“Jorge and I are going on a date,” said Valencia as she came into the common room and flopped down in a chair.

Bethel had gone big. The common room was shaped like an egg, with the domed ceiling forty feet high. An ornate chandelier hung down and gave the whole place a warm light, which was supplemented by a fireplace off to one side. Bethel was mostly past feeling discomfort from being able to reshape herself, and was indulging in a flair for the dramatic, which went like a streak through the whole house. What she couldn’t produce as simply a piece of house from the Anyhouse ability, she was pulling from Earth via the backpack’s ability. As Valencia put it, we lived in an enormous house where every single room was a Room of Requirement.

At times, I regretted giving her the Harry Potter books. I hadn’t thought that she would glom onto them as much as she did; she had read through the series and then decided that there wasn’t much more that the world of literature could offer her, in spite of my suggestions for other series she could try.

On hearing Valencia’s announcement, Amaryllis set down her papers and stared. She had a desk in the common room; she was working far, far harder than the rest of us, and if not for the desk, probably wouldn’t have spent as much time in our company. “It is *incredibly* unprofessional for him to ask you on a date,” said Amaryllis.

“Well *I* was the one to ask him,” said Valencia. “Because I knew that he wouldn’t have asked me on his own.”

“Oh,” said Amaryllis. She was frowning. “It’s still incredibly unprofessional for him to accept.”

“I think it’s nice,” said Solace. “He seems like a very safe choice for you to experiment with courtship.” She was sitting on the floor, putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Her body was that of an adolescent crantek, which developmentally equated to about a five year old human. The puzzle was a way of developing visual pattern recognition and fine motor control, both of which still needed some development.

“Thank you, Solace,” said Valencia. She looked to Amaryllis. “I didn’t say it because I wanted anyone to weigh in, I said it because I wanted to share something important that was happening in my life.”

“Did you ask him with a devil’s skills at manipulation?” asked Amaryllis.

Valencia shifted in her seat. “No,” she said.

“That really wasn’t a convincing no,” said Fenn. She laid with her head in my lap, reading through the first Harry Potter book, with the grey cat on her lap. She was only reading at Valencia’s insistence and a bit of annoyance at not being able to follow what she was saying half the time. I had been relaxing, listening to music and not thinking of anything much. Most of the music we had was vinyl, and I was doing some cultural exploration of Earth of my own, since almost all of it was before my time. We were currently listening to jazz, which was Grak’s

choice; improvisational music was apparently a mainstay of dwarven culture, though theirs was (to hear him tell it) much more constrained, or at least had been within his one specific clan.

“I took in a devil to see what I *would* say,” said Valencia. “And then a few more to get second opinions. But when I asked him, it was just me, with my own words. They were only giving advice.”

“Seems sketchy,” said Fenn.

Valencia crossed her arms. “I didn’t want to screw it up.”

“There are things that he can’t know,” said Amaryllis.

“I *know*,” said Valencia.

The List of Things That People Can’t Know

1. Game layer
2. The identity of Amaryllis Penndraig
3. Our possession of a teleportation key
4. The assault at Aumann’s
5. The public fight in Boastre Vino
6. The murder of Larkspur and company
7. Releasing Fallatehr from prison
8. Valencia the non-anima
9. Extracting Esuen
10. The hijacking of the *Down and Out*
11. Our “possession” of a meta-entad
12. Our deal with Uniquities

Jorge already knew a whole lot of those, naturally, since he was Finch’s second-in-command, a relatively high-ranking member of Uniquities, and part of the operation that had briefly captured Valencia. The ones he *didn’t* know were of concern, and the one Valencia was at the greatest danger of revealing to him was the identity of her father, which would raise a whole lot of really obvious questions that we didn’t want to answer.

“What do you two talk about?” asked Grak.

“Harry Potter,” said Fenn.

“We talk about other things,” said Valencia, slightly defensive. She looked at the book Fenn was halfway through. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Fenn. “Though some things get lost in translation, and some of it I’m sure Amaryllis would rail against as being bigotry.” She leafed back a handful of pages. “Greedy goblins, for example.”

I nodded at that. “I mean, their primary cultural trait on Aerb is still material possession, right?”

“You have to make a distinction between the traits of a culture and a species,” said Amaryllis. “You don’t say that goblins are greedy, you don’t say that goblins focus on possession of written information, you instead say that historically their society has been dominated by warring gold mages and a veneration of wealth, and that currently, the Kel’e’thar Library engages in some practices which, yes, might contain some elements of greed.”

“Jesus that’s a mouthful,” said Fenn.

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” said Amaryllis, almost by reflex. They did that a lot, enough that the others had joined in. I wasn’t too big a fan; I’d been raised Christian, and while I was an atheist, it sort of seemed like they were mocking a religion that they only had second-hand knowledge of. Granted, Amaryllis had read the Bible, and Fenn had read at least part of it so they could talk about it, but it still felt kind of ...disrespectful, I guess, even if it was disrespect toward a religion that I didn’t have a lot of respect towards.

“I like Mrs. Rowling’s goblins better than Juniper’s,” said Valencia. “No offense, Juniper.”

“I’d really hesitate to call them mine,” I said. “Everything on Aerb is kind of … twisted, warped, different in different ways, and some of it was just me being silly or making jokes.”

“Yeah, Aerb goblins suck,” said Fenn.

“Please never say anything like that in public,” said Amaryllis. “You’re a government official now.”

“I shall continue to hide and vote how you tell me to vote,” said Fenn. “And I’ll wait for the next proper adventure we all know is coming.”

“I itch to have something to do,” said Grak. He glanced down at his wooden hand. It hadn’t seen combat yet. There were a few gnarls and knots in it, but it was tough as iron, with a few extra properties as well. I might have cut off my own hand, if I had thought that the locus would assent to that. (The locus was the only one not in the common room. Bethel *was* the common room, but wasn’t presenting an illusion; she only appeared when she wanted to talk, or when someone called for her.)

“After the first round of tuunglings is born, we’ll have some time to breathe,” said Amaryllis. “My engineers are already hard at work, not entirely autonomous at this point, but close enough that I could leave them for a week.”

“Maybe I’ll stay back this time,” said Fenn. “Catch some sun, watch some anime, not get shot at or cut in half, that kind of thing.”

“My hand was cut off,” said Grak. “I did not complain.”

“If my hand was cut off it would be gone forever,” said Valencia.

“Technically we could ice it and then use surgery to reattach, along with Earth antibiotics and medicines in order to ensure that it would heal properly,” said Amaryllis. “But you’d be out of action for a very long time, even if the surgery was successful.”

“Wouldn’t you just use some ninjitsu to dodge the attack?” asked Fenn.

“Not all fights are possible to win without getting hurt,” said Valencia.

“Well, you’ve been kicking my fucking ass when we spar, I’ll give you that,” said Fenn.

I’d seen a few of those beat-downs happen in our gym. Fenn was faster and stronger, with elf luck on her side, but Valencia was a far, far better fighter. It was a little unfair to Fenn, because archery was her personal domain of excellence, but Fenn had pretty much every other advantage there was to have, including height, reach, and (barely) weight. Fenn hadn’t won once, though she *was* improving. (Maybe this is patronizing, but I was really proud of Fenn for sticking it out. She had a bit of a tendency to bail out on things she wasn’t good at, which I figured was probably a response to the elven cultural demand of perfection.)

“I would vote for Glassy Fields,” said Grak.

“No more votes,” said Valencia, folding her arms.

“Can’t we rest on our laurels?” asked Fenn. “Besides, we haven’t even gotten our campaign of Arches back up and running.”

“We’ve been resting on our laurels,” I replied. She looked up from my lap with a frown. “It’s true. Amaryllis has been the only one actually doing much work.”

“There’s enough work for whoever wants it,” said Amaryllis.

“I’ve been tending to the locus and attempting to restore my connection to the flowers of my garden,” said Solace as she placed a puzzle piece. “I do think that I deserve a bit of rest.” She looked up at me, briefly. “Were we comparing things that we hadn’t complained about? I did die, after all.”

“Well, you did get better,” said Fenn.

I sighed. “I didn’t mean to say that we didn’t deserve a break, or that the relative downtime --”

Amaryllis gave a short little laugh.

“-- for some of us wasn’t deserved or necessary, especially with the months in the time chamber stacked up like they were, nor did I mean to devalue the work that people were doing, but … with Bethel here, it would be easy to simply abandon our higher objectives and settle into the lap of luxury. I don’t want to do that.” As soon as I said that, a small part of me said, ‘actually, I kind of do want to do that’.

“I’m happy for the lap I’m in,” said Fenn. She reached down to pet the cat that was curled up on her. “There’s something to be said for laps.”

“The Dungeon Master will punish idleness,” said Grak.

“I came out of eight months of almost pure idleness entirely unscathed,” said Amaryllis. She’d returned partial attention to her work. “I’m starting to trust Juniper’s interpretation of the Dungeon Master’s views.”

“There have got to be limits,” I said. “I mean, unless this is going to turn into a totally different game, which I guess is possible, it’s really hard to do tabletop games where the game is just managing an estate, or a kingdom, or whatever. The game system isn’t set up for massed combat, so all scenarios where there would be massed combat get abstracted out, and the actual play slash narrative is really about this small, plucky band of adventurers doing the things that small bands of people can realistically do.” I paused. “That was always how I’d done it anyway.” The truth was, I was gaining distance from Earth. The memories didn’t come as freely as they had back when I’d first arrived on Aerb.

It was hard to reconcile Uther and Arthur, but when I tried, that was always what I came back to. A teenager from Earth, immersed in this other world, with no one and nothing from home but the things he could bring forward from his memories. He spent his entire adult life on Aerb. My working theory was that he wasn’t obsessed with Tiff, making drawings of her because of a long-ago love that had never faded. Instead, she was nostalgia incarnate, a memory so old that it might have been a dream. He’d drawn her to say to himself that yes, there really had been such a place as Earth, it hadn’t all been a vivid dream. But Uther had lived his life at full tilt, always one adventure after another, even during the time he was founding his empire, so the years wouldn’t have felt like years, they’d have felt like decades, more distance … and he’d have felt a keening for his childhood, which happened in that faraway, ephemeral place called Earth. That was also my working theory for what Uther was looking for down the Boundless Pit: home.

None of that excused what he’d done with Bethel. Maybe none of that was even *true.* It made me sick to think about, and sympathetic toward Arthur and the pain he’d felt, and frustrated with the lack of answers about what had happened to him. I didn’t really know who he had been.

“Well I’d rather not have an adventure just for the sake of it,” said Fenn. “But speaking of adventures for the sake of it, can we finally play Arches? We’re all here, we’ve got nothing better

to do, I've had my campaign ready for ages, and I know that Juniper's got stuff ready if we want to play his. Mary?"

"I … yes," said Amaryllis. She began sorting some papers. "Give me a minute to file things away, I can spare two or three hours."

"Well, that's the hard one," said Fenn. "Grak?"

"Yes," he said. "Juniper's? Or yours?"

"Actually," I said. "Bethel and Val have never played a roleplaying game before, so I was thinking that maybe we would start with something fast and easy that we can get through quickly?" I bent down and gave Fenn a kiss. "Come on, up."

She mumbled something about 'cozy', despite being the one that wanted to get a game going, and eventually got up so we could get to the big table, where we ate most of our meals. With Bethel in full control of the backpack's powers, hot food appeared on plates right in front of us, exactly to order. Valencia, as had become typical, said that this was exactly like the Great Hall at Hogwarts. For our impromptu game night, there were cans of pop and bags of chips.

"A new game?" asked Solace as she sat down at the table. She had a booster on her chair, so she could rest her arms on the table. "I rather liked Arches."

"Arches is rules-light, but it's not *that* rules-light," I said, as I watched everyone gather. "Bethel?" I asked the room.

She appeared in her customary seat at the table, which was as illusory as her physical form. "I'm listening," she said.

"Always listening," muttered Fenn.

"I don't particularly care if you have sex," said Bethel. "Hundreds of people have had sex in my rooms."

"Well, I care," said Fenn.

"Do you?" asked Solace. "I seem to recall you being quite free with your love."

"They were," said Amaryllis. She took her seat next to Solace.

"If people know, it's -- whatever," said Fenn. "I'm not going to feel ashamed about that. But someone actively watching feels too much like a third person in there with us. I'm not into it." She looked at me.

"I understand," I said. I didn't agree, but I did understand. The locus could (probably) see everything in its domain, but apparently that didn't trip the same internal reaction in Fenn. I thought it was probably just the fact that it was Bethel that got to Fenn. Our newly-acquired

house was perfect, imperious, and powerful, much like the elves that had judged her unworthy when she was growing up.

“You were saying about a different game?” asked Valencia.

“Yeah,” I said. “Arches is light on rules, but it’s on the heavy end of light, if that makes sense. I was thinking that we could warm up with something that’s single state, single die, what they used to call a one-page game. There are a couple to choose from, ones I know well enough that I shouldn’t need a refresher, and Bethel should be able to snag the rules. In Honey Heist you’re all different bears and you’ve got two stats, Bear and Criminal that you use for everything, um, Lasers and Feelings probably doesn’t translate, since it’s a Star Trek pastiche, and the same probably goes for Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf, which --”

“Stop,” said Amaryllis. Her voice was sharp. “No one speak.”

“Wha --” began Fenn.

“No, *stop.* No one say another fucking word,” said Amaryllis. Her eyes were wide. “Infohazard. Don’t speak without thinking about every single word coming out of your mouth, no nouns, keep yourself to the most common hundred words in Anglish.” She got up from her chair. “We need to go to war footing, there’s a sixty percent chance that most of us will be dead in the next hour, start getting armored up, now. Quickly.”

Fenn looked like she was about to say something, but she glanced at Valencia, who had risen from her own chair and adopted a stance that was familiar from the sparring they’d done together. Whatever Fenn had wanted to say, she thought better of it and began disgorging armor and weapons from the glove. I had practiced getting armored quickly, but it still took some time. *Most of us will be dead in the next hour.* I tried to think about what I had said and give some context to the threat we were suddenly facing.

“Barriers won’t work,” said Amaryllis as she put on the immobility plate. She was speaking fast, almost breathless. “Wards won’t work. Obstructions won’t work, raw killing power won’t work, magic will be shrugged off or only partially successful, no known entad can stop him, and he scales to any threats. On the first invocation of his name there’s a sixty percent chance he’ll appear, and if he does we’re absolutely *fucked* -- *no* Juniper, don’t write anything down.”

I had a pencil in my hand and dropped it at her command. “Can … I … think?” I asked, measuring each word carefully. *Can I think the name that has you spooked?* I was continuing to do up the straps on my armor. *Shia LaBeouf. Shit.*

“Think all you want,” said Amaryllis. “Maintain protocol for speech, no writing whatsoever.” She was sweating slightly, maybe from the exertion of rapidly donning full plate armor. Valencia, wearing a dress but without armor of her own, helped to do up the immobility plate.

“Sixty percent he comes, forty percent he doesn’t,” said Amaryllis as her helmet came down to cover her face. “I’ll explain after, if I can.”

I was pretty sure that I already knew what was going on.

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“You’ve come up to Craig’s cabin for the weekend, prepared for a night of gaming, but not knowing the horrible fate that awaits you,” I said. We were at Arthur’s house on Halloween night, too old for trick-or-treating. We’d each brought a bag of fun-sized candy, which were strewn across the table. The lights were off for this part of the evening, leaving us to play by candlelight.

“Spooky,” said Craig with a roll of his eyes.

“It is spooky,” I said. “There have been little things, little signs, the old man who issued you a word of warning at the gas station, a blood-smeared sign you passed by on the dirt road, which you told yourselves was just roadkill, the sound the radio made when you turned it on that seemed very much like a pained scream before the radio shorted out.” I had prepared that ahead of time. “But you’ve almost managed to forget all the foreboding and have settled in for a night enjoying each other’s company. The fireplace crackles beside you. Suddenly, your idle conversation is interrupted when one of the windows rattles suddenly,” I said.

“Must have been the wind?” asked Tiff.

“Might have been,” I replied with a small smile.

“Anyway, as I was saying,” said Arthur, “My father got me this neat book full of Aramaic, and I was going to try to read some of it.” He was putting on a bit of a character voice, a little higher, a little more nasal, classically nerdy.

“Can I be armed?” asked Reimer.

“Wouldn’t do you any good,” I replied.

“Really?” asked Reimer.

“Just get into the genre, Reimer,” said Tiff. “Horror movie rules. A gun is never enough, he’s supernatural. You go to a phone, the line is dead. You reach a policeman sitting in his car, you’re going to discover that his throat has been slit.”

“Wait,” said Arthur. “Forget the book of Aramaic, I’m going to the bathroom.”

“The bathroom?” I asked.

“We’re away from civilization in a run-down cabin,” said Arthur. “It’s a dark and stormy night.”

“Sure,” I said. I hadn’t described the weather, or even given all that much detail to the cabin.
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“I want to start this right,” said Arthur. “I stand in front of the mirror, I close my eyes. I say it slowly, getting faster each time. *Shia LaBeouf,* Shia LaBeouf, ***Shia LaBeouf!*** Does anything happen?”

“You open your eyes?” I asked.

“I do,” Arthur smiled.

“He’s standing behind you, fully naked, his beard drenched in blood,” I said.

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An hour into waiting, Amaryllis decided that it was time for her to talk.

“We don’t know if it’s a name, or just a word,” said Amaryllis. “Joon? Name or word?”

“Name,” I said, saying as little as possible.

“If you invoke it, a man shows up,” said Amaryllis. “Not all the time. Sixty percent, maybe.” She let out a shaky breath. “If you invoke it three times, you guarantee his arrival.”

“And then?” asked Grak, his words as carefully measured as mine had been.

“He starts killing,” said Amaryllis. “Sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds. It depends on who’s around. He’d arbitrarily strong. He moves as fast as he needs to. Anything you put in front of him, he’ll grow a new power to tear down or go around.” She let out a breath. “I think if he were coming, he would have. We can stand down.”

She sat in her chair and slumped against it. I returned to my seat at well, still in my armor and not feeling any relief. “To be clear,” I said slowly. “It was the name after --”

“No,” said Amaryllis. “Don’t repeat anything. I’ll do it. You said ‘actual’ then ‘cannibal’ and then the name. Don’t speak it, don’t spell it, don’t write it, don’t try putting it in code, don’t knowingly transmit it to anyone else, in whole or in part, through any medium or any level of cryptography.”

“Okay,” I said, swallowing. “How much of that is,” I tried to think of a simple word, “too much caution?” I was pretty sure it was only the name we needed to worry about, and using simple language to speak was just paranoia and a reminder to think very carefully about every single word spoken.

“None of it is paranoia,” said Amaryllis. “We’ve tried to harness him in the past. It always ends with everyone dying.”

I frowned, trying to think about that. “If you were able to transmit it to someone, somehow,” I said. “Have them say it, weaponize it? Suicide bombers?” I was relaxing the attention I was paying to my words, just a hitch. Obviously in the long-term, I couldn’t be so careful that I had to
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think over every word out of my mouth, especially if there was only a single name that I really had to watch out for, and that name was as uncommon as Shia LaBeouf.

“Your suicidal agent would die,” said Amaryllis. “Any means of protecting them or bringing them back would fail. Then he would go after whoever told the agent the word, and whoever gave the order, even if they didn’t know the word. Five of my cousins died in that particular experiment. It’s not something that anyone can actually use, except as an absolute last resort when all you want to do is call down extreme violence on yourself and everyone else in the area.”

I narrowed my eyes slightly at that. She could have killed Fallatehr with it, when she’d been captured by him, just before he’d touched her soul. Shia LaBeouf would have killed her, but he’d also have killed Fallatehr too. Understanding dawned on me as I thought back to what she’d said about that misadventure. ‘Suicide comes in many flavors’, she’d said.

“Is Joon in danger now?” asked Fenn. “If any of us say it, this thing will kill him too, even if he’s nowhere close?”

“Yes,” said Amaryllis.

“Fuck,” I said.

“I heard it from a phonograph playing in the middle of nowhere on a loop, recorded by a dead man who had heard it from others who were also dead,” said Amaryllis. “That’s the only safe way to learn it.”

“Wait,” I said. “Writing triggers it?” Amaryllis nodded. “We have to stop using the backpack. We can’t pull movies from out of it, at least not ones from after 1990, and … shit, we can’t use IMDB, or printouts from websites that might list actors. I don’t know if that would twig it, but --”

“Movies?” asked Amaryllis, suddenly confused.

“The name,” I said. “It belongs to an actor from Earth.”

“What.” Amaryllis was staring at me.

“He was a child actor, became a movie star, now … kind of a meme, I guess,” I said.

“Juniper, you confirmed that there *weren’t* infohazards on Earth,” said Amaryllis.

“No,” I said. “A meme, just … not making fun of him, exactly, because he invited a lot of it on himself, and I think he knew what he was doing, but the idea of him was bigger than the reality? And there was this video,” *Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf,* “which I guess I can’t say the name of, but the joke was that he was a kind of weird Hollywood actor being portrayed as a horror movie monster. It wasn’t horrifying, really, it was the juxtaposition. It was a joke. And then someone made it into a rules-light game that you could play with no prep and sixty seconds to make characters.” I paused. “We only played it two or three times, it was supposed to be campy, not …” I trailed off. “I had no idea he existed on Aerb. You’re not supposed to be able to

summon him, not in the base rules, that was just something Arthur came up with, an improvisation. I mean, one that fit well within the theme of the game, but still."

Amaryllis was staring at me. I could see disgust on her face, but I was pretty sure that it was aimed at the world of Aerb, rather than at me personally.

"Look," I said. "It's fine. We're past the moment of danger, right?"

"Maybe," said Amaryllis. "Probably."

"And now that I know, I can avoid it," I said.

"You could have told us beforehand," said Fenn. This was directed at Amaryllis, not me.

"Oh, yes," said Amaryllis. "That's a fucking *brilliant* idea, spreading knowledge of things that are dangerous to know and even more dangerous to say, and which might *literally kill me* if spoken by someone else. *Why* did I not think to tell *you,* of all people?"

"I love when you get snarky," said Fenn with a grin. "So are we going to play a game of Actual Cannibal --"

Valencia moved over to Fenn in the space of a heartbeat, grabbing her wrist and thrusting it up and behind her back, forcing her down onto the table. Valencia's hand covered Fenn's mouth in the same motion. Fenn stayed down, not trying to fight it. After a few seconds, muffled words came from behind Valencia's hand.

"She's licking me," said Valencia.

"I think she was probably making a joke," I said. "She wasn't actually going to say it."

There was more muffled noise from Fenn.

"Not a thing that anyone should joke about," said Amaryllis. "It's a word -- name that's killed thousands."

"How many of those because you tried to weaponize it?" asked Grak.

Amaryllis' lips went thin.

"I'm going to let her up now," said Valencia. Her eyes had an alertness to them that I was growing better at recognizing, which was a clear sign that she was, temporarily, something more than just herself. It was trivial for her to mask, when she had a devil, but less so when she had a demon, and much of the time she didn't bother.

"I *obviously* wasn't going to say it," said Fenn and she sat up in her chair. "If we can't joke about things trying to kill us, what can we joke about?"

“Puns,” said Grak.

Amaryllis stood up from her chair. “I think I’m done for the day,” she said. “I’ll be in the study if anyone needs me.”

“I think I’m done too, sorry,” I said. “That was, uh, sort of an unpleasant reminder of what kind of world this is.”

Fenn grumped at that, but didn’t gainsay me. When I left, she was already back into animated conversation with the others. I had sort of thought that with Amaryllis and I gone, the common room might empty, but there were apparently things they wanted to talk with each other about. Personally, I wanted to be alone.

Fenn and I shared a bedroom on the third floor, up the house’s grand central staircase and with a view of the cold, grey, bleak Isle of Poran. The ceilings were high throughout the house, which in the case of our bedroom allowed for an enormous four-poster bed for Fenn and I, which we could draw the curtains on for privacy. We had dressers filled with clothes, half from Earth and half from Aerb, and a fireplace with a pair of armchairs in front of it. We barely ever used the fireplace; Bethel had generated a number of Earth books on architecture and building practices, which had led her to discover central heating, and that was more or less the end of fireplaces being needed for anything aside from atmosphere.

I did light the fireplace when I came back to our room though, because I was in need of some atmosphere as a backdrop for my thoughts.

There was a knock on my door before I could get too lost in thinking.

“Come in,” I said.

Amaryllis slipped in and shut the door behind her, quickly taking the seat beside me. She looked at the fire and stayed silent for a while.

“Just wanted company?” I asked.

“No,” she said, after some time had passed. “I think what just happened was a warning.”

“Maybe,” I said. “A warning from the Dungeon Master that if we sit around doing nothing, adventure will come to us?”

“I don’t know,” said Amaryllis. The armchair was big, and made her look smaller than she was. “Something like that.” She turned to me. “I know you don’t want to level up again. It’s something we should talk about more. You didn’t tell me how bad it was the time before, when it was just you and Fenn. You had two and a half months and you just ignored it, like it was going to go away on its own. I should have asked, but I just … I thought you had it under control.”

I shifted in my seat. “I don’t understand the point of the pleasure,” I said. “If you were an idiot, you’d think that it was a good way to compel me to go adventuring more, to complete quests, to

kill things … but I was given the resources to alter myself early on, and if you were literally omniscient, then you'd have to understand that I would be horrified by the idea of losing myself to an impulse to become stronger. Right? I've got a disincentive to pursue leveling up now."

"It's terrible game design," said Amaryllis. "But we need you to level up."

I turned to look at her. "There are things that only I can do," I said. "I know. I don't want to lose myself though. I don't want my identity to be stripped away, not more than it already has been. The levels have been getting further apart, but they're ramping up in intensity. If you hadn't been there ..."

"I know," said Amaryllis. Her voice was soft. "You want to refuse the call."

"In monomythic terms?" I asked. "No. It's more … the later parts of the hero's journey, the death and rebirth. That's what worries me, being forged into something new, and maybe something unpleasant." I paused. "Shit. We missed something."

"We did?" asked Amaryllis.

"The name," I said. I saw her stiffen slightly. "It's the name of a famous actor on Earth. We need to get to Speculation and Scrutiny and warn them, because that's a disaster waiting to happen. You've said before that the nation's pursuit is going to be the spread of technological development for personal gain, and I've said that the group's pursuit should be doing things that only we can do. I'm pretty sure that this is one of those things. There are a bunch of people from Earth there, and the moment one of them says the name of a well-known actor, it's going to be a disaster."

"Fuck," said Amaryllis.

Quest Accepted: The Name of the Beast - Go to the Athenaeum of Speculation and Scrutiny and warn them of the word that no one can be allowed to say.

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Bethel elected not to come with, which I think we all saw coming. She had expressed a strong preference for being a house, and had spent the last few weeks filling herself with all sorts of crap that couldn't easily be moved. For her to come with would mean taking everything that wasn't 'house' and tossing it out onto the ground, or alternately, having someone go around with the glove and hoover up everything from every room. For what was planned as a day trip, and one where we probably wouldn't need overwhelming firepower, that didn't seem worth it.

Granted, we were still loaded for bear and treating this as though it were a military operation, because the most important thing we'd learned about quests so far was that they could be as difficult and complicated as they wanted to be. We were going there for two quests, one the Shia LaBeouf quest, the other ***Straddling Worlds,*** which had been in my quest log since my very first day on Aerb. Both seemed easy, which was suspicious, but at least the
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dream-skewered quest had been given to me when I was level two. You weren't supposed to get incredibly difficult quests at level two, you were supposed to get the first quest in a long chain that you would eventually be able to handle with another dozen levels under your belt. I expected more quests to follow.

We gathered together our things, armored up, checked our weapons over, made sure that the glove was stocked. I felt a little outclassed by Valencia and Amaryllis, given that they were both covered head-to-toe in full plate and decked out with weapons. Bethel had made sheathes, pouches, and in some cases, clothes, pulling things from Earth with precision and making the necessary alterations.

Given that the Anyblade was gone, I was using the shortsword we'd taken from Aumann's vault, ages ago. Bethel could speak considerably faster than any of us, and focus intently on a single task without growing bored (at the exclusion of everything else), so she'd launched a dictionary attack on it, trying to find out whether it had a code phrase that we just didn't know. That had turned out to be the case: it was "smoke". When spoken, the bluish-silver blade would go black, and it gained the ability to pass through metal for a few seconds before reverting to normal. It could do this once a day, which was entirely underwhelming, especially given that Amaryllis had the flicker-blade which could do the same thing, but better and more often. I had bonded to the shortsword anyhow, since it was better than nothing, and I still wanted to be able to use my bladebound powers.

I had a rifle strapped to my back, in order to give me some range. It wasn't magical or anything, but it was the best we had, unless I wanted to use a bow and arrow. As good as I was with a bow, largely thanks to Fenn, I still favored the rifle, in part because I didn't have a fancy 'quiver' like she did to give me near-infinite ammo in easy reach.

I wore bandoliers, mostly filled with bones, in part to give cover to the technique that I was using, which by imperial law, I wasn't supposed to have. Amaryllis was working on squaring everything away as far as legality was concerned, but that was a work in progress, and it was likely going to require some amount of legal recognition of our tiny nation. Once that was all done, we could reveal a little bit more of our true abilities, but as of right now, we were completely unlicensed soul mages working for what was only really a nation because of our pretensions and the backing of polities like the Ha-Lunde.

Amaryllis was very clear that the rules of engagement had changed, and Jorge had been very clear that there were limits to what Uniquities was willing (or able) to cover for. If there was another fight in the streets like the last time we'd been to Boastre Vino, then at a minimum we would need to stick around and explain things to the authorities, which would open up our tiny nation to more scrutiny than it was already under.

In retrospect, maybe taking a fully-armed party of six in to complete a level 2 quest was tempting the narrative a bit too much.