

Amaryllis stood in the kitchen of our new home, the morning after the end of the world, cooking breakfast and singing a little song to herself. She was wearing her faded pink 'Princess!' t-shirt, which was at least four years old at this point, maybe more, and beneath that, pink and white striped undies. She had a sleeve tattoo on her left arm which hadn't been there the night before, but already looked slightly worn in, as though she'd had it for years. It depicted our party and our adventures, including a few things that I didn't think I would have chosen to put on my body, like a unicorn, or Grak going into Darili Irid.

“♪ Makin' bacon, and eggs, and bacon and eggs,” she sang to herself. “♪ Makin' bakin',” she shifted her bare feet to the right, “♪ Makon bacon,” in a lower voice, then feet to the left, “♪ Makin' the bacon, shakin' the bacon,” she moved the cast iron pan from side to side, “♪ Wakin' and shakin' and makin' some bakin,” she wiggled her butt as she sang to herself.

She turned to me. “Juniper!” she said. “I found a problem with heaven. You made a mistake.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Makin' and bacon don't rhyme,” she said. She held up her thumb and forefinger. “They're about *this* close.”

I thought about that for a moment. “We could *make* them rhyme,” I said. “At least, locally, in this context. We could give ourselves the right dialect so that it would work.”

“Nah,” she said, returning to the eggs and bacon. She used her spatula to scoop them onto a plate, then laid some thick slices of bread in the bacon fat to make some quick toast.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“How do I seem like I'm doing?” she asked, looking at me from over her shoulder. Her hair was long, going halfway down her back, in messy half-curls. There was a grin on her face.

“Happy,” I said.

“We won,” she said. “And now we get a reward of bacon.” She used the spatula to flip the toast into the air, and caught it on the plate. “I made some for you, obviously.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking a seat at the breakfast table. Amaryllis set out plates down, then sat across from me.

“Top ten best things about heaven, you start,” she said.

“No suffering of innocents,” I said.

“No risk of being splattered by bacon grease,” said Amaryllis.

“No poverty,” I said.

“Being able to eat unlimited bacon,” said Amaryllis.

"Was that an issue for you before?" I asked. "I don't remember you ever having to watch your figure."

"Juniper, *unlimited* bacon," said Amaryllis. "Before, how many pounds of bacon would I be able to eat without getting sick? How many before my stomach was completely full? And before either of those, I would have stopped getting as much joy from the bacon." She held up a slice of bacon, then closed one eye to look at it. "The very first bite of bacon was always the best, and every bite *after* the first was a little bit less. But now, as we're in heaven, I've made it so I don't get tired of eating bacon, I've made my stomach have infinite capacity, and I've made each bite equally good, so long as other factors like cook time, fat composition, rendering, and the like remain the same. No hedonic treadmill, no limits, not for bacon." She took a bite of bacon. "Something is up with you."

"We've got six more to go," I said. "Here's one: being with you."

"Free housing," said Amaryllis, looking around our new kitchen.

"Affordable healthcare," I said.

"Good schools," said Amaryllis. "Not that it's an issue yet."

"Low taxes," I said.

"Final one," said Amaryllis, shivering slightly. "I have to say, I'm feeling the pressure. Let's see ... oh, temperature control, obviously. There's nothing like cooking bacon in your underwear and not having to worry that it's too cold in the kitchen."

I smiled at her, and ate some of the food. It was quite good, without being literally perfect.

"Juniper," said Amaryllis. She was watching me. "Spill the beans. What's on your mind?"

The night before had been a good one. I had ascended, spent an enormous amount of time planning things out while the world was frozen, consulted with a number of people who were unfrozen for that purpose, consulted with avatars of my party members, then created a splinter of myself with none of the godly memories to keep living in my place. Then, I had been placed back with the others, as though I had never left. We'd gotten a visit from Transition Services, who spoke to us as a group and explained the way of things, then we'd had a little party back in Poran with Valencia, and then we'd temporarily gone our separate ways, but not before Fenn had made us promise that we would get together every six months for reunions, if we didn't all end up in the same neighborhood.

Amaryllis and I had built the house, or rather, had the house built for us, and then we'd gone into our bedroom and slept the sleep of the dead. We'd done that by mutual agreement: obviously it was within our power to edit out the need for sleep, to feel instantly refreshed with no side effects, and a whole host of other things. I had wanted to sleep though, to sleep with her in my arms, cuddled close together.

It wasn't until the morning that I realized we needed a reckoning. Perhaps the image of my darling wife wiggling her butt and singing a bacon song had been too cute and too perfect. That was a disordered way of thinking, but ...

"It's over, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yep," she said. "Unless he decides that it isn't."

"I think he's done with us," I said.

Amaryllis shrugged. "I think even if he isn't, that's not such a bad thing. I think the *narrative* is over. This is just the part at the end where we live happily ever after. Let's enjoy it."

"Right," I said slowly. It seemed very final to me though. "But."

"But what?" she asked, taking a very innocent bite of toast. I swear she fluttered her eyelids.

"I want to know," I said. "I want to know the things that you didn't tell me before. The stuff that you couldn't say because of opsec, or because it would have risked the narrative, or ... I don't know. The stuff that you wouldn't tell me unless I asked nicely."

"I wrote you a letter," said Amaryllis. She reached up into the air and with a twist of her hand, produced a letter. That was one of the house rules we'd established last night: if you were going to circumvent normal physical reality, you had to look cool doing it.

"A letter?" I asked, taking it from her. "You thought you were going to die."

"Yes," said Amaryllis. "When I went down into the hells, I was tempting fate. Going to Fel Seed," I'd given us our memories back, "I was tempting fate. Going down the Long Stairs I was tempting fate. Somehow, three times, I was spared. So, you can read it, and then we can talk, if we need to."

I looked at the letter. "It's a callback."

"Yes," said Amaryllis. "The original was with me in the Long Stairs and got Waltered, but I had backups, not that we couldn't just reconstruct it from nothing."

I slowly opened the letter and read it while Amaryllis ate. It was in her precise, meticulous hand.

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*Dear Juniper,*

*If you're reading this, then I am dead. I'm writing this roughly a month before we attempt to pull you from the hells. If we succeed in doing that, then depending on the specifics, we might have to immediately go fight Fel Seed. If we improbably win against Fel Seed, then there's a good chance we'll be going right down the Long Stairs. I don't know which of those points I'm most likely to die at, but I worry about all of them. If you're reading this, then I didn't make it. Stay on*

*target. If you become god, you have my full-throated consent to recreate me. The mission is what's important.*

*What follows is my attempt to explain the hows and whys of my actions over the last three years, and ideally, what I might have been doing when I died.*

*Your death was a shock. I had expected some of us to die when we went against Fel Seed, simply because the narrative might have benefited from high stakes at that point in time. I had known that the hells were there, waiting for some kind of story interaction, especially given the Helldiver option you'd left checked, but I had also thought that the hells might be a cast off from Uther's time on Aerb, or a plot that he had dropped when he left, not actually meant for us. The existence of Valencia obviously meant that something might end up happening in the hells, but I suppose you might call me an optimist. I'd thought it would be infernal invasion. Really, what I had expected more than anything was a TPK.*

*I knew fairly early that I would have to mount a rescue attempt, but I had no idea how to go about doing it, or what the narrative required of me. I didn't know whether I was in your story or one of my own. When Fenn died, I felt like we had exhausted all the possibilities, not that research into removing someone from the hells was a new problem. I kept running into the problem of planar disjunction, which I read far too much of without really understanding it, in part because those who came before me didn't understand it either. My novel research on the subject didn't bear fruit.*

*Eventually I settled on the Outer Reaches, but I had no good way in. The easiest way to get into the conceptual space required some level of fame, enough that there would be a concept of you in the collective consciousness, and lucky for me, I had already been working on mass manufacture of television with an attendant stranglehold on programming and the mother of all first mover advantages. Funny how that worked out.*

*I still had all my clones though, and I was sending them all over the place. I sent one of them to Cidium looking for Dahlia, and got a handful of stories, along with a few interviews with people who were old enough to remember her. It illuminated nothing about our lives, which are parallel in some ways and wildly divergent in others, but it did help to solidify my thinking about my place in the world. The Dungeon Master likes me, I think. That makes sense, if we assume he's kindred spirits with you.*

*I was thinking about the narrative in every step that I took. I didn't know whether the focus was on me, or whether you would simply get a time skip and wake up years down the road. I didn't know whether you were bottled or tortured, or if perhaps we'd missed you in the hells, which was entirely possible, if a bit unlikely.*

*When I went into the Outer Reaches, it was like someone had turned my sense of narrative up as high as it would go. The schlossvolk love narrative, they practically bathe in it, and when they're inserting things into Aerb, it's always with the eye toward what kind of stories it will allow, and how they might get a conceptual interplay. That's to say nothing of the narratives that go on between them, and the wars fought over mantles and anchors and implements and all kinds of*

things. It was insanity. When I went to make the portal out of hell, which I hope you were able to use, I was fighting hard against a basic fact of the world, which was that no one comes out of the hells, ever, by any means. Worse, I was fighting against narrative considerations, and against the scope of the project. There aren't concrete rules for the schlossvolk, who I was temporarily one of, but there are things that twist and pull, especially when dealing with Aerb. Worse still, worse than everything else, I knew better than them that this was all narrative, that the escape I was setting up needed to be suitably dramatic.

I try not to let my thinking be completely consumed by the narrative. I try to play it like you play it, as though you're unaware of what the narrative has in store, as though the object level is all there is. I think it's a helpful mode, because the narrative has pitfalls you don't want to fall into. On that particular occasion, I failed, and looking back at what I've set up, and what comes next, I think that perhaps there are other failures as well. It's sometimes hard to tell.

I knew the Void Beast was coming. I knew that it was a form of time pressure, though a light one, not liable to be too serious of a problem for a decade, maybe more. I also knew that we almost certainly weren't working on the scale of that many years. In the course of my negotiations with members of the Empire, it became obvious that there were parties that would benefit from a relaxation of the rules surrounding void tools. Perhaps that was what led to the explosion at the void factory, or perhaps the weak stance on void caused the uptick. I worried, after that explosion happened, and after we saw a much higher trajectory than expected, that it was something I had done. With the narrative, I worried a lot about self-fulfilling prophecies.

And I say that, but I've been working hard to set up this rune bomb, which we're planning to drop straight into Fel Seed's city to blow everything there to bits. It is, almost certainly, going to cause an exclusion. Oh, there are other things we'll try first, ways that we might kill or unbottle you from a great distance, but I'm extremely skeptical they'll work. Once I thought to use the great and terrible weapon of antimatter, introduced from Earth and dreamt up by your own mind, I knew that it was what would happen. I could see it clearly.

Risking exclusion of rune magic to bring you back makes no sense on the object level. All we have is your word that the Dungeon Master suggested you might become a god if you were able to get to the end of the game. I've never spoken to the Dungeon Master, though I desperately want to, and I pray to him almost every night. I have relatively little to go on, as far as your claims go. The companion powers are a clear, tangible phenomenon, you have knowledge that you shouldn't have about the world, and we've all seen your skill. All that together shouldn't lead to unshakeable faith.

But if we don't bring you back, what then? The only thing that might remain is for you to escape on your own, and you've been gone a long time.

I've had trouble convincing people. I've kept word of what we're doing to a small, trusted few. The narrative is easy to see, but even if I can get people to see it, they don't always agree that it's the most important thing in the world.

*I try to keep in mind what you've said about tabletop games, and stakes, and saying 'yes, and' or 'yes, but'. I hope that those rules apply to me.*

*I've decided that I'm going down into the hells to help you make your return. I'm setting myself up to die in some permanent fashion, I know, but for you to be pulled from the hells, there needs to be a cost, probably above and beyond the other tangible costs, and I'm offering myself. There are other methods of pulling you from the hells, aside from the machine I schlossed into the Omega Hell, but I know that they won't work, just as I know that the antimatter bomb is the only thing that works. I'll pray for a subversion, but I know the rules, at least for something like this.*

*I'll try to survive down there, when it inevitably comes to that. I'll try to live. I won't be surprised if I fail though. We know a lot about the infernals, and we know that they're preparing to move against us, trying to find some resilience against the kind of attack they know we're capable of. I won't say too much about it here, just in case, but I believe their plan to counter us is something they suspect we have no method of acting against: the people stuck down there.*

*And if it's not the hells, then it's Fel Seed, and if it's not him, it's the Long Stairs. I have a feeling pressing down on me like a weight, letting me know that I'm fated to die, especially if Fenn comes back. I've accepted that. I've paved the path. My death, when it comes, might be justified by the choices I've made. I might have fallen into a self-fulfilling prophecy.*

*The problem, I think, is that I'm pretty useless in a fight compared to the others, and that seems to be all that's left for us. At the same time, you and I have put our romance through its paces. The only thing left for us to do was to have children together, and I don't think that's a narratively compelling reason to keep me around. I don't have any particular investment in seeing Uther either.*

*If I'm dead, I don't want to leave you feeling hopeless and alone, not when there's work to be done, so I'll leave you with this thought: my death will be worth it if you get to the end and achieve godhood.*

*~Your Love,  
Amaryllis*

"Huh," I said once I was done reading. "And none of that came to pass."

"It did," said Amaryllis. She'd finished her bacon and eggs while I read. "We had to use the antimatter bomb, we caused a rune magic exclusion, and we had to use the Omega Hell gate."

"But you didn't die," I said. "Even though it would have been narratively better, in your opinion, if you did?"

"Well, I don't know," said Amaryllis. She paused. "First, are you upset with me for putting the world in danger to get you back?"

"No," I said. "I guess not. It worked, in the end." That felt weak. It felt like there was a quibble I wasn't making.

“Well, then regarding what would be best narratively,” said Amaryllis, thinking for a moment. “I’d anticipated that this was a narrative about letting go. One of the main problems with one of us dying, either before the end or during it, was that it would cloud things with Uther, and in some ways, undercut that meeting. The *other* big problem is that our deaths wouldn’t be permanent unless you somehow had to cut the hells loose from Aerb, or otherwise had lesser powers than we’d been anticipating. If I had died, it mostly wouldn’t have *mattered*, and I’m not even sure how sad you would have been about it.”

“I guess,” I said. “Wait, did we know that this was about letting go? Because I don’t think I knew that.”

“It was my read on the Dungeon Master,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “There were a few pieces of evidence that helped to put the whole thing together. We had to presume that he was you, or someone like you, especially with all that stuff you had said about a connection to him. He was also older though, and even if he hadn’t been, I think we still would have made the nostalgia connection. Aerb is a place with all of your old campaigns, after all. And, because the Dungeon Master is all-powerful, we needed to make some assumptions about why things turned out the way they did with Arthur. I didn’t believe that the Dungeon Master accidentally let Arthur get into a bad state like that, unhappy and questioning his reality. I think the Dungeon Master wanted that, or at least felt it was appropriate.”

“Huh,” I said. “I guess. That’s not what I would have said, given the evidence we had at the time.”

“It’s what I thought,” said Amaryllis. “I didn’t share it, for obvious reasons.”

“It would have screwed with the narrative,” I said.

“It would have screwed with the narrative *and* if it hadn’t, then the conclusion was probably worthless,” said Amaryllis. “There was no upside.”

“It felt like there were so many possibilities, going into the Long Stairs,” I said.

“I think there were,” said Amaryllis. “I was serious when I said to you that it would be narratively appropriate for you to die.”

“And what would have happened then?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” said Amaryllis. “Most likely I would have tried to go to Earth with Uther.”

“And do what?” I asked.

“Die in the process,” said Amaryllis with a shrug. “But if we hadn’t, then there would be fertile new ground to cover, at least as far as the narrative was concerned. I would be the one transported to another world, albeit with almost no advantages to my name, unless the clones still worked. I would stick with Arthur and hope that we could make something of it. Or, perhaps, Aerb would still get the good ending somehow, and I would be your weeping widow.”

I looked down at the letter in my hands. "You made a big gamble."

"Yes," said Amaryllis. "And I think it's quite tempting to say that I had no other choice, that a completely rational actor would obviously have done what I did."

"But that's not true?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It's hard to say. I know we could interrogate it with the use of assistants, but I'd rather hold off on that. It felt, at times, like I was leaning on faith, hope, and prayers. It felt like another version of myself who had all the same sets of facts could have decided on something else. Some of it might have just been my love of you." She shrugged. "I'm not sure it's important, per se. I don't think I *want* the answer. To know, flatly, from a scan that went deep into my mind and memories, that I made the wrong decisions but was rewarded for it ..." she shivered. "No, I think not."

"It says here about Dahlia, then never explains," I said.

"I don't know that it's true," said Amaryllis. "But I went to Cidium, and learned as much as I could about Dahlia, using one of my clones. I spoke to a few long-lived people who knew her. She had a feeling to her, like she was a protagonist in her own right. She even got a cool scar from the Grand Finale. There are several large, important differences between the two of us, but I felt the hand of the Dungeon Master in her life. I think he liked her. There are also similarities between her and the Whore of Blades, from your flesh.txt."

"The Whore of Blades was decidedly straight," I said. "Or like ... ninety percent."

"And Dahlia was complicated, in that regard," said Amaryllis. "Pallida was wrong, she *did* sleep with men, but only when using her girdle to take the shape of a man. Dahlia seemed to delight in shifting between male and female, masculine and feminine. I acquired the girdle, —"

"You did?" I asked.

"Yes," said Amaryllis. "Before Li'o, actually. There was never much cause to use it though. I'd wanted to play a prank on you, but ... well, events as they happened made that seem like a bad idea."

"Huh," I said.

"I used the girdle, naturally, and made myself a man, or at least a woman in a man's body. From what I know of Dahlia, she delighted in the change, and being *able* to change nearly at will. For me ... it was just a penis awkwardly sticking out from me." She looked at me. "Sorry if that makes you uncomfortable."

"Nah," I said. "Surprisingly not, actually. It's something I've thought about."

Amaryllis raised an eyebrow.



"When I was thinking about why I wasn't attracted to Grak, not for other reasons," I said. "I was trying to run my brain through some scenarios and see how I felt about them, to see what my objection was, or what part of my brain was getting tripped."

"And your conclusion was that you wouldn't care if I had a penis?" asked Amaryllis.

"Um," I said. "I'd prefer you as you are."

"But it wouldn't be a non-starter, is what you're saying," said Amaryllis, still raising an eyebrow.

"I think I fundamentally don't understand what women find attractive about men," I said. "But yes, 'male' and 'masculine' are fuzzy categories, at least in our glorious transhumanist present, and they were fuzzy on Aerb, and even before that, a bit fuzzy on Earth in various ways. And when I thought about Grak, and why I had no desire for him, even if there was some implication that I should, I think it just came down to my personal modes of attraction being so off-set from both his physical appearance and his personality."

"Interesting," said Amaryllis, tapping her fingers on the table.

"I think the companions were, in some ways, all introduced because there was some element of them that the Dungeon Master wanted to look at, or have me look at," I said.

"And that brings us back to Dahlia," said Amaryllis. "I think that for the Dungeon Master, it was a bit of prurient interest, or at least an exploration of ... something. There was something Arthur said to you about the way that gender and sex were mixed up and blended on Aerb. Beyond that, we can assume that the Dungeon Master would think of me as attractive, above and beyond what a normal person would think. Wish fulfillment, on his part, in the same way that the early parts of Arthur's time on Aerb were. So when it came time to make me, to make some commentary on ... something, I think that I was a reused asset, in some sense."

"Ouch," I said.

"Well I don't care," said Amaryllis. "But I think it makes the commentary that I provided for the Dungeon Master more stark, if I'm an archetype of attraction for him and you, but without the sexual attraction." She paused. "How old do you think the Dungeon Master is?"

"Unknowable," I said.

"My guess would be in his early to late thirties," said Amaryllis. "And he confessed to you that he's been to college, even if perhaps he didn't finish. If he wasn't actually from Earth, in the end, I think that there's still some mapping to be done, and things to get from assuming that he was, even if it's not directly true. So I asked myself questions like, 'what happened to Juniper *after* high school?', and the answers I came up with seemed like they might make sense."

I frowned. "And do you think ... do you think that he had an asexual girlfriend?"

"Not necessarily," said Amaryllis. "I think that I'm a heightening of someone, though it's possible that like other things on Aerb, it was only an exploration of feelings, conflicts, or things the

Dungeon Master and you thought were neat. Maybe we're reading too much into it. But when I think about who he really was, and what his life after what you know might have been like, I think it's possible that I'm a heightening of something he encountered and felt he needed to figure out. I was built in the image of Dahlia, who you and presumably he thought was the most attractive woman in the world, and then to contrast that, and to turn the contrast up, I have no interest in sex with you."

"Huh," I said.

"I could be wrong, and I don't want to read into him too much," said Amaryllis. "It feels rude, somehow, even given the circumstances. He *did* give us a good end, after all."

"You know, we could probably figure out if there's a diegetic answer to the connection between you and Dahlia," I said. "I saw the whole world when I was god, including the distant past and the possible futures, so if there was an answer, it's there somewhere. I gave myself a few memories, the ones I thought were important, but I left quite a bit for me to discover on my own."

"I'm not sure I care about plots that never happened," said Amaryllis.

"I do," I said. "But mostly because now that the danger is past, I can look at the Dungeon Master's work and take more joy from it. I can see it as ... not serious, I guess. As the creation of someone who was like-minded."

"But it was alright," said Amaryllis, smiling at me, obviously quoting something. "Everything was alright, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved the Dungeon Master."

"You read 1984?" I asked.

"It was one of the ones I loaned to Perisev," said Amaryllis. "Reading a culture's dystopia fiction is a way of getting to know what they value, and what they see as their problems."

"I don't love him," I said. "For the record. But if you can see yourself in someone, it's hard to hate them too much."

"I suppose," said Amaryllis.

"So," I said as I finished my last bit of bacon. It hadn't gone cold, because this was heaven. "What are we going to do with the first day of the rest of our lives?"

"We have a whole heaven to explore," said Amaryllis, gesturing out one of the windows.

"Yeah," I said, following the sweep of her hand and taking in the seas and valleys we could see from high up where our home was perched. "But I was thinking that I might like to build something instead."

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Quite a bit later, I did go looking into Dahlia, mostly to satisfy my own curiosity. Amaryllis was satisfied with the narrative, symbolic answer she'd come up with, but the Dungeon Master usually came up with something that worked within the world as well. With the power of the assistants, it didn't take all that long to find the answer, and as Amaryllis predicted, it was a bit of a let-down, because it hadn't actually happened, and I was just peeking behind the curtain to see what notes the Dungeon Master had written down.

Dahlia had been something like a superhero, or about as close to a superhero as Zorro was. She had gone on all kinds of adventures in and around Cidium, and the more I looked, the more I agreed with Amaryllis that it did seem like the kind of thing that the Dungeon Master would have set up for his own amusement, because it was the kind of thing that I found compelling.

At a certain point during her long and illustrious career as the Red Mask, she had stopped what I suppose I would generously call a cult, one whose interest was chiefly in circumventing death. They were scientifically minded, and had found a backdoor into the process of soul creation through a combination of three fairly powerful entads. It allowed alterations to not just the unborn, but those who hadn't been conceived. They had some limited success in what they called 'soul insertion', allowing a complete overwrite of preconception souls, which was what had caused them to come to Dahlia's attention in the first place: there had been a rash of babies born looking utterly unlike their parents, preternaturally gifted and aware.

Dahlia had apparently thought it was an abomination, not just because it risked a fairly serious exclusion related to the background mechanism of the soul, but because it was depriving parents of their children. Whether or not she equated it to the renacim, who seemed to share some similar functionality, and possibly even the same mechanism, I wasn't able to figure out. She had killed everyone involved, and in the few scraps of conversation I was allowed to see, seemed to justify it in terms of what might happen if the technology and process had become widespread. It was the same justification that Uther had used for erasing knowledge of spirit from the face of Aerb.

And then, in her twilight years, facing her own mortality, Dahlia had a change of heart, or perhaps a shift in perspective. The laboratory she'd cut through like a scythe was still there. The research had been saved. Dahlia hadn't wanted to die, and while duplication onto the soul of the unborn wasn't quite immortality, it was something close. She had believed herself to be a good person, a smart, cunning, brave, and bold person, one who the world could do with more of. Perhaps she was suffering from as much of the same protagonist-induced narcissism as I was, or perhaps it was just an honest assessment of her abilities.

It took her quite a while to get it how she wanted it. She didn't want to be an *obvious* cuckoo, she wanted to blend in. The targets, then, needed to have some selections applied to them, so that the 'clones' of Dahlia required as few changes as possible, and only that which was necessary would be altered. She was in over her head, frankly, working with prototype-level technology and attempting to do something that had never been done before. She worked with only a single assistant, a half-Mezin half-Broshe woman who was a loyal follower. She made some mistakes.

Amaryllis wasn't the only Dahlia clone. There had been hundreds of them, spread out over five centuries and the entirety of Aerb. If anyone had ever noticed, they had chalked it up to coincidence, but it was pretty easy to hide duplicates among the billions, and so far as I could find, again being limited by the Authority's concern for the privacy of the dead, they mostly lived normal lives. Sometimes, with the later ones, there were clear fragments of Dahlia's memory floating around, but most of the time there was nothing at all.

I could see the Dungeon Master's prints all over it. If Amaryllis died, there would have been others. But there was also some kind of commentary on Amaryllis buried in it, the way that Dahlia had wanted the technology eradicated because of the effects that it might have had on society, but was completely fine using it herself. I could see it as a criticism of Amaryllis, easily. But there was *also* something there for Uther, if he had ever come across it, and I wondered how many of these things there were, across Aerb, plots and plans that never came to fruition.

In the following years, I spent a fair amount of my time chasing those kinds of things down, looking for signs of the elusive Dungeon Master and imagining the kinds of plots that he had set up just in case we decided to go running headfirst into them. I spoke with those who had been resurrected, and in a few instances, petitioned resurrections. Eventually, the feeling that the Dungeon Master was still there somewhere, with us, faded away. Amaryllis was right, as usual. If he was around, it was just for the part where we got our (mostly) happy endings.