

We drove down I-90 in a navy blue 2008 Dodge Grand Caravan, listening to Fenn's eclectic mix of songs that were playing from her phone that sat beside her in the front passenger seat (she'd called shotgun). Amaryllis was driving, her hands at ten and two and her eyes straight ahead, while the rest of us sat in back. I had a seat by the door, Valencia was beside me in the middle row, and Grak was next to her. In the back row was Raven, and beside her, taking up most of the space, was the locus, who had donned her humanoid form for the purposes of this road trip.

South Dakota was incredibly flat, and worse, there were butt-ugly billboards everywhere that made a journey through the plains and fields look that much less aesthetically pleasing. I was doing my best to not complain, but it wasn't too hard for me to believe that this was, in fact, some kind of torture.

"We're going to have to stop for gas soon," said Amaryllis, briefly looking down at the dashboard.

"Fuck yeah," said Fenn. "Time to stock up on snacks."

"You know," I said. "If we were being truly authentic, you'd have to worry about gut rot from all the Mountain Dew."

"Bah," said Fenn. "Bah, I say! Fuck authenticity!" She was the one who had insisted on authenticity. Almost all our enhancements were shut off, our bodies had been reduced to baseline, and we were wearing clothing that plausibly could have been bought by or for a middle class teenager in the Midwest circa the 2010s. We had all consented to this, obviously, but still.

"Oh," I said, leaning forward. "Hey, try this. You stick your hand out the window, then wiggle it up and down, like it's a bird flying on the wind."

I heard a bunch of windows roll down, and watched as everyone did what I said.

"Neat," said Fenn five minutes later. "So you would just chill out like that? Listen to music and chat and stuff? I mean, was it different with your parents?"

"Stopping for gas now," said Amaryllis. She took an exit and drove to a Sinclair station in Planinkton, then began pumping gas. "If you're going to get food, do it now, or go stretch out."

"I don't like having a bladder," grumbled Grak.

"There's something very nice about peeing," said Valencia as she slipped out of the car after me. "I haven't given it up yet. I changed it around a bit, but I still go pee."

"Mmm," said Grak. The rules about authenticity had been relaxed for him, given how hard it would have been to get clothes that fit. It was close enough though, a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt that offered free tickets to the gun show.

I went around to the side of the van, where Amaryllis was still filling up. She was dressed in short shorts, a tank top that exposed her midriff, and giant sunglasses that seemed like they covered way too much of her face. It was exactly identical to the outfit that Fenn was wearing,

which had delighted Fenn to no end when she realized what Amaryllis had done. While the tank filled, Amaryllis was looking off into the distance.

"Let me know if you need to switch it up," I said. "I don't want you to have to drive the whole way."

"Nah, it's fine," said Amaryllis. She grinned at me. "So, we're eight hours in. Is this the stupidest fucking thing that we've ever done?"

"The stupidest thing we've done *so far*," I replied.

"I kind of like it though," said Amaryllis. "Given how terrible her taste in television is, Fenn's got pretty good taste in music. Besides, it's been good to have all of us back together again."

"Yeah," I said.

"Grab me a Frappuccino," said Amaryllis. "Surprise me with the flavor."

As I turned around to go into the gas station, she reached forward and slapped my butt. "Love you."

"Love you too," I replied.

There were other people, but they were all played by the Thespian. They were treating us like normal people on a normal field trip, and going about their own business. There was a teenager behind the counter of the gas station chatting with her much older coworker about a DWI, and there were other tourists milling about, along with two truckers having a gas station lunch together. None of them remarked on Fenn's pointed ears, or Grak's stature, but other than that, they were perfectly convincing people who you could be mistaken for having their own inner lives. We were all more or less used to it, though I knew Grak lived in a place without a lot of 'spians.

"Hey," I said to Raven, who was looking over the options for chips. We hadn't talked together much, not since the end times, and not during the trip. "How's it going?"

"Fine," she said. "You know, I think I probably know the least about Earth in this group."

I looked across the gas station, where I saw the locus, who towered above everything else, poking at the fluorescent light bulbs.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Sure," I replied. "When it's my turn to pick, we're definitely not doing Earth. I think by the end of this, it'll have been enough Earth for all of us for at least another ten years."

"He agreed to see me, by the way," said Raven. She picked up a bag of dill pickle chips with a frown on her face.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know you'd asked again."

Raven nodded. "Two denials, and then the third time, success," she said. "Rule of threes. Funny, in a way."

"Maybe we should talk about this in private," I said. "Somewhere that's not a gas station in the middle of South Dakota."

She shrugged. "There's nothing much to talk about." She looked at the ingredients list on the back of the bag, which I'd talked to her about at the last stop. "Are these good?"

"They're my favorite," I said. "When did you find out?"

"A half hour ago," said Raven, moving down to the Little Debbie stuff. She seemed skeptical about the Snowballs, but grabbed one anyway.

"We're supposed to have notifications off," I said.

"Talk to the assistants," said Raven with a shrug. "They let it through, probably because it was a priority for me."

"I think if you're not going to try autotherapy, you should try actual therapy," I said.

"Maybe I like my own brand of misery," said Raven. "You get that. Besides, it's not like I'm *that* miserable." She looked over at me. "But I can see the pity in your eyes."

Raven had an Uther-shaped 'spian. He didn't have all of Uther's memories, that kind of thing wasn't allowed without informed consent, but he *did* have all of Raven's memories of Uther, along with a lot of public documentation. Worse, he was different from Uther in a number of significant ways, namely in that he had an admiration and respect for Raven, and a desire to stay on Aerb. There was also, apparently, a strong sexual chemistry between the two of them, though I'd only heard that through the grapevine, which had, in that case, ended with Fenn. Having a dildo I could understand, but he was more than that, he was an *emotional* dildo. Raven and the 'spian Uther had been living together for months. She'd even requested that he come on the trip with us, which I only found out through back channels because other people had said no before I had a chance to.

"I don't think you should see him," I said. The 'him' in question was Arthur, the Aerb version of him. I didn't consider him to be quite the same person, and I'd already said my goodbyes to the Arthur I'd known, but Raven still lacked closure.

Raven shrugged. "I gave him some time. He learned about his Earth counterpart. I requested, he said no, then no again, then yes. I don't even know if the first requests went through, or if he saw them, but now there is a yes, so I'll be meeting with him. We have assistant approval. It's a tenet of heaven that you're allowed to do what you'd like."

"He won't be Uther," I said. "He won't even be Earth Arthur. He'll just be a sixteen-year-old boy."

"True," said Raven as she set her stuff on the counter. She gave the cashier a nod. "But come on, Juniper, I won't be allowed to seriously hurt him."

"I'm not worried about him," I said. "I'm worried about you."

"We'll talk later," said Raven. "Sorry if I'm ruining the trip for you."

"It's South Dakota," I said as she paid for her stuff and left. "It's not like it's the experience of a lifetime."

Except for the locus, who I had to lead out of the store, I was the last one to come back to the van, though I had a load of junk food with me, including the drink Amaryllis had requested. We continued our long trip down I-90, and Valencia and Grak continued a conversation that they'd apparently been having for quite a bit.

"Oh, I love it all," said Valencia. "Not the extremes, but for the most part I'll take the biological pleasures as they come. Sneezing is great."

"I do not sneeze," said Grak.

"But here you do, right?" asked Fenn, turning around in her seat and lowering her shades to look at him. She'd gotten an enormous slushie, which had turned her mouth a bright shade of blue.

"Hail authenticity," he said to her with a smile.

"Hail authenticity!" yelled Fenn. "Fuck yeah!"

"Farts?" asked Valencia, looking at Grak. "In your normal, non-vacation life, do you fart?"

"No," he replied.

"That's *crazy*," said Valencia. "Farts are great."

"I wouldn't say they're great," I said.

"They're funny," said Fenn, through a mouthful of slushie.

"They're not that funny," said Raven from the back. I looked back there, and the locus was curled up with her head on Raven's lap, taking a nap.

"Wait," said Fenn from the front. "Are Ell farts —"

"Yes," said Raven.

Fenn burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, that's just —"

"I'm mostly a non-biological human now," said Raven. "There's a good reason for that."

"Me too," said Amaryllis. "Though each of the clones has different needs."

"Boo," said Fenn. She turned to me. "Juniper?"

“Optimized biological human,” I said. “I kept everything, it’s just been tuned so that there’s never any pain and it happens on a convenient schedule. No having to stop in the middle of a movie to go pee or anything like that.”

“Who would choose to be an unoptimized person?” asked Grak. This was largely rhetorical, I knew, a question of bafflement rather than a request for examples, since he could name a lot of them off the top of his head. “Are there people who like being interrupted by their bodies?”

“It can be nice,” said Valencia. “I like being kicked out of what I’m doing. It helps with mindfulness, I think.”

“I stripped out almost everything,” said Amaryllis. “I don’t even blink.”

“Some days she doesn’t even wear a body,” I said.

“Can we not talk politics?” asked Fenn.

“Is it politics?” asked Valencia. She seemed genuinely curious. “Why would it be?”

“Eh,” said Fenn. “Traditionalist versus modifiers. I hate politics.”

“Can I squeak in one final thought?” asked Amaryllis.

“Fine,” said Fenn. I was pretty sure that beneath her sunglasses, she was narrowing her eyes.

“If you want the fun of biological function, I don’t understand why you don’t go further,” said Amaryllis. “Why not heighten the pleasure? Why not orgasm when you sneeze? Why not sit on the toilet convulsing from the sheer ecstasy of defecation? The answer, obviously, is that you’re just attached to keeping things the way they are.”

“See?” asked Fenn. “This is why I don’t like politics.”

Amaryllis waved her objection away with a lazy hand.

“Dear god!” I fake-shouted. “Keep your hands on the wheel!”

Amaryllis giggled, and shot me a grin before turning back to focus on the road.

Behind me, the locus rose from where she’d been napping on Raven’s lap. She had been drooling slightly, and looked at me with bleary eyes before settling back down for the nap. When I looked over at Grak, he met my eyes.

“Do you think,” he began. “Do you think she heard you shout ‘deer god’?”

I cracked up at that.

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“‘Don’t Shrug for Wall Drug,’” said Fenn.

“‘Find Transcendental Enlightenment at Wall Drug’,” said Amaryllis. “‘Wall Drug — Wealth Beyond Meaning’. ‘Free Custom Organs at Wall Drug’.”

“I feel like you’re not even trying,” said Fenn, shaking her head.

“‘Unplug at Wall Drug’,” said Grak. He was looking at his phone, and I frowned at the screen.

“Grak is using rhymezone.com, is that cheating?” I asked.

“Most of them don’t rhyme, so I think it’s fine,” said Valencia. “How about this one. ‘Giant Talking Deer, Only At Wall Drug’.”

“She doesn’t talk,” I said.

Valencia turned around to look at the locus, who was doing something like yoga in the backseat, much to Raven’s consternation.

“To be honest,” said Valencia. “I kind of forgot we had a giant deer with us, I was just picking a random animal.”

“Man, we should have brought Solace,” said Fenn. “I regret not inviting her. She was a cool old lady.”

“You missed the tail end of that relationship,” I said. “And I doubt she’d have come. She’s not even a druid anymore. Besides, we have a cool old lady, it’s you.”

“So you’re saying you’re fucking an old lady?” asked Fenn. “Gross.”

“I mean,” I said. “I’m not. The Narrator is.”

“You’re sharing memories with him,” said Fenn, pointing a finger at me. “He told me you were.”

“He has it in his head to write an epilogue,” I said. “I figured, why not? He’ll clear it with all of you before he shows the book to anyone though. There’s some personal stuff in there, I know.”

“Why did the Dungeon Master want it, anyway?” asked Valencia. “I never really understood that.”

“Book fetish,” said Raven from the back seat. She had been pushed off to one side by the locus.

“Says the librarian?” I asked.

“I like books,” Raven shrugged. “But there are better forms of information preservation and absorption today. I’ve been keeping track of some of the work people are doing in the Mid-Uppers. It makes me wonder why such an archaic medium would be his choice.”

“It should have been a TV show,” said Amaryllis. “Or maybe VR.”

“I do not consent,” said Grak.

"Yeah, that would be a problem," I said. "Plus there's a lot you'd have to cut anyway, if you wanted people to actually watch it. Or read it, for that matter." I frowned, as dark thoughts crossed my mind. "Has anyone else read it?"

"I did," said Amaryllis. "It was okay."

"As an accurate log or a work of art?" asked Valencia.

"Both," said Amaryllis. "I think I come off pretty well, but it *is* shown through Juniper's eyes. And I think he comes off pretty poorly, but it *is* shown through Juniper's eyes."

"I read it," said Grak. "It helped to put things in perspective for me. I learned something from it."

"I haven't read it," said Valencia. "I'm not sure that I want to. I think I'd cringe at every page I have a line on."

"Yes, probably," said Amaryllis.

"Well, I'm waiting for a rewrite," said Fenn. "One where I'm not dead for half of it. Or one where we check in with Heaven Fenn every ten chapters or so to get her screaming hot takes." Heaven Fenn, sometimes called Henn if you wanted to annoy her, or the Angel if you wanted to flatter her, was also not on the trip, but had a memory-sharing arrangement with Fenn. Both Fenns lived together with the Narrator.

"Seems unfair that you two get to have clones," said Valencia, folding her arms. "Where's *my* clone?"

"They usually approve a clone request," I said. "Did you make one?"

"Well, no," she replied. "But it's still a little suspect that you got grandfathered in, isn't it?"

"I mean, they would almost certainly give you a clone," I said.

"Ah, just giving you a hard time," said Valencia. "You're being no fun about it."

"Top Five Least Awesome Things About Heaven!" called Fenn. "Go go go!"

"Other people," I immediately said.

"Resurrection restrictions," said Raven. I felt a jolt of unpleasantness at that. Really, the whole listing thing wasn't really to my tastes, since I, or a version of me, was the one who had built everything.

"Time," said Grak.

"What, just time?" I asked. "You don't like that the very concept of time exists in heaven? Or is it just the length of this road trip?"

Fenn turned around in her seat and glared at me. "I'm only allowing that because complaining about the length of the road trip is an authentic part of the road trip experience."

“There’s another sign,” said Amaryllis.

“‘Wall Drug — 5 cent coffee’,” Fenn read. “Fuck yeah.”

“‘Wall Drug, we’ve got loss leaders’,” I said. “How many signs have we seen now that have mentioned the 5 cent coffee?”

“It’s probably pretty good coffee though, right?” asked Fenn.

“I dunno, I never had it,” I said.

“Well, that alone justifies the trip,” said Fenn, grinning at me. “New things!”

“Sit straight,” said Amaryllis. “You don’t want to be twisted around in your seat if we get in a car accident.”

Fenn looked at her for a long moment. “Fine, for the sake of authenticity.”

“And another,” said Amaryllis, nodding forward. “‘Wall Drug — Free Ice Water’.”

“Luxurious,” said Grak. He had returned to his phone, which was connected to the Earth internet. “Google Maps lists this place as a ‘sprawling shopping complex and attraction’. The adjective ‘sprawling’ seems odd. Almost ominous.”

“Like a tangled overgrowth,” I said. “Which tracks?”

“I’m excited,” said Valencia. “But how much further is it going to be?”

“It’s not about the destination,” said Fenn. “Also, Google Maps says two hours.”

“I need to switch places with someone,” said Raven from the back. I looked at her, and saw the locus had turned back into a deer and was taking up most of the room. Raven had been with the locus since Sioux Falls, giving up her spot in the front passenger seat.

“Fine,” said Amaryllis. “Let’s make another stop and stretch our legs.”

We pulled off into the town of Presho, and Amaryllis once again went to a gas station, but she turned back to us once she put it into park. “Are we eating here?”

“Sure,” said Fenn, peering out the car. “Where’s all the fast food though?”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere,” said Amaryllis. “They’re short on franchises. Either you get something from Cenex, or you go to a diner.”

“We’ve been in the middle of nowhere for almost two hours,” said Valencia.

“Sorry,” said Fenn, frowning a bit before undoing her seatbelt and getting out of the car.

“You know,” I said as I stretched out. “We *could* just teleport to Wall Drug.”



"Authenticity, Juniper," said Fenn, but she seemed a bit beleaguered. "Besides, we've come this far. Looking back, I probably should have chosen for this to be a shorter trip."

"We could also shorten it," I said. "I mean ... make the van go faster, make there be less space between, something like that."

"I'm still having a good time," said Valencia as she extended her arms above her. "I didn't mean to gripe. It's nice for us to all be together."

"Agreed," huffed Grak as he got out. He stretched too, touching his toes.

"Well, I'mma find some food," said Fenn, looking around. There wasn't much to see. "Next time we do a road trip like this, we'll plan it out a little better." She stayed where she was though, close to us.

"You're insane if you think I'm ever doing this again," said Raven. "Once is going to be more than enough."

"Our agreement was a get-together twice a year," said Fenn. "It was my turn to pick."

"It was a good pick," I said. "But I think maybe the idea of us taking a trip from my hometown up to Wall Drug was, perhaps, a little funnier in concept than in execution."

"We are doing this early," said Grak. "In twenty years people will start doing the same. They'll seek novelty and weirdness for its own sake."

"Nah," I said. "You can strip the novelty circuits out of your head, or rewire them. You can make it so that each time you read a book it's like the first, without needing to strip out your memories."

"I stand by my prediction," said Grak.

I noticed Amaryllis and Raven in conversation with each other, and wished I knew what they were saying, mostly because their voices were low.

"Isn't it weird for the two of you?" asked Valencia, looking at me and Fenn.

"Weird?" I asked. "Why?"

"Knowing that she's romantically involved with a duplicate of you," Valencia.

"That's, uh," I said. "Very blunt."

Valencia shrugged. "It's not even that blunt. I could be *lots* more blunt."

"Well, it's not weird for me," I said. "I'm happy for her. I don't really understand why they're *sharing* a Juniper, but," I shrugged.

“Because it’s fucking great,” said Fenn, beaming at me. “We can tag team him. Oh come on, don’t be juvenile, I meant we tag team him with jokes and teasing and stuff. Though obviously we tag team him in a sexual way, which I will proceed to describe to you in graphic detail.”

“Fenn,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“See?” asked Fenn. “If we had a second Fenn here, we could keep going back and forth, and you could play the straight man. How could that not appeal to you?”

“I — it does,” I said.

“Oh,” said Fenn, “Plus, you know what I’m great at? Calling people on their shit. It’s definitely in the top five best things about me. So with two of me, we can call *each other* on our shit, and Juniper doesn’t have to do as much emotional labor.”

“You’re actually terrible at calling people on their shit,” said Valencia, frowning. “You’re too self-conscious about whether they’ll still like you afterward. This is balanced out by your tendency to torpedo good things because you think they’re too good for you, but —”

“I thought you weren’t using devils anymore?” asked Fenn, lowering her enormous sunglasses so she could squint at Valencia.

“I’m not,” said Valencia. “But I *did* pick up a thing or two.”

“And how are you?” I asked. “How are you and Jorge doing? And the kids?” We saw them every so often, but before this trip it had been three weeks.

“It’s wonderful,” Valencia said with a wistful sigh. “I miss him dearly, but it’s the kind of homesickness that I think this trip is supposed to be about. The kids are sometimes difficult, mostly because they’re so *different* from each other. Amy is such a quiet, solitary child, and she comes to me with these questions sometimes, out of the blue, asking me about why some mushrooms are bad to eat. Juniper is quiet in a much different way, always with her head buried in a book, but when she’s not reading, she’s talking constantly about what she read. Having nannies for them has been a load off my mind. Having them be safe and secure, incapable of being hurt too badly, has been wonderful.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad.”

“Well,” said Fenn, looking over at Amaryllis and Raven. “Their secret talk is taking too long, so let’s leave them to it and get some grub.” She set off, and I followed behind her. Val fell in beside me, and the locus did too, bounding over on bare feet from where she’d been playing with Grak, once again in human form.

“Amaryllis says you might have kids,” said Valencia. “That you’re thinking about it, anyway.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m really, really nervous.”

“She said she wants to go traditional, which I found surprising,” said Valencia. “A full pregnancy, rather than just instantly having a baby in her arms.”

“Solace left a mark on her,” I said, looking back at Amaryllis, who was still in conversation with Raven. “It’s one of the things I think about, when I think about how things ended.”

“It’s not ended though,” said Grak.

“You know what I mean,” I replied. “There are a few things that just don’t get resolved by everyone being in heaven.” I looked back at Amaryllis and Raven, this time focusing more on Raven. “Things that *still* aren’t resolved.”

“They will be, in time,” said Valencia. “You didn’t build a bad heaven. Raven will just have to work through things, if she’s not willing to edit.”

“I know,” I said. “I just ... the thing with the ‘spian Uther is ... I don’t know. It feels like a bad end.”

“Takes her a hundred times longer to let go, right?” asked Fenn. “Bad worldbuilding, if you ask me.”

“She’s basically human now,” I said. “Or, as much as any other human in these times.”

“I know,” said Fenn. “Sad.”

“Not sad,” said Grak. “Everyone should be the person they want to be.”

“It’s sad that she didn’t like who she was,” said Fenn. “I dunno.”

We had reached the small diner, which wasn’t too far away from where the van was parked, and quickly found ourselves a booth. The locus was pretty tall, and barefoot, and I kind of wished that she would turn back into a deer, just for the laughs. Instead, she took the inside seat and began looking at the menu, not in the way that you or I would look at a menu, but like she was interested in what it was. Fenn sat beside me, while Grak was squeezed between the locus and Valencia.

“How ya folks doin’?” asked the waitress. She was in her fifties, graying and giving us a forced smile that a couple of decades had probably etched into her face. Her name tag labeled her Aubery. She, like everyone else in the diner, was a ‘spian.

“Good!” replied Fenn. “We’re on a road trip!”

“Anythin’ I can getcha to drink while you figure out what you want?” she asked.

“A round of Cokes,” said Fenn, twirling her finger.

“Water for me,” I said. “And the locus.”

“Wait,” said Valencia. “Do you have kefir?”

“I’d hafta check in back,” said the waitress scrunching up her nose. “That’s two Cokes, two waters, and whattid you say honey? A kefir?”

"If you have it, please, yes," said Valencia. "If not, a Coke is fine."

"We had kefir in Barren Jewel," I said.

"I know," replied Valencia. "Grak mentioned it to me."

"Then they shouldn't have it here, should they?" asked Fenn. "Authenticity, after all."

"It's an Earth drink too," Grak said.

"Yeah," I said. "But they shouldn't have it here, because it's the middle of nowhere. It's a yuppie thing, I think."

"You looked it up?" asked Grak.

"Yes," I said. "Because *Worth the Candle* exposed some holes in my knowledge." I'd needed an assistant to point them out though, once I finally realized I was being made fun of.

We looked at the menus for a bit. It wasn't a terribly fancy place, the kind that only had a few options for a late dinner, and my guess was that it wouldn't be good, or at least not *classically* good. It would be an authentic experience though, I was pretty sure of that.

Amaryllis and Raven came in after us, and elected to sit together at a table some distance away from us, to continue their conversation.

"What do you think they're talking about?" I asked.

"Bonsai," said Valencia.

"What?" I asked.

"It's a joke," said Grak.

"I don't get it," I said.

"You suggested bonsai to Raven," said Valencia. "She got pretty into it."

"Weeb," said Fenn.

"Anyway," continued Valencia with a grin. "The tree she almost exclusively works with is a," she pointed at me.

"Ah," I said. "A juniper. They're talking about me."

"You or Uther," said Fenn. "My guess is Uther."

"It's not really any of our business," said Grak.

"Aren't you normally the group gossip?" I asked.

"I have been trying to better myself," said Grak.

"How's that going?" I asked.

He shrugged. I thought he was going to leave it at that, but then he spoke up. "Gossip is a way of making sense of the social connections around us. It is a way of placing ourselves within our social spheres. Finding better ways to relate to people is difficult."

"Huh," I said. "And ... how are things with Darili Irid?"

"Good," said Grak, letting out a little sigh. "There are many dwarfholds in the lower heavens. It sits there among them. It might be hard to believe that everyone there was dead for several years."

"You went to visit again?" I asked.

Grak nodded. "My father is still under the impression that I had brought them all back."

"In a way," I began.

"Yes. In a way," replied Grak. I was surprised to hear him accept even that. "He wanted me to come home, and asked me again. He wanted me to take my place. I refused him, again."

"Ouch," I said.

"Fenn and I spoke of it at length," said Grak. "Sometimes there is a disconnect between you and the people who raise you."

"Fenn said that?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Fenn stuck out her tongue at me.

"No," said Grak. "But it was the conclusion that I came to after speaking with her."

I looked at Fenn, and she smiled at me. "I give good advice sometimes," she said.

"You were a good sounding board," said Grak. It had the feeling of being a correction.

"Hey, you know what's fucked up?" asked Fenn.

But the waitress came back over with our drinks, and took our orders, so it took some time for Fenn to get back around to it. Me, Fenn, and Valencia ordered burgers, but with a few variations on toppings, and Grak wanted a sampler of fried things. For the locus, the waitress offered some mixed vegetables and fruits. It turned out they *did* have kefir, which I was skeptical was truly authentic.

"What's fucked up is that *she's* Heaven Fenn, and *I'm* Hell Fenn," said Fenn. "Like she's an angel and I'm a demon, no offense Val."

"Those days are *long* behind me," said Valencia with a little laugh.

"How about you Grak?" I asked. "Still doing any warding?"

He laughed. "Not a single bit. A month ago I woke up from a nightmare that I was still a warder. I turned nightmares off after that."

"Well, I'm still arching," said Fenn.

"That's not the right word," said Grak.

"Me and angel Fenn had a contest," said Fenn.

"Being in heaven doesn't make you an angel," said Valencia.

"Yeah," I said. "Otherwise we'd all be angels, right?"

"We had a contest," continued Fenn, soldiering on. "It was to see who could tag the other with an arrow at a hundred paces."

"Taking turns, or both at the same time?" I asked.

"Same time," said Fenn. "I got absolutely pin cushioned, but I think she got a bit worse. So yes, I still do arching, but only really in dumb contests with my clone." She looked at me. "And you? Still do any, uh, saving damsels?"

"Amaryllis has me open jars for her," I said, grinning. Even just saying it, I couldn't *stop* grinning. "Like, she'll act all frustrated that a jar isn't opening, and ask me to come do it, and then give me a kiss when I inevitably conquer it."

"You set up your heaven to have jars only you can open?" asked Grak. "Or does she just pretend?"

I frowned. "She just pretends," I said. "Look, don't dissect it, it's silly, it's cute, and I like it."

"You're allowed to like things," said Grak with a mild tone.

"You're also allowed to have a mix of emotions about liking a happy domesticity between the two of you," said Valencia. "I think people undervalue the mental benefits of taboo breaking."

Fenn squinted at Valencia. "Okay, so if you're not using devils, did you just bump up your mind?"

"A bit," replied Valencia. "I'm in the High Heavens, it's allowed. For this trip, we were all supposed to go as we were during the adventure, weren't we? So I think it's fine."

Our food came then, and for a moment there was only the sounds of eating, with mumbles about how good the food was. I was surprised by the quality, frankly, not just of the burger, but the fries. After protracted negotiation with Grak, I traded him a bite of my burger for one of his onion rings, but Fenn ended up stealing half of it.

We talked some more, and caught up, as we'd been doing. I enjoyed it, visiting with friends and having no stakes in play, though I wasn't looking forward to getting back on the road.

It was dusk when we finished, and as we were leaving the cafe, Amaryllis slipped her arm into mine. "Sidebar, my love," she said.

"Okay," I said, feeling a twinge of anxiety. We went some distance from the others, keeping back so we could talk in private.

"I had a *lovely* talk with Raven," said Amaryllis.

"Mmm," I said.

"You set up the heavens," said Amaryllis. "You set up the 'spians. You went through a *whole thing* about how it doesn't really matter whether it's real, so long as it's real to you."

"So I shouldn't judge her for having a 'spian Uther," I said. "Yeah, I guess."

"We need to get at the root of *why* you think that's a bad ending for her," said Amaryllis. "And then, because it's probably a stupid reason, we need to crush it."

"Okay," I said. "Can I get some time to think?"

"Tell you what," said Amaryllis. "It's getting dark, we're going to be in Wall Drug soon, where we're going to be renting some rooms. Why don't you sit in the back with the locus and think about what you've done, okay?" She smiled at me.

"Alright," I said. "Would it be bad of me to just do some edits?"

"Of course not," said Amaryllis. "But I know you, and I know you're going to try to wrestle through it first, possibly at great length with much wailing and gnashing of teeth."

"Yeah," I said.

"I love you," said Amaryllis. She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek, gripping my arm for balance, or maybe just because she liked to touch me.

"I love you too," I replied.

I sat in the back and thought about Raven while a frankly ridiculous conversation took place between Amaryllis and Fenn. We were supposed to have left Bumblefuck, Kansas, at 7:30am, so that we could get to Wall, SD early enough that it would just be a one day thing. Fenn had overslept though, and then it had taken longer than expected to get everything packed. There was a round of recriminations about the number of stops we'd taken, who had been dawdling when, and things of that nature. It was a conversation that everyone was engaging in with great pomposity and exaggeration, and occasionally Fenn would interject with 'Hail authenticity!'.

The locus cuddled up in the back with me though, and I thought about Raven.

There were a couple of factors. The first was that her Uther wasn't real, he was just a 'spian, capable of perfectly expressing love but not of feeling it. Of course, the 'spian, *all* of the 'spians, were part of what I had engineered when I was supreme god, and the god that ran everything

was, in a lot of ways, still a heightened version of me, smarter, wiser, with all the Juniper bumps removed and several thousand subjective years of reflection and studying.

But it wasn't that her Uther was a 'spian, because I didn't really have problems with them. If someone had a social or emotional hole in their life, and they wanted to fill it with something that had been created for that purpose, who was I to judge? But perhaps I did have a set of biases against them, and made some unfavorable comparisons, at least when it came to the individual case.

The thing a 'spian *couldn't* give you was true cognition and connection. If you told a 'spian who had been pretending to love you that it should hate you instead, it would immediately do that. You could lock yourself under some consensual bindings that would make you *think* that it was real, but there were always ways to undo those locks, and conditions that they could lift under.

In the post-heaven world, the one thing that was most limited was other people. You couldn't make other people do what you wanted them to do. You couldn't make someone love you or care for you. There were matchmaking programs, and mutual editing solutions, and all kinds of things that would help you to find and keep someone as a friend or lover, but there were still limits, even in the higher heavens. Real, true, life could be created, but the Authority was stingy. It made the 'spians feel more like substitutes for things you couldn't have.

I wondered whether Raven had entertained the notion of creating an Uther for herself, or at least someone who would fill the hole. If she requested that of the Authority, I wondered whether it would be granted. Creations needed to have autonomy, and free will, and everything that a normal person had, and in fact, they would be indistinguishable from a normal person in pretty much every way. They had to be built to consent to their own creation, and had to have a lifetime that was predicted as being relatively free of suffering, and there were a few other rules, mostly the same rules that governed other life creation, but if Raven put in the request, it might have been granted.

The fact that Raven hadn't requested a creation, or had been denied, and the fact that she wanted to go visit the Aerb version of Arthur, all added up to a tragically imperfect life for her. It was *heaven*, for fuck's sake.

I had asked her, when we were riding on *The Underline* together, whether she'd thought about removing her grief, pain, and unresolved feelings for Uther via soul magic, and she had used the excuse that her soul was too marked and scarred for a soul mage to work on it. Now, that wasn't a problem, but she still hadn't done it. I understood that, since I preferred to self-actualize under relatively 'normal' circumstances, editing sparsely, but it still made me feel bad for her.

"Raven," I said, leaning forward, "Can I possibly get you to trade places with the locus?"

"Um, sure," she said. She looked forward. "Do we need to stop the car for that?"

"There's literally zero chance of us crashing, and if we did, we'd be completely fine and could reconstruct the car in an eyeblink," I said.



“That wouldn’t be very authentic,” she said.

“When I was on Earth, we did this kind of thing all the time,” I said. “Low risk.”

“Okay,” she said.

The biggest problem with the move was getting the locus to trade places, which took more time than I would have liked, and involved me being kicked in the shoulder as she tumbled over the seat. Raven was much more graceful in moving, which wasn’t saying all that much, and the whole thing was uncomfortable and complicated, all because of the desire for authenticity.

“Okay,” she said when she was finally situated. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Raven nodded. She was wearing a black t-shirt with a vaguely punk design on the front, along with blue jeans that I thought were a little unseasonably warm. She had a dark red lipstick and her hair back in black pigtails that both looked a little childish, and also like she was doing something ineffably subversive. I wondered why she’d picked that, from all the outfits she could have picked, but I hadn’t asked. “What are you sorry for?”

“For,” I said. “I don’t know. For not respecting the way you’re choosing to handle things. For being a shitty friend about it. For not visiting you more.”

“I didn’t visit you either,” she said. “Once we were done, we just ... didn’t see a need to see each other.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m also sorry I carry too much of my feelings about Maddie into my relationship with you. I think maybe that explains some of my discomfort.”

“You have a hard time seeing me as anything but an immature child,” said Raven. “So to you, me having sex with someone must necessarily be a violation.” The sentences hit me like a one-two punch, both of them delivered with a chilly power. “I understand that. It’s the same way you thought of me on Aerb, there was no reason for it to change now that we’re in heaven.”

“It’s a toxic way to look at someone who is obviously her own person,” I said. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll give myself another week to sort it out, and if I can’t, then I’ll just do an edit. Okay?”

“I’m not comfortable with the edits,” said Raven. “You didn’t live through the Second Empire like I did. Giving people that power over themselves, even with failsafes, even with guidance — you didn’t ask me to sit next to you so I could lecture you on the problems I have with your implementation of the heavens.”

“No,” I said. “But I hope you’re happy, or that you find happiness.”

“I think you might have the wrong impression of me and him,” said Raven. “The construct isn’t — I think, perhaps, in your mind, it’s this grossly unhealthy wish fulfillment that’s only halfway fulfilling the wish. I think for you, what I’m doing is like the Dungeon Master running Arthur through a particular kind of hell that made both of them miserable, or where Arthur was made

miserable as a reflection of the Dungeon Master being miserable. Like playing with my puppet is making me sad.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

“I didn’t make him like that,” said Raven. “I didn’t make or call him into being for that purpose. Do you think, if we’d ever have brought Uther out of the Long Stairs, if he had somehow fallen in love with me, that it would have satisfied me?”

“It’s weird to hear you admit all that stuff out loud,” I said. “To admit that’s what you wanted. Love.”

“There was a lot I wanted,” said Raven. “There was a lot that I genuinely thought would have been for the best for Aerb, and for Uther. But those things I’m admitting now, those are the things that I tried to keep to myself.”

“Anyway,” I said. “No. I think that you had some vague feelings toward Uther, maybe a girlhood crush, and you built him up over time, and ...” I paused. “Did you say you read the book?”

“I didn’t say, but yes, I have read the book,” said Raven. “It was quite emotional. There was a lot that was very personal, about all of us.”

“Well, the thing the Dungeon Master said, at the end,” I said. “About Pippi Longstocking.”

“You think that Uther was my Pippi Longstocking?” asked Raven.

“Sorry if that’s stupid or insulting,” I said.

“I can see how it would fit,” said Raven, briefly looking to the ceiling. I let out a breath. I’d been worried that it was a dumb comparison to make.

“But then ... okay, explain your thinking to me, I guess.” I was trying not to think of her as Maddie, and ironically, her getup was helping with that somehow. She was dressed more like Maddie than I’d ever seen her before, and that made the differences stand out more, somehow.

“You’re not attracted to Pippi Longstocking anymore, right?” asked Raven.

“Correct,” I said.

“Well, for me, I constructed a fantasy that was ... not quite right. One that would have a lot of the inevitable problems, waiting there for me to find.” Raven frowned a bit. “I had my assistant build in points of conflict, places where I would either see through the facade or where there’d be some cognitive dissonance.”

“But ... okay, it’s been a year, and I know it’s not *all* that, because sometimes,” I paused. “Sometimes it’s been nice, right?”

“Sometimes,” Raven admitted. “Less so, now. Three months ago I requested a shift in my hedonic treadmill when it came to Uther, just to speed things along. The highs are getting less

high. I'm getting ... bored. It hurts to say that about someone I have feelings for, even if he's just a character played by an actor."

I stayed silent, but I was thinking about the Aerb version of Arthur, and how Raven was going to have a meeting of some kind with him. I wondered how that fit into what she'd said, and whether she was really doing things in a healthy way.

"So eventually you'll break up," I said. "And you'll move on."

"I think so," said Raven. "I think the last year with him has been ... instructive. You can think of it as an extended send off, if you'd like, the goodbye that I never got to have with him on the Long Stairs."

I nodded. "I don't think he would have wanted to stay in the Long Stairs for a year."

"No," sighed Raven. "I suppose not. And he never thought of me in the way I wanted to be thought of."

I left it at that, and we sat in the back in silence for a bit. The others up front were sharing knock-knock jokes of generally terrible quality, given that most of them were made up on the spot, and Raven leaned forward so she could join in. Apparently, she had a ton of them.