

"Think out your plan like a woman of action. Then act out your plan like a woman of thought"
-Carmen Sandiego, Where In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?-

JP adjusted the cuffs of his shirt for the millionth time, pacing back and forth behind Ben's desk. "They're late."

"They're not late." Ben said without looking up. He was reading an old paperback, and seemed totally comfortable with the prospect of patience. JP almost diverted his thoughts to wonder if that was because Ben was from a dungeon made out of a mountain, or if that was just Ben trying to infuriate him. "They checked in. They'll check in again afterward, or if they need us."

"We should be on call for this." JP sniped back. "We have the stupid skulljacks, it wouldn't be hard. Fuck, they could just be wearing earpieces."

Ben turned a page. "You don't use your skulljack, I don't have one, and while we could have just used, I dunno, normal radios or something, you know how much that distracts James on these things."

"I do." JP grimaced, stopping his pacing behind Ben to fold his arms and stare at the far wall of the warehouse. "You don't have a skulljack?"

"I'm not human, and don't want to risk it."

"All the camracondas have skulljacks." JP pointed out.

Ben turned another page, his reading speed slowed somewhat with JP talking at him. "I'm not a camraconda either."

"You're infuriating is what you are."

"Thanks."

"We should call them."

"Nope. Let James work. He's..." Ben trailed off, tilted his paperback down, and looked over his shoulder. "Don't you have something to be doing that isn't this?"

JP tugged at the collar of his shirt as he refrained from sighing. "Not really. Increased specialization and trust means that I don't need to know whatever Karen's worried about right now, or how dangerous our space elevator is. Harvey and I have a talk with our civilian oversight board later to talk about the ethics of hacking street cameras, but that's later. It's... what, three?"

“Close to it, yes. Which is why it’s *fine* that they’re taking their time. Harlan showing up when it’s not under the mysterious shadow of night is novel enough.” Another scratch of old paper as a page was flipped. “I understand that you’re nervous, but-“

“I’m not nervous, I’m irate.” JP corrected, nodding at a pair of Response members who had come in to pin a request for some esoteric and probably magic tool to the big board they kept back here.

“I don’t care, man.” Ben sighed. “If we want to solve this problem, we should just recruit and train up more people. Which takes time, and money, and also people.”

JP frowned and glanced at his phone, scrolling through a mile long list of messages he hadn’t acknowledged. “Didn’t we just hire a batch of people?” He shook his head as he ran through the thought. “Though I suppose they wouldn’t be trained, or useful, and we don’t want to trust anyone with magic that might be a secret serial killer or something. Hm. You know what, we should recruit more camracondas. Everyone loves the camracondas.”

The comment got an eye roll from Ben, who was about to say something about how offensive that came across to *him*, when he was interrupted by a pop of air.

Alex hit the floor on her hands and knees, not bothering to go through the technically proper process of hitting the teleporter landing platforms and instead intentionally popping back into the converted warehouse space. Her fingertips were still numb, and she felt like she could barely breathe, but the aftereffects of using too much Breath at once were starting to fade.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to go ask to use the weird Status Quo crown thing that would let her reoxygenate her blood with what was left of her stored Breath. That was, in fact, one of the farthest things from her mind as she toppled off balance onto her side and crashed into a desk, sliding the heavy metal furniture several inches out of alignment and causing a chain reaction of spilled pens.

“Hey!” Alex croaked out the word as everyone nearby scrambled to react to her entrance.

She might have passed out for a second, because the next thing she realized, there was a red haired woman half-wearing one of the Order’s semi-custom sets of armor supporting her with one hand, checking her pulse with the other, and doing something that drew Alex’s eyes to focus with a third pseudo-limb of green geometric light. “No concussion, looks like she blacked out from oxygen deprivation. Murdau says she’s awake. Hey, Alex, you with us?”

“I’m good.” Alex wheezed, taking a deep breath and looking around at where JP and Ben were hovering nearby. “Overdid a thing. Fuck, my head. What... *wait, fuck! James!*”

“Here.” The woman stood and offered her a hand, helped up herself by the camraconda sitting nearby that Alex recognized as one of the people who helped out in the kitchens a lot.

Alex took the hand and stumbled to her feet. “James is gone.” She felt like the words weren’t real.

“What the fuck *happened*?!” JP demanded, a dozen cryptically patterned instances of Planner’s tentacles radiating out from behind his head and back. “Did Harlan fuck us? Where’s James?”

“No... Harlan was fine. Someone... he’s...” Alex suddenly didn’t know what to say. What *had* happened? Everything was going wrong, and she didn’t know...

At a nod from Ben, the red haired woman steered her to a chair and had her sit. Alex set her hands on the flat surface, something reassuring about how solid it was. “Thanks Ann.” Ben said softly as he sat across from her. “Alex. I’m gonna ask you some questions. Can you answer for me?”

“Sure, we’re friends.” Alex said, instantly calming slightly now that someone she was close with was here.

Ben nodded, and for Alex it wasn’t hard to understand why he had a pained look in his eyes. Everything was falling apart. “Okay. Where is James?”

“I don’t know.” Alex said. “The cafe is gone.”

“Start from the beginning.” Ben didn’t let himself get sidetracked. “You met with Harlan?”

“Yes.”

“What went wrong?”

Alex kept her breathing steady. Something was off, but she was starting to feel a lot more steady. It only took her a second to sort her memories. “Someone came in. I think they were trying to kill Harlan. They had a magic... bomb, I guess. We were just about to telepad out, when it got set off.” Alex stared at the backs of her hands, and saw that one of them had a slash across it from where she’d hit the torn concrete. “I used my Climb spell, tried to put myself between James and the blast. Everything got bright, and then it was just me, in the foundation of the cafe. The whole building is gone.”

JP snapped, pointing at Ann and Knife-In-Fangs. “Go.” He ordered, and the two of them nodded instantly, the camraconda already in the process of helping Ann attach the rest of her armor properly. “Intel and anything in the rubble. Don’t fuck around when the police show up. Look for a body.”

“It smelled like blood.” Alex whispered. Then cleared her throat, and spoke up. “But I didn’t see any bodies. It was like the place got scooped out.” She focused on Ben’s face, her friend sitting across from her, making rapid notes as she talked. Ben, who she’d known for so long. It was weird; he was so good at keeping her calm in situations like this. Had they dated once? How had she never... “Who the fuck are you?” Alex asked, slowly recoiling, reaching with a deliberate but slow hand for her concealed pistol.

JP tapped Ben on the head with the flat of his hand, and he got a wide eyed look, before suddenly Alex didn’t know him that well anymore. He was just Ben, the new guy in their rogue division, who wasn’t...human. “Sorry. Shit, I’m so sorry.” He said, looking away from her, and almost rushing to leave.

“No, wait!” Alex might have sounded more frantic than she meant to, and Ben froze. “No, it’s fine. Thanks. I’m good. Just caught me off guard. It’s okay.” She sighed. “That’s really useful. It’s okay.”

JP paced back and forth behind where Ben slowly settled back into his chair, phone to his ear. As Alex finished talking, he lowered the electronic, calmly pushed a button, and then got a look on his face like he was considering pitching it into the wall at high speed. “Where the *fuck* is Nate?!” He demanded.

“Indiana.” Ben answered without hesitation. “Still. It’s been two hours, stop being so impatient.”

“Well he’s not answering his phone!”

“That’s bad.” Alex said, then looked over to meet Ben’s eyes. “Right? That’s bad, right? Like, that’s literally why you sent us out, he was checking on other people who were out of contact?”

“Yeah. It’s bad.” JP sighed. “Okay. James is missing, and-“

“He might be dead.” Ben’s voice was like a knife. JP glared at him with a sudden ferocity, but Ben just met his gaze. “*He might be dead.*” The mimic said more forcefully. “If not, good. But you can’t make assumptions. Not now.” He turned his head back while JP continued to aim a glower at the back of his skull. “Was there anything else you can remember? Details?” He asked Alex, this time without the enforced friendship.

Alex glanced up as the air conditioning of the building kicked in and started making a whirring noise in vents overhead, and by the time she looked back down, JP had sprinted out of the room in search of something or someone. “Uh, yeah. Harlan said they were familiar with the person. Didn’t remember them, though. Oh, they were answering questions, before we got... yeah. No reaction to the question on the pillars, it looks like the people they know can’t actually find us as a group even though they know about *James*, uh... there was something... oh!” Alex rapped her knuckles on the table. “They were talking like there were other groups like Status

Quo! But also like they get killed off a lot? It was weird. Also they did two of the shootings in New York. Uh, Harlan did. They didn't care. They're fucking creepy." Alex focused on breathing again as Ben rapidly transferred everything she'd said to a whiteboard he'd dragged over and wiped clean.

For a little bit, the warehouse was quiet as it was just Ben asking her slight clarifications or pressing for more details, and background white noise.

"What's going to happen now?" Alex asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Ben said, his back to her as the pen he was holding squeaked a blocked off line between "Harlan" and "pillars" on the board.

Alex started fidgeting with one of the mechanisms on a clipboard that was sitting on the desk. "I mean... what happens, if James is gone?"

Ben stopped, and let his arm fall to his side, not turning away from the whiteboard. "Then... I don't know." He said in a soft murmur. "Let's hope that's not what's happening." He turned along with Alex as the noise of the door caught their attention, and a pair of women walked in.

Well, one woman, two bodies. "JP told me to get in here and get ready?" Marlea said. "Is something going on?"

"I'll fill you in." Ben said with a professional nod to the hive mind, then looked between them to the door, where another cluster of people had just entered. "As soon as they get over here."

While he did that, Alex went through the mental process with her skulljack to connect to the local network and check the Order's message service. It looked like Marlea was updating a channel for this crisis in real time, so she didn't have much to add, but as Ben kept explaining to the others what was going on, a general alert caught her attention.

She and Marlea jolted at the same time, as did Charlie who was the other heavy skulljack user in the growing group JP was sending to the warehouse from people he was dragging away from other things. "Uh, guys?" Alex spoke before the others

It wasn't that Alex was an antisocial person or anything, but it was a little weird when a whole group turned their attention on you instantly. "What's going on?" Ben asked her.

Alex double checked the message, and then tapped her neck in the commonly used signal to indicate where she was getting this from. "Six people just teleported into our landing platform." And then, realizing that was vague, clarified. "Six people who *aren't Order members*. They had what's left of a telepad, and from the pictures, I *hundred percent* recognize one of them from the cafe."

“Okay.” Ben’s voice didn’t really change, but something about the mood shifted. “Shifting objective. Our goal is now to find, and bail out a one James Lyle. Let’s hear some ideas.”

Deb was sitting around a small circular table with Lua, who was reprising her role as Order talk therapist, and Ishah, who was still a ratroach for the time being. They were talking; technically with an objective, but since part of that objective was making Ishah feel comfortable, the conversation was languid and relaxed.

Strangely, Deb didn’t mind. This was still part of patient care, after all, but it was also a chance for her to take a break. To just move slower as a person, even if she was still trying to help someone redesign their body from the ground up.

“And presenting as male has been feeling better for you?” Lua asked with a smile, that Deb found herself matching as they listened to Ishah speak.

The ratroach nodded slowly; he’d been too enthusiastic once and snapped some of his own chitin. The unmodified ratroaches, the ones that hadn’t been repeatedly exposed to the shaper substance in the Akashic Sewer like Arrush and Keeka were, they were *far* too fragile for Deb’s liking. “Better, better, yes.” He chittered out. “Safer. I feel. Safer. It was good idea.”

“Good.” Deb said with a tight smile. The topic at hand was hard for her, and she was resisting the urge to bury herself checking updates on her phone instead of listening. But this was important, and she needed to be present. “How’re you thinking about biologically transitioning, with the full reshaping?”

The ratroach hissed slightly, ducking his head and idly tugging at the antenna that stuck out the back of his furred neck with his extra hand, while his primary two claws remained clasped on the table. “Don’t know.” He said eventually. “Changes. Big changes are scary. But...” he shrugged. “What is happening has been wonderful. So maybe more big changes will be even more as so.”

“If you don’t know, it’s important to not commit to things you don’t actively want to.” Lua pointed out in a calm but firm tone. “I would say that changing out of *fear* is not something that you will feel happy with, long term.”

Ishah started to shrink back into his chair at the comment, before Deb slowly reached over, made eye contact with one of the ratroach’s offset beady black eyes, and took one of his claws in her own hand. Ishah squeezed twice, chitin and short bristly fur warm against Deb’s palm, an indication that she should say something.

Deb glanced back at Lua. “Ratroaches don’t think in long term.” She reminded the therapist.

“Of course.” Lua winced. “I’m so sorry. But that doesn’t change the fact that you can begin to, now, and benefit from it.”

“Yes.” Ishah nodded. “I don’t... think about it.” Their other hand pulled back to press against part of the handmade flannel shirt they had on, over the emergency surgery scar on their abdomen from shortly after they’d been brought back to the Order. “I don’t know.” They admitted. “What should... I think?”

Lua’s smile came back. “That’s not a helpful question. We aren’t here to tell you what to think, we’re here to help you make the best decision for you. From what I’ve read of everything Deb here has documented, this process is going to be painful, difficult, and dangerous. Even if she can make it safe for you, doing it repeatedly is a needless risk, and every attempt is a chance for failure. So what you wish to make of yourself, you could be for quite some time. You can be whatever you want, the only condition is that you *want* it.” Deb moved her hands a lot when she spoke, always shifting her open palms to emphasize points.

“I want...” Ishah stopped, and a shaking wave passed through their body as tears suddenly formed in the corners of some of their eyes. “I am stupid.” They said abruptly.

“You are not.” Deb spoke somewhat harshly. “You’re hurt, which is fixable. Sort of.”

“Deb...” Lua gave her an exasperated sigh.

The sudden mild absurdity got a scattered chattering laugh from Ishah. He composed himself, and then spoke between deep breaths. “Feels as if... I failed at something. Lost something. Even though I know... it would have... killed me.” They looked up at Lua, who silently handed them a folded towel to wipe their tears on. “So I am a fool.”

Lua took in the words, and made a few notes on the pad of paper she always brought to her sessions. Then she nodded to herself, and asked one of the more important questions of the day. “Do you *want* to be able to have children eventually?”

Ishah bowed his head, arms curling tight around himself, except for the one that still held Deb’s hand. “Yes.” He said in a very small voice. “Stupid.”

“It’s not that stupid.” Deb said reflexively, in a voice that didn’t fit with the intimate tone of the conversation. She caught a sharp shake of the head from Lua, and corrected, “It’s not stupid at all, actually. You already identify as male, regardless of your body. There’s nothing that says you can’t keep doing that, even when you make a body that better suits you.”

“I could be... different?” Ishah asked in a squeak, still staring down at the table.

“We’re all different.” Lua said comfortingly. With one finger, she tapped her bangs. “Deb and I have different hair colors. Genetically, that means we’re *surprisingly* far apart. The two of you

might have more in common in that way than she and I do. There's people in the world who would disagree, who would hate you for being different in *any* way, but they aren't here."

Opposite the therapist, Deb did a good job controlling her desire to explain that ratroach's weren't that genetically similar to humans. "Also you can always ask James and he'll break their knees." Deb added instead, unhelpfully.

"Deborah!" Lua folded her arms, ignoring Ishah's snicker. "That is uncalled for!"

"I mean...!" Deb stopped as her phone started beeping. The phone that she'd muted before coming in here. "Uh oh." She said, pulling the device out of her pocket and checking the message someone had sent her. "I have to go." She stood rapidly enough that Ishah flinched back. "Shit. I have to go, *now*." Deb dipped a hand into a different pocket to where she kept an emergency telepad with a specific destination prewritten on all the pages.

She vanished with a pop, leaving Ishah and Lua watching where the doctor had knocked her chair over. Slowly, Lua looked back at Ishah. "Would you like to talk about how you've been doing living here, while we wait for her to get back?"

Ishah slowly nodded, carefully putting his hands back on the table. "I have discovered... pop tarts." He said, getting a cozy smile from Lua as the two of them went back to speaking about life, and how to handle its worries.

For Deb, her worries had just gotten complicated.

The hospital space the Order had built was close to state-of-the-art, had a decent amount of space, and was really not suitable as a triage area. But that was what it was being used as when Deb arrived.

"What *happened*?!" She demanded as she landed, getting a scream out of the college aged girl nearest her. The girl started to speak, but Deb ignored her as one of the actual nurses gave her a rapid update.

"Six people, teleported in. They aren't Order, but they need help. Mostly." The elder woman, Margie, was rapidly pulling her wavy hair back into a tight ponytail as she jerked an elbow toward an even older man in a wheelchair by the hospital area's door. "He's not hurt, but he has no idea where he is."

Deb nodded as she circled to the sink and started scrubbing her hands. "Have you done triage before?" She asked in a suddenly unsteady voice. She'd put in some overnights at an ER to pay for her student loans, but that wasn't *this*.

To her relief, Margie nodded. "I called you as soon as they arrived. Let's get to work."

The sorting was rapid. One man was *missing his fucking arm*, and was already unconscious. One man had an ankle that looked broken, but wasn't an immediate risk, and the woman with him seemed to be his wife, but not suffering anything other than confusion. Which was normal, when dealing with the Order, as far as Deb was concerned. The two girls both had injuries that looked like *bite marks* somehow, but they weren't bleeding out.

The last girl had been brought in by a pair of Response members, both of whom had authorities that were healers. If you asked her after three beers and an evening of socializing, Deb might tell you that the authorities making her entire education invalid was frustrating. But right now, she didn't fucking care, and she yelled a task at them to close and sterilize the girl's wounds as she and Margie got the armless man stabilized.

Tourniquet and sterile dressing for the injury itself. It was a slice so clean you could have used it for an anatomy textbook, which confused Deb immensely. What had *happened*?! She desperately wanted to know, but she didn't let it stop her from taking the offered block of pure water ice that Margie handed her, pressing it to the man's bloody chest, and letting out a Breath.

Deb wasn't a delver anymore. But that hadn't stopped her from getting Ethan's team to carry her ass up a couple thousand feet of the Winter's Climb so she could take the spell that turned ice to blood transfusions.

Then it was a matter of double checking his vitals, getting an IV in with a painkiller and antibiotic mix, drawing some blood to test for anything immediately dangerous, making sure he was strapped to the bed so he didn't thrash when he woke up, and getting an oxygen mask on to help regulate his shallow breathing. Margie also briefly turned up the heat in the room to counteract Deb bringing the temperature down with her magic.

"He's stable." Deb announced forty minutes after the man had arrived. A blossom of relief in her chest as she spoke the words.

"He's still missing an arm. I'll have Aaron contact St. V's to set up surgery." Margie pointed out. "Also Aaron and Display-Of-Morning got here while you were working. We had Response set the broken ankle, but it needs a proper cast if we don't have another option. The girls are okay."

Deb let out a long breath. "Okay. Let's go double check on them."

She strode out into the hallway, moving with purpose, but no longer in a rush. A big part of it was being a steady presence for anyone who was hurting; doctors that ran everywhere scared people, and scared people were a problem. Deb didn't take her time swapping out the blood covered scrubs and removing the rest of the red from her hands, but she did it with deliberate motions, in view from the clear doors of the rooms that their new patients were in.

When she walked into the first one, the girl there looked terrified. "What's going *on*?!" She demanded in a crying voice. "What is *happening*?!"

Deb wished she had a chart to check. Response were great people, but they didn't make notes when they magically sealed up cuts, and checking a chart was a great way to look official while you composed yourself. Instead, Deb just jumped into it. "You're in the hospital section of the Order of Endless Rooms. Someone will want to talk to you soon about what happened, I'm just here to make sure you're safe and healthy." She smiled her best winning smile, which she knew was a little tight right now. "Can you tell me how you got hurt?"

"Some... something bit me." The girl stammered, a hand pressing against her chest under the hospital gown she had on. "Oh, God, it bit me. And then someone... did we teleport?" She sounded confused, like she couldn't tell if she'd just had a nightmare or not.

"You did." Deb confirmed. "You spoke to James, then, I take it?" She said as she pulled up a stool next to the bed and checked the girl's pulse. "Do you mind if I do a blood draw?"

The girl nodded slowly. "He said to... tell you everything. And to tell someone he loved them?"

"That sounds like James." Deb snorted.

"What about everyone else?" The girl asked as Deb got a vein to the surface and poked a needle into her. She made a face at the pinch, but didn't squirm too much, which Deb appreciated.

Deb glanced up at her. "The other girl who got bit is one room over, I'll be checking her next. The man who lost an arm will... well, he's okay for now. Did you know either of them?"

"No... yes. She's my study partner. But I meant *everyone* else." The girl looked at Deb. "In the cafe?"

"I don't..." Deb glanced over her shoulder, looking for anyone who might help. "I'm sure they're doing okay. If anyone was hurt, they'd be here, or at a bigger hospital." She said reassuringly, even if she wasn't sure of that herself.

She finished up, and moved to the next room over to sit by another bed and answer the same questions again. As she did so, Deb kept up a secondary conversation through her skulljack, probing for information on what had happened. James had vanished, Alex was back and nearly killed herself chaining Climb spells, something had gone wrong...

Deb focused on what she was doing. After this, she'd do some basic lab work on the blood samples she'd pulled, make sure there was nothing in their...

She stopped. The girl's arms were bleeding. And not from her needle, either. "Did you get bit on your arms?" Deb asked abruptly.

The young woman held her arms up, blood beading on her dark skin like drops of glittering oil. “Oh.” She said in a woozy voice. “That... hurts?”

A few seconds later, she dropped her head back to the pillow, eyes flickering closed. “*Shit.*” Deb unprofessionally barked out, quickly checking the girl’s breathing and temperature. Absolutely running a fever, so the bite must have done something. And it was a high one, too; she needed to get that under control *now*, probably for the other girl as well. “Margie!” Deb called, stepping out of the room and into the expanded hallway. “I need a naproxen IV for these two. Whatever bit them... wait.” Something caught her eye, and Deb snapped out an arm to point at one of the Response members who was sitting near the door, waiting to make sure they weren’t needed for anything else. “What are you doing?”

“Scratching?” She said curiously. “My arms itch. A lot, actually.” She got a curious look on her face as she grabbed at the arm under her long sleeve. “Uh... hey... uh oh.” The Responder said as she pulled down her sleeve, and revealed a set of dripping red holes. “Wow, that’s low key very bad, huh.”

“*Shit!*” Deb barked. “Stay there! Seal the entrance! Margie, can you do those IVs? Display-Of-Morning, check on the other patients, *don’t touch them*, seal the rooms. You,” she pointed at the two Response members, both of whom were now holding arms that were bleeding. One of them had an authority manifested as well, the hard green light from their scarf forming a mimic arm that *also had holes in it*. “Did you teleport them down here, or walk?!”

“We teleported, but... they came in on the landing pads.” The man who answered had a wide eyed look of terrified understanding.

Deb took a breath, then closed her eyes and accessed her skulljack, and sent a message.

Emergency quarantine of the Lair. She broadcast, poking the program that would ignore whether or not anyone’s phones were muted or not. *Seal floor by floor. No one in or out until spread vector is determined.*

She closed the program and opened her eyes, as the sounds of running feet sounded outside. “It’s either airborne, or physical contact.” She said out loud. “Airborne could be slower, so... *shit*, again.” Deb turned and sprinted down the hallway that had no business fitting in the space it was allotted. They had a fairly large space down here, even if they didn’t actually use it all yet, but there was one room in particular that was occupied on a near constant basis. In the back of the hospital, decorated with flowers and the clumsy paintings the occupant made to pass the time, was a single crow-wasp.

Deb snapped a mask over her face as she ran, cursing that she hadn’t taken the precaution either. She’d gotten fucking *complacent* working here. Her sneakers squeaked on the tile floor as she bolted to where Banana’s door sat open, the increasingly cheerful girl sitting with all four legs crossed on her bed as she bobbed back and forth, watching a documentary on the TV. By

the time Deb got there, her head was pounding, and her arms itched, and she realized that something had gone horribly, unspeakably wrong.

“Hhhhhhhello!” Banana cheerfully greeted Deb, taking one of her unfolded wing arms off the plush shark she had sitting beside her on the bed. And then she saw the look of bitter fear in the human woman’s eyes. “‘Ebb?” Banana’s voice was a buzzing anxiety.

Deb pulled the door closed, and twisted the handle to the quarantine seal. A system they’d installed once as a specific precaution, replicated across the whole suite of rooms, suddenly seeming disturbingly prescient. She tried to say something, but found her breath was coming hard.

Banana scrambled out of her bed, scattering sheets and punching a hole in the mattress with the one spike-limb she still had intact by accident. “‘Ebb!” She screamed in terror as the door closed. “Whyyyy?!”

“Sorry.” Deb mouthed through the wall as she felt herself lose her balance. She braced against the heavy glass, sliding down to the floor with a thump as fever flared up. In a haze, she tried to send a message to Sunny, but she could barely make her skulljack register, much less do detail work right now.

And then she blacked out.

When she came to again, her forearms hurt and had scabs all over them, Banana was making a buzzing wail behind her as she pounded her feathered wings on the sealed door, her head was perfectly clear, and there was something floating in her mind.

[Survivor : Low : +2 Skill Points]

“Ow.” Was the first thing Deb said. Followed by “God dammit.” As she realized she’d bled all over her floor, and also her sneakers. “I *liked* these.” She said as she dragged herself, leaving bloody handprints on the glass of the door, and realized she could stand without issue.

“‘Ebb!” The squawk from behind her drew her attention back to Banana. “Whyyyy! Why?!”

“Banana. I’m so sorry. How long was I out?” Deb spoke up to be heard through the glass.

Banana cocked her head, pointing her good eye at the TV in her room. She started counting on the tips of one of her wing hands. “F-four!” She announced eventually.

“Four hours, or four animals?” Deb sighed at how the new crow girl kept time by relative nature documentary spans. Banana nodded at the second part of the question. “Animals. Okay. So about an hour and change.” Deb pressed a hand to the sealed room. “Okay. We don’t know

what this is, and you need to stay here for a bit, okay? When it's safe... well, I'll be back. Don't worry. I swear I'll be back. You've got your shark to keep you safe, right?"

"Kay." Banana sounded scared, but pulled the plush shark off the bed to hold in front of her as she sat on the floor.

"Don't stay down there or your legs are gonna hurt." Deb said, before coughing phlegm out of her throat. "Okay. The others. I have to check."

There were a thousand missed messages as she walked slowly back down the hall to where the others were. No one knew why she'd called a quarantine, but it had rapidly become apparent. Some people had woken up before her, and so Deb started building a profile of the infection as she moved.

Rapid spread, almost certainly airborne. No secondary infection, though she'd need to do full bloodwork to verify that, and she would be taking *zero* chances. It hit camracondas way less harshly, and they also only got a single skill point from it instead of two. No one had *died*, which was good, though several people had collapsed into things and had physical injuries which was less good. At least one concussion. They'd managed to lock everything down before it left the Lair; it never even made it to the upper level, and it absolutely didn't get to the LA office, which was almost enough of a miracle to make Deb reconsider going back to Catholicism.

Almost. Not quite.

And also, everyone had gotten skill points, which was new. Which meant this was a *dungeon disease*.

Her worst nightmare was here, now.

And then Deb got to the part of the medical wing they'd been using, and had to update the Order on something grim. Someone *had* died. Five someones, actually. Five out of the six people brought in were corpses by the time Deb got there; the only person alive was the one girl Margie had gotten an IV into before she'd passed out herself. She was already awake, and sobbing, having tugged her IV stand into her friend's room and encountered the results of the disease firsthand while everyone else was out.

I think we have a real fucking problem on our hands. Deb sent over the Order's message server. *What the hell did James do?*

Reed was working on something big when stuff started to go wrong. He didn't actually know, though, because he was working with the crazy old mechanic cult leader's notes, which required him to be in the secure room where they stored them, which was also a faraday cage. Which

was frustrating, because he actually had gotten used to using his skulljack to reference *everything*. Having google in your brain was essentially what it was to own a smartphone, but turned up to eleven.

Right now, though, he was devoid of the internet, and having to use his wits, his least powerful weapon, to muddle through what he was doing. Which was trying to build a dungeon detector.

The old madman who had killed an entire city had *not* kept good notes. Reed also didn't keep good notes, but his were bad on the level of someone who didn't index properly, not someone who was having a disassociate break with reality and was also very bigoted. Though a lot of the man's bigotry seemed to just be in the form of using whatever words were available to hurt anyone who wasn't him personally. But it still sucked.

The problem was, there actually *was* information in his notebooks about how to do stuff. How to use dungeon magic to make living servants, which was how the necroads had gotten put together originally, or how to turn owned property into a sort of array that could suppress a dungeon that you 'surrounded'.

Reed had been trying to turn this stuff in to usable knowledge, which was tricky. A lot of it was tricky on the level of being hugely unethical, like how making dungeon life this way required you use the bones of people you personally killed in the dungeon. Some of it was tricky because it required Route Horizon specifically, he was pretty sure. And the rest of it was a logistical nightmare, like, "buy a town" logistical nightmare.

But there was some stuff that he'd noticed right away, that had already been relevant. Like how some of the patterns the mechanic had carved into things were *really* similar to the design work that made red orb totems work properly. And while Momo's practice of just 'feeling it out' was nice and all, Reed had been trying to build a database of more practically usable information for those. And from *here* he had found something like a language. Not the same, but close, like how English and Spanish were cousins. Terms for 'car' and 'distance' and 'machinery' were dragged out and translated to Momo and Juan's work on the reds, and Reed had gotten encouraged.

Now, he was trying to figure out if he had the information he needed from just this, and the other bits and pieces of knowledge the Order had picked up, to make something that could *find* a dungeon, if they didn't already know where one was. He was pretty sure, *pretty* sure, that he could build one that would find an entrance to a specifically known dungeon. If - big if - he was willing to personally slit the throat of someone between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

Reed twisted a curl of his hair around a finger, and tugged. Reading this stuff made him feel like maybe the Order should lean a little harder into just shooting more people. No one should *think* like this, *act* like this. And he felt gross for having to use it as a source to strip something useful from.

But a dungeon detector would put them so absurdly far ahead of the curve they knew about. So he kept reading.

Right up until the guy doing the monitoring today, which was Daniel, knocked on the door that he'd punched in the code to open up. "Hey!" He called. "We've got a problem!"

"What did James do?" Reed asked reflexively.

"Unleashed a plague. Check your notifications." Daniel said. Reed laughed, and then stopped laughing, and then felt his face fall as he left everything he was working on on the table, stepped out of the secure room, and started pulling stuff up through his skulljack link. "Oh fuck." He said, looking around the space they were in. "Are we safe here? Wait, why did you take me out of the sealed room?!" He demanded of Daniel.

"I think we're okay." Daniel said, sheepishly not admitting that he just hadn't thought about it. "But we should stay put here."

"Wait, James is missing?" Reed walked around behind the desk outside the door that led to where they kept the dangerous stuff, and stole Daniel's chair. "When did this happen? Oh hell, we need to figure out how to find him." Reed glanced back at the room where he'd been plugging away at a madman's notes.

"Is it close to working?" Daniel asked him.

"Not even slightly." Reed snorted. "I think I'm missing something about time, in the abstract, and the standing policy of not fucking with time seems smart to me. But that's fine. We've got options."

"Do we?" Daniel asked.

Reed didn't blame him for the question, and it *did* seem earnest. Daniel had been away for a while; he and Pathfinder, the first navigator the Order had ever met, took a lot of camping trips. He was only here today by coincidence, because Davis had asked the first person he'd crossed paths with to fill in for him while he took a couple ex-Alchemists on a first dungeon delve.

For a while, it had annoyed Reed, that Daniel was gone so much. But it had been pointed out by one of the new camraconda engineers that he could take a vacation literally whenever he wanted, and yet, he was still absorbed with Research. Also, Alanna had casually mentioned to him once that everywhere Daniel and Path went, they seemed to stumble across some kind of mystery to solve. The image of the pair as living an unintentional Scooby Doo plot was too funny for Reed to be mad at all.

"I think we can come up with something." Reed said. He rapidly created a channel for brainstorming through his skulljack and invited all of Research. And Daniel, who took a lot

longer to join it through his phone. “Dude, just use the thing.” Reed said, shaking his head as he tapped the back of his neck.

Daniel looked up from where he was leaning on the other side of the desk, the only sound down here aside from him tapping his foot on the concrete floor was the hum of an air conditioner. “I don’t like it.” He said. “Okay, what about this? Someone says we have a Climb spell for tracking things?”

“They didn’t read the whole document.” Reed snorted, already knowing what was being talked about. “It’s a range of about a *mile*.”

“Oh.” Daniel kept scrolling. “Jesus, everyone has so many ideas. What have you guys been doing down here while we were gone?”

“Identifying dungeontech, building the future, and trying to figure out if we could crush yellow orbs in a hydraulic press.” Reed answered. “The answer is yes, before you ask. It’s deeply disappointing.” He didn’t explain why that was, as he closed his eyes and devoted his attention to the conversation.

Potions were out; they didn’t have anything that even remotely helped with this. Relationstick connections also weren’t viable, so that whole field was dismissed for now. Someone had checked the iLipede that made social connection maps of people, and put James’ name in, which helped them start identifying the other people still in the cafe with him, but didn’t do much for figuring out where that cafe was.

People outside the building got looped in. The Route Horizon delvers over in Townton ran down their list of available spells, but the closest anyone got was the one that made a journey safe, and that didn’t even come close to finding whatever dungeon James had absolutely been teleported into. Reed remembered that the map chunks they’d copied and the spell from that weren’t in the database yet, and made a link to it, but Pave was the simplest Route spell they’d found so far and it was basically just a somewhat unpleasant punch.

“We have a table that swaps bodies?” Daniel asked abruptly.

Reed looked up from where he’d laid his head in his folded arms on the desk’s surface. “Yes. It’s not helpful.”

“I mean, I figure not now. But what happens if you swap bodies with an infomorph or something?” Daniel questioned.

“We don’t know. The table seems like it would give someone from OSHA a heart attack. Focus.” He ducked his head back down.

“What this about a lion sculpture thing from the Library? Also why haven’t I gone to the Library?” Daniel kept distracting him.

Reed groaned. “Oh, that thing. It’s a menace. We used two of them before we realized it was eroding trust. It, like, ‘amplifies the effect of successful rhetorical attacks’, or something. I’m not the psychology guy. We’ve got one left, we’re not touching it, it won’t help, move on.” He closed his eyes again.

They couldn’t teleport to James. Someone had already tried, before the quarantine had come down, and it just sent them to a different James who was *rather* surprised. Mostly, this just worked to confirm that he was in a dungeon. Teleporting into dungeons was a problem, because no matter how artificial they seemed sometimes, it was important to remember that dungeons didn’t actually have *addresses* in them, and that was what the telepads seemed to function on. Even the new variety Anesh had made.

After exhausting their list of stored magic, people started trying to make blue orb objects that could do the job. Cell phones that could connect to specific humans, pagers that could summon someone, even just a rolling office chair that would always hit James specifically if you drifted across the floor in it.

None of them worked. Or rather, the ideas never got off the ground. Everyone was getting better at making magic items, but no one could make the high concept ideas they had *stick*, and they rapidly burned through half their supply of size two and three blue orbs before switching directions. The other plan was trying to add a relevant power to a Status Quo leveling object, but after another thirty broken orbs, the most the team on that had accomplished was giving a shield bracer the Stockpile Atmosphere power at level one, which had nearly killed the person who tested it and blew out their eardrums in the temporary vacuum they made.

“Can Path hear me?” Reed asked suddenly.

“If you talk out loud, sure.” Daniel answered. “Why?”

“We have navigator eggs down here. If we incept one with the starter map of ‘find James’, would that work?”

Daniel focused, folding his hand back to lock fingers with Pathfinder’s manifested limb. “No.” He said sadly. “She says it would hit the same roadblock she is; there’s something resisting finding him. It might kill the new navigator, even if it does work.”

Which was unacceptable, Reed thought with a grimace. The Order’s stance on not making life to be tools was entirely understandable, even if sometimes he *did* sorta wish he was an ethically dubious mad scientist.

But this diverted him to a new line of questioning.

Planner said they couldn't feel where James was, but that wasn't a big surprise, since Planner wasn't actually living in James' head. What was weird was that the handful of Response authorities that were starting to develop in the direction of search-and-rescue couldn't detect him either. Reed had a brief worry that there was something blocking informorphs in general, which would be bad for a lot of the tricks the Order had.

He opened his eyes and looked at Daniel, who was already answering as he read the same thing Reed just had. "Path can't find him." Daniel said as a dusty orange hand settled over the back of his arm. "Because of the cost. It's too far, *and* too resistant."

"Do navigators not have a similar wavelength, like assignments do? Could you at least try to contact Zhu?" Reed asked.

"They do, but we can't. Path doesn't actually *know* Zhu."

Reed winced again. And then jolted upright, sending the wheeled chair he'd stolen sliding backward into the concrete brick wall. "The beach!" He yelled.

"Aah!" Daniel jerked back from the shout. "What?! Why!"

"Like, a week ago, we went to the beach!" Reed was shouting. "I fucking remember Zhu zooming around. A bunch of infomorphs were out, actually. But *he had a friend!*"

"Why are you *yelling?*!" Daniel yelled back. Then he blinked, a look of understanding coming over his face. "Wait, no, okay. Path says that could be enough; who was it?"

Reed flicked open their roster in his head, trying to figure out who it had been as he coiled and tugged his already curly hair into further loops. "No, no, no, wrong species, no... here." He snapped his fingers. "Speaker! One host, they're marked as the child of Eleanor Elias Chase."

"I know EI." Daniel said with the kind of grin someone got when they had a clear solution to a problem. "She lives one basement sideways. Let's go."

Reed caught his arm, and found that Daniel was surprisingly hard to actually drag to a stop. "There's a quarantine." He said abruptly. "Because of the plague."

"Right." Daniel looked down the open hallway, the two of them going silent as the hum of the air conditioning took over. "Right. Do we... should we wait in the secure room?"

"It's not hermetically sealed, also next time suggest that an hour ago." Reed snorted.

Momo slept through a potential end of human civilization. If she were conscious to that fact, she might feel bad about it, but she also might just roll herself back into a blanket burrito and wait for it to all blow over.

When the Order had opened up almost a hundred well made, comfortable, warm, and cozy apartments inside about two hundred square feet of basement, Momo had actually had first dibs if she'd wanted one. She'd helped a lot with the design of the orange totem array that they used, been one of Mark and Bill's consultants on the actual build of the first apartment when she wasn't helping fetch them stuff, and did a lot of the security testing with JP's bastard squad. Momo wasn't a huge player in any one part, but her fingerprints were all over those apartments.

She'd turned it down. Not that they weren't great, but someone *else* could enjoy one. They had a bunch of people, it was pretty much a guarantee that someone would need a place to live. Maybe her claim had gone to a ratroach or something. That'd be cool, Momo figured. Those poor fuckers needed every tiny comfort the Order could give them.

After all, she already had a place in the Lair. And, sure, Alanna got on her case about it being a concrete box in the basement. But Momo had *furniture* now. And her walls were covered in cork board with all her totem notes on them, and also a large art print of a sexy fox person, because Momo hadn't survived death on multiple occasions to not have a sexy fox person on her wall. And yeah, she didn't have a kitchen or a bathroom, but the Lair did, and they were no farther away than just 'some stairs', which... well there were *houses* with the rooms farther away.

Her little slice of the world was small, but it was hers, even if it was cramped and it got way too cold when she was trying to sleep. But that was what the roughly one million blankets she had were for. She'd mentioned she was cold *once* and everyone had given her blankets over the next week. The one from Liz was especially nice, even if Momo felt like the direction of gift giving there was backward, since she'd nearly gotten Liz killed that one time and probably owed her something.

Plus, Momo had a new heater for her bed. It complained a lot though, but it was still great for staying warm in the middle of an extended winter.

Blinking her eyes open, Momo made a strained noise as she stretched out and felt her feet poke out of the blanket pile into the cold air. For a few minutes, she considered going back to sleep, but there was stuff to do today, as with every day. Also her stomach was growling, and she was reminded that it had been a *while* since she ate anything.

"Mmm... breakfast." Momo pushed herself up to a sitting position, thinking about a sandwich and trying to ignore the chill air across her skin. She needed to get to one of her bathrobes. "Kay." She turned and swung her feet off the bed, sitting on the edge and slowly letting her brain turn on. The divot she put in the bed caused the other person sleeping against her to roll haphazardly up against her back with a sleepy "Oof."

EI woke up a lot more violently than Momo did, rapidly thrashing off half the blanket nest she'd been buried under before flopping into a curved form and wrapping herself around Momo's waist. "Uggggh." She groaned out, strands of tangled blonde hair falling into her mouth. "My head hurts."

Momo couldn't, and didn't try to, keep a sleepy smile off her face as she shifted around and ran her fingernails over EI's back. "Yeah. Cause you got hit in the head." She said coyly. EI cracked one eye open and glared up at her bedmate. "And also a lot of other places." Momo conceded, eying the black and yellow bruise that was splashed across EI's flank like someone had hit her with a paint balloon.

They'd gotten back late from a dungeon delve into the Ceaseless Stacks. EI seemed to remember washing off ink, mutually agreeing to eat later, and sneaking beer stolen from Nate's 'secret' fridge into the bath. "Am I hung over?" She asked. "Is that why my head hurts?"

"I mean, you never were before, why start now?" Momo cheerfully asked. "Wanna go get breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Great. It's six PM or something, so we can't." Momo hopped off the bed, but not fast enough to avoid the swat EI aimed at her ass. "Ow! You dick!" She slid herself backward, pivoting her feet into a fighting stance that felt ingrained in her bones but that she'd never actually learned. "Treat my ass better!"

"You never said that before, why start now?" EI snarked back at her.

"I'm going to kill you." Momo snorted.

"What, dressed like that?" EI snipped back.

Momo looked down at herself. Currently, she was dressed in a pair of Hello Kitty panties, and a bunch of scars. "I think I look pretty good like this, sure." She said, poking at her stomach. "Would you still love me if I did the exercise potion thing, stopped being a curvy delight, and got abs?"

"Who says I love you *now*?" EI asked, waggling her eyebrows as she crawled out of bed herself. She brought a blanket with her though, wrapped up as a shawl to ward off the basement cold.

"I'm hurt!" Momo swooned dramatically. "Devastated! I feel so used! This is exactly what my mother warned me would happen when I got involved with you!"

“You told me you stopped talking to your mom even before everyone forgot you existed. *My* mom just told me our relationship is a phase.” El’s voice dropped some of the humor as she said the words, and a sudden awkward silence took over as she started digging around their shared misuse of a dresser for a pair of jeans.

It took Momo a second to slowly drop her hand from her forehead where she was posing. She slumped a bit, softening as she stepped over and hugged El from behind while she rustled through their drawers. “Your mom is kind of a dick.” She offered, voice muffled by El’s worn blanket.

“Eh.”

“She *is!*” Momo insisted. “She’s mostly cool about the magic and the dungeons and stuff, but she gets so fucking weird about *any* romantic stuff. She’s weird about *us*, she’s weird about Deb and Sunny, she’s weird about Arrush and Keeka, she... El your mom is just low key fucking homophobic, wow, how am I just now getting that.” Momo kicked one of her bathrobes up off the throw rug on the floor and sniffed at the fabric before slinging it around her shoulders.

“I know!” El threw her arms up, sending one of Momo’s shirts flying as she did so. It knocked something over. Neither of them reacted. The room was already a certified disaster area, what could get any worse? “I fucking know. What am I supposed to do about it? Tattle on her to James or something?”

“He’d kick her out for you.” Momo helpfully pointed out. “He *likes* you. Like, not in a... like a person. A friend or something. For some fucking reason.”

“Ass.” El nailed Momo in the face with a sock. “Yeah, and then I’ll have rendered my mom homeless. Yay me.”

“Whatever, it’d be her fault. Also do you see my brain braid around?” Momo swept her eyes over the available surfaces, before starting to tug up the edges of blankets on the bed and see if she’d slept on it.

“You put it in a pocket last night.” El reminded her, before she took a step and got a weird look on her face. “Oh, shit, I forgot to turn in the orbs.”

“Which ones?”

“The ones I just stepped on.” El snagged a pouch off the floor, tossing it onto the bed with a thump. “Welp. I have a rank in a very specific kind of spider now. Also red tail hawk. That’s cool, I liked Animorphs.”

Momo gave her a friendly shoulder check as she moved across the room to search her desk. “I never read that as a kid. The author’s cool, right?”

“Hah! Yes! As a kid!” El’s face tinted red as she stared at the ceiling of the room lit entirely by lava lamps. Momo twisted her head around and shot her a look. The kind of look that said ‘oh come on’, and also ‘remember who you’re talking to’ all at once. “Alright fucking fine,” El conceded, “I listened to the audiobooks in the Horizon over the last month. Jake is a war criminal and I’d probably fuck Ax. Happy?”

“I don’t know what that means but yes! Absolutely!” Momo dropped a stack of notebooks onto a stuffed bee on her floor, the paper folding slightly as they all slid off. Her desk was mostly clear now, and she still hadn’t found her braid. “You make me happy for some fucking reason. And dammit. I can’t find the thing. You wanna go eat?”

El wrapped Momo in a sudden hug, the warmth of her body pressing through the bathrobe. “I can think of something to eat.” She said suggestively.

Momo pulled her head back to land a set of small kisses on El’s neck. “Mmmh. I can think of-” Both of them stopped suddenly as, in unison, their stomachs growled in a way that was almost painfully audible. “Okay, nevermind. I’m fucking hungry, not hungry fucking.”

“You have such a way with words.” El flicked her tongue over Momo’s ear before letting her go. “A poet of our age.”

“Poetry is subjective. That was a poem. Anyway, I’m ready to go grab something. You dressed?”

El flipped her off as she grabbed a shirt from what she hoped was the clean pile of laundry. “You’re wearing a bathrobe! That’s not ‘dressed’ you fucking gremlin.”

With a smile like a shark that had just been offered a job at a day care, Momo spread her arms. “I set a precedent!” She declared. “Everyone thinks this is just *me* now! I change hairstyles every two days, wear bathrobes, and do weird magic shit! And they pay me!”

“I do youth group stuff.” El said. “They pay me too, and I get to dress with, like, pants and shit.” She sighed. “Also I’ve got one of those in, like... an hour? You said it was six? I gotta eat fast.”

“It’s four, I lied.” Momo said. “You have a phone!”

“My phone got broken on the delve.”

“You take your precious magic pocket device on delves?!” Momo looked shocked. “*This* is why James likes you! You’re as stupid as he is!”

El kicked a pillow off the floor at Momo’s head, missed, and nearly took out a lava lamp. “Why the fuck am I dating you again?”

“We’re both lonely and can keep up with each other.” Momo said with a kind of raw honesty that maybe should have hurt, but just... didn’t. It was just true, and they both knew it, and it didn’t make things any less fun. “Anyway. Let’s go harass whoever’s in the kitchen to make us sushi.”

Trying to comb down her hair with her fingers, El rolled her eyes back at Momo. “I’m going to start dating a camraconda. They seem easier than you.”

“Bring her by sometime when you do.” Momo replied with a wry grin. She made sure her bathrobe was fastened around her waist, double checked El was dressed, and then pressed on the door with a metal clack of the heavy handle.

“Are we poly?” El asked. “Or, like, open? Or whatever the shit everyone else around here is. Anarchist polyamory?” She sounded legitimately curious. “Also have you noticed that *no one* in this fucking building is monogamous?”

“That’s not true! Bill and his wife are... actually I don’t wanna dig into that too deeply. We’ll find out they were swingers in the 80s or something. Whatever. We can be whatever you want as long as you tell me about it while we eat.” Momo kicked a pile of laundry away from the door and swung it open.

Just in time to catch Reed about to start frantically pounding on the door. He was wearing a mask, as was Daniel, who was with him, and even...

“Planner, why do you have masks on?” El asked, popping her head on Momo’s shoulder. “You don’t breathe.”

“That did not keep me from being infected.” Planner said. “We require your assistance. *Now.*”

Momo and El took steps back from the door. “Infected with *what.*” Momo asked.

“Do you not have a phone?” Daniel asked with confusion.

“We’re not doing this again.” Momo did not explain. “What do you need?”

“El, we require Speaker. And for you to sleep for us.” Planner said in their voice like pen on a legal pad.

El shrugged. “Sure. Speaky was staying with Ava and Hidden while we were playing in the Stacks, but I can get them back here basically whenever. Can I get breakfast first?” She snapped. “My youth group!”

“Probably canceled.” Reed said.

"I'll handle it." Momo said. "This looks serious. Should we do it somewhere that isn't... uh..." she subconsciously moved to block the view through the door of the chaos that was her room.

"Yeah." Reed nodded. "Let's go. And get a mask; you're probably safe, but Deb's still yelling at everyone and the upstairs got hit bad."

"Hit bad with *what?!*" El exploded.

"I'll fill you in on the way." Reed said, turning and leading the way out.

"This is James' fault." El said to Momo as the two of them followed, Momo always managing to be surprised when she got far enough away from the red totem that told her how her succulents were doing that it stopped dumping information into her head. That might be why she was having weird dreams, now that she thought about it. "I know this is James' fault. It's *always* him. No one else ever comes back with this kind of problem."

"*You* came in with this kind of problem. You *shot*—"

"I'm sick of hearing how I shot James." El cut her off. "In fact, if I have to keep hearing it? I'm gonna do it again, just to refresh the feeling."

"I'll hold his arms. Anyway. Let's go see what's fucked this time."

Alanna and Anesh were hanging out in a basement when trouble started.

James had gone off to handle a problem at about the time Alanna was getting off her Response shift. The three of them had been going to hang out tonight with Sarah and Auberdeen, just lounging around their apartment and making food. Maybe watch a movie, probably just *talk* or something. But then Sarah had gotten wrapped up in a Clutter Ascent thing, and Auberdeen was... well, actually still at home with another Anesh. But the point was that plans got shaken up.

Plans were a transient thing around the Order of Endless Rooms.

Alanna still wanted some kind of thing to *do*, and Anesh had shrugged and suggested that they could help with working on the gardens, probably not expecting Alanna to jump on the chance to do even more work. He was fine with it though; his girlfriend's seemingly boundless energy - possibly magically induced energy at that - was refreshing, and he'd personally been feeling kinda isolated from the Order in general lately.

“Well yeah, you spend all your time arguing with one of the two people who can actually understand you about either space travel, or totems, and you do it using math.” Alanna had bluntly informed him when he brought it up on the elevator ride down.

“...I like math.” Anesh defended himself. “Also I spend time with you and James!”

“Buddy, I love you, but we spend a lot of our time exploring dungeons together, having sex, or going on walks and talking about dungeons or sex.” Alanna countered as the elevator doors slid open. “We’re not exactly *social*. I’m the most social, and I kinda don’t like people that much.”

“You do Response activities literally every day.” Anesh squinted at her retreating back as he followed her off the elevator and into the basement, the two of them falling into step next to each other as they pushed a hand cart laden with bags of potting soil down the hallway to where the concrete halls would eventually open up into a massive atrium full of apartments. “You *love* people.”

Alanna clicked her tongue at him. “I love ‘people’ in an abstract. I think every life is deeply precious, and that our systems and society should cherish and nurture those lives.”

“...and?”

“And I have more important things to do than talk to people who don’t interest me.” She said flatly.

“Uh huh.” Anesh snorted. “And the members of our magical chivalric order don’t interest you?”

Alanna helped him pull the cart to the side to let a line of camracondas and a lone human filter past them, before they got moving again. “We’re *barely* chivalric, if at all. I don’t actually know what that word means, but I am *pretty sure* it’s got more vows of chastity than anyone here has ever taken.”

“That’s hardly fair, Alex is ace.” Anesh countered. “Also, there’s... mmmh, no. No. I was gonna say ‘ratroaches’ as an example, but that’s... a bad example, that’s trauma.” Anesh sighed. “There’s too much going on. I’m losing track of it all. I used to be able to keep a list of every skill we had in a notebooks.”

“And now we’re gardening!” Alanna cheerily hip checked him. “In a magic basement, that we built a magical habitat in!”

“You also dodged my question.”

“Everyone here is fine I’m just being contrary for no reason.” Alanna speedily admitted.

Anesh ruffled her hair, the motion of reaching up to his taller partner's head both familiar and amusing to him. "Cute." He said. "Let's go make you some friends." He masterfully deflected the conversation away from the fact that *he* was the one who had a hard time meeting people in the Order.

The living quarters of the Lair were in a basement. This was technically correct, but a deeply meaningless designation. This basement in particular probably belonged to a university, or maybe an athletic club, before it had been dropped under the Lair through the magic of a green orb. No one was sure if it was copied, or stolen, but it *probably* wasn't stolen since "basement goes missing" is a headline that's hard to miss.

The hallway was more like an access corridor, and while there were two different halls into the apartment area, bottlenecking was sometimes an issue, so people tried to move quick and not be too in the way here.

As they stepped into the open area that might have been modeled after a basketball court or something, the whole place opened up. Almost literally. Natural light from a skylight overhead let the last bits of winter evening in from through twenty feet of rock, dozens of patios spread out around them on either side of the expanded courtyard space, and what *should* have been maybe a hundred feet of room stretched out for maybe ten times that much.

There was something that looked like a modern art sculpture in the middle of the courtyard space, uneven tubes of polished steel bound to each other like a strange crystal formation. Originally, it had been the totem array that kept this place going, but that was a stupid security risk, so the actual totem was somewhere underground and locked in place with a few magical effects, and this was just statuary. And all around the massive courtyard, a growing collection of plant life.

It had been noticed fairly quickly that the space had a few well traveled lines of residents going from the entrances to the apartments to the exits of the space, and the rest of the courtyard was mostly unused. And so, as a project, a few people got into setting up a little community garden. Which had sort of turned into a bigger project than anyone expected, as their ambitions threatened to catch up to their budget.

But it had gotten a lot of people interested, and now Alanna and Anesh were bringing more potting soil to a new addition to the living space. A fact Alanna announced by calling out "Hey I brought you dirt!" as they wheeled the cart in to where an amount of construction work was happening.

"Oh good, the dirt I ordered!" Mars clapped his hands, dusting off the work gloves he was wearing as he rose up from where he was dumping chunks of broken concrete into a wheelbarrow. "Hey, kids, we have dirt!" He called back to the group of people helping him pull chunks out of the line of shattered stone.

“You broke our floor.” Anesh accused the engineer.

“Well hang on.” Alanna interjected before Mars could defend himself. “Maybe he’s got some kind of floor magic.”

Mars nodded so vigorously it looked like his freckles blurred. “I do. It’s called ‘professional help from someone who works with concrete’. Also probably some actually magic but that’s not my department.” He pointed a finger at a line drawn on the floor around the edge of where it had cracked into movable pieces. “We’re basically digging a trench here, I actually *do* have some magic for drainage, and then we have normal pipes for irrigation. We’ll layer the dirt down, and then do some planting.”

As he was talking, a couple of younger kids had crept up toward the conversation. Morgan was actually halfway through being nineteen, but Alanna still thought of him as a kid, and Ava was only just starting middle school, which made her... twelve? Eleven? Young. She might be a bit late on it, since dungeon nonsense had upended the poor kid’s life. Morgan spoke up, interjecting into the conversation in the way that teenagers did when they *knew something*. “We’re planting bamboo!” He explained. “And then beans, to maintain soil quality, because it’s an artificial symbiosis.”

“That sounds like a term you read recently and have been waiting to use on someone.” Anesh said as he kicked the break pedal down on the cart.

“No!” Came the instant denial.

Anesh laughed. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m only saying that because I do it too. James doe sit *constantly*.”

“Oh. Then yes.” Morgan abruptly pivoted to admitting to the tactic.

“So, you want our help breakin’ rocks?” Alanna asked, and got another nod from Mars. “I could move some rocks.” She looked over the group of people who were either loading wheelbarrows, or taking water breaks, when a specific figure caught her eye. “Oh! Hey Arrush!” She was actually kind of surprised the ratroach was out here. There were more people in general than she’d expected, actually; maybe twenty or thirty people who lived and worked here helping or hanging out. She was actually pleasantly surprised to see there were more ratroaches as well. All of them looking very on edge, but all of them still here and participating.

“Hello.” Arrush greeted her, dropping what looked like a forty pound chunk of concrete into the metal wheelbarrow he had just mostly filled by himself. A few more people, including an excited Ava, tossed smaller chunks in around it, but it rapidly got to the point that the man hauling them away had laughed and called for them to stop as he took it away. “I am helping.”

“Yeah, same.” She shrugged as everyone just kind of flowed around her, and dropped down to help move rocks.

Alanna and Arrush worked next to each other for about twenty minutes without saying anything. She just kind of rapidly got into the groove of loosening one of the shattered chunks, prying it away, and then dumping it into a removal cart. Anesh had gotten into a conversation with Mars about space travel, again, and Alanna found herself snickering about it as the two of them rapidly created a bubble of distraction around them. A pair of camracondas wearing a new generation of the arm packs came in at one point and deposited about a hundred pounds of bamboo clippings that they’d be using as their starting line. Ava almost instantly got distracted when another kid her age showed up and sprinted away in the way that only children with boundless energy could. Morgan vanished off to somewhere, which was also about how Alanna remembered being a teenager and having to do landscaping work.

It was when Keeka came by and handed Arrush a water bottle that Alanna actually stopped to take a break. She *loved* the strength she had, but you could only move so much concrete before you wanted to do something else. When Keeka had gone to hand her one of the plastic bottles too, he’d seemed to notice who she was for the first time since she’d gotten here. “O-oh. Hello?” Was the first thing he said, in the slightly chattering voice he had.

“Hey!” Alanna grinned back. “Haven’t seen ya in a while. Also thanks.” She tilted her head back and rapidly drained the contents of the bottle. When Alanna looked back down, though, Keeka had vanished. She gave Arrush a confused look, and he silently pointed a small arm to the other side of the courtyard where the other ratroach was being dragged away by Ava and another young boy. “Uh... is he being kidnapped?” She asked.

Arrush started to talk, then sneezed violently at the dust in the air, before coughing his throat clear. “We have been adopted.” He answered.

“Wat.” Alanna cocked her eyebrows. “I mean, that’s cool, but that doesn’t actually answer the kidnapping thing.”

Arrush made a clicking noise that might have been a laugh. “Ah. No. Ava heard us say how old we were. She declared herself our... big sister.” The ratroach rose up from his curled crouch, and Alanna was reminded suddenly that he was one of the few people here actually as tall as she was. “She is collecting siblings.”

“That’s adorable.” Alanna informed him in a stoic voice. “What does that *mean*, though?”

“That Keeka can avoid moving rocks.” Arrush answered with a grin.

“Oh, that’s not special!” Alanna threw her arms up, and then instantly regretted it as she saw Arrush flinch. She made a mental note to be a little less extra around him. “Anesh isn’t actually

helping, and he's just talking to someone about spaceships. Also, just to check, you know you don't have to be here or anything, right?"

"It's calming." Arrush answered. "I like... plants. This place needs more plants."

"Good enough for me." The two of them got back to it, and in another twenty minutes, had cleared about as much of the strip of space as the other ten people who were breaking it up had combined. They took a short break as someone with a blue power smoothed out the bottom, and Mars ran a length of irrigation hose along it, the pair falling into comfortable silence as they rested by leaning on one of the benches around the central statue instead of sitting on it.

After the whole thing was set up, and someone had put the teenagers to work sweeping up the concrete dust, and a layer of clay got magically shaped into place at the bottom, Alanna and Arrush got back to work, following Mars' instructions on laying dirt and breaking up rough edges with a gap of gravel.

This was something she was good at. Not *landscaping*, exactly, but putting her physical body to work at a thing. Leaning into a project, and pushing until it was done. And while he was panting heavily next to her as they upended a bag of soil into the gap, Arrush seemed to be something of the same way. "So hey." Alanna said abruptly.

"Ah... yes?" The answer was clearly taut with nervous energy. A pair of the ratroach's eyes on the left side of his triangular face pivoted toward her, though he didn't tilt his head at all.

Alanna found the effect strange, but maybe that was just because she didn't hang out with him enough. "You wanna come over for dinner sometime?"

"W-what?" Arrush paused in confusion. "I... what?"

"Dinner. Like, food." Alanna stopped, blinked, and then slapped herself. "Wow, sorry, I actually just listened to the words I was fucking saying. That was stupidly condescending. Uh, no, I mean, actually though. Come over to our place, have some pasta. You and Keeka, really." She leaned over conspiratorially. "We can use it as an excuse to get James to make garlic bread."

Arrush perked up. "I like garlic bread." He offered. "But... are you sure?"

The first part of the answer was welcome because Alanna hadn't been sure if ratroaches could eat garlic. That seemed like the kind of cruel allergy the Akashic Sewer would spin up in its creations. "Oh, yeah. I mean, okay, look. You've got a massive crush on my boyfriend, and-

"I don't want-!" Arrush started to say.

Alanna held up a hand and rolled over him in the conversation. “It’s fine. Like, I’m not kidding, man. It’s cool. I don’t have a clue what I’m doing in this relationship, so things being weirder isn’t gonna make me mad. I’m looking at this as a thing where everyone can be happier, you know?”

“How... so?” Arrush slowly asked, a pair of claws scratching nervously down his left arm. “What do you... want?”

“I want garlic bread.” Alanna said. “I want James to stop stressing about shit. And I kinda want more friends, and you seem cool. I feel like I can get a three-for-one here.” She shrugged idly. “Also I already think it’s hot when James and Anesh are fooling around, so this seems like a *great* idea, and I realize that sounded sarcastic but I swear I actually mean it.”

Arrush slowly slit open another bag of dirt with his claws, and kicked it forward to add to their section. “You are very... um...” He tried to think of the word he was looking for, without saying anything that might upset Alanna. Then he realized that the word he was looking for was because Alanna *wouldn’t* be upset by him being honest. “Strong?” He said. “No...”

“Well hey, I’m a *little* strong.” Alanna protested. “But I know what you’re trying to say. I’m trying this thing where I just say what I want and try not to be a dick to people. It’s working out.”

“You want to be friends?” Arrush realized he’d slipped into Spanish, and repeated it in case Alanna didn’t know the second language he’d been made with.

“Sure, why not?” Alanna asked with a shrug. “You’re easy to get along with. We can go on jogs together and no one will try to bully us out of fear of our combined physique.”

Arrush gave a hissing sound of amusement. “I don’t think... that is as good as you think it is.” He said. “I understand though.” He leaned back, balancing on the heels of his curved paws. “Can I... ask a thing?”

“Yeah, sure.” Alanna looked down the trench they were working on. They were about halfway done, and at the other end, Mars was guiding a few people in how to space out the bamboo stalks and the other assorted seed they had for this project.

“Do you... have therapy?” Arrush sounded more cautious about this than anything else so far.

“Oh, heck yeah.” Alanna snorted a laugh. “Man, you would not believe... well, actually, you probably would. Yeah. I only do once a month these days, but Lua was a massive help. Not just because of the whole ‘trauma of nearly dying’ thing, or any other dungeon bullshit. But, like... I’m thirty-ish years old depending on how many extra days I’ve added with the delves, and I had issues I didn’t even know I could *ask* for help on. I’ve had decades of building up problems and thinking it was normal. Fucking hell, just talking to someone about my mom was

a massive relief. I mean, like, James and Anesh knew. Sarah too, I guess. But someone *new*, you know?" She looked over at Arrush and winced. "Sorry, this might be oversharing."

"N-no!" He waved several of his arms at her. "I don't mind. I have been... putting it off."

"Yeah. It's easy to do, huh?" Alanna nodded. "You just tell yourself you can get through this, and it'll be fine on the other side, right?"

"Right..." Arrush stared at her. "How...?"

"It's not." She shrugged at him. "It won't be. There's no other side. There's just more bullshit. Therapists aren't all good, and therapy isn't some magical cure-all, don't get me wrong. But it's better than the alternative."

Arrush nodded slowly, scratching a claw along the chitin of his neck. "Okay." He said. "Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem. So, hey, I didn't get an answer on dinner!" Alanna prompted.

She wouldn't get an answer, either. Because news traveled fast in the Order, and news chose that moment to interrupt their conversation. Something had happened. James was gone, Alex had said something about a whole building going with him. Things had started moving, but it wasn't much of a surprise when JP ran into the room and started grabbing people for something.

Alanna had given Anesh a kiss, and an understanding goodbye. Arrush had said a soft hiss of words to Keeka and given the smaller ratroach a similar tender embrace before he'd pulled away as well. And then she and Arrush had headed to the armory to down exercise potions, strap on armor, and prepare for alternately a rescue or a revenge.

One way or another, they would have something to do soon.

"I hate this part." Anesh muttered, watching Alanna leave.

"Yes..." Keeka hissed from right next to his elbow.

Anesh would be lying if he said he wasn't a little startled. Hell, he practically jumped out of his skin. Unlike a lot of the Order, he didn't actually spend time around the ratroaches that often, but more relevant was that Keeka had just snuck up on him from what he *thought* was a hundred feet away without making a sound. Still, he tried not to show how much of a challenge it was to steady his breathing before he answered. "Kinda surprised you aren't going too, actually."

“Because I am dangerous?” Keeka asked, shrinking back, his spine curving as he started to curl in on himself.

“No, I... oh, bollocks. I guess that was what I was thinking.” Anesh sighed. “Or I wasn’t thinking at all. I’ve seen Arrush doing martial arts or something with Karen, and I kind of assumed you did too. I apologize.”

“I don’t... want it. Don’t want to fight.” Keeka peered up at Anesh, claws balling up and stretching the fabric of his skirt and sweatshirt. “But also don’t like this part.”

“If it helps you feel better, I don’t like fighting much either.” Anesh said. “I’m not... oh, whatever we’re calling what James is. I’ve purposefully sat out more heroics than I’ve been a part of.” He sighed. “I can say, more confidently than most people, that I’m very mortal. This stuff scares me.”

“Also scared.” Keeka slowly agreed. “But also guilty. I want to... help. But I don’t...” He waved some of his arms in a loop, searching for the word he didn’t have on the tip of his long tongue.

Anesh filled in the gap. “Want to get shot?” He asked. “Well hey. I’m going down to Research to go through our boxes and boxes and boxes of badly sorted magical nonsense for some kind of ‘solve the problem’ button. Want to come help?”

“Really?” Keeka drew out the ‘r’, his voice a confused squeak.

“If nothing else, you can help me find my way around.” Anesh offered as he started moving, waving to Mars and motioning Keeka to follow after him. “I *know* you’re at least one of the people who lurks on the overhead pipes down there. And *you* never seem lost.”

Keeka defiantly raised his snout up into the air. “It’s quiet there.” He defended himself as he followed Anesh into the basements.

It had been unfortunate chance and a stupid misunderstanding on his part that led to Myles having teleported back into the Lair after an outbreak of some kind of wizard plague. He didn’t know what everyone else was going to call it, but he was gonna stick with wizard plague.

Unlike most members of the Order, Myles didn’t have a magical immune system booster. He didn’t have *any* purple effects, actually. Or any magic at all. He was a completely mundane human being.

Well, a mundane human being who was almost qualified to be hired by the FBI for one of a half dozen roles. But that was all personal skill, and being taught by people who had real experience and magical knowledge injected into their skulls.

The point was, he wasn't a camraconda, and therefore immune, and he wasn't enhanced, and therefore durable.

He was unconscious for fifteen minutes, tops, before he was back on his feet, and his long running attempt to be someone invisible to magical radar was shattered.

Two skill points. Well. At least he *knew* it was real now. And he was in it.

"Where's JP?" He asked Ben as he strode into the warehouse. The place was worryingly empty, for the whole Order starting to mobilize. Ben didn't look up from his laptop, just pointed an arm wrapped in bandages over to a couch where JP was passed out and writhing in a feverish delirium. "Why's he... still unconscious?"

"No idea. Why aren't you?" Ben glanced behind himself, sniffing suddenly at something, before looking back at his work.

"I'm a healthy guy." Myles said, picking at one of the holes in his arms. "Are you okay?"

"Don't... don't do that. The scratching. Wow, stop, please." Ben looked disgusted by Myles' continued prodding at his wounds, even as he tried to focus his vision on his laptop screen. "Here." He pitched a roll of gauze at him. While Myles tried to wrap up his forearms, Ben continued. "It seems to hit everyone a little differently, but so far, no fatalities. It probably helps that the people who we have with immune disorders or other similar conditions just don't work in this building. But it's suspicious."

"It's a wizard plague." Myles said, not bothering to explain. "Where's Nate?"

"Indiana. Looking for someone."

"Where's Yin?"

"Indiana, being looked for."

"Did I piss you off or something?" Myles asked suddenly. "You seem like you're pissed at me."

Ben flicked cold blue eyes up at the other rogue. "It's been a stressful day." He said. "What are you here for?"

"I heard the big boss was missing, thought I'd come by, then ruined my resume." He held up a forearm and pointed at the awkward bandage job. "Also I can safely report that the warehouse... the one in New York, the *abandoned* one, in whatever the east part of Queens is called... that warehouse. Anyway, I can tell you there is no chance a pillar is using it for anything. No one else, either."

“Really?” Ben raised his eyebrows and actually looked up at Myles fully. “That’s bizzare, but good I supp- what the fuck happened to you?” Myles looked down at himself at the question. He looked mostly fine, but he was only just noticing that one of his pant legs was charred and crumbling. Which was probably also why that leg hurt. “Wha- is *that* what the smoke smell is?! Are you on fire?!” Ben hopped over the desk in an honestly impressive one handed maneuver that Myles didn’t think he could pull off even now, in the best shape he’d ever been in, and rushed him.

“I actually feel fine.” He said as Ben started checking him for burns. “Look, it’s fine. I just had a thing I wanted to talk about.”

“What the fuck happened to you?!”

“There was a fire.” Myles said. “Look, I’ve been catching up on this thing with James...”

Ben stopped trying to rip his pants any worse than they already had been, and looked up at him. “You burned down the warehouse, didn’t you? Is this you trying to deflect?”

“No.” Myles said. “Look, I’m here now, I wanna help.”

Ben glared at him. “Everyone wants to help.” He said abruptly. “It doesn’t matter. We’re running out of options. We can’t make a magic item that gets us there without an address, because Officium Mundi magic seems to give more of a shit about bureaucratic categorization than doing what we want it to. We can’t find the entrance unless, and I’m quoting Reed here, ‘we are okay stabbing six or seven people in the neck’. And we just... ugh.”

“Do we know that James is even still alive?” Myles asked. “Because he told me a month ago that if he dies I have to fight the other candidates to take his job.”

Ben scowled at him. “Stop fucking making jokes.” He snapped out. “But yes, he *is* alive. We actually know exactly where Zhu is. Well, Speaker does.”

“We just can’t get there.” Myles nodded. “Yeah. Because no version of the telepads works? We checked the ones Anesh made, right?”

“And a new iteration someone in Research made. It’s the same thing as how they don’t work inside the Akashic Sewer. I think they only technically work in the Office because it’s categorized itself.”

Myles nodded, and refrained from saying something about how lewd ‘categorized itself’ sounded. “So, teleporters from the Office don’t work.”

“All our teleporters are from the Office, which is a problem. Are you *sure* you’re okay? You didn’t get hit in the head?” Ben moved a finger slowly back and forth in front of Myles’ face.

“I have an idea.”

Ben stopped, and looked at the deadly serious glint in Myles’ eyes. The utter conviction behind those four words, especially here, was terrifying. Slowly, he lowered his hand. “What are you thinking?”

“We know where one is.” Myles said. “A teleporter that isn’t from the Office. Maybe it won’t work. But we can try.” He shrugged. “All we have to do is take it.” He shifted his stance, and faced the far side of the briefing warehouse. Not the side that delvers used to plan, but the side the rogues used to track targets and compile intel. The side with the big board of everything about the New York situation.

And the smaller board with everything about a small terrorist camp in the Alaskan wilderness.

“Oh.” Ben said.

“Yeah.” Myles nodded. “We should probably wait until this stupid wizard plague isn’t in the air though.”

Ben clapped a hand on Myles shoulder, fingers cold and sharp. “I’m going to make a call.” He said. “Thanks.” The mimic turned to return to his desk, pulling a phone out of his pocket before he shot one last look at Myles. “I’ll get this set up. You maybe go clean up.” He said. “You smell like a chemical fire.”