

Back on Aerb, I was pulled from a large machine, one surrounded on all sides by death. It was a huge auditorium, one that looked similar to the portal I'd just left, but laid on its side. Instead of a wide variety of different mortal species, there were Dorises, each of them with their brains hooked together with long wires, though with a sophistication and rigidity that hadn't been there in the version that was in the hells. There were also ten bubbles, each of them painted black to disguise what was inside, and from the small glass bottles attached to each, I thought it likely that the original intent had been to harvest the souls shortly after whatever mechanism inside killed them. It was horrifying, but in a much more industrial way than things had been horrifying up to this particular point. I hadn't seen the worst of the hells though, never got near one of the large-scale farms where people were stapled to trees or had their skin endlessly stripped from their bodies. The infernals had died without me seeing all that many of them, so I was spared the worst of it. And before that had been Fel Seed ...

"Debrief or decompress?" Amaryllis asked me.

I looked at the women next to her, who were checking me over and putting a robe on me. I hadn't recognized it right away, but they were both Dorises. They didn't look how I thought of Dorises as looking. They didn't have weariness lining their faces or the same signs of embedded despair. They were clean, put together, and well-fed.

"Are you debriefing me, or am I debriefing you?" I asked after a bit.

"I'd be giving you a debrief," said Amaryllis. "I have to warn you, it would be dilated and inside Bethel."

"Fenn," I said. "I need to talk to Fenn, we did in the hells, but it wasn't enough time with her. Amaryllis, you *brought her back*, it's — I didn't think it was possible."

Amaryllis nodded. "It wasn't. I'll give the two of you time together, in Bethel, maximum dilation, like we did with Fel Seed. A few days in a few minutes."

"Fel Seed wasn't that long ago for me," I said.

"Sixty-three hours," said Amaryllis. "That's approximately how long it's been since we lost rune magic."

"Understood," I said. "Send me in whenever you're ready then."

"Close your eyes for three seconds?" she asked.

I did. No game menu appeared. "Nothing. Magic is back though."

"I know," said Amaryllis. "I feel it too, which means that Symbiosis is back." She nodded to the Dorises. "We're checking you over," said Amaryllis. She had her arms folded and was watching me.

"Alright," I said.

“Your body in the Omega Hell was altered,” she said. “The hells, *by their nature*, alter people. This isn’t the same body you used to have. Let me know right away if anything feels wrong to you, either mentally or physically.”

“Pain modifications got undone,” I said.

“Anything else?” asked Amaryllis.

“I’ll take a look,” I said. “I would guess you’re ready to put me down?”

Amaryllis nodded.

I did the check, as requested. Everything was where I left it, minus the pain modifications. The hack that I’d imported to get the Outer Reaches to stick was still there, as was the other hack to make sure I didn’t go crazy with the rush of leveling up, and I had my meme protections as well. I reported that back to Amaryllis, which caused her to let out a bit of tension.

“Good,” she said.

“I don’t suppose I get super regeneration powers, given this is an Omega Hell body?” I asked. “Or resistance to going insane or catatonic from pain?”

“No to the regeneration,” said Amaryllis. “It’s a property of the hell, not your body. The other stuff we haven’t had a chance to test.”

“And won’t, right?” I asked. “Like, we won’t be torturing someone to the point of insanity to see if that still works?”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “It might come up in the wild though, given what we’re about to do.” She hesitated. “Decompress,” she said, nodding to me. “We’re leaving for Fel Seed tomorrow at the latest.”

“I *just* got done with Fel Seed,” I said.

“We lost the first round, and we’ll win the second,” said Amaryllis. “We have the teleportation key, the place we’re going is a part of our worldlines, we can wardproof past wards if necessary, it’s — something that can be saved for when we’re under dilation.” Maybe she saw the look on my face.

“I’m ready,” I said, nodding.

“It’ll be inside Bethel,” said Amaryllis. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing the part of myself that felt uncomfortable with it. It was the second time she’d mentioned it. A few days ago, I might have objected, because it was different, using Bethel as a source of comfort and relaxation. Time was tight though, I could tell that.

Without so much as a goodbye, I was standing in a nicely furnished room. The legs of the two couches were black maple, with a brown studded leather on top. Between them was a coffee

table of a similar design, one that was nearly overflowing with different kinds of food and drink. Beyond this prepared area, there were other features that I didn't quite understand, because it seemed like they couldn't be real. There was a balcony with open doors, its curtains billowing in a faint wind. It was an ocean scene, with birds in the distance, their calls faint. Doors led to the left and right, into unknown places. Fenn was already sitting on one of the couches, dressed in some of her old clothes, khaki short shorts and a tank top. She was smiling at me.

"It's a real trip, huh?" she asked.

"You've already spent some time dilated," I said, looking her over.

"A'yup," said Fenn. "Re-integration, Mary called it. Lots of creature comforts, a few movies, some snuggling, it was ... you know. It didn't make up for being killed, nor for having to kill myself a half dozen times, or all the bullshit in the hells, but it was nice."

"Are you," I paused. "Are you coming with us to Fel Seed?"

"Jesus," she said. "You get done with all of that, the fucking Doom Sun, and you want to throw yourself right at the guy who literally killed you?"

"Want to, no," I said. "Have to, yes. It's the fate of the world. There's a chance that we'll be allowed to win. Or if not strictly allowed to win, then maybe he won't cheat this time. Or won't cheat as much."

She shook her head. "Mary was talking to me about it. Grak too." She looked at me. "But you know, that's not really what we're here for. You and me, we're here to chill out, relax, maybe watch a movie or two, get in some reading time, just ... decompress. And hey, I'm back, right? Which you're still happy about?"

"Right," I said. "I didn't mean to — it means the world to me that you're back, but the mission is just ... all-consuming. I don't know if Amaryllis told you about what it was like to go into Fel Seed's domain, what it was like to fight him, but —"

"But maybe if she didn't, then you shouldn't either," said Fenn. Her voice was gentle. "Maybe I don't need to hear about all that." She looked me over, searching my face. "You're different."

"Hope so," I said. "The me of a few months ago was a total asshole, and I didn't like him. In fact, I disavow anything that I said up until, uh, the start of this conversation. So it should be a clean slate."

Fenn smiled at me. "Fine," she said. "Amaryllis explained things, by the way. About you and her. How you're so in love. It does sting, I have to say."

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry," she said. "I was dead, I get it. You and Amaryllis ... I can't say that I really get *that*, but it seems like it was always there, even from the start. You're too similar, if you ask me. You've got that same analytical way of looking at the world. And a kind of ... detachment."

"I guess," I said. "I've never really thought about it like that. There's a lot to like about her. A lot to admire."

"Agreed," shrugged Fenn. "She was always my favorite, no offense."

"None taken," I replied. "Shit, I'd be lucky to find myself in the top half of that list."

"I also have to say," said Fenn, dragging out the sentence longer than necessary, "I did proposition her."

"Who?" I asked. "Mary?"

Fenn nodded.

"When you were in the time chamber together?" I asked, frowning. "In the Boundless Pit?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Like, twelve hours ago." She was watching me, and I'm sure I looked more bewildered than anything. "In my defense, you were dead and she was a widow, and after the death and mayhem, I felt like I needed a release."

"Huh," I said. "And what did she say?"

"Well, it was really more of a, 'hey, wouldn't it be funny if we both got naked, I've never been with a woman, might be nice to try before I died, just joking, ha ha,' kind of thing," said Fenn. "I mean, she knew I wasn't joking. She brushed me off though, in a very gentle and understanding way."

"Huh," I said again. "I didn't know you were, uh."

Fenn shrugged. "Any port in a port."

I stared at her. "Okay, I know you know that's not the expression, but I don't —" I paused, trying to collect my thoughts. "In your mind, is it that the phrase 'any port in a storm' is so obviously a sexual metaphor, with the ship being a penis and a port being a vagina, and the storm being ... horniness, I guess, that when talking about two women, you feel the need to substitute in port? Like ... two ports mashing against one another?"

She smiled at me. "Sometimes I just say things without really thinking about them," she said. "You should try it sometime."

"You're in a good mood," I said, frowning at her.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe it's coming back from the dead that's done it, but I *am* in a good mood. You know, I can understand why people fake their own deaths and then go listen in on their funerals. When you die, everyone has such a rosy picture of you. It's been three years, and they've forgotten all the annoying shit about me." She reached forward to the coffee table and began moving things around, finally pulling out a pack of mochi. "You should eat."

My digestive tract was empty, and my body, to the extent this was my body, was as hollowed out as it could be without me dying. Not wanting to risk it too much, I grabbed a glass of water and started eating some plain crackers, but I was, in fact, hungry, and that progressed to meats, cheeses, fruits, and all kinds of other things, eaten in a very undignified fashion. Fenn watched me until I started to slow down.

“Do you feel differently about me?” asked Fenn.

“Meaning, differently from the way I felt before you died, after I had a few months to reflect?” I asked.

Fenn nodded.

“Yeah,” I said. “Some of that was talking to people about you. I ... had a very specific image of you, one that really appealed to me, but it wasn’t what you actually were. I didn’t take your attempts at growth seriously, and I ignored you when you tried to contribute to the group in any other way than being comic relief. That’s my post mortem, if you will.”

Fenn sat back and popped a mochi into her mouth, then chewed on it as she watched me. It wasn’t a small mochi, so this took some time.

“And now, what?” asked Fenn. “You’ve got a better understanding of who I am? You’re a changed man?”

“Eh,” I said. “I’ve been through some stuff, I guess. I don’t want to make promises. I will try though.”

Fenn nodded. “Alright, good enough for me. Let’s go kill Fel Seed then, shall we?”

“I don’t know if you’re joking right now,” I said slowly.

“It’s a joke, because it’s funny,” said Fenn. “But it’s also serious, because yeah, sure, I’ll do it.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I mean, everyone that was on the initial team — and I don’t yet know what the redux plan is — we were all there for a reason, either against Fel Seed himself, or for when we got into the Long Stairs.”

“I’m a pretty fucking good archer,” said Fenn. “Surely you haven’t forgotten that?”

“A lot of that was Twinned Soul, no offense,” I said.

“Well, whichever,” said Fenn. “You don’t want the world’s best archer on your team?”

“I do,” I said. “But it’s more because I selfishly wouldn’t want to do it without you than because I think you’ll — and again, no offense — shoot Fel Seed through the heart with an arrow.”

“Hmm,” said Fenn, narrowing her eyes at me.

I sighed. “I mean, I get it, if Twinned Souls is even still *there*, which it maybe shouldn’t be —”

"It is," said Fenn. "Mary could feel it. She wants to do some testing, but she thinks that everything except the user interface is still there. She lost Symbiosis while you were gone, but not Twinned Souls, because of some rules lawyer stuff, or maybe the grace of the Dungeon Master."

"Okay," I said. "I'm just ... what I was saying was, let's say that you're William Tell, Legolas, and Hawkeye all rolled into one. Even with your bow in hand, these aren't the kinds of problems that can be solved with an arrow."

"William Tell used a crossbow," said Fenn, folding her arms.

"Uh," I said. "Okay, sorry?"

"If you're going to use Earth references, you should at least get them right," said Fenn. "Last time you mentioned William Tell, I looked him up, and he was a crossbow guy, not a bow and arrow guy. Completely different."

"I don't remember ever mentioning him," I said.

"You told the whole story," said Fenn. "Someone said William Tell had to shoot an apple off his son's head, so he pulled out two arrows, except they weren't arrows, they were bolts, and then he did the shot, perfectly, and the other arrow, except actually a bolt, was revealed to be meant for the guy who told him to take the shot, in case he missed."

"Well I sure hope I did a better job of telling that story than you just did," I said, smiling.

Fenn beamed at me. "It was interesting enough for me to go look it up," she said. "And yeah, crossbow guy, not bow guy."

"I also kind of misunderstood the Earth stuff," I said. "I mean, your interest in it. That's another thing I think I was going to apologize about."

"Oh, keep them coming," said Fenn. "I love apologies."

"You were trying to connect to me," I said. "And trying to figure out where the elements of elven culture came from. It's a way of understanding the world. You had your own interests, which were different from mine. I was too self-absorbed to see it, I guess. Worse, I was too self-absorbed when it came to you, specifically. It might have been more forgivable if it was the same level of self-absorption for everyone else."

"Oh yeah," said Fenn, laying back with her head resting against the couch. "That's the stuff. Keep it coming." She let out a small moan.

"Wow," I said. "You know, I'm trying to be emotionally mature here, to make amends, and you're just — making me feel like it's not actually appreciated." There was a temptation to laugh with her and blow off all the serious talk. There always had been, with Fenn.

"Sorry," she said, sitting up. "You know that I'm not good with this kind of stuff, right? Or did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget, it's just hard to remember that it was all only a few days ago for you," I said. I looked around in the piles of food and finally found something appealing, a small bar of chocolate. For whatever reason, the table had been stacked with a lot of candy.

"I could pretend to be 'emotionally mature', if that would help," said Fenn. She gave me a grin. "Sorry, Juniper, that I'm bad with my feelings," she was using a silly, mocking voice, "I use humor as a coping mechanism, I annoy people so that they'll push me away which lets me blame them for not taking a joke and protects my fragile ego, I try to defuse things that are serious so that I don't get hurt, myeh."

I gave her a skeptical look.

"See, it's funny because it's true," said Fenn. "But you're not laughing, which is the sign of a *really* funny joke."

"Yeah," I said, letting out a breath. "Well."

"Also, that's as close to an apology as you're going to get from me, at least for the moment," she said.

"Ah," I said. "Because you didn't want to see me doing the same expression of orgasmic bliss that you were doing to me?"

Fenn snorted and leaned forward, looking for something to eat. "Oh come on, you know what my expression of orgasmic bliss is like." She looked up. "That's probably inappropriate, now that you're married."

"It is," I said. Amaryllis wouldn't mind, but I would mind. Fenn probably would too.

"Damn," said Fenn, snapping her fingers. "Tell me, is it inappropriate in a good way or a bad way? Be warned that no matter what you say, I'm going to take it the wrong way."

"Our breakup was ... a few days ago for you," I said. "Something like four, five? Sorry, it was a while ago for me."

"Longer," said Fenn. "I've been in here, or a place like it, for almost a week. So, call it two weeks total, for me, since the break up. That's rounding up though."

"Then I don't really," I paused. "I don't really see what you get out of flirting with me."

"I like flirting," Fenn shrugged. "It's fun. Knowing that you're married, that you can't flirt back, that it's inappropriate — you know, it's immature, but that does it for me."

"And if I politely asked you not to?" I asked.

Fenn rolled her eyes. "Valencia talked to me," she said. "She explained that I would probably feel some lingering attraction to you, and I would need to 'not fuck you'."

"Her words?" I asked.

“Approximately,” said Fenn. “She understands me. I mean, even without the devil whispering in her ear, she gets it. I see a bad decision and my brain goes ‘oh my, don’t mind if I do’. There’s this *allure* to the forbidden. It would all be a lot easier if there were someone to rebound with, but there are *not* a lot of available men in our group. You should have worked on that while I was gone.”

“Grak?” I asked.

Fenn laughed. “I’d need to be *very* drunk to fuck Grak.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Did you know he doesn’t even have a penis?”

I didn’t find that particularly funny, but maybe it was because the dwarves were one of the Aerbian species that I was most intimately familiar with. Grak not having a dick was, yes, true, but her saying it out loud felt like it undercut who he was as a person, and the trials that his people had gone through. It was nothing against her, it just didn’t land right for me.

“Tough crowd,” said Fenn. She was watching me and seeing how poorly it had landed with me.

“It was dumb of me to suggest it,” I said. “And I know he doesn’t have the right kind of energy for you.”

“I suppose,” Fenn replied. “I guess it doesn’t matter, if the end is coming. Soon we’ll beat Fel Seed, capture Uther, then you’ll become some kind of god, and you can just whip me up a new boyfriend to help me soothe my woes.” She squinted at me, then waved a hand in my direction. “Someone like you, big and strong, but,” she waved her hand some more, then flicked her fingers at me, like she was casting a spell. “Better.”

“Like me, but better,” I nodded. “Can do. I mean, you could also go for someone who was completely unlike me. I don’t think I’m that great.”

“True,” said Fenn. “But you were a good friend. Are still, I guess, given that you helped pull me out of the hells, though I’m giving Mary most of the credit.” She was looking at me. “You know, I like the muscles, but a part of me misses the horribly plain Juniper, the one I met back in Silmar City. Simpler times.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Not actually that much simpler, but yeah.” My mind went to the horrible pile of undead, as large as a skyscraper, and the fireteam we’d had to kill together.

“So listen,” she said. “This has been ... great, I guess, but part of my mission statement here was to make sure that you weren’t suffering from any problems following the whole killing yourself a dozen times thing, or some of the shit in Fel Seed’s zone. So what do you say we clear the table and play some games, or pull out the television, or do something to take our minds off whatever the hell is going on in this great big world that seems to have left both of us a little bit behind.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’d like that.”



I went for the television, the better not to think for a bit. I'd been expecting something like the old setup, the one we'd used back in the time chamber, either the prototype made from Earth scraps or the simpler film projector. Instead, it was something that had clearly been made by on Aerb. It was shit, frankly, by the standards of Earth, but by the standards of having been invented three years prior with a bunch of workarounds to make sure that it wouldn't allow an eldritch entity to mind control people, it was incredibly impressive. It was bulky, a piece of furniture in its own right, but it had a little attachable module that could play cassettes with spooled magnetic tape inside them.

"Mary thought you would get a kick out of this," said Fenn. "They started pumping out the televisions, but they needed television stations, and shows, so," she slid in one of the cassettes. "This is the most popular show on Aerb, watched by about twelve percent of the population."

"The fuck?" I asked. "There are televisions in *twelve percent* of homes?" Or more than that, because surely not everyone was watching this show. That seemed really high, for only three years having passed.

"You'll have to ask her about it," said Fenn. "Shhh, it's starting."

The image quality wasn't great, but again, that was by Earth standards. For Aerb, it was probably impressive as heck. Part of what was probably *really* impressive was how complete of an experience the whole thing was, polished and iterated over, with all kinds of tricks that had been reworked and refined on Earth over the course of a century. There were production company logos and a fade-to-black as the music began to rise, with a wide establishing shot of some Aerbian city. I didn't know how long those things had taken to happen on Earth, but here they were, done right away in the first few years of television on Aerb. Everything was in full color, and the audio quality was better than I'd heard on Aerb's radios or telephones.

The establishing shot gave way to a mid-shot of an apartment building, and that in turn led to a shot of two people sharing breakfast together at a small table in the middle of an apartment. The woman was broshe, tall and elegantly dressed, while I guessed that the man was ha-lunde.

"What is this?" I asked.

Fenn didn't answer me. She was gazing intently at the screen. It was nice to be with her, but I didn't know what I was expecting to get out of this. There would be a punchline, I expected.

The idle conversation between the two characters was cut short when someone knocked on the door, and the camera moved and panned, showing only the woman and obscuring what was happening by the door. She looked a little bit bored, but then in the course of words being exchanged at the door, her eyes went wide. There was a sound of a gunshot, then a second, and then the woman was shot twice in the chest. The camera held on her as she groaned and bled out. In the distance, footsteps were heard beating a retreat.

"They allow this to be shown on television?" I asked.

"After the kiddos are to bed, yeah," replied Fenn. "No Hays Code."

"I didn't understand that reference," I admitted.

Fenn shushed me.

"In the criminal justice system of Anglecynn," said the TV, "The crimes are processed by three separate yet equally important systems: The police, who investigate crime, the judges, who determine guilt, and the exclusions, where trials are held to determine whether the criminal's life should be spared."

"Is this fucking Law ampersand Order?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Fenn. She was still looking at the screen, not at me. "You know, they actually kill the actors for this."

"What?" I asked.

"Yeah," she replied. "On Earth they use those little blood bomb things?"

"Squibs," I said.

Fenn frowned at me. "I thought that was a wizard who couldn't do magic."

"It's both," I replied.

"You understand I'm going to look this up later?" she asked, poking me in the ribs.

"I do," I said, squirming.

"But JK Rowling decided on squib, right?" asked Fenn. "Why would she have used that word if it was already a word for something?"

"No idea," I said. "Maybe she didn't know."

"Anyway, we haven't invented squibs on Aerb," said Fenn. "In plays and such they use trick costumes or something like that, and make a red silk scarf coming out of someone's vest look close enough that the audience gets it. But for a show like Crime & Exclusion, they just have two revision mages on set, and the actors agree to be temporarily killed until the cameras stop rolling."

"That's fucking insane," I said. "How do you even put in a performance?"

"Practice, I'd guess," Fenn shrugged. "Though I think usually they try to make sure the deaths are pretty fast, like that one. And it's not hard to act like you've just been shot when you've just been shot."

"Wait," I said, watching what was happening on screen. "That actress."

"Yup," said Fenn, beaming at me. "Our Mary moonlights as an actress."

We'd been talking over a lot of the show, but apparently this was the part where the main two detectives worked on the case together. Her partner was a guy who had been on-screen for quite a lot of what we'd seen, and they both played kind of similar characters, weary and sardonic. They looked around the crime scene for a bit, talked to some witnesses, then went to track down some leads. Fenn and I talked through a lot of it.

"Nah, I've seen six episodes of this now, and it's pretty critical of the whole thing," said Fenn. "It's got our girl's sense of justice and complexity in it."

"Cops always get the bad guys though, right?" I asked.

"Nope," said Fenn. "In one of them, they get the wrong guy. I mean, it's not stated outright, but the actor did a good job in the exclusion part selling the innocence angle."

"Eh," I said. "I still think 'beautiful detective saves the day' might be a bit of propaganda. I would maybe call it unintentional, but if Mary is behind it, then it's got to be on purpose."

"For sure," replied Fenn. "It's our Mary, she's putting herself front and center on almost half of these shows, and she's writing almost all of them. A lot of them are cribbed from Earth, but she controls the televisions, the stations, and the companies that are making the content, so of course she's showing what she wants to her twelve percent. Crime & Exclusion is the best of them though."

It turned out to be a story of revenge. The guy in the apartment at the start, the one who'd got shot, had fucked a corpse, which his species did to reproduce. It was one he'd been allowed to, as it had been donated, but the guy who'd done the shooting hadn't understood that, or maybe just couldn't handle it. The detectives caught him, he had a very brief trial, and then he was sent to an exclusion, which took up the last twenty minutes of runtime. It was less brutal than I'd thought it would be, especially given the violence of the opening, but it was definitely not what I'd have chosen to watch after having gotten out of the hells. With Fenn beside me though, it wasn't so bad, especially because we were talking over it.

We spent quite a bit of time there, snacking on things, talking over taped television, and just generally taking it easy. I was, unavoidably, getting some details on what had happened on Aerb, but there was nothing that surprised me all that much, not given what I already knew.

"You know, maybe I should have gotten pregnant," said Fenn.

"You ... did?" I asked.

"No, right, I know that," she gave me a light punch, "But back when we were trying to bring Solace back to life," she said. "I'd have gotten nine kooshy months in a time chamber, waited on hand and foot."

"I think you're looking at those days with glasses that have been not just tinted, but painted over," I said. "The first few days in the chamber were fine, but it grated on you."

"True," she said. "And with Mary, she could at least get along, smooth things over, but you and me, we probably would have had some fights. It's not the kind of place you'd want to fight, given how you still need to share all your meals together and can't even go to another room. Lots of sex, especially boredom sex, but also lots of fights. So you're right, bad idea."

"But rilirin, right?" I asked. "Nostalgia for a thing that never was and never will be."

"Yeah," said Fenn. She sighed. "But hey, once the Fel Seed thing goes flawlessly, and we find Uther, and then dot dot dot, and you become god, you can create an alternate reality where that happened, and make it not suck!"

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "I mean, the point of using the time chamber was to bring Solace back, and if I were god, I would just ... do that. Just bring her back."

"Seriously?" asked Fenn. "So you would never create some contrived circumstance that would put us together?"

"No," I said. "Or ... maybe. Between things with Fel Seed, the Dungeon Master, the hells, and before that, Invriezen, and the locus, I've been thinking about gods a lot. About how I would do things in an ethical way. I'm thinking of opt-in danger, like there is in video games, some amount of risk and pain for people who want it that way. So maybe, if we both opted into that, then I, as a benevolent god, would have contrived circumstances so that both of us would have been stuck together in such a way that we both had a chance to learn and grow."

Fenn gave me a poke. "You're less fun than you used to be."

"I was never fun," I replied.

"Yeah, but you were less serious," said Fenn. "Even now, after a few hours of rest and relaxation, I can feel you vibrating to get back out there. You used to treat actually doing stuff as an unfortunate obligation."

"It is," I said. "All this stuff, it still *is* an unfortunate obligation, one that I would rather not have, one that I would rather someone else do. But it's *my* obligation, and if I don't do it, it's not going to be done."

"You're not worried that it's all a trick?" asked Fenn. "That you won't open that door, or find Uther, and there will just be a little note on yellow legal paper saying that your Lost King is in another castle?"

"Sorry, but I don't really want a lot of reasons not to go back there," I said. "I don't want to be convinced. To the extent I have that same driving purpose, I want to keep it, because I'm going to need every ounce of willpower to get through Fel Seed a second time, not to mention traveling up the Long Stairs, however far we have to go."

"No, you're right," said Fenn. "I shouldn't have said anything." She turned away a little bit. "I just wish I had my fuck-off buddy back."

"Have you tried Pallida?" I asked. "She might be available for that. I mean, she's a thief by trade."

"Meh," said Fenn. "New people." She leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder. We were ostensibly watching a talk show, one hosted by Amaryllis. It was okay, though I understood about zero percent of the monologue. It was weird and unsettling seeing her mug for the camera, but the studio audience seemed to be laughing.

It was nice, being with Fenn, but the more time we spent together, the more I could see all the old cracks in our relationship. Nothing much had changed for her, and even the trip through the hells, tough as it had been for all of us, didn't seem like it had particularly caused her to reflect and grow. / hadn't grown, not all that much, but for all that I could see the things that had attracted me to her, it wasn't as appealing anymore.

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When we were in the time chamber together, or the massive dilation that technically didn't count as a time chamber, Grak gave me a long hug, and I hugged him back, closing my eyes and letting it go on for as long as he needed it, which turned out to be a long time.

"I missed you," said Grak, pulling away.

"If I can be blunt, it wasn't enough time for me to miss anyone," I said.

"I know," he nodded.

"So," I said. "What's new, I guess?"

"Well," he replied. "The biggest thing to happen in my life is that I died and returned from the hells."

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry about that."

"I volunteered," he said. "We were not short on volunteers. I could have let someone else go."

"I know you have a thing about shirking duty," I said. "You know, you don't need to go fight Fel Seed with us. I'm giving you an out there. Same goes for the Long Stairs, if we beat Fel Seed and have a chance to go get you."

"I have a thing about shirking duty," he replied, smiling at me slightly. "Now, while I have you, there are some Ranks configurations I think you'll find interesting ..."

That was mostly what we did together, maybe because he was following the mandate of getting me mentally and emotionally ready for Fel Seed, or maybe because he felt it was the best way for us to connect. I asked him about his personal life a few times, but was mostly rebuffed. Like the rest of them, he'd been living in the DFEZ, though he often traveled the world for work, which seemed to suit him. He wanted to tell me more about the places he'd been than about himself, it seemed, but traveling the world and seeing more of its enormous variety was important to him.

With his unique abilities, he'd gone into a number of entad exclusion zones and shut them all down, at least as much as possible, finding the entads themselves and then putting wards around them to stop their effects. He didn't really seem to care that much about it though, nor see it as any great accomplishment, and my guess was that the fact that his abilities were unearned and unfair still weighed down any joy he might have found in his competence and power.

He had friends in Dorisopolis, which had a fairly small contingent of dignitaries, engineers, specialists, and there were regular social events that were largely dominated by Dorises. Hearing about it made me think of a Where's Waldo book I'd had with a land filled with Waldos and like a dozen random non-Waldos thrown in. He'd also grown close with Raven, though I had trouble imagining what that was like.

It was clear that he'd missed me, and toward the end of our time together, he broached the topic of depression and suicide, which seemed to him like a spectre that would forever haunt him. I had no easy answers there, only empathy and understanding. I hoped that was enough. I broached the topic of pharmaceutical answers, which were beyond the reach of Aerb's technology but not the backpack Bethel had eaten, and he'd told me that he'd tried one which made him violently ill. I stopped trying to fix things after that, and did my best to make him feel loved, since that was what I had to offer.

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"I'm not coming with you," said Valencia. After a brief hug, it was the first thing she'd said to me. She definitely seemed older, in a way that Amaryllis and Grak mostly hadn't. Maybe it was that she'd had more maturing to do.

"I understand," I said.

"Jorge and I got married," she said. "We have three children."

"Three?" I asked. "Damn, you must have been busy."

"It's been almost five years for me," said Valencia. "I sleep using the time chamber." She shrugged. "It's necessary in order to ensure the infernals don't know that the attacks are tied to a real person who needs to sleep. It's been a part of the protocol."

"Still," I said. "Children. That's ... unexpected. They, uh, have souls?"

She nodded. "Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle left behind some research data. We discovered that it was possible. Safe, or as safe as having children when magical healing doesn't work."

"And I suppose you read them the Harry Potter books every night?" I asked, giving her a smile.

"Only the oldest," she said. "I hope you don't mind that I used the name Juniper. It felt more fitting when I thought you were dead."

"Oh," I said. "No problem, I guess. For your sake, I hope he's not like me. I have a feeling I was a bit of a tough kid to raise."

"She's a girl, actually," said Valencia.

"Huh," I said.

"Ah," she said. "That you *do* mind."

"I'll get over it," I said. I had been teased for having a girl's name a few times, but not enough that I had a complex about it.

"I know you will," she smiled. "I missed you. We haven't had enough time together."

"I feel like you became a different person while I wasn't looking," I said. "When we first met —"

"I was abused for almost my entire life," said Valencia. "You were the first person to treat me like a human, and you were the reason that the tables were turned on the infernals. You allowed me to not just block them from taking control of my body and my words, but to *kill* them. I know you had nothing to do with it, that it was the machinations of a higher power, but in my mind then, and still a bit now, it was all you."

"Which wasn't healthy," I said. I looked out over the coffee table, which had been restocked when she came in. I was having trouble meeting her eyes.

"A relationship between us might have worked," said Valencia. "But it wasn't a good place to be starting from. There was a power imbalance between us, a complex one that went both directions in various ways. It's hard to fix relationships that have a bad start. Not impossible, but hard. All that applies to being friends as well, but less so."

"And now?" I asked. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"We are," she said. "Or were. It's been a long time, for me. When I left with Bethel, it wasn't just because I thought that's where I was needed. It was because I knew that I had never made it up to you, what happened with Fenn."

I frowned at her. "You did," I said. "I don't — I expected too much of you, and a lot of my anger was just — you said true things. I was defensive."

"I know," said Valencia. "But I was in the wrong, and I needed to square it away with myself before I could feel like I had actually done a good job apologizing."

"Okay," I said. "Consider your extended apology happily received."

She gave me a smile. "I would come with you, to Fel Seed and beyond, if I didn't have children. Maybe even then, if someone didn't need to hold down the fort as far as the hells go. But as it stands, this is probably the last time we'll see each other, until and unless you come out the other side."

“Thank you all the same,” I said. “How is it, being a mother?”

“Good,” she replied. “Better than expected. I’m privileged in a way that nearly no one else in the world is. Bethel has been a good home to us. She watches the children, cooks us meals, makes sure that everyone is safe and happy. We’ve given each other what we both wanted.”

“Ah,” I said. “It’s still ... there’s a part of me that flinches from her. Once bitten, twice shy.”

“I know,” said Valencia. “I think you’re right though, that you’re under no obligation to like her, or to be her friend. She’ll help you through what remains, to the extent she can, and then part ways forever.”

“Is she going to be a problem, when it comes to Uther?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Valencia. “She’s broken out of her own cycles of hatred. It’s still a reflex within her, but she’s gone years without hurting anyone. If I could come with, I would be able to make sure that she stayed the course, but the thought of leaving my children without a mother terrifies me down to my core. I never had a mother. They’d have a father, a good one, but ... there are also the hells to consider, which make me feel like I’m not being selfish. I don’t even know if I would be able to act against them in the Long Stairs. I’ll stay here, with them. We’re already losing our house for an unknown period of time.” She gave me a but-what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it smile.

“I’ll try to be understanding with her,” I said. “I’ll ... do my best.”

“I know,” nodded Valencia. She looked over the coffee table. “Now, did you know that I ran a candy store? There are a few creations I want you to try.”

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“Okay,” said Amaryllis, once Valencia left the time dilated apartment. “Are you ready for a debrief on the last three years and a mission overview for what comes next, or do you need time with me?”

“I need time with you,” I said. “But ... you can do a soft debrief.”

Amaryllis nodded. She didn’t look like she’d aged at all, despite the three years, which, with her clones, should have been something like ninety subjective years. That wasn’t counting time in the time chambers either, which I was sure she would have used.

“Wait,” I said, before she could start. “Are we still — I mean, I was dead, but are we still ... married?”

“Are you asking if I still love you?” asked Amaryllis.

I gave her a sheepish nod.



"I still love you," she said. Her voice was soft. She was sitting across from me, on a couch, with papers neatly laid out in front of her. "There have been other potential suitors, some of them appealing, and offers of strategic partnership, but I turned them all down."

"Oh," I said. "I'd have understood if, uh." I paused. "If you'd had the need for affection, or intimacy, or even just needed a marriage to get things done."

"I know," said Amaryllis. "If it had been necessary, I might have, but I was able to do without. I always knew you were coming back."

"You did?" I asked.

"You'd call it an article of faith," said Amaryllis. "It took a long time to get anyone else on my side."

"I can understand that," I said. "In terms of debriefing me, can we start with what the world thinks happened to me? I assume my ignominious defeat at the hands of Fel Seed wasn't made public knowledge?"

"We made the strategic decision to reveal the existence of the Other Side," said Amaryllis. "According to public reports, you've been there, fighting the Union Empire. Figaro Finch has been helping us keep the truth from getting out."

"Okay," I said. "I'm not ready to go on your talkshow just yet. You'll need to give me more information if you need me to lie to anyone."

"I have a script prepared," said Amaryllis. "But it's moot, because we're not going to do that unless the rest of our plans go horribly wrong. I'm a bit worried about the Other Side actually, because it *does* seem like there's some amount of unrest within the Union Empire, to the extent we're able to get any intelligence out, and that instability might mean that there are plot elements happening there, but at this point we simply don't have time."

"I'm sorry you had to go through this alone," I said. "Or, not alone, but without me."

Amaryllis had been looking down at her papers, then looked back up at me. "Thank you," she said. She looked at the papers, then set them down and got up from her couch. With quiet footsteps, she came over to my side, wrapping her arms around me as she sat down. She buried her face in my shoulder and kissed my neck. For a moment she just sat there, holding me and breathing me in. "I missed you, Juniper."

I rubbed her back for a bit, and then she moved us so that we were laying together, with her on top of me, her face pressed against my chest. I didn't really know what all she'd been through in the past three years, but it had probably been hard. She'd had the rest of the team, and the clones, but it wouldn't have been even remotely the same, just because of the personalities involved. She'd gotten along best with Raven, but their differences in values would have undoubtedly caused friction at certain points. And from what Fenn had said, Amaryllis had been diminished, losing the power of Symbiosis and all her magics along with it.

“Okay,” she said, after ten or fifteen minutes had passed. She pushed off me, then leaned down and gave me a long, slow kiss. “Fuck I’ve missed you.”

“Sorry I died,” I said.

“It was necessary,” she said. “Cold and cruel, but a necessary part of the plan.”

“The ... plan?” I asked, suddenly alarmed.

“The Dungeon Master’s plan,” she said. I relaxed. “You needed to die so that we could follow the pattern, the second time he can give us a fair fight, which we should win. You always talked about the do-over, the new campaign you were making that would correct for the problems of the past. That’s what this is.”

“It is?” I asked.

She nodded.

“I actually talked with him,” I said. “After I died. When I was in hell.”

Amaryllis stared at me. “And what did he say?” she asked. There was something about the way she said that, a kind of breathlessness, that made me uncomfortable.

“He copped to being Vervain, said that he hated me, explained some of what he did with Arthur, uh, told me Fel Seed’s weakness was that Fel Seed wasn’t actually the Dungeon Master,” I paused. “I can see in your eyes that you’re going to ask me a lot of questions about the precise words, but this was three days ago, and I frankly went through a lot after that, so you’ll forgive me if I’m just giving you the gist of things.”

“It’s vitally important,” said Amaryllis. “I’m sorry Juniper, I know you hate it, but if there’s some hint, some clue, then we need to know it.”

“We’re going to Fel Seed anyway,” I said. “We’re going to try to defeat him a second time, because we really have no choice in the matter anymore. If we had some kind of clever plan against the Void Beast, or against the hells, maybe I would say that we stay and fight, but it seems like we don’t. I can see the necessity of getting eyes on every word the Dungeon Master said, but I would rather just charge into the fight again.”

“Okay,” said Amaryllis, relaxing.

“Okay?” I asked. “That’s not like you.”

“We’re following the will of the Dungeon Master,” she said. “We need to do our due diligence, but I’ll let you go over his words on your own, if that’s what you prefer. I trust you.”

“Really?” I asked. “Seriously?”

"I've come to accept that the Dungeon Master doesn't speak to me," said Amaryllis. "To the extent anything was designed for me, it was always subordinate to the things that were about you."

"Ah," I said. "That sounds ... kind of grim."

"It's reality," she replied. She got up off of me and went back to her own couch, taking a moment to compose herself. "Are you ready for the *proper* debrief?"

I nodded, and Amaryllis gave me the bullet points of the last three years.

With me gone, the Council of Arches had lost a seat. That wouldn't have been a problem, because quorum was defined as four of the seven seats, but there was a challenge from some of the tuung on account of several of those members being 'straw' advisors, under the control of Amaryllis but not actually involved in governance. There could have been an argument, or a political fight, but Amaryllis gracefully allowed the Council to dissolve, at least as an official government body. That left the first and second generation to self-governance, which brought with it a fracturing of their society into a number of different factions, at least partly along generational lines. The tuung loyalists were still loyal to Amaryllis, the tuung nationalists were loyal to their Republic, and the tuung traditionalists were more interested in going back to the traditional ways of their people, albeit with some level of synthesis with the culture Amaryllis had created. This was not, by any means, an equal split, with the traditionalists being a small but vocal minority. I had some questions about the tuung that I'd known, either the ones I'd talked with on security detail, or those that I'd sat with in committee sessions, and Amaryllis gave me brief one line descriptions of the trajectories of their lives.

The Void Beast had altered its velocity, or had its velocity altered, and it still wasn't known what had caused it. If you graphed it though, you could see a sharp upward inflection which started with an explosion at a void factory, but couldn't be accounted for with just that. The common theory was that it was another death cult like the one in Li'o, though how they'd gotten their hands on enough void crystals to make an appreciable change in trajectory was a mystery. In theory, it was possible to set up banks of thousands of void rifles firing every six seconds for as long as they had power, but only a death cult would do that. It was also possible that some state actor had done it, for whatever reason, or some non-state actor following incentives, but it was very difficult to know for sure.

The Republic of Miunun had become a part of the Empire of Common Cause, though it was a bit of a contentious issue for both Miunun and the Empire. The industrial might of the small nation was undeniable, as was the educated workforce and technological prowess. The omnidevice they'd been producing hundreds of millions of seemed likely to be in every home in the near future, and the massive factory and supply lines couldn't be beat by anyone, especially since so much of it had been done with entad assistance. It wasn't just a television, it was a (better) radio and VCR too, which meant that anyone with disposable income would be clamoring for it. Amaryllis had no official government position within the Republic, but she commanded loyalty, and had personally founded and funded almost every major company, often acting, with her clones, as the entirety of upper management.

The Dorises had gotten their collective act together. There were, apparently, a few factors involved in that, but the biggest thing that had happened was that resource scarcity had been virtually eliminated. Grak could, apparently, set up a ward that would prevent duplication of a Doris, but not her things, and these had been set up in public places all around the zone, enough so that a Doris could duplicate her possessions once or twice a day. Entad duplicates had also been flooded into the city, supplied through BGD-sponsored clades, borrowed from the stash that Amaryllis had accumulated. Resource scarcity had been virtually eliminated over the course of a year, and cleanup efforts had been followed by new buildings. It was enough to create a slowly expanding zone of lawfulness and charity around the initial site where BGD had been found. One of the biggest changes, at least according to Amaryllis, was a change in the *culture* of the zone, and the understanding that all this largess ultimately came from one of their own. A combination of extraordinarily improved conditions and the idea among Dorises that they were capable of being not completely shit had led the Empire to reclassify the zone from major exclusion to minor exclusion. A second reclassification to 'free' exclusion was on the horizon.

The locus was healthy and expanding, and most of the tuung nationalists still lived on the Isle of Poran, which had quadrupled in size thanks to whatever the locus was doing. There was a thriving colony of druids there, mostly doing jack squat, and tight controls on who went in or out, because the place would have been mobbed in a heartbeat if anyone had let it. Amaryllis said, in a low voice, that there had been a sighting of a second locus, far away from the Six-Eyed Doe, one shaped like a wide white toad with a garden on his back. Information was, at the moment, sparse, and inspecting a locus too closely was a bad idea.

"Do you think it's," I said. "I mean."

"Yes," said Amaryllis. "I do. There's no proof one way or another. It's possible it's not even connected to the doe, or not a locus. I saw it with my own eyes, then left."

"And what, uh," I said. "What would be my ... responsibilities?"

"Unclear," replied Amaryllis.

"Okay then," I said.

Amaryllis had, in fact, gone to the Outer Reaches and become a conceptual version of herself, as her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather had done before her.

"It was difficult," she said. "Probably the most difficult thing I did in the entire time that you were dead. Getting there was easy, Raven found a way, but *being* there was like trying to drive straight while completely drunk. I could see when I was going the wrong way, but when I tried to correct, I would overcorrect and end up swerving all over the place. The Court is mercurial, not even really fitting of the name court, it's just people as ideas, holding ideas, using them, sharing them, altering them, *being* them. I took on the Mantle of Princess — imagine everything in all capital letters, all the time — and the Mantle of Assassin, a combination that hadn't been seen in thousands of years. I could barely remember what I was there for. It was so easy to get sucked into the games they played. Death and Hero were in personal union, I think because you were dead, but I never got a straight answer from anyone."

"Sounds confusing," I said.

"I enjoyed it, at the time," said Amaryllis. "Enjoyed it a bit too much, to be honest. I killed the Queen and took her Mantle, and looking back there was no real reason for it. I was prideful, I think, maybe because of the Princess Mantle, or the Assassin one. I — my conceptual self — was there for an entire year. I almost missed the window for bringing you back."

"But you did come back," I said. "And you managed to insert a way out of the hells."

"I did," nodded Amaryllis. "You know, the whole time I was in p-space, I was thinking that it was the kind of thing we should have been doing together. It was the kind of thing we *could* have been doing together. I don't know why it didn't occur to us to do all this once Fenn died."

"It didn't seem possible, I guess," I said.

"You would have been better at the insertion than I was," said Amaryllis. "I kept trying to build a way out of the hells, to retroactively construct ... something, anything, that would get you back. We didn't have your soul, we didn't know whether you were alive or dead, we didn't even know if you were maybe in the hells and we'd just missed you, somehow."

"And so you built this enormous thing," I said. "Something that runs on suffering, something that the infernals could plausibly have built and then never used, with high costs on both ends."

"It was as good as I could do," said Amaryllis.

"I know," I said. "I mean, I figured you didn't just do it that way for kicks."

Amaryllis nodded. "In a way, it was, though. There was a part of me that was trying to create something beautiful, something inspiring, poignant. But in the end, I managed it, to make something that could do the impossible. And even then, I had to betray people who were — not friends, not in p-space, but who were aligned, which maybe meant something more. If I'd just been able to keep my head straight, I would have been able to do something better, but I was in this fog of clever ideas, of roles and narratives and ... it didn't feel *right* to make a portal to the surface without suffering and death. I tried other things, too, but the portal left me diminished, and I was worried if I stayed too long, I would never come out."

"You did more than anyone could have expected," I said. "Whatever went on there."

"The clones had to fend for themselves," said Amaryllis. "They couldn't sync. We did, once I was back, but there was some divergence, some sense of ... differentiation."

"And you're okay?" I asked.

"There were three of the thirty that didn't want to merge," said Amaryllis.

"Ah," I said. "And ... did they, eventually?"

She nodded. "Two of them were," she let out a breath. "Lovers. It was utter narcissism." She blushed slightly at the memory, then paled. The muscle in her cheek went taut. "I didn't manage

to convince them. They didn't think that I would have the same love for myself as they had for each other. They argued that they could be just as effective without merging. I just merged them anyway."

"Ah," I said. It sounded suspiciously like murder, or at least forcibly changing another person's mind. I couldn't judge though, not with three years gone. "And ... you're okay?"

She reached over and threaded her fingers through mine. "The world is coming to an end, but for the first time, I feel like we're back on track."

The party had stayed together, which had apparently not been a given once the disastrous attempt to Fel Seed had been made. Pallida had fucked off for most of the time I'd been gone, rejoining the crew only within the last few months, and then only because Amaryllis had put in the time and effort to retrieve Pallida's favorite hat from the Bryllyg Sea. Raven had gone back to the Library, but only temporarily, and mostly to make amends and ensure that everyone was working on the same side. The end of the world was on the horizon, and seemed unavoidable, at least based on the information they had.

Grak had never left the group, nor threatened to, but he'd had a number of relationships in that time, most of them flings, some of them serious, and Amaryllis had been mildly worried that he would settle down, leaving her without the most powerful warder in the world. I got a lot more from Amaryllis than I'd gotten from Grak, at least about the relationships.

Bethel had been brought back into the fold. She was done with being a place for colonies of tuung, done with being a mobile defense platform, and for the most part, done being of any particular use to anyone, except as the best house she could be. The one exception to that was a promise, one made shortly after the whole Fel Seed thing had gone sideways, extracted by Amaryllis in what was apparently a heated exchange. Bethel was going to help with a second shot at Fel Seed, and the Long Stairs. She felt she owed it to us, and she had unfinished business with Uther, though to hear Amaryllis tell it, that was more about closure.

And Valencia? She had the three children, of course. She had been a friend to Amaryllis and the others, but not as much of a partner. She wasn't coming with us to go against Fel Seed, not when she was so much more vulnerable than we were, and not when she had a family. It was, clearly, not what Amaryllis wanted, but it did mean that Valencia would be on hand to counterattack whatever the infernals were doing. She would also be there remotely, watching in and able to speak through Bethel and a variety of different entads, but it wasn't clear whether that would work in the Long Stairs. It was odd, how differently Amaryllis spoke about Valencia compared to how Valencia talked about herself.

"She's changed the most," said Amaryllis. "She's stable. Happy. Not all that interested in adventuring, or statecraft, or, really, any of the mountain of work she's most suited to help with. Bethel is mostly her house."

"You were trying to keep everything together," I said.

"Maybe it would have been possible, if I'd done things differently," said Amaryllis. She let out a long, low sigh. "I think that's everything you'd care about, and most of what you'd need to know."

"The rune magic exclusion?" I asked.

"Very recent," she said. "I tried other methods, and nothing worked. It's arguably the worst exclusion in Aerb's history, and I was almost solely responsible. And now we have very little time."

"Because of the souls piling up in the hells?" I asked.

"It's already weighing on me," said Amaryllis. "And if the guilt and doubt weren't enough, there's some chance they find out that it was me. I could be arrested."

"You've been a fugitive from the law before," I said, frowning. "I mean, I understand what you're saying, the gravity of spiking souls not working anymore, but ... being arrested, or having to avoid it, I'm missing what's clearly an emotional component." I'd come to that realization as I was talking to her.

"Three years ago it would just have been about the loss of resources," said Amaryllis. "Now? I've built up so much. I'm famous. Actually, so famous that it's almost a problem sometimes. We're at twenty percent saturation on the omni, but the reach is far larger than that. I have power, influence, and — I'm using it to do real good." She looked me in the eye. "I thought about not going for you."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"The three year window was closing," she said. "I could extend the window for Fenn, there are half a dozen ways to do that, but we didn't have you, and it was only a guess that you'd been bottled. Maybe the three year time limit was only imagined, if you were still alive, being endlessly tortured by Fel Seed. We didn't know. We still don't know, actually, what the fuck Fel Seed had done with you. A part of me was having a crisis of faith, wanting to call it all off, to forge a world without you, or at least put it off and hope that we could still execute the plan at a later date. It was attachment speaking, I think, a base desire for the wealth, accomplishment, accolades, and power I'd won. I loved you, I *do* love you, but I knew that no matter what happened, when I went ahead with the rescue attempt, everything else would irrecoverably shatter."

"And it did," I nodded. "Just worse than you thought."

"No," said Amaryllis, shaking her head. "Not worse than that worst case. I thought that one of us wouldn't make it back from the hells. I thought maybe it would just be you back in the world, at the expense of everyone and everything else."

"Oh," I said. "That's ... a huge risk to take." I did wonder why she'd chosen to go, when she could have sent someone else, but I was worried about the answer she'd give me. It smelled like narrative thinking.

"It was a risk," said Amaryllis. "Infernal unification was a bigger risk. If things had gone perfectly, we might have been able to extract you without them noticing. Now ... we tried to keep it contained, and we tried to make sure there were decoys, but they have their own investigative teams. They've been working on the project for three years now, adapting to this extreme asymmetric warfare, and we've tipped our hand, at least in part. There's a good chance they'll know we can read the minds of the dead. Val can kill them, but we need to know where they are first, and the hells are just too big, with too many infernals, too many teams working in cells, and too much of a risk that they'll breach into Aerb and make a beachhead here we won't know about until it's too late." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters. We just need to get you to the Long Stairs."

"I know," I said.

Amaryllis let out a breath. "I was hoping you would say that. Come on. We have planning to do."