

*“People often accuse me of tearing up tradition, but what is tradition, apart from peer pressure from dead people?” -Magid Magid, The Art of Disruption: A Manifesto For Real Change-*

“I talked to some of the more leader-y camracondas yesterday.” James spoke softly as he got dressed in the bedroom he shared with his partners. A bout of interior design had... *occurred*... over the last month or two, leaving the bedroom much more a bedroom than a cramped mess. James had finally just given in and moved his desk over to the other bedroom that was now sans-bed, making a little den for him and Anesh to work or relax in. There was a mild lack of privacy, sort of, but it didn't feel that way. And also James was barely ever home anyway. He was pretty sure Rufus used the computer more often than he did. Fuck, he was pretty sure *Auberdeen* used the computer more often than he did.

It had made room to put a bigger bed in here. One that could fit all of them, even when there were one or two extra Anesh. Not that they were even close to on the same sleep schedule, but that just meant James could sprawl out even more when he slept alone. He was trying to be better about sprawling. During a therapy session last week, Lua had pointed out to him that he didn't just *slouch* so much as he tried to hide himself by compressing down, and that wasn't healthy either mentally or physically. Especially not physically. James was still going strong, but the cumulative damage of a bunch of small injuries added up, and some scars never stopped hurting.

James realized he'd been spacing out as Anesh said something to him. His boyfriend was currently laying in their newly upsized bed, gently rubbing Alanna's back as she napped. And he'd said something James hadn't actually heard. “Sorry, what?” James shook himself as he finished pulling a shirt over his head and started looking for a pair of cargo shorts that would do nothing to protect him from the ninety degree sunshine outside.

“I asked what about. Are you alright?” Anesh gave him a look of concern, shifting up onto an elbow to look at James.

“I'm fine.” James murmured the soft lie, not wanting to wake their girlfriend. “Uh... oh, camracondas. Right. We were talking about cultural integration and stuff.” He rubbed a hand on his face, resisting the urge to sit on the edge of the bed, a fate from which he knew he would not escape from for a while. “You know, I'm doing a lot of reading and learning about things like government and civic engineering and everything, and it's all pretty straightforward. We might not have, like, the best answers? But civilization has a lot of research and historical data that can be used to avoid specific problems. We just kind of don't. I mean, the collective we.”

Anesh gave him a smile as he rolled to the end of the bed to look up at James, goosebumps forming over his naked form as he abandoned the blankets and threw himself into the apartment's air conditioning. “You're sidetracking.” He said with amusement.

“Right. So... that’s very distracting...” James grinned down at Anesh, who rolled his eyes at his boyfriend and also started getting up to get dressed. “So, there’s problems and solutions there. And then there’s a single question about ‘culture’, and it feels like it all falls apart. Like, what, exactly, is a culture? Ten billion people have been arguing about this across history, and we don’t have a good answer, and I’m just absolutely drowning in anxiety that I’ll destroy someone’s traditions by building what I project as a utopia.”

“Nnnnnnxiety...” The ‘word’ came from Alanna in a sleepy drawl as she flailed one arm at James.

“No, no anxiety.” He said with a smile, circling over to the side of the bed kiss her forehead. “Go back to sleep.” The he glanced at Anesh. “Wanna go on a walk so we don’t wake her?”

“Sure. Let me get pants.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine, I don’t mind.” James answered with a wide grin, stifling a laugh as Anesh scowled him out of the room.

Ten minutes later, Anesh joined him in the living room, walking in brushing his hair back - he decided he needed another haircut, maybe Momo could loan him whatever dungeontech she obviously used - as he spoke a little louder. “Alright, I’m ready to-“ He trailed off as he saw James on the couch, talking to the dog.

“...the stuff is useful, but not wholly safe. And it gets safer if you’ve got a firm knowledge of what biology you’re working with. Which is why I don’t have organic sonar in my ass yet, even though I would totally do that.” James said, while Auberdeen, their massive white ball of fur masquerading as a living creature, watched him politely. She let out a low woof with a jerk of her head, as if urging him to continue. “Right. So, we don’t have anyone who’s qualified to teach you. Deb’s busy, Amy’s... well, maybe Amy? Anyway. No orbs for it.” James waved at Anesh as he caught sight of him putting his shoes on, while Anesh wondered how a dog could look *so disappointed*. “That said,” James continued, standing from the couch, “how would you feel about auditing a college course or two? There’s a veterinary school around here, and I’m sure we could get you into a few biology courses at PSU or something.”

Auberdeen woofed excitedly, while Anesh processed those words. “Wait, hang on...” He started to protest.

“What?” James asked. “There are no rules that say-“

“Don’t you Air Bud me!” Anesh crossed his arms over his chest. “How would she get there safely? How would she *take notes*? This is not a well thought out plan!”

“See, you’re gonna make her feel like her dads are fighting.” James held his hands out dramatically to frame the dog curled up on the couch. “Also I totally thought this out. Skulljack things.”

“That can’t be your answer to everything.” Anesh said, and then sighed. “Even if... that is a great answer to everything. Wait, wasn’t the point of this that she... sorry Auberdeen, that *you* want to be able to talk?” Their dog woofed in the affirmative, paws tapping forward with excitement. “Doesn’t a skulljack just fix that?”

“It’s less reliable, as we’ve seen with the camracondas. And a lot of them already want to get reshaped to have natural voices. Deb’s still doing trials, and wants to bring in a lot of professional consultation first though.” James answered.

“But then she’ll have a skulljack. Do you want a skulljack?” He asked Auberdeen.

The furred girl on the couch shook her head. Well, her whole body, really, but it was obviously a no. And then she woofed twice more, trying to convey something. “See?” James said, like he understood that. “Besides, she can just get rid of it with the shaper treatment anyway.”

“Is... that an option?” Anesh asked, suddenly curious.

“We should find out.” James admitted. “Anyway, yeah, Auberdeen, I’ll look into that for you. Make Sarah remind me later, okay?” The dog woofed again. “Alright, we’re headed out for a bit. See you later!”

He slipped out their front door into the afternoon sun, the shift from the cool dim interior of the apartment that had a lot of blackout curtains up to the scorching heatwave inflicted day a sudden transition that left James reeling. Anesh followed, seeming to have no such problems.

Anesh gave a refreshed ‘aahhhh’ as he basked in the sunlight, while James mimicked him with a much more screamy ‘aahhhhh...’ as they started their walk.

“So, our dog is gonna go to college.” Anesh started.

“Now who’s getting sidetracked?” James smiled back up the stairs at his partner as they descended down into the parking lot, the asphalt smelling like melting fire as the sun continued its relentless midday assault.

They walked without talking for a little bit, avoiding the well worn process of repeating themselves as cars went by or they had to move single file to get past the apartment complex’s dumpster to make their way to the walking trail they used.

James was already sweating by the time they made it there. Why had he thought abandoning air conditioning was a good idea, he would never know.

“So, culture things.” Anesh refreshed him.

“Right.” James said, his emotional energy level rapidly fluctuating as the question brought him back to what was bothering him. “So, they don’t... care. They don’t care about... about themselves, I guess? As a people.”

“Okay.” Anesh nodded, pulling at the neck of his tee shirt. “Are they a people? Like, as a distinct unit? I do math, not political science.”

James gave a sideways look at his boyfriend, mouth set in a line. “I know for a fact you know a *lot* about the workings of certain subcultures, mister ‘I accidentally used all the orbs on Vatican secrets’.”

“That happened once.” Anesh protested.

“Once is literally enough.” James abandoned the line of friendly joking, and refocused. “But really, I don’t *know*. Are they ‘a people’? I don’t even know what that means. Like, what makes being a cultural unit important, or meaningful? I’m also having a lot of trouble because in ‘normal’ life, I’m vehemently opposed to the idea of ethnostates, but here I am, feeling bad that the camracondas don’t have unique camraconda things.”

Anesh sympathetically laid a hand on James’ shoulder. “They are snakes with magical physics breaking eyes, James.”

“Unique cultural things.”

“They are snakes with-“

“Alright, alright!” James laughed. “But I’m serious! Thought-Of-Quiet, who apparently wanted... well, that’s not important. But he’s so onboard with the idea of the Order as a shared point of collective culture, that he doesn’t care if his own people’s identity is eroded, and I’m just legitimately not sure how to feel about that. I feel... I feel like I’m *taking* something from them, you know? Like this wasn’t their choice, they were brought here without a real option, and every little thing they built up for themselves is suddenly washed away.” He took a deep breath, wishing the air was cooler, or refreshing in any way.

Anesh thought for a second, looking off to the side of the little path and the browned grass bobbing slightly in the almost non-existent breeze. “What about you?” He asked.

“What about me?”

“What do you feel, about giving up your own culture?” Anesh asked.

“That’s the thing.” James said. “I’m *not*. The Order is absolutely meant to be something new and different and to make deliberate meaningful changes to how we all act in daily life, and I *guess* that’s culture. But it’s just normal for me. It *is* my culture, and it doesn’t help that it’s drowning in a sea of modern local ideas.” James shrugged. “I wanna steal good ideas and discard ones that don’t work and try new things, but I cannot ignore that I’m a product of how I was raised. I can say ‘I want to be more vulnerable’ all I want, but it’s a huge leap to put that into action, you know?”

Anesh nodded. “I absolutely know, yeh. I still don’t really know how to be affectionate, even when we’re alone.”

“Like this!” James said, reaching out and taking Anesh’s hand as they walked, his partner flushing slightly as they walked for a bit like that, hand in hand. “But seriously,” James said through his smile, “even this, where I’m grinning like this is *funny* - which it is to be fair - and not just something pleasant to enjoy with you, it’s a form of me trying to deflect from being vulnerable. And I don’t know how to turn it off easily.”

There was a pause, before Anesh shook his hand free, the heat and skin contact making the kind gesture a little warmer and sweatier than was actually comfortable. “So, the camracondas, or some of them at least, want... what, to just meld into us?”

“Culturally.” James clarified. Then, a second later. “Also maybe in other ways, I dunno, I ain’t here to kink shame. But culturally at least, yes.”

“Is there a meaningful difference between ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’, or... I don’t know how you’d say this. ‘Species society’, maybe?” Anesh asked.

James thought for a second. “I feel like culture is more of a living thing? Like, what we do now is culture, and a lot of it is informed through the lens of tradition? But I generally have a lower view of tradition than culture. The ‘frozen yogurt’ view of cosmopolitan interactions.”

Pressing on and ignoring that painful attempt at a joke, Anesh continued. “And you find this bad, because... well, it’s *you*, so I’m guessing you’ve got some imposter syndrome going on and you don’t believe that anyone should trust you with anything serious, right?”

“Hey!”

“Right?”

James slouched without thinking about it, shoulders hitched up as he looked anywhere but at Anesh. “Yeah.” He grumbled.

“This brings up something else, though.” Anesh said, patting James on the shoulder in a knowing way. “The camracondas... what do *they* want?”

They came to a footbridge, stretching over a small creek and a riot of green that the hot summer hadn't been able to overwhelm. The bridge smelled like cooking wood and hot tar, and the sturdy construction thumped under their boots. James paused in their conversation to give a friendly nod at a passing dog walker, and dog, before answering. "Thought-Of-Quiet and Scent-Of-Rain at least, I think, want to just... be part of the Order. Or something like that. I don't know. They don't seem interested in having their own thing. And it just makes me *worry*."

"Right, I wanna talk about that." Anesh said. "So, *your plan*, for the *whole world*, is to build a cosmopolitan utopia, somehow..."

"It's a ways off, I admit." James said sheepishly.

"Shove it, let me finish. Your *plan*, such as it is, is to build a singular unified world, under the banner of compassion, understanding, and tolerance, yes?"

James smiled, a small little twitch of his mouth as he brightened up. "I like that!" He said, thumping a fist into an open palm. "Let's use that as the explanation from now on."

"Explanation or no, *why* are you getting *worried*, that other people want to *do the thing you want?!*" Anesh demanded.

"You know, Thought-Of-Quiet said the same thing." James admitted, ducking away as Anesh tried to grab him in a headlock, a move his boyfriend had learned from Alanna. "Anesh, come on! I don't wanna do a colonialism! I'm trying to put real thought into this!"

"Okay." Anesh took a *deep* breath as they finally made their way into a part of the trail where the trees were close enough to provide some much needed shade. He didn't actually need to breathe much, but the motion still felt good, and there probably wasn't a downside to keeping his blood moving. "James. I love you. I really do."

"Aw, I love you too."

"And you're an idiot. Sometimes."

"...I am reconsidering how much I love you..." James said in a tone that made it quite clear he was not even a little bit serious.

Anesh swatted a mosquito away. "The really funny thing here is, this is the sort of problem that only comes up if you actually care. But you skipped a step in your logic." He glanced at James. "You're spending all your brainpower worrying about if you're doing right by the camracondas, which is great, but in doing so, you are absolutely dismissing their own ability to have agency. To make choices. You are *doing what you are afraid of*, telling them that *you know better*. Even if you're being very you about it. And at a certain point, you're going to have to accept that if

you make a place that's great to live in, people are going to want to live in it. That includes displaced artificial magical species of serpents made entirely out of cabling."

"They actually do have internal organs." James said easily, ignoring the point. "Like, at the least they have lungs, and a stomach. And also primary sexual charact- okay yes!" He broke off as Anesh scowled at him. "Yes, I get it! It just feels bad! Like they'll never get a chance to make anything themselves!"

"But they will." Anesh said quietly. Almost too quietly, as they came to an intersection with a sidewalk, and their walk changed to one that had too many cars next to it. "They'll make so much. With us. They get to get in on the ground floor, with no stupid hang ups about vulnerability or ethnicity or stereotypes or *anything* to hold them back. They're totally new, but smart enough to choose. Do you have any idea how *good* that must feel?"

"I don't." James said, thinking about it.

"Me neither." Anesh replied, leaning into James' shoulder as they waited for a crosswalk. "But I bet it's great. Now come on, let's grab some kind of frozen drink and hope the cafe has air conditioning."

"Wait, we weren't even going to... how did we end up here?" James looked around at the small strip mall they'd arrived at, like he hadn't been paying attention. "What just happened?!"

"All our walks end up with us getting coffee. Or, at least, outside a cafe. How have you not noticed this?" Anesh asked.

James snorted. "I'm very oblivious." He answered honestly, as they headed toward their apparent destination.

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Alanna found them an hour later, in the middle of an extensive discussion about applied public transit design, and the role of a government in the application of services to the common people. By the time she'd gotten her own drink and sat down at their table, she'd picked up that the conversation had mostly derailed into a semantic debate on what 'common people' did and should mean, and what the role of things like public recognition, reputation, and social power should be in a practical utopia.

"You guys get that the baristas here think you're insane, right?" She asked as she tried to rearrange her chair to where she wanted it without dragging it across the flagstone floor.

"Heh. Yeah. It's great." James said with a casual confidence. "Also hello! How was your nap? And how did you know we'd be here?"

Alanna gave him a look. “Where *else* would you two be? I mean, aside from at the tri-weekly Order meeting that you’re missing right now.”

“You are also missing it.” James pointed out. “Also is it actually tri-weekly if it’s once per three weeks? I should ask someone about that.”

“Wait.” Anesh interrupted. “Today’s meeting is about Response stuff, shouldn’t at *least* one of you be there?”

“It’s really more a lot of logistical stuff.” James answered easily. “Talk about telepad use numbers, defining responsible boundaries for Response, budget stuff. Oh! The new telepads are *great* by the way, thanks Anesh for that. Thinner notepad backing, less useless cardboard per duplication, Texture-Of-Barkdust says we’re getting something like another five or six hundred ports per duplication run. Progress!”

Anesh glanced between the two of them. “Thanks. But uh... And you don’t think... maybe we should be there for this? This seems like the sort of pivotal thing that can define a huge part of who we are?”

The motion Alanna made with her hand as she sipped at the coffee she’d gotten wasn’t exactly dismissive, but it was casually uninterested. “Eh.” She said after she finished her sip. “You’re *right*, obviously. But there’s about twenty people there to debate the balance between budgets and efficacy, and they don’t need me or James being snarky.”

“I could be serious.” James offered without interrupting, tapping a finger on the side of his empty ceramic cup.

“And like,” Alanna continued unabated, “here’s something great about us. This whole thing. I actually trust the people who are talking? I mean, sure, I might disagree on some stuff, but I trust that they’ll act in good faith, and also, I *know* some of them are smarter than me.” She shrugged. “So I’m here, to hang out with you two. What’s up?”

While Anesh excitedly talked to Alanna about trains - and James was pretty sure that his boyfriend had gotten a skill orb in that recently; no one was this excited about trains - he leaned back with a smile and just let the atmosphere of the room wash over him. It felt nice, to be out somewhere, just relaxing with his partners. The soft orange-yellow light of the cafe’s lamps mixed with the late afternoon sun outside, and the regular hiss of the espresso machine and mixed smells of coffee and bagels left him feeling like he was wrapped in a comfortable blanket.

His partners made it better. He wasn’t totally focused, but he did follow a series of train puns as Anesh and Alanna parried and riposted in their verbal spar. It made his heart warm to see the two of them acting so comfortable with each other. Having Alanna back in their lives after she was missing for months really had done wonders for his mood in general, too.



The conversation meandered. Anesh talked about how he was thinking of quitting his job at NASA, despite being able to manage it with one of his clones. There were a few problems, not the least of which was that the other Anesh still lived through days isolated from his partners and friends, and it was a big source of stress. But also, his legal status was kind of up in the air right now, and with the Order's break away from the FBI's prying eyes, it wasn't clear if Anesh's special status as space probe designer was in jeopardy or not. Also also, basically only one of the people he worked with took him seriously when he said he had a space elevator. He wanted to hire that guy, a bearded mountain of a man who constantly looked like he was being lightly choked by the dress code.

James and Alanna made sympathetic noises, and reminded Anesh that they'd support him even if he was a jobless malcontent. He'd given them a scowl, and then when that hadn't been enough, had tried to get another iteration of himself to come by to give them an extra scowl. The other iteration of himself was at the Response meeting, though. And the third one wasn't actually ready to just *quit* NASA yet, and didn't want to be teleporting everywhere.

For a while, Alanna tried to get the two of them engaged in a game she wanted to play called 'guess who is here on a date'. Her enhanced Empathy, courtesy of the communication lesson that she'd gotten from the sewer that was even now threatening to crest over into an even bigger upgrade, was a power she couldn't really turn off, only avoid by focusing on things that weren't other people. But sometimes, it was amusing to her to see just how obvious it was that someone was really, really, *really* invested in sleeping with their date. And she wondered how she could have missed the tiny cues before. Technically, empathy was something a person could learn, but James pointed out that *aim* was something you could learn too, and he still outperformed her in everything from pistols to throwing knives with just a couple points of his own stat.

James tried to sideline her from her casual people watching endeavors, asking about the sewer creature that Alanna had rescued months ago who was finally making progress on healing, and had even woken from what seemed to be a coma. And the distraction worked. Alanna had been spending time with the creation that was like a blending of a raven and a hornet. Nothing serious, but she sat with the young girl as she learned to speak through a skulljack connection, helped her learn to take halting steps on prosthetic feet that the Order's engineers had leapt to put together, and tried to spend at least a little time when the girl was awake talking to her.

"She's not like the ratroaches." Alanna explained. "Deb... okay, you know how Arrush and Keeka hurt all the time?"

"Yeah, and did *you* know that they can actually tolerate enough ibuprofen to kill a yak?" James countered.

"Yeah. Well. Deb says their biology is put together for them to feel pain. But whatever this girl is, she's not made that way. She's basically a dungeon version of a kamikaze." Alanna's voice had an undercurrent of cold anger to it as she leaned forward heavily on the small cafe table.

“Made to hit a target, then die. And... that’s it. There’s no extra nerve clusters, no embedded anger or fear responses, she’s just kinda blank. Learning fast, though. And curious about a lot of stuff. She’s also starting to get stir crazy down in medical.”

“Does she have a name?” Anesh asked.

Alanna shook her head. “Not yet. She said she had a... well, it’s a mix between a loud buzz and a production number. So not that. And she hasn’t picked anything yet. But seriously, I’m worried about her sneaking out when no one’s looking. Even if we do have a full time staff and someone is probably always looking.”

“You could bring her here, if you want!” James offered.

“I mean, here is kind of a big jump.” Alanna raised her eyebrows.

“Is it?” James asked, actually thinking about it as he spoke. “I mean, it’s not like you can’t just teleport here. It’s a summer tuesday afternoon, so there aren’t that many people. And the baristas already think we’re weird anyway. Wait, hell, the baristas regularly serve *camracondas* now, since everyone at the Order comes here anyway.” He shrugged. “It just might be a nice way to get her out for a bit. Let her experience some of the world somewhere safe.” He looked down at his own hands idly tapping against the empty cup he had. “I feel safe here, anyway.” He muttered.

“There *are* a bunch of teenagers here.” Anesh pointed out. “Teenagers can be awful.”

“Eh.” Alanna dismissed that point. “They’re all bleeding awe and hero worship because they know who we are.”

“Yeah, I didn’t wanna say anything, but one of them was legitimately thinking about asking us for autographs a minute ago when I went to the bathroom.” James said with a wince.

Anesh stared at the two of them, before leaning slightly to look between their seats and over to the table of younger people, one of whom rapidly ducked their eyes down as he noticed he was being watched. Anesh leaned back. “Bloody hell.” He grumbled. “Okay, I’m with James. Go grab your friend.”

“This seems... reckless?” Alanna paused and asked the question not like she was trying to convince them otherwise, but because she wanted to double check that she had their approval. James just shrugged, a goofy grin on his face, while Anesh looked like he was about the launch into some kind of explanation. She didn’t know what of. But Alanna was willing to take it as a yes. “Right.” She nodded. “Do good *recklessly*, huh?”

Behind her, James let out a cherry “Exactly!” as she got up and headed to the bathroom to teleport away.

And then fifteen minutes, and a few confirmation texts later, back.

The young girl who came with her - and it was always weird for James to constantly try to assess how mature creations that were only a year or two old were - was perhaps the most out of place thing the cafe had ever seen. And camracondas hung out here. James and Rufus played card games with teenagers here. *Sarah* came here fairly often.

None of them ever caused the kind of hush as Alanna walked back into the lobby, letting the inhuman friend she'd brought along lean on her.

They were an angular quadruped, but their body was still shaped like they were supposed to walk and move like something with two legs. The extra legs connecting to ancillary hip joints without having any extra large bone structure or even the proper support from their form. They didn't have feet; instead they just had conical stingers, lances of chitin with tips that shattered easily on impact. Or at least, she *had* had them. Three of them had been broken away when the girl was rescued, and never grew back, and currently had secured prosthetic claws attached to them. The fourth leg did as well, to keep balance, but the girl still wobbled like she wasn't used to walking. Which, to be fair, she wasn't.

The rest of her body was a compressed hourglass of chitin; she didn't seem to have arms, just a black and yellow striped shell, black feathers sprouting off her waist and shoulders like a cloak, with a set of six thick translucent oval wings behind her. A tall black furred oval face dominated by a cracked black beak with a few soft feathers surrounding it, and one large multifaceted eye flicking wildly around their surroundings while the other one was covered by a black eyepatch, the strap of which was wrapped around and under the antenna coming off the back of her head.

She moved like she didn't know how light she was. A simple white robe covered most of her body, with slits cut in the side and the sleeves tied back behind the back. And like she was unused to walking. And she stared. At everything, and everyone, like she'd never been outside of one of two different buildings before.

Which she hadn't.

For a few moments, the only sounds were the soft piano playing over the cafe's speaker system, and the clicking of her artificial feet on the stone floor. Everyone in the cafe slowly stopped what they were doing, and turned to stare at the alien presence in their midst.

Then they noticed *Alanna*, who did *not* look amused with them, and was silently threatening everyone with her aura, and people turned their open stares to surreptitious glances, and their silence to resumed conversations and whispers.

Alanna guided her friend over to their table, and pulled out a chair for her, turning it sideways so the girl could move her non-human-standard legs into a sitting position.

"I'm back." She said simply, while the crow-wasp kept rapidly flicking her head and eye back and forth around the room. Looking at the lights, sometimes focusing on individual people, until settling on staring out the big bay windows at the front of the cafe. "Deb... uh... might be mad at me?"

"We should give her a vacation." Anesh said.

"Yeah, we're too hard on that girl." James added.

The wasp girl flinched as they spoke, whipping her sight between the two of them, before looking back at Alanna with a wide eye expression. "It's alright." Alanna said in a soft voice that James and Anesh had never heard from her before. "They're my friends too. You can say hi if you want?"

There was a long pause, the girl shifting herself as she tried to get comfortable in the chair, and looking down at anything that wasn't eye contact, burying herself in her own feathers and the robe she had on. "...Hello." Eventually came the mechanical tone from the speaker clipped to the robe's pocket.

James smiled as kindly as he could. "Hello there." He said. "Alanna thought you'd like to get out of the hospital for a while."

"Yes." The girl looked up at him, cracking her beak and buzzing something warbling at him. Then she snapped her beak shut and ducked back down again like she was ashamed or afraid.

Anesh looked at James with concerned eyes, before turning back to the girl. "It's alright to talk." He told her. "Even if no one understands you. Happens to me all the time."

"Okay, hang on." James' voice slipped back into familiar banter without meaning to. "You talk about high level math all the time."

"Yes." Anesh nodded sagely. "And you don't understand me. But I keep doing it, don't I?"

"You tried to explain trigonometry to me, as a date." James grumbled, folding his arms.

Alanna's laugh surprised both of them, and they looked over to see the bird girl had slipped an arm out of her robe to hold up the speaker to Alanna's ear and 'whisper' something to her. James caught a glimpse of a cascade of slightly shimmering black feathers, capped with a grasping claw on the end of a wing, before the girl pulled her arm back and the limb seemed to vanish as the seam of chitin blended in against her body.

"No, no." Alanna said, softly rubbing a hand on the girl's shoulder. "They're just like that. It's how they express love."

“You do the same thing!” James accused her with a smile. “Also to express love, I assume. Either that or this is a very long con on your part.” He looked back at their new tablemate. “Would you like anything to drink, if you’re comfortable being here for a bit?” He asked. “Uh...” He looked back at Alanna. “Can she drink coffee?”

“Oh that seems like a terrible idea. Also she’s allergic to nuts.”

“Really?” Anesh quirked an eyebrow. “Just nuts?”

“Hate. Nuts.” The girl said with atonal conviction. She was still getting used to forming words through her skulljack, and even if she had a more or less complete picture of English dumped into her mind, that didn’t mean she had practice using it.

“No nuts then.” James stood and headed over to the counter, hearing behind him as the girl started to open up a bit, asking Alanna what the windows were. He was smiling as he got in line and waited for the barista to get slightly less busy. “Hey.” He said to the skinny, heavily tattooed guy on the other side of the counter. “How’s your night going?”

“Weirder than normal.” The dude replied, with a nod. “What can I get for ya? Coffee? Tea? Alien ichor?”

“...do you want a job?” James asked with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. “I feel like I should offer you a job. I think you’d fit into our operational structure pretty well.”

“I don’t really do operational structures.” The barista told him easily, like he’d been saving the line for exactly this moment.

“Yeah, neither do we, that’s why I’m offering.” James said. “Anyway. Small... banana smoothie?”

The barista flipped an empty cup in his hand. “Coming up. If you promise to explain what’s up with the monstergirl later.” He said, vanishing before James could even pay, saying something muffled about it being on the house for new people. James stared at the blank space behind the cash register where a person should have been, then begrudgingly accepted the free drink and dropped twenty bucks and a skill orb into the tip jar.

He got back to the table a few minutes later to find Alanna explaining the blender noise to the new girl. “Here ya go.” He said, settling the drink in front of her, a straw already poking out of the cup. “So, I was thinking-“

“What. This?” The wasp girl asked him, flicking her beak between him and the smoothie.

“It’s a drink.” James said. “A sweet fruit mix. I dunno if you’ll like it, but it’s something different than what you’ve been having in the hospital.”

Anesh made a humming sound. “You know, I haven’t actually needed to spend any time in our on-site hospital, just, you know, regular ones. For a variety of dungeon reasons. And that one time you broke my hand with a crowbar.” He ignored James’ protests that it was an accident, and also years ago. “Anyway. My point is, isn’t *our* hospital food just whatever Nate or Marjorie made that day?”

“Or me! I also work in our kitchen!” James offered. “I’ve been getting so good at making bread lately, you have no idea.”

“You have skill ranks in cooking.” Alanna pointed out. “It’s kind of cheating. Oh, man, you know what? We should find you a sewer lesson on home ec or someth... ah.” She stopped talking as she noticed the girl next to her had gone rigid, straw poking loosely into her beak. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to... uh... are you okay?” Alanna reached out to the wasp girl’s shoulder again, worried that her mention of the Akashic Sewer had frightened or upset her.

But then the girl whipped her head around to Alanna, her sides cracking open as she extended her wing-arms again to grab the cup, flinching slightly at the cold of the smoothie. She held it up. “What. This?” She demanded, same tone as before but the volume turned up slightly, her organic voice a buzzing symphony as she paired it with her skulljack assisted speech.

“It’s... a banana smoothie!” Alanna pulled back slightly from the frozen drink being presented to her face at close range. “Are you okay?!”

“Banana.” The girl said, pulling the drink back and wrapping her beak around the straw again, taking a long drink. “Banana.” She gave a squawking buzz, like a gasp or a sigh as she stopped pulling on the straw, before she dove back in again. “Baaaaa naaaaa naaaaa...”

James was doing his best not to choke on his own laughter, not wanting to startle the new girl. But she was in her own world now, her good eye focused on her drink, her wings out and her clawed hands balancing the cup. Her quiet curiosity about the world she’d been dropped into narrowed down to the single point of a fruit smoothie. “This is adorable.” James whispered to Anesh, who was doing a better job of not laughing, but still nodded back with a beaming smile on his face.

There were a lot of little reminders that the residents of both the Sewer and the Office that had been brought back to Earth had lived hard lives. Been subjected to abuse that no one should have to survive. And sometimes those reminders were grim and depressing, but other times, it was a form of soft magic to watch someone enjoy a frozen drink for the first time, muttering the word ‘banana’ over and over, body language getting more animated in small motions.

They made some small talk for a while, just letting their whims and words wander, while the wasp girl enjoyed her drink and got used to being around people. A few times, people would stop as they came in and stare, but Alanna or James would just look at them pointedly and give small shakes of their heads, and that was enough. James *knew* that eventually, they'd have to deal with someone horrible, but not *now*. Not tonight.

It was in the middle of this comfortable sense of togetherness that a small voice crept into James' consciousness.

"Can... I try one?" The navigator in his mind asked.

"Try a smoothie?" James asked out loud, getting looks from Alanna and Anesh until he tapped the side of his head.

"Yes...?" The navigator asked.

He still hadn't really chosen a name either, and was, really, quite quiet most of the time. He didn't visit James' dreams or make much contact during the day, unless they were on a dungeon delve. Sometimes, he felt more like a distant roommate than a friend or companion. But that was *also okay*, and James made sure that he knew that it was fine. Still, he felt a warmth as he let the connection to the infomorph bloom.

"Of course." James said. "Do you want to come out and say hi?" He asked. "It's not a traditional journey, but we can see where this is going all the same. And I'll go order another one of these and hope the barista isn't annoyed with me yet."

Anesh rolled not just his eyes but his whole head. "We really have given up on any semblance of secrecy, haven't we?" He asked. "No, no, I know you've got a reason, and don't get me wrong, I *like it*. But wow, we just gave up on trying to not draw attention, huh?"

He said this as the navigator bled into physical space, a phantom limb slipping off of his own arm, orange and gold light covered in feathers that grew out of James' body all the way up to his neck. A few of the feathers farther up seemed to move of their own accord, eyes opening on them and looking around at the world on their own.

When James went back to buy another smoothie, the barista had it ready for him already, and just handed the plastic cup over. "You guys know this place isn't so big or loud that no one can hear you, right?" He asked.

"I think this came up before, when Alanna was yelling about overthrowing the government or something." James answered, taking the drink.

"...Thank you." The navigator's voice was like a whisper on the wind, and the barista startled a little as James handed the partially manifested infomorph the cup.

“Uh... you're welcome?” The other guy said, scratching at his neck awkwardly. “Two in one day is kind of a record for you guys, really.” He added as James laughed and returned to the table once more, as the navigator pulled the straw into a set of serrated teeth between a few ghostly orange feathers.

“How are you tasting that, even?” Alanna asked when James sat back down.

“Very good.” The navigator said, eyes on James' shoulder squinting in pleasure.

“Very...banana.”

“Yes! Banana!” The wasp girl agreed.

“I'm glad they're making friends.” Anesh said. “This is nice. We should do this more often. I should bring myself here next time; you two get to have friends, I should have a friend too.”

“You could bring that girl who you were probably flirting with several lifetimes ago?” James suggested. “We never did get to meet her, you know.”

Anesh sighed. “Eh.” He said, grinning at Alanna who was watching the navigator's assault on the smoothie with wide eyed fascination. “I mean, we got along, and there might've been something, sure. But it's been a while, and we pretty much just stopped talking. I'm kinda fine just moving on.”

“Surreptitiously moving on is how James plans to address the adorable gay rats having a crush on *him*.” Alanna pointed out.

“Wait, what?” James jolted upright.

If Anesh had anything to say about that, he didn't let it distract him from finishing a previous thought. “I also... uh...” He flushed a slightly darker copper tone and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I don't actually remember her name.”

“Names are important!” The navigator spoke like crunching gravel.

“Actually, yeah, do you have a name?” Anesh asked. “I understand that it can be a lot of trouble to choose one for the first time, for a lot of people.”

The navigator ruffled the feathers around James' neck, getting a sputtering swat from his host as James got ethereal feather up his nose and flinched away. “I am unnamed, for now.” He said. “James is... descriptive. I do not want to be named like a bird.”

“Not *like* a bird, just a *bird of some kind*.” James badly defended himself, the thing Alanna had said dropping from his mind, briefly. “You're covered in feathers and I'm actually not very



creative, okay?! I can't help it! Besides, Albatross is a cool name, and I stand by it as a suggestion."

"You see?" The navigator said, setting the smoothie on the table for a brief window to gesture to James with his projected limb. "This is what I mean." He said, with a voice like tires on asphalt.

Alanna nodded knowingly. "I think it's pretty telling that James just says 'The Office' or 'The Attic' all the time to talk about dungeons. He says the capital letters, but he really does go for descriptive names." Across from her, James held a hand to his heart in a shocked 'I am right here' kind of motion. "How about you, kiddo?" Alanna's tone slipped back into that warm, almost *motherly* voice as she gently nudged the girl next to her. "You get to pick a name whenever you want, you know. And I can't keep calling you 'that one girl' forever."

"Banana!" The Sewer creation said, swiveling her head to face Alanna as she slurped down the last dregs of the smoothie, pivoting to look down at the empty cup with a widening eye and a cracked open beak, disappointment radiating off of her.

"I mean... uh..." Alanna seemed taken off guard, which was foolish. James and Anesh had seen this coming a mile away. Hell, the navigator had seen this coming, and they'd only just really joined in. "You can... go with that, sure. Are you sure?"

"...No." The wasp admitted. "But. I like this." She held up the empty cup. "So yes."

"Then we can come back here again." Alanna said with a smile. "If you want to?" The girl nodded at her, head drooping slightly as she did so. "Okay, you need to lay down." Alanna's voice suddenly turned to concern. She looked up at the others. "I'm gonna get her back. I'll see you two later, right?"

"Uh... yes." Anesh said. "That is how our relationship works. We see each other constantly."

Alanna flipped him off as James passed her a telepad he'd already written the Lair's receiving point on. "Thanks." She told him, before getting Banana up on unsteady feet, and pulling the telepad page. A few seconds later, the two of them vanished with a light pop.

"Hey, did you notice that?" James asked, eyebrows raised.

"The... delay?" Anesh looked back at his boyfriend. "Yeeeeeeah. Do the new telepads do that? Uh oh. I may have cocked that up."

"A strange move." The navigator said around the smoothie it was still working on. "But so safe. You made it?" He looked at Anesh with his myriad eyes.

Anesh nodded. "Yeah, though it doesn't work very well for exploring. Sorry." The navigator gave an exasperated huff.

“You know, if you want, we could go on more of a walk.” James said. “It’s less... uh... on fire outside now? Also we’ve been taking up this table for a couple hours. We can just go a direction we never have before. Talk about names. Or social living space design!” He perked up. “Oh! That was the thing, before Alanna got here! I wanted to talk about plaza design, and the thought of using orange totems for clear lines of walkability! I mean... uh...” he trailed off. “If you want to. Obviously.”

“James, I’m tired, still too hot, and I have to piss.” Anesh said. “But I can fix one of those before we go, and I love you, and I always want to talk about whatever logistical nightmare you’ve thought of next. So yes, let’s go on a walk.”

It wasn’t very often that Anesh outright said that, James realized. Not when they were out and about. His boyfriend *was* a loving, affectionate person, but he was also very reserved and tried to avoid being flustered in public. Or so James had thought, anyway. Maybe Anesh was changing. Maybe they both were, and he hadn’t noticed.

James didn’t have a quick reply to the words, anyway, and as Anesh went to use the washroom, the navigator poked at him. “I am disappointed.” He said.

“Wha?” James jolted, realizing he was sitting at a table essentially talking to ‘himself’ as an older couple waiting for their drinks stared at him. “Sorry, what?”

“Disappointed.” The navigator said again. “Do you know why?”

James thought about it for a few seconds, before he chanced a guess. “Is it,” he asked, drawing on the knowledge that even if they were different people, the navigator had still ‘grown’ using his own mind, “because *you* wanted to be named Banana, and she beat you to it?”

“Yesssssss.” The navigator hissed. “I would have been a good fruit...”

“Bananas are berries actually.” James said with a smile, leaning back in his chair and watching the people flow by on the sidewalk through the windows of the cafe. Families going to the lake or fountain nearby, older shoppers whiling away their Tuesday, people on lunch break going to grab something from any of the half dozen little overpriced restaurants around here. “Also, there are other smoothie flavors, if *you* want to come back here. Actually, question about that; you sorta feed off of journeys, right? Is that *just* exploration and new places? Does it not include comfortable habits?”

The navigator paused, pulling its feathered limb close to James, ocular feathers rippling in thought. “I do not know.” He said. “But... we should try? We should try. I think. I would like to. I have maybe been too quiet, I think.”

“Hey, it’s alright.” James said, kicking forward as he spotted Anesh coming back. He stood and rolled his shoulder, trying to stretch out his back before they started walking again. “We don’t always have all the answers. So we try things. And sometimes they’re good.”

“I like that a lot.” The navigator said softly. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” James told him, approaching Anesh and not stopping as he got within his boyfriend’s personal space, wrapping his shorter lover in a slightly feathery hug before spinning around and holding the door open. “Alright! It feels like I’m already stepping into an oven! Let’s see how long this lasts before someone tells me they like my coat and you can surprise the heck out of them!”

“This feels like a weirdly familiar game...” Anesh said.

“This is an *excellent* game.” The navigator shot back.

It was an excellent game. It took three minutes, and the woman who said it didn’t take back her offer to buy the coat even after the navigator talked to her. Which sort of put a damper on how fun it was, but afterward, they laughed at the absurdity anyway.