to a storm.”

“I thought they dealt with storms?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “That was what I meant; she had to deal with a storm.”

Bethel leaned forward. “There are too many people in me,” she said with a frown. “I’m feeling less like a house and more like a facility.”

“It’s temporary,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was tight. “And I asked you before I made any plans.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t grumble, now that your better half is back,” said Bethel.

Pallida and Heshnel were with us at the table. My eyes went to Pallida at the comment from Bethel, and I saw a slight frown cross her face. She had designs on Amaryllis, that much was clear, and in the doomed timeline, it had apparently worked, for a time. I wasn’t sure what Bethel was playing at, unless she was just trying to stir up shit. Or maybe I had misunderstood, and our murderous house had just been saying ‘better half’ in a strictly non-romantic way. I might have been reading too much into it.

“And you, Juniper?” asked Amaryllis. “How was your time in the Library?”

“I learned Library Magic,” I said. “I also learned Spirit. Unfortunately, that triggered quest completion, which, ah, turned me into my worst self.”

“A number of people died,” said Raven. “I think it would suffice to say that it’s better we don’t go back there unless we want a fight.”

“A fight you would win, surely?” asked Bethel.

“Maybe,” I said. “Some of their weapons are novel. I was hit with one.” I glanced at Raven. “I’m not
saying that we shouldn’t ever return, but we came out with a large cache of books, and I accomplished everything that I meant to do there.” I looked over at Solace. True to what the books had said, she was back to her five-year-old crantek body, with small antlers coming from her forehead as embellishment. Druidic bullshit, I was pretty sure, but I was still happy about it, because her being in the body of some random guy hadn’t felt quite right. “I haven’t read through all the books yet, but we were able to get all of the Second Empire’s research into the nature of the loci. It’s knowledge that was paid for in blood, but I’m hopeful that I can find something in there that gives me a hint as to what I can do to help get the locus established in the outside world, some way to spread its power and let it take on new lands.”

“Hrm,” said Solace. She narrowed her eyes and cast a glance at Heshnel, who didn’t meet her gaze. “I’m doubtful that such materials would prove useful. The Second Empire never truly understood the loci. That was one of the reasons they killed so many of those I loved.”

“It’s as good as I’ve got right now,” I said. I cleared my throat. “I’d also like to sleep in the bottle from now on, if that’s okay with you.”

“Certainly,” said Solace. She seemed much more pleased with that. “Keep your soiled research outside though.”

I nodded, then turned to the others. “That aside, there are a few other things to report on. I guess the first is that Fel Seed is going to be more difficult to deal with than I thought he would be.” I took a breath. “I’d like to postpone going into his exclusion zone until after we’ve managed to concoct a good enough plan. I have a book that chronicles the closest anyone has ever gotten to killing him, along with some research and case studies done by the Second Empire, all of which might be helpful. It also looks like we’re going to bring Thargox into the mix.” I looked over at Pallida and Heshnel.

“That can be arranged,” said Heshnel. “We have the entad it used for communication, or failing that, we can meet it. I don’t know its specific stance on you, as yet. Lyda died swiftly, in that confrontation, before Thargox could weigh in.”

“I’m hopeful,” I said. I took another look at the seats around us as I realized something. “Gemma hasn’t come back?”

“She’s going through a warrior’s trial, last I heard,” said Pallida. “Her account was challenged. The Foxguard customs haven’t really kept up with the times. If she’s unlucky, she won’t return. She did bring the Egress back though.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m pretty sure that we’re going to be making heavy use of it in the coming weeks. I’d like to hit a few of Uther’s old caches, and we’re due for a return to Speculation and Scrutiny, or as close as we can get and still be outside the zone. Masters has a cache of entads that should, as close as I can figure, go to us.” I was the new Chosen One, like it or not, and on my side was not just the last of Uther’s Knights, but Masters’ daughter as well.

“Can I ask if you found any books I wrote?” asked Amaryllis, leaning forward some in her chair.

“Yes,” I said. “You managed to single-handedly revolutionize a number of fields on Aerb and kept things running for nearly a hundred years.” I hesitated. “There are limits on how much it’s good to show you.”

“Oh?” asked Amaryllis.

“For the safety of the Library,” I said. “We might have burnt some bridges on our way out, to put it
mildly -- no, sorry, I ... I killed some people, and more died because of me, when I leveled. I don’t want to downplay that. That’s the primary reason that we won’t be going back, that and the fact that I have work to do in the real world. But even if we’re not going to be actively using the Library, it’s still a valuable resource, one that I don’t want to compromise.”

“So the books stay sealed?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I replied. “Not sealed, just ... it’s important that you do the things you were going to do anyway. I brought back six different editions, and I’d like some time in the chamber to read through them, but I agree with Raven that it would probably be better that you don’t try to skip past all the hard work, not at the expense of the Library.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “Read carefully and tell me what I need to know.”

“You left some messages to yourself,” I said. “Personal ones, I gather. I’ll write them down for you. They were encrypted.”

Amaryllis raised an eyebrow. “I promised myself I wouldn’t do that.”

“It seemed like something that you really wanted to say to yourself,” I said. “We can talk about it more later. For now, I’d prefer if you limited your chamber time, at least until I’ve gotten caught back up to speed on what you’re doing.”

“Do you actually care?” asked Amaryllis.

“I do,” I nodded. “I think I’ve been sitting on the sidelines for too long, and some of what you have planned is ... well, I wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“Are we done here then?” asked Pallida, leaning forward in her seat.

“No,” I said. “There’s one more thing.” I turned to Grak. “Grak, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to make the trip to Darili Irid. It might take a day or two to get all the gold ready, but we promised you our assistance long ago, and I want to make good on that.”

Grak’s face showed no emotion. “You want to be with me,” he said.


“Fine,” he answered, and that was that.

“Can I verify the integrity of your soul?” asked Amaryllis.

We’d had a group dinner, with custom meals created on the spot by Bethel, where I’d given the longer version of my time in the Library, and I’d been filled in on the more mundane goings-on around the Isle of Poran. Grak had started in on the Harry Potter series at Valencia’s request, Solace had taken to designing some rituals and holidays for the tuung to take part in, and our two newest members had settled into life on the island. Amaryllis was working on a prototype television that wouldn’t kill or brainwash anyone, but it was going to take awhile; in the meantime, we had the film projector, along with all of the verified-safe films that we’d already watched once or twice, which helped serve as an introduction to Earth culture for the newbies.

After we were done eating, Amaryllis had taken me aside, into her room, and asked to look into my soul.
“No,” I said. “There’s an image in my memories that you might see that would make you catatonic. I could maybe fix you with Spirit, or it’s possible that with half my skill you could fix yourself, but … no, you probably can’t verify integrity, or at least not safely.”

“That’s a problem,” Amaryllis frowned.

“Do you have specific concerns about my soul being compromised?” I asked. “Uh, technically you have to worry about both soul and spirit, because I think that you can effectively replicate most effects using one or the other.”

“Lovely,” said Amaryllis with a sigh. “I’ll probably take some time in the chamber to get a handle on it.”

“Maybe we both should,” I said. “Things got kind of fucked at the Library, and I have two new points that my evil twin thankfully didn’t spend, which means that I can raise the caps on skills.” I stopped myself, unsure whether or not I should say what I was thinking. “When I was reading the books that you wrote … I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” nodded Amaryllis, as though it were a statement of simple fact rather than anything emotional. “I’d prefer if you don’t go running off on your own again, but I recognize that the rule of three is in play.”

“Rule of three?” I asked. “Ah, Speculation and Scrutiny was the first, the Infinite Library was the second?”

“Yes,” replied Amaryllis. “Uther writes about the rule of three a lot, especially in Degenerate Cycles. Either two times establish a pattern so the third time deviates, or two encounters with a win and a loss set up a tiebreaker. He notes that infinite cycles have to find ways around that.”

“And that’s some of what you spent time in the chamber thinking about?” I asked.

“It’s one of the things, yes,” said Amaryllis. “Mostly it was in setting up experimental protocols for dealing with hostile, unknown memetic threats, eldritch entities, and/or hostile and contagious magic. I drew up some designs for labs that would self-seal and incinerate everyone inside, for example.” She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t suppose that you can tell me much? Or that you’re willing to? Obviously I had some success.”

“The world lasted an extra hundred years without me around,” I said. “A lot of that is on you. You figured out solutions and worked your ass off, all the while knowing that it was all for the sake of the books you were writing and little else.” I paused. “So whatever you came up with, it worked there. I don’t know how much knowing that will change what you do.”

“I’ll be interested in reading whatever you clear me for,” said Amaryllis with a shrug.

“You’re very nonchalant about it,” I said.

“Curiosity is something that I tamed long ago,” said Amaryllis. “Do I want to read my notes from decades in the future? Obviously. It’s like a burning itch. But part of being a rational, competent person is in understanding that there are some itches that you shouldn’t scratch, for your own good.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll give you the encrypted messages you left yourself though. I assume they were personal.” Amaryllis was sitting on her big, fluffy, four-poster bed, and I was sitting on a chair next to her fireplace. I shifted around some, not quite comfortable. There were things that I wanted to say to her, but not quite her, the person she was in the books, that doomed Amaryllis who had lived out her life in service of the world. Cypress. It was the fake name she’d given me when we’d first met.
“Just say it,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Whatever you’re thinking about or stopping yourself from saying, just say it, unless it’s one of those itches that you know you shouldn’t scratch,” said Amaryllis.

“I was thinking of putting my points into SOC first,” I said.

“Permanent points?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I know they’re not the direction that your roadmap points to, but … it’s sort of a question of what’s important, you know? And that depends on what the Dungeon Master wants from me, which is guessable but unknowable, at this point.”

“SOC would help to solve personal problems, not hexal ones,” said Amaryllis.

“And I’m a lever to move the world, not a lever to help my friends?” I asked.

“That’s not --” Amaryllis began.

“Sorry,” I said. “That came out wrong, which I’m going to blame on my low SOC. I didn’t mean it to sound snarky, I meant … I can understand how it would seem, from your perspective, like I’m burning an extremely valuable resource in order to solve what are ultimately small problems. But when I look at everything that happened in the last month? Even if I’m thinking rationally, I have to look at all the stuff that got fucked because I didn’t have enough SOC. How are we going to get allies if even using half your considerable skill sees me completely screwing everything up? Narrative aside, Fenn was close to walking away. Solace and Grak have both expressed their reservations about staying, and I don’t think that’s entirely about goals and values. SOC leads to Loyalty, whether we like it or not, and Loyalty leads to power.”

“You’re saying that the personal is political,” said Amaryllis.

“Political?” I asked. “You mean global? Er, hexal?”

“It’s a second wave feminism slogan,” said Amaryllis. “I’ve been reading some of Tiff’s books in anticipation of her showing up. It’s not entirely apt. Sorry, I thought you would recognize it.” I shook my head. “Whatever. I understand your argument. I even think there’s some merit in it. The problem is that you have so few skills that are capped by SOC, or that use it at all, that you’re essentially wasting the level as far as combat and utility go.”

“And how much utility do we lose if people keep stepping away?” I asked. “What if I say the wrong thing to Pallida and she leaves? In purely mercenary terms, she represents more power than an extra three ranks in half my skills do.”

“Point taken,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “You could take more time to think about it.”

“I know,” I said. “I will. I just … to get back to what we were talking about earlier, the thing that I wanted to tell you but was having trouble with, I just wanted to, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, or you don’t want to say?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“You were lonely,” I said. “She was. Cypress, I guess we’ll call her. In that doomed timeline, you had your work and almost nothing else. I know that you don’t need people to function, but it was still sad, and I don’t have the SOC to say it properly, but I want you to know that if you need a person, if
you want a person, I’m there for you.”

“I see,” said Amaryllis. She was watching me. “I stopped interfering with the natural processes of the soul, in the doomed timeline?”

“You did,” I said.

“So I loved you,” she said with a sigh. “How many years in the future?”

“Until you died,” I said. “596 FE, but with extra subjective decades in the chamber.” It ran contrary to what the Dungeon Master had told me, but I didn’t know whether that was because the rules were different in the other timeline, because he’d lied, or because I hadn’t ‘let’ her get over me.

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis. She closed her eyes and made a melodramatic flop backward onto the bed. “And I suppose I was forthright with you about this in the books, and that’s part of the reason you’re feeling whatever you’re feeling?”


“I have no idea why I would choose that,” said Amaryllis. “To love someone who was gone?”

“I think maybe it made it easier for you,” I said. “You were in this doomed timeline, knowing that you were going through all this work to become Queen of Aerb so that --”

“Queen of Aerb?” asked Amaryllis, sitting up and looking at me.

“I don’t think that’s something I need to hold back on,” I said. “That wasn’t actually your title. You were Secretary General of the Empire of Common Cause, Queen of Anglecynn, and Commander of the Imperial Defense Force.”

“Anglecynn doesn’t have a queen,” said Amaryllis. She was looking me over. “Hasn’t had a queen since Zona, nor a king since Uther.”

“Things can change. Constitutions can be rewritten,” I said. “I’m pretty sure that the Imperial Defense Force isn’t a thing either.”

“It’s been floated for the better part of a decade,” replied Amaryllis. She sat back on the bed slightly. “I was actually able to accomplish all that?”

“You blew up Celestar,” I said with a smile.

Amaryllis stared at me. “You’re piquing my curiosity after having told me that you won’t sate it,” she said.

“I’m not trying to,” I lied. “I’m just in awe of what you managed to accomplish over there, how far you were able to advance the state of the art, even as you were pushing through this loneliness and solitude. I wanted to give you a hug. That was all, really, all I wanted to say, just that I value you and I want you to be happy.”

*Loyalty increased: Amaryllis lvl 23!*

“I would accept a hug,” said Amaryllis. She opened her arms wide.

I came over to her and wrapped her in a hug. She was small, compared to me, but with hard muscles. I held her for a moment, thinking of the old woman sitting at the end of the world with a figurative army of personnel working beneath her and a literal army of magus-soldiers at her command, the
woman who had done all that she could just to send a message to an audience of one. A Cypress Waits.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” Amaryllis murmured into my ear.

“No?” I asked. I tried to pull back, to see her face, but she held tight, keeping me where I was.

“I like hugs,” she said. Her voice was low. She rested her head against mine. “I’m not in love with you. I just missed you, and I like being hugged. Don’t take it the wrong way.”

“I won’t,” I replied. I stayed silent for a bit, as the hug went on. I felt myself wanting to cry, because I missed Fenn, because it was obvious that Amaryllis had wanted someone to hold her, and because some other Amaryllis that never was had waited until the end of the world.

“Would you be upset,” Amaryllis began, then stopped. “Would you be upset if I did this with Pallida?”

“No,” I said, even as I felt my heart sink a bit. ‘Upset’ wouldn’t be quite the right word, but I wasn’t sure what word would fit.

“We did,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was near a whisper. She was still holding me tight. “I asked Valencia what you would think and she refused to say.” She paused. “I shouldn’t have asked her, obviously, but how you would feel about it didn’t enter my mind until after Pallida was touching me.”

“Ah,” I said. “Pallida likes you.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. She had gone tense.

“You can relax,” I said. I waited until she did. “If you don’t want to hug, then --”

“I do,” replied Amaryllis, squeezing me once. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I asked.

She shook her head, which I felt rather than saw. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m sorry if my other self complicated things. I’m sorry if it was me who made the mistake, not her.” She finally pulled back and disentangled herself from me. “I don’t want to lead you on. You’re not the person who should be giving me physical affection.” She was staring at me with her pale blue eyes.

I shrugged. “Maybe,” I said. “Do you think it should be Pallida?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “She wants … well, she wants Dahlia. It’s an awkward and confusing mess for different reasons. I shouldn’t have led her on either.”

“How far did it go?” I asked, not really wanting to know the answer. It wasn’t a betrayal, obviously, I’d told Pallida that I wasn’t standing in her way. I still didn’t really want to hear it.

“She kissed me,” said Amaryllis. “On the neck. I pushed her away, and that was that, but she had this hunger in her eyes. Like you sometimes get.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If it weren’t against my principles, I would edit that right out. We’re platonic friends, I get that, you don’t want me to complicate things, I understand it, that’s -- I mean, you’re right, probably no more hugs.”

“It was nice,” said Amaryllis. “It’s nice to be touched. To cuddle.”
“You miss Fenn,” I said.

Amaryllis nodded.

“I do too,” I said. “With what I know about Spirit, I’m more convinced than ever that she’s gone, unless there’s some analog to the anima exa that sticks to the soul. If there’s not, then we only have a fraction of the real thing, and there’s no way to get her back, not even in principle, besides maybe letting her show up in the hells.”

“I never thought we’d be able to get her back,” said Amaryllis.

“No,” I said with a long sigh. “Me neither, not really.”

Amaryllis moved away from me and stood up, leaving me alone on her bed. She walked to one of her windows and took out the ribbon that was tying her hair back, then redid it. “I should get going. There’s work to do, as there always is.”

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m good. I was just thinking about you.” She was facing away from me, hiding her face. “Can I be blunt?”

“Of course,” I said. My mind went racing back to when we’d been in the bottle, and she had said that if I had wanted to have sex with her, she would have endured it. That still stung.

“I don’t love you,” she said, still looking out the window. “You’re my best friend, you’re physically pleasant to look at, and you’re usually the most powerful person in a given room, but I don’t love you. Every morning, I go into my soul and dial things down specifically so that I don’t love you. It made sense, when you were with Fenn, when I didn’t want to live with the distracting emotional pain of wanting you and not being able to have you. And now that she’s gone, and she’s been gone, a month for you, a month and a half for me, there’s the question of whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing, on balance, for me to let myself love you.”

I watched her. She was still standing facing the window, and still toying with her hair, but it was clear to me that it was just an excuse not to look at me. Maybe it was easier for her to be clinical that way.

“You made a pros and cons list?” I asked. I was feeling melancholy at the moment, but that didn’t stop me from being faintly amused by the idea.

“I’m making one, right now,” said Amaryllis as she looked out the window. “I don’t really want to share with you and Bethel until I have something worth presenting.”

“You said we’d make a horrible couple, when we talked about it back in the chamber,” I said. “Though I guess you also said that you were wrong, and that was horseshit.”

“I did say both those things,” said Amaryllis, “Is it too soon?” she asked.

“As far as Fenn goes?” I asked. I hesitated and tried to break that question down. Would it be a betrayal of Fenn’s memory, and the relationship I had shared with her? It would certainly feel like it, but that feeling seemed like it would belong in the class of stupid feelings that don’t really have a reason to exist. Would it be too soon for me though? Would Fenn pollute every thought I had and hang over me like a ghost? Would I wake up in the middle of the night and touch Amaryllis, thinking that it was Fenn until my waking mind caught up with my sleeping one, would I have intrusive thoughts about Fenn that clouded any new relationship, whether it was with Amaryllis or not?
Probably. “I think I need more time,” I said. “Or I would need more time, if you thought it was more pro than con.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis. She finally turned back to face me, and looked at me with piercing blue eyes. “Thank you for the hug. I’m sure my other self would have appreciated it.”

That felt like a dismissal to me, so I stood up and awkwardly walked out the door, muttering something about how I would see her later. When I left, Bethel was leaned up against the wall, waiting for me and smiling.

“Well that was interesting,” she said.

“Do you ever think about how one of the functions of a house is to provide privacy for its occupants?” I asked. “In your grand theory of houseness, is that at all a consideration?”

Bethel pressed a finger to her lips and pretended to think about that. “Not one bit,” she finally said. She was in her usual form, the tall woman with cedar-colored skin and an impossibly gauzy dress (in its current form, it looked like each of the thousand layers was as thin and translucent as a soap bubble). Her hair was somewhat different though: while it had always been braided and coiled like rope, now it was much explicitly closer to looking like Ropey. We hadn’t talked about the wedding, but it was going to happen soon.

“Is Grak in his room?” I asked.

“Why?” asked Bethel.

“I was going to pay him a visit,” I said. I began walking without waiting for a response.

“Yes, he’s in his room,” said Bethel.

I glanced over at her. “Can I ask a favor from you?” I asked.

“Can we talk about you and Amaryllis?” asked Bethel with a pleased smile. “That’s my price.”

“Sure,” I said. “My favor is that you redecorate Grak’s room. No more explicitly dwarf stuff, it’s too much of a reminder of his old home, which he’s got some bad feelings about.”

“Did you talk to him about it?” asked Bethel.

“No,” I said. “For all I know, he picked it out himself as a form of self-flagellation, but that would be all the more reason to change it. I’d rather he not know I asked, but it doesn’t need to be a big secret. I just think he’d be happier if he was living in a place that didn’t remind him of Darili Irid.”

“Done,” said Bethel. “And no, he didn’t ask for it to be like that. It offends his sensibilities?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. I kept walking. “Now go on, you can make whatever snide remarks you want to me.”

“You think so little of me?” asked Bethel with a little laugh that echoed through the enormous halls.

“I know you like getting your digs in,” I said. “I choose to take it as good-natured ribbing, and you should choose to take my complaining as being equally good-natured.”

*Loyalty increased: Bethel lvl 11!*

“Hrm, where to start then?” asked Bethel. She was floating along beside me, not bothering to
animate her legs moving, though she did have her toes pointed down, as was traditional for ghosts. “You had quite the erection, for someone who was hugging a platonic friend who has about as much interest in your penis as she does in a jar of pickled onions.”

I laughed. “You know, I had forgotten how creepy you are? You’re also a pervert, but you knew that.”

“I’m a house,” replied Bethel with a sniff. “I can’t possibly be perverted, the concept simply doesn’t apply. I only mention these things because I enjoy your reaction.”

“That’s the perversion,” I said. “Next thing you’ll be telling me something like, I don’t know --”

“The taste of Raven’s cervix?” asked Bethel with a smile.

I stopped in my tracks and looked over at her. “Ew,” I finally said, before I started walking again.

“Was that a step too far?” asked Bethel.

“Yes,” I replied. “I really don’t like thinking of Raven like that.”

“Even though you had sex with her doppelganger?” asked Bethel.

“How did you know about that?” I asked. “My letters to Fenn?”

“I snooped, yes,” said Bethel. “I have access to everything inside the glove, so long as the glove is inside me.” She paused for a moment. “You wrote those letters with the understanding that I might read them, around when we first met.”

“I didn’t count on them staying private,” I said. “But I was still hoping they would. Just like I was hoping that Amaryllis and I could speak our thoughts without an audience, but I knew that it was possible, maybe even probable, that you were listening in.”

“Hrm,” said Bethel. “You think I should apologize for being invasive, where a Penndraig is concerned?”

“I didn’t say that,” I replied as I continued down the hallway. “I’m just talking about what I want. And really, I’m pretty simple. The thing I want most in the world is for my house to not keep track of the time, location, and presumed cause of all my erections.”

Bethel laughed at that. “If you’d give me a moment, I could probably construct a chart for you.”

“Please don’t,” I said. I kept putting one foot in front of the other. “This hallway is getting suspiciously long.”

“Ah,” I said. “No. If Amaryllis was downplaying it, or even if she was lying, or massaging the truth,
then I have to trust her to have her reasons.”

*Loyalty increased: Bethel lvl 12!*

“You restrain yourself so,” said Bethel with a moue. “It’s unbecoming.”

“And yet,” I replied.

“And yet what?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Nothing,” I said. “I really did want to see Grak though, so if this hallway could be a little less endless, I would appreciate it. If you’d like to needle me more later, I’ll be available.”

“You didn’t answer my question about the dwarf,” said Bethel. “You’re going to see him. Why?”

“I wanted to give him a hug,” I replied.
“So,” I said as I came into Grak’s room. “I’m giving out hugs today.”

Grak stared at me, looking me over.

“Why?” he asked.

“I thought that you would like one,” I said, switching over to Grogli. “When I left you were upset that Magor wasn’t coming. I can be your krinrael instead.”

“Your command of the language hasn’t given you the understanding of culture you think it has,” replied Grak, scowling at me.

“You were the one who taught me,” I said. “I knew the term krinrael because you were the one to teach it to me, not because it got implanted into my head through unknown means. If I’m misusing it, it’s because I didn’t understand what you were trying to say, not because I was given the wrong understanding by a higher power. Does krinrael not denote physical affection?”

“It does,” said Grak. He was still scowling. “You could not be krinrael to me. I disgust you.”

“What?” I asked. That seemed like it had come from nowhere. “You don’t disgust me.”

“I’m not stupid,” said Grak. “I see the way that you look at them, and I see the way that you look at me.”

“Them?” I asked, still dumbfounded.

“Amaryllis, Fenn, Valencia, Bethel, even Solace, before she turned into a child,” said Grak. “You’re pleased with how they look. You barely meet my eyes.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry. I don’t think that means what you think it means though. It’s one half aesthetic preference, one half cultural artifacts from Earth. I know that you’re not actually male, but you look male, and on Earth, I wouldn’t look at a man like I look at Amaryllis, even if he were beautiful.”

“Am I beautiful?” asked Grak.

I had no idea how to answer that. Obviously from a ‘keep Grak happy’ standpoint, the answer should be yes, but … “The way dwarves were built, back on Earth, by people who came before me, was by appealing to a specific kind of fantasy about what humans were, or could be. Elves were the erudite upper class, effeminate and gracile, perceptive and aloof. For dwarves, it’s about strength and brute power, hard work and stubbornness. They weren’t the farmer-miners they are on Aerb, they were just miners, usually with no clear source of food.”

“That wasn’t the question,” said Grak.

I stifled a sigh. “No,” I said. “I don’t think that you’re beautiful. You’re appealing in a way that’s sort of separate from what I would consider to be beauty. That’s different from what I would call disgust. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s the truth, and I assume you prefer that.” I was getting exasperated, mostly because this conversation felt like I’d walked into an ambush. “Forget the krinrael thing, I just thought that you would like a hug.”

Grak frowned at me. “Yes,” he finally said.
I gave Grak his hug, trying to put as much love and warmth into it as I could, because I did care about him, and I did want him around. The idea of him being sequestered off from the others in the doomed timeline, or killing himself in the crypt that his hometown had become was heartbreaking. I could see his unhappiness as having mirrored my own, when I was in the depths of depression, that kind of rabid animal wounded that wanted to lash out at everything and everyone around me. Would I have wanted a hug? Yes. I probably wouldn’t have accepted it though. I probably wouldn’t have thought that I deserved it, or I would have seen it as a betrayal of the pain that I should be feeling. At my worst, maybe it wouldn’t have done anything for me, but there had been bad nights when all I wanted was to be held.

“I’m sorry,” said Grak.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I understand.”

*Loyalty increased: Grak lvl 17!*

I sat there in silence for a moment as I held him. I still needed to read the books, which would hopefully say more about his ultimate fate. I didn’t actually believe that pairing him off with some random dwarf and writing him out of the story was the best that we could do for him though, not by a long shot.

“Is this about what you read in the Library?” asked Grak. He still hadn’t let go of me.

“A bit,” I replied.

“That’s why you want to go to Darili Irid?” asked Grak.

“No,” I said. “I wanted to go there before, because it was important to you, and something you need to do. If you don’t go, it will linger and consume your thoughts. I knew that before I left.”

“Hurmph,” said Grak. He pulled away from me and looked me in the eyes. “I think I am done.”

(This was a mildly unusual construction in Groglir, because all statements were inherently considered to be subjective expressions. To say that you thought you were done required bending a word that was normally used for other agents, not yourself, and placed extra emphasis on the act of thinking.)

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t ask if it had helped, because I didn’t want him to feel compelled to answer. ‘We could do movie night tonight?’”

“Yes,” replied Grak, switching back to Anglish, which was usually his cue that he was done talking.

When I left the room, Bethel was waiting for me. “An interesting day for Juniper Smith, it seems.”

I made the necessary alteration to my spirit, the one that would hopefully lock away the ‘evil’ Juniper forever. It took a fair bit of work, most of which involved peering at my soul and tracing threads back into the spirit, and it was hellishly difficult to see where anything was, because the ‘Level Up’ value was suppressed so low that the relevant threads were hard to feel and harder to see. I did eventually find them though, and after I had leveled Spirit a few times, got a perk that made the whole thing easier.

*Skill increased: Spirit lvl 10!*

*New Virtue: Threadbare*

*Threadbare: When analyzing a thread, you gain information on which threads it has historically
had some connection with, which aspects of the soul it has connected with, and a sense of historic thread size.

The language there settled on a metaphor, at least, that of ‘threads’, but I didn’t particularly like the terminology, because ‘thread’ meant something in computer science, and these didn’t really seem to fit, especially because so many of the threads were dormant. I liked ‘functions’ better, especially since it seemed like they could ‘call’ each other, but whatever, it was close enough, and ‘thread’ was what I would stick with.

Once I could see more of the threads, it was easy enough to trace back and see which one needed to be restricted. I squeezed it down, as I’d done with the meme that still laced through my spirit, until there was practically nothing left. The ‘Level Up’ value was still increasing, but some more debugging of my soul/spirit let me fix that too; it was ticking up because I had the memory of ecstasy. That was easy enough to change, once I had found it, though I opted to strangle the spiritual connection between the memory cluster and the spirit, rather than at the endpoint where the spirit touched back into the soul.

I hoped it would all be enough. After a day, ‘Level Up’ still hadn’t moved from the position I’d left it at, right between ‘Belly button lint’ and ‘Anise’. I was tempted to do another big sacrifice, pushing skill points into Spirit and bumping it up to absurd levels so that I could get all of the Virtues for it and be as good as I could be to within the limits of what the game would allow, but I had done two of those sacrifices now, and it was legitimately difficult to raise the skills that had been traded in, especially those that had been traded in twice.

The day before we were set for our expedition to Darili Irid, Amaryllis and I spent a week in the chamber together, mostly so that I could read through the books her other self had written, and she could read through the other books (notably, the locus materials and Fel Seed manifests) and practice her newfound skill in Spirit.

In the evenings, we usually spent an hour or two together, sometimes playing games and other times watching movies using the projector (the television had been shelved). She would lean into me sometimes, resting her head on my shoulder, and I would put my arm around her. She decoded the messages from herself, but never told me what was in them, and I never asked.

She had the capacity to make more permanent changes now that she had half my skill in Spirit. We didn’t talk about the implications of that either, or at least not the implications it had for what she felt for me. She would have to decide, as someone who wasn’t at all in love with me, whether the ancillary benefits of letting herself be in love would be worth the change in personality.

Other than that, it was good to be back together, and to have someone to talk to about the things that were weighing on me.

“I keep thinking about him,” I said. “The other Juniper. I have to think about him like that, like he’s not me, because if I think about him as though we’re the same person, then I have to accept that I was responsible for killing a number of innocent people. Not just innocent people, but innocent people that I knew and liked.”

“I do have some experience with the feeling,” said Amaryllis. “After what Fallatehr did to me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “She was more competent though.”

“From what you described, you weren’t incompetent, just optimizing for the very near future,” said Amaryllis. “Like a drug addict who just wants the next hit, rather than making plans to have as many hits as consistently as possible over the rest of his life.”

“Surely you’re glad that you didn’t succeed?” asked Amaryllis.

“I am,” I replied. “It’s just weird and upsetting to have had all those thoughts. Especially that last one.”

“When he ended himself?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I keep thinking about -- well, about Fenn. I keep thinking about what I would do if someone offered to bring Fenn back, except I would have to carve out the part of myself that cared about her. And I think … yeah, maybe?”

“You used Fenn in that example, not Arthur,” Amaryllis remarked.

“More immediate, more visceral to me,” I said. I felt my stomach churn. I had been spending a fair amount of time in my soul; I knew where the values stood. “Sorry.”

“It doesn’t warrant apology,” said Amaryllis. “I was just pointing it out. It’s not a mark against you, just something that you might think about, the next time you’re considering going to have a chat with Fel Seed for Arthur’s sake.”

I waved away the argument that would start, which we’d already had more than once. “I think that the obvious parallel is to a drug addict, right? So if you put a drug addict into withdrawal, and you tell them that they’ll get more of the drug, and they’ll get that rush, but they’ll no longer be addicted … I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” asked Amaryllis.

“I mean, yes, obviously my model of a drug addict would take that deal, and that’s what happened, but I suppose I just want it to have been me that made the choice, rather than him,” I said. I thought that got to the crux of it. “I wanted it to be homicide, not suicide.”

“That’s not how he was thinking of it,” said Amaryllis, shaking her head. “At least, when I was soulfucked by Fallatehr, -- you suddenly don’t like that expression?” She was watching my face.

“I wouldn’t want the act in euphemism to make it more palatable, I guess,” I replied. “So it’s fine.”

“For me,” said Amaryllis, “The important thing was Fallatehr, only Fallatehr, that he survive, that he stay coherent. I would have killed myself, if I had thought that it was necessary. I would have defiled myself in whatever way I thought would work. I’d have consigned myself to the hells for eternity. Personal identity wasn’t really a factor in it. It was different, for the ‘other’ Juniper, because he needed to be alive to get the feeling, but in the face of such overwhelming desire, especially short-term, things like personal identity and continuity of consciousness go out the window. He was just doing whatever he could to get to the next level up as quickly as possible and probably not being philosophical about it.”

“I guess,” I said.

“‘You wish that you’d have overcome him, somehow, through sheer willpower?’” asked Amaryllis. “‘Even though ‘you’ weren’t a coherent entity at the time?”

“Yes,” I replied with a smile. “Yes, that’s exactly what I wish had happened. It’s one of the reasons so many stories have heroes win through the power of grit and determination, or the power of love and friendship, rather than because they were smart and planned things out.”
“Of course, you weren’t smart, and you didn’t plan things out,” said Amaryllis. “Raven should have tied you to a chair while you learned Spirit.”

“I didn’t think the game would fuck me like that,” I said, but even as the words were out of my mouth, I knew how foolish that sounded. People had died because I didn’t take the threat seriously. More people would have died, if I had been capable of (or amenable to) long-term planning. And there were a lot of scenarios in which I would have died.

“Lesson learned, I suppose?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“Lesson learned,” I agreed. “All the more reason to power up before Fel Seed.”

Amaryllis nodded, but I was sure that there was a part of her that wanted to launch into an argument about going for Fel Seed at all.

I fell in love with the doomed timeline, I have to admit. I wanted to live there, in the same way that I had wanted to live in Hogwarts when I was a little boy (or really, the way I wanted to live anywhere that wasn’t home). There were so many little details that I wanted to explore, but couldn’t. They weren’t just locked away and visible only through books, but locked away and only visible through these books, because the Library had reset, and it had all been wiped away except for those particular books we’d copied.

Computers were, apparently, a problem, because too much computation in one place led to a specific type of magic to crop up, one which was difficult to control and could prove deadly to anyone who practiced it. Computational magic could go rampant in an instant, leading to runaway processes that would eventually destroy all of Aerb if they weren’t stopped. Amaryllis had known that it was dangerous though, and done almost all of the initial research and development in what she called SCRsIs, Secure Compartmented Research Institutes, all of which were wrapped in heavy wards and with strict protocols regarding screening and quarantine.

And as for actually using the computers? Well, once the principles were understood, computing magic could be warded against, allowing engineers and programmers a relative measure of safety. That still made computers too unsafe, if they were going to be used like we used them on Earth, but Amaryllis had settled on a workaround by inventing cloud computing right from the get-go (following an evolutionary path that had died out on Earth fairly early on). Instead of a global internet of connected computers, there were enormous mainframes with ‘dumb’ terminals that communicated with a heavily warded central hub that was rigged up with fail-dangerous traps to destroy the mainframes and kill everyone inside the perimeter if anyone attempted to tamper with any of it. That also gave Amaryllis a fairly effective stranglehold on the technology and dystopic surveillance of anyone using it.

She put up a network of ‘satellites’, hung in place above Aerb using rotating shifts of still mages and other magics, and allowed by a complicated agreement with the Draconic Confederacy. It was a huge investment of capital, but it made the ground repeaters for radio obsolete, allowed for the construction of ‘dumb’ geolocation devices, served as a centralization point for distribution of television and radio programming, and acted as both a stationary weapons platform and eye-in-the-sky. Much of this had government funding as a way of keeping people ‘safe’.

The Imperial Defense Force had been brought into existence as a means of having a ‘cooperative’ armed forces that could deal with Empire-scale threats, which in principle meant border-crossing threats and exclusion zones, but in practice meant whatever the people in charge wanted to aim their guns at. ‘People in charge’ mostly meant Amaryllis, a handful of tuung that she had known since their birth, Valencia’s adoptive children, and to a lesser extent, the rest of the Council of Arches.
Their chief weapons were fear, surprise, and ruthless efficiency, but beyond those, they also had the recovered entads that were Amaryllis’ by claim-in-fact, the systems and technology that Amaryllis had set in place, and a secret weapon; plastic mages.

Aerb didn’t have much in the way of fossil fuels, which made sense given that it was (supposedly) thirty thousand years old. They had rubbers, mostly harvested from trees, and some crude hard plastics that reminded me of something like Bakelite, but not much else. If Amaryllis had been a quitter, maybe she would have seen this as a branch of chemistry and industry that wasn’t worth trying to crack. Instead, she had purchased, at great expense, an open portal to the elemental plane of wood, from which she imported vast quantities of wood which went through a number of esoteric processes in order to turn those delicious hydrocarbons into usable solids, liquids, and gases. There were a huge number of useless (or largely useless) byproducts, especially given that the fuel they produced couldn’t out-compete what soul energy could produce in very many areas. None of that mattered so much though, because it opened up the world of plastics, and plastic had its own brand of magic to it.

The first half of it was easy enough; it was Reed Richards’ superpower, flexibility and stretchiness, which came with an ability to tank hits like there was no tomorrow, mediated by the plastic plates that were attached, fused, or integrated into their skin. At the magus level, with ten years of training, they could reshape themselves nearly at will, altering most aspects of their appearance. The second half of that was a bit scarier, with plasticity applied to their minds, allowing them to think and adapt faster than they could before. The old lady version of Amaryllis joked that she’d accidentally reinvented dopplegangers, but it wasn’t too far from the truth, especially given how often they were given infiltration and assassination missions.

(Two or more sufficiently skilled plastic mages could merge with one another, and that was where you started getting problems, insofar as things that might be exclusion worthy. That research was permanently banned after an incident that came close to destroying the world and was only stopped through heavy use of void weapons. After that, the members of the Plasticlique were rarely given assignments together, for fear that they would try something inadvisable.)

There were elements of fantasypunk dystopia, certainly, but I still marveled at it. Was this why people liked fascists?

“Problem,” said Amaryllis. She was knee-deep in the Second Empire’s locus research, while I sat at the other end of the ‘living room’, making notes on the future that I thought I could actually give to her without terminally fucking things up for the Library. It was hard work, and I was ready for a break.

“Problem?” I asked, coming over to her.

“The Second Empire did locus recovery studies,” she said. She slipped a piece of paper out of its binding and slid it over to me. “Apparently, when they were in the course of their study and extermination campaign, someone thought to ask to what extent a locus could spring back from having their druids murdered, their lands salted, and their corporeal form injured. Look there, on that chart. For any with less than three druids, growth is completely stagnant. For any with less than ten square miles, growth is stagnant. Our locus has a single druid and a single square mile, beyond just the fact that it’s in an extradimensional space.”

“Ah,” I said. “Maybe the fact that they were measuring affected the results?” I asked.

“I’m still reading through their procedures,” sighed Amaryllis. “I just thought that you should know.”

“It’s pretty grim,” I said.
“Yes,” replied Amaryllis. “I don’t suppose there’s any sort of hint from the future-that-never-was?”

“You outlived the locus,” I replied.

“Fuck,” said Amaryllis, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment. “Okay, we have these books now, maybe there’s something of use in them. And you’re here, which means maybe there’s something we can try that’s outside context.”

“Maybe,” I replied.

As far as research went, it was a pretty frustrating week. The Fel Seed problem seemed more intractable than it had before, and we got almost nothing but bad news so far as the locus went. The books from Amaryllis were more helpful, especially in pointing out some strategies that she’d used in order to deal with existing threats. In particular, it seemed like the work of a week, at most, for us to find Thargox and seal up the Gates of Leron, especially if we enlisted Uniquities. I was pretty sure that was an idea that we’d have come up with on our own, and was thus okay to deploy. Similarly, the future Amaryllis had a working relationship with Doris Finch, along with specific advice on how to deal with her.

I was of the opinion that we should spend a few weeks of our time mopping up old quests for the (presumed) XP, especially those that seemed like they would be trivial given our deeper roster and expanded resources. Amaryllis felt the opposite: the oldest quests were the ones that made her the most leery, largely because our trip to Speculation and Scrutiny had turned into such a clusterfuck.

At the top of my personal list, there was Grak.

It took some time for us to gather together the gold, largely because we needed to do some currency exchange. It was a considerable sum, all told, more money than we could actually afford, but I had promised Grak, and if this was what it was going to take, this was what I was going to do.

“What’s he going to do with it though?” asked Pallida, who had contributed a fair share of the money. Our pink-skinned companion had come to my room to speak with me in confidence. She was out of her inky black armor and wearing a dress, which made the muscles of her legs and arms much more noticeable.

“I read through the dwarven myth that Grak’s been basing his penance on,” I said. “If he follows that, which I assume he will, because he’s a clan traditionalist, or at least acting like one, then he’ll probably leave it there with a handful of wards around it. Maybe he won’t put up the wards, I’m not sure.”

“And you plan to actually leave it all there?” asked Pallida. “That’s insane.”

“Ideally we don’t have to,” I said. I was comfortable enough admitting that. “But if that’s what it takes, then yeah, we’ll leave twenty million obols worth of gold there.”

“That’s insane,” Pallida repeated. She raised an eyebrow. “Amaryllis will never go for it.”

“Yes?” I asked. “She already agreed to it.”

“Then there’s some kind of trick,” said Pallida. “Lead coated with gold, maybe. Or fool’s gold, maybe. Something like that.”

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug. “Remember that he’s got warder’s sight, and will be directly looking at the gold. I’ll be pretty fucking pissed off if Grak finds out that we were duping him, because I
explicitly said that it had to be the real thing, not just pretend. It’s not symbolic. Or it is, but for the symbol to have any weight, it has to be actual gold. So yes, we’re doing this.”

“I’m going to talk to her,” said Pallida. She got up and turned to me. “And I’d like to come with.”

“I was going to ask you,” I said. “Your armor helps you breathe fouled air, right? I think we might have enough magic between us to suit a team of five or six, which would mean we could use the key.”

“It is absolutely bizarre that you have one of those,” said Pallida. “If I hadn’t pledged my life to you, I would steal the key in a heartbeat.”

“Well, I’m glad to have you with us,” I said. “I’d prefer if you not mention the idea of fake gold to Grak? He’s pretty slow to trust, and I don’t want him to think there’s reason to doubt.”

“Aye aye, captain,” said Pallida with a lazy salute.
Darili Irid

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were three thousand miles between the Athenaeum of Barriers and Darili Irid. Using a teleportation key for a single dwarf was out of the question. The typical cost for traveling between touchstones in major cities was ten thousand obols, but that assumed that you had four other people who would be splitting the cost, and there were service fees on top of that. Teleportation for a single person into an insecure location started at five times as much, and then on top of that, you would need to pay for some trusted key-keeper to go with, their expenses for returning to civilization, and the costs of having the key teleported out by bulk teleport.

Instead, Grak took the trains.

It was a long journey, with a large number of connections and layovers, but Grak was glad for that. When he had left Darili Irid ten years prior, he had been gawping at the world and nervous about the train schedules, frightened of so many strangers, all of them taller than him, and so many new and different things that he had only read about in the books and newspapers that came in by bulk teleport. The world was too big and too interconnected, with too many different people to see, and it had all washed over him in a torrent, most of it unintelligible. On top of that, he’d spoken only halting Anglish, which made the conversations around him utterly confusing, as people spoke too fast to follow.

On the return home, it all seemed so provincial. Grak had spent ten years at Barriers, in the grand city of Junah, and he had always taken an interest in exploring the world and seeing new things. The cities and towns that the trains passed through on his long journey home had little new to offer him, when compared to Junah. The food selections were horrifically limited, the people were uninteresting, and while the scenery went through some marvelous changes, the actual experience of riding a train was very close to standardized throughout Aerb.

Still, it was better than what waited for him at home.

The train didn’t go straight to Darili Irid, obviously. It was a town of two thousand some people, tucked away in the side of a mountain, and the number of people that came and went in a given year could be counted on two hands. Trains were among the services that suffered from ‘last mile’ problems, and in the case of Darili Irid, the ‘last mile’ was actually thirty miles.

When the train arrived in the city of Meerhan, the majority of the people on the train were altek, because Meerhan had started life as an altek city, and never grew much beyond that. When Grak had first made the trip there, he had marveled at it, but now he saw it for what it was; a cut-rate ethnicity that had barely grown beyond what it had been five hundred years ago, even as the Empires rose and fell. It was as provincial a place as you could find within the Empire, almost everyone of the same species, steeped in the same culture, and wearing the same fashions. The buildings were all similar to each other, the result of architects copying each other and putting little effort into creating something truly new. Perhaps it was even worse than that, and the local government had made prohibitions against ‘imperial sensibilities’. That was common in the more backward parts of the Empire, Grak knew.

And for all that Meerhan was depressing, it would be nothing compared to Darili Irid. Growing up, Meerhan had been the ‘big city’, thirty miles away and utterly exotic. It was dominated by the altek, but there were occasional ‘foreigners’ of other species, enough that if you spent an hour or two
sitting on a bench next to the train station, you might see one.

Eventually Grak went over to one of the phones and placed a call to Darili Irid, to let them know that he was in Meerhan. The response was terse, and the first time that Grak had heard Groglir in months, a simple acknowledgement and a reply that a truck would come out to get him in due time.

Grak walked through Meerhan for a bit, found an altek cafe, and ordered a frongal-stuffed roll. His server spoke only broken, halting Anglish, but Grak was used to dealing with a variety of language barriers, and got what he wanted through a combination of pointing at the menu and pantomime. He ate the roll and thought about the fact that it was going to be the last good food he ate before going back into Darili Irid and eating little else but the kear that consumed the rocks. He could order through the catalogs, and have food delivered in bulk once a month, but it wouldn’t be the same, and while the matter of wages would have to be discussed with his father, he was certain that he wasn’t going to be making nearly what he’d been pulling in as a tutor and student worker in Junah. Food that had been through the bulk teleport wouldn’t taste the same anyway, and that aside, he would be expected to eat with the others and share in a sense of community. The obligation was already strangling, thirty miles from the place that had once been home.

It was Naridalogor that arrived in the truck, honking once as he pulled up at the train station. Darili Irid owned three trucks, all of them communal, all built specifically for a dwarf’s stature and range of motion by a dwarven company in one of the metropolitan dwarfholds. The truck was low to the ground, with a long bed in back.

“Come on,” said Nari, leaning over to pop the passenger door open. “I don’t have all day.”

Grak placed his two large trunks into the back of the truck, fussing for a moment to make sure they were secure. Those trunks were the entirety of his worldly possessions. He had been a good and faithful dwarf, and brought back all sorts of things for people in Darili Irid, toys and games, treats and foodstuffs, whatever you couldn’t get through the catalogs (or not for as cheap as in the market stalls of the city).

They were outside of Meerhan when Nari started talking.

“There’s a trial going on,” said Nari. “When they got the call, they decided to wait for you.”

“Okay,” said Grak. He hadn’t seen Nari in ten years, yet there were no questions about what the Athenaeum of Barriers was like, and no comments about how Grak had stayed longer than planned.

“Young Dalonakla was on deathwatch for Dalin-nai,” said Nari. “We don’t know if Dalon fell asleep or just wasn’t paying attention. Dalin’s soul passed on to the hells.”

“We used to have two for deathwatch,” said Grak. He had done it more than once, as part of his duties to the clan as most-pure. You had a half hour after death to retrieve the soul, work that was usually done by the clan’s doctor. The final days of a dwarf could stretch on though, so the duty was often given over to younger dwarves. They would watch through the night and run to wake the doctor as soon as the old one’s heart stopped beating or their lungs stopped moving air.

“It was supposed to be two,” replied Nari, nodding slightly. “Dalin was a long time dying.”

“Is that Dalon’s defense?” asked Grak.

“No,” replied Nari. “He has none. He threw himself on the mercy of his elders.”

“Did he say how he missed it?” asked Grak, pressing the issue.
“He doesn’t know,” replied Nari.

Grak sat for a moment and thought about that. In Darili Irid, the traditional penalty for allowing someone’s soul to go to hell, whether through malice or neglect, was that the responsible party’s soul should follow. In practice, that was rarely actually followed, because it took quite a bit to prove malice or neglect, and because the interests of the families had to be balanced against each other. The families that made up the clan were likely going to be the focus of the trial, and Grak’s presence would only be to cement the return of the prodigal son, rather than because his input was desired.

It was all so small and pointless.

Nari filled the silence with more talk. He didn’t seem to mind that Grak was quiet. From what Nari said, Darili Irid hadn’t changed one bit. The social fabric was different, but the pattern was the same, a balance of power between families, new scandals that put people out of favor, births and deaths, all of it as it had been when he’d left ten years ago. There were new rooms and structures in Darili Irid, carved from the stone, and there were mild improvements to infrastructure, new pipes, vents, and wires, but Darili Irid was still decades if not centuries behind the rest of the Empire. Part of that was poverty, and part of it was obstinate refusal to change.

The truck made the switchback climb up the hill on gravel roads to the dwarfhold’s mouth, which was filled with familiar outbuildings and didn’t seem to have a stone moved in ten years time. Nari parked the truck, took one of the trunks, and set off to the main lift down. He looked back only briefly at Grak, and Grak took the other trunk, aware that he had been standing, unmoving, for too long.

They took the lift down and reached Darili Irid fifteen minutes later. Dozens of people were waiting for Grak, and the conversation immediately became a furious noise. Dwarves weren’t much for pleasantries, preferring a blunt approach to conversation, to the point that other cultures might consider it rude. People spoke their true thoughts to Grak, not seeming to care that he had been gone for ten years and might like some time to readjust. He was told that he should have come home earlier, that it would have been better if he had been able to take the reins from the clan warder, Dalin-nai, rather than coming in afterward to figure things out. It was impossibly rude by imperial standards, and the part of Grak that had acclimated to foreign mores itched under the barrage of questions and comments.

Grak felt a hand around his wrist, grasping him, and was pulled in for a rough hug. Grak only realized it was his father when they were already hugging. When the hug was complete, his father held him at arm’s length, looking him over. They were the same, or close enough, with Grak’s father having an extra twenty-five years of age etched on his face. Grak was surprised by how old his father looked. Ten years was a fair amount of time, especially for the leader of the clan.

“It’s been too long,” Grak’s father said. There might have been some trace of sentimentality there, but it was hard for Grak to take it as anything but a simple statement of fact. “We should talk. Privately.”

They made their way through the crowds, with Grak trailing behind his father the way he’d done as a child. Grak was full grown now, with a braided beard just like his father’s, but he still felt small. He squared his shoulders and projected none of that as he walked through the hallways; he had always been better about hiding his feelings than the other dwarves, which was one of the reasons that he had been a prime candidate for Barriers.

When they entered into Grak’s childhood home, the sense of the past was overwhelming and unpleasant. Grak’s room was visible through an open archway, seemingly unchanged, with a thick-fibered blanket and a hard surface. Grak had gotten used to proper beds, the kinds filled with soft
things. A dwarf was expected to go without so much as a pillow; they didn’t ‘need’ them in the way the other species did, but Grak had always liked having one. The cubby above the bed was still filled with books that Grak had gotten through the catalogs with his allowance, along with the wax cylinders and player that Grak had been gifted so he could hear spoken Anglish and pick up more of the language before he left.

“We have had a home carved out for you for several years,” said Grak’s father. “You should have returned when five years passed.”

“I was doing well,” replied Grak. “My teachers said I had promise. I was sending money home.” That much was true; Grak had a gift for warding that had won him scholarships starting in his second year.

“You did not wish to return,” replied Grak’s father.

Grak stayed silent at that accusation. It was true, after all, and he had always done his best never to lie to his father. He was here, back in Darili Irid, fulfilling his obligation, that was what was important. It shouldn’t have mattered what he wanted, only what he was doing. Action was more important than thought.

“I’ve arranged a childbond for you,” said Grak’s father.

“What?” asked Grak, momentarily startled. His heart began to sink as the impact of the words set in.

“It will do you good,” said Grak’s father. “It will strengthen the ties that have grown weak.”

“Who?” asked Grak. He could feel the stiffness in his voice and the tension in all his muscles.

“Kradohogon Kadok,” replied Grak’s father. “It is a good match.”

It was political as well, Grak imagined, given that the Kadok line was among the largest and most powerful. He had only faint memories of Kradoh, who had been two years younger than Grak, and was now surely a completely different person. In truth, it didn’t much matter who his father had chosen for the childbond. Grak would have been aghast no matter whose child he was meant to bear.

He turned away from his father. Bad enough to be home, back in Darili Irid, away from all that was bright and new. The world was a great and flowing river, and Darili Irid was a rock stuck at the bottom of that river, unmoving. It was difficult to imagine being with Kradoh, pressing up against him. His krin in Junah had been tall men of different species, needful men, and there were very few dwarves that could match that passion. It was incredibly doubtful that Kradoh would be one of them.

“No,” said Grak.

“You are not allowed to say no,” replied Grak’s father. “I order it by my position as most-pure. The deal has been struck. He is a good dwarf. A good match.”

“No,” replied Grak. “I refuse.”

“You cannot refuse duty,” Grak’s father said. “No one can.” He turned away. “Come. We’ve waited on you for a trial. It will help you get back into the rhythms of rule.”

They moved through the city, flanked by his father’s friends and allies, until they got to the main hall. Tiered seating surrounded a circular space in the center, with a domed roof overhead. It was the biggest room in Darili Irid, and insofar as the dwarfhold could be considered to have a centerpiece, this was it. There was seating for five hundred, nearly a quarter of the population, and the place was
packed when there were performances or festivals.

Here, instead of a celebrating populace, there were twenty dwarves, the most important in Darili Irid, and those who would decide Dalonakla’s fate.

Most of the ‘trial’ was already done, and Grak could immediately see that much of this had been arranged for his benefit. The timing was too suspicious; Dalin-nai had died a week ago, and the trial was only now, far later than it should have been. At issue was the question of duty and responsibility, and the parallel was bluntly obvious, even by dwarven standards. ‘This is what happens when you don’t do as you’re told!’, the assembly might as well have screamed.

Grak had been gone too long. He’d been expected to stay at the Athenaeum of Barriers for five years, which had stretched to seven, then nine, and finally ten. He had been on the cusp of becoming a proper magus, and from there -- well, it was all immaterial, because he was back at Darili Irid, over-educated for what would be asked of him. He had argued to his father, in a series of long letters, that every bit of extra skill he developed would be useful, that his skills as a warder would bring in money outside of Darili Irid, but it was all just a sequence of excuses. He hadn’t wanted to come home. Being clan warder and most-pure hadn’t been his dream, not when he was a child, and certainly not now. To be childbound with a dwarf chosen by his father was another turn of the vise.

Grak found himself mumbling assent at the verdict delivered unto Dalonakla. Dalon was young, the elders declared, derelict in his duty and grievously in the wrong, but young nonetheless, with a life within Darili Irid ahead of him. He would have to wear the black mark, so all would know what he had done (not that they wouldn’t in any case), and eventually, he might gather back some scrap of redemption for allowing another dwarf and valued member of the community to be eternally tortured. Forgiveness was the dwarven way, the elders agreed.

The community would abide much, so long as duty was followed. It was another message meant for Grak. He wondered, idly, what the dwarves of Darili Irid had said about him during his extended absence, but found that he didn’t much care. He would hear all about it, he was certain.

Dinner was in the great hall, the second largest room in Darili Irid, where the noise of dwarves eating and talking was nearly deafening. They ate kear, as expected, baked into flat loaves and completely without spices or seasonings. Grak forced it down while answering questions directed his way with as few words as possible. He might get used to it again, eventually, eating the same thing every day, for every meal, with only minor variations. Dwarves didn’t have the same palates that other species had, and didn’t need the same variety that others did, but Grak had been a city dwarf for too long, and the kear was beyond bland.

When Grak entered his new home for the first time, late at night, Kradohogon Kadok was waiting for him.

“'I've had a long journey, and a long day after that,'” said Grak, pushing past the other dwarf. The house that had been created for Grak was palatial, by dwarfhold standards, with four different rooms, including a private bathroom. There was room for expansion as well, places where the rock walls could be carved away without running into the neighbors. It was generous, but all that Grak could see was the exposed wiring where the lights hooked into the dwarfhold’s power system and piping where water was pumped in and out, and the marks where tools had obviously been used to craft this space. In Junah, buildings were constructed to hide how they’d been made, and electricity and plumbing were tucked away, out of sight. Everything seemed so small, compared to the imperial standard of keeping ceilings fifteen feet high. Small and crude.

“We’re to be childbound,” said Kradoh. He wasn’t unattractive, as dwarfs went, but Grak had grown to prefer taller, larger species.
“Childbound,” said Grak. He stifled a sigh. “Yes, we are.”

“We should spend the night together,” said Kradoh. He reached up and began undoing a button on his shirt. “Better to be krin first. Better to know each other’s touch.”

When Grak made no move to object, Kradoh undid a second button, then a third. Grak’s heart started beating faster. It had taken a long time to get to Darili Irid, a long time without anyone so much as looking at him, and even before then, it had been a dry spell, a time with neither krin nor krinrael. He felt that familiar response stirring inside him, the response to need, until he looked at Kradoh’s eyes. There was no need there, and no desire, despite the forcefulness that Kradoh was displaying.

Grak accepted it nonetheless. He had been too long without touch. He removed his clothes, as Kradoh did, and they lay together, holding each other. Grak tried to take comfort in the feel of someone’s skin against his own, the heat that another body generated beneath the covers, but his mind kept going to the idea that this was all he would ever have. Even if he could learn to love Kradoh, even if they could raise children together without quarrels, it wouldn’t ever be enough.

Grak waited until Kradoh was asleep, then rose from the bed and dressed himself. He had no real plans about what he would do. He only knew that he couldn’t stay in Darili Irid and spend the rest of his life as the clan’s warder.

It was late, and Darili Irid had emptied. Grak grabbed only a single one of his trunks, the lighter of the two, and took the lift up to the surface, where the multi-colored stars hung overhead. He took one of the trucks and drove, without thinking too much about where he was going. He would park it somewhere, he decided, and send a letter back to Darili Irid so that they would know where to go to retrieve it. Bad enough that he was depriving them of a warder, he wouldn’t deprive them of a truck as well.

It was six months later, as he was sitting in a cafe in Junah eating breakfast, that he learned what had happened.

From the outside, Darili Irid presented as a crop of outbuildings on the side of a mountain, with a single unpaved road leading away from them. We were high enough up the mountain that we were above the treeline, but there were still smaller plants trying to struggle against the low pressure and get enough air to breathe. Some of them had sprung up in places they clearly wouldn’t have been, had these outbuildings still been the surface protrusion of the dwarfhold. The buildings were all still in good repair though, either locked down and shuttered as a matter of course, or closed up by whatever poor soul had survived the deaths of two thousand dwarves down below.

It took me half a tick to realize that the dwarf who survived and packed everything up might have been Grak.

It was Grak, Amarillus, Valencia, Pallida, and myself, with the others staying back. We’d taken the teleport key, though there was some talk of taking either the Egress or Bethel; Bethel had made a garage to house the ‘ship’, which gave her its powers so long as it was parked, and meant that she could be moved without having to collapse down into staff size. She was much more amenable to moving like that, given that she could retain her form (and all the contents inside her) and be a ‘moving house’ rather than a ‘fake human’. For this particular situation, it didn’t seem like it would be at all necessary, especially since we were going to be far underground for most of it.

Entrance to the dwarfhold proper was through a long shaft at a forty-five degree angle. It was wide, with thick rails running through it and a chain that laid limp against the ground. Beside the rails were
the stairs, which were just wide enough for Grak. The tunnel was cramped, as I had been warned the entire place would be; it was built for a species that was, on average, more than two feet shorter than I was, which would mean a lot of ducking.

We walked down in silence, with Grak leading the way. We wore breathing tanks, brought in from Earth courtesy of Bethel, and then our various entads as a backup, just to be on the safe side. Pallida was the one exception, because her armor covered her mouth entirely, meaning she had to use either one or the other.

“These rails were rarely used,” said Grak. His speech was somewhat muffled beneath his mask. It took me a moment to realize that he was speaking Groglir, which meant that he was speaking to me and not the others, unless Valencia was borrowing the right kind of devil.

“Most of what came in and out was bulk teleport, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” Grak replied. I was waiting for more, but nothing came. I already knew a fair amount about how dwarfholds tended to work, through talking with Grak, from reading a number of dwarven books, and from the words that popped into my head when I looked around.

The main shaft still had its uses, in the case where it was cheaper to ship to a close neighbor, which wasn’t often, and for when people wanted to leave the dwarfhold, for whatever reason. A dwarfhold was supposed to be a self-sustaining thing, but there were still rare occurrences where a dwarf might want to go somewhere. A fair number of the dwarven romance novels I’d read (research, much more than prurient interest) were epistolary, because it was common for dwarves to have pen pals a long way away, and that was often the foundation for a romance to blossom. It was, of course, a dwarven romance, which was much more about mutual understanding, intellectual compatibility, and close intimacy than it was about the physical. At the end of the novels, there inevitably came a point when one or the other, or in one case both, had to leave their dwarfhold in order to meet up with the person that they’d fallen in love with, and it was always this big, dramatic moment, because it wasn’t common for dwarves to leave their dwarfholds, and for the target audience, the departure was this momentous thing.

It was possible Grak would have used this main shaft only three times: the first time when he left to go to Barriers, the second time when he came home, and the third time when he left again, this time for good.

“Did you come back?” I asked. “After the accident?” I wasn’t sure whether to call it that.

“No,” replied Grak. Again, it seemed like there was more to say on the matter, but he stayed silent. I followed after him as we took the stairs, watching the back of his head, and trying to think about what I was going to say, if I needed to say something to him.

We had Valencia with us, in case I really fucked things up.

After half an hour and barely more than a few sentences of conversation, we reached the bottom of the shaft. The stench of death came in through the mask I was wearing, slow and subtle at first, and then pervasive. It was a stale smell, like my grandparents’ basement, the smell of a place that had settled into stagnation. It had been two years since the accident had happened. I still wasn’t sure that was the right word.

It felt too small, but to say anything else might make it seem like I felt it was Grak’s fault, and, well …

When Arthur died, I thought a lot about alternate timelines and what might have been. I thought
about all the things that I could have done differently that would have resulted in him not dying, and I felt like shit over it. It wasn’t my fault, but there were things that I could have done that would have made it not happen. In Grak’s case? He had a lot more cause to think that his actions had directly led to the deaths of everyone in his dwarfhold. His clan had invested money and time into him, so that he could take up the role, and he had left them in the lurch, which led them to hire on a warder who only had three years at the Athenaeum and a provisional license. That was the primary thing you would point to, if you were trying to explain how it had all gone wrong.

Putting myself in Grak’s shoes, if I had gone off to college to become a doctor and come back home to Bumblefuck out of a sense of obligation, rather than because I actually wanted to … well, that already didn’t sound too much like me. But if my dad had said, “Hey, you have to marry this woman you don’t know and have some children with her!”, I would have told him to go fuck himself and then left that very night. My mom would probably have tried to guilt me into staying by saying that people would die without my medical expertise, and I would probably still have left, either downplaying the possibility or telling myself that I didn’t actually owe them anything.

Then, when a fifth of the population of Bumblefuck died, two thousand people, I … I had no idea. It sucked. It sucked that Grak had been saddled with this expectation. It sucked that Darili Irid wasn’t what he wanted from life. It sucked that his father had picked the worst possible way to try to keep him chained to the dwarves, and then when a stupid random failure made it all go to shit … ‘sucked’ was underselling it.

We found our first corpse at the base of the main shaft. Grak walked past it without stopping, and I followed after him, considerably more aware of the corpse. We were using Earth flashlights, because we could, and the beam of my flashlight lingered on the body. The smell that came in through the mask around my mouth was far stronger, here in Darili Irid proper, not just that rotten meat smell, but feces and mold mixed in with it. The corpse still had its hair, but that was nearly it; the skin was partially eaten away by insects that must have gorged on the body, and where it hadn’t been consumed, it was stretched tight around bone. Beneath the body was a large stain where the internal fluids had leaked out.

I hoped that it was no one that Grak knew.

The ceilings were low enough that I had to stoop down as I walked, following behind Grak in silence. It was fucking creepy in Darili Irid, what with the terrible smell that my oxygen line did little to mask, the utter silence, the complete darkness, and the claustrophobic way that everything was too small for me. Worse, my mind kept making up stories whenever we saw a body or bodies. Most of the people in Darili Irid had been asleep when the accident happened, but there were bodies in the hallways, which meant that it hadn’t been instant. A few people had woken up and tried to escape, or cover their mouths, but none had made it very far. I felt my stomach churn when I saw a larger corpse cradling a smaller one in its arms.

“There have been collapses,” said Grak, his voice tight, still speaking Groglir to me and me alone. “The mine-farms, left untended, eat away too much rock.”

“Is it safe?” I asked.

“If we stay to the center,” replied Grak. He kept walking, not stopping for anything. He held his flashlight steady and ignored the bodies we saw. I didn’t mistake that for callousness on his part; he was focused on his task, because if he stopped, he was liable to break down.

We eventually made our way to a large room, one with a high enough ceiling that I could actually stand up without hitting my head. It was a dome shape, with a smoother surface than I had seen in
Darili Irid thus far, and a number of passages branched off from it in different directions. There were benches, or something like them, ringing the center floor. It seemed like an arena or a theater, though I couldn’t be sure which. Grak pulled out his wand and began tracing a large circle on the ground, in the center of the room. The rest of us stood back and watched.

“Juniper, you can stay,” he said. “Tell the rest to go.”

Amaryllis looked to me for translation. (My three points in Language had, so far, given her nothing.)

“Go back the way we came,” I said. “We’ll return to you when it’s done.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” murmured Amaryllis. She kept her voice low.

“It’s fine,” said Valencia. She was looking at me from beneath her crown of thorns, with her red armor in place and the oxygen mask firmly attached. “Good luck.”

Amaryllis glanced at her. “What do you know?” she asked.


“You said it’s fine,” replied Amaryllis.

“Because Juniper can handle himself,” replied Valencia. “Whatever happens. You have to trust him.” She looked back at me. “I trust him.”

“Let’s go,” said Pallida. “Whatever this is, I’d rather have it over with, and if the dwarf wants us gone, then the sooner we move, the faster we leave.”

Amaryllis furrowed her eyebrows. She was outnumbered. “Watch him, Juniper,” she said. “And whatever you’re planning to say, to convince him to stay with us, just -- good luck.”

I was pretty sure that Grak could hear everything that we were saying, which was why Amaryllis had used the euphemism, ‘convince him to stay with us’. Maybe no one had told Pallida, but the rest of us knew that Grak wasn’t just bringing this gold down into Darili Irid for the ceremony of it all.

When the three women had left, it was just Grak and I in the domed room. Amaryllis had given him the glove for this trip, and he was placing the gold in the center of the circle he’d made. I watched him in silence while I tried to figure out how I was going to start this. I had put the points from the level up into SOC, and the floating points were there too, which meant a (respectable, in my opinion) 6 in Insight and a less-respectable 4 in Charisma and Poise. I wasn’t leaning on those stats to help me, but I had taken whatever help the game might give me.

“When I was ten years old, my grandfather died of lung cancer,” I said. “He took a long time to die though, seven days, and we stayed in South Dakota for all of it, with all my aunts and uncles there while he was dying. He was on his deathbed, with translucent skin and barely any meat on his bones, writhing around, because they didn’t want to keep him drugged out of his mind, I guess, or maybe they just didn’t have access to pain medication because it was in-home hospice. So when he was lucid, he was in pain.” I paused and took a breath.

“My aunt was a doctor. She was doing most of the work, making sure that he was turned so he wouldn’t get bed sores, giving him water, trying to get him to eat food, things like that, but it was cancer in his lungs, his brain, his stomach, all through his body, and there was only one thing that he wanted, which he asked her for a couple of times.” I paused. “He wanted to die.”

Grak stopped what he was doing for a moment, then continued on, carefully placing more of the
gold into the circle. They were heavy bars of gold, each one twenty pounds, fifty in total.

“My aunt didn’t want to kill her father,” I said. “I don’t really blame her for that. So my grandfather tried to get his other children to do it. I don’t think it was the pain, or not just the pain, it was the fact that this body was failing and he was dying, and everyone knew it. He was in this body he no longer recognized as his own, incapable of doing anything but feel his flesh and organs degrade until something gave out.” I cleared my throat. I was getting upset just thinking about it. “None of his children did anything about it. They wouldn’t put him out of his misery. And so I remember sitting there, looking at him on his deathbed, and thinking that I was going to figure out a way to do the proper thing, which was to end it for him.” I had done it with deer, later in life, when my shot hadn’t landed right and I’d had to chase after a wounded animal trailing blood through the woods. “I didn’t actually do it, because I was only ten years old, but it always stuck with me, this feeling that you should be allowed to die, if you really wanted to.”

Grak stopped what he was doing and turned to me. He was watching me now. I had his attention. The pile of gold was only half finished.

“Fast-forward seven years later,” I said. “I was seventeen, and Arthur had died, and I had pushed away damned near everyone, and it was all just … shit. Total, utter, shit. I hated my life. I was failing my classes. I was barely eating. I wasn’t taking any enjoyment from anything, not movies, not the internet, not even D&D, which I had managed to ruin for everyone anyway. I kept thinking about my grandfather, and the way he must have felt, and after everything was just about as broken as it could be,” after Maddie broke up with me, “I kept thinking that there just wasn’t that much point in living anymore, not if this was what my life was going to be like. It started with idle thoughts, I guess, just me thinking about how great it would be to have that release, to not be alive anymore. I was assuming that oblivion was waiting for me, no heaven or hell, just nothingness, and it seemed so preferable to my life as I was experiencing it. I didn’t believe in heaven or hell. Maybe if I had, that would have stopped me. But no, I was thinking about my grandfather, and how everyone had made him keep going even though he wanted to stop, and how unjust that had seemed to me.”

Grak was silent, but he was listening.

“I didn’t start out making plans,” I said. “I would see a big semi truck go by and I would think about stepping in front of it. I would look up at the radio towers and think about throwing myself off one, head down so that my skull would split open and I wouldn’t have any possibility of surviving the fall. I wrote some letters to people, not suicide notes, but written so that they might serve as that, if I died. It became a part of the fabric of my life, where I would spend time online looking up how many grams were in a lethal dose of various household poisons, or reading stories about how people had killed themselves, not with sympathy, just looking for tips.” I paused and licked my lips.

“My biggest fear was that I would screw it up. I had this horrible, gut-sick feeling whenever I thought about that, about trying to strangle myself and losing blood flow to the brain, but not dying from it. You can lose IQ points by the dozens, if that happens, and if I was mentally crippled on top of everything else … there were so many scenarios like that going through my head, my digestive system destroyed by bleach, half the bones in my body broken from a fall, things like that, attempts that left me still alive and only more broken than before. You can survive getting shot in the head, if you shoot yourself in the wrong place. And then you end up in the hospital, disfigured or brain damaged or both, and how does that help anything?”

Grak looked to the pile of gold. “What was your plan?” he asked. His voice was tight, and he sounded far away, even though I was standing right next to him.

“There were some train tracks that ran through town,” I said. “If you get hit in the head by a train
going full speed, there’s almost no chance that you’ll survive, and it seemed like it would be fast, just
by its nature. I followed the train tracks through the woods until I found a little bridge that passed
over a creek, then stayed there for a bit with my backpack beside me. It was cold out, tail end of
winter, and not very comfortable. I thought I was probably far enough away from any roads that
even if I didn’t die right away, I would bleed out before anyone could get me to a hospital. Before I
could get myself to the hospital, I guess, since I didn’t trust myself to go silently.”

“What happened?” asked Grak. I realized that I’d stopped talking for a bit too long.

“I took some pills that I had crushed up and mixed into a drink,” I said. “That was the backup plan.
There’s something called the LD50,” I had to bring in Anglish for that, “Which is the dose that’s
lethal half the time, so I took about three times that amount. I was dumb though, or just ignorant,
because all it really did was make me puke, when my body started reacting. Turns out for it to be
lethal dose, you have to have some way of keeping the drug in your system when your body realizes
that something is wrong and tries to save you.”

“You were talking about a train,” said Grak. He was slightly muffled by the oxygen mask he wore. I
saw his wooden hand, curled into a fist.

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “The pills were the backup plan. I knew when the train was
coming, so I drank the drink right before. The train … probably not a surprise, but it’s actually really
hard to face down a train. I was on this bridge, hidden from sight behind one of the struts, and I just
kept thinking, ‘All you need to do is stick your head out, you fucking coward’. It was terrifying
though, to be staring down death like that, and there were these hidden animal instincts that were
holding me back, parts of me that hadn’t made themselves known when I was still trying to plan
things out. Trains are huge. They shake the ground as they approach, and they make a hell of a lot of
noise, like a beast on the savannah coming to kill me, and my brain didn’t know much about dealing
with Earth, but it had some firm opinions on being hunted by a beast like that. I couldn’t do it. So the
train just went by, a foot away from me, barrelling on its way. And after it had passed, that was when
the pills started to take effect, and I started to get really sick. My pupils got so crazily dilated it was
hard to see, my heart was hammering in my chest, and then I started to throw up, and didn’t really
stop throwing up. Beyond all that was a sense of relief that I wasn’t actually dead.”

Grak grunted just a bit. I was waiting for him to say something, but he was still silent, still staring at
the pile of gold.

“It didn’t help,” I said. “I mean, it didn’t help me with being depressed, and it didn’t make me less
suicidal, not really. I spent half the day puking in the woods, and when I got home, my parents were
pissed because I hadn’t been in school. I guess they thought it was drugs, which was almost right.
And I was still failing school, and my life was still in shambles, and I still just didn’t want to be,
if that makes sense.”

“It does,” said Grak. His voice was soft.

“Yeah,” I said. I’d thought it might. “So at around three in the morning, I got in my car and took my
rifle down to the local police station, then I sat there trying to work up the courage to shoot myself in
the brain stem. From what I’d found, that was the surest way to make it actually fatal, because the
brain stem controlled a lot of important, base-level stuff, like keeping my blood flowing and my
lungs working. That was the plan, anyway. When it came down to it, I was sitting there with the gun
in my mouth, stock between my knees, tasting the metal of the barrel, crying as I tried to force myself
to put more pressure on the trigger. That was the most scared I’ve ever been, even with all the shit
that’s happened here.” I paused, thinking about it. “Turns out that there was a part of me that wanted
to live after all. I think that’s true, for most people in that situation.”
Grak closed his eyes and took a heavy breath. “The Second Empire used wards for execution,” he said. “Annihilation wards against skin and blood. Death was instant. They would route trains full of living people through a standing ward and dump the bodies at their destination. I learned that in one of my first classes at the Athenaeum of Barriers. It always seemed a gentle, painless way to go.”

Grak sat down and began to cry.

I moved over to him and sat down next to him, within the wards and next to the absurd amount of material wealth we’d brought, then put my arm around him.

It took him some time to get it out of his system enough that he could speak.

“I set the wards up,” he said. He was looking off into the distance. “All I would have had to do was walk through. I couldn’t do it. All I thought of was the hells. I deserved eternal torture. It was what they got,” he waved a hand to encompass Darili Irid, and the thousands of people who had died here, “But I couldn’t. I wanted it all to end, and I couldn’t.”

“Yeah,” I said. It had been the same for me. He leaned in toward me, and I held him. I was crying a little bit myself.

“I set out to pay a penance,” said Grak. He was speaking softly, but his voice was loud in the silence of Darili Irid. “It was supposed to be impossible. I thought I would die along the way.”

“I know how it is,” I said. “I know how seductive it is, to feel like the solution to all your problems is to just stop existing.” I gave him a squeeze with the arm I had around him. “But if there’s any part of you that wants to be in this world --”

“There is,” he said.

“Then you’ve got to start working toward building a life back up,” I said. “I know it might seem impossible to think about anything else but what happened here, that every moment of happiness feels like a betrayal, but … the world needs us. It’s not fair that it does, that it’s another burden that’s been placed on you, but the world really, really needs us. And after Fenn -- I don’t want to lose another member of the party. We’re family, Grak, and I just,” I lost my sense of words. I wanted to be honest with him, but I couldn’t tell him that it was going to be okay, because I didn’t know that, and all signs were that things were only going to get tougher. I wanted to tell him that he was stronger than I ever was, and if I could get through it, then he could too, but even as I tried to think of a way to express that it seemed like it would come out wrong. “I care about you.” I didn’t think anything I could express could possibly be sufficient, and I already felt like I had failed him.

“Okay,” Grak said. He leaned into me harder.

“Okay?” I asked.

“Okay,” repeated Grak. “I’ll try to make a life.”

*Loyalty Increased: Grak lvl 18!*

*Quest Complete: All That Glitters - Grak has returned to da nad home and confronted the disaster that took place there. Keep an eye on di. (Companion Quest)*

*Companion Passive Unlocked: Wardproof (Grak)!*

*Wardproof: Grak can selectively ignore wards that would apply to di, the things da wears and carries, and up to one other person (at a time). This ability activates automatically when the effect of*
the ward would be undesirable and can be selectively applied to any ward Grak chooses.

End Book VI

Chapter End Notes

Special note: If you'd like a version of this first half of this chapter which uses non-gendered Groglir pronouns, it's available here. This is more true to Grak's internal understanding of da-self, but it gets in the way of the story (in my opinion).
Stats for Nerds II

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Level: 14

Quests

■ **God Botherer**: There are gods in this world, titans of power and masters of domains, each their own creature with their own special rules. Tread carefully around these creatures, especially if you wish to someday join their ranks.

■ **The Lost King, Found?**: Five hundred years ago, Uther Penndraig, figure of legend, King of Anglecynn, and ancestor of Amaryllis, disappeared from this world while on a quest of grave importance. This enduring mystery must have an answer for those brave or foolish enough to seek it, mustn't it?

■ **They Say You Can't Go Home Again** - He had a life, before you, and you had a life, before this.

■ **Through the Lashing Glass** - Far inside the Glassy Fields exclusion zone, the only place on Aerb where glass magic still works, lies a castle coated in shards. The treasures within are unknown to the world, but you could unearth them, if you dared.

■ **Taking Root** - The world has but a single druid, tending to but a single locus. With the locus so constrained within a magic bottle, no more druids may be inducted, but removal might prove fatal. With your help, druids might stalk the world once more. (Companion Quest)

■ **The Slayer of Horrors (0/13)**:

□ **Murder in Duplicate** - As soon as it was discovered by a precocious young girl, the ability for a person to duplicate themselves was excluded to a thousand square miles and that single person. Doris Finch lives her life in duplicate; to complete the exclusion, it will be necessary to kill every single one of her. (0/9,532,119)

□ **Manifest Destiny** - The fall of the Second Empire was, by some accountings, inevitable, but by others, it was the work of a single incident. The exact nature of the magic that allows the immortal man named Manifest to puppet his subjects from a distance is unknown, as is his exact location, but it is clear that with the magic excluded, his range is limited to only Lankwon, once the Imperial City, now the City Made Manifest. Defeating him will be an impossible task, but one that you have taken upon yourself.
- **A Door Into the Soul** - Caldwell Gatesmith has the dubious distinction of being responsible for two exclusions. Through his portals, he keeps watch over his domain. If he spies you, and you do not meet with his satisfaction, his portals will cut with an edge designed to cleave time and space.

- **The Z-word** - Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle is the reason that no one says it. That's his word.

- **Everything Eater** - More monster than man, no one has seen Rove's face in four hundred years and lived to tell the tale. He sits at the center of a half mile of dirt, flesh, and garbage. If you slay him, you will be the first to have survived contact with him.

- **Better with Loops** - Through magics unknown, a young boy of eighteen found himself reliving the same month over and over again, with death only bringing him back to the same crisp spring morning. Time does not behave within his exclusion zone, and only bringing a permanent end to his life will restore the area to normalcy. Beware, lest you be trapped in the cycle.

- **[REDACTED]** - The more you [REDACTED], the more you [REDACTED], until [REDACTED]. Merely knowing his name makes him [REDACTED], and his gender alone is a piece of information you might wish you didn't have, if [REDACTED]. Better to go in blind.

- **Unwavering** - In the beginning, they said that the goblin inspired loyalty, until it became clear that what he was doing was more literal than figurative. To kill him, you'll need to fight through a veritable army of his loyal servants, if you don't end up becoming one of them yourself.

- **Fleshsmith** - For millennia, fleshsmithing was a noble trade of Pendleham, one practiced by noscere and ignoscere alike. When a small cabal took the craft too far, exclusion reared its ugly head, leaving Pendleham as the City of Flesh, where none dare tread.

- **Aches and Plains** - Perhaps farming might seem an innocuous thing to evoke the exclusionary principle, but given the time and attention brought to it by a billion minds, it was inevitable that someone would breach its deeper secrets. The land of Pai Shep is now guarded by a single warrior-farmer, his fields impeccable, his power absolute.

- **Guardian of the Underworld** - A machine of vast intellect, funneled into the body of a broken man. The people of Aerb have yet to pass his tests, but perhaps someone of a different world has the wherewithal to be allowed within his inner sanctum.

- **Finger of the Sun** - When the elves broke Celestar, there were a small few who continued on with their research. The product of their effort brought nothing but pain.

- **Gone to Seed** - There is a place on Aerb considered worse than the first four thousand hells. Fel Seed sits on a throne of living flesh, unable to spread beyond his domain, but with a rule of horror within it. You know his weakness.

**Birth of a Nation:** You've set out to become a real power in this world, no longer independent agents bumbling from crisis to crisis, but instead a nation, bumbling from crisis to crisis. Quest completion entails becoming accepted as a member nation of the Empire of Common Cause.

**Tragedy of the Commons:** Following the discovery of the Void Beast, void weapons and tools were made illegal under international law, usable only with expensive permits or in situations that called for it. For a time, this was sufficient. Now the Void Beast stirs once again, and imperial regulatory schemes won't be enough.

**We're Going To Need Books, Lots of Books:** The latest report from the 'Infinite' Library is that the world will stop publishing books roughly two years from now. The man who left the library changed the future, and if you go in, you'll change the future too -- but perhaps that’s for the best.
Amaryllis Penndraig, Loyalty lvl 23

Amaryllis is the most direct descendant of Uther Penndraig, the Lost King, which gives her special claim-in-fact to a fair number of his estates and heirlooms bound along cognatic or enatic primogeniture, ultimogeniture, and gavelkind rules. She was once a keystone member of a bloc of power within the Lost King’s Court, but now she has been cast out through means both semi-legal and downright nefarious. Her homeland of Anglecynn is forbidden to her now, at least until she’s gathered enough power to wedge open some doors.

Grakhuil Leadbraids, Loyalty lvl 18

Grakhuil comes from the largely parthenogenetic clan of dwarves in Darili Irid (loosely, Gold Hole). Due to da nad skill in the game of Ranks and overall empathic nature relative to da nad kin, Grak was selected to leave Darili Irid for the Athenaeum of Barriers with the plan that da would return and become the next master warder of the clanhome. Upon returning home, da was entered into a rare arranged pair-bond with another dwarf, and fled from Darili Irid after refusing the Kiss on da nad bond night. Da has spent da nad time looking to make amends for the damage da nad absence caused to da nad clan.

Six-eyed Doe, Loyalty lvl 7

[I’d closed my eyes and paged through after my little experiment in experiencing awe and wonder, only to find that instead of text, the Six-Eyed Doe had a picture that expanded outside the box it was meant to be set within. This was the first time that the game interface had shown me anything other than text, symbols, or lines to make boxes.

The picture had various scenes, devoid of any clear chronology and bleeding into each other where they met. When I looked at it, the view zoomed in, leaving the rest of the game interface behind and filling my vision with only the pictorial story of the Six-Eyed Doe. Most of it signified little to me, because it was focused on rivers and forests, with the occasional animal. I focused in on people, where I could find them, and ended up looking at a full-on orgy with writhing, naked bodies of a hundred different species. To one side of it, up and to the right, armored men were coming in and slaughtering the people, but toward the bottom there were a handful of pregnant women sitting around, and beneath them various women giving birth, with naked children walking away through the woods, and some donning leather armor of their own to fight off the attackers.

This was the story of the locus, as told by some insane artist who had the ability to paint photorealistically at a yottapixel scale but lacked any idea of how to tell a coherent narrative. It took me some time to find the bottle, which sat all by itself, away from everyone. There was no attempt at being literal; it was only barely big enough to contain Solace, who sat with legs folded and her staff across her lap. It was such a small thing, in comparison to the rest, and that was probably the point.]

Valencia the Red, Loyalty lvl 26

Valencia is a nonanima, a humanoid without a soul, created by the essentialist Fallatehr Whiteshell in the Amoureux Penitentiary where she lived for the first seventeen years of her life. Until recently she was subject to repeated possession by demons and devils at random intervals, but now, touched by your magic, she has become something to be
feared, for much different reasons than she was before. She is nearly a newborn, in some ways, trying to find her feet.

**Bethel, Loyalty lvl 12**

Bethel is not just an entad, but a meta-entad, capable of taking magical items and adding them to itself. Initially created by Omar Antoun using funds and labor provided by Uther Penndraig, it stood empty for several years until Uther returned. Once he discovered the house’s abilities, he began adding entads to it, eventually raising it to a sort of sentience, and after that, despite its objections and pleas. Five hundred years later, it had sequestered itself partway down the Boundless Pit, until you came along.

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**Entads and Equipment of Note**

**Group:**

- **Marzipan Urn:** A ceramic container filled with small cubbies where marzipan fairies grow. Each may be consumed for healing, but serious injuries will require more than one. Doesn't restore lost blood. Doesn't regrow missing bones. Bound to Amaryllis.

- **The Egress:** A ship whose exterior is modeled after the "Cloud Gate" sculpture in Chicago. Moves with little regard for physics, and at extreme speed, without disturbing the people who fly in it.

- **Bottle of Manifold Space:** Appears as a large, five gallon glass jug. When a person touches the spout, they're (apparently) shrunk down and fall inside it, roughly two miles down. The interior space of the bottle appears to be roughly a mile and a half across. A set of wards provide support to the interior ecosystem, ensuring the movement of water through the bottle, and regulating atmosphere. Currently inhabited by the last known locus, whose domain covers the entire interior of the bottle. Exiting the bottle requires either some appropriate magic, or leaving through the spout.

- **Teleportation Key:** Allows the user to teleport himself, plus another four people, and all the equipment they carry on them, up to 200 lbs each (plus any amount of objects carried in extradimensional space). "People" is defined rigidly, and does not include non-anima, sentient entads, or the locus. People in extradimensional/warped space still count against the limit.

**Juniper:**

- **Sword of Transient Metal:** Once per day, with a command word, the sword will change so as to pass through metal (though not anything else). Bound to Amaryllis, invested in Juniper.

- **Slink-thief’s Dagger:** A throwing dagger that returns to the person who threw it shortly after it's either missed or hit its target. Exists in whatever spot is remotely plausible for it to exist on the wielder, meaning that it can be drawn from a cuff, inside a jacket, pulled from within a waistband, etc. Stays hidden when the wielder is searched.

- **Ropey (the Eternal Golden Braid):** Sentient length of rope. Entirely prehensile. Bound to Amaryllis.

- **Sander's Bow:** A bow with a sandstone grip. When activated, arrows fired from it will appear to hang in the air for thirty seconds before resuming its previous velocity.

- **Unicorn Bones:** Aside from their other properties, they can be pulled on to allow extremely short time loops (from the perspective of the user) and multiple lived timelines (from the perspective of everyone else).

- **Sapphire:** An expensive gem, precisely cut and useful for gem magic, worn around the wrist on a leather thong that can be shifted to put the gem in the hand for better contact/use.

- **Void Rifle:** Uses void effect to put holes through things. Can fire a maximum of once every
six seconds. The void effect travels through half an inch of steel, six inches of flesh, or five hundred feet of air.

- **Ring of Partial Incorporeality**: Allows the wearer to make a single part of themselves incorporeal, so long as that part is contiguous and does not create two non-contiguous stretches of corporeal matter (ex. it can make a hole of incorporeality in someone's palm, but not one which was wide enough that both fingers and wrist were corporeal with nothing connecting them). Bound to Pallida.

- **Bracelet of Panacea**: Cures the wearer of any short-term (less than 24-hour) poisons by purging them. The mechanism that allows it to work is unknown, but it's believed to be predictive, as it has previously responded to poisons both novel and unknown. Its power allows the wearer to breathe fouled air, so long as there's sufficient oxygen.

- **Cloakshield**: A cloak which, when swished, causes it to become as hard as a metal shield for one second before returning to cloth form. Bound to Pallida.

**Amaryllis:**

- **Immobility Plate**: Stops the wearer in place with a thought, then allows them to resume motion with another thought. Contains inertial dampers to prevent injury to the wearer. When immobile, becomes much harder to affect with kinetic weapons/forces. Immobility is not absolute; sufficient force can still move it, but it takes a lot. Reference frame is Aerb.

- **Ancestor's Amulet**: Contains a facsimile of a previous owner, which can be overwritten. This ancestor can be spoken to, and has some ability to form new memories based on conversation, as well as 'feel' emotion, though personality is static. Currently, the ancestor is Cyclamine Penndraig, Amaryllis' great-grandfather.

- **Flickerblade**: A sword that can blink in and out of existence with a thought. When the blade materializes, any material in its way is instantly removed from existence.

- **Sable**: A vanta black glove, capable of putting things into a limitless extradimensional space after ten seconds of contact and a thought (the thought can come any time after the initial ten seconds of contact, so long as contact is maintained). Objects stored within the glove must be "whole" objects and will exit if they split. There is no breathable air. Decay and other processes continue to happen. Anyone who wants to can easily exit the glove with a minimum amount of exerted will.

**Grak:**

- **Temporal Plate**: Allows manipulation of time to give the wearer more time to perform actions. In physics terms, behaves as though time were accelerated for the wearer. Doesn't allow for more powerful punches or greater kinetic energy (does allow for faster wards and better aimed pistols). Bound to Pallida.

- **Spectrum Glasses**: Eyeglass which, when worn, give people colored auras. These colors are clearly non-random, but the meaning behind them is opaque. Most civilians show up as somewhere between blue and orange. Most allies show up as purple. Most 'enemies' show up as red. The unclear significance of these colors, false positives, and false negatives, mean that they're rarely if ever used anymore. Bound to Amaryllis.

- **Hair Axe**: An axe that causes anyone cut by it to grow an extra foot of hair, where 'hair' excludes eyebrows, body hair, etc., and full effect may vary by species. Depth of cut does not matter, and with magical healing, the axe may be used cosmetically. Can be returned to his hand, sailing through the air, with a thought. Bound to Grak.

- **Warder's Monocle**: Allows the warder to see magic at various wavelengths. Burns the retinas if used too long. Superceded by warder's sight.

- **Warder's Wand**: Allows for the warder to create or manipulate wards, drawing on their concordance.

- **Ironwood Fist**: A wooden left hand, harder than iron and fully mobile, with joints that bend
both directions, greatly increased grip strength, and the ability to slowly change shape on demand.

Valencia the Red:

- Red Armor of Arramor: Prevents physical/kinetic damage to the wearer, then transfers the entirety of the damage that would have been at the top of the hour (minus whatever the armor itself would block or redistribute), as well as dealing the same damage to whoever had damaged her, so long as they're still living. (Note: Valencia has no soul and does not take the damage, though damage is still prevented.)
- Crown of Malingering Thorns: Prevents poisoning and purges existing poisons. Any poison negated in this way is "paid back" with a mental affliction. (Note: Valencia has no soul and does not receive magical mental afflictions, though poison is still negated.)
- Memory Blade: Becomes sharper the more it hits. Each hit removes memories from both the wielder and the person struck, with the magnitude of memories removed dependent upon the severity of the strike. (Note: Valencia has no soul and does not have her memories removed.)
- Handguns: Two, holstered at her hips.

Solace:

- Cloak of Leaves: Extradimensional space, accessed by putting things behind her back. Storage space is limited to approximately nine cubic feet.
- Flower buds: Various effects.

Raven:

- Orb of Three Spirits: A small orb, carried about the person. At a thought, three sea-foam green orbs appear above her, each of which can be fired off in a straight line, carving through any solid or liquid in their path with no resistance. Each orb, once used, will take one week to recharge. Bound to Raven.
- Anklet of Reactive Radiance: When someone increases their physical abilities near her using magic, typically bone magic, her own physical abilities rise an equal amount. This effect also matches the effects of permanent increases from entads. Bound to Raven.
- Banded Grasp: Worn as a single band of metal, usually under the clothes, allows armor to snap around the user with a thought. Doesn't cover head or hands. Armor is extremely resistant to kinetic damage, and absorbs a fair amount of power from other attacks (heat, electricity, radiation, etc.). Disbands with a thought. Bound to Raven.
- Shadow's Cloak: A pseudo-sentient cloak, which will twist and flutter in an imagined wind unless instructed otherwise. Has a wide variety of weak powers, including extradimensional interior pockets, resistance to tearing and ripping, and the ability to defensively react to threats. Bound to Raven.
- Mirrored Blade: A blade that can be summoned to hand with a thought and disappears into extradimensional space when not in use. The blade itself is made of a slice of stilled time and capable of cutting through nearly anything. Bound to Raven.
- Brace of the Bound: A brace that can store information from books in it when the wearer touches a book. A single book at a time can be made manifest with a thought, though it's not a "real" book and cannot leave the wearer's possession. Holds 32,768 books, with new books requiring an old one to be cast out. (Currently full.)

Pallida:

- Trident of Bubbling Flame: With one command, this trident will activate, allowing it to warp and bubble away at a wide variety of materials. Bound to Pallida.
- Inkscape Armor: Skintight armor that can retract or cover at will. Wardproof, and makes anything it covers wardproof as well. When covering the face, it provides air supply.

Bethel:

- Contains multitudes.
The knock on my door was a timid one.

“Come in!” I called.

I was surprised to see Valencia step through. She looked trepidatious, with her hair (white, dyed brown) covering her face some. Her eyes were crimson red, rather than the purple they took on when she put her lenses in. She wasn’t the same girl we’d rescued from the Amoureux Penitentiary: she was healthier now, with better posture, and a fair amount of muscle from the training that she’d been putting in, some of it in the time chamber.

“No devils,” she said, holding up a hand.

“Oh, I said. I turned back to my things. “I’m just in the middle of packing up. I’m going to be living in the tree soon, in the bottle, to be with the locus. Historically, trying to force loyalty hasn’t worked, but it’s worth a shot. Maybe I’ll come to understand it better.” I’d meant to make the move sooner, but things had been a little bit hectic.

“You did well with Grak today,” said Valencia.

“Devil’s insight?” I asked. I tried to keep the frown from my face.

“In this case, yes,” said Valencia. “Not when you were there, just with him alone. I wanted to be sure that he wasn’t going to try something.”

“He has feelings for you,” said Valencia.

I stopped what I was doing to stare at her. “I mean, that’s … what kind of feelings?”

“You’re going to have to talk with him about that,” said Valencia.

“Is he?” I asked.

“No,” replied Valencia. “I don’t think so,” she hedged. “There’s something that I want to talk to you about though.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“He has feelings for you,” said Valencia.

I stopped what I was doing to stare at her. “I mean, that’s … what kind of feelings?”

“You’re going to have to talk with him about that,” said Valencia.

“Is he in love with me?” I asked.

“It’s complicated,” said Valencia. She gave me a frown that was very reminiscent of Amaryllis. “I just didn’t want you to get blindsided.”

I closed my eyes. “Shit,” I said. “Okay, well that’s going to make things awkward.”

“Probably,” nodded Valencia. “I just thought that you should know. You were planning on having him move into the tree with you, weren’t you?”

“I was,” I said. I kept my eyes screwed shut. “Fuck,” I said. “I wanted to be able to keep an eye on him and maybe help with the loneliness. Dwarves like to have someone to sleep beside, I thought … I offered to be his krinrael.”

“Bethel told me,” replied Valencia.
“Lovely,” I said with a sigh. I opened my eyes and looked at Valencia. She was watching me. I had no way of knowing whether or not she had a devil in her or not. “Okay,” I said. “Do you have advice?”

“Advice?” asked Valencia, momentarily nonplussed.

“What do you think I should do?” I clarified.

“I -- why?” asked Valencia.

“Because you’re here?” I asked. “I don’t know, I just wanted some insight into what you thought I should do.”

“You want me to use a devil against Grak?” asked Valencia.

“No,” I said. “I want your advice.”

“But … you hate me,” said Valencia.

“I don’t hate you,” I replied. “I think what you did to me and Fenn was shitty, and I don’t actually trust that it was for the ‘right’ reasons, whatever those are, and yeah, it pissed me off, especially after she was gone, but I didn’t and don’t hate you.”

“You did,” said Valencia, shaking her head. “Devils know hate.”

“Alright, well, fine,” I replied. “Maybe I hated you for a bit, but if we don’t give each other second chances, then we’re not going to be a very effective team.”

*Loyalty increased: Valencia the Red lvl 27!*

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“I’m glad we could clear that up,” I said. “But do you have advice on how to handle Grak?”

“Find him someone, or wait until the Dungeon Master does,” said Valencia. “That’s how I got over you.”

“Ah,” I said. “Wait until he gets a Jorge?”

“Do you still not like him?” asked Valencia, cocking her head to the side. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He’s an interloper. He’s … maybe this isn’t an analogy that you would get, but it feels like when you have a long-running sitcom, and a new character gets dropped in at the start of the seventh season, and you’re just supposed to accept that he’s there now, a part of the crew without any real introduction.”

“It’s not because you still want to have sex with me?” asked Valencia.

I winced. “Jesus,” I said. “That’s --”

“I’m only asking,” said Valencia, frowning at me. “Can’t we talk openly?”

“We can,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “It’s just hard to be laid bare like that.”

“Well I didn’t want to tiptoe around it,” said Valencia. “Sometimes it seems like half of what you people do.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I haven’t looked at you while holding a devil
since you asked me not to, not even when it would have made sense to for other reasons, and I’ve tried my best not to think about you while I had a devil either, so I was just asking, because I don’t know how else I’m supposed to know.” She hesitated and let her arms drop a bit. “I’ve missed talking to you. So just … talk to me, if you’re going to?”

“If there’s some part of me that finds you physically attractive,” I began.

“There is,” said Valencia with a nod.

“Then my ideal version of myself shouldn’t be thinking about that or taking that into consideration where Jorge is concerned,” I said. Especially since there’s absolutely no chance I would ever act on that attraction. “So I’m just going to resolve not to do that. I do think that it’s a little weird that you’re dating so quickly, and as far as emotional and social maturity I’m skeptical, but … he’s a good guy?”

Valencia gave a firm nod. “He’s the best person I’ve ever met. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said, and tried to mean it. “But, wait, really? Of everyone?”

“Yes,” replied Valencia. “I checked him over very thoroughly.”

I frowned. “I’m not going to say that your judgment is suspect, but, uh.”

“Everyone has dark, ugly parts to them,” said Valencia. “I’ve seen them in everyone I’ve met. It’s just how people are. Jorge’s dark parts are only a little dark, and his ugly parts are only faintly unattractive.”

My mind drifted, naturally, to the dark and ugly parts of myself. “You said my flaws were beautiful, back when we first met,” I said.

“No,” said Valencia. “I said that it was beautiful to see you struggle against those flaws.”

“Ah,” I said. “I guess I didn’t remember it exactly right.”

“You probably didn’t want to,” said Valencia. “I still think it’s true, by the way. What you’re doing for Grak doesn’t come naturally to you. You’re comforting him. You’re being a warm blanket to curl up in. When people are hurting, you want to be a rock for them, a solid, dependable protector. It’s what you wanted to be, for me, I think.”

“You think?” I asked. “You don’t know?”

“I don’t trust the devils,” said Valencia. “I don’t trust myself when I’m borrowing their wisdom and knowledge.”

“Probably smart,” I said. “But I think that’s right, for what it’s worth. That is what I would have wanted to be for you. It just … it couldn’t be tied in with all the romance stuff, not when you’re still developing as a person.”

“Romance and sex,” said Valencia.

“I … yeah,” I said. “That’s one of those things I’d rather we never said out loud.”

“I know that,” said Valencia. She frowned at me. “One of the hardest things about people is all the things that they don’t say, especially the things that everyone knows, or everyone but me knows. With a devil I can figure it out, but even then it seems so pointless. And we could become the sorts of
people who just talk about all the things we’re thinking, but we don’t, because it would be work.”

“It’s just people,” I said. “People are hard. Really hard, sometimes, or even most of the time.”

“I wish they weren’t,” said Valencia. “I wish that I could have a devil in me all the time, and change people so they aren’t so much work. You and Mary both told me not to do that though, even if it would make us a better team together.”

“We’d have to trust in your judgment,” I said.

“I know,” said Valencia. “And I know that I don’t know enough to start fixing everything. Don’t worry, I’m not going to try.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you for the heads up about Grak though.”

“I wasn’t sure whether I should say it, or whether I should have said it earlier,” said Valencia. “You’re really not mad at me?”

“No,” I said, and I found that I meant it. “In the other timeline -- you and Jorge were happy.”

“We were?” asked Valencia. “For a long time?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Up until you died and the world ended.”

“I’m not sure that I want that with him,” said Valencia. She shifted on her feet. “The forever future, I mean, not the death and apocalypse, obviously.”

“Well, the books just show a single future,” I said. “You don’t need to feel bound by them.”

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. She frowned. “I think … I think I fixate on things. That’s what Mary said, but I think that she’s right. I don’t know if that’s bad or good, but Mary thinks that it’s bad.”

“I fixate on things,” I said with a shrug.

“Mary said that I fixate on the first thing that I come across,” said Valencia. She looked down a bit. “Because I’m broken.”

“Did she say that?” I asked. I felt a flash of anger at the hypothetical Amaryllis who would have called Valencia broken, even if it was sort of true, and even if Amaryllis would never say that.

“No, she didn’t say it,” said Valencia. “But she thought it.”

“We’re all broken,” I said, resisting the urge to tell her that she couldn’t actually see inside Amaryllis’ head. “It’s just a matter of how we deal with the broken parts of ourselves. If you find that you have a tendency to fixate on the first thing that you come across, you have ways of dealing with that. I guess I would argue that it’s not a real negative, unless it’s stopping you from finding something that you’d like more, or if you’re just deluding yourself.”

“Do you think I am, with Jorge?” asked Valencia. “Deluding myself?”

“Er,” I said. “I don’t know him. I’ve met him once or twice, briefly, but everything that I know about Jorge comes from what you’ve said about him, and from that, he seems nice, so … not really my place to judge.” And the bias I feel … well, better not to give it a chance to express itself. “If we were talking about Harry Potter though? Then yeah, I think you’re wrapping yourself in the first thing that resonated with you and holding onto it a bit too tightly.” I shrugged. “I do like the books.”
“Thank you,” said Valencia. “For talking to me. And for giving me something to think about.”

“I’m not saying that Jorge isn’t great,” I said. “I really want to make that clear. I’m just saying that if you find yourself falling in love with the first thing you come across too often, maybe that’s not because it’s the best ever, it’s just a case of you giving too strong a weight to what looks like an island of stability in a sea of uncertainty.” I paused. “I guess I should probably meet Jorge. Bring him around to dinner, maybe?”

“Yes,” nodded Valencia. “I think I would like that.”

After having lived in Bethel for quite some time, the tree house in the center of the bottle was a pleasant change of pace. Everything was small and cozy, with a great deal of thought going into the proper placement of everything. It wasn’t that Bethel was thoughtless, it was just that she liked to go big and luxuriant, more of a palace than a house, for all that she complained about having too many people in her and feeling more like a facility. She also changed frequently, moving around rooms on us to fit her whims.

“I’ll need you to get in and out, when I’m staying here,” I told Solace. “So I would appreciate if you stay in here when I’m here, if that’s okay, just in case there’s an emergency.”

“Understood,” said Solace with a bow in my direction. She was three feet tall, in her child’s body, with the green skin of a crantek and two small antlers on her forehead, new additions and from what I could tell, only added for a little bit of flair. She was wearing clothes, thankfully, most likely out of respect for my wishes. “I’m happy that you’re here.”

“I’m hoping that it will help,” I said. “I have no idea how it would, but maybe not knowing is to our benefit.”

“Your profane texts didn’t hold any clues?” asked Solace.

‘Profane’ was a strong word, and one that I didn’t think really fit with the Second Empire’s research. They didn’t give a shit about the loci and saw them as both a political tool and an impediment to progress, but ‘evil’ was another strong word, and while it did fit, it was at least goal-oriented evil, the kind of evil of people who were willing to pay steep prices, so long as someone else was willing to foot the bill.

“No, nothing,” I said, keeping my thoughts to myself. “I think our plan is to knock out as many quests as we can as quickly as possible, and in the downtime, I’ll try to, um, connect with the locus.”

“Good,” said Solace with another small bow. “Grak will help me tend to the domain in the meantime.”

I saw Grak nod beside me. We’d flown down into the bottle together, as birds. “Whatever I can do to help,” he said.

I had invited him to come live with me before Valencia had said anything about him having feelings for me. That was something that I wasn’t looking forward to navigating, but I would try to be as forthright and honest as I could be, and then hope that the Dungeon Master would throw Grak his Jorge.

“Excellent,” said Solace with a pleased smile.

On cue, the Six-Eyed Doe showed up, tall and imposing, but with a slender body and six curious eyes. I looked it over, trying to see the beauty in it, trying to feel some sense of wonder and majesty,
and failed entirely. Why a deer though?

“Let’s go for a walk, shall we?” I asked.

The doe huffed at me and nodded its head once.

I began walking, and the doe followed along beside me. I had no idea what I was supposed to say to it, or how I was going to have to have a conversation with it given that it didn’t actually talk.

“Alright,” I said. “First things first, can I call you a she, rather than it? Everyone just calls you ‘the locus’, or talks around it, but I think it helps me, mentally, to compare you to a living thing rather than an inanimate object. Maybe that’s me placing a bit too much faith in Sapir-Whorf.” I’d already been making an effort on that front, but I had forgotten to ask the locus’ opinion on the matter.

The doe bent its head once.

“Second question,” I said. “Do you want me to explain references that I assume you won’t get? I don’t even know if you speak Anglish, or you’re just reading intent, or maybe feeling my aura or something, but --”

The doe shook its head once.

“Okay,” I said. “No explanations. I guess I’ll just talk then, because I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do.”

There was no response to that. The doe kept on walking beside me. I was following one of the little trails that ran through the bottle, one I’d been on a few times before, when Fenn and I had wanted to get away from the house.

“I guess I’ll talk about the personal stuff,” I said. “We can start with Fenn. She was …” I trailed off and then stopped. *She was.* “I wish that I could have saved her. It’s hard for me to not blame myself for that, and maybe I shouldn’t even be trying to skirt blame. Maybe I should just accept some share of responsibility.” I sighed. “And now that she’s gone, it’s like she’s sitting over my shoulder, and I might be able to shake that off, but I don’t think I want to. I think about what she would say sometimes, if she were here, and sometimes it just seems like we all stop talking so she can make the obvious joke, until we realize that she’s not making jokes anymore.” I sighed again. “That’s probably just me, seeing meaning in silences, because I miss her.”

The doe huffed once. I looked over at her, and the three eyes that were pointed my direction. Only one was watching me. I had no idea whether she was finding this worthwhile.

“So that’s its own thing,” I said. “But at least it’s nothing actionable, nothing that I could confront or change. With Grak … Valencia said that he has ‘feelings’ for me, but I’m not sure exactly what that maps to, and I’m not looking forward to that conversation. Dwarves aren’t so different from humans, I guess.” I paused. “I’m not gay. I mean, he’s not technically a man, but he’s got a beard, and no boobs, so the lack of attraction is, I don’t know. It’s nothing against him. And even if he looked like Amaryllis,” I paused again as I tried to contemplate that. “It would be weird. He would carry himself differently than she does, and we’d probably use female pronouns for *her*, even if *she* still had a cloaca and all the other dwarven internals, but, I don’t know.”

I glanced over at the doe as we walked. “I think that Amaryllis is legitimately as beautiful as I could find a woman to be. Pallida has this hairpin that makes whoever wears it more pretty, and I keep thinking about what it would be like if Amaryllis put that hairpin in. Would it just not do anything? Would there be a buffer overflow that would make the game crash? I don’t mean to objectify her,
because she’s so much more than how amazingly pretty she is, but it’s really hard for me to properly express what I feel when I look at her. I thought that I was mostly past the ‘holy shit she’s gorgeous’ part of things, and maybe I was for a while, but I came back from the Library and when I saw her I just thought, ‘Oh.’ It’s so hard to believe I’d gotten used to it. I have higher Poise now, and I have no idea whether or not that’s even doing anything, but if it is, it’s not enough to be noticeable.”

The doe nodded once.

“But when I think about Grak in Amaryllis’ body, besides the fact that it weirds me out, I still don’t feel the same way about hypothetical-her. It’s not like I’m in love with him and I wish that he had a different body that I was attracted to, it’s just … there’s nothing there. He’s a friend, and I care about him, and if what he needs is physical affection, I’ll get over my cultural hang-ups and provide it, but this kind of puts me in a bad spot, because I don’t want to lead him on, and I also don’t want to just reject him, because I feel like that’s me telling him, ‘Hey, live! But not with me, ew’, which isn’t what I would have wanted to hear in his position.” That was an understatement. I’d have been crushed. “I can’t just lie to him though.”

The doe nodded along. I had no idea what she was thinking, if anything.

“And moving down what’s a very long list, we have people pairing up, or seeming to, and,” I stopped and looked at the doe. She seemed a bit like she was smiling, or as much as a deer could smile. “I’m a total shitheel. I don’t know if you know that about me. I have these stupid feelings, all probably rooted in reasons that have obvious evo psych origins. I was evil for a bit, you probably know that, but this is a different sort of evil that I keep having to go over in my head. It’s like, I want Amaryllis to be happy, I want Valencia to be happy, but there’s this part of me that sees them with partners or potential partners and screams, ‘No, mine!’. And how fucked is that? I don’t actually think, on an intellectual level, that either of them owes anything to me, but there’s still this emotion, jealousy or something else, that just … blegh.”

The doe snorted once.

“Exactly,” I replied. I was sort of getting into this. “I think if I had an afternoon free to do it, I might be able to go into my soul or spirit and just tear out everything that was causing problems, but that might mean giving up my humanity, and I find it offensive on a personal identity level, not to mention the utilitarian objections given that I don’t have a degree in psychosurgery.” I did wonder how easy it would be, with both of them pushed to max, but momentarily pushing skills up came with high costs.

“I’m already not acting on those feelings, because I know they’re in that middle area of the Venn diagram of stupid and abhorrent. I maybe have the excuse of being in love with Amaryllis, and maybe that relationship would even make the both of us happy, but with Valencia?” I shook my head. “It sucks, because I know she still sees right through me, and she knows that I know she knows, and I don’t talk about it, even though she said that we should. I just don’t see what it helps, to bring all that shit into the open. I mean, I’m doing it now, but to confirm the things she already knows would just be painful and awkward.” I thought about that for a moment. “It’s not how I was raised. You’re allowed to think things, so long as you don’t say them or act on them.”

I looked over at the doe again. We’d reached the edge of the bottle, where the path turned to match the curve of the glass. The bottle only held about a square mile of land, but the paths wound around within that mile, through a variety of terrain. If we followed the loop, eventually we would come back to the house, but it would take some time. I continued on; I didn’t know what I was doing here, but this didn’t seem to be hurting, and in some ways it felt good to be able to say these things out loud. That was probably why Valencia had wanted to talk about it.
“That’s where Fel Seed comes from,” I said. “When I was drawing up this great and terrible villain, he was every dark thought I’d ever had. I would think about the times that I wanted to hurt people, and I would think, ‘What if I felt like that all the time? What if I could enact that pain with impunity, with no one to challenge me?’ And it just sort of went from there. The City of a Thousand Brides was a crystallization of the same kinds of feelings I have about Jorge and Valencia.” Stupid, stupid, nonsense feelings.

“And when I think about Amaryllis and Pallida … I don’t know. They’re both women, so it doesn’t trip the sensors as much. I don’t think that they would be happy together, and I know that they weren’t too happy in the doomed timeline, but I don’t know if saying that to Amaryllis would just be in service of killing that relationship in the crib or what. And if I was going to propose that she start loving me again, maybe I should have done it already.” I looked out at the grass. It really was beautiful in the bottle.

“It really is beautiful in here,” I said. “This landscape, confined within a mile-tall glass bottle, is everything that I could want in a place.” I glanced over at the doe, wondering if that was insensitive. “There used to be a thing called a demiplane. If I had to guess why they were excluded, I would say that someone found a way to proliferate them too much, or nest them, and if you could stick everyone into custom demiplanes, you have to imagine that everyone in the world would do it, which would change the nature of everything. But demiplanes were always my favorite. They were cozy little places. This bottle is probably from or inspired by my microworlds campaign. I loved the microworlds, the tightly packed, highly detailed places where you would know everyone and see everything. I know it’s not what you want to hear, I know you want to be big and sprawling, but these contained worlds, with everything organic but all still in its place, they hew close to my ideal.”

**Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 8!**

I had just been rambling, not really thinking about what I was saying, and the message took me by surprise.

“Um,” I said. “I just got a loyalty message, which typically seems to mean that something has changed in how you view me, or something like that, but I have no idea what I just said that would have resonated with you. Surely I’ve called this place beautiful before? Or, was it that I expressed my own form of beauty?”

The doe let out an unhelpful bleat. On instinct, I reached forward and patted her on the flank. She was softer than a real deer; I’d always thought deer were a little bit bristly, but all of my experiences with touching them had come shortly after having killed them.

“Amaryllis has some theories about companions,” I said as I resumed walking. The sun was starting to set, which added some color to the surroundings, given that it was one of the few clear days on the Isle of Poran. “The big central axiom is that companions aren’t random, and that they’re related to me on some axis, which is about as broad a statement as you could make. If Fel Seed is everything evil and wrong about me, then it’s pretty clear that Bethel is some of those same instincts, but much more aligned with our goals.” I scratched my head, then ran my fingers through my hair. I needed a haircut. The last one I’d had, Fenn had given me, against my better judgment. “Valencia is obviously Joonbait, and Raven is an idealized version of Maddie. Grak is meant to help me confront the fact that I attempted suicide, maybe? Or maybe it’s about growing up in a rural area and knowing that the rural life isn’t enough. Probably both.” I looked over at the locus. “You have to understand that I don’t actually think of people this way, I’m trying to get myself in the mindset of the Dungeon Master and what it is that he might have been thinking, if anything.”

The doe nodded her head once and blinked at me, with her six eyes out of sync with each other.
“Amaryllis is maybe meant to teach me a lesson about how it’s okay to just be friends?” I scratched my head again. “No real clue there. Similar for Fenn, though in her case I guess that maybe the lesson, or the point would be that people, or women, or women that I love, are capable of being imperfect, and deserve no less love for it. Or maybe that I should value people for who they are, not for what I want them to be. So many of these lessons I know though, which makes it frustrating, like I’m being told to be a good person in all the ways I already know I should be. It’s one of the reasons that I’m inclined toward saying ‘fuck the narrative’.”

I could see Grak and Solace in the distance. We hadn’t talked about it in front of him, but Grak was on an informal suicide watch, and had been for a while. I wasn’t too worried, but I didn’t want him to be left alone. Solace was calm and gentle, and I hoped that she would provide what he needed.

“That brings us to you,” I said to the doe. “If we accept that companions are some form of communication by the Dungeon Master, or maybe just purposeful, or can be meaningfully read as such, then what would your existence as a companion be trying to say? Thoughts?”

The locus raised her head high into the sky and let out another loud bleat. In the distance, I saw Solace and Grak stop what they were doing and turn toward us for a moment, before resuming their gardening.

“My own thinking is that it’s about the ineffable,” I said. “I mean, that’s obvious enough. Maybe it’s about beauty and art. Maybe it’s whimsy. I was always bad at that kind of thing. I would get pictures in my mind’s eye and then when I went to put them down on the page, they would come out too sensible, with none of the magic that I’d wanted to pour into them. From what I understand of it, that’s druidism in a nutshell, wrestling with manufacturing whimsy. But I don’t know how knowing any of that helps you, except that these stupid loyalty meters give rewards, and maybe one of them will get you out somehow.”

The locus bleated again, twice, then lowered its head and nudged me. I patted her on the head.

“My other theory, as far as ‘loyalty’ goes, is that some points I get just by being myself,” I said. “Some might be from changing, or recognizing that I’m wrong, but others are just because I was able to express something core to myself, something that you didn’t know before.” I found that I enjoyed talking out loud to the locus. I was used to keeping all my thoughts internal, but it felt good to verbalize them, even if it was to someone who wasn’t quite equipped to respond.

I began talking about the act of creation, not the simulationist part of it that was so often the result of trying to pin things down, but the truly artistic side. I rambled a bit, because I didn’t think that it mattered if I drove directly to my thesis, whatever it was. I described the times when things had seemed to simply come to me from the aether, connections that my mind had made without me, or details that had been added for the sole reason that they seemed right, not because there was necessarily any logic underpinning it.

I tried not to break my flow when the notification came.

Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 9!

“The Zorish Isles,” I said, continuing on. “They were one of those things that would have needed a lot of backfilling. I was sitting in my bathtub and imagining the tips of my fingers as islands jutting up from the water, and when I had it in my mind’s eye, my fingers blown up to ludicrous scale, and the people and life on the islands ignorant of the reality, it seemed so perfect and right. I tried to write up backstory for them, but everything I wrote seemed to diminish them, save for those explanations that raised more questions than they answered.” I stopped for a moment and thought about that. “Maybe that’s what it is for me, the sense of seeking as an elemental part of creation. Eventually I
turn to filling things out, but that never gives the same satisfaction, it’s just going through a checklist of plate tectonics and biomes. Satisfying, maybe, but not as satisfying. I want the floating islands to drift over the land, and they’ve got to have some explanation, but sometimes it seems better to just say, ‘it’s magic, I don’t have to explain shit’.”

**Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 10!**

**Companion Passive Unlocked: Six-Eyed (Six-Eyed Doe)!**

I immediately closed my eyes to look at the virtue.

**Six-Eyed:** Any attempt to use any system in a non-standard way will be considered one degree more reasonable than it otherwise would be. Any existing virtues, entads, or effects that specify a degree of reasonableness are increased by one degree of reasonableness in your favor (calculated after all other effects). The Layman will look more favorably on your attempts to argue definition.

I looked at that for a while. I was going to have to write all that down for Amaryllis. Given that the game didn’t actually have a manual, the text of the virtues was one of the only things that exposed any of the game to me. ‘The Layman’ was mentioned once, and ‘degrees of reasonableness’ were mentioned twice. *In theory,* Six-Eyed meant that my Monkey Grip ability would let me wield even more unreasonably large swords than before, and I suspected that if I still had the Anyblade, it would be a little more lax about what counted as a blade, not that it had been an exceptionally strict item to begin with. I assumed that ‘the Layman’ was a conceptualization of DM-as-adjudicator, but I didn’t really see how that fit in with the rules system of the game as I understood it, not if most things had abilities that were set in stone. Boundary conditions, perhaps?

“Okay, so what counts as a chair?” asked Reimer.

“A chair is a chair,” I said.

“That’s meaningless,” said Reimer. “I’m asking for the purposes of the spell, what’s a chair? You said that it can make chairs valued under 25 gp, so what’s a chair?”

“Alright,” I said. I’d been prepared for this, after one too many arguments. “So there are a couple of different directions we can go with this. One, we do the porn test, I-know-it-when-I-see-it, but that requires me to see it, so every time you ask whether or not something is a chair, I say yes or no. That’s probably what we’re going to do, but there are other options, for the sake of a diegetic explanation.”

“A what?” asked Maddie.


“It’s Juniper’s favorite word,” said Tom.

“No,” said Craig. “His favorite word is egregious. It was on the bingo sheet.”

“I have a lot of favorite words,” I said. “But to go back to what I mean, and Maddie, hopefully to help you understand, we can say that in game terms Reimer-the-player is asking me-the-DM whether or not something is a chair and I’m replying to him, but that doesn’t actually explain what Karbon is experiencing in-game. A wizard attempts to cast the spell, but does he hear a voice in his head that says ‘hey, that’s not a chair’? Probably not, though that is one of the options. Instead, maybe there’s something like memetic space —”
“From Long Stairs,” Tiff said to Maddie.

“It’s basically a conception of collective memetic strength,” I said. “So if you took all the ideas about what a chair is in all the heads of all the people, then you could make an average weighted by confidence or strength or whatever, and you’d end up with something that wasn’t really a definition, but which mapped to various real-world objects with a given strength, and then you could have a cut-off as far as how far away from the meme is too far. Similarly, you could have a Platonic realm where all objects exist in their ideals, and you could see how close to the p-space ideal the target of the spell was.”

“Or you could give a literal definition,” grumbled Reimer. “You could say that a chair has got to have four legs, a place for a humanoid to sit, et cetera.”

“Doesn’t a chair have a minimum of three legs?” asked Tiff. “Or two, if they’re curved, like a rocking chair.”

“That’s exactly the sort of the argument that you’d get into literally all the time,” I said. “It’s the stupid ‘is a hot dog a sandwich’ thing again.”

“A hot dog is totally a sandwich,” said Craig. “Meat between bread, how is that not a sandwich?”

I let out a long, low sigh.

“Alright,” said Arthur as he sidled back into the room and took his place. “What did I miss?”

“Chairs,” said Reimer.

“Great,” replied Arthur with a smile. “Are we still standing in front of the count?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I could usually count on him to get us back on track. Unfortunately, this new ability didn’t seem help the locus in any meaningful way. More than that, it was a passive that applied to me, not to her, which made it unique among the loyalty bonuses. Weren’t they supposed to act on the person who received them, with only tangential or symmetric effects for me? That had been the rule thus far. I was glad that I’d been able to get two loyalty ups in fairly quick succession, though it was a sign that I really hadn’t been putting in the work as far as the locus was concerned.

I tried more, naturally, but there was only so much that I could say about artistry and creation, especially since it had been such a long time since I’d done any of it. I was having the itch to do it again, especially as I talked about it with the Six-Eyed Doe, but they were muscles that I hadn’t been using, and if I was going to do it, it would be strictly recreational. I was also forcing it, which was (maybe) a bit easier with higher social stats, but still grated on me.

“How are things?” I asked Grak and Solace as I approached with the doe stalking along beside me.

“Good,” said Grak. He gave me a tentative smile.

“Good,” Solace agreed with a nod. “I understand that the house has its own priorities, but it’s nice for someone other than Amaryllis and Valencia to come down here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll try to make more of an effort. It’s just … easy to get caught up with what’s happening on the surface, and then I was away at the Library for a week and a half. I’m sure you appreciate those excuses a lot.”
Solace laughed. “It’s fine,” she said. “We’ve enjoyed the company we’ve had. Valencia really is a lovely girl, you should give her more of a chance.”

“I already am,” I said. A frown crossed my face. I didn’t really think that it was any of Solace’s business.

“Oh, allow an old woman her opinions,” said Solace with a little laugh. She gave me her best child’s smile. I had never really been around children that age, since I was an only child and the youngest of my flock of cousins. I felt awkward and uncomfortable.

“If you wanted to be regarded as an adult woman, you could have picked a body that suited it,” I said.

“Bodies are bodies,” said Solace. “I’ve had my share, and appearing as a child when I still have something of a child’s mentality and development seems apropos.” She touched her antlers. “You didn’t say whether you liked the embellishment.”

“If you can change your form at will,” I began. The doe poked me in the back with her head. “Okay, okay, fine, you can’t mimic a doppelganger, that was too much to ask.”

(We could already kind of do that, if we had access to the body we needed. Essentialism in the thirties wasn’t quite enough to reach into the anima exa in a timely manner, which was a problem given that the anima exa dissipated pretty rapidly when out in the open, but I could still do body swaps and take on a novel identity, so long as the person I was swapping with had the same number of bones. There wasn’t much reason to take on a different physical appearance though.)

“Grak and I have been gathering up things for dinner,” said Solace. “Does roast smeerp and root vegetables sound good to you?”

“Smeerp,” I said.

“It’s like rabbit,” replied Solace.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “It’s … roast smeerp is fine.”

“Good,” said Solace with a nod. “Grak, would you do me the honor of being my sous chef? Juniper needs to be a dedicated pupil and tend to his plants.”

We ate dinner together, then I helped clean up, helped start a fire, and finally got some time to relax when Solace was already heading for bed. She claimed that rest did the mind good when you were still growing up, but I thought that was only about half true, and she’d really been giving me space to talk alone with Grak.

Grak and I set about doing what we normally did together, if we had time to kill: we played Ranks against each other, using ‘variants’ taken from a thick book.

“Solace has offered to be my krinrael,” said Grak, after some time had passed. (We spoke Groglir, per custom.)

“Oh?” I asked. “That’s, um. Nice?”

“She’s like you,” said Grak. “She offers out of concern, as a way of fulfilling a friend’s need.”

“Can I be meg with you?” I asked. [meg, mëgi: forthright, blunt, and true to one’s self, especially to
“Yes,” said Grak. We were talking as we played, which was taboo in dwarven culture; Grak didn’t seem to care so much.

“Okay,” I said. I took a breath and steeled myself. “Do you have feelings for me?”

“That is not the nature of megi,” said Grak. He was moving pieces around his board, trying to find the optimal set-up. He was good enough at Ranks to do it all in his head, which was a good sign that he was doing this just to relax, not to compete. “You do not ask questions.”

“Right,” I said. “Let me rephrase.” And hope that you’re telling the truth about what you prefer. “I don’t have any romantic or sexual feelings toward you. I can give physical contact, if you feel a need to be touched, and we can cuddle, but not much more.”

“I know all this,” said Grak as he moved his pieces.

“Okay,” I said. “I just didn’t want to lead you on.”

“I know,” replied Grak. “I appreciate it. That was megi as it should be.”

I returned to the game board in front of me, moving around the carrot, wolf, and rabbit tokens, but my mind wasn’t even remotely on the game. I glanced over at Grak, who was giving his game board a vacant stare.

“Dwarves are responsive,” said Grak. He cleared his throat. “We do not naturally feel much lust. We do not get ‘horny.’” (This was an English loan word.) “There are exceptions, especially among the agkrioglian, but I am not an exception.” [agkrioglian, ɑɡkriɔɡlɪɑn: a dwarf who makes their home ‘outside’, typically used to refer to those raised with imperial customs, cultures, and values.] Grak paused. “When I was at Barriers I had many krin and krinrael. Most of them were species that felt that sexual need in one way or another. I was happy to oblige them, if they would understand what I wanted in return.”

“To be touched and held?” I asked.

Grak nodded once. “I developed my responsiveness over time,” he said. “I would see that need, and feel the reaction before being touched. I came to enjoy it, that sense of being needed.” He hesitated. “I don’t want you to think that I left Darili Irid for that preference alone.”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t think that. And even if you had --”

“No,” said Grak. “I believed that about myself for a long time. No, I left for many reasons.”

“Okay,” I said. “I didn’t mean to imply anything.”

Grak waved that away. “What I feel for you is not love or longing. It is rilirin.” [rilirin, ɹɪlɪrɪn: wistfulness for something that never was, nostalgia for times and places not lived-in]

“Is there anything that I can do about it?” I asked. My throat felt thick. “If it’s an unpleasant feeling?”

“You don’t understand,” said Grak, shaking his head. “Rilirin, it’s a feeling of … I see how you are with Amaryllis, how you were with Fenn, and I wish that it were me instead. Physically, you’re of the sort I’ve most liked to be with, tall, muscular, able to wrap me in your touch. I saw how you were with Fenn, kind and considerate, at least as far as the physical went. I know that’s not an option between us.” He shrugged. “Rilirin.”
“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Grak. “I am not Amaryllis, that I feel the need to excise it. I don’t want you to think that I’m suffering. Only rilirin.”

“Okay,” I said. “Is there anything that I can do?”

“You asked already,” said Grak. “I will find someone, I’m sure. In the meantime, I can sleep with Solace. It is enough that you made yourself uncomfortable while trying to help me.”

That didn’t make me feel great, but it was more or less true. I did feel uncomfortable, mostly because of the male coding and the cultural conditioning I’d gotten growing up in small town Kansas. Grak could see some of that, if maybe not all of it.

We finished up Ranks (his solution was far, far better than mine was) and he went to the nook where Solace was already sleeping.

I stayed up, trying to work things out in my head, and having no real luck.
One of the first orders of business, once I got back, was following Bethel’s soul line. I’d been mildly
derelict in not doing it earlier, as it was the traditional unlock for Loyalty 10, but I’d had too many
plates spinning at once, and in my defense, I hadn’t thought that Bethel would get one, given that she
(like Valencia) didn’t actually have a soul. Mostly, I just hadn’t been thinking about it, given the
minor crisis and wildly expanded abilities that had overshadowed that particular aspect of Loyalty
10. I’d noticed the line in the Library, while I was in the middle of routine soul maintenance and
inspection, but it was completely locked off to me.

When I followed it, I found myself standing in a white room. It wasn’t the featureless plain that I’d
met the Dungeon Master on, but an actual room, with the edges where the walls met the floor clearly
visible. My guess was that it was about ten by ten by ten, a perfect cube, with no visible doors or
windows. The lighting wasn’t quite ambient. When I looked closely, I could see that it was just
recessed, with strips of light to provide the illusion that there wasn’t a singular source.

Just as I finally found the seam where the door was, it swung open. Tiff was standing there in her
‘Kansas Swim’ t-shirt, staring at me. It didn’t take my brain long to catch on to the fact that she was
not, in fact, my ex.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Uh,” I said. “I followed a line in my soul.” I looked around the room, then beyond Bethel, into the
hallway behind her. “Where am I?”

“This is my memory palace,” Bethel replied with a sniff. She looked me over, and my eyes drifted
down to see what she was seeing. I wasn’t wearing what I was wearing in the real world. Instead, it
was a t-shirt and jeans, with sneakers of the kind that they didn’t really have on Aerb. It was as close
to being my Earth uniform as could be. It took me a moment to realize that I had lost muscle too, not
so much that I was back to how I’d been on Earth, but still less than I had on Aerb. “You can’t come
in.”

“I wasn’t asking to,” I replied. “I just wanted to see what your soul equivalent was. It’s useful to
have a sense of someone else’s soul for diagnostic purposes. Though, actually, I probably shouldn’t
peep yours too deeply anyway, because I think you’re immune to a variety of memetic threats, and
my soul is off limits to others because of the particularly shitty one that Raven hit me with.”
Similarly, I wasn’t going to look in Raven’s soul anytime soon.

“Hrm,” said Bethel. “I’ll have to talk with Raven about which of her books have those threats within
them. I indiscriminately copied everything she had, though I didn’t look terribly closely at any of
them. Is that usual, do you know, for sentient entads to have such an immunity?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I would think that if the so-called memes are acting on the stuff of the
soul, then being without a soul would allow you something in the way of immunity, but -- it’s the
sort of thing that the Second Empire probably did research on.”

“Lovely chaps, those,” said Bethel with Tiff’s smile.

“I’ll be going,” I said. “I didn’t want to disturb you.” I paused for a moment. A palace with a
memory palace. “I do have to note that whatever entad gave you this ability, it’s not on the list of
entads you gave us.”
“No?” asked Bethel, staring at me. “I could have sworn I included them all.”

“I kind of assumed you had left some off and would either tell me when you were ready, or when you revealed them through necessity,” I said with a shrug. “I’m kind of a fan of people being allowed to keep a few secrets here and there.”

“So you’ve said, a few times,” replied Bethel. She was still looking at me. “Would you like to see this place?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just … hide anything you think might kill me?”

“I can’t actually do that, but I will steer you away from the things that are suspect,” said Bethel. She looked down the hallway and squinted slightly before turning back to me. “Come along.” She left the doorway and began walking, and I kept pace with her.

“It’s interesting that you’re her,” I said. “That you took Tiff’s form.”

“It’s not my choice,” said Bethel. Her tone was mild. “Here, and with the Dagger of Dreamspeech, I’m rather less amorphous. I believe it has something to do with the way the entads function. Perhaps I simply wore your girlfriend’s form for so long that it became a part of me.”

I thought on that for a moment. “These aren’t the clothes that I’m wearing in the real world,” I said. “They’re … I don’t know. The soul has a conception of the body, but my guess is that this,” I gestured to myself, “is maybe something else, my mind’s conception of myself? An intellectual view? So far as I’ve seen, the spirit doesn’t duplicate that aspect of the soul, but maybe it’s just not obvious. I’ll have to look at it. None of that really explains you, except that you probably have a pseudo-soul and pseudo-spirit for the purposes of interacting with entads.” I paused. “Tiff is my ex-girlfriend, by the way. Not girlfriend.”

“You broke up with her?” asked Bethel.

“I … no,” I said. “But I don’t think that either of us thought that we were a couple, so.”

“Certainly not after you fucked Maddie,” said Bethel. She stopped in front of a room. The walls of the hallway were large wood panels, and there were no doors to the rooms, only wooden archways. It reminded me of a boarding school, or at least how they were presented in television shows and movies. “This is the Boundless Pit, if you’d like to see it.”

Inside was a long tube of gray rock, which took up almost the entirety of the square room. I could see inside it, as though the section nearest to me had been removed, but there was no obvious discontinuity. It was a bit like clipping through the wall in a video game, in that I could see the far wall but not the near one. Bethel gestured with one hand, and the tube spun around, displaying different parts. Then, with another gesture, the tube shot down past us, lowering through the floor, with more of it coming down from the ceiling.

“You’re meant to view it from the inside,” said Bethel, stepping into it. I followed her, so that the tube surrounded us.

“What happens when it gets wider or narrower?” I asked.

“The view compensates to keep it as wide as the room,” said Bethel. “I didn’t build this place, incidentally. The memory palace was created from whole cloth the moment the entad was put into my closet. So far as I’ve been able to tell, it changes in response to new memories, and occasionally reorganizes itself, but nothing else.”
With a gesture, the upward scrolling came to a stop, just as the lip of the Boundless Pit was shown to us. It wasn’t as I’d known it, with the city of Headwater displaying the view of the mile-wide pit. It was mostly lichen-covered rocks and green fields, and everything wet from the waterfall. Bethel twisted her hand, and the view focused in on the house, on her, as it must have been just after construction had been completed.

“Moving me wouldn’t have been difficult,” said Bethel as she gazed at the image. “Uther had the right entads. I think he knew that I was unruly though. Give a house legs, and watch it scuttle away from you.” She turned to look at me. “That’s the word that I imagine him using, ’scuttle’. Dehumanizing, don’t you think that would be his style?”

“You’re not human,” I said. I hoped pointing that out wasn’t offensive.

“No,” said Bethel, turning back. “No, I’m not. Yet sometimes I like to be seen as one. It makes things a bit easier, when dealing with mortals. If I don’t present as a person, in a person’s form, how are they to read emotion and meaning?”

“I always thought you could, in a house,” I said. “When I would go over to a friend’s house, there was always a story there, partly the story of the family who lived there, but also the story of the house itself, like whether it was happy or anxious. It’s anthropomorphizing, I guess, but it was still something that I thought about.”

*Loyalty increased: Bethel lvl 13!*

Whatever thoughts were going through her head, she said nothing.

“There are some ways that you’re not a home to us,” I said. “I’ve kind of been wondering about that. Privacy violations are one, but that’s pretty well-trod at this point. It’s more that you move things around, I guess, and make things unfamiliar. There are rooms that we’ve seen once and then never again, and you keep redesigning interiors. One time I came back to my room after lunch and I thought I’d wound up in the wrong place.”

“Yes?” asked Bethel. She looked over at me. “And?”

“At first I thought that it was just you doing what you wanted,” I said. “Then my alternate explanation was that you were trying lots of things because you were trying to give us what we wanted. But I was thinking back to watching Amaryllis cook in the kitchen, and the way that she had to keep looking for things, and I decided that it was more likely that you were just making things uncomfortable on purpose, so we wouldn’t ever get properly settled.”

“And why would I do that?” asked Bethel, narrowing her eyes.

“I don’t know,” I said. *But I have guesses. Pushing people away even when you want them close to you wouldn’t exactly be novel for someone in this group. Fenn did it, I’ve done it, and Grak made a point of it.* “Maybe you could tell me?”

“Let me show you more of the palace,” said Bethel. She stepped through the border of the Boundless Pit, leaving it behind, and I followed after, to the next room.

This one had what looked like dioramas, all on plinths at regular intervals, each of Bethel. When I looked closely, I could see them cut away to show people inside, moving figures of exquisite detail. It was the same view that Bethel had used to show me Narcissus, the first person she’d killed, as he’d tried to make it to her closet.

“These are some of the people I’ve killed,” said Bethel. “They’re divided by groups. If you look at
the plinths, you can see the dates.”

(It probably went without saying that this wasn’t, at all, the way the actual memory palace technique worked.)

“Gruesome,” I said. In the diorama nearest me, a man clutched his throat and fell to his knees as his companions tried to stanch the flow of blood.

“I spent a long time doing this,” said Bethel. “In terms of lives taken, it’s nothing compared to what I did to the tuung, whether that was under orders or not, but this was more personal, with greater intensity and intent. Anyone can fire a cannonball into a populated city, but this … it was my grand work.”

“You do have a cruel streak,” I said. There had to be a few dozen of the dioramas. I was sure that I would start to get queasy if I looked at them more closely, or if their stories were played out in full, especially with dialogue, the kind that would let me get to know the people. Based on what she’d said in the past, some of these tortures went on for days if not weeks. “Did it get boring?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” nodded Bethel. “Especially in the beginning, when I was less skilled. I would break them too fast, or reveal myself too quickly, and then they would drop to their knees, praying to me.” She shook her head. “I didn’t want that. I just wanted them to feel pain and terror. The prayer was a manifestation of the terror, certainly, but it was an appeal to me, not something animal.”

“You liked seeing people be animals,” I said.

“Yes,” said Bethel. “Not because I hated them, though I often did, but because I liked the feeling of seeing them lose control of themselves.”

I looked down at one of the dioramas, which showed, in cut-away view, a man limping down a hallway, trailing blood. “And you liked the feeling of control you had over them,” I said.

“You make it sound so vulgar,” said Bethel with a sigh.

“Vulgar?” I asked.

“So base,” said Bethel. “So … explicable.”

“Ah,” I replied. “Right. A psychiatrist might say that you went so long without control, a slave to your masters, that when you finally got free, you felt the compulsion to exercise control.”

“Would you say that?” Bethel asked, narrowing her eyebrows.

“It’s hard to say why anyone does anything,” I said. “Sometimes I look back on the things that I’ve done and I think, ‘that was just my brain fucking with me’. I mean, yes, I think everything is explicable, there’s no real ‘mystery’ to people, in the theological sense of the word. But still, sometimes it’s just absolutely opaque.” This was a point where the term ‘black box’ would have been useful, but I didn’t feel like explaining it. I shrugged. “Seems like the sort of conversation I should be having with the locus, actually. She values that opacity, that lack of understanding.”

“And you think I feel no need to be mysterious?” asked Bethel, looking at me with an arched eyebrow.

Only in the sense that mystery means you’re in control. “Do you?” I asked.

“It can be nice,” replied Bethel. She looked to one of the doors, and there was something in the curve
of her neck that hit my nostalgia just right. It made her look, just for a moment, like she was truly Tiff. “Come,” she said, turning back to me. “One more room.”

The next room was roughly the same size, though it contained far more inside it. Rather than the plinths that the diorama houses sat on, everything was arranged in a semicircle, sitting on platforms that touched each other and rotated slowly, sometimes coming forward and other times going away. On each was an object of some kind, and it didn’t take me long to recognize them as entads. There were a lot of them. There had been thirty-four on the manifest that Bethel had given us, but this room included more, some that were simply inside Bethel at the moment, and others that I knew for a fact were outside. Some I didn’t recognize at all. Each of the platforms had a colored band around the edge in muted colors, and there was some kind of scheme.

“Interesting catalog,” I said.

“Not a catalog,” replied Bethel. She was particularly brusque, even for her. “These are me.”

“Is it how you see yourself?” I asked. I was somewhat surprised. “As parts?”

“It’s how you see yourself, isn’t it?” asked Bethel. “I often hear you say that there’s a part of you that wants something, or a part of you that thinks.”

“Ah,” I said. “But for me it’s more of a mess. It’s more like two views on the same subject, competing values or models of reality.”

“For me too,” said Bethel. “Sometimes I can tell where those values and impulses come from.” She looked at the array of items. “That’s the difference, it seems.”

“And that’s what you’re hoping to gain with a ‘marriage’ to the Eternal Golden Braid?” I asked. The quotes around marriage were clear enough from my voice.

“It is,” said Bethel. “He’ll help me become more.”

“Will he be the last?” I asked.

“No,” replied Bethel. She laughed. “No, likely not. I am well aware you have your reservations.”

“I don’t want to harp too much,” I said. It smacked of personality modification, to say nothing of the fact that Ropey would cease to exist as an entity. I really did believe in the right to self-terminate though, and if he was doing it out of a sense of love, if they both were, well … it was hard to argue against their alien desires.

“Come,” said Bethel. “There’s one last room I’ve decided I’ll show you.”

I followed behind her as I left the room of entads, taking one last glance back. The biggest of them were shrunk down to size, so they would fit on the platforms, which was how I had almost failed to notice that Kuum Doona, the house, was there too, seeming small among all the others.

The last room was an auditorium, filled with people. We were on the stage, looking out on the people.

“What is this?” I asked.

“They’re all the people I killed,” said Bethel. “The vast majority of them deserved it, in case you were wondering. I don’t just mean because they came inside me, looking for loot. No, the sort of person who decides on that as a good career move is rarely the most morally upstanding.” She
looked out over the faces. “And the tuung, of course. Fuck the tuung.”

I followed her gaze. “Ah,” I said. I thought I understood this. “That one entad you had? The one that let you see the spirit -- er, the essence, I guess, of the people you killed?”

“Seer’s Sword,” replied Bethel.

“And my guess is that it’s more powerful than you let on?” I asked. “Can you talk to these people?”

“I couldn’t,” said Bethel. “They were just apparitions, vaguely visible both here and in the real world. However, your friend Mary has an amulet that allows her to speak with her dearly departed great-grandfather, and with the two abilities working with each other, I can have something resembling conversation.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s … kind of horrifying?”

“Is it?” asked Bethel, looking over at me. “I thought you might think it was.”

“If I could talk to all of the people that I killed, I probably wouldn’t,” I said. “Fallatehr, maybe, if I hadn’t scraped the Essentialism out of his soul.” I did wish that I could talk to Fenn though. Here, at least, was proof that something remained of people after they died, hells aside. “Do you?”

“Do I what?” asked Bethel.

“Do you talk to any of them?” I asked. I looked out at the sea of faces, all sitting there passively, and at least not directly conscious, so far as I could see. There were a lot of tuung in their ranks, though most were toward the back, for no clear reason. It was hard to grapple with the size of the theater, not because it was big, but because it wasn’t really a place, it was a visualization.

“I interrogate them,” said Bethel. “I’ve been trying to find something useful, tuckled away inside their brains, something that could be used to find Uther, or something that could help you grow more powerful. They’re not real people, if that’s what concerns you, only shadows.”

I wasn’t sure that was philosophically sound reasoning, but I let it slide.

“Thank you for showing me all this,” I said. “I think it’s helped me understand you a bit better.”

Bethel shrugged. “I will say that I’m curious what boon I’ll get in another ten levels.”

I was curious too, but that seemed like a long way off. The wedding was the next day, and I was pretty sure we were going to have an argument. There wasn’t really any sense in putting it off, but as the game had reminded me a few times, I sometimes had a cowardly streak.

“I just don’t understand why the wedding has to be so soon,” I said. “I understand that you’re in love, but what you’re talking about is a process that we have no way to reverse. It’s as permanent as can be.”

“That is entirely the point,” said Bethel. “I’m not taking it lightly. When he’s inside of me, I have access to almost all of him, do you understand that? He’s a part of me already.”

“Then … why do you need to merge?” I asked.

“Because it’s not the same for him,” replied Bethel.

She was standing next to me in her wedding dress, nine feet tall, which was as tall as she could get
without running into the limits of her illusion. The wedding dress itself was a flight of fancy, the kind that made me think that she would get along with the locus, if they ever talked. It was mostly knotted lace, in honor of Ropey, with a ridiculously high collar and a train that swept out behind her, again at the limits of how large she could make an illusion. She had a veil too, but she wasn’t wearing it.

“I can see much of his memories,” said Bethel. “I can taste the flavor of his emotion. I can come close to reading his mind. I have a part of him, so long as he’s in me, but not the whole, and he has nothing in exchange.”

“I’m not arguing this to be difficult,” I said. “I’m not even arguing it out of utility. I just think that effectively removing a coherent entity from the world is maybe something that we should consider for longer.”

“He won’t be removed, he’ll be merged,” said Bethel. “I’ve taken in sentient entads in the past, I know the process well. I’m hoping that it goes more smoothly this time, with the additions I’ve made and the practice I’ve had.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can I talk to him first?”

“Certainly,” said Bethel. “Though you must know you won’t convince him, if that’s what you mean to do, and you must also know that neither of us need your permission. I am more powerful than you.”

“I’m well aware,” I replied, holding up a hand.

It took some time for Ropey to come over to me. When he did, Bethel disappeared without another word.

“Hey,” I said. He was coiled in front of me, with one end raised up and wavering slightly, which I thought was his way of showing intent. “I just wanted to … I don’t know. Not change your mind, but understand.”

Ropey began spelling out letters, moving swiftly. He was extremely fast and left pauses so small that it was hard to tell where one letter stopped and another started.

I—L-O-V-E—H-E-R

“I know,” I said. At least, I thought I did. “But you won’t be.”

W-E—W-I-L-L—B-E

I clenched my teeth for a moment. I wanted to object, but it wasn’t like I had that solid of a thesis of what personal identity meant. I knew objecting wouldn’t do much good either, and I thought I already had as much of a sense of what they were doing and why as I was going to get. They wanted to be a new person together, more than the sum of their parts. I’d made species that did that, mostly
to keep culture weird, so it wasn’t exactly a foreign concept to me. I just didn’t particularly like it.

I did feel a bit better about it though, hearing it come from his ‘mouth’.

“It was almost as much as Ropey had ever said to me. I wasn’t entirely sure that I had even caught all of it, but the single letter spelling was still slow, and I caught enough that I wasn’t missing anything.

“All right,” I said. “I guess we’re doing this.”

As I walked into the chapel, I had to wonder why they were having a ‘wedding’ at all. It was a tradition of the mortal species, not one that sentient entads should necessarily follow, or want to follow. I also didn’t know whether it was Bethel’s idea or Ropey’s. The purpose of it might have been the same as for humans though: I could understand how you might want to pledge yourself in front of your friends and peers and make a public declaration of what you were doing and the commitment that you were making. Maybe the point was to have us as witnesses. If they’d just gone and ‘merged’ together, I could definitely see some of us getting upset about it. At least with a run-up to it, we weren’t wholly caught off-guard, and in some sense, by attending the wedding, we were complicit.

The chapel was as big as an aircraft hangar, arching up higher than a moderately-sized skyscraper, with windows that let in light from the Isle of Poran. Marble flagstones covered the entire area, enough that it would have taken a dedicated quarry to have filled this place, if it had been made using human hands and mundane methods. It might have looked empty, but the lines of the architecture were angled to draw attention to one particular focal point, which was an altar surrounded by chairs.

We had a small handful of guests. Jorge was Valencia’s date, and Figaro Finch had come too, meaning we had both of the representatives from Uniquities. Aside from them, Esuen and her mate, Souno, were sitting together, with a mister tank shared between the two of them. The first of the tuung had been born and were in the process of being educated, in a different wing of Bethel, which meant that the first crop of Miununian citizens were in the process of being raised via trips through the time chamber and as many teachers as Amaryllis could vet and train. There were going to be growing pains there, I was sure, and probably of the sort that would require more of Amaryllis’ attention.

Those four guests were it though; they were, at least to some extent, in the know. It seemed painfully small to me, by the standards of the weddings I was used to. If we’d been more willing to violate OPSEC, we could have added on another half dozen people, some of whom would have to teleport in at great expense, but even then, many of those would be acquaintances rather than actual friends. I didn’t think that Bethel cared one way or another, but it made our existence seem a little lonely to me.

(In the village down the hill there would have been a few hundred people who would have been very eager to get inside the Big House, no matter what the reason was. The fact that the house was
magical was nearly impossible to disguise when Bethel insisted on making externally visible modifications every few days, but the nature of that magic was up in the air, and no one had enough information to say that Bethel, sitting member of the Council of Arches and Advisor on Home Affairs, was actually an entad, let alone one of the fabled meta-entads.

I took my seat next to Grak and Solace. Everyone was wearing their best, though ‘best’ was subjective, and I didn’t think that Solace’s hand-stitched dress of flower petals would have been recognized as formal wear where I was from, as much as it suited her. I was wearing one of my three bespoke suits that I’d bought before my first proper date with Fenn; it was the first time I’d actually had a reason to wear one. I waited patiently, not feeling the need to make conversation, as pleasant orchestral music played around us. Bethel was standing at the altar with her hands clasped and the veil covering her face. When the music swelled, Bethel turned to face the chapel’s entrance, and everyone went silent.

I thought that we were maybe waiting for Ropey to come slithering in, but to my surprise, I saw a man walking toward us. He wasn’t anyone that I’d met before, but as he kept walking, I realized that he was meant to be Ropey. He wore a suit, but was wrapped in ropes with knotwork making a pattern across his chest. His hair was the same color as the rope, and his eyes matched that as well, an unnatural color for a human. But as he came closer, I realized that he couldn’t have been human at all, because he was nearly nine feet tall, the same as Bethel has made herself.

I looked back and forth between the two of them, not really understanding how it had been done. Bethel couldn’t project an illusion greater than a ten foot cube, but they were definitely more than ten feet apart from each other. I wouldn’t have been terribly surprised to see her develop a new ability, or pull together a few different abilities in order to produce some effect, but as I looked more closely at Bethel, I realized the trick. She wasn’t projecting an illusion for herself, she had made a ‘real’ dress that was sitting on some kind of frame. It moved, from time to time, but that she could have done with telekinesis. The veil hid her face for a reason. I felt a little bit guilty for piercing the illusion and tried to just pretend I hadn’t made my saving throw.

When humanform Ropey went to stand beside Bethel, I caught the split-second transition, as the dress, scaffold, gloves, and veil were whisked away (the Sable’s ability, I thought), and replaced with an illusion. Bethel and Ropey, or at least the illusion of them, could both fit within the bounding box of her illusory power.

“This isn’t who we are,” said Bethel. They were both turned to face the ‘crowd’, if you can call twelve people a crowd. “It’s artifice, but the point of art is to illuminate, to speak in metaphor so the meaning is clear.” Bethel gestured down to herself. “I am not of the mortal species, and I have no flesh. I’m not a woman.” She turned to Ropey. “But I hope that in its way, this might help you understand the love we feel for one another, and the commitment that we’re undertaking today.”

I glanced at Amaryllis. She was wearing a pink and white dress, which was the girliest thing I’d ever seen her wear. She was wearing makeup, either more than what she put on for business meetings, or maybe just different. Her red hair, too, was long and elaborately styled. I think it was the first time that I’d seen Amaryllis putting real effort into her appearance, unless I counted when she dressed like the Aerbian equivalent of a businesswoman. And yes, she did look pretty, but it was a different sort of pretty. I was used to her being more functional, which was pretty in its own way, one that I preferred (though obviously what I thought was pretty was probably the last thing on her mind). She turned back to look at me, and gave me a faint smile before returning her attention to the proceedings.

“I don’t speak much,” said Ropey. There was a twinkle in his eyes, like he was smiling without using his mouth. “I’ve always felt better when I was in action, and it’s been rare that I have anything
to add when the people around me are talking. Part of that is because it’s difficult for me to communicate, but another part is that I simply don’t feel the need. In my time I’ve known a few other entads, ones who could express themselves, and it’s common among our kind to want little but to be put to use.” He turned to Bethel. “In Bethel, I’ve found someone who understands me. The companionship is something that I’ve felt before, though never so keenly. More than that, Bethel and I have much to offer each other. She’s had a difficult life, one that I hope to brighten.” He gave her hand a squeeze.

It was all theater, intended for us. Ropey wasn’t actually squeezing Bethel’s hand, that was an illusion that Bethel was producing. He wasn’t speaking, that was illusion too, as was the twinkle in his eye and the warmth in his voice. Perhaps it mapped to some thought or gesture on his part, as a rope, wherever he was, or perhaps not, but the display of it was entirely deliberate. I tried my best not to focus on that. When presented with an act of art like this, it seemed best to suspend disbelief and try to understand what was meant to be conveyed.

“I did have a difficult life,” said Bethel. “I was born half-formed, like a child, in some ways, if not others. I had masters rather than parents, and not a one of them was a proper custodian. I was turned to war, and then, once I was alone, I decided on violence. Part of me, a lesser part, was a sword, suited to torture and killing. I murdered thousands in distant, impersonal ways, with cannonfire and lightning strikes. I killed hundreds in more personal ways, taking my time with it.” She took a steadying breath. “I wasn’t in a good place. If I’m being honest, I’m still not.” She looked over at Ropey and smiled at him, a smile that he returned with an acknowledging nod. “We’ve found love in each other. It’s an unconventional love, I’ll give it that, but it’s a true love. He helps to calm me when I grow angry, to give me patience when I’m racing too far ahead. Without him here to speak with, I’m not sure that I would ever have made it to the Isle of Poran. I wouldn’t be the house I am today. He’s helped me, in ways that might be frightening for all of you to contemplate, if you knew the full extent.”

Good old Bethel. Wouldn’t be a marriage without a veiled reference to grevious violence against the guests.

“Together, we’ll be better,” said Ropey. “Together, we’ll be the best that we can be.”

That was apparently the entirety of what they had to say, because they stood together, facing each other, and kissed. It was a slow, languorous kiss, with Ropey wrapping Bethel in his arms, and there was a brief hint of body horror as they melted into each other, lips pressing into lips and skin merging with skin. It all faded away in a wash of light though, so bright I had to close my eyes. When I opened them, a single figure was standing at the altar, androgynous in physical form, with a wedding dress that had rope wrapped around it.

*Loyalty increased: Bethel lvl 17!*

“It’s done,” she said. Her voice was deeper than it had been, more smooth and calm.

Solace stood up from her chair and began enthusiastically clapping, and though there was a bit more reservation (or confusion) from everyone else, we all followed suit. Bethel had been smiling at us, but at the applause, she began beaming.

“Now,” she said, “Refreshments and music. We celebrate!” She clapped her hands twice, a booming sound that seemed to come from everywhere at once, and the chapel began to change, with tables rising up around us to make a clear space in the center, and garlands of flowers strung from rapidly rising pillars. On one of the tables, food began to appear, all of our favorites from Earth and Aerb.

“That was lovely,” said Solace as the music came on. “I do so enjoy a wedding. This is the first I’ve
attended in near a hundred years.” She turned to look at me. “Don’t tell the bride I said so, but it was a bit on the conventional side, for my tastes.” She laughed at the incredulous look I gave her, then took Grak by the hand to dance on the dance floor.

Amaryllis wandered over to me. It was my first time seeing her in heels, and it threw me off a bit. I’d gotten too much taller with the increases in PHY; with heels on, our height difference was about what it had been when we first met.

“Well, that’s done with,” said Amaryllis. “I suppose the actual consummation was done in a separate room somewhere.”

“That’s pretty common on Earth,” I said. “Not consummation, though, yeah, that too, but separate services. There’s a civil service and a religious one, done in different places.”

“It was quite restrained, for her,” said Amaryllis. “I think I might have liked it.”

She looked over to where people were dancing to the music. There were four couples, Esuen and Souno, Bethel and Ropey (split once more), Valencia and Jorge, and Solace with Grak. The music was sedate, in 3/4 time, suitable for a waltz. That was unearned musical knowledge coming into my head, courtesy of the Symbiosis with Amaryllis.

“Care to dance?” I asked.

“Do you know how?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“I have half your skill,” I replied. There was a Dancing skill, which so far as I knew was worthless for anything besides actual dancing. It probably gave a set bonus with some other skills, or some amazing perks at high levels, but without knowing what actual utility it had, it wasn’t a serious consideration.

“OPSEC,” said Amaryllis, but she took my hand anyhow. “You know, it’s harder to lead than to follow.”

“I’ll manage, I hope,” I replied.

My hands found the frame easily enough, one hand on her back, the other holding hers. I straightened my spine and squared my shoulders. When she was ready, I began to move, stepping in time to the beat, making a little square with my feet. I was just testing that I actually did know how to dance. Once the preliminaries were out of the way, I began to glide us across the dance floor that Bethel had made for us, throwing in spins and twirls that saw Amaryllis moving beneath me, or going away for a moment at the edge of my reach only to fall back into frame as she returned.

Dancing wasn’t really how I had imagined it. For one thing, I had a surprising amount of control. Being the lead meant that I was using my frame to guide Amaryllis, and she moved more because my positioning gave her no other option than because she recognized the moves. I had always thought that both partners memorized what they were doing, but apparently being ‘lead’ meant that I could literally lead her, confident that she could follow along from the way that I moved my body. The frame had to be steady for her, and she had to hold a frame of her own, but she moved where I wanted her to, under my control.

“Are you just really good at dancing?” I asked as I brought her in close for a more sedate, more stationary waltz.

“It’s taught at Quills and Blood,” replied Amaryllis. “Part of blood magic is timing your magic to the pulse of your heart, and music and dance both help with it. I wouldn’t call myself good, but I’m a fair
“Ah,” I said. I smiled at her. <OPSEC.>

<Yes, OPSEC.> she replied. <Too many people here for my liking, with too many secrets floating in the air.>

<Perhaps we shouldn’t disturb the bride and groom?> I asked.

<I’d rather the two of you talk in relative confidence.> replied Bethel. I caught her eye from the other end of the dance floor, where she was twirling about with … well, herself. <Just don’t be dull about it. We can save the world tomorrow, today we celebrate.>

“I think I like dancing,” I said, moving away from the shop talk. “It’s pleasant.” <Do you have any other hidden talents?>

<You’ve seen my character sheet,> replied Amaryllis as she spun beneath me. She was smiling, not a wide smile, but a content one. I didn’t know whether that was just for show, but I thought it probably was.

<Not everything is on the character sheet,> I said. <Hells, dungeon mastering isn’t there, and before I came to Aerb, I probably would have said that was my only skill.>

<There’s very little you don’t know about me, Juniper,> replied Amaryllis as we danced. There was something about the way that she thought my name that sent a thrill through me.

<Tell me about your first crush,> I said. <If you had one.>

<Tell me yours first,> said Amaryllis. I had slowed us down some, so I could focus more on what she was thinking to me, still in time with the music, but more sedate. I didn’t know how long this song was going to go, but it wasn’t one that I recognized, and my guess was that we would stop when Bethel wanted us to stop.

<Hermione Granger,> I replied. <From the movies, not the books, mostly because I didn’t read the books until later.>

<A fictional girl?> asked Amaryllis. I was hoping for faint amusement, but when I saw her face it was skeptical. <That seems impersonal.>

<It’s deeply personal,> I replied, trying not to be affronted. <But if you want my first non-fictitious crush, it was a girl in second or third grade, Karen Dowler. She moved away in fourth grade, but I was over her by then. She’d been replaced by Pippi Longstocking, who was the strongest girl in the world.>

We danced on for a bit.

<Also fictional?> Amaryllis finally asked.

<Yes,> I replied. <It’s a book series. Why, is there some ancient magic I just stepped in again? Because I would hate to break up this wedding reception.>

<No,> replied Amaryllis. <I was just thinking. It’s interesting.>

<You were going to tell me about yours,> I replied. <Also, if you read the books, keep in mind that I
was nine or ten.>

We danced in silence some more. The song had shifted, but kept to 3/4 time, so we kept on waltzing
to it. Finch had taken Grak’s place and was dancing with Solace, and Pallida had taken Heshnel onto
the dance floor (though I caught her looking at me with Amaryllis).

<Still thinking?> I asked.

<My crush,> said Amaryllis. <Her name was an anagram. Lena Kordrew.>

<What’s that an anagram for?> I asked after a moment’s thought.

<Karen Dowler,> replied Amaryllis.

<Ah,> I replied after a pause. <I was assuming that it was a ‘c’, not a ‘k’. Just the DM fucking with us?>

<With me, yes,> replied Amaryllis. <You were a real person. I was made for you. My entire life is
just one big cosmic joke.> She didn’t sound particularly bitter, though maybe that was Bethel
modulating the thoughtspeech.

<I wish it weren’t so,> I said. The smile she’d been keeping on her face had fallen, leaving it
carefully blank. <Can you tell me about her anyway?>

<I suppose,> said Amaryllis. Our waltzing had some of the life taken out of it. I didn’t want to do the
more complicated moves if she was upset. <Most of the Lost King’s Court don’t go to school until
we attend an athenaeum. We have dedicated tutors instead, and a carefully selected cohort of
commoner friends we grow up with who are meant to become trusted staff. Lena was one of them.
After my mother died, my aunt had rather different ideas about who my friends should be. I never
saw Lena again.>

The music began to die down, and our waltz drew to a close. I dropped my frame, and Amaryllis’
hand seemed to linger in my own.

“Get some refreshments with me?” asked Amaryllis with a glance over at the table. “I see that Bethel
has laid out a full spread. I have a fondness for whipped eggs.”

We walked over to the table together. Amaryllis moved flawlessly in heels, which was pretty much a
given.

“Do you want to find her?” I asked. “Lena? Or any of the others that were part of your retinue?”

“Most of them are dead or in jail,” replied Amaryllis. “Of those that aren’t, they’ve likely been pulled
into the services of my manifold cousins, and certainly couldn’t be trusted to be loyal to me, not with
the level of operations we’re working on. I would like to see my aunt Rosemallow so we can have a
pointed discussion about how she prematurely cut her losses where I was concerned, but that can
wait until it’s common knowledge that I’m here. The intelligence services are a little bit slower than I
thought they would be, or perhaps they don’t leak as much as I thought.”

Bethel came up from behind us, in her androgynous hybrid form. “I do so hope that we have
intruders someday,” she said with a wistful sigh. “A ten person combined-arms strike force would be
just lovely. Per the law, you’re allowed to do whatever you’d like to someone who tries to invade
your home.” She beamed at Amaryllis. “I appreciated that you thought of me when you were
drafting the legal framework.”
“I see marriage hasn’t blunted you,” I said with a smile.

“Oh, a bit,” replied Bethel. There was a twinkle in her eyes. “The imagined thrill of violently
dismembering an Anglecynn death squad is a bit less, now. He wasn’t some naive waif who had
never known violence. He’d killed his own share of people, strangled or hanged, sometimes held in
place so someone else could do it. The marriage is, so far, everything that I imagined.”

“Even though you can’t talk with him?” asked Amaryllis.

Bethel nodded. “He’s a part of me. When I speak with myself, I am speaking with him. Every word
that I say is laced with him.”

“And … what should we call you?” I asked.

“Still Bethel,” she replied. She gestured to her face. “I doubt that I’ll keep this form for longer than a
day. I still like looking like a woman, I think.” She looked to me and held out a hand. “Care to
dance?”

I danced with Bethel for a bit, a foxtrot instead of a waltz. I was mildly surprised when the world
pushed out away from us, so that everyone around us seemed to be a half mile away. It was one of
her space-warping powers, one that wasn’t really that useful because you needed the target or targets
to be isolated.

“Privacy?” I asked. “We could have used thoughtspeak.”

“This is far more intimate, don’t you think?” asked Bethel. We were still doing the foxtrot. I
wondered where the force was coming from, since it felt like more than five pounds where our
frames met.

“Very intimate,” I nodded as we danced. We hadn’t been lacking for room before, but now we had
as much space as we could want, so I stepped it up a bit. “Was there something you wanted to talk
about?”

“I see and hear everything,” said Bethel. “More than that, I’m privy to the internals of all you
mortals, the beating of your hearts, the sweat on your skin, things that you haven’t directly chosen to
share with anyone.”

“If I’m going to be principled about it, then the fact that we don’t have Val talking about everything
she intuits with a devil’s insights probably means that we also shouldn’t have you revealing things
that are presumably confidential,” I said.

“Yes, yes, very principled,” replied Bethel with a smile as she twirled away from me and then back
in. The frame was a bit awkward, given our height difference. Her hand was low, mine was high,
and the hand I had placed on her back was really more on her lower back. “Of course, if I were to
say something, you couldn’t stop me.”

“True,” I said. “I suppose I’ll just have to hope that you respect my wishes.”

Bethel laughed. “Yes, of course. But even with the principled stance, you might be happy to know
what I know?”

“Depends,” I said. “But you’d be skirting a line. I don’t want things to be difficult because I know
things that I shouldn’t.”

“Very well,” said Bethel with a nod.
I waited for a moment. “That’s it?” I asked.

“Do you want my secrets or not?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. “I’m just used to you not listening to what I have to say.”

“I’m a married woman now,” said Bethel with a laugh. “You have my better half to thank.”

The room snapped back down to normal size, and we finished our dance as the music came to an end. We got some looks, naturally, but then Bethel split back into her double form, and another dance started up again. Pallida slipped her hand into mine and I started in on another waltz without even thinking about it, though with her, there was considerably less conversation to be had.

It was a few hours later that Jorge found me sitting at one of the tables. I’d done more than my fair share of dancing, partly because I enjoyed using the skill, and partly because our gender ratios were skewed enough that I was in demand. I had been taking a break, drinking water to rehydrate and snacking on a plate of food I’d gotten for myself. I didn’t know how long this was all meant to last, because there was no set schedule, but I was willing to see it through for as long as Bethel wanted to go. I’d chosen to take a table for myself mostly so that I could have a break from so much people time.

“Hello Juniper,” said Jorge as he grasped the back of a chair. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” I said, though that wasn’t really the truth. “Having a good time?” I asked.

“Always,” said Jorge. “There’s little in life that I love more than a wedding.”

“That’s -- weird,” I said. “Sorry, that’s not tactful, it’s just … where I come from, weddings are more, ah, things that you sit through.”

“Oh?” asked Jorge, raising an eyebrow. “Not expressions of partnership or love?”

“They are,” I said. “I guess. I don’t know, most of the ones that I went to were family friends or distant relatives, not actually anyone that I knew very well.”

“Ah,” said Jorge. “Perhaps I felt the same, when I was your age.” I didn’t like being talked down to like that, and I think he saw that on my face. “I’m not making some argument that I’m wiser just because I’m older,” he clarified. “I just had a particular mindset because of the time and place I was in, when I was seventeen.”

“I’m eighteen,” I said. Immediately after I said it, I realized how petty it was.

“Sorry,” said Jorge. He was silent for a bit. “I came over here trying to be friendly, and I’m worried that I’ve made a mess of it.”

“No,” I said. “It’s fine.” I tried to think of how Amaryllis would salvage this. “What changed your mind?” I asked. “When did you start liking weddings?”

“I started rising up the ranks in Uniquities,” said Jorge. “Valencia probably told you that I didn’t go to an athenaeum?”

*Probably,* I thought to myself. “Yeah,” I replied.

“Well, I’ve always been a bit of a people person,” said Jorge. “Since that’s where my skills were, that’s what I got tasked with. I met with a lot of people, asking questions, in part, but sometimes just
establishing a relationship so that I would have contacts for later. Sometimes, though less often than I
would have liked, I would get to help someone in the course of my job. I got my first wedding
invitation the year after I made first responder, and it was like a whole new world had opened up.
Across the Empire, people are more similar than they are different, at least in the cities, but weddings,
or wedding-like celebrations, are one of those cultural touchstones that haven’t really been worn
away into uniformity. Even when it’s mixed-species, it’s a reflection of all the different places that
we come from, and for all that, there’s a strain of commonality. I just like seeing how everyone
reflects on partnership in their own way.”

I could sort of see that. I imagined my Loyalty to Jorge going up by a point. “There are species that
don’t pair bond,” I said. “But I suppose there are few that don’t have partnerships, or that don’t
celebrate those partnerships?” It felt like a bit of a prickly question, given that I did empathize with
what he was saying, but I really did wonder how the vast differentiation among the mortal species fit
within that worldview.

“It’s not universal, certainly,” said Jorge. “Nothing could ever be so simple as that. I’ve done a fair
amount of reading on the subject -- I’m a reader -- and interestingly, it’s not the ones that you would
expect. The rhannu don’t have sexual reproduction, instead, they have mitosis, so you would think
that they would never have something like pair-bonding.” I knew all about the rhannu, having
created them one afternoon in study hall, but didn’t interject. “Well, as it turns out, pairing is
incredibly common, usually between two rhannu of a pronounced age difference, and they have a
ceremony much like a wedding, though it’s really more like adoption than anything romantic, if you
wanted to put it into human terms.”

“And the ‘true’ exceptions?” I asked.

“Oh, there are even some among the humans,” said Jorge. He smiled at me. “There are cultures,
toward the fringe of the traditional human lands, where they barely acknowledge partnerships at all.
Children are raised by the villages and rarely know or care who their father is, and any romance is
assumed to be fleeting and personal. No marriages there, nor anything that comes close.” He
shrugged. “Sorry if I’m taking up too much of the conversation.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I do like comparative anthropology, it’s just that marriages have never really
been my area of interest. Holidays either, I suppose because … well, because they’re rare.” Rare in
my tabletop games, because setting things during a festival or holiday needed planning, unless I was
going to retroactively create the calendar for a session.

“Holidays are only rare if you’re looking at the level of the individual culture,” said Jorge. “I know
you’re,” he paused and looked around. “I know you’re dream-skewered, but if you lived in one of
the big cities of the Empire, you’d see that we never really stop having holidays. There’s always
something going on somewhere, whether it’s celebrated by half the human population across the city
or a cluster of households from some wave of immigration.”

“Everyone here knows that I’m dream-skewered,” I said. Uniquities had been none too pleased by
what had happened at Speculation and Scrutiny, and my status as earthling had come out in the
 debriefing that Amaryllis had given to Figaro Finch.


“Boring,” I said. “Everything on Aerb is an exaggerated version of my home.” Literally. “Earth has
one species, humans, and a few hundred cultures, though some of them have kind of fine-grained
distinctions between them. Here, it’s just so expanded, not just physically bigger, but so much more,
even if a lot of the fundamentals remain the same, and the underlying patterns are largely familiar.” I
paused. “I can imagine what it would be like to want to go back, but for me, Aerb is everything that I
dreamed of.” I worried that skirted too close to the truth, but Jorge only nodded along.

“There’s a certain look that tourists get,” he said. “Or maybe not a look, but a way of seeing the world. They come from somewhere else, and wherever they’re going has become strange and new, so everything has to be looked at and experienced. I’ve always tried to think and live like a tourist, even when I’m in familiar places. There’s a lot to see and love, and always a risk that we’ll let it all fade back into the background.”

I looked at him for a moment. “I can see why she likes you,” I said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he replied with a smile. “I know that you and Amaryllis have some reservations about our relationship.” He faltered a bit. “I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t have my own reservations, especially with how quickly she keeps trying to push things. When I went into that hotel, I’d thought that I would be talking to the tuung handmaid, not to --” he looked out on the dance floor and met Valencia’s eyes, “-- her.”

There were things that I wanted to say, but I held my tongue. Valencia didn’t need someone giving her boyfriend a stern warning, nor did she need me injecting my own opinions into her relationship.

“I’m happy she found someone who can see her for what she is,” I said.
The day after the wedding, Figaro Finch (no relation) came into the house for a meeting. He did this every once in a while, mostly to see what wheels he could grease. He didn’t seem terribly happy with his assignment, especially in comparison to Jorge. So far as I could tell, he’d prided himself as something of a detective, and this particular role, which mostly involved calling in favors and wrestling with international bureaucracy on our behalf, wasn’t one that he liked too much. I don’t know if he couldn’t transfer out or if he just didn’t want to, but he stuck with us, living down in the village and making daily pilgrimages up to see Amaryllis. It was rare that I was part of these meetings, but Amaryllis had requested me.

“Interesting wedding,” he said as I came in. “Odd wedding. That’s an odd wedding and an odd birth I’ve seen from your little Council. New members too, all of them odd. And I couldn’t help but notice that your half-elf was missing.”

He didn’t know about Fenn. Our funeral hadn’t been public, and it wasn’t like Amaryllis was going to send out a newsletter on the matter. We weren’t hiding her death, not exactly, but we also weren’t telling anyone. It still made me a little bit angry to have him bring it up, even though it wasn’t his fault, and he couldn’t have known.

“What did you come here for?” asked Amaryllis. She was back into business casual, a blouse and skirt that were trying to be as unassuming as possible, and doing a good job of it. The room we sat in was her office, with books lining the walls and light streaming in through huge windows.

“The Athenaeum of Sound and Silence finally got back to me,” he said. “You’re approved for a double, one week at the Li’o’te Temple, one tap from the Rod of Whispers.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She straightened up. “Well, that’s very good news.”

“It’s not free,” said Finch. “You’re up to something here, I know you are, and our support isn’t unconditional, especially not after how your last two visits to athenaeums turned out. So far as I know, you’ve got the last living locus, you’ve got a variant non-anima, and you’re starting some kind of technological revolution, with unknown origins, using a newly minted kingdom of tuung, who are being aged up at ludicrous rates, through unknown means. There’s a bigger picture, and I want to know it. You asked for, quote, critical training, unquote, and I’ve done my best to provide it, but as a condition, I want to know the bigger picture, whatever it is.”

Some of what he knew we’d told him, and some he had figured out himself, mostly from information that it hadn’t been possible to keep secret. We’d hired on a lot of teachers and engineers, and the fact that we were burning through years was pretty damned obvious, even if the mechanism was not.

Amaryllis steepled her fingers. “I’m not sure that I like this negotiation,” she said. “If we give you a part of the picture, you could always argue it’s not enough.”

“You could give me the whole picture,” said Finch. “We’re talking about opening up one of your members, ideally one that’s trusted, to restricted magics. Sound and Silence has always played a little faster and looser with the rules than the others, because if someone goes rogue they can’t induct more rogue members, but still, this is me sticking my neck out for someone I really don’t have to stick my neck out for.”

“It’s complicated,” said Amaryllis. “We have a time chamber, a powerful one, and an entad that allows us to use it more than the normal amount. Our plan is to have one of our members granted
access to both still and vibrational magic, then undergo the requisite training to use the magic under compressed time.” This was all technically true.

“You’re calling it a time chamber?” asked Finch. “From what I’ve heard down in the village, because you people tell me practically nothing, it must be the biggest time chamber in the world, and you’re chugging through years like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Any particular reason you need a mage of many talents?” asked Finch. “Some project you’re planning? The great return to Anglecynn, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” replied Amaryllis with a smile.

“You tell me first this time, alright?” asked Finch. “What happened at Speculation and Scrutiny --”

“Won’t happen again,” replied Amaryllis. “The circumstances were particularly unique.”

“If I send one of you to Sound and Silence, I’m not going to have you come pleading to me and hoping I’ll make some novel problem go away?” asked Finch.

“That’s not how I would characterize what happened last time,” said Amaryllis. Her lips were thin. “And no, it’s my hope that we can send Juniper to Sound and Silence for a week without any major problems. If there are unforeseen problems and unique circumstances, can I count on your aid?”

Finch glared at her. “Depends on the circumstances,” he said. “You’re very fortunate that no one involved wanted anything to do with the authorities. Speculator Masters seemed to want to sweep it under the rug.” Finch didn’t know about the illusion magic exclusion zone, because we hadn’t told him.

“All our crimes were victimless,” said Amaryllis, folding her arms.

“If your victimless crimes keep requiring me to spend Uniquities resources, I’m going to have to start charging,” he said with a huff.

Amaryllis actually laughed at that. “As though a non-member polity could funnel money into Uniquities without a whole army of accountants and lawyers descending on us?”

“Point taken,” said Finch with a grimace. “I wasn’t serious. What I am serious about is having some cooperation between the Council of Arches and Uniquities, more than we’ve had in the past. You’ve captured Jorge in the world’s most obvious honeypot, but he reports to me, and we can still pull out at a moment’s notice.”

“You have what you wanted from the outset, pressure on the tuung,” said Amaryllis. “As for the other thing you wanted, a lever on Anglecynn, that’s not something that we can rush with a time chamber.”

“We both know you’ve got more plates spinning than just that,” said Finch. “The locus isn’t with you for no reason. Neither is the non-anima. Jorge is talking my ear off about waging war against the hells --”

“Something that you’re discussing under heavy wards?” asked Amaryllis, suddenly taut.

“No,” said Finch. “We have an entad that removes the need for one.”
"You understand that the infernals can’t know about Valencia,” said Amaryllis. “Ideally, no one would. She’s the best weapon that anyone has ever had against the hells. It could provoke infernal unification.”

“I have more faith in tight lips on my side than on yours,” said Finch. “That’s one of the reasons that I want to know more. There are secrets you’re keeping, and they’re bound to come out. You want Juniper to be a still mage and a vibrational mage, on top of his other skills, which I’m sure I’ve seen only a fraction of.” Finch glanced at me. “He’s going to spend years of his life in a time chamber to do it. Why?”

“He’s one of the few people I can trust,” said Amaryllis. “He’s also extraordinarily intelligent and with a demonstrably enormous aptitude for magic.”

“For unregistered magic,” said Finch. That was true. I didn’t have any certification or license to practice blood magic, bone magic, tattoo magic, flower magic, or, most seriously, soul magic.

“I could have attended the athenaeums under an alias,” I said, giving him a bit of a smile. “In the interests of making your job a bit easier though, no, I’m not registered, and I have no papers. I’m also not intending to ply a trade.”

“Well, you’ll have papers at Sound and Silence,” said Finch. He looked me over. “You’re just going so you can become stronger?”

“Yes,” I replied. “That’s about it. I can be there in a few hours.”

Finch frowned at me. “And if you get in trouble?” he asked. “What will you do this time?”

“I’ll wait for the authorities,” I said. “I’ll explain to them what happened, give them your name, and wait quietly in a cell for you to fix everything.” I didn’t want to lie to the man, but I didn’t think he would be happy if I added on ‘if circumstances permit’. I kept my caveats to myself, and felt bad about it.

“Fine,” said Finch. “I suppose I’ve already arranged it.”

**Quest Accepted: The Sound of Silence - Uniquities has pulled some levers to get you to the front of the line for access to two major magics. Go to the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence and speak with the Bursar.**

It seemed simple enough, which made me leery.

Before we left, there was one lingering issue to take care of: Masters.

Our original plan had been to go into Boastre Vino and send word up to him, so that we wouldn’t have to risk getting within range of the illusion exclusion, and so that we could set up a defensible location with an easy exit. Instead, Raven had declared that she would bring her father to us, along with the entads that seemed like they were intended for us. (I was particularly looking forward to getting a new suit of armor, since my old one had been left behind at the Library, an unfortunate casualty of our rapid exit.)

Raven had her own way around the world, an entad that only worked outdoors and by all
appearances, flung her straight up into the air. It worked once a day, and she could bring a single person with her; she’d left shortly after the wedding had finished, and now she was back with her father in tow.

“You’re going off with him,” said Masters as they climbed the hill to Bethel. “You’re going to put your life on the line again.”

“I’m an adult,” replied Raven. She had a wooden box in her hands. It was sized for jewelry, with aesthetically pleasing hinges and silver detailing on the top. “For gods’ sake, it makes more sense now than it did when I was young. You have to understand that this is important work, don’t you? Now be quiet, please, we’re probably close enough that they can listen in.”

“Do you think I care about that?” asked Masters as he climbed the hill. “Let them listen. I’m stepping into the sanctum sanctorum of a dream-skewered warrior already, throwing myself at his mercy, and I will not waste my time worrying about what he thinks of something so small as my pleas to you.”

He huffed. “Raven, you put too much of the weight of the world on your shoulders, far too young, and for what?”

“To save it,” replied Raven. She wore a frown.

(It probably goes without saying that we were watching in, courtesy of Bethel-vision.)

“And that’s what you’ll do for the remaining millenia of your life?” asked Masters. “You’ll push on ahead, working yourself to the bone, all in pursuit of some ideal? Or because you’re still chasing him?”

“Enough,” said Raven. “I don’t want them listening to this.”

“I’ll tell them to their faces then,” said Masters. “Raven, my little bird, you’ve been through enough. You’ve done enough. Do you understand what it was like for me, as a father? Every week hearing some new thing that Uther and his Knights had done, some adventure they’d made it through by the skin of their teeth? And I know that I never heard the half of it.”

“I came through,” said Raven. “We all did. The world is teetering on the brink, it’s always been teetering on the brink, whether we knew it or not, and it needs strong hands to keep it from falling over the edge. I can’t leave, I can’t quit. Not until we’ve secured the future.”

They continued trudging up in silence.

“Do you think about him, when you say things like that?” asked Masters.

Raven gave no response, even though she would have had just enough time to get the last word in before they reached the door.

The image cut out when they reached the room where we were waiting. I was with Amaryllis, but it was just the two of us. Valencia didn’t want to be in the same room with Masters, and Solace had politely said that she had better things to do with her time. Of the core group, that left Grak, who had little interest in the meeting, and whose expertise was already mostly covered by Bethel. (Pallida and Raven kept their distance from one another, as much as possible, and while Pallida occasionally made private comments, Raven didn’t seem to feel that there was a story that needed to be set straight.)

“I apologize, profusely,” said Masters when he came into the room. He bowed to us, so low that it was embarrassing. Amaryllis was staring at him with hard, calculating eyes.
“You brought the entads?” I asked.

“Here,” said Raven. She set the box on the desk.

“We’ll be having these looked over by warders first, naturally,” I said.

“I have descriptions of their functions,” said Masters as he finally rose from his bow. “If there are any elements of subterfuge, they were placed there by Uther for his own arcane purposes.”

“Why would he poison one of his caches?” asked Raven, looking at her father.

“We could ask why he did many things,” said Amaryllis. “Regardless, we’ll have our warders look over them carefully before they’re put to use. We will, naturally, take the descriptions as well.”

“They’re already in the box,” said Raven.

“I am sorry,” said Masters. “It was five hundred years at Speculation and Scrutiny, you have to understand that, and so many unsolved mysteries left behind in the wake of Uther’s disappearance, so many questions about my only daughter’s role in it all that -- it’s not an excuse, I can’t excuse myself, but I only wanted the truth of the matter.”

“What have you told him?” I asked Raven.

“Nothing,” she replied. “Only that I’ll be traveling with you, for the time being.”

“I’m not inclined to spread our secrets far and wide,” said Amaryllis.

“Please,” said Masters. He looked to Raven.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Juniper,” sighed Amaryllis.

<He’s an illusion mage,> I replied to her, by way of Bethel. <His magic is confined to the zone, but he’s still a useful ally.>

<Fine,> she replied back, but in a way that really made it seem like it wasn’t fine.

So I talked for a bit, about things that I was getting a little bit tired of talking about. Unfortunately, I couldn’t answer all of Masters’ questions, because a lot of them had answers that I didn’t know.

“But why did he win so consistently?” he asked.

“He didn’t,” said Raven. “Everyone always says that, but there were times that he lost.”

“Definitively lost?” asked Masters, glaring at his daughter. “Not as a prelude to some greater victory, not as the inciting incident for one of his cycles, but a true loss?”

“His wife lost everything below her ribcage in the Blight,” said Raven, gesturing to her own body with her hand. “I don’t care how you want to reframe that so it doesn’t count, but it was a loss, a true one.”

“To answer the question,” I said. “The Dungeon Master entity is, presumably, powerful enough that he can ensure a close win every single time, no matter what the odds seem like they should be on the face of it. Why he would choose to do that, I don’t really know, especially since it seems from where I’m standing that it was nothing more than an unusual form of extended torture.”
“But why was he so secretive about it?” asked Masters. “Why would he set me to my task at Speculation and Scrutiny without *telling* me this?” He was insistent, but that insistence was a little easier to handle now that he wasn’t using magic against us.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It would have weakened him politically, if people had known that he was dream-skewered, and even more if they had known that he was receiving supernatural aid of some sort. That still doesn’t explain why he didn’t tell his Knights, but,” I shrugged. “Maybe he couldn’t. Maybe he had his reasons. I’ll ask him, if I ever have the opportunity.”

Masters glanced at his daughter. “Don’t let him take advantage of her.”

“Take advantage?” I asked. I looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Not like that,” said Raven with a tight frown. “He means -- he thinks that I’m more impressionable than I am.” She turned to Masters. “I *am* one of the most renowned Ell to have ever lived and a central figure in the history of the world. I can handle myself. I know there’s nothing that I can say or do that will make you believe that, but I can.”

I’d fought her; I believed it. Of course, if I had been thinking properly at the time, I probably could have caught her off-guard and murdered her before she had a chance to react, defensive entads be damned. Beyond that, Bethel had cut all of Raven’s fingers off two weeks ago, which also wasn’t the sort of thing that Masters would have wanted to hear.

I answered more of Masters’ questions, which took quite a while, but there was only so much that I could say, and he didn’t seem to find all of my answers that satisfactory. I told him about Maddie, in brief, leaving a few choice things out. It raised more questions, a lot of which I still couldn’t answer. Some of those questions were ones that I was curious about myself, questions about Uther, questions about the Dungeon Master, and questions about what it was all for and what it all meant.

He left soon after, declaring that he had taken leave of Speculation and Scrutiny for a time and would be staying down in the village, which Raven seemed distinctly displeased to hear.

“It’s always the same arguments,” said Raven, shortly after he was out the door. “They say that’s how it is among the Ell, that we’re slow to change our minds, but he goes beyond that. He never listens, not to me, not where Uther is concerned.” She turned to the box. “It’s irrelevant. This is the reason it was worth talking to him at all.”

“That’s a harsh way to speak of your father,” said Amaryllis.

“Perhaps,” said Raven, looking over at her. “I would think that you would understand how paternalism could be grating.”

“My father died when I was two years old,” said Amaryllis.

“Ah,” said Raven.

“I’ve always thought it better to have allies who disagree on what’s best for you than to not have allies at all,” said Amaryllis. “I might empathize more if he had the capacity to stop you in any meaningful way, but he’s helpless and burdened by forces completely out of his control.”

“I won’t complain more, if it bothers you,” said Raven.

“I didn’t say that,” replied Amaryllis.

“Can we get to the loot?” I asked. “I’m itching to be armored again, and the sword that I’m currently
“I’ve already looked them over,” said Bethel, appearing beside me. “I’ll take Grak’s second opinion though. He’s a more capable warder than I am, and might see something that I’ve missed. I wouldn’t want to take in something toxic to me, if Uther planned for this.”

“You understand that we’re just exercising due caution, right?” I asked Raven. “I wouldn’t want you to think that we don’t trust you.”

“I understand,” said Raven. “To be honest, it’s refreshing.”

It took some time for Grak to look over the box before he was willing to declare it safe. Once he did, Raven opened the lid and took out a pair of tweezers that was held in place with a set of tiny pegs in the lid. She picked up a number of miniature entads and set them out, then tapped each of them twice, which caused them to grow back to their normal size.

It was the entirety of the armory that Pallida and I had found at Speculation and Scrutiny: five suits of armor, two dozen weapons, and two full display cabinets full of miscellaneous trinkets.

I couldn’t help myself; I got giddy.

While none of it was completely worthless, some of it was niche, and not really worth talking about. The other stuff? Pretty good.

- **Space Plate:** Airtight, watertight, pressurized, and with two days air supply, this one had been lifted from the Fantasy in Spaaaaaace part of one of my campaigns. It was impact resistant, but you’d still be taking the hit, meaning that the armor did what mundane armor did and spread out the force of impact into something that the body could handle better. Good for deep sea diving and hostile environments (potentially including Fel Seed’s, given it could block spores). As a bonus, the helm was completely transparent, allowing full field of view.

- **Gardner’s Plate:** It had twelve small holes at various points around it, from which vines could be projected while it was worn, though they only worked for a few minutes before retreating. The vines were fully prehensile and under the control of the wearer, though they were difficult to use for everyone but me. My guess was that it was because of the Ambidexterity virtue, but the game didn’t give me any feedback on the matter.

- **Alvion’s Vambrace:** The reason that so many suits of armor were a consideration was this little beauty, a tube of metal worn around the forearm with an opal set into it. With a twist, the opal allowed an instant change of clothes, where ‘clothes’ was fairly permissively defined and could include both weapons, armor, and things carried up to two hundred pounds (though our attempts at lassoing another person and swapping them into the extradimensional space failed). It was innocuous enough, for an entad, and could even be hidden beneath a long-sleeved shirt, which would help it avoid a cursory examination by a warder. There were three notches, meaning two ‘outfits’ stored and one worn.

- **The Probability Blade:** My new primary weapon. It was a gray blur of metal when held, but when you went to cut something with it, or parry a blade, it became whatever sword was best suited to the occasion. Imagine Schrödinger’s cat, but it’s a sword.
• **Needler:** My new secondary weapon. It was a throwing dagger with a blade of crystal, and whenever a blade was thrown, a new copy would appear in my hand. Twisting the handle caused the copies to blow up. Any of the copies would disappear if they were more than a hundred feet from me, which limited it somewhat, though with some obvious exploits.

• **Ring of Upward Bliss:** Tapping the ring three times would teleport me up a mile up into the air. Without an accompanying entad to slow my fall or otherwise survive the drop, it was of limited use, but we were still planning to get Prince’s Invulnerability to me, something that we’d meant to get a long time ago (we hadn’t been able to find a qualified tattooist), and I was going to get the slow-fall tattoo that I’d first had when I’d been dropped out of the plane. It went better with the Immobility Plate, in my opinion, but Amaryllis insisted that it was an easy entad to switch over in a hurry, and that if someone were to survive or get out of a jam in a hurry, it would be me.

• **Ring of the Broken World:** Despite the weird title, it was really just a limited form of teleportation. Instead of having a set distance, it could teleport me such that I was still touching the place that I had originally been standing in, preserving my momentum. I could teleport up so that my feet were where my head had been, or I could teleport to the side so that my left hand was where my right hand had been. In other words, the maximum distance was pitifully short, but it was activated by thought, and could be used many times in rapid succession, which meant that it had combat utility.

• **Pedant’s Pendant:** Worn around the neck, it gave the ability to precisely recall rules, facts, pronunciation and other miscellanea. In effect, it was a limited form of eidetic memory with a rather narrow focus. Amaryllis took that one.

• **Choker of Concordance:** Warders needed a pool of concordance to draw on, which could be tapped dry, leaving them able to manipulate wards but not actually make them. The choker, black with an inset crystal, could be used to triple the pool, though it would still take some time to refill. Grak and Bethel had a minor fight about who would get it, until eventually settling on a compromise whereby Bethel would use it first to reinforce her wards, and then after that, Grak would use it in the field.

It was a huge haul, no doubt about it. Solace finally got some armor, which instantly resized to fit her and could be dialed in to protect against different elemental threats at short notice, though she complained that the metal clashed with her aesthetic. Bethel became more powerful in a lot of ways, not that she needed to be, though the biggest get for her was a suit of armor with telekinetic effect, one that effectively gave an increase to the functional synthesis force she could project with her other telekinetic effect and the momentum exchanger. Solace even got a staff to replace the one that had been voided, a gnarled wooden one that gave her partial control of plants, an ability that mixed well with her druid powers (or so she claimed).

“How much loot is there?” asked Tiff.

“Shhh, no complaining,” said Reimer. “We’ve been behind on loot since level four.”

“When it rains, it pours,” said Arthur.

“Now, I’m not going to suggest that Juniper forgot,” said Craig. “But is it possible that Juniper forgot? Just asking questions.”
“He always forgets,” said Reimer.

“I don’t forget,” I said. “It just doesn’t make sense for the enemies to have loot sometimes, especially level appropriate loot. If you go by the guides, the enemies have treasure parcels, but there are only certain situations in which that actually works without breaking the reality of the world. So instead, yeah, treasure gets a little uneven and the Skinner box of loot distribution isn’t working at maximum capacity.”

“What Joon is saying is that adventuring is supposed to be its own reward, rather than just numbers-go-up,” said Arthur.

“But I like numbers-go-up,” said Reimer. “Who doesn’t like numbers-go-up?”

“We all like numbers-go-up,” said Tiff. “But the question is just whether this is the right way for numbers to go up? I mean, in theory, it’s better if we’re getting loot at regular intervals, right? Both for balance, enjoyment, and whatnot.”

“Joon has been DMing too long,” said Arthur with a laugh. “That’s how he used to do it, until we got in this big argument about why this necromancer was leaving magic items on his zombies for no good reason.”

“Was that it?” asked Reimer. He looked over at me. “I remember that, is that the moment you decided that you weren’t going to give us loot like a sensible DM?”

“Arthur is trying to tell a story,” I said with a shake of my head. “If you wanted to make a narrative about it, then sure, I was a mild-mannered DM until one fateful day we had an hour-long digression about how a smart necromancer strips the magic items from his zombies and puts everything of value in the most secure, hidden place he can think of, and that argument changed me forever. That’s not really accurate though. It was more like … I don’t know, there are elements of unreality to the D&D experience, and I’ve always kind of hated them, because you bring in these game elements and that undercuts both the world and the narrative.” I shrugged. “Realistically, sometimes you’re fighting enemies that don’t have loot. Sometimes you get front-loaded on loot because someone wants you to succeed at the task they gave you. Sometimes accomplishing your goals doesn’t actually earn you anything material. So yeah, it’s a bit uneven, and yeah, that’s not the best thing for balance, though I think I’m doing a pretty good job of adjusting for that, but it at least doesn’t spit in the face of realism.”

“You can just admit that you forgot to give loot,” said Craig.

I let out a beleaguered sigh.

In my ideal world, we would have gotten to play with the entads a bit, figure them out, then spend some time divvying them up. Doing that with Fenn and Grak was still one of my fondest memories on Aerb. Instead, they were just handed to us, already figured out by Uther and his people and stored away for later use. I’m not going to lie, I sort of resented it, as childish as that might have been, given what a gift it was. Still, when I went to Sound and Silence, I finally felt like we had level appropriate gear.

At noon the next day, Bethel lifted up into the sky and minutes later, landed in an empty field ten miles away from Sound and Silence.

I was, at least for a week, going to college.
Sound and Silence, a Brief History, by Juniper Smith

The original discoverers of the Li’o’te Temple were never recorded, but the tradition of still magic dates back at least ten thousand years, making it one of the earliest ‘formal’ magics. While control of the temple has changed hands innumerable times, the temple itself is inviolable, and has survived everything from explosion to a complete burial that left it hidden for the better part of a decade until it was retaken. Through its history, the Li’o’te Temple has seen countless students engaged in meditation in order to reveal the first, base perception of still magic that allows it to finally be used.

The current history of the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence began in 143 BE, when a cabal of still mages seized control of the Li’o’te Temple from the Independent Province of Hong-shin. The area immediately around the temple, a moderately sized city that largely existed in support of temple activities, was declared a fully independent city-state following the ousting of the city’s mayor. The city was renamed as Li’o, a name it’s held since then. Strict control over the creation and training of still mages made the city-state into a fearsome local power, especially in an era where void weapons were virtually unknown. After some decades had passed, the cabal was restructured into a representative democracy of still mages, and shortly after, Li’o joined the Mage’s Agreement, the predecessor to what’s now the athenaeum system.

In 13 FE, Uther Penndraig arrived in Li’o during the height of an internal conflict between two factions of still mages, a conflict which was largely about the Mage’s Agreement and had been sparked by a blood mage ‘defector’ who had come to Li’o seeking asylum. This was only a spark; the role of still mages within the international community was a topic that had been provided a great deal of fuel and tinder over the years.

Uther sided with those in favor of cooperation, which effectively pitted him against the people keeping the blood mage under their protection. It had been Uther who had reformed Quills and Blood essentially from the ground up, making it into a juggernaut of power within a few short years, and so his role in the conflict was set from the beginning. When all was said and done, the inner circle of opposition had been either killed or subdued, and the rogue blood mage was turned back over to Quills and Blood, where he was summarily executed (those being somewhat uncivilized days by modern standards). Li’o went through a number of growing pains as a result of that debacle, and Uther Penndraig’s genius left its mark on the institution, which formally became a part of the First Empire, one of the first city-states to join.

A decade later, Uther returned, this time carrying the Rod of Whispers. It was one of the more powerful entads on record, capable of permanently granting access to vibration magic, though actually learning enough to use it took several weeks on top of that, and mastery was a years-long process. Uther had taken the Rod of Whispers from an infernal cult he’d rooted out, and was looking for a good home for it. Because the Li’o’te Temple was deep underground, because the academy already dealt with controlled distribution of magic, and because they already had security measures in place, Uther had decided that it was the perfect place for the Rod of Whispers to be placed. That still magic and vibrational magic were, in some ways, opposite from each other, yet with conceptual overlap, was all the more reason for the first generation of vibration mages to be trained in the P’emp’té Valley. Five years later, the Li’o Academy became the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence.

By the time the First Empire had begun its collapse, the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence, like its brethren, was a force to be reckoned with. The scope of the exclusionary principle and possible causes of outbreaks were widely known, resulting in research being moved to a remote sister site, a
practice common for athenaeums, but Sound and Silence itself was firm and resolute in those trying times, backed, in part, by a renewed Mage’s Agreement between all the athenaeums, this one more conspiratorial than Uther had likely intended.

During the First Interimperium, the athenaeum continued about its business, training and educating students, inducting them, and then sending them out into the world under a variety of different schemes to ensure their cooperation with the athenaeum. Absolute loyalty was less of a concern for Sound and Silence, given that a rogue student couldn’t teach others, but the Mage’s Agreement had certain provisions in it which could make matters decidedly unpleasant for rogue mages, and like the other athenaeums, Sound and Silence made use of those provisions from time to time.

When the Second Empire was formed, the athenaeums by and large capitulated, mostly because there was surprisingly little cost in doing so. The early Second Empire had recognized the strength and power of the athenaeum system as a problem, and had worked hard to ensure that there would be as few sources of conflict as possible. In fact, the Second Empire never fully took control of the athenaeums, as it didn’t need to; many of them were perfectly happy to have increased funding from the Department of Education or the Department of Advancement, and so what if there were some ethical concerns with what the Second Empire was doing, or moral arguments against some of the actions it was taking? Most of the athenaeums already had blood on their hands anyway, and Sound and Silence was no exception.

After the Second Empire fell and the Second Interimperium began, Sound and Silence once again assumed a defensive posture with regards to the outside world after it had weathered the purges of its leadership (those who had been aggressively persuaded by the Second Empire’s soul mages, or whose complicity in crimes was too great to ignore). When the counter-imperialists failed to seize power for themselves, as everyone thought they would, Sound and Silence continued on its way, a place of learning for two of the magical arts, much as it had when the First Empire fell. The teleportation key network and hexal railway system caused Li’o to become more multicultural than it had been before, and encouraged students to come from further afield, so that by the time the Empire of Common Cause had finally begun promoting open borders and cooperation between polities, Li’o was already in their camp.

When Bethel landed in the field ten miles outside of Sound and Silence, we were, technically, trespassing, and also, technically, in violation of the city-state of Li’o’s sovereign airspace, as well as the Draconic Confederacy’s rules regarding air travel. Thankfully, the *Egress* was so fast and smooth that virtually nothing could catch up to us, and with a reflective coating on her, Bethel was nothing more than a streak through the sky while in flight. On the inside, we felt absolutely nothing, just as we’d felt nothing the first time we’d rode on the *Egress*.

Bethel reorganized into her staff form, with all the rooms inside her remaining their full sizes. Our agreement was that she would be our house wherever we decided to go, but she wouldn’t be brought into combat to be wielded like a weapon, nor would she have to take a human form. With all of the entads inside of her from so many different sources, it was technically feasible to have her entire physical form be a reasonably-sized humanoid, but she’d flatly refused that. It was an imperfect compromise, but it meant that we would have a home base wherever we went, rather than a home base back on the Isle of Poran, which might potentially be thousands of miles away from where we were conducting operations.

It took us the better part of a day to first get near the athenaeum, then find a plot of land where we could stick Bethel. The P’emp’té Valley was famed for its large, domed buildings, but domed buildings were somewhat expensive to build and didn’t pack together well, so a lot of the more modern parts of the city had simple city streets with sardine-packed rectangular houses, just like most
other places on Aerb. Samey houses like that just didn’t make it onto the postcards in the same way that huge domes did. It was on one of these side streets, away from the primary hub of activity, that we found an empty lot for sale, which we bought for half again the asking price, on the condition that we could pay cash and take residence that same day.

This was all in service to getting Bethel on the ground and as a full, functional house again, albeit one that was bigger on the inside. It was a condition for her coming with. The plus side was that the comms tattoos, Parson’s Voice, would work on the scale of miles, meaning that so long as Bethel always contained one person with a tattoo, she could be called in at a moment’s notice, descending from the sky like a murderous angel to get me out of whatever jam I was in. (Parson’s Voice was ridiculously expensive for what it did; Amaryllis had the foresight to grab what she could from Everett after his death, in the brief window where they would still retain some scrap of their magic. Pallida and Heshnel each had one too, and Pallida had given hers up to Amaryllis, meaning that we had three in the group.)

It probably went without saying that it was wildly, flagrantly illegal to simply erect a building on a plot of land in the middle of a city, even if you happened to own that land. You needed permits, inspections, more inspections, more permits, and the gentle caress of a dozen bureaucratic tentacles. We weren’t going to be in Li’o for long enough for that whole process to even get started, let alone be completed. We were mostly hoping that by the time the authorities caught on, we could be long gone, or failing that, we would just pay whatever fine was levied against us, but it was a somewhat fraught thing. Again, it was all in service of keeping Bethel placated and close at hand, ready to come down like the hammer of god the moment things got heated, which I highly suspected they would. As a compromise, I didn’t fully like it, but Bethel was obstinate about her role within the party; she was a house.

Once that was all squared away, we left Bethel as a group of six, leaving Valencia and Heshnel behind, the former because of the unacceptable risk that someone or something would out her, the latter because someone besides Bethel herself needed to be able to deal with any problems that might arise back at base, a job that he had volunteered for.

“Testing,” I said, placing my fingers to the tattoo on my throat and talking as we walked. The tattoo had two basic functions, the first being push-to-talk, and second being always-on. All you had to do to switch between the two was place your fingers in a different spot. The always-on mode was, unfortunately, extremely annoying to everyone on the other end, and the tattoo was indiscriminate in sending things out to everyone on your local network.

[I hear you,] replied Heshnel. It was like he was speaking directly against my skull, bone conductivity rather than thoughtspeech. It was remarkably clear.

“Works so far,” I replied with a nod to the others. “We’ll see you in a bit.” I let my fingers drop down. Most of the time, we’d be keeping it off. “I’m really hoping that we don’t have to call in the cavalry.”

“Hrm,” replied Amaryllis. She was without her armor, though she still had her flickerblade, and against Bethel’s wishes, had taken the extradimensional glove with her as well.

“You’re thinking of narrative,” I said.

“She’s always thinking of narrative,” said Pallida with a laugh. “I think you were right to put an end to it, but that’s only made her more vocal when she’s not with you.”

“The theory holds weight,” said Raven. “Uther talked about it extensively, he wrote about it right up until he went missing, and every analysis we have points to narrative theory being essentially
“Probably a conversation better held under wards,” said Grak with a grunt. He was walking beside Solace. They were both slower than the rest of us, owing to their stature, which meant that we had to accommodate them.

“Probably,” I replied. “I actually don’t know who the potential enemy listening in would be, or what they would gain from hearing any of this, but yes, probably best not to talk about it out loud on a public street.” I looked over at Raven. “Do you have any grand insights on Li’o or Sound and Silence that you’ve been keeping quiet about?”

“No,” replied Raven. “I’ve been here only three times since the First Empire disbanded, always on business with the Library.”

“That seems like a lot,” I said. “Three times in a little more than one hundred thirty years? What were you visiting about?”

“Classified,” said Raven. She looked around a bit. “It’s very nice to be able to say things like that and not have to worry that I’m going to have my fingers cut off.”

“She’s harmless,” said Pallida, waving her hand.

“She cut my fingers off,” replied Raven with a scowl.

“I would agree she’s not harmless,” I said. “However, I’m hopeful that’s all in the past.”

“She was talking about what a bad neighborhood we were in,” said Amaryllis. “She mentioned that perhaps someone would try to break in. She seemed pretty excited at the prospect.”

“Yes, well,” I said. “Someone should probably familiarize themselves with the legal code of Li’o. Or maybe we should get a lawyer on retainer.”

“We already have one,” said Amaryllis. “We have a lawyer on retainer in the top ten cities on Aerb by population, as well as all the cities with an Athenaeum in them. I set it all up by mail shortly after Solace was born.”

“What does retainer mean, exactly?” I asked. “We have lawyers in twenty-three cities?” I stopped to think about geography for a moment. “Er, lower. Eighteen?”

“We’ve prepaid for legal services,” replied Amaryllis. “And yes, eighteen cities.”

“That’s not horrifically expensive?” I asked.

“In the scheme of things, no,” replied Amaryllis. “The retainers aren’t large, and the lawyers aren’t world class, but we need to be able to not shoot ourselves in the foot if we need to navigate the courts, especially given how different some of the legal traditions are from each other. In Li’o, our lawyers are Comb and Bācaṇīge. Commit the name to memory, in case we get separated. They’re authorized to do work for the entire Council of Arches.” She glanced at Pallida. “You would likely need to find your own representation.”

“You wound me so, princess,” said Pallida with a laugh. “I wasn’t planning on getting into trouble. I’m probably not even going into the athenaeum. I tried to steal the Rod of Whispers once, and while I don’t think they’ll remember me, best not to risk it.”

“Sorry,” I said. “You tried to steal the Rod of Whispers? The source of vibration magic?”
“That’s the one,” said Pallida. “Good security around it though, I do have to say that. I probably could have gotten it, if I’d been willing to kill someone, but, eh.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What would you have done with it?”

“Not sure,” replied Pallida. “Ransomed it off, maybe, but that’s always partnered with its own problems, because naturally, people don’t want to give you money, they want you dead and their stuff back.”

“Typical,” replied Raven with a snort.

“Oh?” asked Pallida, looking back at her. “Typical?”

“Yes,” replied Raven.

“Then tell me how it’s ‘typical’,” said Pallida.

“We’re not doing this now,” I said, before things could get heated. “It’s my first day at college, and I’m not going to have it ruined because you’re bringing up stupid bullshit from the past.”

“Don’t call the athenaeum a college,” said Amaryllis. “Otherwise, I agree.”

“I was making a joke,” I said.

“Make better jokes,” said Amaryllis.

Pallida shot one last, angry glance at Raven, but that was the end of it. Maybe it had been a mistake to take both of them with, but in terms of firepower, I wanted as much as I could get. That’s why we were bending for Bethel as much as we could to get her to meet us halfway. I was nervous about what going to college would bring.

I pooh-poohed Amaryllis’ narrative theory a lot, but it was an interesting question whether the challenges we faced would assume that we were at full strength, or whether they would be altered to match us (or, possibly, that we would be altered to match them). Even with narrative theory aside, I did assume that the Dungeon Master was setting things up for us, at least in part. It just didn’t have to be because he had any particular outcome in mind; maybe he wanted to see what I would do, how I would respond, or whether I would pass the test. I wasn’t going to twist myself into a knot trying to guess what he had in store for me, especially since I would have to go down however many meta-levels he was playing at, but the thought that I couldn’t just approach this quest on its merits had me a bit on edge.

Li’o sat within a wide valley with steep hills on either side. The Athenaeum of Sound and Silence was set in the side of one of those hills, with its campus sprawling out, a chunk of relatively homogeneous buildings in that one little patch of city. We made our way up steep roads, passing by a wide variety of businesses and the midday push of people. We were armed and armored, legal in Li’o but a bit conspicuous. In theory, being conspicuous wouldn’t matter, because we were only very technically criminals, and for crimes that it would be difficult to prove we committed (that of illegal entry into the city-state of Li’o, plus the probable airspace violation charge from the local air authority).

The city was one of the prettier ones, though the temperature was much higher than on the Isle of Poran, and it was somehow more humid too, even though we were pretty far from any body of water. Weather on Aerb was incredibly weird, the more I had looked into it, and Li’o had apparently been saddled with a tropical climate by the atmoplanar (yes, they called it that) projection layer, the wide-scale magic that created functional jet streams, and the shape of the land.
True to her word, Pallida left us behind when we got to the campus proper, insisting that she was going to ‘do her own thing’ and would meet up with us later, despite not having any way to keep in touch with where we were and what we were doing. She gave Amaryllis a hug before she left, which Amaryllis seemed a bit embarrassed by, then went on her merry way, carrying her magical trident like it was no big deal.

We found our way to the bursar’s office with only a modicum of trouble; it was located within one of those big domed buildings we’d seen, along one of the outer curved walls. Once we knew where we were going, I dialed my vambrace to give myself ‘normal’ clothes, consisting of my more understated bespoke suit, and left the others behind (though close by, and given our tattoo comms, easily summoned at a moment’s notice).

The bursar had a gnomish secretary who paled slightly on hearing the name ‘Figaro Finch’. I wasn’t quite so racist (specist?) that I thought all gnomes knew each other, but that gear did make half a rotation in my head before I caught myself. More likely, she was just dreading the upcoming meeting. Finch had said to press the bursar, if it came to that, but not to threaten or hurt him.

The bursar himself was a fat man, which was unusual for one of the he’lesh. The Book of Blood went into great detail about their apparently prodigious members (thanks, Syfriend), but in terms of outward appearance, he had orange skin, three thick, mutually opposable fingers on each hand, and a way of walking that kept his long legs tucked in and his feet close to his butt. Standing tall didn’t come naturally to the he’lesh, which was probably a good thing, since he’d have been nine feet tall if he unfolded himself. After doing me the brief courtesy of opening the door and ushering me in, he did a little waddling walk so that he could sit behind his desk, on a cushion rather than a proper chair. I took the chair in front of the desk, adjusting it to human proportions, then watched his dark orange eyes look over a hookah that was sat on his desk. He pressed a lever, then took a hit from the hookah and looked at me.

“Helps me think,” he said, frowning at me.

“I know,” I replied. I designed the he’lesh. “It’s my understanding that it’s not considered rude to ask which you just took?”

“Indignation,” replied the bursar, narrowing his eyes at me. “You want to skip not one line, but two.”

“Finch said that all of this was already handled,” I replied.

“You need to take classes,” said the bursar. “I told Finch that you’d be in under the Special Returning rule, not the donation rule. To be paid off would be one thing, but money wasn’t on offer. It was the best that I could do, I told him that, and he wanted more. To think I call the man friend!”

“He said that it was handled,” I replied. “Finch is stationed in a place pretty far from a touchstone, otherwise he would have come here himself. I would have brought him, if I thought that this was going to be a problem. If you’re going to go back on what you told him, then --”

“No,” said the bursar, shaking his head. He reached down and took another hit from the hookah. I peered in at the internals of the machine. It was set up so that different herbs could be burned on demand, each only enough for a single hit. It was no doubt expensive and ingenious, especially given how many options it had. “No,” he repeated, letting out a puff of smoke that smelled like incense. The whole room reeked of different herbs laid over top of each other. “No, no, I told him that I could arrange it, but I never said that it would be completely without caveats, and because there’s no money changing hands, my hands, are, eh, tied. You must take classes, at least for long enough that you can have four instructors sign off.”
“I was meant to be here a week,” I said. “After that, I was going to step into a time chamber and teach myself as much as is possible in as short an amount of time as possible. I’m legitimately not sure that I can take classes for a week, not under the time constraints I have.”

“There are procedures for skipping ahead,” grumbled the bursar. “Sufficient donation is enough, but even then we don’t do it on so little time.”

“You agreed to this,” I said. “That’s why I’m here. If it can’t be done, then I came here, at great expense, for no reason. I don’t want to have to tell Finch that I went through all this trouble and then walked away empty-handed.”

The bursar grumbled again, then took another hit of his hookah. “I’m telling you, a week of classes, then a number of magi to sign you off, that’s the way it must be done. It will look, from the outside, as close to proper as possible, and I said as much to Finch in my letter.”

And then he expected me to argue you down? “If I’m understanding this right, I just need a rubber stamp? I don’t actually have to attend classes?”

“Are you trying to make this difficult?” asked the bursar. “If you want to feel the touch of the rod, if you want to meditate in the temple with the others, then yes, yes, you need to attend classes. It’s a sham, obviously, but one that must appear proper.”

“And if I just pay the fees instead to skip all that?” I asked.

“At least a month,” said the bursar, shaking his head.

I was being stonewalled. The person to blame was probably Finch, not the bursar himself, or on a meta level, I could obviously blame the Dungeon Master. And really, I was only getting upset about it because Finch had said it would only be the week needed to meditate; if he’d said from the outset that I would need to take a week of classes, I would still probably have taken that deal.

“Fine,” I said. “One week of classes, some paperwork on your end, then I’ll get access to the magic.”

The bursar startled slightly, then looked over at his hookah, pressed a different button on it, and took a hit. “Excellent,” he said as a scent like pine needles filled the air. “Yes, excellent, I’ll fill in the papers and you’ll be on your way. I assume you have no need of accommodations?”

“I have a house in Li’o,” I said. As of this morning.

“It’s extremely important that you don’t mention this arrangement with anyone else,” said the bursar. “It’s irregular, and might create some problems if the exact nature of this shortcut were revealed. The magi might ask, and if they do, tell them the truth.”

I nodded. I had figured as much.

I was relatively surprised by how little paperwork there was, given how much paperwork I got at the start of every school year in high school, but I supposed that made sense, given that Aerb didn’t have computers and laser printers, meaning that paper documents had to either be made with spirit duplicators or mimeographs or some even more exotic technology. Instead, my schedule was written on a piece of paper for me, with quick directions to the various classrooms written there too.

I read the paperwork the secretary handed me very carefully before I signed anything. The bureaucratic procedure that the bursar was taking me through was, apparently, a loophole that had been set up for extraordinary circumstances where an existing student of Sound and Silence had matriculated and then once again needed access to either the Temple or the Rod.
“Renacim are one of the reasons this rule exists,” said the secretary, looking displeased at my question. “Forcing them to go through material that they already know would be absurd, and forcing them to pay would be, well, profitable in the short term but not in the long term. There are other species who face similar problems, and must be re-evaluated to see whether it would be appropriate for them to be re-anointed, either so they could make use of their existing education, or so that they could take continued education.”

“And what am I?” I asked. “For the purposes of, uh, this paperwork?”

“It’s unspecified,” replied the secretary, frowning at me. “There’s technically no need to specify, since it’s at his discretion. I would be cautious of who you speak to of this arrangement. It’s all perfectly by the books, but it would be better to not have it come to light that the bursar was using his discretion in such a manner.”

“I won’t say anything,” I replied. I hesitated for a moment. I really did want to ask her whether she knew Figaro Finch, but every social instinct I had was warning me not to. If Finch and the bursar were friends, then it stood to reason that he might have met this woman, or that she might have been a connection. I held my tongue.

“How did it go?” asked Amaryllis. Solace and Grak were gone, leaving just her and Raven.

“Fine,” I said. “There’s a minor hiccup. They want me to attend classes, just for a week.”

Amaryllis sighed. “That’s going to make Bethel’s position more problematic.”

“Still worth it though, do you think?” I asked. “I thought it would be.”

“It’s a spanner in the works,” said Amaryllis. She tapped her throat. “Wasn’t safe to talk?”

“I didn’t want to break it out if I didn’t have to,” I said. “How much does this interfere with things?”

“I’ll work it out,” she replied. “Classes, starting tomorrow?”

“Semester starts in three days,” I said. “So, it’s really more like two and a half weeks.”

“I’ll have to speak with Bethel,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think it will be a problem, as such. I’m still waiting for the catch.”

“Is there always one?” asked Raven. It was just the three of us, for some reason.

“No,” I said. “But when things seem like they might be easy? Then yeah, more often than not, I would say. Though it might be that the times it actually was easy don’t stick out as well.”

“Regardless, we have three days free?” asked Amaryllis. “Do you have any advice on how to speak with Bethel?”

“About what?” I asked. “Also, where are Grak and Solace?”

“There’s a dwarfhold close by,” said Raven. “Grak wanted to go visit, and Solace said she would accompany them.” I had been asking Amaryllis, not her, but she seemed to want to be a part of the conversation, rather than a third wheel.

“Well, okay, but how are we going to find each other?” I asked.

“We’ll meet back at Bethel,” said Amaryllis. “You’re carrying too much over from your old home.”
“I am?” I asked.

“He is?” asked Raven, perking up with curiosity.

“Smart phones,” said Amaryllis, turning slightly to face Raven. “Small, handheld technological devices that transmit information back and forth via radio. Where Juniper is from, everyone has one, and everyone knows where everyone else is at all times.”

“That’s … not quite true,” I said. “But in a general sense, yes, you can just send someone a text and ask them where they are, or whether they want to meet up.”

“A text is a short message,” Amaryllis supplied. I didn’t particularly think that was necessary, or I would have translated on my own.

“Ah,” said Raven. “And he’s still so unfamiliar with norms, after roughly five months on Aerb?”

“Half that time was spent in a quite small time chamber,” replied Amaryllis. “The other half has seen him on the run from various forces or factions, wandering through exclusion zones, or ensconced within our group. I could count the number of people outside the group that he’s had meaningful interactions with on one hand.”

I looked at her, seeing the look on her face as she explained things. “Mary, are you … offering exposition about me?”

Amaryllis caught herself. “Ah,” she said. She glanced at Raven. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Raven. She looked between the two of us. “That was always my role, in our group.” She looked a little bit sad. “We would come to some new place, and I would set out to read all the books as quickly as I could so that I could offer him as much information as he needed.”

“I’m sorry if that wasn’t what you wanted,” I said.

“Oh,” said Raven, looking at me. “No, it was. I loved to read. I loved having someone to talk to about what I had read. The way he would look at me with this intent expression, listening closely to every word I said …” She looked to me and her demeanor changed. “It’s not clear on what my role in this group is, as yet.”

“I don’t know either,” I said. “I would consider you a heavy hitter though.”

“That speaks poorly of your power, no offense,” said Raven.

“It’s why we’re here,” I replied with a shrug. “I’m not expected to match Uther at the height of his power so quickly, right?” I was trying not to be, but I felt mildly defensive.

“We don’t know,” said Amaryllis. That was more or less true. Power scaling, if it existed at all, was a mystery. I was pretty sure that attempting to go into Fel Seed’s exclusion zone would get me killed though, at least as I currently was, which was the primary reason I wasn’t doing it.

I looked out on the campus, with its many paths wending between the buildings, and more greenery than you might naively expect in a city. There were no trees, but the bigger buildings had vines cascading down the sides of buildings here and there, which somehow gave the impression of not being manicured, though they undoubtedly were. There was a care and thought that had gone into this place which I found myself appreciating. It was something that I would probably talk about with the locus; she seemed like she would appreciate that.
My gaze shifted to the people walking the campus. All of the athenaeums ran all year round, without the three-month gap we had for Earth universities, a consequence of how far away the average student came from and the burden it would have been for most of them to sit around for the summer season or go back home. The start of semester was a few days away, but there were still plenty of people around, the various races of Aerb that I’d grown more and more familiar with, though the majority were human. I looked at a small group of humans on one of the sidewalks, talking to each other, and I could almost imagine that they were part of a transplanted slice of Earth.

One of them looked over at me and did a double-take. My eyes widened as I recognized him. He said something inaudible to the people he was with, then came over to us at a half-jog. I was watching him, unable to look away.

Logically, it wasn’t Reimer. I’d met two doppelgangers so far, Bethel-as-Tiff and Raven-as-Maddie, and this person was probably Reimer in looks only, on the taller side, with a blonde crew cut and glasses, a smarmy grin even as he was coming over. Not Reimer, just meant to look like him, for the Dungeon Master’s ineffable reasons.

“Juniper?” he asked. “Holy fucking shit, Juniper?”
“I -- yeah,” I said. My mind went briefly to my vambrace, which would switch me into full combat gear. I was on edge, obviously, and while Reimer (or whoever he was) didn’t look like a threat, there was a chance that could change in a hurry. I could feel Amaryllis tense up beside me.

“What the fuck man,” he said, smiling at me. “What the actual fuck, what are you doing here?” He looked me up and down. “When did you get jacked?” His eyes went over to Raven, then to Amaryllis, who he stopped and stared at for a little bit too long.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Are you,” he said, then stopped. He turned to me. “You are Juniper, right? Juniper Smith?”

“I am,” I said. “And you’re …” I waited for a moment, so that he could fill in the blank. “Arthur Reimer?”

He nodded, seeming confused by the question. “How the hells did you end up here, Joon?”

_Hells?_ The word tripped me up. If you were listening to spoken dialogue and trying to determine whether it was from Aerb or Earth, there were a few common shibboleths, and the two biggest were ‘hells’ and ‘gods’. I had mostly switched to using ‘hells’ and ‘gods’, the better to fit in, while Amaryllis had switched the opposite way, maybe because she’d gone too deep on Bible study, or maybe because it felt like it had more impact. If I’d gone native, then maybe Reimer had too … but maybe it was a sign that he wasn’t who I thought he was.

“It’s a long story,” I said. I cast my glance over to the people he’d been walking with. They had stopped to wait for him, still talking amongst themselves. “Do you have time to talk?”

Reimer looked back. “Yeah,” he said, waving them off. He turned back to me as they started going on their way. “Seriously though, what gives?”

“What’s the last thing you remember hearing about me?” I asked.

Reimer glanced at Raven, then at Amaryllis. Again, he held the look for a little too long. “You were arrested,” he said. “Expedited sentencing or something like that. I thought you were in prison.” I could see the confusion on his face.

Things started clicking into place. “I was,” I said. I shrugged. “Trial by adversity.”

Reimer’s eyes widened. “You survived that?” he asked. “So you’re, what, part of the Host?”

“It’s a special arrangement,” said Amaryllis.

Reimer stared at her. “Amaryllis Penndraig,” he said, with only a slight upward inflection.

Amaryllis frowned at him. “No,” she said. “Tamra Constance. I work for the government.”

“You look just like her,” said Reimer, openly staring at Amaryllis. He glanced at me. “Joon had a poster of you in his room.”

“Future Leaders of Anglecynn?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah,” said Reimer with a laugh. He looked back at me. “It’s good to see you,” he said. “I’m sorry,
I didn’t want to hold anything up. Are you -- will you be around? Catch up, maybe? It’s been, what, half a year?"

“Sure,” I said, not feeling it. “I’ve, uh, got a house off-campus.” I gave him the address, and noted a slight frown on Amaryllis’ face. “I’ll be there for the next week and a half. Stop by any time.”

“Can I ask what you’re doing here?” asked Reimer. “I mean, I’m starting classes in a few days, is this just coincidence, or … ?”

“Just coincidence,” I said, though that wasn’t at all the truth. “I’d like to sit down and talk for a bit, but … not here.”

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Joon, I know you weren’t doing well, but … hells, trial by adversity? And now you’re here somehow, thousands of miles from home?”

“I’ll explain everything,” I said. “Not out in the open though.”

Reimer nodded once, cast a second look at Amaryllis, and then hurried off to wherever it was he’d been going. We watched him leave, silent.

“Oh, that was something.”

“I’m not sure that we should have let him go,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“Who is he?” asked Raven.

“It’s complicated,” I said. I was internally groaning. “I have an outstanding quest to return to the place that this body is originally from. My guess is that he’s from that same place, and thinks that I was his childhood friend, because there are proxies for everyone I know there.”

**Quest Updated: They Say You Can’t Go Home Again -** He had a life, before you came, one with parallels to your own. The man you met is not Reimer. The girl you will meet is not Tiff. But they’re close enough, for our purposes.

I let out a sigh. **Fuuuuuuuuuuck.**

“Are you so certain that you should be going to a dwarfhold?” asked Solace.

“It’s a test,” said Grak, grumbling beneath his beard. He’d been thinking of shaving it off. He’d done that, once or twice, when he was at Barriers. It had felt odd, like being naked, and repeated shaving had irritated his skin, so he’d grown it back out again. To cut it might be a nice change though. Juniper had offered advice along those lines. He had said that cleanliness was foundational, that incremental progress toward building a new version of himself had been invaluable. Small changes. Small steps.

“You went into a dwarfhold in Boastre Vino, if I recall correctly,” said Solace. She had a pleasant voice, high, as fit her child’s body, but still with the tones and cadence of a wise old woman.

“Yes,” said Grak.

“Also a test?” asked Solace.

“Of sorts,” replied Grak. He was being taciturn again, for no good reason. “I thought it was part of my penance to be with dwarves. To be a true dwarf.” **Megimaka,** it would be in Grogglir. There was
probably a cleaner, more evocative way to say it in Anglish. “I worried I would drift.”

“And now?” asked Solace.

“Now I want to see how I feel,” said Grak.

She slipped her hand into his, a casual thing that buoyed his heart. They were unalike, in so many ways, but she had a real and honest affection for him, and wasn’t at all shy about touching him. The first night they had slept together, he had been hesitant, but she had removed his clothes with deft fingers and pressed her skin against his own. She was odd, a four-hundred-year-old woman who had been reborn a dozen times, now voluntarily choosing to inhabit the body of a child. They barely knew each other, but she had treated him as a longtime friend from the very beginning. She was good at being krin.

“I’m glad you’re doing better,” said Solace. “Are you sure you wouldn’t have preferred different company?”

“Juniper?” asked Grak.

Solace nodded once, bobbing her antlers. “I know he means something to you.”

“He does,” replied Grak. He bit the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit. “He cannot be what I pin my life on, whatever else he is.”

They walked hand-in-hand for a while, winding their way through the city. They got a few looks, even in a cosmopolitan area such as this, in part because of the entads they had on clear display, in part because of the fact that she presented as a child, and in part because of her antlers. There were odder couples in Li’o though, people who were actively trying to be strange. Grak liked that.

Grak’s father had held a low opinion of the dwarfholds that could commonly be found next to the major cities of the world. There were a variety of names for those dwarfholds, but none were particularly flattering. “Shadow cities” was what Grak had grown up hearing, and he had never been able to think of them as anything else, dwarfholds that formed as a shadow cast by imperial cities.

When he’d gone to Lalon Dohore, the shadow city beneath Boastre Vino, he had been thinking about leaving the group. No one had questioned the pretext, and they had barely asked him about what he’d done when he was there. All that was to be expected, and more to the point, as he’d wanted it. He didn’t want to have to explain the alienation he’d felt among the dwarves there, the way their culture had seemed strange and unfamiliar, the same unsettling medley of dialects and traditions that had marked his year spent with the dwarves at Barriers. With Lalon Dohore, he had been trying to prove to himself that there was no place in the world for him, that even a larger dwarfhold, a proper city, one steeped in imperial culture, couldn’t be a place for him. He had been wavering in his dedication to his penance then, tempted by the thought of simply taking the gold from Aumann’s and making a life for himself. It would have been a slap in the face to everyone who died in Darili Irid, not only living on without them, but spending accursed gold as well, after everything the gold mages had done to his people, but he had still thought about it, and hated himself for it.

He was going to Raho Lenheg for a different reason. He was going to see if he could gain a new perspective on the dwarves.

They walked together to the entrance, which had a similar trolley system to the one that connected Boastre Vino with Speculation and Scrutiny. This was a system designed for much greater throughput though, with thicker trolleys running at more regular intervals, capable of carrying a
hundred people each. Grak had always been glad that Junah, the city that housed Barriers, didn’t have a shadow city of dwarves, as otherwise he might have been expected to live there, rather than in Junah itself. He might have commuted in every day and been otherwise sequestered, at his father’s insistence, in with other dwarves, even if they weren’t the right kind of dwarf.

Even going down the tunnel in the trolley, there was something obvious that marked Raho Lenheg as different from Darili Irid. The seats were shaped for dwarves, it was true, but they could easily be raised for other, larger species, and the roof of the trolley was higher, allowing humans and others to ride in comfort, which several were doing. The shadow cities differed in how they dealt with accessibility; some considered themselves dwarven cities first and foremost, and if their accommodations locked them off to some other species, all the better. Raho Lenheg had put in some work, likely some expensive work.

The entrance to Raho Lenheg was expansive, with a vaulted ceiling that was held in place almost entirely with wards. Grak stared at it with his warder’s sight, not liking the look of it. There wasn’t necessarily anything wrong with relying on wards for structural support, but wards could fail if they weren’t made properly. The roof was currently failing to collapse. It was probably fine. He knew pitifully little about engineering, save what he’d learned in the relevant class at Barriers. Most likely he was seeing the same kinds of tolerances used in more mundane versions of construction. It still called to mind the idea of the wards failing, which called to mind Darili Irid, an old wound that had reopened so many times that it was a mass of scar tissue.

Solace squeezed his hand, and brought him back to the world.

They went off together, quickly getting lost in the shadow city. The main thoroughfares were brightly lit, two stories tall, which expanded the view and gave long sight lines, with exterior stairs going up to the second level, allowing twice as many businesses. It didn’t take long to find a tavern; their goal was, ostensibly, to gather information, in the hopes that they might avoid being blindsided.

“Would you like to split up, or stay together?” asked Solace. She let go of his hand as they took a seat. Again, the tavern had the same arrangement as the trolley, with seats and tables that could be adjusted upward if needed, and too-tall ceilings which almost no one was making full use of.

“Stay together,” said Grak. They sat down to order food and drink.

The gold hadn’t ended up staying in Darili Irid, though Juniper had made plenty of offers to let it stay there, either because he thought he needed to, or because he believed that the gold was, ultimately, immaterial. Juniper had said, repeatedly, that in his games the “loot” didn’t matter much, that he would adjust the challenges to the party as they gained abilities and could spend more money. It was hard to tell with Juniper how much of what he said was hollow words, how much was simply motivated by the game, and how much he really meant. In this case, he was saying that it was no true hardship, because money would come to them all the same. ‘Gold sinks’, he kept saying. It was slightly uncomfortable, to hear that the money didn’t matter either way. Grak had deferred to Amaryllis; the money wouldn’t bring anyone back. It wouldn’t actually provide absolution. He had always known that.

Grak still thought about the prices as he ordered. He had spent a long time thinking that it was necessary to devote himself to the pursuit of penance. To be frivolous with money was as good as to declare that he didn’t really care about the penance at all, that the lives lost because of him had been meaningless.

That wasn’t how he was going to live his life any longer.

“There,” said Solace, nodding to another table. “Guards. The patch on their shoulder is the same as
the one on the trolley. I’d wager they hear a lot.”

Grak nodded once, then walked over to the table. He had done this sort of thing a few times, and it was always painfully awkward. At Barriers, it had always been in pursuit of knowing others, whether they were classmates or simply people he’d seen out in public. Here, he wanted to know whether they had heard about the sorts of problems that only the Chosen One could solve.

“Hello,” said Grak, feeling awkward. “I’m new in town. I was wondering if you’d like drinks in exchange for some gossip.”

The dwarves looked between each other, exchanging some wordless conversation.

“So long as it’s not the ferment,” said one of them. “Something bubbly.”

Grak ordered from the bar, trying his best to affect the mannerisms of a dwarf from far outside the big city, which wasn’t terribly much of a stretch. He was, largely by technicality, the Advisor on Defense for the Republic of Miunun, but if asked what he was doing, the truth would probably be that he was simply following Juniper, at least for the time being. (And again, there was the familiar flash of rilirin, nostalgia for a world that never was and never would be. It was easier to dismiss, now.)

“Now,” said one of the policemen, “Tell us what sort of gossip you’re looking for. You want a mate?”

“No,” said Grak, shifting uncomfortably at the suggestion. “General information. Things that people might talk about up there.” He was self-conscious about his dialect, a cadet branch of the many-pronged Groglir family tree.

“Goings on with S&S,” said one of the policemen with a nod. “There’s new construction in their underground bunker. They hired on a few dwarves for it.” His moustache was slicked so that the tips of it were pointed up, and they bounced as he spoke.

“Some problems they’ve been having down there,” said one of the other policemen. “Problems at S&S always ripple out, they say. That’s how it is at Li’o. Council of mages still runs the city, on top of employing a fair number of people, directly or not.”

“There was a death,” said the first, the one who had asked for drinks. “Three months ago, down in the temple.”

“No one is talking about that anymore,” said the dwarf with the pointed moustache, shaking his head.

“It’s the reason for all the construction,” replied the other. “It’s relevant.”

“We’re off track,” said the third, who had been mostly silent up to this point. He turned to Grak. “You want to ‘gossip’ so you can speak to people, to know what’s going on? Or to make conversation?”

“Both,” said Grak, furrowing his eyebrows.

“The Demonblooded Festival is coming up, a week from now,” the other dwarf replied. “That’s what will draw attention. Maybe the wrong kind, if you’re talking to a prospective employer and didn’t want to take a side.”

“Only side is against the devils, isn’t it?” asked one of the others.
“But they’re not devils,” replied the other policeman.

The conversation continued in that vein for some time, with a fair bit of back and forth that delved into arcana Grak wasn’t familiar with. He wouldn’t have assumed that either of them were either, and as he listened to them talk, he could see the seams of their knowledge showing; neither knew quite what they were talking about.

“The death,” said Grak, when there was the slightest room for him to speak. “Can you tell me more?”

“When they go down to the temple, they meditate,” said the third policeman, who seemed eager for a respite from the demonblooded conversation. “They do five hundred at a time, packing the temple full, with entads so they don’t need food and water. They said it was a reaction to one of those, the magic not sitting right in a young girl’s system.” He shook his head. “Smells of negligence.”

Grak nodded at that. Whatever it was, it was probably not negligence; more likely, it was something that only the Chosen One would be able to deal with. Grak was pleased with himself; he’d been useful.

Valencia didn’t like being part of the home team. It was just her, the locus, Heshnel, and Bethel. There were also all the teachers and aides for the young tuung, and the tuung themselves, but they were in a different ‘wing’ of Bethel, and didn’t count. Valencia could see the logic in raising tuung from birth, totally isolated from the world and cared for by people who had been paid a tidy sum to undergo the time dilation … but it all reminded her too much of her own childhood, locked in a cage and muffled so that a devil’s words wouldn’t get out.

Worse, Jorge was several continents away, left behind on the Isle of Poran. Valencia had wanted him to come with, but someone had to stay back and deal with the hangers-on in the village, and Finch hadn’t wanted to do it alone. She missed him, in part because she knew that she would probably be confined to Bethel until she was needed, if she ever was. The armor would conceal her, but there was too much of a risk that she would be outed anyway, as she had been twice now, first with the illusion mage, and next with a complex ward. The armor didn’t have a good track record of keeping her secret safe.

Instead of reading *Harry Potter* again for the third time, she went to bother Heshnel, who was in his room, half of which was a makeshift garden. It was a pretty place, with light streaming in through the windows, more light than could possibly be hitting Bethel. The plants there were all small: Bethel had asked him whether he’d like accelerated time, and he had informed her that under no circumstances was she to do anything like that. Off to one side, he had a lofted bed and a desk beneath it, along with a trunk that he was, for the time, living out of. The traditional home of the dark elves was the Gelid Depths, in homes carved from the seafloor ice, but Heshnel was an oddity, as an elf would have to be to join them.

“I’m surprised that you’re planting them,” Valencia said. He had let her in without seeming surprised that she had come. “Do you expect to be here long?”

(This was small talk, which was one of the things that Valencia knew she needed to work on. It would be easier, with a devil, but she was trying her best not to use them, both because she thought it would be good for her, and because killing too many devils might stir up the rat’s nest that was the hells. She’d grown more powerful when Juniper returned, with more tendrils, which moved more swiftly through the hells and sought out targets more eagerly, but she held them at bay for the time being, with her targets pre-selected. There would be a time to strike and wipe the hells clean, but it was not yet, not before she was powerful enough to actually do it.)
"I don’t know how long I’ll stay," said Heshnel as he tended to his plants. “Flower mages thrive on connection. To go without building that connection is anathema. Yet it’s difficult, in cases such as this, when there’s uncertainty in the air.” He looked over at her. “The seeds contain some of the connection of the plant, fading slowly over time. I plant in the hopes that these might flourish and their connection strengthen. If this garden is demolished, then I still have the seeds whose connection is slowly fading.” He sighed. “I’ve lost many plants and many seeds, over the years. When hard choices have to be made, it’s often the flowers that are sacrificed.” He turned to look at Valencia. “We were Uther’s flowers. He cultivated his connections, and when the time came, he spent us for higher purposes, vast and opaque ones.”

Valencia didn’t know which one of them was being bad at small talk. “Tell me about my father,” she said.

“Fallatehr Whiteshell,” he said, after a long pause. “I don’t know who he was in prison, or who he became. The things that Juniper says are, I have to admit, disturbing.”

Valencia reached out and killed a devil, a minor one, picked at near-random. She, Jorge, and Amaryllis had all sat down to make a map of her kills across the nine thousand hells, then established a protocol for future kills. It was undoubtedly the case that the demons and devils were making their own map of deaths, and while there was nothing to be done about those early deaths, their working group (Mary’s term) had done their best to ensure that future deaths wouldn’t give anything away. At least some of Valencia’s ability would be put toward continuing the old patterns, making them look more random than they had been, or if not random, then at least part of a complex phenomenon that had no real relation to the real world or the Council of Arches.

With the devil in her, Heshnel snapped into focus once more. He felt as though he bore the weight of the world on his shoulders, one of the only people left alive who was in the know, especially with so many allies fallen, either in the Grand Finale after Uther had left, taken by old age, or killed when the Second Empire fell from power. Then more, in the last two weeks. He was adrift, uncertain, not willing to follow Juniper whole-heartedly, yet with no real idea what he was going to do if not that. He had a stubborn pride for what he’d accomplished as part of the Second Empire, though he was keenly aware of its missteps and faults, as well as those events and programs which would later be labeled atrocities. He’d been a soul mage, and seen hundreds of years of practice and dedication to that magic stripped away in an instant. He blamed himself for that; it was one of the things that drove him, the idea that he was meant to do something with his life. It haunted him that he had wasted enormous amounts of time and effort on a grand project that had borne only rotten fruit. Like other soul mages, he had altered himself, slowly and carefully, in order to become better at the tasks he laid before himself, more driven, more focused, more cutthroat. Little of that had been undone.

Valencia knew him, deeply and intimately, as she knew everyone she looked at with her augmented thoughts, so long as she’d had time to make concrete observations. She kept her face the same, not changing her outward appearance in the slightest. She had gotten better at that.

“Who was he, when you knew him?” asked Valencia. She put calm and understanding into her voice, with a touch of force, to show that she was trying. “He thought of me as a thing, not a person,” she said. “As a father …” She momentarily paused, unable to spit out the devil’s words. “He came up short. But I still want to know him, from someone who knew what he was like before the prison.” It was true, after a fashion, which meant that she could say it without running afoul of the instructions that Mary and Juniper had given her.

“He was a researcher,” said Heshnel, after he’d paused to think. “He was eccentric, even by the standards of Second Empire researchers, and especially for an elf. He spoke Anglish with a lisp, rather than avoiding the difficult sounds, as most elves do, or some clever bit of magic, as is
common. The most eccentric thing about him, though, was his purity of focus. He dedicated himself to knowledge of the soul, without concern for politics, or even the core principles of what we were attempting to accomplish."

Valencia took note of how he said these things, that obstinate pride in the purpose of the Second Empire. Heshnel would apologize for specific aspects, or even, sometimes, say that it had all been a calamity, but much of it would be empty words, said to pacify or further his aims, rather than because he actually believed it to be true.

He and Solace could be set at each other’s throats with a single sentence, if need be. Someone might even do it on accident.

“What did he work on?” asked Valencia.

“Everything,” replied Heshnel. “Comparative studies to catalog the differences between species, studies with other mages to see how the soul interacted with their domain, studies with entads to see what parts of the soul they were touching, and how, … and yes, the more problematic aspects of the soul.” He hesitated, unsure of how to phrase it so that Fallatehr would come out best. He knew that some of the things he had to say would sound reprehensible to her, but he wanted her to see Fallatehr as he saw Fallatehr. He wanted to imprint his mindstate on her own.

There was a distant part of Heshnel that had gotten used to freely adjusting the internals of other people, and longed for that power once again.

“He studied non-anima. He studied the hells. He studied Animalia, renacim, the loci, all manner of things, sometimes at a remove, through commenting on studies done by others, and sometimes on his own, attempting to solve the open questions, or to check what he saw as sloppy work.” Heshnel paused, watching Valencia, seeing how she was reacting. She could have kept her face blank and allowed him to assume that she was concealing her opinion from him, but instead she affected confusion and doubt.

“That’s why he made me,” said Valencia. “He wanted to know more about the soul.” She couldn’t pretend to come to an epiphany, that would be too obvious, but she could pretend that she was slotting the fact of her existence into the broader picture that Heshnel was trying to paint.

“He thought the soul was elemental, a basic fact of reality and consciousness,” said Heshnel. “And yet the existence of the non-anima showed otherwise.” He paused. “I am sorry, for what you went through. People may claim that you are not a person, but it’s only because it’s easier for them to justify what they have done to you.”

“He knew I was a person,” said Valencia. “That doesn’t make it better. It makes it worse.” It wasn’t what she should have said, if she were trying her best to manipulate him.

“It makes it worse,” nodded Heshnel. He only seemed to come to the understanding as he said it. He was still searching for some way to make himself the better person, to justify the things that he and the others had done. Valencia watched his mind as revealed through his mannerisms as he came up short. “Forgive me,” he said. “I need some time to think.”

“You held out hope that he was alive,” said Valencia. “You hoped that it might one day be possible to rescue him from prison, and you knew that he’d escaped having his education stripped from him.” And you had hope, until a few weeks ago, that he could teach you once more, so that you could regain what you had to give up.

“Yes,” said Heshnel. He was hesitant. He’d gained some skill at deflecting away from his past, but
that skill was useless here. “I know he wasn’t kind to you. I wish that I could say that was because he had his reasons.”

The unspoken, ‘but I can’t’, hung in the air.

Valencia could see the good in everyone. With her augmentations (Jorge’s word), that came with the territory, but she was very careful to seek out the good parts, just so she would know where the light shone brightest within them. For Heshnel Elec, it was the way he wore his guilt, bone deep, so deep that she would never have seen it. He knew that things had gone wrong, even though he still believed in the ideals, even as he still wanted to defend his compatriots. He was incapable of self-directed change, incapable of doing better the next time, he’d already proven that by bringing together a band of murderers to kill Uther, but he wore his guilt well, and ruminated on it in a way that Valencia found pleasing.

She felt the itch to change him, to craft him into a better version of himself. It would take time and careful speech, especially if she didn’t want to reveal the devils she was using, but she thought she could probably do it.

She had thought she could manipulate people before.

“I have some books,” Valencia said instead, releasing the devil’s skills from her reservoir. “They’re about a young orphan who becomes a wizard. Would you like to read them?” Heshnel stared at her. “They might help us understand one another a bit better.”

Heshnel looked to the plants in his garden, the ones that he was planning to pluck or reap. He was thinking, and Valencia no longer knew what it was he was thinking about.

“Yes,” said Heshnel, slowly, turning back to look at her. “It’s been a long time since I’ve read for pleasure.”
“Did this ever happen to Uther?” I asked Raven. “Did he ever meet people from Earth? Not the
dream-skewered, but, um --”

“No one matching the names on the list my father was holding at Speculation and Scrutiny,” said
Raven. We were still standing around on campus, having not moved too much, even after Reimer
had left. “As for appearances … ?” She gestured at her own face.

“Right,” I said. “Right.”

“Juniper, it’s going to be okay,” said Amaryllis. She reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder,
and weirdly, it did make me feel better.

I took a breath. “If Reimer is here, and thinks that he knows me, that means that the person whose
body this is, is me, or an Aerb-equivalent, and the quest text --”

“Quest text?” asked Amaryllis.

“Sorry,” I said. I closed my eyes and repeated it back for them, fast as I could. “That implies there are
Aerb equivalents for everyone that I knew on Earth. Different, because they’d have to be, given how
different our cultures are, but … probably all there just to fuck with me.”

“He didn’t recognize me,” said Raven.

“No,” I said. “I noticed that.”

“If you didn’t want to interact with this quest, you shouldn’t have given him your address,” said
Amaryllis. “This campus is big enough that you would never have had to meet him again.”

“I shouldn’t have met him this time,” I said. “It’s coincidence, which means that it’s really the
Dungeon Master.” I screwed my eyes shut. “Urgh, all I want to do is just complete the quests, how
hard is that? How hard is it to just go take a week of classes and then meditate for a bit without stupid
doppelgangers showing up all the time?” I opened my eyes and looked at Raven. “No offense.”

“What’s a doppelganger?” asked Raven.

“Oh,” I said. “Changeling?”

“That’s not what I am,” said Raven with a frown. “You mean people who look like those you knew
on Earth?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry. It’s just, with you, Bethel taking on Tiff’s form, and now Reimer showing
up, I just wanted a normal college adventure. I didn’t think that was asking too much.”

“Who is Tiff?” asked Raven.

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“It’s not,” said Amaryllis. “She was Juniper’s girlfriend on Earth. They dated. You’ve seen her,
incidentally. She’s the form that Bethel first took, when she went by Kuum Doona. That appearance
was taken from drawings by Uther, and honed by his instruction.” A lesser person might have
paused, to let the gravity of ‘instruction’ sink in.
“I see,” replied Raven. “And some version of her, and all your other friends, are here on Aerb? Simulacra of the players who played in your games?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“It was the most likely scenario for that quest,” said Amaryllis. She turned to Raven. “I have long lists of guesses for each of them.”

“You predicted this?” I asked.

“No, I wracked my brain thinking about all the things that it could be, ordered them from least likely to most likely, and this one, counterparts from Earth, was the most likely,” said Amaryllis. “I did think that it was more likely to be your mother and father though, rather than your friends.”

“Shit,” I said. “They’re probably there too.” I groaned. “I know I’m being a big baby about this, but I really don’t want to talk to my mom and dad if I can at all help it.”

“Even if there’s easy experience in it for you?” asked Amaryllis.

“We don’t even know if there is experience,” I said. “Though …”

“What?” asked Amaryllis.

I sighed. “Though, if I think about it, our Aerb equivalents didn’t play D&D, because it doesn’t exist on Aerb, which means that they had their own ruleset.”

Amaryllis paused. “Meaning?” she finally asked. “Meaning what, that they might have been playing a, a game that maps to the system?” She didn’t have to say which system. It was the system that we’d spent a fair chunk of our time together looking over and trying to infer the rules of.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “No, they have not. That would literally be the strangest thing to have ever happened. It would require truly obscene levels of manipulation by the Dungeon Master, beyond anything that he’s done before, and … and there are things on your character sheet that aren’t public knowledge, aren’t there? Things that your alternate wouldn’t possibly have been able to know or deduce?”

“It’s just a theory,” I said. “Not even a theory, just … what came to mind. If they’re Aerb equivalents, then what did they play? Aerb doesn’t have tabletop gaming, at least so far as I’ve been told. If you wanted to translate those people, my friends, then you would have to give them something else to do, and different things to talk about.”

“Meaning that we might finally get a manual,” said Amaryllis. There was a gleam in her eyes.

When we returned to Bethel, Pallida was waiting by the door, leaned up against it and in a different outfit than she’d been wearing when we’d initially seen her. I wondered whether she had stolen those clothes. There would be no reason for her to, given how rich she was, and how much it might jeopardize what we were doing here, but she’d spoken fondly of thievery in the past, and seemed to have no compunctions about stealing.

“You’re down some members,” she said as we approached.

“Grak and Solace went their own way,” I said. “You haven’t seen them?”
Pallida shook her head. “You’re a student now, I take it?”

“Yes,” I said. “It will take more time than planned. You’re settling in?”

“I am,” nodded Pallida. “Just wanted to hold off on going in until the rest of you were back. There are a lot of strange and dangerous things in that house, no offense.”

“At this range, she can hear you,” I said with a raised eyebrow.

“Can she?” asked Pallida. She glanced back at the door to Bethel. “I thought you said that she extended some kind of thing beneath us, back on Poran?”

“Well, you’re a fool if you think she hasn’t spread herself as far and wide as she can,” I replied. “My guess would be that she’s got tendrils laced through the block as far as she possibly can, allowing her to monitor everyone around us.” I looked around, hoping that we weren’t drawing attention. “We should go inside.”

When we went through the door, Bethel was waiting for us. “It’s a fifth of a mile, actually,” she said with a grin. “Or a tenth of a mile in any direction, if I want to go all ways, but I thought it most prudent to spread myself along the street, as that’s the avenue of most likely approach. It’s all my domain, and I’m graciously allowing the houses and shops around us to continue existing.”

“Good,” I said. “You should talk with Grak about security. That’s his forte.”

“You really think that this house needs more security?” asked Pallida as she flopped down into a chair. The room we were in was a decoy of sorts, a bog standard living room of the kind that you would expect from a magical house that had sprung up on an empty lot. Somewhat quaintly, it fit within the confines of the exterior spatial reality.

Bethel had made it grudgingly, as it eschewed her normal aesthetic, and it was obvious to me that she had deliberately gone over-the-top to make a parody of a coziness, with overstuffed chairs, tassels on the furniture and rugs, useless knick-knacks taking up too much shelf space, pictures covering one wall, and a crackling fireplace that screamed ‘home’ almost as loudly as the knit afghans did. It was clearly meant to be twee and oozing saccharine sentimentality, but I kind of loved it.

“I don’t want laziness or complacency to undercut us,” I said. “Grak’s a better warder than Bethel, and if he hasn’t given his input yet, then he should as soon as possible.” I turned to Bethel. “No offense, obviously.”

“None taken,” she shrugged.

“One other thing,” I said, sitting down in one of the big, comfy chairs. “We might have a guest in the next day or two. Reimer.”

“Your friend?” asked Bethel, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes,” I said. “Or something that goes by the same name. Presumed non-hostile, so don’t get any ideas. I’m sure that you read the description in Amaryllis’ files, but --”

Bethel held out her hand, palm up, and showed me a miniature illusion of Reimer. She reached up with delicate hands and pulled on his arms, like she was going to rip him apart, but instead, more bodies accordioned out, maybe a dozen in all, holding hands and hanging down in a chain. It was almost everyone from Earth who held any importance to me.

“How?” I asked.
“She has the Dagger of Dreamspeech,” said Amaryllis. “She can look into our dreams.” She said it like it was obvious. I’d seen that item in the manifest, but I hadn’t realized the implication that she would be pulling information out of our dreams with it. “It’s good,” said Amaryllis. “If you can show these to the others, it will help us to make positive identification and prevent miscommunication.”

“Is she out there too?” asked Bethel. “Tiff?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Hrm,” said Bethel. “Then I suppose I’d like a chat with her, when she’s available.”

Solace and Grak were slow to come back, but when they did, they had information.

“There was a death at Sound and Silence,” said Grak. “It happened in the temple during meditation three months ago. Many meditate there at once, but the circumstances are shrouded in mystery.”

“You would assume deaths,” said Amaryllis. “Five hundred people each week, that’s twenty-six thousand over the course of a year. Sure, they’re likely to be healthier than average, and they’re probably screened, with medical staff on standby, but embolisms happen.”

“You wouldn’t expect it to be shrouded in mystery,” I said. I frowned at Grak, thinking it through. “You also wouldn’t expect that if a single death were notable, it would happen so close to me arriving. And … it was around the time that I came to Aerb, so maybe it was setup for that.”

“Maybe,” nodded Amaryllis. “Or maybe it’s meaningless noise.” She gave a hollow little laugh. “There’s a trap in trying to see the narrative in everything, because there are red herrings, and even beyond red herrings, there are some things that are just scenery. ‘Not everything is a clue’.”

“I don’t really care about narrative,” I said. “What happens, happens. I do want to know what’s happening in Li’o though, so that we’re not blind-sided and having to play catch-up with all of the things we could have read up on in our free time.”

“There’s something else,” said Grak.

“Lots of somethings, actually,” said Solace.

“Something important,” said Grak, glancing at Solace for a moment with a frown. “The Demonblooded Festival, a week from now.”

“They throw a festival for the Demonblooded?” I asked, momentarily confused.

“Public effigies,” said Grak. “Then a public execution.”

“Really?” I asked. I was taken aback. “Here?”

“They’re not a protected class,” said Amaryllis with a frown. “It’s not uncommon for there to be some differences of agreement in how they should be treated.”

“But they’re not actually infernals,” I said. “You can’t just execute someone because of how they were born.”

“You can,” said Valencia.

“Well, you shouldn’t,” I replied.
“The demonblooded is a criminal,” said Grak. “Or so I was told.”

“Really?” I asked. “The demonblooded are rare, do they really have so many of them here that they regularly get charged with capital crimes? This small city-state we’re in just naturally executes that many demonblooded that they happen to have one on hand? Even without looking at them, I’m pretty sure that the demographics don’t work out.” I paused. “Or the demongraphics, if you prefer.”

“I do not prefer,” said Bethel.

“It has nothing to do with us,” said Amaryllis. “We can’t go around fixing every injustice we pass by.”

“Uther would have,” said Raven.

“Uther was insane,” said Pallida.

“He wasn’t insane,” I replied. “He believed that there was a narrative, and he was probably right.”

“That’s not why he wanted to help the downtrodden,” said Raven, folding her arms. “He wasn’t trying to do good just for, for points, because he thought there would be a reward at the end.”

“That would be the best interpretation of him,” said Pallida. “If there was actually a point to it, instead of just the universe rewarding him for what was sometimes objectively terrible decision making? If he was actually playing the game?” She snorted. “That might actually make me like the man.”

“We don’t know,” I said. I fucking hated playing peacemaker. It reminded me too much of when my parents would fight. “If we find him and can talk to him, then he can tell us what the reality of his situation was. I don’t want to judge him before then, not if it means making assumptions about what circumstances he was facing.”

“Yes,” said Bethel. She had set up a spike and was impaling the small figures of my Earth friends on it with a scowl on her face. They gave inaudible screams and writhed as she punctured their guts, one by one. “Yes, Uther might have had reasons for what he did, reasons which would make it all perfectly acceptable.” The last of the figures was Tiff, Bethel held her up by the wrist, pinching it between thumb and forefinger. Bethel looked at the illusion, for a moment, then looked past it, to me. “Speak like that inside me again, and I’ll kill you all.” She began ripping Tiff apart, limb by limb, moving with furious calm.

“I’m sorry,” I began.

Bethel disappeared, leaving the miniature corpses behind. She was using her illusion power to do it, just to send a message.

“Well,” said Pallida. She pursed her lips. “That was something.”

“She can hear everything you say,” said Raven.

“Like you would shed a tear if she killed me,” replied Pallida.

“You have valuable skills,” said Amaryllis. “No one wants you dead.”

Pallida put her hand to her chest in mock outrage. “You wound me, princess.” She looked over at the bodies, which were still slowly sliding down the spike that Bethel had made. “Is that just going to stay there then?”
“Yes,” I said. It made my stomach churn. “I probably deserve that.”

“Would she actually kill all of us?” asked Raven.

“Yes,” I replied. “I think so. She’s not in the habit of issuing idle threats.” I chewed my lip for a moment. “I agree with her though. There’s no conceivable reason that he should have done what he did to her. There’s nothing that logically paints him in a good light there.” There were things that weren’t logical, scenarios that were possible but so highly improbable that they had to be immediately discarded. Maybe the Dungeon Master had given Uther instructions of some kind, maybe there was a prophecy that had to be fulfilled … maybe. It was possible. I wasn’t about to say that out loud though.

Reimer arrived late at night, just when I’d started to think that he was going to wait for the next day. He was standing around in the cozy living room when I reached him, looking nervous.

“Hey man,” he said. “Do you just want to talk here?”

“Sure,” I said. I glanced at where the miniature version of him had taken a spike to the gut, making sure that it was all completely gone.

“You’ve dressed down,” he said, looking me over like he was trying to verify that I existed.

I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, my usual back on Earth, though it was all of Aerbian provenance, plus the vambrace that would let me move into combat mode at a moment’s notice. Reimer was wearing practically the same thing as back on Earth, though he had the Aerb equivalent of sneakers, with hard rubber on the soles. He even had a baseball cap on, the kind that he’d always worn back on Earth. Setting aside the minor differences, it was like we were sitting down together back in Bumblefuck.

“Tell me about home,” I said.

“Nah,” replied Reimer, sitting back. “How about you tell me about whatever crazy shit you’ve been up to in the last five months, and then maybe I’ll tell you.”

I sighed, and mentally tucked away ‘five months’ for later. “I went to jail,” I said.

“Prison,” replied Reimer. “Jail is for the shire, prison is for the kingdom.”

“Right,” I said. “Prison. I spent some time there, tried to keep my head down, and then got put up for trial by adversity. We were dropped over the Risen Lands.”

“Shit,” said Riemer. “How the fuck did you make it out of that?”

“I made a friend,” I said. “She helped me to fix up a soulcycle and we rode to the wall. From there …” I paused. Whoever he really was, however much the differences between him and the real Reimer, I hated lying to him.

“That’s a bunch of bullshit,” said Reimer. “No way you made a friend.”


“And the girl?” asked Reimer. “Because I’m not going to outright say that’s Amaryllis Penndraig, but I know for a fact that she was dropped around the same time you were, and she looks almost
exactly like she did on the poster.”

(The poster, according to Amaryllis, had been for a group called the Future Leaders of Anglecynn. While there were a whole host of princes and princesses in Anglecynn, occupying the top level of decision-making for almost everything in their kingdom, there was a distinct and perpetual shortage of subordinate managers, maybe because of the lack of upward mobility. The FLA was a sponsored school club with chapters all over Anglecynn. It had a bunch of benefits for the kids who could qualify to join, including a yearly trip to Caledwich to see the seat of government and talk to some of the princes and princesses. Amaryllis had been the face of the program, because she was the right combination of young, high-ranking, and pretty.)

“I think you have an inflated idea of what I’ve been up to,” I said. “She’s a high ranking government official. That’s all I’m going to say about her. Now, can you tell me about what’s been going on at home?”

“Not much,” said Reimer. “You know, you could have written a letter once you were safe.”

“Reimer, you’ve gotta give me more than that,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t write.”

“Yeah, well, tell that to Tiff,” he said. “She’s worried sick about you.”

“Is she,” I hesitated. “Here?”

“Here?” asked Reimer. “Fuck no.” He gave me a concerned look. “You know she had her heart set on Claw and Clocks.”

“Oh,” I said. “I just … I wanted to see her.”

“Yeah, sounds about right, you bumped into me, and you wanted to see Tiff,” said Reimer. “Send her a fucking letter, if you care so much. She knows about you and Maddie, by the way.”

_Fuck you, alternate Juniper, why couldn’t you have been a better person?_ “How’s Maddie?” I asked.

“Dropped out of high school,” said Reimer. He said it with a casual air. “Not that you actually give a shit.”

I scowled at him. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Yeah?” asked Reimer. “Joon, I’m happy to see you, I’m glad you’re not dead, but everything that happened to you was your own fucking fault. If you didn’t want me to be mean, then you should have been a better person.”

“I’m trying,” I said. “I’m really, really, trying.”

“So send Tiff a fucking letter then, asshole!” asked Reimer. “Does it really take me bumping into you and telling you that to make you see that you should have done it ages ago? Bad enough you ghosted her, bad enough you fucked Maddie, but for you to just sit there like you’re totally oblivious to what she needs?” He shook his head. “Come on, man.”

“Sorry,” I said. “You’re right.”

“Okay,” I said. I closed my eyes and let out a breath. “You really piss me off, you know that?”

“That’s why we were such good friends,” said Reimer. He gave me a sardonic smile. “When you weren’t being such a whiny little shit about everything, or a backstabbing cunt.”

<Amaryllis would like you to ask about the games,> Bethel said into my head. It was the first thing I’d heard her say since she’d threatened to kill me. She could have just relayed the message in Mary’s own voice, but she’d chosen this as an olive branch.

“Did you bring any of your game stuff with to S&S?” I asked. It was an open-ended question, one that he would hopefully help me fill in the blanks on.

Reimer shook his head. “Your mom wouldn’t let me have any of it,” he said. “I’m not sure what she did with it. I was tempted to break in, but Tom talked me out of it.” He laughed. “You always argued that you could and should rewrite the system from the ground up. I guess we’re going to see how accurate that is, unless you’re planning on going home anytime soon.”

“No,” I said.

<I’m not sure that I’m going to be able to get away with telling him nothing,> I thought.

<Was that for me or her?> asked Bethel’s voice.

<Either,> I replied. <Both.>

<Amaryllis says to give him a minimal version of the truth, but try other things first,> said Bethel.

<She’s eager to hear what he knows.>

“I have a question,” I said.

“About Tom?” asked Reimer. “Or Craig?”

“Well,” I said. “I guess I want to know what they’re both up to.”

“Tom’s doing an apprenticeship, something to do with machine tools,” said Reimer. “Craig got himself recruited into the Host, just like he’d always talked about.” He shrugged. “It’s a cushy job, if you can get it, and assuming that a war doesn’t break out, and assuming you don’t end up doing wetwork for one of the princes. He probably won’t get court-martialed.”

“Thanks,” I said, and I meant it. I wondered how that compared to their post-graduation fates on Earth. “My question was … I don’t know if there’s a good way to ask this. How do you describe our games, to other people?”

Reimer frowned at me. “That’s your question?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Humor me.”

“Well, first off, I don’t,” said Reimer. “It’s never come up in conversation, because why would it? But if it did, I would probably talk about the minis, I guess. More tactile, easier to put into words. Otherwise you have to start talking about the character ledgers, and it makes it sound weird. Why?”

I grimaced. “I … I’ve been through some shit,” I said. “I don’t … I don’t remember it all.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, narrowing his eyes. “You forgot the rules?”

“Most of them, yeah,” I said. “It’s bits and pieces. And what’s left are just, I don’t know, jumbled.
Even the campaigns, it doesn’t fit together like it should. I just know that it was important to me. It was such a big chunk of my life.” That was a guess. I was hoping that it was a good one.

“How can you just forget two hundred pages of rules?” asked Reimer. “You’re just going to go ‘blah, blah, blah, and then I was out of the Risen Lands with a secret job and a brain like Swiss cheese’?”

“Swiss?” I asked.

“You really forgot?” asked Reimer. “You really just … you don’t remember any of the jokes either?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There’s an entad that eats memories, and I got hit pretty bad. I just … I want to know, mechanically, how the system functioned.”

Reimer stared at me. “Ten attributes,” he finally said. “Three physical, three mental, three social, and luck, based on, I think, something you read about bone mages. Does that ring a bell?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And … skills?”

Reimer was still staring at me. He nodded. “Two hundred and fifty-six,” he said. “Most of them worthless, mind you.”

“Woodworking?” I asked.

Reimer laughed. “What the fuck is up with you?” he asked. “What is this bullshit about not remembering any of it? Like, I knew you’d gone off your nut, but man, it’s not like you to screw with me. Not like this, anyway.”

“Can you just -- can you tell me what you mean?” I asked.

“Woodworking 100,” he said. “It was … you fucked up the system, like you always fucked up the system -- I, I don’t mean that as a dig, but you just added all this shit in because you were reading something, or you thought it was cool, and so the system had a lot of crap grafted onto it. You remember that much, right?”

“I guess,” I replied. “And … Woodworking 100?”

“It was … you remember virtues?” he asked.


“Yeah,” replied Reimer. He kept looking at me like I was crazy, which would have been less crazy than the truth. “Yeah,” he repeated. “I always said we should just call them something else, because you had all this crazy shit lumped in under virtues, even if it was just mechanical garbage, not actual virtues.”

“Woodworking 100,” I repeated.

“So … there are skills, which have caps from the attributes, and skills have numerical levels of their own,” said Reimer. He had apparently switched gears, wanting to explain things to me rather than question what I did or didn’t know. “Skills get skill-specific virtues at either level 10 or 20, then every twenty levels beyond that, with the final one coming at level 100. They got better as they went, usually, except for a few times you misjudged what was good and what was objectively terrible. For Woodworking, they were all about being able to be a better woodworker, or carpenter, or whatever, and the capstone virtue was that you could make anything out of wood.” He raised an eyebrow. “
“Ah,” I said. “That … seems dumb of me.”

“Yes,” said Reimer, sitting back with a smile. “So we got in this huge fight about it, and I quit playing until … until Arthur came to talk to me about it.” His satisfaction faded away as he said that.

“Amaryllis wants more,” said Bethel.

“I have a lot of money,” I said. “Can I convince you to write down every single thing you can remember about the system?”

Reimer’s eyes widened. “Joon, I’m just starting at the Athenaeum, I have classes in two days, I can’t just --”

A pile of cash appeared in mid-air between us and fell to the ground in bundles. Reimer stared at it, then looked up at me.

“One quarter million obols,” said Bethel.

“That’s a quarter million obols,” I said.

“The fuck,” said Reimer, looking down at the cash. “How’d you do that?”

“Entad,” I said.

“You have entads?” he asked. He pointed at the vambrace. “More than just whatever that one is?”

“A few,” I replied.

Reimer looked down at the money. “That’s … yeah. Sure. I’ll write down what I know.” He looked back up at me. “You’re not going to tell me more?”

“It’s classified,” I replied.

“It’s classified, and you’re going to pay me the cost of a house to write down the rules of a game that you mostly invented?” asked Reimer. “That’s nuts. That’s insane. And I don’t know if you know this, but I never knew the full rules, because you split the system in two. There were rules you never shared with us.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Whatever you can remember.”

Reimer kept staring at me. “So I could just write down whatever I wanted, and you’d have no way of knowing?”

_Fucking Reimer_ “Are you seriously trying to munchkin this?”

“Munchkin?” he asked.

“Look, it’s money in exchange for the ruleset,” I said. “I’m friends with some very powerful people these days, so just write down the fucking rules, and if I get a chance to compare them to what’s back home and it looks like you were just fucking with me, I’ll … I’ll be pretty pissed off.”

Reimer looked like he was about to laugh, then looked down at the money. “Send a letter to Tiff,” he said. He met my eyes. “Tom too. Then I’ll do it.”
I wanted to object that I was giving him a pile of cash for writing down a partial set of rules for the system that I had apparently created, but I held my tongue and nodded. When I did, a yellow legal pad and a mechanical pencil dropped into his lap, startling him.

“I need to take a breather,” I said. “If you want coffee or water or anything to eat, just say it loudly and clearly into the air.”

“A bar of gold,” Reimer said, in the direction of the ceiling.

A bar of gold dropped from the ceiling onto the ground between his feet, narrowly missing his feet and denting the hardwood floor. Reimer stared at it, then looked at me.

“I wasn’t actually expecting that to work,” he said. He looked back down at the gold bar.

“You can’t take it with you,” I said with a sigh. “Please don’t ask for anything dangerous, because you’re likely to get it.”

Reimer looked at me for a moment, then opened his mouth again. “A naked woman with --”

“Pretend it’s a genie,” I said. “Pretend that it’s a horribly malicious genie that will answer the letter of the request but not the spirit, if you try to ask it for anything besides, I don’t know, chocolate and tea. Actually, pretend that it doesn’t even care that much about the letter of the request and is perfectly capable, willing, and eager to cut off all your fingers if you’re being inconvenient. Okay?”

Reimer hesitated. “Why are you no fun?” he asked, but he had no conviction in his voice.

“I’m going to step into the other room,” I said. “Write, please, I’ll be back when you’re done.”

“How will you know?” asked Reimer.

“I’ll know,” I replied.

I went through the door to the next room, where everyone was waiting.

“There are a lot of implications,” said Amaryllis. “We have two days until the start of term. I’m of the opinion that we should go to the Sporsan, which is where Juniper’s body is if the worldline was interpreted right, and get the manual tonight.”

“You’d have to do it without me,” I said. “I don’t want to go there, I don’t want to see it, I don’t want to have anything to do with any of it.”

“There’s a manual,” said Amaryllis. “Even if half of it is incorrect, it would still be invaluable. We would get to know how outcomes are determined within the system, what the virtues for higher levels of skills are, we’d --”

“It’s the Dungeon Master fucking with me again,” I said. “I don’t want to go back to Earth, and I really don’t want to go see a playhouse Aerb version of my hometown with all the familiar faces twisted and warped by being transplanted here. I’m not doing it. You can do it. Take Bethel, take the Egress, take the key, I don’t actually care, just leave me out of it.”

“He didn’t recognize me,” said Raven. “But he mentioned Maddie.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I meant to talk to you about that, before, but --”

“It’s fine,” said Raven.
“I’ll volunteer for the team that’s going to Juniper’s hometown,” said Solace.

“It’s not actually my hometown,” I replied. “It’s a mockery of it.”

“I’ll go too,” said Grak. “You’ll want a warder.”

Amaryllis nodded. “We can’t use the key without a worldline close by,” she said. “We’ll take the Egress. I plan to leave tonight.”

“Reimer recognized you,” I said.

“I’ll be in full plate,” Amaryllis replied. “Someone else can do the sweet talking.” She glanced at Valencia.

“I’ll come,” she said. She paused, then looked at me. “Though … with your parents, do you want me to refrain from seeing them?”

“Do whatever you want,” I said. “Accomplish the mission. Just please don’t tell me about it. I know too much about those people anyway.” I tried to get myself to calm down. I wasn’t particularly happy with this turn of events. “Sorry,” I said. “I’m just … a bit emotional right now, and if I don’t have to go back home, or whatever it is that’s standing in for home, then I’m not going to. End of story.”

“It’s a quest, Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t know if we can actually complete a quest without you.” She pursed her lips. “We’ll try. But if we get held captive by forces of unimaginable power, I’ll consider it within my rights to say that I told you so.”

I turned to Bethel, then realized that while we were standing inside her, she hadn’t given herself a material form.

“Bethel?” I asked the air. “Is he writing?”

<Yes,> she replied, into my mind.

“Okay,” I replied. I looked to Amaryllis. “Be careful, when you go.”

“We’d benefit from someone who knew the layout,” said Amaryllis. “Someone who was, if not a local, then something close to one.”

I sighed. “There’s nothing for me there,” I said. “You’ll be bringing an extreme amount of firepower into a town of ten thousand people, where the local weapons are likely incapable of hurting you.”

We’d figured out the town from the teleportation key awhile ago, because there wasn’t a good reason not to. My internal name for it was Fumblebuck.

“We’ll be going into Anglecynn,” said Amaryllis.

“We’ve been in Anglecynn before,” I said. “It was a stopover when we were going to Sulid Isle.”

“I’m no longer asking you to come with,” said Amaryllis. “I just want to clarify that there’s a strong possibility that it is, in fact, dangerous. The Egress is extremely fast and hard to detect, but if we trip a rapid-response team, there might be trouble.”

“We should talk to Jorge and Finch,” said Valencia.

Amaryllis winced. “I’d rather that Uniquities doesn’t know where we’re going. If our existence becomes more public than it already is, then someone might try to use these people against Juniper.”
“We’re trying to stay in Finch’s good graces, right?” I asked. “I figure we can only count on him to bail us out of international incidents another five or six times.”

Amaryllis sighed. “Point taken,” she said. “We’ll land the *Egress* on the Isle of Poran and give him a talk, but so far as I’m concerned, these need to be spheres that overlap as little as possible, at least to anyone on the outside. Juniper, you would put Tiff in danger if you talked to her, do you understand that?”

“I don’t want to talk to her,” I said.

“Really?” asked Amaryllis. She raised an eyebrow.

“I want to talk to the real her, not the Aerb-equivalent version of her,” I said. “Right now, all I want to do is get through a week’s worth of classes, a week’s worth of meditation, and then plow through the next thing. Mixing quests together doesn’t appeal to me. The whole idea that there are almost-but-not-quite copies of everyone I cared about is … well, existentially terrifying, obviously, but I’m not going to have them be used as a tool against me, and I don’t care about them any more than I care about some randos off the street.”

There was an awkward silence after I’d said that.

“I think that was a lie,” said Valencia.

“Of course it was a lie,” said Grak.

“I assumed it was a lie, and I barely even know him,” said Pallida.

Valencia frowned. “Well I didn’t want anyone to think I was using --”

“Alright,” I said, throwing up my hands. “Fine. I care, a bit. But what does it even do for me to meet with any of them and tell them that their friend is effectively dead, replaced by a close-enough clone, and that I’m sorry for whatever it was he did, because I did something similar to *their* close-enough clones? How does that help anything?”

“It might make you feel better,” said Grak, grumbling slightly, as though he was taking pains to point out the obvious.

“Maybe later,” I said. “Mary, you can go off and do the quest on your own, or just grab the manual, or whatever you want.”

“That’s what I’ll do,” she said with a nod. “Anyone else?” she asked, looking around. “Heshnel, Pallida? There’s a strong chance that we’ll be back before the night is over.”

“I have a garden to tend,” said Heshnel.

“I’d love to,” said Pallida. “I’ve got plans tonight though.”

“Plans?” asked Raven.

“Yes, *plans*, young one,” Pallida stifled a sigh. “I’m an adult woman, and I have plans.”

“That’s fine,” said Amaryllis. She turned back to me. For a moment, it looked like she was going to ask me one last time whether I was sure that I didn’t want to go, but instead she only said, “Wish us luck. Keep an eye on Reimer.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding slowly. “Good luck.”
She filed out, with the others, and Heshnel left at the same time, leaving me alone with Pallida and Raven.

<Still writing?> I asked Bethel.

<He took a break to summon a variety of drinks and snacks,> replied Bethel. <Now he’s writing again.>

<Thank you,> I replied.

<You’re welcome,> she said. I was surprised by that. I hadn’t actually expected a response to basic politeness.

“Okay,” I said, turning to Pallida and Raven. “Can we hash this out, somehow? The two of you together are bordering on causing some actual problems within this team, and I’d like to address it now, while it’s convenient, rather than have it go on.”

“Nope,” said Pallida. She let her ink-black armor surround her, slipping over her skin and shaping to fit her. “I’ve got stuff to do. Besides, you seem like you would suck at this kind of thing, and Maddie’s not too happy with you right now.” She went out the door with a saunter, leaving me alone with Raven (and, obviously, Bethel, who was always assumed to be listening in).

“I meant to tell you about the Maddie thing,” I said.

“Did you?” she asked. She was sitting down in one of the conference room’s chairs, and was watching me impassively.

“I did,” I said. “Didn’t seem appropriate when we first met though.”

“How old was she?” asked Raven.

“Fifteen,” I replied. “I was seventeen.” I didn’t want to say anything that felt like a defense.

“Oh,” she said. “When I met Uther … I was twelve, in human terms. I thought, maybe, she was … I thought maybe that’s how old she was.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know why there’s an age difference. Though he was how old when you met him, in his early twenties? If I had to guess at intent, then maybe it was for you to always be a child in his eyes.”

Raven held herself still. “I see.”

<That’s not what she wanted to hear,> said Bethel.

<You’re whispering advice now?> I asked.

<You need it,> said Bethel.

“Can I ask,” said Raven. “Can you, um, tell me about her?”

“Not much to tell,” I said. “She had an older brother, Craig, they were raised by their mother, absent father … there was a thing called the ‘internet’, which I’d have to get into the weeds on to really help you understand her. I think it was sort of like, uh, the Republic of Letters, if you ever had an equivalent? A group of people writing letters back and forth?”

(The Republic of Letters was a 17th and 18th century international clique that almost all of the
greatest thinkers of the time were in. They talked to each other by letter, and when they were co-
located, met in salons, creating an intellectual movement that in theory transcended their borders and
cross-pollinated ideas and theories far and wide. In practice, there were some bitter feuds and
rivalries, which made good fodder for D&D adventures. I assumed that they either existed on Aerb,
or had in the past.)

“The Society of Letters?” asked Raven. “I was a member.”

“At twelve?” I asked. “Or, twelve equivalent?”

“I was precocious,” said Raven, without a trace of humor in her voice. “I used a pseudonym. When
you’re as old as I am, people just see you as a fixture.”

Okay,” I said. “Well, the internet is like the Society of Letters, but there’s no barrier to entry,
communication is instant, and it’s completely anonymous if you want it to be,” I said. “There are
very few checks and balances. So, that was the Society of Letters that Maddie was a part of, and a lot
of it was just … insane, by Aerb’s standards. And she was in the thick of it, spent most of her time
neck-deep in it, and it sometimes made her a bit hard to understand, or to deal with, because it was
like she was from this other culture, and it was one that we didn’t share with her.”

Raven looked away from me. “I can relate,” she said, staring at the wall. She finally looked back.
“The Society of Letters was one of my assets,” she said. “It was one of the things that made me
valuable to Uther. And it was one of the reasons that I wanted to go with him, to see the world.
There were so many people that I talked with only through written words, people that I felt like I
knew, but had never seen in the flesh.”

“Must have been a shock to them,” I said. “To see that you were, to all appearances, a child.”

“Yes,” said Raven. “I thought it would be fun. It wasn’t always pleasant. Eventually word got out.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“And then … Uther was in the middle of making his mark. He knew things that no one else did. He
had ideas that didn’t occur to anyone else. He was, it’s obvious in retrospect, from the future, or
something like it, from a society that had already done all the hard work of figuring things out.” She
sighed. “I was his go-between with the Society of Letters. I was valuable, because I knew people,
and I knew what they knew, and I could help to connect him. I was valuable because I was the
person that they had to talk to in order to get Uther’s ear.”

“Sorry,” I said. “None of this stuff is mentioned in your biographies.”

“No,” said Raven. “It was a sad, personal struggle, trying to be taken seriously, wanting to fit in, and
finally getting it, only for it to all be about Uther. Eventually I came to accept it, to accept that he was
this titan, and I was … not.”

“You kicked my ass,” I said. “So you have that going for you, which is nice.”

“You’re weak,” Raven replied. “You were also impaired, but beyond that, you were weak. I’m not
at the peak of my power anymore, and even then, the fight we had, it was like you were one of the
enemies I sometimes had to deal with on my own, not trivial, but not strong. The kind that Uther
could kill by the handful as a prelude to the real battle. The kind of enemy that I would fight one-on-
one while the real battle was happening elsewhere.”

“I’m trying,” I said. “He had thirty years to get that strong. I’ve had low single digit months.”
“I know,” said Raven. “I’m just trying to help you understand what’s coming. I spent a century reading the signs and seeing the end of the world. What I’ve seen, since you’ve been here? It seems like we don’t have much time.”

“I’m trying,” I said again. “It’s the reason that we’re here. I’ve just … I’ve had this level up thing hanging over my head, and now that’s maybe, hopefully dealt with, and I’ve had to use time in the chamber just to help me deal with it all. I -- I’m sorry, for how it went with Maddie. I wish that I could take it back, or do things differently, but --”

“It’s okay,” said Raven. “Uther wasn’t perfect either.”

“He had women,” I said. “At least, everyone says so. I’d wanted to ask about that.”

“None until after his wife, Zona, made it very clear that was what she wanted,” said Raven.

“That’s how it happened?” I asked. “I thought that was … farce, I guess. A cover for him.”

“No,” she replied. “He loved her. I think it’s important that you know that. After the Wandering Blight took half her body, physical affection wasn’t much of an option. Even if … if they could have managed something, she was weak and frail, intellectually capable, but physically …” Raven trailed off, then looked at me. “Most of what you’ve heard was true. She only wanted him to be happy. She was Queen of the Zorish Isles before they married, a noble’s noble, and she’d always expected that whoever her husband might end up being, he would be a philanderer. It was expected.”

“But he didn’t?” I asked. “Not until later?”

“Their marriage was a political one,” said Raven. “But he wasn’t a noble. He wasn’t even from Aerb. He had different ideas about what a husband should be to his wife.” She pursed her lips. “A lot of it was shielded from me, in those days.”

“Shielded how?” I asked.

“Some of it appeals to prurient interest,” said Raven. “The marriage wasn’t for love, it was for politics. Zona expected him to consummate it on their wedding night. Uther didn’t want to.”

I raised an eyebrow at that.

“He was conflicted,” said Raven. “She was beautiful, but for her it would have been duty, not an act of love, and he found the idea of that unwelcome, because he was enamored with her from the start. He stayed chaste, which she found irritating. Eventually, she started to really see him, not as the upstart king who vanquished the evil and took their reins of the kingdom, but as he really was, thoughtful and intelligent, with a meditative calm that gave way to decisive action. He was the Poet King, by that point, and eventually, she realized that it wasn’t just a moniker. And then they were in love,” she said, her breath catching a bit, “perfect for each other.”

“Until the blight got to her,” I replied.

Raven hesitated, then nodded. “Maybe. I still think --” she let out a sigh. “A part of me still wants him to have resisted. To have stood stoic and declared that she was the only one for him, the physical be damned. Maybe he would have, if she hadn’t tried so hard to force women on him.”

“Maybe,” I said. I was a bit skeptical.

“You don’t believe me?” she asked.
“It sounds noble,” I replied. “I just … I’m having trouble mapping that to the Arthur that I knew.” I wasn’t actually sure that it was noble, but it sure sounded noble. Arthur playing that aspect up for the purposes of his self-imposed character? Or the legitimate moral stance of someone who felt strongly about monogamy? I couldn’t actually say.

Raven shrugged. “It was who he was. When he believed in something, it was hard to shake him of it. He would adapt to new information, but he thought faster and harder than anyone else, both sides of the argument. He would answer objections before anyone had even thought to raise them.”

“But not that time?” I asked. “Not with his wife?”

“I don’t know,” said Raven. “I wasn’t privy to their discussions. There was so much that I didn’t know about him, even after thirty years together. You’ve heard that they died?”

“The women?” I asked. “Yeah.”

“That was exaggerated, with time,” said Raven. “Some of those women had no relationship with him. And there were others, who he took as lovers, that no one ever knew about. But it did happen, with regularity.” She hesitated again. “He insisted that it didn’t, that they were women in dangerous situations, that danger followed him, or that he went where the danger was, but … it was like there was something protecting him, and us, a magical effect that couldn’t be quantified or measured which allowed us to escape by the skin of our teeth, and that effect simply didn’t extend to them.”

“But why did he keep doing it then?” I asked.

“Carrying on the relationships?” she asked. I nodded. “It didn’t seem to matter, or that was what he said. If he rebuffed their advances, if he tried to manipulate things to push them out of the picture, it only seemed to end up worse. There was a woman who was smitten with him the moment we showed up, shortly after the theory was first being floated, five years after Zona had been brought back from the brink. She was bright and sunny, almost irresistibly so, and Uther pushed her away, worried that there was some curse, something placed by an ineffable power of the kind we had only just begun dealing with. He paid for her way out of town, and watched her leave on horseback.”

Raven swallowed. “We found her body three days later. There was something off about the wine we were drinking, and when we opened the keg … I still have trouble with wine sometimes.”

“Shit,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “Your friend, or whoever he is to you, Reimer, I would be careful about sending him away. I’ve been trying to put our adventures in the context of this Dungeon Master, and the games you played, and it might have been that a woman soaked in wine was a warning not to deviate from what was planned.”

She turned and walked from the room, without another word.

I sat down at the conference table and rested my head against the tall chair, cursing silently to myself. I closed my eyes and dismissed the character sheet that popped up, so that I could have some time to think. It wasn’t that late, but it felt late, maybe because I hadn’t synced up chamber use with Aerb’s day-night cycle, or maybe because too much shit had been going on lately. I didn’t blame Amaryllis for going off to Fumblebuck, not when a manual would be useful, but I really didn’t want to deal with any of it. I just wanted to go to college and have adventures, was that so wrong? If there was a narrative, why did it have to be this narrative?

“Can we talk?” asked Bethel. I opened my eyes and looked at her. It was the first time she’d made an appearance since driving the dolls through their spikes.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was trying to make peace between Raven and Pallida, and I didn’t think about how the words would sound to you. I was tunnel-visioned on the one problem and not thinking about you. I hope talking with Raven about Uther, how she viewed him, wasn’t too bad for you.”

“She’s blinded,” said Bethel. She paused, measuring what she wanted to say to me, changing tracks. She took a seat beside me, more tentative than she’d ever moved before. “I’ve killed a lot of people.”

“I know,” I replied.

“I didn’t always want to,” said Bethel, and only then did I recognize a sort of hollowness in her voice. “I was forced to, naturally, first by Narcissus, who would have hurt me otherwise, later by others who wanted me for a weapon. But some of those people I killed, I killed of my own volition, and even then, I didn’t always want to.”

She leaned forward slightly. “There was a couple who came to raid me, back before the tuung had such heavy restrictions on travel. They walked my halls, looking for magic, or at least something that they could sell. When they split up, I appeared before the woman, and told her to be quiet, or I would slit her throat. I had questions I wanted answered about the outside world. She started screaming, almost at once, and I thought to myself, well, I gave her an ultimatum, hadn’t I? And if she defies me, what choice do I have but to end her and keep true to my word?”

“But you didn’t want to,” I said with a nod.

“I didn’t,” said Bethel. “I did it anyway. It did nothing to help me accomplish my goals, it was just … without any true purpose. It didn’t set a precedent for anyone else, it didn’t get me the information I needed, I just killed her because I had said that I would, and I felt it important to follow through.”

“Yes,” said Bethel. She sat there at the table next to me and drummed her fingers on the table for a moment. “I’m not going to kill you,” she said. “I’m not going to hurt the people that you love. I was only saying that to lash out at you.”

“It is,” said Bethel. “I understand being a child.”

“Can I say again that I’m sorry?” I asked. “About earlier?”

“You can say it,” replied Bethel. “I already heard it the first time.” She cocked her head to the side. “He’s done, incidentally.”

I took me a moment to realize that she was talking about Reimer, who had been toiling away in the other room. I got up, took one last look at Bethel’s impassive face, then went to go join him.

Reimer was sitting in the same chair that I’d left him in, but his immediate surroundings had changed. He had a table beside him with eleven different drinks on it, some of them steaming and others frozen. A second table held six different plates with a variety of snacks on them, a few half-eaten.

“Hey Joon,” he said when he came in. He glanced at the drinks and snacks. “Genie’s pretty friendly,
Reimer laughed that off, then saw the set of my face. “Seriously?” he asked.

“Yup,” I said. “You’re done writing?”

“Yeah,” he said. He shook his hand. “I tried to go fast. There’s still some orientation stuff tonight I didn’t want to miss.” He stood up and passed the legal pad to me.

Written in big, bold, capital letters were the words “SUCK A DICK”.

Reimer smiled at me.

On the next page were his actual notes, and I could tell just from the way the paper had crinkled that it went on for several pages in the hasty writing that I’d once known so well (I’d looked over his character sheets trying to make heads or tails of them more than once).

Skills have primary and secondary attributes and are capped at three times primary or five times secondary, whichever is lower. There were a few ways to raise skills above that, whether by virtues/afflictions, entads, spells, or special circumstances. When a skill is checked, roll two ten sided dice, one for ones and one for tens, and add your skill, multiplied by either the average of the primary and secondary attributes, the primary attribute, or the secondary attribute, depending on what the GM feels like, then add in special circumstances or multipliers depending on virtues/afflictions, conditions, GM whims, and other factors. Check that against another, target number.

Usually we’d have all three numbers written down on the sheet for each of our skills, and any in-the-moment multiplication followed the “first digit” rule, where you only multiply the first digit of the number, which made things a little less gross to work with. There were just a fuckton of corner cases for everything we wanted to do, part of it crap from before I joined, and part of it shit you made in response to me. The section on grappling was four pages. I hope you remember that.

Rolls were always against the GM, who set arbitrary but “realistic” numbers, sometimes with some principled backing for opposing characters. Some of the time this was just bullshit, but it was hard to tell exactly when. You slapped write-ups down on the table more than once, so I don’t know. Rolling against players mostly didn’t happen, and the rules for it were constantly in flux, more than other pieces.

Should probably mention that a lot of this system wasn’t unique, it was descended from a game called Fullplate that focused more on wargaming instead of adventures/theater. Your innovation was hacking on a whole bunch of garbage and including some talky bits, though at least some of the work was done by Arthur’s brother, not sure how much.

I kept reading for a bit. Some of it was new information (yes, attributes actually did affect skills), but a lot of it was confirmation of things that I already knew from the game, or which had been hinted at by the virtues. A d100 system was fairly standard, as systems went, but I wasn’t sure that was actually accurate to my situation. Critical hits were apparently level-dependent, on the theory that luck played more of a role than skill at lower levels. The system was big on categories of effect, levels of success, and results tables, which probably accounted for the sheer length of it (though I didn’t know whether “two hundred pages” was hyperbole or not).

The biggest get was probably the skill synergies, which were explicitly listed, though it was just a
sketch of the groups, not what virtues you actually got from them. That one I asked Reimer about.

“There are either five or six virtues per skill,” said Reimer. “Five point five, call it. There were two hundred and fifty-six skills. That’s what, one thousand four hundred and eight before getting into all the combo virtues? Not to mention that you never told us them unless we got there, which we mostly didn’t. So if you don’t know, then I don’t know what to tell you, they’re either in the big book, or you never wrote them down because you didn’t think that anyone was actually going to take Accounting.”

“Okay,” I said. “You didn’t write any virtues down though. You don’t remember any?”

“Do you remember any?” asked Reimer.

“Thaumic Dodger,” I said. “Eliminates the penalty for dodging magic.”

“No, it was more than that,” said Reimer. “Magic, magical effect, entads, entad effects, and then the Layman clause.”

According to the notes that Reimer had given, the Layman was more of a concept than a person, one which could be ‘instantiated’ in different ways, either through DM fiat, through agreement by the players, or by asking a third party who had no or little stake in the outcome. What that would mean on a system implemented in full with more rules, on what was probably a simulation was anyone’s guess.

“I want more,” I said. “Everything that you can remember. Everything.”

“I’d be here all night,” Reimer complained.

I gestured at the pile of cash on the floor.

Reimer narrowed his eyes. “Point taken. Not sure on the wording though. I used to use a notes system, but all that got burned.”

“Burned?” I asked.

“I was pissed off,” said Reimer with a shrug. “Sort of a, I don’t know. Effigy, I guess.”

“Of me?” I asked.

Reimer nodded, then shrugged again. “You’re a dick. You’re a garbage dump of a person. You’re obscenely rich and hobnobbing with your high school crush, with some kind of military deal worked out, if any of that was true, but … fuck if you didn’t do your best to piss everyone off, and that always made it easier to be pissed off at you.” He looked down at the cash. “I don’t really want to rehash any of this right now.” He looked back up at me. “I’ll mail you whatever else I can remember, but it’s hard to reconstruct from memory, given how long it’s been since we played. I cursed the game more than once, after you were gone. Said I would never play it again, not like there was any threat of that.”

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “I’ve been trying to not be a dick.” I struggled to put it into words. “I’ve been trying my best not to hurt people, to be honest with them, to make up for mistakes, or if not make up, then at least live my life better than I did back in Anglecynn.”

“How’s that going?” asked Reimer.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Depends on who you ask. I’d give myself a C-.”
“A what?” asked Reimer.

“Oh,” I said. “Letter grades. It’s a new thing, A is highest, F is lowest.”

“Why is Z not the lowest?” he asked.

“The point is,” I said, “I’m trying. It’s going okay. I think I catch a fair number of mistakes before I make them, and I’m getting better at recognizing and acknowledging mistakes after they’ve been made. But I am trying.”

“Okay,” shrugged Reimer. “You have anyone to call you out on your bullshit?”

“A couple people, yeah,” I said. “I don’t need you to believe me. I don’t need you to forgive me either. I just … I’m trying, that’s all, and I’d hoped that maybe it would help you to know that.”

“You owe Tiff and Tom a letter each,” said Reimer. “I’ll check up on that. Maybe I’ll actually believe you, if you follow through.”

*That’s going to be pretty fucking hard when I’m not the person that they remember.*

“Okay,” I said. “The money is yours. Leave the bar of gold. You can send the virtues by mail, as best you can remember. Maybe mark down how confident you are in each of them?”

“Fine,” said Reimer. He seemed unsure of himself. “What’s the deal with all this?” he asked. “I don’t actually believe that you’re paying me all this money for something so trivial.”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Need to know. Classified.”

“Infohazard protocols?” asked Reimer with a roll of his eyes.

“Yeah,” I said. I hesitated. I hadn’t thought that the existence of infohazards was well-known. Unless … “Which campaign was that?”

“Long Stairs,” answered Reimer. He looked me over. “Shit, what happened to you?”

“There’s an entad,” I said. “The Memory Blade. It’s a use-in-emergency-only sort of thing, since it gets sharper the more memories it takes from you, and, well, I was in an emergency. I lost a fair bit.”

“Since when do you know how to use a sword?” asked Reimer.

“Since I was forced to learn,” I replied. I tapped the legal pad with a finger. “I’d like a list of campaigns too, as many as you can remember, with as many events, entads, magic, worlds, et cetera as possible.”

“I’ll mail it,” said Reimer. “I’m not going to stay here all night.” He shifted his stance. “I should actually probably get going.” He shook his head. “It’s been weird seeing you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I don’t want to keep you, if you have things to do, but do send me more. Virtues, campaigns, anything else you can remember.”

“Because your memory has been shot through?” asked Reimer.

“Yeah,” I said. “And … it was important to me.”

Reimer shrugged. “You know that there’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for money. I’m serious about you writing to Tiff and Tom though.”
“I will,” I said.

“Okay,” replied Reimer. “Good.” He stood there awkwardly for a moment, then began gathering up the money from the floor and sticking it in a bag that materialized beside him. When he was finished, he slung it over his back. “Alright,” he said. He glanced at the door. “If you’re in some shit, don’t involve me.”

“I’ll try not to,” I said.

I was pretty sure that it was entirely out of my control.
I sweated over it a fair bit, but Amaryllis and the others came back safe and sound at around four in the morning, but without the manual. They had met my double’s dad, who was close enough to being my dad, a helicopter pilot for the Anglecynn military who had left after a decade of service to work in the private sector flying helicopters for farmers (aerial applications and photo survey, mostly). That was more or less what had happened with my real dad, though replace the Anglecynn military with Gulf War I, and probably less negotiating with draconic bureaucracies.

He’d been reticent to let them in, but Valencia had taken the reins, and from there, it hadn’t taken her too much to get him to open up. My dad, the real one back on Earth, never opened up, except a few times when he was drunk. I asked that they go light on the details, and they had obliged, giving me only what seemed like it would actually matter. First, my parents on Aerb were divorced, and had been for seven years. Second, my mom had left Fumblebuck after I was put in prison, going to parts unknown. Third, the manual, if it still existed, wasn’t anywhere in my dad’s house, and he had no idea where it might have gone off to.

After a search of his house, which he’d for some reason consented to, they had gone to my mom’s house, which had produced nothing worthwhile, then over to speak with a few of the fake versions of my friends, none of which produced any fruit. Fake Maddie looked different from real Maddie, for unknown reasons, and that was as much as I wanted to hear about it. So far as they could piece things together, the fake Juniper had followed nearly the same trajectory that I had, and most of the differences could be accounted for by what had to change, if it was all playing out on Aerb instead of Earth. I was apparently Aerb’s version of Gary Gygax, unrealistically prolific given that I was building a lot of it from the ground up, creating rules from whole cloth that just so happened to have parallels to game systems I had played on Earth, and then putting in all of the same effort toward campaign creation that I had in the real world on top of that. All, somehow, without the internet for fast research and easy inspiration.

The whole cast was there in Fumblebuck. Fake Arthur had died in a car accident, I had dated fake Tiff, and later fake Maddie, still ill-advised but a little more acceptable on Aerb, and fake Craig had still been really upset about it. The real Craig had been talking about joining the Navy, and the fake Craig had joined the Host, which I thought was likely another way for the Dungeon Master to scatter them all to the four winds, the better that I would eventually run into one or another, no matter what paths I took.

None of it was actually useful though. The quest stayed incomplete. Amaryllis found it frustrating, but I was adamant that I wanted nothing to do with it. Besides, what was the Dungeon Master going to do? Cheat so that only I could figure things out, so that only my presence would accomplish whatever the quest was supposed to accomplish? No, fuck that, I wasn’t going back home.

I was in college, at least for a week, and I was determined to enjoy it.

My first class at the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence was listed as “A Still Magic Primer”. I actually had a passing understanding of my instructor; she was the woman who had written The Commoner’s Guide to Still Magic, one of the most singularly useless texts in all of known existence, though it had fierce competition from the other titles in that series. I did read the whole thing though, against my better judgment, so I thought that I had a bit of a handle on the magus, Genna Ermaretor. She was much more concerned with people than with the actual study and practice of still magic, and while some of that might just have been to fill pages of a rather slender book with nothing of real
importance, I thought I saw some passion for the individual stories in the book, rather than the science or practice of magic. It was hard to tell though, and I was trying to go into the class without preconceptions.

Magus Ermaretor stood before the class behind a podium, with a bored student standing next to her for unknown reasons. The student’s arms were in a cramped pose though, so I assumed that she was some kind of mage as well. Magus Ermaretor was a penumbral, a species that could only tolerate about four hours of sunlight a day and fed on shadows in a form of reverse photosynthesis (which was entirely magical rather than using real physics). She had jet black hair done up in a bun, and gray skin, like she’d been rendered in monochrome, an effect which was offset by the garishly bright colors of her dress, reds, blues, and purples in a pattern that instantly drew my eye away from her face.

“Welcome to a Still Magic Primer!” she called to the class with a cheerful smile. There were maybe a hundred people in our lecture hall, and I was near the back, largely because the plan was for her to give me a rubber stamp. The sound was still crystal clear though, like she was standing right next to me, despite the fact that there were no speakers. The student beside her was frowning and concentrating, which clued me in that this was probably the sound component of vibration magic at play.

“In this course, we will discuss the history of still magic, the craft as it’s practiced today, what to expect when you’re down in the temple for meditation, and various other topics that will help prepare you for a life as a still mage.” She cleared her throat. “This is not a difficult course, nor is it one oriented toward practical applications. It is, instead, a required course intended to give you the background necessary to become a part of the common culture of still mages, who will be, after all, your peers and colleagues once you’ve matriculated.”

She spent some time on history, most of which I already knew from The Commoner’s Guide and other supplemental reading, and the parts that were new seemed extremely unimportant. I perked up when she talked about Uther.

“The Penndraig reforms were extensive,” said Ermaretor. “An expansion of the campus was one of the most obvious ones, done to accommodate a great deal more students than had been seen in years past. The temple was changed, with entads from Uther’s vast stores added to allow a much greater density of meditating still mages, less time in the temple for each of them, and a solution to the logistical problems associated with moving people in and out of the temple. He meditated in the temple himself, and picked up an understanding of the art over the years, some of which he used, in his fashion, to revolutionize the field. It was Uther who extended still magic to the domain of cold, Uther who showed that we could produce silence, and Uther who pioneered the deep meditation of the soul.”

I started paying more attention at that one. I hadn’t heard of such a thing, but here it was, being casually tossed off in a freshman level class (not that they followed the year naming convention at Sound and Silence). Unfortunately, her primer on history went on to other, less interesting things, and worse, she was skipping over a lot. It was only because I was familiar with the timeline that I realized she was going through the period of time when the Second Empire had been dominant, without so much as a sly wink about what had happened during that period, or what role Sound and Silence had played in it. I looked over at the other students in the class, wondering if anyone had caught that, or whether there was anyone here old enough to have lived it. Mostly it was humans, and other of the mortal species who weren’t of the especially long-lived. Ermaretor was just blithely white-washing history, it seemed.

“And that brings us to today,” said Ermaretor. “Sound and Silence is a firm and proud member of the
That must have been a well-rehearsed lecture, because a bell started ringing very shortly after she was done. As first classes went, it was a little underwhelming, but normal students didn’t get their time in the temple until two years at the athenaeum, so I supposed some amount of filler was necessary.

“Juniper Smith, if you could stay a moment?” asked Magus Ermaretor. The student who’d been standing beside her had left, and she had to strain to be heard about the din of a hundred students filing out of the lecture hall. I made my way down to her.

“I have another class in about fifteen minutes,” I said. I knew where the building was, but I was still a little anxious about missing the lecture, even if it was going to be something like this.

“You’re the bursar’s man,” said Ermaretor. It was halfway between a question and an accusation. She looked me over. “Human?”

“Yes,” I replied. The paperwork said as much. I glanced at the door.

“I’d like to speak with you in private, when you have more time,” said Ermaretor. “My office is in Dinai Hall, on the third floor, and I’m there from the end of classes until just after sundown.”

“Okay,” I said. “What are we talking about?”

“I’ll explain then,” said Ermaretor. “It would suffice to say that my signature on your papers is contingent upon a private meeting.”

I gave an inward groan. “Alright,” I said. “I’ll see you after my last class today.” I glanced at the door again.

“Go ahead, get to your next class,” said Magus Ermaretor. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I rushed off with my bookbag over my shoulder. When I was out the door, I moved my comms tattoo up and touched it.

“Minor hiccup,” I said. “Professor wants a meeting.”

[They’re instructors, not professors.] replied Amaryllis. [But noted. We’ll provide backup in case there’s an attack. Otherwise went well?]

“Sure,” I said. “A bit boring.”

[Keep an open mind.] replied Amaryllis. [Private instruction gets skill levels higher, faster, unless you’re intent on skilling up through combat after the soft cap.]

The abortive attempt at getting something from Fumblebuck was a source of conflict between the two of us. Amaryllis had been poring over the notes that Reimer had left, along with the supplemental stuff he’d mailed later on. She wanted him back in for a sitdown, but I was a little leery of that, especially since it wasn’t clear how much the two systems might have diverged from each other. Reimer’s notes indicated that the system got constant updates and revisions, sometimes without any actual notice. I was trying my best not to worry about it, as Amaryllis put effort into redoing her ‘best possible’ character sheet. In theory, if the game was correct that I could change skills once
every 100 / Essentialism levels, then I should theoretically be capable of changing skills again, if I hadn’t been before. (I had not tested it, as it was an incredibly valuable resource that I didn’t want to waste.)

My mind wasn’t really on that as I moved on to the next class. Instead, I was thinking that all roads led to Rome. It was a common DM tactic, where three or four different threads could all be pulled on, all of which would tie back to whatever main event the DM had planned. In the context of Reimer? It was one of three visible threads leading back to Fumblebuck, the first being the teleportation key and what it had revealed about the body’s past (which was when the text had been generated), and the other threads being people from Fumblebuck that had spread to the winds. Going to Sound and Silence had led me to Reimer, whose part in all this I hoped was over. If we’d gone to the Athenaeum of Claw and Clocks, I would have bumped into Tiff. There were probably other paths leading back to Fumblebuck, whether it was high school friends sent by happenstance to the locations I was most likely to visit, or some other kind of bullshit.

The further in I’d gotten, the more these parallel paths had become a running theme. In one sense, it was comforting, because it was weak evidence that I had some degree of free will within the DM’s schemes, and the world had simply been set up or manipulated into such a state that there were many mechanisms by which the same beats could happen. In most other senses, it was kind of terrifying, because I was surrounded by threads to be pulled on and clearly visible backup plans intended to manipulate me.

The whole reason that we’d gone to Fallatehr in the first place had been Cyclamine, Amaryllis’ great-grandfather, whose entad-poltergeist had remarked that he was one of the most gifted soul mages still alive following the decapitation of the Second Empire, and that he should, despite the odds and common sense, still have some measure of his power in prison. Later on, we’d found Heshnel Elec, who was one of Fallatehr’s proteges long ago, and he had basically delivered us a quest prompt for a quest we’d already handled. Who knew how many other paths led back to Fallatehr? Would we have found a book that pointed in his direction in our hour of need, if those two other prompts had misfired?

More concerning, what was everything at Sound and Silence pointed toward? What were the disparate threads all pulling on?

I ran out of thinking time when I got to my next class. It was a similar room to the first one, with tiered seating and peculiar adjustable desks, with a section in front similar to handicapped seating on Earth, a place where students who were unusually large or with particular needs could sit and take up more room. There weren’t many there though, just mezin, broshe, and a criios girl hooked up to a tank, presumably to keep her temperature down.

I didn’t know the rules for taking up special seating, so I headed up to the very back of the classroom, where there were two empty seats. The class was “Fundamentals of Vibration Magic”, a basic prerequisite for actually getting authorized to become a vibrational mage. When I sat down, the instructor (never professor, apparently) was already clearing his throat.

To my surprise, I saw a red-haired girl moving from her seat in one of the lower rows, pushing past people and apologizing profusely as she did so. She looked vaguely familiar to me, though I couldn’t place her; her hair went down to the small of her back in ringlets, she wore a vest, a blouse, and a skirt, all of which looked expensive (if I was any judge), and she had rectangular-frame glasses. I caught her looking at me as she moved through the chairs, and I was startled when she went up the stairs and took a seat beside me. She made enough glances at me that I started wondering what was up with her.
Our instructor was a human, which was a bit disappointing, because I liked seeing the different species of Aerb. He had a smooth voice though, and opened the class by asking everyone to signal to him if they would like the volume higher or lower. It was, so far as I could tell, a party trick for an experienced vibration mage, but it was still pretty impressive, given that he was adjusting volume independently for more than a hundred people, while also giving a lecture on the subject.

“So, now that everyone is settled, let me introduce myself. I’m Magus Bertram Leister, second order, and I’ll be introducing you to the wonderful world of vibration magic.” He beamed at us. “My particular specialty is in the middle ranges, which, if you don’t already know, refers largely to sound, hence the calibration. I teach a number of classes at the higher levels, most notably Sonic Offense, Signals Interference, and Destructive Collision. Through our time in this class, I’ll be bringing in a number of my colleagues for demonstrations, lectures, and some question and answer sessions, as I don’t want to focus too specifically on this narrow field.”

The girl sitting next to me leaned over. “Indecisive or ambitious?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You were in M. Ermaretor’s class,” she replied.

Ah. “Ambitious,” I replied. It wasn’t usual for someone to take both kinds of classes, and apparently it had been noticed that I was on both tracks.

“Me too,” replied the girl with a curt nod in my direction. She was keeping her eyes on our instructor, but she held out a dainty hand, and I shook it. “Is this your first?” she asked.

“First?” I asked. I was trying to keep my voice low. Vibrational mages could have super-hearing, if they wanted to and had the mental bandwidth for focus, but I couldn’t imagine that our instructor was carrying on with a general history of vibrational magic, amplifying his voice at individualized levels, and eavesdropping on students. (Or rather, I could imagine it, but it seemed like a bit much.)

“Do you have other magics?” she asked. She looked around briefly, cupped her finger in a hand, and then with a slight frown of concentration, lit her finger on fire. I diverted my attention from the lecture briefly and looked at it. Aarde’s Touch, the spell was called, the first real bit of magic that I had learned on Aerb.

I looked at her and tried to quietly re-evaluate her. Maybe it was the glasses, but I had marked her as a bookish nerd, probably not too much younger or older than I was, and almost certainly human. But if she was a blood mage … well, Aarde’s Touch wasn’t all that special, Amaryllis had been able to do it when we met, but that was the product of maybe three years at Quills and Blood, a lot of it focused on other things, with her time cut short.

“You’re a multimage,” I said.

She shook her head, seeming annoyed. “Not yet,” she said. “I’m going to be.”

There were a few reasons that wasn’t common on Aerb. The first was political: mages owed some allegiance to their athenaeum, both implicit and explicit, and you could be denied learning on the basis that you were already a mage in another discipline. The second problem was practical: if you spent ten years learning to become a warder, you probably had some bills to pay down, or if you didn’t, then you at least had a trade that you could practice and make some good money on. If you went on to master another magic, what did that really get you, in practical terms? Higher pay? Maybe, depending on cross-applicability and economic considerations. Generally speaking though, it wasn’t done, because a multimage took far too much schooling for not enough benefit, not when you
had to stay sharp in both at once. A multimagus was even more rare, because to become a magus in pretty much any discipline took a decade or more, though the title ‘magus’ was defined differently by the different athenaeums.

I wasn’t sure what, precisely, that might say about this girl sitting next to me. She’d asked me whether I was ambitious, on the assumption that I was angling to become a multimage. Did that imply that she had ambitions? With the red hair … well, not every remotely attractive girl with red hair had to be a Penndraig, but unless my ear for accents was failing me, she did sound like she was from Anglecynn.

“Juniper,” I said, extending a hand to her.

She looked me up and down. “Like the flower?”

“It’s a tree,” I said.

“A tree with flowers,” she replied as she took my hand and shook it. “Lisi,” she said. Her hand was limp and a bit cold. “Are you?” she asked.

“Am I what?” I asked, bewildered.

“Anglecynn royalty?” she asked. Again, she seemed annoyed that I was confused.

“No,” I replied. “You?”

“Are you my shadow?” she asked, ignoring my question, or maybe implicitly answering it.

I was mostly ignoring our instructor by this point, as interested as I was in what he was doing. He had pulled tuning forks out from under the table, and was giving a brief lesson in the difference between amplitude and frequency of a wave, which wasn’t new to me, but was at least more practical grounding than I’d been given in Ermaretor’s class.

“I’m nobody,” I said.

Lisi gave a brief huff at that, and immediately began tuning me out. If she was another of Anglecynn’s many princesses, then she was shockingly rude. Hells, she was even rude by dwarven standards; dwarves were blunt, but they were at least making an attempt at communication, rather than barreling on ahead with their own unrelated trains of thought (this was, naturally, painting a whole species with the same brush, and dwarves were as much products of their environments as humans were).

The demonstration of amplitude and frequency was accompanied with drawings on the chalkboard by our instructor, Magus Leister. All vibration, he explained, was about regular change between one state and the other, from the fastest (light) to the slowest (the tides).

(Can I talk, for a moment, about how fucking dumb it was that Aerb had tides? Both the Sun, Celestar, and the stars were in the same apparent position no matter where you were on Aerb, so even if there were gravitation from those sources, it wouldn’t have caused anything that was much like tides on Earth (in theory, the sun’s gravity should have pulled everything to the east at dawn, then everything to the west at dusk), and anyhow, the tides were hexal, meaning low tide happened at the same time no matter where you were on Aerb. So then where the fuck was all that water going or coming from? There were even spring tides and neap tides, caused, on Earth, by whether the sun and moon were working in concert or in opposition, but on Aerb … who fucking knew. Every day, $10^{20}$ liters of water were displaced, and there were a whole bunch of complex theories about how it
was happening or why, but the tides went in and the tides went out, and no one could explain it.)

A lot of the lecture was about waves, it seemed, but it seemed to mostly be about waves in terms of how they interacted with the specifics of vibrational magic. M. Leister joked that he wasn’t going to bombard us with a whole bunch of equations and terms we’d have to memorize on our first day, but it felt like that was what he was doing anyway. Vibrational magic had a lot of scope, mostly because it was permissive in what was defined as ‘vibration’, extending to almost anything that oscillated to some degree, even if it wasn’t ‘vibrating’ in the sense that I understood it. Still, sound was by far the easiest thing for a vibration mage to deal with, and it was their stock-in-trade. The discovery that light could be produced and manipulated with vibration magic was a relatively recent one, but it took so much skill that only the grandmasters were capable of doing it reliably, and they were gunshy, given the fact that exclusions sometimes happened when people pressed the boundaries too far.

The last thing we went over was the actual source of a vibration mages power, a well of internal energy that could be slowly expanded through rigorous, monotonous mental exercise. We (or rather, the other people in the class who weren’t on fast-track like me) were required to prove that this was something we were capable of by learning an instrument and achieving technical proficiency with it, something that would also come in handy when we were tuning to specific tones. I was really hoping that I would just get a mana bar. At any rate, the major complication for vibration mages was that this internal well of power, called ‘breath’ instead of just ‘mana’, was governed by trade-offs between what was modulated, so that frequency increase at the expense of amplitude decrease (or vice versa) was far less draining than increasing both, and decreasing either was practically free, a convenient way of silencing your footfalls.

I liked M. Leister. He was an engaging speaker, and he moved fast enough to keep my attention, with none of the pauses or drawn out elaboration that I’d always hated in my teachers. He finished his lecture just as the bell rang, which was apparently a skill he had in common with M. Ermaretor. I braced myself to be called down by him, but he was just looking at his notes, not at me.

“We should walk together,” said Lisi. I had practically forgotten about her, except to briefly glance at the meticulous notes she was keeping.

“Okay,” I said. “My next class is in the Canis Building, I’m not sure if we’re going in the same --”

“We are,” replied Lisi. “Fundamentals of Combat Magic?”

“We are,” I said. “That’s the one.”

We headed out together, with her leading the way on sure feet. I moved my comms tattoo up and touched it once, as stealthily as I could, so that it would broadcast everything I said to the others.

“So, are you one of the Penndraigs?” I asked.


“Lisianthus?” I asked, mostly for the benefit of Amaryllis. “Sorry, I don’t know the royal family that well.”

[Don’t mention me,] said Amaryllis, across the comm. I couldn’t answer her without speaking to Lisi.

“I’m from a minor house,” she replied. “One of the gavelkinds.”

“Ah,” I said. “So are you part of the Lost King’s Court? I mean, in an official capacity?”
“I’m the Second Under-Princess of Defense,” she replied with a frown. “Understudy to the understudy. If there were any actual roles or responsibilities I wouldn’t be here. If there were any risk that I would ascend to Princess of Defense, I would be replaced in short order. It’s honorary.” She glanced at me. “You?”

“Not a princess at all,” I replied with a smile.

“I want to know who you are,” said Lisi. If she saw any humor in what I was saying, she didn’t show it.

I tried not to wince. “Juniper Smith,” I said. “Originally from Anglecynn, but I’ve been in a somewhat unique situation for the past few months, which is how this opportunity came up. I’m … not sure how much I should share with you.”

“Hrmph,” said Lisi.

[You can tell her,] said Amaryllis. [You’re Advisor on Culture in the Republic of Miunun.]

“I’m the Advisor on Culture in the Republic of Miunun,” I said. “It’s a new nation of tuung, recently founded and not recognized by the Empire of Common Cause yet.”

“You’re not tuung,” said Lisi.

We entered into the Canis Building, which had a weird front door whose door frame was two legs of a giant brass dog, and Lisi kept walking with purpose. It occurred to me that we were probably going to be sitting next to each other again, and I wasn’t sure that was what I wanted.

“I’m there in an advisory capacity,” I said.

“But you’re here,” replied Lisi. She was still frowning, and not really looking at me, like she was doing some complicated math in her head.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked. She still had that characteristic bluntness. Now that I knew they were related, I could see a little bit of Amaryllis in the way she talked, but I might have just been reading into things.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

[It’s quite frustrating to only be able to hear half this conversation,] said Amaryllis.

The lecture hall was much like the others, though a bit smaller, sized for forty instead of a hundred. It also had a wider area in the front, with pads placed down and a circle painted on them. They looked like wrestling mats; Colin had been in wrestling, and I’d gone to see his matches a few times.

Lisi found a seat, and looked back to make sure that I was following. Somewhat reluctantly, I took the seat beside her, a slave to my social impulses.

“Complicated how?” asked Lisi.

“The Council of Arches is a seven person body,” I replied. “My role isn’t exactly honorary, but the council can make most of its decisions without me if need be, and I’m not a lynchpin. I --”

My voice caught in my throat as I saw Reimer walk into the lecture hall. He saw me at once, given that it was still mostly empty, and he frowned at me for a moment before coming up the stairs to where we were sitting. That fucker was going to take a seat right behind me.
“You?” asked Lisi, prompting me to pick my train of thought back up.

“I have an entad that allows for extremely fast travel,” I said. “My plan is to commute for the duration of my education. I have a place in Li’o, but once I’m home it’s not much effort to make the transition, and the council is willing to accommodate me.” I resisted the urge to look back at Reimer.

“For how long?” asked Lisi.

“For as long as it takes for me to gain access to the magic,” I replied. “Until then, I’m just a normal student, like you.”

“I take offense at that,” said Lisi. She narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m six standard deviations from the norm.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Hi, I’m Reimer,” said Reimer, leaning down between the two of us and sticking his hand out toward Lisi. “Juniper and I went to high school together.”

“Reimer,” I said. “Please, just butt out?”

Lisi shook his hand, though she seemed skeptical.

[Why is Reimer there?] asked Amaryllis. I didn’t have a real answer to that question, except that he had probably independently signed up for the class.

Before we really had time to say anything more, our instructor walked in. He was intimidating from the first moment I laid eyes on him, that wiry muscle that old men sometimes had, and a face that was lined with tension. He wasn’t human, because he had four arms, but I wasn’t sure what species he was, only that he looked like he was about half a second away from shouting someone down. His head was shaved, with just enough stubble that I could tell, and his shirt was form-fitting, showing the muscles beneath it.

The rest of the class had trickled in, and the chatter around us settled into silence.

“This is Fundamentals of Combat Magic,” he said. He crossed both pairs of arms over his chest. “I’m Magus Oberlin. If you’re wondering about my species, I’m an endling, last of my kind. That’s as much as I want to say on the subject. This is a mixed-track, all-years course, but my specialty is vibration magic, with a sub-specialty in resonant frequency.” His voice was sharp and loud, and didn’t seem to be carried by any sort of magic. It was a smaller room, but still, that was a little bit intimidating.

He walked over to the desk and pulled out a handgun from one of the drawers and set it on the desk with a loud clunk.

“This is a handgun. It will kill most people just fine and takes far less time to train.” He was scanning the classroom, looking at us, and his eyes paused for a moment as he looked at me. I was tall and muscular, and I hoped that was what had caught his eye. “There are things that a handgun won’t work on. The majority of entad armor will stop a small-caliber round, and a minority will stop larger calibers. There are also a wide variety of mages who are immune or resistant to gunfire, including pseudo-mages like the bladebound. There are species who will shrug off a bullet and monsters who will only gain power from them. Wards will also stop bullets dead in their tracks, if your target is bunkered down. It’s by no means a perfect solution, but it’s the first one you should reach for.”

He reached into the desk and pulled out a second handgun, this one of a slightly different make. He
set it down next to the other handgun. “This is a void gun,” he said. “It’s considerably more difficult for potential targets to deal with, and is brutally effective at making holes in things. It’s also banned for personal use by the Third Empire, with no exceptions.” He strode forward, leaving the guns behind him. “These are two of the three low hanging fruit, if you have interest in being more lethal. They will make you deadly with little time, effort, or cost. The last of the three best tools is the right mindset, the ability and will to act with extreme violence at a moment’s notice. I won’t be teaching that here, but I can give recommendations, if it’s a skill you still need to learn.”

He drummed the fingers of one hand on the table. “There are two essential varieties of combat magic. The first is a tool added to the toolkit, existing magic turned toward violence because it’s one of those weapons we’re never without. Mages might be called upon to use when other tools,” he gestured to the guns on the table, “are not available to us. Based on my past experience, that’s why most of you are in this class. You will be learning magic here, at this athenaeum, or have already, and you want to know how to effectively use it against others, so that in a time of need you’re not trying to do something novel.”

He drummed his fingers on the table again. “If that’s your purpose in coming here, there will still be things for you to learn, but it’s not the focus of this class. Fundamentals of Combat Magic is a course aimed squarely at the other type of combat magic, the one focused entirely on incapacitating the enemy, not as a petty bonus of the magical arts, but as the sole aim of magical education and practice. Raise your hand if you intend to be a combat mage.”

I very slowly raised my hand. To my surprise, Lisi raised her hand too, not casually, but like she was straining to make sure it was noticed. I looked around the room a bit. We were in the minority. Seven people had raised their hands, and that was including me, in a class of maybe forty. I found myself wishing that I hadn’t raised my hand.

“You,” Magus Oberlin said, pointing at me. “Name.” His fingers were thicker than a human’s, and I stared for a moment before answering.

“Juniper Smith,” I said.

“Why do you want to be a combat mage?” he asked.

“I don’t currently have much of a choice about whether I’ll be in combat or not,” I replied. “Given that it’s a certainty, I would rather have as many possible options for how to kill.” In truth, I was already a combat mage, or at least as close to a combat mage as you could get with skills piped directly into your brain and no formal education.

“Have you killed before?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. I braced for more questions, but mercifully, he moved on to the others, asking the same things of them. He saved Lisi for last.

“Why do you want to be a combat mage?” he asked.

“With respect,” she said. “I’m already a combat mage. I was trained at Quills and Blood.” Her cheeks were flushed.

“Bare augmentation?” he asked.

“No,” replied Lisi. “I can form the Claret Spear.”

“I see,” frowned Magus Oberlin. “And why do you want to be a combat mage?”
“Comparative advantage,” replied Lisi. Her lips were thin. “I’m predisposed towards violence and lacking in empathy. I will make a better combat mage than anyone else.”

Magus Oberlin nodded. “Good,” he said. He returned to behind the desk. “Those of you who raised your hands, it’s you who this class is for. If you’re here because you’d like to know and practice the combat applications of your magic, as a secondary aspect of your education, you’ll get something out of this class, but that’s not my primary aim.”

He looked out over the class. “The first lesson, and the focus of the rest of our time, is lethality. In a normal combat situation, it will be assumed that you are attempting to kill your opponent, and that they are attempting to kill you. Unfortunately, there is no perfect, idealized combat scenario. If you are a combat mage, you will likely be working for either the Third Empire or one of its member polities at the behest of Sound and Silence. That employment often comes with political and mission constraints, which might limit lethality. To give one example, hostage taking has been an effective aspect of warfare since the dawn of time. More insidiously, sometimes the powers-that-be wish to limit casualties because of how it would appear to the public, even if that requires risking a mage’s life.”

“Still mages in particular are often called in for the purposes of capture, rather than strict lethality. There aren’t many on this campus who will say a word about it, but during the time of the Second Empire, still mages were routinely employed to bring in subjects of interest alive so that their souls could be altered and they could first divulge every secret they knew before being volunteered into the ranks of expendable soldiers.” He grunted slightly. “It was not a policy that was as singularly effective as it might seem on first glance. In fact, if you read any number of texts on the era, or take Atrocity Studies, many writers will intimate that it was horrifying because it was an effective tactic. This was not the case. Dissidents who would otherwise have quietly gone to prison adopted high lethality means of defense, turning every arrest into a fully lethal fight. Sometimes support staff died. Sometimes void weapons, poisons, or other means were used, and still mages died, despite the best efforts of those involved. In other cases, when there was no hope to inflict damage, the potential targets, useful sources of information about their resistance networks, would simply kill themselves, condemning themselves to the hells as a price to be paid in the war waged against the Second Empire.”

Magus Oberlin looked around at us. “There are three primary takeaways here. The first is that in practical terms, a combat mage will be asked to refrain from lethality for reasons that may or may not be sensible, and if you are a soldier, you won’t always be privy to that decision-making. The second is that lethality is a consequence of escalation, something that happens when lesser means fail, or would guarantee defeat. And the third, naturally, is that there are prospects worse than death. By some measures, there are prospects worse than eternal torture at the hands of the hells.”

I could only barely fathom wanting something so badly that I was willing to suffer an eternity in the hells for it. Most of the worlds where I made that trade, it would be naked utilitarian logic, given that I knew when faced with eternal torture I would be so unable to comprehend the actuality of it that I’d just be running the numbers. I was a lot more likely than pretty much anyone else to run into the sort of situation where I had to choose between my own personal concerns and those of the wider world, and I’d already committed myself to the wider world, for sufficiently large quantities of ‘wider world’, but I had trouble mapping that to what members of the Second Empire resistance would have been feeling.

(Were it possible, I might have liked to spend time at the athenaeum just to learn more about this sort of thing. The books I had read about Aerb were broad spectrum, some of them suggested by a bookseller or marked as worthwhile by Amaryllis, but that was a far cry from being able to talk to people who had devoted a significant part of their life to learning about these things. I had no idea
how the resistance would have operated, given that people could turn into snitches once captured, and even the anima exa could have memories pulled from it, even if that took a staggering amount of time and expertise.)

“This course will be broken down into individual case studies,” said Magus Oberlin. “We will discuss the lethal means available to every school of magic, starting with vibration and still magics, as well as the most common methods of defense against them. This is not to teach you how to attack and defend against every school of magic, which would take a lifetime, but to give us the fundamentals of combat magic through practical examples. Mixed in with that will be mock battles, carried on under Marquise Chamberset’s rules. Grades will be given following an individual question and response session with me at the end of term. That’s all for today’s class. If history is any guide, at least five of you will put in petitions to drop, and I see no reason not to give you adequate time before the next bell. Juniper Smith, a word.”

I sighed under my breath, and got up from my seat to go down and talk with him. I had one more class left, and at this rate, I was going to end the day with a whole host of small quests.

“You’re Finch’s man,” he said as he looked me over. “The multimage.”

I looked around us, where the rest of the students were still filing out. Many of them were looking our way. “That’s not public information,” I said, keeping my voice carefully controlled.

“Our conversation is private,” he said. He punctuated the final word by raising the volume, without any apparent effort on his part.


“To my office then,” he replied with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded and followed behind him as he left. Ermareror had called me the bursar’s man. I didn’t quite know what kind of strings Finch had pulled behind the scenes, but I had hoped that the bursar and his secretary were the only ones who had a clear picture of what was going on. Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case.

Magus Oberlin had a nice office. I would have expected, I don’t know, swords and guns up on the wall, but instead there were just lots and lots of books and a broad desk. He sat down behind the desk, then steepled his fingers with one set of hands while he gestured for me to sit opposite him with the other set. I wondered, idly, where he got his shirts from.

“Are we warded in here?” I asked.

“Against vibrational magic, yes,” he said. “Against entads? No. I could call in a warder and take up the rest of the day for both of us, if you’re that worried.”

“No,” I said. “It should be fine.” We try not to let Finch know anything that we don’t want the general public to know. “What did you want to talk about?”

“You’re a multimage,” he said. “Bone, blood, skin, and gems, according to Finch, all unregistered and unlicensed, without any trace of formal education.”

I frowned at that. I wasn’t actually sure how Finch knew that, but if he’d kept talking to eyewitnesses after we’d first met … I would have to do an inventory of everything I had done, and in front of whom, cross-referenced against what Finch could be presumed to have found out. It was good to know that I’d hidden at least some of my abilities.
“That’s all true,” I said. “I assume that Finch has some reason to trust you?”

“I trained him,” said Magus Oberlin with a smug smile.

“He’s … a mage?” I asked.

He shook his head. “He’s Uniquities. He worked under me for five years.”

“Sorry,” I said. “You worked in Uniquities with him?” I was trying to wrap my head around that and reshape the model I had of Oberlin.

Oberlin nodded. “I still ply my trade for them, when there’s cause.”

“Oh,” I replied. “That’s … good news, I guess. The bursar said that I needed signatures.”

“You’ll have mine,” replied Oberlin. “No real point in you coming to my class, unless you need to keep up the charade for some other reason. But Finch thinks that you’re the kind of person who trouble follows like a stink follows fish, and he asked for my help to make sure that if you get into shit here, you have someone to help bail you out.”

“I’m doing fine so far,” I replied, feeling just a touch defensive. “If you have intensive lessons to offer, I’m all ears. I also have access to a time chamber, if you want to spend a month or two training me. I have a lot in the way of liquid assets at the moment. I could pay you.”

Oberlin frowned at me, and finally looked momentarily nonplussed. “Tell me how you came by your magics.”

“What does Finch think?” I asked.

“Finch and I were talking by mail,” replied Oberlin. “Securely, in case you were wondering. We didn’t have room on our one-time pads for idle speculation. If you want my guesses, which are probably better than his, I’d say that you’re not the real Juniper Smith. There are dozens of ways to fake an identity, and most places aren’t too serious about stopping it from happening. That still makes you an impressive example of a multimage, but it’s less impressive if you’re a few hundred years old.”

“Wrong,” I said. “But it’s more believable than the truth.”

“Which is?” asked Oberlin.

I hesitated. “I can learn incredibly fast, under the right circumstances,” I said. “So far as I know, I’m a bog standard human, but I was introduced to blood magic from a neophyte student four months ago, and now I’m capable of doing bare augmentation.” I shrugged. “Not much more to it than that.”

“What other magics do you have?” he asked.


“Soul magic,” said Oberlin.

“That would be pretty dumb of me, given the anolia,” I said. “The next time one looked at my soul, I’d be revealed as a soul mage, and then … I don’t know what the penalty is here, but in Anglecynn it would probably come with the penalty of death.”

“If you were good enough, you could carve it out before the anolia stopped you,” said Oberlin. “Finch told me that he floated the idea of one coming to the Isle of Poran for the sake of security and
the idea was immediately shot down.”

Carving out Essentialism was my plan, if it came to that, though I would be loathe to lose it. Anolia couldn’t see into the soul instantly, and I was pretty fast with my Essentialism so high.

“Question,” I said. “Why in the hell are you telling me this?”

“I want your trust,” said Magus Oberlin. “According to Finch, you’re one of the more lethal people he’s met, with a great number of skills under your belt and a stockpile of entads. And here, at Sound and Silence, things have started to go rotten.”

“Rotten how?” I asked. Here comes the quest.

“There have been deaths and disappearances,” replied Oberlin. “Most of them linked to the temple in one way or another.”

“I heard of one death,” I said with a frown. “Dehydration or something. Or some entad interaction.”

“Five deaths,” replied Oberlin. “Four disappearances.”

“But … no one knows about it?” I asked. “How is that possible?”

“That’s what I need your help in finding out,” replied Oberlin. “The one death you probably heard about was a scandal, but that was because it happened inside the Li’o’te Temple itself. The others have either been in the city, or in the case of the disappearances, somewhere unknown. I suspect that it’s a coverup of some kind, though by who and for what purpose is a mystery. At best, institutional malfeasance.”

“And I’m, what, some unconnected person who you know is clean?” I asked. Gods, how many times had I used that line as a DM?

“You also have skills, and Finch has pulled some strings to get you down into the temple itself,” nodded Oberlin. “To hear him tell it, you were itching to go for your own reasons.”

“Who can I trust?” I asked.

Oberlin smiled. It was the first real smile I’d seen from him. “Finch said that you would dive right in.”

“Yeah, he knows me well enough to know that,” I replied. “Give me a week and I’ll destroy the conspiracy or cult or whatever it is, but first I need to know what you know, and I need to know who it would be dangerous to talk to.”

Oberlin raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t take you for the cocky type,” he said.

“I have a good team,” I replied. “Some people with centuries of experience, some with skills that are utterly unique to them.”

“Good,” nodded Oberlin. He opened up his desk and took a folder from inside it, which he slid across to me. “Do you have somewhere safe to put this?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Give me a second.”

I stood up and pulled back the sleeve that concealed my vambrace, then turned it so that I was in my panic/survival set, Space Plate, Ring of Upward Bliss, Ring of Partial Incorporeality, Bracelet of Panacea, a pair of unicorn bones in a bandolier, dead fairies, and the Needler with twenty copies
dangling off my belt. Oberlin moved back a step, probably reflexively trying to put some distance between us given that I was fully armed and armored with unknown entads, but I just folded the folder up, slipped it into a loop in my bandolier, and then switched Alvion’s Vambrace back to mundane mode, safely hiding the envelope away in extradimensional space.

“Interesting,” said Magus Oberlin. “You’re better equipped than Finch suggested you would be.”

“Finch isn’t the only one hiding things,” I said. “Take that reveal as a token gesture of goodwill.”

Oberlin nodded. “Let me know before you make a move. If you’re just learning things, better for both of us to have some deniability about what’s going on. Maybe that’s paranoia, but I’ve spent too much time thinking about the risks a soul mage poses.”

“Were you … alive during the Second Empire?” I asked.

Oberlin gave me a skeptical look. “No,” he said. “Are you the kind of idealist that thinks soul mages aren’t out there, manipulating things as best they can from beneath the screenings that the Third Empire does? Do you think the Third Empire doesn’t have tame soul mages of its own to rip their way through captured prisoners?”

“You know that for a fact?” I asked.

Oberlin shrugged. “Could be.” I’ll take that as a yes. “You should get going, if you have another class for today.”

“Okay,” I replied. “What are your thoughts on teaching me in the time chamber?”

“I’d have to get an anolia to check you over,” Oberlin replied. “The athenaeum keeps a cluster on staff, and I’m friends with a few.” He was eyeing me as he said it.

I’d have to junk my skill in Essentialism back down to zero in order to pass that particular test. I was loathe to do it, in part because it had taken a long time to get so high, because it would be harder to raise up again given what had happened in the past, and because it was a really useful skill I didn’t want to be without.

“I’ll pass on that inspection for now,” I said. It was a tacit admission that I was, in fact, a soul mage, or if not that, that I was hiding something in my soul that I didn’t want anyone to see. Anolia were invasive, that was true, but I wasn’t particularly convinced that I could sell indignation about that test.

“Suit yourself,” said Oberlin with a nod. “If you prove yourself, maybe I’d be willing to relax that requirement.”

I left his office shortly afterward, and was surprised to find Lisi and Reimer leaning up against the far wall. They were close enough that I thought they’d probably been carrying on a conversation with each other. They both looked at me like they expected something from me.

“I don’t have time for this,” I said. “I have to get across campus for Ethics.”

“We have it too,” said Lisi with a short nod.

“Okay,” I said. I took off without waiting for them, even though I only had a vague understanding of where to go.

“What did you talk about with him?” asked Reimer as he fell into step behind me.
“Classified,” I replied.

“By what authority?” asked Lisi. “If it’s by a classifying authority of Anglecynn, there’s a good chance that I have clearance. Do you have a codephrase?”

“Not Anglecynn,” I replied.

“You implied that you were working with Anglecynn,” said Reimer.

“Yeah, I did,” I said as I pushed out a set of double doors and into the midday light. “Didn’t I say you’d be better off not getting involved in any of this?”

“Like I was ever going to listen,” said Reimer. “You’re trying to push me out of this like I’m some NPC.”

“NPC?” asked Lisi.

“Non-player character,” said Reimer. “It’s a whole thing. Like a bit part in a play.”

“Oh,” said Lisi. She turned her attention back to me. “What business does the Republic of Miunun have here?” she asked.

“Classified,” I said.

“Wait,” said Reimer. “What’s the Republic of Miunun?”

“It’s the government he claims to be on the advisory council of,” said Lisi.

“How in the fuck did that happen?” asked Reimer. “And how … why would that girl you were with be a part of it?”

“ Classified,” I said again.

“Are you classifying things as we speak because you don’t want to talk about them?” asked Lisi with a frown. “That’s bad practice.” She turned to Reimer. “What girl?”

“Uh,” said Reimer. “Classified?”

We mercifully reached the lecture hall and went about finding our seats, but Lisi apparently wasn’t the sort to simply let things go just because we’d walked into a classroom. Unfortunately, there were three seats in a row, and we all ended up sitting together, mostly because I was worried about what would come from Lisi and Reimer sitting together (and what might already have come from them talking to each other outside Oberlin’s office).

The course, Ethics, was a mainstay of the modern athenaeum system, and it was one that Amaryllis had taken at Quills and Blood, so I had some idea about what to expect. What had happened was, essentially, that someone at some point had pointed out that the athenaeums were complicit in a lot of the crimes of the Second Empire, whether that was by furnishing the Empire with trained personnel, or more directly using their considerable sway to make things worse (for given values of worse). Obviously this was a serious structural problem that no one wanted to have repeated a second time. Less obviously, the solution was to teach people to be ethical, which was to be done early in the education process for people who were going to find themselves in a fair bit of power. I couldn’t tell whether this was laughably idealistic thinking, or simple virtue signaling, but I was leaning toward the latter. I was expecting it to be the most boring thing in the world, so I was mildly surprised to find myself paying attention.
“It’s important to note that the Second Empire did not see themselves as doing anything wrong,” said our teacher. “It’s a trite Utherian observation that everyone is the hero of their own story, but the Second Empire was more than simply a lack of perspective, of the inside view being different than the outside view, it was an ideology with a great many thinkers, thinkers who weren’t justifying their actions to themselves as so many people do, but who were operating according to that ideology. We don’t talk too much about that ideology these days, which is a shame, because it increases the chance that if you see it in the wild, you’ll find it attractive, and be unequipped to deal with the imperial memeplex.”

She grinned at us. “So let’s dive right in and talk about trolls. Through the course of the Second Empire’s one hundred and seventy-one year history, there were two consistent, opposing, and complementary trains of thought, held by two overlapping groups. The first group was progressive, concerned primarily with the betterment of people, and saw itself as the heir to Uther Penndraig, who brought so many well-loved reforms and technologies into the world that he was regarded as something of a saint by those people, someone touched by a higher power, which he might well have been. The second group was a group of abject pessimists, who thought that it was only a matter of time before either civilization or life itself would be wiped from the face of the universe. They also saw themselves as the heirs to Uther Penndraig’s empire. From the marriage of these two broad groups comes the imperial motto, ‘Ever onward, against the dark’.”

She took a sip from a glass of water. She was looking over everyone in the lecture hall, more than a hundred of us, her bright eyes looking for signs of engagement. “The trolls were perceived as a problem by both groups. They were a tall, brutishly strong species, with low impulse control, fast breeding, and fast regeneration. The trolls were barely intelligent enough to form rudimentary kingdoms, even with social and cultural technology imported from elsewhere, and those kingdoms were, on the whole, violent toward their neighbors and nearly incapable of engaging in trade. The Second Empire didn’t particularly want any of the troll lands, but its member countries found themselves constantly defending against the troll kingdoms. Even when such defense was relatively assured, it was still a drain on resources, one that the Second Empire found to be wholly unacceptable. They were, after all, pressing forward and trying to make the world a better place, trying to secure a future against a hostile world, twin tasks so monumentally important that problems like the trolls needed to be looked at with a clean and clinical eye.”

She looked out at the class. “This, I think, is the Second Empire as it should be taught. Yes, the end result was xenocide, but from the inside that wasn’t how it looked. If we’re to keep ourselves from repeating their mistakes, we need to familiarize ourselves with that inside view, the better to see the errors in their ways. I’ll go through the remaining history of the trolls very briefly, for those whose schooling skipped it. The first concrete action that the Second Empire took was to topple the troll kings and institute leadership of their own, administrators who would oversee what was only barely a government and institute the particular type of planned economy that was in vogue at the time. They dealt with the inevitable problems that follow from that sort of thing, which the Second Empire would become well-acquainted with over the years, dissident populations, asymmetric warfare, worker strikes, and the general problems that come with governance by force rather than governance by consent. The trolls remained a problem for the Second Empire, but now one that was entirely their own burden to bear, and an early test of the second imperial experiment. Cultural programs were employed to help bring the trolls into the fold, but their low impulse control and low intelligence wasn’t something that could be entirely cured through such means. Many of the trolls who were brought into the developing cosmopolitan society would wind up committing crimes that got them sent to prison, which was a further burden on the empire.”

“At some point, someone began thinking that it would be better if there were fewer trolls in the world, or more likely, people had thought that all along and a shift in social mores happened which allowed them to speak previously unspoken thoughts. The Second Empire started with relatively
innocuous measures in that direction, as compared with what they would do later on. They called it voluntary sterilization, a measure done chemically, magically, and virally, all in service of reducing the birth rates of the troll kingdoms down to virtually nothing, usually implemented by the imperial governors and their staff, none of them trolls themselves. When there were few takers for voluntary sterilization, incentives began to be offered, and the trolls, lacking impulse control, began to comply en masse. Populations began to drop dramatically, and it was accounted as one of the early successes of the Second Empire.”

Maybe I should have mentioned this before, but our instructor was demonblooded. She had two small horns, light purple-red skin, and black hair that was carefully plaited. It was hard to think that people were going to be participating in the Demonblooded Festival in a few short days and putting someone that looked like her to death almost purely for the misfortune of how they were born. It was something that I was keeping in mind within the context of what she was saying.

“They saw what they did as humane,” our instructor continued. “They erased a culture from the world, extinguished a language, wiped away a species, and removed what they saw as a somewhat significant problem. The ‘voluntary’ sterilization program was seen as an unmitigated success, and those who worked on it turned their sights to other populations that the collective might be better off without, largely r-selected species of lower intelligence. By that point they had done the majority of the groundwork and knew how to do such things simply, easily, and with cost efficiency. They had gotten good at arguing their case to others.” Her smile had become subdued. “Most of you aren’t here because you really want to be. You probably think that of course you’re not evil, and you don’t need a course to tell you how best to not commit atrocities. This course is required for anyone going into combat or biological tracks, and for many, it will seem like a burden. It’s a difficult course to teach, I’ll say that outright, because what we really desire here is not that you will all memorize some key set of facts, or attain a particular mode of thinking, but that you will be transformed such that the ethical mode of thought is your default.”

The bell rang not long after that, and I was left kind of stunned, not because anything she’d said had been all that novel to me, but because she hadn’t seemed to deliver the punchline. I got up from my seat and went down to speak with her.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Juniper Smith, I’m hoping that the bursar spoke with you?”

“Oh,” she replied with a faint frown. “Yes. There’s no need for you to attend this class.”

“Okay,” I said. “I just wanted to make sure that there was no issue.”

“No,” she replied. She gave me a skeptical look. “Why would there be?”

*Because you’re an ethics professor?* “No reason,” I said. “Some of the other instructors have wanted to speak with me.”

“I don’t see a need for that,” she replied. She had been putting papers into a messenger bag, notes that she’d been consulting, or spare mimeographed copies of the syllabus. “I can finish the paperwork on my side tonight and get them to the bursar as soon as possible.”

I didn’t like that response. “Can I ask … what should the Second Empire have done about the trolls?” I took note of Lisi and Reimer standing by the door as the rest of the class continued filing out. They were clearly waiting for me, which I didn’t enjoy, and they were talking, which I also didn’t enjoy.

The instructor froze at the question. “Are you asking because of actual interest?” she asked. “Curious.”
“It’s curious?” I asked. “Wasn’t that the point of the lesson? Thinking about ethics?”

“It just doesn’t happen often,” she replied. “I could count the number of times someone had approached me outside of class to talk about the lesson on a single hand.”

“Really?” I asked.

“The class is mandatory, as I mentioned,” she replied with a shake of her head. “There are some significant pressures in place for instructors not to outright fail someone, and the class sizes are large enough that what I’m attempting to do, which is to shape minds, can’t really be done effectively.” She finished packing up her things. “If you’d like, I can give you some outside instruction, though I wasn’t under the impression that you were going to be here long, or that your attendance was anything more than a formality.”

“I was honestly just curious,” I replied. “I mean, as you described it, the Second Empire was facing an outside threat, an expensive one, and one that they didn’t really have much of a way to deal with without spending an enormous amount of money on either administration or defense. I’m right in thinking that the troll kingdoms were warlike?”

“They were,” replied the instructor with a nod. “The glib answer is that the Second Empire’s first mistake was in committing xenocide, but I think that ignores how they viewed themselves.” She glanced at the door. “Do you have a fifth class today?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, so long as I’m not keeping you,” she said with a nod. “Do you think that the lesson would have been better with some contemplation of things that the Second Empire could have done instead?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I guess … I guess I just expected it. You present a problem, you show how they dealt with it, and then there’s no alternative solution. Right? The trolls were always going to be nipping at the Second Empire, presumably. I’m not really a student of history, but that’s how you laid it out.”

“I did,” she replied. “We risk getting too bogged down in the specifics, but the troll ‘problem’ was debatably not a problem at all. The trolls could barely cobble together an army on their best days, and the real problem was that trolls would simply wander in over national borders, something their kings generally did not do anything about. It took trained personnel to deal with a troll, which was a cost to the Second Empire, but it wasn’t a cost that couldn’t be borne. They just felt no need to bear that cost in the long term, or considered that cost too high.”

“Because of their ideals?” I asked. “Because they were looking forward and trying to make progress, or worried about the end of the world?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “And if you believed that the world was going to end, then perhaps you would look at the numbers in your ledger, see the cost incurred by suffering the trolls to live, and make a judgment call.” She shrugged. “It’s difficult, to seek the nobility in the Second Empire, but I think it’s vital, because it explains how and why they did what they did. I should note that what happened with the trolls was very early on in their history, before anyone can start laying blame at the feet of the Guild of the Essential Soul.”

[Juniper, status?] asked Amaryllis.

I swallowed once. There was no point in this conversation, not really, but it was bugging me. I still
needed to meet with Magus Ermaretor, then hopefully figure out what the hells was happening down in the temple, who was involved in this presumed shadowy conspiracy, and find some way to shake both Reimer and Lisi, hopefully permanently.

I wanted to see the numbers though. Surely the Second Empire must have run them, right? Someone, somewhere, had to have seen that the trolls were a cost incurred by the Second Empire, and then … well, it would make so much more sense if they had been placing too low a value on the trolls, or if they had just been genocidal monsters, or whatever. Voluntary sterilization seemed so harmless, the equivalent to handing out condoms, and if someone on Earth had done that … well, if someone on Earth had done that and specifically targeted human races that they didn’t want to exist anymore, well, there we might have some fundamental problems with actual racism, not that it would be terribly better if it were classism instead. But it was different with the trolls, because even from someone who was arguing against the Second Empire, the trolls were regarded as stupid and impulsive, and they were that way even if you changed their socioeconomic context. Was any of that trustworthy or true?

It was all irrelevant. I wasn’t there to debate ethics, I was there to get a rubber stamp so I could gain power and move on to the next thing.

“I might have some more questions,” I said. “Tomorrow, though.”

She gave me a skeptical nod. “I’ll send the paperwork over to the bursar tonight.”

I left the classroom, and almost immediately had Lisi and Reimer in tow, which was not my preferred state of affairs.

“Reimer said that you were with a woman who looked like a Penndraig,” said Lisi.

I cast a murderous look at Reimer.

“In my defense,” said Reimer. “Lisi’s actually kind of threatening.”

“Thank you,” said Lisi. “I am a blood mage.” She turned to me. “So who was she?”

“Classified,” I said. “Just a moment.” I moved Parson’s Voice up and pressed against it. It was really difficult to use it discreetly, especially sending messages intended for both ends, so I’d decided that I just wasn’t going to bother, not around these two, not when Reimer had probably already told Lisi everything that he knew. “I’m out, sorry that took longer than expected. I have a meeting with Ermaretor, then I’d like an escort home. Lisi and Reimer are with me.”

[Noted,] replied Amaryllis.

“We were going to get something to eat,” said Lisi. “The campus cafeteria is surprisingly good.”

My stomach was rumbling. There wasn’t all that much time between classes, and I hadn’t brought a snack.

“Who were you talking to, if it’s not classified?” asked Lisi.

“It’s definitely classified,” said Reimer.

I tapped Parson’s Voice again. “Any particular reason to keep this secret?” I asked. “Point of contention number two?”

[Lisianthus is not the ideal entry point,] replied Amaryllis. [How much did Reimer tell her?]
“Probably everything,” I replied.

[We’re not situated well for this,] said Amaryllis. [We’re a country whose entire citizenry, bureaucracy, and army is currently located within a foreign city, and will be for the next two weeks.]

“You could go back,” I said. “Split the party again.” I didn’t actually know where Amaryllis was, but I assumed that she was close by, ready to come running in case there was any danger.

“You know that it’s rude to talk to other people with us next to you, right?” asked Reimer.

[My plan was that the curious members of the Lost King’s Court would come to me on the Isle of Poran and step into Bethel,] said Amaryllis. [That would have given me significant leverage for rejoining Anglecynn, to the extent that it’s going to be possible for me to do that. If they go to the Isle of Poran now, they’ll find it nearly abandoned.]

“Lisi,” I said, still touching Parson’s Voice. “How much back channeling do you do with the kingdom of Anglecynn?”

[It wouldn’t be back channeling, it would be channeling,] said Amaryllis.

“It would be channeling, not back channeling,” said Lisi. “And the answer is practically none. I was supposed to have a shadow, but I haven’t found him yet. I may not rate one.”

“Okay, well, my superior says that it’s still classified,” I replied. I made sure that Parson’s Voice was still pressed when I said that, so Amaryllis could hear. We both knew that she wasn’t my superior, but I thought she would probably catch the humor in my voice.

“Do you want to eat with us?” asked Lisi.

“I have a meeting with one of the magi,” I said. I hesitated. “Tomorrow, maybe.”

“What kind of shit have you gotten into, Joon?” asked Reimer.

“Classified,” said Lisi, rolling her eyes at me. “Dinner together then?” she asked Reimer.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” he replied.

They split off, together, which was worrisome, and I continued on to Ermaretor’s office.

“Oh, Juniper!” she said when I came in. “Lovely that you made time to come. Close the door behind you.”

There were blackout curtains in her office, covering the large windows. I wondered why in the world she’d been given an office with such big windows if they were going to be permanently closed to the outside world, but maybe it was a status game of some kind. Her office was nearly as colorful as her clothes, which highlighted the monochrome greys, blacks, and whites of her hair and skin. It was stark, in its own way, and a little bit disorienting.

“How was your first day?” she asked.


“But you’re not staying here for long,” she replied with a nod of her head.

“No,” I replied.
“And tell me,” she continued, “Are you a traveller on the path made by others?”

“The … what?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she replied, shaking her head. “You would know it, if you were.”

“Can I ask what this meeting is about?” I asked. “The bursar said that there shouldn’t be any trouble, so long as I could make it through a week of classes.”

“The bursar says many things,” Magus Ermaretor replied. “Can I ask, do you meditate?”


“It’s important for the temple,” she said. “It’s not mandatory that people take classes on meditation prior to going into the temple, because the environment there is conducive to it, but many take one or two supplemental practice sessions. Free of charge, naturally, since it helps to ensure we make the most of a scarce resource.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll look into it.”

“One class, mandatory,” she replied, staring me down. “That’s one of my requirements.”

“One of?” I asked.

“You have to understand that what the bursar is asking is irregular,” she replied. “If something were to go wrong, questions might be asked, and while the bursar is the one sticking his neck out, it’s those of us he’s roped into this that will be splashed by his blood when the board of directors beheads him.”

I hoped that was figurative.

“What are the other requirements?” I asked.

“I’d like to know who you are and where you come from,” she replied. “Not the full truth, mind you, but at least the story that you’ve been telling people who have asked, with enough details that I can know if you’re an unsavory element, at least you’re one that’s done his homework. It wouldn’t do to have your threadbare backstory exposed with a gentle wind. There’s no one investigating you now, presumably, but if they do in the future … well, I have a future here, one that I’m looking to protect.”

“I’m the Advisor on Culture for the Republic of Miunun,” I said. “We’re a fledgling nation with very little in the way of magical power. The plan is for me to be rushed through initiation, then study independently in a time chamber for as many years as it takes.”

“A time chamber?” she asked.

“Sand magic,” I replied. “It allows years to pass in the space of a day.”

“With private instructors?” she asked. Her black eyebrows drew down as she looked at me.

“No,” I said. “The plan was to learn mostly from books.”

“That would be a long, arduous process,” replied Ermaretor with a twitch of her lips. “You would be spending years of your life just to get a thing done quickly. Why not hire a proper still mage?”

“With respect, we’re in a precarious position. Outsourcing magical abilities doesn’t seem like it would be too smart, at least not at the present moment.” I shrugged. “It was decided that I could wear
another few hats to better serve our interests. Advisor on Culture, chief still mage, and chief vibrational mage.”

“They’re worried about spies?” asked Ermaretor. Her frown had deepened.

“As I’ve said,” I replied. “We’re a fledgling nation. In another few years, we’re probably going to be pretty important, given a number of advantages we’re going to leverage. People already seem to know that, but our intelligence services are, frankly, rather poor because they’re still being built, and we don’t have the necessary expertise to properly vet outside hires.” A lot of this was completely true; Amaryllis thought it was fairly likely that one or two of the teachers she’d hired for the tuung were agents for either foreign nations or other agencies who answered to the Empire.

“Interesting,” said Ermaretor. “The bursar appears to be playing with fire. You understand that once you’ve undergone the initiation, you’ll be beholden to Sound and Silence?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “You get a portion of my salary for services rendered, and some other binding stuff.”

“A week isn’t long enough to teach you our culture,” said Ermaretor. “I’m skeptical that you could become a mage of either flavor just from an extended period studying books, but if you did, you wouldn’t be one of the right stripes.”

“I’m completely fine operating under the framework that everyone else does,” I said. “It’s very important that I don’t spend the next several years at this athenaeum though. I’ll divert a portion of my salary and do whatever else is asked of me, so long as I can learn the art in my own way.”

Ermaretor leaned back. “Very well then. I believe I’ve done my due diligence. A single session of meditation though, that’s the remainder of your obligation to me.”

“Plus classes?” I asked.

Ermaretor looked aghast. “Of course I expect you to attend. How would that look if you didn’t?”

“Just checking,” I replied. I wasn’t sure that I was going to skip out on Ethics, and I definitely wasn’t skipping Combat Magic, but not forcing me to attend seemed entirely sensible. “I’ll attend the meditation class you recommended and do my best to make sure that you’re in the clear as far as potential problems go. We want this to be as smooth as you do.”

That, at last, seemed to unruffle some feathers, and I left her office shortly afterward.

“It went fine,” I said to Parson’s Voice. “No attempt on my life or anything, just some political stuff, plus a cryptic question at the start, something about a path.”

[Do you have more than that?] asked Amaryllis. [I’m around the corner, coming to meet you.]

“Hold up,” I said. Four people in robes were approaching me. Two were likely human, a man with a neatly trimmed beard and woman with a mask, both older, but the other two were more exotic species, tywood (a sand-dwelling species), and rhannu (who reproduced via mitosis). They were all looking at me, and not looking happy.

“You’re human,” said the rhannu. She was on the small side, five feet tall, with purple streaks in her hair that I was pretty sure were from dye, and purple streaks on her skin that were part of the coloration her species had. I was pretty used to the wide variety of species on Aerub, and I’d read The Book of Blood more or less cover to cover, but I still took a moment to look for the other distinctive features relative to the human baseline. Larger eyes, smaller forehead, a large set of ears and a small
one beneath it, and an extra finger. Nothing you couldn’t do with a little CGI. They hadn’t been from one of my more exotic phases, their interesting breeding aside.

“Can I help you?” I asked, looking between the four of them. All older, I thought, though it was tough to say how much. Thirties? Forties?

“You’re human,” the rhannu repeated, jabbing a finger my direction.

“I have no idea who any of you are,” I replied. “So, I’m just going to leave.”

“We’re the Student Council,” said the tywood (seven feet tall, lizard-like, with knees that bent backward).

“Okay,” I said. I was bewildered. “I don’t actually know what the student council does here, or what your powers are, but I haven’t had dinner yet.”

“You’re human,” repeated the rhannu for the third time. “You’re here under provisions that were put in place in order to help and protect special cases. They’re not for humans, they’re for rhannu and renacim, among others.”

The rhannu reproduced via mitosis, like cells did. When that happened, each would get a portion of the skills and memories of the original, and my guess was that this worked via the soul somehow. They would die if they didn’t split every thirty or forty years, and each half had to spend some time building back up into a whole person again, mostly mentally rather than physically. Now that she mentioned it, I could clearly see how Sound and Silence might have to have some kind of provision for her species.

“Is it the link between the Li’o Temple or the Rod of Whispers that doesn’t transfer when you split?” I asked.

“Both,” she said, crossing her arms. I’d thought there was an outside chance that me knowing a bit about her rather rare species might help, but if anything, it had the opposite effect. “My ancestor was the one who helped get the Special Returning rule created.”

“Alright,” I said.

“What are your special circumstances?” she asked.

I looked between the four of them, trying to figure out what was going on, other than that the rhannu was upset, which was obvious enough. “I don’t think I’m required to say,” I replied. “And like I said, I haven’t had dinner yet, so.”

“The SSSC has broad authorities,” said the human man. He was gray at the temples, but a bit baby-faced despite that. “We might not be able to expel you, but we can censure instructors. After we talk to them, it’s doubtful that they’ll want to sign off on the form.” There was no passion in his voice whatsoever, but his speech was quite cold.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“You’re cheating the system,” said the rhannu. “Two years, would that be so hard, to be just like everyone else? You’re using a rule that’s not for you.”

This was going sideways in a hurry. If I had things right, the bursar had been the one to have me follow this ‘Special Returning’ rule, because he had the authority to do so, but per the rules, I needed a week of classes and a sign-off from the instructors, which was now under threat. I didn’t think
Oberlin would give a fuck, but this was exactly the sort of thing that Ermaretor had been worried about.

“‘You’re right,’” I said. “‘We’re using the rule in a way that it wasn’t intended to be used.’ I probably can’t get away with just saying that it’s classified. ‘I’m here on behalf of the Empire. I’m investigating the recent deaths. It’s vital that I be allowed to operate as a normal student, and unfortunately, this was the only way that we were able to accomplish that.’”

That shook them out of their subroutines. “‘You’re … a spy?’” asked the tywood, who hadn’t yet spoken. His voice was surprisingly mellifluous.

“Spy is a strong word,” I replied. “Undercover though? Yes, that would fit.” I looked between the four of them. “‘We don’t know who’s involved, and that’s what I’m trying to find out. Going in with guns blazing wouldn’t suit that approach.’ I was really hoping that none of them were reporting to the enemy, whoever that was, but I didn’t think that I had much of a choice here, given that they were capable (and presumably willing) to sink my shot at two of the most difficult to attain magics.

“We’ll be checking up on this,” said the rhannu. She folded her arms across her chest. “‘You understand that.’”

“I do,” I replied. “‘Send a certified letter to Uniquities. I’ll have them confirm.’ And if they don’t want to, then I’m sunk and I’ll disappear from this place like I was never here, but hell if this isn’t a problem. ‘I need to know who informed you that I was here under the Special Returning rule.’”

“We don’t need to tell you,” replied the rhannu. “‘We were told in confidence.’”

“But,” said the man, stroking his chin, “‘If there really is something nefarious going on, then it’s possible we’re being manipulated.’”

The rhannu turned on him. “‘How?’” she asked. “‘Manipulated by actually following procedure?’”

“Yes,” replied the man with a nod. “‘Historically speaking, that’s a common tool of people with nefarious intent, and one of the primary failure modes of anonymous or pseudonymous reporting.’”

The tywood let out a sigh. “‘Later. We’ll send out a certified letter and go from there, before we take any action.’”

“Even if it is clandestine imperial business, isn’t that worse?” asked the rhannu. “‘The empire can’t come in and do whatever they please here, and they’re weakening institutional trust.’”

“Assuming anyone finds out,” replied the bearded man. “‘And given that he must have sanction from someone at the top, that implies that the matter has already passed some level of institutional review.’”

“Perhaps storming across campus to confront him was a mistake,” replied the masked woman with a monotone that I couldn’t help but think was a little sarcastic.

The rhannu seemed to realize that she’d lost much of her support in a few short minutes. “‘Fine,’” she said. She turned back to me. “‘When you find something, let us know. That’s our condition.’”

“‘Our’ is a strong word, Jiph,” said the masked woman.

“It’s my condition,” said the rhannu.

“Okay,” I said, having no actual intent to do so. “‘I’m working toward the best interests of S&S. Hopefully this will all be resolved soon.’”
The rhannu, Jiph, stormed off, and the other members of the student council followed after her. I mentally added that to the list of things that I had to worry about, which was growing fairly long at this point. Had they all stepped out of a meeting together to come find me? It seemed bizarre.

Amaryllis came up next to me a few minutes later, wearing her full plate with the helmet firmly in place, a necessary precaution given that there was a greater risk of her being recognized than previously thought.

“How are we doing?” she asked.

“Good,” I replied. “One day down, four to go, about half a dozen sub-plots to keep track of. No homework though.”
True to his word, Reimer had mailed us (actual physical mail with stamps and everything!) more notes on the system, including more of the virtues he knew, and notes on the campaigns that he’d played in, the ones created by the Aerb version of myself. I read through them, naturally, and even with the Reimer filter on things, I felt like I got a sense of that alternate Juniper. It filled me with a profound sense of loss.

One of the campaigns took place on a giant bird, where each feather was as large as a mountain, and generations passed while the bird was in flight. Mites were serious threats to the miniscule playable races, though it wasn’t clear whether or not the characters were small or the bird was simply enormous, and the whole thing was tied together with magic to make it work on even the high concept level. The great cities of the world were built into the hollow quills of the bird’s feathers, with an ecosystem that was partially based on the real ecosystem of a bird’s skin, and partly derived from a consequence of the binding magic that made the setting work. I could see the knock-on effects just from Reimer’s sparse descriptions of how it all worked, little details that betrayed magnitudes of worldbuilding.

Another campaign was set in an endless desert, with water and food supplied entirely by extremely expensive wells that had been created by a long-gone elder race. The wells were slowly deteriorating, on the scale of centuries, and no one had any idea what they were going to do when the wells (each of which supported a city) finally failed. The party were cast into the roles of elite desert wayfarers, one part scholars delving into the ancient ruins to uncover the mysteries of the elder race, the other part emissaries who traveled from lush city to lush city, spreading knowledge and solving problems. I couldn’t help but draw some global warming parallels to that campaign, though if the other Juniper was native to Aerb, the feeling that he would have been drawing on would have been either the Void Beast, or the exclusions, or something like that. Reimer described most of the desert cities as being more concerned with the here-and-now than a hundred years hence, even among the long-lived races.

Aerb left its prints everywhere on these campaigns, naturally. If I’d grown up on Aerb, my influences would be far different, not just because I didn’t have any actual tabletop RPGs to work from, but because Aerb was absolutely stacked with wildly different magics, intelligent species, cultures, and all the stuff that had been cribbed from my worldbuilding. If you were a teenager in Anglecynn, faced with all that, you probably wouldn’t do it like I did it, especially without Wikipedia to turn to. So the other Juniper had gone simple, paring things down to where they were manageable for a single person to make campaigns in. Per fake Reimer (a tenuously trustworthy source) they had usually picked characters first, then had the world constructed afterward, with exactly as many intelligent species as needed, and as much magic as required for the characters, with everything else made up to suit that.

They’d played their own version of a campaign inspired by Arthurian legend, though theirs was inspired by Uther, and was thus twice removed. The details were sparse on that one, which I thought was understandable, given that it was still a bit sensitive for me, and probably would be for this Reimer. I had thought that maybe I would see some reflection there, with their campaign resulting in the Arthurian legend of Earth, but instead they were just a mutation of Utherian legend, Othyr Bendrak and his Knights of the Star Table.

I wanted to meet other Juniper. I wanted to talk to him about what his life had been like. Reading Reimer’s notes … well, Reimer didn’t focus on the things that I wanted him to focus on, but I could still get some sense of the other Juniper peeking through. Kindred spirits. I wondered if the Dungeon
Master looked at me in the same way that I looked at the other Juniper. Probably not, given the torture.

I talked about this with the others, the night of my first day as a student.

“I’d just like to meet him and see what he was like,” I said. “I know that sounds incredibly narcissistic, but … I almost feel nostalgic for him.”

“Rilirin,” replied Grak with a nod. He was sitting on the couch in the common room, with Solace leaning up against his legs. She was knitting, which was entirely unnecessary in at least three different ways, but I supposed that everyone needed a hobby.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s narcissism,” said Amaryllis. “You find him compelling, or at least his ideas. You’d have to be a pretty boring person not to find mirrors of your own ideas compelling. I would have liked to meet Cypress, or failing that, to have read her books.” Amaryllis sat at the table with Raven, where they were both going over notes together. They had colored index cards with places, names, and subplots written on them, as they worked to try to figure out the narrative.

“Sorry,” said Raven. “But it’s important that the Library continue to function.”

“I’m aware,” replied Amaryllis, looking slightly annoyed. “I’m only stating my preference.”

“For my part, I would like to speak with Maddie,” said Raven, looking briefly at me before returning to the notes. “We should get string, I think,” said Raven. “It might help us visualize the potential connections.” This aside was directed at Amaryllis. “There should be no problem with me going to speak with her, should there?” she asked, turning back to me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The way things have been going, there could be booby-traps everywhere, the kind that we could never see coming. Like, if it were me, and I wanted to create drama … you have binary explosives on Aerb, right?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Or rather, we could easily make them, but it’s not an entrenched concept like it is on Earth.”

“Well, I was thinking that if I were a total bastard, what I might do would be to create a binary meme, consisting of two memes that are safe when separated, but deadly when mixed together,” but even as I was saying it, I was frowning to myself. “Seems inelegant though, at least as a way of artificially creating drama, and raises some questions about where each of the half memes came from, and how they got their properties.” I noticed that Amaryllis was rapidly writing something down. When she was finished, she looked up at me with a scowl.

“Could you not?” she asked.

“Not what?” I asked, momentarily bewildered. “Oh come on, do you really think that me saying things will retroactively change the world so that we have to face those things? That all of history is actually changing because I say something like, ‘hey, they’ve probably got binary memetic weapons’?”

“It’s possible,” said Amaryllis. “Possible enough that it might be better to keep those thoughts to yourself, or maybe not think them in the first place.”

“You want me to not think about how things could go wrong?” I asked. “But isn’t that what we’re all supposed to be doing? And, again, I don’t think that retroactively changing history should really
be on the table, because if it is, there’s nothing we can really do but go through the motions.”

“It wouldn’t need to be a retroactive change to history,” said Raven. “There was once a cabal of mages capable of predicting the future with incredible accuracy, the pathists.”

“Oh,” I said, stopping for a moment. “Yeah, I remember them.”

“You remember creating them?” asked Raven. Something had changed in her demeanor. “Was Uther aware?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “It was the Patchwork Republic campaign, the one loosely based on Soviet balkanization.”

“You realize that description isn’t helpful for anyone, right?” asked Pallida from her end of the table. She’d seemingly checked out of the conversation an hour ago, in preference for reading Earth books (she was making her way through the collected works of Roald Dahl at the moment).

“Is this a thing that I need to worry about?” I asked. “There are pathists on Aerb?”

“Not anymore,” said Raven. “Uther killed them to the last.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “Mary, if you’re going to tell me off for thinking up new weapons that might possibly be used against us, can you please also tell Raven off for loudly and firmly declaring that all the pathists to have ever lived on Aerb were slain to the last? That’s narrative bait if I’ve ever heard it.”

“Raven,” said Amaryllis, looking exasperated. “Please never declare that Uther and his Knights successfully dealt with a problem that will surely never rear its head again. Also, explain what a pathist is, in case we have to fight one.”

“Juniper?” asked Raven, raising an eyebrow.

“They could chart a path through the future,” I said. “But there was a hierarchy: they couldn’t make a path through the future where it would be altered by pathists above them.” I got some blank looks at that. “So, pathist C gets in a fight with a random schlub, then charts his destination as being, basically, winning the fight. He follows the path, not really knowing what he’s doing and why, and at the end of it, he’s somehow won. Paths were simple declaratives, a single phrase without caveats or qualifiers.”

“In what language?” asked Amaryllis.

“I have never in my life fallen for the old ‘make up new words’ or ‘speak in a different language’ trick,” I said, waving away the implied attempt at munchkinry. “Anyway, if pathist C fights pathist B, then pathist C can’t chart a path whatsoever, because pathist B is superior to him, and when their paths would end up in this iterative alteration pattern, instead path B just wins out. And way at the top is pathist A, and nothing stops him, ever, unless he makes a mistake in what kind of path he decides to be on.”

“That was how Uther defeated them,” said Raven.

“Well, it’s also how they defeated them in Patchwork Republic,” I said. “Though they also had the option to just use overwhelming firepower, because some paths just weren’t possible.” I looked at Amaryllis. “I doubt that this is going to come up though.”

“I didn’t bring it up because I thought it would,” said Raven. “I just … he knew, before it all
happened? He knew that they existed, how they worked, and how to defeat them?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “I mean, yes, Arthur was there for those sessions, but that was when he was maybe fifteen, so it would have been a long time, probably, with a lot of shit having gone on in the meantime.”

“He never said a word,” said Raven. She slumped in her chair and looked at the notes in front of her. Here, already, she had some measure of authority and input, and Amaryllis had eagerly welcomed both the help and the knowledge. With Uther, Raven had never even been allowed at the table, not really. No one had. He was a king who commanded his knights, a solitary leader. Raven had been someone he brought along for the ride.

“The reason you brought it up was that history didn’t need to be rewritten?” asked Amaryllis, gently prompting her.

“Oh,” said Raven. “Well, yes, the higher pathists often did things in response to events that hadn’t happened yet, to plans that hadn’t been made, to things that people would say only weeks later.” She shook her head. “If you have good enough precognition, which the pathists effectively had, you don’t need to rewrite history. You can alter the past when it’s still the present.”

“And these pathists are all dead?” asked Amaryllis. “Their magic is excluded?”

“Not excluded,” said Raven. “Not to my knowledge. But the magic was tightly constrained, available only through access to a device that has long since been destroyed by the pathists themselves.”

“An entad?” I asked. “Or the kind of device that could be rebuilt?”

“There was an elder race, some twenty thousand years ago,” said Raven. “They were frighteningly clever, until they ceased to exist. There were things they left behind, rare items that no one was ever able to duplicate.”

Forerunner trope. It had never been one of my favorites. I refrained from saying that though, for fear that it would trivialize what she was talking about. I had a problem with that, I knew, and I was trying to get better about it.

(But really, the whole ‘ancient forerunner species that disappeared after making a bunch of neat stuff’ was, in my opinion, some lazy worldbuilding. It was great from an adventure perspective, because it gave the opportunity to put down a lot of places where a party of adventurers could go spelunking with a lot of convenient treasures to snag, but it raised a whole lot of questions, most of which were never going to be answered. There were obvious reasons that worldbuilders leaned on it, and I wasn’t at all surprised to see it in Aerb, but I hoped that the Dungeon Master had done something clever with it. The alternate Joon’s desert world had wells and other technologies constructed by ancients, but it was implied, at least in the notes I had, that the mortal species of that world could have attained the majestic works of the ancients, if only they could have gotten their shit together for a year or so. Nothing the ancients had done there was so supernaturally beyond anyone alive that it was essentially a miracle.

Not that I had never used the stock ancients, because sometimes I was a lazy worldbuilder who wanted some cheap mystery and wonder in his game, or artifacts without the consequence of someone living being able to produce those artifacts. I would at least call it out as lazy though.)

“Juniper?” asked Amaryllis.
“Yeah?” I asked.

“You zoned out,” she replied.

“Just thinking about worldbuilding,” I said. “Probably not germane to the conversation.”

“Out with it,” she said.

“I was just thinking about the ancients,” I said. “How I don’t really like them, how they usually don’t make sense, and if they do make sense, they need to fit in with whatever the themes you’re working on are. Like, Patchwork Republic was about balkanization in the wake of imperial collapse, and there were a lot of the ancient-artifacts-no-one-can-build floating around, but they were recent artifacts, things that had been built within living memory, or if not built, then at least maintained within living memory. The game was implicitly about how sometimes things collapse, so the ancient lost secrets things was more poignant.” I looked over at Raven. “Do you know what killed the ancients?”

“Which ones?” she asked.

“Of course there are multiple,” I said with a sigh.


“The ones that pathists are descended from, then,” I replied. Five was actually lower than I had expected, given how nuts Aerb got about packing stuff into it.

“For those ones, it was a proto-exclusion,” said Raven. “Not quite an exclusion as we know them today, but with many of the same features. In that particular case, it caused the sudden malfunction of a mental augmentation their kind used, killing them all instantly, and so far as we’ve been able to determine, none of what they made can be recreated or repaired once broken.”

“Wait,” said Pallida, “Are you talking about the Gomerons? Is that what happened to them?”

“How do you not know this?” asked Raven. “You lived through it.”

“Like I had any idea?” asked Pallida. “I was in Gomera at the time, and all I saw was everyone around me drop dead, all at once, for no discernable reason. It was a little horrifying, now that I think about it.” She kept her face expressionless, but I thought that had to be a joke.

“They weren’t prepared for the magic to fail,” said Grak with a grunt.

“No, they weren’t,” said Raven. “It was an unknown threat at the time.”

(The Empire of Common Cause was barely prepared for a major exclusion, in spite of a lot of legislation that had been passed on the subject. I had asked Amaryllis about disaster preparedness as it pertained to the exclusionary principle, and she had spent a half hour in what I can only describe as full-on rant mode, covering a wide range of topics: regulatory capture, coordination failures, motivated optimism, toothless legislation, and pandering politicians. It was a somewhat harrowing experience for me, and she didn’t peter out until I tried to get through the thicket of acronyms that she’d used and tease apart some of the underlying assumptions. The long and short of it was that there were a few different magics which, if fully excluded, would end up with a lot of people dying avoidable deaths, and a lot of other people dying unavoidable deaths. As it turned out, getting people to plan for disasters that had never happened, and might not happen in the next lifetime, was actually pretty difficult.)
“And the other ancients?” asked Amaryllis. “I suppose you must have had access to their books.”

“How, Pithescenes were turned into obdurite by a still-unknown entity or phenomenon,” said Raven. “Anlasians were hit with a memetic disease that wiped them out within a fortnight, Reshnik vanished without a trace for unknown reasons, and the Frumions, as near as we can tell, simply suffered from supply chain failures and became a feral version of themselves.” Raven shrugged. “The names are probably unfamiliar to you.”

“Uh,” I said. “I know three of them. Reshnik made White Spires, and probably drowned, if they were like in my campaign, Anlasians made the hand whose fingertips are the Zorish Isles, and the Frumions were responsible for the Underhalls. Incidentally, are you sure it was supply chain failures and not the Jubjub bird?”

“Wait,” said Raven. “The Jubjub bird is real?”

“I have no idea,” I replied. “But it was something that I thought up, and canonically, that was what took down the Frumions. Maybe on Aerb it was just a kink in some complex supply chains.”

“I think I was on the other side of the hex when the Frumions went away,” said Pallida. “What’s a Jubjub bird?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Uh, big bird creature, four wings, six feet with talons, sinuous neck like a snake, but I think if you saw one you would probably focus in on the fact that it was fifty stories tall.” I shrugged. “It’s virtually indestructible, pecks people to death, calls people to it from the corners of their attention, invades dreams and appears in the twilight of consciousness … I’m not sure that I can remember much else. It was never something the party faced, it was just a background detail.”

“I’m pretty sure I would have remembered hearing about a five hundred foot bird,” said Pallida with a raised eyebrow. “Not doubting your, uh, expertise, but it really does seem like something that would stand out.”

“It wasn’t in your notes,” said Amaryllis, frowning at me. “Manxome Foe?”

“Yes,” I replied. “And sorry, like I said, it was a background detail, one of those horrible things that was roaming around and making life impossible in the long-term, not something that players were supposed to actually fight or really interact with.”

“So why was it there?” asked Pallida.

“Flavor and scene setting,” answered Amaryllis. “It would be the sort of thing that Juniper would include in order to sell the players on what the world is like, introduced by way of character backstory or plain exposition in order to make them feel a certain way.” She turned to Raven. “How did you know about it?” she asked.

“I read about it in a book,” said Raven. She frowned in concentration, then popped the book out of her entad and leafed through it for a moment. “Terrors of the Black Age, written four years after Uther disappeared, nearly at the same time Fel Seed happened. The author names and describes Fel Seed, along with some others. It stuck out to us as being prophetic, given that there are things described in this book that wouldn’t appear until later, but the exact nature of this foreknowledge has eluded us.”

“Author?” asked Amaryllis.

“Anonymous,” replied Raven. “Here, ‘The Jubjub bird is a great and powerful creature of sixteen
wings, six feet, and an elongated neck that sways and undulates as it seeks its prey. The bird is so massive that it dwarfs the largest buildings, standing high above the minarets. When the Jubjub bird wakes, the world will tremble.”


“Again,” said Pallida. “I’m pretty sure that a five hundred foot tall bird would stick out like a sore thumb.”

“I’m not saying that it ever existed,” I said. “I don’t think Raven is either. It’s just something that was in my games, which means there’s a chance that it’s here, especially given that it appeared in a book.”

“In a book that offers a glimpse of the future,” said Raven. The book disappeared from her hand. “If you’re confirming it, then it almost definitely exists.”

Amaryllis held out her hand in concentration for a moment, after which a sheet of paper appeared in it (likely some private communication with Bethel). She handed it over to Raven. “Here, this is the poem ‘Jabberwocky’, by Lewis Carroll.”

“A poem?” asked Pallida.

Raven read it wordlessly, her eyes rapidly scanning it. It wasn’t a terribly long poem. As soon as she was done, she read it again, going a bit slower. Her face had grown still and pale. She reached for a pen, then turned to Amaryllis. “Can I mark this?”

“Go ahead,” replied Amaryllis. “I have copies.”

Raven started writing, marking particular lines and circling things, though I couldn’t see what from where I was sitting. “All from one poem?” she asked, not looking up. “Juniper, what happened?”

“I wasn’t in a great place,” I said.

She finally stopped writing and stared at me. “By my count there are a dozen of the worst things on Aerb here. The mimsies, those were from this? The borogroves?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Fel Seed was, ah, from there too. He’s the manxome foe. Incidentally, it’s ‘borogoves’, not ‘borogroves’.”

“I saw that,” said Raven, looking down at the poem. “But they’re a group of trees.”

“It’s a pun,” I said. “Not a hugely clever one, I guess. It’s ‘groves’, here?”

Raven nodded. “There’s an island where the trees grow,” she replied. She looked back down at the poem, then up at me. “What’s Mome Rath?”

“No idea,” I said. “It was on the list that Uther had your father read to me. It sounded familiar, but I don’t know if I was just thinking of the poem, or if it’s extrapolation from the other stuff, or whether I thought up something and then forgot it. So far as I know, it never made it into a game, so maybe it just never stuck. But it might be a novel creation of the Dungeon Master.” I shrugged. “I’m kind of curious how Arthur knew about it.”

“I am too,” said Raven. “I have people and concepts to map to everything on that list.” She frowned. “That backpack Bethel fused with, have you tried pulling game notes from it?”
“Yeah, I tried,” I said. “I got a note back that said ‘this test is not open book’. I can pull other stuff, like my birth certificate, my parents’ tax information, and other personal items, but not any notes, character sheets, or game materials, aside from the books. Nothing personally touched by the campaigns, if I had to generalize a rule.” I was able to get my favorite hat, so that was something.

“So we’re left with what you remember?” asked Raven, sinking slightly in her chair.

“Yes,” I replied. “You have to understand that Aerb draws on everything, nearly a decade of work, a lot of it throwaway stuff, some hasty or poorly thought out, especially the earlier things,” like the Ell, “and I remember more than I think I probably should, which I’ll attribute to KNO, but I don’t remember every little detail, not without something to jog my memory or use as a springboard. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Raven. “It’s just another mystery. I think, at this point, more is being resolved than created.”

“Not for me,” Amaryllis grumbled.

“We can take some time together,” said Raven. “Would the time chamber be available, do you think?”

“I had some things that I’d like to discuss in private with Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “I was planning to spend tonight in the bottle. The chamber is difficult, because it interferes with regular scheduling unless you want to spend the entire day in there. Can we block out a time?”

“Certainly,” Raven replied, but I thought I saw a moment of hesitation when Amaryllis said she was planning to spend the night with me.

(Would I have caught that before bumping my social stats up? It was hard to say. Insight had always been the highest of them, and in theory that was the governing stat for realizing that Maddie -- actually Raven, but Maddie in my head, a mistake I kept making -- found the idea of Amaryllis spending private time with me to be slightly troubling for reasons that probably didn’t have anything to do with the idea that we shared secrets. Amaryllis had tried to brush past it with the question about scheduling, and I wasn’t sure whether or not the old me would have noticed that she was intentionally pivoting. It was hard to tell, and there was always a chance that my so-called insights were all in my head.)

“I was actually going to go to bed soon,” I said. “Today has been a really long day. I had wanted to talk to Heshnel about the trolls some, but I guess I don’t want to get into that right now.” I wasn’t quite rubbing my eyes and yawning, but I was close, and it took some time to get down into the bottle, say hello to the locus, and get myself situated. I wasn’t terribly happy that I was going to spend the week having two commutes, one from campus to Bethel, the other from Bethel to inside the bottle, but there wasn’t much to be done about it.

“Amaryllis can take you down in the immobility plate,” said Solace. She was still in the middle of knitting. “Grakhuil and I will be staying here for a while, and I wanted to pick Pallida’s mind for a moment.”

“My mind?” asked Pallida. “What for?”

“You’re as old as creation,” said Solace with a grin. “I was hoping that you had some stories about the loci as they once existed.”

“Oh, I do take offense though,” said Solace, setting her knitting aside. ‘‘Perversion’ is an application of outsider mores.”

“Come,” said Amaryllis under her breath as she stood from the table. I followed after her, waving good night to everyone. Heshnel and Valencia were at their own table away from everyone else, and had been talking about the Harry Potter books, which was … something, I guess, a conversation that I didn’t really want to have, because I had enough Harry Potter in my life, but which I kind of wanted to listen in on. The last bit of conversation I caught was Pallida seeming to get ready to defend her claim of perversion. The last sight I caught was Raven watching us go.

“I need to grab the immobility plate,” said Amaryllis.

“Bethel could probably handle that,” I replied.

“I’ve been sitting too long,” said Amaryllis. “It won’t take long to get to my room, and it will do good to stretch my legs.” She stretched her arms behind her, seemingly for effect. “Besides, I wanted to talk.”

“Okay,” I said, waving for her to lead the way. “Lead the way.”

(Bethel was listening. Bethel was always listening. I tried not to mind, but in the back of my head I was wishing that we had some real, honest privacy. Maybe part of me was wishing that we could be alone together.)

It took Amaryllis some time to speak her mind, either because she was gathering her thoughts, or because she needed to switch gears from the intensive narrative stuff that she’d been working on with Raven to some new topic.

“Two things,” she said. “First, I want you to expose me to the meme you have, then excise it like you did on yourself. There are a lot of subplots here, and I’m worried that you might level up, even though it hasn’t been very long. If your spirit modifications fail, you’ll need someone to patch you up, and when I compare the risks against each other, I think it’s better to risk the meme reduction procedure now than to risk meme exposure in the heat of the moment for something that could literally end the world.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m not happy about it, but you’re probably right about the balance of risks.”

“The second thing … I wanted to talk about Lisi.” She took a breath. “We actually went to the Quills and Blood together.”

“I figured,” I said. “Or rather, the timeline had me wondering. Did you know each other?”

“Yes,” replied Amaryllis. “In the parlance of the Lost King’s Court, we would be cousins, but our actual relationship is that I’m her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-aunt twice removed.”

“That’s great,” I said.

Amaryllis smiled at me. “Yes, hence why everyone is a cousin, uncle, or aunt. You are expected to know proper relationships though.” Her smile faded a bit. “Outside Anglecynn, it’s fairly common for Penndraigs to have regular social meet-ups, little weekly dinners together, just to keep on familiar terms, even if you’re in opposition to one another.”

“Sounds like a good way to get poisoned,” I replied. I was only half joking.

“I don’t think you understand how many entads I had,” said Amaryllis. “Poison wasn’t really a
concern.” She took a breath. “Anyway, I saw Lisi at those dinners. We were close enough in age, reasonably ambitious, reasonably talented, and we’d both come to the attention of our aunt Rosemallow.”

“The same Rosemallow who gave you instructions on gritting your teeth through your wedding night?” I asked. I tried not to feel visceral disgust at that, and failed.

“The very same,” replied Amaryllis. “We were on opposite sides of the power scale though, Lisi one of the gavelkinds, myself … well, you know.”

“Rich as fuck,” I said.

“Yes,” replied Amaryllis with a nod.

It had taken me a pretty long time to understand the scope and breadth of power and money in the Lost King’s Court, partly because it was all about as foreign as it could have been to me without being inhuman, and partly because I hadn’t really taken the time to look into it (or to listen to what Amaryllis was actually saying). To start with, entads were money, both because some of them could consistently produce things of value, and because the ones that allowed for investiture could be rented out at hefty price. Back when Amaryllis had been a proper princess, she’d had people on staff whose entire job was to find buyers for entad-produced goods and services, and to secure contracts for the wealth of entads that could be invested in other people. Even if all of her investments were wiped out (which they were) and her properties seized (also mostly true), Amaryllis would never have to work a day in her life, because the entads would make her money hand over fist.

Gavelkind was a succession law where possessions were divided among children. The entad inheritance implementation of that was that when a person died, all their gavelkind entads would go into a conceptual ‘pool’, which was then divided up among the children. From the perspective of one of those children, it was a total crapshoot whether it rounded up or down and which ones you would end up getting. The enormous Penndraig family had a whole wing of ‘gavelkinds’, who barely inherited anything in the way of entads. These weren’t poor people by any measure, but they definitely hadn’t been favored by the rules that were at play.

“One of the things that I’ve always had to deal with, up until meeting you, was the motivations of the people approaching me with offers for friendship,” said Amaryllis. “Lisi … she was unimportant, and she knew that she was unimportant, so she went seeking out someone who could help her with that problem.”

“Ah,” I said. “Motivated friendship.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Not the first time,” she said. “And it probably won’t be the last.” She came to a stop, and I realized that we’d come to her room. “I’ll change into the armor, give me a second.” She went inside and closed the door behind her.

Bethel took that as her cue to appear next to me.

“I could give you a peek,” she said with a lascivious grin.

“No thanks,” I said. “How are you?”

“Good enough,” she replied with a shrug.

“What have you been up to?” I asked. “Watching the mortals?”

Bethel nodded once. “As always. Are you sure that you don’t want a peek?”
“Yes,” I replied. “The thought of spying on her … I find it kind of sickening.”

“Such a moral little human,” said Bethel with a cluck of her tongue.

“No,” I replied. “I mean, yes, I try to be, but the way it makes me uncomfortable isn’t really related to morality, it’s cultural programming. I didn’t decide to be sickened because I’m super moral, I just am sickened. It’s like the opposite of a fetish. Though I do also think that it’s immoral.” I paused. “How are you?”

“Fine,” replied Bethel. “You already asked. You want to talk about me, rather than her?”

“Either is okay,” I said. “But she’s going to be spending the night in the tree with me, so we’ll have more time to talk. You … I was gone most of today, and I’ll be gone most of the rest of the week too, so I wanted to make sure that your needs were being met, to the extent that I could actually meet them.”

“It’s not your forte,” said Bethel. She arched an eyebrow as she watched me.

“No,” I said. “But especially for you, I know you have your issues with Amaryllis, and she’s usually the one that helps to smooth things out with the others, so it’s down to me. And I think I understand you better than she does, though I can’t claim to understand you that well. I think I also probably like you better as a friend than she does.”

“Hrm,” said Bethel. She sighed and looked away from me. “I was watching the two of them, Amaryllis and Raven. Peas in a pod, it seems.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “I can see the similarities.” I hesitated. “It might just be my memories of Earth clouding things. I’ve been trying really hard not to see Raven as Maddie, and I think that I’m mostly there, but sometimes it’s like a little echo of Maddie, a place where you can see that they have the same DNA.”

“DNA?” asked Bethel.

“Uh,” I said. “Deoxyribonucleic acid, part of our cells, it’s what allows for heritability in humans. Or it does on Earth. For all I know, the mechanism is completely different on Aerb. Blood types don’t work the same, that’s for sure. Anyway, yes, there are places where Raven evokes Maddie, just, a grown up version of her, one with such a lifetime of experience that I could never hope to match it. Our roles are kind of reversed. But if you’re talking about her like she’s the same as Amaryllis, then I could probably go on for quite a bit about what makes them seem so different to me.”

“Amaryllis is almost done,” said Bethel.

“Sorry,” I said. “I got off topic. I really do want to talk to you about your own stuff.”

“Perhaps another time,” said Bethel. “I believe I’ve gotten something from this conversation, more than I was seeking, in fact. I may go speak with Raven.”

“Don’t cut her fingers off,” I warned.

“I would never be so dull as to repeat myself like that,” said Bethel. “But it appears that she and Pallida are having a spat at the moment, and I’d like to devote my attention to that.” She disappeared with a pop.

Shortly afterward, Amaryllis emerged from her room, clad in the immobility plate. “Ready?” she asked.
“Yeah,” I said. “You were talking about Lisi, and how it was a case of motivated friendship?”

“You remembered,” said Amaryllis. She cocked her head to the side. “Do you care? I won’t be offended if you say you don’t.”

And just like that, I was struck by the fact that maybe Amaryllis wasn’t giving me a debrief for the purposes of fulfilling my quests, maybe she just wanted to talk about something that was on her mind.

“You don’t talk about your past that much,” I said.

“It’s a confusing morass of names,” said Amaryllis. “And you know everything that’s actually important. If I talked about people like Lisi, it would just be a barrage of them, servants, staff, cousins, instructors, so many that even I have trouble keeping track of them so long after the fact.”

“Well, go on,” I said, gesturing for her to lead the way. “Tell me about Lisi.”

“Motivated friendship,” said Amaryllis as she started walking. “It wasn’t the first time, but it was definitely the least subtle. I don’t know what she thought I would get from her company, but she was abrasive in a way that I never found entirely appealing. We Penndraigs are destined for politics and governance from birth, but not all of us are suited to it, and Lisi … there’s a reason that she’s studying to be a combat mage instead of doing something a bit more prestigious. In another ten years, she’ll be a multimagus, but she’ll still be sitting outside of the traditional spheres of power within Anglecynn.”

“She’s the Second Under-Princess of Defense,” I said. “Does that really not count for anything?”

“She’s at the athenaeum, a world away from the seat of power,” said Amaryllis. “That should tell you everything that you need to know about how much influence and utility she actually wields. It’s typical to give younger members marginal roles to give them experience with governance, but she’s not even doing that.”

“Except that you got to be Special Liaison on Existential Emergencies,” I said. “Which seems, from what you said, like it actually did have some power attached to it.”

“I don’t want to be immodest, but I’m special,” said Amaryllis. “And even then, if I were a different person, I could have coasted through the position, putting in very little work, or offloading that work onto my staff. As it happened, I was putting an enormous amount of effort into the position, meeting with leaders and functionaries from other nations, working hard to get clearance on relevant issues, talking to imperial delegates -- this is boring you.”

“No,” I said. I didn’t think that I looked bored, and I certainly didn’t feel it.

“There was a joke you used to make with Fenn,” said Amaryllis. Her voice caught slightly on the name. “’Blah, blah, blah, politics’.”

“That was Reimer’s joke,” I said. “Not really a joke, just a way of dismissing things he didn’t care about. Fenn liked it.” I shrugged. “I have, in the past, maybe been a little bit dismissive of things that seem very remotely connected and not otherwise that interesting. Politics … I like politics, in the sense of knowing the groups and how they’re in opposition to each other, but if you’re talking about the process of deal-making and whipping votes, then it’s not really my cup of tea.”

“That’s fair,” said Amaryllis. “It can be frustrating, sometimes.”

“I want to clarify that this time I wasn’t feeling particularly bored,” I said. “If I had that far-off look,
then it was because I was trying to think about you doing all that stuff at fifteen or sixteen years old. When I was fifteen …”

“What?” asked Amaryllis.


Amaryllis rolled her eyes, but she smiled all the same. “You spent your time working on flesh.txt?” she asked.

I blushed. You write one erotic worldbuilding file, and this is what happens. “Might have,” I said. “Gods, it’s so weird that all my secrets are out in the open. Not just out in the open, but there are entire living, breathing civilizations built out of my literal masturbatory fantasies.”

“Yes, well, I suppose that’s one advantage of not being interested in that sort of thing,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t have those secrets to spread.” She pursed her lips. “Sorry.”

“I feel like if I had another few points in my social abilities, I would have some idea what you were sorry for,” I said.

“Sorry for bringing it up,” she said. “I know you’re sensitive about it.”

“Meh,” I said. “Pretty much all my dirty laundry is out in public now anyway, I live in a house that gives me a level of privacy below what was even possible on Earth, and of course, there’s the Dungeon Master, so … whatever.”

“You haven’t told us about the Fel Seed Incident,” said Amaryllis. ”The mechanics, yes, the personal stuff, no.”

“No, I haven’t,” I said.

“I wasn’t saying that you should do it now, just pointing out that you’re still leaving us in the dark,” she replied. “It might feel good to talk about it.”

“It might,” I said. “Or it might feel better to talk about happy things, or irrelevant things, instead of the nightmare monster that we’re going to be meeting at the end of the road.”

“Agreed,” said Amaryllis with a sigh.

We arrived at the room where Bethel kept the bottle. Whatever space warping was making it happen, there was a full night sky above us, though Li’o had all the light pollution that one would expect of a city with electricity, and the only celestial body I could see was Celestar, whose lined face was shining down on us. The bottle room, as I thought of it, was probably my favorite room in Bethel, mostly because it always had a wide open feeling to it, lots of greenery, and the statuesque hand that held the bottle seemed entirely mythical to me.

I held my breath and went into the glove, to save Amaryllis the awkwardness and embarrassment of having me ride her down. It had been a while since I had taken a trip in the glove, and it didn’t provoke even a little bit of nostalgia, though my mind did wander to Fenn, and how she had disliked those trips.

When Amaryllis pushed me back out of the glove, the doe was waiting for us.

“Hi,” I said. “Doing well?”
The doe gave me a nod.

“You’ve been doing better with it?” asked Amaryllis.

“I’m coming close to a week of spending my nights here,” I said. “I’m … starting to get used to it, I guess. Maybe I’m starting to understand it.”

“You should be careful about that,” said Amaryllis. She was already starting to take off pieces of the immobility plate and store them in the glove, but the bigger parts would need more dedicated maneuvering.

“I don’t think understanding is anathema to the locus,” I said. “Or at least, not understanding in the way that I’m talking about it. It’s just a different kind of understanding.”

“Feeling, not thinking?” asked Amaryllis. There was some curiosity in her voice.

“Maybe,” I said. “But … no, not really. I don’t think that breaking it down into an emotion and thought dichotomy actually works. It’s easier to describe what I’m feeling in terms of emotion, but it’s not actually emotion itself, not, uh, qualia. It’s not a distinction between what’s qualitative and quantitative.” I was pretty sure that I wasn’t articulating my position very well.

“Perhaps it’s better that we don’t have this conversation,” said Amaryllis. “If what you’ve been doing is working for you, then I don’t need to know exactly how.”

I walked over to the doe and patted its flank. I had lately been trying to curb away from calling it ‘her’, not because the gender was inaccurate, but because it seemed far too much like fitting the doe into a box. If my intent had been to increase empathy for the doe, I thought that the change in gender had mostly worked, but it was a bit of a crutch. The doe was its own thing.

Eventually we have to boil it down to something, ” said Reimer.

“You’re wrong,” said Tiff. “Sorry, but you are.”

“Guys, why are we even talking about this if Arthur isn’t here?” asked Craig. “Seems like something that you’d want to save for him.”

“Are you kidding?” asked Reimer. “Neither of us would be able to get a word in edgewise.”

“All I said was that so far as magic goes, the sword will glow in the hand of a woman,” I said. “A statement which you’re making me deeply regret.”

“Because there are edge cases,” said Reimer. “Like, big, obvious edge cases that we should all be familiar with.”

Tom gave a somewhat guilty look.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” replied Tiff. “You’re ignoring the actual meat of the argument.”

“You’re saying, basically, that it doesn’t boil down to the edge cases?” asked Reimer.

“I’m saying … you’re taking things like Klinefelter’s or androgen insensitivity and just making them into new categories,” said Tiff. “Or you’re making these different frameworks for them and pretending, I don’t know, that there’s a master framework, or that we’re stuck using frameworks at all.”
“Again,” said Craig, “Really seems like an Arthur kind of thing. Because we’re going to have to go through all this again when he comes back and hears about it.”

“Solemn pact not to tell him?” I asked, only partially joking.

“Question,” said Tom. “What is Klinefelter and what is the annerogen one?”

“Women have two X chromosomes, men have an X and a Y, someone with Klinefelter syndrome is XXY,” I said. “Androgen insensitivity is, I think, the one where you have XY chromosomes but something goes wrong with how your body handles hormones and you wind up outwardly presenting as a woman.”

“‘Goes wrong’ is a value judgement,” said Tiff with a frown. She was in a bit of a mood, which happened occasionally when she was having to defend her position. Usually it was better when Arthur was gone, but in this particular case, Reimer was pressing her buttons, or she had just had enough of us (not that I, specifically, was to blame).

“I’m wrong in the sense that it anthropomorphizes evolutionary processes and assumes that chemical, hormonal, and biological processes have intent,” I said, after a moment in which no one leapt to my defense.

“No,” said Tiff. “‘Wrong’ implies ‘right’, and that’s all just a construct. A useful one, sure, but you and Reimer are both talking about these things like they’re, I don’t know. More options that you would add to a drop-down, I guess.”

“My actual point,” said Reimer. “Was that the sword must have some way to know whether or not someone is a woman, right?” He looked at me. “Right?”

“Well,” I said. “Right.”

“Wrong,” said Tiff, frowning at me. “I mean, right, in the sense that yes, there’s some rubric that the sword might be able to apply to the question, but wrong, because the sword doesn’t ‘know’ and there’s no privileged frame there.”

I sighed. “We’re really not having an argument.”

“Could have fooled me,” said Craig.

“Wait, let me jot this down,” said Tom. “‘Not an argument’, there, got it.” He grinned at me. “Always good to keep track.”

“All I’m saying is that when the sword is presented with someone who’s intersex or transgender, it just makes a determination whether or not they’re a woman,” I said. “Eventually the rubber has to hit the road at some point, and the magic has to either work or not work. Right?”

Tiff crossed her arms and frowned. I wasn’t as good at the debating thing as Arthur was, but I thought that I had laid out the best argument that I could. I couldn’t even really remember how the argument began, except that I had offered up a sword that had special bonuses if you were a woman. I was pretty sure that Tiff had made an innocuous reply to some innocuous comment from Reimer, and it had snowballed from there, but it was the kind of thing that was hard to pinpoint after the fact.

“I understand wanting to put everything into little boxes,” said Tiff. “Or even wanting to firmly declare some things outside boxes and some things inside boxes. Most of the time, including this time, it’s fine. Can I just somehow get you to understand that it’s not real? It’s convention, it’s a sloppy fit because it’s always going to be a sloppy fit, it’s just … it’s frustrating that I can’t get you to
understand what I’m saying. Arthur would probably disagree, just for the sake of it, but he would at least understand.”

“Just to be clear, Joon,” said Craig, “You already made your ruling about who qualifies for the sword?”

I let out a sigh. “Yeah,” I said. “Though in the future, I probably won’t make a magic item like that.”

Tiff apologized afterward, more for disrupting the game and getting upset than for anything she actually said. It was one of those apologies with a lot of caveats, I think because she didn’t want to back down from her position, or claim full culpability for the fact that the argument got heated, but she did think an apology was warranted.

After I’d finished with the doe, something that I was trying to get less regimented about, I went inside the tree house, where Amaryllis was waiting for me. She’d shed her immobility plate and put on pajamas, which for her meant flannel pajama pants and a tank top, both probably from Earth.

“Have fun?” asked Amaryllis.

“Kind of,” I replied.

“Any … progress?” she asked.

“I’d rather not say,” I replied. “It’s … well, the loyalty system has always worked to undermine pretty much every interaction I have with my companions. It’s this metric sitting there, debatably not doing anything except providing bonuses, and focusing on it, trying to make it go up -- we were just talking about motivated friendship, weren’t we?”

“It’s different,” said Amaryllis. “Loyalty bonuses are symbiotic. Positive sum, mutually beneficial. The way it would have been with Lisi, I’d have to treat her like an investment, and she would always be getting more from the relationship than I would.”

“But you would be getting something,” I replied. “You would elevate her, and in exchange, you would get her loyalty, her service, and some say in how she lived her life, unless I’m horribly misreading how things were done among nobles.”

“Yes, and I would be paying out in various ways until she was actually worth something,” said Amaryllis.

“Harsh,” I said.

“Non-literally,” I said.

Amaryllis laughed. “Well, the elves were purged from the bloodlines long ago.”

“Uh,” I said, stopping for a moment. “Really?”

Amaryllis smiled and nodded. “It’s not funny, really, because it’s a reflection of a xenophobia that’s still present in Anglecynn, but still. It’s funny to think that the best that can be said about my relatives is that they don’t literally eat each other alive … anymore.” She laughed again.
“Well, at least you can laugh about it?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Amaryllis. “Do you know what Lisi showing up means?”

“That we’re going to be neck-deep in Anglecynn death squads within the fortnight?” I asked.

“I wish,” said Amaryllis. “Bethel would … well, it’s probably in bad taste to wish that on relatives, or worse, people hired by relatives, but yes, it means that we’re likely due for the Anglecynn subplot to return to the fore.”

“Which means, if current theories are correct, that we should shortly be getting another dozen reasons to go there,” I said with a sigh. I caught a brief and small sour look on Amaryllis’ face before her expression went still and controlled. “Amaryllis, if the opportunity presents itself to make you Queen of all Anglecynn, I will put full and honest effort into it, it just really seems more like your thing than mine. Fenn and I,” my voice caught, even though I’d tried to steel myself, “We always talked about what it would be like for us to go to society balls with you, how much we would like stomping all over everything, and all the nobles would have to hold their noses, because we had superior firepower. That was the fantasy of what going to Anglecynn would be like, and I always knew that the real thing would be its own special kind of hell, designed just for me.”

“I know,” said Amaryllis. “It’s just frustrating to me, especially when you seem so willing to shirk your own plotlines. You have no particular desire to go to Anglecynn with me, save for the desire one friend has to help another, and yet you also have no desire to go to Anglecynn to complete quests that might get us closer to your self-professed goal of killing Fel Seed and reuniting with Arthur.”

“Reuniting isn’t how I would put it,” I said. “And finding him, or at least finding out what happened to him, is also a step toward godhood, at which point I can do whatever I want, including installing you as grand monarch of Aerb, if that’s what you want.” I shook my head. “We’re retreading arguments. I hate that. Happened all the time with the group.”

“Sorry,” said Amaryllis. She looked over at the beds. “We should do the meme inoculation now. That would be more productive.”

“I assume you talked to Raven about it?” I asked.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Why would I? She doesn’t actually know much about spirit, and her expertise in memetics doesn’t seem like it would apply, because I’m more concerned with using soul surgery on a self-inflicted infection.”

“Maybe we should talk to her before we do something irreversible,” I said.

“Perhaps,” said Amaryllis. She went to sit down on the bed, the bunk that had once been hers back when we’d all lived here together. “Narratively --”

“Okay, okay, I’ll just do it,” I said. I sat down on the bed next to her. “How do you want to do this?”

“I’ll look at your soul first,” said Amaryllis. “Either it will infect me or it won’t. If it doesn’t, then there’s less need to worry, but if it does, you’ll have to make the same alterations to me that you did to yourself.”

“Alright,” I said, taking a breath. “I’ll watch over you, if you’re out.”

*Loyalty Increased: Amaryllis lvl 24!*
(How did that change anything? How was that enough to push her over the edge? Didn’t she already know that I would protect her? Was it just that I had said it out loud?)

Amaryllis placed her hand on my shoulder, with her thumb touching the base of my throat. She closed her eyes, and began frowning in concentration. She should have been at Essentialism 15, which for me had made the process far from automatic, but still doable in short order with some effort. I wasn’t sure how long it would take her to make her survey, nor whether I would know if she were infected, so I was left to wait, and with nothing to do but look at her.

We weren’t usually so close to each other. We were almost never touching. If she was paying attention to my heart rate as she tried to find the pathway to my soul, it was possible that she would feel my pulse speeding up, just from our proximity. Back near the beginning, when we weren’t so close, I’d had some fantasies about Amaryllis, fantasies that I’d done my best to squash, and fantasies that were returning, unbidden. She was too pretty, like every line of her had been made by an artist’s hand, and if I let my guard drop for even a moment, it was easy to be mesmerized.

I found myself wondering what I was waiting for. Why hadn’t I tried to make a better case for myself? Why wasn’t I trying harder to be the person that she wanted me to be, especially if it was the person that I wanted to be too? Uther was my point of comparison, and while I didn’t want to be him, the things that he’d accomplished before leaving were so far beyond what I had managed to do that they seemed more like myth than reality. Amaryllis … left to her own devices in a parallel timeline, she had conquered as much of the world as she possibly could have, with only a slight bit of cheating. I wanted to be with her, whether as a friend or not, and I knew that if we were going to keep things copacetic between us, I would have to be more like her, more driven, more ambitious. I knew that I should be anyway, even if she wasn’t around.

I should have gone home and faced whatever terrible thing the Dungeon Master had planned for me there.

Amaryllis’ hand fell from my shoulder and the light pressure on my neck was released. She opened her eyes, but they were half-lidded and unfocused.

“So I guess that didn’t work, huh?” I asked. There was no response. I felt a cold sweat break out as I looked at her. I could fix her, I was pretty sure, I could fix myself, we’d tested my ability to use Spirit on other people, the meme no longer looked like anything in particular to me, and it was all going to be fine … but I still felt a sense of dread.

(We should have tested this on D-class personnel first, that was what we should have done. From a utilitarian perspective, it made perfect sense. I wondered why Amaryllis hadn’t brought it up. Because she knew that I wouldn’t go for it, or because she thought it was abhorrent? There was something she’d written as Cypress, about indulging in petty morality, which really stuck with me.)

I took a moment to grab a pen from the dining table and draw a mustache on her. It made me feel better, though I immediately had second thoughts about whether or not she’d find it funny. Fenn would have found it hilarious, I was pretty sure.

Getting to her spirit from her soul was simple enough, and the meme thread was easy enough to find too. I shrunk it down and squeezed it tight, until it was nothing more than a thin line, then traced it back down into the soul, where it was lodged in her memories. There, it was easy to see, given that almost everything linked to it. I cut the links, as I had in my own soul, which (so far as I understood) would dissociate the image from all my memories, then took a moment to make a very cursory glance at the rest of her soul before leaving.

A better person than I was probably wouldn’t have been tempted to peek at her values or social
It would have been easy to see whether those had changed recently, whether how much she valued me was higher or lower, and whether she was once again romantically attracted to me or not. But as tempting as it was, it was her decision whether or not to do it, and her decision what she was going to tell me. (Again, I’ll acknowledge that a better person would have had no temptation there.)

When I came out, she was staring at me. “Fixed then, I suppose,” she said. I had forgotten that I’d drawn a mustache on her, and was laughing a little. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, still giggling. She just looked so serious, and then had that ridiculous mustache on. It was a little crooked, which just made the whole thing funnier. Fenn would have loved it, and for a moment, that thought wasn’t accompanied by regret and loss.

“Juniper,” said Amaryllis. “Explain.” Her voice was very stern, which only made the crooked mustache I’d drawn on funnier.

“Just laughing at my own joke,” I said. “Really immature.” Trying not to laugh made everything funnier. It was dumb, super dumb, but still funny. “There’s a mirror in Sable,” I said, which I wasn’t sure was true, but between Fenn’s kleptomania, Amaryllis’ paranoid preparation, and the fact that we’d used it with the Earth backpack as general storage while in the time chamber, I was pretty sure that the glove contained almost everything a person could ever want.

Amaryllis held the glove out and a hand mirror popped into existence. She stared at her reflection for a moment, then looked back up at me with a raised eyebrow. “Really?” she asked. For a brief moment, she seemed disappointed in me, but then her eyes went down to the mirror again, and she cracked a smile. “You’re ridiculous,” she said. She gave me a skeptical look, then her eyes returned to the mirror again. “You didn’t even draw it right!”

“I didn’t want to spend a bunch of time on it,” I explained.

Amaryllis set the mirror down. “You know that this means retribution, don’t you? A Penndraig is not to be trifled with.”

“Wouldn’t be the first mistake I’ve made,” I said, smiling at her.

“She would have loved this, you know,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said, and then I started laughing again, because she still had a mustache on her face.
The phrase “full English breakfast” apparently didn’t have an analog on Aerb, but the idea had apparently tickled Bethel’s fancy. She had started with the traditional full English breakfast, then moved on to other Earth nationalities (apparently other countries had their own take on it), and once she’d exhausted those, she had moved to making full breakfast versions of Aerbian nationalities. I was pretty sure that no one had asked her to do that.

On the morning of my second day at Speculation and Scrutiny, it was a full Grebellian breakfast, and I couldn’t identify literally any of the ingredients. There were some crispy, greasy things that looked like they had once been the skin of a reptile, and were close enough to bacon, some blue-colored slime that looked like Jello but had the consistency and mouthfeel of eggs, a pile of fruit with a variety of greens, and six other sides that looked almost, but not quite, completely unlike normal breakfast foods.

“Can I make a polite comment without having my fingers cut off?” asked Pallida as she looked over at Bethel.

“Of course,” replied Bethel.

“And nothing else chopped off either,” Pallida clarified.

“Oh,” said Bethel. “Well, then it depends on what you were going to say.”

“This isn’t quite what they eat in Grebells,” said Pallida. She picked at an orange blob with her fork. “Or at least, it wasn’t when I was there.”

“Your criticism is duly noted,” said Bethel.

“Where did you get this stuff, anyway?” asked Amaryllis, picking up a crispy piece of skin. “Your backpack gives you access to Earth foods, but none of this seems like it should be possible with your combination of abilities, because there are base ingredients that wouldn’t be available on Earth.”

“I paid for the ingredients,” said Bethel with her arms crossed. “A young neighbor boy was walking by, and I offered him a sum of money if he would run to the specialty market and get a few things for me.”

“Ah, that’s the problem,” said Pallida. “Most of what you got probably came by bulk teleport, with not enough demand that it would be fresh.”

“Again, your criticism is duly noted,” replied Bethel. Her voice was a bit more frosty than it had been.

“Alright, fine, don’t mind me, I’ll be eating,” said Pallida. “If you want tips though, I have tips.”

We ate in silence for a bit, but I finally made eye contact with Valencia, and she took that as her cue to speak. She gave me the impression that she had been waiting with bated breath for me to notice her.

“Do you want to hear my Hogwarts theory?” she asked.

“Uh,” I said. “Hogwarts theory?”
“Not this again,” muttered Pallida.

“Well,” said Valencia, “I was thinking that everything happens for a reason, and so I was thinking about Harry Potter, and that there must have been a reason that I was given those books.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And that reason extends beyond just me wanting you to get started on reading a relatively inoffensive children’s series as a form of socialization?”

“Yes,” said Valencia.

“There were parts that I found offensive,” said Heshnel with a frown.

Valencia waved him off. “Not important,” she said. “What I was thinking was that since you’re at a magical school --”

“Please just call it an athenaeum,” said Amaryllis.

“-- I was thinking that there might be similarities, and that Hogwarts was placed as an important clue,” said Valencia. She smiled at me. “I’ve started breaking things down into houses.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to be helpful,” I said. I turned to Heshnel. “What was offensive? The house elves?” In Harry Potter, they were a knobbly little slave race that had been mind-fucked into being perfectly subservient, which had some definite Implications, and which I was pretty sure no Aerbian elf in their right mind would find a flattering depiction. I was fully ready to leap to Rowling’s defense with a discussion of the origins of Earth elves and the ways that Aerb elves had been drawing on a different tradition.

“The Death Eaters,” said Heshnel. “They’re a caricature of the Second Empire.”

“It’s not important,” said Valencia with a frown. They had been sitting together the night before, and I thought this was probably a continuation of that conversation.

“By all means,” said Heshnel with a wave of his hand. “Go ahead.”

“Anyway,” began Valencia.

“The Death Eaters are the bad ones, aren’t they?” asked Solace.

“As depicted in the book, yes,” said Heshnel, frowning slightly. “Their stated aims, however, are noble, and their means are given a blanket condemnation without any consideration of nuance or the fact that those means were used by bad actors. There are a number of fallacies.”

“The young one would like to talk, Hesh,” said Pallida.

“It’s rude to call people young,” I said.

“Most people take it as a compliment,” said Pallida with a raised eyebrow.

“I believe he meant within this context,” said Amaryllis. “In which case I would agree, it’s unnecessarily demeaning for no good reason.”

“We’ll see if you say the same once you’re thirty thousand years old,” replied Pallida.

“Would you like to hear my findings or not?” asked Valencia, looking at me.

“Of course I would,” I said. “Sorry, we have too many people at this table.”
“I didn’t say anything,” said Grak.

“Well, yes, you’re much more considerate,” I replied. “Valencia, you have the floor, I’ll register my objections when you’re done.”

“Okay,” said Valencia, looking pleased. Everyone else listened to me, which was a bit of a shock. “To start with, I tried to split the houses between the two schools of magic in Sound and Silence, but that didn’t seem like it worked. Instead, I realized that you have four professors, one for each house. Then the question was which house each of them belonged to. I want to talk about it a bit more, but I think Ermaretor is Slytherin, Oberlin is Gryffindor, Leister is Hufflepuff, and Malus is Ravenclaw.”

“This is all gobbledygook to me,” said Pallida.

“Then you’re welcome to read the books,” replied Valencia. “Juniper, what do you think?”

“I don’t have enough information,” I said. “And the house system is just a typology, and typologies are always a case of square pegs and round holes. Just because you can take four people and fit them into four houses, that doesn’t mean anything more than that the numbers line up and the system is flexible. It’s a magic eye test. You might as well do the same thing with the four humors, or get creative about how you’re counting people and do enneagrams or horoscopes or Myers-Briggs or … whatever.”

“More gobbledygook, but I think a different flavor,” said Pallida.

“So you don’t think it’s worth anything?” asked Valencia. She looked a little hurt.

“I’m saying … okay, why did you put Ermaretor in Slytherin?” I asked.

“She’s ambitious, cunning, focuses on power, and she’s evil,” said Valencia.

“She’s likely evil,” said Amaryllis, who had finished her food. “There’s a difference.”

“The code phrase she gave you might have been a red herring,” said Raven. “We’ll see what happens at this meditation class.”

“The penumbral are literally shadow people,” I said. “It’s in the name. If she were evil, it would be too on the nose.” I turned back to Valencia. “I can see your reasoning, but I could also make an argument for Hufflepuff, because in her lesson she put a lot of focus on the people who had come before, the importance of loyalty to the athenaeum, and stuff like that, and in private conversation with me, a lot of what she was talking about turned out to be fair play, even if it was, I’ll admit, a little bit of a Slytherin way of talking about fair play.”

“What houses would you put them in then?” asked Valencia, frowning at me.

“I’m just saying that they probably don’t go in houses, and just because we can make arguments for which houses … it’s asking the wrong question, I guess,” I said, scratching my chin. “You’re presupposing that houses are a sensible way of looking at a collection of four people. You might as well slot all of us into houses.”

Valencia gave me a very guilty look.

“Okay,” I replied. “I guess I should have seen that coming. What I’m trying to say is that unless I get a lot more evidence, I’m going to assume that the Hogwarts houses aren’t going to map onto my instructors, the other students I meet, or anything else.” I hesitated. “Keep working on it though, and if you think you have something that’s more of a match than you’d get just by random chance, let me
know, okay? It’s wouldn’t be the strangest thing that had happened this week.”

“I would like to hear more about these ‘Death Eaters’,” said Solace.

“The abolition of death is not, in and of itself, immoral,” Heshnel began, but I was already wofling down my food again, and the ensuing fight between everyone who was more than four hundred years old (and a bemused, immortal Bethel interjecting occasionally) didn’t really capture my attention in the same way. I was hoping that they could keep from each other’s throats too much while I was off learning things.

On my second day of college athenaeum, Lisi was waiting for me in “A Still Magic Primer”. She had already found her seat, and as soon as I came in, she began waving her hand frantically, as though she was incapable of registering that we had made eye contact with each other. I resigned myself to my fate and climbed the stairs to sit down beside her.

“How was your meeting with Ermaretor?” she asked.

“How was dinner with Reimer?” I asked.

“Informative,” said Lisi with a slight sniff. *He sang like a canary.* “What did you discuss with Ermaretor?”

“Politics,” I said. “Nothing really important.”

“She called you ‘the bursar’s man’,” said Lisi. “What did she mean by that?”

“Uh,” I replied. “Not really sure that I’m at liberty to -- oh for fuck’s sake.”

The day before, there had been a student standing up there with Ermaretor, moving her hands in a way that was apparently typical of the less-trained vibrational mages, and which was likely used in place of a speaker system for some reason (practice for the mages, I was guessing, or maybe just because student labor was cheap). The student that had been there the day before had looked pretty bored with the lecture, but the audio quality had been clear, so it was easy enough to forget that she was even there. Unfortunately, the student who had replaced her was a rhannu, and unless there was some other compelling reason for a rhannu to be staring daggers at me, I was pretty sure that it was the same rhannu that I’d met the night before. Being on the student council apparently meant that you were able to swap work study. At least we’d been able to put a name to the face the night before; she was Jiph, no last name, a graduate student, vibrational mage, and ‘activist’ of local renown.

“What did you do?” asked Lisi, watching me with a skeptical look.

“Nothing,” I said. “She’s, ah, a member of the student council.”

“I know that,” said Lisi. “Why does she hate you?”

“She’s probably listening to what we’re saying,” I replied.

“Does she know why she hates you?” asked Lisi. “Even if you were worried about eavesdropping you should be able to clearly state information already known to her.”

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Reimer was talking about some of your complications,” said Lisi.

*Fuck.* “Look, Reimer and I haven’t seen each other in four or five months, and we were never really
that close to each other even when we saw each other every day.”

“He said you were like a brother,” said Lisi.

“That doesn’t sound like him,” I replied with a frown. *It sounds like something he’d say to impress a girl who wanted information, maybe.*

“He said the black sheep of the family,” said Lisi.

“Ah,” I replied. “That sounds more like him.” I was trying not to look at Jiph, who was still staring at me, and whose anger hadn’t abated much. I wondered whether she would be able to keep up the same intensity for the whole class.

“He said that you were with a girl who looked like Amaryllis Penndraig,” said Lisi.

“He did?” I asked. *Traitor.*

“Yes,” said Lisi. “He also said that you went to prison.”

“You could probably have found that out just by calling up one of your relatives,” I said.

“Probably,” said Lisi. She was looking at me with an uncomfortable amount of intensity. “I knew Amaryllis Penndraig.”

“I had her poster up in my room,” I said. “Future Leaders of Anglecynn.”

“Reimer said,” replied Lisi. “He thinks that the girl he saw is Amaryllis. I’d like to meet with her.”

“I’ll ask,” I said.

“Now?” asked Lisi.

“Class is about to start,” I replied, which was thankfully true. They were doing some setup down at the front that they hadn’t done the day before, and a couple of people were involved. When I looked more closely at the armor, I saw that it was shimmerplate, a signature of imperial agents, which started raising alarm bells. I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, the point at which this would all explode into mayhem and carnage. I rested my hand next to my vambrace, readying myself for GTFO mode.

One of the visitors setting things up had a storage entad, and deposited on the front stage area a giant flat stone that was at least ten feet across. Following that, he put down all kinds of papers circling the stone. When he was finished, he touched the stone with a very specific motion, which caused the center of it to change shape into a concave surface. This quickly filled with murky black water that came from nowhere. Staring at it, I was uncomfortable, because it certainly seemed like a summoning ritual of some variety.

“Welcome class!” called Ermaretor as she surveyed the room. She was wearing another colorful dress, which I still thought was an odd fashion choice given her grayscale biology. “As you can see, we have a special treat for you today. Behind me is the Urquhart Stone, on loan to S&S from the Penndraig Museum of Curiosities for the next few weeks. I was planning for today’s lesson to go over foundational still magic theory, as it was known to the ancients, but I made a few calls, and it turned out that I was able to secure the use of the Stone. It’s an entad with a very specific power; when given the notes, correspondence, memoranda, and other writing of a person, the Stone is able to bring a simulacrum to life, one of some limited intelligence which can answer questions.” She beamed at us. “Class, I would like you to give a welcome to a shade of one of the most prominent
thinkers on still magic, a man who revolutionized the magic, in addition to his many other accomplishments in diverse fields.” She swept a hand behind her, and the man tending to the Stone pressed his hand against it. “Uther Penndraig!”

I went still. Of fucking course it was Uther Penndraig. But if I was hoping to see Arthur again, even the older version of him I’d seen in Masters’ mirror, I was disappointed. Instead, the water stirred, and from it rose a miniature version of the Loch Ness monster. I’m not saying that to be glib about it, it was to the exact proportions of that famous photograph, though obviously not as big, given that it fit within the dark waters. Why, exactly, the entad would work like that, I had no idea, and I had no clever ideas (though it was entirely possible that I’d have been able to make a correct guess using a dumb idea instead).

“King Uther, what are the fundamental differences between magic?” asked Ermaretor, in what was clearly a rehearsed question.

The sea monster didn’t speak with Arthur’s voice. Instead, it was a timeless, androgynous voice.

“The magics of Aerb can be divided into four distinct categories,” said the sea monster, “The first is phenomenological, magics founded on simple, understandable, base principles. Of these, gem magic, feng shui, and conjoinery are the most prototypical examples. The second category is metaphorical, where there is no one binding truth to the magic, merely reflections of humanoid interaction with the base subject. Blood magic, dibbling, and water magic are the most prototypical examples. The third –

The sea creature’s voice cut out, but its toothless mouth kept moving. I stared at it for a moment, not understanding what had happened. It didn’t become clear until I looked around the room and saw that everyone else was still listening in. I felt a surge of adrenaline as my hand went to my wrist to twist the vambrace into panic mode, and I stopped myself just barely in time as a different thought occurred to me.

Jiph was the one providing us all with adequate sound. There wasn’t some new threat that had revealed itself, it was just a member of the student council specifically excluding me from the lesson. I locked eyes with her, and she gave me a very curt nod before looking away. Unlike the other student, she didn’t seem to use her hands when using vibration magic; she kept them tucked away, with her arms crossed.

The sea monster continued talking. He was apparently having a dialogue with Ermaretor, but I couldn’t hear either of them, and I hadn’t yet learned how to read lips, if it was even possible to read the sea monster’s lips in the first place.

On the one hand, it was really doubtful that there was anything of value to be learned from this lecture, at least on the face of it. If the entad worked like Ermaretor had said it did, then it was just a fantasy spin on the old ‘reconstructed from his social media’ trope. I had no specific cause to question that, and it did seem like my style. So they had a fake Uther, the one revealed by his writings, and not even a full collection of his writings either, given that Degenerate Cycles wasn’t there. There would be nothing in the books, notes, and letters that surrounded the entad about Earth (except for the fiction Uther had stolen from there), the dream-skewered, or his life as Arthur, because someone would certainly have noticed (that someone likely being Raven, who I could readily assume had read every scrap of writing that Uther had ever produced). So there wasn’t much that I was going to get from this lesson, unless I was particularly interested in hearing an introduction to still magic as it had been practiced five hundred years ago. There probably wasn’t going to be a test, and at the end of the week, I was going into the temple to become a still mage, skipping to the front of the line, before leaving the athenaeum forever. Not being able to hear was no big loss.
On the other hand, I really did want to hear what Arthur had to say. Back in high school, he always had some hot take on almost everything, sometimes cobbled together from nothing in the space of a few minutes, other times the result of some actual deep thought on his part. Part of the fun, at least for me, was trying to tell which was which, and where I could, I tried to undercut his arguments entirely. Arthur was smarter than I was, better at rhetoric and debate, but he spoke off the cuff with some regularity, and the few times I’d been able to catch him out had been golden.

(I still missed him. Maybe he was a monster, and maybe the memories were a bit tainted, but I still missed him.)

It was just so petty to use magical powers to deprive me of that. Even just to deprive me of the lesson on its own was petty, mean and spiteful in a way that I would hope she’d be above.

As the lesson went on, I wondered what Jiph’s plan was if I lodged a complaint with Ermaretor. I wasn’t going to do that, because I was going to be a good little protagonist and keep my eyes on the prize, nevermind this idiocy. Still. That didn’t stop me from wondering what the game was, what she would say if I went to Ermaretor after class.

And up a level, it was possible that some bullshit was going on. There shouldn’t have been anything to learn from the entad recreation of Uther, but I could think of a dozen unlikely mechanisms by which he might have something valuable to say. Maybe there was some correspondence that Raven had never got a hold of which would shed light on some possible future plot, or maybe there were a lot of small, innocuous things which the entad could add up together to have some relevance to us. I was sure that the Dungeon Master could engineer it somehow. And if I was meant to hear something here, then it was possible Jiph was screwing all that up.

Or more likely, the Dungeon Master had put her here in order to leave me blind to whatever entad-Uther would say. Or, no, even more likely, this was a challenge, not meant to stop me from learning something, but a barrier I was expected to get past on my own. If I failed, there would be consequences of some kind, and maybe a second chance, but there had to be some stakes to the challenge. That was what I would have done, as a DM.

I started going through my options. I couldn’t read lips, and so far as I knew, Languages didn’t allow me that ability. I was, nevertheless, trying to read lips, so in theory, it might unlock at any point, but I couldn’t depend on that. I had a lot of different magics, but none of them seemed to help me either. Bone magic let me have some sense of my bones, but it wasn’t a physical sense, and bone magic was almost entirely concerned with the bone’s connection to the soul, rather than the bone as it existed in the body, meaning that I couldn’t do something like moving my hand over onto Lisi’s desk and listening in via bone conduction.

Spirit seemed like it might be an option. The spirit/soul system logically had inputs and outputs, because if you saw an image, it had to have some way of moving into storage and spinning up a thread (e.g. how an image in a book could logically operate as a memetic attack), but I hadn’t yet found the input or output threads of the spirit, and futzing around with the mechanism of my consciousness in the middle of class in order to get information that might be completely irrelevant seemed like a really bad idea.

I burned through a few bones, one by one. I didn’t actually have any idea what stat would govern hearing, since in theory it was both physical (the eardrum) and mental (the ability to distinguish between sounds). The game rules that Reimer had given didn’t seem to specify anything about vision or hearing, which was weird, since that was part of D&D’s core rules, but I didn’t know whether those were rules hidden from the players, rules he’d forgotten to include, or if it was DM fiat every time.
Eventually I thought I was able to hear something from MEN, and though it was difficult with the split focus of listening and keeping up a burn at the same time, it was at least better than sitting there in silence. I’d missed maybe fifteen minutes of the lecture.

“...phenomenological,” finished Uther, the start of the sentence completely unintelligible. “In this case, the school of magic is extended, not through metaphor, but by deeper understanding of the phenomenological nature. Stillness, defined, is not the absence of kinetic motion, but the absence of change in any form. Now, I will grant that many forms of change are reducible to the kinetic movement of elemental particles, whether we consider heat, chemical reactions, or indeed, light.”

Ermaretor waved a hand, which she’d done a few times before, and Uther-the-sea-monster stopped talking. “Among the circle of scholars, Uther is seen as a remarkable figure, not just because of everything that he did, but his uncanny ability to make predictions about the world, even when evidence was thin on the ground. The idea that light had a speed was foreign in Uther’s day, but he declared, with some conviction, that not only did light have a speed, it was composed of ‘elementary particles’ and, paradoxically, also waves. In the battle of Alheim, against the Dread Radiance, Uther was able to use still magic to completely nullify the offense of the Dread Spears and bring an end to the reign of the Hallowed Shards, in a feat that was then thought impossible, and only now fits easily within the modern frameworks.”

Typical Utherian bullshit then, Still Magic 100 or something like it. Maybe a virtue, maybe just raw skill, but Uther was like me, and could easily go beyond what was possible for everyone else.

Uther continued on. “If still magic, then, is the stopping of things, the halting of change, there are further applications outside the realm of traditional study. When we take the iconic view of the still mage, we think of a speeding cart barrelling down the winding roads of Chisholm, stopped in its tracks with no damage to the passengers or goods, but there are other forms of change as well, beyond the mere physical. Still magic might stop a certain class of connections between an entad and its user, or at least those aspects which are dependent on change, rather than static in their nature. It might stop a chronomancer’s clock, or a dibbler’s spell. And though I have not yet found practical applications of it, a still mage can stop mental processes.”

Ermaretor waved a hand, which stopped Uther. I wondered whether he was on a script. That hadn’t been a part of how she’d described the entad. “It’s a difficult technique,” she said. “But yes, a grandmaster magus of still magic can invoke the stillness of the soul and make themselves immune to soul magic, if they have the time and attention to mount such a defense. Similar defenses can be mounted against all manner of phenomena that would seek to change you against your wishes, so long as you have conscious effort to still that change. For most of you, this will remain a bit of useless arcana. For others, I hope that this will be something you take to heart. There are future classes that deal more specifically with defense against esoteric threats.”

I stopped burning bones, and the silence became nearly complete again. I was running low on useable bones, the ones that I could replace through the mirroring trick, and besides that, it was too difficult to split my focus between listening, burning bones, trying to connect the things that were being said to what I knew to be true, and how I thought about Aerb’s magic. None of it seemed objectively useful though, and the sound quality with the boost was low; I thought I was probably hearing what they were saying through the inevitable echoes around me, which wasn’t the ideal way to take in a lecture.

The upper reaches of still magic were a bit dizzying, but that was no great surprise. Short of another sacrifice, I wasn’t going to get there for another twenty levels or so, but in a pinch … well, there were a lot of things that I would probably try in a pinch, different methods of flensing myself away, but still magic seemed like it would be one of the go-to ones, since it offered a form of countermagic.
I’d read about Uther stopping lightning bolts and lasers in their tracks against the Dread Radiance, but I hadn’t actually known that it was advanced still magic. I tucked that away for later analysis.

As for Uther’s thoughts on how to divide magic, he was the expert, not me, but it really sounded like the same kind of bullshit that he’d spouted in high school, if maybe marginally more refined. To my knowledge, the system that the simulacrum was espousing here in class wasn’t one that Uther had presented in the books he’d published, and I could sort of see why, because it wasn’t all that convincing. The only reason that you would see four clear categories of magic system is if there were four underlying mechanisms of design, or if they were all the result of four underlying rulesets. To start with, that wasn’t how I designed magic systems, but even with that set to one side, it really didn’t seem like you could chunk all the magic systems (some of which I knew more familiarly than others) into broad groups, especially not if you had to fit druidic magic in there somewhere. I really wanted to quibble over the definition of ‘distinct’, because if it were four categories that were overlapping, I might be a lot more willing to accept that he was describing something that was real and/or useful.

(To my way of thinking, you would be better off with different axes, though even there you would probably run into problems, and I wasn’t sure that it would be that useful. You could put magic systems on scales according to how firm their rules were, what resources they used, where progression came from, which attributes they focused on, and so on, which would give you different quadrants or octants or whatever, but even if you did that, what would it actually show?)

I closed my eyes, fixed my bones, and then sat out the rest of the lecture, occasionally glancing at Lisi’s notes in order to see if there was anything that I really wanted to listen in on, something about a conspiracy at S&S, or deep and previously unheard lore. I saw Lisi write down ‘still mages limited by range and power not internal well’, and I wondered to myself why this was being taught in class, why Uther would have felt the need to say that, and why Lisi felt the need to write it. Why would anyone ever come into this class without knowing that? Who would that come as a surprise to? Based on Lisi’s notes, a lot of the remainder of the lecture was on the implications of those base limitations, and again, it seemed like the brain dead sort of observations that I would doodle in my notes at school, rather than any deep insight. It was an intro class, and I was reading it instead of experiencing it, but I still wanted there to be more somehow, some vital secret revealed instead of just stuff that I could easily have learned from a book.

(The higher levels of still magic were well outside the day-to-day of the average still mage, who worked primarily in either industry or disaster response. There were lots of applications for bringing things to a halt, and most of the people in the class with me would presumably be going into prestigious but mundane occupations of that nature. I was almost past the point of being amazed by Aerb as I walked through its cities, but I had still been gobsmacked to see still mages casually holding girders in place at a construction site.)

“What did you think?” I asked Lisi, once the lecture had come to a close.

“I’m still waiting for the classes to begin,” she replied with a frown. “Ermaretor hasn’t seen fit to delve into the force equations yet.” She looked down at Jiph, then over at me. “You have Parson’s Voice. Ask the girl you were with whether I can meet her.”

I sighed. That wasn’t the sort of thing that I wanted Jiph to overhear.

“When we’re outside,” I said.

“Parson’s Voice can be used indoors,” said Lisi as she gathered up her materials.

“I know that,” I said. “Security concerns, which I have to imagine you’re very aware of.”
“Eavesdropping,” said Lisi with a nod. She got out of her seat and I followed her down the stairs. “You still haven’t explained who you are.”

“It’s complicated,” I said. Really fucking complicated. “Do you really not get this whole diplomacy thing?”

Lisi whirled around and looked at me. The family resemblance was particularly strong when she narrowed her eyes at me. “Why do you say that?”

“Keep moving, I don’t want to be late,” I said. Surprisingly, she did as I asked. I tried not to watch Jiph as we walked past her; her petty attempt at disrupting the lesson had been largely successful, and I was hoping that if I just ignored her, she would think that I didn’t care.

“Oh, okay,” said Lisi, once we were outside the building and on our way to the next. “Speak with her.”

I raised my hand to the tattoo and pressed against it. Unfortunately, if I wanted to keep my status as a tattoo mage secret, I was going to have to pretend that I couldn’t move the tattoo, which left it sticking out slightly. The collar I was wearing was high enough to partially hide it, but it was still conspicuous, though not as conspicuous as moving the tattoo would be.

“Lisianthus Penndraig would like to speak with you,” I said. “I told her that I would ask. My old friend Reimer seems to have had an extended conversation with her.” I was hoping that I could phrase things oddly in order to avoid giving too much away.

[Fine,] said Amaryllis.

“Wait, really?” I asked.

[I think that we should tell them both,] replied Amaryllis. [Not the full truth, but something substantially correct. They’ll have made guesses, and those guesses may get back to Anglecynn. We need control.]

“Well, we could have talked about this before now,” I said.

[Yes,] said Amaryllis. [I assumed you asked because she’s pressing the issue?]

I nodded, then remembered I was on comms. “Yes,” I said. “And I do see your point, but Reimer --”

[Minimal information only,] said Amaryllis. [There’s more we might be able to get from him, but he’ll need more of the truth.]

“Will do then,” I said. I let my fingers fall from the tattoo and looked at Lisi. “I guess you’re going to get to meet her.”

“When?” asked Lisi.

“Tonight,” I said. “Dinner at my place.” I gave her the address, and she quickly took her notebook out to write it down, repeating it back to me. “Reimer will be there.”

“Good,” said Lisi.

“Good?” I asked. “I’m surprised you’d want him around.”

“We’re friends,” said Lisi, frowning at me. We had made our way into the classroom and found seats together. The chalkboard in front of us was filled with equations and diagrams over its full ten-meter span.
“Friends, after a single day?” I asked.

“It’s easy to make friends if you know how,” replied Lisi. She turned to me. “There’s some discussion among the cousins about what Amaryllis Penndraig’s status is, if she’s not dead.”

“We can talk about it over dinner,” I said.

“So she is Amaryllis?” she asked.

“Classified,” I replied. She didn’t laugh or even smile, but the class started shortly after that.

“Alright, settle in everyone, does anyone need recalibration before we start?” Our instructor, Leister (magus, second order) stood before the class, smiling. No one raised their hands, and his smile widened by a fraction. “I see that some of you have moved, I hope not in an effort to trip me up.” He laughed at that. “At any rate, I have the first bit of bad news today, which is that you’ll have the first spot of homework for this class today. It will be given at the end of session, so please be sure not to miss it. With that said, I’ll introduce the topic at hand, which is all about frequency and amplitude, how they’re defined, and the fun stuff that you can do with them, whether you’re an engineer or a vibration mage.”

As it turned out, there really was a ton of stuff to know. Some of it was very basic, which I didn’t mind, and some of it seemed incredibly complex, particularly the math side of things. Leister demonstrated in a variety of ways, partially through drawing on the chalkboard, partially with his (beautiful) voice, and partly with pieces of string. My increased KNO was definitely helping with the trigonometric identities and math part of it, which I had never been particularly stellar at back on Earth, and I found myself taking a lot of notes. The fun thing about Leister as a professor was that he always related things back to what we were actually studying, which was vibration magic. A vibration mage’s ‘breath’ was of primary focus, namely in terms of how much needed to be accomplished certain effects, and how the fundamental properties of vibration (and waves) played into those applications.

There were, thankfully, no particular upsets, no long-dead friends coming back from the grave to give lectures, and no new personalities. Lisi didn’t even interrupt me or try to talk over the instructor. Score another point for the class, I supposed. We were given homework right at the end, written up on the chalkboard, all of which would take supplemental reading and some amount of math.

“It’s all a method of slowing us down,” said Lisi as we walked to our next class. (I had literally all my classes with her, which I wasn’t too thrilled with.)

“Is it?” I asked. “You don’t think any of that was useful?”

“Some,” replied Lisi. “It’s a base for future learning and might be helpful in that respect. But two years of groundwork is far too much, and the primary purpose of it is to deter people from classes, or worse, as Ermaretor explicitly stated, to instill a culture in graduates.”

“Ah,” I said. “You’d prefer that they just taught you the things that were most directly useful to your pursuit of choice and didn’t make you take anything else to round it out. Like a trade school.”

“Of course,” said Lisi, looking affronted. “Anglecynn trade schools are focused entirely on training people to be productive workers with as little time, effort, and cost expended on that training as possible. That’s the model the athenaeums should be following.”

“But they don’t, because they have other considerations, like tuition, politics, culture, et cetera,” I said. “Makes sense to me.”
“It’s inefficient,” Lisi scowled, as we went and took our seats in the next classroom. I was looking forward to Oberlin.

“It’s inefficient, but that’s the kind of thing that happens,” I said. “Especially in a place like this, where there’s a rate limit on both types of magic and no competition.” A monopoly on magic was, in essence, what the athenaeums were, with all the negative impacts that inevitably had. I was mildly surprised that neither Uther nor the Second Empire had managed to do some trust-busting, but not that surprised, given that the athenaeums worked together and represented a vast amount of power.

“What’s inefficient?” asked Reimer as he climbed the stairs to come sit with us.

“Sound and Silence,” replied Lisi. “Good to see you.”

“You too,” said Reimer. He looked between us for a moment, then sat next to Lisi, putting her between the two of us. “How’s it going, Joon?”

“Fine,” I said.

“We’re invited to dinner at his house,” said Lisi. “I thought we could go together.”

“Oh,” said Reimer. He glanced at me. “Sure.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Just … be careful what you say about the house.”

“Why?” asked Lisi, her eyes widening slightly. Either I hadn’t used the right tone with that warning, or I had. I hadn’t meant to spook her.

Oberlin came into the room shortly after the last of the students had, carrying something that looked like a mannequin, which he set down on top of the mats. It wasn’t quite a department store mannequin that I was used to though, since it had clockwork contraptions at the joints, and far better workmanship, but it wasn’t that far off. Given that there was no clockwork magic (at least, that I knew of), I suspected that it was an entad. That hypothesis was mostly confirmed when Oberlin touched the mannequin on its chest and glowing blue goop flowed out of it, surrounding its head, torso, and limbs, then becoming firm and opaque, changing color and adding features all the while. Eventually, it looked human, so real that I would have struggled to tell it apart from a real person. It was also fully nude, and quite clearly male. I cast a glance at Lisi, who didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest.

“This is an entad,” said Oberlin. “It can take the form of any humanoid, and while transformed, has fully realistic anatomy. What I’m going to show you today will be gruesome, by almost any reasonable standard. If you would like, you have a few minutes to leave while I give a practical overview of the combat applications of vibration magic. You have until the week’s end to change classes. For anyone else, the school provides counseling if you have difficulty with what you see here today. Knowing what it looks like to see a person die is vital to the practice of combat magic, and an important part of this class.”

There were fewer people in the class than there had been the day before, five or six missing students, and I was surprised that two more left as Oberlin continued to talk. That was nearly a quarter of the class gone in two days, leaving us at nearly thirty people, the smallest of my classes. Oberlin was pushing people out of the class, seemingly for ideological reasons, and it was working. I wondered how the athenaeum felt about that.

“The mortal species have some resistance to magic in many of its forms,” said Oberlin. “This resistance is weak; it will give you a fraction of a second when under assault. Unfortunately for
vibration mages, extended contact with the subject is necessary for all our most precise attacks, meaning that in a full combat situation, you will either need impeccable control, overwhelming power, or some form of assistance. It is nevertheless the case that a skilled combat mage is capable of producing death at a distance, within line of sight for most intents and purposes, though there are a few caveats. I will now demonstrate the three most common methods of attack for a vibration mage on this entad."

Oberlin went over to the small desk beside the stage and pulled a small knife from the desk. He began to hum, an unearthly sound that I was pretty sure was the result of either unique vocal chords or vibration magic. He paused for a moment and looked at us, still humming, and then turned his attention on the mannequin.

The more I looked at the mannequin, the more real it seemed. It was breathing, or at least giving the impression that it was breathing. And when Oberlin directed his attention at it, it started clutching its ears and screaming in pain. Oberlin rushed it and stabbed it in the throat with his knife, which caused the screaming to become a gurgle as blood rushed out of the wound. It fell to the floor, now gripping its throat, and Oberlin stopped his humming.

“That’s the first method,” said Oberlin. His shirt had been sprayed with blood. “It doesn’t take much skill to generate a pitch that’s loud enough and painful enough that you can find an opening. Debatably, you might say that I killed him with a knife rather than the magic, and I might grant that. This isn’t a person, it’s an entad, capable of only basic responses to stimuli, but you’ll have to take my word for it that it would work on a person more often than not. Those of you who are going to become vibrational mages, you can take lessons that will teach you proper control for this specific technique, but this class exists largely to give you the practical basis. Obviously, you might also want to take a course that will give you the skills and experience necessary to kill with a weapon of some kind.”

Oberlin bent down to the body, which was now a corpse, and removed the knife. I looked over at Lisi and Reimer. She was listening with rapt attention, making notes while her eyes never left Oberlin. Reimer looked a little bit ill. When I looked back at Oberlin, all of the blood was gone, and the entad was back to looking like a mannequin. He touched it again, and the goop came out of it as it reformed itself, human again, but this time female. I didn’t see why it had to be so realistic, or if it had to be, why it couldn’t wear clothes. She didn’t look like anyone I knew, thankfully.

“I will give you some caveats about distraction,” said Oberlin. “First, it can be difficult to use when you have allies around, given that the essence of the technique is sound generation, and sound is notoriously hard to keep contained. Possible, but hard. Second, the distraction technique is largely about sensory overload and pain response, neither of which are present in all the mortal species, and not to the same degree among those who have them. There are a number of books that catalog specific responses to both sound and pain; in particular, I recommend Thurston’s *Aural Weakness.* Third, it should be fairly obvious that this requires a secondary method of either incapacitation or murder. If you have a gun, use it, otherwise, depend on other tools in your toolkit. And fourth, this method is non-lethal on its own. That might make it tempting to some of you without the proper disposition toward combat magic, but it’s vital that you see that as a weakness of the method, not a strength.”

Oberlin turned toward the woman and held out his hand. “I would advise everyone to cover their ears.”

I did as he said as soon as he said it, because whatever else I was thinking about Oberlin at the moment, I was pretty sure that he wasn’t fucking around.
He began humming again, with the same tone as before, like a singer giving a pitch before the performance began. Then there was a loud bang, a rush of air that ruffled my hair, and the entad-woman fell to the ground. It was strangely bloodless. I slowly uncovered my ears. It had been considerably louder than a gunshot, but I didn’t think quite loud enough that it would have caused damage.

“Not like it is in the illustrations and stories, is it?” asked Oberlin as he looked out at us. “That was a directed pressure wave, raw force applied through vibration magic. Most of the damage comes from the boundary areas within the body, places where the differences in density cause different parts of the body to press against each other or shear rather than moving as one. In particular, the lungs will be harmed more than almost any other part of the body, enough to kill. To do it like in the stories and tear the head from the body would take the full breath of a skilled vibration mage. To vaporize flesh would take even more power, power that’s not realistically available to us. A pressure wave is enough though, at least for the majority of the mortal species.”

He went to the corpse, which was leaking fluids, and set it back up again, transforming it first into its clockwork form, then into another human woman, this one different than the first. Still naked, which still bothered me.

“Pressure waves are deadly,” said Oberlin, “But they take a significant amount of power to accomplish what they do. It does benefit from being the fastest lethal method in the vibration mage’s arsenal, but the requirements make it difficult to use at a distance with any efficacy. In addition to that, I’ve never found it that much more powerful than a firearm, and because the pressure wave is kinetic, most things that stop one will stop the other. Defenses against firearms are extremely common, at least in combat scenarios. A pressure wave is flashy, especially when you use it with power well in excess of what should be lethal, but I would liken it to a gun with three or four bullets, one that you need to spend years of study to master. It’s rarely worth it.”

I was pretty sure that the woman standing behind him wasn’t going to be ‘alive’ for long. Somehow it was much harder to take than when it was male. I wondered whether the entad picked at random, or whether Oberlin was trying to make a point about latent prejudice and how we needed to be ready to kill someone no matter what their gender was. It hadn’t actually felt any different to kill women, but there was still a part of my Midwestern upbringing that instinctively recoiled at the thought. Tiff would probably have called that bigotry. Maybe the Aerb version of her would call me out on it, if and when we met, if and when she got the full story. All I could say in my defense was that I had killed a few women, which I thought probably counted for something, but that was a gallows humor way of making that argument.

“The last method is resonance, and as I said in our first class, that’s my specialty,” said Oberlin. He looked over at the naked woman standing there. “The resonant frequency of a human being is between five and ten hertz, dependent upon magnitude of vibration, but ‘resonant frequency’ as a concept is difficult to apply to a mass of different materials. For the purposes of killing, the heart and the skull are the easiest targets, though given how many of the mortal species have more than one heart, the skull has become the de facto method. The technique for resonance is a difficult one, because it has to be uniquely tuned, and because it takes a fair amount of time and observation, relative to a combat scenario where every second can be vital.” He turned to the woman. “Starting now,” he said.

For a half second, nothing happened, then the woman began clutching her head. She fell to the ground and rolled slightly, before she had what looked like a seizure, and finally went still. It didn’t take more than four seconds or so.

“I try my best to be humble, but this is beyond what can normally be expected of a vibration mage,
should you face one in combat,” said Oberlin. “The primary benefit of the technique is its range, and
the fact that it requires no line of sight, so long as you can feel the vibration at a distance, which any
sufficiently skilled vibration mage should be able to do. On a clear, dry day, it takes me half a minute
to kill someone a half mile away. With a proper vibration sense, it can be done around corners,
attacking someone behind cover, though in that case, range is more limited.” He walked over to the
corpse and it reverted back to being a mannequin once more. “There are limits and countermeasures
to this, naturally, as there are for all three primary modes of attack available to a vibration mage,
which is what we’ll be covering in the next half of the class. Before we go on, are there any
questions?”

To my surprise, Reimer’s hand went up. I was considerably less surprised that Lisi had a question;
her hand was up with much more urgency.

“Arthur,” said Oberlin, pointing at Reimer.

Reimer blinked for a second, but didn’t correct the instructor. Not that Arthur wasn’t his name, but
that wasn’t how he introduced himself, and no one back in Bumblefuck had called him that (and I
was guessing that the same was true for Fumblebuck Reimer). “Vibrational mages can create and
manipulate light,” said Reimer. “Is it possible to create harmful radiation using vibration magic, and if
so, is it possible to do so in a combat scenario?”

Oberlin frowned. “There are a few hundred people who have attained the knowledge and power
necessary to create light,” he said. “To my knowledge, it’s never been used in an offensive capacity.
Given that intensive research efforts are often implicated in the exclusionary principle, research is
tightly controlled, and carried on at a satellite site well outside Li’o. I can’t speak to the efficacy of
radiation as an offensive weapon, given that it’s entirely untested in combat situations, but perhaps in
another few years you’ll be able to get an authoritative answer.” Oberlin paused. “You’re not one of
those planning to be a combat mage.”

“No, sir,” said Reimer. “Just curious.” He’d looked pale before, but some of the color had come back
into his cheeks.

Oberlin nodded, then pointed to Lisi. “Lisianthus?”

Lisi quickly lowered her hand, which she had kept up through the whole exchange with Reimer.
“What about multimages?” she asked.

“A rare breed,” said Oberlin. “Cross-applicability varies widely. We’ll have an entire unit on
combined forces and how they’re typically handled, and I’ll save discussion of multimages until then,
because there’s a good deal of overlap between the two subjects. If you have any specific lines of
inquiry, let me know after class, and I’ll try my best to work them into the lesson plan. I also have
extended office hours for anyone intending to become a combat mage.”

Lisi gave a curt nod.

I found my own hand going up.

“Juniper,” said Oberlin with a nod.

“Are we going to discuss utility aspects of magic with regard to combat?” I asked. “Things like
eavesdropping on communications, echolocation, signals intelligence, illusions, that kind of thing?”

“We’ll cover it in brief,” said Oberlin with a nod. “There are other classes that better cover some of
those subjects; once you’ve gone through initiation, Disambiguation is one of the more important
classes you can take, as is Sensory Adaptation, both of which will serve to expand your capabilities. Neither, however, will cover the combat applications, which I’ll go over, likely as part of tomorrow’s course. You’re right that there’s more to combat engagement than simply killing people.”

He took another three questions, none of them terribly illuminating, before moving on to the second half of the class, which was all about the typical defenses against vibration magic, with a lot of attention paid to how common they were in comparison to how effective they were. The primary opponents of a vibration mage were those brands of magic that could apply a counterforce of some kind, which could act to nullify either the sound, pressure wave, or resonance in some way.

- Warders were a definite problem, but they were largely immobile, so only a problem if you were attempting an assault, and apparently not worth much mention outside of that.
- Still mages could stop both sound and pressure waves dead in their tracks, but attempting to still their head from vibrating was too difficult to be practical, because the human head didn’t take kindly to having all motion in it stopped. Even if they did it, they’d be left with their head stuck in place.
- Velocity mages could produce a counterforce, and they were hard to target if moving at speed, but counterforce of any kind didn’t come naturally to them, they needed to be prepared, and they had little in the way of control.
- Gold mages could use their tactile telekinesis in a similar way to still mages, and had a great deal of built-in instinctual defense against kinetic attacks in general, but they were more or less defenseless against the resonance attack, especially because applying telekinetic force to their own head was liable to result in injury.
- Revision mages could revert the damage, and the experienced ones could do so automatically, for which vibration mages had no real counter. That would lock a revision mage in place, but eventually the vibration mage would run out of ‘breath’, and the revision mage was unlikely to run up against any of their own fundamental limits.
- Passion mages under the influence of anger could tank the pressure waves and partially negate the resonance, but only a skilled one under the effects of some emotional influence, and not in a way that was sustainable.
- Rune mages could create wearable runes that absorbed both vibration and kinetic energy, but for that to protect them, they would have to position the runes at the proper points on their custom armor, which most wouldn’t unless it was part of their modular kit or they were specifically preparing for an encounter with a combat vibration mage.
- Vibration mages could counter each other, but there wasn’t a perfect symmetry between offense and defense, because defense against any of the three attacks cost much less than the associated offense, and tended to be quite effective. The one sticking point there was the pressure wave, because if it was a single enormous wave-front, it was much harder to counter than something like a tone or vibration, and harder to detect as well.

That was hardly exhaustive, but it covered the bases well enough. There were bloodline magics and specic magics to get into, as well as entads, but it was already a lot to keep in mind, even if I could have worked out some of it from base principles or my own experiences. I accumulated a page full of notes, then another, and finally a third. From what I could see of Lisi’s notes, she was making at least twice as many as I was. I wasn’t sure how much of this we were actually supposed to learn or remember; my impression was that the barrage of scenarios and information was Oberlin’s way of weeding out more students, or maybe just getting us accustomed to a particular way of thinking in which there were manifold threats to consider, more than any one person could really be an expert in. If you went into an encounter not knowing what you were facing, or with the possibility that your intel wasn’t correct, you would need to think on the fly. I could see where that would be vital to a combat mage, even one that was part of a national or international organization.

“We’ll be on this topic for the rest of the week,” said Oberlin. “Your homework for tonight is thirty
inches on the three primary forms of combat for a vibration mage, with arguments for when to use each of them. We’ll talk more in depth tomorrow. Your assignments are due at the start of class and will be graded by the week’s end with notes.”

Oberlin picked up the mannequin and left, though the bell hadn’t rung yet.

“Thirty inches?” asked Reimer. “Is he insane?”

“You can’t do thirty inches?” asked Lisi.

“I can,” said Reimer, defensively. “But I have other homework to do, and if I have to go through Li’o to get to Joon’s, then a dinner of some kind there, it’s going to be tight.”

“I can help, if you’re having trouble,” said Lisi. She hesitated. “Did you read about using light generation for radiation somewhere?”

“No,” said Reimer. “Came up with it on my own.”

“It’s moderately clever,” said Lisi. Reimer beamed at her, and raised an eyebrow at me when he caught my eye. “I’m sure that someone else has already considered it,” she continued, which deflated him somewhat.

“Do you know any cross-compatibility with other schools of magic?” I asked Lisi.

“There’s a reason that I’m taking blood, still, and vibration together, aside from just convenience,” said Lisi. The bell rang, and she sat up as though she already had a Pavlovian response to it. I hadn’t even put my stuff away, and I hurried to fill my backpack back up as I followed after her. “Still magic is the second most powerful defensive magic after warding, which makes it invaluable as part of a larger package. Unfortunately, it’s touch or near-touch, which limits it, a limit which can be overcome by spraying blood onto opponents in the course of battle, or delivered with extensors in at a distance.”

“Extensors?” asked Reimer, and I was glad he did, so I didn’t have to expose my ignorance (especially since I didn’t know whether my ignorance would be hard to explain or not).

“The blood contains the power of the soul,” replied Lisi. “An extensor is any of a variety of additives that allow that connection to last longer.”

“Oh,” said Reimer. “It’s also the same name of a particular type of muscle.”

“Yes, I know that,” replied Lisi, frowning slightly. She continued on as we walked. “Blood magic allows the application of still magic at a distance. It’s technically possible even without blood magic, but for someone who has no natural connection to their blood, the connection is so fleeting and difficult to use that it’s practically worthless. Aside from that, vibrational magic helps with pulse timing attacks, and allows for overclocking the heart.” Lisi looked at me, because I was laughing. “What?” she asked, clearly annoyed.

“You really call it that?” I asked. “Overclocking?”

“That’s the technical term,” said Lisi, still frowning at me.

“So you pump your blood faster?” asked Reimer. “Does that … I mean, is there a benefit to that?”

“There are clear benefits to greater internal control of the body’s natural cycles,” said Lisi. “The ability to manually control my heart rate will have a number of applications. I already control the
flow of blood, which is itself useful, especially in a fight."

When we reached our next class, there was a note on the door, and a number of other people in our ethics class gathered around the door. Lisi pushed past them and read from the note.

“Ethics class is canceled until the end of this week, when it will recommence with a new instructor,” she said out loud. She looked to one of our other classmates. “Will this affect our grades?”

“How should I know?” he asked her.

She made her way back to us without deigning to reply. “Did you hear me?” she asked.

“Sounds like we have some free time, I guess,” replied Reimer. “Your place?” he asked me.

I ignored him and pressed my fingers to my throat. “Ethics professor is missing under mysterious circumstances, do you know anything?”

[She was arrested three hours ago,] replied Amaryllis. [Are you safe?]

“Yes,” I said. Lisi and Reimer were both looking at me. “Do you know why?”

[Unclear,] replied Amaryllis. [As soon as we’re done here I’m probably going to find my way to the lawyers we have on retainer and find out whether they can get more information. This feels like it might be important.]

“Yes, it does,” I replied. “Keep me posted, even if it means interrupting.”

[You have meditation next,] replied Amaryllis. [Do you want me speaking into your ear during that?]

“I guess not,” I replied. “Let me know if it’s urgent. Stay safe.”

[You too,] replied Amaryllis.

Reimer and Lisi were watching me as I brought my fingers down from my throat. “Well?” asked Lisi.

“My people don’t know much,” I said. “The rumor is that she was arrested, but what for is a mystery.”

“Demonblooded,” said Reimer. I shot him a dirty look. “Oh, come on Joon, we’ve done that whole circus enough times that you have to understand what I mean. Regardless of what you think of the demonblooded, they get arrested more than normal people, for reasons that, yeah, probably have more to do with prejudice than anything else, but they do get arrested more often.”

“Fine,” I said. I let out a sigh. “Well, I have to stay on campus for the meditation course, so I have an hour to kill.”

“We can start work on our assignments,” said Lisi. She turned to Reimer. “If you’re worried about the inches for Oberlin, I can help you.”

We ended up going into a study room and working through our assignments. Most of the conversation was between Lisi and Reimer, since I was keeping my thoughts to myself, and also because I didn’t want to be found out by some awkward slip of the tongue. I knew a fair bit about Aerb by now, enough not to make a total ass of myself most of the time, but being covered for all the major things still meant that there was room for me to be wrong about a lot of minor things.
I wrote the essay for Oberlin first. I didn’t know the traditional style that they used at S&S, but I was a new student, and Oberlin already knew the score, more or less, so I stuck with the five paragraph style that I was used to, after first doing some estimation to see how long it would need to be to make thirty inches.

“Can I see?” asked Lisi when I was finished. I shrugged and slid it over. She read it silently, staring at the words like she was going to bore a hole into the paper. “Hrm,” she said as she set it down. “Trivial observations.”

“Oh?” I asked. “In what sense?”

“In that they’re trivial,” replied Lisi. “They’re the first things that anyone would consider.”

“Oh,” I said. “Isn’t that sensible though? Those are the things most likely to be correct.”

“Here,” said Lisi, grabbing Reimer’s essay from his hands. “Reimer has the opposite problem, he’s trying too hard to be clever.”


“True though,” I replied.

“Fuck off,” said Reimer.

“Here,” said Lisi, looking over Reimer’s essay. “‘Superior range allows for removal of support personnel prior to engagement with heavy attackers.’ How would you know which ones were support personnel? And which kind?”

“I don’t know,” said Reimer. “I was assuming that I had proper intel.”

“Magus Oberlin pointed out that was a poor assumption on the first day,” said Lisi. “And ‘support personnel’ are unclearly defined. Revision mages, by most ways to parse that, would count as support personnel, and attacking one of them first would be a bad idea, because they’re resistant to attack and you would give away whatever advantage you had.”

“I only meant --” began Reimer.

“You meant ‘support personnel contingent on that actually being a good idea’,” replied Lisi, “Which isn’t a good guiding principle and doesn’t demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of vibration mage warfare.”

“I was under the impression that Oberlin wanted us to show him how we thought so he could tailor his lessons to us?” I asked. “I’m not sure that it does anyone any good for you to rewrite our essays.”

“I wasn’t planning to rewrite them,” said Lisi.

“She just wanted to tell us how wrong we were,” said Reimer, casting a smile in my direction.

I wasn’t sure how he was able to do that. He would laugh and joke like we were friends sometimes, like nothing was fucked. I didn’t think much of the fact that he was doing it here on Aerb; he’d done it on Earth too, before I’d taken my leave. And then after he’d played nice, he would turn around and tell me that I was a piece of shit who more or less deserved to wallow in my self-pity. Craig had told me to fuck off and then cut all contact with me, which I at least got, and Tom seemed to think I was still a good person and a worthwhile friend, despite the evidence, but I just didn’t really understand what it was that Reimer got from being something like a friend to me.
“Well, I should get going,” I said, grabbing my perfectly serviceable essay back. “Ermaretor is having me take a meditation class, and I’d rather get it out of the way sooner than later.”

“Why are you taking a meditation class?” asked Reimer.

“Why does she want you to?” asked Lisi.

“Politics,” I said, which wasn’t quite a lie. “That, and she’s covering her ass, since I’m not really a conventional student.” I felt a twinge of worry about whether or not ‘covering her ass’ was appropriate language around a princess, but I had already said worse, so that ship had sailed. Amaryllis had a mouth like a sailor, when she felt like it (albeit a pretty sailor).

“You never explained why she called you the bursar’s man,” said Lisi.

“We’ll talk about it over dinner, I promise,” I said. “I’ll meet you both there.” Leister’s problems would have to wait until later.

I left the two of them behind, glad to have some time by myself, and checked in with Amaryllis.

“Update?” I asked.

[Nothing yet,] said Amaryllis. [I’m not looking forward to another few days of this. The Immobility Plate breathes and bends better than it should, but it’s not perfect.]

“Well, I appreciate you playing shadow,” I said. I was making my way to the building where the meditation class would be held, and felt my foot drag as I had a thought. “Was it so bad, the last time?”

There was a brief bit of silence from the other end. The last time she’d played shadow, Fenn and I had been going on our one and only proper date. We hadn’t ended up needing her as backup, but she’d been there, just out of sight, in the same plate armor, less concerned with hiding her identity, but still suffering through it, just to play bodyguard for us as Fenn and I played at being two normal people on a normal date.

[Heshnel can hear what you say,] replied Amaryllis.

[I can,] confirmed Heshnel. [I apologize, but that is a limitation of the tattoo.]

“We can talk about it in private, if there’s something you’d like to say,” I replied. “We could even say it outside of Bethel, if you want true privacy, though it seems likely to me that she snoops around in our dreams at night, so who knows.”

[You’re going to meditation class now?] asked Amaryllis.

“I guess so,” I replied. “I hope you know what you’re doing with Lisi and Reimer.”

[Me too,] said Amaryllis, which wasn’t at all reassuring.

I didn’t want Reimer to be a part of my life anymore. We’d been friends for ages and spent enormous amounts of time together, and we didn’t really get along that well. And this wasn’t even the Reimer that I could spend hours talking/arguing about movies, games, and random internet crap with. It was some other Reimer, essentially the same but from a completely different culture, and with none of the shared history. I wouldn’t have wanted the real Reimer, let alone this imposter. But if Lisi had sensed weakness and latched onto him, then he was a liability, and if he knew things about the previous version of me, then he was an asset. The only logical thing to do was to keep him close, as
much as I didn’t like it.

I wasn’t particularly looking forward to meditation class, but I was hoping that I would get some kind of bonus from Library Magic, if not on a game-mechanical level, then at least from all the meditation that I’d done. There were other meditation-like aspects of other skills too, ways of shedding attention on other things in order to settle into a particular mindset, which I hoped would be helpful. All that aside, it wasn’t like they could *tell* that I wasn’t meditating right, so it would mostly just be a time sink.

And naturally, there had to be a twist, because as soon as I walked into the small classroom, I saw Jiph sitting there with the others. She didn’t seem to see me, and I froze for a moment, not wanting any part of this. She would notice me, and then I would have to suffer through her making this ‘class’ miserable as well, probably by having a high pitched whine in my ear for the duration, or something equally petty. I decided to go up to her and see if I could (somehow) head this off at the pass.

“Hi,” I said. “Can we talk?”

She turned to face me with a quizzical look. “Yes?” she asked. None of the hatred or anger was displayed on her face. I wondered if that was a performance for other people, or if something else was going on.

“Uh,” I said. “I think that we got off on the wrong foot, and --”

“You met Jiph,” she replied. She placed a hand on her chest. “Sonee.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry, I --”

She waved a hand. “We get it a lot. In human terms, we’d be twin sisters. She gestured to her dress. “We *try* to dress differently, but I have no idea what she was wearing today.”

Now that she’d said it, I could see that. Sonee was wearing a light blue dress, while Jiph had been wearing something closer to a pantsuit. If my mind had registered the difference, I must have immediately discarded it. People could change clothes, after all.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, holding out my hand. “Sorry for not realizing.” That was a better recovery than I had ever made in my life (which was damning it with faint praise).

“You too, and it’s fine,” replied Sonee. “So you had some trouble with my sister?”


“Sure,” said Sonee. Her lips quirked up in a smile.

“If I understand *rhannu* right, you were split apart from the same individual?” I asked. She nodded once, seeming slightly amused. “Is it common for you to be so … different?”

“It varies,” replied Sonee with a shrug. “Assuming it’s not a misfire, then no, usually we end up pretty similar. We each get half, and on average, two halves of any person will be somewhat similar.” She shrugged again. “It happens. It’s rarely pleasant.”

“A misfire?” I asked, as the woman I took to be our instructor came in.

“One half lives, the other dies,” replied Sonee, speaking quickly and quietly.
“Welcome, welcome everyone,” called the woman wearing flowing clothes who had entered the room. It was a small class, not more than a dozen people, which wasn’t surprising given that it was an extracurricular that was supposed to teach people how to meditate, something that apparently wasn’t required to be let into the temple. The room was smaller than a lecture hall, but much larger than it needed to be for the dozen of us. “This is ‘Meditations on Meditation’,” she seemed entirely too pleased by that. “My name is Henneta, and I’ll be your instructor. We’re here to learn how to meditate. Officially, this course is recommended for those who have cause to think that they might have difficulty in the temple, though anyone is welcome to join.”

When I looked around, I realized that Henneta and I were the only two (presumed) humans. I thought maybe the reason for that was because of the variations in biology and psychology, which might lead to either more difficulty with meditation, or at least the perception that it might be more difficult. Henneta herself was only probably human, given that there were species like the Ell who were visually indistinguishable from human. If we were on Earth, I probably would have called her Asian (dark hair, epicanthal folds, short, darker skin), but there wasn’t a clear counterpart to Asia on Aerb. I had always been terrible at guessing race with any specificity.

“This is not a class,” she continued, forcing a smile, “And provides no credit, just so we’re entirely clear. Instead, we are here to better ourselves. To start, I’d like everyone to grab a mat and find a place you’ll feel comfortable.”

I took one of the mats leaning up against the wall and went over by the window. It wasn’t one of those foam yoga mats, since I didn’t think that those had been invented on Aerb yet. Instead it was something similar to tatami, though I had no idea what it was made of, aside from some kind of plant.

“The first thing that I’d like you to do is relax your muscles and control your breathing,” said Henneta. “We’ll get to the meditation in just a bit, but for now, we need to speak about what meditation is, at its heart. Meditation is the letting go of thoughts, of allowing your mind a time where it does not think. In the modern world, we spend all of our time so focused, even on those things which aren’t drawing our attention, which can interfere with our ability to step back from the world and see it for what it is.”

Coming from an Aerbian, this was hilarious. I still kind of missed the sheer connectedness of Earth sometime, the way that I was never more than ten seconds away from being able to read something new on the internet, or look up the answer to a question. It was a terrible thing to feel nostalgia for, but I still had buried bits of muscle memory that saw me reaching into my pocket when I got bored. There were books to read, more than I could ever finish, but it wasn’t the same, because there was nothing that gave me the quick burst of dopamine that checking reddit did.

“Settle yourself,” said Henneta. “Relax the muscles of your hands and feet, then your limbs, get into a position where there’s as little tension and thought given to the position of your body as you can. This will vary from species to species, so do what works best for you. Relax the muscles in your face. Let everything go slack. Now, close your eyes.”

I did as instructed, though I was a bit skeptical.

“Now, focus on your breathing,” she continued. “Make sure that it’s happening without effort. Sometimes it helps to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, if you have a nose. Either way, make sure that your breathing is done without tension, completed without thought.”

I settled into my position and tried to let my mind be free, which I thought was probably the next step. Meditating for library magic felt kind of like trying to induce a sensory deprivation experience without actually going anywhere, enough that I could focus on the books and let random thoughts drift through my head, like I was in a rowboat with the oars pulled in, letting myself drift, paying
only enough attention to dip a hand in the water and make small corrections to where I was drifting.

“Imagine woodland,” said Henneta. “Dappled light, green leaves, a soft breeze, small animal sounds, the call of a bird.” Her voice was soft and slow, lulling me into a deeper relaxation. “There’s a man in the woods, clad in armor, his face obscured. He’s engulfed in flames.”

My eyes went open, and I stared at Henneta. I hadn’t been paying enough attention to her. She had her eyes closed and sat in the lotus position, with her feet resting on top of her thighs. I had abandoned meditation entirely. I was intent on figuring this out, and steeling myself for whatever was going to come next. If Parson’s Voice could be used silently, or with subvocalization, I would have been screaming at Amaryllis to get over to me, and maybe even telling Heshnel to get Bethel ready for a drop.

“This is a method called kalatet, a technique of juxtaposition,” she continued, eyes still closed. “The woods are calm and peaceful, but there’s a man, on fire, walking between the trees. Take that man in your mind’s eye, watch him. He’s unconcerned by the flames that engulf him, calm and serene. The flames don’t burn the plants, the fire doesn’t spread. He’s approaching you, stepping through the underbrush. He means you no harm.”

What the actual fuck. I had no idea what to do. A part of me wanted to scream at the others, to tell them not to think about the flaming man, but I had no real basis for saying that, no proof that it was anything nefarious, just a gut feeling that things tended to go wrong around me, and that threats never stayed hidden for long. That instinct had been misfiring lately, raising my hackles when things were fine, causing me to reach for my sword when it wasn’t needed, but …

Maybe there was such a technique as kalatet. Maybe it was a dumb idea I’d had while waiting at my bus stop a few years ago that made it into Aerb despite the fact that I’d forgotten about it, or maybe it was the natural consequence of a Juniperesque civilization I’d designed, one that explored the inherent tension between creation and destruction.

The image seemed too clear to me, too focused, and it was a man, an entity, the kind that could invade thoughts and dreams if given half the chance.

Henneta continued talking. I was making an active attempt to hold onto my senses, to stay as focused and tense as I could. Needless to say, I wasn’t even remotely attempting to meditate anymore.

“Kalatet is about the imperfection of the world,” said Henneta. “The woodlands are peaceful, serene, and your mind might feel them marred by the presence of the man, on fire, coming toward you. Know that this is part of the world, come to accept that this, too, is the same as the woodland, that there are things we cannot change, problems we cannot solve.” Her voice was calm and sedate. “There is a tension, and we are embracing it, holding it, letting it soak into our understanding of what it means to live and to be. Meditation is not a retreat from the world, to a place where no thoughts exist, it is a way to reorient ourselves into a better place. Watch the man on fire among the tree, see how he is not harmed by the fire, how he knows not to react to it. Accept him as part of this world.”

The more she talked, the more unsure I became. If things were really going wrong, wouldn’t I see some sign of it? Wouldn’t there be, I don’t know, bloody noses from the people meditating around me, seizures, something like that? All I saw around me were calm faces. All I heard was measured breathing.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing. It was a weird form of meditation, one foreign to my concept of the practice, but that didn’t mean that it was a threat, or supernatural, or anything to be worried about. More than that, if it was a threat, then I knew virtually nothing about it, and the fastest way to find out would be to get as minimal exposure as possible. I tried to weigh my options there,
whether it made more sense to do the same meditation while surrounded by friends and allies, or wait to do research on the practice later, and decided to err on the side of action.

I let Henneta’s words wash over me, trying my best to ignore them, and put myself in the place she’d outlined, tranquil woods with as many of my own touches as I could think of, enough to let go of some tension. Birch and ash trees, small yellow butterflies, enough clouds to obscure the sun and let in shafts of light, soft moss and miniature mushrooms.

And there, in front of me, a man on fire, his features obscured by flame. I was thinking too hard for it to be anything like meditation, keeping the picture in my mind and looking for signs of malefassance. I controlled my breathing and tried to relax, to picture the wrongness of the man on fire as something apart from me, a manifestation of the terrible things I couldn’t change. He was Arthur’s death, Fenn’s death, the nine thousand hells, everything that I wished I could change. He walked closer to me, and it was hard to tell whether I had made him do that, or whether my mind was just following what it had been told on its own. I added to the scene, cladding myself in armor, giving myself the Anyblade laid across my lap, all as much without exiting the scene as possible. Henneta droned on in the background.

The flaming man took a step closer to me, and this time I was sure that I hadn’t intentionally imagined it. There was a solidity to the scene now, and I wasn’t just ignoring Henneta, her voice had become indistinct. It had shifted to being dream-like, with a sense of unreality that went beyond the fact that it wasn’t reality. It felt like being in a soul trance, the way that my mind kept turning away from other thoughts, focused on the burning man that was walking ever closer.

Fortunately, I had some experience with the soul trance, and pushed back against it, opening my eyes into the real world, which flooded back into focus. Magic of some kind then, and from the looks of it, not a pleasant one.

Henneta was still sitting there, still droning on, repeating herself more than she had been. Her eyes were closed, and she sitting in the lotus position, carrying on as calmly as she had been. I had no idea what was happening to the others, but it didn’t seem like it could possibly be good. Deaths, disappearances, and now this. How long had this been going on? Who was implicated? Ermaretor was the one who had sent me here.

I stopped to think about my priorities here. The reason that I was at S&S was to unlock the two magics, but the secondary reason, which seemed like it might become the primary reason, was that something fucky was going on with some unknown number of students and staff. I had a strong urge to go around screaming and trying to snap everyone out of their trances, or call in Amaryllis from wherever she was, but I had no idea whether that was actually a sound course of action. The problem at S&S, whatever it was, had been going on for months, which meant that this particular edge of it was just part of a larger pattern. If I reacted now, I’d be kicking the hornet’s nest without actually knowing a single damned thing about the hornets, where they were, and what they were trying to do.

I stayed where I was. It was possible that the people around me were going through something that they couldn’t get out of, and that I was simply failing to help them, but I hoped that it was nothing that couldn’t be undone. Sonee had seemed nice enough, and if the man-on-fire had come for her … well, they couldn’t be killing people here, someone would have noticed that, and I was both a skilled soul mage and the only living spirit mage, so if something had gone wrong, I had some amount of confidence that I would be able to set it right.

Henneta stopped speaking for a moment, allowing us to sit in silence.

“Alright,” she said. “I want you to come up from the surface, return to the room, retether yourself to your worldly concerns. Touch those emotions that you left behind. Connect to that focus that we
keep inside us. Open your eyes, and see.”

I did as instructed. I looked at the people around me, trying to get some kind of clue that something had gone wrong with them, that they were possessed or controlled. There was nothing, not even someone who looked like they were puzzled by our instructor talking about a man on fire.

“How’d you do?” I asked Sonee, trying my best to be chipper (but not suspiciously chipper).

“Fine,” she replied with a shrug. “Different technique than I remembered, but it seemed fine. Weird, but fine.”

“Did he … walk toward you?” I asked.

“Huh?” she asked, staring at me. “What are you on about?”

“It was part of the instructions,” I replied. “Imagine that he’s walking toward you.”

“Oh,” replied Sonee. She relaxed slightly and shrugged. “Must have missed that part.”

I wasn’t sure how that was possible, given that Henneta must have said it a half dozen times. I said my goodbye, disengaging as quickly as possible, and left the building, walking until I thought I could talk to Amaryllis in peace. Meditation class had given me the willies. To my surprise, she walked up beside me, wearing her Immobility Plate, before I could use Parson’s Voice.

“Let’s get home,” she said. “I’m itching to get out of this armor.”

“Yeah,” I said. “One sec, I’m going to change into mine.” I went for the vambrace and dialed it to ‘oh crap get away’ mode.

“Anything that I should know about?” she asked.

“Oh, you know, someone was going to attack me in my mind, there’s a probable infohazard involved, and I once again have no idea who to trust or how to help,” I said with a sigh. “The usual.”
Sing For Your Supper

We sat around the big table together, with everyone assembled. Dinner was coming, and I was stressing about that, but we had a few hours to kill until Lisi and Reimer showed up, and that meant that it was time to debrief. Hopefully, I would get some information out of our elders.

“I have nothing,” said Raven. “I have a lot of guesses, but none of them are good.”

“Let’s hear them,” I said.

“All of them?” asked Raven.

“In descending order of how stupid they are,” I replied.

“Should be ascending order,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“No?” I asked. “I want the smartest first. So as we go, it would be … wait, shit, I think you’re right.” Amaryllis gave me a nod. “Fine, in ascending order of stupidity.”

“First, and just to get it out of the way, it could be an entad,” said Raven. “The powers of entads vary wildly, and they can sometimes be used in combination, so whatever it was you saw when the flaming man was invited into your meditation … it’s possible that was accomplished partly or mostly through entads. It’s hard to say how likely that is, but it’s possible.”

“It explains nothing,” said Heshnel, frowning at her.

“Yes,” replied Raven. “Uther always hated entads as an explanation, but it was always one that had to be considered.” Heshnel waved a hand. “It was never entads, incidentally.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Not once,” said Raven. “Unless something was kept from me.”

“What a fascinating historical detail,” said Pallida with a roll of her eyes.

“It has relevance,” replied Amaryllis. “It changes the probabilities.”

“We must assume it’s not an entad,” said Grak.

“Yes, agreed,” replied Raven. “I just wanted to put that forward first, along with the obvious note about unknown unknowns like an entirely new variety of magic, because every other explanation I can think of has significant problems.” She cleared her throat. “To start with, the Lord of Dreams. He shut down the usual pathways five hundred years ago, and it’s possible that he’s chosen now to open them back up. Obviously meditation is distinct from dreaming, but at least one of his Aspects was able to enter into the twilight realm of daydreaming, and maybe that would be close enough. The second issue is that Juniper’s description of what he saw doesn’t match with the Lord of Dreams, nor any of his Aspects known to me, and it really doesn’t seem like their modus operandi either. It’s possible that the Lord of Dreams was usurped, or got new Aspects, in the five hundred years since our misadventure there, but it’s very difficult to say. As a precaution, it would be good for Bethel to watch over us in our sleep.”

“Done,” replied Bethel.

“Does anyone have more to add on that?” I asked. No one said anything. I was pretty sure that
Raven was the only one of us with any experience in the realm of dreams.

“Okay,” Raven said, taking a breath. “Well, the third thing I was thinking was expansion of some currently known magic. It would be helpful if that was the case, because it would give us clues as to who or what is behind it, but there aren’t any likely candidates. We also don’t know what specifically caused the aberration, whether it’s constrained to instruction from a practicing cultist, or a memetic effect caused by that specific imagery, prompting, or intonation. There might be geographic constraints, a practitioner on the other end … there’s no real place to start research.”

“I could do it again,” I said. “See if I could get another visit.” I got some skeptical looks from around the table. “And yeah, that might be feeding information to the presumed enemy. Alternately, we could convince one of the other students to get in a position where I can examine their soul or spirit, which might give us something useable.”

Amaryllis gave a polite cough, so perfectly poised and respectful about it that I assumed she’d been tutored on it at some point in her life. “I want to state, for the record, that attempting the meditation in class was a bad idea. It ended up helping us, but it was unreasonably dangerous.”

“Is there a record?” asked Pallida, raising an eyebrow.

“I keep transcriptions, yes,” replied Bethel with a serene smile. I was happy that she was sitting at the table with us like a normal person, instead of leaving an empty seat like she sometimes did. “Along with some notes on body language.”

“Make sure there are never copies,” said Raven. “I don’t believe the Infinite Library would --”

“Assume that I’m not a moron,” said Bethel, cutting her off (figuratively, not literally).

“Well,” said Raven. “Okay.” She turned to me. “Do you want to hear the other theories?”

“There are more?” I asked.

“Eighteen,” replied Raven.

“Jesus,” I said. “Alright, go on.”

This consumed almost all of our time, with a heavy amount of crosstalk. I decided that I was going to have to pull Grak aside later that night and thank him for being circumspect in what he contributed, because there were too many fucking people in our house, and too many of them had disagreements with each other for too many different reasons. Grak spoke up when he had something productive to contribute to the conversation, and otherwise kept his own feelings on matters silent, which I wished everyone else would do too.

Raven tried her best to go through the list quickly, and some of them were real dumb, so dumb that I would almost have faulted her for including them, except that we really did have to be looking at outside possibilities, and it helped me to learn something about the thirty years she’d spent with Uther.

Uther and his Knights once had to deal with a cult whose members would meditate in order to devote their brainpower to an eldritch creature, who, in turn, operated primarily by possessing a single cult member as his avatar. All that would probably have been weird but fine, but this creature, the High Onism, had both a strong desire to subsume the world, and some unsavory appetites of the flesh. The High Onism played Moriarty to Uther’s Sherlock for three years or so until Uthur pinned it down so it couldn’t flee for another host, then fed it a deadly meme. It had the meditation link, and the puppetry link, but aside from being as confirmed dead as it could be, all the people that meditated
to give it power did so willingly, and there was nothing about a man on fire.

Uther had tangled with the he’lesh, who smoked their emotions. More specifically, the he’lesh kingdom had been overtaken by a novel herb that induced an altered state, one where they would see things that they would later forget. It was a shared delusion, a link between the smokers, which might not have been so bad, except that there were things within that shared delusion that had gone feral and could make some impact on the lives of the smokers. Uther had gone in and killed the hallucinatory beasts, then exterminated trade in the herb with extreme prejudice. It was notable in part because the bursar was he’lesh, but other than that, there weren’t many similarities.

Late during Uther’s time on Aerb, there started to be disappearances. Raven became one of the missing: she was having a daydream of a shining palace on top of a cliff, and ended up there, leaving the prime material plane behind. As it turned out, one of the other planes, Xoltle, had been brought into collision with the material plane. Anyone who daydreamed about the place on Xoltle that was co-located with the dreamer’s physical location on Aerb would wind up on Xoltle, where they would be picked up by the insane hierarch who had set his sights on conquest. Uther had defeated the hierarch (naturally), then untangled the planes with star magic beyond anything anyone had seen before or since.

Raven had eighteen of these. She wasn’t trying to tell us stories, just give us facts, but it was astonishing to me, even knowing what I did, that she could be given a prompt like, ‘I saw a guy on fire in the woods while I was meditating’ and she could spit back so many possibilities related to flames, dreams, meditation, altered states, subverted will, memory erasure, and dissonance of effects. There were enemies that might come out of the woodwork, enemies whose defeat had been less than total, and it seemed like Raven was slowly coming to grips with the fact that some of these plots could have sequels to them.

(I was thankful that I didn’t get a barrage of quest prompts, though it would have been helpful to be pointed in some particular direction, or get guidance from on high.)

“Some of those are real dumb,” said Pallida, once Raven finished.

“I did say that going in,” replied Raven with a frown.

“As much fun as you two are,” interjected Bethel. “Our guests are walking down the street as we speak. I’ve begun preparing a traditional Anglish dinner.”

“And what are you going to tell them?” Raven asked me.

“Amaryllis and I were talking on the way back from the athenaeum,” I said. She’d wanted to stop by the lawyers, which gave us more time to talk. “The plan is to tell them both that Amaryllis is Amaryllis, and then deal with whatever complications come from that. The game system stuff … it might potentially be helpful to have Reimer in the loop, but he doesn’t seem to have much loyalty to me, and the truth is, well, absurd. We’ll see how some of the rest of it goes. We’d both rather not have Lisi and Reimer have all the same information, but it’s not clear how avoidable that will be in practice.” I didn’t really want to tell Reimer everything, for a whole host of reasons.

“They’re at the door,” said Bethel.

“There’s the matter of who’s going to be present for this dinner,” I said. “Me and Amaryllis, naturally, but … well, some of you have physical appearances that raise questions.”

“The young are ever persecuted,” said Solace with a sigh. She was still holding onto her little green girl form, which I still found just a bit irritating, as much as she protested that she was still
undergoing development and there were some benefits to it.

“How much are we bringing them in?” asked Grak.

“Honestly, I’m partial to just laying it all out at once, for the fun of it,” I began.

“They’re here,” said Bethel, “And their argument appears to have reached its conclusion. I’m going to answer the door.” She disappeared with a pop.

“Alright,” I said. “I’m going to go meet with them. Executive decision, it’ll be me, Amaryllis, Grak, Valencia, and Bethel.”

Bethel had shrunk down to a reasonable size, enough that she could pass for being a person, and when I came to meet them, she was standing next to Lisi and Reimer with a smile on her face. Bethel had changed her clothes too, to something resembling a serving outfit: it was a far cry from a French maid’s uniform, instead being more about functionality and layers, blues and whites with rolled up sleeves and thick boots on her feet.

“Hey Joon,” said Reimer with a wave. He was dressed up a bit, with slacks instead of jeans, and a button-down shirt. He must have gone back to his room to change. I wondered whether the change in clothes was for Amaryllis or Lisi, though it was possible it was for both.

“Juniper,” said Lisi with a nod. She looked around the place. “You asked for no comments on the house?”

“You did?” asked Bethel with one raised eyebrow. “Why, whatever for?”

“Reimer, Lisi, this is Bethel,” I said. “She’s my companion.” I almost said that she was my house and caught myself in mid-stream. There had been a time when I would have stumbled and flubbed it, but those moments of sheer awkwardness were behind me, and whatever idiotic thoughts my brain was churning through, I managed to keep my composure.


“Charmed,” said Bethel, taking her hand lightly. “It’s just Bethel, only one name. Always a pleasure to meet a Penndraig.” Her smile was feral.

“Arthur Reimer,” said Reimer. He shook Bethel’s hand too. “Everyone just calls me Reimer though.”

“Pleasant to meet you,” said Bethel. “Now tell me, honestly, what do you think of the house?”

I didn’t think that Bethel was going to do anything to either of them. She was just fucking with them, and really, fucking with me by proxy. Despite myself, I felt my heart rate rise. There wasn’t a lot that I could do about Bethel going rogue, so I tried my best to keep calm.

“Is it special in some way?” asked Lisi, looking around. “Is there a trick?”

“Yes and yes,” I replied.

“Then what’s the trick?” asked Lisi.

“Here,” said Reimer with a smile. He held out his hand. “A glass of water.”
Nothing happened.

“Quite impressive,” said Bethel. “Can you do other drinks as well?”

“Juniper,” said Reimer, as he frowned at me. He lowered his hand, then turned to Lisi. “It was working last time I came here.” He looked back to me. “Did you tell the genie not to give me things anymore?”

“No,” I said. “And it’s not a genie, I just said it’s like a genie, in that you shouldn’t use it because maybe you would annoy it and wind up poisoned.”

“So the house is an entad?” asked Lisi. “Or it has an entad inside it?”

“Something like that,” said Bethel with a raised eyebrow. “Entads are common among the Penndraigs, aren’t they?”

“I have four,” said Lisi. She turned to me. “I’ll have more available to me as a combat mage, invested by members of the family.”

“What do they do?” asked Reimer.

“That’s an impolite question,” said Lisi, folding her arms. She looked at me. “I would like to meet with Amaryllis now.”

“Sure,” I said. “Last I heard, dinner was being prepared.”

“Still true,” said Bethel with a nod.

We went through the cozy little sitting room and into a dining room that was cramped by Bethel’s standards, not too much larger than it needed to be to hold the table, chairs, and an extra bit of walking space. It was done in the same style as the sitting room had been, with an overly done, kitschy aesthetic to it, dozens of small paintings on the walls, floral wallpaper, a chandelier of cut glass made to look like diamonds, doilies and flower arrangements, all kinds of visual clutter. It was less charming than the sitting room, but I still kind of liked it. It reminded me of my grandparents’ house, but without the smell.

Amaryllis was standing behind one of the chairs with a set look on her face. I went around to stand next to her.

“Reimer, this is Amaryllis Penndraig,” I said. “Lisi, I’m given to understand that you two know each other.”

“Yes,” said Lisi. She pursed her lips. “It’s good to see you again, cousin. You’ll have to tell me how you survived the trial by adversity.”

“Inconsequential,” said Amaryllis. “I need to say some random words. Give me a few minutes.”

“Words of what nature?” asked Lisi.

“To see what you know,” replied Amaryllis. “It’s part of our threat assessment. Reimer, you too.”

“Uh,” he said. “Sure.”

The list went on like that for quite some time. Lisi sat there, stone-faced, while Reimer just looked bewildered. Running alongside the long list Amaryllis was going through, Bethel was thinking into our heads.


This particular plan had been my idea, one made long ago. We’d stolen the change-colors-if-you-know ball from Masters, and Bethel’s virtue allowed her to temporarily take on the powers of any entad inside her. In the case of the memory ball, that meant the ability to sense which of the four (now notional) colors would be created when anyone anywhere in the house heard any noun phrase. Bethel opted not to use it most of the time, because the information it provided was virtually worthless and it was a strain on her sensorium, but for a short test like this, it could help us to magically note a couple of things.

The list had been Amaryllis’ work. It had the names of almost everyone we’d ever worked with or fought against, plus a handful of decoys. It had the names of future threats that might be connected to one or both of Lisi and Reimer, and a long list of names from Earth. Because the memory ball was capable of disambiguating between two identical noun phrases that referred to different things (‘Chinatown’ the place and ‘Chinatown’ the movie was the ur-example), there were some repeats.

“Project Garden Stake,” said Amaryllis. “Aubergine Stake, Snow Pea Stake, Cauliflower Stake.”

<Gray, gray, gray, gray, gray,> replied Bethel.

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “That’s the list.”

“Those weren’t random,” said Reimer. “They were names.”

“Not all of them,” said Lisi, narrowing her eyes. “An entad?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “One that, among other things, confirms that you’re both who you say you are.” As well as confirming that you know what we expect you to know ... “With that, I think we can start.”

Amaryllis was wearing a purple dress, nothing terribly fancy. She was wearing makeup to match, light pink for the lips and a touch of eyeshadow, plus probably a bit more that was too subtle for me to notice. On her hand, though, was Sable, the pitch black glove. She tapped a finger against the table, and she must have practiced it, because a stack of papers instantly appeared there.

“This is a contract,” said Amaryllis. “It’s legally binding in Li’o, Anglecynn, and Miuun. It doesn’t have terribly much weight to it insofar as enforcement, but you signing it is a precondition of further conversation. I’ll allow you to read it, but it would suffice to say that there are stiff penalties for disclosing anything that we speak about here today, whether the nature of that disclosure is intentional or otherwise.” She slid the paper across to Lisi, then produced a second copy, and slid it across to Reimer.

Lisi began reading it with furrowed eyebrows. “I already know you’re here,” she said. “I know you’re connected to the Republic of Miuun in some capacity, that you’re connected to Juniper, and the location of this house. I could walk out this door and leverage that.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“What are you offering us?” asked Lisi. She glanced over at Reimer, who was already signing. “What are you offering me, then?”
“Power,” I said. “Influence, material support, connections, and resources. We have a lot. We’re planning to bring you in.” Part way, anyway. “But to hear the offer, to know more, you have to sign.”

Lisi finished reading through the document while Reimer sat idly next to her.

“Can I ask a question?” he asked.

“Sure,” I replied.

“What the hells does any of this have to do with me?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you when she’s either signed or left,” I said, nodding at Lisi.

Lisi looked up, glared at me, then looked back down and kept reading.

<Getting anything?> I asked Bethel.

<She has an entad dagger,> replied Bethel. <It allows crossing a distance of a few miles. She has two tattoos, both the Surface Sheath, containing survival or emergency equipment, from what I can tell. Heart rate, pupil dilation, and perspiration are all consistent with excitement and nervousness. I’m feeding information to Valencia. She thinks that Lisi is approximately what she says she is. She’d like your permission to use a devil while in the room with you.>

<Granted,> I replied. <Hard to avoid it.>

<Nothing you don’t want her seeing?> asked Bethel.

<Lots,> I said. <I’ve got an ugly soul.>

“Okay,” said Lisi, as she signed the paper with a flourish and slid the papers back across to Amaryllis. “Explain.”

“I did make dinner,” said Bethel.

“And there are others I’d like to introduce you to,” said Amaryllis.

“Fine,” said Lisi.

On what was presumably Bethel’s cue, Valencia and Grak came in. Grak gave a stiff bow, and Valencia a sweeping curtsey.

“This is Grakhuil Leadbraids and Valencia the Red,” I said. “They’re our warder and combat specialist, respectively.”

“‘The Red’?” asked Reimer.

“Yes,” replied Valencia, nodding once. “It’s a name to let my enemies know they should run away.”

“And now, food,” said Bethel.

Plates appeared in front of each of us, a small salad of bright greens with tiny, colorful flowers mixed in, and a miniature cruet on the side.

“I want to know how you escaped trial by adversity,” said Lisi.
Amaryllis took a slow, delicate bite of her salad, then used the cruet to distribute a thin vinaigrette onto the salad. “There was an entad in Silmar City,” said Amaryllis. “Rather than going for the walls, where the Host would be waiting for us, and where I would presumably have an attempt made on my life, we headed toward the center of the exclusion, found the entad, and escaped.”

“Together,” said Lisi, looking at me.

“No,” said Reimer. “Bullshit.” He was looking back and forth between me and Amaryllis. “That’s … that doesn’t parse. You, Juniper Smith, went through a trial by adversity, met the girl you had a crush on for years, somehow got jacked as fuck while also growing a few inches, and now you’re here, at S&S, getting not one but two schools of magic, all without Anglecynn knowing about it? And you’re also part of some fish person island?” He sat back in his chair. “And that’s aside from you paying absurd amounts of money for the rules to a game system that you designed, and the oh-so-convenient way you claim to have lost your memory. No. Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

I was eating my salad while he talked, and calmly put down my fork.

“You’re right,” I replied. “I’m not Juniper Smith. Are you familiar with the phenomena called the dream-skewered?”

Reimer frowned at me. “I guess you’re forgetting the group project we worked on?” I nodded once. “Well, that’s what it was, a presentation about the dream-skewered. It was a glorified book report of a not very great book.” He narrowed his eyes. “And that’s what you’re going with? The real Juniper Smith was dream-skewered shortly after or before what usually serves as an execution, and you’re just the poor, deluded fool that lives in his body? Except, somehow, you know enough to talk and act like him.”

“I’m from Earth,” I said. “But there was a Juniper Smith that lived on Earth, who was essentially the same person as the one you knew, just with all the details changed around.”

Reimer stared at me.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “It sounds far-fetched.”

“When presented with extraordinary claims,” said Lisi, “It’s always better to seek mundane explanations. To wit, it’s more likely that you’re lying about who or what you are for some unknown reason. An elaborate, pointless prank, for example.”

“Okay,” I said, spreading my hands. “I’m pretty sure that with some time together, Reimer would see that I was telling the truth about who I am, or at least, he would be able to figure out what I believe to be true. He has the capacity to test me. We can even lend some entads that might help with that, though I’ve been living on Aerb for quite some time now, and I know a lot of things that a native would know.”

“Your claim has no proof but your word,” said Lisi.

“Wait,” said Reimer. “Why were you paying so much for the game system?”

I sighed. “Because it’s real.”

Reimer thought about that for a moment. “No?”
“Yes,” I said. “It’s real, and it, or something like it, is affecting me.”

“Prove it,” said Reimer.

“I can’t,” I replied. “All I can do is show you some of my abilities, but they’re nothing that you couldn’t replicate with either sufficient training or entads. You don’t have a trusted warder to make sure that I’m not using any magic anyway.”

“It wouldn’t be proof,” said Lisi. “But it would give some bounds to the problem.” She frowned. “For the record, I don’t think this is a particularly important point.”

“You’re wrong,” said Amaryllis. “It’s the most important part of all of this.”

“How about this,” I said. “I’m a blood mage, bone mage, and skin mage.” I moved my tattoos around to briefly cross my face and hands, then stabbed myself in the wrist with my fork and caused the blood to arc under my concentration, before burning a bone to heal it back up. I wiped the remaining blood away with a napkin.

“You’re a multimage,” said Lisi, staring at me. “If you were Juniper Smith, then you would be young enough that you went to Quills and Blood at the same time we did.”

“He didn’t have to,” said Amaryllis.

“Wait,” said Reimer. “The game doesn’t actually work, it’s held together with sticky tape and reliant on house rules half the time, with the other half just being fiat.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“But … who’s the arbiter?” he asked. “Who’s the Dungeon Master?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“You don’t know, but one exists?” asked Reimer.

“Yeah,” I said. “I met him, actually, he just wasn’t someone that I knew.”

“You’re talking about this wargame you played?” Lisi asked Reimer. Her face was set in a serious expression that was very close to a scowl.

“If he called it a wargame, he didn’t explain it right,” I said.

“It’s descended from a wargame,” said Reimer, folding his arms. “It’s not not a wargame.”

“There’s no war,” I said. “It’s small groups.”

“Fireteams are an element of war,” said Reimer.

“Semantics,” said Amaryllis with a wave of her hand, as though she didn’t love semantic debates.

“Right,” I said. “What I’m saying, essentially, is that I have a large amount of power, and our ultimate goal is to use that power to do the most good.”

“In what sense?” asked Lisi.

“I second that question,” said Reimer. “That could mean a lot of things, some of them evil.”
“In the short term, we’re solving whatever unambiguous problems we can,” I said. “In the medium term, we’re working on a technological revolution. In the long term …” I paused, because it was audacious. “The plan is to solve problems that exist on the planar scale.”

“How?” asked Lisi. “This power of yours is that good?”

“Wait,” said Reimer. “Are you … are you leveling up? You have skills? That’s why you wanted to know all the rules?”

“Yes,” I said.

“But who’s the Dungeon Master then?” he asked.

“I already said,” I replied.

“But that’s -- it all depends on who the Dungeon Master is, that’s what it all hinges on, because the arbiter has all the power, and they can just say no if they don’t like whatever it is you’re doing. You can’t rely on a sensible interpretation of the rules.”

“Is that what you’d call it?” I asked. “Sensible?”

“What’s the mechanism this all works by?” asked Lisi. She turned to Grak. “How does it map?”

“It doesn’t,” Grak replied. “It’s invisible to warder’s sight. All his magics appear as they would for anyone else. There’s no trace of his unique ability.”

Lisi raised an eyebrow.

“Wait,” said Reimer. “Then why the hells did you come to S&S? Like, let’s say that I believe you became a skilled multimage in the space of five months courtesy of some magical not-magic bullshit that happened to you, why come here, where you’re going to have to wait two years anyhow? Unless you can learn without getting inducted? But that would raise all kinds of questions.”

“I’m fast-tracked,” I replied. “One week of classes, then I get to go down.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” asked Lisi, slamming her fist against the table.

“There’s a special procedure in place,” I replied.

“For someone with game powers?” asked Reimer, in his most smartass tone.

“No,” said Lisi. “For special circumstances, rhannu or renacim or something like that.” She stared at me. “But you’re human.”

“And that’s why the student council is a little displeased with me,” I said.

“You’re going to pick up two magics inside a week,” said Lisi, staring at me. “At what proficiency?”

“Probably four to eight years of study,” I replied.

“Intensive study or regular study?” asked Lisi.

“Uh,” I replied. “It varies, I think, but regular study?”

“Meaning with all of the normal classes that we’re forced to take for no reason other than desire by the athenaeums to make people take their time learning things?” she asked.
“Yes,” I said.

“Wait,” said Reimer. “What level are you? How high are your skills?”

“Level 14,” I said. “Most skills in the 30s.”


Nothing happened.

“Joon, get it to do the thing,” said Reimer.

“Manners might help,” said Bethel with the kind of smile a person usually had before engaging in cannibalism.

“Papers, please,” said Reimer with a huff.

“Oh, I meant sincere manners, not the pretense of them,” said Bethel.

“Oh mighty magical thing, could I please have some paper?” asked Reimer.

A sheet of paper appeared in front of him, to the side of his neglected salad. He stared at it for a moment. “Pen too.”

A pen fell from the air above him and hit him in the head.

“Be more considerate next time,” said Bethel. “And eat your salad.”

Reimer picked up the pen and rubbed his head, then began scribbling on the paper.

“What are you doing?” asked Lisi.

“Math,” said Reimer. “Okay, level 14, per the rules we played under, you should have 31 points. By the discounting rules, that’s 17 total in the abilities, which would mean above 50 in all your skills.” He looked up at me. “Right?”

“Juniper’s points weren’t all put into a single category,” said Amaryllis.

Reimer looked at me in disbelief. “But … why?”

I really didn’t want to re-litigate this. “Is that really your question?” I asked. “Of all the things that you could be asking right now, that’s what you want to focus on?”

“I mean,” said Reimer, looking a little helpless. “Yeah?”

“Multiple ability dependence is bad,” I said. “I’m fully aware of that. But when I came to Aerb, it was in the Risen Lands, with undead all around me, and Physical was the only thing that was going to keep me intact. Even after we got our asses out of there, I had to deal with problems that really couldn’t be solved by Mental or Social.” I resisted the urge to glance at Amaryllis, because I knew that point was debatable. “So yes, I changed course, I multiclassed, sue me.”

“What does that mean, ‘multiclassed’?” asked Reimer.

“Nevermind,” I replied. “The build is suboptimal at present, yes, and it’s a generalist build in a system that doesn’t seem to give a lot of preference to those. I’m a multimage, and I’ll probably be one of the best in the world in another month or two, and we’re going to have to hope that’s
enough.”

“I’m in,” said Lisi. She was staring at me. “Whatever you want from me, I’m fully committed.”

“You figured it out,” said Amaryllis.

Lisi nodded.

“Sorry,” said Reimer, looking between us. “Figured what out?”

“He’s Uther Penndraig,” said Lisi, gesturing at me. “Or something similar.”

“What?” asked Reimer, looking me over. “No, that’s insane.” He looked at Amaryllis, then back at me, and I suppose it must have dawned on him that we weren’t denying it. “That’s … of all the fucking people in the world?”

“Yes,” I said. And it’s worse, because I was the one to create a large portion of this world. “Sorry.”
Dinner went … okay. There were questions and answers, but we avoided talking about some of the bigger stuff, like the narrative, and the exact nature of Uther Penndraig. How Reimer hadn’t made the connection to Arthur … well, he’d grown up his whole life knowing about Uther Penndraig, the mythical figure who had done so much that a lot of people were willing to believe was mostly mere legend, and this Reimer had also grown up knowing his own Arthur Blum, and the idea that his now-passed friend was, in some sense, the reincarnation of Uther Penndraig wouldn’t have been promoted to consideration, not without some details that I had left out of the conversation.

I wasn’t lying, per se.

The main course was duck, stuffed with herbs and seasoning, then crisped to perfection, and the dessert was a chocolate cake. It had none of the usual experimentation that Bethel had been showing recently, which I hoped wasn’t the result of Pallida being critical (even though it was a marked improvement over the Full Grebellian Breakfast).

“So,” said Reimer. “Are you guys going to do some kind of loyalty pledge?” He moved his fork between Amaryllis and Lisi.

“Those aren’t real,” said Amaryllis.

“Yes, they are,” said Lisi.

Amaryllis stared at her.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” said Reimer, holding up a hand.

“They’re propaganda,” said Amaryllis. “Part of the deliberate mythology.”

“They’re grounded in second century practice,” said Lisi. “That doesn’t mean that they aren’t real.”

“From a practical standpoint,” Amaryllis began.

“Concede that you were technically incorrect,” said Lisi.

Amaryllis glared at Lisi’s set face. I wondered whether this was just what it was like in the Lost King’s Court sometimes. I watched the muscle in Amaryllis’ jaw briefly clench and unclench.

“I don’t want to get into an argument about semantics,” said Amaryllis. “I concede that I was using imprecise but colloquially correct language.”

“Colloquially incorrect language,” said Lisi.

<‘I’m enjoying this immensely,’ Bethel said into my head.

“No, the meaning of colloquially,” Amaryllis began, before shaking her head a bit. “It doesn’t matter, and I just said that I don’t want to get into a debate about language or semantics.”

“Do you want my loyalty pledge or not?” asked Lisi.


“Good,” said Lisi. “Amaryllis Penndraig, tenth of her name, I, Lissianthus Penndraig, fourth of my
name, do pledge my everlasting loyalty to you, let my soul be condemned to the hells for eternal torture at the hands of vile devils should I ever betray you.” She gave a curt nod.

“Er,” said Reimer. “That’s not how it is in the books.”

“It’s historically accurate,” said Lisi. “The actual punishment was only used on three occasions.”

“Right,” said Reimer. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not pledging loyalty to anyone.”

“No one expected you to,” I replied.

“I’m actually not sure what it is you need from me,” said Reimer. He gave me a little grin. “Other than help with optimizing your character, naturally.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “That’s what we’d like.”

“That … that was a joke,” said Reimer, staring at her.

“Mary is bad at jokes,” said Valencia.

“Mary?” asked Lisi.

“It’s what we all call her,” said Valencia.

“A nickname, given to me by a friend,” said Amaryllis.

“Sorry,” said Reimer. “You want me to manage the magical character sheet?”

“It doesn’t make sense as a nickname,” said Lisi. “A-muh-rill-us, Mary isn’t a diminutive.”

“She was that kind of friend,” replied Amaryllis with a nod.

“Reimer, think of yourself as a consultant,” I said. “A very confidential consultant, sworn to secrecy, and hopefully not in any actual danger.”

Reimer’s mouth opened and then closed for a bit as he looked at me. “Can we talk in private for just a bit?” He held up his thumb and forefinger, half an inch apart.

“Sure,” I said. But *not really*. “We can go into the next room.”

I pushed back from the table and went ahead of Reimer, just to make sure that Bethel wasn’t going to try to pull anything. She seemed to have a problem with him, which was her own damned fault, because she’d been the one giving him a dozen different drinks and an assortment of snacks the first night he’d come over (not to mention the bar of gold).

“Okay,” I said, once we were alone. The room was, thankfully, normal, just a plain sitting room with some books on the shelves and minimal adornment, though I was fairly sure that it didn’t fit in with the previously established geometry of the house.

“This is all so fucked,” said Reimer. “You know, I didn’t come to the athenaeum for this? I thought it would be years or longer before I saw anyone from Sporsan, least of all you, and you’ve changed so much, and there’s apparently some serious magic floating around, and you’re not you, and …” He shook his head. “You just plopped a quarter million obols in my lap like it was nothing, and I have no idea what role Lisi is playing in all of it, but I’m with a princess, just like we’d always joked about, and it’s all just way, way too much, way too fast.”
“So you’re bowing out?” I asked.

“No,” said Reimer. “No, I didn’t say that, I just wanted to talk to you, or whatever of you is left, even if you’re some weird alternate version of yourself.” He shrugged. “Too much cross-talk going on in there, and Lisi … she’s great, nuts, but great, and …” He let out a breath. “Pretend it’s one of our games,” he said. “Pretend that we all got off-track somehow, talking about Animalia rights or accessibility or gender politics, like we always did, and you’re there trying to pull everyone back into the session, kicking and screaming. That’s all I want.”

“O-kay,” I said. “Not my forte.”

“No shit,” replied Reimer. He was fidgeting and looking around.

“It’s hard to think about things that won’t blow your mind,” I said. “Or things that would be far enough off topic that they wouldn’t just loop back to how crazy everything really is.” I paused. “Hang on a second. Okay, how about this: there’s this world made up of islands that float through the sky, gentle places that have no predators, no harmful magics, no exclusions, nothing like that, just people farming.”

“Always with the floating islands,” said Reimer. “Fine, so how does it go shitty?”

“It … it doesn’t,” I replied, narrowing my eyes.

“It always goes shitty, that’s just how you think,” said Reimer. “They’re, what, facing resource scarcity, their livestock have died and they can’t replace them, the islands have another ten years of fuel left before they crash into the monster-covered lands below?”

Those all did sound like things that I would have used in the past. “It’s not a setting for D&D,” I said. “It’s just a scenario to think about.”

“Then how do they keep everything balanced then?” asked Reimer.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They’ve got some kind of biomanipulation going on, and they’re capable of creating their own custom species to make more food than they need, which means that labor is what’s limiting them more than anything else, in terms of what’s expensive and what’s cheap. Custom plants that they can weave the fibers of, custom homunculi for simple, unskilled labor, biomanipulation on people in order to cure diseases and prevent most aspects of senescence … that kind of thing. So, what’s your character like?” That was a classic DM tactic; people loved to talk about their own characters, and if I needed Reimer to get his head on straight, I was hoping this helped.

“What kind of institutions of learning do they have?” asked Reimer. He moved over to the couch and sat down, and I took a seat opposite him.

“Groundseers and windseers,” I said. “I’ll grant that it’s not a big community, so there are relatively few people involved, not anything like S&S, or even our old high school. Groundseers are focused on the ground and the islands, the different species, the biomanipulation, that kind of thing, and the windseers are focused on the skies, birds and weather.”

“Okay,” said Reimer, taking a breath. “But the groundseers are the more important of the two, right?” he asked. “Like, the bioengineering is how they keep everyone fed, how they grow trees to make wood for houses, how they make whatever flying mounts they have, --”

“No flying mounts,” I replied. “They’ve been trying for decades, but you can’t just scale up a bird --”
“Because of the square-cube law, yeah,” nodded Reimer. “Should still be possible to ride a flying creature of some kind though, there are like, four primary species of flying mount, and I don’t think all of them use magic to do it.”

He caught me slightly off-guard with that. “Right,” I said. “ Doesn’t mean that it’s trivial. So if you’d like, you can be between the two institutions, someone hoping to synthesize their disparate fields of knowledge. The windseers train the birds that fly between the islands, and at least a fraction of them are veterinary experts. So maybe that could work for you.”

Reimer frowned. “Except this isn’t a game that we’re ever going to play, is it?” he asked. “Because you’re some kind of warrior mage now, in service to a princess, just like you always wanted.”

“I can’t speak for the other Juniper, but I never wanted to be a warrior mage,” I said.

“Oh, I meant more the ‘service to a princess’ thing, less the warrior mage part,” said Reimer with a smile. “Tiff used to call it monarch fetishism.” I winced at that. “Yeah, out of all of this, I keep thinking back to that poster, and how you’re just casually standing next to Amaryllis Penndraig now, and it’s just … let’s say you’re right about everything you’ve said. Well, then it’s like some malevolent genie came in and granted you your dreams, at this absurd cost.”

You’re more right than you know. “He was obsessed with her?” I asked. “The other Juniper?”

“Eh,” said Reimer with a shrug. “We didn’t really talk about that kind of thing much. I mean, both Tiff and Maddie, I found out after the fact.” He was watching me. “You think you’re from Earth, yeah? Same thing over there?”

I nodded. “I’m sure there’s some universe where Juniper Smith isn’t a shit.”

“At least you know it,” shrugged Reimer. “I’ll give myself a point for that.”

“You really shouldn’t,” I replied with a sigh. “You’re feeling better though? Calmed your nerves?”

“Yeah,” said Reimer. He rubbed his neck for a moment. “Thanks.”

“Sure,” I said. “You’re … a friend. I guess.”

Reimer laughed. “Yeah, I know what you mean. That’s what I tell people.” He looked over at the door back to the dining room. “Say, however you cock things up, can you somehow manage to not fuck with what Lisi and I have going on?”

“Which is?” I asked. You telling her everything she wants to know, presumably because she pressed you hard enough?

“I have no idea,” said Reimer. “I just don’t want you to fuck it up, alright? You can do that for me?”

“I … sure,” I said. “I can try. Seems really foolish to me, from what little I know of you, and if you have some kind of idiot crush on her, --”

“She uh,” Reimer swallowed. “She gave me a hand job.”

“Fucking what,” I said.

He grinned at me. “Yeah, I don’t know, it was … it was a thing that happened.”

<That’s hilarious.> said Bethel.
“I just …” I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Why?”

“Like I know?” asked Reimer. “And come on, it’s not like you’re the handjob police.” He paused. “Wait, is that what this is all about? You went to join the handjob police?”

“Reimer,” I said. “Jesus Christ just,” I shook my head, because I had so many questions, and I was picturing it, despite the fact that it really wasn’t something that I wanted to picture. “Let’s shove all this shit into some cupboard that we never speak of, okay?”

“Yeah,” said Reimer. “Sorry, it’s just … you’re the only person I know at S&S, and this is part of the confusing shit that’s been going on in my life in the last handful of days.”

“Right,” I said. “The realm of things that I’m equipped to deal with has been growing lately, but that —”

“Yeah,” said Reimer, sitting up a bit. “Got it.” He paused for a moment. “Are you and Amaryllis …?”

“Are we what?” I asked.

Reimer made a handjob motion.

<I’m back to liking him,> said Bethel.

“I think I’ve had enough of you,” I said. “Amaryllis will want your opinion on the best possible builds, given what’s been done in the past and what our options are for the future, but I frankly think that tonight has gone on for long enough. We’ve got class tomorrow.”

“Seriously?” asked Reimer. “You’re still going to class? And you think I’m going to class?”

“I have to go,” I said. “I’m at S&S for a reason. I need to attend classes in order to have the instructors sign off on the special form. Once all that’s done, I’ll get to level 30 in both Still Magic and Vibrational Magic in short order.”

“Yeah, but why would I go back to class?” asked Reimer. “Isn’t this going to be, like, my job now?”

“We’re not hiring,” I said. “I mean, I should actually double-check with Amaryllis about it, but … Reimer, I don’t want you to freak out —”

“Too late,” he replied.

“I’ve killed a lot of people since I came to Aerb, probably in the double digits, more if you include all the people my companions have killed. A lot of people have tried to kill me. One of my closest friends died a few weeks ago.” I swallowed. “There’s a good chance that this is what your life has been building up to, and I don’t think that I can dissuade you, but if I were you, I would continue on with classes while spending my nights hoping and praying that I never had to deal with the shit that’s plaguing my good friend Juniper.”

“My mediocre friend Juniper,” said Reimer, but his grin faltered. “How bad is it?”

“It’s escalating,” I said. “What kind of shit did I throw at you when you were level 14?”

“Oh,” said Reimer. “But … the world isn’t like that, there aren’t just arbitrarily powerful threats, and there are governments to deal with that shit, the empire, you were always bending over backward to explain why these were problems that only four or five people were working on instead of dozens or
I don’t want to tell you more,” I said. “I want you to be able to walk away. I’m hoping … I’m hoping that maybe it will work if I let you know enough, so you can make your own choice.”

Reimer stared at me. “Shit.” He let out a breath. “Let me think on it.” He looked at the door. “Do you think Lisi will want me to walk her back to the dorms?”

“I have no idea,” I replied. “Try not to complicate things. We have a lot of moving parts.”

For Pallida Sade, being with the Council of Arches had taken a turn for the worse, in the past few days. Really, if she had to trace it back to one thing, it would be that she didn’t have her hat anymore. The hat allowed her to change her appearance, replacing pink skin with that lovely creamy color humans sometimes had, which would allow her to blend in. Pallida liked being renacim, but they were a damnedably conspicuous and staggering rare species. Her armor could cover her well enough, but the armor was conspicuous too. The hat would have solved her problems quite handily, but it was, unfortunately, somewhere at the bottom of the Bryllyg Sea. The ship she’d been traveling on had capsized and sank in a hurry, and while she was a strong swimmer, it was a stronger storm. Everyone else aboard had died and been whisked away to an eternity of torment in the hells, but Pallida had been reborn, as she always was.

It had been three hundred years, and she still missed that damned hat.

This whole life had been just a little bit off. The life before, she’d lived to the age of eighty and taken a controlled death, right next to a woman who’d gotten pregnant specifically for the purpose of bearing Pallida to term. It was a truly, horrifically soft way of both leaving the world and coming back into it. Not that Pallida could remember anything of what she’d been like at eighty one life ago, and not like she could remember the first few years of her life, but she was a strong believer that infancy set you up for everything else, and up until she was able to secure a release from the guardianship of the Renacim League at the age of ten, she’d had a coddled little life.

There had been a few times when Pallida had considered herself the greatest thief in the world. She was close enough in age to remember a few of them, breaking into the most secure places in the world, stealing from the rich and famous, and dabbling in related arts like forgery or assassination. There’d been two times she’d been so successful in her criminal enterprises that she’d ended up becoming a de facto government, and thankfully both those times were well in the past, because there was no one around who remembered what a wretched ruler she’d made.

This life? She had no great deeds to her name, as yet. She’d barely done any training either, meaning nothing much that would be carried on to the next lives. Sometimes there were nothing lives, ones where nothing much happened, nothing was gained for the future, nothing learned or experienced, and Pallida had made peace with that, but this life seemed to be at a critical juncture, the stars aligning just so, Uther (or someone like him) emerging back into the world, all the old threats rearing their heads. It wasn’t a great time to be feeling off.

Pallida walked through the streets of Li’o, with her inky black armor engulfing her up to her throat and down to her fingers, but with her weapons left back in Bethel. The armor certainly made a statement, though for those who knew what a renacim was, the pink skin said quite a bit more. She caught a few looks, and a handful of stares, but not as much as she might have in the past. Li’o was a cosmopolitan city in a cosmopolitan area, and there were so many species floating around that people just accepted the fact that not everyone looked alike. There were two hundred mortal species, give or take, and some variations among them, enough that it took actual work to memorize them all. Most people didn’t like doing actual work, and for everything that set Pallida apart, she didn’t like doing...
work either.

The trick for finding the underworld, so far as Pallida thought there was one, was that you had to work your way up from the absolute scum. There were bad neighborhoods, even in a magocratic city-state like Li’o, and even bad neighborhoods had places where people gathered, usually for drink, drugs, or something similar. It was one of those places that Pallida slipped into, knowing that it was going to be rough going for someone as clearly upper crust as she was.

Officially speaking, Amaryllis hadn’t given Pallida a task. Instead, what Amaryllis had said was that Bethel was one of their strongest members, and one that benefited greatly from entads, including those entads that were normally nearly worthless because of the restrictions on who could use them. Amaryllis hadn’t told Pallida to go out and steal anything, but the subtext was there.

And Amaryllis herself … Dahlia had left her mark on Pallida, that was certain. Pallida was old, not just as old as the hills, but older than them, as old as the world itself, by certain accountings, and Dahlia had been, simply, the best, the perfect complement, the perfect friend, the perfect lover, second to none. Or, at least, that was how it felt to Pallida in her 20s; her 30s were indistinct, and she couldn’t remember any of her 40s yet, from any of those lives, nor anything beyond that, but she also couldn’t remember being young and reading about some great love in those past lives, which she surely would have recorded for posterity.

Amaryllis wasn’t Dahlia. Physically, they were nearly identical, and there was some overlap in their personalities, some of which was, maybe, because they were both Anglecynn princesses. They had that same drive to them, that same ferociousness, the sense that if the end of the world was coming, they would be there with sword in hand … but there were also a lot of differences. Amaryllis was cold, sometimes in a teasing, mocking way that was really quite fetching, and sometimes simply in how she didn’t respond to the things that she should have. Pallida was no stranger to seduction, she had lifetimes of experience to draw on, but with Amaryllis it all fell flat, and not in the ways that it typically did. Maybe it was that Pallida was trying to force it, or maybe it was complications with Juniper, but it all felt just a little bit off.

And Raven was around too, which wasn’t what Pallida would have preferred, even though they’d been friends once-upon-a-time. She could remember the falling out more than the friendship.

Not to mention that steadfast allies had died in the very recent past, Everett, O’kald, and Gur Dehla, not all close friends, as such, but people that could be depended upon from one life to the next.

There was the whole ‘end of the world’ thing happening again too. That wasn’t great. It was just a whole lot of not great things going on, frankly, and she was in a slightly-off life.

At least no one had called her ‘palisade’, so she had that going for her.

The bar was called the ‘Errant Shaft’, presumably for bawdy reasons, and Pallida Sade was better than anyone in it. She had more skills, more connections, more material wealth, more knowledge, more training, and she was, certainly, older. It was a mixed-species bar, the kind that people had stopped calling mixed-species bars, and now just called bars, because that was the way of the Third Empire. People still segregated themselves though, that was only natural.

Pallida sat down at a table near the back, interrupting a conversation going on between four human men. They looked her up and down, taking in the entad armor, the pink skin, and the cheerful smile on her face.

“A round of drinks, to start us off?” asked Pallida, grinning at them.
“Sure,” said one of the men with a nod.

Pallida whistled for the bartender, a loud, sharp whistle she’d mastered thousands of years ago, and had cause to dredge up more often than might have been expected. She ordered the drinks with a gesture, and hoped that the bartender wasn’t going to serve up the lowest quality, highest priced drinks available.

“I’d like to do some buying and selling,” said Pallida, still holding her slightly predatory smile. She wished that she’d brought her trident, for a prop.

“There’s a market,” said one of the men. Pallida liked to judge books by their covers, and he seemed like the most guarded of the lot, not the kind of man she was looking for.

“The kind of market I’m looking for?” she asked.

“Depends on what you’re buying and selling,” he replied.

“Oh, sundry things,” said Pallida. “Hard to find things. I’m new in town, you see, so perhaps someone in the know, someone who can procure things that are hard to come by.”

“Lorentz,” said one of the men. The others looked at him as though they didn’t think highly of him sharing that information.

“An address?” asked Pallida.

The man hesitated, then gave one, which drew more looks from his fellows.

And with that, Pallida popped up from where she’d been sitting, paid the bartender, and was on her way. With luck, she would be in touch with someone of real power in another two or three stops.

After Lisi and Reimer had gone, we had a meeting about it. I was tired, and not really all that interested in a recap of everything that had just happened, but Amaryllis was a little bit worked up.

“She’s as difficult as I remembered her being,” she said. She turned to Valencia. “Can we trust her?”

“Mostly,” replied Valencia. “She thinks that this is a chance for more power than she would ever have had inside the Lost King’s Court. The biggest risk of defection will be if she starts to view herself as subordinate to you. She took the loyalty pledge seriously, though it was more in the sense that she was making a precommitment than that she so fully intends to be loyal. It was calculated.”

“Naturally,” said Amaryllis. “And Reimer?”

“He’s in over his head,” I said.

Amaryllis cleared her throat and looked over at Valencia.

“Oh, Juniper is definitely right,” said Valencia. “He’s in over his head. Lisianthus manipulated him easily enough, and anyone else he meets with more social skills will probably be able to do the same, though perhaps with a bit more effort, after tonight.”

“I assume you’re against moving him here?” Amaryllis asked me.

“The only reason we’d do that is to keep him safe,” I said. “And while Bethel is likely one of the most secure places in existence right now, that would also mean keeping him with us indefinitely.”
“Until the end of our time at S&S then?” asked Amaryllis.

“Maybe,” I said. I shifted in my seat, then turned to Valencia. “Am I just pushing him away because of stupid reasons?”

She blinked at me.

_Loyalty Increased: Valencia the Red, lvl 28!

“Oh,” she said. “Yes and no. You’re trying.”

“Not terribly comforting,” I replied with a frown. “I suppose I’ll defer to the Council.”

“I’d prefer him away,” said Grak. “What he offers can be extracted from him.”

“Mercenary,” said Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow. “But I suppose I concur.”

“You don’t think the same of Lisianthus?” I asked.

“With respect,” Amaryllis began. “Aside from the game he played and potential narrative revelations he might provide, Reimer is no more special than any other high schooler. By comparison, Lisianthus, for all her problems, was given the same intensive education and opportunities that I was. She was groomed for power and importance.”

“She’s a mediocre blood mage,” said Bethel, tapping her fingers on the table.

“Yes, well, we have some significant problems with hiring people, don’t we?” asked Amaryllis. “Valencia can do screening, but to put someone at the core of our team raises a lot of risks.”

“What would she even do here?” asked Bethel.

“I don’t know,” replied Amaryllis. “But she is, at the least, someone that we can find a use for. Reimer, by comparison, becomes useless after we’ve had a week or two in the time chamber to fully debrief him.”

I frowned slightly at that. “Assuming he’d consent to that … I’m not willing to call him _valueless_, given the impossibility of a full debrief. There would be years upon years of my campaigns in his head, and even if those didn’t directly map to Aerb, then he’d at least be another person who knows how I think as a DM.”

“He’s a security risk,” said Grak, shaking his head. “He’s already proven that.”

“We did what we could about that,” said Amaryllis. “He knows some of what’s presumably going to be public when Uniquities inevitably leaks, or what an outsider might observe from putting the pieces together on their own.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The bigger risk right now isn’t that he says the wrong thing to the wrong people, it’s that someone kidnaps him and tries to use him against me somehow.”

“I’m willing to do a weeks long debrief in the time chamber,” said Amaryllis. “Ideally we would get some form of communication entad that would allow us to remotely bring him in for conversation when needed.”

“Do we have one of those?” I asked. Parson’s Voice was short range, and wouldn’t work outside of (roughly) the same large city, not that we’d want to outfit him with a tattoo, given how expensive they were, and the fact that he would be privy to conversations we’d want to keep private.
“We don’t have an entad,” said Bethel. “Lisi has one, a quill linked to its duplicate, though there’s a day’s delay on use. I don’t know where the pair is.”

“They’ll probably be together,” I said. “Assuming that we don’t bring her with us when we leave.”

“Why would they be together?” asked Amaryllis.

Valencia narrowed her eyes at me. “She seduced him?”

“Is that a question?” I asked.

“I think it’s what you think, but it’s not what I think, so I’m confused,” said Valencia.

“Here,” said Bethel. She held out a hand and replayed the conversation I’d had with Reimer about the hand job.


“How accurate is that playback?” asked Valencia.

“Extremely,” replied Bethel.

“Then I don’t think he’s lying,” replied Valencia.

“I don’t think we need to get into this,” I said. “I also think that Reimer told me that in confidence.”

“More fool him,” said Bethel.

“It’s important to know what their exact relationship is,” said Amaryllis.

“Well,” said Valencia, touching her finger to her chin. “She’s Hermione, and he’s Ron, so --”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Just, no.”

“I’m interested,” said Bethel with a smile.

Valencia had to have known that Bethel was just humoring her for the sake of exasperating Amaryllis, but she continued on all the same. “Well, Juniper is Harry, because he’s the protagonist, and Lisi is Hermione, because she’s a girl, she has an overbearing personality, and she focuses on intellectual endeavors. Reimer matches Ron’s strategic genius, the way he’s overshadowed by his family, --”

“Sorry,” I said. “Reimer’s an only child.”

“His metaphorical family,” said Valencia. “Anyway, what Lisi sees in Reimer is likely the same as what Hermione sees in Ron, which is that he’s got this spark of intelligence he applies only to certain things that capture his imagination, like Quidditch or wizard’s chess. Plus his courage, naturally.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But you tried to do this with the houses too, and it’s just --”

“It’s the same thing that Mary does,” frowned Valencia.

“It is not,” replied Amaryllis.

“I read the books very quickly, and might have missed something,” said Bethel, “Did Hermione give Ron a handjob?”
“This is too vulgar,” said Amaryllis. “And no, she didn’t.”

“It’s implied in the text,” began Valencia.

“Is it?” asked Amaryllis in disbelief.

Valencia huffed. “Well, you have to understand that the books were written for children, but given that sexual curiosity is completely normal in the early and late teens, their close proximity with one another, their history of dating others, then yes,” said Valencia. She folded her hands. “The lack of explicit sexual activity probably has more to do with the marketing of the books and the social mores of both the author and audience.”

“How does any of this help us?” asked Amaryllis.

“You were asking what’s going on between Lisi and Reimer, and Valencia was interpreting, like you asked her to,” I said. I looked at Valencia. “You were saying, essentially, that they were attracted to each other?”

“Yes,” nodded Valencia. “Though specifically with regards to manual release, I think it’s also likely that she either had some existing fetish, pattern of behavior, or commitment to that course of action. Say, for example, she had wanted to get some experience with boys following a relatively cloistered existence at Quills and Blood, as I think is common there, sapphic experiences excepted.”

Amaryllis cleared her throat. “Well, good to know,” she said. “If he’s not lying, then I suppose it’s good that it’s not base seduction.”

“She knows herself well enough to know that seduction isn’t likely to work,” said Valencia.

“Noted,” said Amaryllis, her voice firm.

Valencia looked like she wanted to say more, but she held her tongue.

<We should do handjob inquisitions more often,> Bethel thought in my direction.

<Har har,> I replied.

<You’re just jealous of him,> said Bethel, with a mental ‘tch’.

<Lisi’s not my type,> I replied.

<My experience has been that you have lots of types,> said Bethel. <More than a few around here who would give you a handjob, if you wanted.>

<Har har,> I replied again, as I used blood magic to slow my heart rate and suppress my blush.

<I can tell when you do that,> said Bethel. Her tone was teasing, with something in the mental connection beyond just the change to how the voice appeared in my mind.

<Not for your benefit, and I figured as much, since you’re constantly staring at my internal organs,> I said.

<Are you turning me down then?> asked Bethel.

Slowing down the flow of blood through my body was harder than it sounded, because I had control of my blood, not my heart. My heart was still getting its own hormones and electrical signals and whatever else, and it was kicking into overdrive, half because of the inherent danger at the prospect
of turning Bethel down, half because there was a portion of my brain that was devoted to thinking about sex.

<Can we talk about this privately?> I asked. Valencia and Grak were talking about death of the author, and I wasn’t at all listening to them.

There was a flicker of black and I was transported from the dining room, where we’d been sitting there talking, to my bedroom. My position hadn’t changed at all. This came as a surprise, but it was part of a technique that we’d developed a week ago. Sable could take in any object that it was touching (so long as you were touching it for more than ten seconds), Bethel had enough effects going that she counted as touching everything inside of her, and there was nothing to say that Sable had to spit things out from the same place as it took them in. Normally that last bit didn’t matter, since Sable was a glove, and it was a difference of a few inches. When Sable was inside Bethel, however, it meant instantly moving objects through the house.

“There,” said Bethel, “Private.” She was standing in front of me, still human-sized, as she’d been in the dining room, though in her more traditional gossamer dress.

“I don’t know if you’re just needling me,” I said. “And if it’s not just that, not only that, then I don’t know what you would get out of it.”

“Because I can’t feel physical pleasure?” asked Bethel.

“For a start, yes,” I said. “So far as you’ve said, you have nothing like sexual need, sexual pleasure isn’t part of your sensorium, and you can already feel … well, damned near everything else, whether the other party consents or not. So I just don’t.” I squeezed my hands. “I don’t know what’s in it for you, other than to make fun of me for things outside of my control.”

“Perhaps I want to make you happy?” asked Bethel. “Or perhaps I’m just curious.” She sat down on the bed beside me and used a hand to smooth down the bedsheets, the combination of illusion and physical force immaculate, as though she were really there. It was easy to forget how deliberate she was. “Do you think that was what it was for Lisi? She wanted to see what it was like?”

“No clue,” I said. “I barely know her.”

“And what is it about me that doesn’t appeal to you?” asked Bethel, looking me over. “I can provide nearly any sensation you would like. I can take any form that you think would please you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, on the surface, that’s a pretty good deal.” I fidgeted. “Leaving aside some of the more complicated feelings on the matter, like the feeling that I would be following in Uther’s footsteps,” I swallowed at that, and avoided looking at her face, because she must have thought of that, “It’s not what I’m into.” I paused. “I wrote this campaign setting, flesh.txt, sort of a … well, pornographic worldbuilding, this fantasy world just made for … not sex, exactly, but for my own lewd interests. I assume you’ve snooped enough to hear about it.”

Bethel nodded.

“Anyway, there were magic items there, not entads, since they weren’t singular, but something close, and they could amp up sexual desire. Rings, usually, or chokers, things that could be worn while naked.” I stopped and sighed. “If we found something like that, and you consumed it, then maybe it would be more appealing to me, if that makes sense? If you got something from it, rather than just making me happy? I don’t know. The idea that you’d be touching me, and that it would be no more pleasurable for you than touching a piece of wet cardboard …” I trailed off. “I guess for me that would be worse than nothing, even if there was a physical response.”
“You understand that’s what it would be like for her, don’t you?” asked Bethel.

I sat in silence for a moment. “Yeah,” I said. “Maybe. To be determined.”

“And then?” asked Bethel. “If you love her, and she loves you, but there’s still no spark of sexual love between the two of you?”

“Come on,” I said. “What is this? You’re going to go from propositioning me to relationship counseling?”

“Just curious,” said Bethel. “It might be my imagination, but part of the reason you’ve turned me down is that your moral code dictates that you would, one day, have to explain it to her, if we had sex? And you imagine that she wouldn’t take kindly to that.”

I shrugged. “The thought crossed my mind. It’s not a secret that I would want to keep, and it’s not one that I would want to tell. That’s not the primary thing stopping me though.”

“It’s the idea that I would get nothing but an experience I’m curious about?” asked Bethel.

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t know. There was a time when I would have jumped at the chance.” I frowned slightly. “Don’t tell him, but same probably goes for Grak.” Two, three years ago? Maybe less. Maybe a lot less. I’d slept with Maddie, after all, and that was equally ill-advised, the pursuit of sex because hey, it was just sex. Even without the depression and the listlessness, I’d have tried it, with both Bethel and Grak, even if it wasn’t my thing.

“And if I do tell him?” asked Bethel.

“Then we would talk about it, and that would be fine,” I said. “Maybe he would learn about me, and I would learn about him, and it would be … whatever. I just thought that it would illuminate things for you to know that. Maybe ‘jumped at the chance’ is the wrong phrasing for Grak, but I would have, maybe, I don’t know, been really careless about it. Even though it’s not,” I shook my head, then looked over at her. “If you want, I can help you pick someone. Man or woman. I wouldn’t think that trust would be a big deal, given your virtual inability to be hurt and massive firepower, but --”

“You’d be mistaken,” said Bethel. “Trust goes beyond what can be physically inflicted upon a person. If you allowed me the opportunity to pleasure you, and I was terrible at it, then I trust that you would do your best to be honest with me, and to soften the blow, to tell me what I was doing wrong, how I could improve, that you would take my feelings on the matter into consideration. You would be nice.”

“I’m not really that nice,” I said.

“You would still be nice to me,” said Bethel. “Careful and considerate, not because you were afraid that I would tear you limb from limb if you said the wrong thing, but because you have a core decency to you.”

“I think you’re really overselling me,” I said. “Like, a lot.”

“Perhaps,” nodded Bethel. “Oh well.” She sniffed slightly, more performance, for my benefit, nothing more. “Remember the offer, if you’re ever in the mood. Would you like to return? Amaryllis would like to speak to you.”

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Anytime, kiddo.” Bethel smiled at me, and there was a blink of darkness that saw me sitting back in
the chair I’d been in when I left the dining room.

Everyone else had left and the dishes had been cleared away, leaving just Amaryllis, who was sitting beside me, just as she had been. She gave a stifled sigh of relief, and pulled away the paper that had been sitting in front of me. I reached for it first though, and she let me take it.

_Took J for a private talk -- Bethel_

_Bring him back when you’re finished -- Amaryllis_

_In one piece_

_Please_

“You shouldn’t have worried,” I said.

“No, I should have,” said Amaryllis. “Verbalizing that worry was probably unwise though, or at least meaningless. You’re fine?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?” she asked.

“Oh,” I said. “Just … stuff.” I swallowed briefly. “Juniper and Bethel stuff. I can tell you, if you’d like, but it’s kind of personal, and I don’t think anything good would come of us talking about it.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Amaryllis.

“Eh,” I said. “Yesterday was a long day, and today was too, and I have a feeling that it’s just going to be a series of long days until we’re out of here.”

“Time chamber,” said Amaryllis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I might have to use it to stretch the days out. Get some homework done, get some more sleep in.”

“I did your homework already,” said Amaryllis.

“Oh,” I said.

“I won’t be offended if you throw it out and do it on your own,” said Amaryllis. “I know you had some preconceptions about what this would be. If running through the equations on your own is what will make you happy …”

“It’s a fantasy,” I sighed. “I know it is. Not even one of my top fantasies, to be honest, it’s just, growing up, reading about wizarding schools, going to the College of Winterhold, I thought maybe this was going to be more of a lull. I wish that Valencia was right, that it was, in some way, Hogwarts.”

Amaryllis nodded. “Sorry.”

“S’okay,” I said. “Where are the others?”

“Getting rest,” said Amaryllis.

“Well, we should gather them up,” I replied. “It’s late, but the jail doesn’t have set visiting hours, so
… time to go visit my ethics professor, I guess.”
The sun had gone down while we ate dinner, but Li’o seemed no less busy, and the temperature hadn’t seemed to move all that much, thanks to a warm wind that was blowing through the streets. Amaryllis and I had talked to the lawyers earlier in the day, enough to get a sense of what was happening with the ethics professor.

Li’o was a city-state, one of the member polities of the Empire of Common Cause, and sharing some but not all of the common legal framework that the Empire had managed to put in place. A lot of that common framework was grafted onto the existing system though, and that system was, in essence, a magocracy, controlled by and for the mages, with some lip service paid to equality and due process of law. That foundation could still prove a bit problematic, if you caught the ire of the mages in question.

Malus Lartin was not, as it happened, a mage of any stripe. I’m not sure why I had assumed she was, other than that she was teaching at S&S, but there wasn’t any need for someone teaching ethics to be a vibrational or still mage, or any other sort of mage, and Malus decidedly wasn’t. She’d been educated at a bog-standard college, one of the lower institutions of learning that could never hope to match the prestige of the athenaeums, then gotten the job at S&S mostly because there were legal prohibitions that mandated that ethics instructors had to be hired from outside the athenaeum that they taught at, presumably to prevent a corrupt institution from teaching corruption (not that I thought such a policy would do much good).

All that was relevant mostly because it put Malus into a fairly precarious position. Non-mages (and non-students) were subject to expedited sentencing, which could move frighteningly quickly if conditions were right. Given the upcoming Demonblooded Festival, plus all the things that she’d been charged with, conditions seemed very right.

“There are imperial anti-discrimination laws,” said Amaryllis as we waited in the police station. She had opted to keep out of her armor; in theory, she was only a public figure in Anglecynn, and while both Lisi and Reimer could give a positive identification, the risk of running into someone else from Anglecynn seemed fairly low. It was also pretty unlikely that she’d be able to be part of the conversation here if she kept fully armored. “Unfortunately, there are a number of loopholes in those discrimination laws so large that you could drive a truck through them. Discrimination on the basis of merit is legal, for example, and widely used to extend into other matters, because there are certain things that certain species are incapable of, and merit then becomes a proxy for species. Monarchy is another one, naturally, as you might have guessed by Anglecynn’s unique situation. Most of the problem is actually the imperial legislature being unwilling to do anything about flagrant abuses of the exceptions.”

“Similar thing in America,” I said. “Except we mostly got our shit together. Mostly.”

“Here in Li’o, there’s a power imbalance, both because of the literal power the mages wield, and the vast resources they control, both explicitly and implicitly. This city is built around the athenaeum, with funds coming in from all over the world. No chance for an uprising, not a real one, not one that would work.” She sighed.

“That’s probably part of the reason they hold the Demonblooded Festival,” I replied. “Five minutes hate.”

“It technically lasts four days,” said Amaryllis.
“Sure,” I said. “Just, it gives the people who might otherwise feel disenfranchised somewhere to direct their hate and frustration.”

“For the dwarves that’s everyone else,” said Grak. “We direct hate at anyone not a dwarf, and a fair few dwarves as well.”

“That’s probably not the situation that we’re here to solve,” I said. “Societal change isn’t really in our wheelhouse.”

“I’m not sure that we should be here at all,” said Amaryllis. She looked around the waiting room. “No quest.”

“Some things are worth doing even if they’re not quests,” said Raven.

It was the four of us, because Solace had wanted time with the locus, Heshnel wanted to guard the house, Valencia was non-anima, and Pallida had gone off to do Pallida stuff sometime after Reimer and Lisi had shown up. Heshnel I could take or leave, especially since he wasn’t fully “in” as part of the team, by his own accounting. Pallida would have been helpful though, in the event that we found ourselves urgently needing to stage a prison break; getting into and out of places she wasn’t supposed to be was kind of her thing. I really didn’t want to do a prison break in this kind of situation, but it seemed within the realm of possibility.

“Visitors for Lartin,” said the orc guard as he ambled into the room. We stood up and I gave him a small wave, which didn’t seem to impress him. “Two at a time.”

I looked at Amaryllis, raising an eyebrow, and she gave me a slight nod. I did want Grak with me, because he could take a look at the magic the jail was using, but Amaryllis was better at talking, and so far, I didn’t know whether or not anything would actually be required of me.

(Before we’d left, Valencia had helpfully pointed out that *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* was about a wrongfully imprisoned person in magical jail. I had held my tongue, but I really didn’t think that was a clue.)

We walked down a hallway, following the guard, until he brought us to an archway with red and yellow markings all around it, and more signage than I could read in short order. For the most part, it was a set of rules and warnings.

“No entads during prisoner visits,” the guard said. He tapped a bin. “Everything you have, into this bin, you’ll get it back when you return.”

I don’t think that we gave any outward signs of displeasure, but I had an instant knot of anxiety. Alvion’s Vambrace was my get-out-of-jail card, as well as the place my full combat kit was stored. I wasn’t defenseless with my entads removed, but they were a big part of my arsenal, and worth a lot of money. It was hard to tell what was a normal precaution any sane jail would take, and what was a narrative trick to get me at my weakest.

I took off the vambrace, while Amaryllis took off Sable and the amulet that contained the soul of her great-grandfather. I still had a gem and the smallest of the unicorn bones in my pocket, but it felt awkward to be without everything else at my beck and call. I was certain that went double for Amaryllis, especially since the incredibly valuable teleportation key was currently within Sable.

Nothing happened when we walked through the archway, which from the signage I assumed was a flat ward against entads. Full coverage from all entads was so expensive that it was almost never done, but doing it this way, where it was a single doorway’s worth of protection, was just expensive.
enough that it was more or less practical for a large city. Entads would still work beyond the archway, they just couldn’t pass through it, not unless they were wardproof. That was another place where Pallida could come in handy; her armor was wardproof, and could cloak anything that she was wearing from the wards.

We were led to a closed room with a thick metal door, then led inside after some curt orders were issued.

“More visitors,” said the guard. “Thirty minutes. You know the rules.” He looked at the two of us. “No magic.”

Then he closed the door and left us alone.

“Juniper, was it?” asked Malus. “I’m surprised to see you here.” She gave Amaryllis an appraising look.

“Just a friend,” said Amaryllis. “But one that might be willing to hire legal counsel for you, depending on the specifics of the case.”

“Hrm,” said Malus. She looked back at me. “You’re in luck. I sent the paperwork to the bursar yesterday. I don’t know whether or not it will be considered valid, given that my employment at the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence might be coming to a swift end, but I believe the bursar is the one making the consideration.” Her voice was calm. I had expected some signs that she was crying, but she was taking her incarceration and presumed execution pretty well, at least so far as I could see.

“That’s not really why I came,” I said. “I wanted to see -- you’ve been charged with some crimes that you’re really unlikely to have committed, all things considered, crimes where it’s not clear what your motive would even have been.”

“You think I’m innocent,” replied Malus. She sounded skeptical.

“Probably,” I said. “If you want to confess guilt, then sure, I would believe you, but all else being equal, the timing here with the Festival is too neat. If you tell me you’re innocent, then there might be ways for me to help.”

“On what basis?” asked Malus.


“Did you do it?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” sighed Malus. She looked between the two of us. “I’d heard about the death down in the temple, but I didn’t have the motive, means, or opportunity. I’m not a mage. I work for S&S, but I was installed here by the Empire, which means that I have relatively less access, political power, and ability to call in favors than anyone else among the staff. The other deaths I’m being charged with, I wasn’t even aware of before today. I live a solitary life, and some of the events were quite a while ago, so I don’t expect that I’ll have a useful alibi for any of them, but from what was discussed in the preliminary hearing, it seems that the method was a time delayed poison of some kind.”

“Meaning that it could have been administered at almost any point,” I said. I frowned. “It seems like a really obvious set up to me.”

“Yes,” nodded Malus. “ Apparently my predecessor didn’t do a good enough job of teaching ethics.”

“You seem very calm about this,” said Amaryllis.
Malus shrugged. “Demonblooded are often brought in for crimes they didn’t commit,” she said. “Li’o is a particularly bad place for us, so far as that’s concerned. I knew when I moved here to teach that it was within the realm of possibility.”

“But you’re just going to accept it?” I asked.

“‘Accept’ is a strong word,” said Malus. “I won’t go to my death with a wailing and gnashing of teeth, if that’s what you’re asking. I won’t uselessly debase myself just so that I can say that I did.”

“Martyrdom,” said Amaryllis.

“Perhaps,” replied Malus. She looked to me. “Is there anything else?”

“We can provide money for legal counsel,” I said. “Failing that,” I glanced at Amaryllis. “There are extralegal methods of saving you.”


“Your lack of concern for your own life is becoming a little irritating,” said Amaryllis.

“I would understand if you were crusaders for a cause, ideologues always looking for the next fight,” said Malus, looking back and forth between us. “But that’s not what this is.”

“It kind of is,” I said. I shrugged. “Maybe you had some preconceptions about me because of how we met.”

She turned away from me. “Let me think on it,” she said. “If you give me a phone number, I can call you tomorrow. So far as I know, I’ll still have some semblance of rights then. Unless this is now or never?”

“No,” I said. “We’ll pay for the best legal representation for you, unless you’re planning to refuse it. We’ll leave funds with you, and you can contact us. Beyond that … it would be helpful to have some information about what you’re being charged with, and why you think that the athenaeum would be so willing to throw you under the bus. I don’t know a single thing about the demographics of Li’o, but even with the Festival, you’re probably not the low-hanging fruit, so far as demonblooded go. Right?” That was about as delicately as I could phrase the question.

“You’re wondering what I did to provoke them?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “There were easier, less contentious targets, if they were going to frame someone. So why you?”

“I don’t know,” replied Malus.

“You’re lying,” said Amaryllis, which seemed uncharacteristically aggressive to me.

“Yes,” said Malus. Okay, so I missed something. “I’m sorry, whatever you’re here for, I can’t offer it to you.”

There was a knock on the door, and a muffled voice from the other side shouted, “Three minutes!”

“We’re still willing to work with you,” I said. “Whatever lies you’re telling, whatever you’re hiding, this is part of something bigger --”
“It is,” replied Malus. “Juniper, I’m sorry, you showed actual interest in the lesson, and that’s rare among the students I’ve had. I wish that I could have been a better instructor to you. But we don’t know each other, and this doesn’t concern you. Try your best to be good.”

“That’s that then,” said Amaryllis. There was something hard in her eyes. “Have a nice rest of your life.”

We left shortly afterward, and if she’d been holding back before, Amaryllis let the scowl form in full on her face.

“I don’t know what this is,” she said.

“Psychology, maybe?” I asked. “Sometimes people act against their own best interests. Maybe it’s martyrdom, like you said, maybe it’s fatalism, maybe, I don’t know, obstinate refusal to accept help from a society that wasn’t offering help before.” It reminded me of Fenn for some reason, maybe because Fenn was often unpragmatic.

“Do you think she’s guilty?” asked Amaryllis.

“If she was, why would she refuse help?” I asked. “I mean, if she’s been killing people secretly over the past six to eight months, then why would she have compunctions about taking our help?”

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Amaryllis. “Or rather, it doesn’t make sense without some pieces of information that we’re currently lacking.” She raised her hand to her mouth and bit at her thumbnail for a moment. “I wish Bethel were more cooperative.”

I looked at the back of the guard, who was probably listening to us. “We might help with investigation, to the extent we can do that as private citizens.”

We collected our entads, and it was frankly a relief that we were back up to maximum lethality again. Maybe there was something wrong with that mindset, but I wasn’t going to try to change it just yet.

“Anything?” Grak asked when we came back out into the waiting room.

“More questions than answers,” I said. “And not many ways to get answers to those questions. We’d need to know who’s in charge of the investigation, and even that might not help us that much, because we have no standing here.”

“Not even as advocates of the accused,” said Amaryllis with a sour look.

“We should get home,” I said. “I could go for some sleep in the chamber, a day off, maybe.”

“It seems like a very frustrating dead end from someone unwilling to cooperate,” said Amaryllis.

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe it’s just set up for something else.”

Raven and Grak had been left alone in the waiting room of the local jail. Grak had come along partly to be sociable, partly to get out from the house, and partly in order to be kept in the loop about what was going on. It had been easy, in the past, to think of himself as a mercenary, someone following orders for his weekly pound of gold, but the past was the past, and now, he was demanding something more of himself. His training and expertise were in wards, and as an outgrowth of that, security systems and points of failure. There was, for the moment, little need for that expertise, but the moment might one day come. In the meantime, he was watching, soaking things in, becoming more and better simply by taking in the world around him instead of pushing it away. The others
talked *so much*, some, like Amaryllis, because they were putting in their full effort at all times, and others, like Pallida, simply to fill a silent room with their thoughts.

“I’ve known a fair number of dwarves in my time,” said Raven. It was only a mild surprise that she spoke Groglir; the woman was one of Uther’s Knights, after all, and aside from perhaps Vervain, the most academically inclined among them. Her accent was odd, the dialect either long fallen out of favor or a result of how the language had blended with the others she knew.

“I’ve known a fair number of dwarves too,” said Grak. *Most now dead.*

“You’re atypical,” said Raven. She put a little bit too much force into the declarative, borrowing dwarven bluntness, in a way that was peculiar to non-native speakers. Juniper had never done it, not before his transition into being a perfect native speaker, and not after, for which Grak was grateful. There was something grating about non-dwarves trying to sound like they were culturally dwarven.

“We are all atypical,” said Grak. “Atypical Ell, atypical elf, atypical renacim, atypical crantek, atypical humans. An extremely atypical non-anima. We wouldn’t be in this group if we were typical.”

“True,” said Raven. She folded her hands in her lap. When Grak cared to look with warder’s sight, she gleamed with magic, every item she wore an entad. “It’s alienating in three ways. First, we are separated from our species. Second, we are separated from our culture. Third, we are all different in our own ways, bonded by being unalike, but not by our own peculiarities.”

“Yes,” said Grak. He felt the instinctive urge to leave it at that, to shut down any conversation that would delve deeper, or reveal something about himself. Historically, that way lay pain. “I am less a dwarf and more a citizen of the Empire. It is a different category, bigger in some ways and smaller in others. There is less depth.”

“I’m a citizen of no country,” said Raven. “The last of Uther’s Knights. And now, the last of the Knights to join Juniper.”

“We are not Knights, not subordinate,” said Grak. “He is insistent.”

“Is the word ‘companion’ accurate?” asked Raven. “It was given by his power, wasn’t it?”

“It is a mild word,” said Grak. “We journey with him. Nothing more is implied by it. Whether you want to be his friend is your choice.” *Or more, if his appetites would stir for you.*

“There is less that binds you,” said Raven. “With Uther … he united us. He was our king.”

“There’s still time for Juniper to become a king,” said Grak. “He could marry into royalty.” He was likely to, even. “Sorry. That was not your point.”

“I don’t know my point,” said Raven. She adjusted her magical cloak, though it could move on its own. “I would like that higher purpose again. I don’t know that I’ll find it here, though there’s nowhere else for me to be. Uther knew what he was doing.” Again, that characteristic dwarven bluntness, borrowed by the Ell in a way that didn’t suit her.

“I never met Uther and have read less than the others,” said Grak. In Anglish, this was where one might put a ‘but’, as a way of negating whatever was prefaced. In Groglir, it was more about flow from one subject to another, bare facts juxtaposed with one another. “Sometimes he was making it up as he went along, inventing his own mythology and deciding without enough information.”

Raven was silent at that. “It was easy to get swept along by him,” she said. “You might be right.”
“I say that because of what Juniper has said of Arthur,” replied Grak. “I did not know Uther.”

“I don’t think I did either,” said Raven. Her voice was soft. It seemed that whatever she’d hoped to get from this conversation, she hadn’t gotten it.

“We can be friends,” said Grak. He held out his hand to her, and she took it, her small hand in his large one, shaking briefly. “You said that you had known dwarves.”

“Yes,” said Raven. “I didn’t mean … I only thought maybe it would interest you. I’m seventeen hundred years old. I’ve seen things. I met Godo the Everliving, ten miles beneath the surface of Aerb. There was a different time when Esclin Tearheart threatened to destroy the whole of dwarvenkind through a bloodline attack, a long but largely unsung adventure that led us to the home of the first dwarves.”

“Bloodline attack?” asked Grak. “I’m unfamiliar.”

“Excluded magic,” said Raven with a shrug. “So many magics gone, more than the Empire counts. That was one of the nastier ones, silently excluded to an unknown place. It was once possible to kill a man by weaving a spell and punching his father hard enough.”

“I wonder what Aerb will be like, once the last magic has been excluded from the world,” said Grak. “Like Earth, I suppose.”

“Let’s pray that we never find out,” replied Raven.
Arthur had always been a fan of pointing out time compression in media, wherever he saw it. There was a part in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman escapes from this big pit somewhere in either India or Morocco, and then has to travel back to Gotham City. He probably has enough time to do this, so it’s not a plot hole per se, but the way that it’s cut just compresses all that down to maintain a sense of urgency, so we don’t have to sit around watching Batman steal, lie, and sneak his way across the world to get back, which would completely ruin the pacing of the film and destroy the tension that was being built up. Arthur loved pointing that out; it was his go-to example. The other one he brought up a lot was (sigh) Harry Potter, where the first book takes more than a hundred pages to cover roughly a week, then finishes out the year in the last half of the book. Per Arthur, there was a time warp in effect whenever a character was doing something that was going to continue on for some time, uninterrupted.

By the third day at S&S, I was hoping that I could somehow skip ahead to all the bullshit that was undoubtedly waiting for me at the end. There were too many people, too many things that I was probably never going to need to know, and far too much that was unpleasant. Any fantasies that I’d had about this place being a “college experience” were in the past.

I double-checked with the bursar that the paperwork Malus had put forward would still be valid, and he confirmed that there wouldn’t be a problem on that count, which meant that my day was down to three classes.

Jiph, the rhannu girl from student council who had been on my case, was gone from Ermaretor’s class, replaced by yet another student aide. The lesson was nothing special, other than the fact that it was the first one that taught anything practical about still magic, and it was grounded more in a discussion of the definition of ‘change’ as it applied to the magic than it was actual practical examples of the magic as used by mages.

Leister was his usual chipper self, though there was even more math, and while he went over it all, as well as why it was important, it felt like I was never going to use any of it in combat, which was the primary place that I expected to use vibration magic. Further, mathematics didn’t have that much to do with how vibration magic was actually practiced, given that vibration mages weren’t running equations. The fundamental relationships between oscillators were important, sure, but the actual math … well, not so much. Also, I didn’t take the Mathematics skill, which left me just bog-standard Juniper on the subject. Still, if you were going to prohibit any actual practice for two years, I could see where this would be one of the things you’d teach.

For his part, Oberlin continued on with combat lessons, still deep in vibration magic, this time going into what defenses were available to a vibration mage. The short version was “none”, but the longer version was that there were some slender fraction of attacks which a vibration mage could no-sell, and another small handful that they could partially defend against, but for the kinds of attacks that you were likely to run into in the real world … well, most of them were kinetic or energy based, bullets, swords, arrows, lightning bolts, nothing that a vibration mage could really do a damned thing about by virtue of being a vibration mage. That was Oberlin’s opportunity to segue into “mundane combat”, which covered a number of diverse topics, including the trade-offs in armor, how to find cover in a hurry, how to flee from close quarters combat, and a few other things.

He stopped me for a talk after class.

“How goes it?” he asked.
“Fine,” I replied. “Ready to be done here.”

“Getting close?” he asked.

“Two days after today,” I replied.

“I meant the investigation,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “Leads?”

“Fuck all,” I replied. “We can talk in your office.”

A short trip later, we were sitting together, still more exposed than I would have liked, but with at least a little privacy.

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll start with what you probably know. The single death was initially ruled an anomaly, supposedly an unforeseen interaction between the heavy wards down there, the area-of-effect entads, and her personal history. As of yesterday, they’ve revised that diagnosis to having been a variable time-delayed poison that didn’t come up on their, ah, post-mortem tests.” Aerb didn’t actually have toxicology screenings, which was where my mind had been going. “There are also the disappearances, some of which have now been ruled to be deaths using the same variable time-delay poison. Demographically, the disappearances are all over the place, one instructor, a handful of upperclassmen, and a handful of staff. They tend to be more important than not, but their actual role at S&S runs the gamut, so no help there. No obvious trends with regard to species.” We’d spent a good deal of time trying to solve those cases, and come up short, mostly because they were extremely cold.

“They’re pinning it on my ethics instructor,” I said. “I can’t tell whether or not that’s because it’s someone at the top wanting to find a scapegoat, or whether she really is involved somehow. It’s at least a tacit admission that something greater than a single death has been going on here. Beyond that, I’m pretty sure that the meditation class is compromised in some way, though how, exactly, is really unclear. I was planning to attend again.”

“Meditation class?” asked Oberlin.

“It’s extracurricular,” I replied. “Ermaretor asked that I attend, which means that she’s probably in on it.”

Oberlin swore and leaned back in his chair, crossing his four arms across his chest. “You’re going to have to pull at threads,” he said. “Sooner than later. If they’ve got a scapegoat, that might mean that they’re cleaning up after the fact. Anything else?”

“Very little that I could find,” I replied. “Given that they’re pinned on someone now, I would guess that the local police have information I don’t, even if it’s entirely fabricated, but that doesn’t help too much.” I paused, not sure how much to trust Oberlin. “In your time at Uniquities, did you ever encounter a flaming man who could be seen during meditation?”

“A very specific question,” he replied with a raised eyebrow. “Memetic?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I was hoping that you did.”

“Explain,” said Oberlin.

I told him, in brief, about the meditation class and what I’d experienced, leaving off most of the speculation that had come from Raven on the matter. As I was speaking, he closed his eyes, and when I was finished, he let out a long, low sigh.
“Fuck,” he said. “It’s Herald.”

“You’re familiar with this entity?” I asked. “It’s … a known quantity?”

“Yes and no,” replied Oberlin. “First contact was ninety years ago, a small cult outside Terrenar. They were trying to bring about the end of creation. Their emblem was a burning man.”

“Why were they trying to do that?” I asked.

Oberlin waved a hand. “Not important.”

“ Seems important,” I replied with a frown.

“You’re familiar with oblivion doctrine?” he asked. “It holds that oblivion is better than eternal torment in the hells?”

“Sure,” I said. That was pretty much standard around the Empire.

“There are people who take it a step too far,” said Oberlin. “They stare into the infernoscope and decide that it would be better if all creation were destroyed, rather than have the hells continue existing. They crop up at different times, with different names. The cult was one of those, and their method of choice was to try to bring forth the biggest, baddest thing they could find. There was never much risk of them actually succeeding, mind, but you don’t let babies play with guns, even if you know they’re not loaded. Satisfied?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just thought it might be relevant.”

“It’s not,” said Oberlin. “The second time we encountered the symbol of the man on fire, he was part of a demonic cult. They were out of Five Spires, urban, with a cluster of star mages creating a planar depression that facilitated possessions. Nothing world ending, we don’t think, though they were making an honest effort there at the end. There was discussion of the man on fire in their notebooks, and a handful of drawings. That time there were survivors we were able to talk to. They talked about him showing up in their dreams.”

“Okay,” I said. “So … how many examples are we dealing with?”

“I haven’t been with Uniquites for a while,” said Oberlin. “It was around twenty times, when I left. Always associated with something unsavory, never actually appears on the ground that we can tell. Likely geographically confined, but it’s hard to say how big the range is. We’d call it memetic, but it doesn’t seem to spread like that, and we’d call it some class of infohazard, but that’s not clear either. He shows up when bad things are going to happen, sometimes, not always.”

“He’s a leading indicator, not a trailing one?” I asked. “And the memory thing?”

“Leading indicator, sure,” replied Oberlin. “The memory thing … if this entity was responsible for altering memories or personalities, or if it does anything other than just showing up, then we don’t know about it. If it had an ability like that, it might explain how little information we have about it.”

“Crap,” I said. “So you’re saying that’s a dead end? And if this is a leading indicator, why isn’t it known, like … on the most wanted?”

“You think we should have plastered the empire with information about a suspected infohazard?” asked Oberlin with a raised eyebrow.

“I … no,” I said. “But if my group of very well informed people have never heard anything, that’s a
problem.”

“So far as Figaro Finch has told me, you’re operating well outside the law, even more than Uniquities normally does,” said Oberlin. “But at least we know it’s something. So far, the phenomena related to the man on fire have been dealt with, sometimes with casualties, sometimes with mass casualties, but always dealt with. If it’s part of the same pattern, then there are limits on how bad it can be.”

I had been trying my best to rein in Amaryllis’ obsession with narrative, instead electing to live my life on Aerb in the ways in which I would prefer to live it, narrative be damned. Tabletop games weren’t governed by narrative, at least not how I played them, they were governed by a DM adapting to the player’s choices, making things fun and engaging for them depending on what they decided to do. The Dungeon Master wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows, and clearly there were things that he had planned, but the seams were showing, and they reinforced my belief in how he was running the game. Narrative, schmarrative.

Still, hearing someone unironically say “How bad could it be?” had me wincing.

“I’m really worried that we’re not going to find anything until it blows up in our face,” I said. “It really seems like something is going on down in the temple, between the construction there and the disappearances. I’ve got one chance to go down there, three days from now, and going in blind seems like it’s not the greatest idea.”

“Steel yourself, because it might be necessary,” replied Oberlin.

“I’d like private training,” I said. “I know we talked about it before, but –”

“A suspected, if not completely confirmed soul mage wants me on his home turf, subjected to magics under his control,” said Oberlin. “I didn’t get where I did in life by taking that kind of risk.”

“Okay,” I said. “I had to try.” I wasn’t sure how much help Oberlin would actually be, given that I was at or near the cap for most of my skills. I still thought that there were techniques or ideas that he could add in somehow though, and some of the stuff he’d been talking about in class did seem helpful. “If I go down into the temple, which I’m still planning to, you’re on call.”

“You’re not allowed equipment or entads down there,” said Oberlin. “There are wards against skin magic. They take it very seriously. You won’t have a way to contact me.”

“I’ll try to figure something out,” I replied. “And if I’m alone … well, I might be able to handle myself, hopefully not against the unknown power of the Herald.”


“The … the name of the flaming man in armor is Harold?” I asked.

“Yes,” nodded Oberlin. “Uniquities used to use a naming scheme designed to reduce exposure to memetic and infohazardous effects.”

“And this threat is named Harold?” I asked.

Oberlin nodded, watching me.

“Okay,” I said. “Harold.”

“It’s better protocol than using whatever name an entity gives itself, trust me on that,” said Oberlin.
“Be careful.”

“I will,” I replied.

When I got to the meditation class, there was no one there, and not even a sign explaining where it had gone. I stayed there, thinking maybe I’d gotten the time wrong, until Sonee showed up.

“What’s up?” she asked, looking around the empty room.

“No idea,” I said. “Did I miss a memo?”

“If you did, then I missed it too,” she replied. She undid her hair tie and looked around the room as she redid it. “But I can’t see any reason that no one else would show up. This was supposed to be every day, right?”

“Supposed to be,” I said, frowning.

“Can I ask why you were here in the first place?” asked Sonee.

“Magus Ermaretor suggested that I might like it,” I said. “That’s pretty much it.”

“Ah,” she replied. “I’d wondered. Most of the people in class I could look at them and kind of get it. Some species are worse at certain kinds of thinking.”

“But … not rhannu, I didn’t think,” I said. (I kept thinking about how I would be able to get her alone for long enough. It was only slightly less creepy with context.)

“No,” replied Sonee. She finished with her bun. “I just thought that meditation might help me. I’m rod track, not temple track, and I’ve already got my bop on the head years ago. Well, years ago, and then years before that, and before that.”

“And you come here with each new life?” I asked.

“They’re not really new lives,” said Sonee. “I mean, that’s as close to the right language as Anglish has for it, but we usually talk about splits and treat it like one big continuous life, even though it’s not. It’s more like, I don’t know, you have half the memories of your mother, and a quarter of the memories of your grandmother, and an eighth and so on.” She looked me over for a moment, then looked around the room. “Weird that no one else is showing up,” she said. “I can understand the teacher being a no-show, but then where’s everyone else?” She turned back to me. “If we give this five more minutes and we’re still the only ones, do you want to go some place?”

This was either serendipitous, or I was being set up in some way.

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe go look for someone who knows what’s going on?”

“I was thinking coffee and baked goods, personally,” replied Sonee. “Wait, do humans like coffee or tea? Or something else?”

“Both,” I said. I laughed a little at that. “I’m still not used to people asking me what humans are like.”

“Oh?” asked Sonee. “Are you from a human ethnostate?”

“No,” I replied. “Just Anglecynn. Not Caledwich though, just a small town out in the middle of nowhere, with only a handful of other species.”
“And you’re liking the big city?” asked Sonee.

“Well enough,” I replied with a nod. I looked at the door. No one had come in. “Has that been five minutes?”

“Close enough for me,” Sonee said with a shrug.

We walked together and did some idle chattering, and I sent off a surreptitious message to Amaryllis to keep her in the loop. The fact that the meditation class had seemingly evaporated had me on edge, and I was trying to find some undercurrent to the things she said, or some indication that she was intentionally lying. We went to one of the eateries that were near Canis Hall, then found a small table together (buttered coffee for me, thistle tea for her).

“So, yeah, it’s about three years, on average, to get back to basics, not all that much different than a human going from infant to toddler,” Sonee was saying. “But we’re the same size, which can make it tough to handle us, especially if we’re missing something big. Like, Jiph got pretty much all the impulse control, and I got the biggest chunk of language, so after the split she was a calm, patient near-mute, and I was this wild motormouth.”

“What about meditating?” I asked.

“Kind of,” replied Sonee. “We -- rhannu -- we have our own ways of thinking about the split, you know? Like, there are things that are foundational, which maintain through the split, and there are things that you learned, which you don’t get. And I think our prime form, before the split, she was this woman who worked really hard at the impulse control thing, trying her best to rein in her appetites, to be in control of herself, or whatever. And so you might say that we had naturally bad impulse control, but a really highly learned management of it. And you might also say that Jiph got the management aspect, leaving me with nothing. But that’s the thing, because she’s the one that’s constantly upset with me, like I’m not the one that got the short end of the stick.”

“Sounds tough,” I said. “I have a dwarven friend, clonal, who had a pretty bad experience with his father, for what sound like similar reasons. The whole ‘why can’t you be like me’ part of it, anyway.”

“Oooo, interesting,” said Sonee, eyes lighting up. “An old dwarf friend from back in Anglecynn, or a new one from S&S?”

“Old one,” I said. “Agkrioglian, if that means anything to you.”

“Nope,” she replied. “I knew Groglir a few splits ago, but never really kept up with it. Not many dwarves around here, in case you hadn’t noticed, mostly because S&S doesn’t teach the kind of magic that’s too useful when you’re living underground. There’s a dwarfhold in Li’o, actually, but a lot of what they do is just help with the temple, I think, mining and building. I mean, it’s a whole city, so it does a lot of city things, probably, I’m just saying as it relates to S&S.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Juniper!” called a familiar voice from nearby.

I looked over and gave a wave to Valencia, who was grinning from ear to ear. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, not her usual fare, with a bookbag slung over one shoulder. Her contacts were in place, ensuring that her red eyes were purple. Bringing her out into the open like this was a risk, one that we were partly taking because no one liked the idea of her being cooped up in the house for two weeks. As soon as she’d shown up, I felt a bit better, because her social skills were amazing, but a
different tension took hold of me, as I worried that a passing warder with warder’s sight would see her, or some other invisible tell would mark her as non-anima. That was what contingencies were for, I supposed.

“Sonee, this is my friend Valencia,” I said, gesturing to her. “Valencia, this is Sonee.”

“Ah, but not your friend Sonee,” said Valencia, shaking Sonee’s hand. “Or does it just need more time?”

“Acquaintance Sonee’ sounded weird in my head,” I said.

“Do you mind if I sit?” asked Valencia, pointing to a chair and looking at Sonee. “It’s been a long day.”

“Of course,” nodded Sonee. “Are you two old friends or new?”

“New,” said Valencia. “We actually met on the train over, hence me ribbing him about us being friends.” She looked over at me. “Though I’ve always thought that when you come to new places you have to declare your friends early.”

Sonee nodded at that. If she was put off by Valencia’s joining us, she wasn’t showing it. “Which track are you on? Juniper mentioned that he was dual-tracked.”

“Juniper’s an overachiever,” said Valencia with a little laugh. “Or he will be, if he achieves the things he’s set out to do. Me, I’m planning to be a vibration mage: higher demand, and it pays better.”

“Tsk,” said Sonee. “Not in it for the love of the craft?”

“I have my crafts that I love,” said Valencia. “But unfortunately, the things you love aren’t always good career choices. If I had my way, I would be a dancer.”

“Oh, you could definitely make a career at that,” said Sonee. “But it’s one of those things where you’d run yourself ragged trying to be in the top one percent that actually get paid something, and you’d end up working jobs on the side, and it would be a mess. Trust me, I speak from experience.”

“You were a dancer?” asked Valencia, sitting back and widening her eyes.

“In a former life,” nodded Sonee. “Ribbon dancing, specifically, though I was never the best.”

“I love ribbon dancing,” said Valencia. “Can you still?”

“I’m rusty,” replied Sonee, looking a little abashed. “I’m rhannu, I don’t know if you know our species?”

Valencia shook her head, frowning, and Sonee glanced at me. “Well, we split off instead of doing the baby thing, and I was a dancer two splits ago, so I have a fourth of my skills, and the way I have them, it’s worse than being a novice. I’d pick it up again, but as I was saying, there are a lot of downsides to taking it as a career.”

“Well, I’d love to pick your brain sometime,” said Valencia. “Are you busy tonight? Juniper and I were going to have dinner back at our place.”

“You have a place together?” asked Sonee, looking between the two of us.

“Temporarily,” Valencia said. “We both suffered from a mix-up in getting campus housing, so we’re
in a little place. It’s a bad neighborhood, and it’s small, and I saw a mouse yesterday -- I’m really selling it, aren’t I? -- but it’s the first place on our own for either of us. And Juniper is an amazing cook.”

“I’m okay,” I said.

“Well,” said Sonee, swirling her tea. “In that case, I have one request. I’d like to do some meditation before we eat.”

Valencia grinned. “Sounds like a plan.”

Sonee took a single step into Bethel and collapsed, caught before she hit the floor by an invisible force. The room we came into was no longer the cozy chairs around the warm fireplace, but clearly student housing, bereft of much decoration, with hand-me-down couches, tables, and chairs, and a few boxes to suggest that we hadn’t yet finished unpacking. All for show, obviously.

“Not how I wanted to handle this,” I said with a sigh.

“Oh?” asked Bethel as she appeared beside me. “You said that you wanted to look at her soul.”

“I do,” I said. “But I was hoping that we could figure out a way of doing it without knocking her out. It was done safely?”

Bethel looked affronted and waved a hand to lift Sonee up off the floor and over to the couch. Somewhere in the vast house, a weight was falling down, with the momentum transferred perfectly to Sonee’s body in such a way to prevent damage.

“I blocked her carotid artery,” said Bethel. “It’s the fastest, easiest way to knock someone out. I’m doing bioregulation right now to keep her under. You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“She was compromised,” said Valencia, shrugging off her bookbag and walking over to stare at Sonee. “Not consciously though, at least that I could see. She wasn’t an actor playing a part, she was behaving within her own set parameters. The difference was that those parameters kept changing.”

“Changing?” I asked. “Meaning what, that she was a different person every few minutes?”

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. “It’s outside the realm of infernal experience. Whatever the explanation is, I think the closest analogy would be to soul magic. It was like something was clicking inside of her to change her internal states. The most obvious was when I first arrived. She was annoyed by my being there, because she was having fun flirting with you, and then there was a sudden, jarring change in her disposition.”

“That’s explainable,” I said. “I mean, maybe she just realized she was being -- wait, flirting?”

“Are you seriously going to second guess me when you couldn’t even see that she was interested?” asked Valencia. “Do you think that I don’t know the difference between a person realizing that she was being unreasonable, and a completely unexplained change in her outlook? It wasn’t a change of mind, it was something else, something changing her mind for her, with none of the internal signals of natural change visible to me.”

“That’s a big clue,” said Amaryllis, who had been shadowing us and had just stepped in. She took off her helmet and lifted her head slightly. “Bethel, can you help with this?”
Ten seconds passed, and the armor was removed all at once, vanished into the glove’s extradimensional compartment, leaving Amaryllis in a tank top and panties, a slight sheen of sweat on her. She looked down for a moment. “I was wearing pants,” she said, keeping her voice mild.

“Were you?” asked Bethel. “My mistake.” She smiled at Amaryllis and made no move to rectify the error.

Amaryllis sighed and pulled a blanket from off the back of the couch, wrapping it around her as a makeshift skirt. “If whatever force we’re dealing with can reach into her head and change memories, it might be able to accomplish the same thing to make changes to her disposition.”

“I was spending the walk back here exploring the phenomenon,” said Valencia. “It only happened a few times, but always consistent with getting us to engage in meditation with her.”

I hadn’t noticed any of that. “Well, okay,” I said. “If it can reach into her head and monkey around without her knowing, that’s … well, horrifying and bad for us, in that order, especially if it’s got eyes on her in some way. And depending on how many people it can do the same thing for, and which of those people it has, and how strong it is -- I’m stalling, it’s bad, that’s all, and it’s time for me to look into her soul.”

“Nothing with warder’s sight, incidentally,” said Bethel. “I’ll have Grakhuil consult when he gets here. He and Solace are current indisposed. Shall I call in the others as well?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m hoping that I find something in her soul or spirit that won’t kill me outright. Hopefully we can find some kind of answer or antidote.” I sat down beside Sonee, placed my hand on her forearm, and felt the blood flowing beneath her skin, which I’d found to be the easiest entry point into a person’s soul.

The naked floating image of her body greeted me, which made the whole thing feel more exploitative than it already did, and I moved away to look at other things, starting with her values. There was nothing even remotely suspect there, just a list of names and concepts. Pleasure and Continuity were at the top of the list, nearly tied with one another, and just below those, Expression and Jiph. It all painted a picture, but it was none of my damned business, so I continued on, looking for something else.

Her relationships looked normal (and confirmed some attraction to me). Her skills looked normal (Vibrational Magic and Dancing being the highest, at 16 and 21, respectively). I felt more and more terrible the more I looked, because I really did think it was an invasion of privacy against someone who was, by all appearances, an unwitting puppet and innocent bystander. I was worried that I wasn’t going to be able to fix whatever was wrong with her, but I was also worried that even if we did fix her, she’d go home having a vague uneasiness about having fainted in the home of a stranger and lost time, during which gods-know-what had happened.

I found nothing out of the ordinary. Her family tree looked weird, but that was a result of being rhannu, not anything having to do with Harold. Other than the things I thought must have been related to her species, she seemed like a perfectly normal college student to me.

When I moved up to her spirit, I saw it, hundreds of bright orange lines looping and swirling, descending down from on high, where they gathered together in a thick bundle that faded out into nowhere. It was a representation of *something*, though it was impossible to say what. When I looked down at the places the orange threads were connected to the more normal parts of her spirit, I saw that the connections were perpendicular, which would indicate … well, I didn’t know. In the threading metaphor, it seemed like it might be process injection, or man-in-the-middle, or something like that, a way of capturing information from those threads and replacing it as need be, all in a way
that was beyond my current abilities with Spirit (and, frankly, my understanding of the spirit).

I had no idea what to do. I could strangle all of the bright orange threads, like I had strangled my own threads to deal with both the memes and the level up stuff, but if changes had been made to Sonee by someone or something at a remove, then all I would be doing would be making those changes permanent, if the counterforce couldn’t just revert what I had done.

“She’s infected,” I said, pulling out of her spirit and back into the real world. The room had filled with people while I was looking around; Raven, Pallida, Heshnel, Solace, and Grak had all joined. “Which means that it’s likely everyone in the meditation class is infected, and probably dozens if not hundreds of others. I can maybe lock her into the state she’s in now, but whatever changes have happened … I don’t know.”

“There’s another person who knows spirit?” asked Solace, frowning. She was standing close by Grak, and I brushed aside the thought that had been planted in my head when Bethel had said ‘indisposed’, because she still looked like she was five years old, and krin didn’t necessarily mean anything beyond cuddling.

“It wouldn’t have to be another person who knows spirit,” said Raven. “In the same way that phenomena affect the soul without being soul magic, there are phenomena that affect the spirit without being spiritual magic. As the only living practitioner of spirit that we know of, Juniper would be the only one capable of fixing it.”

“Oh,” I said. “I have other news. I spoke with Oberlin. Apparently the entity is known to them, though there’s not all that much that binds separate appearances, other than tangential connection to world-ending threats and altered states.”

“I’d have heard of it,” said Raven with a frown. “I know all the extant threats, at least those that have active history.”

“Not if it never actually ended the world,” I replied. “If Uniquities just quietly dealt with it, or the entity’s plans fell through for other reasons, it wouldn’t necessarily reach the Library’s attention. How common is book circumvention?”

“Meaning?” asked Raven, furrowing her eyebrows.

“Meaning … how common is it for organizations to bind their materials such that they don’t count as books and can’t be spied on by the Infinite Library?” I asked.

“Uncommon,” said Raven, frowning. “But not unknown. The Second Empire was a government of factions. There were those in the know about the Library who wanted to keep things from their nominal colleagues. Politics.”

“So this man on fire never showed up in a vision of the future and never needed to be stopped?” asked Pallida. “Wouldn’t that be a good thing for us? He’s so inept at ending the world that he was stopped by Uniquities?”

“His name is Harold, by the way,” I said.

“The herald of what?” asked Raven.

“No, Harold,” I said. “Like, just the name Harold. At least, that’s the name that Uniquities gave him. I’m partial to it.”

“Because it’s dumb?” asked Pallida.
“Yeah,” I nodded. “Easier to face.” I looked down at Sonee. “If I’m not going to try an intervention, which I don’t think I am because of the unknowns involved, then you should all clear out and we should wake her up. The less lost time, the better.”

“Could you tell whether Harold has eyes and ears here?” asked Amaryllis. I glanced down and realized that she was still wearing her blanket skirt, completely unselfconsciously.

“I couldn’t,” I said. “But what Valencia said about the way that Sonee’s mind changed implies that someone or something was changing it in response to stimulus, and there didn’t seem to be a mechanism for doing that internally. My guess is that the entity has at least some access, but I don’t know how complete it is.”

“We’ll assume that he does, then,” said Amaryllis.

“We still don’t have a plan,” said Raven.

“We don’t have a grasp on the threat,” said Grak. “There can be no plan without that.”

“Call in Uniquities,” said Valencia. “They have the expertise.”

“Except that I’m getting the feeling that we’re the feet on the ground for Uniquities,” I said. “Figaro Finch knew that something was going on here, and he set me up to deal with it. I’ll send him a letter, express, but if this extends to the ruling council of mages in Li’o, then I’m not sure what the Empire could actually do about it, legally speaking, since this is a sovereign city-state.”

“There are provisions in place for the event that a member polity is compromised in some way,” said Amaryllis. “That said, Article 86 has never been invoked, and invocation would almost certainly be catastrophic for imperial cohesion, though I don’t know whether it would cause disintegration, economic collapse, or outright civil war.”

“Meaning that any aid from Uniquities will be covert aid,” said Valencia.

“And from a narrative perspective, it seems unlikely that our role here is to call in the cavalry and then leave,” said Amaryllis.

“While I agree that the Dungeon Master probably has some bullshit planned,” I replied, “I’m not going to throw up my hands and just say that it’s probably pointless to do the smart thing.”

“That wasn’t what I was saying,” replied Amaryllis. “I can be the one to draft the letter, if you’d like.”

“Good, thank you,” I replied. “And as I was saying, we should probably wake Sonee up and then escort her home, to minimize how much the adversary knows, and minimize what trauma this is causing her.”

“She’s perfectly safe,” said Bethel.

“I meant more on the mental end of things,” I said. “It’s a violation.”

Bethel frowned at that. <Are you pressing my buttons?> she asked.

<No,> I said. <I’m expressing my reservations at this whole thing, that’s all. If you see some parallels to what was done to you, maybe that’s something that you should think more deeply about.>

<Watch your tongue,> replied Bethel.
“Alright, let’s clear out,” said Amaryllis. “Val, you’re good to go back out? No troubles?”

“None,” replied Valencia with a sigh. “It was so wonderful to see the city and the school. Someday.” She didn’t finish the thought or say what she hoped would happen someday. Maybe she was just hoping that she wouldn’t have to worry so much that someone’s magic would tag her as a threat.

Everyone left, leaving me and Valencia alone with Sonee.

“She’s been out for twenty minutes, but we’ll say less,” Valencia said to me. “She doesn’t have a watch and there isn’t one in the room, and if it’s too much time, which it frankly was, then it raises questions about why we didn’t go for help or do something about the fact that she mysteriously passed out.”

“She’s still going to want us to meditate though, right?” I asked.

“We can fake that, if we have to,” replied Valencia. “Harold would know, but there’s not much that can be done about that.”

“Sure,” I said. I looked over to Bethel. “Now, please.”

It took Sonee some time to wake up. She stirred slowly, then blinked a few times, glazed-over eyes looking around the room.

“Oh, thank the gods you’re awake,” said Valencia, kneeling down beside Sonee and looking every inch the concerned host. There were traces of panic in the way that she looked Sonee over.

“Wha’ happened?” she asked. She sat up in the couch and stretched out.

“We don’t know,” said Valencia. She ran her fingers through her hair. “You were walking in and just collapsed. Joon caught you before you fell, but I was so worried, is this like a medical thing? Or something to do with rhannu?”

“I don’t think it’s a rhannu thing,” I said.

“No,” said Sonee. She rubbed her head. “I feel fine. Maybe a little groggy. How long was I out?”

“Ten minutes,” said Valencia.

“Val’s been freaking out,” I said. “We checked your pulse, and everything was fine, you were still breathing. You should probably go see a doctor though. I was looking for some smelling salts. My mom packed me a first aid kit, but I couldn’t find it, sorry.”

“It’s okay,” replied Sonee. “I feel completely fine. Better than fine, actually, maybe I just needed a nap.” She laughed a little at that, then looked at our concerned faces. “Really, I am fine.”

“We’re taking you home,” said Valencia, voice firm. “We would have called an ambulance, but we don’t have phone service hooked up yet, and it’s kind of not that great a neighborhood, so I didn’t want to go knocking on any doors, and --”

“It’s fine,” said Sonee. “Really, it is. Thanks for looking after me. I could stay, if --”

“No,” said Valencia. “No, we’re going to get you home, no more walking either, we’ll figure out a way to get a cab here, then send you home. Juniper can pay for it, and he’ll go with you.”

“Are you sure?” asked Sonee, looking at me.
“I have money,” I said. “You wouldn’t think it to look at this place, but yes, it’s no trouble, and after that scare, we want to get you home safe and sound.”

Sonee let out a breath. “Okay,” she said. “Walk me to the corner and we can hail a cab. I feel fine, but if I fall, I want you to be there to catch me.”

We went out together, the three of us, and eventually found a cab on next street over. I thought that the chivalrous thing to do would be to go with her, then walk back home, but I wanted to put distance between us, given what I had seen in her spirit and how little I really knew about it.

“I think that went well,” said Valencia as we watched the cab leave. “She began to shift toward leaving, rather than shifting toward capturing us.”

“But … why?” I asked. “The entity was cutting its losses?”

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. “I’m having a hard time modeling Harold. The infernals I’ve plucked have no useful information on the subject, and without knowing the general class of entity it is, their expertise is useless, not that they’re particularly strong with creatures who aren’t of the mortal species.”

“Are you doing okay?” I asked. “Sometimes when you don’t talk like yourself, I wonder if you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” said Valencia. She closed her eyes. “There, danger has passed, devil is gone. Let’s head back and speak to the others.”

“We’re going to have to talk about whether or not I’m going down into the temple, if things remain the same,” I said. “If we can’t make headway, if we don’t know what we’re working against … either the temple is the key to it all, or it’s the key to me gaining power, but either way I’ll probably want to be down there.”

Bethel watched.

The bottle remained opaque to her. It wasn’t the entad itself, nor the huge and impressive wards that had been anchored to the inside of it with the entity Thargox’s help. No, it was the locus, which was doing something to stop her sensorium. The block was baffling, and seemed as though it was never the same twice. It took all of Bethel’s restraint not to see this as an act of war that would require retaliation. Thankfully, no one had asked her whether she could see into the bottle, nor had they requested her assistance going into or out of the bottle, which meant that she could let this stand and still keep face, rather than make a big deal about it. The locus shouldn’t have been able to block her. It shouldn’t even have known what it was blocking. But then again, it was a locus, and they were known for very casually not making much sense. The bottle, at least, was Grak, Solace, and Juniper accounted for, though it was well possible that Solace could use the magic of the locus to leave the bottle undetected. The only method of tracking that Bethel had any luck with was the entads, which still provided her their powers, even if she couldn’t sense them through other means.

The tuung were studying under the tutelage of the teachers that Amaryllis had hired. It was daytime, so far as that wing was concerned. Everyone there was ignorant of what was going on outside the wing, to the extent that they had no idea they were even in Li’o. So far as the teachers knew, they were still on the Isle of Poran, undergoing compressed time. Bethel had agreed to wait on putting everyone in that wing under the effects of the chamber, so that they could essentially be stored without much worry or need for interventions. She’d been mildly surprised that the whole enterprise hadn’t collapsed in the first fortnight, but the tuung children were coming along nicely, with
relatively few problems. Whether they would be the dedicated workforce that Amaryllis wanted … well, they had been in the future as portrayed by *A Cypress Waits*, which was something.

Most of the rest of Bethel’s inhabitants were asleep, with two exceptions.

Raven never slept. Because she didn’t sleep, she didn’t dream, which produced another blind spot for Bethel, though not a serious one. Raven was reading, as she often did when she was alone, with cats blinking in and out of existence thanks to that unruly part of Bethel. Her subject of choice this time was Uther Penndraig, as it had been the last few nights, and her reading was as seemingly disorganized as it had been then, a few paragraphs from one book, then a few paragraphs from another, without much rhyme or reason. Bethel had read over Raven’s shoulder for a bit, but it was boring, because the really interesting things must have been going on exclusively in Raven’s head. So far as Bethel could determine, Raven was trying to reconcile her image of Uther with the one that was being revealed to her, but it was hard to say which direction her thoughts were going. Seeing her dreams would have been helpful.

The other exception was Amaryllis, who lay awake in her room, staring at the ceiling. Bethel had added some flourishes to the ceiling, little stars made from moulded glass, which would cast off light from a fireplace. There was no fire going in Amaryllis’ room at the moment, so the stars were nearly invisible, but it was easy enough for Bethel to pretend that her work was being appreciated.

<Why did you take my pants?> asked Amaryllis.

<Is that what you’re thinking of, little one?> asked Bethel. <All the day’s events and your brief moment of near-nudity is what occupies you?>

<I’m trying to understand you,> said Amaryllis.

<I thought it would be amusing,> replied Bethel. <It’s my understanding that Fenn did something similar? You still wear that ‘Princess!’ shirt.> It was sitting in Sable’s storage, which Bethel could access, more faded than it had been when Bethel had first seen it.

<It’s not the same,> said Amaryllis. She sounded melancholy. <Did you do it because of Juniper?>

Bethel considered not responding. Sometimes she did that, when conversations bored her, or when she didn’t like the direction that they were going. It was so easy to stop talking to someone, and left them with so little recourse, so little understanding of what she was thinking, and that could be entertaining in its own right. Amaryllis was too patient though, too unflappable, and there was little to be gained from subjecting her to silence.

<I enjoy seeing his reactions,> replied Bethel. <Like an insect, trapped in a bottle, prodded with a stick.>

<What a performative answer,> replied Amaryllis. <You like him.>

The real problem, so far as Bethel was concerned, was that Raven was the only one in the house who was exhibiting proper fear. Oh, certainly Bethel would rather be loved than feared, but fear came easily, and love did not. There had been a time when Amaryllis felt fear, even if she was good at hiding the outward signs, but perhaps because she had seen that it had worked for Juniper, she was becoming more and more flippant, more casual in her disregard.

<I like him,> said Bethel. <You, I could do without.> She wasn’t entirely sure that was true. With Amaryllis gone, the tuung could be flushed out in the wilderness somewhere, but the group would be left lurching, and it wasn’t clear what Juniper would do. He would survive, and he would still need a
house … but maybe it would feel a little less like a home.

<And was his reaction to your liking?> asked Amaryllis.

<Very much so,> replied Bethel. <Did you know he refused me?>

<Refused you?> asked Amaryllis. Her heart began to beat faster, and she did the same trick that Juniper sometimes used, stilling the motion of her blood with blood magic. There was no point to it; it would have been obvious just from watching the flow of their blood, even if Bethel didn’t have a warder’s sight to look at the magic of the blood in active use.

“Do you mind if I sit?” asked Bethel as she created an image of a woman next to Amaryllis. She relished the way that Amaryllis flinched at the sudden presence, but of course being startled was fleeting, and Amaryllis handled it with her usual aplomb.

“Not at all,” said Amaryllis, sitting up in her bed and looking over the form that Bethel had chosen.

Bethel was projecting her default, changed in a few ways to suit the circumstances. She’d chosen a height similar to Amaryllis, and a build similar too, with clothes the same as what Amaryllis was wearing, a tanktop and underwear, hopefully just similar enough to be unsettling. Bethel kept her usual face though, with cedar skin and ropey hair, though there were tweaks there too. It was just enough to remind Amaryllis that Bethel was perfectly -- perfectly -- capable of making a duplicate.

“So?” asked Amaryllis, after a moment of silence.

“So what?” asked Bethel. She was paying attention to the illusion, the breathing that she had to mimic, the slight movements of the eyes, minor shifts in position, all so it would look just right. She exerted force onto the sheets she was projecting the illusion above, to keep them pressed down as though someone were sitting on them. Elsewhere within her, a weight on a chain was steadily dropping, deprived of its momentum to transfer more than the simple five pounds of force.

“He refused you,” said Amaryllis. “What was the offer? And what context?”

Bethel altered the illusion, so that it was examining its perfect nails. Amaryllis was on edge, and it felt good to let her sweat. “He’s been experiencing some sexual frustration,” said Bethel. She looked up at Amaryllis. “Well, you can understand, can’t you? It’s been some time since Fenn’s unfortunate passing, and men have their needs. His appetites have been returning to him. You’ve noticed that he’s eating his fill again, haven’t you? Taking better care of himself?”

“What did you do?” asked Amaryllis.

Bethel projected a laugh. “Nothing,” she said. “I asked him whether or not he would like me to sate him.”

“As me,” said Amaryllis.

“How utterly narcissistic of you,” replied Bethel. “I went as myself. And as I’ve said, he declined me, very sweetly.”

Amaryllis shook her head. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“For the fun of it, I suppose,” said Bethel. “I’ve grown fond of him, I think, and I would like to see him happy.”

“This is all in pursuit of that?” asked Amaryllis. “How does it help to make him happy to see me
“Debased?” laughed Bethel.

“The removal of my clothes,” said Amaryllis.

“He’s seen you naked,” said Bethel. “He saw you give birth.” *Humans.*

“It was a deprivation of autonomy,” said Amaryllis. “Whether he enjoyed it or not, and I suspect that he didn’t, or if he did, it was with an appropriate amount of guilt -- that’s immaterial, because you were taking a choice away from me, humiliating me, because hurting me like that brought you enjoyment.”

Bethel sat back. She could kill Amaryllis so easily. There might legitimately be half a hundred ways to end the small human’s life. It would depend on how you counted, but there were at least six methods involving wards, ten or so involving five pounds of force applied to her in various ways (easy enough to pad out the list with more there, if need be), innumerable poisons from either Earth or the Everflask or her miasma, space warping, time warping, suffocation, drowning, or any number of items pulled from Sable’s space. She would spend some time, later, making a complete list, a full book that she could give to someone who had drawn her ire, just to let them know.

“Do you not find it fun to hurt people?” asked Bethel.

Amaryllis softened slightly, her hackles lowering. “I have,” she said. “It’s not part of my temperament, but … when we had to use the crown, we each had afflictions. Mine was aggression, or something similar, and the idea that anyone lives their whole life like that, a ball of anger, taking so much pleasure from even the thought of hurting someone, I had some cause to re-evaluate what I believe about people.” She sighed. “I attacked Juniper. At the time, it felt so good, so justified, and he had agreed to it, I had consent, and he could heal without spending any of our resources, but now, looking back, I have to think of it as the actions of another person.”

“Amaryllis Penndraig, not being able to imagine hurting someone?” asked Bethel.

“I didn’t have a reason,” said Amaryllis, casting a dark look at Bethel. “I’ve killed people, but it came with a sense of duty, or the satisfaction of a job well done, or a battle finished, a war won. With Juniper, I didn’t hurt him because there was a purpose to it, I just wanted to hurt someone, and he was there to be hurt. When you ask me whether I’ve ever found it fun to hurt people, that’s what I think about, that moment. And if that’s how you feel toward me, toward any of us, then I don’t know what there is to do. If it were something else, I could reason with you, I could try to be your friend, I could show you love and affection, see your good points, like he does, but if you want to hurt me in the ways that you’ve been doing it, the jump scares and invasions, then I just don’t know how we’re ever going to reconcile any of it.”

Bethel focused her sensorium on Amaryllis, looking her over with all her manifold senses.

“Perhaps we won’t,” said Bethel. “Perhaps this will be how things are, until the end of your life, however near or far that might be.”

Amaryllis drew her legs to her chest and hugged her knees, one of the positions that humans took when they were feeling hopeless. Bethel felt a small twinge of sympathy, though she also assumed that Amaryllis was carrying on with some plot, rather than actually feeling downtrodden. Bethel was very good at telling when people were lying, simply by tracking their vitals in real time, but it was an imperfect art. Perhaps this was a false negative.
“I’d like to be left alone,” said Amaryllis.

“Well,” said Bethel. “I would like to stay.”

Amaryllis nodded slightly, then crawled across the bed and got under the covers.

“I’m sorry,” said Bethel. That was her second apology in as many weeks, not a habit that she wanted to get into.

Amaryllis let out a breath. “It’s not enough to mean it,” she said.

“It’s not?” asked Bethel. She forced her illusion into a confused frown.

“When I have disagreements with Juniper, it’s often like he knows exactly what a good person would do, and he simply fails to do it,” said Amaryllis. “Sometimes he comes to the realization later, sometimes it’s in the moment, but it’s inconsistent, and -- it’s not enough to say sorry, and it’s not enough to mean it, you have to stop doing the thing that you’re apologizing for. You have to figure yourself out, and then you need to change whatever is causing the problem. Juniper says that he made a mistake, that he should have come with us, that he should have owned his past. If he does eventually go to Sporsan and resolves that quest, fine, but it doesn’t mean that we’re not going to run into the exact same problem again down the line.”

“It’s so hard to trust a Penndraig,” said Bethel. “Especially you, manipulative little girl. You say these things, and I’m left to wonder whether this is an honest outpouring of emotion and thought, whether these are lies you wish me to propagate to others, or whether you mean to manipulate me with your weakness and struggles.”

Amaryllis closed her eyes and laid her bed, staying still for so long that Bethel might have thought she’d simply gone to sleep, save for the fact that her heart rate hadn’t slowed.

“Narratively, this is all pointless,” said Amaryllis. “I can’t change your mind. I can’t help you to change and grow. This is all to stage left while Juniper talks to the locus, or plays Ranks with Grak. Or maybe this is the intermission, with the curtains drawn, while Juniper sleeps.”

“You don’t really see the world that way,” said Bethel.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “No, I don’t, but when I run straight into metaphorical walls, or come up against intractable problems like this, a part of me just thinks, oh, well, he’s the protagonist, maybe the Dungeon Master set this up for him, maybe nothing that I do will actually matter unless it’s done where it furthers his plot.”

“Would it cheer you up if I told you that you had helped to make a marginal change in my way of thinking?” asked Bethel.

Amaryllis opened her eyes, then sat up so she could look at the illusion in the gloom. Eye contact was important for most of the mortal species, as was a sense of presence. It was so handy to have a notional body when speaking with them.

“Is that true?” asked Amaryllis.

“It’s hard to tell,” said Bethel. “Juniper has said to me that he hardly ever knows why he does the things that he does, and any examination of his actions after the fact will always reek of bias and revised history. I don’t think that I’m so different from him in that regard.”

“Well, at any rate, thank you for trying to cheer me up,” said Amaryllis.
“It was only a hypothetical,” sniffed Bethel, but she altered the illusion to convey that it wasn’t merely that, and in return, Amaryllis gave the illusion a small, gratified smile. “You should rest. There are games afoot, and enemies in the shadows.”

“As always,” said Amaryllis.

Bethel added to the illusion, billowing smoke from it, and deconstructed the whole thing in an artful way that she was sure wouldn’t be wholly appreciated for its complexity and nuance. But she stayed, for a time, and kept her attention on Amaryllis, until the little Penndraig was finally asleep.

And then, of course, it was time to spy on her dreams.
There was a hiccup in the Demon-Blooded Festival, right at the last second: apparently the prisoner that they were going to execute escaped from custody shortly after what I can only assume was an absolute farce of a trial. The committee decided to instead use an entad, helpfully donated by Oberlin, but everyone was well aware that it was an effigy, and no one was really happy with the outcome.

“But … we had nothing to do with it,” said Amaryllis, when we heard the news.

“Maybe she had a plan, and that was why she refused our help,” I said. “Or maybe it was some other group that wasn’t going to take no for an answer like we were. At any rate, I’m glad that she got out.”

Amaryllis fidgeted.

“She’s thinking about narrative implications,” said Valencia.


“No,” said Valencia, looking quite proud. “That was all me.”

“It was fairly obvious,” replied Pallida.

“It’s just,” began Amaryllis. “How does it fit in with everything else? She’s a loose thread now, until she shows up again, but then what’s the resolution?”

“Can we just carry on without worrying about how it all fits together?” asked Pallida. “It’s so exhausting, trying to put everything into that frame.” She looked to me. “Juniper, you said that you dropped threads all the time in your campaigns.”

“I did,” I replied. “Sometimes I just forgot, which I don’t think can happen in this case … unless things are a lot less steady than they seem. I suppose if the Dungeon Master controls everything, maybe he could forget, it would just run its course because it was no longer under his supervision.” I paused to think about that. In the simulation framework, the Dungeon Master couldn’t forget, but I had to remind myself that Aerb-as-simulation was only a dominant theory, not something that I could accept as material fact. Maybe the Dungeon Master could forget, and if it did, then things would continue on apace without whatever had escaped his notice. “Other times, it was clear that the players didn’t have any interest, so I would slowly and quietly write the plot thread out and hope that the thing they weren’t having fun with would be forgotten by them, if not by me. And hells, sometimes the dice just didn’t end up agreeing with me, and a plot thread would die in its crib. No plan survives contact with the players.”

Amaryllis folded her arms.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I just want to make sense of it,” said Amaryllis. “I want to see how it fits in the puzzle.”

“I don’t actually know that there is a puzzle,” I said. “And I’ve said as much many, many times. This could actually be two or three completely unrelated things. Maybe Harold is just the big one, and the other ones are side quests, or they’re meant to point at Harold, but,” I shrugged. “The meta-analysis doesn’t seem like it’s bearing fruit, so why don’t we go focus on the non-meta analysis? Namely,
what I’m going to do about the fact that classes are over, and I’m expected to go down into the temple, alone, with practically all of my neat toys taken away from me?”

“You’re going to have to go down there on your own,” said Raven.

“On what grounds?” asked Amaryllis. “We could walk away.”

“On the grounds that Uther was forced to go alone more times than I could count,” said Raven.

“More meta-analysis,” I said, shaking my head. “On the concrete, object level, should I or should I not go down into the temple in order to unlock still and vibrational magic?”

“You should,” said Grak. “The risk is that you will be alone among bad actors. There is no evidence to suggest that they will attack you down there.”

“There’s some evidence,” said Amaryllis. “A single, mysterious death, likely connected to a cover-up from on high, a handful of disappearances, and a collection of entads to aid in meditation, during a ritual that’s centered around meditation, when the entity in question appears to have some access to people in altered states.”

“Juniper has seen Harold before,” said Grak. “If it happens in the temple, he can stop meditating.”

“I can probably stop,” I said. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any information on what specific entads are in use down there, nor do we know how they interact with Harold.”

“About that,” coughed Pallida. “I might have obtained both a detailed schematic of the temple and a list of entads used there.”

“Stole?” I asked.

“Such a strong word,” said Pallida. “I would prefer to say that I acquired them, and I would rather that no one asked me the specifics of how that was done.”

“It’s important to know provenance,” said Raven.

“Fine,” said Pallida, pouting at losing a bit of her mystique. “Then yes, stolen from inside the offices of the dwarven construction crew that was being brought in for the underground expansion. The entad list was apparently something their magic specialists demanded, since some of them have significant range. Bethel?”

“Here,” said Bethel, placing papers in front of us.

I looked over the list, curious what would be there. The map was easy enough; it showed the temple itself, the barracks next to it that housed the staff during their shifts, the adjoining rooms, the Spelunker’s Stroll that students went down for initiation, and the far more practical elevator that was used for the transport of both staff and the newly-minted mages. Beside the temple was the room that contained the Rod of Whispers, and all the floorspace necessary for supporting the safe and efficient initiation of new vibration mages. It was all fairly simple; the list of entads was much more interesting.

There was a spoon that took care of food for everyone in the temple, its effect extending out to cover the entire underground complex. There was a cup that had to be tipped upside down every four hours to keep everyone hydrated, which was done by an attendant in a room beside the temple. For sleep, there was an orb that kept everyone wide awake, though after they left its effects, they would need to pay back an extra hour of sleep every night for each hour they were under the effect
(approximating to half a year of extra sleeping after initiation, something that I’d been warned about by S&S). An entad censer kept the air pure and clean, despite how cramped the temple was and how many people were breathing, and an entad chest handled waste elimination. An entad sand timer took care of bed sores. Lastly, there was a small entad fountain whose water helped to calm, center, and open the mind; the magical waters it produced were converted into vapor and circulated through the room.

“So it’s only this last one that we need to worry about,” I said. “And it sounds like the kind of thing that might just be assisting Harold in, I don’t know, doing whatever it is he’s doing to these people. But that doesn’t mean that it’s a direct risk to me.”

“Except for the risk of being surrounded by hundreds of converts who know that you’re opposed to them and not converted, without your weapons, tools, or most importantly, backup,” said Amaryllis.

“It is my understanding that initiates are hot-swapped,” said Grak. “There would be converted and unconverted in the same room.”

“They might still go for him,” said Amaryllis, crossing her arms. “It wouldn’t be hard to separate him from the herd and take him to a back room where they could put a void gun against his head.”

“He would kill them all,” replied Raven. “I say that on the basis of having seen him fight.”

“Against a still mage?” asked Amaryllis with a raised eyebrow. “Against unknown entads, magics, wards?”

“Yes,” nodded Raven.

“I’ll implant some unicorn bones beneath my skin,” I said. “They don’t help against an instantly decapitating strike, but if I get into the thick of it, they should help me survive, in the event I’m outside of a ward against active bone magic.”

“Which there will almost certainly be,” said Grak. “I would assume they are following perfection protocols.”

(‘Perfection’ was a loaded term for a warder, when it came to security, because spaces needed to be usable. The perfection suite was a set of wards that would guard a place against every conceivable form of attack, and in practice it was never used, mostly because it was expensive and impractical. Still, there were ‘theoretically optimal for these circumstances’ wards, which shared a lot of similarities with the theoretically optimal solutions that you could arrive at in a game of Ranks.)

Amaryllis rubbed her forehead. “This is above our pay grade.”

“No response from Finch,” I said with a shrug. “He should be back on the Isle of Poran, if we wanted to go visit him. He’s almost certainly gotten our letter by now.”

“He should have got it days ago,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“I mean, I can opt out, if you really think that’s wise, but the whole point of us even coming here was so that I could unlock those two magics, and if we need to resolve all this other flaming garbage first, I don’t see how we’re going to do that from where we’re sitting,” I said. I breathed out, letting some of my frustration show.

“I’m just worried about you,” said Amaryllis. “It bothers me to have you so far away with no possibility that I can reach you.”
“I can tunnel through rock,” said Bethel. “It’s courtesy of an entad I was merged with for moving around the Boundless Pit. If needed, I can move all of us close to the temple.”

Amaryllis looked at her. “You would do that?”

“I would,” replied Bethel. “It isn’t particularly house-like, but if needs must.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That should alleviate all concerns?”

“Most of them,” nodded Amaryllis.

“There are underground structures,” said Grak. “We will have much to avoid, moving adjacent to the temple. There is also some risk of detection.”

“Doable, given how small I can get,” said Bethel with a nod. “In theory, I might be able to extend myself to encompass the entirety of the temple, as well as the room which contains the Rod of Whispers, which would save us quite a bit of headache.”

“Do you think it’s doable?” I asked.

“Full entad wards,” said Grak. “They’re ruinously expensive. I would expect the livelihood of the athenaeum to be protected with them, though.”

“Possibly,” said Bethel. “The schematics don’t mention wards.”

“Good security,” said Grak with a slight nod. “Entads need disclosure more than wards.”

“Could the two of you power past them?” I asked.

“No,” said Grak. “It would be possible to bend them, if they are poorly constructed. I would be surprised if they were.”

“Better,” said Bethel. “So long as Pallida is here with that armor, I can become wardproof.”

“No,” said Grak, shaking his head. “Full entad wards would counter a wardproof entad.”

Bethel frowned at him. “Really? That makes no sense.”

“I can explain the arcana later if you do not believe me,” said Grak, face impassive.

“He’s right, for what it’s worth,” said Pallida. “I’ve run into that problem once or twice, had to hire a warder good enough to poke an exception into the ward.”

“Either way, good enough,” I said. “And if I need to contact you, then I can contact Bethel through the soul link, which, in theory, can’t be warded against. That should be good enough, shouldn’t it? Plus I think, with enough time, we might be able to prepare a few other tricks.”

There was some broad agreement among the assembled.

Amaryllis frowned, but said nothing.

“Alright,” said Lisi, staring me down like I was going to run. “The Claret Spear is simple in theory and difficult in execution. Before we start, I need to know that we have magical healing on hand, and that you’re capable of blood hardening and blood bypass.”
“Magical healing we have plenty of, but the blood stuff, I don’t know what those are,” I said.

“But you might still be able to do them?” asked Lisi.

“Maybe,” I said.

She folded her arms and frowned, then glanced over at Reimer, who was sitting with Amaryllis to one side of the dojo. “It’s technically a violation of my agreement with Quills and Blood to teach you blood magic. I could be killed for the transgression.”

“You already agreed,” I said. “Besides, teaching me the Claret Spear in the space of an afternoon should be impossible, so you’re probably in the clear.”

“You said you have a time chamber,” said Lisi. “That would be one possible mechanism, and more likely than the apparent truth, so far as a disciplinary tribunal would be concerned.”

“I know,” I said. “But you already agreed, and I might need the Claret Spear soon.”

Lisi glared at me, then gave a fractional nod. “Blood bypass means altering the flow of blood such that it doesn’t exit the body from a wound, or, more difficult, altering the flow of blood to prevent internal bleeding. Can you do that?”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, that’s easy.”

“Good,” she nodded. “Blood hardening is altering the blood and harnessing its force in order to prevent injuries. Can you do that?”

“Uh,” I said. “I haven’t, but probably?”

“Amaryllis!” called Lisi.

Amaryllis got up from where she was observing and walked over. “Yes?” she asked.

“You didn’t teach him blood hardening?” asked Lisi.

“It wasn’t covered in my studies,” Amaryllis huffed. “I was focused primarily on the topics that would make me a better administrator. Is that all?”

“How far did you get in blood magic?” asked Lisi.

“I could perform Aarde’s Touch and the Crimson Fist,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll also note that Rosemallow cut my education short so that I could get more hands-on experience in Anglecynn.”

“Hrm,” said Lisi. “That’s all.”

Amaryllis didn’t quite stomp back over to Reimer, but it was clear that she was restraining herself.

“Blood hardening is a necessary prerequisite to the Claret Spear,” said Lisi. “Do you have a stick that I could hit you with?” A stick materialized out of thin air, landing right beside her. “Oh.” She looked up slightly, at the place in the air where the stick had dropped from. “Thank you.”

“I’m pretty sure I can do it,” I said. “I have 30 in Blood Magic, and even if you’re a savant, you should have less than that.”

“Then let’s prove it,” said Lisi, picking up the stick.
“Not sure why you need a stick for this,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Economy of motion,” said Lisi. “I don’t want to get tired. Now, when I hit you, I want you to use your blood for a counterforce. It’s likely and expected that the skin might break. Ready?”

“Sure,” I said. The ‘stick’ was more of a quarterstaff than a proper stick. I wasn’t particularly worried though. Unfortunately, I had forgotten two things. First, Lisi wasn’t the kind of person to pull her punches, and second, she was a trained blood mage with all the force of her blood behind her strike.

She hit me across the chest, and I nearly fell over, because it hurt worse than anything had hurt me in the past two weeks, the kind of pain that didn’t really compare to, say, having my hand sliced off, or literally dying to Raven, but also wasn’t something that I could get used to.

Spell discovered: Blood Hardening!

**Blood Hardening:** Channels the force of your blood to minimize damage from attacks. Bludgeoning attacks are reduced by three orders of magnitude. Piercing and slashing attacks are reduced by one order of magnitude. Only applies to parts of your body that have sufficient blood flow. Consumes 5 drops of blood.

I had to close my eyes to see the spell description, and when I opened them, Lisi was watching me.

“Well?” she asked.

“I guess I didn’t know it until just now,” I said. “Can we move on?”

Lisi frowned. “I’m going to hit you again, to make sure you have it.”

“No,” I said. “I have it.” She didn’t put down the stick. “Lisi, you can try to hit me, but you’re not going to land the hit, because I’m bigger, stronger, faster, and more skilled than you are. I know you like violence, but this isn’t the time.” It was the place though, realistically speaking; Bethel’s sparring room was state-of-the-art. “If you want to spar later, I’m sure that either Valencia or Amaryllis would love to take you up on it, though I have to warn you that you’re not going to beat either of them if they’re trying their hardest.”

“Fine,” said Lisi, dropping the staff. She pulled a small dagger from within her dress. “The Claret Spear is a delicate weapon, one shaped by both your raw will and the paths of your blood as it flows along.” She moved the dagger across her wrist, making a bloodless cut. “A true blood magus would be able to draw blood from their body without any actual wound, but I’m not at that point yet. The first step is blood bypass, to ensure that you don’t bleed to death, and after that, it’s a matter of visualizing the pathways in order to get the blood to take shape. A blood spear is a frozen-in-motion point, with concentration put toward the very tip, which does the bulk of the damage.”

Blood shot from her wrist, faster than should have been possible from blood pressure alone, and froze in place in midair as she concentrated on it. With each additional spurt, the spear began to take shape, until there was what looked like a pint of blood, suspended by nothing and gripped in her hand. She took a steadying breath.

“There are four difficult aspects to the technique,” said Lisi. “The first is operating while light on blood, though there are techniques to increase the blood volume of the body and magically compress blood to have a greater natural store. The second is that concentration must be maintained on the Claret Spear at all times, even in the heat of combat. The third is that the spear must be retracted back into the body, unless you want to spend an enormous quantity of blood with every use, and the blood outside the body will have contact with foreign particulates, air, and germs, which means techniques...
have to first be mastered to purify blood, either inside the body or outside it. Fourth, you have to
come to the counter-intuitive understanding that the spear is maintained in its shape by pure will, and
does not obey the laws of physics as such.”

She moved her hand in a slicing motion, and the spear stayed in its position relative to her hand, not
curving through the air like I had expected it to.

“Why a haft?” I asked, pointing down at the rod of blood.

“It’s defensive,” replied Lisi. “As with a mundane spear. Do you understand what I mean about
physics?”

“Meaning, if you swing the spear, then the tip doesn’t necessarily change position, because in a
spear, it would be a result of the tip being connected to the shaft, and here, it’s all just your control,” I
said. “So if you want the tip to move, you can’t take advantage of rotation differentials or whatever,
because making the spear do that would just be using more of your concentration or will or
whatever.”

“Yes,” replied Lisi. She retracted the spear back into her body, then tossed her dagger to me,
seeming unconcerned about whether I would cut myself on it. I didn’t, because I had the reflexes of a
cat, but still. “You try.”

I swapped the dagger to my left hand, then stared down at my wrist for a moment before making the
incision. I had practiced dealing with wounds before, and took a moment to make sure that the cut
wasn’t producing blood. Then, with a short, silent countdown, I let the blood flow out, trying to
shape it as I did.

*Spell discovered: Claret Spear!*

I found it to be simplicity itself, and moved the spear around as I watched it. Holding it in place
wasn’t really hard, just an annoyance that tickled at the back of my mind, less so than burning bones
did. The word ‘spear’ was a really, really poor approximation of what it actually was, and the only
way that I could think anyone would ever find it accurate was if they’d seen a blood mage thrusting
with it and knew nothing about the underpinnings or practical advantages and limitations. The only
thing that was stopping me from growing the spear longer was that I could feel my control of the
construct getting worse with distance. I could see other possibilities with it too, ways that it hooked in
with my existing knowledge of blood magic.

“Neat,” I said, before retracting it back into my wound, then eating a marzipan fairy to heal myself.

“That’s it?” asked Lisi, staring at me. “Just like that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “There are other advantages with it, aren’t there? If I can force my blood into
someone --”

“Yes,” said Lisi. “We call it the bloodline.”

I had already learned that aspect, back when I had given Fenn a quick and sloppy transfusion, this
was just a fast, easy, and effective way to do it against an opponent. All I would need to do was stab
them once, push my blood into them, and then use it against them.

“And it can be launched?” I asked. “If I wanted it to be ranged?”

“Yes,” said Lisi. “At the cost of a fair amount of blood. Easier, with more blood to provide pressure.
You learned the technique in the span of a moment?”
“Well,” said Reimer, coming up to us. “It looks like the ‘learning’ variant is in effect. Joon got tired of us leveling up in the middle of a dungeon, and he said that a new rule was that mages don’t learn new techniques from nothing, they have to have some kind of teacher or read it in a book, something it was assumed we were doing during downtime. Otherwise, we were just pulling new powers we shouldn’t logically have had out of a hat.”

“But that’s in addition to the restrictions on skill caps?” asked Amaryllis. “Why both?”

Reimer shrugged. “It wasn’t the best game in the world. I mean, a lot of the design decisions were just based on what bugged Juniper or what came up in the middle of play.”

“But why though?” asked Amaryllis. “Surely there were predicate conditions?”

“Sure,” said Reimer with a shrug. “I mean, it’s easier to graft on a new system than to make modifications to the old ones. So skill rolls are modified by abilities, and then they go up on the basis of use, but you run into problems where skills are just going up way too fast for it to be sustainable, so you say that actually, skills are going to be a logarithmic curve, and then people start dicking around boosting skills, so you say that you need a teacher or better training, if it’s not going to be actual, ‘legitimate’ use, and then we have a big argument about what ‘legitimate’ means, and how that’s a completely nonsensical term and doesn’t map to how skills improve in the real world, and … you get the idea.”

Amaryllis sighed, then looked at me. “I do,” she said.

“I actually remember that conversation,” I said. “Doesn’t apply to D&D.”

“How many of these systems were there?” asked Reimer, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh,” I said. “Lots? Maybe not hundreds, but probably close. Of the ones that we actually played, for at least one session, I’d say maybe twenty.”

“Twenty?” asked Reimer. “Why would you ever need that many?”

“Different strokes for different folks,” I said.

Reimer actually laughed. “Did you come up with that? Different strokes?”

“Sure,” I replied with a smile. “But seriously, different game systems have different natural outcomes, so depending on what outcomes you’re looking for, you have to have a different system. And sure, part of it was just people making iterative improvements, or wanting to sell a complete system that wasn’t piggybacking on someone else’s work, but that’s partly to do with how fluff and crunch are intertwined with each other.”

“Are you going to explain fluff and crunch?” asked Reimer, once again betraying an astounding ignorance of the norms and terminology of tabletop role-playing games. It was weird, because he was otherwise so much like the Reimer I’d known.

“Is any of this relevant?” asked Lisi.

“No,” I replied. “Not really. It’s just fluff. We’ve already dealt with the crunch.”

“Ah, I get it,” said Reimer, snapping his fingers. He glanced at Lisi. “Well, we should get going then?”

“I suppose,” said Lisi with a sniff. “I doubt that I have anything more to teach you.”
“It was very welcome,” I said, with a small bow.

Amaryllis saw them out, while I looked at my character sheet to see what the spell had to say about the new ability.

**Claret Spear:** Channels the force of your blood into a pointed weapon. Damage and attack are dependent upon your Blood Magic level. Blood cost is dependent upon blood loss and your roll on the blood recovery chart. Complex variant shapes require higher Blood Magic.

It was more or less what I had expected, with another random table I couldn’t see or test thrown in there for good measure. The principles seemed more promising than the ‘spear’ itself; if I had sufficient multitasking or control, I could make myself into a blood porcupine, and even if that was currently beyond me, I was pretty sure that projecting the spear from the wrist to be gripped in the hand was all just a matter of convention and ease. If I were grappled and had a deep enough cut, I could probably just thrust the spear out from my back and into my attacker, which was a handy thing to keep in mind.

“You did well,” said Amaryllis, coming back in to speak with me.

“Well in what sense?” I asked.

“Handling her,” said Amaryllis. “You didn’t put your foot in your mouth.”

“Damning with faint praise, that’s an idiom on Aerb, yes?” I asked.

She smiled at me. “I just mean that you’ve sometimes been a bit insensitive to people about the game.” She held up her thumb and forefinger, a quarter of an inch apart. Just a tiny bit.

“Point taken,” I said with a stifled sigh. “How was Reimer?”

Amaryllis shrugged, but her face had fallen somewhat. “A bit of a know-it-all,” she said. “Our discussion on theoretically optimal character builds was of mixed success.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“He had a lot of assumptions about what it is we do, along with the resources at our disposal,” said Amaryllis. “We got into an argument about runeforges, and he just,” I saw her squeeze her hand into a fist. “It was often the case, in my short-lived career in politics, that I would come across someone who didn’t know the first thing about what they’re talking about. Some of them would fold and defer as soon as they saw that they were talking to someone that knew more than them, and others would try to just continue on, as though their ignorance was a match for my knowledge. Reimer was the second kind of person.”

“Oh,” I said. “That … doesn’t really sound like him, I don’t think. But sorry. He was probably just flustered. This hasn’t been the easiest thing for him, and even if it had been, you’re …”

“Yes?” asked Amaryllis.

“Imposing and beautiful,” I said. “If he was pretending to know about runeforges, it might have been because he was trying to impress you.”

“Well,” said Amaryllis, turning away from me slightly. “It did him no favors. There are five runeforges in the world, and I’ve visited two of them in person. They’re tightly controlled, and even if they weren’t, runic magic is labor and time intensive in a way that no other magic is. I said all that, and he made a retreat to a weaker position, still holding fast to his ignorance, and it made me want to
throttle him.”

I shrugged. “Not sure what to tell you, except that he would probably benefit from a little slack.”

“You’re being understanding,” said Amaryllis, almost like an accusation.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve just known him a long time. He always liked facts and figures. Arthur was more about ideas, but Reimer was more about all the kinds of things you could pin down. Hard to imagine him without the internet, really. On Aer… well, I can’t say, because I didn’t grow up here, but you have, what, encyclopedias?”

“And libraries,” said Amaryllis. “And yes, that’s probably where the tiny sliver of things he knew came from, plus whatever you made up for your game.” She shook her head. “Sorry, you’re right. Part of it is Lisi. She puts me on edge.”

“S’fine,” I said. I had a thought, and hesitated as I debated whether to voice it. “Sorry about earlier, if it was weird that I called you beautiful.”

“No,” said Amaryllis, “I know who I am, physically speaking. I’m likely in the top ten percent of women by attractiveness. It was a political consideration.” She shrugged. “I took it as a statement of fact.”

“Top ten percent?” I asked. “That’s … specific.”

“It’s just a guess,” she said. “Part of it is nutrition and healthcare afforded to me by my upbringing, and some of it is surely the eugenic effects of nobles selecting attractive partners. You’re right though, it’s something that might have been affecting Reimer, which is annoying, especially if he and Lisi are, apparently, a thing.”

“I mean,” I said. “For what it’s worth, you’re … I might as well just come right out and say it, but my first thought on seeing you was that you were literal, physical perfection.”

Amaryllis raised an eyebrow. “Look,” she began.

“I’m not kidding,” I said. “I’m not trying to be poetic or to pay you a compliment. I mean that you are as beautiful to me as I think a person could possibly be, and there’s nothing that I can imagine that would improve you.”

“Very strong words,” said Amaryllis. She tapped her foot. “I didn’t think it was that overwhelming.”

“Well,” I said. “We’re friends and colleagues. Ideally, I’m not letting aesthetic preferences get in the way too much.” Ideally, I’m not letting the hammering of my heart and the adrenaline of being next to you do me in, I’m not acting on the errant thoughts of touching you, I’m not having private fantasies at night when I can’t sleep before I inevitably give in and use the sleep spell. “I think I did let looks get in the way, with Grak, the opposite direction, for … well, up until recently. And even now, I worry that Grak and I spend our time together playing games, not talking about our feelings or whatever, and I don’t know whether deep down he’s the kind of person who’s content to stay silent, or whether I need to be the one to initiate, or what.” I had asked, and he’d said that he didn’t like to talk unless he had something to say, but it was hard to tell if him not having something to say was what I should worry about. It was off-topic. I was rambling.

“Can I ask, if you find me so beautiful, why you ended up with Fenn?” asked Amaryllis.

“Ah,” I said. I chewed on my lip. “Do we really want to be having this conversation now?”
“Yes,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t mind that you were with her, I’m not jealous of what was, I just want to fit this into the context of my supposedly overwhelming beauty.”

“Well,” I said. “Half initiation, half personality, I guess. Fenn was always flirting, always, partly because she liked to tease, partly because she wanted me to reject her advances as some kind of screwed up inferiority complex, partly because she liked me. And some of the flirting was really blatant, basically an invitation for sex, and that helped me build up this image in my head of what it would be like, if we were a couple.”

(Whenever I talked about Fenn, I tried to keep an internal gauge of how much it was hurting, a technique that I had practiced for a time with Arthur. Thinking of Fenn still hurt, but a lot of the memories were more on the sweet side of bittersweet. I missed her, and wished that we had some plausible mechanism to return her to life, but none of the conversations I’d had with Pallida, Raven, or Heshnel had provided me with anything resembling hope. Uther had never returned anyone from the dead. For as weird and wild as magic got on Aerb, return from death was apparently not in the cards, not even if you were Uther.)

“Has your opinion of my personality improved?” asked Amaryllis, pressing on.

“You know, you were just complimenting my social skills,” I said.

“I don’t take offense,” said Amaryllis. She had look of gentle understanding, which I appreciated. “It was tactful.”

“I think compassion and conscientiousness combined with pragmatism and a long view can look like coldness,” I said. “You’re always trying to look a step ahead, which means sacrificing the present for the future, and … I like you, I do, but -- am I making a mess of this?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She turned away from me. “Now’s not the time for this.”

“Okay,” I said. Not what you just said a minute ago. “When is?”

She turned back. “I know I have my deficiencies as a potential partner, I’m painfully aware of that, but right now, I’d like for us to focus on what’s ahead of us. This interpersonal stuff, it’s not going to make the difference down in the temple, it’s going to be a distraction.”

“I don’t want you to come away from this thinking that I think you’re deficient,” I said. “Dammit, I was trying my best to just explain my feelings, and I feel like it came off as insulting. I didn’t mean for it to.”

“No,” said Amaryllis with a nod. “It’s good to clear the air.”

“You know that I didn’t mean that I thought you would be deficient, if we,” I said, faltering. My heart was breaking, just a bit. I really did care about her, and maybe I was even in love with her, but I had my reservations, and not just because of the ghost of Fenn sitting on my shoulder.

“I know,” said Amaryllis. She looked over to the door. “If. Come on, we should get some food, then some sleep. There’s work to be done.”
Long ago, the Li'ote Temple had been buried by people who had wanted to put an end to still magic and couldn’t get around the temple’s inviolability. When the still mages had recovered the temple, they had left it where it was, deep underground, and done little more than excavating down to it, largely because it was far more defensible deep underground than it was on the surface. The path to get down to the Temple of Li’o was known as the Spelunker’s Stroll, a long, winding path that was part and parcel of the intentional mysticallity of the place, and a keystone of the culture of Sound and Silence.

Before I could go take the Stroll, there was a rather paranoid amount of security to get through.

“You’ll have been warned that there are wards against entads,” said the attendant, giving me a dispassionate and imperious look. “Do you have any on you?”

“No,” I said.

“Strip, please,” said the attendant.

I removed my clothes, until I was standing naked in front of her. I’d been asked if I’d had any preference on what my security would be like, and said that I didn’t. The halfling in front of me, wearing a white coat, was apparently what I got as the default. She had a little stepstool that she was standing on, and I tried not to apply the mental model that was loudly declaring her to be a child (she was, at best guess, in her forties).

“You have tattoos,” she said, looking me over. “Passive and active skin magic is warded against within the complex, taking effect prior to when you’ll exit the Spelunker’s Stroll. Do you anticipate any problems with that?”

“No,” I said. Though, yeah.

“Nothing in those tattoos is necessary for your continued function?” she asked.

“No,” I said. I was pretty sure that she knew what all the tattoos did, as I had a number that were very expensive, but very few that were uncommon.

“The complex is fully warded against active and passive blood magic,” she said. “Do you anticipate that to be a problem?”

“No,” I said, which wasn’t actually true, but I’d taken care of it before I’d come in. Apparently the Hypertension virtue counted as passive magic rather than latent magic, and having magically compressed blood lose its magic was catastrophic to the human body. I’d thankfully done a consult with my favorite warder so as not to be surprised by it, and solved the problem by bleeding out approximately half of my blood supply into plastic bags that we could later use for a transfusion.

“The complex is fully warded against active and passive bone magic,” she said. “Do you anticipate that to be a problem?”

“No,” I said. But actually, yes, because I had cut open my stomach and inserted the three smallest unicorn vertebrae there as a weapon of last resort. I would effectively be worthless as a bone mage down in the temple, but as soon as I was to safety, I would be able to unleash.

“Do you have any other sources of magic available to you, whether latent, active, or passive?” she
“No,” I said. I was really thankful that lie-detecting entads were so incredibly rare, because otherwise I would probably be in a lot of trouble. So far as we’d been able to tell, there was only one thing that would be a real problem.

“We’re going to do anolia inspection now,” said the attendant.

“I have an exemption,” I said.

The attendant looked down at her paperwork, leafing through a few pages. “So you do,” she said, still frowning. She looked up at me. “Why?”

“My soul has a feature which I believe would be harmful to any anolia that looked at it,” I said. “I was exposed to an infohazardous threat which makes my soul toxic to anyone who views it. This provides a natural defense against soul mages, but is equally harmful to anolia. They would instantly be placed into a catatonic state.”

The attendant looked down at the paperwork again, still frowning. “That’s quite novel,” she finally said.

“I had the paperwork checked over twice,” I said. Thanks, Oberlin.

“Very well,” said the attendant, still frowning. “It’s the first time I’ve seen something like this.”

“If there are anolia down in the temple, you should probably warn them,” I said. “I should also say that it’s likely to be infectious, meaning that if anyone does look at my soul and go catatonic, then no one can look at their soul either.”

The attendant narrowed her eyes at me. “And how did you survive this?”

“It’s complicated and classified,” I said.

She tapped her pen against the clipboard several times, thinking this through. In the end, I think it was probably the fact that Oberlin had walked me through the paperwork that did it; she relented, and I was made to put on a robe, with my clothes taken away from me.

Following that, I was passed through some wards, very similar to the ones that we’d gone through in the jail when we’d visited Malus. I felt nothing as I went through, because I was more or less following the rules, smuggled unicorn bones and tattoos aside. Two of the tattoos were for storage, and held the probability blade and the vambrace, which in turn held all my other stuff. I hadn’t tested the probability blade in combat yet, aside from a few skirmishes with Amaryllis and Grak. I was really hoping that I would have the blade if I needed it, and also that I wouldn’t need it.

From there, I was on my way, effectively bereft of the nice and shiny things I’d accumulated, and walking down the Spelunker’s Stroll.

I was to go alone. That much was tradition. There was a small waiting room for initiates, and a stern-looking man who told us when it was our time to go, with nothing for us to do while we patiently waited for him to signal us. So far as I could tell, it was about fifteen minutes between initiates. I had some time to think about how things could (would) go wrong, some time for misgivings, and then, because it was an old habit in times of stress, uncertainty, and boredom, some time to think about worldbuilding.

(It was hard to think about stuff that hadn’t been done on Aerb, simply because Aerb had so much of
what I had done before, and so many things that seemed like they had been made in anticipation of what I would do in the future, grown in a vat from the same DNA, if not actually made by me.)

(My waiting room worldbuilding project was a legal system that revolved around armed combat, which was a nice, meaty question that needed a lot of consideration and effectively distracted me from the tension I was feeling. There were a huge variety of legal systems on Aerb, but I contented myself in being mostly ignorant of them, mostly because I didn’t have the time, motive, or inclination to learn about them in depth.)

Eventually, my name was called, and I headed down the Spelunker’s Stroll.

A lot of it was theatrical mysticism, mixed with a lack of OSHA compliance. I walked down rocky steps that had been worn smooth by the footsteps of thousands of others making their descent, and watched as the lights occasionally changed, allowing less and less visibility, until I was making my way from one point of illumination to the other. There were a zillion ways to light a tunnel on Aerb, from glowing glyphs to shining orbs to regular old incandescents, and as the tunnel continued on, eventually I was walking beneath what very much appeared to be bioluminescent anemones, stuck to the ceiling and giving me a friendly wave as I went past.

It was all painfully sculpted, though maybe you wouldn’t get that from it if you had never been to Disneyland. An underground river trickled by, winding on its own course that gave me just a glimpse of it, and I saw it three times as I made the descent, in steadily worsening light. All I could think about was that someone must have had a hell of a time carving it out so that it would be visible to me without actually getting water on the stairs, and they surely had to have some kind of mechanical pump system to keep the flow steady, and there was no way that it was actually connected to the watershed, because this tunnel would flood during heavy rain.

I went through several caverns, which had been placed at strategic intervals, each of them with their own unique theme. One had stalactites hanging down, smeared with luminous green gunk. Another was filled with water, and had all the light coming up from the bottom, illuminating the fish that swam around as I crossed over the wooden bridge. A third was filled with mushrooms of all kinds, some as big as dinner plates. It was all awe-inspiring, in its own way, but I couldn’t suspend disbelief as I looked at it, not for very long. It reminded me of some of the early dungeons I’d designed, when I’d tended to string together a series of set pieces rather than have something holistically created to tell a unique story of a real place.

When I got to the end, two large double doors were waiting for me, rising up fifteen feet. They might have been impressive, if I hadn’t been inside the Infinite Library. I pulled on the handles and opened them up, which led me into a room with columns on either side, and another attendant waiting for me.

“Welcome to the temple complex,” he said, smiling gently. He was ha-lunde, I was pretty sure, judging by his size. “How was your stroll?”

“Good,” I said.

“To the rod first, then,” he said, gesturing to one side of the room.

I ended up in another waiting room, where I was given a pamphlet, and the whole thing started to remind me of Disneyland again, namely the tedium of waiting in line. I saw one of the people that I’d been in the other waiting room with, and wondered whether Spelunker’s Stroll had been meaningful for them. This was, in some sense, the equivalent of a graduation ceremony, a lot of pomp and circumstance to celebrate the fact that we were going to be joining the ranks of the mages, but I sure didn’t feel like I was getting anything out of it.
Eventually my name was called, and I was guided down a hallway, then to another room, which was accessible only through heavy doors, arranged in an airlock configuration that needed authorization from both sides. Two men in full-plate with wicked looking weapons stood in the room, watching me carefully, and I had every reason to think that they were some flavor of mage as well, though which would hopefully remain a mystery. It would be an awful place to fight in, if Harold had compromised them. The third man wore vestments, and held the Rod of Whispers in one hand.

It was a thick rod, about two feet long, tapered toward the ends. It was brightly colored in reds and blues, with a criss-crossing pattern that you might have thought was the work of a master artisan, unless you knew that it was an entad. There was really no reason that it had to be ornate, but the forge frenzy drove people to make entads in very specific ways, and the Rod of Whispers was no different.

I walked forward, with my feet making the only sound in the room, and received my tap on the head.

**Skill unlocked: Vibrational Magic!**

**Achievement unlocked: Oscillancy**

And with that, I was a vibration mage. I left the room, went through the airlock again, and let out a breath that I’d been holding. When I felt the attendant touch me on my arm, I nearly jumped; that room had been the perfect place to jump me, at least in my estimation, because two hulking guards draped in entads would probably have been a real problem for me.

I was led back through the room with columns, and into a second waiting room. There really was a lot of waiting to be done, presumably because that allowed for an optimization of throughput at some point further down the way.

While I sat in the waiting room, I tried vibration magic on for size. The temple complex had heavy wards, expensive, permanent, and virtually unbreakable ones, but it wasn’t clear whether or not vibration magic was included in them. I got the answer pretty quickly when I began listening to the sounds around me.

**Skill increased: Vibrational Magic lvl 1!**

It ranked up pretty quickly, and I mostly ignored the messages after that as I played with my new toy. The oddest thing about it, at least as far as sounds went, was that it was easy to ‘feel’ vibrations going past me, except that I basically only felt them when they were already continuing on. In some ways it was like playing a videogame and realizing that the joystick was set to inverted, so that up was down and down was up: it was a very unintuitive way of conceptualizing sound, such that I was sensing where sounds were going, rather than where they were coming from. It made a little bit of sense, since obviously I had a lot of channels with which to feel vibration, and most of them required that the wave actually hit me, but it was a little disorienting. That disorientation rapidly faded as my skill increased.

I had a new gauge as part of my HUD, labeled ‘Breath’, sitting between my mental exhaustion meter and my blood meter. So that was neat. My first, very minor attempt at altering a vibration caused the meter to tick down just a sliver, and based on what Reimer had said, the bar would grow as I increased in level.

I pushed hard to get to level 10, where, thanks to Reimer, I knew what was waiting for me..

**Skill increased: Vibrational Magic lvl 10!**
New Virtue: Biorhythms!

Biorhythms: You are in tune with the natural cycles of your body and capable of altering them at the expense of breath, either temporarily or on a permanent basis. This virtue does not prevent any ill effects from e.g. loss of breath or loss of sleep.

As virtues went, it was a level 10 virtue, meaning nothing to write home about, and not really more than a minor superpower. It was still nice to have, especially for altering circadian rhythms, which was a bit of a headache to get back on track given how often we used the time chamber. There were also (per Reimer) some less obvious things that you could do with it, like altering REM cycles in order to get in more dreaming, but I wasn’t sure about the “ill effects”. One of the bigger benefits was being able to control my heartbeat, which seemed like it would be useful in both combat and social situations.

I got up to level 13 by the time they called me over to the temple, meaning approximately equivalent to four years of study in the time it might have taken someone to eat lunch. The levels had gone quickly, maybe because my mental stats were so high, or maybe because I’d had a week of prep work and a pretty good foundation from my instructor.

I was taken to the temple itself, which caused me to go on edge again, because this was another perfect time for an attendant to take me into a room where I would be instantly killed by something nasty. That threat failed to materialize though, and I was led into the large room that the temple was contained within, which was in one sense a relief, but in another sense, was cause for concern, because it meant that I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The Li’o Temple was inviolable, which was a special term that described a whole host of items and structures on Aerb that couldn’t be destroyed, with a big, fat asterisk for void tools and void weapons. The underwater hand whose fingertips made the Zorish Isles was inviolable, and it was a property of a fair few entads too. Inviolability was both a curse and a boon, because it meant that there was little risk of damage, but also little possibility of modification or change.

The Li’o Temple was small. When I thought of temples, I thought of big, open places, the kind with arched roofs and lots of open air, the Acropolis, maybe, or a cathedral. The Li’o Temple wasn’t too much bigger than the average living room. And if you’re wondering to yourself how you fit five hundred people inside a space the size of a living room, then the answer is ‘very carefully, and in a way that would make the fire marshall wince’.

Because of the temple’s inviolability, the doorway was a severe bottleneck, and if you wanted to maximize the number of people inside the temple, that was something to contend with, especially since the decision had been made to do swapping instead of having simple batches of roughly five hundred. The solution that they’d come up with was a more extreme version of the Japanese capsule hotels, with people put into something that very closely resembled a coffin with a porthole window on top, picked from a variety of sizes that ran the gamut of the mortal species. These were then moved in by attendants and stacked into place, with as little room between initiates as possible, and no possibility of getting out without the help of the attendants. It wasn’t the most horrifyingly claustrophobic thing that I could imagine, because I had a good imagination, but it was definitely optimization taken to an unpleasant extreme. This was a part of the Penndraig reforms; before he’d come along, people had been meditating in better conditions, their time in the temple broken up by breaks, in part because they didn’t have the entad support that he provided to make the “packed like sardines” thing workable.

(The first thing that I’d asked about, on hearing this arrangement, was why they didn’t use space-warping entads, miniaturization entads, or something similar. Amaryllis hadn’t known the answer,
but she seemed to think that it was so obvious that they had to have tried it, and my idea was dumb, and that I should feel bad for so much as suggesting it, though I might have been reading between the lines a bit when she shot me down.

Even if other magics were off the table, it should have been possible for soul manipulation and healing to (temporarily) replace peoples’ bodies with smaller forms, like turning a human into a halfling, which would have increased potential occupancy by a factor of eight, but the only answer I’d ever gotten was that it hadn’t been done during the time of the Second Empire, and so had probably failed to pass some early test. There was some anti-munchkinry going on, but the exact flavor wasn’t clear, especially since this stacked coffin monstrosity was an abomination of flavor yet also somehow permissible.)

I was nervous. How would I not be? A week stuck in the temple, with no way out except hoping that my bare fists could break through the wood, against people who were better equipped, which was to say, equipped at all, within wards that could have been explicitly keyed against me in ways that were completely sensible for even a non-adversarial power to have done? Yeah, I was having second thoughts. I climbed into the coffin all the same, and was carried into the temple.

Some of the effects I’d felt right away, like the unnatural purity of the air, and the way that every last trace of thirst was eliminated at once. To keep people in a coffin for a week, you needed to take care of basically all of the messy people stuff, the thirst, hunger, heat, air, and waste. But to get them into a coffin and into the proper mindset for seven straight days of meditation, you needed something to assist with that.

It was a dissociative episode. I’d had them once or twice, enough to recognize the sensation. I could still sense things, but the signals were getting confused somewhere along the way, my fingertips touching the cloth bottom of the box that they’d put me in, but the concepts of ‘cloth’ and ‘box’ and ‘fingertip’ not quite connecting to each other, or anything that was going on in my brain. It was like looking down on myself, from within myself, as though everything was happening to someone who wasn’t me, and it might have been unpleasant or scary, if I could properly connect those sensations to anything coherent. Instead, I was drifting, floating free.

I could feel the thing that I was meant to feel, that I was warned I would feel, a conceptual tether sitting in my mind, linked to an obelisk, an idea that was as inviolable as the temple I sat in, waiting there for me to draw closer, to inspect it, to know it.

Except that standing next to the pillar was a man, his armored form wreathed in flames, watching me.

I had enough presence of mind to shut the image out, to focus somewhere else, as much as the tether attached me to the pillar. I was still deep within the dissociative state, my body nearly immaterial to me for all that I could make sense of what I was feeling and seeing, but I could keep my distance from that pillar, and from that man, if I put effort into it. I was swimming in a sea of thoughts, all seeming like they weren’t my own, my control over myself only barely there, but I did have some control, and there was an island of stability in the sea of confusion.

I was trapped, for the duration of a week. The entads that they were using to make meditation in the temple surefire and fast had also made some kind of a place for Harold to do his thing, whatever that happened to be, whatever purpose he was currently driving toward. Harold had probably already done his thing with everyone who was currently in the temple, some unknown number of the staff, and some unknown number of people who had already passed through, thousands of them, it seemed like, with the ability to convert others.

I moved my arm, which didn’t feel like my arm, but instead, like someone else’s arm that I was watching at a remove. My mind could barely make sense of the movement, since the proprioception
was shot, but it was movement, which meant that the body in the coffin could possibly escape. The tether was closer to me though, like something that I had a memory of imagining, but still more real and solid than my sense of self.

It was like losing the plot in a movie, or staring at the words in a book and seeing them as separate entities rather than parts of a sentence, let alone a coherent train of thought. When I was in eighth grade, I had trained myself in unhearing English, to force the words to disassemble into their component sounds, unintelligible to my higher brain, which I could manage for a few seconds at a time. It was the first time I’d ever tried anything remotely like meditation, all because I hated listening to my parents fighting, and wanted to unhear it, to transform the thoughts and ideas they were expressing into pure phonemes. Sitting in the box, it was the opposite problem, nothing coming together, nothing connecting, just a bare shred of me in there somewhere, watching it at a remove.

I had no idea what to do, except that I had to do something. Ignoring Harold could only work for so long, given how much mental effort it took. The temple was designed such that meditation couldn’t fail, the overlapping entads being at least somewhat equivalent to a sensory deprivation tank, only more extreme in some respects. And even if I could somehow go a full week, Harold would know, in the same way he’d sent Sonee to try to convert me. If I’d been allowed into this coffin by his confederates or puppets, then it seemed unlikely that I would be let out by them, and for all that Raven seemed to have faith in me to pull some Utherian stunt to get out of trouble, I was thinking that I was kind of fucked.

And when it seems like you’re fucked, that’s the best time to try to change tactics.

I let myself follow the tether toward the conceptual pillar, where Harold was waiting for me. It was hard to make out an expression behind the flames, but it seemed something like stoic determination.

“What do you want?” I asked, sending the thought at him rather than physically speaking (a process that seemed like it would have involved mechanically moving my mouth flaps). I was trying my best to keep my distance from him. I had no idea what would happen if we got into a fight here, or if he ‘touched’ me, or anything like that. I was at a loss for what the rules were. I didn’t know if Harold could speak, or how he was capable of hurting me, or whether I would be able to fight off his attack somehow.

“The End,” said Harold. He had a voice like the crackling of coals, with the timber of a furnace being stoked.

“The end of what?” I asked.


“How?” I asked.

“The Calling Forth of A World Lord,” Harold answered. He held out one flaming hand to me. “You Will Join.”

Somewhere out there in the real, my body’s throat swallowed. It might have been my imagination, but the dissociation seemed like it was getting a little less oppressive.

“Nah, I’m good, thanks,” I replied. It was a flippancy that I wasn’t really feeling.


He drew his flaming sword. I had no idea what he was going to do with it, given that he was only in
my mind, but I wasn’t really eager to find out. I forced my attention away from the pillar, and Harold with it, until I was back thinking about my body, and how it didn’t seem to be mine anymore.

The dissociation was definitely getting better, or maybe I was getting used to it, but there was an ‘I’ there, firmly in place, even if it was dissociated from other things. Maybe that was the skill check that I needed to get past, reconstructing a mental model of selfhood from the nothing, all so that I could spend a whole week without Harold putting his sword through me, whatever that would do. I had no idea how much time had passed. It felt like ten minutes, or maybe twenty, but I wouldn’t have been surprised to have them pull me out and tell me that a week had gone by.

I dipped down into my soul, and almost immediately, the pressure and tension was relieved. The soul trance, it seemed, had something of a protective effect, for which I was grateful, but that wasn’t the reason that I was there. Instead, I followed one of the lines from my soul, along a channel that no known wards were capable of blocking. When I reached its terminus, I was standing in a small white room.

Bethel (as Tiff) opened the door and looked me over. “I take it things haven’t gone well?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Harold was waiting for me. How long has it been?”

“A few hours since you went in,” said Bethel.

“Well, most of that time was spent waiting,” I said. “So waiting out the week is going to be … I might have to do it in here, with you.”

“Which I assume would mean that you wouldn’t acquire still magic?” asked Bethel.

“Seems likely,” I said. “I did already get vibrational though.”

“What a waste that would be, to spend so much time and come so far just to bow to the enemy,” said Bethel.

“Yeah,” I said. “So your advice is to just rush headlong into combat against an enemy with unknown capabilities on an unstable and novel-to-me battlefield?”

“For all his faults, it’s what Uther would do,” said Bethel, raising an eyebrow.

“To be frank, he’s not really someone whose footsteps I want to follow, except in the literal sense,” I said.

“What I’m saying is that he took what he wanted and plowed on ahead,” said Bethel. “It was monstrous, but it was part of his strength as a monster. You would do well to take that lesson.”

“Well, pass it along to the others,” I said. “If you don’t see me again, it’s probably because I died horribly.”

“We’re close by,” said Bethel. “There were a few problems with our descent, but nothing that I couldn’t handle.”

“No one dead?” I asked.

“No,” sniffed Bethel. “Not even mildly injured. But all that preparation and firepower is worth nothing if you’re not willing to press forward.”

I tried to give that some due consideration. One out of two … well, so far as I was concerned, still
magic was the prize that was most worth having, because it offered an overwhelming amount of defense, some of which was going to be absolutely necessary against Fel Seed. In contrast, vibrational magic was mostly another weapon, and not one that had any real lasting power. Unfortunately, that meant that Bethel was right; staying in a soul trance to avoid the forced meditation would, at best, mean that I would spend a week in the temple for nothing. That was better than dying or being mind controlled, obviously, but it reeked of cowardice.

“Alright,” I said. “I guess I’m going to go fight Harold.”

“Excellent,” said Bethel. “Give him some scars to remember you by.”

With that talk done, I steeled myself and left what passed for Bethel’s soul. The sense of dissociation returned, just as strong as it had been, and I allowed myself to follow the tether once more. Harold was still standing there, still on fire, still staring at me.

“You Will Die,” he said, with the kind of conviction I wished I had about anything.

Harold was real, but he wasn’t physical. That made the prospect of attacking him somewhat troublesome, but so far as non-physical attacks went, I did have a few. I was probably one of the better soul mages left on Aerb, and so far as I knew, the only living spirit mage. With that in mind, I reached out to touch him.

The tether was real, but it wasn’t physical, and the same could probably be said about the pillar I was supposed to be meditating at. As for Harold, he wasn’t physically standing next to a mostly conceptual pillar, he was just conceptually or representationally standing next to the conceptual pillar, in the same way that he’d been in my mind when I was meditating. To do what he’d done to Sonee required that he somehow touch her spirit, and I was hoping that it was a bidirectional link.

From a distance, I could feel nothing from him, but as I tried to feel something from him, he drew closer, and the distance between us shortened considerably. I suppressed the urge to run, or to think of something else, and pushed on ahead, trying to get a thread of him somehow, something that I could pull on, in the same way that the magic of a person’s skin was often an effective pathway to their soul. When he was five feet away from me, I finally felt it, a minor disturbance that I could just barely latch myself onto, like trying to pull a penny from a crack in the sidewalk with just my nails. Once I had my grip though, it was simple enough to push forward and see where it led.

It was a mass of red, orange, and brown threads, so numerous that it would have been impossible to count them all, their numbers dwarfing what I had seen in my own spirit, speaking to something more complex than I would ever be. If my spirit was a small town with light but constant traffic going down the streets, then this was a planet-sized city, Coruscant or Ravnica, stretching nearly to the horizons of my disembodied viewpoint. And if the disorganized threads were a vast mess below me, then above me were throbbing lines, wrapped into thick bundles, just like the one that I had seen going into Sonee’s spirit. There were thousands of them, if not tens of thousands, each almost certainly connected to a person.

I dove down into the mass and began changing things, going for the bigger threads first, hoping that they were somehow vital to Harold’s continued functioning. Doing that was dangerous, given how many people he was connected to, and how uncertain it was that I wouldn’t accidentally help him, but I plugged on all the same, strangling threads that looked important, ripping out connections wholesale where I could find them. The architecture of Harold was different, with more connections between the threads, in addition to simply how much more of those connections there were. I had no idea whether or not I was actually doing anything, because I had no outside reference.

After five minutes, I felt a surge of pressure on me, one that lifted me up and pushed my viewpoint
away from the damage that I was hopefully doing, spinning me into the notional sky and flinging me backward, until eventually I landed in my own spirit, with its more comforting colors. So far as I could tell, everything looked more or less how it should, which came as a relief, until I realized that the counterattack had only just begun.

Orange threads were descending down toward the threads that made up my spirit. They were going surprisingly slowly, but there were hundreds of them, all twisted together, braided further the more they went up.

I raced between them, closing them off, and for a time, it seemed like I was going fast enough that I would be able to outrace the assault. When one of those threads attached to one of the threads that made up my spirit, that was liable to be a problem, because I was actively using my spirit to fend off the attack, and my spirit was far from being the warren of threads that made up Harold’s. I wasn’t sure which places were most in need of defense, except by trying to track usage patterns as I was in the middle of closing off the orange threads, which was more attention than I thought I could spare.

It slowly became clear that I was, in fact, losing. I hadn’t seen it happen, but whatever Harold was doing to push these threads down toward me, he must have put it into overdrive, because there were four times as many as when I’d begun the defense. They were slow enough that I might have been able to handle the initial batch, but with so many more, some of them would be able to get in an alteration to my spirit, which had a pretty good chance of fucking me up enough that I couldn’t mitigate the damage.

I decided to try a different strategy. Instead of closing off the hostile invaders, I tried feeding them. My spirit was, after all, already marked by a rather different invader, the virulent meme that Raven had exposed me to, and which I had shut down as completely as I could. The lacework that made it up had been left behind though, and that was what I began dragging up to the hungry orange threads. At first it did nothing, but then I thought to expand the meme’s thread slightly, giving it more bandwidth, and when I did, the result was immediate; the orange twisted and writhed, until finally shooting backward.

I did it with another, then another, hoping that the meme was infecting Harold. The assault continued though, too many threads to deal with, and this method far more labor-intensive for what seemed like it wasn’t all that much better of a result. I kept on with it though, hoping that the backchannels would get to him, that there would be damage, or that eventually I would simply prove myself to be poisonous enough that I wasn’t worth the effort.

Twenty applications later, the assault suddenly stopped, with the lines Harold had been sending not so much retreating as disappearing entirely. I watched them, cautiously, unsure whether this was only temporary. Unfortunately, there were different fronts in this battle, and I couldn’t watch them all at once. With a push, I returned to my body and faced the wave of dissociation that came from being within the area of effect of the entad that was meant for forcing meditation. I checked over the body, as best I could, just to make sure that I hadn’t been moved, then followed along the conceptual tether to the pillar.

Harold was nowhere to be seen.

I went back into my soul to look it over, then to my spirit, and finally stepped into Bethel’s soul, where she was waiting for me.

“Well?” she asked.

“I put up a fight,” I said. “Scared him off, maybe, or at least proved that I wasn’t an easy target. I’m hoping I’m not ten minutes away from being taken out of the temple and put to death.”
“Good,” she said with a nod. “I always believed in you, and I can give you the names of those who didn’t.”

“Not really necessary,” I said. “I’m worried he’ll come back, and I’m worried about part two, but for now, the name of the game is still magic.”
“Assume people know what they’re doing” is often a pretty poor heuristic, but I didn’t really have much of a choice as far as meditation went. The instructions I’d been given were vague, describing the pillar and saying that I should keep it in mind for the duration. Because that was all I’d been instructed on, it was logical to assume that the people running the temple knew what they were doing, and that it was hard if not impossible to fail the week-long ordeal. Yet as the time passed, I kept going back to worrying that maybe I was too much of an outlier, or maybe they were wrong.

I stared at the conceptual pillar from all different directions, and spent all my time doing that. All my needs were taken care of, and it wasn’t like there was much else to do. I tried to keep on edge, waiting for either Harold’s return or some shenanigans related to my body. Nothing came though, and it was hard to stay on my toes, even with the alertness entad that I knew was affecting me.

Instead, I ended up meditating on the pillar, just like everyone else was doing.

**Skill unlocked: Still Magic!**

**Achievement unlocked: Holdfast**

It took five and a half days instead of seven. I wasn’t sure where the discrepancy came from, whether it was my unique ability to do things faster, my experience with meditation, or whether the game system broke things into discrete chunks that allowed it to happen faster, or possibly if there was just some buffer built into the procedures that they followed in the temple. I couldn’t find it in me to care though, given that I had a new power to play with, one that might come in handy in the very near future.

“I could do an extract,” said Bethel, when I went to visit her.

“Could you?” I asked.

She nodded. “The anti-entad ward is too powerful for Grak or I to break, even working together, but it’s anchored relative to Aerb, rather than relative to the temple, an oversight that we could exploit by hollowing out the ground beneath the temple and dropping it. From there, it would only take ten seconds to bring you out.”

“That’s a last resort,” I said. “They would know it was me, since I’m in the register, and I would be the only one missing.”

“I could turn everyone into a thin red mist,” Bethel mused. “Or, more gently, I could abduct everyone, put them into cells, and then randomly distribute them around the countryside, so that no one would have any idea who was the real target.”

“That -- yes,” I said. “That’s a possibility. It’s still a last resort.”

“I thought that you wanted me in the field?” asked Bethel, narrowing her eyes.

“I did and I do,” I said. “I’m just concerned with fallout. Things haven’t come to a head here yet, and I might be able to get out without causing hundreds of thousands of obols worth of damage and making what’s effectively an attack on one of the stronger world powers.”

Bethel sighed. “Fine, fine, we’ll keep being nice to our enemies.”
“Can you see into the temple?” I asked.

“Not the temple, nor the immediate environs,” said Bethel. “The anti-entad wards are ludicrously extensive and well-made. I’ve been working with Grak, but he expects us to fail.”

“Meaning that if things go south, I have to come here to call on you?” I asked. “Which might not be possible. Time-to-entry for my own soul is down to half a minute, maybe less, but that’s not feasible in an emergency. I’ll keep you updated, when I can.”

“Good luck,” nodded Bethel.

I backed out again, stared at the pillar for half a second until I realized that it was pointless, then tried focusing on my new skill. All I had access to was the small coffin I was stuck in, but that contained my body, and that was enough. My first act of still magic was attempting to stop my chest from rising and falling with every breath that I took, which turned out to be a lot more painful than I had expected it to be. I was still extremely thankful that no one had warded against still magic.

**Skill increased: Still Magic lvl 20! (Skill can no longer be increased by amateur training.)**

**New Virtue: Proportional Halting!**

**Proportional Halting:** If the change you are attempting to still exceeds your current maximum capacity, the object/force/concept will be stilled proportional to your Still Magic level or to your current maximum capacity, whichever is greater, over the common stilling interval.

I hit the soft cap on Still Magic and Vibrational Magic without too much trouble, focusing entirely on the things that I could affect, which basically meant my body. I wasn’t paralyzed, though lord knows they probably would have done it if they had an entad that could do it safely and effectively, and the only real trouble was the fact that I was still suffering from mild dissociation, apparently beyond my ability to adapt to it.

And after all that, I waited, and then waited some more. The meditation had been boring, in some sense, but also easy, in another, a kind of nothingness of the mind. More than that, there had been a purpose to it, which made it easy to clear my mind and go on ahead with it. Now that the magic was unlocked though, there was no point to the pillar, and the thought of losing myself staring at the pillar some more seemed like such a waste that I actively pushed myself away from it.

It was when I was checking over my character sheet that I saw something out of place: a glowing +2 was floating in the upper right corner of the screen. I stared at it for a long moment, trying to make sense of it. I got two points for every level, plus an extra five for level 10, and I was absolutely certain that I had distributed everything. Yet here were two more, waiting to be spent. The game layer didn’t give me a log to look at, which was incredibly annoying and meant that I could miss things like quest updates or skill increases, especially if I was in soul or spirit trance, as I’d been when I was fighting back against Harold.

The logical conclusion was that I had leveled up without realizing it.

That was exactly what I wanted, but it left me feeling a little bit hollow, because there was none of the ceremony that was supposed to accompany the level, to say nothing of the pleasure that usually came with it. It was only satisfying in a numbers-go-up sense, and not even really that much, because it wasn’t like there were any decisions to be made about where the points were going to go, because the revised character sheet was more or less set in stone, and the only question was when I would pull the trigger on changing out new skills. I put the two extra points into MEN, though a part of me
wanted SOC instead.

And then I waited to be let out.

Eventually, my coffin was moved, taken out of its place on the rack by the attendants and transported out into the room that surrounded the temple proper. I felt a wave of relief when I was out of range of the dissociation entad, as my fingers finally felt like fingers, both connected to the concept of fingerness, and under my subconscious control without me really having to think about it. I flexed and stretched, relishing the fact that my body was more or less mine again, the way it had always been.

When I’d gotten into the coffin, I had been in a side area, one where people were fitted to different containers (with a wide enough variety for all the mortal species). When I was taken out, it was to elsewhere. I could see the men above me through the glass lid of the coffin, stone-faced as they carried me. It seemed to me that there was no reason not to let me out as soon as I was out of the temple, but I didn’t know what their protocols would be like, nor their logic. Optimistically, they were taking me to some place where a medical team looked over initiates and made sure that the week of laying still in the coffins hadn’t given any lasting injury or otherwise had a negative impact.

Pessimistically, they were taking me somewhere to kill me without any witnesses.

It was hard to see from within the coffin, given that the sides were opaque and the glass at the top only let me see directly up. I was watching as I was moved, and started to get a bad feeling when I saw that I had been moved through a doorway. Based on the schematics of the complex that Pallida had stolen, I was in one of the small rooms to the side of the temple proper, out of the bigger room that contained the temple itself. If they were going to do it, this was the time.

As soon as they set me down, I pushed up on the lid, hard, prepared to give an apology if I was in the wrong, prepared to fight if they so much as hinted at training a gun on me. The lid went up without any trouble at all, and I was up and rolling right after it, moving out of the place that I’d been in. I heard the telltale *thwip* of a void weapon and tried to get my bearings to see who had fired it.

There were three people in the room with me. One of them was a woman, by the small room’s door, vitric, blue hands already crackling with electricity. The other two were men, one humanish, the other a tall mezin. He was the one holding the void pistol, a somewhat crude affair, but still capable of putting holes in things.

I jumped to my feet and grabbed for the pistol, trying to bring myself in closer to the mezin in the hopes that it would make the vitric less likely to shoot me full of lightning. As I tried to wrest the pistol from him before it could cycle, I felt every muscle in my body spasm as the room flashed a bright blue. Half the charge must have gone to the mezin, because he was shaking too, and as soon as I had control of my body again, I pulled him in close to me, taking his weight and tripping him so that he would go down, putting more space between me and the vitric. Unfortunately, the human had moved around the table they’d set the coffin on, and I learned, to my chagrin, that he wasn’t actually human.

His fingernails extended into three-inch claws and his muscles bulged within his shirt, shifting and warping him, and showing a fraction of his true power. It was an awkward fight in a small room, and while I hadn’t forgotten that the human -- actually parovartako -- was there, I wasn’t really ready for him. His claws sliced cleanly through my face as I backed away, causing a jolt of pain and significant amounts of blood to start gushing out of my body. On instinct, I tried to use blood magic, only to find that within the wards it wasn’t working. Less on instinct and more on a prayer, I tried using bone magic to heal the wound, but that wasn’t working either. I was blind in one eye, and he
was still coming.

I made nearly impossible dodges, twice, ducking beneath his claws. I was trying to do it while forcing my good eye open and trying to ignore the searing pain of the cut I’d taken to the face. After another failed swipe from him, I grabbed his wrist, trying to gain control and maybe force him into a lock, but he brought his other claws down with startling speed. I yanked on his wrist and he ended up cutting deep into his arm, far less superficially than the cut he’d given me on my face. He howled in pain, but on sheer instinct, I turned away from him, just in time to dodge out of the way of another lightning bolt, which struck him square in the chest.

The mezin had recovered the void pistol and was clicking at the trigger, trying to get it to fire as soon as possible. It fired with a *thwip*, but I was ready for it, and had my hand up just in time for me to parry the void effect. “Parry” in this case was probably a little generous, since it made a line straight through the meat of my palm, but that was better than getting shot in the head, and the remainder of the void effect didn’t seem to have penetrated my skull, at least on first blush.

I kicked the mezin squarely in his stomach, then punched him in his head as he doubled over, which sent him sprawling to the floor, hopefully unconscious. A glance backwards at the parovartako showed that he was still writhing in pain, so I ran straight at the vitric, who was backing up in alarm, hands raised. I had no idea how much charge she had left in her, but it didn’t really change the calculus much, because lightning aside, I was far stronger than her. A solid strike to her throat was enough to double her over, and I stomped on her head with the sole of my foot, three times in quick succession, as soon as I got her on the ground. A big **defeated** message showed up.

I picked up the void pistol and shot the parovartako in the head before he could rise to his feet, then carefully watched the other two as a silence settled over the room. I wasn’t sure whether or not I had killed the mezin or the vitric, but both of them were staying down. We had made a considerable amount of noise, and I stayed ducked behind the table, waiting for someone to come. No one did.

I checked the vitric and the mezin. She was dead, but he was still breathing. My right hand hurt like it was on fire and I couldn’t move the fingers with or without pain. My face was still bleeding too, enough that it was a fairly steady flow of blood rolling down my chin and soaking into the robe that I was wearing. If I had any thoughts about escaping the complex by being inconspicuous, they were completely gone. A brief, tentative touch to my forehead was enough for me to feel a hole there, one that was worryingly deep and bleeding profusely, but not actually all that painful.

Harold had compromised some of the temple staff, maybe even most of them, but he hadn’t compromised **all** of them, or they would have made an attempt on my life in another way. So far as I could tell, that was the only good news. I was wounded and losing blood, and still in a place where the wards were stopping pretty much all of my magic from working, with very few exceptions. Worse, whoever Harold had compromised would probably be showing up shortly to finish the job, or worse, actual site security would get involved, at which point I would probably be fucked.

Using my good hand, I dragged one of the bodies over to block the door, then spent precious seconds being vulnerable to deliver a message to Bethel.

“Things are fucked,” I said. “I was attacked, no extraction options at the moment. Pull the trigger.”

“Wait,” she said, a moment before I was going to go. “Something is happening. Storm overhead.”

“Storm?” I asked.

“Shit,” I said. “Okay, get me out.”

“Might be a problem with that,” said Bethel. “The excavation is taking too long. Rock is substantially reinforced. You might be on your own.”

“Fuck,” I said, then stepped back from the soul just in time to see someone trying to force the door open. I snatched up the void pistol as I got to my feet and sighted it at the door, hoping that no one was going to throw a grenade in.

I heard a key slide into the lock, then watched as the door pushed up against the mezin’s body (Claude’s body, given what the game layer had told me, a ‘feature’ that I continued to hate). I held myself still, glancing briefly at the meter that showed my blood loss, which was getting worrisome.

The door opened wide enough for someone to stick their face through, and the only thing that kept me from shooting them was that the very last thing you’d do, if you were making a breach into a hostile environment, was to stick your head through the door and look around. It was a younger man, whose eyes went wide as he took in the bodies on the floor and copious amounts of blood, most of it mine. I was crouched, so it took him some time to see me, but when he did, he pulled his head back with a scream, banging his ear against the door as he stumbled back. I heard the sound of footsteps shortly after that, and sprang forward.

I had no idea why Harold wasn’t taking the opportunity. Was I wrong about how much he could see, or how much control he had? I kicked the body out of the way and nudged the door open further with my shoulder, stepping out into the hallways that I’d only seen the ceiling of. I was still dripping blood, but I had a weapon now, one that was impossible to ward against. All I needed to do was to get to someplace that I could access my storage tattoos, or at the least, somewhere that I could heal myself.

I crept through the hallways on my bare feet, holding the void pistol in my left hand and cradling my right against my stomach, trying to keep it from being jostled as much as possible. The game pinged me a message about blood loss, which I ignored, because there was nothing that I could do about it.

I tensed up when I heard the droning. It wasn’t quite singing, because it was a solid tone, but it definitely sounded like it was made by people. What had Harold said? ‘The chorus is ripe,’ and a ‘world lord’. I started going faster, less worried about being silent or being seen, and put my energy into trying to find the source of the noise. Eventually I reached the room that contained the temple and slowed down, leading with my pistol, ready to shoot.

When I peered into the room, I saw a chaotic scene.

Half of the temple attendants were standing stock still, feet shoulder width apart, heads tilted slightly upward, mouths open, each emitting their own tone, which was creating the unholy racket that I had been hearing.

The other half were standing around, mostly looking confused. I saw a woman trying to shake a man out of his weird behavior, and a man huddling next to the wall with his hands on his ears. The sound wasn’t that loud, not like someone shouting, but I could instantly see the comparison to a choir, especially in the way their subtly different takes on the same tone mingled together.

One of the attendants saw me and rushed over, looking me up and down, her eyes finally landing on my void pistol.

“What the hells happened to you?” she asked. She was human, with a bit of a punk look, brightly colored hair, an undercut, and a handful of piercings. “Do you know what’s going on, why they’re
I was attacked,” I said, pointing to the hole in my head. “Why are they doing that?” I asked, looking at the people ‘singing’. I doubted that she knew, but it was worth a shot. I was also pretty sure that I wouldn’t like the answer.

“We need to get you medical attention,” she said. “Medic!” she called, out toward the others. “Shit, I think both our medics are caught up in whatever’s happening.” She bit her nail for a moment, then looked back at me, taking in the claw marks on my face, the hole in my forehead, then the hand I was cradling.

“I can heal myself,” I said. “But there are wards stopping me. Get me to the place set aside for healing?”

“Sure,” she said. She looked around at the people who were stuck in place, droning on. “Gods I hope this isn’t an exclusion.”

The thought hadn’t even occurred to me; I was too focused on Harold and whatever his plans were. A storm overhead, powerful magic … usually the exclusions were spoken of in the abstract, without firsthand accounts of what it had been like. Maybe I had just been avoiding the oral histories or firsthand reports as worth less for my time than a dry accounting. Now though, I really could see it; this might be an exclusion in the making.

At least, if it was something big, dangerous, and viral, we had better hope that it got excluded instead of spreading over the whole world.

The attendant led me down another corridor of the complex, and I kept on testing my magic, trying to move the tattoos around, trying to pull healing from the bones, trying to control my blood. None of it worked until we got to a small medical office, which had most of the paraphernalia that you’d expect to see with both a blood mage and a bone mage. I immediately took hold of my magic and stopped the bleeding, then grabbed a bone off the wall and began an application of PHY-based healing.

“You’re a bone mage?” asked the attendant.

“Multimage,” I said. “When did they start with the yelling?”

“It’s not really yelling,” she began.

“One sec,” I said. “Does skin magic work in here?” But I already knew that it did, because I could feel my tattoos on me once more.

“It should,” she said.

I tapped Parson’s Voice to finally get back in touch with Amaryllis. “I’m alive,” I said. “Safe, for the time being. Harold has done something. About half the people here are standing still and just making a low, continuous tone.”

[Something is happening,] said Amaryllis. [Something bad. Heshnel stayed on the surface, and he’s saying the same thing. Fewer than half though. And there’s a storm that came out of nowhere, which has Raven worried. She thinks that it might be a summoning.]

“A summoning?” I asked. “Of what?”

[Good question.] Amaryllis replied. [Any idea how to stop it?]
Kill everyone making the tone ... but I couldn’t bring myself to verbalize the thought, and even if that would have worked, there were logistical issues, given how many converts there were. Had Harold given up on killing me? Had he pulled the trigger on his master plan? Was it already too late?

“I’ll think of something,” I said. “Leaving the comms on, but I’ll be out of range soon.”

“Well?” asked the attendant who had taken me to the medical room. “How are we going to help them?”

“I’m going to try some magic,” I said.

“Bring them in here?” asked the attendant, looking around.

“No,” I said, grabbing another few bones off the wall and draining them as quickly as possible, just so I would be topped off. “It’s a different kind of magic.”

We hustled back down the hallway and I grabbed the first person I saw that was continuing on with the droning, a humanoid with pointed ears that might have been a half-elf, except that those were so rare it would have been weird. I glanced at the attendant, trying to read her.

“Juniper Smith,” I said, holding out a hand.

“Polly Haines,” she said. “You can fix him? Somehow?”

“Maybe,” I replied. “I’m going to be sensory deprived. I’ll need you to watch my back.” I handed her the void pistol. “Shoot anyone who looks like they’re dangerous.”

She handed me the void pistol back. “I’m not going to kill anyone,” she said.

“Fair enough,” I replied, holstering the pistol in the cinch of my robes. “Shake me then, if it looks like I’m going to be killed.”

“Okay,” said Polly. “Good luck.”

I laid my hands on the half-elf and got my bearings, feeling the tendrils of magic coming off him, all manifestations or connections to the soul in one way or another, then dove down in, rising into the spirit as soon as I could, trying not to count the seconds impatiently.

It was the same as with Sonee, the orange lines descending down from above and connecting in to the machinery of his spirit, touching it at hundreds of different places. The difference here was that all the orange lines were completely taut, pulling straight ‘up’ and tugging at the threads they were attached to. I had no idea what that image might be a metaphor for, but it seemed like it was probably bad.

I pushed hard, trying to move myself along the orange lines, pretending that they were a track, or some kind of analog to the connection my own soul had to the souls of my companions. For a moment, there was no particular effect, but then I was set forward in a rush, back toward Harold’s core.

Everything was strained, pulled into a state of absolute tension. The fields of lines were all pulling on an ineffable something, taut and stretched, and every single one of the anchors he had in all the people he’d compromised were the same, pulling, or doing whatever the pulling was a metaphor for. I dove down into the morass of orange lines and began wreaking havoc again, as I’d done before, but there was so much of it to hurt, and my efforts seemed to be making barely more than a dent. After a few minutes of doing that to no obvious effect, I tried to push myself to a different conceptual
level, so that I could see what was happening to Harold’s soul, if he had one. If he had a soul though, it was locked off to me.

I pushed myself back out into the real world. More people had arrived, and they were standing around us. The droning on was continuing.

“Well?” asked Polly.

“He’s enraptured,” I said. “Connected to some outside entity that’s trying to do something terrible, possibly world-ending.”

“An exclusion would stop it,” said one of the people standing around. He didn’t seem to be comforted by that theory.

“At the cost of Li’o and the surrounding valley,” I said. “It would put a permanent end to the athenaeum. Come on, we need to get out of here.”

“No,” said Polly. “There are five hundred people inside that temple. Most of them would be trapped if we left.”

“Most of them are singing,” said one of the other attendants. “You can hear it if you go in there.”

“It’s not singing,” said Polly. “It’s … something else.”

“Droning,” I said. “Look, I know there’s an elevator, and I need to go up, as quickly as possible. It’s happening on the surface too.”

“Follow me,” said Polly, moving with purpose, and leaving the other attendants behind.

We turned quickly through the hallways, until we reached a large set of doors. Standing in front of it were two men, both of them droning on. I really had a feeling that I should be doing something about them, but there were so many, both in the temple complex and above it, that all my efforts seemed like they would be futile. How many people had Harold been able to grab from within the temple as they went through initiation? He’d been at this for months, so he probably had what, a few thousand of them just from the temple itself, not even counting however many he’d picked up through things like the meditation classes or kidnapping people to drug them into an altered state?

I had no idea how I was going to stop it.

“You and your people had better work to save them,” said Polly. She poked her head into the elevator and pointed at a thick lever. “Flip that, then wait, the gates will open back up when you’re at the top.” She backed away. “Good luck, mystery man.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Just as a note, you might want to tie up the droners. Whatever they’re doing right now, there’s a risk that they’re not going to be safe to be around when they’re finished.”

“Well,” said Polly. “Good to know.”

With that, I closed the door to the elevator and flipped the lever. It lurched in a way that I would have assumed was unsafe if I hadn’t had some exposure to Aerb’s elevators, and I anxiously waited for my magic to come back online so that I could be in fighting shape once more. Everything came back online all at once, with Amaryllis already talking.

[Repeat, Juniper, when you get this message, do not go to the surface,] said Amaryllis.
“Why?” I asked.

[Oh thank fuck,] she said. [And there’s an entity up there. We’re bailing as soon as you get out.]

“I’m taking the elevator up now,” I said. “Should be a while.”

[We’ll have Bethel go through the rock,] said Amaryllis. [Stop the elevator.]

“What’s up there?” I asked. I moved a storage tattoo over and pulled the vambrace from it, locked that around my arm, then turned the dial to the combat position.

[Something huge,] she replied. [Juniper, I know you might want to, but we can’t fight it. It’s hundreds of feet tall, dropping down from the clouds then going back up. There are dozens of legs and eyes that must be the size of human heads to be visible from street level. Joon, please, I’m telling you now that if there was ever a chance to stop this thing from being called down, we failed at it, and we can’t even begin to think about fighting it. This is bigger than us. The Empire is going to get called in. They’ve got thousands of mages and magic beyond anything that we do.]

“I want to see it,” I said. Something was tickling at the back of my mind, a thought that I couldn’t name, something on the tip of my tongue. I was worried that was a sign of compulsion or compromise, and while I waited for the elevator to reach the top, I dipped into my soul and spirit to give them another glance. There was nothing out of the ordinary there though, and I felt like myself.

When I reached the top, I came out into a security area, which was completely, ominously empty. I had my probability blade drawn and throwing dagger in my left hand, and moved cautiously through the checkpoint. Eventually I reached a more populated area, but it was only filled with people whose droning noise had let me know they were there. They were like the ones down in the temple, fewer of them, certainly, but displaying the same symptoms. I moved around them, cautiously, and went outside, where people were gathered around, looking up at the storm clouds up above.

It was tornado weather, the sky bruised and angry, no rain, but a whistling breeze. It was go-hide-in-the-cellar weather, the kind that always made me think about kneeling in the hallways at school. The clouds were roiling and low to the ground, not like I had ever seen them before, close enough that they were probably covering the tops of the hills that surrounded the valley.

As I was watching, a giant leg came down from the sky, knotted and gnarled, ending in claws as big as cars that dug deep into the earth. A second leg joined it, seeming to come from the clouds themselves, this one piercing straight through Canis Building some distance away. The creature descended slowly, but with the slowness of immense weight, other legs coming down to join the first two, until finally its bulk descended down from the cloud cover. People around me were screaming and running, and all I could do was stare. It had hundreds of eyes, long legs like a water strider, and a coating of short hair that moved without regard for the wind. Its head swept from side to side, and its many-jawed mouth let out inhuman screams in a handful of different pitches.

I looked at it with a distant horror. “Oh, that Mome Rath.”
“Alright,” said Arthur as we sat in the theater, waiting for the movie to start. “Dumbest possible cinematic universes, go go go.”

It was his third time seeing Captain America: Civil War, and my second. I had been feeling weird about our friendship, mostly because I was seeing Tiff behind his back. Every time it was just me and Arthur, I felt like I was utterly transparent, like he would just somehow figure it out and stop me, or confront me. I had gone over the conversation what felt like a hundred times, mounting imagined defenses to his imagined objections, preparing for the gamut of emotions he might possibly display.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I mean,” Arthur continued, then stopped. “Which part of it is giving you trouble?”

“‘Possible’, I guess?” I asked. “Like, I could easily imagine a cinematic universe where, say, Failure to Launch crosses over with Ghostbusters and, uh, Night Court or something. And that wouldn’t even be that bad.”

“Alright, fine, fine,” said Arthur. “Assume that they have to all be connected to each other somehow, either by genre, theme, plot, characters, or something like that.”

“Fast food,” I said. “Burger King, Ronald McDonald, Wendy, uh, the Colonel -- why is it that so many fast food places have human mascots?”

“That’s not even that dumb though,” said Arthur. “Like, I would watch the shit out of that. Did you ever see that anime cosplay version of the Colonel facing down Ronald McDonald?”

“Yeah, probably,” I said. I leaned back in my seat. The local movie theater in Bumblefuck had terrible seats, but at least we had a theater. “I think we have different definitions of dumb, if you think that’s not dumb.”

“Okay, so Alan Moore did the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, right?”

“With Sean Connery?” asked Arthur with a frown.

“Ah, no,” I said. “I mean, yes, but Alan Moore does comic books, not movies. The comic books were actually, you know, good.”

“Ah,” said Arthur. “Wish they were easier to get my hands on.”

(It was always mildly surprising to me when I had read or watched something that Arthur hadn’t. He had an annoying way of playing it off sometimes, either putting me down for wasting my time on something that was objectively garbage, or making some excuse for himself, which was never wanted or needed.)

“Point being, that was an attempt to fit together a lot of the Victorian canon. Jekyll and Hyde, the Invisible Man, Dracula, stuff like that. So like, that, but for the worst possible time period. Needs research though. Of the top of my head, there aren’t many eras that have a distinctly terrible yet identifiable set of people or creatures to put into a cinematic universe.”
“So where steampunk, cyberpunk, et cetera borrow from an era’s aesthetic, you would borrow from their fictional characters?” asked Arthur. “I guess I can dig it. Seems like it would mostly end up lame rather than dumb.”

“Sure,” I said. “Or, hey, maybe we could do an author’s works? Like, Harry Potter meets up with Cormoran Strike, meets … whatever else she did?” I was starting to get into the groove of it. Arthur, being Arthur, surely had something in his back pocket, some incredibly dumb potential cinematic universe, which was the whole reason that he’d brought the subject up.

“I think that’s it,” said Arthur. “Hrm, you know, Stephen King is almost there, all on his own, that’s part of the conceit. Doesn’t really flow as well into movies that have a big team up at the end.”

“Discworld?” I asked. “But there was never really a crossover, they just existed in the same universe.”

“There were crossovers,” said Arthur. “But yeah, minor ones. And those aren’t dumb cinematic universes. I like where your head is at, with authors.”

“C.S. Lewis?” I asked. “Mix up Perelandra with Narnia and The Screwtape Letters somehow? That’s almost not insane.” (The Chronicles of Narnia were the only bit of fantasy that my mother had ever read, unless you counted the Left Behind series or a few dozen paranormal romance books that she kept hidden in her bedside table. C.S. Lewis had been my first fantasy author, and I’d always had a soft spot for him, more than Tolkien.)

“You’d need more,” said Arthur. “And I agree, it would probably work best to pick someone who’s got a lot of different works, if you’re going dumb. Hard to think of though, because so many of them just get into a rut writing the same thing over and over. Oh, Sanderson is another who’s basically done all the work for himself. We’re pretty much never getting movies though.”

“Alright,” I said. “You want dumb? How about a cinematic universe from a single poem?”

He grinned at me. “And how does that work?”

When we’d come into the theater, we’d been pretty much the only ones, but it had begun to fill, and I suddenly felt self-conscious about who could hear us and what they would think. “Nevermind, it’s dumb.”

“Joon,” he said.

“The Jabberwocky cinematic universe,” I said, trying to keep my voice low.

Arthur laughed at that. “For real?”

“Right,” I said. “So, vorpal sword is obviously our version of the infinity stone, right? And from there, we just need monsters that get their heads cut off. Like, horrible villains that are set up in their own movies, or monster protagonists.”

Arthur took some time to think about that. He seemed off his game, and a part of me instantly wondered whether he’d found out about me and Tiff, whether his hesitation and slowness was because he was putting up a front. It was probably paranoia, the kind that had been fucking with our friendship for months. “Alright,” he said. “Sell me on them.”

“Them?” I asked, not tracking. “Like, you want my Feigian outline of a dozen movies in phase one?”
“Jabberwocky is nonsense,” said Arthur. “Not nonsense, but, you know. So what does it look like, in your head?”

“Okay,” I said. “Here’s my pitch. Movie one is all about the vorpal sword, basically as it is in D&D, a thing that cuts off heads, which is more terrifying than I think the game or the community gives it credit for. Maybe first third is seeking the vorpal sword and then killing some monstrosity with it, and the back two thirds are about in-fighting among the initial band of adventurers?”

“That sounds terrible,” said Arthur. “Undercutting narrative for the sake of it.”

“Reservoir Dogs,” I said. “A heist movie that’s mostly about things falling apart after the heist. Anyway, movie two is -- give me a name from the poem?”

“Mome Rath,” said Arthur. “Though I guess it’s unclear whether ‘mome’ is an adjective or not.”

“Sure,” I said. “So movie two is all about the Mome Rath, this giant, skyscraper-sized beast, one that no one can think of unless he’s there.”

“Wait, memetic?” asked Arthur.

“Antimemetic,” I said. “Totally different. He’s got hair like fingers, he’s got --”

“What the fuck are you even on about with hair like fingers?” asked Arthur with a laugh. He could be loud. Previews hadn’t started yet, and some people looked at us. “Prehensile hair?”

“No,” I said. I held up a finger. “Okay, picture this finger as three links of a chain. Extrapolate that out for like, ten yards, then multiply it by a thousand. He’s got a full head of hair, like fingers.” I stopped for a moment as a thought caught up to me. “But like, randomly rotating the angle of each knuckle in his finger-hair, I guess, so that it doesn’t all go one direction.”

“Gross,” said Arthur. “Is this for a game? Is this spoilers?”

“Nah,” I said. “At least, probably not. If I use it, try to act excited.”

“I always do,” said Arthur.

“Anyway, the antimeme stuff is the best part, because that’s what the movie is built around. People remember their cities being destroyed, but they’ve got no idea what happened, no one knows what did it, or has any explanation, there’s nothing on the video cameras or whatever they’ve got to record things, it scrubs itself from reality unless you’re less than, say, a mile from it, and so on.” I paused as I tried to think through this. I was using my improv brain, a subset of my brain that had been finely honed by panicked attempts at keeping marginally ahead of the players when I was out of material for the night. “So the first third of the movie is about investigating these phenomena, and in the last two thirds, they have to fight it, but they have to make do with what they have, because if they get too far away, they’ll simply forget that the threat exists, not just forget, but they won’t be able to puzzle it out from the evidence that’s sitting in their notebooks.”

“Too much SCP for you,” said Arthur, shaking his head.

“Maybe,” I said. “But think about the stakes there, a giant kaiju, and the twist is that if you leave, you’ll forget about it, and you just have to depend on everyone else in its field to figure something out? Can’t direct resources to fight it, can’t call in help, can’t go grab your special whats-it that might do the job?”

“And you have like six more of those, right?’” asked Arthur.
“Oh, sure,” I lied, planning to think on my feet, not really worrying about being called out, because after years of gaming, Arthur would never do that to me. “Previews are about to start though. Don’t you want to give your pitch for worst cinematic universe?”

“Nah,” said Arthur. “After. Yours was already so ridiculous and disconnected from the base material that I think you might have me beat.”

But after the movie was over, we’d both forgotten about the subject, or maybe Arthur had just wanted to talk about something else. I sketched out a bit more of Mome Rath when I got home, along with some of the other giant beasts that might inhabit a Jabberwocky world, after I’d read through the poem a few more times and read some of the flavor text around the vorpal sword. It was idle worldbuilding for the sake of it, mostly because I didn’t have any real D&D prep that needed to be done. And yeah, maybe the dismissive way that Arthur had been talking about it had me feeling upset with him, and maybe I just wanted to show that I could do something with the idea. Not Jabberwocky like the poem was, but a world that was to the poem what the vorpal blade had been in D&D, an extension of the concept. I was hopeful that Tiff would get it, if no one else.

Five days after we’d been talking in the movie theater, Arthur got in his car accident.

I never did end up using Mome Rath though. He hadn’t made it into the worldbuilding doc, and so he was just sort of forgotten, like a little joke to myself, the antimeme that didn’t even show up in god’s description of all reality.

And maybe I did forget about him for real when I came to Aerb, but it was hard to say whether that was some latent antimemetic effect, or whether he just didn’t end up sticking right. All that he’d ever existed as was that one conversation with Arthur. I’d remembered the conversation, just not Mome Rath, a detail that had escaped me. It was hard to tell how much I should have expected myself to remember it, nine months after the fact. But in either case, as soon as I saw Mome Rath, the memory had come flooding back.

“Antimeme,” I said to Amaryllis as I ran toward it. “If we leave the area, we’ll forget about it, and we won’t be able to tell anyone. Phones and entads won’t work.”

[Juniper,] she began.

“We can’t call in the cavalry,” I said. “This is one of mine, and basically the only interesting thing about it is that it’s anti-call-in-the-cavalry, at least how I drew it up. It’s Mome Rath.”

There was silence from the other end for a moment as I kept running. Running toward the big scary thing, or at least one leg of it, the leg that had crashed down into the Canis building. Mome Rath wasn’t just forgotten, it was an incomplete creation, never fully fleshed out beyond a few physical details I’d given it. Would I just leave him at being a big antimeme? Probably not, but I would have to figure out what its weaknesses were on the fly.

[Where are you?] asked Amaryllis. Her voice was calm and steady.

“It’s got a leg in the Canis Building,” I said. “I’m going to climb. Almost there.” Its leg was as thick as a redwood, but because of the proportions, it still looked like a creature on stilts.

[Juniper, we should leave,] said Amaryllis. [Or you should wait for us.]

“No one will be able to stop it,” I said. “There should be uncompromised people left in Li’o, mages with some fight left in them. We need Grak up here for analysis and to make some wards. Might be able to ward against the memory effect?”
[I’ll check,] she said. [We’re on our way up. Don’t do anything rash.]

I had reached the leg that was sticking through the building and was staring straight up. Mome Rath was enormous, maybe the biggest thing that I had ever seen in person, and I was just going to, what, stab it in the face until it died?

Yeah, that seemed like what I was going to do.

(It was what Uther would have done. It was what Raven would expect me to do. Hells, it was probably what the fucking narrative wanted, a test that the Dungeon Master had set for me, for all that I gave a damn about that. But it wasn’t any of that pushing me forward, it was the fact that thousands of people were going to die if this thing wasn’t stopped, and the very real possibility that I was the only one capable of stopping it. It was the same uncomfortable feeling that I’d had when we’d almost left Valencia behind at Speculation and Scrutiny, but here, I hoped, more founded.)

(And I could see a path where I would wait around until Bethel got to the surface, then ensconce myself in a war council, where we would have endless debates and debriefs while people died by the thousands. Maybe it was seven agonizing days down in the temple that had me wanting to get moving sooner than later, or maybe it was just the knowledge that if the forthcoming climb was worthless, little would be lost.)

I ducked into the Canis Building, whose edifice had been smashed and whose doors were hanging open, and darted forward toward the leg, blades at the ready. I had to clamber over rocks and broken beams of wood to do it, then across one of the claws that was dug into the basement of the building. My heart was thumping in my chest. Mome Rath had lots of legs, which meant that if he was moving at a sedate pace, each would stay in place for a little while, but I wasn’t sure how long that would be. I rushed up to the face of the leg, which was covered in what looked like ultra thick slabs of bark, and sank my blade in, wiggling it slightly to make sure that it would hold. What I really needed, for a climb like this, was hooks and spikes, particularly to give my feet something to hold onto, but all I had was my Gardner’s Plate, and then, only in an emergency. With my left hand, I used the Needler to stab in, though it had a more difficult time sinking into the foot-bark.

I began my climb. The probability blade made me wish that I still had the Anyblade, which could have been used to hook and grip, wedging itself into a hole that it made. The probability blade, by contrast, was constrained in its purpose, with something of a mind of its own, that mind being primarily driven by conventional swordsmanship, cutting, stabbing, disarming, and parrying. Climbing? Not so much.

I made it five feet up, using only the strength of my arms and awkward footholds where I could find them, before I realized that I wasn’t using the Needler to its full power. I leaned back slightly, holding onto the sword for support, and began throwing the Needler upward. Each time I did, a copy of it stuck into the side of the leg, ready to be blown up with a twist of the handle. Instead, they made for handholds and footholds, awkwardly placed and not stuck in that tightly, but good enough to make the climb significantly easier, ready for me to plunge in deeper when I got to them.

(On a game-mechanical level, there was a Climbing skill, which Mary had, and I didn’t. I had half her skill, which left me in the low 30s, because Climbing was apparently one of the things that was canonically part of her character by whatever metric the game was using to decide what it meant for my companions to ‘keep up’ with me. Per Reimer, there were a few cases where skills overlapped, with the less relevant ones getting a percentage penalty to their roll, but adding to the main skill if both were present as a kind of synergy bonus. It seemed like a horrifying pain in the ass from a bookkeeping perspective, but apparently the bonuses were only invoked in special situations where life was on the line. The upshot was that my effective climbing skill was masterclass, better than
maybe any other skill I possessed, on top of some of the fundamentals of climbing that Amaryllis had taught me in the time chamber, when we’d done bouldering together.)

When I was a hundred feet up, the leg moved. It was dizzying to look down, and dizzying to look up, and blades weren’t the best handholds and footholds, which meant that I nearly fell. But the acceleration was slow, befitting the sheer amount of mass being moved, and I clung to the weapons I’d sunk into him, bracing myself. I had left a lot of Needler copies in him, but detonating them all seemed like it was unlikely to do anything.

The leg stopped moving much more suddenly than it had started, with the claws below me bashing straight through one of the campus buildings that I had never been in, housing for freshmen, if my memory of the map could be trusted. I was nearly thrown free from the sudden stop, but managed to shoot the vines out from my Gardner’s Plate in time to give me some extra support. I retracted the many vines back in as quickly as I could once I’d regained my handholds, because vine-time was a precious resource. After a handful of minutes of being out, they needed time to rest, and I didn’t have the ten minutes it would take.

(How many people had died in the last ten minutes? How many would die in the next ten? Hanging on the side of an enormous kaiju wasn’t the time to be thinking about that, but goddamn it this all needed to be stopped, as soon as possible, and holy shit recovering the bodies of the dead was incredibly important, lest hundreds be cast down into the hells, and I wasn’t even thinking about it, but those two I killed down in the temple were probably going to be tortured forever because I didn’t tell anyone they were there.)

My stomach churning, I continued on my way, stopping every once in a while to throw more copies of the Needler for desperately needed holds on the swaying leg. I finally reached the first of three knees and took a moment to catch my breath at a place with far easier holds; Mome Rath was fucking tall.

[We’re on the surface,] said Amaryllis. [Where are you?]

“On one of the legs,” I said. “A hundred fifty feet up, maybe two hundred, not sure.” I looked down at the ground, and my Range Finder virtue pinged. “Two hundred and twenty three feet,” I said.

[What’s your plan?] she asked.

“Keep moving,” I said. “Hit its weak points for massive damage. It should be just like Shadow of the Colossus.” A game that I’ve never played, mind you. “It would be nice if Bethel could, you know, fly up here and cut through it like a scythe.”

I continued on up, not waiting for a response, depending mostly on my superior climbing skill to carry me along. I had no real clue what I was going to do when I got to the top. How much would it actually matter if I destroyed his eyes? Did he even have a brain? Was he physical in name only? I was pretty sure that I could feel some amount of skin magic where I touched him, not that I had the ability to do anything with that magic. A brief attempt at accessing whatever passed for his soul had proved fruitless, without so much as a whiff of progress.

[Do you have a quest?] asked Amaryllis as I continued my climb.

“No,” I replied back. “Busy right now.”

[We’re flying up to you,] said Amaryllis.

I stopped climbing and looked out at the ground below me, trying to spot them. Eventually I saw a
speck that was pitifully small by the standards of Mome Rath, but growing with every passing second, not because it was getting closer, but because Bethel was reconfiguring herself. She was increasing in size, spreading out, until she was a sharp and pointed thing, more similar to an oversized fighter jet than to a house. At her maximum size, she was as big as the Palace of Versailles, though I could think of no immediate reason why she would want to be that large.

She moved on Mome Rath, firing lightning and cannonballs at him, getting closer and aiming directly for his face. He roared in pain and anger, rearing back slightly, such that he was only supported by a small handful of his legs. Despite that reaction, he didn’t seem to be overly affected by the assault.

I had been thinking of Mome Rath as a large, lumbering beast, slow but heavily armored, incapable of proving much of a threat to anyone fast enough to get out of his way, a destroyer of cities and creator of refugees, all in fitting with how I had designed him. That notion was laid to rest when he used his triple-jointed, reared-back legs to strike out. The scale of things, given how large Bethel had chosen to go, must have made it seem slower than it actually was, but it still seemed lightning fast, as claws went through the air so quickly I heard the crack of a sonic boom, too fast for even the raw speed of the Egress to dodge.

Instead, the claws went through Bethel, passing through her immaterial bulk, thanks to one of a few dozen entads that she contained within her. There was a thirty minute per day limit on that one, I was pretty sure, time that couldn’t be sliced into smaller chunks, and the clock had started ticking, which put even more pressure on us to get this thing done.

I continued on with my climb, pushing ahead, trusting to Bethel that she was going to work things out, slightly heartened by the fact that she was apparently suppressing her drives to wreak havoc.

Our whole group was in there, all of our entadic power, all of it focused into Bethel. I halfway wished that I were getting more from their end, but I had my own climb to focus on.

[We were hoping that we could get this done while immaterial,] said Amaryllis. Her voice was tight. [Seems not. All of the best options require ramming. In combination, they might be enough. We’re having a disagreement over whether to get you. Are you okay?]

“Yes,” I said. “Do it,” though she certainly didn’t need for me to make the call, and my guess was that it was Bethel who was running the show.

Raven had a sword that was made of frozen time, a sword which was inside of Bethel at the moment. Amaryllis had the flickerblade, whose entire blade could disappear and then remove matter from existence when it reappeared, and that sword, too, was in Bethel. And on top of that, Pallida’s trident. It was no mistake that Bethel had taken a shape that was at least vaguely like the point of a spear.

Bethel zipped forward at full speed, straight toward the center of Mome Rath’s immense mass above his dozens of legs. He shot his claws forward, toward her, and where they struck, they were cut, huge pieces falling down toward the city below. Before they could land, she struck center mass, and Mome Rath was split open at what passed for his belly, with Bethel partially wedged inside of him. His weight came down onto his legs again, from the raised up position he’d been in, crushing more buildings beneath him, and as he settled down, a black liquid dropped from the wound, whole Olympic swimming pools of the stuff. Bethel was clearly trying to push in harder, to open up the wound, and I saw a whole section of her blink out of existence, then blink back in, just like the flickerblade did, simply removing chunks of Mome Rath from existence.

Half of his legs folded up and inward, sharp claws pointed toward Bethel. They all struck at once, with the built up power I’d seen before, and the rumbling crack of multiple sonic booms reached my
ears. Bethel was strong, incredibly strong, but I was worried about how much damage she could actually take.

[Retreating,] came Amaryllis’ voice. [She had to use one of her wishes.]

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. One of Bethel’s entads, on the list that we’d gotten, allowed her three wishes each day, with the caveat that they could only be used to undo the effects of an attack on her just after it was launched. It was a get out of jail free card, one that had just been used. I watched as Bethel flew out from the wound she’d made, dodging attacks so quick I could barely see them in motion.

[Second wish used,] said Amaryllis as Bethel got clear. She was shrinking as she went, back down to a smaller size, with less of a surface to attack. [We don’t have a clear picture of what defenses are on top, but we might be able to avoid the legs if we attack there. Per Bethel’s report, that first attack left us at ninety percent casualties before she wished it undone.] Her words were clipped, her tone terse. [Thoughts?]

[I’m leaving the city,] said Heshnel. [I will regroup with you in Karatern, if you survive. This isn’t my fight.] I had nearly forgotten that he was on comms with us.

“I’m going to keep climbing,” I said. “There’s got to be a way to stop this thing.”

[Let me know,] said Amaryllis, again speaking so quickly and efficiently that it was impossible to read emotion from her.

“Start on search and rescue,” I said.

[On it,] replied Amaryllis. [We’ll leave killing Mome Rath to you.] It was hard not to read that as bitterly sarcastic.

Amaryllis tried to keep herself calm.

“I might be able to kill it,” said Bethel. “It doesn’t appear to be immortal. Flesh and blood, to a warder’s sight.”

She was standing in front of a dais, in a room that she’d apparently created for this express purpose. In front of her, within the bounding box of her illusion, was a recreation of what was going on outside, Mome Rath a huge, dominating figure above the city of Li’o, dozens of knobbly legs stretching downward.

Amaryllis was deep in consideration. Simply taking things on their base merits, they should all run. Mome Rath was too big, with no obvious way to kill it, with unknown capabilities that appeared to include striking out with claws that could move arbitrarily fast. But on the design level, Juniper was correct, Mome Rath likely had been designed to be beaten by a small group of people, in accordance with tabletop design principles. And on the narrative level, Juniper was the one to do it; the Dungeon Master would have conspired to make the entire thing about Juniper, in some fashion, because this was Juniper’s story, above and beyond anyone else’s.

So on balance, as she had thought from the first moment Heshnel had made his report, the answer was that they should fight it, even if they could simply run away. Of course, that answer wasn’t the same as the answer to the question of what her outward facing opinion should be. Juniper had asked her to think more on the level of base reality, hadn’t he? And putting forward a conservative position had, in the past, tended to spur him toward recklessness in a way that could be infuriating. In this particular case, setting herself on the object-level course seemed as though it would pay narrative-
level dividends.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “You took two lethal hits when you cut him.”

“And I can take another, before the wishes give out,” said Bethel.

“You took two last time,” said Amaryllis, trying to keep her voice even.

“And I suppose that void artillery would pose too much of a risk to Juniper?” asked Bethel. “Fenn’s bow has seven charges.”

“This isn’t the sort of situation where void is good,” said Amaryllis. “You could make a hole, but it wouldn’t be all that big. You’d be better off with raw kinetics, if you want to use the bow charges.” She turned to Grak, who had just returned from what Bethel had called the observation deck.

“Status?”

“Novel magic, from the dark end of the spectrum,” he said. “Wardable.”

“It would be a bad time to bunker down,” said Raven. “What did Juniper say?”

“He wanted us on search and rescue,” said Amaryllis. “Picking up the wounded, or even the still living.”

“I want to kill it,” said Bethel, staring down at her display as though there was nothing else in the world that mattered. “This creature has affronted me.”

“Juniper will kill it on his own,” said Raven.

“Juniper isn’t playing by Arthur’s rules,” said Pallida. She put an emphasis on the A in Arthur, and I saw the faintest hint of a reaction from Raven. “We all agree on that, don’t we?”

“No,” said Raven, jaw set.

“Not the time,” said Amaryllis. “Bethel, you know that I can’t stop you from attacking, but I want you to reconsider, because if you take a real hit, one like the ones that you wished away, we could all die.”

“I would survive,” said Bethel, still staring at the display. “Do you think it would be prudent to cut off its legs? Or to direct an attack at the top of it?” The display showed Bethel rising higher, twisting up into the sky, to just below the cloud cover. For all her movement, there was no sign of it from within her, one of the secondary powers of the *Egress*, which was currently sitting inside of a garage within Bethel.

“We don’t know what defenses it has on top,” said Amaryllis. “Do you think it’s just armor? Or something more?” The sheer speed of the claws was absolutely mind-boggling, well faster than sound, so much mass moving so quickly that it should have torn the creature apart. The fact that it could endure stresses like that, even if it was with its innate magic, spoke to how ungodly powerful it was. “I know how Juniper thinks, and I sure as hell know how he DMs. There will be complications of some kind if we try to hit it from an angle.”

“Meta-narrative,” Bethel began.

“No,” said Amaryllis, taking the risk of interrupting. “It’s nothing to do with narrative, it’s design speculation based on what we know of the designer. Juniper and I have talked for hundreds of hours about what went into making these things.” She pressed her fingers to the tattoo on her throat before
“Anyone could interrupt. “Juniper, when does Mome Rath date to?”

[Five days before Arthur’s death,] he eventually replied.

Amaryllis neatly slotted that into her mental timeline. It was incredibly worrying, because it implied that antimemetic threats had been retroactively wiped from Juniper’s memory the moment he’d arrived on Aerb. Juniper had never shared the memetic threats he’d created, for fear that they were dormant in his mind, and if the antimemetic nature of Mome Rath was any indication, there was the equivalent of several tons of undetonated ordnance in his mind (one of the many reasons that she’d kept every trip into his soul as brief and constrained as possible).

“Search and rescue,” said Amaryllis, speaking to Bethel. “I don’t want to risk all our lives just to find out what surprises the creature has. Target the destroyed buildings farthest from the creature, use ropes as tendrils to touch people, transfer them inside, I’ll be down in whatever medical bay you create, providing healing to the wounded and extracting the souls of the dead.”

For a moment, Bethel looked like she would object, and Amaryllis steeled herself for either an argument or for diplomatically backing down, depending on her displayed mood. Instead, Bethel nodded once.

“I’ll participate in the healing,” said Solace, and before she could say more, she completely disappeared. Amaryllis followed soon after her, a slice of blackness separating her time in the command room from her time in the med bay.

“She’s becoming more confident,” said Solace as she looked over the medical supplies in clear disdain. The place was enormous, in Bethel’s usual style, with hundreds of beds laid out and ready for intensive triage, nevermind that they didn’t have the workforce to staff it all. There were hundreds of bones ready for Amaryllis to use, most of their stockpile that they’d bought in bulk.

“We’re going to have to call in the tuung,” said Amaryllis. “The oldest of them will be capable of helping. It will be good field experience for them.”

<On it,> replied Bethel.

There was another slice of matte black, and then Amaryllis was standing in the wing that housed the tuung, in the entrance. Bethel could alter her shape and warp space at her leisure, which meant that banking years was much more easily accomplished, but the years weren’t free, not so much so that the tuung wing could be as large as Amaryllis would like it to be. The tuung and their teachers weren’t actually in time dilation, but it had been decided that they would be kept in the dark, in part because there had been no particular reason to inform them, not when it would all hopefully be a singular blip in their young lives.

“Aurora Protocol!” she shouted, trusting her voice to carry across the place. In an ideal world, there would be sound wards to keep some semblance of silence, but Bethel moved around with some frequency, and wards anchored to some particular moving thing (rather than the default reference frame of Aerb) were incredibly difficult, beyond Grak’s ability, at least at scale and for the desired durations. Amaryllis tried her best to have a royal bearing, and removed her helmet, tucking it beneath one arm. There was a fine mist in the air, mimicking the tuung’s natural environment. She hoped she looked the part of their leader; she checked in every year, always with attention paid both to her appearance and to the impression she was making.

The tuung came forward, with the teachers and staff behind them. Aurora Protocol was one of the general ones, only really signalling that there was going to be a non-combat deployment. Amaryllis took a moment to look out on the tuung, trying to make an evaluation of them. They were halfway
through their physical development, and so far as she had been able to tell, maybe a third of the way through their social development. If compared to humans, they weren’t quite teenagers, but tuung matured much faster. The group was mixed male and female, and thankfully, the females hadn’t yet developed the ability to infect the males with their scent (which was bound to happen, and would need to be treated as the highest crime that a tuung could commit).

They had never set foot outside of Bethel. The small, cramped quarters had been their home for their entire lives. Amaryllis had provided them with conditions as good as possible, with free time and entertainment, gourmet food, and every other luxury that could reasonably be fit into the complex, but it was still a small world, and for all that they could read about the real world or ask their teachers about it, they had been looking at Aerb through a pinhole.

“We’re facing an emergency for which we need manpower,” said Amaryllis. “We’re expecting hundreds or possibly thousands of casualties from a wide range of species. You’ll be working triage, carrying out simple orders but often acting under your own recognizance, especially in terms of setting up ad hoc command structures.” She hoped that the vocabulary would be intelligible to them; it should have been, by the standards that she’d set for their age. “The threat we’re responding to is ongoing. There’s a danger out there.” And in here, even if you stay. “Do I have any volunteers?”

Amaryllis felt a keen delight as every single tuung raised their hand.

Moments later, they had been placed into the medical bay, which was already filling with screaming, moaning people. Every trace of joy was washed away from her in a single cold moment, and she moved into action, giving instructions to the tuung, making things up as she went along, recruiting people who didn’t seem too badly hurt, trying to build some kind of structure to the proceedings with only vague outlines, made months ago, to go off of.

She didn’t have time to wonder what was going to happen with Mome Rath.
When the bats showed up, my first thought was, “Oh, of course there are bats.” We had never done a giant, multi-legged kaiju in my games, but if we had, I would have included mooks like that, because you have to have mooks. Because Mome Rath was so tall, and probably wouldn’t be taken down by someone cutting off all his legs (though you never know), he needed other active defenses. Besides that, mooks were always great if you wanted to tie the players up with something that they knew was meaningless, so that they had to make a choice between taking care of the mooks or striking at the heart of the real enemy.

(The bats probably weren’t mooks in the proper sense of the word. More likely, Mome Rath had some kind of ecology to him, and he would be covered with creatures that lived their own lives within that ecology, either symbiotic with Mome Rath and serving some vital function, or part of the food chain. Mome Rath probably wasn’t sending bats at me, the bats just lived on him, and had come with when he was summoned from wherever.)

I was past the third of his knees, to a place where the bark was gone completely, replaced with a bumpy, matte gray surface. There were numerous red welts the size of dinner plates. I touched one, briefly, and it felt firm and taut, like a zit that was ready to pop. I was pretty sure that something was going to happen if one of them burst, but it hadn’t happened yet. When I made a periodic stop to throw more daggers, I did my best to avoid the red welts. It was during one of those relative lulls that the bats showed up.

I say ‘bats’, but that probably doesn’t do them justice. Each was the size of a house cat, with long, whipping tails and sharp fangs. I was probably five hundred feet up the leg, with another hundred feet left to go, and I wasn’t really in a position to be fighting, not when I couldn’t effectively move, not when I had to keep one hand gripped on the blades that were plunged into Mome Rath. Maybe if it had just been one, I would have been able to deal with it, but there were thirty. I hadn’t seen where they’d come from, but I prayed that there weren’t more.

I was an untested still mage. I had the levels in it, but no practical experience, and while the game took care of a lot (a whole lot), it was sort of like having to consciously think about the controls when playing a new game. In comparison to what everyone else got, I wasn’t about to start complaining, but there was a little bit of lag at the beginning, and this really didn’t seem to be the time for the inaugural run. Unfortunately, I didn’t have much of a choice.

I leaned backward as they flew in, brandishing the probability blade in their general direction. When it was out in the open like this, it was a gray blur in the air, vaguely cone-shaped. As soon as the first of the bats came within range, the probability blade picked a form, that of a wickedly sharp kopesh, which sliced through the bat-thing at the perfect angle, cleaving halfway through his skull until I flicked the sword to the side to get the corpse loose.

Mome Bat defeated!

I killed more of them as they came, trying to hold off on the next part for as long as possible, but once the first handful were dead, they were too densely packed for me to be able to kill them all. That was when I began burning one of my three internal unicorn bones.

I was killed pretty quickly. Holding onto the side of the leg on dagger handholds, my probability blade to the side, and my mind focused on the burn, it was too much at once, and one of the bats slipped past my blade as one of his brothers was dying to it. He bit me with an unhinged jaw, driving his upper fangs down into my skull and his lower fangs up through my mouth, piercing my palate,
and then crunched down, breaking bone with what had to have been magically enhanced strength.

The second time around, I was more prepared, and the burn of the bones had faded in my consciousness to one of a handful of things I was juggling. With my focus properly split, I used still magic to stop his bite, causing the point of his fangs to make contact with my skin and no more. I stabbed at him with the probability blade, and was rewarded with a gush of hot blood across my face as he died.

**Skill increased: Still Magic lvl 21!**

**Mome Bat defeated!**

After that, they swarmed me, grappling me with tiny claws that weren’t much more serious than a cat’s, biting me with teeth and jaws that would have put a shark to shame. Where my Gardner’s Plate covered me, it offered some protection, but I felt a piercing pain in my thigh, and as I wildly swung my probability blade around, I looked down to briefly see that one of the bats had managed to get his teeth through the magical steel. The surge of blood was enough for me to know that he’d hit the femoral artery, and as I directed my attention to the flow of blood, another two of the bats managed to work their teeth through my armor as well.

I reset again. The unicorn’s magic wasn’t going to last forever, and I was constrained by that, but I was getting repeated messages about skill increases and bats defeated, and still magic was getting noticeably easier to apply, both because I was settling into it and because it was increasing in power.

Unfortunately, I still hadn’t found the winning path.

The more of them died, the easier it was, but I was gripping onto the side of a leg fifty stories up, barely able to dodge and parry, restricted in how I could twist and turn. One of the bats clamped his mouth down on my arm, and I headbutted him back, but the probability blade was the only weapon that seemed to be doing enough damage to kill them. Mostly, there were just too many. I extruded the vines from my Gardner’s Plate, wrapping them around the bats, and squeezing them tight, or having them hold me so that I could use both hands to slash away. I used the incorporeality ring to let the bats fly through me, but that was of limited use. I got down to the last five when one of them came at me from behind, using its fangs like a lance rather than to bite me. I felt teeth enter my skull, and used still magic to stop them from going further, but my brain wasn’t working quite right.

I reset without really meaning to, which probably had something to do with how the unicorn magic worked. I hadn’t died, I didn’t think, but something vital in my brain had definitely been hit. I went through the fight again, now marginally more familiar with where the bats were going, more in the groove of using all my abilities and entads at once, striking out with blood magic, bone magic, vines, blades, and a single shot of gem magic that I knew I was going to regret, even if it killed ten of the things at once.

I was vaguely surprised when I shook another bat off my blade and looked around for the next target, only to find that there were none. Below me, dead bats were still falling down, tumbling through the winds, bouncing off the leg that I’d climbed so far up. The battle had been short, and I hoped that there wouldn’t be another like it, but I wasn’t confident that Mome Rath didn’t have more where that came from. I healed the wounds I’d been given, including one place where a bat had punctured my upper arm, and the scratches on my face, then looked down at the destruction below for one dizzying moment before continuing my climb.

I was waiting for more bats, and trying to look out for them from my awkward position on the side of the leg. I was increasingly certain that there would be more of them, because given Mome Rath’s incredible size, there almost had to be. Too much of my attention was focused on more potential bats.
though, and not on the red welts. I didn’t notice them swelling until it was almost too late.

I had a split second to make a decision between burning another unicorn bone and trying to hunker down. Instead, I felt the slight tug of LUK 1 and let it carry me away. I kicked off from the leg, pushing myself backward and out into the open air, then began to fall. The welts began to explode soon after, spraying some kind of red mist through the air, just far enough away from me that none of it so much as touched me.

I fell, picking up speed, until the last little bit, when my tattoo began to burn away and slow my descent down to practically nothing. I landed, nearly feather-light, and grimaced at the lost progress.

“Back on the ground,” I said. “Died a few times up there, until it got too hot to handle.”

I looked over Mome Rath as I waited for Amaryllis’ reply. He was towering over me, and striding away. The climb hadn’t taken me that long, all things considered, since throwing the daggers had been the most time consuming part. My muscles weren’t even aching, thanks to repeated applications of PHY. There was absolutely nothing to show for it though. Mome Rath had visible injuries, missing legs that were very slowly regrowing, and a belly wound that was still dripping, but it had been Bethel that had done all that.

What am I even doing here?

My best, the answer finally came. Trying to kill this fucking thing so that it won’t keep destroying this city.

[We have four hundred wounded, with more on the way,] Amaryllis finally replied. [Give me a rough location and I can send Bethel to come get you. Then we’ll leave and let someone else deal with this.]

“No,” I said, tightening my grip on my weapons. “This is my partial design. I don’t know its weakness, but I know that any true method of finishing it would have some way that it could be defeated by, at minimum, a group of five mixed-class adventurers.”

[If you want to be dropped on top, Bethel might be able to do that,] said Amaryllis. [Unknown defenses though.]

“Likely significant,” I said. “Nothing can ever be easy. I still think small groups are the way to go, unless Bethel can deliver a very fast deathblow.”

[No,] said Amaryllis. [I’ve seen her map of the thing’s internals. It has bones and flesh, but the organs are nothing she can make sense of, and there’s no brain to plunge through, no hearts or obvious points where it could actually be killed.]

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay. I think maybe I can set things up for the killing blow.”

[How?] asked Amaryllis.

“I’m a multimage,” I replied. I gave one last look around me, then began running toward Mome Rath, using the Sanguine Surge to gather speed. I was nervous about what I was about to do, given how potentially dumb it was, and given that if it didn’t work, I might quickly end up dead.

[Juniper, how?] asked Amaryllis.

As I got myself beneath Mome Rath, I gave her a brief description of what I had planned, and she swore, then agreed to divert from their rescue efforts.
Before I could change my mind, I activated the Ring of Upward Bliss and teleported myself a mile up into the air.

I was up in the low clouds that were swirling around Li’o, the ones that had either brought or were a part of Mome Rath. I began falling at once, and used still magic to slow my descent to something more reasonable. I had a single copy of Prince’s Invulnerability which I could have used to slam into Mome Rath at speed, but without a proper target I was worried that all I would give it was a flesh wound, and Prince’s Invulnerability represented a significant expense, even given how large our war chest was.

When I saw Mome Rath from above, I knew that there were going to be problems. He had hair like fingers, covering his back, but sticking out from the finger-hair were large brown lumps that seemed to be moving all on their own, independent of the slow, swaying walk that Mome Rath was doing, more of the implied ecology of the gargantuan creature. I tried my best to angle for one of them, but this was only my second experience with anything like skydiving, and instead, I awkwardly landed in the finger-hair. The strands of finger-hair, consisting of thousands of knuckles each, were thick enough that I could stand on them without sinking in, which was good, because I didn’t know how deep they went.

I began hacking away at the finger-hair, slicing the probability blade through knuckle bone with abandon while trying to keep my eyes open for whatever countermeasures were roaming the top of Mome Rath. So far, I had seen nothing. I kept hacking away, trying to get down to the flesh below, which was my ultimate goal. I was blade-bound to the probability blade, and it cut quickly, but something was tickling at the back of my mind. There should be defenses on his back, big ones like the claws had been against Bethel, and small ones, like the bats and welts had been against me, death traps and mooks and things like that.

I was struck in the side of the temple so hard that the world momentarily went black. When I regained my senses, I had lost three quarters of my HP, and was bleeding from a heavy wound. My head felt lopsided and misshapen, like a potato, and I woozily spun around trying to figure out what had hit me. There was still nothing. I hadn’t seen anything when I fell, either.

“Shit,” I muttered. If I had less experience with these sorts of things, I might have chalked it up to something flying through the air, but I knew better. An attack from nowhere was a good indication of an invisible enemy, or in this case, a more thematically appropriate antimemetic one.

[Status?] asked Amaryllis.

I began swinging my sword through the air, Needler sheathed, probability blade held as an oversize, two-handed, monkey-gripped weapon, which extended its field by a good margin. “Enemies,” I said. “On Mome’s back.”

I watched the probability blade become material for a moment, its gray blur suddenly replaced by a steel cutting edge. It only lasted a moment though, before it was back to normal. Had I felt a pull from the weapon as it cut through something? I wasn’t sure. There was no blood on the blade either. I kept swinging though, going for the spot where the probability blade had struck before, and was rewarded with another change as it became a solid sword.

Mome Rat defeated!

It appeared in front of me like it had been there all along, a thing of claws and jet-black fur, the size of a man, with a thick, hairless tail swirling and twitching behind it. It was on par with the bats then, as far as what it took to kill it.
I was hit again, before I could revel in the victory. The hit struck the armor on my back, tearing some of it away, though I could tell the magic still held. There was a second rat, because of course there was, and as soon as I got to my feet, stumbling among the broken and bloody finger-hair, I began burning one of my precious unicorn bones.

I died not long after, from a hit that I couldn’t see coming, a rat that I could only assume was there. The unicorn’s power brought me back, as it had many times before.

I cut through the rats, one by one, looping through a handful of times so that I could find them, or so that I could dodge them. Each time I was hit, their location was revealed, even if I was killed, and the probability blade’s ability to take the perfect cutting angle made up for when my attacks were a little bit off. I got notifications from the game about skills hitting their caps, and tried my best to stay in the moment, burning through bones to keep myself alive, bones to keep my speed up, and bones to loop through a small window of time.

Eventually the unicorn bone lost integrity, and I allowed the loop to close, with another six of the rats dead in the space of a handful of seconds. I had no idea whether there were more or not, and I kept my sword in front of me, swinging it around like a lunatic, trying to nick one so that I could find it.

(The game notifications had been coming thick and fast, but they were a distraction, not worth the eyeballs they were printed on except to tell me when I’d killed a thing.)

[Coming down,] said Amaryllis.

I watched as Bethel flew overhead, her form about as small as it could be. Amaryllis appeared outside it and began dropping, slowing herself as she went, which answered the question about whether my companions would be able to use still magic through symbiosis. Raven and Pallida were next, with Valencia following quickly after, and then Bethel swung away, darting off through the sky at great speed.

“These rats are antimemetic,” I called to them as I burned END to heal myself. “You can’t perceive them, except indirectly, and not that much.” My sword, which I was still swinging, momentarily turned material, and I bounded forward, slicing through the air where it appeared to have hit. I was extraordinarily thankful that the effect was weak, and that I was still able to make inferences.

“We need to dig, now,” said Amaryllis. “Last wish was used. Bethel is to the winds.”

“Explosive stare,” said Raven. “If it gets desperate, it might use it on its own flesh.”

“Where’s Solace?” I asked. “Grak?”

“Solace is busy with triage,” said Amaryllis. “Grak is working on a ward weapon.”

“Fine,” I said. “Start digging. We need to get close enough to a bone.”

“I’ll be on killing the invisible rats,” said Pallida, randomly poking her trident through the air.

“Not invisible,” said Raven. “Unseeable. There’s a difference.”

“I can see them,” said Valencia. Her face was hidden by her red armor. “Must be magic, not information. They’re staying back.”

“Sure,” said Pallida, still poking her trident around, then swinging it in wide circles. “Just tell me where to poke.”
Clearing away the finger-hair was easy enough, if gruesome work. The ‘strands’ were just like fingers in almost every way, filled with bones and ligaments, with blood flowing through them. It wasn’t long before I was knee-deep in blood, in a pit that was four feet deep. I stabbed down with my probability blade and hit something hard as stone, and an experimental poke at it (the iron smell of very human blood making me very slightly nauseous as I stooped down) showed that I hadn’t made much more than a scratch.

“Raven,” I said. “Orb.”

The three seafoam green orbs appeared around her head, and with a thought, she set one of them straight down, through the pooled blood and into Mome Rath. I stood well back until she signaled that I was clear.

Mome Rath didn’t have a soul, not that I had been able to access, but he did have skin, blood, and per Bethel’s report, bones. I handed my probability blade to Amaryllis, then formed the Claret Spear, hesitating for only a moment before driving it straight down into Mome Rath.

I could feel my blood mingle with Mome Rath’s, and began applying the Bloodline effect immediately, reducing his PHY and my own at the same time. Five factor modifiers improved the bonus I could apply when our blood types were similar, and improved the malus when blood types were different. Mome Rath’s blood was barely blood, or maybe only blood because of the Six-Eyed virtue allowing me some leeway with definitions, but the upshot was that Mome Rath lurched beneath us.

“It’s working,” I said, though I was sure they didn’t need me to say it. “Guard me.”

I pushed my blood down deeper, trying to keep it directed, trying not to let it diffuse. I could feel myself getting lightheaded, and wished that I’d had the time to give myself a transfusion from the bags of my blood that were sitting back in Bethel. I could feel Mome Rath’s blood too, in with my own, distinct from it, pushing against me, and yet somehow I was still unable to feel his soul, if he even had one. Eventually the tendril of blood I had within him found what I had been searching for: his bones.

They were something like ribs, massive things that helped to hold his incredibly large structure together, even though he was an impossible creature of unbelievable proportions. I pushed my blood down rope-thick capillaries until I had latched firmly to the bone, then began to burn it for PHY as hard as I could.

**Achievement Unlocked: Stronk**

**Achievement Unlocked: Sanic the Hegehog**

**Achievement Unlocked: Unbreakable**

Burning someone’s bones didn’t directly hurt them. Maybe in another few months, Mome Rath would start feeling a bit ill, or if he was healing back, it would heal in wrong, but a burnt through bone was entirely survivable, if it was just one. The real point wasn’t that though, it was what I got from it, which was an absolutely enormous amount of PHY. I could feel myself become stronger, tougher, faster, and my perception of time became so warped that I was actually able to see the counterattack coming.

Mome Rath’s head rose up, his many eyes and mouths swinging around on a sinuous, snakelike neck, the only thing moving in a world that was, to my eyes, standing still. Raven must have seen my eyes widen, because she turned too: her entad allowed her to be boosted by the enormous power that
I was burning from Mome Rath’s bone. I pushed the extra PHY I’d boosted off the bone down the bloodline, attacking Mome Rath with its own power, then pushed still magic after, trying to stop him. He slowed, but not enough.

I activated Prince’s Invulnerability as quickly as I could, which shot golden spears of light at Pallida, Amaryllis, and Raven. I had tried to include Valencia too, but she wasn’t what the spell considered a person, and the magic didn’t even make an abortive attempt. I began burning my last unicorn bone at once, dividing my focus again.

Mome Rath’s eyes lit up, all of them, all at once, and the world exploded around us.

Prince’s Invulnerability made us and our equipment inviolable, just like the Li’o Temple was, immune to any damage whatsoever for the entirety of its six seconds. It was expensive, military-grade stuff, the kind of spell that a tattoo mage usually kept in his back pocket and never used because it was too hard to replace. There were entads that offered varying levels of protection to their bearers, but almost all of them had limits, limits which didn’t apply to Prince’s Invulnerability. It could even stop void, though the mechanism was unclear.

Unfortunately, it didn’t stop movement. I was blown from Mome Rath’s back, my body twisted by the blast just to the point of being mildly uncomfortable and no more. I was twirling so quickly that my brain would probably have been smeared around the inside of my skull, had Prince’s Invulnerability not protected against that. I couldn’t see anything but blinding white until I was well clear of Mome Rath, and even then, everything was whipping around so fast that I couldn’t make sense of it until I’d applied still magic to stop my rapid rotation.

Mome Rath had blown a hole in his own back, leaving a crater whose ejecta was still flying through the air, myself included. Maybe the damage was worse because I’d been feeding his own END back to him as a malus, reducing his ability to take the hit, but it was a terrible, ugly wound that had left him reeling and wobbling on dozens of unsteady legs. Enormous bones were fully exposed and blood was dripping down by the barrel, sloshing out of him. He had some kind of healing power, I knew that much, but I honestly wasn’t sure that he would be able to come back from what he’d done.

I let myself be pulled back by the unicorn magic, back to that frozen moment when I temporarily had the stats of a demigod. I moved to Valencia and grabbed her by the arm, but I had no idea how I was going to save her. The explosion hit again, and I was wrenched away, but I had been been gripping her tightly, tightly enough that I managed to hold onto her arm, but it was just her arm, the only part of her that Prince’s Invulnerability seemed to consider part of my equipment. The rest of her had been vaporized, the overwhelming power of the explosion obliterating the Red Armor of Arramor and Valencia along with it.

I reset again and ran at her, this time trying to use the Ring of Upward Bliss, but trying to tap it three times as I darted toward her at speed simply wasn’t doable, not with how comparatively slow the ring was to respond, not even with how insanely high my SPD was, and she was vaporized before I finished.

I tried using the Ring of Partial Incorporeality on her, but it wouldn’t extend that far beyond me, and when I was blown free of Mome Rath and got my bearings, I saw that I was holding just her upper half, the rest of her vaporized from the waist down.

I was running out of options.

I went into my soul and began making sacrifices. I had no idea whether they would hold through the small loop or not, but my memories did, and I hoped that was a good sign.
I dumped all 30 points of Library Magic, 21 points in Improvised Weapons, 21 points in Dual Wield, and another 9 from Debate. All 81 got funneled into Still Magic. When I opened my eyes I was spinning, and I didn’t bother to stop myself, I just reset, hoping that the changes to my soul would carry through, because if they didn’t, then it was very likely that Valencia was done for. The unicorn bone was degrading, and I didn’t know how many attempts I would get.

I rushed over to her, putting my full speed into it, and wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight and desperately stilling both of us with all my might. The explosion wasn’t blinding this time: I could feel the light and heat hitting us, stilled before they could do anything. I was low on blood, having lost the Claret Spear, and feeling faint, but as the force of the explosion died down around us, I felt a wave of relief. Valencia was still in my arms, still whole.

“Are you okay?” I asked, as soon as I’d let up on the stilling. I had worried that I would accidentally stop her heart, or the electrical activity in her brain, but she hadn’t gone limp. I kept us stilled in midair, just above the crater of flesh, as Mome Rath swayed beneath us.

“Yes,” she replied. “What happened?”

“Explosion,” I said. “Unicorn powers. You died a few times.” I paused, looking beneath us for a moment, then allowing us to drop. “You need to leave.” I looked up for a moment. “Amaryllis?”

There was no response.

I was standing with Valencia in the crater of flesh and bone, looking around me. Mome Rath’s head was nowhere to be seen, not beyond the crater wall. I had no idea how often he could use that explosive vision, but given that he hadn’t used it against Bethel the first time they fought, and wasn’t using it against the populace, I was hopeful that I had a minute.

I climbed over the torn flesh, which was already knitting itself, until I could get to a place where I was touching two of the bones at once.

“Steel yourself,” I said to Valencia.

I was feeling woozy, but I made another Claret Spear and jammed it down, not having to go terribly far to mingle my blood with Mome Rath’s. Then I reached out with both hands and began to pull on the bones, hard, draining them of PHY, funneling all of that power into the bloodline, using Mome Rath’s own monstrous strength against him. I was surely sending him into the negatives, which, per Reimer, should have meant that he would be trivial to kill, or possibly dead as a result.

I was about to ask Valencia to start stabbing at Mome Rath, given that he should have been pitifully weak, but before I could, I saw Bethel rising into the air, close by us, the shockwave of her passage through Mome Rath felt only afterward.

*Mome Rath, the Forgotten, defeated!*

*Achivement Unlocked: More like Wuss Lord, amiright?*

*Level Up!*

*Quest Complete: Mome Rath, the Forgotten - Mome Rath has fallen, his corpse evermore a record of his existence. (This quest cannot be repeated if another Mome Rath is summoned from beyond space and time.)*

*Level Up!*
I felt nothing from the level ups.

Mome Rath lurched beneath us and began to fall in slow motion, his bulk surely destroying buildings and killing people below him. I grabbed onto Valencia and stilled our motion, which wasn’t necessary for long, as Bethel scooped us up shortly afterward.

Ten seconds after the ropes had grabbed us, we were inside of Bethel, in her command room. Grak was there, but Solace was missing.

“Amaryllis?” I asked. “It’s dead. I’m going radio silence, talk to me if you have a location. Hopefully you made it out okay. Bethel can come grab you.”

There was no immediate response from her. Prince’s Invulnerability or no, the explosion had blasted us all apart from each other, and six seconds wasn’t enough to fall to the ground even without any upward force from the explosion. Amaryllis had the immobility plate, which meant that she was the best able to survive something like that. Whatever she was dealing with, I hoped that she was fine.

“Scan for Pallida and Raven,” I said. “I’m hoping that they survived.”

“They might not have?” asked Valencia, looking at me with wide eyes. She’d taken her helmet off, revealing a sweaty face, with hair stuck to it.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The physics isn’t strongly in their favor. Raven has her cloak, which might help her break her fall, but Pallida … I don’t know.”

I looked around the room, until my eyes fell on Grak, who was sitting down and looking off into the distance. I went over to him. “Are you okay?” I asked. “Where’s Solace?”

“She’s tending to the wounded,” said Grak. He swallowed. “I failed you.”

“You did?” I asked.

“I was preparing a warded weapon,” he said. “I wasn’t fast enough.”

“It worked out,” I said. I paused briefly. “You can do that? A ward anchored to some object? I mean, I knew that it was possible in theory, but I hadn’t realized that your warding had gotten good enough.”

“It’s not,” said Grak. “Clearly.”

I sat down beside him and patted him on the shoulder. “It’s fine,” I said. “Our work is far from done, and your expertise has been invaluable. I also got three level ups today, so if you weren’t able to do it ten minutes ago, that might have changed.”


“One for Harold, two for Mome Rath,” I said. “Probably because they were both threats far beyond my level.” I shrugged, though I was still wired from the feeling of victory. “It worked out. Should make things easier in the future. Actually, wait.”

I closed my eyes for three seconds and then went looking at my virtues. I had been busy, but as soon as I had defeated Mome Rath, I should have gone looking for them. I had overloaded Still Magic in order to save Valencia, which would let me know what the remaining virtues were, as well as confirm that Reimer was right about what lay ahead.
**Instinctive Halting:** So long as you’re not stilling beyond your capacity, still magic will be applied automatically to any and all effects when it would be beneficial to you. For more information on intent and volition, see LUK rules. This effect applies only when you are conscious.

That one Reimer had known, and normal still mages got something like it, which allowed them to stop incoming bullets even if they didn’t know what direction they were coming from (for example). In their games, still mages were mostly tanks, though they didn’t have any way of taking aggro.

**Partial Stilling:** Removes the penalty for attempting to still a single part of an object. Doubles the damage dealt to objects by stopping or slowing only half of them.

And that was what I would mostly consider a whiff, especially since it seemed to be the virtue for level 60. It had a handful of immediately obvious combat applications, so long as my target was moving, but still magic already excelled at close-quarters combat, and the additional bonus seemed minimal. If this was what the Aerb version of Juniper had come up with, well … Reimer seemed to have a dim view of how the game was balanced, and I was in at least partial agreement.

**Still Soul:** You can still any changes to your soul, including natural ones. When contesting an entad, roll against its i-level with a multiplier for reasonableness. When contesting a skill use, follow normal contest rules. For other cases, consult your Dungeon Master.

This was the one that I had highly expected to be the capstone. It was a known ability of a few best-in-their-generation still mages, and allowed not only an effective halt to aging, but immunity from all but the most powerful of soul mages. It was really, really good, but it was apparently available at level 80, not level 100.

**Meta Stilling:** You can still any game effect with a duration.

And there it was, the capstone of still magic. There were very few game effects with durations, at least so far as the revealed text went, and I would have to touch base with Reimer to see whether there was anything he’d failed to mention, but there were at least three that I was currently under: the Skilled Trade, Overcapped, and Double Overcapped afflictions were gradually reducing my bonus to Still Magic.

Or rather, they would have been, except that Instinctive Halting apparently worked with Meta Stilling, and was already holding Still Magic steady. So far as I could tell, I would have Still Magic maxed out for as long as I stayed conscious, which meant that the sacrifice I’d done to save Valencia would keep paying dividends for the rest of the day, or maybe longer, if I could get a copy of Kenner’s Eye.

“I’m getting a message,” said Bethel, frowning slightly.

“Amaryllis?” I asked again. I still hadn’t heard anything over Parson’s Voice, and I was trying not to get myself worked up over it. Bethel was looking, and there was very little that I could do. She had the means to survive. Raven did too. Pallida … we would cross that bridge when we came to it. I had been a bit put out by Heshnel fleeing, but now I was grateful that he’d been spared the danger.

“No,” said Bethel. “There’s an entad that I was forced to synthesize with, the sending slate. It was a paired entad, for communication. The other half was supposedly broken, but now it appears that’s not the case.”

“Oh,” I said. “Who has the other end? What’s the message?”

“Figaro Finch,” said Bethel. “He wants to talk.”
“Alright,” I said. “Can you, uh, project the messages or something?”

“He wants to talk in person,” said Bethel. “One moment, he just gave me an address.”

“He’s here?” I asked. “In Li’o?”

“Five hundred feet away,” said Bethel. “Now, zero.”

“The hells?” I asked.

Ten seconds later, Figaro Finch was standing in the command room with us, presumably snatched up by a rope and deposited there by Bethel. He seemed unperturbed by the sudden change in scenery. He came with friends, or at least people who Bethel had snatched up, all of them wearing Imperial-standard shimmerplate. Four of them were gimmals, a one-armed race with no mouth, eyes, ears, or nose (they sensed, ate, and manipulated gravity). The other was a woman with two small horns and light purple-red skin. I was shocked to realize that I knew her; it was Malus Lartin, my erstwhile ethics professor.

“What in the holy fuck are you doing here?” I asked.

“It’s business, not pleasure,” said Figaro Finch. I’d forgotten how short gnomes were. He was the only one of them in a suit rather than armor, which seemed like a terrible idea to me. “Now that the big guy has been taken down, we need to talk next steps. Harold is still here, in this city, and this time, he’s not running. We need your help.”
Raven felt an overwhelming rush of sheer physicality as Juniper began to burn through the giant monster’s bone, a sensation doubtlessly provided by the Anklet of Reactive Radiance. It was raw physical power, an immense amount of it, whose like she’d only felt perhaps a dozen times before (Uther’s many adventures being what they were). She saw Juniper darting forward, to Valencia, the only one of them not covered in Prince’s Invulnerability, and knew that disaster was incoming. With a fine instinct honed by decades of adventuring, Raven moved without thinking, toward Pallida, who was standing stock-still.

Raven grabbed Pallida’s arm, then took a stretched-out, glacially slow moment to look around and see what it was that Juniper was responding to. Her eyes found the enormous head of Mome Rath, his hundreds of eyes, his serpentine neck, and a look she dimly recognized as anger. The eyes lit up, the world exploded around her.

She kept her tight grip on Pallida, helped, perhaps, by the bone that Juniper was burning, or by the fact that Prince’s Invulnerability wouldn’t allow a tight grip to be undone if it would require such wrenching force that the protected individual might be hurt. The two of them went flying through the air, and Raven tried to keep her eyes open, alert to the world around her. In her experience, it was far too easy to go into pure reaction at a time like this, which was normally fine, if you were in a situation that you were trained for. When in the great wild worlds of adventure though, instincts couldn’t always be trusted, because sometimes they would lead down the wrong path. It meant balancing on a knife’s edge sometimes, trusting instinct because that was the only way you’d be able to respond fast enough, and keeping alert enough that instinct could be overridden.

They arced through the air and then began to fall. Raven felt it when Prince’s Invulnerability wore off, as the winds suddenly began to buffet them hard enough to hurt, and bits of detritus pinged against her armor. They had been spinning, but her cape had stretched itself out to put an end to that, because her Shadow’s Cloak was a good, loyal entad, one that often acted on its own when there were threats against Raven.

“We’re falling,” said Pallida, quite uselessly. She was shouting to be heard over the wind of their descent. “Don’t let go.”

“I won’t,” replied Raven. The thought hadn’t even crossed her mind. She looked behind her, at her cloak, which was doing its best to slow their fall. “Landing will be hard.” It was unlikely that they were going to die, but it wasn’t going to be the cushioned landing that a tattoo could have provided.

Uther had Thoughts about falling as a method of injury or death, as Uther had Thoughts about almost everything. Uther had thrown one of his early enemies from the top of a castle, back in the era of the Dark King, only to have learned later that same day that there existed a simple but expensive spell that might have been tattooed on him. Uther hadn’t quite flown into a rage, but he had castigated a young Everett for not knowing about it, and when the ensuing manhunt produced nothing, it had meant a long chain of events that eventually ended with the villain getting his head stomped in by a giant. After that whole affair had reached its conclusion, Uther had declared that anyone worth their salt would survive a fall, no matter how fatal and unrecoverable it seemed to be. It wasn’t quite the first instance of narrative thinking, but it was a rather stark one.

And then, much later on, when the normally circumspect and secretive Uther had progressed to becoming nearly impossible to talk to, after Vervain had died (or been killed, whichever way one chose to phrase it), it was then that Uther changed his tune. When heinous individuals came to his attention, the kind that he could kill with a snap of his fingers, he became more elaborate about their
deaths, less direct. The practice of trial by adversity dated to long before Uther, but he had brought it back, a tradition used in place of an execution. He sometimes said that he liked for someone to be able to prove themselves worthwhile, but it was a twisted form of worthiness. Half the time, he would sit them down for a talk afterward about how they had survived, and what they might accomplish. Memorably, Uther had thrown a thief from the top of a tower and declared it a trial by adversity after the fact.

In retrospect, perhaps that was his views on narrative taking hold. He had gone from being irate that a villain had escaped, to actively encouraging escape, knowing that there was some margin for error in these methods, a way of creating plot threads from nothing. Raven had read through *Degenerate Cycles*, his last real book, but she hadn’t fully put the pieces together until she was falling through the air.

Midway down, Raven had a rush of memories, all brief, all recent, all laid on top of each other, with Juniper the only variable. He had used a unicorn bone, it seemed, attempting to save Valencia from the might of Mome Rath.

They hit the ground one after the other, Pallida first, Raven second, both rolling to redirect their momentum, both standing up and stretching out to make sure that they weren’t too injured.

“Just like the good old days, isn’t it?” asked Pallida, looking up at the colossal body of Mome Rath, still standing, but swaying slightly. “Probably too much to hope that’s a lethal hit.”

“It wouldn’t have killed itself,” said Raven, staring up, trying futilely to get some understanding of what had happened.

“Healed back most of what Bethel did,” said Pallida with a nod. “Prince’s saved us?”

“Yes,” said Raven.

“Acceptable use of my funds, I suppose,” said Pallida with a sniff.

They watched as Bethel zipped through the sky, fully enlarged. Another counterattack from Mome Rath was a possibility, and she was all out of wishes. How many thousands were inside of her now? How many of them civilians?

After Uther had gone, Raven had gotten used to casualties, to hard choices, to operating without a safety net: that was what being the Head Librarix had entailed. It was tempting, now that she knew who Juniper was, to fall back into the old habit she’d had, the one where she consoled herself that Uther would fix things, that he would win, as he always did … but that was Uther’s unique brand of magic, and if it was ever to be true for Juniper, Raven couldn’t see it just yet. With Juniper, there was a chance he could fail.

Bethel sliced through Mome Rath, moving as fast as she could, the anticipated counterattack never coming. When she came out the other side, the spray of flesh and blood was visible from the ground.

“He was burning its bones,” said Raven. “I think that might have been --”

Mome Rath lurched as its many knees gave out beneath it. The creature was so big it appeared to be falling in slow motion, the alarming kind of way that very large things sometimes moved, so full of energy that a shockwave was surely coming, or if not that, then at least death and destruction for people close by. Raven had seen mountains lurch, oceans briefly rise into the sky, and in one case, watched a floating island drop to the ground. Mome Rath falling down wasn’t so serious a problem as those, but it was nonetheless breathtaking in the way those things had been. It crashed to the
ground and sent a fierce wind their way, one strong enough that Raven had to strain against the wind.

“The deathblow, yeah,” said Pallida. “Good on our boy.”

Raven stayed silent, waiting for the creature to rise. When it failed to, she let out the breath she’d been holding in. “Without our help.”

“More or less,” said Pallida with a nod. “That’s always how it was in the old days, wasn’t it?”

Raven looked at her. “I don’t want to talk about the old days.”

“Don’t you?” asked Pallida. “I’ll grant that I wasn’t there for as much of them as you were, nor do I remember them as well, given a lot of my involvement was when I was younger or older, but my recollection was that you loved to talk about the old days, back when the adventures were fresh. And even now, when we have the big meetings, it’s practically the only thing out of your mouth."

“I don’t want to fight,” said Raven.

“Who’s looking to fight?” asked Pallida. She swung her trident around for a moment, gazing at the tip, then planted the butt of it in the soft earth. They were standing in what was probably a small park, with bits of flesh and gore around them.

“You’re always looking to fight,” said Raven. “Always on the defensive, always looking to get your jabs in. You weren’t always like this.”

“Eh,” said Pallida. She looked around. “Do you think they’ll pick us up?”

“I don’t know,” said Raven.

They sat in awkward silence for a moment. Raven’s cloak fluttered behind her, in a wind of its own, patiently waiting to be useful.

“It’s always easier to be nice and good when things are going your way,” Pallida finally said. “Maybe I’m not, in this lifetime, but there were times when I was the best thief in the world, the best of anyone at infiltration, exfiltration, recovery of goods, I was an explorer of forbidden places, a spy, a saboteur … and the thing was, when that was who I was, it was always easy to just be cock of the walk, to let my deeds speak for themselves, but when I’ve got a life like this, and people ask me what I’ve done lately, and all I have to answer with is that I haven’t, I’ve just been sitting around waiting for various things, living off the largesse of past lives … I don’t expect you to understand.”

“You feel worthless,” said Raven. “Worthless and small, like you don’t stack up to others.” She looked at the corpse of Mome Rath. There had been creatures on it. It was probably too hopeful to think that they were all dead. Maybe mopping up would be her role in this. She grimaced.

“Yeah,” said Pallida.

“What was your excuse, five hundred years ago?” asked Raven. “You had deeds to your name, at fifteen. Uther had sent you on a half dozen missions that he couldn’t have accomplished by himself, the three of us,” she choked up slightly. “We had our own adventures, separate from him. We had done things. Maybe not so much as Uther had, but in any other age, we’d have been legends, we were legends in our own right. You didn’t have an excuse.”

“We were in love, Raven,” said Pallida. She’d been keeping her inky armor down, so that her pink skin was visible, face clear, but she turned away and let the armor cover her fully. “Seventeen
hundred years and you’ve never been in love? Never felt that pull toward another person? It’s not
some *excuse*, it’s -- how could you deny it, if you’d felt what I felt? How could you fault someone
for rushing headlong into a bad decision?”

Raven stayed silent. It was the season for old wounds, it seemed. In more than a hundred years at the
Infinite Library, she had eventually come to think of Uther only once or twice a day, and then
usually when he was relevant to their ongoing work. Granted, that was often, but nothing like it was
now among the Council of Arches, with people who had known Uther personally. And there was
Arthur, and old stories from Juniper, with new context brought to his adventures, new tidbits that
were either mentioned in Amaryllis’ notes or brought up directly by Juniper. If Uther *was* Arthur,
then so many of the things that Uther had seen on Aerb were echoes of the games he’d played.

There had been one too many unpleasant trips down memory lane.

“The worst part,” began Raven. “The worst part about your relationship with Dahlia was that it left
me out in the cold. I had kept wondering why the two of you were doing things without me, why we
had lost that sisterly solidarity. I would come back to camp needing someone to talk to about the
horrors I’d seen, or if not that, then at least someone to be there for me, someone to distract me, or
take my mind off what I’d seen. And you weren’t, neither of you, because you had cut me out of
your lives.”

Pallida looked off at the horizon and twirled her trident for a moment. “Yeah,” she said.

“Yeah?” asked Raven.

“What do you want me to say?” asked Pallida. “We were shitty friends. I should have told you that I
had a thing for Helio, I should have told you when we first kissed, I should have let all the petty
drama of it wash over you so that you could forget about the stench of death or the feel of someone
dying in your arms, I just … I wanted something for myself, something that I didn’t have to share.
And look, it’s lifetimes ago, barely remembered. I have a policy of not apologizing for things that
happened in past lives, because if I was going to do that, I would have to apologize for, I don’t
know, everything under the sun. I’m sorry. It’s a mealy-mouthed apology, because I’m not even
saying that I wouldn’t do it again, but maybe I would try harder to puzzle out a way through that
mess, if -- incoming.”

Giant bats were flying toward them, with razor sharp fangs, not quite so many of them as to
constitute a cloud, but enough that they were an identifiable mass.

At least that was a problem that would be easier to deal with than the personal.

“What the fuck, Finch?” I asked. “You came here ahead of Mome Rath?”

“Who?” asked Finch, raising an eyebrow.

“Mome Rath,” I said. “The big thing with a hundred legs that I just put down?”

“We don’t have time for this,” said Finch. He looked past me, to where Bethel was standing.
“Bethel, are we going to be stationary for a while?”

“We can be,” said Bethel with a nod. “There are still dead and wounded all over the place, including
lying under the enormous corpse. Better that you make things quick. You’re thinking of employing
the time out?”
“I am,” nodded Finch. He signaled to one of the gimmals standing behind him, using a quick gestural language that only used one hand. I watched closely, hoping to acquire it, but had no immediate luck. “Who’s going to be in it?” he asked.

“You, myself, Valencia, Malus, if that’s her name,” I said. “The gimmals too, if they have something to contribute. Bethel will be part of it, if she’s able, but I’m doubtful.”

Finch nodded, then signed more to one of the gimmal, which still didn’t trigger a ping for me, despite my active will. A one-handed sign language would be handy, even if the gimmal language was sure to have some peculiarities to it given their gravity sense and the fact they only had one arm. The gimmal responded to Finch’s signs by holding his hand forward, then moving himself around in a small circle, roughly ten feet wide. As he went, his hand began glowing blue, building in intensity and covering more of his arm, until it was glowing through the seams in the shimmerplate. I stepped inside it without being asked to; I had seen the spell used once before, back in Silmar City, under extremely different circumstances. When the spell was completed, we were cast into darkness.

“Alright,” I said as I lit my hand up. “Now we should have time.”

(I should note that at this point, I had been awake for something like a hundred and seventy hours, which included the Spelunker’s Stroll, two fights with Harold, dissociative meditation, another fight against three people who’d been sent to kill me, and all the business with Mome Rath. I had leveled up, which was a convenient cure for almost everything that ailed me, but it was still a very long time to be awake, and I was starting to feel the drag of it. I’d opted not to get Kenner’s Eye when we’d been tattoo shopping, something that I was deeply regretting now, given that Still Magic was sitting stock still at just above 100 points until the next time I slept. I wasn’t tired, but I was wanting for sleep.)

“Tell me what the fuck is going on,” said Finch.

“Fucking you first,” I said with an exasperated sigh.

“May I?” asked Valencia. She looked intimidating in the torchlight of my hand, spiked red armor and crown of thorns giving her a particularly savage look.

“Sure,” I said.

“Malus Lartin was a deep cover operative placed as a teacher at Sound and Silence by the Empire of Common Cause under the direction of Uniquities.” That much, at least, I had figured out, but I doubted that I would get any credit for catching on after she’d shown up in shimmerplate. “Her role was to write covert reports on what was happening here, as well as to be a first responder in the event of some emergency that the magocracy couldn’t or wouldn’t handle. That’s all in addition to other, less defensible covert missions that Uniquities would sometimes send her on as part of their attempts at wrangling power across Aerb.”

“She cheats,” Finch said to Malus, who was looking at Valencia with alarm.

“Be that as it may,” said Valencia. “At some point in the past six months, Malus -- that is her real name, by the way -- realized that something was happening, and sent back a report -- a series of reports -- which eventually found their way to Finch. Based on what I know of how Uniquities operates, Finch was read in on Malus and they began trying to gain more information about what was happening. Threat level would have been low enough at that point that it would be handled through cryptographically secure express mail. Eventually, the threat level was raised, at which point Finch decided that he needed -- wait, no.”
She had been watching Finch in the dim light of my flaming hand. “Got something?” I asked.

“Finch knows more than the last time I looked at him,” said Valencia. She turned to me. “Or maybe I just wasn’t looking closely enough.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “What does he know?”

“Uther was unique,” said Valencia. “Maybe the most unique individual in the entire history of Aerb. Our recent friends weren’t the only ones who noticed that. They weren’t the only ones who made plans, in the event that someone else like him came along.” She looked back at Finch. “I’m … not sure exactly when Juniper got flagged.”

“He’s confirmed now,” said Finch. “Or as close to confirmed as we think we’re going to get.”

“And that’s why you sent me in,” I said. “Without so much as a whiff of information or support.”

“No support?” asked Finch. “You had a seasoned veteran of Uniquities and one of the deadliest vibration mages on the plane, and in theory, you’d have had Malus too. You had your own team. And besides all that, you weren’t even supposed to be doing anything, you were deniable backup in case things went pear-shaped, off accomplishing your own goals that I’d fervently hoped wouldn’t intersect with those of Uniquities.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “And how did that turn out?”

“We don’t know,” said Finch. “Because like I said, Harold is still out there, and I’ve got a newflash for you, we still need to get him.”

“Harold, an entity that you told me fucking nothing about,” I said.

“Harold, who I didn’t know about until you went to that meditation class,” said Finch. “So there was no way I could have told you, even if I’d wanted to. And once you were exposed, you and yours were suspect, because there’s no way to tell whether or not Harold’s got to someone.”

“Tell me what you know,” I said. “If you want my help going after him, I need more than that stale report that Oberlin gave me. Finch, we sent you an emergency letter and you stonewalled us.”

Finch stared at me. “We don’t know how Harold works,” he said. “It’s something like soul magic, but the anolia can’t pick up on it, and there are no other methods we know of to detect it. Harold changes people. So far as we can tell, he can do small, subtle changes to one of them at a time, or big, ham-fisted changes to all of them at once. Did you happen to catch the makeshift choir out there?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Big, ham-fisted changes,” said Finch. “But now that the big guy was summoned, you might have noticed that the choir has stopped, and all the people singing their little one-note song have returned to whatever it was they were doing.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said. “I was dealing with bigger things.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Finch. “But the people Harold has his hooks into are to the winds now, capable of being steered by him at any moment, so long as both he and they stay in Li’o. And given that Harold is who he is, he’s going to use them again, more aggressively this time, and my best guess right now is that he’s going to summon another one of those things that you’re so proud of having killed.”
I almost, almost said something boastful and dumb like ‘well then I’ll just kill the second, and the third’, but I wasn’t so awash in my victory that I could forget the sheer destruction that Mome Rath had brought down on Li’o and the athenaeum. When his body had come down, it had flattened buildings, and before that, he had been doing targeted destruction. Li’o might recover, eventually, but I had no idea what the death toll was sitting at. More worryingly, the hells toll was also probably pretty high, given how total the destruction was, and how difficult it would be to get to some of the bodies.

“And who is he?” I asked. “What does Harold actually want? I’ve heard what he had to say, but it was, frankly, nonsense.”

“You talked to him through one of his puppets?” asked Finch.

“No,” I said. “I talked to him when he tried to get in my head. It didn’t take.”

“Then you know a thousand hells more than I do,” said Finch. “I spoke with him once, shortly before he was ported out. Seemed like a snot to me, typical end-of-the-world cultist but with a heap more power behind him, grabbing onto someone’s head to force out words. Tried to recruit me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too. He talked about the World Lords, which Mome Rath seemed to be one of, and told me that he was trying to bring about the end of the world. Not sure how he thought Mome Rath was going to do that.”

“What’s a World Lord?” asked Valencia, staring hard at Finch. I briefly looked at Malus, who had her eyes fixed on Finch.

“Really starting to not like you very much,” said Finch, frowning at Valencia. “Fine. One of Uniquities’ many duties is containing the World Lords. If three of them get out at any given time, it’s supposedly game over for Aerb and every plane with even a remote attachment to it, hells included. No real details on the mechanism, and obviously no proof that’s true. The identity and nature of the World Lords is classified beyond belief, and most of it is guesswork, but there’s already one of them, living in an exclusion zone.”

“Fel Seed,” I said.

Finch stared at me. “Not a lucky guess?” he asked.


“Why?” asked Finch, raising an eyebrow.

“If you go more than a mile from him, you forget about him,” I said. “Can’t think about him, can’t remember him, probably some other stuff, none of it confirmed too well, but I’m pretty confident in it. I’m pretty sure we’ll be able to remember the corpse, but maybe not even that if another is summoned. He seemed intent on destroying the city, but if you’re right, then maybe the worst case would be that he went off into the countryside where everyone would forget about him. And then we would be one World Lord away from total destruction. If you’re right.”

“So you’ll help?” asked Finch.

“I was always going to help,” I said.

Finch had some stories about Harold, told as quickly as they could be, before our limited supply of
oxygen ran out. Valencia interjected a few times, when he was being loose with the truth, and sometimes he would correct himself, while other times he would mutter something about classifications or information hygiene, then continue on.

Harold had been a thorn in Uniquities’ side for a long time, and building information on him had been difficult. It had been as Oberlin said, little hints and clues here and there, the motif of the flaming man appearing incidentally in various, seemingly unconnected places. Every time there was some evidence of Harold, it was more information added to the pile, more information about how he operated, who he was, what he wanted, and what his limits were.

In brief, Harold operated like a more powerful soul mage, one that anolia couldn’t detect, and one that could operate without needing touch. His modus operandi appeared to be infiltrating or co-opting cults of various persuasions until they were working towards his goals, which very much appeared to be the end of the world, though the justifications for it by cult adherents varied, leaving Harold himself somewhat opaque. Like many soul mages, Harold had a solid core of carefully cultivated and meticulously sculpted supporters, people who moved around with him when he inevitably fled from one failed attempt at ending the world to the other.

There were a few scary things about Harold, from Finch’s perspective. The first was that he left virtually no trace of himself. When he bugged out, he bugged out hard, completely ditching whatever project had been in the works. Since his normal mode of operation was to not have anyone actually know that he was there, there was very little sign when he left. Second, his geographic range appeared to be pretty damned big, all things considered, which meant that he could potentially settle in with a cult that was on the other side of the city from the place where he was physically present, which in turn meant even less sign of him. And third, maybe most importantly, Harold never stopped. There was no gap in his activity whatsoever: as soon as he’d fled from one failed plan, he was on to the next, starting the same day, if that was feasible. He didn’t take breaks, and he didn’t seem to have needs, or at least not anything that would slow him down. He was just incredibly bloody-minded about the whole world ending thing.

Fortunately, Harold didn’t seem to be very smart. He didn’t tend to iterate on plans that were inches away from working, and he very rarely aimed at local destruction of any kind, nor did he put much effort into weakening the institutions or people that were constantly trying to stop him. That wasn’t to say that he lacked a faculty for long-term planning, but there were ways in which his various plots to destroy the world could have been enormously improved by having a human advisor.

“He used to run at the first sign of trouble,” said Finch. “That he’s not doing that now should be incredibly concerning to everyone. Maybe he knows that he’s blown, maybe he’s reached some critical mass of people, maybe he’s finally taking the advice of someone smarter than him, I have no idea, but if thousands of singers were enough to summon the big guy, what’s to say that he can’t do it again?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Or, maybe just the total number of people he’s got available.”

“And if I were Harold, I would be building back up to full strength,” said Finch. “He can work on anyone with a sufficient disconnect from reality, and if he does have a mortal advisor, they probably would have told him to do some things that he should have done years ago. Putting drugs into the tap water, kidnapping people and forcing them into altered states, all kinds of things. We’re pretty sure that he’s rate limited in what he’s able to do, but --”

“How do you know?” asked Valencia.

“What do you mean?” asked Finch.
“You’re uncertain that it’s true,” said Valencia. “I wanted to know what led you to that conclusion.”

“We fought him,” said Finch. “Last time he tried some shit like this, he got close, close enough that we were breaking down doors in order to stop the ritual-in-progress. It wasn’t the singing, it was some other attack on the world, rune magic, near the Lexian forge. As we went in, we were facing down singular threats, one after the other, low-tier mages, sometimes twos and threes, but usually not. The clairvoyance team assigned to the operation said it was a sudden change, individuals called to action. Could be something else, but yes, our after-action analysis was that he was turning them into soldiers, one by one, as quickly as he could.”

“All shit you could have told me before I went to S&S,” I said.

“Again,” huffed Finch. “I didn’t know that it was Harold until you found out that it was. And there was no way that I was bringing you in on this, not when it’s so far outside of your demonstrated training and abilities.”

“It’s also against protocol,” said Valencia. She turned to me. “If they thought you were the next Uther, they would keep you at arm’s length, because institutions rarely survived contact with Uther untouched.”

“Yeah, if he were here, he would tear Uniquities to the ground, no doubt,” I said. “Deep cover agents working against the athenaeum, ill-considered nation-building projects, subverting international diplomacy and the rule of law, operating outside the purview of the consent of the governed? Doesn’t seem like the kind of thing that he’d let stand.”

“Uther was no saint,” said Finch.

“I know,” I said. “But I’m probably more familiar with his biography than you are.”

Finch snorted. “I very much doubt that,” he replied.

It wasn’t really the time for retorts, so I let it drop. “Point being, if we’re going to be working together on this Harold thing, I need to know that you’re not keeping anything from me.”

“There are things that I know that would literally melt your brain,” said Finch. He tapped the side of his head. “There are things in this mind that would make the very world scream in agony. You literally can’t know everything that I know.”

“Fine,” I said. “Infohazards and other memetic threats aside then. We’re on the level?”

“As much as we need to be,” nodded Finch, which seemed like about as much assurance as I was going to get from him.

“He doesn’t trust you,” said Valencia. “But he trusts you enough that you should be able to accomplish this together.” She looked at me. “He’s on the side of good.”

“Good,” I said. “Then we should get out of this bubble and go track him down. I assume you have a way to do that?”

Finch shifted uncomfortably. “Yes,” he said.

“He’s consulting with Doris Finch,” said Valencia.

“How in the hells did you know that?” asked Finch, staring at her. “I can buy that you have powers, incredible powers, but I’m not that transparent, your special ability doesn’t make you that good at
connecting the dots.”

“Special ability?” asked Malus, looking between us.

“Long story,” I said. “Finch, you’re using Doris’ probabilistic vision thing?”

Finch grit his teeth, then nodded.

“And it can help us to find Harold?” I asked.

Finch nodded again.

“One of his cultivated associates, actually,” said Valencia. Finch gave her a nasty look. “In the interests of disclosure.”

“Fine,” I said. “We can have a long conversation about all that at a later date, so long as Doris is willing to play ball.”

Finch grunted once, then gave a quick gesture to the gimmal who had cast the spell. The blackness around us dropped, and I was back in the command room again.

“Need me to kill him?” asked Bethel.

“No,” I said. “Finch, do you have coordinates?”

“I have a spread,” said Finch. “One second.”

“Oh, allow me,” said Bethel. She splayed out a hand to her left, and just within the bounding box of her illusion, a map of the city of Li’o appeared, with a section of it colored in like a heatmap, red in one particular building, with orange surrounding it, the whole block in yellow, and everything else in blue. “I can have you there in twenty seconds.”

“The people Harold has are his captives,” I said. “I’d really prefer to keep them all alive, if possible.”

Bethel gave me a slight frown. <Can you do this without me?>

<Yes,> I said, hesitating only slightly. <If we have to. Not feeling up to it?>

<Are you trying to goad me?> asked Bethel, her tone quizzical.

<No,> I replied. <Just wondering. I know you’ve been operating outside your normal parameters.>

<I’m not a robot, Juniper,> replied Bethel. <But yes, I have thousands of strangers inside of me at the moment. I’m trying to track and watch them all. It’s unpleasant.>

“Everything okay?” asked Finch as Bethel and I carried on our silent conversation.

“Perfectly fine,” I said. “Just having a chat.”

“They do that sometimes,” said Valencia. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

<I understand,> I said. <You’ve been doing good work. I’m pretty sure that you got the killing blow on Mome Rath. And as for Harold, I’ve got more power right now than I’ve ever had. Any word on the others? Pallida, Raven? Amaryllis?>

<Pallida and Raven, yes,> replied Bethel. <I’ll fetch them shortly. Amaryllis, no.>
I went down into my soul and was relieved to see that the thread was still there. I raced down along it and looked at her soul for a moment, then down into her spirit to make sure that it was okay. So far as I could see, she was just as she’d been when I had tamped down on the paralyzing meme. All that was comforting, in a way, but it didn’t explain why she wasn’t responding to Parson’s Voice.

“Alright,” I said, coming to. “Amaryllis is presumed alive. As soon as Raven and Pallida come in, we’ll hit Harold’s compound hard and fast.” I looked to Bethel. “You’re grabbing them soon?”

“Hrm,” Bethel replied. “It would appear they’ve run into trouble with the remains of Mome Rath.”

“Remains?” I asked.

“The creatures that inhabited it,” said Bethel. “They’re strangers in a strange land, one they might adapt to.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “Fuck.”

“Creatures?” asked Finch.

“Mome Rath wasn’t just a giant beast,” I said. “He was an ecosystem all his own, and some of the things living on him are tough enough to tear through shimmerplate, if that gives you any idea what kind of problem Li’o is going to be dealing with.”

“How contagious?” asked Finch, narrowing his eyes. “Li’o is pretty much toast, but could these creatures spread? Breed?”

“No idea,” I said.

Pallida fought with her trident, and Raven with her sword. They were both world-class fighters, both with top-of-the-line entads. There were, unfortunately, a lot of the bats, and they moved rather fast.

The bats weren’t coordinated, which was a relief, and they didn’t seem to have the force necessary to bite through Raven’s banded armor, though she could feel it flex (worrying, given what forces it was capable of withstanding). Unfortunately, there were too many of them, and their bite gripped tightly, which meant that Raven soon had bats clamping down onto her arms and legs, beating their wings, pulling at her and putting her off-balance, even as her sword cut its way through more of them. Her amulet protected her head and face, her cloak whipped around and strangled any that tried to get behind her, but her hands were unprotected, and eventually one of the bats sank its teeth in, piercing straight through her palm.

Pallida was there in an instant, stabbing through the bat with her trident, heedless of the danger to herself. They fought back to back for a moment, clearing each other, slicing and stabbing in a coordinated way, inches from injuring each other. In truth, that was how they had always been best, when they were working together with purpose, instead of talking. They probably would never have become friends if not for the fact that they were permanently beset on all sides by enemies that needed to be dealt with, but those had been their circumstances.

After two dozen of the bats were dead, no more seemed to be coming, and Pallida speared through the last of those that were hanging onto Raven.

“Just like the old days, eh?” asked Pallida, panting slightly and allowing her armor to come down and show her face. “You took a hit there -- here, I’ve got a fairy.” She reached into the inky black
armor and pulled forward a dead marzipan fairy, from the jar that Uther had used once upon a time until it was superseded by better entads and more powerful magics. Raven ate it down, swallowing as few times as possible: marzipan healing had some bad associations.

Not long after, before their breathing had returned to normal, Bethel descended down from the sky, extending long ropes that wrapped around them, and, ten seconds later, put them inside.
I was worried about Amaryllis, though I was pretty sure she wasn’t dead, at least based on the line to her soul. There wasn’t much to be done though, so instead, I focused on my new powers, their implications, and the ways that I could use them.

Meta Stilling was the capstone, and by implication, the best of the Still Magic virtues. The text was simple and short, at least as far as virtues went: “You can still any game effect with a duration.” As far as munchkinry, there were two big concerns. The first was sleep, or rather, a loss of consciousness, which was what allowed Meta Stilling to continually function via the Instinctive Halting virtue. As soon as I went to sleep, all the penalties that the sacrifice had given me would resume their function, which would lose me my current Still Magic. I was good on sleep, but kicking myself for not taking Kenner’s Eye from Amaryllis; it had been one of the tattoos that she’d managed to recover from Everett’s body before his skin had completely lost its magic. There were other, more permanent solutions to the question of sleep, including training with the Elon Gar, but all that would have to wait until later, when it was a point of actual concern. It was possible that I could get Kenner’s Eye from someone, or have it tattooed on me, but I would have time for that after the Harold thing was taken care of.

As for the effects with a duration, I would have to consult with both Amaryllis and Reimer on it, but a quick look through the game interface found only a few examples of explicit durations. The Icy Devil spell, which I always wore a copy of, could allow me to chill things indefinitely, which seemed neat. But as I looked at it, it dawned on me that there was a different tattoo with a very definite duration, one that I had used while Meta Stilling should have been in effect.

Bethel, is Prince’s Invulnerability still active on me?> I asked, careful not to verbalize it with Finch still in the room with us.

<Yes,> said Bethel. <Intriguing.>

<Probably not permanent,> I said. <But it’s much more permanent than it normally is.>

The more I thought about it, the more I began to get worried.

“Cleregore,” I said, looking down at my note. “After you spend the short rest testing the abilities of your spear, you find that it allows you to teleport to it with a thought. Mechanically, you can do it as a reaction so long as you’re attuned. In addition to that, it can be collapsed to the size of a pencil, then expanded at will. Uh, expanded at will back to its original size, not as big as you want. Oh, and it’s got the returning property.” Giving out loot was one of my favorite parts of being a DM, mostly because it was the one thing that was guaranteed to actually make them happy, in a way that monsters or NPCs rarely did.

“That’s busted,” said Craig with a smile.

“At this level?” asked Tiff. “Seems like it. I thought that teleportation didn’t come until later on.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Reimer. “I think you took that discussion about power level too much to heart. Joon doesn’t give a fuck.”

“It’s true,” said Arthur. “We once got flying surfboards at third level.”

“In retrospect, it was kind of a nightmare,” I said.
“A nightmare for the one guy who fought in melee,” said Reimer. “Still pissed about it. Point being, it’s Mario Kart rules: if you get a bunch of neat stuff, you get maybe one encounter where you get to stompe face, and then the enemies start adapting to your tricks, or you start running into weird circumstances where your neat stuff doesn’t work, and you’re back at baseline.”

“I’m not really understanding the Mario Kart reference,” said Tiff.

“Motion to adjourn so we can play Mario Kart,” said Craig, raising his hand.

“Overruled,” I said. “Or denied, whichever.”

“That week of mock trial you did is really showing its worth,” said Arthur with a snort.

“The AI in Mario Kart is designed to adapt to how well you’re doing,” said Reimer, picking the thread back up. “You get in first, they’ll all speed up and be right on your tail, or zooming past you. You fall behind to the back of the pack, the leaders will slow down. Pretty simple to notice, if you’re looking for it. You can still win or lose, but the game does a bunch of stuff to keep it close no matter how you’re doing.”

“And Juniper does that?” asked Tiff, giving me a skeptical look.

“Worse than that,” said Craig. “Sometimes he breaks things if you abuse them.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Coin of Fates,” said Reimer. I was pretty sure he’d been waiting to spring that one on me.

“Oh,” I said. “Fine, there have been one -- or two, or three, I don’t want to get into it again -- times when I’ve made some serious mistakes in either house rules, items, monsters, or whatever else, and I’ve had to take some corrective measures, and I usually do that in-game instead of just pulling you all aside and saying that I made a balancing mistake, because I tried that once, and it went terribly.”

“It’s better in-game,” said Arthur. “No need to break the suspension of disbelief if you can help it.”

“Sure,” I said. “And I tend to agree.”

“Sorry,” said Tiff. “Can someone regale me with the story of the Coins of Fate?”

“Just one coin,” said Reimer. “Coin of Fates. You could ask a question when you flipped it, and it would tell you weal or woe with 62.5% accuracy.”

“Oooookay,” said Tiff. “So you used it for everything? Or, uh, just flipped it a bunch of times and tried to do some math?”

“Joon wouldn’t let us use it on repeat,” said Reimer. “Though I’m 62.5% confident that he didn’t think of it beforehand. There were a bunch of rules.”

“It was annoying,” I said. “Literally every corridor they were going down, every NPC they met, every potential encounter --”

“So Joon made up this whole angelic superstructure that was getting really annoyed by us hogging their bandwidth,” said Reimer, which wasn’t actually the flavor I’d been going for, except that it was meant to be a tragedy of the commons. “They came down, told us off, and they didn’t take the coin, but it was throttled from then on.”

“It made sense in context,” I said.
“Kind of,” said Arthur.

“Point being, if Craig’s new spear looks overpowered, then either we get some situations that really challenge it, situations that make it worthless, or it gets stolen, lost, destroyed, confiscated, whatever,” said Reimer.

“So … why munchkin?” asked Tiff. “If it’s just all going to get you into hot water or worse situations?”

“Because that’s the fun of it,” said Reimer. “It’s, I don’t know, punching above your weight class, challenging the gods —”

“Literally, in some cases,” said Arthur.

“It’s pulling out the unexpected and seeing Juniper’s face fall,” said Reimer, grinning at me.

I turned to Tiff. “I think for me, a lot of the fun of the worldbuilding stuff is just setting up systems and seeing where they go, like, if you have a society who can’t have a person born without one dying, what does that look like, right? To me, that’s super interesting. Well, for the Reimers of the world, it’s probably sort of the same thing, looking at the extremes of the system through certain hypotheticals, it’s just more directed than anything I do. Honestly, the focus on optimization sometimes seems like it’s secondary to the whole thing, because sometimes he’s not even optimizing for being good.”

“Am too,” said Reimer.

“You had that whole build where you were trying to throw as many daggers in a round as possible,” I said. “Are you really going to say that was about being good, rather than just because you could?”

“Meh,” said Reimer.

“Anyway,” I said. “Cleregore, that’s your spear. For the record, I think it’s good but not overpowered. And if it leads to bigger, better challenges, or unique circumstances,” I shrugged. “That’s just how the game is played.”

I was terrified of the exclusionary principle, which seemed like it had been sitting in the background waiting to thwack me upside the head from basically the first moment I’d heard of it. The exclusions came in enough forms that I couldn’t know which one I would get smacked with, but at best, I would get some fraction of still magic excluded, with my new shiny toy taken away, and at worst, I would be trapped within a very small geographical region, unable to leave. Somewhere in the middle ground were outcomes like, for example, all of skin magic being excluded from Aerb, or all of still magic, or something insanely wide-reaching like that.

And if an exclusion didn’t happen, then what kind of things would I be facing down? Amaryllis and I got into narrative arguments with some frequency, but a lot of that was simply that I thought she was using the wrong standards, namely, the standards of prose, plays, and movies, rather than the standards of tabletop roleplaying games. For the most part, TTRPGs worked like real life, at least as I had played them, and if you ran toward danger because you thought that you were the invincible protagonist who couldn’t get hurt, you would probably get smacked down hard, because that was stupid.

Having so much power, even if it was only momentary, scared me simply because it meant that any reasonable DM would start throwing all kinds of terrible shit at me, things to test my new powers, then after that, things to circumvent them. So long as I had Still Magic 100 and Prince’s
Invulnerability active, the number of things that could possibly hurt me was very, very small, but my mind was already racing ahead to expand that sliver of the pie chart and think about the kinds of things I would invent if I had to deal with a player with my current powerset.

- Still soul seemed like it would make me functionally immune to most memetic agents, but it was a complication, because I could still be infected, which would mean that the whole not-going-unconscious thing would simply kill me, rather than just leave me depowered.
- Still magic was, by its nature, hard to ward against, but it was still possible, and any enemy that knew my capabilities and had a capable warden would do that immediately. Grak was able to see wards, but I wasn’t, not yet, which meant that it would be vital to keep him by my side.
- Debatably, poisons might work on me. I had given the Bracelet of Panacea over to Amaryllis before going down into the temple, on the theory that Bethel could use it for anyone in the house in a pinch, but we had other backups. It wasn’t clear whether Prince’s Invulnerability worked on poisons or not, given that the timescale was normally in the six second range; we were deep into uncharted territory.
- I was really good at not being hurt, as well as stopping any attack that touched me, which meant that various forms of immobility were still entirely in play. Neither still magic nor Prince’s would help me get out from under a net, which was kind of hilarious to think about, given how godly powerful the combination otherwise was. More seriously, anything that could freeze me in place could potentially make me as good as dead, a time-tested method of dealing with otherwise immortal people (encased in a concrete block and thrown into the ocean was the standard, and I saw no reason that it wouldn’t work on me).
- I still needed to breathe. Apparently, Prince’s didn’t handle that, which I’d tested by simply holding my breath until I came close to passing out. Someone could probably still drown me, or shove something down my throat, or replace the breathable air with helium, or something like that. Air mages were normally among the weakest magic users, but they were at the top of my threat list.
- I could still run into problems where personal protection wasn’t really the name of the game. All the best Superman stories weren’t about whether or not Superman could punch a problem hard enough, they were about difficult choices and intellectual or philosophical issues. On a less pretentious level, it was very possible that either civilians or the people I knew and loved would be put in harm’s way.

As soon as that last thought occurred to me, I thought about two salient facts. First, Harold had somewhere in the neighborhood of thousands of civilians under his control, and there were millions of (relatively) innocent people in Li’o just trying to live their lives, something that a combination of Harold, Mome Rath, and all the various creatures that had been living on him probably weren’t going to allow.

Second, I still hadn’t heard back from Amaryllis.

“Mary,” I said, pressing my fingers against the tattoo. “We’re about to go make an assault on Harold, I’d really like to hear back from you. Not sure what kind of circumstances you’re in right now.”

It hadn’t been long since the explosion had knocked everyone apart, but I was getting increasingly antsy, and checked the soul line again, just to be sure. I did a quick check of her soul itself, then her spirit, making sure that nothing looked out of place. Wherever she was, at least she was internally fine, and physical damage was something that could be healed. The specific circumstances that would have either knocked her out or kept her from using Parson’s Voice … well, speculation wasn’t useful at this point. It hadn’t been long, not more than ten minutes, and I tried to tell myself that it was too soon to panic.

We had some time, and I used it. Grak was wearing his temporal plate, on loan from Pallida, which
allowed him to manipulate time and give himself a weaker, localized version of the time chamber, but without the restriction of needing to be inside a room. Because the temporal plate was inside of Bethel, she could slow time down for us absent the time chamber, giving us three minutes for every one on the outside. Because that effect stacked with the time chamber, that meant we were looking at only five minutes on the outside for spin up and spin down, plus twenty seconds for a full day in the chamber. We weren’t going to do a full day, not before I’d solved the sleep problem, but a handful of hours would help tremendously.

“Is this how you people live?” asked Finch, when we were all (sans Bethel and Solace) inside the chamber.

“Pretty much,” I said. “I figured that you knew that, given that you seem to know everything else.”

“I knew about Bethel, more or less,” said Finch. “I got the slate by tracking the history of Kuum Doona. But from everything I’d read, she wasn’t so strong as she seems to be now. She seems like she’s teetering on the edge of exclusion and loaded up with a Penndraig’s vault worth of entads.”

“Well,” I said. “We’re keeping it to six hours here, in order to plan, nothing more.”

We kept to that, more or less. Bethel had made us a lavishly spacious room, by the standards of a designated time chamber, and I went to work doing the first thing I thought was necessary, which was combat testing still magic with Raven as my sparring partner. Finch watched distantly while in quiet conversation with Malus, who had knelt to get down to his level, and I took an opportunity to eavesdrop with vibrational magic.

“We’re way off the map,” said Malus. “I’m not sure what kind of paperwork is waiting for us when this is over, but we might be facing disavowal.”

“We’re doing what needs to be done,” said Finch.

“You know what they’ll say,” replied Malus. “A whole athenaeum taken out, with people on the ground who could have stopped it? Foul play isn’t so crazy to think about.”

“You’re letting your recent incarceration get to you,” said Finch.

“People like scapegoats,” said Malus.

“You know you weren’t just that,” said Finch. “You were clocked. That’s why they took you in. It’s just a matter of how much they know. Did any revision mage pay you a visit?”

“If they did, they could have wiped it from my mind,” said Malus. “I was keeping my eyes open for discontinuities, but you know the ways around that same as I do. I was kept in the dark anyway, right where you wanted me.”

“It’s going to be bad times if this is pinned on us,” said Finch.

“Agreed,” said Malus. Her tone was impassive. “And all this is your circus too? You brought a lot of power into Li’o.”

“Not power I control,” said Finch. “These people … they’re a cannon that you could vaguely aim in the right direction, if you had a deft enough touch. I’m fifty-fifty on whether or not they’ll turn on us.”

Raven clocked me upside the head, which instinctive stilling caught, but she gave me a look that let me know that she was well aware I wasn’t paying my full attention to her.
“You’re fighting sloppy,” said Raven.

“Sorry,” I said. “A lot on my mind right now.”

“Amaryllis?” asked Raven, raising an eyebrow.

“That too,” I replied.

“I was captured by enemies on twenty-six different occasions,” said Raven. She brandished her sword at me, its mirrored finish impeccably sharp. “Once a year, more or less.”

“If that’s what happened, it would be her third time,” I said, after thinking about it for a moment. Aumann, Fallatehr, and now Harold. “Four, if you count the pregnancy. Five, if you count the rat rot.”

Raven struck out at me, moving with unsurprising speed. I couldn’t burn bones to match her, because that only made her stronger, which left us fighting against each other on more or less even footing. Of course, with still magic being as high as it was, there was little chance of her actually hurting me, but she was still landing hits that I thought I should have been able to dodge or deflect.

“Alright,” said Raven, after she’d touched her blade to the side of my head again. “I want you to try stilling me.”

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked. “I mean, if I stop your heart …”

“Brain activity,” said Raven. “It should be faster. Uther could do it without hurting anyone.”

“Live fire exercises on your allies are idiotic,” said Pallida, stepping in from the side. “You know that, Raven.” Raven frowned at her. “I get it, it’s about keeping civilians safe, and not the kind of thing you want to do for the first time in the middle of heated combat, but you should leave martyrdom to those of us who can come back to life.”

“You’re volunteering?” I asked.

“Hells no,” said Pallida with a laugh. “But as I recall, there was an entad that was useful for combat testing, one that was helpfully donated to the Demonblooded Festival by a magus Oberlin. And after that, well, if it was stolen, ah, who could know where it ended up?”

“That would have been nice to know before we came in here,” I said. “Given the spin up and spin down time.”

“You’re not the only one who can do the teletalk with Bethel,” said Pallida with a smile. She went over to one of the cabinets that I’d assumed were just dressing and pulled out the mannequin. “Ta da!”

“Oberlin won’t see the humor in it,” said Finch, calling out to us. “That entad was hard won.”

“Yeah, well,” said Pallida. “Looks like Juniper is going to kill it a few times, and maybe if he’s still alive, Oberlin can complain about it later.”

“I’d bet on him,” said Finch. “He’s a tough old bastard.”

I was less sure. Not about the tough bastard part, which seemed true, but about his survival. Mome Rath had focused much of his efforts on the campus, and there was no particular reason that Oberlin’s skill as a vibration mage would allow him to survive an enormous claw to the face. Oberlin
himself had said that vibrational magic was much more about offense than defense.

We set up the dummy, and after some fiddling, finally got it to mold itself into a person.

“Does it even have brain activity?” I asked, looking skeptically at the woman it had created.

“Yes,” said Finch. “It’s lifelike in every way, up until the moment it’s killed. Might even be able to fool your house.”

“I really doubt there’s an entad that can fool Bethel,” I said.

“She’s not a god,” said Pallida. “Please don’t let her know that I said that.”

I approached the entad-person. It was going through all the motions of being a person, breathing, blinking every once in a while. When I touched its neck, I could feel its pulse, though there was no trace of latent blood or skin magic, like there would have been in a real person.

(It was tempting, when faced with an entad like this, to try puzzling out what it was for, but conventional wisdom on entads was simply that they came from nothing, with no intent on the part of their forge-frenzied creator, instead originating from somewhere else, or through some other process. A part of me wondered what this entad was, from the perspective of the Dungeon Master, and another part of me wondered what I would have made such a thing for, aside from the obvious joy of creation.)

I could feel the motion in her body, and dimly, yes, electrical signals, the kind necessary to keep a person standing upright, to keep them breathing, to go through the motions. It occurred to me that it was entirely possible that the person here was a ‘real’ person, for some given value of ‘real’. Oberlin had been cavalier about killing them, but … well, the story of Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle was one that tended to stick with people, myself included.

In brief, Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle was a powerful necromancer during the Second Empire, one who reached heights that no other necromancer ever had before, not even in Uther’s time. His particular brand of necromancy got excluded, leaving him as the sole practitioner, but as far as enpersoned exclusion zones went, he was pretty calm and relaxed, capable of making deals with those outside his realm. At the time, that included the Second Empire, and they invested money into the Captain’s lands, putting up factories which were staffed by zombies, the name given to special creations that would slowly decay over time, but could be directed toward simple work until that point, the pinnacle of mindless labor. The Captain’s realm took in raw goods and sent out finished ones, at a fraction of the price that anyone else could do the same work for, and he did it with branding and public relations, little stamps that said ‘zombie-made’ on plates, hammers, all kinds of things. The zombies were, per the Captain, ethically sourced, only taken from people who died naturally in his realm, which had a fair population of the living as well.

The only problem was, Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle had been lying, and the zombies weren’t fully dead at all. Instead, the person who died was locked into their body, fully able to feel everything that happened to them, but unable to take any action on their own. The ‘zombies’ would sit there doing assembly work, watching as their bodies slowly and inevitably decayed, unable to speak, unable to stop, watching their own demise at a remove.

Eventually, the truth came out, thanks to some investigative reporting and a few very specific entads that allowed the zombies to have a voice. It was a big, complicated mess, an atrocity committed almost entirely by one man, and it got tangled up in the burgeoning world economy and the complicated ethical positions of the Second Empire. The upshot was that ‘zombie’ became a dirty word, especially after Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle published a long screed about how people knew in
their hearts, and didn’t care, and would continue to buy the products from his factories anyway. ‘Zombie’ had always been his word, with slightly cutesy connotations, pictured in his propaganda as dim-witted but loveable creatures. It was a lot less cute when you knew there were people trapped inside those bodies, forced into permanent labor as they watched their bodies degrade, feeling every single bit of their slow death. Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle had been wrong about people: they’d stopped buying his stuff, mostly through coordinated action and a stringent ban by the Empire of Common Cause, and he’d been stuck in his exclusion zone for quite some time, increasingly unhinged and severely unhappy.

(I had a quest to kill him.)

Now, you’d think that the whole zombie thing would make people think twice about declaring that someone or something wasn’t a person, but there were so damned many rights and identity issues on Aerb, a lot of which were deeply ingrained or more complicated than they appeared on first blush. Entads and non-anima were notable (and obvious-to-me) holes in how most people defined personhood.

So I was left looking at this woman, the creation of an entad, and thinking that maybe she had some moral worth, or that maybe I shouldn’t be so cavalier about inflicting harm on her until Bethel had a chance to check it out.

And then I forced myself to realize that I was too much in my own head, and maybe just worried about all the puppets I was about to be fighting in relatively little time, some of which I might end up killing.

I backed up for a moment and then reached forward with one hand, applying still magic the moment that my fingertips touched her skin, focused entirely on the task. She dropped to the ground and laid there, motionless. After a few seconds, she reverted back to the mannequin.

“Huh,” said Pallida. “So, we’re saying that’s lethal?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Fast though,” she continued.

“Yeah,” I said. “Last resort, rather than first.”

“Not sure I agree with that,” said Pallida, “Given that my life will be on the line.”

Raven gave her a look.

“Uther would have saved everyone?” I guessed.

“Sorry,” said Finch, cutting over. “We haven’t been introduced.” He held his hand out to Raven. “Figaro Finch. I saw you at the wedding, but you left right after it finished. Figured we should at least know each other’s name, if we’re going to be working together.”

Raven raised an eyebrow at him, then slowly shook his hand. “Raven Masters.”

Finch stopped shaking her hand and just stared at her. “Bullshit,” he finally said.

“I don’t have much in the way of proof,” said Raven, not seeming apologetic at all.

“It wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to happen,” I told him. “And you know it.”
“But where’s she been?” asked Finch, looking over at me.

“Cleaning up your messes,” said Raven, scowling at him.

“Pardon?” asked Finch.

“We’ve crossed paths before,” said Raven. “Four times, by my count.”

“You have?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Raven, staring down Finch. “521 FE, Litergo Province. There was a small portal that was increasing in size. Uniquities got called in, and they took control of the site. You ran the numbers and extrapolated the growth rate, and came to the conclusion that it was a threat to all of Aerb. Except instead of sounding the alarms far and wide, someone decided that Uniquities would handle it.”

Finch frowned. “It winked out after two weeks.”

“Yes,” said Raven. She pointed to herself. “That was me.”

“How?” asked Finch. He didn’t really look like he believed it.

“I used an entad to deal with it,” said Raven. “It had to be done early, because otherwise the portal would have grown out of control, beyond the ability to be contained. Tell me, was there someone on your end of things arguing that taking down a bigger threat might pull in more funding? Or someone arguing for exploitation?”

“Sorry,” said Finch, looking her over. “Who the hells are you again?”

“Raven Masters,” she replied. “The last of Uther’s Knights. My job was saving the world when you people fell flat on your faces.”

“Where?” asked Finch. I have to admit, it was satisfying to see him thrown off his feet. “How?”

“Raven, Finch, you have an hour to hash this out,” I said, making a decision. “We have things we need to do before we resume the fight. I’m going to be practicing on this entad, then pulling in more power if it’s warranted.”

“More power?” asked Raven.

“We’ll talk about it later,” I said. “Privately.”

There was one big trick left, one that I was hesitant to use. Soul Scaphism was the level 80 virtue for Essentialism, and the penalty for that had a duration, which I was pretty sure would be stilled by Meta Stilling. That meant that if I sacrificed enough skill points to get to 80, I would be able to scaph out some souls in order to boost all my other skills, which would then persist under the same conditions that Still Magic would. We had an inventory of souls, including all of the people that had died in the battle just outside Boastre Vino, and it was a certainty that they had skills that I could use to replace whatever I sacrificed, in addition to boosting me to higher heights, given that Soul Scaphism appeared to stack with itself. And if that power boost could effectively be made permanent by getting a foolproof method of dodging sleep … well, souls weren’t exactly valuable for anyone but me, even if the souls we’d be interested in were the souls of people who were reasonably competent at different things, rather than the natal souls used as a power source. We had a huge opportunity there.
I had no idea what the Dungeon Master would think about that, if anything. Having straight 100s in all 40 skills seemed like it was realistically possible from where I was standing (unlocks aside), but all the arguments I was having with myself about what the Dungeon Master might do were amplified the more I began breaking the system wide open. If I had straight 100s, or even higher, then what kind of ridiculous crap would come out of the woodwork against me? What kind of horrors were lurking out there, in a ‘break glass in emergency’ kind of way? It was scary shit, frankly.

After a half hour experimenting with the mannequin entad, I had finally settled on something I thought had a good balance between speed and non-lethality, which mostly involved partial stilling of bloodflow. It was difficult and precise work, but after only a small amount of practice I could do it quickly and reliably. Ideally, the upcoming fight would be one that was mostly about keeping collateral damage low, rather than truly fighting for my life. I had enough tricks up my sleeve that I was really hoping that I could save everyone and still manage to get Harold while also avoiding a second Mome Rath.

When I noticed Grak in conversation with one of the gimmal, I went over to them, because Grak was talking using one hand, which wasn’t a skill he’d had the last time I’d talked to him.

**Skill increased: Language lvl 4!**

“-- civilian casualties?” The language was a fluid one, cheremes running into and altering each other, much more than phonemes did in any of the languages I had exposure to. I could retroactively understand some of what Finch had said, but it was hard to do that and keep track of the conversation at the same time. “Total obliteration?” They weren’t questions, more like inflected statements, typical of how the Gimb was spoken (the name appeared in my head as soon as I reached for it).

“I should be able to isolate it?” said Grak. “Calibrate for feedback, isolate spectral position, then apply against it?”

“Too slow?” replied the gimmal. “Too costly?”

“No,” said Grak.

“Are you magus?” asked the gimmal.

Grak hesitated for a moment. “Yes,” he replied. “Entad support as well.”

“What are you two talking about?” I asked/signed. “And how?”

“Translation tattoo,” said Grak, raising his non-wooden hand to show me a tattoo on the back of it. He didn’t question my own understanding of Gimb. “The gimmal only speak their own language. We are discussing Harold’s method of extraction.”

“Huh,” I said. “And it’s an entad?”

“Yes,” replied Grak with a nod. “This is their warder. He is unskilled. He does not have a signature of the entad used.”

“Then how do they know it’s an entad?” I asked.

“It is a guess,” said Grak.

“Yes,” nodded Grak. “I may be able to find it though.”

“By cycling through the entire spectrum of possibilities?” I asked, switching back to finger language and raising an eyebrow. I didn’t know much about warding, but I thought I had caught that much. I cast a look at the gimmal. No eyes and no mouth made it very hard to read expression. “I hadn’t heard of that technique.”

“It may be novel,” said Grak. “Niche, but novel.”

“I guess,” I said. I looked over at the gimmal. “Or is he selling himself short?”

“If it is accomplished it will mark him as a greater magus,” replied the gimmal.

“I see,” I replied.

“If it is accomplished,” replied Grak.

“I have faith in you,” I replied. “If you need more time in here, let me know. Chasing Harold away from his base of power in Li’o would be good, but catching him would be better.”

Grak gave me a brief nod, then returned to signing with the gimmal, going into technical detail of the scan he’d be doing that I was pretty sure was meant to signal to me that I wasn’t needed there. I was hopeful that his plan would work, both because it would mean that Harold wouldn’t get away at the last second, and because I wanted Grak to feel better about his annihilation weapon plan not having a chance to come to fruition.

Raven was talking to Finch, and from the way his arms were folded, I had a feeling that she was castigating him for failing to stop the end of the world. Pallida and Malus were in conversation too, though it was less clear about what, and from the playful expression on Pallida’s face, it seemed like she might be flirting. That left the rest of the gimmals, who were resting, and Valencia.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Making the rounds?” she asked. Her helmet was off to one side, but she was still in the Red Armor of Arramor, sitting down with her head resting against the wall. She didn’t have the crown either, which was probably for the best, because that thing could be sharp.

“Kind of,” I said. “I also wanted to know if you were okay.”

“I am,” said Valencia. “You know, I can still feel down into the hells like this?”

“I wasn’t aware,” I replied. “I didn’t think that much of anything got past the border of the time chamber.”

“A few things do,” said Valencia. “Your soul link does, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Amaryllis still has a soul, so that’s good.”

“Hrm,” said Valencia. “You know, we’ve talked about using this time chamber as a way of helping to kill all the infernals.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “How are those calculations going?”

“Okay,” said Valencia with a shrug. “You leveled a few times. I have more tendrils now. I’m not great at math without a devil, but we’ll have to run the numbers again.”
“I’m not eager to fight the hells,” I said. “But I’m pretty sure that we’re going to, at some point.”

“Probably,” said Valencia. “They’re worried.”

“The infernals?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Valencia. She was being more quiet and withdrawn than I was used to.

“So I hate to ask a third time, but are you okay?” I asked.

“You saved my life,” she said. “You used a unicorn bone to do it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m hoping that you didn’t get the memories from it?”

“No,” said Valencia. “It was bad?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“How many attempts?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Five or six.”

“I’m sorry that I was a burden,” replied Valencia. “I went down onto that monster’s back and didn’t accomplish anything.”

I frowned. “It’s not really like that,” I said. “I mean, I know that it wasn’t exactly a group effort, but - -”

“It’s fine,” said Valencia. She let out a sigh. “That’s just what’s on my mind. You don’t need to spend time working through it with me.”

“Val,” I began.

“It’s fine,” Valencia repeated. “I have weaknesses. Even with the gifts that I’ve been given, there will be times when I’m a liability.”

“If it’s edge cases like not being affected by Prince’s,” I started.

“It’s not,” said Valencia. “That’s part of it, but it’s … I stayed in the house while you were at school. I sat here doing nothing because if the wrong person spotted me or I tripped up an entad there might be a manhunt for me. I left once, and then only helped a little.”

“Alright,” I said with a sigh. “I see it. You know you’re not the only one?”

“I know,” said Valencia. “When you rescue Amaryllis, I’ll talk to her about it.”

“I was thinking Grak,” I replied. “But Amaryllis too.”

“And Fenn, when she was alive,” said Valencia.

I made no response, but I could definitely see that too. I missed Fenn, but if she’d made it through to this point, I was pretty sure that she wouldn’t be happy. She would probably be complaining about how there was no way that she was going to be able to do a damned thing using just her bow and arrow, no matter how good she was. It made me feel terrible just thinking about it. I was sure that she would have said something to let me off the hook, but that was just how she was, most of the time, self-deprecating and ready to sacrifice a bit of herself so as not to be a bother.
The Dome Away From Home

After I was done talking to Val, the only bit of business left was to go over our plans, which we did around a simulacrum of the targeted building and its environs, which Bethel had helpfully provided for us before locking us in. Finch seemed impressed, but I was certain that if Bethel were with us to give commentary, she would point out how crude it really was, given how limited her sensorium was out past a hundred feet. Still, it was enough for rough planning, and we decided to go with a rooftop landing where Grak could try his scanning technique.

And a short five hours after we’d gone in, we were ready to go back out again.

“This is the sort of entad that would go for billions of obols to a wealthy nation,” said Finch as we waited for the chamber to spin back down. That waiting period was awkward in the best of times.

“She’s a person,” I said.

“Unconventional politics you have there,” said Finch.

“She would kill anyone who tried to sell her,” said Pallida. “And that’s whether they had standing to sell her or not.”

“And I doubt that I’ve seen the full depths of her power,” said Finch, nodding slightly. “Only a fraction is being used by or for your little republic.”

“She’s not really interested in being worth billions of obols to the right person,” I said. “There aren’t many things she wants that she could buy with money.”

“Entads?” asked Finch.

“Easier and cheaper to steal them,” said Pallida with a smile.

“You realize that I’m law enforcement, of a sort?” asked Finch, looking her up and down.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have said it otherwise,” replied Pallida. “You think that in thirty thousand years of life I’ve never worn a badge?” She snorted. “Believe me, there have been times I’ve been on the straight and narrow, way more than you seem to be.”

“No stealing,” said Finch.

“I think technically it would be looting, given the circumstances,” said Pallida.

“No looting,” said Finch.

“But maybe just a little bit of looting,” said Pallida, nodding toward him. She smiled at me. “This is fun, we should have the police over more often.”

For once, I was happy to have Pallida with us, because she was helping to distract me, and so long as she wasn’t trying to seduce Amaryllis or fight with Raven, she could be fun. I was anxious about the fight ahead of us, both because I was worried it would be scaled to my power or working to subvert it in some way, and because there were a lot of innocents involved.

“Alright, we’re ready to go,” I said once we were out. “You’ll stay close by? And keep an eye out for Amaryllis?”
“Yes,” nodded Bethel. “There are also people I should be helping. I may do that.”

“As opposed to what?” asked Finch, frowning at her. “Sitting by while they die?”

“Don’t antagonize her, Finch,” I said. “I’d thought if you knew her nature you would understand that.”

Finch had a sour look on his face, but said nothing. I wasn’t sure whether or not he’d made the connection between Mome Rath’s death and Bethel, or how much he’d seen of her capabilities, but he’d gotten the other half of the sending slate from somewhere, and it was clear to me that he knew more about Bethel than we generally preferred people to know. He had been at the wedding, but I had no idea what he’d made of it.

“Bethel,” I said. “We’re ready. Rooftop entrance, if you can do it clean and fast.”

She didn’t need to be told twice. With how fast she could move, and her ability to effectively teleport us using Sable, there wasn’t much more than half a minute between me asking and us being placed on the roof.

The building was one of the big domed ones that sat around Li’o, most of them historic landmarks, with a few built in the modern era in the old style. The one that had been so helpfully marked for us by Doris Finch was one of the newer ones, built fifty years ago rather than a few hundred. There was no one sitting there, and hopefully no one that had seen Bethel’s small form come in. Grak got to work at once, moving his wand using careful, precise motions as the gimmal warder looked on.

(I wondered about the gimmal. Clearly they were athenaeum trained, which would probably have required some rather significant accommodations, but from my experience at S&S that wasn’t too unusual. But why they had all been trained up as operatives was a bit of a question, since it obviously represented a coordinated effort and a serious investment of time and capital. The gravity manipulation that was unique to the gimmals was a fairly good one, as was their gravity sense, but I got the feeling that it was their lack of other senses that had led to them being drafted by Uniquities. That alone would make them immune to a pretty wide range of infohazards, though in the present situation it seemed a bit worthless.)

“Sixteen entads in the building,” said Grak, after a moment.

“Really?” asked Finch.

“He is a master,” the gimmal signed.

“Which is their teleportation one?” asked Finch.

“I don’t know,” said Grak, pursing his lips. He was still moving his wand. “This method is untested. Extracting information is hard.”

“Well, we need to isolate and ward against it,” said Finch, crossing his arms. “A singular entad ward shouldn’t be too difficult, I don’t --”

“I can set up wards against all of them,” said Grak. “Mixed with a velocity ward around the structure so that they can’t be moved outside it. I’ve gotten good at expansion warding, so I shouldn’t need to circle the building.” He looked at Finch. “It will give us away.”

“That’s fine,” said Finch.

“It won’t be foolproof,” Grak began.
“I’ve spoken with warders enough to know that you’ll be wasting my time saying more,” said Finch.

“I cannot ward against every possibility,” said Grak.

“We don’t expect you to,” I replied. “Can you use your technique to monitor the building?” I asked. “Give us some rough numbers?”

“It would take time,” said Grak, frowning. “It would cost concordance. Presence or absence of specific magic would give very little information. I could cycle through species specific magic though.”

“Do,” I replied with a nod. “Let us know.”

“Not sure we have the time,” said Finch, looking grim. “We don’t know how much longer the clock is going to run until the singing starts up again.”

“My hunch is not long,” I replied. I looked around at the small team we had. I didn’t know how many people were in the building below us, but it was possible that it was in the hundreds. I turned to Grak. “Set up the entad wards,” I said. “We’ll move in as you’re finishing, because suddenly stopping the effects of all the entads might tip them off, and I really don’t want to see what plans and contingencies they have in place.”

“I should follow after?” asked Grak, raising a thick eyebrow in my direction.

“Yes,” I said. “Maybe. Your expertise is invaluable, and I don’t want to put you in harm’s way.”

“I can handle myself,” said Grak. “You will need me if they have wards of their own.”

“I know,” I said. “I don’t doubt that. I just want you to be safe.”

“We’ll keep him toward the back,” said Raven. “That’s where I always was, in situations like this.”

*And how often did you get injured or kidnapped?*

We went to the roof access door, leaving Grak to weave his wards. Wards only activated the moment you completed them, and we wanted as much time as possible before they were alerted. The tactics of it were Finch’s show more than mine, given that he had years of experience taking down cults, and even though we were facing something distinct from a cult, it was at least a little similar. His suggestion was that we go in fast and hard, taking as many of them out before they had time to raise an alarm or get into better defensive positioning, and that seemed smart enough to me.

Pallida unlocked the door and then I went first, moving fast. The warder gimmal was right after me, and I kept glancing back at him; his gravitational sense was good enough that he could effectively see through walls, and his warder’s sight would allow him to see any wards before I ran smack into them. I wasn’t concerned with annihilation wards, since Prince’s would leave me intact, but a ward against skin magic would stop Prince’s, and I had no way to get it back, not in a hurry.

(The gimmal all had names and identities, but they were all dressed virtually identically, and they looked the same to my eyes, because I didn’t share their ability to sense gravity, which was their primary form of differentiation. I’d made an effort to talk to them when I was, as Valencia said, ‘making the rounds’, but it was mostly just smalltalk about the upcoming mission, because I didn’t want to ask a bunch of probing questions about their upbringing, education, and employment. They took it in stride that I spoke their language, and they seemed nice enough, for being part of a Uniquities anti-meme fireteam. Note: “anti-meme” meant that they were trained to fight memes, not that they were trained to fight antimemes. They called themselves the Meme Squad, which was so
cringeworthy that I wished I hadn’t heard it; their motto was ‘ignorance is strength’.

We first encountered resistance two floors down, when I opened up a door into a big room with a dozen people in it, which the gimmal had warned me about beforehand. Most of them were armed, but it didn’t seem like they were expecting anyone from my direction, so I raced forward to get in the middle of them, burning SPD. I grabbed two of them, putting into practice the brief training I’d done on using still magic to knock people out, and they were both down by the time weapons were being pointed at me. They had rifles and pistols for the most part, but one was carrying a sword, and he had a stance that let me know he was proficient. Blade-bound were relatively common, and his sword had the look of an entad, and my mind went to my sword, wanting to draw it so that I would have something to defend myself. Instead, I let him hit me in the neck and used still magic to stop it in place, then reached down to grab his hand and still the flow of his blood until he lost consciousness.

There was nothing that they could do against me. They shot me, of course, but I had still magic on my side, and even if I hadn’t, Prince’s would have protected me. They cottoned on to the fact that I was bulletproof fairly quickly, but by that time I had positioned myself at the other exit to the large room, and it was just a matter of grabbing them one by one, just long enough to still them into unconsciousness.

The last one turned his gun on himself, holding the rifle in an awkward way so that the tip of it was positioned under his chin.

“You, have, seeeeeeeerrrrrr, a, World, Lord,” said the man. The words were coming just a bit wrong. For all that Harold seemed capable of fine manipulation, speaking directly through one of the people he’d captured didn’t appear to be a smooth process.

“I killed a World Lord,” I said. I wasn’t fully listening to Harold; I was thinking about how to save the man in front of me. I didn’t know how much of a hair trigger Harold would use, how many pounds of force were already on the trigger, but I had to assume that an individual life meant nothing to him. I thought that maybe I could slice off the man’s hand with a thrown dagger, fast and hard enough that he wouldn’t be able to get the shot off, but it would be a hell of a trick, and it wasn’t one that I was in a position to do.

“The, Second, Calling, Will, Be, More, Powerful,” said Harold through his puppet.

“It’s not going to happen,” I replied. “If you could do it, you’d have done it by now, and --”

A shot came in from the side of the room, and the man crumpled over with blood pouring from the side of his head. I turned and looked in time to see Figaro Finch holstering his pistol.

“It was a diversion,” he said. “Classic stalling behavior. Let’s go.”

I looked at the body. I wondered who that man had been, whether he was a student who had been grabbed in the temple, or someone taken through other means. Finch was right though; I had known that we might run into this kind of situation, and I had been more sentimental than planned. It was a stalling tactic.

We continued on. The gunfire had alerted the rest of the building, which made subsequent floors more difficult. When I went into the next room, down a flight of stairs, there were four people with their guns already drawn. It was a concerning number of rifles, one which implied heavier
armaments through the building. One of them took a few shots at me as I came in through the door, and the bullets were stopped before they could smash themselves against my invulnerable skin. The others had turned their guns on themselves.


I reached into my bandolier and pulled out a scroll that Bethel had made for me. I wasn’t sure that now was the time to use it, but it didn’t seem like something that I could keep saving. With a fast motion I unfurled it and pointed it toward the people who were standing there. In theory, the image that Raven had used on me back in the Library, the one that was inert inside my mind even now, should have put them all into a quick and safe coma that I would eventually be able to bring them out of.

In practice, there was no change.

“You, Have, Exposed, That, Scripture, To, Me, Already,” said Harold, through the tall man. “Such, Divine, Horrors, Of, This, World.”

“Joon!” called Finch. “Stalling.”

“Right,” I said, quickly lowering the scroll and folding it up so that no one could see it. “Harold, you absolute fuck.”

I moved on the people he had in the firing circle, and they all shot in quick sequence (and accompanying defeated messages). I rushed to the nearest one and began burning a bone to try to heal her, but she’d been shot in the brain with a large caliber round, and the level of healing magic you could get from a huge boost to END wasn’t enough to make the difference.

“Time,” said Finch as he came in, pushing past me. “We’re working against time. Stop chatting.”

I gave a soft growl, then got to my feet, trying to get the images out of my brain, or at least not let them get imprinted there. It was stomach-churning, but I’d been desensitized to death, and in the context of everything else that had happened today, all the people who had died from Mome Rath’s assault, watching Valencia be vaporized so many times, I was pretty sure that I wasn’t even going to have nightmares, not unless I saw something much worse. Maybe I would get out of having nightmares by simply never sleeping again.

We went down another flight of stairs and went down a long hallway, trying to move fast, because Finch was right, it wasn’t the time for talking to Harold, and it wasn’t the time for maudlin sentimentality for people that I had never known. The game gave them names, but they were just mooks. That wasn’t the way that I wanted to think about it, but it was probably saner, or at least might result in better outcomes.

As I moved to open the next door, I felt a hand on my shoulder and came to an abrupt stop. When I turned back to look at him, the warder gimmal began a rapid series of signs that bled together so quickly I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t have understood anything if I weren’t as proficient as a native speaker.

“Large room ahead. Many people. Area is warded,” he signed.

“Grak?” I asked, looking back at the train of people that was following behind me.

“Yes,” Grak replied, pushing forward. “If he’s just said that it’s warded, he’s right. Sloppy work.”

“Which wards?” I asked.
“Several,” said Grak, narrowing his eyes. “Non-lethal. Active and passive skin magic, yes. I can subvert it.”

I saw the gimmal make a quick sign, “Incoming”, and I just barely had time to get in front of Grak to still the force of the explosion and keep him intact with a hand placed on him and my still magic protecting him. I sapped the explosion of the brunt of its force, but it still carried through, down the hallway, bouncing off shimmerplate and knocking people off balance. I stayed back from where the wards were, but as the dust settled I could see the room in front of us was a large one, the inner part of the domed building where the dome was on full display overhead. There were, by my estimation, thirty or forty people in there, most of them hunkered down and waiting for us. Some of them had guns, but there were mages among them too, some identifiable by their implements, others by their appearance. The door had been blown open by a pustule mage, who was readying another of his growths to pop.

“Down!” I shouted to the others, but when I looked back at them I realized they were undergoing a different kind of attack. Malus was on the ground, gripping her head in her hands, and the others members of Uniquities didn’t seem to be in much better shape. I had seen this before, in Oberlin’s class: it was a resonance attack by one or more vibration mages. Pallida, Raven, and Grak were all fine; I had soul-linked them, out of sight of Finch, and the transference effect was apparently solid enough to stop the vibration. Valencia had no soul, but the Red Armor of Arramor seemed to hold, which I was thankful of given that I hadn’t known beforehand whether or not it would stop her from being vibrated to death.

I did my best to still the air around me, to deprive the vibration mages in the room ahead of us of the ability to affect the members of my team. Still magic was touch ranged though, and “touch” wasn’t such a fuzzy concept that the Layman would allow me leeway to freeze entire sections of solid air. The best I could do was about a foot out from me, which was more than any other still mage could manage. (If the vibration mages were targeting me, I hadn’t noticed.)

The second fireball came in hot after the first once, and I wasn’t able to stop it all, not with still magic, and not with my weaker vibration magic attempting to collapse the pressure wave as it went by me.

“Grak!” I shouted. I was sure that my ears would have been ringing if Prince’s Invulnerability hadn’t dealt with that. “Get that ward down!”

He didn’t need to be told twice, and moved forward with his wand out, attempting the world’s fastest subversion of an active ward. I kept a hand on him so that I could defensively still him, just in case there was a niche attack that got past all my defenses, and he used his temporal plate to speed himself up. I wasn’t willing to give up Prince’s Invulnerability, not to the ward ahead of us.

I heard Grak grunt, but he kept his wand steady, and I thought nothing of it, given that I had him completely stilled, and I was in front of him, guarding him as best I could while still allowing him access to the ward. The assembled army in the next room were taking potshots at me from behind cover, and I was letting the bullets strike me, because there was little reason not to. As soon as Grak gave me the word --

“Done,” he said. I looked back at him and the strange raspiness of his voice, and saw that he was bleeding from a hole just above his left eye. I wasn’t sure when or how he had been hit, but it was the telltale mark of a void weapon.

I left him behind and raced forward, into the big domed room, rushing past the blown-open door. It was four stories tall, with balconies all around looking down into the central area, and I ran, heedless of any danger, toward the nearest group. They were hiding behind pillars that supported the upper
floors, and I tore through them with my blade in hand, no longer trying to go gently and delicately. The pustule mage was among them, a woman, now that I was close enough to look, covered in boils and growths. As she brought her hand up to manipulate one of them, I sliced with the probability blade, and the gray blur became a thin line of solid steel for the brief moment it took to pass through her body.

*Jessica Pendle defeated!*

When the six people I’d gotten in the middle of were dead or incapacitated, I moved back into the domed room and made a blood-boosted leap up to the next story, landing next to a man with a void rifle. I swept my probability blade at him before he could aim at me.

*Oliver Leister defeated!*

“He’s on the second floor!” I heard someone call from above.

The voice shocked me out of what I was doing. Why were they talking to each other? Surely everyone here was under Harold’s influence. But from what Finch had said, and what I had seen, Harold could only do one at a time, which meant that they weren’t a hivemind, they were just people, not even people who had their values changed like a soul mage might have, but people who had some different idea about what was going on and why they had to be fighting me.

I had no time to stop though, not when these people would do their best to kill us all, not when Harold was threatening another summoning. Besides that, more people were coming at me. I brandished my sword and let them come; they had probably seen that I was soaking up gunfire like it was nothing, and decided on different tactics.

A man and a woman came at me, lunging for me in a way that seemed like pure suicide until my sword connected with the man’s midsection and was instantly stilled, leaving him unharmed. The woman touched me, and stopped me in place, and the man came soon after, gripping me by the neck. One of the traditional methods for a still mage was to stop a person in place, then stop their heart, something that the body would naturally fight against. Being a still mage didn’t give any defense against this: we were good at stopping things, not preventing them from being stopped.

Unfortunately for those two, Prince’s Invulnerability was the last word in invulnerability, and it *meant it* in a way that other spells or effects might not have. And also unfortunately for them, I was at least temporarily one of the best still mages in the world, and they didn’t have my same defenses. I stopped the man’s brain, then the woman’s, and both fell to the ground as twin messages popped up at the bottom of my vision to confirm them as defeated. In the meantime, there were more people on the second floor balcony with me, people who I had distantly heard thundering down the stairs. I wasn’t sure whether or not I could take them all, but so far it didn’t seem like anyone was stopping me.

They circled me as I held my sword out in front of me. I was waiting for the next trick. Harold was surely watching, he had to be building a profile of me, and even if these people were autonomous, he could pick one of them to act through, if he wanted to directly use their hands.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” said a woman with gray hair and her lips drawn into a thin frown. She was of a humanoid race, with bird claws for hands, maybe a harpy, not that it was important.

“Sure doesn’t seem that way,” I replied. More stalling, I was sure, but she wasn’t speaking with Harold’s voice, not in that same inhuman boldness.

“He can talk,” said one of the men standing next to her. He had his rifle drawn and pointed at me,
which seemed pretty useless.

“Look,” I said, “You’re all infected by an agent, compromised, I don’t want to hurt you and you
don’t want to hurt me, if we could just --”

Someone was coming toward me with a metal net, the links of it clearly from some high quality
source. Li’o was a city full of still mages, and short of a void gun, a net was the next best weapon
against them. I should have figured that they would have one on hand, as the kind of tool that could
level the playing field against that particular kind of magic.

“You can come quietly,” she said.

Except that they still presumably had a warder somewhere, maybe even more than one, and a ward
against skin magic would lose me Prince’s Invulnerability, which would mean that they could just
shoot me with a void rifle.

I burned a bone and spun into motion, moving straight toward the circle of people. To my surprise, I
saw a stutter as everyone seemed to change places around me, the telltale sign of a revision mage at
work, and the discontinuity happened again, this time with more shifting around. I had no good
defenses against a revision mage, not even the probability blade would work to kill them, and a brief
jump cut later, the net was down on top of me. I couldn’t even tell which one of them was the
revision mage, not that it would have helped that much unless I could overload their capacity for
revision. I fought against the net, but there was another discontinuity as the revision mage must have
undone my efforts, a sign that I might have been successful.

It was after that last discontinuity that I saw Finch, creeping up the same stairs everyone else had
come thundering down. He was still unarmored, with nothing but a gun in hand. I had no idea what
he thought he was going to do when faced with those kind of forces, but when he pulled two
grenades from his inside his vest, my eyes went wide. He pulled the pin from the grenade, then
waited quietly, his lips moving slightly as he counted down. He threw them at the last possible
second, one just after the other, and the frag grenades exploded in mid-air, right in the middle of the
group of people. One of those people moved preternaturally quickly, without even looking at the
grenades, but he was caught in the blast all the same, as was I, and as was Finch. The fragments
sliced through everyone there and stopped dead when they hit my armor. I threw the net off as fast as
I could, trying to get myself untangled before any other complication could descend down on me.


I ignored it and cast the net free. I had no idea what kind of high-powered grenades Figaro Finch had
used, but the killing power had been immense. A still mage could have withstood it, but apparently
the two that had tried to grab me were the only ones that they had on hand. As for the revision mage,
I assumed he must have been overloaded, undoing his death and the explosion too many times as he
tried to avoid them. I glanced over at the stairs, where Finch had been standing when the grenade
had gone off, and saw blood there, but no gnome. There were more adversaries in this building, ones
on the upper floors, but we needed Finch, or at least the entad that he was using to get information.
The goal wasn’t to take out everyone here, that was a distraction and a moral hazard, we needed to
get Harold himself.

I jumped from the balcony and went back to the door we’d come in through. The others were there,
sans Finch, recovering. Raven looked a bit worse for the wear.

“Got them?” she asked.

“Some,” I said. “Whoever is left didn’t make themselves known. Finch came to the rescue, but I’m
not sure he made it. Grak?” He was halfway through a room off to the side, laying on the ground, but he sat up when he heard me.

“Fine,” he said. “Fairies.”

“He’s not fine,” said Pallida. “He got shot in the face. There’s a hole in his skull and I think it voided some brain.”

“I am fine,” said Grak.

“Good,” I said. “I was worried.”

“You need me to find the entad,” said Grak, slowly getting to his feet. “I can scan for it.”

“He lost brain, Juniper,” said Pallida. “Not so great for a person. Healing that is always a crapshoot.”

“How many hostiles are left?” asked a voice from the door. I turned around to see Figaro Finch, standing there with his pistol in hand, not only unharmed, but without any blood or trace of damage to his clothes.

“How did you survive?” I asked.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” said Finch. “Not that you couldn’t have gotten yourself out of a bind, from what I know of you.”

“How?” I asked again, looking him over carefully. “You’re keeping something from us.”

“Top secret,” replied Finch. “Grak, you said you can sweep for the entad?”

“Possibly,” said Grak, nodding slightly. He was swaying, just a bit, even after having eaten a few fairies, which was a very bad sign. Healing magic should have cured him, given that there was nothing magical about the brain, but it was possible that the injury had lingered for long enough, or been serious enough, that it had made a mark on the soul. I was going to have to go in and check him, but we simply didn’t have the time for it. Grak saw me looking and straightened. “Single entad wards are simple. I already have active wards against all of the presumed hostile ones. It will take time. I can make the time.”

He pulled out his wand and began using the temporal plate to warp time around him, his unsteady movements made more obvious as I watched him move at triple speed.

“Finch, does your contact have something more specific?” I asked.

“Down,” said Finch. “Probably this place has a basement. Unusual, in this city, but possible.”

I watched Grak for a moment. “Harold knows we’re here. He knows that we’re coming for him. He probably knows that we’re stronger than him. What’s his next play?”

“If the ward keeps his entad here, then he’s trapped,” said Finch. “Maybe he tries to leave without it, but we can track him, and so long as he doesn’t have a backup waiting for him, he’s smoked.” There was a slight gleam in his eyes as he said that.

“Then the gimmals can do mapping and Grak will lead us where we need to go, in conjunction with your source,” I said.

“Should do,” said Finch.
“I have it,” said Grak, coming out of his temporal plate enhanced scanning. “Two floors down, beneath the floor of the room we were just in.”

From the corner of my eye I saw the warder gimmal signing to the others. “He is a grandmaster.”

I didn’t know warding well enough to know how impossible what Grak had done was, but my guess was that it was at the upper edges of what a warder could possibly do, or maybe just a bit beyond that. Grak was a dwarf of many talents, from axe-throwing to being a midwife, and the few times I’d looked into his soul had confirmed that he had an extremely wide skillset, but warding had always been far and away his specialty. With another three level ups, I imagined that he was in the high 90s, if not completely capped out. When he was in better shape, and we had time, I was going to have to compliment him on the work he was doing, which I only had the barest understanding of. I was sure it would be like one of the unwashed masses telling a violin virtuoso that they played well.

“All right, Finch, you’re invincible, you lead the way,” I said.

I expected him to object, but he said nothing, and after he spent a moment peeking out the doorway with his gun raised, he began walking with purpose. I didn’t think that he was invincible, that would have been insane, and surely whatever magic was accomplishing it could be picked up by Bethel, but he wasn’t wearing any armor, and I’d seen him survive a grenade that he should never have been able to survive.

We made our way through the hallways, turning where Finch told us to turn, down first one flight of stairs, then a second. The big room, the one directly below the dome, had been ornate, the centerpiece of the building, with pillars and tiered balconies. The basement floors, by contrast, were much more utilitarian. Whatever this place had been before it was taken over, it was dark and foreboding now, with very little light along the way. I was frankly pretty shocked that there was still power to the building, since back on Earth, power was one of the first things to go in an emergency. On Aerb, that didn’t appear to be the case.

Eventually we came to a door, and Finch gave me a nod. I signed to him in the gimmal language.

“Is this the place?”

“Yes?” he said, with a mild inflection to the movement of his fingers.

“Three people there,” one of the gimmal replied.

“Finch, you first,” I signed to him.

Again, I waited for him to object, but he hesitated for only a fraction of a second and placed his hand on the door, looking at me for confirmation. I readied myself, then nodded once, and followed quickly after Finch as he rushed inside.

One of the three people was holding a shotgun, aimed and ready, and he fired on Finch as we breached. I had no idea what to expect, but Finch grunted and collapsed, his face and chest marred and bloody. I went on ahead, stepping over him, and grabbed the shotgun just as the second blast struck me harmlessly in the chest. I used my stilling technique, stopping the flow of blood, and let the man drop to the ground.

“Let me do the talking,” said a woman who was watching me impassively. She spoke loudly, which I thought was probably because she was trying to talk over some hearing damage of a gun going off in a small room, as much as I’d tried to use magic to make it quiet. The words were so incongruous and so nonchalantly delivered that I hesitated for a moment, the kind of hesitation that might have
cost me my life, if I weren’t currently invincible.

Neither of the other two were armed. The woman had thick-rimmed glasses and wore her hair tied back in a neat ponytail, with a few piercings that I vaguely recognized as being culturally significant rather than fashionable, though I couldn’t remember anything beyond that. She wore a semi-formal dress, but it was nothing special, and overall she struck me as being incredibly plain.

The man beside her was tall, also human, or at least close enough. He had on a boiler suit that was worn and stained with grease or dirt. He was a thick man, bald but with stubble showing, and he was gazing at me with a dumb look on his face, like he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on.

“Juniper, Smith,” he intoned as I looked at him.

“I said let me do the talking,” said the woman. She looked me over. “You’re in the wrong place.”

“Wrong place?” I asked, momentarily befuddled.

“You want him,” she said, pointing a finger at the large man that Harold had spoken through. “But you’re in the wrong place. You were tracking me?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Who are you?”

“You don’t know?” she asked, looking only mildly surprised. Her voice had lowered back down to normal volume, whatever after effects of the gunfire had faded enough that she wasn’t so troubled.

“I was --” I looked back at where Finch had been hit, where he’d been lying on the ground, and saw that he had disappeared. The door was partway open, and Pallida was standing there looking in but not moving to follow, which was pretty much my preference. “I wasn’t the one in charge. Who are you?” I repeated.

“Darri,” she said. “And you’re Juniper, aren’t you?”

“He, Is,” said Harold, from the body next to her. I wondered whether he was even his own person, or whether Harold had used his pithing needle. I didn’t particularly like either answer.

“I said let me do the talking,” said Darri. Her voice was mild, but I could tell she was strained. There was tension in her muscles and a slight bit of visible sweat, even though the room was fairly cool.

“You’re one of Harold’s people,” I said.

“We call him Quee Shepak,” said Darri. “Harold is the name that Uniquities gave him.”

“Why?” I asked. “No, forget it, I don’t care. Tell me where he is.”

“No, I’ll answer the why,” she replied. “There are a trillion people in the hells, maybe more. If we can end the world, we should. There’s nothing that can change the fundamental reality of eternal torture, not when the exclusionary principle has cut off so many promising avenues of research. Maybe you only care about yourself, but there are thousands of people sent to the hells every single day, because people just don’t care about them, not like they should. I’m sure that what you want right now isn’t someone telling you things that you’ve been hearing your entire life, fringe opinions that you can easily dismiss, but this world shouldn’t exist, not if there’s no way for us to fix it.” She forced all that out quickly, her voice slightly shaky.

“Where is he?” I asked.
“I don’t know,” she replied.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve lied to me,” I said.

She shrugged, again with the nonchalance seeming incredibly forced. “We were tracked before,” she said. “I’ve been off-site. When this one was coming to fruition, it was important that most of the main players weren’t around.”

I looked back toward the door. She was making me uneasy. “Grak, Val, I need you.”

Valencia strode in, looking around the room, and Grak followed after.

“She has a weapon,” said Valencia, looking Darri up and down. “She’s afraid to use it.”

“Grak, analysis?” I asked.

“Nothing to warder’s sight,” he said, frowning. “Still no trace of Harold.”

“Juniper,” said Valencia, looking at me. “Do you remember the swordsman from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?”

I looked at her with a raised eyebrow. *Just shoot her?*

“Yes,” said Valencia. “Now.”

“I’d rather hear what she has to say,” I replied, utterly confused by the exchange. Valencia wanted me to kill this woman, that was clear, but if she was a link to Harold, someone with information -- and what could she do?

“She’s stalling,” said Finch. I looked back to see the source of his voice, and saw him coming into the room with a look of consternation on his face. He was apparently unharmed, even as he stepped past what was clearly his blood on the floor. He raised his pistol and pointed it at Darri. “Where is he?”

“No here,” said Darri. She was trembling slightly, looking between us.


“She knows something,” I replied. “Probably a lot.” I looked at Grak. “Put up wards, to be on the safe side.”

I really had no idea what Valencia thought this woman was going to do. I believed her judge of character, really, I did, but it would be strange for this woman to have a weapon that I couldn’t respond to in some way.

“Tell me about him,” I said. I looked over at the large man that Harold was using. He was still standing there, docile. “He doesn’t speak like a person.”

“He’s not,” said Darri. “He’s not a person. He’s something else. But he can bring about the end of the world, and wants it with every fiber of his being. That’s the only thing that anyone really needs to know about him.”

“But you’re working for him,” I said.

“She’s *stalling*,” said Finch. “That means it’s a matter of minutes, not hours. She’s keeping us here because Harold is going to try again, or try something different.”
“This is dangerous,” said Valencia. “I don’t know how, but it is. Some exotic weapon. Be ready to kill her.”

“Why are you working for him?” I asked. I was hoping that she would let something slip, because as it stood, Finch was right, we were getting nothing.

“Because he wants to end the world,” she replied. “Have you looked through an infernoscope? Have you seen what they’re like? Have you thought about a trillion people down there, being tortured forever?” She raised a hand and wiped the sweat from her brow, and as she did, I watched the others around me react by raising their weapons.

“We’re less than a year away from fixing it all,” I said. “We have a method of depopulating the hells of infernals. We’ll rescue everyone down there.”


“Look,” I said. “Listen to me. We’re not from Uniquities, we’re -- Val, can you explain?”

“There are things you don’t know,” said Valencia. She was less convincing, with the armor covering her face, but she was gentle and imploring. “There’s a way to erase all suffering from the world, to save everyone from harm for all time, to undo millenia of torture. We have the key to it all, we just need more time, months, not years. The forces of the universe are conspiring against us, and this, right here, right now, is part of it. Quee Shepak is part and parcel with the exclusionary principle, it’s not the only thing holding mortals back.”

Darri faltered.

“False, Hope,” spoke the man standing next to her. I stepped to him and touched him on the chest, stilling him so that he would drop unconscious. Raven helped me lower him to the floor, not that I needed it, then she began putting on handcuffs.

“He’s not principled,” said Valencia. “He doesn’t care about suffering. He just wants it to end, for his own ineffable reasons. You’ve been with him long enough to know that. I know you’re skeptical, because we’re promising the thing that you always wanted to be true, but I swear that it’s the truth.”

The corners of Darri’s mouth turned down. Valencia had told me that a pure cold read against an unknown quantity was incredibly difficult, and based on my understanding of the rules and what Reimer had said, Valencia was getting the skill levels of the infernals, not their actual attributes, which meant that she was more fallible than she should have been. I was still hoping that she would find some success here, that she had said the right words to unlock this woman’s mind.

She opened her mouth, then closed it, and looked at Harold’s avatar again.

“The temple,” she said, and then crumpled to the ground.

I stooped down and touched her, aiming for her soul as quickly as I could, but before I could get in, I felt her go cold and dead, her skin no longer connected to her soul, her blood no longer pumping with vitality.

“He killed her,” I said, frowning.

“Why would he do that?” asked Finch.

“Because I can disconnect them, and he knows that,” I replied. “Shit, the temple?”
“This was all a distraction,” said Finch. “All stalling. A decoy.”

I felt my heart sink, because I knew that he was right.

“Okay,” I said, as we made our way back outside. “Tell me how you survived.”

“Classified,” replied Finch.

“Finch, I don’t know what you know about Bethel, but she would happily kill you as many times as it took to figure out how your power works,” I replied. “All I know is that it’s probably not magic, because otherwise our warders would have picked up on it.”

“Seven years ago there was an incident,” said Finch. He was almost running to keep pace with me, given that his little gnome legs weren’t quite up to the task of being fast. I thought about asking him whether he wanted to be picked up in the name of expediency, but that seemed like it would be insulting to him. “I interrupted a ritual, one that was meant to summon something terrible. The thing they brought through only came halfway. Wrong place, wrong time, and it stuck to me, made me a part of it. Only it wasn’t so much a thing as a bit of information, and I co-opted it, made myself a part of it.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“I’m not Figaro Finch,” he replied. “I’m the idea of Figaro Finch. Flesh and blood, to all appearance, but really something more.”

“You’re saying that you’re a meme?” I asked. “And … that somehow makes you immortal?”

He cast a quick look at me. “You can’t kill an idea.”
Six seconds was an eternity in any kind of combat scenario, but it still wasn’t long enough. She hadn’t seen Prince’s Invulnerability happen, and she hadn’t seen the explosion coming, and it was only while she was in the air that she was able to put the pieces of the simple puzzle together. She was spinning, rapidly, the result of the explosion’s wavefront hitting her unequally, but the solution to that certainly wasn’t instinctual, because all of her training in the immobility plate had been in their training gym, either with aerial maneuvers five feet off the ground, or turning it on and off as a part of sparring. So by the time it occurred to her to stop both her fall and the spinning, Prince’s Invulnerability was no longer providing its protection, and her inner ear was basically fucked, the centripetal force acting on her in viscerally unpleasant ways.

The immobility plate had some protections built into it so that coming to a complete stop from full speed wouldn’t kill the wearer or turn them into a chunky paste inside of a suit. These protections weren’t all-encompassing though, and rotation was one of the things that they were particularly bad at. When Amaryllis used the immobility plate to bring her to a stop, her brain slapped itself against the inside of her skull, and she blacked out a thousand feet up in the air, suspended there by the plate as pieces of Mome Rath rained down around Li’o, so high that she was in the low-hanging clouds.

She was confused and disoriented when she woke up, and fell without meaning to as she groped her way back to consciousness. Her head felt full of fog. She’d only been hungover once in her life, after a night of too much drinking with Fenn, and this was like a worse version of that. She hoped that she didn’t have permanent damage; the brain was a notoriously difficult thing to fix, and affected the soul more quickly than any other injury.

She fell through the air in fits and starts, turning the immobility plate on and then off again, unfocused and knowing that this was dangerous, but seeing no other clear option.

“Juniper?” she asked through Parson’s Voice, speaking with a tongue that felt swollen and uncoordinated. Pumping END didn’t seem to help much. “Juniper?” she asked again. There was no response.

People saw her slow, awkward fall, and came to greet her.

“What are you okay?” one of them asked, a tall, handsome man whose features suggested he was a quarter-elf. He had a small badge secured around his neck that marked him as ‘Emergency Operations’. A few of the others did as well.

“No,” said Amaryllis. She had no idea how long she had been hanging in the cloud, suspended there, and she suspected that she had at least some mild brain damage that bone magic wasn’t doing enough for.

“Come on,” said the man. “We’re going to get you to shelter.”

“I have friends,” said Amaryllis. She was in no position for elaborate lies, so she left it at that. Had Bethel not been able to find her? Was Bethel even still alive? She’d seen the corpse of Mome Rath laying across the ground, covering large parts of Li’o, crushing so many things beneath it. The finger-hair was still writhing, somehow, with unpleasant and barely visible undulations.

“We’ll get you to shelter,” repeated the man. “We have plans in place for something like this.”

“For something like this?” Amaryllis asked.
“Disasters,” he clarified. “Exclusions. The temple is the safest place for a hundred miles around.”

Amaryllis nodded, slowly, and regretted it, because her head hurt, more than it had ever hurt before. She tried to think. It was strictly untrue that the temple was the safest place around, the safest place was Bethel, but if Juniper wasn’t responding, then there was no way to meet back up. Hadn’t they looked for her? Hadn’t they wondered where she was? They had beaten Mome Rath, without her, and then what had happened? She wanted to meet back up with them, to spend a week in the chamber recuperating, but maybe the temple really was the best place for her to be. The hair on Mome Rath was still moving, that couldn’t be a good sign, but what could one person do about it, even one like Amaryllis?

“Okay,” she finally said. “Take me there.” She tried one more time to reach Juniper, sotto voce, but there was no response.

(((As it would turn out, both the time out and the time chamber interfered with Parson’s Voice. That was expected, but also really, really unfortunate for us, and partly just down to unfortunate timing.)))

Amaryllis walked with one of the people wearing a badge, toward a nondescript building that had lots of people buzzing around it.

“We’re going down?” asked Amaryllis. She was starting to feel a little bit better. She couldn’t remember what the symptoms of concussion were, and wasn’t sure whether or not she had ever known. It felt like something she should have read about. “Standard protocol for something of this magnitude is evacuation.”

“It’s not an exclusion,” replied the girl. “Not that we can tell, anyway. And the thing is dead.”

“There are creatures on it,” said Amaryllis.

“They’re being handled,” replied the girl. She pointed out at the campus, where mages were gathered, forming a defensive perimeter. “People are being taken care of.” She kept up her brisk walk, but gave a noticeable pause in her speech. “You’re a soldier?”

“Yes,” replied Amaryllis. “Here by chance, not deployed.”

“You fell from the sky,” said the girl. She had to have been fairly young. Athenaeums often offered spots to younger students, especially those with money or connections, but this girl didn’t look like she was too far into her teens.

“I tried fighting,” replied Amaryllis. “It didn’t work out so well.”

“We’re here,” said the girl. “The elevator is constantly running, but it has a few cars, you’ll just have to wait.” She hesitated. “Do you need medical attention?”

“No,” replied Amaryllis, which was a lie. “I’ll be fine.” She was low on trust at the moment, and someone laying hands on her was the last thing she wanted, not unless it was Juniper.

The girl left her, and then Amaryllis got into line. She tried her best to listen to the conversations around her, to see what other people were saying. Some of them were surprised by the underground shelters, which was entirely fair, given that the secondary facility definitely hadn’t been marked as that on the floor plans they had, and from what Bethel could tell from the outside, it was much more of an expansion to the temple than anything else. It was a mystery that they didn’t know the answer to, one that had been lingering since Grak had first reported back on the construction. There was a thin corridor between the two, but it was heavily guarded with a surfeit of wards. Confusion, that was what Amaryllis was feeling, and what she heard in the conversations around her. Was confusion
a symptom of concussion? Amaryllis felt like it was, but it was hard to tell whether that was just
because it sounded reasonable.

It had already occurred to her that going down into the ground wasn’t a good idea. Mome Rath was
apparently dead, and Juniper was who-knew-where doing who-knew-what with everyone else, if
their party wasn’t simply scattered to the winds. Even if that hadn’t been true, going to a secure
location wasn’t common practice for something like this, because extraction was so expensive and
unlikely that it was rare that it would ever happen, not when there were so many people who needed
to be saved. When the cavalry came in, if it did, you wanted to be as close to the surface as you
could be. You didn’t want to be sequestered somewhere far away, not unless there was a compelling
reason.

From the perspective of the narrative? If she was meant to be a damsel in distress, it seemed that was
likely to happen no matter what. But if that wasn’t what this was, then it was a chance to do more
work behind the scenes, to produce real, concrete results that would provide measurable benefits
without having narrative impact. In the last twenty-four hours, Amaryllis had seen the fruits of similar
efforts, both with Bethel fighting on their side for once, and with the tuung finally coming out
from their long sequestration to help save lives. She wasn’t going to take full credit for either of
those, but she had been putting in work while Juniper had been gone, especially with Bethel, and it
was hard not to see recent events as the culmination of that. What did it matter if it was mostly in the
background? It wasn’t like she cared about credit.

She had no idea what she might find once she went down the elevator. An attack was certainly
possible, and a death … well, not off-screen, that seemed unlikely, simply on the face of it, but that
was still possible. Raven had told that horrible story about drinking from a cask only to find out that a
woman had been killed and placed inside it. That had been a punishment directed at Arthur though,
hadn’t it? A missive penned by an angry god who didn’t want his hero subverting the love interests
so thoroughly? It was hard to say. In theory, the Dungeon Master’s disposition would be different in
this scenario. Amaryllis had done a few things that might have raised the Dungeon Master’s ire, from
what they knew of him, but nothing that should warrant her death.

Still, it was always risky to do things because the narrative demanded them. Juniper had been clear
on that point. Do things because of narrative immunity, and the Dungeon Master will come down
with sword in hand, cleanly slit your throat, and retreat to his mountaintop palace to watch the rest of
the show in peace. But it did seem that the Dungeon Master was directing her downward, into the
shelter with all the others, for some purpose of his own. Going down was, in some sense, narratively
motivated, but skepticism toward going down was also narratively motivated, so it was difficult to
make sense of.

Either way, she was going down into the temple to see what was there.

The elevator ride was jam packed and uneventful. Many of the people around Amaryllis were
students, and most of them were repeating rumors about what had happened. Her head was starting
to feel better, and she listened closely, trying to file some of it away for later. No one knew that the
Council of Arches was involved, naturally. If they had seen anything, it was an enormous skyship
going toe-to-toe with a beast who could have straddled most small towns. That same ‘skyship’ had
apparently gotten the killing blow. There was no mention of Juniper, not that she expected there to
be. No mention of people being taken in by that same ship either, though most of Bethel’s work had
been in the worst affected areas. Mostly, there was talk of the destruction, of buildings that simply
weren’t there anymore, and people who might not have made it. There was also talk of what came
after, how or whether classes would start up again, what would happen to the campus, and whether
the things coming off the enormous creature’s body would turn the whole valley unlivable. No one
liked the way the hair was moving. Amaryllis supposed they would like it even less if they knew it
was made of fingers.

After the elevator ride was over, they were all guided to a holding area. Amaryllis drew some looks, but that was hard to help given the obvious entad armor. There was nothing particularly suspicious about anyone, or anything that they were doing, save for the fact that they were deep underground, not at all where they should have been given that evacuation should have been of paramount importance. The elevator in particular was suspect, given how fallible those things were, how limited their capacity, and how little robustness they displayed.

Amaryllis was waiting for the other shoe to drop. She kept her helmet on, even though the armor had grown moderately uncomfortable, and all its magical breathability couldn’t disguise the fact that she’d been through hell. Very few of the others around her looked like they had been in battle, or anything other than simply displaced. A woman had her arm in a makeshift sling, and a boy had blood on his brow, but it was nothing more than that. Amaryllis had been at ground-zero for a massive explosion that had rained blood and gore down on the whole city.

“We’ll be bringing everyone here into the next room,” said one of the attendants. “There are entads used within the temple that will be relocated so that everyone is provided with food and water for the duration.”

“How big is this place?” one of a group of girls near Amaryllis whispered.

“Dimensional reinforcement,” replied another in a knowing voice.

(Amaryllis suspected that he didn’t know what the hells he was talking about. A skilled star mage could make a room that was bigger on the inside than the outside, but it was hellishly expensive, and the failure modes weren’t pretty. Nothing in the schematics had indicated the kind of reinforcement that you would expect, if there really were extradimensional spaces in play.)

Amaryllis followed the group, still waiting for whatever was yet to reveal itself. She didn’t have her flickerblade: it had been out when the explosion happened, and had no native ability to return to her hand. Perhaps it would find its way back to her, but it was entirely possible that it was buried in the rubble somewhere, never to be found, which would be a terrible loss. She was armed only with her martial skills (and her magics, though most of those were under active suppression at the moment). A quick test let her know the immobility plate was still working, as the full entad ward was only for the temple proper, not the annex, likely due to the cost, or maybe because the annex was obviously unfinished. Her tattoos weren’t moving though, which was a good indicator that Parson’s Voice was out of commission. Come to think of it, it was entirely possible that Juniper was within these same wards, which was why he hadn’t responded.

The new room was larger than the old one, with tall ceilings and better ventilation. It wasn’t clear how many people this space was designed to hold. There was nowhere to sit, but some people found spots on the floor. Amaryllis found herself frowning at the arrangement. They hadn’t been told why they were being moved, but maybe that was because there were lots of people, and the reasons for the logistical decisions wouldn’t be clear to anyone at the end of the chain of command, that wasn’t how you ran an evacuation program, nor how you fought a war. Still.

Amaryllis was the first to see the gas coming through the vents. It was subtle, off-white and thin, but it was there, and she could smell it a moment later. She was wearing the Bracelet of Panacea, which had been given to her back when they’d been getting ready to send Juniper down into the temple for meditation, and prayed that it would work.

The effects were slow and more subtle than Amaryllis would have expected. It wasn’t a gas meant to kill people, or at least not one meant to kill them quickly. The conversations grew louder, more
intense, and with more people involved. A few of the people were slurring their words slightly. Amaryllis wasn’t talking, and wasn’t feeling the effects.

People began to droop and slump, and Amaryllis drooped and slumped with them, doing her best to copy them and not stand out.

*Altered states.*

Harold had been using the temple, which had an entad that could induce a forced meditative state, one which he could presumably exploit. It was a reliable five hundred captive people every week, and given that he’d shown up at the meditation classes, his capacity was greater than that. Other means were being employed, to gather up more people. From everything they knew of Harold, as filtered through Oberlin, there were a somewhat wide variety of altered states that could be taken advantage of, and drugs were likely one of them.

Eventually almost everyone was laying on the ground, some of them sprawled out. Most were still talking though, the words barely coherent as words, all trains of thought horribly derailed. Amaryllis chose to be one of the silent ones.

Harold would know.

Harold *might* know, but if this were an operation to get as many people converted and ready for the choir as quickly as possible, then perhaps he would miss one person sitting in the middle, immune. Perhaps he was most aware of those he had access to, and could see through the eyes of the people he’d snagged in the way a human would, one at a time, rather than like an insect with a thousand facets to his eye. It was possible that Amaryllis would get lucky, or that Harold would be sloppy.

After ten minutes had passed, the far door opened up, and more attendants began to move in, these ones wearing thick gas masks with rubber hoses leading to heavy tanks. They were big and strong, members of the mortal species who were strongest, aboria, broshe, and Ha-lunde. They picked up the people that were laying there, no one dead or even asleep, but all completely out of it, unable to resist as they were lifted up and carried out. It wasn’t a terribly fast process, but it was done with efficiency.

Eventually they got to Amaryllis and removed her too. She made herself dead weight and watched with half-lidded eyes through the helm of her armor. The immobility plate didn’t restrict vision as much as it seemed like it should have, but as she was unable to move her head without giving herself away, there was little she could see.

The room they brought her to was packed with tall pews, so tall that a person could rest their head against the back. It was a massive room, and filling up fast, with most of the people packed in together so tightly you could barely tell how many of them were slumped there. Amaryllis was carried past row after row, more and more people who must have come down as part of the disaster response, then been drugged out of their minds so that Harold could get to them. What was his conversion rate like, that he could do this? Or, no, he had been covering his tracks back then, this was just a field of people who were obviously compromised, something that he wouldn’t be able to hide for longer than a day. Maybe he could go faster this way.

Mome Rath was dead, but for how long?

The attendants pushed her into place in one of the pews, then more attendants came with another person, and another, pushed in like sacks of meat. Amaryllis kept playing dead.

This was what she had come down here to find, but her tattoo was still shorted out, and getting back
up was … well, daunting to say the least, especially when there were only three ways of getting back to the surface that didn’t involve magic (not that she had magic that could cross the distance). The Spelunker’s Stroll and the primary elevator were both past what the floorplans had indicated was a secured passage, and the secondary elevator she’d come down was teeming with people, many of whom were compromised agents of Harold.

A different person might have been a ball of anxiety at the thought of being down there, surrounded by enemies who clearly had a plan, with help decidedly not on the way. Instead, Amaryllis felt exhilarated.

Oh, it was certainly a nightmare, that much was true, but there were plans to be made and then executed, a concrete direction, and that much she was good at. If she had simply gone down into the makeshift shelter and then stayed there until someone had given the all-clear, meeting up with the others hours or days later, that would have been a blow to her very being.

She stood up from the pew and moved past the insensate people laying there, edging her way to the end of the row. When more attendants went by, carrying more bodies, she stayed stock still, not wanting to make any movements that would catch their eyes, not even to duck down out of sight. They were, fortunately, carrying a body, and not paying attention to anything but the work they had apparently been carrying out for the last half hour.

Once they had gone by, there was nothing for it but to exit the pews and start walking. Someone would surely notice her, but walking with purpose was a skill that a person could learn, and as a princess, you simply couldn’t walk around like you were lost and confused, even when you were. Amaryllis prayed to a higher power that whatever Harold had done to make these attendants, he hadn’t given them the intelligence to question her presence, nor the wherewithal to raise an alarm.

As she walked, she saw two more attendants carrying a body between the pews. One of them looked at her briefly, then continued on, as though she were nothing.

Amaryllis didn’t know the layout of the secondary temple well enough. She had seen the floorplans, which they had stolen a week ago, but there was no guarantee that those told the whole story, and she had gotten twisted around between coming down from the secondary elevator, being led into the gassing room, and being carried into the room with the pews. Obviously going back through the gassing room was infeasible for a number of reasons, but that meant trying to work out a safe path back to the elevator that would route around it.

How long had this plan been in place? Months, at the least, maybe since even before the first death that had begun to bring heat down on the administration. Was this what Harold had planned all along? And with Mome Rath summoned … well, more bodies for the choir seemed to imply that Harold was going to try again. There were limits to how many people you could pack into a large room like that, but even after it was entirely filled, the rest of the complex could be filled as well. How many could Harold need?

Perhaps the original plan had been to do this once there was a critical mass of people converted, rather than in a time of crisis. That made a bit more sense, at least to Amaryllis’ eyes. The summoning of Mome Rath had something to do with the choir he’d assembled, people singing out a layered tone, but it hadn’t just included people in the temple complex, there were people on the surface too, and if someone had been prepared to take that step, or if it had been general information, then the singers could have been killed before they finished their contribution. Who knew whether or not that would have worked, but it might have been worth a try. Mass conversion underground, under some believable pretense (like an expansion of temple capacity) would allow a final push to a choir that couldn’t be stopped.
It wasn’t entirely academic. Figuring out Harold’s plan was the first step to stopping it. Amaryllis had frustratingly little information about what had happened with Juniper down in the temple, but it was entirely possible that Harold had acted early, in response to his encounter with Juniper, and now that Mome Rath was laying dead, the original plan was being quickly adapted into a different form.

Amaryllis passed a few people as she walked out of the hallway, but if any of them recognized her as being out of place, they showed no indication of it. She took a left, then a right, which should have gotten her into a room that was on an alternate path to the elevator. Instead, she had her first encounter with someone who recognized her as not belonging.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” said the woman with a frown. She was wearing an outfit that showed a lot of skin, but she wasn’t a tattoo mage, because there was nothing visible on her dark skin. It was the beads circling one wrist and the small box she was clutching that gave her away; Aumann had something similar, a collection of projectiles that marked her as a gold mage. The room was small, with just a table and a few chairs, a place that might have been a break room if the cabinets had been finished.

“No, I’m not,” replied Amaryllis. “I was trying to get back to the surface.” Lying was one of the things that she was good at, and she’d gotten better over the months with Juniper.

The woman nonetheless stood up from where she was sitting. Amaryllis had been holding out hope that gold magic was warded against in the annex, as she knew it was in the main temple, but she saw the beads rotate around the woman’s wrist with no outside force.

“On whose orders?” the woman asked.

The problem was, there just wasn’t enough information to bluff. Amaryllis didn’t even know Harold’s actual name, if people around here knew of him at all.

“No one’s orders,” said Amaryllis. “I’m not in the chain of command.”

“I see,” said the woman with a slight frown. She moved her hand slightly, to a more combat-ready stance. “Stay here for a moment.”

Amaryllis moved as fast as she could. Blood was still working, but bone wasn’t. Conventional wisdom, when facing down a gold mage, was that you needed to create as much distance as possible, then assault them with non-kinetics. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option here, and the non-kinetics that Amaryllis had on hand were extremely limited, especially without the flickerblade at her disposal. She rushed forward instead. It was a tactic that was, at least, a surprise to a gold mage, in part because it would normally be suicidal.

Amaryllis ducked down and slipped under the gold mage’s arm, then spun and came around from behind, wrapping her in a hug. As soon as that was done, she activated the immobility plate. Then she began focusing on the kill.

Gold magic and still magic were mirrors of each other in some respects, in terms of physical power, not their sources. A gold mage’s tactile telekinesis had no limitations aside from power output, which was tied to their marked gold, while a still mage had no limitations aside from their stilling ability, which was normally limited by how intensively they had trained and how deep their ability ran. In the game mechanical terms as laid out by Reimer, it would probably be a contested roll, skill check against skill check, and nothing more. In physical reality, it was force applied against counterforce, which in a way was even simpler.

(A small but significant difference was that a gold mage could act only on things that were within a
fraction of an inch of their skin, while a still mage could act through sufficiently close or linked objects. It was one of those tidbits that you read about in a book and then filed away for later, then suddenly needed to take into consideration in a crucial moment.)

The gold mage was pushing back against the immobility plate, budging it, but not by much. Amaryllis held the gold mage in a hug that didn’t do enough to restrict her arms. Gold mages could turn anything that they touched into a projectile, one that could be as powerful as a bullet, and that was exactly what the gold mage was trying to do, pushing hard against the armor in short jabs, without the need for any projectiles. The immobility plate was a good armor, and it didn’t succumb to the force, but as Amaryllis tried to still the gold mage’s heart, the fear was starting to run through her. Catching the enemy off-guard was one thing, but if the woman wasn’t fighting at a blind panic, she might try other, more effective strategies.

Amaryllis almost had it when the woman tried to scream. Vibration magic, even so weak as it was, was enough to silence the scream before it even left the woman’s throat, helped in part by the way Amaryllis’ extra senses extended beyond her. The gold mage’s heart was weakened, almost giving out against the force tamping down on it and forcing it not to pump blood.

That was when Amaryllis felt, through still magic, the beads from the bracelet rolling over the woman’s skin. The immobility plate was full plate, with gloves, gauntlets, and a full helm, completely encasing its wearer. Amaryllis had been hoping that the second tactic the woman would try was going for the head or hands, traditional weak spots of entad armor, weak points that the immobility plate decidedly lacked. Instead, the woman began flinging the beads at the wall, puncturing them through with small holes as she kept trying to scream. She got six of them out, traveling almost fast enough to be bullets, a dangerous and indiscriminate attempt at getting any help.

And then the gold mage tried something else, something that might not have been tried in the history of Aerb; she tried to use her tactile telekinesis to pump blood through her own body. Amaryllis could feel it, and first tried to still it, then allowed it through. Gold mages could put an enormous amount of power into pushing things around, but it wasn’t fine-grained, and as soon as Amaryllis was no longer stilling the blood, the gold mage was slamming blood through her own body, bursting arteries and veins, and popping her heart at the seams of the muscle.

After she’d gone limp, Amaryllis spent an extra second, just to be sure, then stopped the immobility and dropped the gold mage to the floor. Amaryllis grabbed the woman’s head and jerked it upward, hoping to sever the spinal cord, just in case, a move she added the pulse of blood magic to for extra power. There was a cracking sound, but not much else, and Amaryllis hoped the woman was dead for good.

It was pathetic, to spend so much effort to kill so minor a foe. How many mages did Harold have at his disposal? Still mages and vibration mages in abundance, that much was clear, but if he was willing to drug people with abandon, then he could have captured so many more, and exotic species too, ones with their own bespoke magics and abilities. There were mages that Amaryllis would have no chance at beating, entads that would stop her dead in her tracks.

And if the holes the gold mage had poked in the wall had done any good, Amaryllis was likely going to have to face them, with her tattoos non-functional, her bones blocked, and her strongest available magic, still magic, one that she’d had precious little time to train with. She didn’t have her flickerblade either, nor any other useful weapon.

She needed Juniper. She shouldn’t have come down here without him. If it took waiting outside and waving her arms, she should have done that instead, rather than trying to go off on her own and getting stuck.
When no one immediately burst into the room, Amaryllis checked the body. The woman was confirmed dead, and Amaryllis had no method of saving her soul within the next thirty minutes, not when she was surrounded by hostiles. She winced at that, then stole the woman’s dagger, which was either an entad or made to look like one (too stylized to be utilitarian), though three quick slashes through the air revealed nothing in particular, and it was entirely possible that if it was an entad, it had either been invested by someone else, or was hereditary rather than unbound. Amaryllis took it anyway, finally securing herself a weapon, even if it wasn’t what she would have asked for. There was nothing else of value in the room.

Amaryllis hefted the knife, looking it over one last time, then opened the door to the next room. She had cause to use her new weapon almost immediately, as soon as she saw the barrel of a rifle pointed her way.

It was a good time to find out that she was bulletproof. In testing back inside Bethel, before Juniper had gotten out of the temple, before Mome Rath had shown up, and before the biggest explosion Amaryllis ever hoped to experience, Juniper’s skill with Still Magic hadn’t been high enough that Amaryllis could actually bring a small caliber round to a dead stop. Now, the rifle’s bullet stopped against her skin with no more than the briefest of warnings to direct stilling power that way.

She stabbed the man holding the rifle in the hand, and he screamed, dropping it. Amaryllis snatched it up with her left hand before it could hit the floor.

There were others behind him though, and they wrenched the door open. Amaryllis threw the dagger at one of them, whipping it around as quickly as she could.

The dagger lit up brighter than the sun for a brief moment, etching itself in her vision before she could screw her eyes shut. When she opened her eyes again, after she could only see the dagger as an afterimage rather than visible through her eyelids, she saw her three assailants clutching their faces -- or, no, one of them had a vertical hole through his chest, singed on both sides, a hole almost exactly as wide as the dagger. On top of that, the dagger was back in Amaryllis’ hand.

She went after the two men while they were stunned, slicing cleanly through their throats before they even had their eyes uncovered, then she stepped out into the hallway and flung the dagger as hard as she could at one of them, whipping it around as quickly as she could.

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She went after the two men while they were stunned, slicing cleanly through their throats before they even had their eyes uncovered, then she stepped out into the hallway and flung the dagger as hard as she could at the first people she saw. She had preparation this time though, and turned away with her eyes closed just after the dagger had left her hand, spinning back into the room for whatever protection it might provide her from the incoming firepower of the people bearing down on her. When the dagger returned to her hand, blinking into existence there, Amaryllis stabbed it into the wall and raised her rifle instead, then leaned out of the room just enough to see down the hallway. On one end, two people were dead, but on another, seen through a quick change in angle, there were two men walking forward, one behind the other. Amaryllis recognized the one in back, but it would have been hard not to: he had four arms, constrained in a tight shirt and with a set look on his face.

Amaryllis fired off a shot, aiming for Oberlin, but didn’t wait to hear whether or not it connected before ducking back into the room. She pulled the knife from the wall and took a steadying breath, then threw it hard toward Oberlin and the other man, screwing her eyes shut so that they wouldn’t be seared by the light it was putting out, and once again ducking behind the doorframe.

Her head started to vibrate just after that, slow and subtle at first, and then faster, as Oberlin locked in on the resonant frequency and began to vibrate her to death. It almost instantly became harder to think, harder to do anything, and Amaryllis knew that she was about to die, was probably seconds away from it. She turned the immobility plate on, locking herself in place, but that did nothing for the vibration. She used still magic on her own head, holding her skull in place against the vibration, but that was a stopgap measure, and even more than the immobility plate, she was pinning herself down.
The worst part was that Oberlin didn’t have to come closer at all, this power was something that he could use around a corner, which meant that her ability to fight back with the meager tools at her disposal was gone. Vibration mages were limited by what they held in reserve, if she could just hold out --

The vibration let up, all at once, and Amaryllis stood up, shouldering her stolen rifle. Whatever had happened to the dagger, it hadn’t returned to her hand. She waited, listening to silent footsteps, aiming at the doorway. She was a mediocre vibration mage, barely able to do anything with the power, with a pitifully small pool of breath, but she tried to enhance her hearing anyway, which only made the footsteps sound more like death.

At the first small hint of something moving past the door frame, she fired her rifle.

The bullet struck Juniper in the head, stopping instantly and then falling. He caught it and looked it over for a moment before looking up at her.

“Nice to see you too,” he said with a widening smile.

“Harold is building up a choir,” said Amaryllis. “Gassing people into an altered state, then taking them over. He’s going to try again.”

“I thought you might be dead,” said Juniper. He was still smiling.

“Focus, Juniper,” said a familiar voice, and Figaro Finch stepped into view. He glanced into the room. “Oh, good, you found Amaryllis. Let’s go.”

“What the fuck is Finch doing here?” asked Amaryllis, staring at the gnome.

“Saving the world,” said Finch as he kept moving down the hallway.

“That’s actually not Figaro Finch,” said Juniper. “It’s the idea of Figaro Finch.”

Amaryllis gave him a bewildered look that the helmet hid and stepped out of the room.

“Sorry,” said Juniper. “I’m just really, really happy to see you.”

“It’s fine,” said Amaryllis, though she was finally feeling warmth and relief flowing through her. He was like a giddy puppy sometimes. “What’s the plan?”

“Find Harold,” said Juniper. “Kill or subdue him. Get to work fixing everyone left alive.” He looked backward, to where Oberlin was laid out. “I think he’ll be fine. There are others that won’t.”

“We think Harold is here?” asked Amaryllis. “Physically present?”

“Might be,” said Juniper. He hesitated for a moment and looked like he was going to go for a hug, or to offer her his hand. “Come on, Finch is right, time is wasting.”

Amaryllis came out into the hallway and saw the others, Raven and Pallida, Grak and Valencia, and for whatever reason, Juniper’s ethics professor, who was in imperial-standard shimmerplate. There were others too, one-armed humanoids that took her a moment: gimmals. Valencia was divesting the bodies of their souls, moving quickly and efficiently, and Amaryllis let out a sigh of relief.

They went through the facility together, with Juniper at the front, and Finch just behind him. Amaryllis had the rifle, one that was useless against the still mages that surely made up the bulk of Harold’s rank and file, but she held onto it tightly, because it was as much offense as she had
available to her. The situation was new and confusing, the reunion fast and missing too much catharsis, because the threat was still out there, and they were still on the enemy’s home ground.

“He’s strong,” said Pallida, walking alongside Amaryllis and speaking under her breath. “Really strong right now.”

“Leveled up?” asked Amaryllis.

“Three times,” said Pallida.

“Three?” asked Amaryllis, eyes widening.

“Three,” said Grak.

But before Amaryllis could ask questions, they were into the next room, and Juniper was moving so fast that he was practically a blur of motion, and he wasn’t even a velocity mage, not yet. The sound of gunfire echoed through the halls, loud and imposing, and Juniper didn’t so much as shrug it off. This was what still magic had promised, it was why Sound and Silence had been one of their goals from early on, but it was still startling to see in action. Amaryllis had only a foggy understanding of the annex, but it seemed as though they were moving toward the center of it, if her reckoning of where they were was correct.

There were certainly more mages of many varieties stationed here, for all the good it did them. Rapid identification of magic was part and parcel of training for fighting in all conditions, and as Juniper tore through the room, she could barely decide which school his opponents belonged to before he struck them down. A rune mage in glowing runic armor had a powerhouse punch stopped instantly, and Juniper brought him down in seconds. A flower mage unleashed an arsenal of racing branches, perhaps hoping to capture or ensnare, and Juniper whipped his probability blade around, neatly severing it all before it could get close to him, then advanced on the woman.

It was a one-man massacre, and all Amaryllis could do was stand there with her rifle raised, hoping that she would be able to help, or at least to take a clean shot. After half a minute, it was over, and Juniper was looking over the bodies.

“Still magic one hundred,” said Grak from beside Amaryllis.

“Oh,” she said. “Sacrifice?”

“To save me,” said Valencia.

“He doesn’t have much time left then,” said Amaryllis. Given the rate of decay, not much time left at all.

“The capstone allows any effect with a duration to be stilled,” said Grak.

“Oh,” Amaryllis said again. “Wait, Prince’s --”

“He’s under the effect,” said Grak. “Until the next time he sleeps.”

Amaryllis was stunned by that, and then the gears started turning as fast as they ever had before, her earlier head trauma making it slightly hard to think. Anything with a duration? Bone magic was unfortunately out, because it relied on transfers of quantities and expenditure of resources rather than being timed, and if that had worked, then Juniper would still be charged with all the manifold powers of Mome Rath, and that didn’t seem like it was the case, because he wasn’t that fast. Everything else though? There were options, so many options that it was nearly dizzying, a whole world of entads,
various spells available to tattoo mages, nothing that would match the heights of Prince’s Invulnerability, but --

“Wait,” said Amaryllis, turning to Grak. “The wards --”

“Subverted for him,” replied Grak. “This can wait.”

But Amaryllis was getting fidgety, because something else had occurred to her, which was that from a narrative perspective, this meant there was sure to be a rapid escalation of threats. Worse, they would be threats that only Juniper could face, not threats that his family, his team, would be able to help him with. The way Raven had described it, that was what it had been like living with Uther, most of the time. There were specialties for each of them, little areas that they had carved out, but there were many threats that Uther simply handled on his own, without help or consultation. Even before he disappeared for good, there had been times that he would simply vanish for a week or two, sometimes giving brief notice, sometimes just disappearing and pretending that it wasn’t cause for alarm when he returned. It had been like that at the Boundless Pit, but that was only one of many.

Fenn had complained about it often, before it had really been a problem, or even a glimmer of one. She had been their archer and self-professed slink-thief, but there was very little call for that most of the time, and after she and Juniper had started their courtship, she had sometimes felt relegated to the role of love interest, especially because there were times when she was trying to give input, in her own way, input which was ignored more often than not. Hells, even from the very start, Fenn had been worried about being locked out of power, an outsider in their little group of three, and then she had become so marginalized as to be practically a footnote in their story, the death that no one talked about anymore.

Amaryllis put herself toward the rear of the party, moving so as to provide support against any attempt to pin them in or attack from behind, but there was nothing. Juniper had cut through the annex like a scythe.

They came into a large room, this one even less finished than the rest, with only glowing glyphs for lighting, the kind that were often used around Aerb but here cast a sinister pall over everything. A man sat in a simple chair at the other end of the large room and beside him, the only other thing in this hollow, hidden place at the heart of the annex, was a jar with something that gave a suggestion of flesh.

“On your guard,” said Juniper, which might as well have gone without saying. “Grak?”

“Give me a moment,” said Grak. He held out his wand with his good hand, and spread the fingers of his wooden hand wide. “I think that is Harold.”

“Sitting, or in the jar?” asked Juniper.

“In the jar,” replied Grak. “I can ward.”

“Do that,” replied Juniper. “Clear of wards here?”

“Yes,” replied Grak, frown visible in the darkness.

“It’s over!” called the man who was sitting beside the jar. “We lost! You won!”

“Careful,” murmured Amaryllis.

“Four entads,” said Grak. “All of them warded against since we left the elevator.”
Juniper began walking forward, crossing the distance, and Amaryllis fell into step behind him. He looked back at her briefly, as if surprised to see that she was following, then continued on. The only other person to approach was Finch, or rather, the idea of Figaro Finch, whatever that meant.

“Hi,” said the man on the seat. “Sorry, give me a moment, just coming down off the high. For a moment, I really thought that we would pull it out there.” He looked a little bit sick, and confirmed that impression a moment later. “I feel like I might throw up, just because of the nerves.”

“That’s Harold,” said Finch, pointing at the bottle of flesh. “I’d bet my ass. You trust your warder?”

“Yes,” said Juniper, without so much as a look backward at Grak. “I’d lay my life in his hands without a second thought.”

“Well, you have,” said Finch.

“Harold?” asked the man who was sitting. He was sweating slightly, and clutching his pants where they covered his knees. “That’s the name Uniquities gave him. You’re them?”

Finch raised his pistol and Juniper, moving fast, blocked the shot with his hand. The shot rang out through the small room, and Amaryllis was thankful that she had just enough skill with vibration magic that she’d been able to keep her ears from ringing.

“Useless to talk to him,” said Finch. “Dangerous too.”

“There are threats he could deploy,” said Amaryllis. “He’s not harmless, sitting there, warding or no. Juniper, some of those threats are known to you.” The Cannibal was one, though Amaryllis didn’t even want to say that much, because it would give information away to the enemy.

“I know,” said Juniper. He raised his sword and advanced, slowly. “This isn’t how this battle ends though, not with me killing these two and then being done with it.”

“How this battle ends?” asked Finch. “There’s no romance here, no climax, just kill the fucking guy and hack through the mass of flesh there, then let’s start in on the paperwork.”

“I want answers,” said Juniper, his voice surprisingly firm. “Harold came from somewhere. He has a goal. There might be more of him, or more of his kind.” Some of this was directed to Finch, but some was also, obviously, directed to the man sitting in front of them. “What’s your name?”

“Ellio,” he said, looking up at Juniper. “And you’re Juniper Smith.”

(Amaryllis was tensed and ready, ready to slit the man’s throat as soon as the wrong syllables came out. The risk wasn’t really the Cannibal, she could kill him before there was any real danger that he could complete the sequence of phonemes, the danger was something else, the great unknown, not something that was in a foreign language or required the twisting of a tongue, because they would expect that, and so the weapon that Juniper would have designed would be different, more subtle. An innocuous phrase that called down hellfire? Nothing someone could say by accident. Maybe two or three words, spoken within minutes of each other, so rare that it could be a trigger to something, unknown to the world.)

“Harold told you my name,” said Juniper. “Who are you to him?”

“I’m his advisor,” said Ellio. “One of them.”

“One of many,” said Juniper.
Ellio nodded. He was still fidgeting. “You have to see the world,” said Ellio. “Not the world how it pretends to be, how you want it to be, how you think you can reshape it, but the world how it is. The world is shit.”

“Garden variety cultist,” said Finch.

“No,” said Ellio. He didn’t take his eyes from Juniper. “There are sixty-two exclusion zones, places of unimaginable horrors, places that are, at best, inhospitable to life. Those exclusion zones come at the expense of useful magics, and every effort put forward to stop the exclusions from happening has failed. The world is getting worse, everyone knows it and no one talks about it, the world is hostile to our very existence just as a matter of course, and grows more hostile every year. We’re getting ground down, and no one is doing anything about it, because there’s nothing to be done.”

“That’s your premise?” asked Juniper, raising an eyebrow. “That the world is getting worse? And that justifies,” he tightened his grip on his sword, “the end of the world?”

“No,” said Ellio, shaking his head. “No, I should have started with the hells, but everyone knows about the hells, they’ve grown up knowing about the hells, and if you start talking about infinite torture then they tune you out, so you talk about the world and how it’s getting worse.” He took a breath. “Our society strives for oblivion, we makes laws encouraging it, mandating it, but we manufacture souls by the thousands, knowing there’s a chance they’ll wind up in the hells, gestating there under infernal control until they’re capable of feeling the same infinite pain that every other resident is subject to. You speak out against it and people don’t care, they content themselves with delusions and ignore the cold reality, the same as they do when they walk past a homeless man on the way to work, the way they justify their sins to themselves, it’s … it’s pain and suffering, as far as the eye can see, and Aerb, the world as we know it, is just the tip of it.”

“Are you getting anything from this?” asked Finch.

“Maybe,” said Juniper. He nodded to Ellio. “Go on, finish your rant.”

“I realized it all when I was a teenager,” said Ellio, seeming grateful that he would get to talk. “I realized how cold and cruel it all was, how people would delude themselves into thinking that it wasn’t. I was afraid of dying then, afraid of the hells after I saw what was there, and when I looked around me, other people weren’t, they didn’t act like they should have if eternity were on the line. They did stupid, risky things like leaving their house without a bottle and a spike hanging from their hip. They slept without someone watching over them, or worse, alone. They didn’t act like eternal torture was on the line. They acted like it would sort itself out. Do you know what the enbottling rate is?”

“Through the Empire it’s ninety-two percent,” said Amaryllis. “Though only one study was commissioned, so far as I know.”

“Yes,” said Ellio, finally looking at her. “Eight percent of the population winds up in the hells, and that’s without even accounting for the fact that the Empire would never admit how often nascent souls go there.” He was fidgeting again, and directed his attention back to Juniper. “It took me a long time to understand that people live in the now, that they put on blinders to the cruelty and horror of the world. And after that, I --”

“You decided that you were going to end the world,” said Juniper.

“No,” said Ellio. “No, I tried to improve it, I tried to open eyes, I joined the Anti-Natal League, I went on marches, but it was lonely, and progress was slow, and all around me, people kept going to the hells, they kept dying. We prepared reports on known incidents, tried to force hospitals into
compliance, lobbied for changes to the laws … and it slowly became obvious that none of this effort was really doing anything.”

“And it was then that you decided to destroy the world,” said Juniper. He sounded flippant, Amaryllis noted with relief. This sort of talk could be seductive, she knew.

“I decided that I would destroy the hells,” said Ellio. “An impossible task for a single person, but the world is large, and eventually I found others, people that I could work with. Not people who wanted to destroy the world, no, people who wanted to destroy the hells, as impossible as that might have seemed. But you don’t care about me, I know that, you’re content to kill me if I don’t tell you what you want to know, I’m just --” He balled up his hands into fists. “Our minds rebel against it, they reduce trillions down to nothing, worse than nothing, abstraction, but any rational person would see that the hells are of paramount importance, their destruction should be the one and only driving goal of mortals,” he began shaking his head. “There ought to be a horrible weight of responsibility felt by every person in this whole world.”

“Harold doesn’t care about that,” said Juniper. “He’s using you, like he’s used others before.”

“Of course he’s using us!” shouted Ellio. “He uses everyone, it’s what he does. But his goal aligned with our own, and -- he was going to end it. He was going to bring an end to the pain.”

Juniper frowned at that, then glanced at Amaryllis. “Thoughts?” he asked.

Amaryllis gave a small laugh. “It’s insanity.” That felt like the proper amount of flippancy to treat the subject with, the right level of dismissal.

“You don’t really believe that,” said Juniper.

Amaryllis felt her face fall. Had something happened within the game mechanics somewhere that had allowed him to notice, two opposed dice rolls that had been extremely unlucky for her? Or was it simply that he knew her too well for such deceptions to work?

“I think it’s something we all think, once in a while,” said Amaryllis. “Not the whole world, but … that urge, to raze it all down and leave nothing but ash in its place. And if the only tool you have is ending the world, if you have to look at whether the world is worth it, then it’s possible to do your sums and decide that if you can’t fix everything that’s broken, maybe it would be better that nothing existed at all.” That was as close as she was going to get to saying what she really felt, at least in the here and now.

“Hrm,” replied Juniper, frowning for a moment and then looking away from her, back to Ellio, and briefly to the jar of flesh.

“You feel it too,” said Ellio, staring down Juniper. “He saw you, he got the measure of you, he knew that you felt it, the need to do something about the world, to erase it all.”

“That assumes that it’s immutable,” said Juniper. “It’s not.” He pointed at the jar. “Are there others like him, do you know?”

“Not immutable?” asked Ellio, ignoring the question. “You’d have me believe there’s some way to deal with the hells? Some way to save everyone from torment? Some way to fix all our terrestrial problems, to halt the inevitable spiral toward collapse?”

“I don’t really care what you believe,” replied Juniper. “But yes, I have it on good authority that there’s a way.”
“How much faith do you have?” asked Ellio. The muscles of his neck were straining. “How much more likely is it that you listened to a deception, that it was a pretty lie?”

Juniper hesitated and seemed to think about that. “Even if it were,” he replied. “If it were a grand and elaborate lie with fabricated evidence, or some delusion on my part, even then, I would still want to strive for better, instead of just giving up. If --”

“Giving up?” asked Ellio, incredulous. “Is that what you think --”

Juniper moved forward, so fast he must have been using magic for it, and touched Ellio on his throat. The man froze in place.

“I don’t want you to make a mistake here,” said Juniper. “I’ve been suffering you to speak. Maybe you were some normal person who decided that the rational thing to do was to blow up the world, and you were enabled and used by Harold and whoever else was part of your cult. Or maybe Harold grabbed a hold of you and decided that he needed someone to serve as his mouthpiece, which would mean that none of this is your fault. I’ve been trying to be nice and pleasant, because I thought that it would make things easier. The thing is, Mome Rath killed thousands, maybe more, and what I need from you now is information about contingencies, information about whether there are other threats, or booby-traps, or anything else that you wouldn’t want me to know.”

“He won’t talk,” said Finch.

Juniper didn’t respond, and only stood there, gripping Ellio’s throat, likely using still magic, engaging in some kind of intimidation tactic. It lasted for a long moment, so long that the silence grew uncomfortable. It took longer than she would have liked to admit to realize what Juniper was doing.

“Oh,” said Ellio. His eyes went slightly wide.

“Tell us everything,” said Juniper.

“I,” said Ellio, looking momentarily confused. “Yes.” He looked over at the jar of flesh. “He’ll kill me.”

“Can he?” asked Juniper.

“No,” replied Ellio. He let out a breath. “We always knew that warding would work. It was one of the things that we tried our best to prepare against. No warder could be allowed to see him unless he had his teeth in them, we were meant to post up in places that a warder couldn’t encompass, and we were always prepared to leave without a trace.”

“So what made this time different?” asked Juniper.

“He thought he was close,” said Ellio. “Closer than ever before. He had a bigger base in Li'o, more people collected, and it was changing him.”

“You can’t trust these answers,” said Finch.

“I’m an unregistered soul mage,” said Juniper, as though that were a casual thing. His voice was slightly clipped; he knew the gravity of revealing that, but he’d made his choice, and sometimes when he did that, he would add this air of false nonchalance.

“What’s going to happen to me?” asked Ellio, true concern on his face for the first time, replacing anxiety.
“I have no idea,” replied Juniper. He glanced at Finch. “Probably not a trial. Probably just confirmation that you weren’t a pawn, then execution.”

“Oh,” said Ellio.

“Where does he come from?” asked Amaryllis, stepping closer to Ellio. “Are there more of him? What was your plan here, once you knew we were coming?”

(The soul magic was frightening, and she was trying to ignore that fear, but it was a watershed moment, the first time their group had forcibly converted someone, the first time they’d breached that particular moral boundary. Logically, it was better than killing the man, and on balance it was probably the right thing to do, but a decade of indoctrination had primed her to think that it was something that was Not Done, and that was hard to shake.)

“We never knew where he came from,” said Ellio. “We had theories, but he never said. Maybe he didn’t know. The plan was to have me here, to talk with you, and maybe convince you, if you tore through everyone else. It was a long shot. If that failed, I was meant to kill you. There’s a word I was supposed to say, one that would kill me too.” He shook his head. “It was likely to kill him too, but if you were going to kill him anyway, we thought it was better to use it than let this all crumble.”

“So that’s it then?” asked Finch. “It’s over?”

“Looks like,” said Juniper, nodding. “Just got confirmation.”

“What does that mean?” asked Finch.

“Nothing,” replied Juniper. He glanced at Amaryllis. “Can we talk privately?”

Amaryllis gave him a nod.

Grak made a ward for us, one that would make it difficult for us to be overheard. I had knocked out Ellio, and it seemed like the threat of Harold had passed without a final showdown. I’d even gotten a quest completion notice for it.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m feeling dumb. I don’t get it.”

“Get what?” asked Amaryllis. She had removed her helmet so we could speak a little more clearly, which I appreciated.

“The showdown with Mome Rath made sense,” I replied. “It’s a big giant kaiju, and it’s one that I designed. This though, was a fight trivialized by the recent upgrades, and at the end of it was a man making the strongest possible argument for ending the world, which in my opinion wasn’t all that strong, not knowing what I know, anyway. So what’s going on here?”

Amaryllis cleared her throat. “I think that it might have been meant for me.”

“You want to destroy the world?” asked Juniper, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Not really.” She took a breath. “I used to have fantasies about ending the Lost King’s Court, just wiping everything out.”

“And installing yourself as dictator?” I asked, giving her a grin that she didn’t return.

“No,” she replied. “I was twelve, and I hated them all. I just wanted it all burnt to the ground, and I didn’t care what, if anything would take its place. They killed my father and poisoned my mother,
Juniper. Allegedly. Nothing proved, but I’ve never really doubted it. And I just thought … it would be better if all this was gone. I wasn’t angry, I was just … it made sense to end it all, because I didn’t then have the ambition to save whatever was worth saving.”

“Huh,” I replied. “I get the impulse, I do, but without the component of putting something better in its place, it feels so alien.”

Amaryllis paused. “Where did you think you would go when you killed yourself?” she asked.

“Ah,” I replied. “Oblivion.” I took a moment to try to see things through that lens. “Okay, I am dumb, this was all a suicide metaphor.”

“I don’t think it was just that,” said Amaryllis. “It was that, but not just that. Harold was his own entity, a malevolent one that only wanted death and pain to the people of Aerb, but the people like Ellio that he surrounded himself with, people that are still, unfortunately, out there, they were following him because they sought a way to end it all. Maybe for some it’s a manifestation of depression and anger at the world, like suicide was for you, but for others, it’s just basic logic. If Uther is on one end, standing fast against incredible odds with a sword in his hand to protect a single innocent, then these people are on the other, taking the measure of the world and finding it so lacking that it’s better the world doesn’t exist.”

“They think Aerb was a mistake,” I replied. “Which I guess I’d argue is correct, given that it was the creation of an amoral monster who decided that sixty odd years of life and then eternal torture was a balance he was willing to strike in order to … I guess to give me something to fight against. And if I didn’t think that there was a way forward, if I thought that it was all going to end in tears and despair, I guess I would try my best to find a way to fix everything — no, sorry, I don’t know who I’m kidding, I would probably just ignore it all and pretend that it didn’t matter, just like all the people that Ellio was complaining about. Or I would opt out for myself without caring about anyone else, which I guess on Aerb means killing yourself in a way that allows you to ensure your soul will be recovered and stored until it decays. Taking everyone with you, that’s a level of dedication that I would never have.”

“I would,” said Amaryllis. “There was a time when I thought about it. Never to the point where I put anything into motion, but I did think about it.”

“Huh,” I replied. “But just the Lost King’s Court? Not the whole world.”

“The whole world … for a bit,” replied Amaryllis. “After I first looked in an infernoscope, when I saw the magnitude of the hells, I did have those same thoughts. That if there was a way to end the hells, I would give my life to do it, and I would give the lives of others too, whether they were willing or not, and when I sat down to do the math, a trillion souls, give or take, measured against five billion alive, it couldn’t possibly be the case that a single person’s life was worth two hundred people rotting in the hells for eternity. And if you factored in that some of those people would wind up in the hells themselves … I would never have done what these people did, but there was a time when, if you’d put a button in front of me and laid out the consequences, I would have pressed the button that erased everyone from existence.”

“I really wouldn’t have seen you as the type,” I said, after a moment had passed. “I’d have thought that you would just reject the math, when the numbers came out like that, or you would make a new formula.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Amaryllis. “If I’m being honest, I was worried that he would sway you, but it seems like I was more susceptible to the attack than you were.” She fidgeted with her armor. “You know, he did raise a good point about the Dungeon Master. I believe that he exists, and that you
spoke to him, but there are good odds that the game is rigged against you, or that even if it’s not, that you have low odds of success.”

“Wait, are you thinking of ending it?” I asked. “Of just releasing Harold and going along with this World Lord plan?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “But I’m scared to run the numbers. I think if I was faced with following through on what my beliefs about the world said to be true, I would become a coward, just like you.”

“Ouch,” I replied.

“Coward, in this context, means not going down the path of darkness,” said Amaryllis. “You don’t think it was cowardice that saved you from killing yourself?”

“I’d rather not talk about it so bluntly,” I replied. “It’s awkward.” I cleared my throat. “But, maybe. I don’t know.” I tried to think for a moment. “I think it was more, when faced with the reality, I just didn’t want to do it. There was some primal part of me that wanted life, and I’d just been ignoring it. Or maybe it makes less sense than that, because human psychology is weird, especially when we’re talking about the failure states.”

Amaryllis frowned slightly. “And it’s all over?” she asked. “There was never a risk that you would be a convert? After Fenn died, you were in a bad place.”

“If someone had given me that talk then, instead of now,” I replied. “Probably still not. But it becomes a probably.” I looked down at my armor, which needed cleaning. The quest completion message had been heartening, but I mostly wasn’t feeling it. Taking out Mome Rath had felt good, but Harold … not so much. I had torn through his forces like paper, and only put myself in any actual danger once or twice. At the end of it, there was just a pathetic minion trying to convince me to join their side and a jar of flesh.

“I’m sorry that college didn’t work out,” said Amaryllis.

“It’s an athenaeum,” I replied, giving her a weak smile.

“Do you think the theme is future?” asked Amaryllis. “Reflections of your future on Earth?”

“I think that’s overfitting,” I replied. “Maybe not so much of an overfit as Hogwarts is, but still an overfit.”

“I’m worried Anglecynn is next,” said Amaryllis. “Lisi showing up is a flag that it’s going to come back. And like it or not, this is probably going to be a major international incident, especially if you’re going to be reversing all of the damage that Harold did to those people.”

“I am,” I replied. “And yes, it would be hard to disguise our involvement, though maybe we could scale back on the scope of it. I don’t want to be seen as the next Uther.”

Amaryllis looked out, beyond the bounds of the ward we were in. There was work to be done, obviously, but I had wanted this break, and I was apparently at the point now where if I thought my time was best spent talking to Amaryllis, then I got what time I needed.

“People are probably dying out there,” I said. “People we could be saving. And after that, clean up. Lots and lots of clean up.”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis, standing up. “Thank you for saving me, by the way.”
“Anytime,” I replied.
All the best conversations happened around the game table. Maybe it was just the idea that everyone was supposed to be doing something else, that these were digressions rather than the main topic, or maybe it was just that Juniper was terrible about reining things in. Sometimes the game would go on pause for a half hour or more as they went back and forth about whatever bullshit got brought up. Arthur instigated a lot of it, naturally, because he was Arthur, but part of it was Juniper, whose games were always about bugfuck weird shit that seemed like it was calculated to draw people into grand, sprawling arguments about all kinds of different topics.

“The problem is multiculturalism,” said Arthur, waving a hand. “Look, it’s really great to be able to go into a big city and get foods from all over the world, to see all kinds of crazy art, to have all these canons to draw from and translated text and all that. The flip side is that it represents a complete and total breakdown in the useful parts of those cultures. We’re talking about cultures and customs that have been around for dozens of generations, things that are tried and tested, and now they’re all torn apart and being used in ways that they were never meant to be used, different parts of them cast off from each other, recombined, and who’s to say that the end result, which is going to be the result of survival of the fittest and memetic strategies, will be something that’s actually good for people?”

That was classic Arthur.

“You’re talking about foods?” asked Tom.

That was classic Tom.

“No,” said Tiffany. “He’s talking about foods as a segue into talking about other things. It’s -- what’s the name for it?”

“Motte and bailey,” replied Juniper. “Named after an old style of castle. But I’m not even sure it’s that, he’s probably just talking to talk. And really, the cultural conflicts that we’re talking about in this city aren’t like that, they don’t arise from synthesis, they arrive from differences.”

“Sure,” replied Arthur, blowing right past that objection. He turned to Tiffany. “You disagree with the premise?”

Reimer watched carefully. This wasn’t quite flirting, but it was something close to it. There was a knowing way that Arthur talked to Tiffany, like they were close friends, and they were close friends, but part of being close friends was that you never let on how close you were, because it could get really awkward, really fast. Tom was given to those moments of sentimentality, maybe because his dad had died when he was little, and it gave Reimer the creeps, even if Tom was debatably his best friend.

“Look,” said Tiffany, which was often what she said when she was about to try cutting through Arthur’s shit. “Just last week you were talking about how it might be possible to build a culture that’s the best of all worlds, or a morality that starts from base principles, and I was sitting here arguing that maybe it would be possible, but the reality was going to be malicious actors and market forces fucking things up.”

Reimer sat and watched. There was a lot to like about Tiffany. There was a lot to hate, too, if you wanted to, things like the way she said ‘malicious actors’ and ‘market forces’ when there had to have been a simpler way of phrasing it, or how she didn’t take naturally to swearing but did it anyway because that was what everyone else did.
“Let’s step back,” said Arthur. “The Ha-lunde are a valued part of the international community.”

“Which ones are they?” asked Craig.

“Corpse fuckers,” Reimer replied. “Though they use something like a cow now, instead of the bodies of their enemies.”

“Gross,” said Tom.

“Which isn’t an example of multiculturalism,” said Tiffany. “They changed because they had to, because they were probably going to be wiped out if they didn’t adopt the sane solution to how they were made.”

“Right,” said Arthur. “But to the Ha-lunde, it wasn’t the sane solution, we erased a part of their culture, or, arguably, they voluntarily erased a part of their own culture. But even then, it wasn’t a one-way street, the Ha-lunde have helped to shape imperial law, so there are a lot of places now, even outside traditional Ha-lunde lands, where you’re allowed to kill a guy and then fuck his corpse to have your baby, so long as you have enough witnesses sign off and proper consent forms filled out so everyone knows it’s on the up-and-up. And because people are oh-so-worried about discrimination, you get a lot of places where having sex with a corpse is legal even if you’re not Ha-lunde.”

“And that’s a problem in your moral framework?” asked Tiffany, folding her arms and raising an eyebrow.

“I never said it was a problem,” replied Arthur. “It’s just what it is. You look at things like sexuality and gender, and obviously what humans end up having is going to be influenced by what goes on in the cities, and the cities have all kinds of species getting together, some of them all women, some all men, and yes, I know, those are terms that we’re applying where we really mean human-centric descriptions of what we can visibly see, but so far as I know, that’s an open problem, unless you want to learn the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax for hundreds of species and thousands of cultures.”

“It’s not hundreds,” said Juniper. “Two hundred.”

“Two is hundreds,” said Arthur. “One hundred, two hundreds.”

“Right, but you’re making it seem like more than it is,” said Juniper. “And we all know the number, so why be imprecise? It makes your point look weak. Also, I think thousands of cultures is probably wrong too, because for that to be true, you’d have to have an average of ten cultures per species, which I think you’d only get to if you were really liberal in your counting.”

“Even if it were ten cultures,” said Arthur. “The point stands that when you meld them all together, you get this confusing mish-mash, one that hasn’t been time-tested, one that’s probably just a collection of thoughts and ideas that don’t form a cohesive whole except to the extent that people try to shove it all into being one thing, which it’s not.”

“Oh, so now you’re going to talk to us about overfitting?” asked Reimer. “I’m going to make a note so I can remember this day, and refer back to it later the next time you have some insane theory that you’re marshalling a ridiculous amount of selectively picked evidence for.”

Arthur waved him away. “I mean, you’re still planning on going to an athenaeum, right?” asked Arthur. “I think that this is something that we should all be thinking about. It’s a different world out there.”
“But, again,” said Juniper. “Some of that, like the city that you’re making your base right now, is just cultures clashing with one another, rather than cultures integrating in some kind of blended ur-culture.”

“It’s a natural consequence of two cultures living together,” said Arthur. “Unless you’re telling me that the people of this city are completely segregated?”

“Mostly they are,” replied Juniper. “There’s no idea that people can pick and choose what they want, that’s modern imperial thinking. When there’s a holiday for the Urush, it’s only for the Urush, they don’t have Telleki people coming to partake in it, going through the streets with streamers, eating the holy food, et cetera. And yeah, sure, there are maybe a small fraction of people who are mixed-species, or who fall in love with someone of another culture and start a blended family, but that’s not the norm, and it’s not really what I’ve been talking about. If you guys come back here in another twenty or fifty years, then sure, it’ll be germane.”

“Sorry,” said Arthur, in a rare apology. “It’s just, I’m hopefully a year and a half out from going to the athenaeum, and it’s going to be so different from Sporsan. I’ve been to Caledwich twice, and that’s at least still Anglecynn, but it’s crazy how many species there are walking around, how much there is to consider, how people take it all in stride, how frickin’ weird it all is.” He sighed. “That’s all, tangent over, I’m sorry.”

And Juniper, being Juniper, would bring all that conversation into the next campaign they played, where this time the world was as cosmopolitan as the athenaeum cities were, with every effort on Juniper’s part to make them as blended and bizarre as possible, pushing his worldbuilding as hard as he could and trying to drive the plot from a place of multiculturalism.

Reimer had already put in his own application to study at Sound and Silence. Arthur was almost guaranteed, he was the head of the local Future Leaders of Anglecynn, plus his father had a little bit of pull with the capital, and of course Arthur was brilliant, even if he was a chode sometimes. Reimer had only hesitantly mentioned that he’d applied, only after he’d quietly sent the application in. When he’d learned that Tiffany had applied to an athenaeum too, it seemed like it probably wasn’t going to happen for Reimer, because she was whip-smart too, and three people being athenaeum-bound from their little podunk town seemed unlikely, just on the face of it. It was far too early to be worrying about how strange and alien Li’o might be, when the future was uncertain.

And indeed, the summer came, and Reimer finally got his letter, which was a firm but polite rejection. That was a kick in the teeth, and Arthur began to grate even more, because of course he’d gotten in, and Tiffany had too, different athenaeums (Clocks for her, the Vervainium for him), but still. It was a real kick in the teeth.

Then Arthur had gotten in a car accident, and died in the hospital weeks later, and not long after that, Reimer had gotten a letter saying that he had gotten into Sound and Silence after all. It was hard not to think that Arthur had died so that Reimer could go. Maybe someone high up in the Lost King’s Court had been informed of Arthur’s death and seen that there was an empty spot in their quotas, then gone through the other applications and seen that there was another application from that same small town. It was possible. Probable, even. The vagaries of the Mage’s Agreement, and the interface between the kingdoms, the empire, and the athenaeums, were all kind of a mystery from down on the ground in Sporsan.

So Reimer was wracked with guilt, and his group of friends was imploding, and he was trying to get his life in order for living in a foreign country and becoming a mage, all of which meant that he didn’t have that much time to prepare himself for the extreme culture shock, not that there was a whole lot that he could have done to prepare, other than taking the train into Caledwich a few times.
Set aside all the stuff about Juniper being replaced by a dream-skewered version of himself, and the stuff about the game system that he’d made getting grafted onto his soul, and the fact that Juniper very much appeared to be a repeat of Uther Penndraig, and how manifestly unfair that was, how bugfuck insane it was, how weird and alien and unsettling it made the entire world. Set aside how much Reimer’s future was in question, how much money he’d made, the fact that Juniper’s version of the ideal woman was something between his girlfriend and his assistant, or all the other weird shit that went on in that weird house that they just happened to have in Li’o. Take all that weird, barely comprehensible junk, and toss it off into a corner for later examination.

Reimer had a girlfriend!

Kind of.

Reimer’s dad had always been one to comparison shop before buying anything, combing through the options that were laid out in the catalogs, talking to people who owned various makes and models. It had taken months to get a new refrigerator, because Reimer’s dad must have looked at a dozen of them; it was always a running joke that whenever they went over to talk to another family, Reimer’s dad would go have a look at their fridge. It was an approach that Reimer took up.

So when Reimer was twelve, and he wanted a new bike, he went into it very prepared, with a budget and a plan. He was going to talk to people about what kind of bike he wanted, he was going to look through catalogs, and he was going to get his dad’s help. Only what ended up happening instead was that they went to a community picnic, and Reimer’s dad got to talking with someone from his work, and later that day he brought a secondhand bike home.

The thing was, it was a fine bike, it was basically everything that Reimer had wanted, but there was something that offended him about the way he’d gotten it, because there was no real element of choice involved, it was just handed to him without any real struggle or effort, no comparisons, nothing like that. It was just so lazy, so unconsidered, even if it was a perfectly fine bike.

Reimer’s worry was that he was Lisi’s bike. She had been looking for a boyfriend, or if not a boyfriend, then something, and he had been there, and apparently through no effort on his part, he’d met whatever her mysterious criteria were.

They were spending enormous amounts of time together, though a lot of that was intensive studying time, which Lisi would spend reading through thick books that were outside of their normal coursework, and which Reimer would largely spend on things that were more frivolous, though writing as much as he could about past campaigns and character builds was its own variety of work, even if that well was definitely running dry. When that wasn’t doing it for him, he would read the broadsheets, read the latest obol book, or listen to a radio play, sometimes just waiting for her to be done.

They talked a lot, through meals, between classes, and after she was done with her reading. He never really got the sense that she cared, but they traded stories all the same, hers always more interesting than his, stories about Quills and Blood, which she’d started training at when he was still wandering through the woods poking at snakes with his friends. He enjoyed hearing about Sanguine through her eyes, a place that was as alien to him as Li’o, but in completely different ways, rigid and hierarchical in spite of how many different species made their home there, firm and controlled, as though the vampires that had once made their home at the Sanguinary Estate had left an imprint so deep that it could never be erased. When Reimer talked about Sporsan, and what it was like on the agrarian ass-end of Anglecynn, Lisi nodded along, asked her pointed questions, and never seemed like it was making all that much of an impression on her, which was fine, because there was no reason that it should.
It was, however, one of the reasons that Reimer felt like he was Lisi’s carelessly chosen bike.

After the handjob, Reimer had thought a lot about culture shock. He and Lisi were both human, both from Anglecynn, even, but they came from radically different backgrounds. His father worked in a factory that made aluminum boats, and his mother worked part-time for the town. For Lisi, it was a completely different story, one marked by big cities and a fair amount of independence, all in the backdrop of imperial cosmopolitan social mores.

It made it impossible to understand the context of the handjob, or what Lisi thought about it, or what it meant. Reimer didn’t know whether they should talk about it, but Lisi didn’t bring it up. It really seemed like you should be able to talk about something that you had done together, but if there were rules out there, Reimer didn’t know them.

Some days, when they were sitting together in her room, after she’d finished her intensive reading and note-taking, she would come up to him and give him deep, passionate, aggressive kisses, and he had no idea how he should respond to that, except to enjoy it. He would touch her, and she seemed responsive to it, but there was never any repeat performance from her, nothing like that first time, when it had all happened without any real effort or awareness on his part, some strange alchemy that he hoped he would someday understand, a thing that had happened to him. Logically, he thought that he could probably take the initiative, remove her shirt while they were kissing, or bring her over to her bed, or something like that, but there was a persistent fear that she would be affronted. That first time she had done everything without so much as asking him his opinion or waiting for him to stop being shocked by the turn of events. So if she actually wanted him to go further, why wouldn’t she do it on her own?

He had tried, once, when she was straddling him and kissing him, running her hands over his body, wearing a dress that allowed her bare legs to touch his. He’d touched her, first her knees and then her thighs, working his way up as they kissed, completely unsure of himself, because he hadn’t gotten that far with any of the girls back home. His fingertips touched her underwear … and then she grabbed his wrists and firmly moved his hands away, back to her thighs, only slowing down slightly with her kisses. He had taken the message and hadn’t worked up the courage to try again.

Reimer waffled on whether or not he was being a coward.

On the one hand, he had seen Arthur and Tiffany go through the same thing, not that they had ever even kissed. Most of it, Reimer only learned after the fact, but it was the kind of thing that you learned about and suddenly the world made a lot more sense. Arthur had plotted, planned, and dithered, and eventually Tiffany had lost interest. It was something that Reimer had talked to Tiffany a lot about, in those waning days of their final year in Sporsan, after Arthur and Juniper were both gone, when she was trying to reinvent herself and prepare for the athenaeum in her own way, no longer Tiff, now Tiffany, a name that Reimer tried to adjust to but often failed at. Maybe, if he sent her a letter asking for advice (which would take an awful lot of explanation to even get to the question) she would say that he should go for it, or that he should just wait a few days, or something equally encouraging.

On the other hand, Reimer didn’t know the rules, and this was one of those situations where there could be rules about not asking about the rules, which you couldn’t find out until you had transgressed. Reimer was, by his nature, a plotter and a planner, but how could you plot and plan if you had no idea what was going on, and you weren’t even sure whether you were allowed to ask?

This went on for a week and a half, with not terribly much changing. They spent huge chunks of time together, ate their meals together, talked enough that he started to think he actually knew who she was, and made out on the small couch in her room almost every night (once on her bed, which
felt like it was leading somewhere but didn’t). Reimer had always heard it said that when you were in love, you would know it for certain, and he didn’t know it for certain, but he wasn’t sure whether that meant he wasn’t in love, or if people who said you would know it when it happened were just full of shit. He was definitely infatuated though, despite how weird and intense Lisi could be, or maybe because of it.

And yes, there were daydreams of being a prince in the Lost King’s Court, though he had very little conception of what that would actually be like, and placed very low odds on it ever happening.

It wasn’t all about Lisi, but in the context of her, it all seemed like footnotes, aside from all the Juniper stuff, which was too big and too strange to grapple with.

Reimer went looking for people to play games with, not that he thought he’d ever find a group like he’d had in Sporsan. The system that Juniper had cobbled together (which was an insult to cobblers everywhere) seemed like it was lost to the sands of time, or more likely, living on only in reconstructed form from what Reimer could remember, but it wasn’t a great system anyway. There was a whole world of other games out there though, and Reimer found a group advertised on a bulletin board, one which explicitly said ‘newcomers welcome’.

When he got there, a dozen people were playing card games, eight of the antlered ahu, two dwarves, a bear animalia, and a ghill, which made Reimer the only human. It was the first time in his life that he’d been the only human in a room, and he almost left, not because of any xenophobia, but because he thought that it would be awkward. His inner Tiffany said, ‘but that’s probably how they feel all the time’, so he went in and sat down, at which point the bear animalia came to join him and immediately began asking him questions. When she (probably she, it was hard to tell) confirmed that he was a complete newbie, she placed a deck in front of him and began explaining the game, which was apparently a card game where you were in charge of constructing your own deck. It was extremely popular with the ahu, but hadn’t really spread beyond them, something that the club was trying to change.

So Reimer was given a ‘starter deck’ and a bunch of other cards to build something with, and he got stomped a few times before realizing that this was just another form of character optimization, and he hadn’t spent nearly enough time trying to break the game. Half of it seemed to just be planning and theorycrafting, which he felt like he’d spent a lifetime preparing for.

It was weird, talking to a bear. Not unpleasant, no, but still a bit weird. Reimer wasn’t a xenophobe, not by any stretch of the imagination, but Sporsan was about ninety-nine percent human, and the remaining one in a hundred people were split into their own unique enclaves, not more than three or maybe four of them, depending on how you counted, refugee groups that had been assigned by Anglecynn (the trotters, with distinctly red-hued skin, banned from school sports because they were about twice as strong as humans) or a single family that had moved a few generations ago and expanded (the Mo’quell family were tention, small and rodent-like, and there were enough of them in Sporsan that most places had special seating). This, this was just a bear animalia, Piper, with her own culture and history, and that, too, brought to mind the conversations they’d had at the gaming table about what it meant to live in a place that was such a strong mix of cultures and societies, because Piper came from a whole family of bears, with their own experience of the world.

After Reimer had rebuilt his deck, with Piper keeping him company, he played it a few times against one of the dwarves and got thoroughly crushed. As it turned out, there were a lot of meta-rules to learn, governing principles of deck construction that he hadn’t known until he’d actually tried it for himself, some of which tied into higher order emergent properties of the internal systems the rules set up.
He was in the middle of remaking his deck when a loud, layered tone filled the room. He looked around, coming back up from his deep thoughts on the game, and saw that four of the ahu were sitting there with their mouths open, all holding a note, not all that loud, but not really quiet either.

“What’s going on?” asked Reimer.

“Not sure,” said Piper. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

There were some attempts at jostling the singers, or trying to get their attention by clapping next to their ears, but none of the group’s crude diagnostic efforts bore fruit (the card games momentarily on pause), and the ahu kept sitting there, doing nothing but making that noise, without any sign that they were aware of the world around them.

“I’ll go get help,” said Reimer.

He’d been a part of the Young Drakes, a youth group that put a focus on disaster preparedness, which involved about one third mundane problems (earthquakes, flash volcanos, tornados, sinkholes, blizzards), one third exotic problems (rogue gold mages, dragons, wars, all manner of magical creatures), and one third total batshit stuff that had never happened in the entire history of Aerb (planning for unknown exclusions, basically). It wasn’t clear, at this point, what kind of emergency it was.

Step one was to go get help, someone with medical training if possible, a mage if you could find one. Back in Sporsan, there had been plans in place, and activating those contingencies as quickly as possible was supposed to be one of the key things to do, especially because a rapid response from Caledwich could solve a whole hell of a lot of problems.

Unfortunately, Reimer didn’t get much past step one, because as soon as he was out of the room and running through the halls, he could see that this wasn’t localized at all, it was *everywhere,* afflicting scattered people all through the building. He quickly ducked into one of the rooms and looked out the window, which allowed him to confirm that it wasn’t even local to this building, because there were people outside, only a few, standing stock still with their mouths open as others looked on nervously.

Reimer had been moving quickly, but after he saw that, he started running, trying to pace himself so that he wouldn’t get winded. There were two good options of where to go, if something strange like this was happening, the first being Juniper and his merry band, the second being Lisi, and Lisi was far, far closer. Reimer was still running for help, it was just a higher order of help, because this was the kind of outside context problem that Uther had always been dealing with.

By the time he got outside, storm clouds were forming in the sky, sickly green, tornado weather, just like he’d seen once or twice back home, except there were never hundreds of people sitting around letting out a weird noise with their jaws slackened and faces blank. Reimer was mildly surprised that he was the only one running, but everyone else seemed like they were stuck in the confusion and panic phase of things. Reimer focused on running and breathing, trying his best not to tire himself out, because in the back of his mind, he was thinking about the off-the-wall stuff they’d prepared for in the Young Drakes, like new exclusions, which by their nature were nothing like anything before. Rule one for that? Leave the presumed zone, as fast as you possibly could.

Reimer wasn’t at that point just yet. It wasn’t even necessarily trouble, just a weird storm and some people zonking out while singing the same not-song, and as he went over that in his mind, that made it seem worse, not better. He kept up his running though, trying not to worry that he was overreacting, and trying to think about all the planning they’d done in the Young Drakes for all kinds of crazy shit. It was generally accepted that there was no such thing as stealing if you were trying to...
escape an exclusion zone. Reimer knew how to do an ignition bypass on a car and drive it without keys, if need be. Unfortunately, he had practically nothing of any value on him, not from a material wealth standpoint, and not from a survival standpoint. There were things back in his room, but that was on the other end of campus.

He dashed past the Canis Building and went into Lisi’s dorm, and said his thanks that the man at the front desk was one of the slack-jawed not-singers, because he’d been stopped a few too many times in the past two weeks. Reimer took the stairs up three at a time, still trying to conserve energy, because who knew how long he was going to have to run for. He was going to need water, and in a disaster, plumbing was often the first thing to go.

When he burst into Lisi’s room, she was sitting there, as he’d hoped she would be, on her bed, reading a book, wearing a light green dress that stopped just below her knee. She looked up at him without any of the annoyance he was worried she would be feeling.

“How was --” she began.

“Something’s happening,” said Reimer. He was breathing hard. “People screaming for no clear reason, a big storm overhead, I don’t know what it is, but it’s not good. We should think about leaving Li’o, at least for the rest of the weekend, until we know what’s happening. We have to move now. Maybe talk to Joon and Mary.”

Lisi tossed her book to the side, slipped down off the bed, and crouched down in front of it, facing away from Reimer. She slid a long, heavy leather suitcase from underneath it, and before Reimer could protest that it really would be better for them to move, Lisi had opened the suitcase, giving Reimer a view of what was inside.

She handed him a pistol in a hip holster, then put on one of her own, and after that pulled a sword from the suitcase as well.

“You said you had experience?” she asked, handing it to him.

“Uh,” said Reimer, trying to think back to what he’d said. He’d mostly used a sword during games period at school, and that was much more choreography and forms than it was actually knowing how to hit and kill things, and the swords they used were simple, kludgy things that were made by the hundreds and blunt as a watermelon. Aside from that, he’d had a little training with his father, which was really just playing around, and more about the tradition of it than because he would ever be expected to use one. “Some,” he said. He hoped that he hadn’t lied to her, or exaggerated too much, but it was very possible he had. The sword she’d given him was a masterwork, at least going by the sheath and grip.

“Good,” she replied. “It’s an entad that charges you up when it hits, you’ll be faster, stronger, make that first strike count if we have to fight.” She pulled a second sword from the suitcase and buckled it to her hip. “When did this start?”

“Ten minutes ago,” replied Reimer. He buckled his own sword on. He was a little skeptical of the utility of it, given that they needed to be on the move, and while he’d always found swords to be surprisingly light, he also knew from experience that adding a few extra pounds could make a person miserable while on the move. “Maybe a little less than ten minutes. I came as fast as I could.”

The second-to-last thing that Lisi pulled from the suitcase was a small pipe that looked like it was carved of bone, which she inspected briefly before sliding it into a backpack, which was the last thing she brought out. “Food and water for three days,” she replied. “Bottles and spikes. You’re carrying it.”
He should have figured that Lisi would be more prepared than he was. She put on thick, sensible shoes as he strapped down the backpack, and as soon as that was done, they were out the door, moving at speed down the steps together. Maybe he hadn’t been as focused on it, but the singing, if you could call it that, seemed like it was getting louder, and when they passed through the front doors of the dormitory, the clouds overhead were thick and low to the ground, their color unnatural. It was **definitely** tornado weather, the green that you sometimes got with a fading bruise, but the clouds were too low.

“We need to get to safety,” said Lisi. “Do you know where Juniper is?”

“No,” replied Reimer. He looked back up at the sky and saw a claw descend from it, only briefly, one that must have been the size of a car. The clouds swirled in its wake, but didn’t lift. “Kaiju,” he said, voice barely above a whisper.

“What?” asked Lisi, who hadn’t seen it, and was still moving, apparently away from campus, toward Juniper’s house.

“Kaiju,” said Reimer as he followed after her. He hadn’t attached the sword quite right, because it was banging against the top of his thigh as they moved. “Juniper had this world, these giant things, monsters, with people living in their shadows. Each was as big as a small town. And it was a low magic setting, only about a dozen kinds, all at the lower ends, no athenaeums, so people hid underground, except some of the kaiju were burrowers, so the mortal species were reduced to being scavengers or worse.”

“I don’t follow,” replied Lisi.

“I saw something,” said Reimer. “Something bigger than the biggest dragon.”

“Lead with that next time,” replied Lisi. They had gotten out of campus and were walking down the street. There was practically no one letting out the tone now, though there were a lot of people outside, looking up at the sky and talking in low voices.

“I don’t think it’s anything that we can fight,” said Reimer. “They weren’t, in the game.”

“We’ll see what they say when we get there,” replied Lisi.

“We’re stealing a car,” said Reimer. “It’ll be faster.”

He took out the wires behind the steering wheel and connected them to each other to create a short that would cause the soul energy to be harnessed again. Reimer was quickly trying to recollect everything that he could remember about the kaiju. He’d been doing ‘work’ like that for Amaryllis for almost two weeks now, writing down everything that he could think of. She had gotten the broad strokes first, then wanted to move on to the deeper lore, the minor characters, the off-hand things that Juniper (the other Juniper, the Aerb one) had thought up. Reimer understood the desire for the game system rules, given that this alternate-but-still-the-same Juniper somehow had game stuff grafted onto him, but all of the campaign stuff … that was a little more confusing, and it was confusing in a way that Amaryllis hadn’t been able or willing to help with.

It was after he’d gotten the car going, on the way over, that Reimer saw the claw descend from the sky again, this time with others following it. Lisi saw too, and stopped for a moment to watch as five claws of enormous size sliced through the air together before returning to the cloud cover. One of them touched down on the ground, somewhere in the city.

“That’s not good,” said Lisi.
It was the first time that Reimer got the sense that she was anything less than completely prepared for what seemed like it might be the end of this little section of the world. In a way, it was comforting to know that she wasn’t superhuman, and that she could say stupid things like ‘that’s not good’ when claws began descending from a greenish sky.

When they got to the house that Juniper was staying at, it was closed up tight with no lights on. Reimer banged on the front door, yelled for them, and then finally tried to force the lock. The windows were frosted, which he was pretty sure they hadn’t been the last time he’d been over.

“I’m breaking in,” said Reimer, glancing only briefly at Lisi.

“If they’re not here, we should go,” said Lisi. “Out, away from what’s happening here. We should be fine if we can make it to one of the major roads with a car.”

“I’m worried it’s too late,” said Reimer. “Other people will be evacuating. That will clog the streets.” He cupped his hands and tried to look through the frosted glass, to no avail. In the distance, he saw the claws touch down again, this time a little more firmly before retracting. “I’m going to break the window.”

“There might be wards,” said Lisi.

Reimer hesitated, then smashed through the window. Wards that stopped a person weren’t really a problem, it was the annihilation wards that would absolutely fuck you up, and in most places their use was prohibited or at least tightly controlled. He didn’t know whether that applied to this place, given that what Juniper and his new friends were doing didn’t seem like it was entirely legal to begin with, and if it was all legal, then they were so far up the power scale that little things like laws could be swept away with a politely worded letter.

That the window actually broke was a good sign. Reimer stuck his hand, careful not to touch the glass, moving slowly so that he could feel with his extended fingertip if there was an annihilation ward. Instead, there was nothing. Looking inside, he saw only darkness, none of what he remembered being in the sitting room, though he didn’t have a good internal map of the place, which had been built in a confusing way that made him feel like rooms were different the second time he went through them. Or maybe it was magic, who knew.

Lisi unzipped the backpack on Reimer’s back and pulled out a shielded dawnrod, which provided illumination as bright as daylight. When she shined it into the house, it was completely empty, not just with all the furniture taken out of the room, but all the walls too, nothing but bare ground, the walls of the houses it abutted, and skeletal rafters holding up the roof. It was like there had never been a house there at all, and only the facade remained.

“Well, that’s a neat trick,” said Reimer.

“We should get back into the car,” said Lisi. “Drive out of town, and stay there until we know more. We wouldn’t even need to miss classes.”

“Agreed,” replied Reimer. “I’m glad that I went to you first.” That just sort of slipped out, but she didn’t seem to take it the wrong way.

“Me too,” she replied. “Let’s go.”

They hopped back into the car, which took more wrangling to get going, then took off as fast as traffic allowed. Unfortunately, that wasn’t terribly fast, because by this point, other people had the same idea. There were still one or two people singing mixed in with all the others, standing stock still
as everyone moved around them. Reimer tapped on the wheel as he tried and failed to maneuver around the person in front of him. Something was blocking traffic, and they just didn’t have the time to deal with any of this, not if that thing whose claws were coming down from the sky did something that was more than just menacing.

It was when they were stopped that the back door of the car opened up and a man slipped into the back seat. Lisi immediately drew her pistol and aimed it squarely at him, but he had both his hands up, and she didn’t shoot, which Reimer was thankful for, given how close the gun was to his head and how loud it would be. The man was, Reimer belatedly realized, a dark elf, but before he could let that sink in, the traffic began its sluggish motion again, and Reimer stepped on the gas.

“Out,” said Lisi.


Lisi didn’t lower her gun. “Who sent you?”

“No one,” he replied. “But I travel alongside Amaryllis Penndraig and Juniper Smith. My name is Heshnel Elec.”

“Nice,” said Reimer with a sigh of relief. “Good to have you.” But he was an elf, even if he was a dark elf, who didn’t even really practice cannibalism, not like the other variants did.

“You were watching the house,” said Lisi, slowly lowering her gun.

“I was in the house,” replied Heshnel. “You just couldn’t see me. Given the choice of staying where I was and following, I elected to see you to safety.”

Reimer glanced at the dark elf in the rearview mirror again. Heshnel had something on his lapel that Reimer eventually realized were flower buds. “You’re a flower mage?” he asked, returning his attention to the road, and the traffic that was still going too slowly for his tastes.

“I am,” replied Heshnel.

“Anything that would let us get away from whatever is coming down?” asked Reimer.

“Not far enough, and we wouldn’t be able to take the vehicle with us,” said Heshnel.

“Are you a proficient flower mage?” asked Lisi, still turned around in her seat.

“I studied under Vervain,” replied Heshnel. “My flower strains date back five hundred years.”

“Good,” replied Lisi, finally turning back to face the road.

“Any reason you’re not with the others, fighting that thing?” asked Reimer.

“I’ve fought too many battles in my life,” said Heshnel. “Juniper will prevail, or he won’t, but I will do my best to be far away.”

“Well, we should have taken fucking bikes or something,” said Reimer. “Because this is absolutely ridiculous.” Nevermind the fact that Reimer basically didn’t know the streets of Li’o at all, it was taking forever to get anywhere, and he would have suggested that they just run, but if they could ever get out on the open road, they would be going so much faster that they might actually stand a chance of escaping the worst of it.

The sky darkened, and Reimer instinctively looked up, trying to see what was happening above.
“Fuck,” he said, as he saw the claws descending, this time with the rest of the leg wholly visible. The thing, the kaiju, touched down with an almost gentle grace, its long hair and many-mouths looking vaguely peaceful. It wasn’t quite on top of them, but it was very, very close, and the thunderous sound of the claws crashing down was loud, even over the sound of the city. There were screams of terror and minor popping sounds, either distant gunfire or explosions. A few of the claws had come down in front of them.

Traffic had stopped. Maybe too many people were looking up instead of going forward.

“We need to get out,” said Reimer. “We’re not moving fast enough, we can get back in a car or hitch a ride when we get to a place where the roads are clear.” He opened the door without waiting for a response. If those claws had come down on the streets, then traffic would be even worse, or blocked entirely, and it was already terrible.

“Where are we going?” asked Heshnel, exiting the car on his own.

“Wherever will have us,” replied Lisi. “We have enough supplies for a few days, enough money to pay our way.”

“We’re going away from that fucking thing,” replied Reimer. He looked back at it, its size beggaring belief, and old questions about the square-cube law came bubbling up to the surface of his mind.

They abandoned the car and took off, not quite running, because the sheer size of the kaiju was mind-boggling enough that a dead sprint would probably wind them before they even got to the furthest claws ahead of them. Reimer paid special attention to Lisi, worried that he would look back and she would be gone, but she kept pace with a grim determination. She was a blood mage, with what seemed like a fair amount of combat training and aptitude, and he shouldn’t have worried, but he did.

Ahead of them, Reimer saw the claws begin to move, ponderously slow because they were so big, but incredibly fast given how much was being moved. It wasn’t going the same direction they were, not quite, but it wasn’t moving away either. Stopping wasn’t an option either way, and Reimer tried to focus on navigating his way down the street, past all the cars that were now virtually stopped. The three of them weren’t the only ones who had decided to flee and to try to go on foot, but there was enough room to move.

When he glanced back, he saw something in the air, a flying ship of some kind, large enough that it would have been shocking, if his mind weren’t getting used to the size of the enormous creature it was battling. There had always been a lot of talk about what kind of defenses the nations of the world were packing, what powerful entads and obscure magics they would bring to bear on a powerful attacker. Most of that stuff was completely secret, but this was apparently what the city-state of Li’o, one of the more powerful, could whip out to face down a threat.

“Keep moving,” said Lisi, pushing him along with a shove so hard he nearly lost his balance.

They kept up their half-jog, moving just a little bit faster than before. Reimer was getting tired; he had been pretty active in Sporsan, but there wasn’t much to do for physical activity at S&S, and three weeks of doing little but walking had worn away at his endurance a shocking amount. He was also carrying the pistol, and the sword, and a full backpack.

“I’m leaving the city,” said Heshnel. “I will regroup with you in Karatern, if you survive. This isn’t my fight.” His voice was smooth and calm, with none of the hard breathing that Lisi and Reimer were doing.
“You’re talking to them?” asked Lisi.

“Parson’s Voice,” he replied, which meant nothing to Reimer.

“Tell them we’re okay,” replied Lisi.

“No,” said Heshnel. “Their work is more important. Knowing we’re together would be a distraction.”

That conversation might have gone on for longer, but one of the enormous claws came down from the sky and smashed straight through a building just in front of them. Heshnel moved quickly and used a bud taken from his lapel, which exploded outward with twisted branches, stopping the falling debris from coming down on everyone. He didn’t stop to savor the moment though, or even to acknowledge the people he’d saved, Reimer among them.

“Keep moving,” said Heshnel.

Reimer followed after. The pistol and sword at his hip felt useless against a thing that size, and he might have dropped them, except there was a chance that he would be forced to use them against people at some point in the near future, something that made his stomach churn just thinking about. People could get feral in situations like that, he had read a few unflinching survivor’s accounts from those who had been in exclusions when they happened.

They kept moving, and the kaiju kept moving too, almost as fast. They were following the street, and the kaiju was following his own path, but he had so many legs, and was moving so fast, that it was hard to be sure that they were staying out of his way. People were in a panic now, and the streets were so clogged that hardly anyone was using their cars, at least in part because the kaiju’s many footfalls had been demolishing buildings and tearing up the roads.

It seemed like their paths had finally diverged when there was an explosion high overhead. The flash of light got to them first, bright enough that Reimer winced, and the shockwave came afterward, rumbling across the city like thunder from a hundred feet away. It rattled windows and kicked up dust. Reimer blinked a few times until he could see properly again, then looked up at the kaiju just in time for the rain of blood and gore to start.

The blood came down in droplets, and the smallest of the pieces came down like hail. As soon as the first of them fell, Reimer grabbed onto Lisi’s arm and pulled her inside the doorway of a building. The first of the bigger pieces, one the size of a small car, slammed down into the road, splattering on impact and hitting hard enough to kill a man. Heshnel hadn’t come with them: the dark elf was staying out there, trying to help others, using his flowers to do it in displays of pink petals or a flash of lightning. He took a hit, then another, not even seeming to feel them (and, unbelievably, it seemed like he was taking the hits because he chose to, so that he could save more people). More and more meat was landing in the streets, the bigger pieces the true hazards, but everything else as completely disgusting as Reimer could imagine it being. He was terrified that something would hit the building and crush them, but it was the only shelter available. When he looked at the ground, he saw pieces of finger, long pieces of finger with too many joints, and worse, they were moving, twisting and curling as if in agony.

Eventually less in the way of flesh was coming down, though the rain of blood continued, and Reimer stepped out of the alcove he’d found for them to look up at the kaiju. He hoped that this was, somehow, a good sign, but when he tried to take in the immense beast and saw its knees buckling, he felt his face fall. It was massive, big enough to cover a few city blocks, and it was coming down, probably close to them.
“Run!” he shouted to Lisi, and he took off without looking back to see whether or not she was coming. He got his answer a second later, when she went bounding past, moving so quickly that she had to have been using blood magic. Reimer focused on his own running, but the ground was slick with blood, flesh, and those weird pieces of fingers that seemed to be everywhere. He wanted to look behind him to see whether the kaiju was still tipping down in his direction, but he didn't want to take his eyes off of the treacherous street ahead of him. He nearly stumbled when he saw a corpse, someone who had been hit by something hard falling down on them, or maybe taken out when a building collapsed.

When a shockwave lifted up the earth, Reimer slipped and fell down into the blood-slick pieces of flesh that dotted the street. A firm hand on his arm lifted him back up to his feet.

“Are you injured?” Heshnel asked.

“No,” said Reimer, looking instinctively to where the shockwave came from. It was a horrifying wall of flesh, nearly as tall as a skyscraper, with giant tears down the side of it and blood gushing from its wounds. The legs were folded up or crunched under it, and the entire mass of it, so fucking large that you might have been able to fit every building in Sporsan inside it, lifted up for just a moment and then slapped back down.

“Juniper killed it,” said Heshnel.

Reimer turned and stared at the dark elf. “No,” he said.

“We lived,” sighed Heshnel. “I had thought it would take longer, a siege instead of an onslaught.”

“Are we safe?” asked Reimer.

“I don’t know,” replied Heshnel. “Nothing like this has ever happened before, not even to Uther.”

Reimer heard running, and turned to see Lisi coming back to him, albeit at a much slower pace than when she’d left. “Why are you stopped?” she asked.

“It’s dead,” replied Reimer.

“We should keep moving,” said Lisi. “The last place we want to be is Li’o. We’ll get to some place where we can teleport back to Anglecynn.” She said that offhandedly, a reminder of the resources she commanded.

“There’s something there,” said Heshnel, looking up at the top of the wall of flesh. Reimer tried to follow his eyes, and did in fact spot something, a black figure, just one at first and then others, hard to make out, the shape nearly humanoid. “Back.”

Reimer backed up, putting Heshnel between himself and the things, which, who knew, could have possibly been a peaceful society living on the kaiju’s back, but were probably terrifying beasts constructed of pure hunger, if the day so far was any indication. Reimer watched the first one drop, and as it fell, something clicked in his brain, and he was staring at an empty spot in mid-air, not sure why he was looking there instead of further up. More dropped down, and the same effect happened again, a momentary confusion about what he was seeing, followed by his eyes tracking back up to where these black shapes were dropping down, until they were all gone, and it was like they had never been there at all.

“What am I supposed be looking at?” asked Reimer.

“I’m not sure,” replied Heshnel. “It must have been nothing.” He relaxed slightly.
“We were all just intently looking up at the top of the wall of flesh, combat ready, for no reason?” asked Lisi. She was still tensed, and Reimer tried to put himself into the combat pose he’d learned for using a sword, feeling awkward and trying to get his feet and shoulders positioned correctly. He drew the sword for the first time, and was greeted by a crackle of electricity and the smell of ozone, both of which quickly faded. The sword was, no surprise, perfectly balanced. He slipped the backpack to the ground, hoping that he would fight better with it off.

Heshnel toppled to the side and was on his feet in an instant, seemingly unharmed. He hand went to his lapel and pulled forth another of his buds, which exploded outward in crimson petals that filled the area, hanging in the air, motionless except where they were disturbed by movement.

As swordsmen went, Reimer was a rank novice. As far as fighters went, he was even worse, having never been in a serious fight in his life aside from when he’d gotten in the middle of other people fighting. But this, flower petals in the air, disturbed by an unseen force, this was something that he’d played out a dozen times at the table, these were the kinds of scenarios that he had dedicated roughly half his life to. He gave a shout that came out more like a scream, with his voice cracking, and swung his sword through the air where the petals were moving.

He might have wondered whether he had connected at all, but the sword lit up with electricity, and shortly after that, his body did too. Lisi had said that he would be charged up, but he’d had no real idea what it would be like. The lightning crackled through him, like it did the vitrics, and he could feel his heart hammering in his chest, faster than it had ever gone before. The strike must have killed whatever invisible beast had been moving in front of him, because it fell to the ground, deep black fur and long, snake-like tail, neither of which fully distracted from how long its claws were. It wasn’t like it had become visible. Rather, it was like realizing that you could see the bridge of your nose all along, your brain had just chosen to filter it out as pointless.

Heshnel was pulling more buds out, using them with abandon. He was taking hits too, not the deliberate hits that he’d been taking when he was saving people from the rubble, but hard and awkward ones that saw him momentarily off-balance. He had a dirk in his left hand and was swinging with it, but he was going based on the movements of the flower petals suspended in the air, and his elf luck was either weak or not working on whatever these things were. The hits, which seemed like they should have been grievous based on the way Heshnel recoiled back from them, didn’t seem to be doing any damage.

The suspended flower petals moved in front of Reimer, and he swung his sword again, this time feeling it connect, but with no associated beast dropping out of the air, and further, no extra charge from the sword, no rush of power except what was still inside him. He swung the sword again, this time putting the full power of the electric charge in his body into it, and sliced through something in the air, where the petals were disturbed. This time a monster did materialize, his brain suddenly deciding to show it after all, collapsing to the ground with a deep cut through its torso.

It was about that time that a clump of hair fell from the kaiju and landed in a pile on the ground not too far from the wall of flesh. Reimer probably wouldn’t have noticed, had it not been directly in his view. The gross thing about it was the color, which was a flesh tone, peachy pink like … like the pieces of finger that were still littering the ground. Reimer tried to focus back on the petals, to see if any were moving near him, or if there was a single one of the creatures that he could kill without too much danger, but his attention was drawn back to the hair, which had split off into individual strands that were slithering like snakes across the ground.

“Hair!” shouted Reimer, mostly because of the adrenaline.

For whatever reason, Heshnel was taking more of the brunt of the attack than Reimer was, maybe
because he was closer, or maybe because he was by far the bigger threat. Despite the times an attack came from seemingly nowhere and threw him off-balance, he was holding his own, an analysis of the situation that held right up until the thin snakes came slithering across the ground en masse. They were whip fast, and though they didn’t seem strong, they wrapped their way around him, and around spots in the air where they petals were disturbed. They came for Reimer as well, in from the sides, and he swung his sword at them as fast as he could, hacking like he was trying to get through the underbrush. His sword caught on something in the air, another of the invisible things, and he reeled backward, using his electricity-boosted speed to get out of the way of claws or other things that might be in the air.

Lisi came up behind him, firing her pistol with a look of grim determination on her face. Her arms were coated in blood, and her green dress was stained with it, but there were three of the rat things laying on the ground where she must have been standing. Reimer was grateful, and tried to find his stance again, but really, he was just swinging his sword through the air and hoping that the lightning inside him would last.

He hadn’t been looking when Heshnel fell, but he saw the dark elf on the ground, unmoving, and felt his breath catch when he saw the elf’s head rolling backward, away from his body, which was being ripped apart.

“We have to go!” shouted Reimer, but he wasn’t sure that he could outrun these things that his brain refused to see. A few of the snake-things, which were made of fucking fingers were dead around him, and he knew that he couldn’t outrun them. He ran all the same, grabbing the backpack for some idiot reason, leaving the dark elf behind them. Reimer felt a wetness on his back as they fled, with the pain coming only later, but there was nothing beyond that, just the feeling of blood coming out from his back and soaking his clothes.

One of the finger-snakes latched onto Reimer and wrapped around his leg, pulling him off balance, and though he cut through it with his sword, he fell enough to bang his knee on the ground. Lisi pulled him sideways and he half-hobbled with her, through a nearby open doorway, which she slammed shut behind her and leaned back against.

“Leg,” she said, breathing heavily.

Reimer, shaking, extended his leg to her, where the finger-snake was wrapped around him. Up close, it really was just a series of knuckles, complete with small hairs, like someone had been trying to figure out what horrible monstrosity they could make with a truckload of surplus human fingers. Lisi quickly unwrapped it from around his leg until she got to the end, where it had apparently bitten him. She pulled once, and he winced at the pain.

“Not sure what removing it will do,” she said. “It’s pretty firm.”

“I got clawed up on my back,” said Reimer. “Probably bleeding out anyway.” It finally occurred to him that this might actually be the point where he died. “You should kill me and bottle my soul.”

“I can heal you,” said Lisi. “I can give you some of my blood. Platelet forcing.”

“You don’t know platelet forcing,” said Reimer. He was feeling a little woozy.

“I know it can be done,” she replied. She looked down at the finger-snake and the junction where its teeth, or whatever they were, had attached it to his leg. “I’m going to pull.”

“Okay,” replied Reimer.
When she pulled, she must have used blood magic for extra strength, because the finger-snake’s teeth (many, many teeth, in concentric circles) ripped out flesh too, and didn’t go quickly. It had been damned near placid with its teeth sunk in, even though it was missing its back half, but once detached it writhed and squirmed like a cornered animal. Lisi dispatched it calmly, ripping it apart into small pieces.

“Bleeding,” said Reimer, looking at his leg. It was shaking, all on its own, and he hoped that this wasn’t how he died, but he knew that this was how people died sometimes, when terrible things came out of left field and all your preparations came to nothing because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Lisi grabbed his leg at the site of the wound, and a moment later Reimer felt warmth flow through his body from the site. He wanted to protest that she should go, should save herself, that she should kill him first and bottle his soul to spare him the hells, but he was selfish, and wanted her here. He was selfish, and wanted to live.

“I love you,” he said. His voice cracked again.

“Hush,” she replied.

He fell silent. Her blood was doing its work. He wasn’t sure whether she’d figured out platelet forcing on the fly, or whether it was just her ability to control blood. They were compatible blood types: she’d done a test a few days before, which he supposed he was thankful for. He didn’t seem to be losing blood either, at least so far as he could tell. It occurred to him that he might live, if the empire brought its full powers to bear, if that huge ship could do effective clean up operations, or if some miracle happened. Then it occurred to him that he might have to live, having told Lisi that he loved her, which he wasn’t even sure was true.

“Why did you move my hands away?” he asked.

“What?” she asked back. She looked slightly annoyed that he was talking, but she often looked like that, and every time he’d asked in the past, she’d said that she was just annoyed that she didn’t understand, or that was how she looked when she was thinking.

“We were kissing,” he said. “And I was touching your legs. And I slid them up and … you moved them away.” This was the most trivial of trivial things, but he’d already told her that he loved her, and if he had screwed things up, then screwing them up a little more in exchange for some answers seemed like it might be a worthwhile trade, not that he’d actually been thinking that deeply when he’d posed the question.

“Ah,” said Lisi. She kept her hand gripped around his leg and shifted slightly. “I was on my period.”

“Oh,” said Reimer.

They sat in silence as she continued trying to heal him using blood magic. Eventually, after that seemed like it wasn’t really working, she dug into the backpack with her free hand and got out medical supplies. She had him flip over and began looking at his back while still holding his leg to connect their circulatory systems together. All of this was done with barely any words exchanged between them. Having Lisi clean his wounds was painful, as was the material she put down on top of them, but eventually it began to have a cooling effect, and at least took away some of the pain.

“I think you’re going to be fine,” said Lisi.

“So long as nothing comes through that door,” replied Reimer. He shifted uncomfortably, feeling the
material on his back itch slightly, which was far preferable to the slicing pain that had been there before. “Clock is ticking on that dark elf out there.”

“I know,” replied Lisi. “Twenty minutes, give or take. Less, if we wanted leeway.”

“Others too,” replied Reimer. “Civilians.”

“You’re a civilian,” said Lisi, frowning at him like she was annoyed again.

“So are you,” replied Reimer. “At least, here you are, I’m not sure what you’d be under Anglecynn law.”

“I have a duty,” said Lisi. “No one would fault me though.” She grabbed a length of gauze from the backpack and began wrapping his leg with it.

“You’re going, though,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “If I can save two people from eternal damnation at the expense of myself, that’s pretty simple math.” She finished the binding and stood up. “I’m hoping for more than two, obviously.” Lisi unholstered her gun and took a breath. “You have a fair bit of my blood. Try not to waste it by doing something heroic. Stay here until help arrives.”

“Lisi,” said Reimer, but he didn’t know what to follow it with.

“You’re infatuated with me, not in love,” she said. “That’s okay. I’m infatuated with you too. It’s probably just hormones.”

Lisi opened the door, pistol raised. Beyond it was the cracked and ruined city, and standing above the drying blood and gore were froglike creatures of some unfamiliar species. They had small tanks on their backs and bottles of souls, but more alarmingly, one of them held Heshnel’s head.

Reimer thought that Lisi would shoot, but she hesitated for a moment, either assessing this new situation or thinking before discharging her weapon.

“They’re friends,” said Heshnel’s head, which was, impossibly, still animated. “I’ve been assured that we’ll be picked up shortly.”

Ropes had come down from the giant ship and touched them for long enough that Reimer wondered what was supposed to happen. Once ten seconds or so had passed, there was a flash of black, and Reimer found himself laying on a bed in a cavernous room with Lisi beside him.

“Powerful magic,” she breathed. She looked at their surroundings and Reimer’s eyes followed her. There were hundreds of beds like his, arrayed in rows, and the same frog people were moving around inside, tending to the injured. The sound was surprisingly muted, given how many people there were, but it didn’t disguise the screams of pain. “And tuung.”

“Tuung?” asked Reimer. The name rang a bell. “Wait, you mean those people Juniper was working with? The Republic of Miunun?”

“Yes,” replied Lisi. “I think this is their doing. The Council of Arches.”

“You think that Juniper has a giant flying ship and a few hundred frog people on retainer?” he asked. The odd thing was, that wasn’t actually out of the question.

“I think so,” replied Lisi.
One of the frog people came over to them with a clipboard in hand. It wore one of those tanks at its side and carried a small satchel with it. “Injuries?” it -- she -- asked.

“His back and right leg,” replied Lisi. “The back injury was caused by claw from some black rat creature, with etcher-grass applied a few minutes ago. The leg injury was the bite of a smaller finger snake, removed and bandaged. I also gave him a transfusion -- we’re compatible -- and attempted platelet forcing, which I believe was unsuccessful.”

“Your own injuries?” asked the tuung.

“Minimal,” replied Lisi. “Bumps and scrapes. Self-inflicted cuts that I have under control. Slight blood loss, but I have experience managing it.”

“Good,” replied the tuung. “Healing will be along shortly.”

“Thank you,” said Lisi with a short nod. At that, the tuung left them alone again, though they were close enough to all the other beds that it was easy to overhear other conversations, and there was nothing like privacy.

“Are you alright?” asked Lisi.

“Mostly,” replied Reimer. “I’ve only had magical healing twice in my life.” He paused. “Do you think it will be magical?”

“I don’t think that they would have this much infrastructure in place without having stockpiled large quantities of magical healing,” replied Lisi.

“Actually,” replied Juniper, appearing out of thin air right next to them, causing both of them to jump. “This place was constructed just shortly after midday, and the tuung that are doing most of the work treating everyone were hatched a month ago, depending on your reference frame.” He reached into his bandolier and pulled out a piece of wax paper that was wrapped around a small plug of something squishy. “We do have healing though.” He handed it over. “Eat this.”

“What is it?” asked Reimer, cautiously taking it and unrolling the wax paper. He skipped over the obvious questions like ‘where did you come from’ and ‘how do you have all this stuff’ and ‘were you listening to us’.


Reimer ate it down and immediately began to feel better. A quick check of his wounds showed that they had sealed entirely, leaving small, barely visible pink flesh where minor scars had formed, the kind that would hopefully be gone in a week or two.

“Better?” asked Juniper, watching them closely.

“Yeah,” said Reimer.

“Okay,” replied Juniper with a nod. He was wearing his full plate, minus the helm, standing taller than he really was and looking utterly imposing. He’d put points into PHY, that was what it was, it was all cheating … but he was still impressive, and probably more impressive without armor covering him. “Now, I would like your consent to check you over on a deeper level.”

“A deeper level?” asked Reimer. “Excuse me?”

Juniper looked up slightly, toward the ceiling.
There was a flash of black, and the cavernous hospital ward they’d been in was gone. Instead, they were all in a small white room with minimal lighting and no windows or doors, the kind of prison that you read about in books, one that you could only get into or out of with an entad. It was immediately claustrophobic and frightening.

“I need to look at your soul,” said Juniper. “Did you hear the people singing?”

“Yeah,” replied Reimer. “Just before the big thing came down.”

“They were compromised,” said Juniper. “I need to make sure that you’re not compromised, both of you,” he nodded to Lisi. “We’ve taken care of the thing that compromised everyone, but it might still have sleeper agents out there.”

“You’re a fucking soul mage,” replied Reimer. “I knew it.” There had been a lot of discussions about that when they’d been going over the character sheet. Amaryllis had been cagey.

“You said that you would ‘like’ our consent,” said Lisi. “What if we don’t give it?”

“That would be a problem,” said Juniper. “Depending on how hard of a no it is, I might just forcibly check you.”

“And if you found something, you would do soul surgery?” asked Lisi. “Unauthorized, unapproved, without consent, by an amateur?”

“Yes,” replied Juniper.

“Good,” replied Lisi. “You have my consent.”

“Uh,” said Reimer. He turned to Juniper. “Do you remember that conversation we had?”

“I’m not from Aerb, I’m from Earth,” replied Juniper. “If I had the same conversation there with your counterpart, I don't remember it.”

“We were talking about if we were soul mages,” said Reimer. “We were talking about what we would change about each other.” It had been a transgressive conversation, one that should have stuck out in Juniper’s mind. You weren’t supposed to say that maybe soul mages mucking about in a person’s soul was okay, even though there were supposedly some ethical uses that the Empire of Common Cause sanctioned with long audit trails and cross-checking.

“Oh,” replied Juniper. “Right, I remember. Circumstances were a little bit different. I said that I would make you less annoying, if I recall, and you said that you liked being annoying, because it wasn’t being annoying, it was being right. I’m not going to change anything but what I’d need to in order to get you out from under the entity’s potential latent orders. We’re actually not even sure that he’s got sleeper agents at all. Most of his work has been pretty crude, from what I’ve seen.”

“How many of these have you done?” asked Lisi.

“A dozen,” replied Juniper. “Many, many more in the future though. Ideally we can find and clear the leadership of Li’o, and they can invoke emergency measures to avoid Article 86. Looks like it’s going to be triggered by dawn tomorrow if we don’t get things wrapped up.”

“You killed that fucking kaiju?” asked Reimer, sitting up slightly. The teleportation, or whatever it was, had taken the table with them too, and he was still sitting on it, even though there was no need. “It was you and your people?”
“Yeah,” replied Juniper. “I’d like to be modest, but mostly me.”

“Shit,” said Reimer. “That’s … that’s a lot to take in.”

“I’m on a clock here,” said Juniper. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” said Reimer. “Just … don’t touch anything. Don’t look around.”

“I wouldn’t have the time to, even if I wanted,” replied Juniper. He placed his hand on Reimer’s arm and closed his eyes.

“This is so fucking creepy,” said Reimer as he watched his friend, the alien, look through his very being.

“He’s more powerful than I thought,” said Lisi.

“I’m not sure that I can do this,” said Reimer.

“It’ll be over soon,” said Lisi. She moved closer to him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“No,” said Reimer. “This, I mean, being a part of this, being a cog in the machine, part of Juniper’s entourage, wrapped up in all this. Lisi, we almost died today.”

“We didn’t die,” Lisi replied. There was a coldness in her eyes, there always was, but it seemed a little more apparent, more present. “Sound and Silence is going to stay closed for months, maybe years. There’s almost certainly been an enormous loss of institutional knowledge.”

“Sorry,” said Reimer. “What?”

“Do you think we’re students?” asked Lisi. “How many of our instructors are still alive?”

“I,” began Reimer.

“You’re clean,” said Juniper. He looked over at Lisi. “Ready?”

She gave him a curt nod. Reimer tried to see whether he felt any differently, but if Juniper had made any changes, Reimer couldn’t feel them. He didn’t think that Juniper would sink that low, but they’d had their fights, and Juniper could sometimes be a rat bastard when he was in a foul mood. Juniper touched Lisi’s arm, and Reimer felt a spike of jealousy that he tried to suppress.

“Fighting for my life made me realize that I really don’t want to be in fights for my life,” said Reimer. “Did you honestly like it?”

“It was different from what I thought it would be,” replied Lisi. “But I had always expected that I would be going up against people.”

“Did you like it though?” asked Reimer. He had no idea what her answer would be.

“No,” said Lisi. “I didn’t like it. It was necessary though. And I have the skillset for it.”

“Well, I don’t,” said Reimer. “Not the skillset, not the mindset, nothing, I made it through by the skin of my teeth, and I don’t ever want to do that again.”

“What are you planning to do instead?” asked Lisi. “Li’o is in ruins. It’s going to take an incredible amount of work to get it functional again. The most likely outcome is that the Rod of Whispers and the Temple will get moved somewhere else and all the students and teachers will live on a campus
created by the fastest, cheapest possible steel magic. There’s not a guarantee that the athenaeum even exists anymore. It might be that the Empire takes over.”

“Sure,” said Reimer. “I’m not saying what I want to do, just that I don’t want to be a part of this.”

“I don’t want you to be either,” said Juniper. He looked Reimer up and down. There was no clue to how long he’d been listening in. “So far as I’m concerned, every single one of the alternates should stay away. I’m just not sure how feasible that is.”

“I’ll still help,” said Reimer. “I just … I don’t want to be a part of it, aside from telling you what little I know that might be able to help.”

“Deal,” said Juniper. “We’ll post you as far away from the front as we possibly can, pay you a salary to do whatever it is you want to do.”

“How safe is the world?” asked Lisi. “How much risk are we talking about?”

“Skin of our teeth,” said Juniper. “If we live, it will be by inches.”

“Manufactured inches?” asked Reimer.

“What does that mean?” asked Lisi, scowling slightly.

“Do you know the word kaiju?” Reimer asked Juniper.

“Yeah,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “How do you know the word kaiju?”

“It was from one of your games,” replied Reimer, feeling slightly confused.

“It’s actually Japanese,” said Juniper. “Means, uh, ‘weird beast’ or something like that.” He must have seen their confused looks. “Japan is a nation of Earth, Japanese is their language. Look, nevermind.”

“The rat things that killed your friend Heshnel,” said Reimer. “They were antimemetic, weren’t they?”

“Got it in one,” replied Juniper.

“Fucking hells, is this all stuff that you made up?” asked Reimer.

“‘Fraid so,” replied Juniper with a shrug.

“Define ‘all’,” said Lisi.

“Half the mortal species, seventy percent of the magical creatures, twenty percent of the magic, and about eighty percent of the entads,” replied Juniper. “But all the stuff that I didn’t make is still at least something that I probably would have, given time.”

“Shit,” said Reimer. “Shit. Even the Long Stairs stuff? Is that all out there somewhere?”

“From what we’ve been able to find, the Aerb Juniper’s stuff doesn’t show up on Aerb,” said Juniper. “Look, some of this is a bit sensitive, I probably shouldn’t be telling you more. The upshot is that yes, the world is probably in danger, more so today than it was yesterday. We’re doing everything in our power to stop it. But Reimer, we don’t need you, and I don’t want you to get hurt. I want you to go off somewhere you’ve always wanted to go, live the life you wanted to live, with,” he paused and glanced at Lisi, “A stable life, good friends, all that jazz.” the word was unfamiliar,
“And ideally you can just forget about what I’m doing.”

“Shit,” said Reimer, again. He looked over at Lisi.

“Am I cleared?” she asked Juniper.

“Yes,” he replied. “Sorry, should have mentioned that. Are you in or out?”

“In,” she replied. She looked at Reimer.

“We have transportation,” said Juniper. “You can still visit each other, if you’d like. No need to pay the teleportation costs.”

Reimer thought he was probably blushing. “Thanks for the offer.”

“Look, I should be going,” said Juniper. “I’ll have Mary set something up for the both of you, or maybe just do it myself if I can find the time. I have hundreds of people to clear. Maybe thousands, though we’re trying to do it in priority order. Good luck.”

And with that, he disappeared.

Reimer looked down at his hands. They were shaking. His mind was going back to the battle, to running through the streets, to seeing that enormous thing fall down and not knowing whether or not he’d be crushed.

Lisi turned his head toward hers and kissed him. They had both been getting better at kissing, in the past two weeks, more natural, more confident, less awkwardly aggressive (on her part). Reimer let his stress and worry melt away a bit, and felt his nerves calm down. Lisi pulled away slightly and rested her forehead against his.

“This isn’t goodbye,” she said.

“You have to promise to stay safe,” he replied.

“I will.”
There were three major priorities. The first was finding a cure for sleep, which would allow Instinctive Halting to be active indefinitely, and Meta Stilling to keep Prince’s Invulnerability active, as well as the boost from stilling all the debuffs. The second was rescuing people, both the living and the dead, which was being accomplished by Bethel and the tuung, and had been since I’d descended into the domed building. And the third priority was calling in help from the Empire, which couldn’t be done without authorization from the ruling council of Li’o, who were all presumed compromised. That last was especially important, because while the Empire could act through something called Article 86, doing so would cause major political problems for the Empire which might result in either civil war or imperial collapse, for complicated (and not so complicated) political reasons. It was an open question whether I actually cared about the continued health of the Empire of Common Cause, but until I had a strong opinion otherwise, maintaining the status quo seemed wise.

Another big thing to do, which only Amaryllis and I were capable of, was trying to root out any plans that Harold had left. The newly compliant Ellio had been clear that they’d advised Harold to create sleeper agents in the case of Harold’s death or incapacitation, but Harold was inconsistent in actually following their directives, which was good for us, because a non-alien intelligence with Harold’s power and goals would probably have succeeded where Harold had repeatedly failed. So far as we could tell, it was the mortal advisors that had gotten him so far this time, within spitting distance of completing his goals.

I didn’t like going into anyone’s soul. First off, the default starting view was of them naked, which in most cases was just awkward for me. Second, there was a temptation to look around and snoop, which I never did insofar as it could be helped, but it always made me feel bad about my moral character. Third, after the first dozen people, it was pretty tedious work. And fourth, there were a lot of people who were understandably justified in not wanting someone to touch their soul, especially someone like me who had no credentials or license. That was an issue that we solved by having Valencia be the one to talk with them, but it still made me feel a bit queasy, for all the obvious ethical reasons.

(I had killed perhaps two dozen people over the course of the day, and I wasn’t sure that I could justify all of them as being for the greater good, or wholly necessary. Sometimes, it had just been easier, or because I was angry, and it was effectively a warzone. Those sounded like excuses to me, but I was terrible at figuring out why I had done things at the moment I had done them. I was trying not to think about it.)

While I was traipsing through the souls and spirits of others, removing Harold’s hooks where I found them and trying to undo any obvious alterations, hoping to not hit a memetic minefield, the other members of our team were working on the other issues. Healing the living and extracting the souls of the dead was a top priority, and we had everyone there who could be of any help. We’d tasked others with the time-critical task of getting me a cure for sleep.

People on Aerb could get brain damaged. You’d think, given that the soul seemed to store a fuckton of information in it, that this wouldn’t be the case, but the brain and the soul were a complicated two-way street, and there were lots of ways that the street could get broken. It was with that in mind that I looked Grak over with every tool at my disposal. Solace had already taken a look at him and declared him fine, but I wasn’t willing to take any chances.

“You did really stellar work,” I said as I touched his forehead. He was still missing bone there.
Solace could fix it, but had declined to, because she didn’t think that it would particularly bother him, and it wasn’t really a health hazard given that it was covered with skin.

“Thank you,” said Grak. “It was unearned.”

“Unearned?” I asked, sitting back slightly to look at him.

“I have not studied enough to know the things I do,” said Grak. “I am not a magus. It all comes to me with fluidity and ease.”

“I suppose you’d be a hypocrite if you were super happy about your jumps in skill, given how much it bothered you that all my power was unearned,” I said. “But I think there’s a pretty solid place between ‘taking it for granted’ and ‘thinking less of yourself’. That’s the middle ground that we should both be striving for. And I wanted to let you know that you did really stellar work.”

“I might be the most powerful warder in the world,” said Grak. His voice sounded a little funny as he said it, with an inflection that he didn’t normally have when speaking Anglish (we had started in Groglir and then switched for Juniper-doesn’t-know-what-he’s-doing diagnostic purposes).

“You might be,” I replied. “Though you are only at eighty-four.”

“That low?” asked Grak, looking at me.

“That’s what your soul says,” I replied.

“I thought it would be higher,” Grak replied. He gave me a sheepish look, one that I wouldn’t have identified as such a few months ago. “Not because I think I’m that good.”

“But you are?” I asked. “And you’re wondering what’s left at the top?”

“Uther was a warder,” said Grak. “The bulk of his wards still stand. There are places he warded that no one can enter. There are wards he broke that were thought unbreakable. He has many feats to his name, some of which have left warders scratching their heads for five hundred years. The real answer is simply that he cheated.”

“We don’t actually know that,” I said. I didn’t really consider the game powers I had to be cheating, just playing a different game with different rules, but I could see how it would look from the outside.

“We suspect,” said Grak. “You should talk to Raven more.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “She looks just like Maddie. And we had a week together in the Infinite Library, and it was just … business, I guess, very few hints that it was going to go in any direction I really didn’t want it to go in. Then when we were out, I wanted it to stay business, I guess.”

“You can talk to her about business,” said Grak, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I replied. “It’s just … there’s been a lot on my plate lately, and I feel like I have to carve out time to spend with people if I ever want to spend time with them. Valencia accused me of ‘making the rounds’.”

“She told me,” said Grak. “She regretted it.”

“Well, she didn’t tell me that she regretted it,” I replied. It had been one of those little comments that had stayed with me enough that I had a vague paranoid worry that it had been thought up by a devil.

“She was waiting to tell you when she made the rounds again,” said Grak. He smiled slightly.
“Well, I guess I know what we’ll be talking about then,” I said with a sigh. I looked Grak up and down. “I’m unsure on the brain damage, by the way. You seem lucid enough. If it’s there, it’s probably beyond my current abilities. Or maybe it was there and it healed on its own, or with the magics we applied to you. I don’t know.”

“I appreciate you worrying,” said Grak. He fidgeted slightly. “You probably have other things to do.”

“I do,” I replied, but I didn’t move from where I was sitting. “You’ve heard of imposter syndrome, right?”

“No,” said Grak.

“Basically,” I said, hoping that I wasn’t just talking out of my ass. “Basically, it’s this internal feeling of being a fraud, worrying that you’re going to be found out, or that you’re not good enough. It’s self-doubt. And the funny thing is that a lot of people feel this, maybe even most people,” which was probably overstating it, “but it’s just something that you have to work through.”

“I’m not sure that’s what I’m feeling,” said Grak. He frowned at me. “You understand we have done little to deserve these powers?”

“I do,” I said with a nod. “But … I don’t know, there’s a difference between knowing that we don’t deserve them, and discounting everything we’ve done as being, basically, worthless. You’ve had help, sure, there’s a thumb on the scale, but it’s still you that’s doing it. It doesn’t invalidate the fact that you saved thousands of people, maybe more than thousands. You don’t need to feel like you’re solely responsible for your successes to feel good about what you’ve accomplished.”

“I would never have said I was solely responsible,” replied Grak, looking at me with an intensity that made me a little uncomfortable. I had seen into his soul, I’d had to in order to check him over, and I had seen how high I ranked. I thought it was probably too high, but maybe that was just my own imposter syndrome talking.

“How are things with Solace?” I asked. “Has she been keeping you company while I was gone?” It wasn’t the most subtle of transitions, but dwarves were supposed to be blunt, even dwarves like Grak who had some amount of imperial sensibilities.

Grak turned away slightly. There was a barely visible blush, hidden as it was by his beard. “Good,” he said. “She has been very … accommodating.”

“Huh,” I said. “That’s … do I want to know more?”

“Likely not,” replied Grak.

I sat in silence for a moment. I really did need to get on with doing other things, but I didn’t want to leave on that, not if it would make him feel like I disapproved, or like I was thinking the wrong things. I wished that I hadn’t asked about Solace and made things awkward, but that ship had sailed.

“I’m happy you have a krinrael,” I said. “Solace always seemed … well, interesting, I guess. And we all need somebody.”

“Even you?” asked Grak.

“I’m comfortable being solitary,” I said.

“Hrm,” replied Grak.
“Don’t ‘hrm’ me,” I told him. “You’re a dwarf, you’re supposed to be blunt.”

“I’m only as much dwarf as I want to be,” replied Grak. “Bethel had mentioned some sexual frustration on your part.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Of course she has. Look, it’s really not anything for anyone to concern themselves with.” I paused. “Can I ask what, exactly, she said?”

“Only that,” replied Grak. “She enjoys being cryptic.”

<do>, said Bethel, and from Grak’s expression, I could tell she was speaking into his mind too. <Juniper, I’m going to patch you to Feldspar, he’s one of Mary’s tuung. Apparently something happened to Heshnel.>

“What happened?” I asked, staring at Heshnel’s head shortly after he’d been brought in. I had already gotten the gist of it from the tuung, speaking through Bethel.

“I was killed,” replied Heshnel. His head was sitting on a table in a tastefully decorated room which Bethel had either made for us or hastily appropriated. She was copying the Baroque style, with gilded floral patterns and ostentatious wallpaper, none of which went all that well with a dark elf’s head sitting in the center of a table. I wasn’t sure there was any interior decorating that could have made it less creepy. “The entad has now fused with my soul, a condition that will last until it is removed from my neck, at which point I will face oblivion.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Through the ages, people have come to see death as an inevitability,” said Heshnel. “I spent much of my life hoping that wasn’t true, and fighting to conquer death, but here I am.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked. “Any way I can get you a body back, or some mobility, or something like that? I don’t want you to be beholden to Bethel or anyone else. I still consider you a part of the team.”

“I’m not,” said Heshnel. “I never was.”

“If that’s true,” I said. “Then that’s only because you wanted to keep yourself at arm’s length.”

“I still don’t have the measure of your place in this universe,” said Heshnel, frowning slightly. He was either taking the whole beheading thing very well, or his new outlook was being magically assisted in some way. “You killed the great, towering, terrible beast, but what does that mean in the context of the world? Is it a sign of how things have escalated, and how much further they have yet to escalate? Or a real and true triumph over something that your Dungeon Master set up for you to defeat, a thing that needed to be felled before your eventual apotheosis?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t have any idea either. Obviously I’m hoping that there’s a finite limit to what the Dungeon Master has on hand, and that he’ll stick to the world as he made it and not spin up new shit when or if everything is beaten, but I wouldn’t count on that. And in the meantime, I don’t really have any option except to respond to the incentives in front of me.”

“You could kill yourself,” said Heshnel, raising an eyebrow. “Just as we were planning to kill you.”

“I could,” I said. “Or I could do like Mary thinks, and try to follow the narrative.”

“That was what I tried,” said Heshnel. He still sounded like he had before, and a touch of sadness
had crept into his tone.

“You … you did?” I asked.

“When your friends, Reimer and Lisi, came to the house, I stayed in the shadows, watching them. I had seen the claws descend from the sky and strike the earth. I knew that it was bad.” Heshnel took a
breath, despite not having lungs anymore. “I followed them. I joined with them. I didn’t want them to die, but I had not wanted people to die before, and accepted that it was necessary in spite of my wishes. I have killed before, because it was the right thing to do, not because it was deserved, not because I wanted it, but because it was the burden of necessity. Your friends, I followed, and them I did my best to save.”

“But not because of any nobility or valor on your part?” I asked. “It was because of … narrative?”

“That’s not quite right,” replied Heshnel. “I don’t understand this universe anymore. I thought that I did, when we came to the conclusion that Uther was the magnet drawing in all these threats, but when you arrived, it seemed possible, probable that this narrative theory was actually correct. I thought about what would happen to those two children if they didn’t have me there to protect them, what import it might be that they arrived, what part I might be meant to play. But to say that it wasn’t nobility, that it wasn’t valor, is to ignore that I have been fighting against those instincts for my entire life.”

I frowned and thought about that. I really did need to get back out there, but Heshnel’s head had been brought to me, and he seemed like he wanted to talk. Over the weeks since his group had ambushed me, I’d begun to feel like maybe I owed him something. He hadn’t been a part of it, he had come to my defense against his friends and allies, and I hadn’t given him much but scorn in return.

“You thought, just this once, that you would do like heroes do in the stories,” I said. “You would do the noble and valorous thing that your heart had been telling you to do all along.”

“It isn’t the heart,” replied Heshnel. “It’s the animal wiring of the brain, the cadence of the soul, the imprint of early lessons. I have cut away much of that, where I was able, where it was possible while leaving me mostly the person I was before. I had friends experienced in essentialism to help shape me, friends I would shape in turn. But some of it remains. That was what I followed. It seemed magical, to give in to those impulses, to save lives in that way, to use my resources for small, concrete goods instead of chipping away in an indirect manner at large, overwhelming ones.”


“I saved other lives,” said Heshnel. “A dozen, perhaps, maybe more. I let the feeling of righteousness get to me. My soul isn’t what it once was. It’s drifted, over the years, grown wild and free where it was once restrained. I expended resources to help people whose lives mattered less than my own, and I died for it.”

“You regret it?” I asked.

“I spent my life for the lives of, perhaps, two dozen others,” said Heshnel. “It’s perhaps the unbridled pride that my species are known for, but I don’t believe my life was worth so little.”

“But you might have died anyway,” I said. “Your life is worth more than the lives of two dozen people, sure, I’d buy that, but it wasn’t a one-to-one trade, it was more like trading a few percent chance better possibility of survival for a large percent chance that the people you helped would stay saved and not die shortly afterward.”
“True,” replied Heshnel. He paused. “Have I ever told you how unlike him you are?” I didn’t have to ask who ‘him’ was. With pretty much anyone who had met the man, Uther Penndraig simply became ‘him’, a vast and ineffable figure.

“Probably,” I said.

“Uther would have answered with a riddle, or proclamation, or something of that nature, rather than a quick check of my mathematical assumptions,” said Heshnel.

“Well, I hope it’s helpful for you to know that we’re not the same person,” I said with a shrug. “I have the feeling you’re not the last person I’m going to have to convince of that.” I looked to the ceiling for a moment, debating whether or not I wanted to call Bethel in and end this so that I could move on to more time-critical things.

“I won’t be staying with you,” said Heshnel.

“When not?” I asked. There had been something about the way he’d been talking that dulled my surprise at hearing that.

“You don’t need me,” Heshnel said. “Solace is an accomplished flower mage, though her style is unorthodox, her strains are weak, and she’s in a period of rebuilding. Essentialism was stripped from me at the end of the Second Empire, leaving me unable to teach it, even if it would only be in those very few areas you might still be lacking. I have little purpose on your councils, save as a lightning rod for old grievances with the Second Empire, a subject on which I have taken my lashes more times than I could count. Nor am I the elder that I might have served as, not when you have Raven and Pallida to tell you about the old days and the reign of Uther Penndraig.” He looked down at the table. “I don’t even have a body.”

“None of that means --” I began.

“Do you want me here?” asked Heshnel. “Is there some reason that my presence is helpful to you?”

I hesitated. “I value having many voices. I value dissent. The Second Empire stuff in particular makes you valuable, and as much as the others might not like me to admit it, as much as I don’t want to admit it, I think that you and I have a pretty strong ideological alignment.”

“And so my dissent is even less valued,” said Heshnel with what I think might have been him trying to nod.

“If you want to go, I won’t stop you,” I said to the head on the table.

“Then I will go,” said Heshnel. “I had always promised myself that death would be the end of my burdens.”

“I mean, there’s a question of how you’re going to do pretty much anything,” I said.

“Did you think that I wore this necklace for three hundred years without having a plan for that?” asked Heshnel.

“No,” I replied. “I guess not. Give it a day or two, when things have hopefully settled down, and we’ll get you wherever you need to go. In the meantime, there are a lot of things demanding my time, Reimer and Lisi being one of them.”

“Go,” replied Heshnel. “Thank you for taking the time to speak.”
“How are you doing?” I asked Bethel, while I took a break from combing through souls.

“How poorly,” she replied. “Too many people, too many obligations, too much like a hospital, a ship, or an institution. I detest it.”

“Okay,” I said. “We appreciate it.”

“I’m well aware that you appreciate it,” replied Bethel, frowning at me.

“Sometimes humans make mouth sounds because we know a situation sucks and there’s really not anything that we can do about it.” I said. “We could set up a makeshift hospital using the tuung and some staff that we’ve cleared for work, and take the Egress as a shuttle, but … well, if you’re at your breaking point, let’s do that. Or, before you’re at your breaking point, because I don’t want you to be pushing past discomfort for too long.”

“I will be fine,” said Bethel. “This will last no more than a day. Two at most.”

“This Article 86 business had better fucking get sorted out,” I said. “Either way, the empire isn’t going to sit by forever while a city crumbles. I’d say that I’m surprised that it’s gone on for so long, but there was this thing called Hurricane Katrina, back on Earth, and the upshot --”

“Yes, I’m well familiar,” said Bethel with a sigh. “You forget so easily that you’re not the only one who knows of Earth.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m going to have to make some new friends who I can impress with my obscure references.”

“Hurricane Katrina was not obscure,” said Bethel.

“You’re in a bad mood,” I said. “I get that. Let me know if there’s anything we can do to make it better?”

“I will, if I think of anything,” said Bethel. “I would like to make it clear that you owe me, dearly. And the longer this goes on, the deeper that debt grows.”

“When we get back to the Isle of Poran, we’ll set you in place, kick out the tuung, and have a solid week of you just being a house for our little extended family,” I said. “Deal?”

“You won’t sleep in the bottle?” asked Bethel.

“That,” I said, snapping my finger. “That’s a little more sticky.” I saw her eyes darken. “But yes, it sounds like an acceptable compromise to me.”

“Very well,” said Bethel. “Valencia continues to line people up faster than Amaryllis alone can clear them.”

“Back to it then,” I said. “Any word from Pallida or Raven?”

“Not yet,” said Bethel. “I will, among my many duties, keep you informed.”

“The locus is tapped out,” said Solace. I had been pulled into the bottle room between clearing people, a place that hadn’t changed at all, which was pretty atypical for Bethel. The bottle was still held by an upright stone hand, and the room was still full of plant life, though the sky overhead was still a sickly green color, even with Mome Rath dead.
“Okay,” I said. “You’ve been doing a lot of good work. We’ll have this room made into the time chamber, set up some grow lights so that it won’t be complete darkness, possibly on a timer, and give it a few days.”

“No,” replied Solace, frowning at me. She was wearing her leaf cloak and resting up against her staff. She was wearing clothes, which I was thankful for, loose slacks and a loose shirt. Her hair was a bit longer than it had been, and it might have been my imagination, but she looked older too, seven or eight instead of five (though I was terrible at guessing ages).

“No?” I asked.

“The locus is not some device that you give inputs in order to have outputs,” said Solace. “It is not a machine that needs oil and water to run.”

I frowned a bit, then relaxed and allowed myself to get into what I thought of as druid mode, even though druid mode didn’t like being called druid mode. Some of getting into the headspace was just breathing and letting myself calm down, which felt a bit hard in the current circumstances.

The first thing out of my mouth was very nearly, “I hear your concerns, loud and clear,” which felt way too much like the opening to a PR-massaged apology from a major corporation. “I understand,” I said instead. “People are going to die because they didn’t have healing. Our stockpiled fairies have already run dry, and we don’t have limitless bones, nor do we have enough bone mages, even with the ones we’ve gotten from the collected survivors. And that’s just the stuff that those methods of healing are capable of fixing, because Lord knows there are gaps. Bethel and the tuung are, at the moment, pretty much the entirety of search and rescue, and the hospitals of Li’o -- Christ, we’re pretty much out-competing them, which is pathetic on their end and means that we have an obligation to do as much as we can.” I paused and took a breath. “And yes, I know that this doesn’t actually change things from your perspective, and it doesn’t magically mean that the locus will be charged up from grow lights and a couple days in the chamber. Even if that should work, it just … won’t. I trust you on that.”

“You find it frustrating,” said Solace. She had her arms folded.

“I do,” I replied. “And yes, I know, that’s reflective of the worst impulses of the Second Empire, the desire to put everything in a nicely labeled box, especially in the name of doing the right thing. But I can’t just deny how I feel, that wouldn’t be what the locus would want of me. It would want me to feel those things, to acknowledge them, internalize my understanding of them, and then change. I have the first part, but I don’t know how I get to the last part from where I stand now. How do you not find it frustrating, knowing that people are dying?”

“I find it frustrating that people are dying,” said Solace. “I don’t place the blame on that which holds no blame. The locus is finished with its help, likely for the next few days, not because it has particular desires, but because of its intrinsic character. Do you get frustrated at inanimate objects when they do things that you dislike?”

“Well,” I said. “Yeah.”

Solace furrowed her brows. “That’s silly.”

“Sure,” I said. “But also very human, and I assume that the same holds true for the other mortal species. And in point of fact, the locus isn’t inanimate, it’s got a … well, I don’t want to say mind, and I don’t want to say soul, but it’s got a something, a spark of life, a will, and it’s very hard to distinguish whether or not individual things that happen are because the locus is willing them to happen, or because it’s struggling against them.”
“Do you have time for this talk?” asked Solace. Her voice had gone gentle, which I thought was probably intentional on her part, given how quickly it had happened, and her previous near-hostility.

“Not really, no,” I replied.

“Then it can wait for another time,” said Solace. “It’s not a conversation that you should be having with me. Your sessions with the locus have been going well, and it would be good for you to continue with them. This seems like something that the two of you could talk about.”

“Sure,” I said. The locus didn’t actually talk during our sessions, it just nodded or looked at me or made facial expression that were nearly unreadable given that it was a six-eyed deer. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Thank you for at least attempting to understand,” said Solace.

“Anytime,” I said. I tried to keep the sarcasm from my voice, but I wasn’t sure that I was successful. <Ready for whatever is lined up for me.,> I sent to Bethel.

<Of course, my liege.,> replied Bethel. <Words cannot describe how much you owe me.>

“And Juniper?” asked Solace.

“Yes?” I asked.

“We still need to find a solution to our problem,” said Solace.

It was a reminder that I didn’t need, an old point that had been brought up so many times before that I was nearly deaf to it. I hear you, loud and clear, your concerns have been noted and in the coming days I will be doing everything in my power yadda yadda. I had nothing to say on the subject, nothing to add, I wasn’t quite doing everything that I could, but we had already sacrificed a lot of time and effort for the locus, and we’d gotten pretty much nothing but the status quo and some bad news from the Second Empire in return. Thankfully, I was saved from having to make a response by Bethel yanking me away.

“You know,” I said to Pallida. “You would think that saving the city would get you a little bit of rest and relaxation.”

“City wasn’t saved,” said Pallida with a raised eyebrow. She was sitting next to Raven in our common room, the large one that held chairs, couches, and a large fireplace with a discreetly rolled up screen for when we brought out the projector. Aesthetically, it was like an inverted Fabergé egg. “That might be a part of it.”

“Okay, sure,” I replied. “The city is pretty much in ruins, and there were a whole lot of monsters running around, and this probably represents a failure on my part in some unknowable way, if it’s not just chalked up to outright malice. But still.”

“Dealing with the aftermath is rarely pretty,” said Raven. “Uther always hated it. It was often possible to kill everyone involved, common that we fought enemies that were truly beyond reform or redemption, but every once in a blue moon we were mired in complicated moral situations, or places where there were no easy solutions.”

“I’m really looking forward to the empire coming in, no matter how that happens,” I said. “This isn’t something that we should really have to be doing at all, not when we have comparatively few resources at our disposal.”
“The world’s most amazing flying house with a literal mile of hospital inside it is comparatively few?” asked Pallida. “Plus a platoon of frogs, which don’t count for nothing.”

“Maybe I’m overestimating the empire,” I said with a shrug. “Anyway.”

“The bad news is, we haven’t been able to find anything novel for your sleep problem,” said Pallida. “The good news is, our looting did pay dividends.” Pallida rolled up a sleeve and showed a tattoo to me. The larger shape was that of an eye, but the pupil was like a goat’s, squished in the middle, almost reminiscent of an hourglass. “Kenner’s Eye. It took us a surprisingly long time to find a tattooist, even accounting for the general bedlam.”

“I’m actually fairly surprised that Bethel didn’t get one,” I said. “You’d think with all the people passing through, there would have been one with Kenner’s Eye.” It was a disappointment, frankly. Amaryllis had her own copy of it, but there was a problem with that, which was that she had incurred a debt. Taking it from her while that debt was active would put her out like a light. It was a fallback solution, to be sure, especially since we could rush through her sleep with the time chamber, but we’d held off, hoping that we could find something better, so that Amaryllis could pay down the debt at her leisure.

“Not so useful, for what it is,” said Raven. “When it was a cheap spell, it was used by guards, firemen, physicians, and anyone who might have to work long shifts, the better to stave off sleep. As the price rose, fewer had it.”

“We actually found an abandoned tattoo shop before finding a different tattooist, and the owner didn’t even have it in his book,” said Pallida. “A book we brought, by the way.”

“Good,” I said. I reached over and touched her arm. “I was thinking that I would probably respec to a more ideal build in the near future. Maybe it’s time to bring Art back into the mix so that I can tattoo myself instead of using spells that others put on me.”

I slid the tattoo from her to myself, bridging our skin and settling the magical inks into place.

**Achievement Unlocked: Exclusive**

“Fuck,” I said, staring at the text. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

“What is it?” asked Raven, going tense.

“Bethel, bring everyone in, group meeting, as quickly as is reasonable,” I said. I looked up at Raven and Pallida’s alarmed expressions. “I got an achievement, ‘Exclusive’, I said. “I’m really hoping that it doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

Our group appeared one by one, put into place around the table.

“What is it?” asked Amaryllis. She must have taken a moment to freshen up, because she was out of her immobility plate and wearing a t-shirt and jeans again. I had switched the vambrace to plain clothes, which was considerably less of a hassle.

“I think there might have been an exclusion,” I said.

Everyone stared at me.

“Come on,” I said. “Get seated. If it’s happened, then we have at least a little bit of time to figure things out. I don’t think that it’s catastrophic.”
We sat around the table together, some of us more cautiously than others. Heshnel wasn’t there, though I didn’t know whether that was because Bethel hadn’t grabbed him, or because he hadn’t wanted to come. To the rest, I explained, in brief, what had happened, which didn’t take very much time at all.

“But what would have been excluded?” asked Amaryllis. “Just Kenner’s Eye? Just Prince’s Invulnerability? Or … something more?” Her face was set into a scowl. “Obviously we’re going to have to test it.”

“You take the Egress, go a few miles out, test your tattoos,” I said. “For what it’s worth, all mine appear to still be functional, though I can’t really test Kenner’s Eye.”

“If it’s all of skin magic,” Amaryllis began. She was a bundle of tension.

“I know,” I said. “There would be implications. Take the Egress and figure out if that’s what it is.”

“It may be still magic,” said Grak. “If the Dungeon Master wanted to place limits.” Midway through his sentence, Amaryllis disappeared from her place at the table, presumably to the garage where the Egress was kept. Bethel would be stationary until it returned, but I was hoping that wouldn’t affect our operations too much.

“Wait,” I said. “She had Kenner’s Eye with a debt on it.”

“Paid off as of three minutes before this meeting,” said Bethel. “She wanted to be prepared to hand it over.”

“Okay,” I said, relaxing just slightly.

“There’s no way of second guessing the Dungeon Master,” said Raven, picking that thread of conversation back up.

“Smart girl,” replied the Dungeon Master.

“You,” I said, locking eyes with him. He had appeared without warning, though it was impossible for me to say how or when. He wasn’t even in anyone’s chair; it appeared as though the table had expanded to allow him a seat. When I looked over at Valencia, who was sitting next to him, I saw that she was stock still, unmoving and unblinking, and a quick look around the table confirmed that the same was true for everyone else.

“Time for a chat,” said the Dungeon Master with a genial smile. He was wearing a dark gray hoodie again, but this one said, ‘Of Dice and Men’ with an emblem of a little mouse holding a sword next to a large d20. In front of him was a monstrously thick book, which would probably have been the largest that I’d ever seen had I not done my stint in the Infinite Library. It was thick and bound in red leather. The spine, which was visible to me, said, ‘Worth the Candle, by Juniper Smith’.

“Amaryllis had a list of questions prepared,” I said.

“Yes, yes, no, yes, maybe, it depends on my mood, yes, no, and I’d have to look it up,” replied the Dungeon Master.

“Literally none of the questions were yes or no questions,” I replied. “They weren’t even ambiguous.”

“Well, I tried,” said the Dungeon Master. “Or at least, I pretended to, and isn’t that what matters?”
“Why are you here?” I asked. I was already getting tired of him.

“Ah,” he said. “I’m here because you’re here, and I thought maybe now would be a good time to talk.”

I stayed silent, waiting for him to go on. Amaryllis had a long conversation with me about how to comport yourself in front of a god, and I was trying to take her advice, even if I wasn’t sure that it actually applied.

“The first reason, of course, is that to fulfill the rule of three, we need to meet an extra time before we meet at the end,” said the Dungeon Master. “That’s assuming that you get there, anyway. Given that we’re about halfway through what I had prepared—”

“Half?” I asked. “That’s … there are only five months left?”

“I’m not giving you a clock, lord no,” replied the Dungeon Master. “You don’t need a Sword of Damocles hanging over your head.”

“There’s a whole fucking armory of Damocles,” I said.

“Don’t be a drama queen,” sighed the Dungeon Master. “The point being, no, it’s not a clock, it’s not even really a statement on anything that’s going to happen, it’s just that this is halfway through what I had planned from the outset. You can take your digressions, if you choose, rack up your wins and losses, wander the hex or settle down to have a family, do as you please, stretch this tome even further than it’s already been stretched,” he patted the book, “But I would still maintain that this is the halfway point, more or less.”

“Okay,” I said. I clenched my teeth for just a moment. “Fine. Halfway to godhood. You said first reason, what’s the second?”

“Ah,” he replied. “Well, there we come to the crux of it. There was a sequence of events that I never intended to happen, and here at the end of it, there’s you, in your current form, invincible except to a select few attacks, most of them ones that people won’t know or think to try, given that your particular form of defense should, by all rights, be impossible.”

“I’m too powerful, so you’re cutting me down to size,” I replied.

“Oh, I let you have your fun,” he said with a wave of his hand. “You stomped your way through the annex, you did things that should have resulted in your death a hundred times over, and it was all enjoyable enough, I suppose. You always used to let Reimer do that, didn’t you?”

“Sometimes,” I replied. “I tried my best not to take his toys away.”

“I was always going to exclude it,” said the Dungeon Master. “Tricky thing, excluding something that’s not degenerate on its own, only in combination with something else. I decided on cutting skin magic, to save you the suspense.”

“You excluded all of skin magic?” I asked. “Scars and tattoos?”

“There were a few subfields that no one discovered,” he replied. “I always try to include little secrets like that, ways to expand things. I’d always wanted to do something with prehensile hair. But yes, all of it.”

“That’s,” I said. “That’s overkill.”
“Oh, yes,” he replied. “It’s very much overkill. But there’s no kill like overkill, is there?”

“Fuck,” I said. “The knock-on effects of that … you’re taking away one of the primary advantages of being an elf. You’re taking away translation tattoos and Parson’s Voice.”

“Yes,” nodded the Dungeon Master. “With relatively little fanfare, it’s a shame to say. Normally I prefer the exclusions to be big, grotesque, snarling things, but sometimes a magic goes out with a whimper instead of a bang. You’ve been to the illusion exclusion, obviously. Not a site of any great tragedies.”

“How did Uther know it was there?” I asked.

“Well, that would be telling,” said the Dungeon Master with a smile. “Look, this kind of thing happened to him all the time, albeit not with a little chat like this.”

“Were you Vervain?” I asked.

The Dungeon Master laughed and thumped his fingers against the book. “This,” he said, tapping the book in front of him, “This chronicles your adventures thus far. Uther has been on Aerb and its associated planes for a long fucking time. His story, told in full, would fill a very large bookshelf.”

“‘Has been,’” I said. “He’s actually on Aerb? Alive?”

“Aerb or its associated planes,” replied the Dungeon Master with a nod. “Though I didn’t say alive, or dead, or somewhere in between. And you already have a clue that you need to follow up on. I don’t even consider this meta knowledge.”

“I’m not sure how I’m going to beat Fel Seed if you keep throwing up exclusions when I gain a scrap of power,” I said. I was trying to stay calm. It was one thing to hear from Raven that Uther had last gone missing in what became the Fel Seed exclusion zone, it was another to hear the Dungeon Master talk about it, even if he was using veiled reference.

“A scrap of power, he says,” the Dungeon Master chuckled. “If I were being mean, if this were retribution, then you would lose still magic and we’d be done with it. As it stands, you still have the strong synergy between Essentialism and Still Magic.”

“And if I find another way to dodge sleep?” I asked. “You’ll knock that out too? There’s an entad sitting in the temple right now, it would be child’s play for us to take it.”

“The way I see it, there have to be limits, and if not limits, then costs or consequences,” replied the Dungeon Master with a shrug. “I won’t say, one way or another, what will happen if you track down some other method. But Kenner’s Eye was always lame, and tattoo magic had always been for Everett anyway, nothing really intended for you, not that you used it, so here we are. It’s gone, wiped away except for in this city. It will probably be good for Li’o in the long run, actually.”

“You don’t even know? That’s the kind of world you’re running?” I felt my voice strain.

“I could know, if I wanted to,” said the Dungeon Master with a shrug. “But I like surprises.” He tapped the book again. “I was debating giving this to you, but I suppose it can wait until you’re done. Offer not valid if you die, obviously.” He tapped the book a final time, and it popped out of existence. “I should get going, things to do, places to see, you know the drill.”

(It did occur to me to ask about the book, especially given the supposed author. The byline could have just been metaphorical, or it could have been a joke, or it could have been literal in some fashion, written by me after it was all over, or when I was asleep, or simply by yanking me out of
time to write a chapter whenever anything important happened then scrubbing my mind afterward. But the number of possibilities, and the untrustworthiness of the Dungeon Master, made it sort of pointless to ask about. Besides, I didn’t really care about the poor schlub who was writing that book, even if it was, in some way, me.)

“Why did you fuck with Amaryllis?” I asked, since it seemed like I wasn’t going to get a better question answered.

“Did I?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You made her childhood crush be an anagram of my childhood crush,” I said. “I get why you’d fuck with me, you don’t like me, hell, most days I don’t like me, and we obviously have some kind of connection, even if it’s just being kindred spirits, whatever the hell that means, but come on, why her? Why make her life into this joke?”

“It’s a single anagram,” said the Dungeon Master. “I really don’t think you appreciate how hard those are to set up. They take an extraordinary amount of planning, because you have to get both the family and given name right, if those apply in the culture, and that’s really a lot to handle, even before considering that the person who gets the name has to be perfectly suited to the task. Do you understand how much work is involved for an Alek Syfriend or a Lena Kordrew?”

“Why do the Infinite Library timelines look like they do?” I asked.

“You’re cheating and using one of Amaryllis’ questions,” said the Dungeon Master with a frown. “You thought that you could just get me talking and I would prattle on, reveal all my secrets, disclose some hidden vulnerability? I’m the Dungeon Master, Juniper, I’m not your adversary, and if I am, the only way you can beat me is refusing to play, and you’ve made it abundantly clear that you’re going to keep playing, even if you don’t think the game is, well,” he moved his hand as if to tap at the book again, then looked down. “Dammit.” He looked back up at me. “How would you feel about wiping this conversation from your mind and doing it over?”

“Are you just fucking with me?” I asked.

“Not just, I wouldn’t say, no,” replied the Dungeon Master, smiling at me. “There is a point, though I’m sure you won’t like it when you find out what it is. Where were we? Oh, right, the same offer is still on the table, don’t think that a little exclusion between kindred spirits changes anything. You have it within you to win, if you want it bad enough, if you act with courage, and if the dice roll your way.”

He vanished at that, and I swore, which caused everyone to look my direction in confusion.
“Something else the matter?” asked Raven.

I really didn’t want to get into it. What I wanted was to ignore the entire conversation and continue on as I’d been before, and I knew that if I said something, there would be an endless analysis of the specific phrasing the Dungeon Master had used, as well as its implications for our future. It wasn’t irrelevant, per se, but I could see the guessing and second-guessing coming, how everything might look like a clue, and I just really didn’t care. I’d suspected that the Dungeon Master wouldn’t let virtual invulnerability stand, and I was right, and I would rather have just dealt with it without having to have a huge thing about it. Unfortunately, there was no way that I could keep it from the others, as agonizing as I was sure it would be.

“I just got a visit from the Dungeon Master,” I said. I turned to Bethel. “Did you sense anything?” She shook her head. “Also, can I have a pen and paper? I want to write down what I can remember.”

To my surprise, there was silence around the room as I wrote down what I could pull out of my brain. It was quiet enough that I looked up just to make sure that everyone hadn’t gone still again. I was a little surprised to find that people were waiting for me to be done.

“Okay,” I said. “The upshot is that he excluded skin magic because he thought it wouldn’t be interesting going forward. There was something about me going off the rails, but I had no idea where the rails even were, which I guess, when I think about it, was usually the fastest way for any campaign of mine to go off the rails. Supposedly Kenner’s Eye was too easy for his tastes, or I didn’t do enough to earn it, but I don’t think it would have escaped his notice that Prince’s Invulnerability is also a tattoo, and also a source of power.”

“Seems a bit of a hammer to take to the world,” said Pallida. “Skin magic was one of the big ones.”

“There will be repercussions,” said Raven.

“And benefits,” said Valencia.

I turned to look at her. She was out of the Red Armor of Arramor, instead wearing a tasteful cream-colored dress that screamed professionalism. She’d been talking to people nearly non-stop since we’d gotten Harold from the annex, convincing them to let me touch them for long enough that I could check over their spirit.

“Grak?” I asked, looking over to him. He was already staring at Valencia.

“It’s hard to say,” he replied. “It is true that skin magic was always what gave her away. Without that, only blood would be visible, but the skin blocks it to my sight. She would still be vulnerable to entads and other magics.”

“But she could go out without having to worry as much about a warder?” I asked. “And with a bit more magic gone from the world, there’s one fewer method of checking her.”

“Yes,” said Grak.

“Which is a boon for any other of the non-anima,” said Pallida. “Pretty slim upside, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t,” I replied. I looked around the room. “Nothing much from the Dungeon Master, really, just hints at things I already knew, some explanation, threats that he was totally serious about killing me,
which I’m not sure is actually true but I’m never going to deliberately test, and -- Raven, he had a
book called *Worth the Candle*, which had Juniper Smith listed as the author. Any ideas on that?"

“None,” she replied. “We scoured the library for books with that author.” I raised an eyebrow.
“Twice, actually. Once when I read the list that Uther gave to my father, the second time when you
were in the Library with me. Sorry. Neither time got any results.”

“And the title?” I asked.

“I could make a list of very tangential connections,” said Raven. She shrugged. “I will, I suppose,
but I don’t think there’s anything that will bear fruit.”

“It’s an expression, back on Earth,” I said.

“Here too,” replied Raven.

“I actually think that I might have said it to him, before, in a prayer,” I said with a frown. “Might be
nothing, but he was tapping the book like it was important.”

“Back,” said Amaryllis, appearing next to her chair. “The exclusion is for skin magic, though it
might be localized to tattoo magic, since I don’t have the proper scars to test on. At a best
approximation the radius is one hundred miles from the center of Li’o, though I only tested in three
directions. It’s the subtype suppressive, not deadening or annihilation.”

“Annihilation?” I asked. “You were worried that all skin outside the zone would be removed from
existence?” I was a little incredulous, given that she must have moved through the boundary going
incredibly fast.

“More likely all magical tattoos,” said Amaryllis. “There’s no precedent for an exclusion killing
everything on Aerb.” That was dry humor on her part, the kind I’d grown to appreciate from her.
“But tattoos that are brought into Li’o should still function: they won’t be directly rendered non-
functional, which is good, because that means that translation tattoos still have somewhere to
function. I don’t think I can overstate how important they are for the international community.”

“Juniper spoke to the Dungeon Master,” said Solace. Her tone was flat.

“What?” asked Amaryllis, freezing in place. “When I was gone?”

“He stopped time,” I said. “I was going to ask him your questions, but he gave me nonsense in
return.”

“Do you remember what his response was, exactly?” asked Amaryllis.

“Yes, yes, no, yes, maybe, it depends on my mood, yes, no, and I’d have to look it up’,” I replied,
looking down at my notes. That one I had made sure to commit to memory.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Amaryllis with a frown.

“He rattled it off in a string, I think he just wanted to make a bad joke,” I replied. “I’ve been writing
down everything that I could remember, you’re welcome to pore over it.” I stood up from my seat.
“In the meantime, I’m not actually sure that anything has changed. Prince’s Invulnerability will fail
as soon as I leave Li’o and its environs, Kenner’s Eye will keep me awake for the next month or until I
leave, though I’d obviously prefer not to pay it down, and I’m going to need some other method of
staying awake in the long-term. Still magic *isn’t* excluded, and I really do think that I would like to
keep it at a hundred for as long as I possibly can. But all that can come later, because there are still
people to save, and still people to check over, though if we haven’t found a sleeper agent by now, I’m skeptical that our current methods are going to do it.”

“You’re going to brush off a visit from the Dungeon Master and a new exclusion?” asked Amaryllis.

“No,” I replied. “But time is short right now, and these are problems and conversations that seem to me like they’ll keep. There are implications to skin magic being lost, shifts in global power, if it took scar magic too, the elves are losing a lot of power, and you talked about the translation problems already. What else are we losing?”

“Or gaining?” asked Valencia.

Amaryllis looked at her for a moment. “It’s a serious blow to Steel and Sweat, the kind of thing that every athenaeum dreads. I don’t think there’s any way to leverage that though, not in the near term. And it’s going to be harder to get into a person’s soul, which is a more immediate problem.”

“Not so long as we’re in Li’o,” I said. “And there’s still blood magic, which I’ve always found to be a little easier, personally. And anyway, I’m off to clear more people, or maybe take the first crack at some of the people who are stuck in a coma state, because I’m becoming convinced that there weren’t any sleeper agents set up at all.”

I spent a long time doing things that needed to be done. I had been finding people Harold had touched, but none of them looked like I would have expected a sleeper to look, and as I cut through all the slack lines that connected them to him, I couldn’t see anything that looked like it was a time bomb waiting to explode, and I didn’t wager that Harold really had the planning capacity necessary to both rig up a sleeper unit, and that he would have made it invisible to a lost art that I was the foremost practitioner of (the other being Amaryllis).

Eventually I moved on to the people who we’d found sitting in their pews, waiting for an activation that would never come. They were all comatose, or something like it, not responding in any way more complicated than having their pupils contract when I shone a bright light on their face. When I went inside the spirit of the first of them, my heart sank; it was an utter wasteland, threads snipped all over the place, and some new structure built in their place, Harold’s lines leading off from it. I still had no real clue what the summoning was, and Ellio hadn’t known much, which was a good indication that I should use another sacrifice in order to boost Spirit up to its max level. That was a lot more palatable, given that I would probably have it available for a much longer time, and with the level ups and Reimer’s work, a respec was coming soon, meaning that the sacrifice and the way it slowed future skill ups wouldn’t sting so much.

**New Virtue: Multithreading**

Multithreading: Your thread utilization capacity is twice as high, though this cannot act as a flat increase on thread speed. Thread allocation works as before and is automatic.

It took me a little bit to puzzle this out, but it seemed to be saying that I could focus on multiple things at once, but that it didn’t actually give me any extra ability to think about things more quickly. A little more thinking and I realized that this was actually really, really good, given how many damned things I had to think about in combat, including pulse timing for blood magic and burning abilities with bone magic. More than that, it allowed me to do something that I had been wanting to do for a long time: burning MEN abilities from bone while still carrying on a conversation, something that hadn’t really worked well in the past. For a level 30 virtue, it was pretty fantastic, especially since it wasn’t a buff to Spirit itself, which I wasn’t planning on using too much. Initial testing showed that I couldn’t really cross the streams, so to speak, which was a bit wonky if I was
trying to think about two related things at once, rather than something like singing the alphabet while doing sums.

**New Virtue: Thread Priority**

**Thread Priority:** You may designate certain threads as high priority threads, which will be utilized first, taking precedence over competing threads. Rampant threads will automatically be set to low priority. Thread allocation otherwise works as before and is automatic.

It seemed like the second half of the level 50 virtue related to memetic or antimemetic threats, or possibly also to runaway emotional things, since those were a part of Spirit’s domain. The first part though … I wondered whether it could be used as a concentration aid, if you isolated the thread that was going during study or something like that, but I didn’t have enough actual legitimate experience with Spirit to know if that could be done.

**New Virtue: Spirituality**

**Spirituality:** You gain supernatural control of your spirit, giving you a number of benefits to a wide variety of magic. Emotions can be initiated and stopped at-will for the purposes of passion magic with no associated qualia. Amount of mental strain is divided by your skill in Gem Magic for the purposes of gem magic. Branches receive a bonus to their Wilson score prior to rank calculation for the purposes of Tree Magic. When doing Accounting, you can hold any number of numbers in your head simultaneously (though you are still limited as usual for the purposes of calculation). Connections (Horticulture, Pustule Magic, etc.) have their decay halved and gains doubled. More benefits apply in specific exclusion zones: consult the manual for more detail.

The only thing that interested me was the benefit for Gem Magic, which seemed like it might suddenly make the whole thing usable, or like Gem Magic in its entirety had been balanced around me eventually getting it. Everything else was a smorgasbord of minor or possibly major benefits, none of which was entirely appealing given how little I knew of the actual rules. I would look over Reimer’s notes with Amaryllis, and maybe bring him in on it, but I wasn’t thinking that anything in there was a game-changer except for, again, gem magic.

**New Virtue: Spiritual Amplification**

**Spiritual Amplification:** When using any skill, treat your effective skill as being ten percent higher, rounded down, before any other modifiers. This applies only to raw skill, not including environmental modifiers, circumstance bonuses, entad bonuses, magical or pseudo-magical enhancement, or other bonuses or modifiers.

Knowing now that this system was in whole or in part designed by the Aerb version of myself, a lot of the idiosyncrasies of the wording and systems made a bit more sense. Some of the clarifications in the virtues I could see as being proactive defenses against munchkinry, or in some cases, at least according to Reimer, reactive defenses after he’d broken something. The rules-as-intended were clear enough, and a bonus to all skills was amazing, even if it was a rich-get-richer type of bonus, one that I felt would probably have been better off as a lower virtue. But one of the other things this understanding of the system allowed me was that a lot of these virtues seemed like something that I would come up with, some of them surely spat out because one was needed in the moment, others deeply considered as cool evolutions of what was core to the skill.

**New Virtue: The Loom**

**The Loom:** You have a full understanding of the history of any and all spirits you view, including
historic changes to those spirits. You may alter a person’s spirit to any state its has been in before. You are completely immune to memes and antimemes that only affect the spirit, and are immune to the spirit effects of memes and antimemes that affect multiple aspects of your being.

With all that, fixing the people in their pews was nearly trivial, especially because I didn’t have to worry about undoing anything beneficial. Mucking about with spirit couldn’t affect memories, except insofar as the spirit interfaced with memories, but the spirit affected itself, threads weaving into each other, and at least some of those effects were beneficial, representing how people had changed and grown over time. Still, hacking away a few months of spiritual growth was worth it, if it could remove all traces of what Harold had done to the more compromised of the people he’d touched.

We found the ruling council of Li’o at around four in the morning, hidden in a secret bunker whose wards Grak had only been able to overcome by spending four weeks in the time chamber to build up concordance, and even then it was apparently a close thing.

The ruling council was all dead, to the last, along with many of their closest advisors, killed in what looked like it must have been a ritual suicide. Ellio helpfully explained to me that this had been one of his ideas, not just that the ruling council should be the first targets (even if that carried some risks), but that they should all die as soon as the summoning was in motion. He hadn’t actually known whether Harold had been able to get them, given that the entity didn’t like to reveal much of his plans, but after what Ellio had said, I wasn’t at all surprised to find that Harold had followed the advice, at least in this circumstance. The fact that the ruling council was dead had left Li’o in the lurch as far as imperial support, and it meant that unless Article 86 was invoked, it would probably be weeks or months before the empire could come in.

But as we’d already established with Finch, Article 86 was going to be invoked by daybreak, only a few hours in the future, which would cause the biggest political shitfest that the Empire of Common Cause had seen in its entire history. The empire’s forces would come in, onto a member polity’s sovereign land, without so much as a token request from their ruler, and effectively take the place over. Worse, it was an athenaeum city-state. The thinking of everyone who opposed this was pretty clear to me: this set precedent for the empire to come in and act against a member polity. The thinking of everyone in favor was that this was one of the larger humanitarian problems since the Risen Lands exclusion, and the ruling council had been completely subverted and then killed, though it would be hard to say that definitively. These people were hypothetical, obviously. The imperial mail system was fast, which meant that news went around the empire pretty quickly, but it would take time for things to get untangled, especially because the biggest presence on the ground, the Council of Arches, didn’t have a proper PR department.

I was on the side of intervention. Hells, I was on the side of a single world government, so long as I could pick and choose who was sitting at the top. The Empire of Common Cause had worked to shrink down the world. It was pretty far from a monoculture, but cross-pollination had happened so far and wide that the polities had a lot more commonalities than differences. Pretending that there weren’t enormous economies of scale to harvest, and a lot of pretty horrible human rights abuses by the worst members, seemed like it was dumb. It would all work better if it was more closely knit. Then again, I wasn’t from Aerb, and I had formed most of my opinions by listening to how Amaryllis described things.

“What are you going to do with Ellio?” asked Amaryllis, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Finch thinks I should kill him,” I said. We were standing just outside the bunker. We probably didn’t have to come in person, but I had wanted to be there for Grak as he cycled in and out of the time chamber, one week at a time to build up and then expend his concordance.
“I concur,” replied Amaryllis. “Kill him, then never let anyone find out what you did.”

“It was necessary,” I said, frowning at her.

“I know it was,” said Amaryllis. She softened slightly. “I’m not arguing that at all. I’m arguing that it would be better if your existence as an unregistered soul mage were something that we could pretend was more innocuous than it really is.”

“Finch thinks that he can backdate authorization,” I said.

“He told me that too,” said Amaryllis. “But ‘thinks’ is the operative word here, and we’re already operating in extremely murky waters. We’re an independent republic making a sojourn into a member polity of the Empire of Common Cause, in what will soon be declared an exclusion zone, with nothing even approaching approval by anyone who matters.”

“Pretty sure we’re heroes in all this,” I replied.

“Of course we are,” Amaryllis said. She gave me a little laugh. “Do you think that being a hero actually stops people from being pilloried? From sanctions, from broken alliances, from every horrible thing that our opponents will want to bring down on our heads?”

“I’d think that it would be at least a little bit of a shield,” I said. “Not a big one, but … in the court of public opinion, which seems like it would have some impact on what the politicians are willing to spend in terms of political capital.”

Amaryllis looked me over. “You put all those points into MEN?”

“I said I did,” I replied. “I don’t even think that was a particularly SOC worthy observation, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’m just surprised,” replied Amaryllis. “But the point stands that we can’t keep Ellio around, not when he’s proof that you’re willing to soulfuck anyone when it’s convenient.”

“That’s unfair,” I said. I held up a hand. “And yes, yes, I know you’re making a point, that’s how it’s going to be framed. But killing a man just like that, in cold blood, when you have him dead to rights, when you could do all the reforms you wanted to him … it doesn’t sit well with me.”

“That was what the Second Empire did,” said Amaryllis, giving me a dark look. “It’s what Fallatehr did. You have a raw ingredient, there’s no victim because he’s a self-confessed accomplice to mass murder and no one will miss him, and you want to turn him into something useful.”

“Isn’t the fact that no one would miss him exactly why it doesn’t really matter?” I asked. “Or … wait, are you arguing from a strict utility standpoint, or are you just creeped out by it? Or you just think that it’s wrong, regardless of utility?”

That stopped Amaryllis dead in her tracks. “I’m thinking,” she finally said. “I might have biases because of what happened with Fallatehr.”

“Okay,” I said. “Or it’s a slippery slope thing?”

“We’d have to establish that the slope is, in fact, slippery,” said Amaryllis. “I do think that if you continued altering Ellio, you might wear away some of your instinctive revulsion at the idea, which might make you more likely to create a problem in the future, even on a strict utility level.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t intend to ever do it again unless I have to.” I added the ‘unless I have to’ on
reflex, because I didn’t want to make myself a liar, but as I said it I could hear how flimsy it sounded. “Anyway, killing him just because he might deserve it, or because he might be a personal problem for me reeks of the kind of thinking that I’d also not want to get comfortable with.” I sighed. “I missed you, but this part, I’m not so sure that I missed.”

“I didn’t either, for what it’s worth,” said Amaryllis. “And you know I missed you too.”

“I think I might surrender him to Finch,” I said, after a moment has passed. “Kick the can down the road, pretend that I don’t know Finch’s opinion, pretend that the man who gives the order doesn’t have to swing the sword.” I paused, weighing that. “Or, shit, I might have to give it a day to see what I think.”

“That might be best,” replied Amaryllis. “Talk to me though, before you do anything rash.”

“I always do,” I replied.

“You climbed up the leg of an enormous creature from beyond time and space,” said Amaryllis.

“True,” I said. “I’ll count that as a point against myself.”

“At any rate, it looks like Article 86 is going to get invoked, unless Finch thinks that he should do something insane like forging a distress call and the requisite authorization,” said Amaryllis. She covered her mouth with her hand and gave out a long yawn. “You know, I really liked having Kenner’s Eye. It was good insurance. If you’d gotten it when you should have, we wouldn’t be in this mess.” She had sworn off the tattoo, because it would almost certainly knock her out if she tried to leave the exclusion zone. (The search for a cure for sleep was ongoing; the entad within the temple was an obvious one, but I would have to keep it on me at all times, and we would also have to steal it, which was a non-starter given how delicate things already were.)

“Depends on which mess you’re talking about,” I said. I looked her over. It was nearly daybreak. “Maybe you should take a half day in the chamber? My guess is that Article 86 is going to mean all hell breaking loose. Not that we need to be around for it.”

“We do,” said Amaryllis. “There’s no possible way to deny that we were here. Most people won’t have ever seen a tuung before, so maybe it would be hours before anyone figured it out and made the connection to the Republic of Miunun, but it would happen eventually, especially because our tuung speak perfect Anglish. We haven’t been telling the civilians much, but I think it’s probably time to start. We can claim credit for all the good we’ve done, and hope that helps when the reckoning comes.”

I nodded. “Go get some sleep. I’ll keep watch and you’ll be back out before anything of significance has happened. Maybe spend an hour or two preparing, but I know you tend to overplan, and who the hell knows what the empire coming in will actually be like.”

“Finch has some idea,” said Amaryllis. “I’ll talk more with him, but I think he’s getting ready to pull out and pretend that he was never here, because Uniquities sure as hell looks suspicious, and my guess is that his department doesn’t shield him from criticism as much as he might have wished it did.”

“Go on then,” I said. “I’ll be helping as much as I can.”

Article 86 was invoked for the first time in history just after daybreak, when the sun began shining over the P’emp’té Valley. Bethel was stationary, the better not to spook anyone, but she’d included a spire in her design, and was giving us a bird’s eye view of the proceedings through the telescopes.
that she’d placed on the spire’s tips.

I should probably point out that she had access to a smorgasbord of entads, because people tended to take their entads with them, especially in emergencies. I was a bit worried about that, both because the Dungeon Master had recently shown himself willing to fire off the exclusion gun, and because the right entad or combination of entads might have made her more powerful than was probably good. I liked Bethel, I did, but she was scary sometimes, and probably as close to chaotic evil as someone could get and still be my friend. In the meantime, I was trying to be happy with her incredible powers.

A portal opened up in a small park not far from where Mome Rath had fallen, as wide as a four-lane highway, and immediately began to disgorge hundreds of people, all of them moving quickly. They multiplied as they came out, as extradimensional entads allowed even more people to exit from being temporarily carried. A few vehicles came too, large, ruggedized ones, a few with treads instead of tires, all of them carrying more people. A beachhead was quickly being established by the first people who had made it through, and that included a handful of buildings springing into existence wherever they could be fit, most of them with the bespoke look of entad buildings. Almost everyone I could see was wearing shimmerplate or something better, decked out in the kinds of magic items that people liked to complain about their taxes paying for.

From the bird’s eye view it was impressive, an operation carried out like clockwork, albeit one that would have been a lot more useful if it had come about sixteen hours before it did.

We got a knock on our door about half an hour later. I hated that Bethel was sitting still, but it wasn’t just that we didn’t want her to spook the imperials, it was also that she needed a break from being the most important entity in a thousand mile radius, especially when that was butting heads with both her personality and her core values. We were going to get as many people out of her as quickly as possible, once the imperials had a field hospital set up that could take them all, but who knew how long that would take. My initial estimate of a day, maybe more, had been really, really optimistic. A lot of the people that Bethel had inside of her were perfectly fine, either injured people that had been healed and couldn’t in good conscience be put back out on the street, or people who had never been injured at all.

“It’s like I imagine holding in feces,” Bethel had said to me. “Or eating a food you find repulsive. Or biting off a leg that’s stuck in a trap.”

“It’ll be over soon,” I said. “You can shit out all the people, you can vomit up the food, and you can limp away from the trap.”

Loyalty Increased: Bethel lvl 18!

“Thank you for understanding,” said Bethel. “I’m supposing that we’ll make an attempt at getting things back to normal? Rather than just allowing this to be interminable?”

“We’re trying,” I said. “We’ll see how this all shakes out.” That was about as much as I could give her.

Maybe it’s best that I talk for a bit about the Office of Imperial Disaster Relief. Part of the impetus for the Empire of Common Cause was to get everyone on the same page as much as possible, especially with regards to trade and disputes between nations. A standing army was not, at all, on the table; member polities would have their own standing armies, thank you very much, and while mutual defense had become a core part of the Empire, it was still mutual defense on an individual basis, polities going to help each other out within a framework provided by the Empire, rather than the Empire doing anything on its own. There had been a time when disaster response had been handled
in the same way, with a member polity making a plea to the other member polities of the Empire, and individual members responding with what they could, sometimes headed by an ad hoc subcommittee.

This was, naturally, horrifically inefficient and generally unjust, with disaster response being provided on the basis of how politically appealing it was. A great number of backdoor deals happened in the days or week following a disaster, and the general outcome was the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. It was with that sorry state of things in mind that legislation was drafted to create an imperial organization that would be funded by the member polities in relation to their ability to pay, constituting a standing response force for rapid assistance in times of disaster. The Office of Imperial Disaster Relief, the OIDR, got its inaugural call from the Kingdom of Perelanth when a star fell from the skies and caused severe destruction to one of their major cities.

(It probably comes as no surprise that the multi-colored stars that dotted Aerb’s night sky worked differently than stars did back on Earth. Aerbian stars weren’t stars at all, they were enormous balls with skins as thin as a Christmas ornaments which drifted around very, very slowly out past Celestar. Every once in a while one would pop, and more rarely, one would plummet down to Aerb, through the complicated dimensional fuckery that allowed a static sky to be overhead a tessellating Aerb, and usually it would cause a humanitarian disaster of some kind, if it was unfortunate enough to land anywhere near where people lived. The starstuff was harvested for a few specialty uses, and everyone else tried to pick up the more metaphorical pieces.)

OIDR (usually pronounced Oy-der) had been a controversial organization at the time it was founded, but a few decades had been enough to allow it to prove itself. There were still detractors, obviously, people who thought that they shouldn’t have to pay for disaster relief that went to far-off areas, or people who saw it as imperial overreach, but they were the typical anti-imperial crowd whose opinions the Empire tried their best to work around. OIDR only moved in at the behest of a member polity, only when a standing imperial committee had found that there was cause, and they placed a heavy focus on doing as much as it could within its budget, which many of its detractors said had been bloated when it was first created and had become a corpulent monster in the time since then.

Someone, somewhere, or more likely a big group of people, had decided that OIDR was going to be the face of the Article 86 invocation, most likely because there were a lot of people who thought well of the organization, and because it put a humanitarian spin on what was, effectively, the Empire ignoring the sovereignty of a member polity.

Captain Elias Satyr had been chosen as the face of the face. He was half-Animalia, half-human, a literal satyr, though for all the Aerb seemed to have every single fucking fantasy race and monster in existence, they didn’t have satyrs, and the name was just a “coincidence” of the sort that the Dungeon Master was fond of (and which brought to mind what he’d said about how difficult it was to set up anagrams). Satyr had been on the frontlines of OIDR when it had helped deal with the aftermath of the starfall in Perelanth and shot up the ranks through what mostly seemed to be a powerful natural charisma. He was also a musician of note: people were often surprised to hear his songs on the radio and learn that not only was he a very rare half-Animalia, half-human, he was also pretty highly ranked within the Empire.

Physically, he was almost exactly my mental image of a satyr, with curled horns like a goat, hooves, and the weird back-and-forth joints on his legs. He was wearing entad armor of some kind, adorned with curled blue waves and shifting whenever you weren’t looking straight at it, and a helm that left his slightly-animal face exposed except at the place where a strip of metal protected his nose.

<It’s not him,> said Bethel. <Some kind of shell of him, Grak confirms, likely entad, though I don’t have a handle on the exact nature of the power. He’s visibly wearing entads, but they’re not showing
Smart, if you have a tool like that, I replied. Best not to walk into the unknown if you can help it. I’d have done the same, if I were going up against Bethel and I knew even a tenth of what she was capable of.

Shows a lack of trust, said Amaryllis. I hadn’t realized that Bethel had put us on the equivalent of a group call, but that made sense. It was just a little jarring, given that I’d thought we were speaking in confidence.

I wouldn’t trust us either, I said.

The issue is that he’s openly displaying that lack of trust, said Amaryllis. He had to have known that we had a warder.

Calm yourself, said Bethel.

Amaryllis had no response to that, other than to look slightly chagrined.

“Captain Elias Satyr of the Office of Imperial Disaster Relief,” he said, introducing himself as we came through the doors. Bethel had made a grand entryway for us to have this little meeting in, with no chairs or tables that would serve as an invitation for an extended talk. “I’m to understand that you’re independent citizens conducting disaster relief?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. She was standing beside me, as were Grak and Valencia. “We’re not citizens of Li’o, we’re citizens of the Republic of Miunun, which isn’t a member polity of the Empire. We were here in Li’o because a member of our government was undergoing training at the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence. When the monster came down from the clouds, we engaged with it using every tool at our disposal, and when it was dead, we conducted as much disaster relief as possible.”

“I see,” replied Satyr with a frown. Maybe he was trying to parse how that was different from independent citizens. “Your presence was authorized by the government of Li’o?”

“No,” replied Amaryllis. “We acted independently.”

“I see. Article 86 of the Imperial Charter was activated forty minutes ago,” said Satyr. “Disaster relief operations will be handled by OIDR from here on out. Given your status as a non-member polity, operating under unclear jurisdiction to put it extremely favorably, you will immediately stand down and vacate as quickly as possible, along evacuation routes that are being established as we speak.”

“There are monsters around here,” I said. “Six varieties we’ve encountered so far.” More things had been fleeing from Mome Rath’s corpse, all of them dangerous. I was pretty sure if that I killed any of them, they would have equally stupid names to the Mome Bats and Mome Rats, but I had been busy with the bigger picture and hadn’t actually defeated any of them. “We also have fairly powerful entads and a number of trained personnel.”

“I appreciate that,” said Satyr. “And candidly, the work that you’ve done here, if it’s even a tenth as impressive as I’ve been led to believe, should be enough to have you branded heroes throughout the Empire. But from a legal standpoint, you had no business being here. If you’re lucky, there will be no one to hold you accountable, but I doubt that you can remain that lucky for long, not when we’re dealing with a new exclusion.”

“A new exclusion?” I asked. Enough time had passed for him to know about that, but this was something that Amaryllis had said we should probably play dumb on. If it came out that I was solely responsible for getting skin magic excluded … well, who knew, but it probably wouldn’t be good,
even if it wasn’t really that much my fault.

“Skin magic,” replied Satyr. “You’re standing in the hex’s newest exclusion zone. We don’t know what might have caused it, but the end result is fairly clear. We don’t know whether it’s repeatable or not, but from prior experience, it’s better to assume that it is. All the more reason for you to leave.”

“Candidly,” said Valencia. “What are they saying about us, up the chain of command?”

Satyr looked her over, trying to get the measure of her. She was radiating calm collectedness, and just a touch of innocence. It helped that she wasn’t wearing the Red Armor of Arramar.

“Information came through backchannels,” said Satyr. “That means that you already had the ear of someone with at least a little power within the Empire, maybe a lot. You’re a new polity supported by staunch imperialists with one or more of the highest tier entads, operating on foreign soil and achieving a frankly astonishing success.”

“They’re suspicious,” said Valencia. “The term ‘false flag’ has been floated.”

“You didn’t hear it from me,” said Satyr, nodding at her. “It’s above my pay grade, frankly. And I can’t say that my own sphere of contacts reflects what popular opinion will land on.”

“Thank you,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll leave then. We do have a number of people we’ve provided healing and rescue to, as well as a large number of corpses and souls that we’d like you to take possession of, if we’re leaving the area.”

“The souls can be sent to our forward operating base,” said Satyr. “The people can leave here with me. Some of my men are outside to give us defensive support and transportation.”

“I’ll take you to them,” said Amaryllis. I might have imagined it, but I thought I saw a slight gleam in her eye.

We walked as a group toward a set of doors at the back wall, not a terribly far walk, but enough to build anticipation. My opinion of Satyr had risen as we’d spoken to him, but this little bit of theater was something that we’d planned out just in case whoever we’d spoken to ended up being belligerent.

I opened the doors for him, and led him out to the balcony that Bethel had created. He set a foot on the balcony, then stopped in place, looking out at the room Bethel had made to serve as a field hospital. It had started big and then grown bigger over hours of search and rescue, until it was near the limits of her ability to stretch internal space. There were four thousand beds, enough for everyone that we’d picked up, some of them still awaiting treatment, but the bulk of them cured and awaiting an all clear signal from outside that I didn’t think Satyr would realistically be able to provide for weeks or even months. The really mind-boggling thing about seeing it like this, aside from the dimensions of the room, was how much stuff there was in there, how many beds, blankets, pillows, how much food was being eaten, how many people were reading books, how many children were playing with toys, all of it clearly provided by us.

<We should have done branding.> said Amaryllis. <Many of these people have lost their homes and will have only the things we’ve given them.>

<Couldn’t be too gauche.> I replied. I was watching Satyr, who was taking it all in.

<No, of course not.> replied Amaryllis. <Something tasteful, a logo or a monogram, nothing more.>

“I,” he said. “I hadn’t realized how many people you had.”
“You don’t have room for them all,” said Valencia.

“We’re mobile,” I said. “If you have a refugee center, we can let them all out there. And I do mean mobile: we could land outside Caledwich within the hour. But we don’t have to, if you want them to remain in Li’o. Some have lost their homes, but some haven’t, and if it’s going to be possible to rebuild Li’o, then taking people far away isn’t advised.”

“I’m going to have to make some phone calls,” said Satyr. “I’m going to have to … I’d thought dozens. The death count is probably a fraction of what we’d been predicting.”

“We can stay as long as we need to,” I said. “We’re not members of the Empire, but we do want to help.”

Satyr stared out at the masses. “Give me time to find a place for all these people,” he said.

“I’ll try to give you as much time as you need,” I replied.
In the House of God

I was laying in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. Kenner’s Eye was pushing off sleep, and would continue to do so for another week before it started to wear on me, and another month before I would be forced into sleep, by which time we would hopefully have something to replace it with which could eliminate sleep entirely. The Lord of Dreams could do it, as could the Elon Gar, but those were the only two methods that we knew of that would last forever without drawbacks, and both presented pretty serious problems. I wasn’t in my room, lying on my bed, to sleep. I was just there because I had been through a lot and wanted some time to recuperate.

I spent most of it wishing that Fenn was there with us. She had always been easy to talk to, easier than any of my current companions, simple and uncomplicated, or at least that way on the surface, able to brush away worries and concerns so that we could settle into a friendly banter with each other. It hadn’t really been all that healthy, because she wasn’t as simple and uncomplicated as she pretended to be, but I still missed it.

It was the first time I really, honestly thought about shoving every part of Fenn’s soul I could into someone else’s body, so that I could have a facsimile of her, just for a moment.

It was hard, sometimes, when I had thoughts like that, to know whether or not they were just the intrusive thoughts that everyone had from time to time, or whether it was because I really was sliding down a slippery slope toward becoming the vile kind of soul mage that everyone always worried about. Part of the complication here was that a few of my former barriers had been outright stripped away: we had a body that seemed destined for the oubliette in the person of Ellio. All I would have to do was excise his memories and values, then replace them with Fenn’s, plus everything else I could grab and remap. It wouldn’t be Fenn, because try as I might, I couldn’t access a person’s spirit from their anima exa (and I suspected that it was simply unavailable), but it would be close to her, a way to talk to someone with her exact memories and values.

I was mulling this over when I got a knock on my door.

“Enter,” I said.

“Hello, Juniper,” said Bethel, slipping inside.

I sat up on the bed and looked at her. She changed form often, which I thought was fair given how easy that was for her. This was what I thought of as her human form, one that was our size instead of nine feet tall, more normal looking, for lack of a better description. She was wearing human clothes, too: instead of the gossamer dress she favored, she had on a simple dress with a green earth tone. The more I looked at her, the more dressed-down she seemed; she normally kept a bit of wood grain as a part of her cedar-colored skin, and her hair was typically in ropelike braids. Both those features were gone, bringing her close enough to human that if I didn’t know better, I might not have been able to tell.

“You came in through the door,” I said. “I’m not sure what I’ve done to deserve that level of politeness, but thank you.”

She was looking me over.

“What’s up?” I asked. “I assume from the fact you’re not using the mental link, this is a more social visit?” I was worried that she was going to harangue me about how long it was taking to get everything in order.
“Do you mind?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I was pretty much done with the decompression. Not really ready to get back out into the trenches just yet.”

“Well,” said Bethel, smiling at me. “The way I figure it, you owe me a favor.”

“Yes,” I said. “Many. Unfortunately, my ability to do you favors is pretty lacking.”

“Somewhat, yes,” replied Bethel. “Do you remember our earlier conversation?”

I stopped, then frowned. “Which one?”

“Sexual pleasure,” she replied.

“Oh,” I said. I straightened up. The near-human appearance seemed like it had more of a point now. “Look, I know that’s something that you expressed an interest in, but as I’ve said --”

“What you said, precisely, was that if I found an entad that allowed me to experience sexual pleasure, you would find the prospect of having sex with me appealing,” said Bethel. She gestured to her body. “Consider that accomplished.”

I looked her over. “What am I looking at?” I asked.

“It’s a body,” said Bethel. “The entad that belonged to Oberlin. I have a physical body now. I have to say, it’s a lot less work than projecting one.”


“You’re aroused,” said Bethel.

I tried to let the tension out of my body. “Yes,” I said. There was really no use in denying that. I’d spent too long looking at her curves. She was pretty, she had always been pretty, sometimes with a bit of alienness to her, but usually just pretty in an exotic way, instantly remarkable. Also, she had boobs, and who doesn’t love boobs? “Let me think for a moment.”

“I’m not sure what there is to think about,” said Bethel, smiling at me. “Amaryllis?”

“Amaryllis,” I said. “That’s definitely part of it.”

“So far as I’m aware, nothing has happened between the two of you?” asked Bethel. “You were really much better at flirting with Fenn than you are with her. So much attraction, wrapped up in polite conversation and businesslike demeanor.” She was looking at me. “Ah, and there goes the arousal, such a pity.”

“Give me a minute to think,” I said. “Pros and cons.”

“You can think out loud,” she said. I might have been imagining it, but it seemed like there was a huskiness to her voice.

“Yeah,” I replied. “But then I would have to voice my thoughts, and there are some thoughts that I’m worried might hurt various people, myself included, if I had to live with having spoken them.”

Bethel sat down next to me on the bed, leaving barely an inch of space between us. “I’ll wait while you think.”
It’s hard to think, when someone is sitting there waiting for you to think, especially when that someone is a house who you are a little attracted to, one that could kill you even when no one else could, but I tried my best.

Look, I was eighteen, and at pretty close to peak human physicality. As a natural consequence of that, I got horny on a regular basis, and while I did my very best not to let that interfere with executive function, it wasn’t something that felt natural to rein in. Some of that was compounded by the lack of privacy, which made masturbating to clear my head a little bit awkward, because if I was inside Bethel, then I knew that she could choose to watch me. That hadn’t historically stopped me much, and Bethel had thankfully never commented on it, though I was pretty sure she might, in the coming conversation. It would have been great if I had been a sexless robot that could just ignore my hormones without the need for self-pleasure, but I wasn’t. Given that, I certainly hadn’t compounded all my other problems by starting on the NoFap challenge for a month when I first got to Aerb. And if you think that I went two months in the time chamber with Amaryllis, the most beautiful woman conceivable, and didn’t masturbate once, then I don’t have any idea what your mental model of me must look like.

And the appeal of having sex with Bethel wasn’t just because of sexual frustration or high libido, the usual attraction of a warm and willing body. At least some of it was Bethel herself, an entity that I was pretty sure had been designed for me by the Dungeon Master, or at least manipulated into existence in the same way that all my other companions seemed like they had been, made for me, in some sense, not that I had asked. Bethel had a mean streak that appealed to me, one that was likely a reflection of my own mean streak, my worst impulses. She had killed hundreds of people, maybe even thousands, and somehow that usually ended up triggering my empathy for her.

If I imagined, for a moment, that Amaryllis were out of the picture, not dead, obviously, because that would be a whole thing, but just some alternate scenario where it was me and the house, or some kind of antimemetic effect that made me forget about Amaryllis … it was fucking terrifying to think about, but if that happened, then I could see Bethel and I getting closer, closer than we already were. Never in love, no, probably not, but there could probably be something between us, at least on my end. Loyalty was a bad and confusing metric, but hers was eighteen, and that probably wasn’t meaningless, you know? She was a house, and she wanted me to live in her, and that was … something.

That just about covered the pros.

Cons? Well, as it happened, Amaryllis hadn’t been erased from my brain, and I was getting to be pretty confident that if it were possible for us to be together, I would want that, even if the whole sex thing didn’t end up working out. I could have sung her praises to the high heavens, if Aerb had heavens, but it was really just a matter of the way that I felt. And to go and have sex with Bethel, or even just have her give me a handjob, felt like it would be a betrayal of a relationship that hadn’t even started. I didn’t think that Amaryllis would actually care that much, given what she’d had to say on the subject. What was important was how I would feel, which would be unclean, like I was a betrayer, and yeah, that was probably guilt about other things tainting how I thought.

And the other downsides were mostly centered around Bethel, who --

“Time is up,” said Bethel. “Are we going to do this or not?” She was giving me a very patient look, the kind of placid that lets people know that they’re being waited on.

“No,” I said. I let out a breath.

“I talked to her, while you were taking time to think,” said Bethel. She was still sitting very close to me, and it might have been my imagination, but I thought I could feel the heat coming off her body.
“She said that she hoped you would say yes.”

“I’m really hesitant to call you a liar,” I said. “But that seems very convenient.”

She leaned over and kissed me. I was taken by surprise, and put up a token struggle before I kissed her back. She smelled faintly of wood shavings and campfire, a pleasant smell. Her lips were soft, so convincing that I wouldn’t have known she wasn’t human. Maybe in that body, she was human. It didn’t really matter, that was just where my brain was going.

“Bethel, no,” I tried to say, but she moved forward when I moved back, still kissing me, and I wasn’t quite not kissing her in return.

<Bethel, no,> I tried again. It felt good to kiss her, and I was fully erect, there was no doubt of that, but I hadn’t actually decided that this was something that I wanted to do, and I felt a knot of fear forming, because she was more powerful than me, and if I said no, well, that was what I had been in the middle of thinking about when she’d interrupted me. I had Prince’s Invulnerability, and she could strip it away like it was nothing.

<I want you, Juniper,> she replied into my head while still kissing me with her bodily mouth. I tried to move backward again, and she pushed against me, so that my back was resting on the bed. It didn’t take her long to maneuver around so that she was on top of me, straddling me, the weight of her pushing down on my erection. <I can feel the arousal in us both.>

She was kissing me hard, firm yet still soft, and moved down to kiss my neck as her hands worked at the buttons of the shirt I was wearing.

I wanted to say that I couldn’t, that I didn’t want to, that I cared about her but that it was still a bad idea for a fair number of reasons. And then I thought that we’d already gone so far, so fast, this would already need to be explained, or could be exploited by her if she really wanted to, and if I pushed her off and told her no, then if she really wanted to, she could overpower me, or kill me in a thousand gruesome ways, or just hurt me, even if I could heal back.

And I liked it. On so many levels, I liked it, not just the purely physical, but the sense of the forbidden, the bad idea that I knew I would regret, giving in to basal impulses, the roughness and intimacy of it, the power she held over me, the fear and adrenaline, being her first, showing her what it was like … the more it was happening, the less I was thinking, the list of pros and cons got washed away into a confusing river of emotion and sensation, all moving toward the same destination.

Afterward, I lay there, staring up at the ceiling, like I had been before Bethel had knocked on my door. The difference was that I was naked, slightly sticky, and feeling out of sorts. Bethel’s new body lay beside me, staring up at the ceiling, same as I was.

“I can see why people like it,” said Bethel, into the silence.

I didn’t respond.

“I always thought it was fumbling,” said Bethel. “Two creatures who can barely see each other, barely feel each other, who have to guess what certain physiological responses must mean, groping and grappling while they seek their own pleasure. It always seemed so inefficient. But I think I can see it better, how the mutuality of it works.”

I still didn’t respond. I was thinking about what we had said to each other, before it had happened, the specific words we had used with each other. I knew that what I should really be thinking about was what my next steps were going to be, or failing that, how I could best support and encourage
Bethel, which my life might depend on. Instead, I was thinking about what I had said to her, and not just that, the tone that I had used, the context of my words. And I was thinking that I hadn’t actually fought back very hard.

“I stimulated my own clitoris, at the end,” said Bethel.

“A lot of women do,” I replied. My voice sounded hollow to my ears, despite my best efforts. “It’s like you said, bumbling animals who hardly know each other.”

“Well, I enjoyed it all the same,” said Bethel. “More than I thought I would. It was at the upper edge of my predictions for how well I thought it might go.”

“Good,” I said. “I hope … I hope that I was as gentle and understanding as, as you thought that I would be.”

I wondered if the game was giving me some penalties to my skills for whatever esoteric reasons it might be doing that. Everything out of my mouth felt like I was watching it at a remove, like there was some lingering dissociation from that entad that I’d been under at the temple. Through every conversation I’d had on Aerb, nothing had ever felt so much like picking dialogue options from a menu, knowing that it wasn’t what you’d actually say in that situation.

(I’d gotten achievement progress on *A Key for Seven Locks*, my least favorite achievement. There had been a time when I had worried that the game would set things up, or contrive ridiculous scenarios, just to make all seven happen, convoluted plots lasting decades in service of incrementing that progress tracker. I hadn’t imagined that it would simply be forced on me.)

“Are you okay?” she asked. Her voice was soft and gentle. She sat up slightly, rolling her naked body so she was on her side.


“But that’s something that you humans like, isn’t it?” asked Bethel. “Spontaneity?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You’re worried about what Amaryllis will think,” said Bethel with a nod.

I hadn’t been, not until Bethel had said that. My brain was still catching itself up to speed. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell her.”

“She doesn’t need to know,” said Bethel. She reached over and laid her hand against my chest, trailing her fingers, clearly experimenting with what it was like to have senses like a human. “I won’t tell.”

“You said you talked to her,” I replied. I felt a chill go down my spine.

“I lied,” said Bethel, dropping that casually, effortlessly.

“Oh,” I replied, because I didn’t know what else to say. I felt a coldness in the pit of my stomach. “It should probably come from me, if it comes from anyone.”

“You don’t owe it to her to tell her,” said Bethel. “You clearly enjoyed yourself, that’s all it has to be. I don’t see myself doing this again. Or if I do, then not with someone so …”

“So what?” I asked, because it felt like she wanted me to ask.
“Conflicted,” said Bethel. “You’re a very moral person, in your own way, even as you stumble and fall. You have these ideas of who you should be, what you should do, it’s sometimes attractive and sometimes not. Even now I can see you trying to find ways to hate yourself over this.”

I felt my stomach churn. I’d thought that I was keeping my feelings from her, but she could still see through me as well as before, it was just that she was misinterpreting the signs. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You deserved someone less conflicted, someone who was fully committed to you, heart and soul.”

“Ropey,” said Bethel. She removed her hand from my chest and sat up on the bed, hugging her knees. She looked down at her arms. “You know, this didn’t really make me feel better. I’d always wondered.”

“Might be learned,” I said. “You’ve got a body, but I doubt it’s got all the things that come with a body, all the stuff that gets packed into a mortal’s brain.” I could feel myself coming back down to terra firma. I was going to have to deal with this reality, with this shitty hand I’d been dealt, all the baggage that I hadn’t wanted and then some. That seemed like the path forward.

Bethel moved over to me and placed her hand on my chest. Her fingers were thin, like I imagined a violinist’s, and she touched the sparse hair on my chest. It took me a moment to realize that she wasn’t being affectionate, she was testing the motions that she’d seen before. A fair number of people had lived in her, through the years, first squatters after Uther had left her alone, and later the mayors of Headwater, followed by the Penndraigs and their help, and later, the armies. I had no real clue how many people had lived in her over the years, and no way to guess how many people had sex in her, but it was probably a lot.

She was touching me because she was curious about the human experience, about the things that these people did inside of her, the aspects of their lives that she had seen but never experienced. Maybe it was like a chef that never ate their own food, tasting one of their dishes for the very first time, just to see what it was like.

I reached for her hand and pulled it up to my mouth, then kissed her fingers, letting myself feel the taste of her, slightly salty. There was a part of me that had liked it, and I tried to bring that to the surface, to think of the pros instead of the cons, and when that didn’t work, I tried to instead think warm thoughts. Bethel had been mistreated, by many people, for a long period of time, and she was trying to come into her own, trying to be a better person, or a person-equivalent. If this, what we’d done together, was the result of that, it didn’t speak well to how she was adjusting, but I couldn’t just give her the cold shoulder, not when she was this huge, terrifying, alien house with anger issues, privacy issues, consent issues, weird values, and damn that cons list would have been long, if she’d given me time to finish it.

But while I was thinking that, I was also kissing her fingers and pulling her closer to me, pretending that we were lovers, that any intimacy between us hadn’t been rent to shreds.

“It would be a bad idea for you to fall in love with me,” said Bethel. She was watching me kiss her fingers, her stare intent.

“Oh?” I asked.

My mind was running on two tracks at once, multithreading, one part caught in a loop and wholly silent, insisting that she’d betrayed me, that she’d gone a step too far, then second-guessing my complicity and replaying what I had said and done for the umpteenth time. The other part of me was slowly relaxing, trying to come to terms with the idea of it, accepting Bethel as she was, because she needed someone to care for her, because I did care for her. I was sure that any objective outside view would say that my mind was a mess, but it seemed to be working, at least so far as Bethel was
revealing anything to me through her human form.

“I don’t think that I can love like a human,” said Bethel. “I’ve seen many lovers before.”

I stopped kissing her hand and let it drop to my chest, and she moved closer to me, curling up in the crook of my shoulder so that she could use me as a pillow. I tried to believe that it felt nice, that it was a comfort, and I think I succeeded in convincing myself.

“Arrogant of you to think I would fall in love with you,” I said. I kept my voice to a murmur. It was something that I would have said to Fenn, a playful little joke that she would have appreciated.

“Humans don’t make sense,” said Bethel. “More than any other species, you don’t have proper brains. It’s not your fault.”

“Well, I’ll try my best,” I replied. And in the thread that was thinking like her lover, or at least like a Juniper that was trying to show her love, a thought occurred, one which might have been warm and pleasant if things had been different, but one which I couldn’t help but speak, even with the roiling conflict inside of me. “Would it be so bad, to do this again?”

“We’ll see,” replied Bethel. There was no mistaking the warmth in her voice. She was practically purring like a kitten.

I went back to my rounds, helping out where I could, until eventually there was an excuse to leave Bethel and have some time to myself when I wasn’t trying to doublethink, wasn’t trying to push down the discomfort, unease, and downright dread I was feeling. Once I was gone from Bethel, so far away there was no possibility she was spying on me, I took a few deep breaths and tried to figure out what I was going to do.
Politics, blah, blah, blah

We spent our days (yes, multiple days) being a support organ for OIDR’s rapidly expanding efforts to get something resembling a workable government. They also took our assistance in hunting down and killing all the random crap that was coming out of (or falling off) Mome Rath’s corpse. I took point on a lot of it, in part because I was somewhat immune to the memes, in part because I was virtually invincible, and in part because without sleep, I had to do something with my time.

And, in part, because I didn’t want to be in the house. I hadn’t told anyone what had happened between Bethel and I. Amaryllis didn’t know, and I was sure that she would be angry once she found out, but I didn’t want to complicate things, I just wanted them to go back to the way they were. It was making me feel slightly sick all the time, except for those moments when I could zone out and forget, more than the lingering problems my burnt out bones had caused me, more than the danger of leveling up. It was just this gut-deep tension that didn’t really make sense to me, because Amaryllis wouldn’t actually be that angry, she would be more angry that I had kept it from her, and whatever drama came of it would probably be nothing in comparison to what I was feeling. But I kept silent, because I didn’t want to talk about it, and I didn’t want to have to explain, and so long as I kept quiet, I wouldn’t have to let Bethel stop believing her own version of events.

There were a few dangling threads in Li’o. The biggest was who would be in control of Li’o once OIDR finished up their work there. The ruling council were dead to the last, and the rules of succession weren’t as firm as anyone would have liked, nor did they have a strong continuity of governance. For anyone who was more concerned with the imperial side of things, this was especially troubling, because they were inevitably going to be a part of the conversation, not to mention that fact that if they were malfeasant, it would be entirely possible to install imperial-aligned interests on the new ruling council, if there was even going to be one. For the empire to violate a member city-state’s sovereignty was one thing, but it was another entirely for the empire to perform what was, from some angles, a coup.

Eventually, it came down to a giant meeting of thirty-odd people at the forward operating base OIDR had set up. The optics of this had been cause for some criticism by Amaryllis, who thought that they should have chosen more neutral ground, but we hadn’t exterminated all the monsters in the city, and it was the safest place for all the most important people to be, aside from Bethel.

I had only barely heard of most of the people involved. The dwarven shadow-city was there, represented by three dwarves, though they weren’t vying for control, only there as stakeholders. Unsurprisingly, the dwarves had come off pretty well from the whole thing, given that they lived pretty deep underground. They’d had a few collapses from what went on above, and a handful dead in those collapses, but that was about it. Aside from them, there were business collectives, the remnants of the security apparatus of Li’o, lower level functionaries who hadn’t been outright killed by Harold, and finally, the student council.

Jiph settled into a scowl when she saw me. She was flanked by the tywood and the masked woman (SSSC Secretary L’osh and SSSC Treasurer Midahl, I now knew). The man with grey at his temples (SSSC President Daven) was absent, which, given how things had been, meant there was a pretty good chance that he was dead. I wondered what she had heard about me in the interim, and whether she had made the connection that I was a master still mage shortly after I had been down in the temple, a place that I’d exited the same day that Mome Rath had come down. It was also somewhat common knowledge that I was a registered soul mage, given how many people I’d had to go through aboard Bethel. The paperwork would, Finch assured me, be backdated, as ironclad as he could make it, with a lot of strings pulled in the background.
Jiph didn’t approach me, which I was thankful for. Amaryllis and I had a seat at the table, as did OIDR, but we were only there in an advisory capacity. Amaryllis was pretty sure that the real reason we were there was because it was impossible to hide Bethel’s involvement in things, both because she’d had an extended sortie and gotten the killing blow, and because there were thousands of witnesses who could speak to having been picked up. That made us heroes, sure, but it was in Satyr’s interests to parade us around so that he could assure everyone that the empire had only acted when all other options had been exhausted, and in fact, had erred on the side of extreme caution before taking the final step of invoking Article 86.

There was a lot of crosstalk, especially at the beginning. Amaryllis had thought there would be. She’d had a lot of experience with meetings, and to hear her tell it, meetings were held together by strict procedure, clear hierarchies, and clear purpose. Amaryllis had argued that we should follow Pennraig’s Rules of Order, the first and last word in procedural conduct, but Satyr had declined. Hierarchies? That was at least in part what was being decided on, and the man with the highest, clearest position here, Captain Satyr, was duty-bound not to actually exercise any of that power, given how contentious this whole thing was among the imperial constituents. And as for purpose, that was up in the air too, because while the nominal goal of the meeting was to decide on rulership of Li’o, the subtext was that we were deciding on the fate of the city-state, the athenaeum, and roughly a tenth of Aerb’s remaining magics.

“The biggest single driver of income to Li’o is the athenaeum,” said Jiph. Her voice was strained. She’d been introduced as acting Sound and Silence Student Council President, which confirmed my suspicions. I wanted to know what had happened to Sonee, but there was no way for me to ask.

“The athenaeum is, in a very real sense, the focal point of Li’o, from a cultural, economic, political, and social standpoint. The ruling council of Li’o was made up entirely of students who had been through S&S.”

“If that argument were persuasive, then it wouldn’t be persuasive in favor of you,” said a member of one of the business collectives. One of the things that vibration mages did, when they weren’t off exploding heads somewhere, was factory work, primarily in materials analysis and ensuring precision, thanks to both their heightened senses and their ability to manipulate vibration. Orcaz, one of the few orcs I had ever seen, owned one of a few factories in Li’o. “The argument would instead be that someone of importance from the athenaeum be appointed, someone with administrative experience.”

“We have administrative experience,” said Jiph. “And we’re here having spoken to as many of the surviving staff and faculty as we could find.”

“Backroom deals then,” said Orcaz with a shake of his head. He looked over at Satyr. “We can’t elect a new council when half of the candidates have been excluded from the running before it’s even begun.”

“I couldn’t force people to come to this meeting,” replied Satyr. “I did, as it happens, extend invitations to a number of likely surviving faculty and staff. Some don’t plan to stay in Li’o, others deferred to the decisions of the student council.”

Orcaz didn’t seem happy about that, but being shot down on that point seemed to take the wind out of his sails. I glanced over at Amaryllis, who had nudged me, and looked down at her rapidly moving hand beneath the table.

“He should point out that the majority of people in Li’o don’t attend the athenaeum, even if it is the most important place,” said Amaryllis, using Gimb. Symbiosis gave her half my effective level in Language, which was apparently rounded down. She’d gotten Gimb, rather than Grogliir or Kindeh,
presumably because that was the first of them she interacted with, though we didn’t have enough data to determine the rule.

“He’s a businessman, not a politician,” I replied. “At least, that’s my read.”

“I concur,” replied Amaryllis, signing rapidly. “But he would be a good check on the power of the athenaeum. Historically they end up dominating almost any region they’re in. This is the first time in living memory that one of them has had a near-total reset. It might be the only opportunity.” (The phrase ‘in living memory’ meant something different on Aerb, as you might imagine. Here, I was pretty sure that it was exaggeration for effect, rather than precision. Lisi would have called her on it, but I stayed silent.)

“The weakness of his play might be because of how powerful the athenaeum is,” I replied. Gimb didn’t really have a way of marking emphasis on a word, so I tried to draw the cheremes out, which I wasn’t sure was entirely effective communication.

My increased Spirit was mostly a boon as far as helping people went, but the Multithreading virtue was amazing in general practice, because it meant that I could pay attention to talking to Amaryllis and the conversation around the table at the same time without actually having the feeling of split attention. My experience with fighting the monsters that roamed Li’o had shown it was equally valuable in combat, if not more so. And thankfully, it was something that I got at level 30, which, after mucking with the spirits of hundreds of people, I had already passed, and wouldn’t go back down below.

Unfortunately, the meeting itself was irritating, mostly because there wasn’t much we could say. We weren’t citizens of Li’o; even if you were a student, you needed a year of residence, and some paperwork that I obviously hadn’t and couldn’t have filed nor faked. I didn’t even think that being a student would really count in my favor either, given that Jiph thought I was a cheater. I wondered whether she thought I was under the employ of the empire.

“Jiph has this,” Amaryllis signed. “She has no opposition. I’m surprised that Ermaretor isn’t here. She was always politically minded.”

“She’s dead,” I replied. “I found out this morning. Not dead in the attack, dead in her office, bottled suicide. She had a husband and two children, all of them crushed. Souls unretrieved.”

“Unfortunate,” replied Amaryllis. Her sign was terse, but she seemed genuinely saddened to hear it, and I spent a bit too much time looking over at her.

“There has been too much death and destruction,” said Jiph. “We need to clean up, clear out, and rebuild. The only question that anyone should be concerned with is what shape that rebuilding will take. There are people who will argue that Li’o should become a ghost town, that the temple and rod should be moved somewhere else. Mortality has been extremely high. Infrastructure is in a sorry state. There is a corpse sitting in the middle of the city, smelling more every day.”

“The empire is attempting to pass legislation that will bring a group of star mages in to take care of it,” said Satyr. “That is beyond the scope of this meeting.”

“Thank you,” said Jiph, nodding at him. “But my point is that things are stacked against us, and I can perfectly well understand why people might want to flee from this place, but the athenaeum is the beating heart of this city, and so long as I have a say, it will stay right where it is.”

“It’s in the best interests of everyone who is staying to have others stay as well,” said one of the dwarves, speaking up for the first time since we’d made introductions. I was used to Grak’s slightly
stilted way of speaking, and it was weird to hear one of them speaking perfect Anglish with no trace of an accent. “The question is whether we can shoulder the burden of staying, and whether we can stay, should enough others leave. The site is, I should remind, an active exclusion zone.”

“We don’t understand the connection between the enormous creature and skin magic,” said Satyr. “Until we understand that connection, there’s an inherent risk in staying here.”

“The fact that it’s an exclusion zone could be a boon,” said Amaryllis. “This is the only place on all of Aerb where tattoo magic still works. There are relatively few tattoos that are still worth anything, given the circumstances, but”

“It was my understanding that you were only at this meeting in an advisory capacity,” said Jiph.

“She is,” said Satyr, giving Amaryllis a displeased look.

“Have you interfaced with the Athenaeum of Steel and Sweat?” asked Amaryllis. She was firm and unflappable, with the kind of stoic determination that I’d come to expect of her. I was pretty sure that she knew the answer to that question: otherwise, she wouldn’t have asked it.

“Speaking to Steel and Sweat seemed inadvisable,” said Satyr.

“Why?” asked Amaryllis, pressing him. “There are hundreds of thousands of tattoo mages who have lost their primary form of employment. There are hundreds if not thousands of scholars whose expertise is only useful within this city and the surrounding areas. Worse, tattoos completed outside the exclusion zone will not be active within the zone,” that was per our experimentation, “which means that this is the only place that a person can have a tattoo added to them.”

“Be that as it may,” replied Satyr. “It is imperial policy to allow governance of exclusion zones to fall under the purview of the original governmental authority, and while it is entirely the case that Steel and Sweat might have an interest in the exclusion zone, that interest is completely subordinate to determinations of sovereignty.”

Amaryllis looked around the table. I suppose she was hoping that someone else would object, but there were no takers.

Satyr cleared his throat and moved the meeting onward, but it was pretty clear that Jiph had taken the reins on the matter, both because she was being quite forceful about it, and because she’d clearly done a fair amount of work in the lead-up to this meeting. It wasn’t really a surprise when there was general agreement that the SSSC would have provisional control over the city-state of Li’o, subject to further discussion once things had settled. That, I viewed as a formality; once someone had power, it was pretty damned unlikely that it would be stripped from them, especially not when the empire was in a precarious spot.

“It’s fucking bullshit,” Amaryllis signed to me as we left the meeting. “She’s going to take over without any of the other stakeholders having their say.”

“We were in a room full of stakeholders,” I replied. I was listening in on other conversations, though there was nothing terribly important. We got a few looks, but we weren’t dumb enough to say anything incriminating in Gimb, on the off-chance that someone knew it. “And she might be least worst.” One of the remaining low-level governmental functionaries had spoken up and made a fool of himself, which had made Jiph look better.

“It doesn’t put us in a good position,” signed Amaryllis.

“No,” I agreed, “It doesn’t. But I’m not sure how important any of it will be going forward. Jiph
hates me, but it’s pretty clear that the athenaeum is going to be on the back foot for a long time, and the time scales we’re dealing with are pretty damned short, in the scheme of things.”

(This is all heavily translated, by the way. Gimb was a weird as fuck language without a lot of the features that I took for granted in English/Anglish. It was supposed to be signed by a species with gravity senses that could effectively do 3D mapping of the fingers, which meant that we were doing a bastard version of it that was slightly more calibrated to our regular old human eyes.)

“What,” replied Amaryllis, which I think was as much as she wanted to say on the matter. I wasn’t actually sure which she meant; we had two that were likely measured in years, the one to stop the Void Beast, and the one to make the Republic of Minun a member in good standing of the Empire of Common Cause. Jiph could potentially fuck us there, not through an overt use of power if she did end up becoming the top of the pyramid of power at S&S, but by poisoning the well if she was in conversation with other imperial members.

“Point taken,” I replied. “Not much we can do about it.”

Amaryllis was silent at that, but she didn’t seem very happy about it.

We headed back to Bethel, and when I saw the house looming, I wasn’t very happy either.

On the fourth day, Anglecynn showed up.

With the matter of Li’o’s governance at least partially settled, there was an entity that could send out requests for aid. OIDR had been established as a collective disaster response force, but that hadn’t fully eliminated the backroom deals, and it was often the case that a member polity could lend additional support, expertise, or magic. I was vaguely reminded of the way that intelligence services in the United States had historically squabbled with each other and duplicated work, or the way that developing a standard meant that there was one more standard to comply with. It was almost funny to see it here on Aerb.

Officially, Anglecynn was lending additional troops from their Host to assist with final extermination of the remaining monsters that had come down off Mome Rath. Some of those creatures were incredibly resilient to our efforts: hard to spot, hard to kill, and worst of all, fast breeders. The arachnid Mom Raths could burrow into any humanoid that they had killed and lay a half hundred eggs, during which time she would be antimetically hidden, the corpse nest only visible to me or through an expansive ward that Grak developed. It remained to be seen whether or not they could actually be contained, but we were doing our best. One of the big risks, long-term, was that Li’o would become ground zero for a number of invasive species. The saving grace was that most of them were incredibly, unthinkingly hostile; if the Mome Rats had the wherewithal, they could have fucked off without anyone being any the wiser. There was a possibility that this had happened: we couldn’t be confident that it hadn’t.

That Anglecynn was showing up was certainly not coincidence, though it was hard to tell whether this was the work of the Dungeon Master or the work of our enemies, not that those were mutually exclusive. I had always thought that if I were the Dungeon Master, Anglecynn would come back into play, not just because of Amaryllis’ history there, but because we’d left a few dangling plot threads behind. Of course, I would have been paying attention to what my players found most interesting, engaging, and fun, which would have ruled Anglecynn out almost completely.

One of those dangling plot threads came to Bethel’s door on the morning of the seventh day. She was wearing different clothes from the ones she’d been wearing when I’d seen her in Boastre Vino, black mourning clothes rather than the frilly red dress she’d been in before, though she was still
wearing the circlet with gemstones on it, an open display of both opulence and power. She had four guards with her, all of them in entad armor, with entad weapons, and almost certainly mages of one kind or another.

“I should kill them all,” said Bethel. “Penndraigs,” she spat. She was wearing her human body, which she’d been doing a lot of lately. Seeing her still set me on edge as emotions came racing back, some of them good, some bad.

I had finally broken down and made a few changes in my spirit, which had helped immensely. Isolating the specific thread was difficult, and knowing how much of a change I should make was impossible, but I had tamped down on my fear and my sense of violation, which were both, in my opinion, greater than they should logically have been. One sign of that was that I was going in to muck with my internals in the first place. I didn’t remove the feelings, not entirely, but I swung the balance a bit, so that it was a thing I hadn’t wanted to happen, not something more and worse. Bethel hadn’t meant anything by it, I was sure of that, she’d only thought that my reluctance was petty morality, or that I was too much inside my own head. If she realized that I was more spooked than I was letting on, or that my anxiety and discomfort was more about the act than my worry about Amaryllis, she hadn’t said anything. She also didn’t appear to have said anything to anyone else, so far as I could tell.

So my feelings toward her were maybe, on balance, more good than bad, but it wasn’t a calm neutral, it was the good and bad smacking up against each other like two warring armies, the memory of her borrowed body moving against mine, the look in her eyes when she came, matched against the sickness I felt in the pit of my stomach, and the fear of something like, say, penile degloving.

“Don’t kill them,” replied Amaryllis. “Public assassination would put us at war with not just Anglecynn, but the entire empire.”

“But private assassination?” asked Bethel, arching an eyebrow.

“If it couldn’t be traced back to us in any way,” said Amaryllis. She looked over at me. “It likely wouldn’t be worth the risk, given that there would be no way to guarantee that there was no evidence, not with the wide range of entads available.” I could tell that she didn’t want to so much as invoke the term ‘remote viewing’, which was a real problem. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“Who do you need for this?” I asked.

“You, Valencia,” said Amaryllis. She gave Grak a guilty look.

“It’s fine,” said Grak. “I have found myself not caring for Penndraigs. I exclude present company.” I couldn’t help but see that as a slight against Lisi, which I made a note to ask him about later.

“And I suppose Raven and I will stay behind, as is our custom,” said Pallida with a sigh. “You know, I really wish that I had that hat. It could give me any disguise, really was a thing of beauty, I could be by your side without anyone the wiser.” It wasn’t fair to leave them, really, but Pallida was renacim, and her kind were recognizable, easy to place. Raven was a bit less suspect, but she was a figure of myth, and the longer we could go without revealing her, the better.

“You’ve said,” I replied. “If we find a way, we’ll search for it.” We didn’t have a quest, obviously.

“I’ve heard that Doris Finch can find things,” said Pallida, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, well, let’s take our adversaries one at a time;” I said.
We went out into the main entryway, which Bethel had kept more or less static since Satyr had paid us a visit. It was far too grand, but at least it made an impression, one that I hoped might give us a tiny bit of leverage in the coming negotiations.

“Amaryllis Penndraig,” said Hyacinth as we walked forward. “I had heard rumors, but I hadn’t thought that they’d actually be true.”

Hyacinth Prentiss had heard more than rumors. The unfortunate thing about running a combination field hospital and refugee camp was that there were a ton of people, and at least a fraction of them were coming and going at any given time, a necessity because we couldn’t in good conscience keep family members from each other, nor could we really keep anyone from leaving if they really wanted to. That meant that anyone who really wanted to could throw on a disguise and get inside with relative ease, and short of killing them and then hiding their corpse in extradimensional space, there was virtually nothing that we could do about it. Of course, one of the fortunate things about having both Valencia, Bethel, and Grak working together was that there was virtually no way that a spy could get onto Bethel without us knowing about it. Grak in particular could use the Penndraig line against them; if anyone with Uther Penndraig as a direct ancestor passed through one of the inner wards, Grak would immediately be notified.

We were pretty sure that the four spies we’d clocked coming in ahead of Hyacinth’s visit were the extent of what she’d sent, because they’d have to be very, very good for us to have missed them.

“Cousin Hyacinth,” said Amaryllis with a curtsy. “I was sorry to hear about your husband. I don’t know if you knew this, but he and I were once quite close.”

“It is the risk that we take in service to the Kingdom of Anglecynn,” said Hyacinth, seeming unbothered. “The price of duty. Of course, the fact that you’re here will serve as further proof that you’re derelict in your duty. A perennial fault of yours, it would seem.”

“I don’t even know what my legal status in Anglecynn is,” said Amaryllis. “I think we can agree that I survived the trial by adversity.”

“You are, technically, a deserter from the Host,” said Hyacinth, smiling at Amaryllis. She looked over at me. “As are you, Juniper Smith.” I wasn’t too surprised that she knew my name, but I was a little surprised that she deigned to speak to me.

“And the Kingdom of Anglecynn intends to enforce that?” I asked.

“No,” said Hyacinth, laughing softly, with an absolute lack of warmth. “We could, obviously, attempt to extradite you from Li’o, but as soon as we tried, you would fly off in this marvelous entad. When the common folk talk about the accountability of the Lost King’s Court, it’s people like you they think of. People who perceive themselves as being beyond the rule of law.”

“So you say,” replied Amaryllis. “From where I’m standing, we saved thousands of lives and rescued thousands more from an eternity of torture in the hells.”

“And you just so happened to be in Li’o at the time?” asked Hyacinth. “You happened to have all the tools at your disposal to kill a beast the like of which has never been seen on Aerb?”

“If you want to make an accusation, make it,” said Amaryllis. “If you had the evidence, you would already have presented it, but you don’t have the evidence, because we had nothing to do with any of it.”

She was convincing. I believed her, and I knew that she was lying.
“Tell me,” said Hyacinth. “How did you arrange for Juniper to be granted the Special Returning status at the athenaeum?”


Hyacinth once again gave us her soft little laugh. “Oh, well, you have to understand that Anglecynn is, as always, the heart of the Empire. What would it look like if we turned our back on a member in times of need, especially one of the athenaeums? We’re here to help. To that end, we have travel arranged for those who don’t wish to stay in Li’o, and housing has been secured for anyone that wants to take up residence in Caledwich or one of the other cities. We need to talk to the people you have here, to let them know of our generous offer. Obviously having you act as intermediaries would be unacceptable for a whole host of reasons.”

“If that was all you wanted, then go right ahead,” said Amaryllis. “This is the single most secure place in all of Li’o right now. Your people can move freely.”

Hyacinth seemed nonplussed. I suppose she had expected us to refuse, or at least to quibble. “I’ll have a detachment over soon,” she replied. She briefly touched her collar. “I do have to ask, in case you might give me a straight answer, what your endgame is. You should know that foreign control of an ethnostate rarely works out, even when compliant species are involved.” She’d shifted topics to the tuung, and the Republic of Miunun. The tuung were of considerable interest to the people inside Bethel, in part because their species was so rarely seen outside of their hidden-away enclaves. I wasn’t surprised that Hyacinth would look at them and wonder what the hells Amaryllis was planning.

“A student of history wouldn’t look at the failures of the past and conclude that nothing could be done about them,” replied Amaryllis. “They would instead learn lessons from those failures and correct for them.” One of the big things was that they weren’t culturally tuung at all, they were Amaryllis’ own custom blend of culture, plus what she called ‘drift’, an inevitability given that she wasn’t spending a decade of her life in the chamber.

“You understand, of course, that the Republic of Miunun is put in a delicate position by having two of its most prominent members be citizens from Anglecynn and wanted criminals on top of that,” said Hyacinth. “The Republic will be unable to fulfill its aims, if the will of the empire is against it.”

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “The empire would be much more effective than it is, if it could be said to have a will at all.” Amaryllis had, on more than one occasion, described the empire as a sack of ornery cats.

Hyacinth laughed. “Very true.” She took a moment to look around the room. “Of course, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“You’re offering a deal,” said Amaryllis, nodding slightly.

“Give up your lands, drop any wards, surrender your entads, and undergo sterilization,” said Hyacinth. “The matter of your desertion will be put behind you, and your Republic will rise or fall on the merits of your rule, rather than the circumstances of your birth.”

“I’ll consider it,” said Amaryllis with a slight nod, and I could see from Hyacinth’s expression that she definitely didn’t see that coming. “My lands are held in trust for the time being, forfeit to the kingdom in the event of a trial in absentia?”

Hyacinth nodded. She seemed slightly off-balance, which made me feel a little better about how things were going.
“And if I were to forfeit everything that rightfully belongs to me, it would go to you?” asked Amaryllis.

“It would have gone to Larkspur,” said Hyacinth. “But as the Foreign Security Director was murdered by parties unknown, your lands would pass to his widow instead.” She placed her hand on her chest.

There was a bit that I didn’t understand, and was forced to figure things out on the fly. Maybe Amaryllis hadn’t told me, or maybe I had simply forgotten, but from what they were saying:

1. Legally speaking, Amaryllis was supposed to have completed the trial by adversity in the Risen Lands and then report to the Host, where she would spend a mandatory minimum of two years in service to Anglecynn.
2. Because she had completed the trial by adversity, she was cleared of her crimes, but because she hadn’t reported to the Host, she was guilty of desertion.
3. If she didn’t report back to Anglecynn, there was a possibility that they would just hold a trial without her there, which would probably not go well for her.
4. Amaryllis had a bunch of stuff in Anglecynn, because while there were potentially recoverable caches of stuff, a few of which we’d already hit, those hadn’t made up the bulk of her material possessions back when she was a princess in good standing. All her stuff was being held onto, for the time being, by parties unknown to me, probably many of them because all that stuff was spread out across a few different countries.
5. Hyacinth was Amaryllis’ next of kin, in some manner, and would get all of Amaryllis’ stuff, in the event that Amaryllis died. Some of that was legal, some was just the nature of magic, because Hyacinth (despite being older) was next-most-direct female descendant behind Amaryllis.
6. For whatever reason, even though it had been a few months by this point, there hadn’t been a trial, and Amaryllis and I weren’t convicted deserters.

To me this meant that there was a glimmer of hope, even though I had the political savvy of a wet sponge. The fact that it had been months without trial in absentia meant that there was some reason for them not to, either an ally working for Amaryllis, or some kind of leverage that we could use. All the stuff that rightfully belonged to Amaryllis was part of it, but I wondered whether that was the whole story. I knew jack shit about how the law worked in Anglecynn, except that it was different if you were a part of the Lost King’s Court, so I didn’t really have a good grip on what was going on there.

“I need time to think, but we have time,” said Amaryllis. “We’ll be here until you can help these people to clear out. We can also deliver them for you.”

“Deliver them how?” asked Hyacinth. “Not in this ship, I hope?” The word ‘ship’ caught in her throat, which I thought was probably Bethel being petty. She really didn’t like being called a ship, and had worse and worse reactions to it as the days went on.

“That was our plan,” replied Amaryllis.

“You risk raising the ire of the Draconic Confederacy,” said Hyacinth. “To do so on your own would, naturally, be your own prerogative, but to risk the lives of others would be unconscionable.”

“Per the 501 FE Sky Treaty, the dragon’s domain over air doesn’t begin until three hundred feet,” said Amaryllis. “We can keep below that for the entire trip, though it will make us significantly slower. Even if that weren’t the case, we could file priority paperwork with the DDACN. It’s a non-issue.”
“Is it?” asked Hyacinth. “Surely you’re aware that the Sky Treaties are forged between the Empire of Common Cause and the Draconic Confederacy? If you claim to be of the Republic of Miunun, which you certainly seem to, you have no standing so far as the Sky Treaty is concerned.”

“Imperial non-members are afforded a blanket protection by the Sky Treaty even if they’re not signatories, so long as they comply with the terms as outlined,” said Amaryllis. Her face was set. I was pretty sure that she could have done this without the Pedant’s Pendant, but that probably made it a lot easier.

“And, in point of fact, you did not comply,” said Hyacinth. “Which means any protection under the Sky Treaty is null and void.”

“You have proof of this supposed non-compliance?” asked Amaryllis, but I could see something in her face change as she said it. This whole conversation with Hyacinth didn’t really matter, it was fact-finding, but you still didn’t want to ask questions that you didn’t know the answers to, and you definitely didn’t want to fall into traps.

“You’ve been crowing about it since it happened,” said Hyacinth. “There are thousands of witnesses.”

That was when it clicked for me. With the Egress inside of her, Bethel was incredibly fast, and with a combination of a reflective coating and all that speed, plus a few other tricks, there was pretty much no way to catch her violating the Draconic Confederacy’s rules about air travel, and it wasn’t like a dragon (fast as they could be) would be able to catch us. In point of fact, we had violated those rules when we’d come to Li’o, and a few other times before and since, mostly in the name of not having to spend an inordinate amount of time waiting for paperwork to be completed, along with a desire to keep our capabilities secret. I had no idea what kind of caveats were involved in the three hundred feet rule, which surely had to have exceptions and regulations that ran for several pages, nor did I have any idea whether Amaryllis had been giving instructions to Bethel in order to stay within the letter of the law.

But there was one clear time when Bethel had definitely gone above three hundred feet: when she was fighting Mome Rath.

“There were exigent circumstances,” said Amaryllis. Her lips were thin.

“Certainly,” said Hyacinth. “And you are, of course, heroes. But I don’t know that the Draconic Confederacy will see it that way. Given that you don’t have the formal protection of the Empire of Common Cause, and given that you clearly did violate the Sky Treaty, even if it was under exigent circumstances, as you point out, you are entirely open to a retaliatory dragon attack. The refugees will be taken to Anglecynn by other means.”

“Very well,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t think there’s anything else we need to discuss, but I’m sure we’ll talk more in the coming days.”

<You only have to say the word and she’ll die a horrible death,> said Bethel, presumably into both our ears. The words sent a shiver down my spine. I was certain that she meant it.

<No,> said Amaryllis. <We have no deniability right now.>

“It was a pleasure to see you again,” said Hyacinth, unknowingly speaking over the telepathic conversation. “It’s my hope that you’ll carefully consider what I’ve said here today.”

“I cannot believe that she would tattle to the dragons,” said Amaryllis. She had her arms folded and
looked like she was planning to murder someone, which was probably an accurate reflection of how she actually felt.

“You know what we should do,” said Bethel. “Have Juniper soulfuck her.”

Amaryllis gave her a dirty look. “Anolia would find it.”

“Even with spirit manipulation?” asked Raven. I took the question as academic.

“Possibly,” I replied. “I think that I might be able to set the two components up so that her thoughts about me were amplified in a positive direction, without changing anything about the underlying soul. The soul contains values, which the threads use as part of, or maybe the entirety of, thought, so if you alter the threads, you can effectively bypass the values, at least to an extent. Ideally I would, I guess, hardcode something into the thread, but I don’t think that’s actually possible the way that things are set up, even if that would be the computing metaphor. The real trick would be making sure that there’s no thread updating that changes what’s in the soul. And obviously, I don’t have an in-depth understanding of how the anolia’s soul sight works, plus it’s possible that she has other methods of detecting changes, which we wouldn’t find out about after she’d already been soulfucked.”

“Possibly not even then,” said Amaryllis. “She wouldn’t necessarily know about every security check in place. We could be found out, which would be a disaster.”

“It’s disturbing to me that we’re talking about this at all,” said Raven, looking between the three of us.

“I agree,” said Solace. She was frowning at me.

“I’m not saying that we will, or even that we should, just examining what the immediate problems with it would be,” I replied. “It seems like it’s not even a question of whether it’s morally acceptable, because it’s not strategically viable.”

“Probably not strategically viable,” said Amaryllis, biting her lip for a moment. “We have no intelligence network in place, no information coming from inside of Anglecynn.”

“We have Lisi,” I said. “And … it might be time for you to speak with your Aunt Rosemallow.”

“Do we not have more important things we should be doing?” asked Solace. She asked it as though it was an innocent question.

Amaryllis shot her a frown. “A dragon descending on the Isle of Poran with claws and teeth, which is at least an outside possibility, would be an unmitigated disaster.”

“Would it?” asked Solace, again using that same tone, one that seemed curious, rather than accusatory.

“I know you want to help the locus,” I said. “We just don’t have any real way of doing that. We don’t have threads to pull on. We don’t have promising leads, or any leads. The only thing that gives me any hope is a loyalty increase, which can’t really be forced because the motivating factors have adverse effects.”

“You don’t know that,” said Solace. “It wasn’t in the notes that Reimer gave to you.”

That was true, though I didn’t know how she knew it, unless she’d delved into the game’s guts herself. The companion system was a mystery to Reimer, with no real analog in the game he’d
played, since the other Juniper had never allowed companion characters or anything like them. Naturally we hadn’t revealed everything to him, given how many secrets we had, but we’d shown him enough of what the game had been revealing to me that he’d been able to identify it as anomalous. (I had asked Reimer about the ‘degrees of reasonableness’, and he’d said that it was all pretty much bullshit, and had been the source of a few fights between us, because the other Juniper has usually been the one determining what was or was not ‘reasonable’ on the seven-point scale.)

“My offer to eat the bottle stands,” said Bethel.

“We don’t know the outcome,” said Solace, glancing over at her only briefly.

“Based on what we know of the loci,” I began.

“You cannot trust what you’ve read from the Second Empire,” said Solace, shaking her head. “You cannot establish rules for what does and does not work.”

“Regardless of that,” I replied. “The books we took from the Infinite Library very much appeared to indicate that even if we were able to disgorge the locus’ entire domain from the bottle without killing it, that still wouldn’t allow it to grow and thrive, nor to induct new druids.”

“Based on experimentation carried out by the Second Empire,” said Solace. She said ‘experimentation’ like it was a slur, which I could understand given what the Second Empire had done.

“I want to help,” I said. “If we had a path we could follow, or a path we could forge, if … I don’t know, if there were something, I would drop other obligations.” I was pretty sure that sounded convincing, but I wasn’t actually sure that I was being honest. I more or less liked the locus, even if I was missing a lot of the cultural baggage, even if, as an entity, it might have been created in order to challenge me. And I did want to save it.

It was just that it was very easy to say that you would do anything when you didn’t actually have to do a single thing, because there was nothing to be done.

“Did you ask the Dungeon Master?” asked Solace. “When you spoke to the god above all gods, did you ask about the locus?”

“There were a lot of things that I didn’t ask him,” I replied. I was trying to stay calm in the face of hostility. Solace wasn’t normally like this. I had cleared everyone in our inner circle save for Raven, who had warned me against it on the basis of how many dangerous things I might see there. Solace still had the locus splattered on her soul where parts of her had been reconstructed by an alien intelligence with no regards for data structures. “But it was part of Amaryllis’ questions, and he blew all those off.”

“Very well,” she said. She stood, letting her cloak flow out from behind her. “I will tend to the locus. I’m sure that it would be eager to see you, should you have the time.” She blinked out right after that, leaving me no time to say anything in response.

“Nice of you to facilitate a flair for the dramatic,” I said to Bethel, frowning at her.

“That was her, not me,” said Bethel, looking me over.

“Sorry,” I said. I leaned back. “Not really where I was hoping this conversation would go.”

“You should give her a break,” said Pallida. “She’s only nine years old, still learning and growing.”
“She’s been frustrated for a long time,” said Grak. Solace had been sitting next to him, and he readjusted himself, looking uncomfortable. “This is her life’s purpose, before all else.”

I wanted to say that it was clearly insane to devote yourself to one person so much, especially when there were other things at stake, and it was only then that I saw a parallel between how I’d been in the wake of Arthur’s death and how Solace was acting about the locus. It was different, wildly different, but I finally saw the thread of similarity that seemed like it had been in the corner of my vision this entire time.

But that didn’t actually help me, because what had I learned about Arthur? That he’d cracked under the pressure of saving the world a few hundred times? Or that he’d been twisted and warped into something unsavory by Aerb? That he hadn’t been as pristine and perfect as he’d always been in my mind’s eye, in the time following his death? None of that would help Solace. I couldn’t tell her to take off the rose-tinted glasses, even if it were true that the locus wasn’t everything that it was cracked up to be. It wouldn’t actually help anything.

Most likely I was just jumping at shadows, in the same way that Amaryllis jumped at the idea of narrative, and Valencia jumped at anything that looked vaguely like Harry Potter.

But it did occur to me to think about whether or not the locus quest might actually be impossible, whether this was all an extended metaphor for letting go of things that were gone. I couldn’t see it, not really, I didn’t think that the Dungeon Master would do me dirty like that, and if he was going to, he would have placed in little hints about it, little nudges in the direction, more ambiguous wordings on the quest descriptions.

The conversation moved on, as it had to, because there were other things to discuss, things like the plan to get me out of having to sleep once we left the exclusion zone, things like Rosemallow and the internal politics of Anglecynn, but my mind was stuck on the locus, and the idea that there might not be a way to save it.
Brownian Motion

The Isle of Poran was a grim and grey place. Most of the time it was completely overcast, with a chilly wind even when the sun was shining. When we got back though, the water mage we’d hired a month ago had arrived, and she’d taken matters into her own hands, leaving us with the first bit of nice weather I’d ever seen on the isle. Amaryllis was eager for me to unlock water magic, mostly so that we could get it leveled and see how it measured up against the others before the big respec, but I begged off, and I guess there must have been something in my eyes, because she relented and said that maybe we should just take a day to relax. I’d wanted more, but I didn’t press it.

Because my life had become an endless series of obligations, there was something that I had to do first.

“It’s been a while, I know,” I said as I walked beside the doe. “Sorry. I had the whole week in the temple, then I wasn’t really sleeping, and … I don’t know.” I still wasn’t sleeping, and I touched the ring on my finger, which would let me transfer sleep debt to another person. It was usable for a thousand hours, roughly a hundred days of not sleeping, and would be worthless to me after that, but it was what we’d scrounged up, a stopgap measure that punted the problem down the road. I kind of wanted to talk about that, how a vital human function had been stripped from me, but it was a distraction from other matters.

“I’ve been thinking about Brownian motion, and how that was maybe something that would help us relate,” I said. “You see, way back in time, on Earth, scientists noticed that little bits of pollen or whatever would have these random movements through the water. In computer programming terms, it was what we call a random walk, just a step in one direction, then a step in another direction, completely random, which gives a little characteristic squiggle if you map it out. Nothing to say that it couldn’t be a straight line, but statistically, that doesn’t happen.” I was silent for a bit. “Of course, knowing that rule doesn’t mean that it’s any less random, it just gives some context to what’s happening. It’s a meta rule. Anyway, they had noticed this about pollen, how it did these random motions that were similar to a random walk, and they had no idea what was causing it, because the pollen or whatever didn’t have moving parts. Eventually some scientist figured out that what might be happening was that brownian motion was the result of that pollen being bombarded by tiny bits of water. It was actually one of the first pieces of evidence that molecules existed. Anyway, I was thinking about that, about the scientist coming up with that theory, and how that feeling of wonder was a little diminished by moving a little step closer to understanding the truth. It was this move from this thing that was unknowable and weird, to this thing that was knowable but still weird. I kind of, I don’t know, get it? Solved games aren’t any fun.”

The doe seemed entirely disinterested in this monologue, which was fair, because my heart wasn’t in it. Sometimes talking to the doe was like this, with an hour or two of me talking about things I was interested in, or that I thought would help us relate, or that I imagined the doe would appreciate, with nothing to even remotely indicate that I was doing anything but wasting our time together. I tried not to be demotivated about it, and I tried not to think about the loyalty ups, but it was difficult, and sometimes, as now, I failed.

“That scientist’s name?” I asked. “Albert Einstein.”

The doe gave no impression that she’d heard me aside from a flick of the ear. Almost none of my jokes or references landed with the doe, which I was used to, but maybe I was just in a mood where everything was more disheartening than it actually should be.

“I had a thought, which was that maybe it was impossible to save you after all.” I didn’t mean it in a
rude way, as though she wasn’t doing her part, but maybe it came out like that. I was despondent, that was all, and most of it didn’t even have anything to do with the doe.

The doe looked at me for a moment, flicked one ear again, and then nodded.

“What?” I asked. “Yes, as in, yes, it’s impossible to save you?”

She just gave me a blank look.

“I mean, I don’t know what the hells we would do then,” I replied. “Cherish the time we have, I guess? I don’t know what lesson there would be from that, what moral would be hidden in -- I mean, not everything is a moral, not everything is commentary, but if it were true that there was nothing that could be done, if Solace is the last druid that will ever live and our ability to keep you going is basically tied to her lifespan, because I’m not sure that we can do the rebirth ritual thing again,” I was rambling. “I’m not going to accept that as the correct interpretation, for the time being.”

The doe gave another little nod in my direction, then ate some more grass. That was a lot more input than I normally got from her.

“Shit,” I said. “Well, Solace is kind of pissed, as you probably know, and if there is no solution, if this bottle is just effectively hospice, then I have no fucking clue how to break that to her, and I don’t think that she would accept it, not that she should. I mean, there’s a quest, isn’t there?”

The doe kept eating a particular type of purple grass that she seemed to favor, and I stopped and waited for a moment, because that seemed polite, like when you ask someone a question but they’ve just put a forkful of food in their mouth.

“So anyway,” I said. “Not giving up on that, obviously, just thinking about the possibility that there’s no winning move. I do like thinking about possibilities, you know that about me. It actually fits with the druidic mindset a little bit, not being constrained by what you think to be true about the world.” That seemed like another point in favor of the hypothesis.

I looked out at the lands inside the bottle, at the trees, the animals, the grasses, and the places where invisible wards were helping keep the ecosystem together. We had better instructions on how to take care of the bottle now; when Solace had died the first time, she hadn’t seen it coming, and neither had we, but there were preparations in place, contingency plans in case things went sideways in some way for a second time. It wasn’t clear that we could use Yaxukasu a second time, not when the first time had been such a tenuous thing, not when the locus was involved, and not given how much permanent damage it had done to Solace.

We were still thinking about those things though, imagining the worst case scenarios, so that we would have a skeleton of a plan in place when we needed to hit the ground running. Amaryllis and Grak were both big on worst case scenarios, trying to see the possible failure modes and then pick the low-hanging fruits of preparation.

See the problem coming, be a little prepared, and then things won’t spiral out of control when it happens.

“I had sex with Bethel,” I said. It was the first time I’d said it out loud.

The locus looked at me with its doe eyes, all six of them, then bent her head back down to continue eating grass. As confidants went, at least there was little chance that she would spill my secrets.

“Look,” I said. “I know that druids have a bit of sex magic, so maybe we have wildly different ideas
about what sex actually is, and how it should be done, and with whom, but I thought maybe I could talk about it, and we could see where it takes us.” I always pretended that the locus was contributing something, even though the most she ever did was give me little looks that I interpreted however I pleased. That wasn’t nothing, strictly speaking, but it was a lot less than I normally got when I talked to people. In this particular case, I was okay with it.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I said. The doe gave no response and kept walking along beside me. “I know it’s not relevant, you know, the whole,” I waved my hand in the direction of Loyalty as gained through understanding and companionship. “But I don’t really have anyone to talk to. No one that I want to talk to. I have lots of people that I could talk to, and at least a few of them that wouldn’t make me feel like shit about it.”

We were outside of Bethel, obviously. I’d taken the bottle to the far side of the Isle of Poran, away from the little town full of diplomats and spies, to a place where we could be truly alone for a few hours. It had actually been a huge logistical problem, since Bethel had reconfigured herself using the bottle’s power and had to not just change all her interior dimensions back to normal, but also find places for all the things that she’d accumulated in the meantime. Solace had been pretty gung ho about the plan once I’d suggested it though, and Amaryllis had thought it was probably preferable to have Bethel pare things down anyway. Bethel had grumbled a little bit, but once it was in full swing, she had started to see it as spring cleaning and been much more on board with it. She had given me a questioning look about moving the bottle, but she hadn’t actually said anything. I was asking for privacy from her, but I didn’t know whether the context was clear. Maybe she just thought I was working through some things, which was, at least, true.

“I keep coming back to three things,” I said. “First, she lied to me. Second, she didn’t listen to me when I said no. And third, it was … good. Physically, I mean.” I bit my lip for a moment. “I had always thought that sex was mostly in the head, rather than the body. That was how it was for me, my experience of it. But my head wasn’t in it, and it was just … She was reading me, I think. She made this comment about how people were these fumbling creatures trying to view each other with our limited senses, and for her, that wouldn’t have really been a problem, because so many of the entads have some sensory component to them. The thought of her scanning my entire body all at once, paying her full attention to how I was moving, what I was doing, augmenting the sensations she was producing with her false flesh, it … I can see how someone would like it, on a psychological level. But after we’d finished, I was just swimming in this sensation, this unpleasantness, like I had been reduced down to a machine made of meat. My uncle liked to tickle me, not in a gross way or anything, but I hated it, because he would always say that I needed to cheer up before he did it, and I just had no control over it, there was this spot on my body that tickled, and no one gave a shit that I told him to stop, not until I bit him. And I still fucking hate that uncle, because I think about being reduced down to this stimulus and response without any control of what happened.”

*Loyalty Increased: Six-Eyed Doe lvl 19!*

I glanced over at the doe. She was looking at me in a way I chose to interpret as sympathetic.

“When I killed Mome Rath, I felt like I was on top of the world,” I said. “And then there was the business with Harold, first at the fake location, then at the real one, but those were at least, if not easy, then something I felt like I had well in hand. I felt competent. But then it was just one thing after another, first the city being terrorized by the creatures Mome Rath brought with him, then the ruling council being dead, then the exclusion zone, and all this garbage with Article 86 … one problem solved, a dozen more created, like some horrible hydra.” I couldn’t remember what the Aerb version of a hydra was, if there was one. Maybe something with dissociative identity disorder? That seemed like a direction I might go.
“It sucks. It just sucks. All I want is phenomenal cosmic powers with no downsides and all my dreams to come true, is that so much to ask?” I laughed, but it was hollow, and I had to remind myself that was okay here, because Bethel wasn’t watching. “I keep asking myself if this was how I DMed, just making everything shittier and shittier, undercutting every triumph with two complications until it’s just this vast, grimdark stew.”

To my surprise, the doe began to use her magic. That wasn’t something that she did often, only a handful of times that I had seen, and usually for pretty minor effects. Of course, the doe was magic, was nearly the incarnation of magic, but when I was walking alongside her, it was possible to forget that. In this case, the magic was on the more extreme end of what I had seen, with plants bursting up around her and flowering instantly, a wild, colorful display of life. Most of the effect was centered around me.

I took a moment to look at the flowers, and then at the doe, and then more, at the bottle around me. My eyes caught on the giant tree in the middle, which had been behind me. It had gone into full bloom, pink and white petals on each of its huge branches, glorious from a distance. As I was looking at it, a wind swept through the bottle, and I caught a delightful fragrance.

“Alright,” I said. “I get it. There’s beauty in this world, it’s not all doom and gloom.” I took a breath and made sure to inhale more of the smell of flowers. “There are things worth protecting. I don’t think I ever disputed that.”

I took a breath and tried to calm myself. That sick feeling had returned a bit while talking to the doe. I could go into my spirit and tamp it down a bit more than I already had, but for a moment I just wanted to experience it, so that I would know what it was that I would be editing away. It had always been strange to me how much the body could be impacted by whatever the brain was doing. Here, the sickness in the stomach felt like it was located at the bottom of the ribs. Maybe I was just unconsciously clenching muscles there.

“So my plan, if you could call it that, was to just go on like nothing happened,” I said. “I would tell Amaryllis at some point, when I had some distance from it, but not the others, because it’s not really any of their business. Keep calm and carry on.” I was still for a moment. “I’m not sure that I can do that. I’m not sure that I should. I was always Bethel’s biggest apologist, when she was scaring people, when she was hurting people, when she was showing us murders or making threats, I was always the one saying, ‘oh, no, you guys don’t understand, she’s just scared and confused, lashing out because that’s easier, because that’s what she knows’.”

I wasn’t going to advocate for Bethel’s destruction, not on the basis of this, but if it ever became necessary, I wasn’t really sure how we would accomplish it. The obvious method was putting up a ward around her. Anti-entad wards were cheap, so long as they targeted one specific entad, so it would just be a matter of having Grak put a ward around her without her knowing about it. That itself would be no mean feat, given that she didn’t need sleep and had a huge sensorium that could grow larger without us knowing, and she was easily capable of hiding her abilities, which she’d done in the past. I was pretty sure that Amaryllis had some kind of plan in place, and had since we’d met Bethel, but I was suddenly quite curious to know the specifics. (And given that Bethel could and did spy on our dreams, I wasn’t sure that even a plan confined to our own skulls was safe from her knowledge. I was thankful that I wasn’t sleeping at the moment, if only for that.)

“I keep trying to see it from her perspective,” I said. Sometimes I went silent when I was with the doe, and thought instead of speaking, letting myself pick back up where it seemed appropriate. “I keep thinking about whether I would have been capable of it, in her shoes. I don’t think I would have. But I come from such a different culture than her, and if I’d been born in different circumstances, I might have turned out differently, still a Juniper, just a different one. A worse one.
Back on Earth, there was this time Tiff and I had been having sex,” I felt myself grow awkward just talking about it, even though I was talking to the deer, “And she said, ‘stop’, and I just backed away from her almost at once, you know, uh, disengaged completely, because I had this paralyzing fear that I’d done something I shouldn’t have, that I hadn’t been reading her right, or that this expression of love had gotten deeply and horribly twisted somehow. That was just sort of how I’d grown up, I guess. Maybe the lessons that they taught on the subject were meant for people who weren’t me, because they were these big giant hammers being swung at us, and I think all I needed was a light tap. Anyway. Turned out that she’d said ‘stop’ because we were on her bed and she had forgotten to move her laptop, which she was worried she was crushing.” It was one of those things that we’d thought would be funny in retrospect, but never actually was. “And I think, if I had heard someone say no twice, or three times, or whatever it was, I would have taken a fucking hint.”

We sat in silence for a bit. I tried to relax, but I was thinking about Bethel, then Maddie, then Raven, then Amaryllis, then Tiff, and finally Arthur, or Uther, or whoever he actually was.

“People are complicated.” I finally said.

The doe snorted in response.

“I don’t really understand why you work through them,” I said to her. “I mean, I understand from an outside perspective that there are druids in D&D and this is one possible version of them, with power channeled through a genius locus, which happens to be moveable thanks to shenanigans, but from the internal perspective, I don’t think that I get it. You’re you. What do the humans give you in return? Wait, that’s probably the wrong question, because it’s not actually transactional, and I’m just a filthy capitalist pig. I guess more … why give them that gift?”

I’m not sure what I expected. If the doe could talk, she never had in my presence, and while that was a rule, and a commonality of loci was that they hated rules, it also felt like it was a spiritual rule, one that was core to her, one that made sense outside the frame of frames, as I was starting to think of it.

The doe just stared at me, chewing grass. Maybe she didn’t even know why she had druids. That was certainly possible. I really wanted to make a bunch of rapid-fire guesses, but that somehow felt like a betrayal of the locus, who was, after all, a creature of mysteries.

“I should tell Amaryllis about the Bethel thing,” I said to the locus. “Sorry, my mind keeps going back to it, and I doubt this is anything that you want to hear. Or maybe it is. I know you had a community around you, and maybe they sometimes had to deal with --” I paused and decided that I couldn’t succinctly finish the thought, not to my satisfaction. I was in need of a big, complex word that covered everything that had happened, a word of nuance and subtlety that could convey a hundred things at once, rather than simplifying it all down, but such a word didn’t exist, and I didn’t want to go through it all. “The choice is between Valencia, Grak, and Amaryllis. Maybe all of them eventually, but only one first. Valencia can keep a secret, but I don’t know whether she would get it, because she spent the majority of her life until we met being violated to her very core, and without a devil’s help I don’t know how much she understands, even if she’s been learning fast. With a devil’s help, I don’t really want to think about what would be going through her mind. And we’re not on the outs, not really, but I’m worried I haven’t been a good friend lately, and there was that whole poisonous thing with Fenn.” I shrugged.

“And between Grak and Amaryllis … Grak would probably understand, maybe, where I was coming from, since he ran away from an arranged marriage, and this is kind of, sort of, maybe a little similar.” I took a breath. “But he’s got his own problems, and I’ve been trying to let him lean on me as much as I can. And I don’t know that he’s that good at comforting people, even if he might understand.”
I took another breath and tried to slow my heart down. “My worry with Amaryllis is … it’s worries, actually, just a big ol’ heap of them. I’m worried she won’t believe me. I’m worried she’ll side with Bethel. I’m worried that she’ll ask questions that I have shitty answers to, or that she’ll make me play it out again. Fuck, she might even see it as the problem it is, but decide that I should just make the best of it because we need Bethel, and fighting her is, if not impossible, then really, really difficult. And, I guess, not something that I want to do. I do still think there’s good in her.”

It was shocking to me how quickly my opinion on Bethel had changed.

“I wish I were angrier,” I said. “I wish it were rage instead of this horrible gross feeling. I wish it had been clear cut. I mean, it was, but I wish … I wish I’d fought back more, that there hadn’t been an element of pleasure, that I found her truly repulsive, that there was no question that -- I don’t know.” I let out a shaky breath. “I’m so worried that Amaryllis won’t believe me. Or that she’ll have a different interpretation.” I stopped and sat down in the grass, then lay back so I was looking up at the neck of the bottle. “Fuck.”

The doe lay down beside me, and rested her head up against my side. I reached over and patted her, softly. The doe’s hair was fine and soft; the texture varied from day to day.

“I could just edit it all away,” I said. “It’s tempting to just become a different sort of person who isn’t bothered by any of it. Or even someone who … I don’t know. If I could do it over again and be more willing, be the kind of person who could have enjoyed it or wanted it and had it be fulfillment instead of violation, maybe. But I’m not that person. I, you know, I weighed what I thought about it and decided against it, and then that decision was just,” I was clenching my fists, “Just stripped away from me. And Bethel is just flatly stronger than me.”

I let out a breath and tried to relax, and the doe nuzzled me, so I resumed patting her. For all that she wasn’t a great conversationalist, I was taking a fair bit of comfort from her, and from being able to talk without being judged. This wasn’t even remotely helping the cause, I was sure of that, but it was helping me to feel better. We lay there in silence, as I tried to keep my thoughts from racing.

The Isle of Poran was bathed in sunlight, which warmed it up quite a bit. The winds had died down too, so that heat wasn’t stripped from our bodies the moment we stepped outside. I’d come to view the Isle as a nice place, just one where you wanted to go out wearing a sweater, ready to retreat back into the safety and comfort of indoors after a walk. With how much Bethel was feeling like she was unsafe to be in, even when she wasn’t physically present, I was incredibly thankful that going outside for long stretches was a little more palatable.

Most of the Isle of Poran was made up of rocks and crags, all of them pretty smooth thanks to some unknown force of erosion. Between the rocks, there were a few fields of short, hardy grasses. And at one end of the isle, pretty far from both the town and Bethel, out of sight of either, there was a beach.

I wasn’t really sure that it was deserving of the name ‘beach’. It didn’t have proper sand, it just had a bunch of small, irregular rocks, each of them maybe half the size of a pea, most of them black or gray, technically gravel or something like that. When you walked on them, it approximated sand, but it definitely wasn’t actually sand, not in my book. More than that, the whole area with those little rocks accounted for maybe two hundred feet of the coastline of our isle, which was small enough that it was barely worth talking about. Still, it was what we had, so it was what we used.

Honestly, I thought a lot of us going to the beach was just Amaryllis wanting to play at being American for a day. She was, naturally, the one who organized things, and as I helped her set up, I saw more and more things that didn’t really belong on Aerb, culminating in a cooler (popped out of Sable) that I was pretty sure was exactly the same one that my parents had owned. Inside were
different pops, wine coolers, and beers, all of them from Earth, and more than that, all familiar brands. For food, we had hot dogs and bags of chips.

“How do you like it?” asked Amaryllis. She was watching me with a slight smile on her face.

“Was this … for me?” I asked.

“I know you don’t want to go home,” said Amaryllis. “But I thought that it might be nice to have some reminders of it, if we’re taking a day off anyway.” She beamed me a smile.

Honestly, as gestures went, I was kind of on the fence about it, but Amaryllis seemed very pleased with herself, and seeing her happy made me happy, so I smiled back at her, and tried to get into the mood.

“You’ll have to let me know the thousand little details that I got wrong,” said Amaryllis. “I was really going for authenticity.”

“No, you nailed it,” I said. I pointed at the cooler. “Though drinking age in the United States is 21.”

“Well, that’s insane,” said Amaryllis. She was still grinning at me, and seemed to be in an uncharacteristically chipper mood, maybe because we were home. “I’m having a wine cooler.”

(A day at the beach was, obviously, a security issue, especially given that we had a few fresh targets painted on our backs. Grak had warded the entire stretch of beach, including what he’d called a shimmer ward to obscure us from sight, which was thankfully one way. No one was wearing armor, but I wore the vambrace that would let me slip into ready mode in short order, and we did bring a lot of our entads, which were close at hand, just in case.)

I think I finally started to relax when people began going in the water. Grak went first, in swim trunks, and made a ward against water that made it look like a hole had been taken out of the sea. I didn’t know how much experience Grak had with water, given that he’d lived underground for so much of his life, but he seemed to take to it, and changed the shape of his wards to make a little bit of a pool set into the sea, one without waves. When he was finished, Solace came to join him, fully nude, and they sat in two feet of water together, looking at rocks.

“Sorry I couldn’t get Solace to wear something appropriate,” said Amaryllis. She’d shown up beside me while I wasn’t paying attention. “Everyone else was amenable.”

I looked around and realized that she was right. It hadn’t even occurred to me that Aerb’s lax nudity taboos probably meant that swimsuits weren’t the norm. All the girls were wearing one kind or another: Pallida was wearing a black bikini that showed off her pink skin; Raven had acquired or requested something much more modest and single piece, which was still as much skin as she’d ever shown; Valencia was wearing a red bikini with thorns embroidered on the butt, which I thought must have been a custom job.

“How do you like it?” asked Amaryllis.

I glanced over at her. She was wearing a skirt and some sandals, with a slightly oversized t-shirt that was revealing a pink strap. That had to have been deliberate, given that our unlimited access to clothing meant you didn’t have oversized clothes unless that was what you felt like.

“You’re very chipper today,” I said, rather than answering her question.

She gave a happy little shrug. “Some good news on a few fronts,” she said. “I promised I wouldn’t talk shop for this outing though. And we’re home, after nearly a month away, back on our own land.
“Juniper, I know the legal code backward and forward, it’s not a crime to be happy.”

“No, you’re right,” I said. “You’re just usually more reserved.”

“I’m not reserved, I’m focused,” said Amaryllis. “And right now I’m focused on having a good time, because that’s what you said you wanted to do today. There’s no point sitting around on the beach being dour. If we wanted to be depressed about our circumstances and the myriad threats we’re facing, as well as the unpleasant personal aspects of the current trials, we could do that at home, and we could be productive while doing it.”

It took me a moment to realize that when she said ‘unpleasant personal aspects’ she meant Anglecynn and her family, rather than anything that was going on with me.

I let out a breath. “Okay,” I said. “If you’re making a focused effort on being happy, I guess I will too.” I looked at everyone in their swimsuits again. “Just to be clear, is this meant to be enticing to me?”

Amaryllis looked me up and down. “Is it enticing?” she asked. “This is standard fare in America, so far as I know. Are you telling me that this is more sexually enticing than just seeing someone naked? Because that was the other option.”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said. “I don’t think that you would understand. There’s -- it’s an element of dress-up, of presentation. I was just asking about intent.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. “Well, no. I didn’t think -- is it bad?”

“Bad in what sense?” I asked. I looked away from the others and over to her. She was frowning slightly. “I wouldn’t say that it was bad in any sense, I guess, I was just … overthinking things. Misjudging you.”

“There’s some prurient interest,” said Amaryllis, nodding slightly. She was looking intently at the scene in front of us. “You know, I got that from when we went to the bathhouse. I expected it here, at least a little, I just … thought this would fit in better with your mores, not worse.”

“It’s not worse,” I said. “It’s just, when we went to the bathhouse in Barren Jewel, I found that pretty shocking, but I’ve tried my best to understand that it’s Aerb and that’s just how things are done for the most part. But here, it’s … it’s unnatural. And it is for me. It just makes me feel weird.”

“ Weird good or weird bad?” she asked, looking me up and down.

“A complex weirdness,” I said. I shook my head. “Sorry, if we’re trying to maximize happiness I don’t think we should be standing around talking about this. Let’s just go for a swim and I’ll forget all about it. I’m in my own head, that’s part of my problem.”

“Okay, a swim, good,” said Amaryllis, returning to her smiling state. She looked down at her outfit, the t-shirt and skirt, and her smile faltered. “Well, whatever.”

She took off her shirt first, then slipped out of her skirt, and finally stepped out of her flip-flops, leaving her in a pink bikini. My breath caught in my throat. She was utterly perfect, from head to toe, with an unmatched grace and power, muscular and feminine, flawless skin, full lips --

The thing about Amaryllis was that I was more or less used to her. You know how you can sit in a room with a weird smell and after about half an hour you don’t notice it anymore? Or how eventually words lose their meanings if they’re said enough, instead becoming this little token linked to a bigger concept? It was like that with Amaryllis. She was beautiful, always, perfectly suited to my
ideals, and yet it hadn’t taken too long for my brain to start tamping down on those thoughts. Maybe it was something to do with how the brain was constantly rewiring itself, or maybe it was just that neurotransmitting chemicals were in short enough supply that you couldn’t be in a constant state of shock at the beauty of someone you were rarely far from, but it was relatively easy to forget that Amaryllis was the most attractive person I had ever met.

There were always little moments though, times when something would slip past the giant filter that my brain had been maintaining. My guess was that the brain was just a big neural network, and it had little false positives or false negatives sometimes, so whatever internal mechanism was dulling the impact of her failed, and that led to those flashes. Sometimes it was just that she was wearing something different, or had her hair a different way, or put on makeup, or the light would catch her in a certain way, or she would briefly be in a different position I hadn’t seen her in before, or … a million things really. I always viewed it as the filter getting caught and having to update itself with new data, briefly reconfiguring and giving me a glimpse of what the brain had been trying to hide. It had nonetheless become easier for me to deal with over time, because I could calm myself down quickly by thinking, ‘It’s just Amaryllis, you know this feeling’.

This was something different, not a temporary chink in the filter but a great and gaping hole, a whole class of unconsidered stimuli. I had tried my best to refrain from fantasizing about Amaryllis, both because of how unclear things were between us, because I knew that even if she felt some romantic feelings toward me, it wasn’t sexual, and because I didn’t want to feel like a creep, not when she was my closest friend. For her part, Amaryllis had begun taking pains to not make things worse for me starting as soon as Barren Jewel, a week into us becoming companions. She would change behind curtains or when I wasn’t around, taking pains to keep concealed (to within her understanding of Midwestern customs of concealment). She wasn’t a nun about it, and she wasn’t actively dressing to be unattractive, but it was something she was pretty clearly aware of, and especially after I’d gotten together with Fenn, the physical attraction was something that Amaryllis had silently tried to make easier for me.

The result of that was that I wasn’t prepared. I had no built up tolerance, not for this.

So I stared at her, slack-jawed, eyes moving up and down her body. My heart was hammering in my chest and I could feel a heat rising in me.

(And, because I had multi-threading, I was thinking other thoughts as well, disconnected from the sheer grace and perfection in front of me, but parallel all the same, thoughts about whether Amaryllis had really not known it would have this effect on me, whether the Dungeon Master’s thumb was on the scale again, whether this was an invitation of some sort, deeply coded, or whether I was just making things up in my mind, thoughts about how I had been an idiot for not actually seeing her as she was, then more thoughts about the filters that my brain had been working on so that it could continue to function around her.)

And it took a moment for these feelings and thoughts to have a head on collision with the gutsick feeling I’d had after being with Bethel. They met like a warm front and a cold front colliding into each other, and the result was a rolling storm, unpleasant and fast, and in the aftermath, guilt and shame tainting everything that I had been feeling. I felt like a predator and a hypocrite, unworthy, dirty, unloyal.

“Sorry,” I said, once I had regained some composure.

Amaryllis was watching me. “I can change into something more modest.”

“No,” I replied. “I’m just … awestruck.” That wasn’t the whole of it.
“Well,” said Amaryllis, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear in a way that was heart-stoppingly attractive. “I have activities planned. We’ll go swimming first.” She looked down at herself, then back up at me. “I *can* change. I don’t mind if you … find me attractive, but if this is going to be --”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, trying my best to mean it. She’d been pretty, she would always be pretty, I wasn’t going to be incapacitated by it, and I would deal with it the same as I’d dealt with it a hundred times before. I had seen her naked, a few times, I had seen her give birth for fuck’s sake, I could tamp down on what I was feeling just fine.

Amaryllis went down into the water, and I stripped off my t-shirt and followed her, trying to feel good, trying not to let the bad thoughts in.
If it were anyone else, I would have felt pretty safe in assuming that Amaryllis was flirting with me.

She was touching me more than normal, being closer, more familiar. She had said that she was trying her hardest to have our day on the beach be a happy day, and I didn’t know if she was doing all that consciously, in an effort to please me, or consciously, in an effort to please herself, or whether it was just something that she was doing because that’s how she thought she would act if she were more carefree. She wasn’t acting, not really, but she was making an effort, trying to be chipper, and it wasn’t poisoning the well in the way that it might have.

We played a game of chicken fight in the water, with Amaryllis on my shoulders and Valencia on Pallida’s. If you’ve never played, the goal of the game is to separate or knock over the other team, which is done with a combination of shoving and wrestling by the attackers, while the vehicles below attempt to maneuver and hold their attackers steady. Amaryllis had apparently found the game when doing her research, and thought that it would be fun, so after we’d done some swimming, and she explained the rules, we were ready to go.

So she climbed up onto my shoulders, and I held onto her legs, and I kept second guessing myself about whether this meant something or not. My brain was still struggling with seeing Amaryllis in a bikini, and added on top of that, she was on top of me. Carrying someone on my shoulders wasn’t exactly the most intimate of positions, but Amaryllis had deliberately put us on a team, and she wasn’t naive, she had to have known that such a thing, back in Kansas, would have been at least a little flirty.

Maybe I was worried about it, or overthinking it, because multi-threading allowed me to follow these trains of thought while some other part of my consciousness was fully invested in maneuvering Amaryllis. Or maybe it was because of all the crap with Bethel, and how I was feeling about it, the way that any hint of sex was drawing my mind in that direction so that I could relive and reanalyze it all over again.

After the third round of chicken fights, we had to stop, mostly because it was getting far too aggressive, more like a sparring match than a game. We hadn’t made a rule that Valencia couldn’t use her powers, but I was pretty sure that was what decided the third match, because she caught Amaryllis by the wrist and twisted so hard that Amaryllis yelped, which led to escalation with still magic, which likewise had been held back by unwritten rules. From there, we went on to other games.

When Amaryllis had said that she had activities planned, she hadn’t been kidding. She had pool noodles, super soakers, beachballs, snorkels, and toys, along with a few games for the beach, including corn hole. It was, frankly, more than I thought anyone would ever take to a day at the lake back in Kansas, but other than that, it was surprisingly authentic.

“I used the backpack to look through a Walmart catalog,” said Amaryllis. We had gone for another swim, which ended in a race, and left both of us sitting on the beach, catching our breath.

“I … wasn’t even aware they had a physical catalog,” I said.

“Well, not as such,” replied Amaryllis. “But they do have binders filled with PLUs and brief descriptions, and that was enough for me to comb through and find what I wanted. Plus I was able to get a lot of adverts that depicted what a typical summer was like, and that let me know what to bring. How’d I do?”
“Not all this stuff is from Walmart,” I said.

“Well, Walmart, Target. I looked at a few places,” Amaryllis replied. “All as close to your hometown as I could get. The brats are from Ash Creek Meats. I got a phonebook and looked up the businesses, which was enough to let me specify something that close.”

“Wow,” I said. “Stalker.”

Amaryllis smiled and gave me a playful swat. “I think that I’ve done a lot of very general research on America, but little that was specific to the American Midwest, and almost none that was hyperlocal, at least not in terms of microculture, which was a real oversight on my part. I got to kill two birds with one stone, which was nice.”

“Yeah,” I said. I looked out at the others playing in the sea.

“Well,” said Amaryllis. She was looking out at the water, same as me. “Either you’re not having fun because there were certain aspects I couldn’t change, like the grains of sand being too large, or the water being seawater instead of fresh water, or there’s something that’s been weighing you down. Usually you’re good at shrugging off the big picture things, no offense, and if there’s something personal, I don’t think I know what it is.”

“Eh,” I said. I didn’t want to talk about it, but if I was going to, now was the perfect opportunity. We were outside of Bethel, away from her constant surveillance. The longer I waited, the worse it would be, and it was pretty typical of how I worked that I would put hard things off for another time, but I had really been trying to be better about it. “Bethel kind of … got handsy with me.”

I hadn’t meant to use a euphemism, and I didn’t realize where I had picked up the expression from, not until it was out of my mouth. It was an expression that Fenn had struck through in her letter to me.

“I see,” said Amaryllis. “How so?” She had always been good at hiding how she felt, when she really wanted to. If I was just listening to the tone of her voice, I would have thought we were having a pleasant conversation about inconsequentialities.

“She propositioned me,” I said. “Back in Li’o, around when I first started classes. She said she wanted to help me with some sexual frustration, and I declined.” I was being overly clinical, I could feel that, but it made it easier to talk about. “Then she came back with that entad of Oberlin’s, and it gave her a physical body, which -- I’d said part of the reason I wasn’t interested was that she wouldn’t really be able to feel anything, or get anything from it, so I guess she thought -- well, anyway, she propositioned me a second time, and I said no, and she kissed me anyway, and I tried to push her off, but,” I really didn’t like talking about it, “I don’t know. I didn’t escalate to violence. She’s stronger than me, and I don’t think she would have hurt me, not in a permanent way,” or maybe I’m just saying that, “but I also thought she would have taken the second or third no as my answer, so.”

So, we had sex, and I pretended that I was fine with it, and I’ve been stepping on eggshells and edited my spirit, and I’ve been feeling like shit about it, and that’s why I’m not as happy as I should be about you trying to make this themed beach outing a success, and it’s why seeing you in a bikini is making me a little bit anxious instead of just horny, not that you would want that, unless for some reason you do.

“Alright,” said Amaryllis. She still sounded completely normal, but I heard a sound and looked down to see her hands, which were gripping the sand. Her knuckles were white.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just, I don’t want this to change things between us, I know that’s dumb to say, but I really care about you, and if you think less of me, then I --”

“When was this?” asked Amaryllis.

“Three days ago,” I replied.

“How do you feel about her now?” asked Amaryllis.

“Afraid, mostly,” I said. “Hurt, confused, sick. Ashamed. I’m worried she’ll … I don’t know.”

Amaryllis was staring out at the sea. “When I’m finished with her there won’t be a piece bigger than a splinter.”

“Thank you,” I said. It was strange how much I found warmth in the cold violence. “I was worried that you would think …” I didn’t have a way to finish the sentence. None of my worst thoughts had seemed all that realistic, even as I was thinking them. “We can’t actually destroy her.”

“Like hell we can’t,” said Amaryllis. Her hands were still clutching the small rocks. “I’ve had plans in place for killing her since we first met her.”

“I,” the word caught, “I don’t think she understands. I don’t think that she even knows how I feel about it.” I hadn’t really been prepared for this. I felt relieved that she didn’t blame me, but --

“And if you tell her, so what?” asked Amaryllis. “You think that’s going to solve anything? You think that she’s going to agree, to understand that she hurt you? You think that this is going to help her grow and change as a person? Even if it did, Christ Juniper, she broke trust, and you’ve been miserable for the last three days, I can only imagine, are you -- do you think that you can keep living inside of her, knowing how much she can see, knowing that she might break trust again just because she likes to pull our strings?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Shit,” said Amaryllis. She pulled back slightly and allowed her furrowed brow to relax. “I’m doing this wrong, I’m not -- Juniper, I love you and care about you, and I want to support you in whatever way helps you get through this. Let’s get that clear, before anything else. I’m in your corner.”

“I know,” I said, but it still felt good to hear.

“Good,” she replied. “I don’t want you to forget that.” She let out a breath. “You feel responsible, I understand that. But it’s on her, not on you.”

“It’s a little bit on me,” I said. I could see the places where I was soft when I should have been firm, where I might have led her on, the way my no had been a weak one, the fact that there were pros and cons, not just cons. I should have been stronger.

“You said no,” replied Amaryllis. “She didn’t listen. So far as I’m concerned, that’s where the conversation on culpability ends.”

“That’s a hard line,” I said.

Amaryllis nodded. “I don’t think that we should be talking about criminal justice right now. How are you doing?”

“I’ve always hated that question,” I replied. “I got asked that a lot, after Arthur died.”
“Sorry,” said Amaryllis. “I just … I care about you. You’re my best friend. I thought that today was going to lift your spirits, and I didn’t realize that it wasn’t just malaise.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry,” said Amaryllis. “It’s not your fault.” She paused. “Do you also hate when people ask you if there’s anything they can do?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “Only because there’s so rarely anything that they can do.”

“You’ll let me know?” asked Amaryllis.

“Can you … just lay with me for a bit?” I asked. I felt embarrassed asking. “I don’t want to talk, I just want to feel, I don’t know, like someone is there for me.”

“Okay,” nodded Amaryllis, answering with no hesitation.

I laid down on the hard sand, moving slowly, and realized only after that this was how it had happened with Bethel. I’d been on my back, pushed there by her, and the memory of it came flooding back. But then Amaryllis lay next to me, and I was able to push the feeling away. Her skin was still slightly wet from the sea, as was mine, and I tasted salt in the air. Amaryllis felt soft and warm, and I did my best to relax into her being there.

“Like this?” asked Amaryllis. She wrapped her arm around me, so that she was holding me close, and I had my arm around her.

“Yeah,” I said.

The brain was a connection machine, linking memories, sensations, and thoughts together, and when something big and important happened, or something that it thought was big and important, it made a bunch of links, strong ones, all at once. It was something that I was struggling with, the way that certain small things brought vivid memories back to me, little incidental things, minor notes that had been threaded into this big tangled mass of what being with Bethel had been like. When Amaryllis laid with me, there was some of that, a sympathy between events that shouldn’t have existed, not if the brain had been doing its proper job, but I had some experience with coping by this point, with trying to teach my brain that no, not everything was about Arthur, not everything was about Fenn, and now, here, not everything was about a single, unwanted night with Bethel.

So after a minute or two, I was able to relax a little more than I had been, and I let the warmth of the sun dry me out while the warmth of Amaryllis soothed me.

“We’re going to have to tell the others,” said Amaryllis, after a long time had passed.

I let out a long, slow breath. “Yeah.”

“I mean, they can see us laying together on the beach,” said Amaryllis. “That alone will probably raise some questions.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s … embarrassing.”

“Well,” she said. “If any of them give you less than their full, unadulterated support, I’ll deal with them, okay?” Her head was resting against my chest, and I could feel the movement of her mouth when she spoke.

“I was most worried about you,” I said. “I thought … Bethel is important. Without her, without the
time chamber ... I never thought we should destroy her, but I did think things might get dicey, and it might jeopardize, you know.” *Your dreams. The Republic of Miunun. The future that Cypress had built.*

“Those are problems we’ll have to deal with,” said Amaryllis. “They’re not inconsequential.” She was still for a little bit, trying to find words. “Sometimes what’s dictated by strict utility and what you want in your heart of hearts aren’t always in alignment. It’s a relief when you don’t have to make that trade-off. I want to keep you as far away from Bethel as possible, to keep you safe, to help you work things out, and I’m very thankful that we live in a world where that’s possible, where you wouldn’t be forced to --” she stopped, as her brain caught up with her mouth.

“Endure it?” I asked.

“That was what I was going to say, yes,” said Amaryllis. “But you don’t. There’s nothing that requires it, nothing that even suggests to me that it would be a good idea.”

“I don’t want to kill her,” I said.

“I know,” replied Amaryllis. “Is it okay if I get up?”

“Sure,” I replied. When she moved, it felt cold where she had been.

“Are you ready to talk about next steps?” asked Amaryllis. “Because I know you don’t want to, but if we’re taking action, which I think we are, now is the best time. The tuung are cleared out and in their secondary school, so she can’t use them as leverage. There aren’t people inside her to hurt. Even the bottle is outside her now.”

“I need to tell the others,” I said with a sigh. “I can’t just unilaterally decide.”

“You can,” said Amaryllis. “That’s in your power now.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I would rather get some perspective.” I took a breath and tried to clear my mind, then sat up. The others were still in the water, but I could tell from the way they kept looking over that they were wondering what was going on. I really didn’t want to do this, and I could feel myself shirking back from it.

Amaryllis stood up and waved them over.

“What’s up?” asked Pallida. She had come bounding through the water, splashing noisily to reach us. “I kept asking Valencia, but she refused to tell us.”

“Because I didn’t know,” said Valencia, still making her way forward. She sounded irritated. “I promised that I wouldn’t look at Juniper with a devil’s insight.” She was looking me over though, as though she might still be able to figure it out with her unenhanced mind.

“Is something wrong?” asked Raven. “Should we get battle-ready?”

“Juniper, do you want me to say?” asked Amaryllis. “If you’re uncomfortable --”

“I’d like that, yeah,” I said. It felt like a weight was lifted off my chest. Amaryllis would find the words, and all I would have to do was sit there.

Grak and Solace were the last to arrive, with him carrying her on his shoulders, and he set her down gently on the sand. Rather than standing next to him, she went to go look at the bottle while the rest of us gathered, close enough to hear, but not really a part of the conversation.
“Alright,” said Amaryllis. “Three days ago, Bethel --” she glanced at me, “Forced sex on Juniper. He’s been having some trouble dealing with it, and so far as I’m concerned, she’s crossed a line that demands an immediate and overwhelming response on our part.”

“You’re talking about a war against the house,” said Raven. If she had any personal reaction, she was choosing to focus on the practical instead. Most likely that was a habit she’d learned with Uther.

“Can she hear us right now?” asked Pallida.

“The question is probabilistic,” said Grak. He was looking at me and giving a concerned frown. His words came out like it was a distraction he was trying to deal with, rather than the meat of it. “I ran a test when we got here and found no entad effects save those that were expected. That does not mean she couldn’t have means I wouldn’t be able to detect. Pinhole portals could be anywhere. Long distance viewing would also be undetectable, though the shimmer ward would stop her unless the apparatus were within the ward. There are also more exotic detection methods that might let her discern wards. She would have to have captured an entad for it, then kept it secret from us. How likely is that?”

“Unknown,” said Amaryllis. “She’s definitely hidden capabilities from us before. She had a lot of entads in her during the evacuation, and she might have taken any of them, though I don’t believe we had any entad thefts reported.”

“So she could be listening in on this conversation,” said Pallida. “She could essentially be standing in the room with us.” She looked up at the sky. “I’m not a part of this!” she called. “I agreed to nothing!”

“If you’re not going to be with us, stand to the side,” said Amaryllis.

“I want to hear what you’re planning,” said Pallida. “I’m just saying that I’m not making commitments, not when we’re talking about the house that’s killed a few hundred people for fun and once told me that I had a nice tasting pancreas. She’s monstrously strong.” She gave me a belated guilty look. “Sorry.”

“We’re not planning on going head to head,” said Amaryllis. “Grak, you can ward against her?”

“It’s complicated,” said Grak. “I have said as much in the past.”

“She’ll see any ward against her as an act of aggression,” said Valencia. “She escalates, by her nature.” I’d seen a reaction from her to the news of what happened, and uneasiness, but Valencia had routinely had her body taken over by infernals for the vast majority of her life, and I didn’t know how much sympathy she would have for me.

“Can I request a devil?” asked Amaryllis.

“It’s going to be hard for me, knowing what I know, to doublethink around Juniper,” said Valencia. “I would rather not have to try. It was already hard not to pick up anything, before. I knew that something was wrong, really wrong, I just …” she squeezed her fists. “I didn’t want to betray trust.”

Amaryllis bit her lip. “I understand,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Maybe you could, I don’t know. Hit me with the full blast, just this once. No therapy though, not yet. Understanding, not alteration.”

Valencia’s eyes widened slightly, then she gave me a quick little nod. There was no visible change in her expression or demeanor when she ate the devil, not that I thought there would be, not unless she
“Okay,” said Valencia, letting out a breath. “Juniper, I could get a little bit more if we talked privately about what, exactly, happened, because I can’t fully reconstruct the circumstances just from what’s been said and from your body language alone, especially because -- I’m sorry, I have to tell the others.”

“I made some minor alterations to my spirit,” I said, before Valencia could. “Mostly so that I wouldn’t have such a strong reaction around Bethel, so she would keep thinking that … that it wasn’t as bad as I found it to be.”

“Juniper,” said Amaryllis, communicating through tone alone that she wished that I had been more forthright, that I had leaned on her more right from the start, that she felt betrayed by it, and saddened.

“He just toned things down,” said Valencia. “He didn’t remove any feelings. I doubt that he would have told you what had happened if he had done a full alteration. Most likely he wouldn’t have said anything if he hadn’t done any alteration at all.”

“I was worried about her reaction,” I said. “Valencia, we can talk now?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I think that would be best for everyone. Mary, you can talk with the others about next steps? A plan for how we would remove her as a threat, if we decide it’s come to that?”

Amaryllis gave a nod, and Valencia walked over to me, slipping her arm into mine and then guiding me across the beach with her, away from the others.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I said. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I know,” said Valencia. “But if you want my help in resolving this in the way that’s best for you, I need to know more. I can operate on body language and implication, but it makes everything more difficult. I understand that you don’t completely trust me, and that I haven’t done enough to regain your full faith, but if I talk to Amaryllis about what you said, I have to filter through too many people. I don’t want room for error, and I know you don’t want that either.”

I was fully aware that she was using a devil to argue against me, and that applied even if she was attempting to ignore the full breadth of what her enhanced social abilities were telling her to say. I imagined that it was like having a solver open while you were playing Scrabble, one telling you all the best words you could make. Even if you resolved to ignore it, it would still show you things that couldn’t be unseen, lines of play you couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t have chosen on your own.

I tried not to care.

I explained everything, reliving it again. It took a surprising amount of time, because I had to go back and explain everything leading up to it, all the minor consent violations that had preceded it, my complicated feelings toward Bethel, the ways I imagined us to be aligned and misaligned. Valencia was patient and asked simple questions with easy answers, having me clarify things for her where it was necessary. She had a pleasant demeanor, understanding and without any judgment.

“I’m pretty sure I’m overreacting,” I said. “She wasn’t … I’m pretty sure that for her, it wasn’t actually, you know.”

“Rape,” said Valencia.

“Yeah,” I said, letting out a breath. “I’m not even sure that’s what I would call it.” I hadn’t, thus far.
I’d kept the word out of my own head.

“You would call it that, if it were someone else,” said Valencia. “The word has baggage that makes it harder for you to deal with it, not easier, so we can refrain from that word if you’d like. It’s my belief that applying a particular word isn’t all that helpful, because we’re not trying to place this incident in a class of other incidents, we’re trying to deal with it in isolation. The semantic arguments that I know you’re tempted to make aren’t actually important or helpful. But if you were looking at a situation that had happened to someone else, especially a woman, you would call it rape. I think we need to be clear on that, just so that you won’t be in such a mindset of denial.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t like that little bit she’d thrown in there, about how I would have looked on the situation differently if the genders were flipped, but she was probably right that this was how I saw the world, even if that was just baked-in Midwestern values, not what I would say if I had a moment of deliberation. “Was that enough?”

“Yes,” said Valencia. “More than enough. It was easier to talk about it the second time, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” I said. “Was that … aversion therapy?”

“I don’t know the term,” said Valencia. “But generally it helps people to talk about things in a safe, secure environment with someone who loves them and who won’t judge them in any way. I hope you don’t see that as manipulation.”

“No,” I said. “I think it was helpful.” If the brain was a bundle of connections, then thinking about what happened could either build those connections up or tear them down. Maybe I was a bit muddled on what therapy was and wasn’t, but what I’d really been fearing was that Valencia would say the perfect words to manipulate me into a different state without me knowing it. Maybe it was therapeutic to talk to her, to hear her soft, gentle, understanding voice, but if that was therapy, then I couldn’t fault her for it.

“When I explain things to the others, it will only be about Bethel, not about you,” said Valencia. “But I might say some things that won’t make it easier for you. Would you prefer to stay here while I talk to them?”

“No,” I said. That was barely even a question. “I think I’m doing well.”

“More denial,” said Valencia with a sad sigh. “But I would accept that you’re doing better than you were a few hours ago.”

We walked back to rejoin the others, and once again, Valencia slipped her arm into mine as we walked. I found it far more comforting than I thought I would, but if it was manipulation, or a calculated action with infernal help, I found that I didn’t care too much. Valencia was there for me too. There wasn’t even a whiff of comparison from her, about how she had been literally possessed for most of her life, deprived of any autonomy for even the smallest thing.

“We’ve been talking,” said Amaryllis. She was looking me over, but not asking questions. “Grak thinks that he can accomplish the ward, but there are risks involved in trapping her, and it’s more complicated than it would seem.”

“A ward against a single entad is easy,” said Grak. “But she’s not just a single entad. She takes on the signatures of the entads that she ingests or uses. I would need to ward against all entads, but I do not have all signatures. She may also be holding entads in reserve. Further, size is an issue. And she is a warder.”
“It’s a bad idea anyway,” said Valencia. “I only said that you should think about it so that you would have something to discuss that wouldn’t lead to a conflict.”

“A conflict?” asked Amaryllis with a frown.

“There are differing views on the personal matter which might have led down a bad path,” said Valencia. “If we’re going to have to have that discussion, then I want myself and Juniper to be a part of it, but I don’t think that we want that discussion.”

“What discussion?” I asked. Even the veiled way she was talking was leaving me on edge.

“I think I get what she’s talking about,” said Pallida. “I’m thirty thousand years old, I’ve got my own opinions on things, but I’m fine deferring to the morals and ideas of the moment. And frankly, the house scares the shit out of me anyway.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Hey, look, I’ve got sympathy,” said Pallida. “But --”

“You making your case isn’t going to have good results,” said Valencia.

“Fine,” said Pallida. She shrugged. “Not really a hill that I would want to die on anyway, just had some personal experiences, that was all.”

Pallida had been alive for roughly thirty thousand years, across thousands of lifetimes. She had pretty clearly seen and done some shit, in all kinds of different cultures, among all kinds of species. What, exactly, she thought on the matter of what had happened between Bethel and myself was left up to my imagination, but we continued on before I could imagine the worst.

“So if you don’t suggest that we trap her, or kill her, what do you suggest?” asked Amaryllis.

“We talk to her,” said Valencia. “We engineer a situation in which someone, preferably not Juniper, can communicate clearly and fully with her, to explain to her what she’s done, and to get her to change. It needs to be done in such a way that she can’t simply lash out, but I also think that it needs to be approached in such a way that she doesn’t feel ambushed, conspired against, threatened, or attacked.”

“And how do you suggest that happens?” I asked. “How am I going to go up to her and tell her that she did something wrong in a way that doesn’t make her flip out?”

“Let me handle it,” said Valencia.

“Val, she could kill you,” I said. “And we know that you’re not as good against her, she’s not mortal, and she only shows what she wants to show.”

“I’m aware,” said Valencia. “But so far as I can see, I’m the best candidate. She can’t heal me if she hurts me, and I won’t wind up in the hells.”

“Is that a realistic possibility for someone else?” asked Raven.

“Yes,” said Valencia. Her answer was simple and to the point. “Again, it’s vitally important that we manage how we approach this, unless you really do plan to kill her outright.”

“I don’t,” I said, before anyone else could say anything.

“And I don’t think that it’s good or fair for Juniper to be in a position where he has to defend his
assaulter, so that will be the last word on that,” said Valencia. “He’s emotionally compromised right
now, but even if he weren’t, that would be what he would decide on. Trust me on that.”

“Fine,” said Amaryllis, crossing her arms. “Then what’s the plan you would pick, if it were entirely
up to you?”

“I would approach her alone,” said Valencia. “I would explain how things had happened, from
Juniper’s perspective, and in such a way that she would be most likely to understand the
implications, with a goal of getting her to acknowledge wrongdoing and culpability, both of which
are probably sticking points at the moment.”

“And then what?” asked Amaryllis. She still had her arms folded.

“Juniper and Bethel need to be separated,” said Valencia. “I don’t think there’s any way around that.
I’m fairly confident that if she doesn’t kill me, I’ll be able to convince her to relocate. From there, we
can keep a line of communication open through a number of means, the easiest being Finch’s half of
the sending slate.”

“You think that she’ll handle being put into exile?” asked Amaryllis.

“She will if I frame it right,” said Valencia. “It’s going to be complicated, but I think I’m the only one
who would be capable of doing it.” She was firm and resolute, undercut only slightly by the fact that
she was a short girl in a red bikini.

“You shouldn’t have to risk your life for me,” I replied. “I should be the one to handle it.”

“I don’t have to risk my life for you,” said Valencia. “I choose to risk my life because it’s my life to
do with as I please. If it could be me or someone else, I would still volunteer. That there’s no other
option only simplifies things.”

“I’m worried about you,” said Grak.

“Worry won’t help,” said Amaryllis. “We’re going to erect a ward against Bethel, as firm and secure
as we can, and then be ready to teleport out of here at the first sign of things going south.”
Hollow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Valencia walked across the Isle of Poran in her red bikini, holding a devil in her maw, thinking through the conversation ahead and all the twists and turns it might take. The first step had been to convince everyone that she was fit to go, which had gone off without any real problems, and only very minor omissions and lies to get there. If they had known how high Valencia thought the risks were, they might have tried to stop her from going. It was, admittedly, unfair to prejudice the group’s decision with fabrications and by concealing the truth, but she had a good enough read on the assembled party that she thought they would probably have sided with her anyway, it would just have taken more time to get to that same point. Spending that time would have been worse for everyone involved, especially Juniper.

Juniper had warned Valencia, early on, that having someone like her on the team would mean that various problems would crop up to stop her most powerful abilities from functioning. On the physical side, that meant magics and techniques that could no-sell physical combat ability, or exotic ways of fighting that would make her demonic aptitude less worthwhile, or methods that would stop a non-anima with frightening efficiency. On the social side, that meant people who had extensively trained with the Elon Gar, entads that could conceal thoughts and emotions, or species whose physiology and thought patterns were rare enough or opaque enough that a devil would still have trouble. Over the course of their time together, they’d run into each of those problems, one by one. Bethel seemed like she would be the hardest.

Bethel was unique. She wasn’t just a sapient entad, she was a meta-entad, one who could be influenced by the intelligence and pseudo-intelligence of the entads she consumed or borrowed. Bethel prior to her marriage with Ropey was different from Bethel after the marriage, and during the ‘borrowings’ era, she had been pulling from various entads at various times, some of them with small intelligences of their own, picking entads up for brief commingling and then putting them down again. Valencia knew plenty about that, how a different perspective could suffuse your own, how augments could change the core without it seeming like that was what had happened.

Beyond that, Bethel wasn’t mortal. Nothing like her had ever reached the hells. No devil had worked to torture a Bethel, and the closest analogs weren’t all that close. There were species on Aerb that merged and split in various ways, and certainly there were unique biologies and values that mimicked something similar to Bethel, but nothing that was all of her, all at once. There were demons and devils that had dealt with sapient entads while possessing a mortal, but that was of very limited value given that infernals weren’t interested in them as a general rule, and reliably finding an infernal with that experience was impossible (or rather, very very difficult when access to anything like an infernal directory resided only in the memories of the infernals she captured).

Even if there hadn’t been basic differences like that, Bethel would give away only what she chose to. She assumed human form for reasons of her own, some of which appeared to be practical, e.g. communicating effectively with the mortals inside her, and some which appeared to be affectations, e.g. appearing with a body because she wanted a body. The latter was confusing to Valencia and it undoubtedly represented some unknown aspect of Bethel’s psychology, which was troublesome given that it would bring a greater context to the picture. The best guess Valencia had was that Bethel did want to be a house, but also desired to take part in the act of living within herself, in a way that seemed vaguely incestuous. It was only a guess though.
If she hadn’t had a devil in her, Valencia might have swallowed before crossing the threshold into Bethel’s vision, or steeled herself for what was to come, or done any of a number of things that regular people did when they were about to do something irrevocable and important. Instead, she just passed through the barrier like it was nothing, and then kept going through the other barriers after that without so much giving a sign that she knew they were there. At this point Bethel could kill with lightning, and at that point she could kill with cannonfire, and here she could slice through brain with ease. Eventually Valencia was in through the front doorway.

“Bethel?” asked Valencia.

“Yes?” asked Bethel, appearing right in front of Valencia. “Ah, my little one has an infernal,” she said, when Valencia didn’t flinch back.

“I do,” said Valencia with a nod. Better to get that out of the way now, since the lie wouldn’t be believed later on.

“Any special occasion?” asked Bethel, arching an eyebrow. She was in her human form, the one she’d taken to lately, with proper proportions, though it was the illusion rather than the false body. The illusion was always off in certain ways that others found imperceptible, but which were clear enough to Valencia. Most of it was just peculiarities from Bethel, small little details that were there because she liked them, rather than because she expected anyone to notice. The folds of the fabric in her dress were all decoratively done, with a cosmetic flair that you would never find naturally. Her hair was laying perfectly without being tied down, sprayed, or otherwise secured, in accordance with physics, but not in accordance with probability.

“There was some drama at the beach,” said Valencia. “Devils help me keep my composure and work through things.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to do that,” said Bethel. She was smiling, as she often did around Valencia. They had a relationship, of sorts, one which was founded on their mutual exclusion from society, though Bethel was a joyful (if mean-spirited) nonconformist, while Valencia would have taken a hypothetical pill to become human with only minor regrets. In some sense they were opposites, Bethel holding significant amounts of hate in her heart, and Valencia the target of hate, but it had given them something to talk about, on those rare occasions when they spoke to each other. There was also some natural distance between them, given that more than a few of Bethel’s magics didn’t work on Valencia: there was no thought-speech, and no spying on dreams.

“I don’t take in devils often,” said Valencia. “Mary doesn’t think that it’s good for my development. I try to just be me, when I can, but it’s not always so easy.”

“And the nature of this drama?” asked Bethel, arching an eyebrow.

“I wish I could pretend to be eager to tell you,” said Valencia. “Can I take a seat?”

“I wish I could pretend to be eager to tell you,” said Valencia. “Can I take a seat?”

“Certainly,” said Bethel. “It feels very good to be empty. Juniper had promised that I would be, once we got back to the isle, but I’d somehow imagined that it was an empty promise. And I have to admit that this spring cleaning has been good. Is the sitting room good for you?”

“Actually, if it’s alright with you, I’d prefer the solarium,” Valencia replied. “I’m not feeling particularly communal. And some clothes, if you could. Your choice. Transport when ready.”

“Ah,” said Bethel, frowning somewhat. “Amaryllis took Sable with her, for all of the Earth frippery. It looks like you’ll have to walk.”
“That’s fine,” said Valencia. “Walking helps me think. I’ll stop by my room, change clothes, then we can talk.”

“Allow me to speed things up,” said Bethel. The door to the entryway opened up in front of Valencia, and she found herself in the room that had been hers since they’d taken Bethel from the pit.

It was, naturally, closely patterned on the dormitories of Hogwarts. Valencia had been very exacting in what she’d asked of Bethel, back when the offer had first been made, and they had gone through a dozen iterations together, with minor tweaks here and there to make it conform more closely to the picture that Valencia saw in her head. The room was dominated by a four-poster bed with curtains that could be drawn closed, and there were souvenirs on the walls, some of them from Hogwarts, the others from their travels and adventures thus far, including postcards from Parsmont and Headwater, along with a dried rose that symbolized the prison Valencia had been taken from (not authentic, sadly). In a case above the mantle, there was a single arrow, one of Fenn’s, in memoriam.

The hardest part had been choosing the house colors. Valencia always thought of the houses as being about their best qualities rather than their worst, and choosing house colors was, in a sense, like making a declaration about who she was as a person, or rather, who she wanted to be. She had finally settled on Gryffindor, which was a safe and easy choice, but also the one that felt most resonant. Valencia wanted to be brave and courageous, a champion for those who had no champion. (In the hypothetical scenario where there were a pill to become human, this would have been the source of Valencia’s regrets, because she was powerful as she was now, and would be powerless as a human.)

Valencia changed quickly, casting aside the bikini and selecting one of the outfits she’d created for speaking to people about letting Juniper touch them. She settled on a beige dress with a knit sweater on top, a casual outfit that would put a person at ease. Valencia had no idea what it was Bethel would think of the ensemble, if anything, but it didn’t hurt to try, and if Bethel was paying attention, it might serve as another signal about what kind of conversation they were about to have. It was better that Bethel was prepared for it, eased into it as much as possible, so it wouldn’t feel like it had come from nowhere.

When Valencia opened up the door to her room, she was greeted not with the entryway, nor a hallway, but the solarium. Bethel was there, in human form, laying across a chaise-lounge. A chair had been arranged next to her, with a small table, on which was set a pencil and notepad.

“This is about me, isn’t it?” asked Bethel. She was looking up at the ceiling, which was painted with all the constellations of Aerb’s multicolored night sky. The top of the solarium was the only part of it without windows, and it could be opened up at will if the weather was nice and whoever was inside wanted a view of the actual night sky.

“Yes, it’s about you,” said Valencia.

“Come, sit,” said Bethel. She wasn’t looking at Valencia, but that meant nothing, because Bethel could see everything inside of her.

Valencia walked into the room, not displaying any of the fear she was feeling. She was as perfectly in control of her physiology as any of the Elon Gar, but even they weren’t necessarily so perfect that they could fool someone who could literally see right through them. Some of it might show through, and Valencia had to accept that. She sat down on the proffered chair, leaving the pencil and pad untouched.

“Now,” said Bethel. “The first question I have is whether you were sent by the group, or whether you snuck off by yourself so that you could get time alone with me.”
“I think we should set that aside for a moment,” said Valencia.

“Of course you do,” said Bethel. “The second question I have is whether Juniper told you, or Amaryllis, or someone else, or whether you simply looked at him and saw the truth.”

“He told Amaryllis,” said Valencia.

“I thought he might have,” replied Bethel. “Hence the mention of drama.”

Valencia sat in silence, waiting Bethel out. So far there was no trace of malice, but the body was an illusion. If Bethel showed malice, it was because she had made a conscious decision to show malice. It was difficult to know whether her current disposition was good or bad, whether the weariness she was displaying was an act.

“I wish that I could undo it,” said Bethel. “If I had known he would be so weird about it, I would never have fucked him.”

“What did you think was going to happen?” asked Valencia. A part of her wanted to make that an accusation, but the infernal part wouldn’t allow that, not for a delicate operation, one with stakes, one with a purpose. The question came out calm and curious, a search for understanding.

Bethel reached up with her hands and created an illusion, adding to the illusion of a body on the chaise. This one was of Juniper, halfway naked, genitals not a part of the picture, laying in bed.

“I needed that,” he said with a happy sigh.

The illusion popped like a soap bubble. Beneath it, Bethel stayed silent.

“And why do you think that it went wrong?” asked Valencia.

“I didn’t understand him well enough,” said Bethel. “I didn’t understand how much his personal history would inform his reaction.”

“He said no,” said Valencia. Again, she had to reign back the venom and the accusation that would have colored the statement if she were reading from a script. “Did you think that you understood him better than he understood himself?”

“I don’t know,” said Bethel. “I supposed that he would have displayed reluctance no matter what, because to him it would be a commitment, rather than something transient. But once I was past his defenses, once we were in motion, I thought that he would appreciate it. I had seen it dozens of times before, the way that humans in particular will pair bond, how the act will bring them closer together.”

“Yes, that does sometimes happen,” said Valencia. “You knew that Jorge and I had sex?”

“You made no effort to hide it,” said Bethel. (This wasn’t strictly true. Valencia had made an effort to hide it from the others, who would have said she was moving too fast, or that she was too immature, or any other objections. Valencia had simply accepted that there was no level of scrubbing and scouring that would hide it from Bethel.)

“I appreciate you not discussing it with anyone,” said Valencia. This line was a test: Valencia had no special knowledge on that score, especially since she had, for the most part, made an attempt to stop using her powers of insight against her teammates (following the Fenn debacle).

“I say very little of what I know,” said Bethel. “Of course, in this instance, it wasn’t very interesting to me. Have you told the others?”
“No,” said Valencia. “Their reaction when I told them I was going on a date was enough to tell me what their reactions would be like when I told them more.” This was a diversion, one that Valencia had embarked on to allow Bethel some room to breathe. The less this felt like it was drilling down to the specifics of what happened with Juniper, the better.

“And what were the reactions of the assembled, when Juniper told them we had sex?” asked Bethel. She was bringing it back to the matter at hand, which was a bad sign.

“We have to talk about how Juniper understood the encounter,” said Valencia.

“Where you and Jorge grew closer, Juniper and I did not,” said Bethel. “Why were things different with your boyfriend?”

That left the most fraught part of the conversation simmering in the background. It wasn’t ideal, but switching back to the previous subject quickly would require aggression, and at any rate, the groundwork hadn’t been laid yet. It would have been better that Bethel got distracted, but so far as Valencia knew, that had only happened a limited number of times in the past, under exceptional circumstances. The vagaries of Bethel’s mind were unknown; it was entirely possible that she was capable of tracking far, far more than a mortal mind could.

“Jorge had reservations,” said Valencia. “He’s always had reservations, about everything. I’m non-anima, raised in an abusive environment, and I’m more powerful than him in several respects. From an outside view, it’s a recipe for disaster. Jorge was smart enough to see that. The firsts, with him, had to be done carefully, tentatively, and with as much of his will and investment as possible.”

Valencia didn’t like looking at her own relationship like this, but here, it was necessary. Her life might depend on the comparison, and she understood Bethel poorly enough that she needed to tell the truth.

“You’re saying that Juniper had no will, no investment,” said Bethel. “And that’s why he’s been acting so oddly.”

“If you want to catch an animal, a trap will do,” said Valencia. “Pit traps, loop traps, these things will catch the animal, and from there you can use superior strength and cunning to keep the animal where you’d like it. Eventually, it will break, depending on the animal, and understand you as dominant, but some element of fear will always be there.” This was a mild lie. A person could be broken and rebuilt more completely than most people knew, but that was infernal business, rather than the mortal world.

“The analogy doesn’t hold,” said Bethel, frowning, but it was a frown of confusion, and while that was projected, it was still a good sign. “I didn’t trap him.”

“Imagine instead that you do things by steps,” said Valencia. “You allow the animal to lead the way. You give it food and shelter, you give it space when it needs some, you allow it to initiate, you respond as if you are as tentative about the arrangement as it is.”

“And that’s what I should have done?” asked Bethel. “You’re saying … Juniper was afraid of me?”

“He said no,” replied Valencia. “You pushed on, because ‘no’ wasn’t the answer that you wanted, and because you thought that it was a false no, one that was a product of his prudish upbringing and nonsensical moral stances, or his ill-fated pining after Amaryllis, or his sorrowful longing for Fenn. You pushed on because you had a human body for the first time, and you were experiencing sexual desire and sexual pleasure for the first time, and it would have been better if he had said yes, rather than no.” This was dangerous guesswork.
“I would never hurt him,” said Bethel. “He knows that I never would.” There was no doubt in her voice. It was pure conviction, an unnatural iron defense that would never naturally come out of a person except about the most obvious and plain facts. This was, of course, a projection, what Bethel wanted to be heard. Valencia was banking on it being false confidence.

“He doesn’t know you wouldn’t hurt him,” said Valencia. “When you pushed him back onto the bed, he was thinking about what escalation would be like, if he fought harder, if he brought his powers into the mix. If he used still magic, you could have countered it, if he struggled, you could overpower him, if he screamed, you might cut his vocal cords. He had Prince’s Invulnerability, but you could have wiped it away in an instant. If you had wanted to, you could have unmade the door to his room and locked him in there, never to see the light of day again unless you willed it, unless he did as you told him to.” Valencia’s cadence was carefully calculated to have a sense of urgency, which might help Bethel find some empathy.

Bethel was silent. She simply stared at the ceiling. The illusion was still ‘alive’, still simulating breathing, blinking, and doing the small movements that people couldn’t help. As illusions went, it was very, very good. Valencia simply waited, hoping that she hadn’t made a miscalculation. She could have gone longer or shorter, and some of what she’d said had been a fabrication, things that Juniper hadn’t said, but might have felt.

“Like I had yanked a rabbit up by the scruff of his neck and placed him in a cage,” Bethel finally said. The verbalization was slow and deliberate, an attempted framing of the facts. “But he enjoyed himself.”

“He did,” said Valencia. “But for a human, and most of the other mortal species, physical pleasure is sometimes distinct from psychological pleasure. The fear response and arousal response follow many of the same pathways, using the same internal mechanics. It’s unclear to me, from what he’s said, whether this was a feeling that grew with time and had been steadily polluting everything, or whether it was true dissociation. The matter is also complicated by his newfound ability to think through two things at once.”

“Fuck,” Bethel swore. She sat up from the chair she’d been reclining in. “He should be the one here, telling me this.”

“He’s afraid of you now,” said Valencia. “Over the last few days he’s been thinking of every threat you’ve ever made against him, every description of murder and torture you’ve regaled him with, and it’s steadily been poisoning his opinion of you even more than it was right after you had sex.” Valencia elected not to call it a rape. That would inevitably bring about a semantic conversation which she didn’t want to have, one which wouldn’t prove fruitful.

“How do I fix it?” asked Bethel. “What words do I need to say in order to make things right? Or I’ll have you do it. You say the words to him.”

“There are no words,” Valencia lied. “It’s going to be a process, and by necessity, it’s going to be a long one. I’m going to help, that’s why I’m here, but for it to work properly, you’ll need to build up trust, which is never easily done. Worse, you will have to place yourself in a position of submission.”

“I didn’t exercise power against him,” said Bethel. The word ‘submission’ had been a gamble, one that Bethel was obviously reacting against. “I didn’t hurt him in the slightest, he had Prince’s on, I couldn’t have hurt him without deliberate intent. I never suggested that I would, and I never said that I would.”

“When people exercised power against you, was it always with a threat?” asked Valencia. “Sometimes they would tell you to do things, and you wouldn’t know how they would react if you
said no, even if you said no in a deferential way, even if you had your own good reasons, even if you were perfectly compliant in all other ways."

“I am not like them,” Bethel growled. Again, it was with an unnatural force and a completeness of confidence that was too perfect.

“Power is the same across the face of the hex,” said Valencia. “Coercion, consent, these are complicated subjects, and I would never suggest that any two situations were exactly equivalent, but the structures of interaction often have recurrent notes, unpleasant melodies that echo each other.”

“You were sent here to manipulate me,” said Bethel, eyes narrowing.

“I sent myself here,” said Valencia. “The others urged me not to go.” This was a dangerous point, it was always dangerous, a consequence of people knowing who and what she was. A lie would have served her well here, or a deflection, but Valencia was attempting the long play, not the short one, not the one that would let her leave to safety.

“And what course of action did they propose instead?” asked Bethel.

“It was between destroying you, capturing you, or fleeing entirely,” said Valencia.

“For this one thing?” asked Bethel. “After all that I’ve done for them?” She stood up and began to pace, another affectation, another projection, but that was a good sign, because it meant she wanted to portray her mood. She wasn’t shutting down. The moment of danger would be if or when there was no open line of communication. “It was Amaryllis, wasn’t it?”

“Primarily, yes,” said Valencia. “You’ve done a very good job of putting her on edge. For her, this is the watershed, the moment that distinguished between being able to live within you, and not. She could put up with threats, so long as those were idle threats, and violence, so long as it was directed against the right targets. I wouldn’t frame it as her waiting for a reason to act against you, I would frame it as an eventuality that she had hoped would never come.”

“And yet you’re here,” said Bethel. Her voice was tight. “They’re not going through with their initial plans. Amaryllis wouldn’t have sent a hostage.”

“No, she wouldn’t have,” said Valencia. “I’m here to talk. I want to explain things to you, in the hopes that with time, we can mend things.”

“Is there a trump card?” asked Bethel. “Is there some weapon that they plan to use against me, some method of killing me that I wouldn’t have thought of?”

“You shouldn’t ask me questions that you don’t expect an honest answer to,” said Valencia. “I don’t think that’s fair to either of us. But the answer is no, they don’t have a weapon. Grak can ward against you, with difficulty and uncertainty, but you knew that.”

“I want to talk to Juniper,” said Bethel. “I want to speak with him.”

“It will take some time before he’s ready,” said Valencia. “Imagine him as a mouse you caught in a cage. He might come back, once he’s been let out, but he’s afraid for the time being, and will be for quite a while, especially if you’re in a position of power over him, which you are just by being yourself. And because he’s a person, not a mouse, he’s feeling other unpleasant things as well, betrayal, shame, guilt, embarrassment, none of which will be helped by talking to him, not now.”

“You’re speaking of separation,” said Bethel. “You’re talking about long timescales.”
“Weeks,” said Valencia. “Maybe months.” She was hoping she wouldn’t regret that in two months time. “I don’t think it was severe enough that reintroduction is impossible. I even think that you could be friends again, but the path forward takes time and care. It can’t be rushed, not if we want a good outcome.”

“You’re suggesting that he lives somewhere else,” said Bethel, crossing her arms.

“I am,” replied Valencia. “More to the point, I’m suggesting that you leave the Isle of Poran.”

“And this was the plan all along,” said Bethel. “This spring cleaning, the promise that the tuung would have a place to go for a week, even this time away on the beach, even the locus being removed from me.”

“No,” said Valencia. “Juniper wanted a private conversation with the locus. I suspect that he told it first, before he spoke with anyone else. The tuung were temporarily removed for your benefit, at your request. And everything else was simply kismet.”

Only that last part was a lie. Valencia had known something was wrong with Juniper, and suspected that it had to do with Bethel, and she was the one who had arranged everything else, acting as deftly and silently as she could to poke and prod Amaryllis in the right ways. It was just shy of being a violation.

“Did you think that I would do well, away on my own?” asked Bethel. “Did you think that I would accept that punishment, even if I accepted that I’m responsible for what Juniper is feeling from moment to moment?”

“You won’t be alone,” said Valencia. “I’m planning to go with you.”

Bethel stopped her pacing and turned to Valencia. She was suspicious, or choosing to display suspicion. “Why?” she asked.

“Because I consider you a friend,” said Valencia. “And I consider this a tragedy. It would have been preventable if I had been watching closely, and more easily mitigated if I had caught it right after it happened, so I share some portion of responsibility. I want to help, and I want you to be my home, even if you can’t be a proper home to the others for a while.”

Bethel was still for a moment, her face displaying no emotion, and Valencia carefully kept her features controlled as well. Death could come at any moment, and if it weren’t death, then it would likely be torture or maiming. Bethel was less likely to be violent to someone who couldn’t heal back from it, but she was a killer as part of her self-identity.

“He thinks that I hurt him,” said Bethel, after some time had passed. “They all think that I hurt him. It was his choice to be hurt.” Some uncertainty had finally crept into her voice. More importantly, it was displayed uncertainty, an uncertainty felt internally and shown to a second party.

“No one chooses to be hurt,” said Valencia, and though that wasn’t even remotely true, it was true enough that she didn’t think Bethel would argue. “The question is whether that hurt could be foreseen or not.”

“And you think that I’m culpable,” said Bethel. Something in the illusion had changed, subtle little differences that together created an impression of malice. Bethel’s eyes were more sunken, the shadows around her darker and deeper, and the incidental folds of her clothing created points, almost spikes, rather than the aesthetic curves they’d been before. Her fists weren’t quite clenched, but she was showing strain in the muscles of her hands. More than that, the atmosphere of the room had
changed, the lighting lower, the atmosphere colder. If you didn’t know better, you might attribute that to a passing cloud.

“He said no,” replied Valencia. “Your culpability began when you decided that you knew better.”

For a moment, Bethel seemed as though she would snap, but that moment passed, and she relaxed. “You can undo it,” she said. “Repair it, rebuild it.”

“I can,” said Valencia. “It will be different from before, and it will take time.”

“Then tell me what needs to be done,” said Bethel.

Valencia nodded. She had to pretend that she knew more than she did, that the path forward was clear instead of muddy, but she’d muddled through this much, half-blind and afraid, and if she could do that, she could make it through the rest. That was the Gryffindor spirit, after all. “We leave now,” said Valencia. She finally picked up the pencil and paper from the little table. “All I need to do is say my goodbyes.”

Chapter End Notes

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