

*“Violence is the language that those in power use to destroy their own world. Violence in turn is the only way they can be forced to listen.” -Noah Gervais, Souls Inheritors-*

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“Rufus!” James exclaimed, high-fiving the growing strider as he passed by in the basement hallway.

James had just come from the main hub of Research, where he was trying to make headway on actually reading through the captured notebooks of the insane mechanic who had murdered the majority of a city a few months back.

The Order of Endless Rooms had a somewhat lackadaisical view of information security sometimes. Everyone knew what their Rogues were up to, for example, and the Response operations records were all public and in a sorted database. But for some things, a more serious approach was required, including taking precautions against things that might not actually be problems.

The fortunately deceased mechanic’s notebooks contained a lot of what you’d expect from someone who had decided they deserved to be a god and that anyone in their way was at best fuel and at worst an insult to be torturously murdered. But in between the self-aggrandizing philosophy that would have looked right at home in some of the worst comments sections on the internet, there was also a frightening amount of power.

Three theoretical ways to draw a dungeon’s territory out from the dungeon. One way, practically tested, to bind it there. Methods - some tested, some thankfully not - for shaping dungeon power to convert human bone into necromantic soldiers, or to eat the life force of sacrificed individuals, or to cloud people’s memories, or to bring a vehicle to life, whatever that meant.

No one was allowed to read it without double authorization from two people who had clearance, and at least one person on site to observe. The book didn’t leave the room, no copies were to be made. If they lost this source of information, then too bad; the Order would get by without it, and that risk was worth not spreading around the fact that it might actually be really easy to trigger a zombie apocalypse.

Not, like, *oops my bad* easy, but as James puzzled through the old asshole’s vaguely racist bullshit, he did start to think it would be easy enough for basically anyone with the right approach to get started. The mechanic had spend a lot of time laying the groundwork, and either by accident or intent put a limiter on his own zombie army, but it did actually seem like anyone with half a brain and a gun could get this started on a much smaller scale.

It sucked and James hated it, which meant he wasn’t in a great mood, and was looking for any excuse to feel better about his day. So, high-fiving a living stapler. Which was actually a great

mood boost, really, and not just because James was doing his best to ditch the scowling face for his friend.

Rufus, crawling across a web of paperclips hanging from the ceiling in that way that James was pretty sure defied physics, made some complex and excited gestures with his pen legs at his lower-to-the-ground human friend. He really had been growing more lately; not hugely, but enough that it was recognizable that he clearly wasn't a normal stapler anymore. If he held really still, you could maybe imagine he was a novelty gift or something, but once he started moving it was hard to see him as a piece of office equipment, and easier to just assume he was a weird form of new life. Which he was.

"Yeah, I get that." James nodded in response to Rufus' gestures. "But you know you don't have to work too hard, right? Or at all, honestly."

Rufus rolled his central eye, an impressive feat while dangling upside down. Maybe. James wasn't actually sure if striders were built to do that. One single pen tip extended slowly to point directly at James.

"Okay, first of all, shut up." James folded his arms. "I don't... I can take a break when... *I was just on vacation!*" Two members of Research passed him by, the humans squeezing against the wall and avoiding in any way getting involved in the conversation of someone yelling at the ceiling about how relaxed he totally was. "Oh, whatever. Anyway, what'cha been up to lately?"

At that, Rufus perked up, and motioned for James to follow, scurrying across the paperclip webbing somehow without dragging it down as he skittered down to the next intersection of concrete basement hall, and took a sharp turn. James shrugged, and followed, passing a few other people who were either absorbed in what they were reading or having a heated conversation about the emerald chips that grew programs.

When he caught up to Rufus, the strider was pushing a lever that had been added at the top of a door to a side closet, the contraption allowing his small form to slide the larger door open easily enough. He ducked in, motioning for James to follow and shut the door.

The inside was *warm*. James instantly felt stifled in the hot air, and he saw why Rufus wanted the door kept shut. It was also cramped; barely any space for a human to stand, most of the whole supply closet taken up by tables covered in pots, lamps, terrariums, and tiny customized gardening tools. And a *riot* of growth, plants both mundane and mystical filling the room. About twenty different small cacti dotted around the area, growing next to pots with thorny vines and weeds James recognized from his walks around the area. But then mixed into that, planter pots that grew copper stems ending in spiked balls of staples, or the entire back wall being taken up by one of those weird vines that James had seen near the printer ink ocean in Officium Mundi.

The strider dropped down to one of the tables, tapping twice on the white painted wood. And James was just about to comment on the space being impressive when a small voice near his feet let out a panicked yelp.

James nearly jumped out of his skin, yelping as well as he hopped back and tried to catch himself on the wall so he didn't knock anything over. Sweeping his gaze over the floor, he caught sight of a splash of white cloth crawling under one of the shelves, and slowly caught his breath. "Okay, *hi*." He said.

Rufus hopped adroitly to the floor, flicking out a pen leg to tap the back of the creature that had startled James, then scratching at the floor in a 'get out here' kind of manner. A few seconds later, Fredrick, one of the first creations of the Clutter Ascent dungeon, rotated himself around to face out from under the shelf, and poked his head out.

"Hello. Ssssnacks?" The creature's face was a soft blending of the smooth flesh of a salamander and the snout of a raccoon, and if that was all you had to go on, he was adorable. He was still adorable when you knew he was part spider as well, and had a number of extra limbs growing off his back, but he was self-conscious about that. His full name was Fredrick Umbra Armillary, because Sarah had named him, and no one, especially Fredrick, was going to tell her otherwise.

James snorted a laugh at how quickly the little guy got over his fear. "Sure." He said, pulling a granola bar out of his back pocket and offering it down. Fredrick scrambled out, bowling Rufus aside as he scampered forward, his normal black furred form covered in a baggy white tee shirt that was splattered with colored inks. "What's with the frock?" James asked.

Rufus tapped once to get his attention, and then pointed to the vine at the back of the room, small oval pods of colored fluid growing off the blossoms on it. He put two legs together, then split them apart with a huff, miming an explosion.

"Huh." James nodded. "That's kinda cool. Good foresight, though!"

With a slump, and a denying shake of his body, Rufus slid up next to where Fredrick was scarfing down the granola bar clutched in his two front paws, and lifted up the hem of the shirt. Underneath, James could see that the normal black fur was painted a bright neon yellow and pink in splotches that didn't exactly *glow*, but were more contrasted than they should have been.

"Ah." James tried not to laugh, but couldn't hold back a grin. "Gotchya. Well hey, wanna show me around?" He stood back up, and dusted off his knees, as his first dungeon friend started scampering from plant to plant, explaining with powerfully emotive gestures and occasionally the help of Fredrick talking in a cluttered hiss around a mouthful of granola what each of them were.

There were a bunch of cacti in here, and a whole row of duplications of the pot that could grow anything as a succulent. Rufus apparently had requested a few, and since they stacked decently, Anesh had used their extra duplication ritual for the last couple weeks to make a bunch. Now, James knew, these pots would be in high demand to grow more of the potion-making sap. But damned if he was gonna take these away from Rufus.

Though it did amuse the fuck out of him that Rufus had used them to grow mostly normal earth cactus. Just... smaller, and more contained. Also, an agave plant, which seemed to be on an accelerated life cycle.

Rufus showed James through rows of his staple crop, which seemed to be growing really well out of normal earth soil that should not have been able to produce something made of steel and zinc. Some of them were held up by small wooden stakes, and had been shaped into different patterns. It took James a minute to realize Rufus was essentially making plant art here, and when he did, his face morphed into a goofy beaming grin as he followed along looking at the plants.

When James went to poke at the wall vine, complete with its pods of what seemed to be highlighter ink, Rufus just stopped him, crossing his legs together and standing between James and disaster. Which was appreciated, really.

And then, after showing James a blackberry vine that he was especially proud of, Rufus and Fredrick practically dragged James down to look at the most impressive thing in their garden.

Under one of the wire racks, shaded from the light in the room, was what looked like a sample of a coiled black vine. Clearly of dungeon origin, it had a rubbery skin and was 'planted' in what looked like patches of office carpet.

James didn't quite get why it was so impressive, until Rufus had climbed over it, and pulled James view to the side, so that he could see a small nub of black rubber plant flesh growing off the main vine trunk. And on the end of it, dull in color and smaller than any other example he'd ever seen, sat a small yellow ball, strands of sticky black goo keeping it in place.

It hadn't been put there. It was *growing* there.

"Well holy shit." James said. Which was a bit of an understatement, really. This meant a *lot* of things, and even just knowing this was possible would set the Research division into a hurricane of action. But right now, it meant one very important thing, which James needed to acknowledge. "This is awesome, you guys." He said, reaching over to fist bump Rufus. "Not just this, the whole garden. Seriously, this place is so cool." James smiled as Fredrick sheepishly tried to recede into the background, the stuff animal still not used to other people. "Alright, I gotta get going. Do you mind if I tell people about this?" He asked, and got a resigned nod from Rufus. "Hey, it's okay to say no." He said, but the strider just gave a bobbing shrug of a motion. "Well, alright. Is there anything you want for this place? Like, I don't want

you to just keep adding more work to do. But if you want anything, we've got the resources now."

Rufus thought about it for a second, and then pointed up with one of his legs.

"A... another floor?" James asked, getting a negative motion in response and more pointing up. "To be upstairs? Up... up... wait, like, sun? You want sunlight?" He snapped his fingers as Rufus started nodding. "Shockingly, yes, I think we have a way to get some sunlight into this underground room." James said, the sentence giving him a moment of perspective on his life. "I'll keep you informed."

He turned to leave, waving goodbye to the two of them and getting waves in return.

After James had left, Rufus turned and patted Fredrick on the shoulder. It was lucky James hadn't noticed the absolute mess of neon orange ink that was pooling on the ceiling like gravity didn't apply to it, and now that he was gone, they had to deal with that before something happened.

"Sssmmmmop?" Fredrick asked. He'd seen a mop around here, somewhere. Rufus considered it and slowly nodded. Maybe they could ask someone from Research and get it written off as cute antics, without anyone asking questions. Rufus wished Ganesh would come by. Ganesh could ask for anything and it seemed reasonable.

Plan acquired, the two of them pulled the door open and made their way back into the basement.

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The problem, as Karen saw it, was that there was a barrier between having phenomenal material wealth, and actually using that wealth.

The Order of Endless Rooms, to the surprise of no one who spent more than a few days around the place, was full marvels beyond what humans normally pulled off. Other species, weird magics, odd artifacts that they didn't know how to use. It was... a bit of a mess. But it also meant that when someone learned they had a matter replicator, the standard response was 'Oh. Okay?'

And no one new appreciated just how much time and effort it had taken to get to the point that they could just casually output an actual literal ton of platinum. Research's work on the orange totems, the actual acquisition of the material in the first place, the duplication runs spent on that when they could have been spent making more magic, empowering the people who fought on their version of the frontlines, or *curing cancer*. The costs added up.

But now they had tons of platinum. Literal tons. Multiple thousands of pounds. In easily portable bars, too.

And there was a bit of a barrier.

What they *needed* was food, materials, manufactured goods, skilled labor, and a slot within the systems of the world that would gradually accrue trust that could be leveraged into logistical lines. No amount of raw material wealth could simply make those things appear, without doing something highly unethical.

You couldn't actually just go to the grocery store and hand them a brick of rare metal in exchange for their produce department. You couldn't deposit it in a bank account, or use it to pay salaries, or trade it for needed materials. You couldn't *do* much with platinum, as a normal citizen of the United States, or any modern country really.

This got into the point where the rubber met the road on the concept of 'value'. What, exactly, was this metal *worth*? Well, twenty thousand dollars a pound, in general. But why?

Because it was rare, and people used it for things. Mostly electronics of various forms. LCD screens used it, so did fiber optic cables. The automobile industry also made use of it, but only for diesel vehicles, so demand was waning as time went by. Karen knew that last part because that had been where she'd gone first to try to offload a large portion of their 'wealth'.

For some time, the Order had maintained a relationship with a local metal foundry, selling quantities of silver that they pulled out of Officium Mundi. Technically, this was entirely legal, but there was a lot of grey area in selling precious metal that you couldn't source the original mining of. Still, it was a working relationship that was a good way to convert something they had no use for, into liquid currency. That foundry operator had laughed at Karen when she'd offered the platinum.

Karen was not the only person working on this problem; she had long since acquired a real staff to help with the Order's finances. But she was the one who had ended up feeling like she had a vendetta against this particular obstacle.

"I understand that this is not what you normally work with." Karen was saying into her phone, voice the patient cadence of a mother who was trying very hard not to be angry, but was still disappointed. "What we are offering is an alternate supply for your factories, with no market fluctuation, no interruption, and no... yes. Yes. Yes, I am aware that you do not know who we are." She struggled to keep her voice level as Texture-Of-Barkdust looked up from where they were doing research on the other side of the desk, the camraconda's eye lensing in concern as Karen's tone got more irate. "No, it is sourced through a private operation, which is- no, it is not stolen or illicit in any way." Her eye twitched. "You can *verify* that through the absolute *absence* of *several tons* of platinum going missing from the open market in the prior *history of the country*." She snapped.

A few seconds later, she pulled her phone away from her head, looked at the 'call ended' screen, and sighed.

"Slightly unprofessional." Texture-Of-Barkdust told her.

"Oh hush." She sighed at her friend and co-worker. "We have made a mistake with this." Karen waved at the stack of notes they had collected, the charts of who they had spoken to, who had said no. It wasn't that she'd made *no* sales - the Order was financially stable for at least a year of 'normal' operations - but this was basically cold calling. Which was not enjoyable.

Texture-Of-Barkdust arched her back, cables creaking slightly as she stretched herself in the basket chair she was using. "Where?" She asked.

"In making this much platinum in the first place." Karen said. "Functionally, we are now able to provide the yearly planetary output of platinum in roughly three weeks, if we chose to do so. But no one will buy from us." She held up two fingers to her lips. "We aren't accredited, we aren't a securities exchange, we have no established contracts. And yes, we *have all this valuable material*, but no one is trusting us enough to take it."

"You have established three long term contracts." The camraconda pointed out.

Karen made a dismissive snort. "Hardly. A year is not a long time, and they're all for far less than we could provide. It's not a problem, we have an income now that is enough for normal operations, however..." She trailed off, both her and Texture-Of-Barkdust nodding slightly as they thought about how 'normal' wasn't really a useful word around here.

"We should tell them to stop making more." Texture-Of-Barkdust said eventually.

"Hm?" Karen looked up from the list of part processing factories and their parent companies she had assembled. "Who?"

"Anesh and the others who run the ritual. We should tell them to stop making more platinum."

Karen blinked. "They're still... we haven't even... how much do we have?"

The camraconda tried to find the note she had, and couldn't. "Planner?" She asked the open air. "What is the quantity of platinum stored in the Lair?"

A thin teal shape of a reaching tentacle coiled out from nowhere behind Texture-Of-Barkdust. "Twelve thousand six hundred and four pounds, rounded. It is being stored in the ancillary crawlspace to keep it out of the way." The infomorph said in their voice like a pen on paper. Texture-Of-Barkdust just pivoted her head to look back at Karen with a nod.

Karen pressed her hands together, bringing the line of her fingers up to her forehead. “Richer than my wildest dreams.” She muttered. “And no one’s buying.”

“Three contracts!” Texture-Of-Barkdust reminded her. “Call someone else! Just tell them it’s magic!” The camraconda’s digital voice spiked in volume briefly.

Karen checked her watch, a classic plated metal band, not some modern digital thing. “Mmh. No.” She said. “I will need to leave in twenty minutes to pick up my daughter.”

Texture-Of-Barkdust nodded again. “Punctuality is important.” She stated. “I will call, then.”

Briefly, Karen felt a spark of concern. And the part of her that *was* a mother wanted to say something about how that wasn’t a good idea, that her co-worker wasn’t ready. The really condescending part of her brain reminded her that Texture-Of-Barkdust was *five years old*, and that despite having mastered double entry accounting and the use of Microsoft Excel, she was a *child* and not a seasoned negotiator.

“I don’t know... if that’s a good idea.” Karen said slowly.

The camraconda met her eyes, an understanding look in her lens. “Because I am not human.” Texture-Of-Barkdust said.

“Yes.” Karen didn’t blunt the truth for her friend. “We’ve talked about this.”

“We have.” Texture-Of-Barkdust said with a physical sigh over her digital voice. “But I have decided I do not care. I am here now, and will not be excluded from my own life. Your people will have to adapt.” She said. “I would rather confront the casual racism of your species, than hide from it.”

Karen flinched like she’d been shocked. She caught herself before she spoke, a dozen defensive replies on her lips. None of them feeling especially good.

Instead, she took a breath, and reminded herself that she was in a place where the normal rules didn’t apply so much. And maybe it would be okay, if her office was cold calling with a life form that most people would assume was a sophisticated computer program.

Also, after a full day of trying to establish contacts in the manufacturing industry, Karen was honestly quite prepared to set Texture-Of-Barkdust on them just to see what happened. And she was short on time anyway. So she nodded, and said in the friendliest tone she had in her at the moment, “Well, don’t make too much trouble. Remember the practice runs we did. And remember to save the call recordings!”



“Of course.” Texture-Of-Barkdust said as Karen stood and collected her jacket and purse. “I am very professional.”

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“Hi.” James said quietly, half holding open the door to a hospital room.

The Order of Endless Rooms had a hospital. More of an ER, really, but it was on par with a modern and well-funded hospital. It was actually their first major orange orb totem construction project, and it was something James was immensely proud of them for, even though he didn't really get why the most important thing was that the nurse's station was only three steps away from any given door. They'd put it in a basement, because the rules no longer applied to them, and James wasn't about to get a permit to build an underground medical facility from a city that wouldn't care that *technically* the walls didn't actually intersect the pipes.

Currently, their hospital held six people. One human who had gotten their leg cut open on a dungeon delve and lost so much blood they'd needed an emergency transfusion; they were stable and recovering, because telepads were lifesavers. One camraconda currently on an IV because they had the flu and that disease was way more dangerous to their species. One Akashic Sewer life form that was some kind of crow-was still recovering from a near-death experience, but was finally out of her coma and was able to be awake for a few hours a day; Alanna tried to spend time with her when she could.

And three ratroaches. Also from the Akashic Sewer, also confused, scared, and not even close to in good health. Deb wanted them kept in isolation until they got a clean bill of health, which might take a little while, since she was having trouble sourcing some of the vaccinations she needed.

For now, though, James was here to have some conversations. Beyond the basic “it's okay, you're safe” that they'd all gotten before they'd been given space to rest, recover, and start to feel comfortable.

These things could take time. And heavy chats weren't anything that needed to be rushed in a situation like this.

The ratroach on the bed looked up at James from the Rubick's cube it was playing with, antenna softly bobbing as it moved. And James was treated to a fresh reminder that the two ratroaches that lived with them already were heavily modified examples of the species.

This one was scrawny, to the point that you could see where its lack of muscle definition caused patches of hard chitin to pull painfully on the fuse points to its furred skin. Like Arrush and Keeka when they'd arrived, it was covered in red lines that hadn't faded yet; infections and rashes that were being actively treated now that it was out of the Sewer, but that didn't just go away overnight. It's head was the same kind of triangular form, ending in a rat's muzzle; this

one with a sweep of smooth chitin on the top of its head that almost left it looking bald. Bald and missing one pointed ear.

It had three eyes. Two big bulging ones, and a single smaller faceted beady dot, the left side of its face having the smaller eye offset under the larger one. And to go with the extra eye, a single extra arm, the 'shoulder' of it growing out of what would be just off to the small of a human's back.

Most of it was wrapped up in the hospital bedding, even over the loose clothing they'd given it. But James could see spots of cream-white fur poking out.

He suddenly realized he wasn't actually sure how Deb had gotten the ratroaches bathed and cleaned. A small spark of guilt rooted into his chest, as he wondered if he should have offered to help with that. But he set it aside for later.

The ratroach flinched as James opened the door and spoke. More than just flinched, it twitched, and cowered. Not a lot, but enough. It also didn't speak, just staring at him.

"Do you mind if I come in for a minute?" James asked, keeping his voice calm and kind.

The ratroach nodded in a snap motion, like it was afraid of giving the wrong answer. James didn't comment, just entering, leaving the door a bit open, and pulling up a chair. He stayed a bit away from the bed though.

"So." He said. "Deb tells me your vocal cords don't work quite right, but that you still know bits of a few languages. So I brought you this." He opened the small bag he'd brought along, and brought out a small whiteboard and a set of pens. "Here." He handed it over. The ratroach looked at him for a while, before cautiously reaching out for the offered objects. "Don't sniff the pens too closely; I dunno what they put in those, but I know it's not great. Whatever you write on the board, can be wiped off easily, so you can... yeah." James nodded as the ratroach, with sharp claws, uncapped one of the pens and started writing something. "Oh, I'll tell you now, I don't know German." James added.

The ratroach froze, then slowly looked around for something to wipe the board with, before looking down at its own sheets. James cut it off, passing over a box of tissues.

A minute later, after shaking paws got the words where it wanted them, it turned the board toward him. "Why here?" It asked.

"Me?" James asked, and got a nod. "Partly to give you that." James said, nodding to the gift. "Partly to talk to you a bit about the near future."

The ratroach tensed up, drawing back and bracing one of its digitigrade legs on the side of the bed, like it was curling up to run for the door.

James didn't exactly sigh, but he did just widen his eyes in a sad look, pursing his lips and shaking his head slightly. "It's not bad, I promise." He added, and the ratroach absolutely did not relax or believe him. "Well. Uh... do you have a name?" He asked. "I'm James."

A shake of the head. When James asked if they'd like to come up with one, they almost eagerly started writing, before catching themselves.

"It's actually okay." James said, trying not to let his voice crack. "I promise. I know it doesn't mean much, but I swear, we are not going to hurt you. It's not a trick or a trap, if you... it's okay to have a name." He swallowed, trying to resist the urge to reach out and comfort the creature in the bed.

He'd tried that with the last one, which was why he was wearing a long sleeved shirt in the middle of summer; it hid the bandages and stitches better.

Still staring at him with one of its eyes, the ratroach picked up the pen off the sheet where it had dropped it, missing or ignoring the mark it left, and slowly started writing something again. The room was quiet for a bit, except for the hissing breathing of the ratroach, and the felt *squeak* of the dry erase marker.

When it turned the board to James, it had one word written on it. "Smoke."

"Smoke." James said, then smiled slightly, ignoring the flinch at his grin. "Hello Smoke." He said. "Has everything been okay for you so far, here?" There was a long pause, but eventually, a slow nod. Again, like the ratroach - like Smoke - was waiting for a trap to spring. "That's good." James said. "So, I'd like to talk about tomorrow." He said.

Smoke pulled itself into a tighter coil, prepared to fight its way out if it needed to. But... James didn't move, didn't look like he was going to even get up from the chair to stop it if it tried to run. It was so confusing. The ratroach took up the board again, and slowly, awkwardly, penned a question, feet pressed on the mattress. "What about it?"

"Well." James said. "Let me get the basic stuff done first. You are *welcome to stay as long as you want*, okay? We aren't going to kick you out, or leave you to go hungry or cold. The Order - that's us, by the way, Order of Endless Rooms, a name that is a bit of a mouthful and I regret making so long - has taken responsibility for you. And that means that you will always have a place here if you want it, even if you leave and need to come back later."

Smoke nodded, but didn't really understand.

"Okay." James continued. "So. We have some real apartments set up in another part of the building, but that's not the only option you have. We have an offsite operation in a mostly empty city; it's technically more dangerous, but there's fewer people around if you'd prefer that. But we

can sort that out later, I just... I'm getting ahead of myself." He took a deep breath, trying to not wince at the strong smell of antiseptic and the half dozen different antifungal creams on the ratroach's body. "Let me outline the next week or so. You'll be here for a few more days of isolation, until your treatment is done. Deb is gonna get some vaccines for you, and I swear, I know this sounds bad, but don't worry about the needles. Also, we need to make sure there's nothing growing on or in you that might hurt anyone. That includes a sweep from Planner or another infomorph, probably to address why I keep thinking of you as 'it' and not 'her', which is really pissing me off every time I notice it. After that, we'll get you moved to somewhere you can start to get comfortable. Someone from our Recovery division will be available to help you when you need it, and we'll also get you started on long term trauma therapy, and cultural lessons." James sniffed slightly as he took a pause, rubbing his nose with the back of a scarred hand. "After that... oh?" He stopped as the ratroach held up their whiteboard.

"Or else what?" Smoke had written on it in Spanish, giving James a frightened but challenging look, their eyes peering over the top of the board held up like it was a shield.

"Or... or else nothing." James said with sad kindness. "Sorry. I should be clear here. You can leave as soon as we're done with the medical stuff. I don't... I don't think you'd like it? The world kind of sucks right now, but you could, and we won't stop you. Hell, we'll give you a care package on the way out. This is just if you want to stay."

Smoke tapped their board again, eyes glinting as they narrowed them at James.

James just shook his head, firmly. "No. You aren't... no. There is no *or else*. There is no threat."

"I won't." The board was turned back to James with a rough and rapid scribble of language on it.

"Won't... what?" James asked, mildly confused, but no less tense. Smoke shrugged at him, and he got the impression the answer was 'anything'. "No..." his voice softened again. "No. We're not asking anything, or demanding anything. This is... this is just a gift. Okay?" He got a nod, but obviously no belief. James sighed now, for real. "Alright. Well, hey. One step at a time. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Why?" The word was written in the margin, next to the other bits. Smoke tapped at it with a frantic claw, scratching their new whiteboard.

James smiled a little. "You know how... you know how, where you were until we brought you here, whoever was strong did whatever they wanted?" He asked. Smoke nodded at him. "Okay." James said. "Well. Together, all of us here? We are *very* strong. And we have decided to be kind." He pushed his chair back, standing slowly. "Think on if you want to live by yourself or not. Also, if you want to talk to someone who's been in your position, there are others here who might be able to help you. Just let the nurse or Recovery agent know, okay?"

And I'll talk to you in a couple days." He didn't get an answer, except a suspicious stare, so he just smiled again, and pulled the door open enough to slip out, closing it softly.

Once in the hallway, James let out a very long sigh, resisting the urge to hammer his head against the closed door. Then he turned, and made a high pitched noise barely muffled by grinding his teeth together, as he almost ran directly into Keeka, the ratroach seeming to blend into the white and blue wall of the hospital area even though he was wearing black sweatpants and a matching hoodie. "*Hi.*" James squeaked out, clutching at his chest and coughing as he caught his breath. "Ahhhhahahaha. Hi. Hi Keeka. How are you. Also *why.*"

The shorter ratroach tilted his head sideways, wet nose on the end of his snout widening as he sniffed loudly. "You smell like blood." He muttered to James. "They hurt you."

"Well, not that one." James said. "Unless you count my sense of karmic justice, in which case, yes, that is also wounded." Keeka just stared at him, not fully understanding and annoyed that James was doing the thing where he referenced stuff the relatively uneducated ratroach didn't get. "Sorry." James said with another deep breath. "I'm fine. Don't worry about. *Please.*

"Knew they would hurt." The ratroach muttered, two arms crossing their chest to grip their left side with clutched claws. "I can..."

"Stop." James said, firmly. "You cannot. It isn't their fault."

"Why not? They're monsters." Keeka said, seeming to shrink as they slouched down and stared at the floor. "Shouldn't be here." They whispered with a wet hiss.

Maybe it was because he'd had a long day, or because he was already feeling emotionally raw, but James acted without thinking about it. Deciding, on a poorly informed reflex, to make an example. An arm snapped out, moving to pat Keeka on the shoulder. A friendly gesture, just one made somewhat rapidly.

Keeka's fangs were around James' forearm on a panicked reflex before he could even blink. The hood falling back from around his crooked antenna, revealing thick whiskers and black fur that was getting healthier by the day. And also teeth that could gnaw through bone, and a corrosive blue saliva, currently coming into contact with James' arm.

To his credit, Keeka jerked back with a frantic whine as soon as he tasted James' blood. But the sleeve of James' shirt was a complete write off, the poor polyester blend shredded and burned to tatters in the wake of the sudden strike.

Keeka pressed himself back against the far wall away from James, while James just rubbed at his arm, wincing at the welling spots of blood where the teeth had cut into him, the cuts already starting to clot. "Ow." He said placidly. "You're not a monster." James said quietly, but loud enough to be heard over Keeka's muttering loop of the word 'no'. He didn't react as footsteps

started slapping on the tile, people running toward them. Instead, he just took a half step forward and offered an open hand. "It's not the end of the world for someone who's scared to lash out." James said. "It's okay, okay? I'm not mad at you, and I'm not mad at them. I pushed too fast, that's all."

Keeka stared up at him with wide eyes, practically his whole body trembling. "I don't... I don't... you... I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry." He kept repeating, breath running out as he fell into a stammer, biology not up to the task of hyperventilating. But James didn't back away or run or yell or anything, really. Just stood there, holding out a hand, waiting patiently. And eventually, he caught his breath, and, still shaking, reached out to take it.

"Would you like a hug?" James asked, and Keeka didn't answer except to shove his body against the sturdier form of the human, James awkwardly holding his arm out a bit so as not to smear blood all over Keeka's hoodie.

And then Deb's voice interrupted the moment, her tone disapproving, and while she wasn't yelling, her words filled the hall with an absolute authority over this part of the building. "James Fucking Lyle!" She opened with, and in that moment James knew true fear. "We have fucking talked about this! What did I say about using dramatic gestures to make conversational points in my goddamn hospital!?"

"...Don't?" James said, optimistic that answering properly would get him out of this. Then, in a whisper to the creature who was still hugging his chest, "Keeka, you have a telepad, right? Help."

"Don't you da-!"

Deb's voice cut off. As it turned out, Keeka *did* have a telepad on him.

Of course, after that, there was a conversation about the importance of taking responsibility, and how even when he was making jokes about running away, James didn't actually just bail out that often, especially when it was something personal that mattered. Then James still had to go back to get his new arm wound properly disinfected, and to apologize to Deb, and to help clean up the hallway he'd bled on. Someone else actually would have done that, but James did feel bad, and didn't want to make fresh work for someone with his dumb dramatic gesture.

But he still appreciated how the skittish ratroach hadn't even hesitated to teleport them away.

It gave him an emotional break before he went through the whole thing again with the third ratroach they'd rescued.