

*“Ah, but I am being rather impolite. I am Mathagani Ten Meti, ‘Murder The Gods and Topple Their Thrones’. I would like to tell you that I am a noodle vendor. But alas! Instead I am a student of the principle art of cutting.” -Kill Six Billion Demons, Wielder Of Names-*

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Being back where he used to work was surreal to James. The building was, largely, the same. But everything about it was different. And not just because he teleported in via the marked landing pad on the fourth floor.

The company James used to work for, back in the before times when he didn't work for an arcane anarchist utopian collective of people who explored pockets of other dimensions and tried to save the world, hadn't so much "gone out of business" as they had just kind of faded away. He was pretty sure there wasn't any magic nonsense at play, aside from whatever normal bureaucracy was, but it sure felt like something was going on. How, after all, could a whole corporation just kind of... die quietly?

The answer of course was that it happened all the time. The western world was absolutely littered with the corpses of the companies that had failed, stratified into the foundation that the survivors built on. A legacy of screw ups and timing errors and just bad luck serving as a warning and an opportunity for everyone that came after.

It was grim and bleak and James was much happier with this place turning into another branch office of the Order of Endless Rooms.

This place, though, was a little more organized than the chaos of the Lair. Not impersonal or sterilized, oh goodness no. There were still a half dozen living - and hopefully friendly - potted plants around the floors, amusing motivational posters stolen from the dungeon they were planted on top of - James was a big fan of the one that just said "job job job" in massive red letters like an alarm screaming in text form - and a mundane vending machine filled with otherworldly snacks. All these little touches, though, showed a place that was becoming not only used, but *lived in* by the Order's members. It was alive, and vibrant, even if it didn't have as many hazardous mishaps or scrambling children as the Lair did.

The larger space that used to be a production line on the ground floor was now just warehouse space they were slowly filling with stuff salvaged from the Office. The second floor was something of a crèche for new camracondas that were slowly being raised to self-awareness by their kindred. The third floor, of course, had the dungeon entrance. And as a safety precaution, they'd moved most of their logistics and quartermaster stuff out to the real world, just in case the dungeon decided to blip it out of existence when they needed it most. And both that and the fourth floor held normal offices and desks where their expanding teams worked to search for other dungeons, assist survivors of traumatic events, attempt to schedule the various Order chaos, distribute cures for cancer, make professional contacts with material resource

companies, and generally do all the day to day bread and butter work of a magical anarchist collective. Or whatever James had mentally called it when he got here.

The building had more floors. But they didn't need them yet. It almost felt silly to have purchased a whole structure for millions of dollars that they didn't need all of, but money had become a fairly abstract thing ever since James realized they'd swapped the M at the start of their bank statement for a B. So instead of feeling wasteful, it just felt like preparation for the future.

It was still weird to see the old place where he dreaded showing up transformed like *this*. But James didn't really have time to worry about it, because he needed to get equipped, and get into the dungeon itself. And today, he and Alanna were showing a couple new people the ropes.

"Alright. The important thing here is that we go at a slow pace." James told Ben and Bea as they stepped through the door, the two nonhuman-yet-human-looking people following him and Alanna. He and his girlfriend had their armor on like comfortable settled layers, but Bea kept shifting her shoulders like the weight bugged her, and Ben was tugging at every strap he could find. "But first. Welcome to Officium Mundi." He turned to face them, putting his back to the rising tower of lopsided cubicles, the grey and beige horizon that curved upward as it swept into the distance, the maze of roughly carpeted walls rife with danger and treasure alike.

Ben gave it a glance, then went back to fiddling with his armor, and James shot him an exasperated look, his mouth set in a line and eyes narrowed before he remembered that Ben literally came from a place that probably looked like this all the time. Bea gave a more baseline reaction, the inhabitator craning her neck up and up and up, staring at everything with eyes that took in the scene like she was trying to drink an ocean.

"This has been here, the whole time?" She asked in the slightly vibrating voice the inhabitators used when they weren't mimicking their converted bodies. Her own natural voice.

"Cool, huh?" Alanna asked with a wide grin as she triple checked the gear she was carrying. They didn't have a clear plan, but they were here for hours yet, so they were ready for a lot. And Alanna going over their medical supplies in the little cart they were pulling behind them was a welcome buffer of comfort.

"Terrifying." Bea said simply. "All this. Lurking under the surface. A predator in the depths of reality itself."

"Okay, that's... that's a little dramatic." James cleared his throat. "So, ground rules. Ben, you good?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Armor's just weird." The friend mimic said idly as he glanced at James.

James breathed out slowly through his nose. “Ben... do you... okay, I should have asked this earlier. Do you *have* a physical form? No, wait, you must be a thing. I’ve seen you pick stuff up. You know we can just make armor for you.”

“What? Oh, no, I can... this is fine. It’s just heavy.” Ben replied quickly.

Alanna grinned wolfishly. “We should get you on a workout routine. Wait, aren’t you a rogue? I’m positive Nate would have done this by now.”

“I’m good at dodging that.” Ben admitted.

“Not anymore you’re not!”

“...*Ground rules.*” James desperately tried to get them back on track. “First, stay quiet. Noise can drive away a lot of stuff if they think it’s dangerous, but sometimes it attracts swarms, and those *will* kill us. Second, move slow enough that you can take in details. No rushing, be on the watch for things out of place that could be traps or ambushes or even just new loot. Third, if you say the word, at all, we turn around and leave. No pushing past our limits. Fourth, no engaging in combat preemptively. We can spoil ambushes, that’s fine, but no killing passive life. Communication first, always. Got it?”

“Yes.” “Yup.” “No, say it again, but in your sexy leader voice.” The last comment was from Alanna, and James chose to ignore her.

The four of them did one last check, and then roved out, in search of adventure. Taking the main corridor that the Order had more or less verified as clear of any real hazards, it took them about an hour to clear the first few kilometers. They only barely stopped to investigate desks or cubicles, adding potential magical items to their cart to check out in detail later. It was a good chance to let Bea and Ben get acquainted with the flow of exploration, but... it wasn’t quite the learning experience that James thought it would be.

The first time a tape dispenser tried to grab Bea, shooting its highly adhesive tongue out of a dark cubby at the back of a desk, she had just yanked it forward with a single hard jerk, avoided the spatially warped ball of teeth to grab the creature around its softer center mass, and squeezed until it splattered into a sticky mess. When Ben had walked into a cubicle that had a pair of sticky note masks hanging on the rear wall, neither of them had even *reacted* to him, and it wasn’t until he’d gotten James to help him find where the password to the laptop was hidden that the creatures had jolted to life and tried to murder them. Well, murder *James*. They didn’t seem to care Ben was there, even as he cut one of them in half.

“Okay.” James said, after they’d survived a fight with a standing potted plant that spat thorns at them like bullets by just letting Ben walk up and tip it over. “Clearly we need to adjust our practice run a bit.”

“Yeah!” Alanna agreed. “We can go *so much farther* like this! Ben, do things just not register you as hostile or some shit?”

“Uh... no.” Ben said sheepishly. “Sort of. It’s complicated.”

“Ben, if we leave you alone with a bunch of camracondas, will you turn into a camraconda?” Alanna asked, mock suspicion on her face as she crossed her arms over the rigging on her chest piece.

“...Yeah.” Ben said quietly.

James sighed, and walked over to throw an arm around what he perceived to be Ben’s shoulder but might just be a clever illusion. “Stop being weird about it. No one cares you’re not human.” He looked around the intersection they were in; a five pointed star of hallways forming an open central point in the middle of this part of the cubicle maze. Overhead, chunks of cubicle wall reached up like crooked branches, leaving plenty of space for beams of fluorescent light to strike down. “Alanna’s right, though. You two are *dangerous*. Which means we actually can go a little farther, if you’re up for it.”

“I am enjoying myself.” Bea said with no discernible human emotion.

“Sure, let’s do it.” Ben said, cracking a nervous grin.

James nodded. “Alright!” He declared. “Onward! We’ll make better time if we skip looting, but that’s fine. Statistically, the loot really does get better when we’re farther in. And at this point, we don’t actually get much out of a few candy bars.”

The group moved on. Still at a steady pace, but with a little more forward motion. Ignoring the cubicles, pushing past potential ambushes often without engaging, and with James and Alanna taking point and explaining to the other two the how and why of their movements. What’s important to check, why you want someone watching upward, how to safely clear corners as a team.

They didn’t have a curriculum, exactly. But they’d been doing this for a while, and at this point, Alanna and James were the duo who had spent the most time in this dungeon. And they’d mixed conventional training on police and military tactics with augmentation from skills, and boosts from their skulljacks, potions, spells, and everything else they had to offer. So while they were a little haphazard in *how* they taught their new delvers, they were more than willing to share everything they knew.

They took a break as the walls started to change from the carpeted cubicle panels into real plaster walls, hallways with office doors popping up out of the landscape in ways that made no architectural sense. While they took turns resting on the chairs they’d dragged into a cleared cubicle with no gaps to be attacked by random staplers from, Alanna tried to strike up a

conversation with Bea about why she'd finally chosen to try being a delver. The inhabitator had tilted her head like she was confused by the question, and simply said that she had been helped, and wanted to help in turn. Which... really, was the entire motivating ethos for the Order, distilled down to the pointed core. It was so simple James couldn't help but laugh as he heard it; not out of mockery, but out of surprise that he'd never phrased it that way himself before.

"If you ask me that question, I'm just gonna turn into a bird and escape." Ben offered when Alanna turned to him. "I have that power. Don't test me."

"...Do you really have that power?" James stage whispered to the mimic. "Because I would love that power. Can you share? Or, like, wanna let me be a hive mind with you while you go flying? Please?"

Alanna tried to kick James' shins, not caring that she was out of reach on her own chair by the door to the cubicle. "Hey! Sharing brains is an intimate and personal process that you do with *me!*" She protested. "And Anesh. And also Anesh. And—"

"And Anesh, yes, I love you both very much." James agreed. "Though that said, did you guys know there's an actual hive mind in the Order? She's kinda cool, actually, and I think is way, way more into the transhumanist angle of what the skulljacks can do than we've really touched on yet."

"Oh, yeah, Marlea, right?" Ben nodded. "She asked if I wanted to join her. She's... evangalistic?"

"Pfft." Alanna made a dismissive noise. "Not okay with *that.*" She said.

"Wait, really?" James looked over at her. "Why not? *We* do that."

"Not permanently, though. And... okay, maybe I'm just being biased toward what I think is normal. It's kinda scary, though, right?" Alanna asked, and got a couple nods in response. "I mean, I like me. I don't want to be less me. But that said, I *do* actually love being *us.*" She nudged James with the toe of her boot, having slid closer to reach him. "And it didn't weird me out when James and Simon were doing it. Maybe it's just because she's trying to convince people to join her. But that's stupid, and I should check my thoughts before I speak next."

Bea looked over at James, her head turning in an almost angular motion. "Does she do this often?" The inhabitator asked.

"What, talk through her own learning process in real time? Yeah. I think it's cute." He couldn't keep a goofy grin off his face. "Anyway. You guys ready to keep moving? We should collect some more orbs for the two of you."

“Wait, what?” Ben’s voice was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Uh... it’s kind of a tradition, I guess?” James glanced at Alanna, and they shared a shrug. “New delvers always get to use a few orbs, just to experience how chaotic and weird they can be. So far, literally everyone has had a semi-useless but very funny first skill rank.”

Ben gnawed at his lip as he popped open one of the pouches on his armor. “I thought we were supposed to save these.” He admitted, revealing almost two dozen collected small yellow orbs.

“As did I.” Bea made the same motion, opening up a pocket to show off a similar small treasure trove.

After James finished explaining to them that they *absolutely* got to enjoy the magic they had worked and fought to acquire, he and Alanna made the two of them try out a few orbs before they moved on. Ben got a skill rank in Bolivian meteorology, Bea got one in Scottish government grant request bureaucracy. It was the perfect end to a short break. Especially when James took one for himself and got a skill rank in driving a combine harvester.

They moved on into the changing biome of Officium Mundi. Spotting and taking alternate routes around the more and more frequent spike traps, hunkering down and staying quiet when tumblefeeds rattled past their locations, and listening to James and Alanna explain the *feeling* that dungeon altered items gave off. Like electrified salt, James called it, but even that wasn’t really quite what it was. It was just something that buzzed in your vision when you looked at it, though it took time and practice to get good at recognizing when something stood out.

They got in a fight with a stuffed shirt at one point. The thing’s most human quality was its polo shirt; face a folded cardboard facsimile of humanity that was instantly recognizable as false. Their group had taken a corner at the same time that the dungeon creature had stepped out of a cubicle, and it had instantly started screeching human resources slogans at them as it tried to fling a purple orb infomorph curse at them. James had a brief moment of curiosity as to what would happen to the free floating infomorph that didn’t connect with any of them, before he’d finished his roll, drawn his short sword, and taken out the paper pusher in a trio of rapid cuts that converted it from an aggressor into a green orb.

Then the living mail cart that they’d failed to pay attention to had slammed Ben through two walls, and the fight had gotten a little chaotic.

After three more additional assaults at the moment they thought they’d won the field, the four delvers stood in a loose ring, weapons out, panting for breath. Well, half of them. James was pretty sure Ben didn’t breathe, and Alanna was just showing off. Though Zhu had briefly manifested during the fight, and his feathered limbs were pretending to breathe heavily in solidarity with James, despite his lack of a corporeal body. James was also pretty sure that Alanna was trying to one-up Bea, who had underhand flung the group’s sledgehammer straight through the side of an angry shellaxy a few minutes ago.

They collected the spoils, including a half dozen purples and one massive green from the stuffed shirt, loaded the cart, and got out of there before it got worse. There had been a pair of sealed briefcases, which they *did* bring, but probably wouldn't open today, or anytime soon. The directions on them were just abstract enough that telepads wouldn't be a great way to find the end destinations. But if a future delve group wanted to solve the puzzle of where "the third desk after the grand array of records" was, and then take a new chair to its occupant, they could have the reward.

The landscape moved around them as they pressed on. The team checked out a few of the offices as they passed, but quickly stopped trying to go into all of them after it became clear that almost every door had an orange totem trap on it, many of them some kind of mildly different time loop. Alanna had apparently gotten *very* frustrated with James after she'd had to repeatedly say the phrase "you are in a time loop, *no it does not synergize with your bracer*, now check under the shelf next to your right foot."

Even though the offices had quite a few very cool bits of magic in them, they decided to just mark the zone down and keep exploring, planning to come back later with a full group to spend a lot more time on it. One of those bits of magic, which James was kinda into, was a stack of sticky notes that changed the emotion of whoever they were stuck to. It defaulted to random, apparently, but in classic Officium Mundi fashion, there was a hidden depth to it, and writing on it would let you guide the effect. James wanted to make a billion copies and use them to cure depression. Alanna wanted to lock them in a box and have a six month long ethics debate with the entire Order. They decided to compromise and just play it by ear.

The real treat came when they found a break room. This time, though, it wasn't while they were in the middle of active combat, and they could take their time on it. Linoleum floors and half dimmed overhead lights gave the place the look of somewhere just before a building had really opened for the day. A scattered labyrinth of tables and chairs, dotted with explosive coffee cups, plotted the way between them and the long counter where the coffee machine, sink, and fridge were.

They came to the break room through a cubicle hallway, but the two side walls were drywall, and there were splintered fingers of a ceiling that looked like a tree growing overhead that blocked out a good chunk of the light from the distant overhead fluorescents. A handful of light tubes in that semi-organic looking ceiling glowed with a soft, throbbing light, that left the place feeling like a deep woods glade.

There was no back wall. Cubicle or otherwise. Instead, there was a dark expanse, on the other side of which they could see light both overhead and dotted around the cross section of the cubicle maze. Waiting by the entrance with the others watching, James had flowing a few drones out through his skulljack to get a better look, and found an impressive sight. A chasm in the dungeon, one of those canyons that were so deep none of them could see the bottom, cut through the back of the break room. Tables were pressed up right to the very edge of it, the

perfectly clean cut in the floor giving them a surreal mixed vibe of stable, and right on the precipice.

It seemed safe enough, so they moved in, with James guiding the two new delvers on how to disarm a coffee cup.

“The thing is,” he said, “you need to cool it down, without knocking it around too much. Which is kinda hard for the ones with the lids on. You actually can just pick them up and carry them to a trash can, too, and once they’re in the garbage they won’t explode for some fucking reason? But dropping the temperature is the easy way.” He took a deep breath, filling his lungs and bracing for a chill as he called up his newest Winter’s Climb spell. Reaching Frost was, pretty simply, a great way to give yourself an extra hand; in that it made a limb out of ice that you could control. It wasn’t perfect, you needed to actually know how to control the limb after all, but it did allow for quite a bit of customization. And it only took a couple units of breath to last for almost half an hour; one of the more intact textbooks they’d found from the Mountain.

After the cold breathless feeling passed, James just used it to make a long, thin arm and hand, which he used to reach carefully over a coffee cup, and then used the nimble fingers he’d made to shave off bits of their icy form into the trap. The coffee cup didn’t react, until abruptly, it hissed, sputtered, and seemed to almost slump. Which was the sign it was disarmed, and there’d be a red orb in the lukewarm coffee inside.

“I still can’t believe you picked that spell.” Alanna grumbled as she took the more traditional approach of slowly pouring from a water bottle into the trapped cups. “You could have picked *anything*.”

“You still haven’t picked anything at all! You don’t get to lecture me!” James reminded her. “You have *two* unused slots! At least take one thing.”

Alanna sniffed as she fished out red orbs from the now safe table she was working on. “I’m waiting for one that speaks to me.”

“I wish to have the snow cat spell.” Bea said in her buzzing monotone as she casually picked up a coffee bomb and walked it over to the garbage can with even gliding steps.

James paused, all three of his arms folding down to his sides as he looked over at the relatively new person. “Oh?” He prompted. And then, when Bea didn’t directly react to what *he* saw as the universal signal for ‘please explain more’, he cleared his throat and added, “Please explain more?”

“I think I... enjoy cats.” Bea paused in her speech for the first time James had heard, and he and Alanna shared a quick flickering smile and raised eyebrows before he looked back at Bea. “And you tell us magic does not need to be utilitarian.”



“Well, if you enjoy it, then it does serve a utility.” Ben pointed out, unhelpfully. “Because people matter, or so I am told.” He caught the incredulous stare James was pointing at him and mimed clearing his throat. “That was a joke. I’m... I’m kidding. Please stop acting like my disappointed dad.” He pled to James.

James was halfway through a smirk and another disarmed coffee bomb, when his brain caught up to what Ben had said. “Hey, hang on...” He muttered as he snapped off what was left of one of his ice fingers, glad that while he *could* feel through the spell, that the intentional dismantling of it was never painful. “Ben! You asshole!”

“What?” Ben jumped from where he was on guard, watching the way they’d come since they hadn’t cleared the room enough to make it to the chasm yet. “What did I do?”

“Ben you don’t *have parents*.” James groused at him. “Stop doing that!” Alanna caught what he was saying, and nearly choked on the water bottle she was taking a drink from as she tried and failed to stop a burst of laughter.

Ben blinked, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then froze. “Ah.” He said, and his shoulders slumped. “Shit, sorry.” He said softly, turning back to stare down the cubicle hallway.

James glanced at Bea and Alanna, his partner giving him a thumbs up as the two of them got back to work clearing mines, while he turned and walked over to Ben. “Hey.” He spoke softly. “Sorry. You okay?”

“You don’t even know why you’re apologizing.” Ben said, voice tight.

“No, but I obviously hurt you.” James said. “You wanna tell me what’s up?”

“I don’t... it’s... it’s that you’re right, I guess.” Ben took a breath, and wiped at his face with the back of a glove. “I don’t have parents, do I? I don’t have a history, or a life, or anything I’ve been telling people. I’m entirely made up.”

James looked down the hall in the same direction as Ben was, not making eye contact, but sharing a quiet moment. “You’re not.” He said eventually. “Really!” He protested as Ben just rolled his eyes in a motion James caught. “You’re... you. You are the you that has been with us for the last few months. It’s not a lot of history, but it’s yours. I officially gift it to you.” He made his voice sound pointlessly regal before dropping back to a conversational tone. “You’ve been working with us, helping us. You *trusted me*, Ben. That’s powerful, and that’s all you.” He heard a wet sniffing noise, and tilted his head to see that Ben had turned to face away from him, one hand up to his eyes, wiping away tears. “I’d offer you a hug, but the armor sucks for that.”

“Yeah.” Ben choked out a tense laugh. “Also whatever my physical form is is probably spikey.”

“Oh my god, is this gonna be another thing like with El’s hearts, where you just refuse to go talk to a doctor?!” James tried not to groan. “Go to the medical wing! We’ve got our own x-ray machine thing now!”

Ben’s next laugh was much more composed. “Yeah, sure.” He said. “Soon as we get out of here. And I catch up with some other work.”

“...uh huh.” James was not convinced. “Well, I’m gonna go get rid of this arm before it melts. If I say something stupid in the future, let me know, okay? It’s okay to tell me I’m a dumbass. I can handle it.” Ben just nodded, and James backed off to give the new man some time to himself.

He, Alanna, and Bea cleared the rest of the explosives scattered across the room over the next half hour or so. Not quickly, not professionally, but at a cautious pace that was as safe as they could make it. Well, for Alanna and James anyway. Bea didn’t seem to understand why it might be a bad idea to pick up one of the things that could detonate and spray scalding liquid across her if she moved too fast. James wasn’t sure if it was because she was armored and felt invincible inside the riot gear, or if it was that her *true* body was a semi-liquid blob near the brain stem of the human shell she was wearing and that wasn’t exactly killable from a small shockwave and some hot coffee. Either way, if it weren’t for how smoothly she moved, James would have called her reckless. As it stood, *he* felt like the reckless one when he accidentally broke three different red orbs, netting himself emotional resonance ranks in confusion, bitterness, and boredom. He really needed to talk to Momo at some point about what those actually *did*, just in case he was slowly eroding his own personality.

Then, just when they thought they were in the clear, a swarm of staplers had exploded out from one of the cabinets under the counter. The older models, heavy chrome and with enough skittering pen legs they resembled centipedes. The kinda that were instantly hostile and cunningly vicious in their use of magic items against delvers.

This pack had made a makeshift weapon out of a table leg, some string, and an eraser that blanked someone’s memory of the last five minutes, as well as a dress shirt several of them puppeteer that repelled anything the sleeves hit with an alarming amount of force.

One skirmish and several light injuries later, James learned that Bea was capable of operating her body even with a broken leg, which she claimed she could heal within half an hour, and also that he had apparently broken a yellow orb during the fight but before he got hit with the eraser stick, so he had no idea what new skill rank he’d gained. He really, really hoped it wasn’t a useful one; though a check of his Sewer lessons at least showed that it wasn’t relevant to those.

They saved a good chunk of the yellow and blue orbs they’d collected, but each took a few for their own use. Alanna got a rank in yak farming, and James scored one in ceramics. Bea got the luckiest of them all, with two whole ranks in teaching. No qualifiers. Just *teaching*. James felt a small amount of regret that they hadn’t kept that to copy, but then, they did copy hundreds

of yellows to test them for useful skills, and they literally could not get them all, so there was just no helping it.

Ben got a rank in marijuana use, which James thought was hilarious.

Afterward, they stood at the edge of the break room, James in a crouch and leaning forward to peer into the chasm below. "Yeah, there's totally more layers down there." He said as he slid himself backward. Cubicle hallways compressed down by the floors on top of them, dark places where strange things they had almost no experience with hunted and grew. He and Alanna had been down there once before, and he knew it was practically packed with treasure. And that had been nearer to the entrance of the dungeon, not a dozen kilometers deep into it like they were now.

Still, none of them wanted to press their luck. Instead, they planned to call this a good point to turn around, steal the coffee machine, reorganize their cart without disturbing the somewhat skittish but otherwise friendly stapler that had decided to hide in their cargo, and then head back, taking more time to poke their noses into places on the way until they ran low on time.

"Wanna bet on what that one makes?" Alanna asked as James carefully unplugged the coffee machine.

"Coffee." Bea said instantly.

Alanna pressed her eyes closed. "N...no." She sighed. "I mean, what magical effect will that coffee have? It's basically potions for this dungeon, after all."

"Honestly, I dunno. It doesn't feel like how James described magic items." Ben said, helping James to pull the cords out from behind the cabinet. "Still worth checking, but really, the table feels more magical than this thing."

"The what now?" Alanna's eyebrows went up.

Ben pointed, and James actually twisted an arm around to point with him, the two of them singling out one of the break room tables. The furniture around the break rooms was usually pretty uniform, but this one had a mixed style, and the table they were pointing at was a rounded tan square of polished wood with a single heavy metal pole in the middle that led down to a clawed base. It was slightly tilted, had some scratches in the surface, and just kind of looked like a table that had been in use for a while.

"The table I told everyone not to touch, earlier." James said. "Because it's practically vibrating. Alanna, do you not feel that?"

"Not really." His girlfriend edged closer, and reached out to poke the table. "Huh. Weird."

“Oh my god, I just said not to touch it.” James rolled his eyes as he tried to politely move the stapler in their cart so he and Ben could set the coffee machine into a rectangular space they’d attempted to clear. “Okay, so, touching it is safe, I guess?” He said as Alanna kept poking it. “You’d think you’d have learned to not fuck with new magic by now.” James’ voice actually was sorta annoyed, because this was more reckless than Alanna should have been.

“I’ve stopped pointing anything at anyone, I think that’s a step in the right direction.” Alanna said. “Also, so far, none of the magic can actively hurt us, right? So this is kinda just how we test a lot of stuff. And I’m not hauling a table back if-“

“-it doesn’t do anyyyyyy *what the fuck*.” James’ voice picked up where Alanna had left off the instant he cautiously stepped up next to her and poked the table. Both of them recoiled, staring down at their hands, heads whipping around.

Behind them, Ben appeared almost instantly. “What’s wrong?” He sounded tense, but ready to act at a moment’s notice. “Are you hurt?”

“Holy shit, I’m tall.” James said. With Alanna’s voice. Looking through Alanna’s eyes. “You know, this is less disorienting than it probably could have been, since we do this a lot, but *wow*, you’re actually really tall when you’re standing up and wearing boots.”

“Oh fuck me, it’s a table that - *Ben don’t touch that* - it’s a table that swaps bodies.” Alanna’s cadence came out of James’ mouth. “Okay, okay. This is fine. James, you... that is you, right?” She looked up at her own body, which... didn’t quite look like her. The face she saw in the mirror was *hers*, but now it wore an expression that was more James’ than her own normal look, and it was a subtle and weird difference to see.

“Yeah, this is me.” James said, voice coming out in a lower pitch than Alanna normally used. “Okay. *Before* we try to put the table in the cart and this happens again, let’s make sure we can swap back, yeah?” He leaned forward, and tapped Alanna’s fingertips onto the wood.

Alanna resisted the urge to start furiously scratching at her new back, where James’ ponytail was currently being the most irritating thing on the planet rubbing against her borrowed skin. “Please.” She said. “Your body is weird.” And reached out to do the same.

There was a moment’s pause this time, but then, with absolutely no fanfare or indication, they were snapped back into their native bodies. “Okay!” James said with his own voice. “That’s weird! Wait, touch it again! I think it’s on a cooldown and I wanna test that!”

Alanna did so, smirking at him now that she knew the effects were easily reversible. “You know, you talk like that, and I’m gonna think you like being inside me.”

“Don’t make it weird.” James said, both of them holding their hands on the table. Then he paused. “Actually, do make it weird. That’s more fun.”

“Please stop flirting.” Bea said in her dull voice. “Let us know when you switch again, so we know how long we have to move the table. I do not wish to test what this would do to anyone switching with me.”

Ben cleared his throat. “Um... is this a mind control thing? Or is there a reason we’re just assuming we’re taking the table?”

“It’s a table that swaps bodies, Ben.” James said, like that explained anything. “We can *find* a use for a table that swaps bodies.”

“Touché.”

“And at the very least, it’s-“ James started

“-a great opportunity for us to explore what it feels like to literally be someone else.” He finished with Alanna’s voice. “Okay, about a minute and a half? Let’s get this loaded. I’ll grab the... uh... whole thing. Since I guess Alanna you can just *pick things up*, holy shit your arms are so fucking strong, what is this?”

Alanna nodded James’ head rapidly. “And that’s with my purple orb enhancements moved over to this body! Kinda cool, huh? You wanna start coming to the gym with me yet?” She paused. “Wait, shit, you know what? *I could take this* body to the gym. Like a project car! Only for weight training! Oh man, this is gonna be a whole thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Bea said, pushing back one of their duffel bags to let James settle the table into their cargo cart, the brave little hand cart barely holding up under the weight. “It will change things. Again.” Bea sounded the closest to amused that she ever had as she pressed some of the heavier objects they’d taken to the foot of the table to keep it in place. “Are we done now?” She asked.

“Well, Alanna and I need to swap back, unless she’s okay with this.” James said, staring at his hands as he flicked Alanna’s fingers and felt the difference in how her muscles and ligaments felt compared to his own. “Also wow, holy shit, you were not kidding about the armor being uncomfortable on your breasts. This is *with* the custom stuff? Jesus.” James started pulling at one of the armor straps.

“Hey, don’t fuck with that!” Alanna demanded, pointing James’ hand accusingly. “That takes time to settle into something workable! Okay, we’re swapping back now before you screw it up.” She slapped his hand onto the table in the cart, and with an expulsive huff of breath, James did the same, putting them back where they had started.

He was still grinning though. “I like this.” He said to Ben. “You wanna go next?”

“With... you? No thanks.” Ben said, as they started to make sure the cart would roll, put their guard back up, and made ready to begin the long hike back.

James blinked. “Wait, hang on. I expected you to say something about species difference, but *that* sounds like you just don’t wanna be in my body. What’s wrong with my body?!” He leaned back in a faux dramatic swoon to look at Alanna. “Alanna, what’s wrong with my body?” James lamented.

“You’re all squishy and stuff, and your socks are weird.” She answered instantly. “Now let’s get moving. We can stop by one of the towers on the way back and stock up on ritual coffee. I think Reed wanted to try copying an email server or something, and I don’t want it putting a dent in our anti-cancer project.”

James nodded, planning to ask a lot of questions about that later, and led the way out, with Bea moving with him in a perfect imitation of what she’d seen Alanna doing earlier.. Alanna pulled the cart in the middle of their formation, their new stapler friend riding on it like it was a luxury cruise. And Ben brought up the rear, mimicked human eyes flicking across the endless walls and gaps, watchful for any sign of trouble.

They ran into some more trouble on the way back.

But nothing they couldn’t handle.

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As it turned out, winter in northern small town Texas was still cold and wet. James wasn’t exactly thrilled with the revelation that he’d have to wade through puddles and brave gusts of wind that threatened to match what he had to deal with on Winter’s Climb, just to get back to the library.

The library was closed, because it was one AM. The library also had a door open, because Vad was lurking around to let James back in. James was outside of the library because whatever his schedule even was at this point, he actually needed to eat sometimes, and there was a 24/7 fried chicken place two blocks away, which was almost worth the fact that his socks were going to be soggy for a whole dungeon delve.

“It’s still so surreal to me.” Vad said as he followed James up the library’s dark central staircase to where they were waiting for the door to open, the small group listening to the wind spattering rain against the tall pane glass windows of the building’s possibly-fictional second floor.

“The dungeon?” James asked as he reclaimed his well-worn public library chair, and pulled a box of cajun fries out of the somewhat damp bag he was carrying for Momo, and then an oversized cookie for Thought-Of-Quiet. “Isn’t this... you go in *way* more often than I do, man. You should have mastered it by now.”

“That’s not even close to reasonable. But also no, I mean... well, actually, kind of about that?” Vad paused, folding his arms in the long sleeves of his bright green college hoodie, trying not to shiver. “You just went out for chicken, and we’ve got... ten minutes before we do the whole risking our lives thing again. Who *does* that?”

Momo looked up with a bleary eyed expression. “I do that.” She admitted around a mouthful of potatoes. “But not this time because James brought me breakfast.”

“...I’m making you eat a salad if we don’t die in the next few hours.” James glared at her.

“That!” Vad reclaimed the flow of the conversation. “That, right there! Okay, so, you got me on board with the adventure and the danger and the magic, *sure*, I get it. But you’re just so relaxed minutes before it all starts!”

“It helps that there’s no audience for me to tense up in front of. And... I guess I’ve done this enough, it’s becoming easier. Not *routine*, don’t give me that look. I just know what I’m supposed to be doing, so my anxiety has less to latch onto.” James shrugged. “Also Momo being a little gremlin who doesn’t sleep and is in a constant worrying state of self destruction is just... a thing you get used to. Along with making her drink water.”

“Mmmmmrgh.” Momo muttered from where she’d buried her head in her arms, occasionally snaking out a hand to drag a fry back into her nap zone. She’d gotten through all the good soft fries though, and was down to the small bits that got too crispy, but she wasn’t about to declare breakfast over just yet.

From under the table, Thought-Of-Quiet spoke up in his digital voice. “I find it easy to stay calm, because nothing can be as bad as the worst thing that has happened.”

“Wait, really?” James slid out of his chair to drop heavily to the floor, leaning his back against a table leg as he looked at the camraconda. “That’s the opposite of how trauma normally works for humans.”

“No, not really.” Thought-Of-Quiet said sadly as he twisted his neck to look up at James from whatever heavy book he had open to read from off the floor. “Everything is terrifying. So I am making inept jokes to deflect from that.”

James nodded. “Okay, *that* I understand.” He said. And then, slightly softer, added “Do you need a hug? It’s not the best time since I’m wearing damp Kevlar, but...”

Thought-Of-Quiet let out a string of rapid short hisses, something that James thought might have been a laugh. “Later. When you are not damp.” He said. “Time?”

Before James could check his watch, Vad's voice came from overhead. "Two minutes. We should get ready. And... uh... wake up Momo?"

"Fool. I'm already prepared." Momo's voice sounded about as imperious as someone who'd just forced themselves awake from a nap possibly could sound. The way she seemed to sway on her feet, or the fact that James noticed that she seemed to be missing her sidearm, did not reassure him that she had been telling the truth when she said she was up for this.

"Momo..." James started in a worried voice.

"I'm fine. Don't at me." Momo huffed. "Vad, TQ, you guys ready?"

"I like that name." Thought-Of-Quiet said as he slithered out from under the communal study table, taking stock of the mechanical arms he had equipped one by one in a precise test pattern. "James, will you call me that now?" The camraconda's digital voice sounded almost apprehensive.

James gave a smiling nod. "Sure! But also, we need to get going or we'll miss the window. Vad, you good?"

Vad was already standing by the heavy stairwell door, counting down the seconds on his smartwatch until the exact moment that he could reach down, turn the metal handle with a ratcheting *chunk* noise, and pull the door open.

"Vad's good." James nodded. "See, this is how you get used to it." He patted Vad on the shoulder as he walked past and into the outer edge of the seemingly infinite rows of shelves and stacks. As he passed, Zuh began to unfurl a feathered shadow over his arm, forming into another limb and a long tail, the navigator also getting in on the action of patting Vad on the shoulder reassuringly. It felt simple to him, in that moment. You got excited about the possibilities, about the future, about yourself. You didn't ever let it become boring. And, he thought, as he waited for the others to fan out behind him as they started checking the aisles to figure out which gap between the shelves would be safest, you maybe didn't eat fried chicken before a delve. That might have been an error on his part. Vad might be unintentionally correct.

Eventually they started moving through the shelves. Because so far, no one had been able to figure out if *any* of the outer rows of shelves were safe. There didn't seem to be a pattern to it, except that literally every one of these long and narrow corridors that led from the outer walls near the entrance to the true expanse of the Ceaseless Stacks was home to a *lot* of angry books.

"We doing the thing?" Momo asked as she and James took point, the orange glow of Zhu's form making the otherwise dimly lit area a little clearer to see.



“Yes, but quietly.” He said back. “No yelling. Both because this is a library, and because it will give me a headache after I do my side of it.” Vad and TQ hung back as James and Momo stepped past the first couple sections of shelf, James keeping alert while Momo seemed to be softly humming to herself with her eyes closed, like she was trying to take a nap mid-dungeon. He waited until a nearby book made its move; a wet pop sounding as the spine of the paperback opened into a bulbous eye that swiveled to focus on the two of them. “Hey.” James said, making eye contact with it. “We’re going through here. We don’t want a fight, so stay on your shelf, and we’re good, okay?”

The book paused, eye locking onto James like it was considering the offer. Or so James hoped, anyway. It might very well have just been thinking that he and Momo must be the dumbest humans in existence. But James didn’t flinch away, even when the book split its lower half into a fanged maw and lunged at him.

TQ caught it with his natural camraconda power, stopping the book in the air where James took it apart with a few strikes of his hatchet before they both let it drop, James snagging the orb out of the air.

“Alright!” He said a little louder. “Let’s try again!” He dipped into the back of his mind, where some of his magic resided. Magic was weird, he’d already decided; it lived in different parts of a person. The Climb spells lived around his lungs, the Horizon’s were in his chest in the abstract, but Officium Mundi? Well, it didn’t really give out spells normally. You had to sneak around to the solution to absorbing blues, and when you did, they were just sort of something you had to know you could do. So James thought of them as being in the back of his mind.

He had two, his own personal limit. One was *always* going to be Manipulate Asphalt, because that was both too useful and very renewable. The other one, the new one he had now, was Remove Text. Which was, if he was being honest, kind of hard to find a use for. Oh, it was a convenient eraser, and great for practical jokes or just blipping out the worse examples of advertising billboards. But James had to find a way to get through a lot of charges before he could try for something more flexible.

Right now, though, he had a thought on what it might allow him to do. Because ‘text’ was one of those words that meant multiple things, and he was pretty sure that if he pushed, and burned more than a couple charges back to back, he could make their entrance a lot more convenient. After all, a book was a text. Though, he’d be the first to admit, a living toothy monster book wasn’t exactly. But that’s fine, that’s what Momo was for.

The first use swept a shelf clean. The second kept going, leaving behind fluttering bookmarks and library slips on the quickly emptying shelves. James focused his attention through the spike of pain that threatened to intrude on his right eye, wincing as he triggered the ability two more times, sweeping it over the whole aisle.

And leaving behind about thirty books. Well, 'books'. Devoid of their camouflage, all of them instantly cracked open wet eyes and toothy pages, tongues that lashed out like prehensile bookmarks, and angry hisses.

"We're gonna come through here!" James spoke clearly, but not loudly, working hard to keep the wince of pain from overusing a blue out of his voice. "And we know you're here, and don't need to- aw fuck, Momo!" The last words came out in a rush as the remaining living tomes started crawling along the barren shelves toward them in a scratching wave of living paper.

Momo had something like five or six absorbed blues, because Momo was just worryingly good at altering her mindset to work with magic. One of them, which she'd refreshed since the last time she was here, was Liquify Paper.

She threw out the spell, her mind thinking of invisible whips carving through the shelves, her arms stretched out, hands dancing in rapid motions as she guided her magic. It was easy for her, when she could see what she was doing and there wasn't a fight happening all around her.

It took one cast and eight seconds for her to reduce three dozen hostile monsters from threats to splatters. Their pages turned to a beige goo that dripped down the shelves, halves of books that had been cut through landing on the floor with wet *splats* as the orbs they dropped on death rolled down to stick in the melted remains of their previous owners.

"Idiots." Momo muttered, lowering her hands.

"Now *that*. That sounded suitably imperious." James told her.

Momo's expression cracked into a confused and tired mess, and suddenly she wasn't a dangerous witch standing on a battlefield, she was just a mid twenties girl who didn't know how to tighten her armor straps. "What?"

"Nothing." James said with a smile. "Let's make Vad get the orbs." He added as he started to stride forward.

Vad wasn't exactly thrilled to be the one to grab the orbs out of puddles of book goop, but the promise of the magic was appealing enough that he didn't complain. TQ complained, though, when the camraconda had to slither through the cleared area and got smears of liquified paper on the plates of his custom armor. The group split the orbs when they made it through to the first landing, on the grounds that they didn't really have a pressing reason to be copying these, and that there was always a chance that someone could find an alternate use for them like with the Office's yellows.

[+1 Species Rank : Bear - Brown - North American]

[+1 Species Rank : Frog]

"I... did not know these could do that." James said as he processed the alien thoughts running through his mind.

"What?" Momo asked. "Ignore taxonomic classifications?"

Vad shook his head at her. "None of these have ever actually followed conventional taxonomy. I checked. And I think the server you guys have is up to date on the list of tests."

"I have a rank in zebras." TQ said, looking up at James with an iris camera eye. "Are zebras not horses?"

"No, but also sort of, but also we can talk about zebras later." James said. "Does this place look different to anyone? Also, check, does anyone hear singing? Before we run into another librarian."

Everyone shook their heads on hearing anything. The space was a circular zone of cracked and worn unpolished wooden floorboards, with a semicircle of a tall desk covering the space between the two staircases ahead of them that led up or down depending on what side you picked. A wide square table sat in the middle, with a display of laminated books on it presented to anyone passing by, and a few deep lounge chairs lined the outsides, their backs against the shelves, with the occasional brass standing lamp between them where there was space.

James split off with TQ to check out the information desk, the camraconda rising up to his full height to help sweep the surface, with James deliberately checking every visible pile of books before the two of them circled around to get through the wooden swinging door and start actually going through the space properly. Momo, meanwhile, was getting absorbed in the covers and titles of the books on display, while Vad finished a visual check of the perimeter to make sure nothing was sneaking up on them, before he got distracted looking at something. James glanced over while his camraconda friend was trying to find anything resembling a password to the weird boxy computer they were looking at, to see Vad standing in the center of the landing, staring upward.

He was going to ask why, but then just decided to look up himself and risk falling victim to a bad practical joke. Overhead, the painted metal of the shelves around them rose up, and up, and up. Well past where the shelves themselves stopped, the metal pieces thinning out, turning into long bony fingers of material that came together in a design that hung over the center of the landing. James blinked as he realized that what he'd thought was a domed skylight was actually just an optical illusion; there was nothing overhead except the strange circular diagram formed by the confluence of the shelves, a ring of dark metal that *insinuated* the idea of glass and an outside, but never delivered on that promise.

Which made sense; there was a staircase that went up, maybe ten feet away from him.

“Is *this* a password?” The camraconda voice brought James’ vision back down to where his search partner had two of his mechanical limbs holding a palm sized black leather notebook open in front of his eye. He turned it as James looked over to show something that looked like a jumble of letters and numbers divided into columns.

“...What?” James asked. “TQ, I still have a headache from vaporizing a bunch of innocent books, and my skill ranks are in encryption, not code breaking, which I *guess* matters. How is that a password to this?” He held out an upturned palm toward the computer they were trying to access. The computers here were weird to him, and he absolutely planned to steal this one, since apparently the library dungeon reset or rearranged itself regularly. It was a cube of a monitor; actually a perfect cube or something close to it. It was sitting on top of a flat rectangle with a series of slots in its front and an indented power button, both devices the color of old grocery store shelving. And while the monitor and the thing that was the processor were obviously working together, they weren’t *connected*. In *any* way. James could, and in fact had, picked up the monitor and moved it five feet to the side, and it was still doing its job.

He wanted this technology. Even if it would take a lot of bizarre magic to make it useful on a large scale.

Right now, though, he wanted to focus on his friend’s explanation. “These columns represent a partial cypher for a substitution code. The other half might be somewhere, but it is meaningless. If the numbers written on the device is the passcode, and we assume it is a real word, then it is either ‘steal’ or ‘steam’. No other missing letters make words. I think.”

“...I’m really fuckin’ glad everyone I’m friends with is smarter than me.” James said, the comment said with a grin and making the camraconda’s eye rapidly refocus as TQ dipped his sinuous neck down. James leaned back to the keyboard - also not tethered to anything - and tapped in the first option. When that didn’t work, he tried the second, and nodded with raised eyebrows as the screen accepted it and switched to a new view. “Nice!” He said. “Looks like this place likes it’s puzzles.”

“That is fitting. I also enjoy puzzles.” The camraconda hissed with satisfaction.

“Also, quick check,” James said as he tapped the arrow keys on the keyboard to navigate around the screen that looked like an alternate reality version of an ancient iMac OS, “TQ? You wanna try that out?”

“Yes.” The camraconda answered instantly. “It feels... no. That is it. It feels. At all.”

“You really didn’t like your name.” James said sadly, glancing down from the cube of a screen.

TQ whipped his head back and forth in a dramatic serpentine denial. “I chose it because it seemed important to everyone else. I don’t... want it.”

“I getcha. TQ it is, then. Until you decide if you want to keep it or try something new.”

James was cut off from his conversation as Zhu perked up around him the instant he pressed one of the heavy keys and opened a folder on the screen. “That!” The navigator spoke like gravel under tires. “Click that one!”

Obliging, James did so, shifting slightly to let TQ get a good view of the screen too. “Oh huh, lookit *that*.” He mused as the screen changed to a pattern of black lines. He wasn’t sure if he’d just opened a program of a file or some weird other designation for a data packet, but it was quickly obvious what he’d found. Zhu’s feathered arm split off from his own, tracing a line over the screen until he tapped on a circular spot in the top left. “You sure?” James asked, and Zhu cracked an eye open on his shoulder just to roll it at James. “Alright. So, that’s us. And this is a *map*.”

“A map that we can carry with us.” TQ said. “Because nothing stops us from doing that.”

“Something *does* stop me from actually enjoying this, though.” James said, ducking his head down to look underneath the tall desk’s overhanging surface. Papers, stacks of library cards, an ink pot, a bright red leather purse, a whole bunch of stuff, but not what he was looking for. “Okay,” he rose back up, “see this icon? This is similar to an old computer icon I’ve seen before. This is a click and drag image, or program, or whatever. But there’s no mouse around here, and the keyboard...” he made a few loud clacks as he tested the arrows, “yeah, this doesn’t work. Anyone see one?”

None of them did. And then Momo and Vad rejoined them, Momo dropping a book with a laminated cover onto the desk in front of James and watching his reaction as he read the title of ‘Barbarian Elk Pounding’. He wanted to laugh, but didn’t want to give her the satisfaction, but he was also pretty sure his facade cracked when he tried to stare at her.

The two were quickly enlisted into the search for a mouse, which turned up nothing. Still, they’d brought a folding cart for exploration, and while James had figured it’d be a while before they needed it, now was as good a time to open it up as any. They loaded the whole computer into it, all the parts they had, along with all the extra orbs they hadn’t cracked. And then, on Zhu’s request, they started trying to figure out what direction they needed to go to get to the tiny box of empty space that didn’t seem to have a clear path to it.

“Okay, so... we’re here. And that’s the desk. So *that way* is left from here.” Momo said, pointing past one of the lamps and into the shelves. “Right?”

“Well, that’s left, but yes.” Vad answered, and James instantly notched up how much he liked the guy in his mental list of people. “Do we just go?”

“We’ve got telepads for leaving. And a map to get us back.” James said. They’d decided not to test how far the monitor could get from the base this time; that was for Research to figure out later when it wasn’t relevant to them getting out of the dungeon.

So they did. They just went. Chose a row of shelves, and started walking.

Unlike the heavily guarded shelves that cut the entrance off from the rest of the dungeon, nothing immediately attacked them as they walked through the tight space. It was just barely wide enough for the cart, light like the glow of lamps coming from nowhere in particular, and more light cast like beams of sunlight through windows lighting up bits of the floor until they got there and found that there were no windows anywhere to be seen.

Books with nonsense titles and meaningless covers were everywhere. James had an urge to just stop and spend an hour or two searching them, looking for the funniest tidbits, or maybe hoping for a text that actually had something useful to say in it. But while they weren’t exactly on the clock, they also weren’t here just to amuse him, and so he had to settle for stealing glances and not finding anything that wasn’t word salad.

They stopped at an intersection, where the dented and chipped paint of the metal shelves they were snuggled between met an aisle where the racks were replaced by a dark paneled wood. Like a library from another era had briefly crossed though where they were walking, complete with the flickering light of an oil lamp from just around the corner, even if there was no real fire casting the light. The corners of the shelves didn’t fit against each other so much as they blended; matte metal and varnished wood fading into each other so gradually that if James hadn’t been paying attention he might not have noticed the shift at all.

But they were all paying attention. Which was why Momo notice the line of blue ink moving in a constantly shifting triangle, just below eye level on one of the shelves. Well, below eye level for James. Above it for TQ. Exactly where Momo tended to look at things.

“Did we ever figure out what these do?” She asked.

Vad frowned. “No. But I have two of them on me, which is hard to explain to anyone who sees me naked since they don’t stop moving. I got one for ‘soar’ when I came in here with Alex and her friend last week. They don’t... seem to be for doing magic? Yish, that’s such a weird sentence.”

“You’re in a dungeon, deal with it.” Momo tilted her head to read one of the angled lines of the repeated word. “Tirano. Spanish, tyrant.” She stated, and the words stilled, then snapped onto the closest part of her to where they were written, the triangle of blue ink returned to rotating in place on her collarbone. “Okay, weird. Three uses of it, but no idea what that means. Do I just yell the word?”

“...no.” Vad said, looking away and pretending he was watching for danger.

“Because?” James prompted with a smile.

“It doesn’t work.” Vad said flatly.

James nodded. “To be fair, I also tried yelling the word ‘hedgehog’ after my first orb here, just to see if it did anything.”

“That doesn’t work either.” Vad’s neck and cheeks flushed red like a spreading wine stain.

They moved on. The dungeon was quiet, which James had sort of mentally expected from a library, but it was quiet in a way that instilled a kind of creeping worry into everyone walking through it. Every footstep sounded too loud on the hard green carpet, every rustle and tap of their gear seemed to echo for miles. There was no air flow, no distant hum of machinery, no movement around them, *nothing*. Even the flickering of out of sight lights was silent.

When there were enemies as they passed, they struck without warning. The books that attacked them didn’t actually get any more dangerous, but the nature of the attacks changed. There were no more stacks of certain combat, followed by relatively safe zones. Instead, *any* of the shelves could hold one or two of the creatures, who would ambush them at random. Never enough to overwhelm, but a single bad bite could be enough, especially with the fact that the books all did seem to be venomous. James was still set to a fairly good chunk of venom immunity, but he was the only one.

The orbs from the books went in the cart. Momo informed them that she’d decided that next time they needed to bring a bucket for this.

Frequently, they would check the map they had. Zhu claimed that he had it memorized, and James claimed that learning how to read it and knowing where they were in case the navigator got knocked out was important. Also, he really did just have a lot of questions about where they were. It seemed like the floor was almost entirely row after row of shelves, with barely any interruptions. Small spaces that could have been reading rooms or sitting areas, or maybe just old card catalogs or inventory computers.

They got near one of them, and half their group heard a quiet, lilting, humming. They avoided that one, slipping back into the stacks and putting distance between themselves and the thing that they just didn’t want to fight today.

James was pretty sure he could handle it. But it wasn’t worth the risk with this small group. They were here to find some cool magic, not to get into life or death fights.

A dozen shelves later, the titles of the books were starting to wear on some of them. Vad caught a glimpse of one of the roaming cat creatures, the lynx like form made up of yellowed pages and folded newsprint. It hadn’t even looked at them, and they hadn’t chased it as it

seemed to splash through a stack of loose books like the paper was water. They moved quieter, though, because James wanted to try to snag the next one.

It didn't seem like they'd have much luck, until they were only a few short rows away from where they were going, and Momo had frozen as she started to step around a corner. One hand held out behind her, her whole body going still as she slowly, *painfully* slowly, eased back, making as little noise as possible. She pointed at TQ and tried to make a hand sign that she probably thought meant cat. The camraconda had gotten the meaning, though both he and James shared a look that said that they needed to get Momo a sign language orb.

Then he'd slipped around the corner, and before the noise of his shifting on the floor could startle the catalog, grabbed the angular paper feline in his gaze.

James stepped around as the camraconda motioned with one of his mechanical arms. "Hey." He gently spoke to the catalog, the creature only half facing them. Moving against the shelves, trusting the two people behind him to yell if any of the books came alive, James got into full view of the paper lynx, and knelt down. "We're going to let you go now. But before you run, I'm looking for something. Where can I find a skill orb that *isn't* a species rank?"

He raised a hand, and TQ released the creature, which jerked as the motion it was trying to make was finally allowed and the extra force it was pushing through its body snapped it sideways. It looked like it was about to bolt, but it paused, to make eye contact with James.

And then it spoke, without opening its mouth. A woman's voice, warm and kind even if the words were economical. The kind of voice James remembered from a librarian as a kid that used to call him 'honey' all the time. "Up two floors, take a left, then the third right path once past the midnight countess, find a lake." The cat says. And then, before it sprang away, it paused, looking like it wanted to add something. But not further words came, and its paper paws took it sideways, tunneling through a shelf like the books on it weren't even there.

"I'm fucking shocked that worked." Momo told him when he came back. "*Zhu* couldn't find another orb type. Why does *your* plan get to work?"

"Orbs aren't a *place* Momo." Zhu's feathers slumped around James as he pouted.

James decided not to get involved in that argument, instead just wiping his gloved hands on his legs before readjusting his grip on his hatchet. "It was a random guess, honestly." James said. "But hey, it worked! And we have *another* proper noun to deal with!"

"Another?" Vad asked with narrowed eyes.

"Oh, yeah, dude." James sighed. "You asked why I was so relaxed about the dungeons? Well, here's a potential reason. Let me tell you about *pillars*." As they carefully shifted their group in single file around a towering stack of paperbacks that loomed overhead, James filled Vad in on



what had been going on outside of the world of the Ceaseless Stacks. The events in New York and Alaska, the whole 'pillars' thing, the vaguely threatening meeting from a mercenary ops leader, their contact with the FBI, all of it.

He wrapped up quickly as they came to a T-intersection, and TQ pointed out that their map said this was where they were looking for; past that barrier of shelves ahead of them, there was a gap of space with no charted way in. Stopping about ten feet back from the change in direction, they took some time to grab sips of water, and Vad took the opportunity to carefully nod, stare at James, and ask, "What the *fuck* is wrong with your life?"

"Lots of things!" Momo cut in, her sleepy energy from earlier completely reversed by her time hiking through the library dungeon. She twisted the cap back onto the water bottle she was holding and flipped it into the cart with a thump of crinkling cheap plastic. "James doesn't like to acknowledge how many people might want to kill us."

"Okay, hang on." James frowned, actually a little offended. "That's not true! We're taking action to remove ourselves from the sights of half the people that might try to kill us, and our intelligence branch is switching to proactive security measures around common Order locations! We're not... like... all wearing shield bracers all the time, but we're not just ignoring it."

"Why?" Vad asked.

"Why what?"

"Why aren't you wearing shield bracers all the time. You gave me one, and I wear it all the time."

"...What, even outside the library?"

"Are you kidding?" Vad's eyebrows shot up. "That's the *best* place to wear it. I set it to vehicle impact every time I walk to work. Half this state drives pickup trucks, and the rest of them don't know how to drive much better, and that's terrifying."

James snorted a laugh, while TQ tilted his head at Vad. "Why pickup trucks? The ones with the cargo bed, yes?"

"Every time someone almost runs me over, it's a pickup truck." Vad said.

"Why do they keep making them?" TQ asked.

James tapped a hand on the camraconda's head. "That's how I feel about most cars." He said. "This is also not the argument for now."

“No,” Vad said, “we should be asking what pillars are, and why you made them mad. Also... shouldn’t you have *told me* that something you call the Old Gun lived in my state?”

“To be fair, we...” James paused, glancing upward as he heard a distant rustle of paper. “Okay, no, sorry.” He sighed. “Yeah, I assumed you would have known, because it’s in the ops manual, but... yeah. There’s a ton of relevant information now, and we need to get better at actual direct briefings. So, I’m sorry.” He looked Vad in the eye. “Actually.”

Vad frowned, but still tipped his head in reply. “It’s fine.” He said in reply. “What *is* a pillar anyway?”

“We have no idea! It’s a new term to us, but I guess it’s what they call themselves.” Momo grinned. “Isn’t it exciting?”

“They’re dangerous, we know.” TQ added.

James nodded. “Pretty much that.” He said. “They’re hard to not notice though. Like, the three of them that we’ve *seen* have all been... in flux, maybe? They look like a ton of different iterations of a person all the time. Which is actually hard for most people to see.”

“Okay, so, not like... the normal shapeshifters?” Vad asked. Everyone stopped, tension ratcheting up rapidly. As a group, the other four turned to stare at him; whether it was slowly or quickly or Zhu opening a dozen incredulous eyes on the tail that wrapped around James’ armored leg. “What?” Vad said. “*What?* Magic is real and my workplace has a hole in reality! Don’t tell me *now* that ‘someone who changes faces’ is something I should have known was wrong!”

“Well... it is. And now you know.” James ground his palms into his eye sockets. “I’m going to scream.”

“Not in the library.” TQ said in a flat digital voice. And then, after a brief pause, “We will scream when we get home.”

Momo held up a hand. “Counterpoint!” She offered. “Maybe Vad hasn’t seen Ol’ Shooty, and it’s just... a normal shapeshifter? I’m *still* waiting to find a real vampire. The world is weird?” She shrugged, suddenly unsure of what she’d just said, but still following her abrupt instinct to pretend that everything was okay.

Despite the fact that so far, that had never been the case, they decided to end their short break there, and keep moving. Though James did make a note to *absolutely* include the building this dungeon was in as one of the places they put real security on. The Order was constantly expanding, but he felt like they might need to go a little quicker now, to get the number of eyes they needed for what was quickly becoming an interlocking series of potentially horrifying problems.

Regardless, they had a destination, and while Zhu shared James' concern about literally everything Vad had said, he was also far more interested in finishing their journey, and his manifested form was practically vibrating against James as they stashed their bottles and readied themselves to move.

It was a bit anticlimactic, really. There was just another tall wooden shelf in front of them. Nothing jumped at them, and while to the left, there was what looked like a solid wall with a lounge chair, and the right stretched back into more of the stacks, there was no gap in the space in front of them. They split into two groups, and circled around it. It wasn't that large, maybe thirty feet wide, so only not even a minute to circle around it. The aisles on the sides were similar; just like every other row of shelves and books in the library so far.

"It's a box." James said as he met up with Momo on the far side of the space.

"It's a *mystery*." Zhu added gleefully, the navigator reaching out to tap at one of the books on the shelf.

TQ joined them shortly, staring up at the shelves. "Perhaps it is a secret door. Do we start pulling on books?"

"You've been watching too much Scooby-Doo." James grumbled in a friendly tone. "But also maybe? Or... do we just climb it?"

"No." The camraconda said. "Well, I do not. You can."

James scanned over the book titles on the shelf, looking for anything that stood out. But they were all just the same collection of random nouns that every other book in here seemed to be. He looked over his shoulder as movement caught the edge of his attention, but there was just a flickering light at the end of a long hall. "Hm." He reached out and grabbed a book at random, coughing suddenly as a plume of dust came with it.

"Ack." TQ said in a perfectly clear voice while the camraconda hissed and spat with his actual mouth. "Why."

"Actually good question." James muttered. "Nothing else here is ever dusty..." He glanced up at the others. "Circle back. Look for a spot that we didn't touch, that's *clean*." Momo and Vad nodded, and James took TQ back the way they'd come, ignoring Zhu chanting softly about a secret door. He moved slowly, the silence of the library swirling in around them as they went book by book, slowly scanning for anything out of place.

It was amazing, to James, how quickly the task became boring. He didn't have any magic that helped with searching something like this, no extra skill ranks, not even experience in this kind of puzzling investigation. Well, aside from the normal alertness required of a dungeon delve.

But that was more about spotting danger, not piece by piece going over an entire wall. TQ apparently didn't share his issue, the camraconda efficiently sweeping low sections of the shelves in a steady methodical gaze before slithering on. But the whole thing to James felt uncomfortable; that steady feeling that he could be attacked at any time mixed with doing something repetitive and dull rapidly stacking up as he failed to find anything and worried he was wasting everyone's time.

Until TQ hissed in delight and removed a pristine copy of a thin glossy covered book titled Clay Wasp Oven, and then looked up at the wall in expectation, his eye irising in short motions as he waited.

"Huh..." James said. "I was really hoping that would-" He was cut off as the shelf in front of them cracked in half in the middle, right at his eyeline; half of it rising up to form an archway, the other half descending into the floor as if it was never there, himself, Zhu, and TQ all jerking back before the fast moving shelves could take their various curious limbs with it. "Oh!"

"I am the best at puzzles." The camraconda declared as Momo and Vad appeared in a dash, following the noise.

On guard for whatever was waiting for them, the group entered through the gap in a vanguard formation, James taking the lead. Traps or monsters, he wasn't sure what he was expecting. They could see through the archway that the room inside was surrounded by more shelves, looking like every other part of the Library, but that was it.

There was a loud *caw* as they stepped through the gap and looked around; a small black bird perched on one of the shelves looking down at them with disdain. James cocked his head at it, eyes flicking around to make sure they weren't about to be figuratively murdered, but it seemed to be alone.

"Ink?" Momo whispered curiously. She was also looking at the bird, and a quick reevaluation showed it was obviously a piece of dungeon life. While James couldn't tell what its body was made of, its wings showed themselves to obviously be pens when it fanned them out; a skeletal structure of ballpoints, with feathers of sticky black ink filling in the gaps around them. Its eyes glowed soft red, and its face and beak looked like intricate origami. "Cool. Think it's gonna try to kill us?"

"I think it's nesting here." Vad whispered back, pointing to a spot where something like a dictionary had been knocked sideways on a shelf and hollowed out into a bed of shredded paper. He gave a small wave to the bird. "We don't have to fight it, right?"

"Right." James agreed. "But we *should* check out *that*." The bird had drawn their attention, and, he would admit, did look really cool. But more important was the room they'd found. The floor was polished hardwood, and empty except for two things; on their right, a pedestal with an open book sitting upon it, and to their left, a... well...

Dungeons, in James' experience, were often consistent, right up until the moment they weren't. Officium Mundi was his go-to example. It used office supplies for its creatures and building materials and themes for its biomes, but then, sometimes, it decided it wanted an ocean, so it made an ocean.

And now, here, amid the shelves of books and the endless smell of old paper, warm wood and distant lights, there was a ring of stone. It was easily half again as tall as James, and the lower part of it was sunk into the floor. Made of a grey stone with lines of shimmering quartz running through it like veins, and with raised circles carved into its surface, it dominated the space as it silently waited for...

"What is this *for*?" James asked quietly.

"It's beautiful." Zhu said, eyes running down his mantle on James' left arm as he looked at. "And this is the end of this journey. Thank you." The navigator sighed in deep contentment as his form shifted slightly.

From the other side of the room, Momo waved James over, jumping as her motion got another loud caw from the bird that was still glaring at them. "We're not gonna bother you, hush." She pursed her lips at it until James joined them. Though he did take the way that didn't lead him past the shelf the bird was on. "Okay, so. Book. Here's what I've got..."

"You've been here eight seconds." Vad said.

"Yeah, I'm good at this." Momo said. "Also it's kinda obvious. Pages won't turn, and it's just this." She shuffled sideways to let James look at the text that she and Vad had already inspected, while across the room, TQ was circling around the ring of stone with a curious eye.

The book was thick parchment, and text that was written in what looked like quill pen. It was in French, which deterred James exactly not at all. Two words, and two underscored blank spaces. "Is this... french Mad Libs?" He asked.

"Oh, it is French! I knew it!" Momo grinned. "Also I think so. But neither of us read French. What's it want?"

"It's 'the blank breaking blank'." James read. "But that doesn't actually help us?"

"Oh, but it does." Vad rubbed at his forehead. "Because Momo and I can feel it asking us for things."

"The word tattoos." James said suddenly, making the connection. "Hm." He glanced over at the stone ring, and then back at the book. "Okay. Let's test this carefully." He called the camraconda over, and the two of them got into a flanking formation on the stone ring that was

the most probable cause of a disaster if this went wrong. He knelt, pulling the handgun he kept as a sidearm and holding it steady, aimed at the ring, while TQ took cover behind their cargo cart and did the same with his own pistol, as well as making sure he had line of sight to the whole space. James gave one last glance to the bird that was patiently watching them with a suspicious ruby-eyed glare, before turning to Momo and Vad. "Okay. See if your idea works, then fan out." He said.

Momo grinned, ignoring the rapid nervous tapping of Vad's fingers on the pedestal. She looked down at the book, and tapped a finger against the first blank line. "Tyrant." Momo spoke, before cringing in her head as she realized how overly dramatic she'd made that sound.

But the word filled itself in, ink scratching across the page, and Momo had a sudden knowledge that she had two uses left.

Next to her, Vad nodded, and took a deep breath as he pressed his finger to the page under where she'd touched it. "Well, I've only got one noun, so, tongue?" He said it like a question. But he said it all the same. The word filled itself in. And the stone ring abruptly lit up.

James tightened his grip on his gun, making sure he was breathing steadily and not clenching his hands too hard as he got ready. Overhead, the ink crow started cawing in rapid bursts of noise, contrasted to the otherwise absolute silence of the event.

And then the light was gone, and in the middle of the ring, suspended in midair, was a small object.

"You doing that?" James spoke out of the corner of his mouth to TQ.

"No." The camraconda said. "Should we shoot it?" He asked.

"Don't shoot my magic!" Momo declared, stepping through the middle of them, somewhat recklessly, but still leaving both of their lines of sight mostly clear as she approached the ring. She paused only briefly, before reaching out and taking the thing, its weight reasserting itself as soon as she touched it. A small soapstone carving of a lion, its mouth open in a roar. "Okay, awesome." She said. "And I have no idea what this does, but wow does it feel weird."

James agreed; it wasn't exactly the same texture as the magic from the Office that he was most familiar with, but the thing Momo was holding practically buzzed in his senses, like a power line in the humidity. And then, with no obvious danger coming, he asked the question that he figured was most important in that moment. "Can you repeat that?"

Vad and Momo shared a raised eyebrow look. And then they did. And it worked exactly the same. They did it again, and the tattoos of moving words they had vanished completely from their skin as they used up all three charges of them. But by the end, the group had three identical soapstone lions, all of them waiting for... something.

“Alright. Time to head back.” James said, referencing the map they’d brought along while Zhu tried to entice the ink crow to come down off its shelf. As Momo failed to pick the book up off its pedestal, James glanced up at the bird. “Nice to meet you. You’re welcome to come along if you want, but we’re heading out.” He said, and got an irate avian yell in response. “Figured.” He muttered. “You know, I think crows are so fucking cool, and they all hate me.” He griped.

Their trip back was a lot faster, and while James did accidentally acquire a species rank in North American fire ants, it was otherwise smooth.

Then they agreed, after a rest, that they were up for trying to find that alternate orb type James had gotten from the catalog.

The stairs up to the next floor felt dangerously unstable under their feet and tail. The next landing was a disarray of scattered books and torn newsprint. But they followed directions, and continued heading up, to a landing that was even more chaotic. It looked like the information desk had been *fortified*; stacks of books, some of them corpses of the living fanged texts, pinned down in makeshift walls and parapets with dictionaries that none of them could move. Wooden chairs splintered and piled to block off access.

Vad voiced his dislike of the situation, and no one disagreed, but they still took a left and moved on as instructed. Though even Zhu was on edge as they pressed deeper into the unknown. A feeling of fear creeping in that didn’t feel entirely natural.

They stopped when they saw the end of the row of shelves they were in opened into a clear floor space with a wooden bannister encircling the middle of it. James couldn’t see stairs down, but it was clear there was a hole in the floor up ahead. And suspended in the middle of it, a globe. So large that it dominated the space; like the kind of globe that a secret cabal bent on world domination would have hanging in their lair. It sat, showing unearthly continents and oceans, in midair over the hole in the floor.

And circling it, an inky-dark whale of a creature. Six long black arms dragging it across the surface of the globe in lazy loops. It wasn’t clear if it had eyes on its protruding flat oval head, or if it was nothing but a single mass. But it was far, *far* larger than anything they were prepared to deal with.

“Okay.” James whispered. “Vad was right. Fuck this.”

“I want to be smug about being right, but I’m too busy being petrified.” Vad admitted.

“Ah. My apologies.” TQ said as they slowly backed away, whispering to each other until they were out of sight of the massive thing, and then hurriedly backtracking to the stairs. Only Momo snickered at the camraconda’s joke, but he felt satisfied that he’d gotten *someone* with it. Humor was hard, to the biomechanical serpent.

James' dream of a new and life-complicating orb type might have been crushed by whatever the hell that thing was - a or the baroness of darkness, he supposed - but that didn't stop the group from finding ways into the librarian desks on both landings, and walking off with the computer hardware they found there.

But that was about all the energy they had for adventure that night. Vad wasn't mentally equipped for a dungeon endurance test, and TQ wasn't physically able to keep up with human leg endurance for that long. James and Momo did a few more sweeps of shelves near their 'safe' landing, collecting another couple dozen species orbs as they picked off hostile books. But it wasn't so much exploration as it was snapping up what they could before they headed back to reality.

"This was fun." James said to Vad as they left. "We should do it again sometime."

"We do this almost every week." Vad reminded him. "You're just busy all the time. Also, hey, why wasn't Arrush with you this time?"

James blinked at the sudden question as they stepped back through the door to the library that was more normal for mundane Earth. "Oh! Uh, he had a date with his boyfriend. I didn't want to interrupt them."

"Oh! Uh... Oh." Vad said with a shrug as Momo started helping TQ unclip his armor behind them and tossed the pieces of camraconda Kevlar plate into the cart.

"...What?" James said, suddenly worried he was going to get defensive. He was aware he lived in a social bubble sometimes where he'd taken great pains to get everyone who was an asshole to fuck off, so he wasn't exactly *surprised* when random new people he talked to turned out to be bigots sometimes. But he still hated the experience, and hoped that wasn't what was about to happen.

It wasn't. "Oh, sorry." Vad said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I honestly just kind of assumed *you* were his boyfriend."

"Wait what?" James was caught off guard.

"Yeah, you've got that vibe." The young librarian answered.

"It's true! You're *super* gay, man." Momo said, clapping him on the shoulder as she walked by. "And, like, come on. If literally anyone in the Order was going to be super into an interspecies relationship, it's you."

"I have a girlfriend!"



“And like six copies of a boyfriend.” Momo retorted.

“And also *there are people in interspecies relationships that aren't me!*” James protested. “I’m not saying I’m against it! But, like, ‘if anyone’ was gonna be dating outside their species, it’d be *the people who are doing that right now.*”

TQ rolled his coils back as he stretched himself out, freed from his armor and armature pack. “I had assumed Alanna was a metahuman variant.” The camraconda said. “Such as the illuminated versions of my people.”

“...You... wait, what?” James took a deep breath. “I don’t know how to process this. I’m at more risk of dying via aneurysm from you dweebs than getting eaten by a book.”

“Well, hey, if you’re not busy and don’t need to get back to your hot rat boyfriend,” Momo started, and rolled over James’ attempts to correct her, “wanna teleport Vad here up to the diner for the traditional after-delve milkshake?” She glanced at the newer member of their chaotic mess of an organization. “Vad? Milkshake?”

““Yeah, sure.” He shrugged. “Why not. Life’s weird.”

James nodded. “Alright. But first, does this library have a bathroom? I ate a box of fried chicken before going on a hike and engaging in a hundred small skirmishes, and I made a mistake.” His companions laughed, or in Momo’s case tried to dramatically pretend she couldn’t hear him, while James just smiled and shrugged. It was, he felt, important to never get so caught up in his ongoing magical growth that he forgot that life was *silly*.

He hoped the staff at the diner shared his view, since the Order kept bringing camracondas and infomorphs and wizards there to get milkshakes.

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Roughly a thousand horsepower thrummed under the hood of El’s 1992 Mazda Miata. The car’s original factor specs had it listed as something like a hundred, and El hadn’t even bothered looking at the original number before she’d started cramming an increasingly unlikely number of magical pieces into the vehicle to push it farther and farther past what was reasonable.

Most of it was flatly impossible. High beams that didn’t care whether light was a particle or a wave. An engine that shouldn’t have fit in the entire car much less under the hood. Variable friction on the wheels (the wheels themselves were not magical, but there were some ball bearings somewhere inside the car that were).

Some of what was involved was magic that just didn’t work quite right. El had poured a lot of her Order stipend of magic into getting a copy of the purple orb that extended proprioception to a touched object, hoping it would make her an even more perfect symbiotic machine with her

car. But unfortunately, something stopped it from going past the steering wheel. El didn't *like* that it didn't work, but it had been worth trying just for what could have been.

For a good chunk of her recent life, the project car had been El's favorite thing. Flatly, just, her favorite. And though her life had changed a lot, along with her priorities, she still loved the high speed jellybean.

James, for his part, wasn't overly fond of the rounded look of the early 90's design. Despite being a child of the era, the main thing James remembered about the 90's was carpet that wasn't very comfortable to play on, Orbitz, and that he never once got to play with one of those mad scientist slime factory toys. This car evoked two of those three feelings in him, though he would admit, El had gone out of her way since she'd returned to delving the Route Horizon to make the seats as comfortable as possible.

He was riding shotgun as they flew across the glassy asphalt of a stretch of the dungeon. James had, to be polite, offered to take shifts driving, and had been shot down so rapidly he was starting to wonder if El's ancestry included a brigade of WWII anti aircraft gunners.

Of course, he'd also offered to drive so he'd have something to do aside from watching the desert around them, fidgeting, and slowly melting under the twin suns overhead.

"I'm just saying, the top doesn't have to be down!" James pointed out. It had been about ten hours since he'd been in the Ceaseless Stacks, and most of that had been spent sleeping, so the mental shift from whispering to avoid detection, to yelling so he could be heard over the roar of the engine and wind, took a little effort.

El didn't even glance at him, keeping her vision forward as they flew along at a comfortable hundred miles an hour. They had the road to themselves for now, but that was no reason to be reckless. Her blonde hair was in a braid, but the ends of it flicked against the collar of her leather jacket as the wind tugged at it, the sunglasses she was wearing were a little unstylish but still let her see potential wastes of time ahead of them. And kept the sun out. "It's part of the vibe!" She replied, a laugh in her voice. El didn't yell; she just let Speaky make sure her words were heard, the infomorph in her head keeping her from shouting herself hoarse.

It had been a gradual shift, over the course of months. She didn't know when it started, or if it was still going on. But El was occasionally weirded out to think of herself as the kind of person who laughed a lot. Or the kind of person that ran a youth group, or took part in group talk therapy sessions.

She'd been stuck in her head for a while, really. And her self image was still misaligned to 'herself but twenty three and recklessly perfect'.

Which was fine. Being reckless was sometimes helpful. And in this winding asphalt and sand dungeon, being perfect was practically a requirement.

She slowed as the road started to curve, not wanting to test the stability of her wheels at these speeds. The curves of the road were deceptive in how much they asked of you, when you were going at speeds like this, so El just eased off and played it safe, while James grabbed onto the door to keep himself stable as she still whipped them through the turn at what could be considered high speed.

Outside the car, Zhu and Harriet, the other navigator that was paired with their back seat passenger, trailed like feathered spears of orange light. Tracing lines against the road as they followed the car and fed off the high speed journey. James and El had brought Kirk along for this one, partly because it seemed silly to not use the seating they had, and also partly because he'd asked nicely. But really, they weren't here to do any long term looting or fighting or anything, except checking out one weird thing.

"Yo! You see that?" El jerked her head to their left, to what mostly looked like empty rough red rock dotted with bits of scraggly sun bleached plants.

James pushed himself up to look over her head as he scanned the space, and behind them, Kirk followed his line of sight. Neither of them had the benefit of El's magical glasses, but they still had eyes, and they looked for anything that looked like it would be worth investigating. The ground around the roads in this dungeon often looked like it went on literally forever, but that was an illusion, caused by intense artificial heat shimmers. There was actually a lot to find out there, off the beaten path, if you knew where to look. And a *lot* of loose rock and dead plants to get lost in, if you didn't.

"Got it." James pointed. "Something metallic, way out there. Look for a turn off!"

It was barely anything, but it was something. A tiny glinting bit of light, just at ground level, off in the distance. James wouldn't even have been looking that direction if El hadn't prompted it.

"Want me to make it work?" Kirk asked loudly, and James gave him the thumbs up. "Alright, slow down a sec." The man closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, bringing his hands up to form a circle with his fingers. Not everyone in the Order used their magic with gestures or words, but for a lot of people it was a good way to focus. And, James suspected, it also just kinda made you feel cooler.

Kirk had a couple spells from the Horizon. Powered by the stored Velocity of his own movements, the one that he called up now was simple. Which, generally, meant it was both flexible and absurdly useful.

A Citizen Of Travel, it was called, and it made part of a journey safe. Or rather, as far as they could tell from testing, it somehow prevented one active threat or injury during a set journey.

He'd asked El to slow down because taking the turn to a new destination could represent the beginning of a new journey. And when Kirk signaled to her, and she spun the wheel to the left, he let the spell out into the world. The Velocity for it would recover rapidly, the way El drove, but the effect was almost immediate. He hadn't needed to signal, even. Through her sunglasses, El saw the wasted time that covered the edges of the road drop to nothing. A *lot* of spots dropped to nearly zero.

By sheer magically assisted luck, El's wheels rolled over the small trench of sharpened scrap metal that lined the highway without a single problem. She piloted them through a gap in the sheet metal guardrail with practiced ease, and then brought them back up to a steady speed as she aimed toward the spot in the distance.

A steady speed, but a slow one compared to what she'd been doing. The 1992 Mazda Miata was a hell of a car, but until El could find a magical suspension for it that made it immune to being rattled apart, she wasn't going to be doing more than thirty across the loose rocks of the Horizon's off road areas.

"You know, you can just buy a jeep or something." James told her, his voice vibrating as they hit a series of small divots. "I will buy you a jeep or something! Oh god, this is... hurk!" The last word was more of a strangled gasp, dragged out of him as El rolled over a two inch drop off a flat stone outcrop.

"I'll pitch in!" Kirk added. "Also, I hate to be the picky asshole here, but *now* can we put the top up?"

"God, you two are babies." El sighed. And then regretted it instantly, as she inhaled a mouthful of gritty red dust that her tires were kicking up.

After sputtering that away, and stopping the car briefly to seal them inside, they resumed the trip in slightly more quiet surroundings.

"This is so much nicer." James groaned. "Also watch out for that cave on the right."

"I see the cave thank you." El rolled her eyes. "Jesus you're such a baby. It's like you want to avoid all the fun."

"Do *you* wanna go in the spooky cave and get eaten by whatever lives there?"

"No, but we can *probably* outrun it. And then circle back and loot whatever it's guarding." El clicked her tongue. "Actually, that sounds kinda like a good plan. Wanna do that?"

"Maybe on the way back. How's the car doing?"

“Oh, fine.” El waved a hand, not bothering to keep both her limbs on the steering wheel when she was practically going a safe speed for a school zone. “She can keep this up forever. Especially with the regeneration gas. Which I’ve been *meaning* to ask you about, but you’re busy all the fucking time.” El shot a split second glare at James.

James just tilted his head back into the seat. “Am I?” He asked after a massive yawn split his face. “I’ve been... uh...”

“Look, I don’t know your schedule, but you’re barely *ever* actually just around for me to find at the Lair. You have an office, and you don’t use it. *Rufus* uses your office.”

“Rufus... what?” James stumbled over his words. “Okay, that’s... I mean, I know he’s getting bigger, but he’s not gonna fill out my chair.”

“Sorry, is Rufus human?” Kirk asked from behind them.

James turned to reply through the gap in the front seats. “He’s a stapler. Maybe puppy sized, I guess? I have a hard time describing sizes. How big is a foot? This big?” He held his hands apart. “However big this is, he’s like, a bit more than two of them long.”

“That’s... just *show me* how big he is.” Kirk shook his head at James. “No, nevermind. Also, hang on, refreshing our protection.” He closed his eyes and settled back into his casting position as his Velocity refilled to the point that he could do it again. It hadn’t fully recharged that quickly, not at this speed, but Kirk had a good supply of it to draw on, and having one get out of problem free card floating around them was always good.

“Okay, so, sorry, regen gas?” James settled back and addressed El, even as he kept sweeping his eyes over the rocks around them, making sure nothing was about to lunge out and attack. They were getting into an area where small canyons and ledges were becoming more frequent, which was not the environment for this car, enhanced or no. And while on the roads, the biggest threats were the fast ones, James knew there was at least one type of giant spider here somewhere. “What’cha need from me?”

“Well, how’s it work?” El asked. James gave her an unimpressed look, and said nothing. “No, come on! I mean, like, you know all the weird cornercase magic shit! How do I make it *dumb!*”

“We prefer the term ‘useful’, but I’m also still not sure what you mean.”

“Okay.” El drummed her fingers across the leather of the wheel in her hands as she made a minute adjustment so they wouldn’t need to hit the largest pothole ever seen. “Like, can I drink it, is-“

“No!” Kirk cut in. “Absolutely do not do that!”

James turned again to shoot the Horizonist a raised eyebrow. "You say that like you tried it." He said, not exactly accusatory, but something close. Then when Kirk just stared back at him James blinked and corrected. "Wait, shit, *did* you try that? I'm guessing it didn't work."

"Yeah, it tasted like gas." Kirk growled. "Don't do that."

"-so what I was saying before the two idiot men in my car cut me off," El picked up forcefully, "was *since that won't work*, I'd like to know how it would. Like, okay, what is the bare minimum condition the gas needs to heal, instead of... uh... doing whatever it does to a human when they drink gas. I'm assuming makes you shit yourself inside out. Sorry Kirk." El winced in exaggerated sympathy for the man, who just silently refused to meet her eyes in the rear view mirror.

James tried to remember. "So, being honest, I'm not Research. I come up with some weird shit, sure, but you should talk to Reed or someone. But I *think* it's just that you need a combustion engine that actually uses the gas as a legitimate source of power. It can't just burn it for fun, and it needs to be meaningfully relevant to whatever it's connected to in order to heal it. Car is easiest, but I *know* someone got it to work with a generator. Though it didn't spread to what it was powering."

"Okay, and with a car, it can bring mostly dead hulks back from nothing, right?"

"It's very cool to watch." Kirk nodded. "We've been using it to clear the streets in Townton. Though it doesn't un-flip the cars, so that's a problem more often than you'd think."

"Oh, before I forget, how're the necroad things doing?" James asked excitedly. "I'm not down here much, I know, but I'm curious how that's going."

"They've stopped hunting us, though no one knows if it's survival instinct or something else." Kirk sighed. "I know what you mean, though. They're important. They're *from here*, sort of, and they can think and learn. That's... I think they're important, and I want to help them, but they're still skittish."

El whapped a hand on the dashboard. "Guys, focus. Gas." James made a show of dramatically refocusing on her, though Kirk just quietly went back to his vigil out the rear window. And James was still watching out the side of the car, staying alert even as he hammed it up. "Because I'm going somewhere with this. I wanna grow car parts."

"...no?" James ventured carefully. "No."

"You've got a million of those cactus pots-"

"Succulents, actually."

“-would you stop fucking interrupting me? This is why I shot you, you know!” El snapped at him. “Just let me plant the smaller magical car parts in them, and then use the regen gas to make them work, even if they shouldn’t! I know none of this shit is valuable enough in a magical-replicator-use kind of way, but I wanna see if this shit can stack, and this seems like the perfect way to do it.”

James hummed. “That... seems like it could work? I mean, I dunno why I’m saying that, I’m not the arbiter of how magic functions. Sounds dumb enough that it might work out. Though I’d worry that the plant-parts might wither if you ever *stop* using the repair gas.”

“They’re *succulents*.” El’s voice held a mocking edge.

“...that... actually feels kinda bad.” James said slowly.

“Shit, sorry. I’m still... nah, fuck it. Sorry.” El’s shoulders slumped. “God dammit, I can’t even banter without being a shitty person.”

Kirk cleared his throat. “I want to tell you that you’re being self deprecating for the wrong reason, but I also need you both to know that there’s something tailing us.” He was twisted around in his seat, the barrel of the long rifle he’d had near his feet now tilted down to the floor of the car as he started to bring it up.

“Did it come from the cave?” James asked, pulling his bullpup up from his chest and starting to roll his window down. “No, don’t answer that. El, what’s our situation look like?”

“We’ve got a clear shot coming up, looks like. I can get us up to speed if we need to, but it’ll be rough.” She shot a look upward. “Shoulda left the top down. Kirk’s gonna fucking blow my window out.”

James glanced in the wing mirror and felt a spike of alarm at the same time that Kirk’s voice rose up from the back seat. “Shit, it’s gaining fast!”

“Go!” James ordered El, who instantly put the pedal down and triggered one of her own Horizon spells. El didn’t bother with words or gestures, instead just feeling the Velocity spike her heart rate, alongside the speed of the vehicle.

Their speed doubled, and then El eased on more acceleration, the car’s wheels leaving the ground for a few heart stopping seconds as they ramped off a thin rock ledge poking up through the dirt. Ahead of them, the two navigators split into forms that were an array of optional paths. Lines of approach showing what was safe and what was certain death. The dot in the mirror that was the thing chasing them had gotten a lot bigger in an alarmingly short few seconds, but at least now it wasn’t going to ram them in the next blink of an eye.

But it was still closing in. James slipped earplugs in, while EI fumbled hers one handed, and both of them gave a thumbs up to Kirk as James shoved his rifle out the window and both of the men opened fire. James' gun was bound to the bracelet he was wearing, so he was a lot less cautious with his ammo use, but Kirk took careful shots with the heavy .308 ammo as they tried to drive off or kill the dune bug before it could get too close.

The first rifle shot went wide as it shattered EI's window, but after that, Kirk leaned back against her seat, bracing the gun, and took aimed shots downrange. The bulbous form of the other car closing with them like it didn't care at all about the hard bumps and jerks it was making on the rocky ground. A dome like a classic VW bug, covered in organic looking growths and with headlights like a predator's eyes. It got to within a couple hundred feet of them before EI's increasing use of their engine started to let them pull away.

Kirk shouted a warning as soon as the dune bug pulled up behind them, and Harriet's navigator light vanished from EI's vision as she rushed back to cover him. Kirk followed a dodge pattern on trained instinct, flattening himself in the back seat as the monstrous car started to bombard them with a hail of corrosive needles. James could barely feel the impacts on the car, like heavy hail mixed in with the increasingly gut wrenching jerks and bumps of their flight across the desert.

James kept his head down, but took the opportunity with every swerve EI made to lay down suppressing fire on the dune buggy. He *knew* at least half his bullets were missing, but the thing couldn't just ignore him shooting unless it was a mindless hulk, and if it did that then the damage would add up fast enough anyway.

EI cackled a manic laugh as she whipped her precious chariot across the battlefield. She felt perfectly in control, the magic of her speed enhancing spell giving her the reflexes to dodge the sudden appearance of a saguaro cactus and the boulder behind it that looked like it was almost trying to camouflage itself against the ground. The thing chasing them was still firing on them, but it was coming slower; she thought James had shot out one of its gun blisters, but she wished it were the one on the other side so she could stop flinching every time a needle buried itself in the Kevlar reinforced seat back next to her head before James toggled his shield bracer to block them with a rapidly flickering dome of gold light.

And yet, for all that her heart was hammering and her brain was screaming at her, EI was having the time of her fucking life. And she could *feel* the energy in the car as the other two caught the feeling too.

Then the second smaller dune bug flung itself out from around an outcrop, and slammed into the back of her car.

She kept control, they didn't quite go spinning, but she heard Kirk hollering in pain as he twisted and started trying to fire at the new thing that had pulled up alongside them. A chunk of her roof ripped away, and EI felt the car pitch in a horrifying way as her rear right wheel was torn apart.



Then she glanced in her rear view, just in time to see Kirk sit up in the seat, take two shots, and get grabbed around the throat by a pair of snapping prehensile seatbelts before he was yanked forward with a snapping of bone, his body sliding out the hole in the car, the orange feathers of Harriet just... gone.

EI felt like her world came to a stop. A cold feeling building inside of her as she blinked slowly, and glanced over at where James was screaming something, still shooting back at the monster that was after them. But she suddenly didn't feel that invested in it.

EI took her foot off the gas and started easing them to a stop. This would be easier if they weren't too far away. She let go of the wheel when James looked over at her with a wide eyed expression. "What the fuck are you doing?!" He demanded frantically. "EI!"

She smiled at him, and shrugged. "You never like this part." She said. "Look over there." She pointed out the window, and James' head snapped around to look. Which gave EI the window she needed.

The Horizon's spells were actually pretty varied for something that seemed to try to be thematic. And one of EI's was both weird, and insane. The Road Leads Ever Onward; a get out of jail free card. If she wasn't in trouble, it plotted a course to keep her there. If she *was*, if there was no other way out, then it did one better. It *changed* things. Let her take a mulligan, a do over, one extra try to get something right.

The only problem was, she needed to actually be at the end of the road to make it work that way.

So EI had a standing policy, that if anyone went down on a delve, she went with them.

Sort of.

The pistol in her center console was small, heavy, and had one bullet in it. This part was always so fucking hard, because it required *conviction*. But fuck it. EI actually liked Kirk.

She whipped the gun up to her head while James wasn't looking, breathed an adrenaline pumping burst of her magic into the world, and pulled the trigger before the other dune bug rammed them from behind.

The Road Leads Ever Onward.

She felt the magic take hold. Looking for any way forward for her. There was an obvious one, which was to jam the gun or have EI miss herself or whatever. But since she'd stopped the car, that wouldn't work; and just "don't do that" wasn't enough for someone who built a solid wall of their own dedication. Also, a good chunk of EI's Velocity had been 'compressed' by the stupid magic hat the Order kept in their basement, and she'd been saving it for something like this. It

did something to the magic; made it more... springy. She couldn't quite describe it, but it worked. So the spell splashed backward, moving through time to change whatever small thing it needed to in order to keep El alive.

It found it in the simplest way possible.

El cut short her manic laugh as she felt a spike of knowledge from the future drop into her thoughts while she whipped her precious chariot across the battlefield. She adjusted course before she even saw the stupid cactus, skidded them across a dusty slab of exposed stone, and threw her right arm out to grab James' head as her other hand spun the wheel in a series of loops. The poor Miata wasn't built for drifting across a rocky desert, but El made it work, the staccato hammering of the wheels on the loose rock as they drifted sideways vibrating her clenched teeth, while her other hand got James looking in the right direction.

As soon as he was where he was supposed to be, she reached out with that now free hand, threw the still car into reverse, floored it again, flicked her fingers up, and yanked the release for the convertible top. As her roof folded away far too fast to be safe, Krik popped up next to her and leveled his rifle at the dune bug that was racing their way from the front, balancing the barrel on the lip of her windshield.

He started taking heavy hammering shots that made El shake more than the bumps in the road, while James shouted in alarm as the second dune bug came into view with its ambush spoiled and the coppersy *tings* of his gun's full auto added to the symphony.

The organic blisters and metal shells of the dune bugs pitted and cratered as bullets slammed into both of them, the monsters unable to get close enough to kill then while El was recklessly sending them backward. Under the unrelenting hail of bullets, it wasn't more than a few seconds that felt like a couple hours until Kirk killed the beating heart of the larger pursuer, and James shredded the eyes and wheels of their smaller ambusher.

El skidded them to a stop on the dusty rock before she backed them into a cave or some other shit. Turned to look at James and Kirk with a massive grin on her face. "Alright!" She said. "That was great! Someone recorded that, right?!" El exclaimed, as James slumped back into his seat when all the tension drained out of him. "Kirk! You record everything in here! You got that, right? God, I'm so fucking cool when I try." She kicked her door open and hopped out onto the dirt, stumbling as her legs didn't work quite right. With a few strides, El made it over to the wrecked car, and kicked it once to make sure it was dead, before she started looting it, carefully avoiding the leaking fluids and sharp edges from the bullet holes.

She needed James' help to get the rubber from the tires off, and the whole time they were working through the dune bugs, Kirk kept watch with a pair of binoculars that she was pretty sure weren't magic from atop a nearby hill, his rifle carefully angled against his chest, Harriet swirling around his feet in her manifested form.

By the time they were done, she'd found about six square feet of assorted map scraps, both navigator seeds, and pretty much nothing else aside from the salvaged materials from their successful hunt.

"Should I be calling these seeds?" She asked as she and James settled the wrapped *things* into her trunk.

"What?"

"I mean, they're more like eggs, right?"

"...Yes." James agreed. "But also they aren't alive when they first... uh... infomorph thing. Incept! They aren't alive then, so they're not really eggs. Though this is now a deeper philosophical debate than I think I can handle right now. I haven't slept much."

"You're running on fumes and you decided to come get into deadly fights with an understrength team on a wild goose chase?" Kirk asked.

"Yes." James said.

EI nodded. "He does this. I think it's a kink thing."

"Fucking hell, everyone wants to talk about my love life today." James grumbled as they got moving again. "Can we talk about something else?"

"How's the new country going?" Kirk asked, saving him from EI.

James tried his best to settle back into the seat, attempting to get comfortable when he felt like his back was drenched in sweat and the car was doing its best to shake his bones apart even at low speed. "I don't think country is the right term. But also... chaotic?" He shrugged, letting his vigilance lapse as he closed his eyes, trusting that Kirk or EI would catch anything coming, and just listening to the engine and the steady clacking of Kirk reloading his rifle. "Okay, so, I wanna ramble for a little bit. As a warning."

"It'll pass the time at least." Kirk assented. EI looked like she was considering either snarking, or trying to figure out if her car had an ejector seat, but ultimately did neither and just shrugged.

James cracked a grin as he closed his eyes again. He knew she was secretly into this. "Okay. So, here's the thing. If you took the Order, all of us and everything we might call an asset, right now, and... like... teleported us to an empty planet? We could do a *lot*." He paused, then added, "An empty planet with life. Like, trees. A forest planet." James cut off that tangent before it got too far. "Anyway, with everything we have? We could get a *lot* done. We've got a couple ways to magically grow food, we've got respawning sources of things like furniture and clothing and even just usable materials. Green orbs alone let us turn a factory or a workshop

into something that hits way above its weight class. Infomorphs can facilitate communication, paper drakes are an eco friendly form of transportation, medical... well, okay, we don't have a lot of medical magic yet, beyond some weird first aid. But still." James sighed. "We can build *wonders* though. And we're going to, soon, here on Earth. Oh, in this fiction, humanity doesn't last for very long? Like... if we're teleported there, we're not going to have a stable population, but we can lay the foundation for growing populations of camracondas and ratroaches and necroads to live in. I'm assuming they're alive, just go with it."

"Where exactly are we going with this?" El prompted. "Is it to a point?"

"I'm kinda into it." Kirk said.

El snorted, and started to mutter an agreement, but didn't get the words out before James answered her. "The point is that we've got a ton of magic that does some awesome stuff, and we could totally build a civilization from scratch. But... uh... we live in a world where the smallest country has a bigger military than us. And that—"

"Wait, hold up. What is it?" El said as she drove them around a deep crack in the baked dirt that she didn't want to risk moving over. "You can't just say that and not explain."

"Oh. The Vatican. They've got I think a hundred people in their army." James said, holding up a hand to her. "I know. But we don't have a military at all, so I'm counting it. We don't even have a hundred people in Response. Though I *do* think we could take the Swiss Guard - the Vatican's army is called the Swiss Guard, I don't know why, please let me finish - the point is that we live in a world where, like, superpowers are sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers into wars, and backing them up with drones and spy satellites and nukes and shit? And I'm not sure where we're supposed to build anything when the whole world is owned by people who'll kill you for disobedience."

"It's not really that bad. Also what about just building an island?" Kirk asked. "Don't fucking tell me that we can't. Or, like, get the Alchemists to brew something that makes a person amphibious. I bet Nile would... whine about being given work. Oh, actually, while we're here, and since you're never in your office; Nile and Red want to start delving. They think it will give them the instinct you have for magic, but for alchemy. You okay with that?"

"I'm not... wait, no, shit." James slapped his head and cut off his instant denial of responsibility. "I literally am the person in charge of this. Fuck. Okay. Um... I'll schedule a time that we can sit down and talk. Message me when we get back to reality." His thoughts caught on something else Kirk said. "Also yes, build an island is an option. El, any other ideas?"

"Just fucking take a skyscraper, say you own it, and then make it the size of New Zealand on the inside? I dunno." She shrugged, then tilted her head out of habit as she listened to a small voice inside her mind. "Speaky says we should just use Montana, because no one will notice."

“Zhu said the same thing.” James laughed. “They’re a bad influence on each other.”

“Yeah, stop corrupting my kid!” El’s voice was light, but something about how she said that struck James in a way he wasn’t expecting. A feeling welling up in his chest at the thought of raising an infomorph, letting them share your whole self, trying to help them find their way in the world. It sounded like a massive burden, but also a wonderful responsibility. And he knew, he *knew*, that he’d tried before.

James let out a long breath, and turned to stare out the window, blinking away abrupt tears that he wasn’t prepared for.

“You okay?” El’s voice didn’t sound too concerned, but she’d still asked.

“I’m something.” James said, taking a stabilizing breath as Zhu curled back around his shoulder, his more bombastic glowing form congealing as the navigator moved to comfort the person who’s distress he could feel on a sudden and personal level. “Yeah, I’m alright.” James sighed as Zhu opened a worried eye at him.

“You kinda trailed off, talking about stealing Montana.” Kirk prompted him.

“Oh, right.” James nodded as he brought a hand up to idly pet Zhu’s feathers. The navigator didn’t feel the same way as a person would, but the intent and the motion was important to him. “Uh... you know what? Later. Because I think we’re where we’re going.”

Where they’d ended up was a sudden canyon. Not a very impressive one, but deep enough to be a problem. Exposed red and pink rock showing bright colors under the twin suns. And, in front of them, what James had spotted a tiny glint of from miles away, was *exactly* what they were looking for.

There was an operations shack on their side of the canyon, a simple white shed with cracked and filthy windows and a set of complicated controls inside. Its equal was on the other side of the canyon. And between them, crossing that gap, was a *bridge*.

A skeletal structure of old weathered wood and polished gleaming steel, the bridge stretched across what looked like about a half mile gap. It was a truss bridge, nothing holding it up except physics and *almost certainly* some kind of dungeon magic. And from the tangles of cables and almost organic bulges of machinery along it, James suspected it was a drawbridge too; though the real engines that powered that might be in the canyon face below them. He could see what looked like a vault door underneath the bridge on the other side, and had no interest in going down there right now.

More importantly than any of that though, was what was on the bridge.

Railroad tracks.

“Oh yeah.” James and El shared a predatory grin while Kirk popped her trunk and started pulling out gear. “This is it. Got it.”

A few times, delve teams had reported hearing a distant train horn. Or seeing the silhouette of one moving on the far distant horizon. But no one had ever seen one up close, or found where they crossed through the desert. Here, though? They’d spotted it. James kicked at the ground, trailing a foot through the dirt until he hit a metal line, then scraped away the dust to reveal the tracks they were right on top of.

He and El, and a few other people as guest delvers, had been looking for this for a while now when they had time. And here it was.

James moved to help Kirk dig a hole in the ground. They’d brought some pretty powerful radio beacons, so they could come back with an actual prepared raiding party and find the place. But first, they needed to set them up, and hope the dungeon didn’t decide to just ruin their plan. But even if it did... well. They knew what they were looking for now.

The group shared a high five, the navigators getting in on it too, though El’s kid stayed in her head for now. And then, there was just the long drive back.

James offered to drive. He got shot down again.

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Hours later, with still a day or two left of his low-stress time left, James pushed his way through the door to the briefing warehouse at the pack of the Lair. “Yeah,” he was saying into his phone, still not having completely slipped the habit of using the physical device even though more and more Order members were starting to just make calls through their skulljacks, “El and I went over the map bits. We’ve got two hits, we think. So I’m gonna leave them in the copy box; just make sure to get them before next week.”

“Nice.” Anesh replied. “Reed and I have a bet on how this is gonna go.”

“I’ve got a similar bet on how much property damage Momo is gonna cause with her new lion carvings when she figures out how to trigger them.”

James nodded silently at Charlie as he walked past, the other man giving him a nod that was a lot more secretly respectful in return, as he listened to Anesh talk about copying map scraps before his boyfriend made a tangent to asking him if he wanted to get dinner that night.

“Oh! Sure!” James said, brightening up. “Just us?” He asked.

Anesh's voice was casual on the other end of the line. "Your call." He said. "I don't mind company. Maybe someone... tall? Or just Momo, if she's still around."

"Momo's probably asleep or drunk on power. And I'm hanging up now." James rolled his eyes and ignored Anesh's attempt to get him to ask Arrush out. "But also I'll be home soon, and we should get... some... pizza. Hang on." He pulled his phone away from his ear as he rounded a desk where they kept the Officium Mundi relevant stuff, and spotted two people laying on the ground. "What is this." He asked flatly.

Morgan and Color-Of-Dawn were sprawled out near the unsorted loot section of their dungeon delving operation. The teenager and the camraconda slumped on the floor like ragdolls; still breathing, so they weren't dead, but Morgan was twitching his arms and legs in small jerks, and Color-Of-Dawn was rapidly irising their eye in a frantic way.

"Uh. Uh. Help?" The voice from Color-Of-Dawn's digital voice wasn't just flat, it was literally just a default text-to-speech voice. "Hi." They added.

James sighed. "What is this. What is going on..." he glanced at where the two of them were sprawled, and realized they were right next to the magic table that he'd dragged out of Officium Mundi a little over one very long day ago. "...here. Really? Morgan? *Really?*"

"Why. My. Fault." The camraconda that was currently Morgan asked in stilted text to speech.

"Anesh, I'm gonna be a few minutes." James said into his phone before hanging up.

It took him a little while to haul the two of them into position to both touch the table again, *without* touching it himself. When he did, he didn't even say anything. Just dropped off the map scraps he'd gotten working with El and Kirk, shook his head in disappointment, and went to get dinner.

"My eye aches." Color-Of-Dawn groaned as the camraconda woozily pulled themselves up to a coiled rest.

"And my legs hurt." Morgan said with a hoarse voice. "Ow."

"Apologies." Color-Of-Dawn said sheepishly.

Morgan looked over at his friend, a chaotic bundle of emotions running through his chest. "I... it's... why are you apologizing? *I'm* sorry. I feel like this is embarrassing for you?"

"Your body is... very... aggressive in how it feels." Color-Of-Dawn said, looking away from Morgan.

“Yeah, well, I meant because you never told me you were a girl.” Morgan said, and instantly regretted the words. “I mean... not that... look, I won’t care or...”

“We should leave before this happens again.” Color-Of-Dawn stated, starting to slither away, before pausing and glancing backward. “Are you coming?”

Morgan scrambled to his feet. “Oh, uh, yeah?” He stammered, almost tripping over himself as he caught up to the camraconda. “Let’s not do that again.”

“Not while you are standing up, at least. I will take time to get used to legs.” Color-Of-Dawn said sagely.

“Wait, what?”



