

*"I think there are four or five serious philosophical questions. The first one is: Who started it? The second is: Are we gonna make it? The third is: Where are we gonna put it? The fourth is: Who's gonna clean up? And the fifth: Is it serious?" -Alan Watts-*

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"Nate!" James called loudly as he stepped out of the small side room connected to the Lair's dining area. It used to be the Response ops center, but since Response was now a hundred people and a lot of hardware, they'd gotten a basement, and this room got to be a telepad landing platform so no one accidentally appeared in the middle of anyone else's lunch.

James strode through the open spaces between the tables and seating, passing a handful of people enjoying simple lunches, the different branches of the Order coming together here to share food and swap stories. It was nice; warm light streamed in through windows that no longer existed, the smell of warm bread and the soft chatter of voices filled the air, and he almost wanted to stop and just drop in to say hi to *anyone* here.

But he actually was here for a reason. So, instead of sitting in on Texture-Of-Barkdust talking about her first real in-depth interactions with humans outside the Order, or diving into the ongoing argument about casual use of shaper substance, or mediating whatever issue was causing a few of the young interns to glare a couple tables over to where Arrush was eating and desperately trying to ignore them.

Okay, no, that one needed attention now. James only noticed it by chance as he was walking by, and he *was* actually in a hurry. But he had a minute to at least deal with the immediate effect.

"Hey." He said quietly, sliding around the smaller table Arrush was eating at alone. "You okay?"

The dun furred ratroach, normally a fairly imposing figure, seemed a lot smaller than James was used to as he sat with his shoulders hunched, his slightly singed hoodie pulled tight by the smaller arms that weren't helping him work through his sandwich and were instead clutching at the fabric. "No." He hissed at James, almost angrily.

James looked past him, to the equally angry looking teenagers, who were doing their best to not be noticed now that James had sat down. "Right." He said. "Let's fix half of this now, and half of this later. I gotta go talk to Nate, you wanna grab your lunch and come with me? We can hang out behind the kitchen." He offered as he pulled out his phone and opened a line to Karen, asking her if she could have her people arrange a conversation between himself and the interns he was trying very hard not to be angry at. A conversation *later*, when this was less personal.

“N... no.” Arrush shook his head at James’ question. “I should... not be... treated specially.” He didn’t raise his eyes, half of the multifaceted orbs in his head clenched closed, only a couple left open to watch his food.

The comment was so perfectly self-deprecating, James was almost convinced Arrush was a high school student himself. He let out a light huff. “Yeah, that’s not how it works.” He said. “You’re not getting special treatment, you’re getting treated how I’d treat anyone who needed this. Grab your plate, come on. You can help me explain our newest crisis.”

He reached out and gently laid a hand on one of Arrush’s chitinous paws before pushing himself up and standing. The ratroach seemed like he was prepared to argue, but when he looked up and saw James’ smiling at him with complete earnestness, he just deflated. A feeling he couldn’t quite explain replacing the fearful hostility that he was feeling, as he also rose to standing and picked up what was left of his slightly corroded sandwich.

“What has gone wrong?” Arrush asked as he followed James into the kitchen, leaving the seating area behind as they passed by the empty serving areas set aside for buffets when needed. “Did you... get shot... again?” He asked with real concern.

“Why is that the first thing people...? No, actually, don’t answer that.” James stopped his own question as he looked around the kitchen. Knife-In-Fangs, a familiar camraconda face, perched on a stool by the back counter, gently arranging premade salads, but he was the only one visible. “Is Nate here?” James asked. “I need him for his other job.”

“Back patio.” The camraconda said through their skulljack speaker, even as their actual mouth was occupied adding sliced vegetables to piles of various greens. “They are being horrid.”

James nodded. “Yes. I, too, have worked with Nate before.” He offered his condolences as he pivoted past the commercial stove and around the corner toward the back door. Arrush followed him in a slouch, like he was worried he might bump one of the wire shelving units that had all their dishware stored on them, and send it all toppling down. James understood that; he’d moved almost the same way in his first kitchen job.

When they opened the heavy door that swung open too quickly and threatened to demolish the wooden post it slapped into, the first thing James noticed was that Alanna and Watcher-Of-Birds were also hanging out back here with Nate, for no discernible reason. The second thing James noticed was the back half of whatever sentence Nate was saying, which ended with, “...right, but do you *fuck* is what I’m asking.” James waved back at Alanna, who was grinning madly at him, and wondered if it was too late to grab the door and pull it back shut, and then it was too late as Nate glanced his way and grunted a greeting.

“This is why Knife-In-Fangs is hiding inside, eh?” James asked, stepping out and taking a breath of the slightly smoky air from the distant forest fires as Arrush followed him and found a spot on a wooden bench away from everyone else.

“He is shy.” Watcher-Of-Birds informed James. “Also yes.” She answered Nate’s question, and then retaliated with, “Do *you*? There is concern for your communal presence.”

Alanna cut through the conversation with a bellowed laugh. “Wow, yeah, you kinda walked into that one.” She told Nate. “What did you think was gonna happen here?”

“I don’t fucking plan that far ahead.” Nate said bluntly. “I just wanted to know if you guys,” he motioned with a hand to Watcher-Of-Birds, “actually had sex, or if the relationships were platonic. It’s fine either way, I was just curious.”

“The details of our bodies are still being learned,” Watcher-Of-Birds said, “but yes, we can. And do. Sex, that is. Though some of my species want to change ourselves with the shaper liquid to better fit that desire, and our selves.”

James held up a hand. “I’m really sorry to interrupt this,” he said, “and I mean that. I would love to have this conversation about how the shaper substance is great and trans camracondas. But Nate, I’ve gotta talk to you about a thing.”

“Is it a problem?” Nate asked with a resigned sigh, pulling off the black cap he wore when he was working in the kitchen and running a hand over his bald head. “No, shut up. How *much* of a problem?”

“In general, probably a six out of ten? For us, personally, a... two? Maybe?” James answered slowly.

Alanna folded her arms and nodded. “I like this kinda problem. Now tell Nate how you want him to make it worse!”

“Tell me the fucking problem first.” Nate said irritably.

“Okay.” James brushed his hair back and took a breath. “Earlier, I was contacted by Malcom McHarn, the guy who runs the FBI’s new ‘huh, magic is real’ division. Division? Sub-section? Whatever.” James shook his head sharply. “I’m getting sidetracked. He clued me into something that’s been going on, and... didn’t exactly ask for help, but sort of I think assumes that we’ll handle this.”

“Is it a political thing?” Alanna asked. “Because we’re probably not doing a political thing.”

“What makes a thing political?” Watcher-Of-Birds asked.

Alanna paused and held up a finger to her lips. “I’ll get back to you on that.” She said.

"It's not a political thing." James interrupted. "...Okay, no, it... you know what? It probably is, it doesn't matter. Someone's violently taking out stock brokers. That's it. That's all. Currently targeting people who are actively investing in oil companies, *as far as he knows.*"

"That's... bad?" Watcher-Of-Birds asked.

"Killing is bad." Arrush said quietly.

Nate glanced over at the ratroach like he'd forgotten that Arrush was there, and stifled what seemed like was a reflexive argument he had. "Okay, so, that's probably disruptive if nothing else. But why did McHarn think it'd be our problem at all?"

"No one has reacted to the killings." James said. "At least one of us here reads the news. Has anyone heard *anything* about a bunch of hedge fund execs being taken out with sniper fire, or messages painted in the blood of the victims?" He didn't wait for anyone to answer. "You haven't, because somehow, no one is talking about the *car bomb in New York City.*"

The car bomb was something of a sticking point for James. It was emblematic of the worst part of what was happening. Even at the worst of times, James was against casually murdering your problems. Yes, there were people out there who used their wealth and power to accumulate more wealth and power, and they weren't the kind of people who you could just explain a better way to and have them agree. They *knew* they caused harm, they didn't care, or if they did care they didn't stop. At a certain point, those people needed to be removed from power, but James was still optimistic about doing it in a way that didn't require murder. It was actively working with the ex-Alchemists, already. But even if violence was required, if they ran into people who would rather burn the world than give up even a slight amount of their privilege, James would absolutely not accept the trade of killing them if it meant civilian casualties. And offing secretaries, or setting car bombs on public streets... well, even if a dark part of him just fundamentally did not care if parasitic financiers died, he still didn't want anyone caught in the crossfire to die with them.

"That's... *real* bad." Alanna commented. "What's the plan?" She asked James. "Bodyguard the relevant targets, catch the attackers, see if we can spin it into more high value recruits?"

"I love that you're with me on the whole 'power of friendship' thing." James told her. "But I don't think that's a thing we can do."

"Why not?" Watcher-Of-Birds asked. "Monitoring is easy, yes?"

"Uh... Nate, you wanna handle this one?"

Dropping the chef role and assuming his persona as their intelligence director, Nate spoke with a professional tone as he explained to the camraconda. "Security is more than just monitoring." Nate said. "To do it well, we need to be in contact with and have the consent of the target. And

in this case, with the attacks spread out over what sounds like a wide range of options, there's a *lot* of targets. Protecting someone effectively requires a dedicated team, minimum six people, because you need to be near enough to cover them, have an exfil at all times, and be able to retaliate against incoming threats. Now, for *us*, it's not that bad. We can fucking teleport; a lot of rules just flat out don't apply to us. So we don't actually need to be able to handle a problem of any size for any target; instead, we need to be able to stall long enough for reinforcements, because we *can* count on reinforcements. But we'd still need to have people on the ground near anyone who might get hit. That means putting our people at risk, and tying them up doing that instead of responding to emergency calls or delving or... whatever the fuck Research does." He shrugged and cracked his neck. "We've got, what, twenty people I trust to *maybe* do this? That's not enough to protect anyone. Especially not if they've got some kinda baffler infomorph thing."

Watcher-Of-Birds nodded in a bobbing motion, her snake form rippling as she listened. "Yes, yes. So, then, how do we save them? That is what we do, yes?"

"That's why I'm talking to Nate, yeah." James said. "I mean, I honestly do not give a shit about these people as individuals. But I'd like us to stop the collateral damage, and add this to our organizational forward momentum."

"James, you know people don't actually level up in real life, right?" Alanna asked him, leaning over to steal a chip off Arrush's plate, which he was holding but not eating off of, just watching the conversation. Alanna got as far as biting into the snack morsel before she stopped and talked around the bite she'd taken, adding, "Yeah, okay, I realize what I just said, shut up." Her face flushing slightly as she rolled her eyes.

He grinned at her, before adopting a more serious face. "Heh. Okay. So, Nate. Suggestions?"

"People on the ground in the area. Start establishing local contacts, look for a pattern, gather intel. We're not gonna get lucky and catch a random attack, most likely, so our best option is to identify the attackers and make a preemptive strike on them. I can pull our rogues off training and local scouting, a lot of them are ready for this."

James nodded. "Okay. Do that." He pulled out the documents the FBI director had given him, and handed the envelope to Nate, who took it with a crisp grab.

"Okay, yeah, I'm on it." Nate pulled out a flip phone and flicked it open, pushing a couple buttons and holding it up to his ear as he stalked around the little fence that separated this patio from the parking lot. "Yo." James heard him say down the line. "Get everyone back here. We've got a real job."

"I thought you weren't in charge." Arrush rasped out with what looked like a pulled grin on his vaguely insectile muzzle.

James stuck his tongue out at the ratroach. "I'm not in charge." He said. "I'm... uh... Alanna what am I?"

"Some kind of leader or something." His girlfriend informed him sadly. "I'm sorry, it's chronic."

"Heck." James snapped his fingers. "Okay. Well. I've gotta write a public notice to the rest of the Order about this. And then... actually, Arrush, do you wanna tag along? I need to talk to you anyway."

"...okay..." The ratroach's voice was laced with trepidation.

"You *know* he doesn't mean about anything bad, right?" Alanna asked, leaning toward the ratroach who flinched slightly as she moved. "I... shit, sorry. Are you okay?" She asked Arrush.

"You do not seem okay." Watcher-Of-Birds leaned back to examine him with a critical camera lens eye. "You should speak with James. That makes most people okay, as far as I am aware."

"Yeah, that's... weirdly accurate." Alanna hummed. "Good plan."

"I am both wise and terrible." Watcher-Of-Birds nodded.

James sighed, looking between the two women who were still bantering. "If you come with me, you can escape *this*." James told Arrush.

"Okay." The ratroach nodded a little more enthusiastically, the humor relaxing him slightly as he stood off the wooden bench, and followed James back through the building after James traded a quick kiss with Alanna

He followed James in tense silence, secretly grateful that James chose the elevator to the Los Angeles office and not the *stairs*. Arrush didn't exactly understand why the Order's humans found the stairs to be that impressive, as it was just thirty floors of concrete steps, and had formed his own independent opinion that the elevator was much softer on his leg joints. His legs weren't digitigrade like his smaller boyfriend's were, and the repeated motion of stairs became painful for him quickly. More so than usual, anyway.

James paused at the door to his own office after they'd passed through the main floor that Recovery used as their planning and paperwork center. He stopped for two reasons, one to wave at Ferninand, the living potted plant that had occupied a place near their vending machine, and two to talk to Arrush. "I'm gonna type up a thing really quick. If you wanna wait with me, or grab a drink, or whatever, it'll be a few minutes."

Arrush nodded at him, and started to move over to the big floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the city, suppressing the old gnawing voice in his head that he shouldn't let anyone see what he actually cared about.

James didn't even consider that old fear of Arrush's. He just smiled at the ratroach looking down on the city in motion, and turned into his office to throw himself into the padded spinning chair someone had put here for him, and start composing a message.

The first message was easy, because it was a short ping to Planner, asking them to set up a public hearing sometime in the next week. This wasn't *pressing*, exactly, in the same way that something that threatened the Order was. If they gathered intel that they needed to act on fast, they'd pull together something sooner. But for now, there was enough of a lack of rush that they used Planner's email.

"They touch upon your mind." The small voice didn't actually surprise James, because he felt the navigator starting to manifest in spectral feathers before he spoke. "And you send email?"

"Email leaves a record and a reminder, and Planner is busy." James answered.

"Mmh. Will this new enemy take us to strange places?" The navigator asked.

James opened a notepad file and tapped at his keyboard as he thought about that. "Probably." He said. "Maybe. I mean, teleporting around, sure. For some people at least."

"And for us."

"Well..."

"Because I know us." The navigator sounded smug. "I know you won't sit it out. I can *feel* that you want to go."

James snorted a breathy laugh. "Go where?" He asked.

"*Anywhere.*" His navigator told him, fading back into nothing.

James shook his head. "Hey, speaking of restless, you still need to pick a name!" He said into the open air. "Or... maybe that's not restless. Whatever. I can't keep calling you a noun in my inner monologue!"

Okay, so, maybe he did feel restless sometimes. But there was so much to do here, and so many dungeons to poke around, it wasn't like he was at risk of getting *bored*. Him being restless was a symptom of anxiety, not actual reality. And for now, he had an actual task to take care of, which he started on as Arrush slunk into his office and took a seat, the ratroach folding

his multiple arms around his legs in a compressed ball of a person, only undoing that to poke a claw at a small potted plant on a thin table near where he was sitting.

*Attention, read the notice James put out. The Order of Endless Rooms has become aware of a potential violent group with anti-information capabilities. At present, there is no indication they are aware of us. Currently, we are beginning to move resources toward low-risk intelligence gathering, to get a better picture of the situation. Planner will have further information about a scheduled meeting to discuss ethical and practical concerns, as well as any early solid information.*

He looked at the screen, and then up at Arrush. “How much information is too much, here?” He asked. “Like, do people need to know what city this is in?”

Arrush started in his seat, before tilting his head, looking up from the plant. “Does it matter? We can be in... any city.” He asked, curiously.

“Good point.” James deleted the half sentence he’d started to type about New York, made a note to get a full record of all the information on their private server soon, and then hit post. Then he shut his laptop as a series of replies started coming in from the people who had a very close eye on the Order’s alert channel. “Okay.” He said, leaning forward and trying to meet Arrush’s eyes. “So. What’s up?”

“You wanted to talk.” Arrush said, the mix of English and Spanish coming out in a still raspy voice, but without as many panting gasps as he spoke. “What is this?” He asked of the plant he was still examining.

“It’s one of those succulent pots.” James said quickly. “I got one from the last duplication batch. I’m trying to see if I can grow finished potions, and not just the sap to make potions, and it didn’t work, but I can’t just murder the thing, and... we’re getting sidetracked.”

Arrush nodded. “Mmh. Not aloe then.” He said.

“What?”

“Like an aloe. The leaves crack, into... gel?” The ratroach tasted the word before nodding. “Gel. Is that where the potion is?”

“I... okay, that makes sense and sounds suitably magical, I’ll check that later. But for now, come on, what’s up?”

“...a succulent?” Arrush asked, like he was hoping to avoid the conversation.

James gave an exasperated look at the ratroach, before taking a steadying breath, and remembering that for all that Arrush was often more mature than he was, the big ratroach still



just didn't have that much experience with people caring about him. "I wanted to talk because you've got a bunch of teenagers glaring daggers at you, and that's kind of unacceptable. And I'll talk to them about this later, but right *now*, I wanna know... I dunno, what's going on?"

Arrush stared at him for seconds that seemed to stretch on into minutes, until eventually he tilted his head down and stared at the floor. "It is... not important."

"No." James told him softly. "We don't do that here. Talk to me, please?"

The ratroach looked back up, like he was caught off guard by James actually pushing back against his attempt to disengage. "It's not new." He said. "They... think I am disgusting. Or violent. Or... it doesn't matter." He stopped and met James' eyes. "Aren't they right?" Arrush asked, in a voice that told James all that he needed to know.

It was a voice he'd used himself, a lot, when he was younger. Almost never to anyone else, but often to himself. The kind of small voice where you were terrified that the answer you knew was correct, that *you* were the problem, actually was real.

"First off," James started, trying to keep the low simmering anger he was feeling out of his voice. He'd try to keep it out even when he talked to the teens later, but especially now, it wasn't helpful. "I find it hard to reconcile you as a violent monster when you're the same person who's afraid to hit people too hard during kendo lessons, hums to plants in the vegetable garden when he thinks no one is looking, and spent a whole day crying when your pet iLipede passed away."

"I..." Arrush's eyes changed color, the exposed skin around them free of fur and chitin tinging a sickly, almost fluorescent green as he tightened his grip on himself and looked at anything *except* James.

"But even if that *weren't* true," James continued, keeping his voice soft as he leaned across his desk, "arguing with them on the point of accuracy isn't going to work. Because what they're saying, was never based in reality to begin with." He sighed. "This happens sometimes. The actual fact of who you are isn't important to them, because they're afraid, and they're letting it poison how they think of *any* ratroaches. And I honestly thought this that they were dealing with in therapy, but it's clear that at least some of them aren't."

"But I'm still disgusting." Arrush mutter-whispered.

James narrowed his eyes and offered a sly grin. "Are you *actually* stating that, or do you want me to do the thing where I list contradictory stuff?"

The ratroach gave a shrug, and made a noise that could have been a laugh. "...yesterday I vomited out a lung chamber?" He said tentatively.

“Okay, I *did* actually wonder if the whole ‘your organs grow faster’ purple orb was going to be a problem. Are you alright?” James asked with concern. “Did you talk to Deb, or... Nnnnnathan? Nathan? Anyone in medical. Did you talk to them about it.”

“Didn’t want to bother...”

James cut him off. “Great! We’ll go say hi after this.” He shook his head. “You actually think that makes you gross? Psh.” He made a dismissive noise. “We’ve had a whole conversation, and you didn’t choke on your own breath during it. Do you know how happy that makes me? No one should have to hurt like you do.”

If Arrush had expected an answer like that, he sure didn’t show it. “You... I thought... you would be mad. At me.”

“Why?” James asked, taken aback. “I... I know...” he swallowed a lump in his throat. “I know you didn’t have a good introduction to life.” He said eventually. “I know you’ve got a lot of fear and pain still buried in you. But mad at you? Arrush, this conversation is to remind you that you’re important, not to tell you that you shouldn’t eat lunch in the dining room so as to avoid offending some petulant children who *really* need to learn better if they’re gonna be working with us.” He watched the ratroach on the other side of his desk, as Arrush flexed his claws open and shut, and took heavy breaths, staring at the floor with mismatched eyes.

“I shouldn’t be so hurt.” Arrush whispered. “Everything here hurts less. Why does this hurt?”

“Because you got used to everyone here being kind.” James stated. “And that’s good. And the problem here isn’t that you expected kindness, it’s that kindness didn’t happen. Again, *you are not the problem*, okay?”

“I’m wasting time.” Arrush said. “You have... things to do. Not this.” He made as if to stand, but James beat him to it, calmly circling his desk and setting a hand on Arrush’s shoulder, settling him back into the chair.

“I have literally one thing to do today,” James said, “and it’s hanging out in the basement with a bunch of nerds coming up with dumb magical synergies. Oh, and saying hi to Banana. Do you wanna come with me? I swear to you, you cannot get in the way more than anyone from Research already will.”

Arrush looked at him for a long moment, before tilting his head away, the green glow around his eyes not exactly flaring back to life, but certainly holding steady. “Yes.” He answered. “And... why?”

“Because I care about you?” James asked with a laugh. “I thought that was kind of obvious. You and Keeka are both... I dunno, you matter to me. I wanna make sure you’re okay.”

“What about... the others like us?” Arrush asked as James started trying to extract the plant pot from where it was lightly clipped to the table.

“The other ratroaches... Oh! I’ve been ordered to come up with a better species name, by the way! So, like... suggestions are welcome there, since I’m not one of you and it seems weird to say ‘I need to do better’ and then not ask.” James snapped his fingers as he interrupted himself, before giving a sharp shake of his head and getting back on track. “Anyway. They are also people, and also deserve the chance to define happiness and seek it. But that’s kinda abstract; they’ll make friends and form lives here, but right now, they don’t overlap *me* that much. I’ve talked to them, and some of them made an impression on me, but we aren’t *friends* yet. So I care, but more in the kind of ‘everyone deserves this’ sort of way.”

“Do you realize that you do that?” Arrush asked, leaning forward and slipping fully into Spanish for some words he didn’t quite have English for yet.

“Do what?” James asked offhandedly as he fished around in his desk drawer for a handful of yen to feed the vending machine with on the way out.

“Answer questions wrong, but still in a way that is important.” Arrush asked, taking the opportunity while James was distracted to rapidly wipe the corrosive tears that had started to form in the corners of his eyes on the sleeve of his hoodie. He had chosen black for his sweatshirt, so no one could tell as it gradually burned. “You do it a lot.”

James looked up at the ceiling, suddenly deep in thought. “Huh.” He said. “No? I guess I do now. Anyway. Wanna come with me and play with potions?”

“The people, or the drinks?” Arrush asked.

“...I... didn’t ask. Reed didn’t specify.” James said as he held the door of his office open and let Arrush walk past him. He traded a friendly ‘hello’ with one of the Recovery investigators on the way by, the middle aged woman giving both of them the smile of someone who was trying to project friendliness, but also deeply frustrated with how hard it was to find a specific phone number. James grinned back at her as they passed; Arrush just nodded, finding he didn’t know what to say or do in this situation. “Anyway. Did you want a drink? I found a thing about thirty feet down the vending machine’s button row that tastes like fruity gunpowder, and it’s stupid how much I like it.”

“You’re not stupid.” Arrush whispered.

“Huh?” James asked as he fed yen coins into the machine, not having heard.

“Ah.” The ratroach twitched, his misaligned lower arms clutching at his sweatpant pockets. “Yes. I will need a straw.”

James handed him a can after the minute of required scrolling the non-Euclidean row of buttons to find the drink, and then started on ordering his own. "We really should get you - and anyone with a mouth not shaped for cans - some good metal straws to carry around. Just make it easier on everyone."

He made idle rambling small talk as they waited for, and then got in the elevator, riding it down to Research's cluttered basement that always felt to James like it had been plucked from a particularly creatively designed university building. But he let his voice trail off, as he just stood next to Arrush while the minute long elevator ride took them downstairs, trying to think of what to say to the ratroach that was rolling the can over in three of his chitinous paws.

It was... not exactly strange. He maybe didn't have the right word for it at the moment, James thought as he lapsed into a kind of awkward quiet. But the way Arrush and Keeka, and from what little he knew of them the newer ratroaches as well, didn't map at all to human expectations, just continued to throw him off. It *shouldn't*. He should know better by now. But it was all too easy to slip into thinking that because Arrush could speak and write two languages, and had a familiar sense of humor that cracked through every now and then, that what he needed was healing, and not maturity or time to develop as a person. That he was a complete individual, and that while he had been traumatized by his life in the Akashic Sewer, that was a breach of normalcy that could be recovered from.

And it was something that he could heal from, that much certainly was true. But... he knew two languages, and hadn't ever really had a friend. Much less a social circle. He knew so many random little things, but had taken weeks to understand the why of the existence of cities.

The ratroaches, all of the ones that were alive right now, were created things. Made as weapons, or artificial worshipers, or just for some twisted need of a cruel dungeon to hurt people. And James kept fucking up, because he kept letting himself slide into a comfortable rut of acting like they were people who had things like childhoods and parents, even when he *knew* that wasn't the case.

Sometimes Arrush had a sense of humor that was exactly like James as he was now, in his early thirties. And sometimes, he silently tried to eat lunch around people who hated him because he didn't know how to ask for help and silently hated himself. Exactly like James when he was a teenager. He was a scattered arrangement of the *parts* of a life, but without the connecting tissue of having lived those parts just yet. Even if every day and every interaction saw him and Keeka growing into the kind of vibrant people that they always should have been allowed to be.

It was a strange mirror to look in. Fur and chitin and antenna notwithstanding. Arrush even *dressed* like James when he was in high school. Though, to be fair, 'black hoodie and loose cargo pants' was kind of a timeless fashion, as far as James was concerned. Though thanks to the frequently used blue orb for refitting clothing, Arrush's hoodie actually had sleeves for all his arms, and was better fit than literally everything James had ever worn. So he was a bit jealous

there. It actually did a good job of showing off just how broad shouldered Arrush was without making him look intimidating, which was kind of... something. It was something.

“Are you... alright?” Arrush asked as the elevator doors dinged open, before they stepped out into the Research basement. “You are quiet.”

“Huh?” James looked over, having been lost in thought. “Oh. Uh... I was thinking about pants.” James said in what was technically an honest statement.

“...why?” Arrush asked.

“I think I started somewhere thinking about relative maturity, and then I got distracted.” James admitted as he held the elevator door open with a hand for a pair of camracondas carrying a cardboard box between them, their artificial arms propped against their bodies at an angle that would have been impossible with anything organic. “Honestly, I have a hard time focusing on stuff. My mind wanders a lot.” He told Arrush as he led them down a well lit concrete hall, getting a wet hissing in reply that really could have meant a lot of different things.

The basement that had started out as a cluttered warren of slightly chipped concrete floors and bare walls with poor lighting had undergone a bit of a transformation under the care of the growing membership of the Order. A lot of the cracks and chips had been filled in when they'd patched all the bullet holes that had resulted from Status Quo trying to murder them all in their own home, but more than that, the place just felt more lived in now. Posters and photos on the walls, little personal touches, the soft sounds of activity in the distance, it all just made it feel less like being trapped in a dungeon and more like being in a place where people could enjoy being.

They stopped off briefly in the medical wing to give Deb a moment of screaming into a pillow when she heard about Arrush's organ issue. When she composed herself, she mostly just made a dry comment about how this mostly proved purple orbs couldn't directly kill a person, and between this and El's bonus heart, that did seem to hold up. But if Arrush kept shedding lung tissue, he should come here to do it under safe monitoring.

While they were there, James had stopped by Banana's room. The half wasp half crow girl had perked up when she'd seen him approaching through the window, and then pretended to be asleep when Arrush had walked into view. James had ducked in to say a few words while Arrush waited awkwardly outside, and got asked if he was lost by two different passing nurses. The young girl didn't reply to James, even when he tried to assure her it was safe, so he'd left feeling kind of down.

“Is she...” Arrush stood with one claw pressed against the window. “Like me?” He'd asked.

“Sort of, yeah.” James had told him.

“Then I understand.” He’d nodded, and walked off, seeming not exactly unbothered, but like he really did simply know what the score was, and didn’t hold it against the terrified creature from his origin dungeon.

After that, there were just a few more concrete hallway turns. And then when James stepped out of the hall and into the main room that Research used as their chaotic meeting area, test zone, living computer nest, and... probably a million other things, really, he had a moment of grinning peace. The place was alive with multiple species of people having a heated argument about space travel, a ring of desks and computers at different heights forming a pen for the shellaxies that the Order had brought here from Officium Mundi, and walls and tables and shelves around the outside of the room covered in magical items they were testing, prototype arm designs for the camracondas, freshly brewed potions settling, and a dozen other things besides. The room was also bigger than it should have been. Not by *much*, really. But enough that it wasn’t cramped, and the paths between desks and tables were always easy to walk, and it was actually more impressive that the magic at play was so subtle. Quadrupling the size of the room would have been easy - and wasn’t that a sentence - but doubling it without letting on was *far* harder.

It felt good to come down here from time to time.

Then Reed caught sight of him and broke off mid sentence to level an accusatory pointing finger at James. “You!” He called across the room. “You picked a fight with someone magical again! James you said you’d stop doing that!”

“I did not!” James protested. “To... to the second part, to be clear. Also the first part! I didn’t pick a fight at all!” Then he dropped his voice from a defensive yell to a normal tone in an abrupt shift. “Also I’m frankly impressed that you actually read that notice this fast. I posted that, like, twenty minutes ago. I figured you’d see it sometime next week.”

“Does he think we don’t know how alerts work?” John, one of the guys who had been around the Order since he’d been rescued from Officium Mundi years ago, but had only recently really started to take an active role, leaned over and asked Columbia. The creature wearing the body of the older man just gave a sharp and unrefined shrug, saying something quietly about how they did not have a phone. James made a mental note to get the living potions phones, but he was pretty sure that had already been done, so maybe Columbia was just avoiding the electronic tether. Or messing with John.

Reed ignored his coworker’s antics, and continued attempting to berate James, who was mostly just taking the whole thing with an impenetrable good natured smile. “You even picked a fight with rich people again! Why?!”

“First off, you don’t know they’re rich, only their victims are. Second off... I dunno, poor people don’t tend to murder each other with machine guns and car bombs? I feel like I’ve had to explain the car bomb thing more than I really wanted to. Car bombs are bad. Can we just...

can we start *there*?” James asked, his smile slipping, voice tightening. “Can we start with ‘blowing up random people isn’t cool’? Because that seems important to me.”

The young man who was in charge of most of Research stopped, and took a more appraising look at James. “...Yeah, okay.” Reed said. “Okay. I’m on board. Good talk. So, why are you two down here?”

James glanced at Arrush with an expression of emotional whiplash, which the ratroach returned with a rippling blink of his many eyes. “I mean, for fun, mostly.” James said. “But also, because I wanted to sit in on your weekly open meeting to find weird magical interactions.”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s pretty much just Momo and Juan this week. Nik likes it, but is off being a medic or something. And Planner went off to plan a meeting, for *some reason*.” Reed narrowed his eyes at James.

“Cool.” James said. “So... where is that?”

“Oh, the room Momo uses for totem stuff, probably.” Reed said. “Oh. Oh!” He clapped his hands together as he remembered something, and then pointed at Arrush. “You!” The ratroach raised an unsteady paw, and pointed back at his own chest, looking around with jerky motions. “Yes! I have a thing for you to try!” Reed turned and took two steps over to a shelf filled with transparent plastic drawers containing rows of settling potions, somehow moving thirty feet with those two steps. “Where’s the new one...” He muttered, pulling up a clipboard and looking over labels, comparing them to the posted notes.

James leaned over to Arrush. “You don’t have to drink whatever he’s about to give you.” He murmured.

“Still need a straw.” Arrush said back, but before he could continue, Reed dashed back over to them, having to take several more steps this direction and hopping over a shellaxy laying in the middle of the floor with a strip of label tape on it that identified it as Assorted Jelly Beans. Arrush flinched back, a drop of corrosive saliva dropping from the corner of his muzzle, as Reed, panting slightly, approached the ratroach completely devoid of fear and handed him a hard plastic bottle. “What.” Arrush’s voice was strained as he awkwardly shifted one of his smaller arms around to take the offered container.

Reed, who *clearly* needed to work on his cardio as far as James was concerned, took a few rapid breaths before clearing his throat. “It’s the improved exercise potion!” He said, like that explained anything. Then he continued to not answer Arrush’s actual question. “Since we have more of the sap to experiment with now, with the whole greenhouse of magical pots or whatever Mars has been doing, there’s been some attempts to improve the recipes the Alchemists had. So, like, this is just the regular exercise potion, but run through a distilling process, and made with less impurities. I think. It’s... okay, look, the potion process doesn’t make sense, alright? But here, try this.”

“I have not... exercised.” Arrush shrunk back, trying to hand Reed back the bottle.

“No no, just... trust me, okay? I need an unbiased opinion.” Reed pushed the potion back, oblivious to Arrush flinching as he made contact.

James held out a hand between them. “Hey, uh...” he started to say. But Arrush beat him to it. Either deciding to trust Reed, or just wanting this conversation to end, he uncapped the bottle with a clumsy claw tip, and tilted it back into his maw. Then awkwardly swallowed, trying to keep his misaligned jaw closed so as to not drip. “Reed...” James said with an amount of concern. But whatever he was going to say was quickly cut off as, next to him, Arrush practically toppled over, only barely catching James for support. “Reed!” James barked out with a *lot* more concern.

But then Arrush pushed off him, breathing heavily, and shook himself. And then stood up, eyes glittering as he looked down at his own paws. “What did you do?” He asked Reed.

“Right, so, it does work on you?” Reed had a clipboard in hand and was making check marks in some boxes. “What’cha feeling? Oh, let me know in an hour if the aftertaste is still there.”

“It... doesn’t hurt.” Arrush spoke slowly, glowing blue tears running down from the corners of his eyes in thick drops that left black scorches across the fur and chitin of his face. “Nothing hurts. What did you do?”

“Reed, answer the fucking question with a straight answer or I am throwing you into the sea.” James said quietly.

Reed blinked. “Oh. Uh, right. So, it’s the exercise potion, right? Only this one you don’t have to drink as much of, and it lasts a bit longer, and it eases muscle pain directly too. It turns out, the Alchemists were actually right about something, and that’s the fact that actually finding recipes that work is a nightmare of constant trial and error, and so we’ve been trying to focus on refining and tweaking the ones we know work. So... you know, thought this might... be a good idea? Because...”

He was cut off as Arrush lunged forward and wrapped him in a multi limbed hug, the plastic bottle the potion was in clattering to the floor as he engulfed the researcher, still sobbing softly.

“I feel like Deb would... uh...” James set a hand on Arrush’s back. “Something... about unethical medical trials. Oh, whatever. You should let him go before he suffocates?” He said with barely contained amusement.

Arrush did so, stepping back slightly, his motions already smoother and easier than before. Reed gasped in a breath, before brushing himself off and trying to play it like he wasn’t both incredibly proud of himself and also unused to being hugged. “Yeah, well. Glad that’s good



them. Uh... it should last for an hour and a half or so. But we made a bunch. And we can make more, for you. Until the shaper substance trials are done, and you can get a permanent fix." He cleared his throat. "Anyway. I've got work to do. I'll have a package for you when you leave. You know where Keeka lives, right? I legit cannot find that kid."

"I do." Arrush said with a sweeping grin that cracked the chitin on his muzzle and left dripping lines of glowing blue trailing down the corners of his mouth.

"You wanna call this off and take these to him now?" James asked, honestly fine with ditching magic exploitation to see that similar reaction again.

But Arrush just shook his head slowly from side to side, antenna bobbing where his hood had slipped down. "He is... speaking to someone." The tan ratroach said. "I will meet him when he is done."

"Kay." Reed shrugged. "You can take him his then. Good to see you guys. I've gotta get back to... something? Server... maintenance? Probably." Reed cleared his throat, and, doing a poor job of covering his own embarrassment, fled back to his desk.

James rubbed a reassuring hand on Arrush's upper arm. "You okay?" He asked.

"...Yes." The ratroach said slowly. "I am. I *am*."

"Cool. Let's go abuse some more magic."

"Yes." Arrush nodded enthusiastically.

The next few hours, the two of them spent in what James would describe as a highly optimistic brainstorming session. Momo was as focused as she ever was on different ideas for construction and use of totems. Juan was a new face to James, but ended up being friendly and mostly concerned with the ethics of different magics and the changes they could bring.

He and Arrush joined them to talk about how the vastly different dungeon powers that the Order had bits and pieces of could be joined together to create bigger and better results. Later, they were joined by Liz who was technically something like Momo's apprentice, and Morgan, who followed Liz and was technically allowed to be wherever he wanted in the building.

It was a fun conversation. Especially when James hit upon getting them to look at the different magics they had not as sorted by dungeon, but sorted by category.

"Why", he argued, "should we say Office stuff and Sewer stuff and Attic stuff? We already know what they do, relative to themselves, *mostly*. So, let's look at things as categories."

"Explain." Momo demanded.

“Explain, but politely.” Juan added, politely.

“Explain, but Juan will make me seem less hostile.” Momo nodded.

While Morgan and Liz tried and failed to not giggle at the exchange, James explained. “Okay, a known example. The Office orbs are skill ranks, right? They teach us something. So, let’s call that ‘knowledge’ as a category. Then there’s the Sewer lessons. They require us to learn things. So, knowledge. I just think if we look at stuff as categories like that, we can probably find more corner case uses than if we just go down a list and compare what might work together.” He paused. “Has anyone done that?”

“We’ve done that.” Momo nodded, clipping one of the pencils orbiting her head but showing no signs of caring. “Sort of. The list of what magic we have actually grows really fast, and every thing that gets added to it means there’s... uh... more stuff on it.”

“It’s a process.” Juan added with a nod. “One we *can’t* automate. Or, well, not without making another AI. Which we are not doing.”

A suspiciously specific denial. But one James wasn’t about to challenge. Instead, the group spent a while looking over the compiled lists of everything they were pretty sure was in the building or the Order had access to in some way, and arguing about what terms they should be using for categories.

It was about twenty minutes into this process, after Morgan and Liz had left again, leaving the adults to their brainstorming, that Arrush, who was laying on the floor in a position that James *swore* could not be comfortable but looking completely relaxed, looked up from the binder he had been trying not to drip anything corrosive on. “Reading.” He said.

Momo nodded. “Yeah, we do a lot of that.” She answered.

“No.” Arrush blinked at her, raising a hand to awkwardly rub at one of the antenna coming off his head. “We... yes. We are reading. But... reading as a concept.”

“Like the Library?” Juan asked. “The orbs there, probably not, but there’s the words on things people can pick up if they know the words. Have we figured out what those do yet?”

“Don’t think so, but that’s a good use for language .mems.” James said. “Also, is it just me, or are languages, and artistic experiences, kind of the two easiest things to put in .mems?”

“They are. But you cut Arrush off.” Momo tried to kick him, and learned that she was too short with where James had chosen to sit to actually reach him.

Arrush nodded. “The Library... has books. But they aren’t read. But you don’t... ‘read’” he made air quotes with his claws, “the books from my... from the sewer. But it feels like reading?”

“I’d say it’s sort of reading, sure.” James said with a shrug. “You’re right that we don’t actually try reading the books from the Library, though. Like, they’re all just random nonsense, as far as I can... hm. We should get someone to actually look at those closely. Maybe. But sorry, Arrush. What overlaps with reading?”

“This.” Arrush held up the binder, opened to the list of potions, and tapped at one line. “For reading.”

“Huh.” Momo leaned back. “Would that... work?” She asked, looking around the room.

Juan gave her a shrug. “It doesn’t cost us much to try it. We still have the Alchemist’s stockpiles for a lot of their potions that don’t cure cancer.”

“And we’ve got lesson books on the list to be copied this week.” James said. “This works out pretty perfectly. Want to turn learning into a superpower?” He asked Arrush. The ratroach just looked around the room, trying to find who James was talking to. “Yes, you! Stop that!” He said with a laughing tone. “You get to have magic powers too, you know!”

“Oh.” Arrush thought about it, then looked back up. “No.” He said.

“No because you don’t think you deserve it, or no because you don’t want to take anything from a toxic culture that hurt you?” Juan asked, not looking up from his own reading as he gnawed on a cheese stick he was snacking on. Silence followed in the wake of his question until he looked up and saw people staring at him. “What?” He asked. “Are we not asking each other deeply personal questions all the time around here? Isn’t that our *motto*?”

“Our motto is... James tell him our motto.” Momo folded her arms and refused to admit she didn’t know their motto.

Not that James was any better. “I want to say it’s ‘do good recklessly’, but I feel like a lot of us have different mottos. You, for example,” he waved an arm around the room, “have a motto of ‘can I buy more lava lamps.’”

“The second thing.” Arrush said, interrupting Momo’s retort.

“Hm?” James looked down at where Arrush was laying as the ratroach rolled slightly to look up at him, pressing into James’ legs.

“The second thing.” Arrush chittered. “I do not... want to... I do not want anything to do with the sewer. Ever.” His voice came out as an angry rattling hiss.

“Okay.” James said softly, smiling down at his friend. Then he let the moment pass, and looked back up. “What about the resistance programs to mitigate the potion side effects? Actually, what about using them to mitigate *medication* side effects? Does that work?”

“Unless you have a medication that causes wood, I don’t think we have one... Juan shut the fuck up.” Momo was absolutely not so short she couldn’t reach her other apprentice. Who was already dying of laughter.

James smiled, flipped the page, and decided to be professional. After he explained the joke to Arrush. And maybe only for a little bit.

He still felt that distant tension. That he had to hurry up and wait to be told where to go to fix a problem. But here, talking to friends and playing with magic, he’d be happy to wait as long as was needed.