

*"I'm not suicidal, I just can't get out of bed." -Metric, Satellite Mind-*

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"So, why are we doing this now?" Alanna asked her adorably dumbass boyfriend.

Currently, said boyfriend was driving one of the cars the Order had acquired through their ongoing process of testing the health potion gas from Route Horizon. It turned out, it was actually pretty easy to get a bargain on buying en masse from a scrapyard. And when you had a form of gasoline that healed damage that you needed to test, a bunch of derelict vehicles in various states of fucked up were a great thing to have.

Alanna had finally gotten to drive the asphalt mech, to move them back to their parking lot. Their parking lot was bigger on the... inside? Bigger than it should be. It was cool. But also, it was full of cars that were crumbling.

What Alanna had personally learned is that she didn't like piloting the mech. Magic should be cool, but it was honestly about as engaging as driving a forklift, except after too many tricky maneuvers, you got a nosebleed. But what they'd learned collectively was that the health gas needed an engine that could at least combust a little bit, and a real fuel tank. Though 'real' was flexible. A makeshift canister and tube still worked. Slowly. But after that, it could fix almost *anything*. Even fully missing parts; though the parts that regrew were... odd. A little more organic than they should be. But they worked, and it was a good supply of vehicles, while also being effective recycling, even if there were some weird side effects.

Also the car she was in now, that James was driving, had one of those weird side effects. An air freshener that smelled like... like... something. Something earthy and spicy. It wasn't bad, but it was odd. Not magical or anything, but it kept growing back if removed, until they emptied the tank of the magic gas.

James had said something while Alanna had gotten distracted by the air freshner again. She glanced at him and made a small grunt of incomprehension, and he grinned as he repeated himself. "I mean, I had a thing about something else, but I think that right there sells me on it. We need a break." He told her.

"We're in the middle of stuff." Alanna said flatly.

"We are literally always going to be in the middle of stuff." James said in the same tone. He glanced through the mirror into the back seat, where three people were smushed together, the pile of their stuff in the back of the hatchback. "Have any of you been *not in the middle of stuff* in the last month?" He asked.

Momo folded her arms and tried to shrink farther into the corner between the seat and the door, the silver studs on her coat rattling. “I can’t believe you took me away from training my apprentices for this.”

Next to her, Texture-Of-Barkdust made a sibilant hiss. “I was tricked into this vehicle.” She said. “I had emails to answer.”

There was a pause before Arrush realized the others were waiting for him to say something. “I was reading.” He said, looking forlornly at the book in his paws. Arrush, it turned out, got carsick. *Very fast*. And somewhere on the side of highway 217, a patch of concrete had a corroded gouge running down it.

“See?” James said to Alanna. “Everyone is all work, all the time. We *cannot* keep doing that. It’s gonna burn us out. You all taught me that, and I’m trying to be better about actually finding time to relax. We have *all the money* now. We can move at our own speed, and we can spend less time *working*. Not that our work isn’t rewarding and awesome, but more that we need to... just... I dunno, just ease off of everything.” He sighed. “Also, I wanna go to the beach while late September inexplicably feels like the middle of summer. And none of you were *tricked into the car*, hush.”

“It’s not inexplicable, it’s climate change.” Texture-Of-Barkdust told him. “I have assayed several studies. This is easily explained. Did you know that there is only one climate?” She sounded legitimately curious, as camracondas often did when they learned new facts about Earth. “Technically. It is all connected. Collective emissions of certain substances create a rise in average temperatures, which has led to this. I assume. Is September normally cold?”

“In Oregon? Uh, yes.” James nodded to himself. “Especially at the coast. It should be... I dunno, overcast and ten degrees out. Not *this*.” He waved at the beautiful golden sun coating the road ahead of them, dusty rays of light beaming between the trees on the side of the quiet highway.

“Look,” Alanna brought his attention back to her, “I’m not... I *get* that downtime is important. And apparently a lot of other people do too, since everyone following us makes up ninety percent of the cars within five miles of here. Though Nate doesn’t count since I think he’s using this as an excuse to barbeque stuff, and I legit don’t understand how he ever ended up working as an... okay, getting sidetracked. Sorry, uh... aren’t there assassinations going on right now?! Isn’t that something we should be not taking a fucking break from?”

“We’re backing off.” James said quietly, but the whole car stilled to listen to him. “For a few days, at least. Response has been quieter lately, I’ve got interviews for the next couple days, everything’s gonna get busy and chaotic again...” He trailed off, he wanted to close his eyes like he could make the stress go away by not looking at it, but sadly, he had to stare at the highway and let the AC dry out his eyeballs. “And we can’t deal with some outside threat if we’re the

ones walking into traps. So we're backing off. And we'll come at it again in a different way when we're back on the sneaky-spy offensive."

From the backseat, Momo spoke up. "Yeah, but like, people are dying?"

"People are dying everywhere." James said with a kind of sudden depressed pessimism. "There's at least one hot war going on, a half dozen oppressively murderous nations doing their thing, lack of education, lack of health care, lack of clean water, lack of *food*, police violence, poverty, and just good old fashioned regular murder happening, all over the place." He realized his face had twisted into a kind of snarl, and he tried to take a breath and relax. "There's... we're a little over two hundred people, Momo. We're gonna recruit more, yeah. And we're gonna do great stuff. But we can't fight every battle. Not now. Not yet. We'll burn out, same as if we never stop working." James met her eyes with a flicker in the rear view mirror. "And don't get me wrong, I am *not* talking about just accepting the way things are. But... we can't just throw people into the grinder and hope to attrition stuff down, you know? We aren't an army. Not really."

"Not yet." Texture-Of-Barkdust said with a note of pride that James suddenly found worrying. "But we will be. Ah, but not if we exhaust ourselves wholly first. I see." She nodded, straining against the seatbelt that held her in an awkward position.

James opened his mouth, then noticed Alanna giving him a very observant pointed grin, and closed it again. He made a thoughtful hum, and said nothing, trying to figure out why exactly that sentence made him ever so slightly unsettled.

Whatever thought was brewing in his head, mental alchemy turning it from whim to structured idea to verbalized statement, it was scattered and cut off as James took the car around a curve in the road, and below them, the ocean opened up. The cliffside road they were on offering a fantastic elevated view of the cold waves breaking themselves on the sand and rocks of this section of coast, one large dome of rock rising up out in the middle of the water, a steady wind throwing sprays of surf and sand up just as it tousled the dune grass and surrounding trees.

Arrush and Texture-Of-Barkdust crammed against each other to look out the window. Momo snorted, but James caught her craning her neck to look too anyway. Alanna had no such worries; she had her own window in the passenger seat.

"I missed this place." James said softly to himself. He hadn't been back to this part of the state in a while, and it was under dramatically different conditions that he was here once again. "Alright, let's go find a spot to park. Then we can stretch our legs. Or... tails. Or... do camracondas *stretch*? No, don't answer that, I will get a full answer later, and try to level up in biology." He took advantage of a straight bit of road to blink slowly and try to let his eyes recover before heading into the small seaside town, and finding a stretch of beach that was mostly empty for everyone to spend the afternoon at.

He parked the car on a gravel lot for visitors to the beach town, killing the machine-healing engine and sighing to himself as the kids in the back scrambled to get out. James glanced at Alanna, wanting to share a quiet moment with one of his partners, but... well, she'd *also* just scrambled out the door, the smell of salt and sand overpowering whatever bizarre substance their air freshener was exuding. James laughed softly to himself, before groaning and stretching his own legs out to the rocky ground as he cracked the driver's side door, standing up and stretching until some of his bones popped as the cars that were following them also started to pull up.

James had been mildly surprised by how many people had joined him for his impromptu day trip to the beach. Despite it being completely unplanned, and happening in a part of the morning where the Lair wasn't really that occupied, there were maybe a dozen people here. And James had heard that others were planning to teleport in later, when they had larger groups and their actual work for the day wrapped up.

Turned out, not everyone wanted to drive for an hour and a half. Though more than one Order member had a navigator now, and some people just liked road trips.

Three different iterations of Anesh wandered over from the van he'd been in, the majority of his boyfriend taking a moment to collect a series of kisses from James before grabbing stuff out of the trunk. "It's a really nice day for this." One of him said. "Like, *weirdly* nice. Is it gonna be a problem?"

"That there's sun?"

"That there's other people here." Anesh snorted.

James paused, and looked over to where Arrush and Keeka were lurking in the shadow cast by the van, then back down the footpath that cut through the dunes and sharp bursts of beach grass to where the sand had a handful of other people on it. Humans, specifically non-Order humans.

"Ah." He muttered as Texture-Of-Barkdust slithered her way down ahead of Nate, who *was* lugging a portable grill, and El, who was trailing Speaker, the infomorph showing as flashes of neon green and blue light within her hair. "Okay, well, I'm sure this'll be fine." James said. When all three Anesh turned to give him *identical* looks, he couldn't help but laugh. "Oh my god, I don't get to hang out with multiples of you enough. Okay, you know what? I'm not gonna be apprehensive. I've decided. Fuck it! If anyone has a problem with our friends, I *do not care*. I've got a hyperactive navigator living in my head, I'm sure I can curse them to get lost on the way to harass us."

"Yes I can do that!" Zhu chimed in James' ear, the sound echoing slightly into the real world.

“I can get on board with that.” Anesh smiled. “Anyway, I’m gonna go find a spot, and then... I dunno, what do we *do* at the beach?”

“Dig a hole.” James announced.

“What?”

“We dig a hole. I’ve got shovels in the trunk.”

Anesh narrowed all his eyes at James, each of the trio giving identical head tilts. “...Why?”

“It’s a thing.” James shrugged. “It’s just... I dunno, it’s something I used to do when I came here. Also it’s fun, because then you have a big hole to put a fire in and hang out in.”

“You are so weird, and I love you.” Anesh shook his head. “I’ll get your shovels and the drink cooler, you go make sure Keeka doesn’t eat that dog.” He brushed past James, patting his partner on the shoulder as he moved for the collective trunks of the cars.

“Yeah, I... wait what?” James snapped his head over to where an older couple’s husky had just bolted away from them, leaving the grey haired man stumbling forward as the dog happily bounded toward their group, barking loudly. Specifically, angling onto the gravel lot and past the van, to where the two ratroaches were trying to adjust to the new environment slightly away from everyone else. James swore. Perhaps a little loudly. And then he started moving.

Arrush also started moving; his whole body tensing, instantly transforming him from a confused newcomer to the concept of the ocean to a weaponized entity as he clapped two hands on Keeka’s side and started to shift the other ratroach out of the way and behind him. Stepping forward slightly to engage what probably registered to his brain as something loud, hostile, and *incoming*. And in the half second of brainpower he had available, along with a few orange lines of approach from his navigator, James saw a dozen scenarios where he wasn’t going to get there in time and someone’s pet was about to get disemboweled, which was, on a very technical level, *not a great start* to a day off.

Then Keeka shrugged off Arrush’s attempt to interpose himself between the sleeker ratroach and the dog, pushed his partner back with one of the ancillary arms he had that came off the back of his torso, and knelt down on the gravel, the thick chitin and thin fur of his footpaws scraping against the rock without concern.

And as the dog bounded up to them, he just faced it without any sudden movements except to hold out one arm with an open paw. The husky, leash dragging behind it, stopped barking as it approached and practically skidded to a near stop, pacing back and forth in front of Keeka in rapid movements while the ratroach just sat perfectly still. Then the dog inched forward, sniffed once at his paw, jerked back, and then repeated the motion, before its tongue lolled out of its

muzzle and it pushed forward, alternately sniffing or licking Keeka with a wagging tail, energetically exploring its new discovery.

Tentatively, Keeka curved his arm around, the joint pivoting in a way that wouldn't be possible on a human, and ran his chitinous fingers through the fur on the dog's head, his pets getting less cautious and more enthusiastic as the husky leaned back into it, tongue panting happily. Behind him, Arrush untensed, and suddenly he was a person again. An awkward, cautious person, who shuffled back away from the dog that his boyfriend was now petting, trying to hide in the shadow of the van.

James slowed his bolting sprint to a stroll, and noticed on the other side of the van, one of the newer Response knights who had come along did the same thing. He didn't know the new guy's name, and he should probably stop calling people who had worked with them for more than two months 'new', but James gave an appreciative smile and nod to the other dude as the two of them both made the same kind of awkward motion of shoving their hands in their pockets and pretending this was normal, both of them readjusting bits of their long hair that had gotten in their faces. Though James figured the other guy had it easier with dreadlocks than he did with a ponytail that didn't stay up properly.

Then the older couple who had lost the dog came hurrying over, the man trailing behind the woman, her light jacket flapping around her as she moved with a slight limp. "Oh my god, I am so sorry!" She burst out as she moved toward the husky. "She's normally well... behaved... and..." the woman trailed off. Not out of breath, but because she had just realized who, or rather what, was petting her dog. "... I..." She stared at Keeka with an expression that shifted from confused to outright horrified in the span of seconds.

"Hello." The black furred ratroach said carefully, four different hands stilling on the husky that was still trying to stick her nose into his hoodie. "Your dog is very nice."

"Ch-Charles...!" The woman yelped out in a voice bordering on a scream.

The man, Charles, and probably her husband if James guessed right, finally caught up, out of breath and panting. "Dammit, woman, don't let the mutt harass... uh..." He looked at the person petting his dog, then around at the other people nearby, then at his wife who was stumbling away and pointing a shocked finger and gibbering something incoherent. Then he glanced over at James, who just gave him an apologetic shrug, back at his wife again, back at Keeka. He seemed to jump a little as he noticed there was a second ratroach standing there as well.

This was one of those moments that made James' anxiety kick into high gear. The bit where someone new encountered a ratroach or a camraconda or an infomorph for the first time. Not knowing if they were going to be the assholes or not. That plunge off the cliff, not knowing if at the bottom were rocks, or a trampoline. The metaphor broke down a bit, he admitted.

The woman, James figured, was probably not going to be helpful. She was starting to yell the dog's name - Hypoxia, for some reason? - and starting to veer into the territory of yelling the word 'monster' repeatedly.

Then her husband spoke up. "Woman, would you calm down?!" Charles said. "Goddammit Lily, they're shooting a movie or some shit. Monsters don't pet dogs. Christ." He threw his arms up, as his wife's panic suddenly pivoted to ire at him, and the words mostly stayed the same as she started yelling at him. Keeka slowly looked over at James, who just shrugged, before giving the dog a small nudge and a point toward her owners. Hypoxia didn't want to leave her new discovery, but eventually did scamper across the parking lot, still trailing the leash, which was taken by the woman who was now thoroughly angry at her husband, who stalked off.

The gentleman watched her go for a second before he wiped scraped palms on his legs and wandered over to James. "Sorry 'bout that." He said, before glancing over at Arrush and Keeka, who were now both watching him with a myriad of mismatched eyes. "So... aliens are real, huh?"

"Not exactly. They're actually from Earth, more or less." James said. "Thanks though. They're still... well..."

"Hey, no one likes being called a monster." Charles shrugged, offered James a hand. "Charles Bain." He said.

"James Lyle." James took the handshake. "You're handling this well?"

"I like The X-Files." The man said, like that explained anything. Then he leaned in, conspiratorially. "So, you government?"

"Nope!"

"Military? Corporation? Wait, no... secret society?" The old man asked like he was an expert in these things, but with a kind of deep *hunger* to know that James empathized with. Like he was faking being 'in', but like the horizon of the world had just opened up into something beyond his wildest dreams and he was terrified it would slip away.

"Noooo... well, technically. Though not on purpose. We're more of... wait, why am I telling you this?!" James gave a wry smirk. "Your wife is gonna be mad if you hang out with us all day."

"Oh? Gonna be here all day? Maybe we'll walk back this way and say hi." Charles matched James' smirk. "Because aliens are real. Who could say no to *that*?"

"You'd be surprised. Do you wanna say hi, before you go?" James asked.

The old man had a grin like a kid at his first circus, his wrinkled and weathered face lit up like a beacon as he moved as fast as he could across the parking lot toward the two ratroaches. This time, Arrush stepped in front of Keeka, and when the man offered a handshake and a name, returned the gesture with a small amount of confusion. Confusion that didn't really go away as Charles started bombarding him with questions while Keeka tried to fade into the background and escape to the open expanse of sand where there was less interrogation going on.

James stuck around to make sure nothing bad happened, but soon enough Charles' wife came back and yelled at him to help her get the dog who had run off to some new scent adventure. James did give the man a business card, though. He seemed nice.

"You okay?" He asked Arrush, laying a hand on the ratroach's shoulder as the two of them ended up as the last ones back by the cars. "No pressure to hurry down to the others, you know."

"Ah..." Arrush watched the retreating backs of the couple, Charles shooting looks over his shoulder until he was consumed in a heated conversation with his wife. "I don't know what... that was."

"*That*," James said with a sigh, "is the *other* side of what I'm kinda worried about. You know how... uh..." he paused as he tried to think of how to frame this, and then decided to just be direct. "You know how a lot of people are going to see you as a monster, because of how you look?" Arrush nodded. He knew. It was unavoidable. "Okay. Welllllll, a lot of people are going to see you as *really awesome* for basically the same reason." James shrugged. "And that's not bad on its own. Charlie there seemed nice enough, right?"

"He was rude... that I had a boyfriend..." Arrush chittered out in a huff.

"Okay, well, nobody's perfect."

"He said that, yes." Arrush's muzzle twitched.

James' own lip twitched back in annoyance as he ground his teeth slightly. "Yeah, alright, fuck that guy. My point is, there's gonna be people who are gonna see you as proof humanity isn't alone, or as a part of a bigger universe that's opening up to us, or just physically attractive *because* you're different. Some of those people are gonna find you hot. Like, 'really, I would like to have sex with that guy' hot." James shrugged again. "And some of them are gonna be weird about it. So, this was kind of... eh. Middle of the road I guess."

"He cared what I was." Arrush tilted his triangular head down to look at the hands poking out of the sleeves of his hoodie. "But he was... not afraid. That matters. I think?"

"It does!" James agreed cheerfully. "I hope a lot more people are like that!"



Arrush nodded, wiping away a line of corrosive saliva with his sleeve. Then he looked down the trail to the beach, where the others had all gone to start claiming a space on the sand. "I would like... to be around others now." He said, a lightness in his voice James hadn't heard before very often.

"Alright, let's go. I'm gonna make sure Anesh got all my shovels. Meet you down there?"

"Yes." Arrush drew the word out with a wet hiss. Then he paused before walking off the gravel and onto the sand. Not because the new terrain frightened or enthralled him; he was *aware* of sand, even though he hadn't experienced it yet. Instead, he glanced back over his shoulder at James, who had slung an old shovel over his shoulder and was closing the trunk of his car and checking his keys. "Find me... attractive?" He hissed to himself.

"Very." Keeka's clipped voice didn't startle him, coming from the dune grass he was laying in off to the side of the little path. He and his boyfriend had lived through too many situations where their stealth was the only way they'd survived for him to be spooked by it now. "Don't you?"

"You, yes." Arrush said easily, turning back with a wide arc of movement. "Not me."

"Hmm." Keeka rose out of the grass, his hoodie and skirt already covered in a thin layer of sand. "Should work on that." He chittered, almost playfully, as he fell into step beside his partner, the two of them heading down to the shoreline in close proximity.

James trailed behind them, giving the two space and also distracted by nearly dropping his car keys twice. He'd cut to the good part of being at the beach, and left his shoes in the car, and as he stepped onto the sand he felt the old familiar sensation of realizing that he had no idea what temperature sand was supposed to be.

It was maybe an hour or so after the sun had been at its highest point, a sunny day even though the wind and sea spray were keeping the heat down, and yet the sand was always so *cold* here. Even now, under ideal conditions, it was still only barely warmer than his feet were. But he still smiled as he started walking down the valley between the sand dunes; this place was somewhere he'd always loved going as a kid, and doing it again now as an adult when he could drag a bunch of friends and random additions along was even better.

In his vision, as soon as he left the parking lot, the navigator he shared his brain with unleashed a riot of orange motion lines. He didn't say anything out loud, but James could practically hear Zhu clamoring for him to go climb something or follow the curves of the dunes or go see what was underneath the porch of one of the houses that abutted the beach. He shook his head and grinned; it was easy to forget sometimes that the navigator really was a *kid* in a lot of ways.

But also James totally planned to go do those things later.

He rounded the corner and hiked the few hundred feet to where the group had claimed a territory at the base of one of the dunes, the space containing a semicircle of driftwood logs and the remains of someone else's beach fire. It surprised him that he didn't actually know several of the people here except as faces that were around the Lair sometimes. A couple people from Response and one from Recovery, he was pretty sure. But then, people changed jobs in the Order all the time, so maybe not.

Nate was unfolding the legs of his portable grill. Alanna was showing Texture-Of-Barkdust how to build a sandcastle. Anesh was... actually all three Anesh were sitting on one of the logs and shifting like they were constantly trying to dust all the sand off. That, James knew, was futile.

He had never once left the beach without sand in his ears and pockets, that he would continue to find for weeks or months.

"That's *never* gonna be un-sanded." James said to Anesh as he passed, sticking his shovel into the sand next to the others with a rasp. "How's the ground feel? You doing alright?" He asked the lone camraconda with them.

"Mmmh." Texture-Of-Barkdust gave him an organic hum as she craned her neck down to look over herself. "It is odd, but I do not think will be a problem. Our cables are somewhat sealed. Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem." James grinned. "So! Who wants to help me *dig a hole*?" He asked with unleashed enthusiasm.

"A whole what?" Nate asked him suspiciously as he pulled a bottle of beer with a label that looked like it took a graphic designer just as long to ferment as the beverage inside out of a cooler and snapped the top off.

James ignored him, very loudly. "Alanna! You like physical exercise! Help me dig a hole!"

"Is this how you flirt with people?" Alanna asked him. "Ask Raul! He likes holes!"

The guy from earlier looked up sharply. "I told you I liked the *movie* Holes. The one with Shia LaBeouf, that's a thinly veiled metaphor for the prison industrial complex, and also delightful. Also that was a *month* ago, and I think the only other time we've talked was when we coordinate a search and rescue, *how* do you remember that?" He demanded, casually accepting the consolation beer from Nate before looking down at the bottle and handing it off to the other girl from Response who was arranging a beach towel on the sand next to the log. Wordlessly, Nate reached back to the cooler and replaced the beer with some kind of soda, which Raul cracked, curly black hair bobbing as he nodded appreciatively.

"I have memory upgrades!" Alanna said.

“Those are for short term memory.” Anesh reminded her.

“Well maybe I just like listening to people and remembering things about them.” Alanna said, defensively. “Wait, why am I... god dammit, James, give me a fucking shovel. I changed my mind, I want to escape this conversation.”

James laughed, and it caught among a few of the others. He also pretended that El had actually escaped his notice, the girl having rolled over a log in a way that he was almost certain he couldn't do as soon as he'd started looking for assistants. It was the polite thing to do for someone who pulled a maneuver like that.

He marked out a circle in the sand, and after Alanna added an annex to it, they started to dig. Cheerfully shifting shovels full of sand onto the beach. It didn't actually take long for Alanna to get into it. “This is weirdly relaxing, for manual labor.” She commented.

“It's because you know we're gonna put fire in it and roast marshmallows.” James told her.

“We don't actually need a pit fifteen feet across for that.” She told him with a snort of laughter, but he just shrugged. “Alright, well, are we also gonna build a driftwood palisade?”

James grinned as he moved another shovel of sand. “You *do* know this tradition!” He said gleefully.

Overhead, the sun shone. The roar of the waves filled the air, nearby and omnipresent but never overwhelming. A few seagulls swirled in the air nearby, waiting to see if they could ambush anyone for their chips; when it became clear no one had opened a bag of chips, they circled somewhere else.

Texture-Of-Barkdust came over to offer moral support. Nate finished setting up his grill, and in the absence of a demand for lunch, started trying to get people to throw a football around. El came over to actually help dig, possibly to avoid being roped into throwing a football around. Four new people joined them - James recognizing them as some of the residents of the house under Clutter Ascent - and were greeted with almost being hit by a football.

Flush with the nourishment of a completed journey, Zhu broke away from James for a while to go wander the dunes between them and the town. El sent Speaker with him, just in case. She didn't say just in case of what, but the two different infomorphs roamed off in search of cool sticks and buried treasure.

They didn't *give up* on digging a beach pit. But they did take a break, leaving it about a foot deep, which was still an impressive amount of sand moved, to go grab some drinks.

“Can I ask a question?” Raul prompted James in the ancient paradoxical tradition of asking if you could ask something. James opened his mouth to comment on that, but then just chuckled

to himself and nodded, leaning back against the driftwood log where he was sitting with Anesh's legs dangling next to him, his boyfriend petting his head idly as he read something. "Okay. So. I love my job. Helping people is rewarding and everything, and I've actually learned a lot in my time here. But how exactly... do we make money?" Raul looked almost apologetic as he said the words

"Oh, is *that* all!" James sighed in relief. "I thought you were gonna ask something bad, the way you were talking."

"Like what?" Anesh curiously inquired, one of him setting down the book he was reading.

James paused before answering. Were his boyfriend all reading the same book? It did sort of look that way. He filed that away for later. "Uh... I dunno, like something about cultural development, or our hypocrisy in regards to dungeon secrecy, or, like... uh... why we don't end wars or something."

"Why *don't* we end wars?" Anesh asked. "I mean, if we could, we should. There's this whole *thing* going on in the Ukraine right now, I hear."

"It's just Ukraine." The other Response girl joined in. James apologetically asked her name, and she laughed lightly. "Ishka. Hi. But yes, just Ukraine. The definitive article was used by the USSR, I think, and they dropped it with independence."

"That's actually cool to know, thanks." Anesh nodded. "Anyway, James, the war stopping?"

James snorted. "Kay, two things. One, we can't just stop a war. Two... that's kind of it. What are we supposed to do, just teleport in and shoot Putin? Even if that *worked*, we live in a world where I swear to god someone else has to have teleportation. I'd lay good odds he's already dead, and the war's still happening. I legitimately don't even know what we'd contribute, aside from, like, making life harder for some people."

"That's what war is."

"Yeah, that's my point." James stated. "Even with teleportation, we can't actually do much more than *join a war*. And I don't actually want to do that. I don't want... I don't want our reputation to be as soldiers. Maybe that's not a good way to look at it, but we're gonna be doing some impactful stuff in the future, and it'll seriously hurt us if people think of our organization as particularly effective killers."

Raul nodded. "Okay, I'm glad I didn't ask that then." He said, digging a heel into the sand.

James nodded with him. "Agreed. Anyway, we make money through a series of increasingly stupid and arcane methods." He answered the actual question. "Basically everything we *do* is a net negative on the balance sheet. Response and Recovery are actually big money sinks,

and *Research...*” He trailed off, shuddering. “Did you know they’re actually building a prototype for a space elevator? Do you have any idea how expensive that is? I don’t! But Karen does, and she won’t stop telling me about it.”

“Okay, I’ve heard that term around.” Ishka stated. “But I do not know what that means.”

“Oh!” Anesh excitedly perked up. “It’s a device for moving stuff from the surface to orbit, but a permanent structure, so it can mitigate the insane resource cost of launching rockets. The design uses magical bullshit. Or, I mean, ours does.”

“Ah.” The girl pursed her lips. “Why... why do we have magical bullshit?”

“Because it makes us money.” James said, not bothering to contain his grin. “Okay, so, you’re probably aware we know about dungeons, yes?” Affirmative replies came back. “Well, a lot of what we’re trying to do is turn that magic into stuff that’s useful. Like Response abusing teleportation. Or opening up space exploration. And a side effect of that kind of thing is that we can often find ways to make money off it, because useful things are usually profitable.”

“You *just told us* that our jobs don’t make any money.” Raul glared at him.

“Well yeah, but we could if we wanted to.” James said defensively. “Anyway, we *actually* make money mostly by having a matter duplicator.” He told his now fully disbelieving audience. “A lot of our recent income has been from sales of platinum. Turns out, when you offer a great deal on a scarce resource, no one cares if your salesperson is a camraconda, and Texture-Of-Barkdust over there is actually good at her job. Uh... there’s that, and then the cure for cancer we have. We have two, actually! First priority goes to Order members, then their families, then we raffle them, basically. The raffle is totally fair, and costs one percent of your net worth if you win, and that basically only had to land on someone wealthy once.”

“We’re charging people to cure cancer?” Raul looked conflicted. “That seems... weird, for us.”

Alanna dropped onto the sand next to them, depositing the armful of driftwood sticks she’d been gathering. “People charge for cancer cures all the time. Our rates are almost painfully low, actually. Though I look forward to not having to do it anymore. And I agree, I also felt gross when Justine proposed that idea.”

“Same.” James admitted. “The percentage thing was a good idea though. But honestly, that’s only a tiny fraction of our income at this point. We had a massive influx this year from... uh... being... highly effective killers.” He paused. “Wait shit.”

“He means that we absorbed the survivors of the Alchemist’s Guild, and-“

“Guild of Alchemists.”

“-and *whatever they were called*,” Alanna continued undeterred, “part of their surrender included the transfer of assets.”

Raul looked uncomfortable with that. “Isn’t that kinda grim?”

Alanna gave an easy shrug. “I mean, they were sitting on pretty hefty wealth for no reason. We’ll put it to use. That’s really all I actually give a shit about, if we’re being honest.”

“Alanna’s big on use of power.” James explained. “And I’m inclined to agree; anyone sitting on a lot of potential good like that is a problem. It’s part of why we don’t hoard wealth. We’ve *got* a lot of money now, but we aim to spend it all, even if we’re still making more.”

“No, yeah, I get that. Is that why we’re getting more people soon? Or, I heard that, anyway.” Ishka looked around at them. “Also where are the drinks? I should get a drink.” She’d barely finished saying it before Nate passed by, handing her something in a can. The woman blinked, looking after the stocky red faced chef as he flung a football in a high arc to one of the *ratroaches* who kicked up sand in frantic plumes as he ran to catch it. “How...”

“I’ve learned to stop asking.” James said. “I mean, actually. Everyone has so many dumb bullshit tricks around here, it’s basically impossible to tell if something is magic or not without checking the database. Just roll with it.” He leaned back, making an appreciative noise as Anesh scratched his neck.

“That’s... no offense here, but...” Raul started. James barked a laugh, but didn’t interrupt. “I mean, that’s a weird attitude for someone who wants to replace the police?”

“I’ve tempered somewhat.” James admitted. “I doubt we’ll be able to ‘replace the police’. Even just in this one country. I think the best we can hope for is transferring skill sets to our own ‘nation’ when we set up shop, and doing things our way on a scale that matters. But honestly, holy crap, the police are worrying, and for a whole new reason now.” He blew out a long breath. “You know how easy it was to just... walk someone out of lockup? El *robbed an evidence room*, and no one even saw her. Even putting aside the judgement call on the ethics of modern policing or how police unions enable gang behavior or, like, *anything* having to do with shooting random civilians. It is *terrifying* how easy it was to get away with that.”

Raul and Ishka shared a worried look, then simultaneously looked back at James with matching facial expressions that made him think these two were experienced teammates. “Are you actually supposed to be telling us that?”

“What, are you gonna turn me in? You work for an magical anti-authoritarian civil safety organization, they’d arrest you in a heartbeat and you know it.”

“Yeeeeeeeah.” Raul shrugged. “I mean, ACAB, really. It’s just weird to hear you actually went that far.”

“I somehow doubt that’s gonna be the end of it. Especially if things in New York escalate. *When*, I guess, not if.” He sighed. “Anyway, I’m gonna get back to digging. I’ve got a second wind, and I wanna build a *wall*.” James said with a waggle of his eyebrows and a cheerful voice.

Anesh joined him this time, the three of him helping to make good progress. Alanna and the other Response members kept talking about the responsibility of power, which James appreciated, but he wasn’t here to talk shop really. Even though he said that every time he tried to take a break, and it never worked.

Some more people arrived, teleporting in basically in plain view. El came over to hide in the growing hole James was digging when her mom arrived with one of the youth group packs. The two of them talked about weird shit she’d seen in the Route for a while, and James expressed that he’d love to go back sometime and start trying to piece together more spells. El offered to let him in if he let her brew a potion, since she ‘had a feeling’, and James had to remind her that neither of those things were things either of them could *trade*, but that she could probably take a shot anyway, and so he’d plan for Saturday.

People passed by, the beach wasn’t *empty*, and it was a nice enough day that James assumed there’d even be younger kids later in the evening after school let out and families came down for walks or to let their kids run around. After the sixth person who asked if the camracondas were drones, Scent-Of-Rain had teleported away and back again, returning with a laser etched metal placard that read ‘Not Drones’, and a wooden post that she got El to help her drive into the sand. Whichever of their basement engineers had made it had also drawn a very badly proportioned snake emblem on the bottom. It was adorable.

Some of the group inevitably ended up in the water while scavenging for shells, or just while trying to get into the ocean, because there was a certain compulsion to go in the ocean. Unfortunately, here was where a lot of camracondas learned that part of the ‘organic’ in the ‘technorganic’ of their bodies included an aversion to dunking their lenses in salt water. It was hard to compare the pain with simple words to a human who opened their eyes in the ocean, so instead of doing that, some of the masochistic idiots that James called companions started using skulljacks to package .pain files and sharing them around to see whose body was worse for undersea operation. Because that was just what was happening today.

For his part, Nate refused to get involved, and started grilling. The smell of lighter fluid and burning coals quickly joined by the mouth watering scent of cooking steak and chicken kebabs. And the air filled further with him calling out finished food for the hungry to file past and make their lunch. James smiled as he watched the scene, not quite ready to eat himself; he sorta knew Nate was one of those people who was only really happy when he was working, but it was at least nice to see him working at something fun like this.

James was sitting on the ledge of his increasingly impressive beach pit, at one of the points where they'd used some driftwood planks and packed sand to make steps up, and hadn't made a piled wall of sand around the outside. He was covered in sand, in his clothes, under his fingernails, in his hair; he smelled sand, *tasted* sand. And his hands and arms ached something fierce. But he was weirdly satisfied with the cool little space he'd made to let a ten - or twenty very cozy - people sit together and roast marshmallows later.

Which was when the horse came by.

It was hard to not notice a horse on the beach. There'd been a few people who'd zipped by on three wheeled bikes earlier, which was also noticeable, and one person James thought was a conservation ranger in a little cart, but *horse* was a category all its own. He pulled himself out of the pit and tried to brush as much of the slightly wet sand off him as he could as the rider approached the space that his friends and companions had sprawled across.

Then he got instantly disappointed as he realized the rider was wearing a gold shield badge, and that this was a police horse, making it a lot less interesting. The officer rode up with his hand resting on the butt of his holstered pistol, a move that already had James interested in being A Problem for this man. "Scuse me sir." The officer said in a domineering voice that sounded like it had never actually mean the words 'excuse me' in its life. "No drones on this beach."

James tried to run through every ritual he had to keep from saying something stupid. He refrained from slowly looking at the 'not drones' sign. He did not say any of the dozen things he wanted to say about reading comprehension, he did not attempt to start a fight by ordering the man to take his hand off his fucking gun, he did not do a lot of the things he really, really felt like. That would have ruined a perfectly good day.

Instead, he gave a politely winning smile; the kind of smile JP had taught him was excellent at masking your utter contempt for someone, and both of them had bonded over how much they needed that skill. "Oh, of course!" James said cheerfully. "There was no posted sign for non-aerial drones! We'll make sure there's no drones on the beach ASAP. Sir." He almost forgot the magic word.

The officer narrowed his eyes at James anyway, the horse giving a snort and idly kicking at the sand with one hoof. "Alright. I'll be back by later to check."

"Of course." James nodded, still smiling, and stood waving as the horse took its rider away.

When he turned around, his face went from cheerful facade to furiously angry so fast that Alanna uttered a low "Yikes!" As she approached him. "Everything okay?"

He breathed deeply. "Yeah." He said. "Totally fine. No drones on the beach, so we're good."



“We don’t have any drones.” Alanna pointed out. “There’s a sign, even!”

“I didn’t tell him that.” James said.

“Why...?”

“I have a feeling it would have ended badly.” He grumbled. “Ugh. I’m angrier than normal. Literally all he had to do was not finger a deadly weapon while he talked to me. That’s the lowest fucking bar, right?”

Alanna patted him on the shoulder, and James pulled a face as the sand in his shirt itched against his skin. “You seem hungry. Go get a kebab.”

“Eehhhhh...”

“Nate made all-veggie ones too! Eat a whole onion!” She urged him.

James cracked a grin. “You know, I fucking love that he makes vegetarian and vegan stuff like it’s not a big deal? He doesn’t really have the vibe of someone who’d make veggie kebabs, right?”

“He looks like he’d eat a vegetarian.” Alanna nodded. “Go get a kebab. Stop stalling, you goof.” His partner didn’t relent, shoving him around his pit and over to Nate’s grill and teleport-assisted logistics station, glowering at him until he finally started eating something. She knew, for a fact, that James would sometimes just not eat for a while, losing a little bit of his emotional stability with each hour as he got distracted. It happened less and less, with his antidepressants in play, but Alanna was a trained eye at noticing that kind of behavior and making sure he didn’t ruin his own day without meaning to.

“Here.” Nate just deposited two skewers of meat and vegetables in a red plastic basket and handed it to James. “Eat this. And stop asking me Rogue questions.”

“I didn’t...” James started to protest, then looked around. “Are there even Rogues *here* today?” He demanded. “I don’t know who works where, Nate, I can’t be responsible for this kind of thing.”

The chef snorted, giving a relieved ‘thanks’ to Knife-In-Fangs as the camraconda blipped into existence near him, depositing a tray of uncooked skewers. He did so with his mouth, which was... a little weird, to James’ food safety sensibilities, but no camraconda was reckless enough to actually bring their mechanical arm packs here. Nate didn’t seem to pay it much mind, addressing James as he scrubbed an onion across the hot metal bars of his grill and added another row of chicken, trying to guess how many people were eying his food like circling predators. “A few here. JP’ll be by later with some others, after they pull out of New York fully.” Nate said. “I wanna talk about that later.” He added.

“You want to bail.” James said, without anger or malice, around a mouthful of chicken that tasted like lemon and pepper and a million other herbs.

Nate looked up at him with an appraising eye. “Yeah.” He said. “I do. This is a bad call on our part.”

“Sell me on it.” James said simply.

And again, Nate reappraised him. “You don’t want to be involved.” He said with a flat grunt as he used a pair of tongs to flip the kebabs in order. “Not what I expected.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” James said, feeling some energy return as he ate, the food flavored more by hunger and the constant physical work he’d been doing the last few hours. “I wanna stop this. But, like... it’s *abstract* right now. The stuff with, like, Status Quo, or the Alchemists, or whatever. We dealt with that because it was in front of us. We were *there* already. This is just... Nate, how thin are we stretched already?”

“It’s not *that* bad, but it’s not like we couldn’t use more people. A dozen half trained field agents isn’t a lot. And we don’t really have a data analysis staff except for Recovery.” Nate shrugged. “We don’t have a lot of digital backup. Maybe get Momo to build an AI to spy on everyone for us or some fuckin’ thing.”

“Momo... would probably not do that.” James said slowly, raising his basket up as a pair of kids scrambled by under where he was standing, getting a barked yell from Nate to get the fuck away from the grill when it was on. “But then, I haven’t seen Momo for over an hour, so the odds that she’s either already built one out of seashells is pretty high.”

“Actually?” Nate asked, half-serious.

“Probably not.” James admitted. “But I do legitimately worry that whenever she’s not directly observed, something spooky could be happening.”

“I’ll talk to JP when he’s here. We’ll get a pros and cons of this op for you. Fuck, for the Order, really. You’re not my boss.” Nate dashed a bottle of some sauce over the kebabs, and jerked his head for James to get out of the way. “More food’s up!” He called, and a flurry of sand signaled people reacting to the holy words.

Shaking his head as he walked off, James tried to find a seat to eat on, but all the logs were occupied by a group eagerly talking about the care and feeding of paper dragons, and while there was a beanbag chair that would absolutely *never* fully get the sand out of it now, that seat was reserved for Banana; the crow-wasp girl twitching with rapid motions to take in the beach full of people with an excited and hungry look in her remaining eye, Deb and Alex sitting on

either side of her in case she needed something. Though Alex was also idly building a sand castle that was doomed to be stepped on at some point.

He ended up taking steps up the side of one of the dunes that their part of the beach abutted, his bare feet sinking into the sand with that strange feeling of going through a hot crust to the cool buried grains. James tried to get to the top without needing to use his hands, so he could eat with relatively unsanded food, and the feat was harder than he remembered it being. Even with his magically enhanced agility, climbing shifting sand was still *effort*.

He stood atop the dune, looking down over the fifty people from the Order spread across a thousand feet of sand around him. Smelling the sea air and charcoal fire, feeling the dune grass stab his calves like he'd slighted its parentage, and listening to the crash of the waves as it drowned out all the human noises except the occasional shriek from one of the teenagers. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs to bursting and feeling a tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding slough off as he took a minute *alone*. Not isolated or lonely, just *away* from everyone for a minute.

Then he blinked as he became vaguely aware that he was not actually alone up here. James tilted his head to look down over his left shoulder, at where a pair of ratroaches were laying among the grass. Arrush was on his back with Keeka's hoodie under his head as a pillow while two of his free hands tried to weave a circle out of several blades of the sharp grass here, while Keeka lay on top of him like a curled up cat. Arrush noticed James looking down at them when he opened a few of his mismatched eyes, a light green tinge creeping in to the flesh around them where the chitin and fur ended.

"Oh, *this* is where you've been hiding!" James said in a friendly voice.

Keeka, who had *not* realized anyone was there, made a noise halfway between a shriek and a clicking snapping hiss, the fur on his exposed back shooting straight up like he was a porcupine prepared to stab an incoming predator. He also shot upward, legs and skirt trailing sand as he whirled on James in the span of a second.

Part of James was *thrilled* that finally, *finally*, *he* was the one doing the surprising. That part was overruled, currently, by the part of him that was letting out a startled squawk, falling on his ass, and being really sad that his onion skewer was now half covered in sand.

"Aw." He said sadly, making a halfhearted attempt to blow sand off his dinner. "Okay." James nodded and set the bright red plastic basket next to him. "Hi there."

"Hello." Arrush huffed out, lungs wheezing as his boyfriend stood perched on his chest. Keeka realized quickly what he was doing, and chittered an apology as he skittered backward and dropped onto the sand, breathing heavily, arms coming up to cover parts of his chest that...

James tried to figure out exactly why Keeka was acting embarrassed, since he had fur that he'd let grow out a bit to the point that it mostly covered the more insectile bits of his anatomy. He didn't want to stare, but he tried to figure out exactly what Keeka was covering. And when the ratroach shifted slightly, James started to wonder if he was trying to hide the old scars from where infected flesh had been stitched together.

"You two having fun canoodling up here?" James asked, shifting back and forth to make himself a makeshift seat in the sand, grains of sand scraping at his legs. "And I say that not actually remembering what that word means."

"It sounds rude to do outside of our rooms." Arrush said, one small arm poking at his ribs and wondering if one of them had been cracked. "Deb told us that." Next to him, Keeka, slowly settling down, nodded sheepishly.

James cleared his throat, heat rising in his cheeks. "Sorry, what?" He asked. "Did... was there..." He trailed off as he heard a wet clicking sound from Arrush, and realized the big ratroach was *laughing* at him. "Oh, I see how it is!" James said, face twisting into a smile and a laugh even as he bit his cheek to try to contain it. "Alright, alright. I deserved that I assume. But really, how're you two doing? We don't get much chance to talk, do we?" He looked over at Keeka, then down at himself. "Also do you want my shirt or something? If you're not feeling comfortable, and so Arrush doesn't have to give up his pillow?"

Keeka shook his head, small droplets of blue corrosive saliva beading on the sand nearby. He started to say something, but from where he was laying on the dune, Arrush held up his left arm and the other arm that split off from it, both hands in a 'hold on' gesture. "Yes." He said. Maybe a little enthusiastically. Keeka squeaked something horribly embarrassed, and James laughed as he casually unbuttoned his Hawaiian shirt and passed it over, Keeka taking it with an unsteady hand, and taking a few seconds to figure out how to manipulate all his lithe arms into the short sleeves.

"We are good." Arrush said from the ground as Keeka settled in, more comfortable with the loose shirt over his chest. "We are... I don't know how to say it all." He didn't meet James' eyes, instead tipping his head back, antenna digging tiny lines in the sand as he stared up at the blue sky with all five half open eyes. "So much less pain."

"From so many fewer places." Keeka added. "You don't know. How it feels to not have to hide." He shifted one of his digitigrade legs, his curved paw wrapping around Arrush's counterpart. "I can do this... and be less afraid." He said.

"Not not afraid?" James asked, curious and sad in equal measure.

"Never not afraid." Keeka whispered, words almost swallowed by the breeze.

James pursed his lips, glancing behind himself briefly as a kid screamed, just to make sure it was because of something fun and not something alarming. "I do kinda get it." He said. "Not to your degree, obviously, but I get it. The hiding."

"How?" Arrush asked. "You... you have..." He waved a hand toward the beach.

"Anesh and Alanna and Anesh and Anesh and..." He broke off laughing as Keeka crossed his arms and pulled back his muzzle in an expression that looked truly bizarre but could only ever be an exasperated pout. "Yeah, I have them. I do. Do you know we were only together for... oh heck, a year and a half before we met? It wasn't that long. Because we were all idiots and afraid of talking to each other or something, I don't remember." James tossed a hand up in a motion of casual dismissal. "And, I wanna be clear here, this isn't even close to the level of trauma you guys are working on. But, like... I feel bad that I was always too scared to tell my dad, you know?"

"Why?" Keeka asked.

Arrush cut in. "I know." He said, in a squeaking chitter that was weirdly adorable coming from his larger frame. "I have heard, from others around home. It... is it... not that you had... love... but that it was the wrong person?"

James sighed. "Something like that, yeah. Modern US society is getting better about not being pissy about guys dating each other. And also a little better about polyamory. Which is that thing where you have more than one partner. But it's still kinda uncommon, and I was just terrified of how my parents would react, so I just didn't tell them. Put it off and put it off and now they're vanished, and I'll probably never get the chance." James tried to give a small smile. "But yeah, I sorta understand being afraid. Even if it's not as bad."

"Not a contest." Keeka said, leaning forward with a long arm and a tiny twig of driftwood to tap James on the head. "Connie told me. We aren't supposed to make our pain a contest."

"Connie is very smart." James nodded, smiling earnestly again. "But also, like, I know your physical pain is still pretty bad. So, I look forward to getting the all clear to do some more work with the shaper substance to maybe fix that. Assuming you're okay with it."

"I hate it." Arrush said with a vehement snarl that emptied his lungs in a rush and left him panting on the ground. "But... we can't... keep taking... potions forever."

"Potions help, though, right?" James might have sounded a little nervous, but he was legitimately worried about these two. Them, and the others back at the Lair, who were still adapting to life outside of the Akashic Sewer. Keeka and Arrush were incredibly fragile, in a lot of ways, and they were the ones who had been modified to survive a fight. The other ratroaches were far too vulnerable, and so James felt like anything that could ease their pain was valuable.

“They do.” Arrush said with satisfaction. Then he paused. “Something you said... is it not normal? To have several boyfriends?”

James shrugged. He opened his mouth to answer, and paused only briefly as he spotted a rustling in the grass two dunes over. He blinked, and kept a sliver of focus on it, but started talking anyway. “I don’t wanna use words like normal.” He said. “Nothing in my life is normal. It’s a bad baseline. A lot of normal things suck.” James rubbed at the back of his neck sheepishly. “Though it’s not something people are used to, so that causes friction sometimes. And, like with basically every relationship thing, there’s a million ways to screw it up. Why, you two looking to date someone?” He smiled and bit his tongue, amused by the thought.

“Just Arrush is, now.” Keeka said as he reached down two paws to run them across Arrush’s stomach, wearing his own grin that froze on his muzzle as a twitch of motion and artificial color caught his attention in the dune grass to his side.

James also saw it. And recognized it, this time. Or at least, the color of the unstealthy shirt. It was at least one, possibly three, of the high school interns, part of the collective youth group that had joined the day at the beach.

It was also, he realized, one of the kids who still had a real problem with the ratroaches. Not specifically; Keeka and Arrush had never done a thing to anyone here. But in the abstract. They’d focused on the trauma of the loss they’d suffered at the hands of the Akashic Sewer, and were slowly turning it into bitter anger and hate at a whole species. Which, well.

James wasn’t a fan.

He also wasn’t a fan of teenagers trying to sneak up on him. But James led a cluttered life, and he had a developed love of multitasking.

He met Keeka’s eye, and gave a tiny shake of his head. The black furred ratroach didn’t untense, but did cock his head slightly at James, his triangular muzzle cracking open slightly in silent question. “So, everything else been going okay?” James asked, keeping his voice even. JP had tried to make him a viable field agent, and James was pretty damn sure he didn’t have the attitude for it, but he did sorta remember the lesson on how to be eavesdropped on.

Keeka slowly nodded, eyes flicking rapidly between James, and the teenagers shimmying through the grass to sneak up on them. He answered anyway. “Yes.” He said. “There is so... *much*. The world is huge. Did you know how many cities there are?” He asked, slightly distracting himself.

“...I actually... don’t know.” James suddenly blinked in realization. “Like, cities of at least twenty thousand people or so? Shit, there’s gotta be... uh...”

“Ten thousand!” Keeka said, excitedly.

“Ten thousand people?”

“Cities.” Arrush cut in. “He watches them, on the cameras.” He curled a footpaw around Keeka’s, digging another temporary line in the sand.

James nodded, eyes wide. “That’s actually more than I realized. Uh... are you planning to visit any of them? I know you two have had some problems with hostility lately.” He didn’t speak up, he just made his voice clear enough to carry when he said that.

Arrush propped himself up, rolling onto a side and using three of his arms to hold himself facing the other two, eyes glittering as he looked at his boyfriend. “No.” He said. “It is... too much.”

“Too many people.” Keeka said. “Too many... other people. We aren’t stupid. No one would want us there.” He made a wet sniffing noise. “It hurts. Even here with you, at home, sometimes.” The ratroach said, a little loudly, staring at James with an expression of deep satisfaction at having caught on to the bit.

“Aw.” James gave a sad grimace. “Yeah, I know Arrush was having a problem with some of the interns being... well, cruel, really.” He said. “He asked us to give them another chance, but... weeeeeelll...” James trailed off.

Arrush, blind to the byplay, gave a shrug of his wide shoulders. “They are children. Still learning. It will be okay, and I will... survive. They can learn to not hate. I won’t hate them while they grow up.” His voice didn’t shake as he said it, and he looked up at the sky again, neck cracking as he smiled peacefully, staring up at the thin clouds.

Out of the corner of his eye, James watched as a trio of those children try to stealthily exfiltrate themselves from a situation that had been made especially awkward for them. Keeka noticed too, and leaned into Arrush in a hug that tried to envelop the bigger ratroach in thin limbs, Shaking lightly with contained laughter as he did so.

“Welp.” James chuckled. “We’ll see how that turns out, I guess.”

“How what does?” Arrush asked, confused.

James just laughed loudly, joining the other ratroach as Arrush looked between them with growing curiosity. He stood up, grabbing his thoroughly sanded food. “I’m gonna go get another kebab.” He said. “And we’re probably gonna do a big campfire thing later. You two should join us?” He prompted.

He got nods in response. And also Arrush took the remains of his kebab, eating the whole thing. Skewer, too. Apparently ratroach internal acid didn’t much care about wood.

James wandered back, leaving his shirt with Keeka and enjoying the feel of the sun on his skin. He got a comical catcall from Alanna, who he rolled his eyes at, and a layer of sunscreen from Anesh, who *pretended* to be concerned but sure did seem to put a lot of effort into it, which James pointed out with a coy voice that made his boyfriend turn a shade of dark bronze.

He didn't really have anything to *do*, really. So he wandered the growing crowd, just enjoying the feeling of a community beach cookout for a little.

Sarah had arrived, and, as was Sarah's new favorite thing to do, had organized a game of beach volleyball where each 'team' was one player backed by a half dozen relationstick linked spectators. She sat with a magic book open in her lap as a dozen people cheered for their avatars, swapping out every point to give everyone a chance to try, normal humans pushed to inhuman limits simply by sharing their capabilities with each other.

A group of actual younger children, not teenagers, including one of the paper dragons, were assembling an increasingly complex sand castle with plastic buckets and shovels. Nearby, Texture-Of-Barkdust hummed to herself as she held the structure in place with an unblinking eye, making a strangely stable platform for the dragon to roost on.

James made small talk with a passing family, two parents and a young girl who was currently trying to get the dragon to let her ride it. The parents weren't really sure what was going on, but they seemed nice enough through their confusion. The mother had some engineering questions about the camracondas, and James pointed to the 'not drones' sign before asking what she did. Apparently, she worked on oscilloscopes, which a long ago yellow orb skill let James converse about for about ten minutes before he got out of his depth.

For a while, he took over the grill from Nate, the chef vanishing for half an hour to do... something. While he was gone, JP showed up along with a pair of people James assumed were Rogues, including a still-bruised Yin. He didn't exactly *apologize* for how things were going, but he did make it clear he himself was getting annoyed and had what he cryptically referred to as 'plans', which worried James more than the antimemetic assassins, really.

At one point, he got roped into a conversation - a debate, more accurately - between *several* people he'd never met. At first, he worried it was a heated argument about whether they had a responsibility to use the Alchemist's stolen potion-producing tree to do anything more than just enrich themselves, but quickly realized that one of the participants was a living potion person, and that the conversation was quite literally about using the sap from the tree of knowledge to literally enrich themselves, and if that was even possible. It wasn't an ethical conversation, it was a procedural one, around the capabilities and biology of the artificial alchemical people. James left it feeling quite confused, but knowing that the potion people had started calling themselves 'inhabitants', which he felt was... a strange species name. But not a bad one.



As the sun began to turn the day from blue skies to painted sunset, several people went home, exhausted. The rest of them began to convert the pile of salvaged driftwood from haphazard stack, into effective fire pit.

James didn't know how many people gathered in the pit he'd dug, though at some point, someone - several someones, perhaps - had expanded it into a series of sandy foxholes. They got fires going, bags of marshmallows and long sticks passed out as everyone settled down with each other, no one overly worried about the close quarters. A few people hung back on the edges, but James found himself strangely comfortable sandwiched between Alanna and Arrush, his partner slightly tipsy from the few drinks she'd had over the day, and Arrush seemingly uncertain how he'd ended up there in the first place.

The fire crackled and popped with orange and red light and heat, not uncomfortable, no, but certainly a gamble that you didn't end up downward of it and caught in a column of smoke. The smoke smelled like nothing else James had ever encountered; driftwood fires just had their own *flavor* to them, and he knew it would stick to his clothes and hair for days after.

The first marshmallow he tried to roast caught fire. Which was exactly the right way to eat them. The debate from *that* statement was *far* more heated than anything else over the course of the day, with James being booed and losing his status as respected hero from half the group as he happily pulled the charcoal exterior of his marshmallow off like a husk and dropped it into his mouth. Alanna tried it, under duress, and proclaimed that James was lucky that she loved him, which, he agreed, really. Arrush tried it, and got melted and burned marshmallow somehow spread across three different hands and a patch of his fur.

Someone at the fire next to theirs started playing a guitar, a twangy sound that went from idle strumming to an acoustic version of a song that tickled the recognition in James' brain but he couldn't quite place. When someone asked if the song had lyrics, the player paused for a minute, then awkwardly asked if they'd like to sing along, and one hesitant skulljack connection later, simply passed on their own memories to a couple people who wanted to participate. Including, James noted with a flutter in his chest and the soft notes of tears in his eyes, Sarah. She'd been - entirely reasonably - terrified of making any kind of use of the skulljack that had been forced on her for a *while*. But here she was, being exactly herself, singing just a little badly alongside the others after accepting the connection.

James had actually felt weird, today. As more and more people showed up and it became less easy to recognize every face, he'd felt like he was losing a bit of his grip on the whole thing. He'd sort of expected a day with a few friends, not *this*. But it wasn't bad, really. He wouldn't want to do this every time he took a trip, but this was *nice*, and he didn't need to be deeply close personal friends with literally everyone in order to recognize that they all had the common goal of being good people and having good lives and making a good world.

He would admit, he was a little surprised when he spotted a tall teenager, sporting glasses and a flat haircut, approach Arrush while the ratroach was taking some time away from the crowd.

James *could* have pushed some of his enhanced senses to their limits to hear what was said, but... it seemed personal, and not unkind, and the ratroach came back looking confused, and a little lighter somehow as he settled into the cold sand next to James.

But soon enough, it was time to go. As much as he didn't ever want to leave, though, the day had to end eventually. And as people teleported back home carrying bags of garbage or empty cans, and James loaded his own car in preparation for the tired but refreshed drive home, he had a massive grin on his face.

Which was slightly undercut when El came up to him with a worried look. "Hey, assbutt. Have you seen Speaky?" She asked.

"Isn't... don't informorphs... inside your head or something?" James blinked at her, thoughts falling over each other.

"Yeah, well, he's 'out', and I dunno where he went." She said. "And I'm kinda getting panicked, but trying to hide it."

"He and Zhu went out earlier." Anesh said as two of him settled a sleeping Texture-Of-Barkdust into the back seat of the car. She'd asked to be part of the drive back, and with Anesh and Alanna willing to telepad out, she got considerably more space. "James, can you navigate to a navigator? If not, we've actually *got* a few dozen stored... uh... eggs... at the lair. I can go crack one for search and rescue."

James started to nod. "Might not be a bad... idea..." He trailed off as a shape crested one of the dunes toward the parking lot. He was, he knew, the last person off that beach, there was no one else down there. And regardless, it was quadrupedal anyway. Not *weird*, just kind of not something he was expecting, the animal trotting eagerly up the sandy hill in the last flickers of light for the day. "Is that a coyote?" He said, a little surprised. "I didn't... uh... wait, no, go somewhere else!" He and El stepped back, next to Anesh, as the wild animal made what seemed like a beeline straight for their cars.

He fought monsters for a living, and he could *probably* take a coyote in a fight if he needed to. But that didn't mean he actually wanted to.

Then it came to a cautious stop, about fifteen feet away from them, its matted fur slightly raised, long legs bent like it was prepared to run. It stared at them, and the three of them stared back.

Then two flickering auras peeled off of it. One a wispy orange, in the shape of feathers, and the other all fins and eyes in a deeper teal. The two different infomorphs, manifested in slightly different ways, swirled around the coyote as they both faced their hosts.

"He followed us home!" Zhu exclaimed excitedly, getting a happily agreeing yip from the coyote. "Can we keep him?!"

James looked back at Anesh and El. His boyfriend just held up his collective hands, shaking his head with pursed lips and a 'nope'. El met his eyes, though, and the two of them shared a moment of understanding.

They'd passed the moment in their lives where saying "yes" to this seemed like it was a good idea. Somehow, they'd become mature adults. James silently pled for help with this situation, and El let out a long sigh as she realized what had happened to her.

All things considered, though? Explaining to a pair of nascent infomorphs why it was a bad idea to kidnap random wildlife wasn't the *worst* way to end a beautiful day at the beach.