

“Bi men who are currently dating women are still LGBT, they just can’t use Hamon as effectively”
-Harry Brewis-

“You’re not even supposed to be here.” Was the first thing Harvey said when James showed up at his office. He was looking good compared to when James last saw him; a perfectly trimmed salt and pepper goatee framing a face that looked like he’d spent the last two years carefully honing his body. It had actually been about three weeks, and something that could charitably be called ‘extensive use’ of the exercise potions. But no one needed to know that.

He also wasn’t alone in his office; a mid-thirties man in cargo shorts and with wavy long hair was doing his best to glare at Harvey, and coming across as angry but ultimately unimimidating. James nodded at him politely, holding the door half open with his head poking in. “So, is this a bad time?”

“No.” Harvey said. “Get in here.” He pressed his fingertips together, elbows propped on the desk he kept as neat as his beard. “James, this is March Cameron, he’s one of our civilian oversight board. March, James.”

James offered a handshake, and got one back in the way that people who weren’t used to shaking hands tended to go for. A little too uncertain and loose, but a good effort. “Nice to meet you. Are you part of the Response program?”

“Technically no.” James answered, which was apparently the wrong thing to say, as the man’s face dropped back to a glower and he retracted his hand rapidly. “So, you wanted to talk yesterday.”

“Yeah, and your entire polycule teleported away on me.” Harvey snorted. “Next time try saying ‘no, I’m busy’. Have some decorum. I know you almost died and all your skin melted off, but you can at least deflect me with some respect.”

“...sure.” James shook his head. “Actually, yeah, sure. You’re right. That was kinda shitty of... Alanna? Probably? Look, I’m reasonably sure I hit my head, I’m using that as an excuse. What’s the issue?”

The other man in the room made a low sound of confusion. “Uh... sorry, your skin?”

“Don’t worry about it.” James sighed. “I’m not telling this story again. What’s going on here, and how can I help? That is literally my job here. Come on. Let’s go. Tell me your woes.”

March blinked and shook off the confusion. “Well, our job is to go over all the records and action reports of Response, look for worrying trends or places that can be improved on, and also to be the place that receives complaints about bad behaviors and has authority to discipline

or remove responders that overstep or aren't working out." He explained. James nodded along, he'd heard most of this before, when he wrote their mission brief. March saw that he had an informed audience, and continued. "So, this includes reviewing any footage of fights or violence. If a responder's report says that they subdued someone, for example, we check the files, and make sure things are on the level. And we *know* that multiple responders were involved in full on *combat*, and Mr. Allison here refuses to hand over the recordings." He finished with a tired glare at Harvey.

James glanced down at where Harvey was seated, and had started working on something unrelated on his computer while March was talking. "Alright." He said slowly. "I think I know what you're talking about. Harvey, what's up?"

"They're not from a Response action, they don't count." Harvey shrugged. "Any knights involved weren't acting as part of the Response program, and don't fall under this guy's oversight. Simple."

"It's *not* simple, and you're using that as a way to dodge the consequences of your actions!" March dramatically threw his hands up. The guy talked in a very animated way, lots of hand gestures and shifting motion. He turned to point at James, adding, "And you're not even on the organization's roster, so if you have authority here, that's *another* problem!"

"Okay, first off." James started. "I'm absolutely on the roster. I fill in when I can, but that's been happening less lately now that I gave Harvey a budget. Second, Harvey, give him the footage."

"What?"

"What?"

Both men spoke at the same time, the surprise from the word stopping whatever attitudes they were bringing to the conversation. James folded his arms and nodded. "March is right. Using 'they were on an unaffiliated op' as an excuse is a bad precedent. In the future, we need better protocol for this." He turned back to March. "But, here's the thing; Response is meant to be a civilian focused safety unit. The other stuff the Order does... less so. You can have this footage to review, but be aware that, as far as I know, you're about to watch one of my people get mutilated, and there *are* confirmed kills in there."

March stared at him for a minute, his face going through a sequence of emotions from confusion to revulsion and back to something that just seemed angry. "What the fuck were you people *doing*?" He asked, finally.

Harvey started to say something, but James gave the man a tiny head shake, before focusing on March. "They were trying to secure an asset that would let them save my life, and the lives of the civilians under my care." He said. "They were doing this by attempting to intercept and rob a heavily armed magical mercenary assassin team, and I just realized how fucking stupid

that sentence sounds, so forgive me if I come across as mildly unprofessional. You're apparently our liaison, so despite the fact that a lot of our actions aren't things we advertise, you should know that the Order of Endless Rooms is active in a lot of weird places. And sometimes, the people who started Response cross over into other divisions. So if you want the footage this time, you can have it, but just know that we need to sit down and have a *real, professional talk* about how we draw the lines between things."

March looked like he wanted to complain about something. So he did. "You're running some kind of private army, and, what, using Response as training?" He sounded *furious*, but in a way he was keeping good control over.

"Absolutely not. The closest we get to an army, or even a militia, is Response. Our other stuff is way less organized." James didn't talk about the rogues, that was... whatever JP was doing. "And if I had my way, Response would be totally isolated from actual combat operations. But I don't, and because a lot of the founding members of Response are people who have experience in life or death situations, and have places in a lot of different spots in the Order, there's some crossover. But in general, we're trying to work toward a cleaner separation."

"Which is important." Harvey chimed in. "Because the stuff you need to be good at to deescalate a brawl, or run search and rescue, or help someone through a mental health crisis, is *far* beyond what the rest of you idiots are doing."

"Hey..." James was a little hurt.

"What *are* you doing?" March asked, still holding onto some anger, but more just interested now. He made a point of looking around Harvey's office, at how aggressively mundane it was. Harvey had a bookshelf full of legal and ethical texts, some personal art on the walls, multiple monitors on his desk where he was presumably constantly watching Response activities even when he was working on administrative stuff, and... nothing else. Even his desk and chair were nondescript and functional. Nothing overly ornate, certainly nothing magical. "You have *teleporters*, and a whole other *species* working with you. And... and we're just taking that in stride, man, I swear. I'm not looking to know all the secrets of the universe or whatever. But you're doing *this* instead of anything else, and I gotta know why."

"Because the system sucks, so we're doing something better." Harvey said flatly.

"Also, the rest of the stuff we're doing is *kinda* secret? Like, we're not a conspiracy." James made sure to not smile as he repeated his favorite line from the operations manual. "But while we're fine sharing the output of our nonsense, like teleporters, I'm not gonna read you in. Besides, the point is that you're independent."

March looked like he was going to protest, when there was a light rapping on the door. Harvey barked out a "Yes?" And a second later the door opened to reveal a short, rail thin ratroach, who froze at the sight of the three humans looking at them. Moving carefully, and skirting around

James to keep him as a barrier against the new person, the ratroach approached Harvey's desk and gently set down a cardboard box that clinked with rattling glass. Then, as Harvey was halfway through saying "Thank you Shallah", the ratroach was out of the office with the door slamming behind them so fast James was impressed they didn't leave a cartoon dust cloud behind.

There was a quiet moment, before March, mouth hanging open and pointing at the door, proclaimed, "See, like that! Tell me about things like that!"

"You were fine with one new species, you'll live with this." Harvey snorted dismissively. "Now, you'll get what you want this time. Anything else?"

"I have so many questions, but no, not now." March said.

"Great. Then my work here is done." James said cheerfully, waving goodbye to the man as Harvey wrote a telepad for him and sent him on his way. Then, once the oversight liaison was gone, he turned to the man behind the desk. "So, is there a reason for the antagonism?" James asked.

"They're slowing us down." Harvey said simply. "And there's too much to do."

James nodded understandingly. "Sure." He said. "But man, you *know* that's how things started going wrong in the first place. Come on."

Harvey froze, and started to glare at James, before his eyes softened and he ran a hand across the mossy curls of his hair. "Shit." He drawled out, taking a deep breath. "Okay. I'll play nice."

"I mean, he seems kinda high strung. I get being annoyed. But yeah, you know what I'm getting at." James shrugged.

Harvey flicked his eyes to one of his monitors before giving his attention back to James. "I hear we're giving up on replacing the cops." He said slowly.

"You're allowed to just ask me questions, I'm not gonna have you murdered for questioning me."

"Alright, why are we changing the goal?" Harvey scowled. "It's not what I signed up for."

"Harvey, you *signed up* to maybe help a dozen people a day with minor crises that the police don't respond well to. *None* of us signed up for this. Response has spiraled out of our scope entirely. And it's not working. We're never gonna have the funding to actually do this on the scale we want, unless we literally are a county. So, yeah, keep at it, keep developing a personnel base, and helping as much as we can. But our goal now is to be ready for when we *are* running a city, or a country, or whatever. To be something *better*."

“Peacekeepers.” Harvey said in rough agreement. “The ones who keep people safe, before everything else.”

“Exactly.” James shared a nod with him, the two men in utter agreement about that one thing. “In the meantime, keep doing your thing.”

“I need more people, and money, and teleporters, and everything else.” Harvey said hopefully.

James nodded solemnly again, and decided to throw Harvey under the bus. “Talk to Karen.” He said, and watched the hope die in the man’s eyes. “Anyway. Enjoy your potions, I gotta go. I’ve got a dozen things to do today, and talking to Karen is already one of them.”

“Weren’t you nearly dead a day ago?”

“I’m nearly dead every day. Shit still has to get done.” James sighed, and cracked the door to step out to the buzz of the Response dispatch floor. “Apologize to our civilian oversight!” He called back as he left, and got a wave from Harvey that he *hoped* was agreement.

James emerged from a stairwell in the back of the warehouse a half hour later, having been co-opted into taking a simple Response call to just rapidly teleport a team of firefighters to where they needed to be so they could clear a building while their engines caught up. It was the kind of thing that he would have *loved* to just remove from their list of services by handing telepads to fire departments, but while James generally thought that on average firefighters were in the top ten percent of Good People, he had absolutely no trust that the wheels of government wouldn’t find a way to take those magical resources away and use them for evil. So the Order kept a close eye on its assets, even when they were using them to help.

It felt bad. They could do so much more, if they could just trust everyone to not be shitty. But they didn’t, and that feeling left James grumpy as he stomped up the stairs and into the briefing warehouse.

The room was cool, and while James was aware it was a grey and rainy day outside, the damp didn’t pervade here. He wasn’t sure if it was good air conditioning, or if the building had a green orb for moisture control, but either way it was good. The whole place was its usual collection of desks and tables, whiteboards and half packed dungeon loadouts. It was the kind of environment James had sort of *envisioned* when he’d decided to lean into the Order as a group that delved dungeons for a living, but the real life version of it was a lot less fantastical than his imagination had been.

It wasn’t chaotic, for one thing. Established teams had their own designated spaces, the whiteboards and pinned documents were full of carefully maintained maps and rosters and daily

objectives, even the *rogues* kept their space neat when they weren't busy doing something stupid.

There were about twenty people here, and in the expansive space it didn't feel crowded as they all worked on their own projects. Discussing past delves or planning for what was next. There was an excitement in the air, too. Not that there wasn't always, but this time it was a little louder than normal.

A woman caught James' eye with a wave as he made his way across the room. He recognized her as Alice, from the team the Order had set to scouting out potential new dungeons. Her partner had, if James remembered right, been hospitalized in the recent attack on the Wolfpack. "Hey boss." She said as he redirected his path out of the room and dropped by where she was sitting. Alice looked *awful*, like she hadn't slept in a month, which James really empathized with, even if he was feeling irrationally perky today. She had her feet resting on the back of a camraconda that was sprawled out under the desk, and was wearing cat ears over their head, which James decided to not worry about. "Here about the signal?"

"I absolutely am not." James nodded even as he denied whatever she was saying. "What signal?"

"The GPS tracker, from the dungeon." Alice said. "Charlie's idea, I can't take credit. But we're all set for it whenever you give the word."

"What are you *talking* about?" James asked, wishing he'd brought his skulljack braid. Or maybe stayed in bed for a few hours reading chat logs and cuddling in the middle of a pile of Anesh, instead of getting up and dragging his carcass to the Lair. "Wait, does someone else need rescuing? Is it just an endless chain of rescues?"

"No! The... the... okay, we put a GPS beacon on the parking lot when we did the teleporter shuffle. And now we know where the dungeon is!" Alice jerked a thumb over her shoulder to the other teams who all looked like they needed coffee themselves. "But you said the place eats stuff from outside, so we have a finite time to find it before it's gone. So we're moving out soon." She frowned. "Well, they are. I'm on my own. So." The woman shrugged, but it was clear she regretted the situation.

"Wh... where the fuck is it?" James asked, trying to figure out if he'd fallen asleep again.

"Webster Grove, and also Fukushima."

"Alice I'm not plugged into the internet right now. One of those is Japan, but where's the other?" James snapped his fingers. "Also it has exits in *two places*?!" That would be super cool and maybe useful if we didn't have the most powerful teleporter ever made on demand right now."

Alice nodded. "The Japan one is a lot weaker and harder to pin down, so everyone's gonna go check out the Missouri one instead."

"Well, Missouri loves company."

"No, it's pronounced Missouri."

James sighed. "No one appreciates my jokes."

"I don't really have a sense of humor." He couldn't tell if she was kidding or not, but Alice still gave him a grin. "Anyway, we're not sure if we'll be in time. Ben's out trying to source some hazmat gear, and figure out how to set up a quarantine site on location, but... well, you tell us I guess. You wanna let this one go?"

James really, really did. But... that wasn't really his call. So he shook his head instead, setting his mouth in a thin line. "The whole thing sucks, we need to be *extra* careful with it, but if we could actually get more skill crystals from it, it might be the most powerful tool we can add to our list."

"How do you figure?" Alice asked. "No one has more than one point, we don't know what to do with the crystals. Or the chunk the... well. You know." James didn't know, but he could guess. It was on his list of things to do today.

"Repeatability." He said. "Get some samples of low-risk infections. Tank a cold, see if we can do it multiple times. It's not riskless, but if we can find a skill crystal that gives something like carpentry or farming or *anything* that lets us bootstrap an education program..."

"I follow." She nodded. "Well, I'll keep you informed." Alice tilted her head back and let out a dramatic sigh. "Since Charlie couldn't not get shot, I'm basically just hanging around here being sad until a team reforms around me. Though it will give me time to harass my sister. She's doing the squire thing here."

"Don't call them that." James laughed.

"I get to be called a knight. 'S not fair the kids don't get fancy titles!" Alice smirked. "Anyway, just wanted to check in while you were passing by."

"Thanks, appreciate it." James nodded, and moved on, as behind him the woman and the camraconda she was using as a footrest watched him go.

Behind him, he heard Alice ask her camraconda friend, "You didn't wanna say hi?"

And a high pitched incredulous voice reply "I can't just *say hi!*"

He stifled his laugh until he was out of the warehouse. Just to be polite.

In the basement of the home building of the Order of Endless Rooms, there was a secure door that led to a small space lined with shelves. At the far end of it, there was a low table with a woman's body on it, and a camraconda on constant watch. And on the shelves, with small carved wooden plates that had names, were the remnants of the fallen.

It wasn't clear if it was a dungeon-specific phenomena, but it happened for many of the dungeons the Order made use of. When someone died, the collective magic they had inside them was returned.

There must be a priority system, of sorts. Anyone with Officium Mundi orbs *always* dropped an orb, no matter what else they had. Yellow, usually. But there were also a pair of battered books on the shelf as well, from a pair of teenagers who hadn't deserved to die, and a number of green orbs from camracondas whose nature as dungeon creations seemed to override everything else.

And now James added a set of skill chunks to the shelves, affixing into place the plaques that read the names of Johns, Zari, Mauro, and Milly. They weren't the only casualties, by a long shot. But they were the ones who left something like this behind.

Zhu woke up and stirred in James' chest while he was finishing up. The navigator slipping out partly, just a brush of feathers and a single avian eye. He lingered with James for a while, both of them unsure of what to say. Or if there was anything to say.

It wasn't profound, or meaningful, or the end of some great journey. They were just dead. Because one asshole had been willing to kill anyone between them and their target. And whether or not Harlan deserved a good murdering, it never should have involved these people.

It was just bleak, and sad. And James hated it.

The last time he'd really been down here, he'd told these little remnants of the dead that he would do better. And, if he was being honest, he *had*. If he hadn't been better, he wouldn't have even lived himself, much less gotten anyone out with him. But there was always more to do. Always a worse problem coming up.

So he said it again. That he'd do better.

That someday there wouldn't be anyone new added here at all, ever again.

The upstairs floor of the Lair technically wasn't actually that at all. Due to a series of unfortunately no longer available effects, they'd managed to link their elevator to an upper floor of a Los Angeles skyscraper. Due to a series of JP-based actions, they still had the lease on that floor for another few months before they had to figure out how to renew it, which James was pretty sure their legal department had already handled.

The floor was mostly just a quiet place for groups to meet in a comfortable environment, and where a few people kept offices or desks. Since acquiring James' old workplace and the outer shell of Officium Mundi, most of the Recovery division had moved over there. Remodeling that was keeping them busy for a little while.

Technically James had an office up here, even if everyone seemed to think it was *Rufus'* office now. He didn't head toward it as he stepped off the elevator, though. Instead, he greeted the living plant that coiled toward him curiously, stopped to get a drink from the infinite vending machine, sipped the cool fruity concoction with a content sigh as he enjoyed the silence of the mostly empty floor.

He was here to meet with Karen, but he didn't see her in the conference room, so James figured he had a minute to himself.

So he turned to stare out the window at the city below, and let his thoughts drift to the coming conversation. He already had a plan for how to tell Karen that it was fine that he was back already, and a joking excuse planned about how the head trauma wasn't *that* bad that he knew she wouldn't laugh at. Mostly, he was trying to think of a good term for what he was about to pitch her. He really, really didn't want to continue the Order's somewhat silly neo-tradition of naming division words that started with R, and so, naturally, the literal only word that would come to mind at the moment was Reach.

James sipped his drink and tried not to swear as he worked to cram the thought out by repeating 'logistics' to himself over and over.

He was so caught up in the growing afternoon rush of the city, so much different from the empty roads and sunset skies that he and Sarah would stand and watch during the pandemic months, that he didn't notice he wasn't alone until it was too late.

A claw tapped tentatively on his shoulder, and James *screamed*. Whirling around and slamming his shoulder against the skyscraper window with an echoing thud, while the purple furred ratroach that had tried to get his attention flung herself backward and scrambled back in a frantic blur of limbs to hide behind the low wall that separated a line of open cubicles from the open space and the door to the conference room.

James slid down the window, panting with a hand over his chest, as he tried to apologize frantically. "S-shit. Sorry, sorry! Is that you Smoke?" He didn't know what having a heart attack felt like, but this was *probably* something similar. "Holy shit you scared me. I'm *really*

sorry, are you alright?" He started to stand back up, but didn't approach where the ratroach was cowering and taking rapid hissing breaths.

Instead he waited as Smoke extended a quivering claw that was clutching her small whiteboard around the wall. "Karen is running late." It had written on it. She held it there, sticking out, while James blinked and took in the words.

It struck him as hilarious, as the adrenaline of the scare faded from his heart. The sudden contrast in feelings bringing a deep laugh to his lips. At the sound, Smoke drew her arm back and stuck her head around the corner, glaring at him. "Sorry!" He said, this time around laughter. "Okay, actually, I'm really sorry. I hope I didn't scare you."

Smoke's mismatched quartet of eyes softened, and she rapidly scribbled something on her board while three of her hands held it steady. "Okay. Sorry I scared you too." It said.

James offered her a hand up, and winced as he felt just how fragile Smoke's claw was in his hand as she pulled her thin frame up off the floor. "Hey, glad to see your arms are better." He said as she pulled away as soon as she was standing. The ratroach was clearly doing a lot better, but was still twitchy in a way that only a lifetime of abuse could bring.

Smoke nodded, her eyes flicking around the room as she stood awkwardly like she was going to write something, before tipping her head down and scurrying away, leaving James standing alone again. Though only briefly.

"Are you scaring my employee?" Karen asked as she strode into the space like she owned it. Which, being fair, she kinda did.

When James had first met Karen, he'd thought of her as 'an adult', in the way that he often thought of people older than him. Stuffy, uncompromising to a fault, humorless, and generally so disconnected from what he found value in that it was hard to talk to her. Since then, he'd revised most of those assessments.

Karen was still kinda stuffy. Pushing fifty and spending your whole life working in one corporate accounting position or another would do that to anyone. And James wasn't blind to the fact that she would have been getting her start in the business world during a time when most big companies had a fundamental problem with her gender, even if the nineties he'd grown up in had pretended that all discrimination had been solved forever. But even though she kept the dress code from her old life, there were plenty of cracks in the facade where she'd show small smiles at weird jokes, or propose ideas that were well outside what James figured someone her age would find normal.

So really, he was the one being a judgemental asshole now. A trait he sought to crush in his thoughts whenever he found it.

“Yes, but only on accident.” He answered Karen’s question as she walked past with a purpose and led the way into their conference room, putting a folder on the long table and flicking the lights on with a thought as she did so. “Also it’s only fair because she terrified me first. Also I apologized.” James followed after her and took a seat near Karen without any other preamble. “So.”

“So.” She nodded. “It’s... good to see you alive.”

“I actually had an excuse prepared if you thought I should be at home today?” James ventured.

Karen’s sympathy for him dried up rapidly. “You’re either smart enough to know your own limits, or foolish enough to ignore them, and since this time no one’s life is on the line, I do not care to hear which situation we are in.”

“Okay ow.” James chuckled, taking the comment in stride. “Anyway, thanks. It’s good to be alive. But also anyway, hi. We have a massive thing to work with, huh?”

The woman gave James a smile like a razor’s edge. “I am assuming you’re now somewhat frustrated that you won’t need to organize a society around using asphalt robots to move cargo.”

“Shockingly no! That thing is really cool, but like, it’s cool as an art project? It’s also a massive pain in the ass and it’s taking up half a basement we could be using for other things and also we’ve never actually *used it for anything* except a few tests.” James flapped a hand in the air as he cut off his string of complaints. “I’d rather have something simple and robust that works.”

“Well, then I have good news for you.” Karen said. “Where should we start?”

“Technical details. I’ve seen that Research is still working on it, but...”

“They often forget to post their results, yes.” Karen flipped her folder open. “The Wolfpack model of teleporter functions by transposing two spheres of space with each other. The device can be modified to change the size of the space, but only slightly. Manual targeting uses something akin to GPS coordinates, but it can also be done by simply having an infomorph give it a destination. Nikhail thinks that a particularly focused biomorph could do it as well, but—“

“Sorry, wait, hang on.” James rubbed at his forehead. “I know I got hit on the head a lot—“

“Are you *certain* you should be here today?”

“-but did you just say biomorph?” James asked. Before Karen could reply, his brain turned over and made the connection. “No, I kinda get it. Infomorph, biomorph, two sides of the sophont coin. Okay. So, that’s how you plucked us from a dungeon, which I’m guessing doesn’t have a way to give the coordinates for.”

Karen nodded. "Correct. As far as we know. Bear in mind, it has been three days, extensive testing has not been done. But it does seem like we cannot rely on this as rapid escape routes. There would need to be a navigator inside to hand off their... locations."

"Which is unsettling, because they're like hearts." James sucked in an uncomfortable breath through his teeth. "Not something I wanna codify, really. But also, not important. How's safety?"

"Poor." Karen nodded at his instinct. "You've seen the bubble in motion. As it rolls forward, it pushes along the edge with something around the force of a car window, according to the fools who dared to stick their limbs through it. Anything that doesn't bend away is crushed and eventually severed, though. This includes living material, as tested on plants. Also using it near the ground does seem to go slower than when the Wolfpack was using it to move their helicopter while in air."

"Makes sense."

"Does it?" Karen looked up to study him carefully. "James, I will be the first to admit I don't have the... the *cultural grounding* in these things that you and some of the others do. But *how* does that make sense?"

The only answer James had was one that Karen probably wasn't going to like. "Because dungeon magic is fair." He told her. "Every weird exploit we have that makes it something absurd comes from overlap between dungeons. Their own magic is always *fair*. The ground slowing it down just feels like something an exhausted GM would tell his players when they tried this. So it makes sense."

Giving him a small hum that wasn't quite an agreement, but did acknowledge that she'd heard him, Karen moved on. "Regardless. The devices must be fed to recharge, but otherwise have no limits. So, with that... oh, fed electricity, since I see that horrified look on your face. Yes, I thought the same thing when Davis used the same terminology. Research needs a technical writer, badly. So with that in mind." Karen set down the pen she'd been ticking off lines of text in her folder with, set her hands on the table, and met James' eyes. "*How do we want to shatter the global economy?*"

James met her eyes, and let a feral grin creep onto his face.

Stuffy or not, Karen had adapted well to *one* thing the Order was making a core part of their culture. If anything that looked like the status quo put itself in their crosshairs, they weren't interested in letting it pass unscathed.

There were some large scale questions that didn't have easy answers, which they'd have to work around for now. Like, 'how many of these do we need?' But other things they could start on immediately. Building facilities as transport hubs would require planning from a lot of people,

but there were goals they could set right now. The biggest thing this allowed for, at scale, was the elimination of a huge amount of the shipping industry. Cargo ships, trucks, trains, humanity had spent a huge amount of time and money moving heavy things from point A to point B, and that entire industry and network was really only immune to disruption because of the lack of alternatives.

With large scale repeatable teleporters, that alternative was here, now.

“My main thought,” James told her, “is that we should focus on the bigger distances. Ocean transport is *real bad* for sea life, for one thing, so I’d like to start with ports if possible. Trucks are still going to be needed to get stuff to the end destination for now, but building hubs in every city will let us effectively replace long haul transport as a business.”

“Scheduling is going to be a nightmare.” Karen told him bluntly. “There *will* be errors, over time. We need safety precautions to keep those errors annoying and not lethal.”

“Agreed. Why don’t we start with, like, a few places across North and South America, and just start selling at absurdly competitive prices?”

“We’re going to put a lot of people out of work.”

“Hmm.” James leaned back. “What if... okay, here’s a weird journey, but go with me on it.” He stared up at the ceiling. “What if we contract out to shipping companies, for now? We offer to do exactly what they’re already doing, but cheaper, safer, and faster. And we take the money from it, and keep paying every employee that we replace.”

“For what?”

“For nothing.” James said, bringing his eyes back down from the ceiling tiles. “Okay, there’s a huge amount of money to be made here, but these companies are already profitable, right?” Karen nodded, and before she could start giving him numbers, James continued. “We don’t need that profit. I mean, we do, and we can make use of it. But we can make use of it best by acting to do what we already wanted to do, which is eliminating poverty. We start by covering the laid off employees, but at a certain point, we’ll have a big enough network that *we’ll be the transport solution*, and we can just drop the original companies we contracted with, and effectively have a monopoly.”

Karen clasped her hands, pursing her lips before taking a deep breath. “I thought you weren’t a capitalist.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely not!” James said. “But if we do this, and turn cargo transport into a *public utility*...”

"I see." Karen's eyes burned as she took the thought and ran with it. "Yes. Yes, I see where you are going with this. You understand that they will fight back with regulations, lobbied government interference, perhaps outright sabotage?" James nodded, and Karen looked down at the page she had flipped to. "How many of these can be produced?" She asked. "And how fast? The speed at which we act is going to be relevant here. Also branching into passenger transport will be critical as well; if we control how people move, circumventing government control of borders will be trivial. True freedom of movement could be within our reach." The words came out breathlessly now. "All we need to do is keep control of anything like this out of the hands of anyone else. Establish early a proprietary technology, and use it to break them before they can react. How deeply can we fabricate a lie? Make them chase their tails thinking teleportation technology is within reach, if only they fund the right research?" She was scribbling madly now on her paper, going a lot farther than James had planned this out. "The initial investment will be... problematic."

"What are you going to need?" James asked, and Karen snapped her head up.

"Me? Nothing. You are *not* putting me in charge of this mad rampage against common sense." She declared, smoothing out the lapels of the smartly cut suit she was wearing. "Recovery will put out feelers, and find you the team you need to bring this vision to life. And I will hire an entire law firm to run interference for us. But after that, I won't be involved."

"Fair. But what are we talking about budget wise?"

"Billions." Karen said. "Not all at once, but... ten to twenty million at least for the first two facilities, and establishing our workflow. The Order is somewhat flush at the moment, but even still. We're going to need income, beyond the mild sale of precious metals."

James nodded and made to stand. "I'll see what I can do for you." He said. "Also, we need a name for this project, and my brain won't let me stop thinking the word Reach."

"Absolutely not." Karen snapped at him. "I will add to our budget funds for hiring someone to come up with something better than *that*."

"Appreciated."

James asked around for a bit to find the next person he wanted to talk to. Which wasn't hard to do, there were a lot of people in today.

With the issue of the badly named wizard plague resolved, or at least contained for now, and James pronounced uninfected, the Lair had gone back to its usual bustle of chaotic energy. People prepping for delves, working on construction projects, showing new members or newly liberated camracondas or ratroaches around, experimenting with magic, gardening, eating

lunch, or just hanging out because this was an awesome clubhouse to hang out in. It wasn't so busy that it got overwhelming, but there were no shortage of small moments where he could catch someone's attention and ask a quick question.

Surprisingly, there weren't many people in the Order that were known to have the knowledge that James needed right now. And google hadn't *really* been much help, which was kind of disappointing for once in his life.

He let the increasingly busy elevator go over to Scent-Of-Rain and her youth group, who were clearly up to *something* fun, but James didn't want to stall the camraconda matron by asking what it was. He just gave an 'after you' gesture to the elevator doors, and let the mixed group of human and camraconda kids relegate him to the stairs.

Not that he could complain. James suspected that at this point, it was impossible for him to be unable to use stairs. The magic overlaid on his body just didn't support that small failure. And besides, once he found the right stairwell, he was going down, and it wasn't that hard on his aching legs anyway.

James used the time to catch up on new green orbs that had been used on the lair. It was a surprisingly short list; he kind of figured that the Order would be putting all of them into this building. But someone must be saving them for something, because there were only a handful of new effects on the place. James rapidly found ones that he mentally flagged as favorites to ask about.

[Local Area Shift : +4.2 Liters / Day - Coffee - Kona Blend - Hot]

[Local Area Shift : -1 Accident / Year - Lethal]

"That's so much fucking coffee." His voice echoed off the concrete of the stairwell. Someone had tried decorating the place once, and that had been undone rapidly when someone else who knew fire safety codes found out. So it was bare concrete walls, mostly. "Where the fuck does the coffee go?" James joked to himself, but really, he was kinda satisfied. Because at least now they knew *one* way that Officium Mundi probably restocked itself.

More important was the fact that someone wouldn't die, once a year. James marked that one and sent a note to Reed to maybe consider de-listing it. Knowing that safety net existed, *especially* without knowing if it was still active or not, could *only* cause more problems than it would solve. It was an actual cognitohazard, which was weird to think about. He'd always figured when the Order made a thought that was dangerous to have, it would be more splashy than just something that could subconsciously cause a disregard for safety standards.

James passed by a trio of responders as he got to the bottom of the stairs and headed out into the cool basement. He realized, suddenly, that none of them were wearing armor. Not obvious armor, anyway. They all had authorities on their person somewhere as gloves or coats, the strange infomorphs not spending any effort to hide their presence. And he was sure at least

one of them was wearing shield braces. But aside from that, their 'uniform' was changing away from the plastic shell riot armor the Order wore into dungeons, and more toward what a civilian peacekeeping group probably *should* look like. Non threatening, but visible.

"We need a logo." James mentally sent Karen an email to get on hiring a graphic designer sooner rather than later. He was getting better and better at using his skulljack for small things like this, and James was starting to understand just how effective some of the people who'd been practicing with it constantly ever since they got them could be.

That was a thought for later, though. He finished his long trek down the halls and past the storage and activity rooms to a heavy soundproofed door that had been installed fairly recently. He took a set of ear protection from a rack on the wall before he went in, and made his way onto the floor of the Order's shooting range.

"Hey, Nik!" James called to one of the two people in the room. "You got a minute?"

Nikhail looked up from where he was standing on the firing line, as he slotted a cylinder into the grenade launcher he was holding and snapped it closed, carefully keeping his finger off the trigger and the weapon pointed down. "What?!" He called back. "Oh! Hey James!" Nik snapped the forty millimeter launcher open again with what a rough move and wiggled the munition out, setting it on the surface in front of him along with the weapon. "Hey John! Take a break!" He called to the other end of the shooting range.

The man standing out next to one of the paper targets, wearing enough armor padding to soak up a tank shell, cocked his head to the side. "What?" He yelled back.

"A break! Take a break!" Nik waved him off the range.

"Oh! Sure!" The young man that James instantly labeled as a kid in his head started heading around the side to the door back to their side of the range, while Nik approached him and took his earmuffs off.

The first thing James realized as Nik approached was that the man was trying to grow some kind of facial hair. He kept the thought that Nik should probably not be doing that to himself as the Researcher grinned at him. "Hey. You're alive! What's up?"

"Your face has been parasitized by something horrible." James said before he could stop himself.

Nik rubbed at his face with a concerned look before he felt his mustache. Then he burst out laughing, taking the abrupt comment in good stride. "Fuck you! Also yeah, okay, I may have... messed up some of the shaper substance things." He admitted. "Either that, or I'm just destined to not have a cool beard no matter what gender I make myself."

“That’s kinda a shame.” James winced in pity. “You know, Deb’s made a lot of progress…”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I’ll get around to it at some point. Honestly, I’m thinking of just making myself a wolf and going with that. I mean, you know, if I can do it without dying.” Nik waved a hand.

James raised his eyebrows. “Is this the part where I start to have a slowly dawning realization that everyone who works for me is a furry?” He paused, and then thought about it. “Wait, actually, TQ had a *really* fast answer when I asked him what animal he’d be... *is* everyone in this building a furry? Is this what’s happening? No, wait, I had another question! Were you just about to blow up John? Is this what happens when Researchers accidentally ruin a potion batch or something?”

“In no particular order,” Nik started ticking off points on his fingers, “we don’t work for you, we’re testing the friendly fire power on the gun bangle with the grenade launcher since we finally had a charge available to bind a new weapon, *you are also a furry*, and I just said ‘wolf’, not, like, werewolf or anything. Also Davis thinks it’s stupid, so it’s not everyone.”

Reserving judgment on Davis’ personal tastes, James nodded. “Okay. So, I have an actual question unrelated to this, and no one has good answers for me somehow.”

“Shoot.”

“Can a military grade transport helicopter or, perhaps, fighter jet, run its engine on regular unleaded gasoline?”

Nik stared at him for a second, eyes narrowing to slits as he sort of cautiously pulled his body language back. “...like, *fly*?” He asked slowly. “Because *no*, that would be stupid.”

James nodded. “Okay, I figured that part, I’m just wondering if the engine would... I dunno the technical term. Turn over?”

“Engage.”

“Sure. Like, would it be able to sustain the process using normal gas, even if it wasn’t a strong enough source to turn the rotors or whatever.”

Nik straightened up with a flash of comprehension. “Ooooh! No. Sorry, no. You’re missing the important thing. You have mechanic skills, right?” He didn’t wait for James to answer that he only sort of did. “You know how the process of the engine moving is sort of analogous to a heart, where the reaction itself is both a source of energy, but also the thing that keeps the reaction going? Like, its own process helps its process work? Okay, aircraft do the same thing. If you want an F-15 engine to *run*, it actually needs a strong enough fuel to make the engine *turn*, because if it’s not strong enough it’s not just gonna make the craft not fly, it’s gonna make

the engine not turn at all, and the whole thing just kinda seizes up. So no, sorry, to whatever you were thinking.”

“Well bollocks.” James sighed, stealing his boyfriend’s favorite epithet. “There goes my plan.”

“What was your plan?” Nik sounded dreadfully curious.

“Use the ball teleport to start snagging derelict fighter jets out of the aircraft boneyard in Arizona, then fill them with Horizon gas until they work again, then... I’ll be honest, that was as far as I’d gotten.”

Nik nodded slowly. “Two things.” He said. “First, you need an end point to that plan. Second, you know we have a blue orb we can copy that gives the refine liquid power when absorbed, yeah?”

“I thought we lost that one?” James made a hum of thought. “Also would that even work? What does that one *do*? I know it doesn’t work on potions. Or so I overheard someone saying, and I probably misremember.”

“Well, it’s one of maybe three things that works on potions, but it just makes the mouth feel less like drinking a blended textbook.” Nik grimaced.

James also grimaced. “Wait, one of three? What *doesn’t* work?”

“Most things don’t work on potions. Blue orbs specifically don’t work cause you can’t make magic food with them.” Nik clarified.

“Really?”

“Really. It just never works, no matter what. Oh! Though! We did manage to make a magic vending machine!” Nik seemed really excited about that one, clapping his hands and rubbing them together like he had a big reveal to make.

“Does *it* make food?” James asked suspiciously.

Nik shook his head vigorously, wiry black hair dancing around his head. “Nope! It just always gives you what you most want from it, even if you didn’t know what you really wanted.”

“That...” James had a long list of thoughts on how that could possibly go wrong. What if it gave you something you wanted but were allergic to? What if you didn’t *really* want anything, and so the magic was just changing your mind to actually want something else? What if it was just mind control and whatever you bought it made you think you wanted more than anything else? What if Research had made an *addicting vending machine*? For some reason, right now, he

wasn't exactly feeling charitable toward weird magical effects that might be screwing with people without their consent. "Uh..."

"We broke the vending machine." Nik said with a sad shake of his head.

"Thank fuck." James sighed. "Anyway. I'm gonna go put in a formal request for the gas thing. You... you keep doing your thing." He patted Nik on the shoulder, the younger man grinning and brightening up as James turned to leave. "Thanks for the help!"

"No problem!" Nik called, before turning back and clapping his noise canceling earmuffs back on and heading back to his firing post. "Alright John! You ready to get this going?" He got a thumbs up from where John as the other guy finished a drink of water and waddled his armored form back to the range. Nik double checked the camera feeds they had set up, and cleared his throat as he slid the grenade back into its slot.

The last thing James heard before the door swun shut behind him was "Test four, incendiary! Firing in three, two...!"

James spent the rest of his afternoon checking in with Banana. The poor girl had been one of the people who'd gotten away with not being exposed to the disease that had torn through the Lair, but the emotionally fragile wasp crow hadn't really had a good time coping with being *trapped*. Even if she didn't leave her hospital room much anyway, Deb locking her in and then collapsing had been terrifying for the poor kid.

So James visited, and sat with her while she talked about skunks through her digital voice box. Banana's obsession with Animal Planet over everything else was adorable to both him and basically anyone who met her, and he had basically no issue being barraged by a litany of skunk facts.

After she ran out of skunk facts, her mood had pivoted on a dime, and she'd practically cried when she showed James the stuffed shark he'd given her. It had a number of holes in it, from where her claws or beak had carelessly stabbed into the plush animal when she was curled up with it in her sealed room. Banana had tried to apologize in both her voices, but had rapidly exhausted herself and fallen asleep before James could really tell her that it was okay.

He'd slipped out of the room, found a few things he needed, and spent the next hour making use of his skill rank in sewing to bring the shark back to life. It wasn't *really* that hard, and he felt kinda silly now that knew what he was doing that he hadn't ever learned this before. He could have saved a lot of pairs of pants. But, like Anesh had crystallized for him so long ago, there was just something a lot more fun about learning when you already knew what you were doing.

James waited by Banana's bedside for her to wake up, passing the time reading a hard copy report Deb had put in about the shaper substance progress. She was being paranoid about it, but fundamentally, they were *ready* to start not just doing small tests, but fully using it. Every advantage the Order could give; skill orbs, painkillers, potions, skulljack aid, custom grown programs to help guide the process, even a pair of totems Momo had made to inform about pain levels; all of it Deb had turned from rough ideas into a *protocol* for how to take a person from one body to another in a way that would keep the shaper substance from inflicting them with chronic pain, and wouldn't take a dozen followup treatments.

The more James learned about the shaper substance, the more he really hated the Akashic Sewer. Any single slip up during the process of changing yourself, and whatever it was you changed would *hurt*. Forever. Who *made* something like that?

Well, a monster, he figured. But at least this particular monster was kind of a fucking idiot, and had still managed to hand the Order a tool that was absurdly powerful when they got ahold of it and could assign some of the smartest people around to make it work right.

He got to the end of the report just before Banana woke up, and tried to repress the sudden anxiety he was feeling by presenting her with her newly reforged shark. The girl had unfurled her elytra wings and wrapped her arms around the stuffed animal with a buzzing squeak of delight, before thanking James repeatedly, threatening to exhaust herself all over again. He'd just smiled and gently patted her feathered head before he had said his goodbye and headed out.

James was making dinner for a bunch of people tonight, and he had to get home and get started on that. Probably go get groceries too. He had a suddenly very mundane checklist of things to do.

He couldn't get rid of the anxiety of seeing that the first name on the list of people undergoing a full use of the shaper substance was Keeka. And that it was *tomorrow*. But... no. James shook it off, and took a deep breath. There was always going to be a chunk of fear in his heart that something would go wrong. But something could *always* go wrong. Focusing on what might slip through the cracks of Deb's frankly impressive set of precautions was just going to be a waste of time.

Instead, he should be focusing on finding a place that would sell him fresh rosemary so he could make really good garlic bread in a few hours.

So James teleported out of the lair feeling pretty good about how the evening was going.