

*"I am going to show you how to kill your landlord." -Omicron, ELDRITCH VOIDTUBER
VIRIDIAN S. LAUGHTER HUNTING BLOOD-STREAM-*

In the open air above the clear space within the library, an optical illusion took place.

Well, it wasn't much of an illusion. Arrush stared up at where the shelves began to bend and coil, until their edges started to connect in ways that were clearly meant to be evocative of a glass dome. On a well honed reflex, he held the back of one of his gloved paws to the corner of his mouth, stopping the drip of corrosive saliva as he looked up.

Arrush had seen quite a few images of human architecture over the last couple of months. He hadn't visited anything truly impressive yet, mostly because he had a perfectly reasonable terror of being exposed to a large pack of humans.

The Order accepted him almost without thinking. But he had seen and heard how some of the younger ones reacted when they saw himself or his partner. He had observed the attitudes of certain humans through their own media. And he did not think he could visit a cathedral without being attacked and killed.

But that did not stop his interest. And as he looked up here, in the library, he could see what it was trying to do. There was a light coming down from the central ring of the shelves that built the dome, one of the ones that was a poor emulation of the true sun. And there were black lines in the air between here and there, meant to look like iron crossbars, keeping the skylight up.

Arrush's eyes were not well suited to appreciating optical illusions. He'd learned it after several evenings of confusion at an image of straight lines, before cautiously asking his kendo teacher about it, and having Karen point out that the lines made it seem as though the pillars were solid in both perspectives.

His eyes were mismatched, out of alignment. All five of them providing something that Deb said was 'close enough to stereoscopic', but clearly, did not let him see tricks like humans did. Or, if he wanted to be kind to himself, that let him see *through* tricks; past them like they weren't real.

The only question he had was, why was the library pretending it had a skylight in the first place?

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" A new voice said to his side. Arrush didn't start or jump, he simply turned his head down, lowering his paw and focusing on Vad, the new human looking at him with that expression humans used when they felt upset.

Arrush almost told him he already had asked a question, but his burgeoning sense of humor was still overshadowed by his wariness around new people. Or old people. Or people. So instead, he simply nodded.

Vad nodded, and took a deep breath, before shuffling closer and leaning in, looking around for any of the other delvers before he spoke. "You're not, like, trapped, are you?"

Arrush blinked. "What?" He said, before thinking about it. That was also novel; he could speak on reflex, his growing lungs supporting better and better speech.

"A prisoner, or a slave." Vad failed to clarify. "Something like that. It's just... you have a look about you."

"Don't know what that means." Arrush said, taken off guard. "I am here because I want to be."

Vad frowned, the look strangely focused on a face that Arrush had mostly seen today panicking at small non-threats. "Really?" He said, firmly, before his eyes widened slightly and he looked around to make sure no one was listening in. But the others on the delve team were making sure the area around the stairs were clear before the descent, and the two of them had a moment of quiet. "I don't think that's true." Vad said, whispering.

"Yes. I am lying." Arrush said with a wet hiss. "Am not a prisoner, though."

The human looked like he was planning to say something else, which was when James swept in and saved Arrush again, albeit in a much less dramatic way than the first time. "Yo. Making friends?" He asked, voice casual.

"Yep!" Vad said quickly, at the same time Arrush said a low and rumbling "No." James raised his eyebrows and turned to the ratroach with an unspoken question. "He thinks I am your slave." He explained to James.

While Vad gasped and tried to think of something to cover for what he'd been saying, James just nodded thoughtfully. "I mean, we've been over this. You did *literally* tell me I owned you shortly after we first spoke. I vaguely remember that. Wait, am I remembering that, or is that mixed up with a camraconda thing?"

"That happened." Arrush said, a ghost of a fanged grin cracking his maw open in a blue glowing line. "You were upset."

"Good times." James said in wistful bitterness. "Anyway, we're gonna head downstairs, check out the humming. Which I still cannot hear, so, weird! You want to come, or do you want to keep watch up here?"

"I will wait. Hunt books." Arrush said.

James nodded slowly. "Alright, but remember to—"

"Give them a chance, yes." Arrush said. "I... know... how personally important. That is." He took slow deep breaths, chitin on his chest creaking as he tried to replenish the oxygen he'd used on talking.

"Um..." Vad looked between the two of them. "You're not mad or anything?"

"What, that you accused me of being a slaver?" James said. "I mean, you opened by cautiously asking questions and not trying to shoot me, so you're not even close to the biggest asshole I've been on a dungeon delve with. Also you're not an asshole, you're looking out for someone you met an hour ago, even if they scare you by being a different species. I'm the opposite of mad. Wanna go check out the humming? There might be something cool."

"...everything here has tried to kill us."

"I mean, not everything. The scrawl seems fine." James told him. "Figured out how to use that yet, by the way?"

Vad looked down at the living writing on his hand. "Not a clue. It's an awesome tattoo, if nothing else, though."

"*There* it is." James said with a grin, before patting Arrush's arm fondly with one of his gloved hands, and turning to head back to the group that was preparing to split off and explore down a level.

"There what is?" Vad asked, confused, turning to look at the ratroach he was standing next to with a bewildered expression. "There *what* is?" He repeated.

Arrush just hummed lightly in response, tired of overtaxing his throat.

Meanwhile, James angled himself around the display of inert books in the middle of the floor and aimed to move to the group. "Okay. Who's going, who's holding here?" He asked.

"I hate stairs." Frequency-Of-Sunlight grumbled. "Deb will carry me, right?"

"Absolutely not. We're staying up here." Deb muttered.

The other camraconda craned his neck around to look at James, who stoically ignored the look, until he moved onto Anesh, and then Alanna, who eventually sighed. "Yeah, I'll carry you Thought." She said, though she said it with the tone of someone who loved being strong enough to actually do that. "Is Arrush coming?"

“No, he and Vad are staying up here. Oh, I was right by the way! You owe me!” James grinned.

“Pay up in private or something.” Momo said. “I’m going. Anesh is thinking about staying. Is this a good idea, only four of us?” In contrast to how she sounded when there was disaster pressing in from all sides, here Momo’s voice was uncertain. It wasn’t that she was bad at planning, it was that this dungeon was unfamiliar, and all the more scary for it. They’d brought nine people, after all. Why split up when they could meet everything with overwhelming firepower?

James answered without really meaning to. “Yeah, four should be fine. Or more importantly, we can’t fit more than four people on the stairs easily, and if we do need backup, we’re visible from up here. So I’d rather keep from getting crowded.” He got nods from the others. “Kay. Alanna stays back with Thought until we’re on the ground, then we check the area. I don’t want us wandering too far off, and we’re not going too deep tonight on this basic magic recon mission, so if there’s nothing down there, we’ll come back up, and just explore the shelves around here some more, okay?”

“Good luck.” Anesh said with a solemn nod.

“I’m going down some stairs, not to my execution.” James rolled his eyes at his boyfriend.

“Just remember you’re not as replaceable as me.” Anesh said, hands idly drumming on the railing.

There wasn’t much else to say, and James didn’t want them lingering around longer than they needed to when they had a self-imposed limited window of time. So he took the lead, and started cautiously making his way down the stairs.

The steps were a dark brown wood, rich and worn with time. They were solid under James’ heavy boots, not creaking or showing any indication of being hollow at all. The open space the stairs dropped into, cordoned off by a wooden railing, looked like it was obviously meant for two different sets of steps with one on each side. But only the right side had stairs, with the far wall simply being a blank wall partially covered by a few cloth banners that moved slightly in the constant breeze of the strange library.

He avoided the carpet that ran down the middle of the steps. They’d poked and pulled at it from the top of the staircase, and James was pretty sure that it was stable, possibly permanently affixed to the wood somehow. But there was no sense in tempting fate in a dungeon.

With each step down, cautiously leading the others while Alanna brought up the rear fireman-carrying a two hundred pound snake, James got more and more of a view of the landing below them.

It was, he thought as he stepped through a patch of shadow cast by the overhead lights that came from nowhere, a little more chaotic than the one they'd come from. The shelves around the open area were still towering and imposing, still filled with row after row of densely packed books. But as he got far enough down that he could see the whole landing from his higher angle, he paused and let Momo do the same on the other side of the carpet.

The floor was the same cracked stone as above, but where the place they'd come from was a fairly simple arrangement of a librarian's desk and open floor, here that was absent. Instead, a long table that didn't look quite right for some reason ran the length of the left side, forming an artificial barrier between the shelves there and the landing. Equally spaced boxy computers sat upon the table, while a riot of cables formed a drape that concealed whatever was below it. On the other side, thick leather chairs that looked like they were sized for beings half again as large as humans formed a semi-circle, facing inward toward nothing.

The floor, unlike above, was not bare. Towers and stacks of books, many of them casually strewn around with spines bent and pages torn and scattered, left the whole place looking like it had the feeling of a careless dragon's hoard.

"Humming's definitely louder." Momo said.

James started moving again, slowly. He stopped at the small landing where the stairs made a right turn before they finished on the stone floor, but all he could see from here was more shelves of books behind the stairs. Underneath where his friends were standing up above them, Deb and Frequency-Of-Sunlight carefully watching them to make sure nothing went too wrong.

He stopped again five steps from the bottom, as he caught sight of what actually was in the middle of that partial ring of armchairs, though.

It looked human. That was the thing. Just like with the stuffed shirts in *Officium Mundi*, the figure sitting in a curled position amid the scattered books was, if you didn't think about it or actually look very closely, a person.

But once you did, once you actually took a second to analyze the situation, and let your eyes show you what they were literally seeing, there were simply too many things that pointed to it being *other* for it to actually be human. It was wearing a torn white robe of some kind, the thick cloth in tatters around its long pale limbs with strips of it dangling off its waving arms. The face, though, was where it became obvious. The lines were too sharp, too much like creases in a book; feminine, yes, but in a way that evoked the story of femininity, not the living of it. Its eyes were the color of highlighter ink, pooled and allowed to solidify.

A few scraps of paper floated in the air near it, dancing in time with its waving arms, and it didn't stop humming when James moved into view; though he wasn't sure if that was because he

wasn't spotted, or if he was simply not worth notice. Then he realized he could hear it now. A soft musical tone. Warm and nostalgic in a slightly cracked way.

He made a hand gesture to the others, and they crept silently down the last few steps, before touching down on the stone floor of the landing, Alanna gracefully settling their camraconda on the floor before rising back up and carefully unclipping the heavy - and most importantly, *not discount* - machete she had on her hip.

The four of them fanned out, James only briefly pausing as a voice whispered inside his head. "Roads splintering out from her." His navigator told him. "Like light through a... one of those things. The rainbow things. The glass ones." *Prisms*. James thought back at his passenger. *Also that's deeply unsettling and kind of unhelpful on a tactical level*. "Yeeeeees..." The navigator sheepishly drawled out. "Good luck."

The delvers didn't talk, though Alanna and Momo did shoot wary looks at each other across James as he stepped forward around a pile of battered paperbacks, motioning them to wait.

He took a deep breath. This was, weirdly, always the scariest part of new dungeons. Not the fights, not the weird geometry, not the fact that anything could be a trap. No, it was the simple act of opening his mouth, giving away the advantage, and saying, "Hello." James held his hands at his side, the feathered tail of his navigator companion loosely wrapped around one of his legs. "We're explorers, and we don't want to fi- *fuck*."

The last word was snapped out as the the artificial person's hum ramped up in volume, and one of the little pieces of paper around it folded itself into a paper airplane that arrowed itself toward James at high speed, freezing halfway to his head as Thought-Of-Quiet locked onto it. The dungeon creature rolling sideways and taking cover behind one of the armchairs, a trail of paper scraps following it in the air as James ducked out of the way and the camracond let the paper projectile whiz by to stab into a pile of books behind them, knocking a dictionary to the floor.

"I've seen this anime!" Momo called, getting some distance from them and pulling a red totem ball out of her pocket, preparing to click it into action and throw the disruptor at their opponent.

James ducked another airplane, putting himself next to Alanna and letting her just slap the next one out of the air with her armored forearm. The paper still dug a furrow into the shell and bullet resistant cloth, which was worrying. "Go left." Alanna told him, tapping him on his own armored shoulder as she broke away and the two of them started circling the line of chairs.

Then, as James was trying to flank the thing trying to kill them, it did something unexpected. It *spoke*. The words came out layered on top of the hum, which hadn't stopped, but they were certainly legible and the same voice, spoken like a sentence picked up from the middle of a narration. "...top of the stairs, leaning forward. And yet the banister could not hold her weight, and a crack of wood split the quiet air..." The creature paused to fling an airplane at James as he ducked behind the oversized leather chair just before where it was cowering.

Except it didn't really seem to *pause* in its speech, so much as it was... waiting, almost. Anticipating. Something built in the air, a pressure.

"Shit!" James heard from Momo twenty feet away. Except the word changed volume and position *really* abruptly, and James snapped his head around to see the spot where Momo was standing absent. Followed by the crack of wood and a startled set of yells from behind him, up the stairs where the others were waiting. There was a strangled scream that cut off suddenly.

"Alright, screw this." He muttered, pulling one of his hatchets off his rigging, popping out, and flinging it overhand toward the creature's hiding place. It didn't hit, but it came really close, his magical Aim enhancement along with actual practice causing it to sink blade-first into the old dark brown leather of the chair next to the creature's head, and causing it to whip its angular face toward him. It flung another razor sharp paper airplane, an arm that was noticeably too long reaching out to grab a discarded book from the floor and tearing another page out to weaponize. James got his arm up in front of his face, letting the armor take the hit, throwing himself sideways to dodge the next one.

But then it started speaking again. A voice like a hush washing over him. "...and the cracks in the ground slipped with the grinding of stone, a new and tiny precipice coming to be under his feet, and he looked down and knew..."

And then it *waited* again.

"*Say something!*" The navigator scream-whispered in James' mind, a flurry of orange lines blanketing his vision as it showed him likely paths forward, all of them twisted and abrupt.

James was more practiced at fighting monsters than most people on the planet. He'd rank himself in the top percentile of general combatants, and he'd survived where a lot of people wouldn't, or hadn't. But a lot of that was down to dogged determination, and a willingness to act, and not actual superpowers. James couldn't think or react any faster than a baseline human, and someone telling him to 'say something' in the middle of a scrap was not a great way to get a reaction.

He might have managed a muddled "What." But that wasn't what was being looked for, or at all enough anyway. And then, the pressure in the air popped, and he found his dodge ending on a different patch of floor, the world swirling around him as he was *moved* to a different point.

Then one of the cracks in the floor shifted under his weight, and instead of stabilizing, James pitched forward as stone ground against stone, his face rushing toward the floor at high speed. And the jagged edge of the broken stone that was a little too conveniently placed.

He froze a couple inches before his nose broke, and the rock went into his eye, Though-Of-Quiet grabbing him with his camraconda eye before he hit. Somewhere nearby,

James heard another yelp, and a thud of someone hitting the stairs. Alanna swearing, loudly. And then, a set of oddly jointed armored arms wrapping around him as Arrush grabbed onto his technically still falling body and lunged sideways while Thought-Of-Quiet let him go, turning what would have been one incredibly painful fall into two slightly less damaging tumbles.

They came to a stop in their roll with James on his back, Arrush still half hugging him, the ratroach's chitin-spotted muzzle panting over his face. "Thanks." James wheezed out. "Gotta get up."

Arrush nodded, no time to be mortified as he drooled flecks of something corrosive onto James' chest, and rolled to the side. Both of them pushed themselves upright, and started running back toward the chairs.

Whatever had been done to him, James had only been moved to the other side of this landing, so he wasn't too far away. He couldn't see Alanna, though.

"Help!" Thought-Of-Quiet called, the serpent having taken cover behind a veritable wall of books, too low to the ground to be anything but an obstacle for a human, but enough for him to duck behind as the creature flung repeated paper airplane bolts at him. It was perched up on the arm of one of the oversized chairs now, the leather back of the furniture giving it cover while it bombarded the camraconda. "Alanna has vanished!"

There was a howl of outrage from somewhere to James' right, muffled by the row after row of shelves and books. He had no idea how far away it was, but Alanna being pissed off was kind of unmistakable, as were the sounds of things breaking that came shortly after.

The creature turned its attention to him and Arrush as they dropped any pretense of tactics, and just charged toward its chair. James fumbling a shaking hand to draw his other hatchet, Arrush with a knife out, both of them with an arm over their vulnerable faces.

"Here!" Whispered the navigator, an orange profile shimmering in James' vision. He dipped and ducked through the motions, a pair of shots flying over his head, his momentum almost completely maintained by the move.

Then, far ahead of Arrush, James reached the chair. Because while James might not be quicker or snappier than most humans, he could accelerate way beyond what was normal, and that included mad dashes across dungeon territory.

He didn't bother trying to scale the furniture, instead just opting to take a rapid swing at the creature that tumbled backward onto the floor. He caught nothing but a piece of its robe, and the realization that the texture of the cloth was far thicker and rougher than he'd expected.

A voice cut over the humming as Arrush circled the other side of the chair, words James couldn't quite make out in a language he didn't know. And then, the humming cut off, like someone had just hit the power button on the stereo.

He stood panting for a second, before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Get it?" He asked Arrush as the big ratroach finished his circle of the chair.

"Nnnno." Arrush gasped, chest heaving as he sucked in fresh air. "Ah...Alanna." He pointed a claw toward the shelves where things had gone quiet.

James jerked, but then stopped as his partner limped back into the clear area. "I'm *fine*." Alanna lied. "Dictionary got my leg. And I feel dizzy."

"Where did it go?" Though-Of-Quiet asked, whipping his lens around the area, searching for any sign of the creature. "Did it run?"

"I think so." James said. "Wait, Momo! Shit!" He looked up toward the stairs they'd taken to get down here, then relaxed as he saw Momo halfway down them.

Momo rubbed at her shoulder as she waved. "I'm fine! Sunny and Vad caught me, and this place sucks!"

With a sigh of releasing tension, James nodded. And then, they all took some time to regroup.

Frequency-Of-Sunlight and Deb checked everyone over, declaring most of them fine, and Alanna absolutely not fine. Sunny called up her authority, who James was somehow only just learning was named Dusty, to needle into the bite wound that went through Alanna's armor and into the muscle of her leg. While Dusty worked, and whispered to the camraconda, Frequency-Of-Sunlight confirmed that the books were indeed venomous. Or at least, the one that had bitten Alanna was, though it was only a soporific.

The protocol the Order had developed of switching ownership of the resistance programs that they ran on the increasing mess of hardware in their basement to whatever delve team was active was suddenly seeming a lot less like an overdone precaution now. A total ten percent resistance to venom was kind of nebulous, but since Alanna had been teleported mid-fight into a shelf filled with things trying to eat her, an extra ten percent could have been what kept her alive.

There was no real way to confirm it, but James shared what his navigator had shown him, the way the paths around the creature fluctuated when it started talking, and the feeling of a kind of pressure in the air when it stopped. Momo and Alanna confirmed feeling that too. "I think," James said, "it's an improv game."

“Explain, but use words Arrush will understand.” Frequency-Of-Sunlight said, getting a fondly exasperated pat on the head from her girlfriend and a tilt of the head from Arrush, who was still sitting with his back against one of the padded chairs.

“Improv is a thing where...” James stopped himself before Anesh could say whatever he was going to utter. “Right, sorry. Not the time for the full explanation. Um... you’re supposed to finish the story. It was narrating *this fight*. But it was putting us in the worst places. I just... uh... I am not creative under pressure?” He admitted.

Anesh sighed. “I’m not creative at all, so this is going to be a problem. Also, and this may sound bad, but... is that not a bit shit for a *second encounter*? So much for the theory that dungeons need to be fair.”

“It’s perfectly fair.” Alanna muttered in a drowsy tone. “I could take her.”

“Also third encounter.” Momo said. “I’m counting the crab.”

“*Also*.” James added. “It’s... unfortunately fair. Also Anesh I want to remind you that my third Office encounter was a fucking tumblefeed, so, like, ‘balance’ is relative.” He sighed, and glanced over at Thought-Of-Quiet. “It’s like the camracondas.” He said. “It’s a test. A gate. Can you be creative under pressure? If not, die. Just like how the camracondas are ‘did you bring a friend if not die’.”

“It is true.” Thought-Of-Quiet said softly. “I always win one-vee-one basketball.”

Vad blinked and opened his mouth, the new guy uncertain if he should interject. But everyone noticed, and James motioned him to go ahead while Momo elbowed him. “Uh... no, sorry, I just kind of want to know how you play basketball?” He asked the snake.

“Very well.” Thought-Of-Quiet answered, tilting his head back proudly.

The new guy nodded like that answered his question. “Right.”

“So, what now?” Deb asked as James stretched and started looking around for wherever his first hatchet had landed. “We still have plenty of time. Are we sticking around?”

James groaned. “Nnnnnnooooo.” He eventually admitted. “No. We can’t. Not with something like that around. That fight was... okay, so, *four of us* against it, and the best we could do was not get instantly murdered. That’s *bad*. Maybe if we’d downed half our potions in prep, we could have managed it. But the way it can throw us into the shelves, where there’s books waiting? I don’t think it knows how bad that could be, which is good, because we’d be toast.” He sighed. “We can’t keep poking around where something that can disrupt us that bad is hanging out.”

“Ah, but you know how to deal with it now.” Anesh pointed out. “Also, we could just go deeper into the shelves on the main level?”

“You’re really hoping to find a magic book, aren’t you?” James asked with a grin.

“James I love you, but everyone here wants to find a magic book, you included. Vad’s known about magic items probably since I started this sentence, and he wants to find a magic book.” Anesh held out a hand palm up toward Vad, who just nodded sheepishly. “See?”

In response, James just grinned.

It took them a little time to navigate the stairs up, with two camracondas in tow, but from there, the group took the next hour or so to prowl the shelves, looking for anything useful.

Mostly, they found more incredibly angry books full of teeth. And a few of those strange mobile words that scrawled themselves across surfaces, waiting to be translated. That, and more shelves. Momo, Anesh, and Thought-Of-Quiet had just come back from scouting a point where the shelves shifted from metal to wood and formed a split intersection, when James decided to call it.

No magic book tonight. Instead, all they had was just shy of a hundred of the orbs from this place, which Deb and James had gotten to work marking with a label maker before they left through the main door and headed back. No one really felt like letting a comical mixup happen between these and the Officium Mundi orbs.

“So, that’s it?” Vad asked as they stepped back into reality.

“That’s it, like, that’s the end of it? Or you’re not impressed with the extradimensional library? Or... nope, no idea what you mean.” James said as the warm night air of Texas summer slapped him in the face after the cool interior of the dungeon.

Vad gave him an incredulous look. “I mean... you’re not going to try to shut it down, or... or... I dunno, set up camp?”

“Well,” James said, “we don’t actually know if this one has done anything aside from defend itself, so we’re not just gonna kill it. Not that we know how, anyway. And we’ve got lives to get back to, so we’re not gonna build a dungeon guard post or anything. Mostly, what we do in situations like this, is get someone on the ground nearby as an early warning system in case anything changes. And then we’ll explore and make use of the dungeon’s resources as we’re able.”

“Oh, okay.” Vad looked mildly reassured that James actually had a plan. Then he paused, because he was smart, and knew where this was going. His eyes widened slightly. “Wait, no...”

“Yeah, so, we’ll get you onto the Order’s server, and get you the contact info for everyone who you’ll need.” James patted him on the shoulder. “Also an armory package. You’ll probably like it.”

“Is it more magic? Because yeah, I probably will, but this is... what is happening?”

“Responsibility of power or something.” Anesh said as James checked on an Alanna who was sitting with her leg propped up on one of the library chairs and getting tired of being checked on. “You actually can say no, if you want. James is serious, but this isn’t a mandatory thing.”

Frequency-Of-Sunlight nodded as she looked over at Vad. “Yes. I was told that we could not interview people who did not ask.”

“I mean, yes, obviously.” Vad said. “This is terrifying, but also... uh...” He flushed slightly and looked away.

“But also really cool and you can’t wait for more, even though you got hurt the first time, right.” Anesh said knowingly. “We’ve been there. Anyway, don’t go in alone, we’ll be in touch, uh... any other questions?”

Vad looked like he had a few million questions, but settled on, “Why does James have a tail?”

Anesh opened his mouth, then closed it, and looked over at his boyfriend. “I think it’s a navigator thing? I... had not noticed that really. Huh. I’ll get back to you?”

“Sure...” Vad said, still reeling from the night’s events. From the last couple weeks, really. It had all moved kind of fast. He still didn’t really get his bearings until well after the Order’s team teleported back to their home base, leaving him alone in a library at four in the morning.

It was kind of weird, being at work like this, when no one else was around, he mused.

Somewhere, old wood creaked, and Vad decided he’d muse at home, and not in this fucking building by himself.