

*“Waves cradling a weathered boat. A globe of stars, pointillism as a glittering map. Steady eyes, searching. Open fields with horizons obscured by humid haze. A clasping hand, firmly pulling forward. Inexorable motion, determined cessation.” -Sun Basin Soap, description for Navigator-*

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James woke up on his couch, a pained and panicked yell coming from his mouth, as something sharp scraped at and then into his upper arm. As soon as he started shouting, other startled yells and one confused series of barks also started filling the apartment with a cacophony of voices.

As he stumbled to his feet and clipped his hip on the table next to their couch, James rapidly realized that what he was scrambling away from was Arrush, who had let go of him almost instantly when James' shout had woken him out of his own dream. Or, more accurately, nightmare. The ratroach who had been sleeping in a half slumped position against James had started scrambling in his sleep, and one of his claws had torn a thin bloody line down James' arm, before catching on the wrapped bandages around his forearms from the still unhealed wizard plague marks.

Now he was awake, panting frantically and pushed back against an equally panicked Keeka, while Alanna and Sarah spilled out into the hallway of the apartment and Auberdeen howled as she tried to figure out what was going on.

James took a deep breath, and let it out in a short huff. “Alright, jeeze, everyone calm down.” He said. “I'm awake, no need to freak out.”

“Holy shit, you're bleeding on the floor.” Alanna gasped out, rubbing sleep out of her eyes as Sarah rushed over to check on the ratroaches and also tell Auberdeen she could stop being quite so enthusiastic. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“Hm?” James glanced at her. “Oh. Alarm clock malfunction. I'm fine.” He said. “Awake, too! Which is novel, normally I'd try to sleep for another few hours.”

“S-sorr-sorry...” Arrush made a gasping hiss of the word. “I... I...”

“*You* are gonna stop apologizing.” James tried to offer a placating smile and failed to make his face do the motion properly, since he was still groggy. “This happens to me pretty often. Alanna flails when she sleeps, and her nails are actually sharper than yours.”

“I do not!” His girlfriend protested, flushing red at the accusation. “Also that's magic, it's not my fault! Get tougher skin!”

Whatever quip James was going to fire back was interrupted by a pair of Anesh, eyelids drooping and stifling yawns, stomped out of their bedroom and down the hall toward him. One

of them silently grabbed James arm and held it up, while the other ran an alcohol swab down the cut, and then applied one of those big patch bandaids to the injury. Then handed James the castoff bits of bandaid wrapper, dropped his arm again, and silently stomped back to bed.

James pointed after him, looking at Arrush, and seeing Sarah reassuringly holding Keeka's claws behind him. "I legit think he doesn't even wake up to do that." He said. "Anyway. Go back to sleep! All of you!"

"Yeah, okay." Alanna gave a short laugh, before pecking a kiss on James' forehead that he reflexively wiped at. "What're you doing?"

"Going into the Lair." James said. "After I find pants. Since, I mean, I suck at going back to sleep."

"Still sorry." Arrush offered. "For waking you up." He looked far less panicked now, having seen James' almost placid response to the accidental injury.

James shrugged. "It's fine. Time in this building is weird, so I actually *have* slept enough to feel okay. Anyway. *Everyone go back to bed.* Everything's fine, sorry for yelling."

Almost reluctantly, Auberdeen lay back down, shuffling her front paws forward to stare up at the others just in case there was an emergency that called for canine intervention. Sarah gave James a sleepy headbutt as she passed by, and he didn't miss the fact that she gave him what felt like a whole hour's worth of extra rest through the contact. Alanna looked like she wanted to say something, but just got some water from the kitchen before wandering back down the dim hall of the apartment, figuring they'd talk later when she hadn't just woken up. Arrush and Keeka looked like they didn't fully know what to do, but as James passed back through the living room fully dressed, he offered them a teleport ride back to their own apartment.

"Because," he said, "I am entirely sure you have a better bed than this couch."

"I like this couch..." Keeka muttered through the pillow he had his multitude of limbs wrapped around.

James nodded sagely. "Same. But I wasn't disparaging the couch, I was asking if you wanted to blip back with me and have your own bed where there's lumbar support and stuff." He paused. "Do you guys *need* that, actually? Like, you were sleeping all curled up, does that not hurt your... ah." It occurred to him as he was speaking that they probably just didn't notice one more source of pain, if it hurt at all.

Before he had his shoes on, he had an answer. Keeka had already fallen back asleep, the exhausted ratroach snoring with wet hisses as Arrush watched him with worried mismatched eyes. With half a granola bar in his mouth, James had hugged Arrush lightly from behind the

couch, whispered a goodbye, and teleported out of his apartment before anything else could go wrong.

It wasn't a perfect start to the day, but he had a lot of stuff he wanted to take care of, and kicking things off with a problem and a solution seemed pretty apt.

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"Hey, how does our voting system work?" Bill ambushed James shortly after he'd arrived, but before he'd gotten any farther in his day than having a probably-non-magical coffee.

James was starting to realize he didn't really like the taste of coffee that much, and that he was basically just used to drinking the adult version of chocolate milk every time he had a mocha. But he didn't have a place to get mochas anymore; the Lair didn't have an espresso machine for some reason, as far as he knew, and the one cafe that he was cool teleporting to was gone.

He needed to talk to the owners and remaining staff of that place. Recovery was already working on it, but James felt like he owed someone an apology.

None of this was relevant to what Bill was saying though. The bear of a contractor was drinking out of his own travel thermos of what James assumed was suitably masculine midnight black coffee, and looking like he was deciding if he should fully wake up today.

"Voting for what, exactly?" James asked. "Because some stuff works differently."

"Uh... big projects?" Bill shrugged.

"Big projects that require use of major resources beyond time, big projects that require commitment to outside people, or big projects that are weird cobbled together magical nonsense that will nonetheless upend how we do things around here?" James had a list prepared. He'd had to field this question a few times now.

If Bill was caught off guard by the instant response, he didn't show it. "One and two. Probably also some of three." He answered. "Mostly askin' for the second part though. I don't speak for everyone here, even when sometimes I really should." He cocked one eyebrow at James in a motion that James *knew* the older man must have practiced in the mirror.

"First off... no, let's skip that. I don't have the focus for it. It's two steps. First you do a majority vote of the relevant members. So, if this is some kind of infrastructure or construction thing, it's your crew, Mark's people, maybe also the engineers in Research, that kind of thing. We're working on streamlining how we figure out who to alert. But, anyway, if a majority vote passes, then we move it to a general discussion, make sure the idea aligns with what we want to do as the Order, and then lock in the specifics of the project. The second vote requires an

overwhelming majority for ideological alignment, but only a simple majority for the go-ahead to start.”

“Why?”

“To which part?”

“Half of what you said.” Bill laughed, a rough and loud chuckle that reminded James a lot of how his dad used to laugh. “Why the political part at the end?”

James shrugged. “Because the Order exists for an ideological reason, not a tactical one. We aren’t trying to make money, or take over the world, or eliminate our enemies, or something specific like that. We’re trying to improve things for as many people as we can. That means we need to start by looking at if we *should* do large scale stuff, before we ask if it’s profitable or convenient.”

“Okay. And the first vote? The limited one? Isn’t it kinda bullshit extra work?”

“Well, it does mean that half of Research’s more... volatile... ideas never make it to a general forum.” James said, and Bill instantly started nodding, changing his mind at the words alone. “But also, *you guys* would be the ones putting in the work, most likely. It makes sense that the people who’d be on the clock should approve the thing before the rest of us even see it.”

“Wait, so, it’s *specifically* so we only work on what we want to?” Bill seemed confused.

“I mean, yes?”

The man tugged at his beard with his free hand, eyes looking a hundred miles away. “Huh.” He said eventually. “Well that’s fucking weird.”

“Sure.” James agreed. “What are you wanting to propose, anyway?”

“How long do you have?” Bill asked.

James looked around the Lair’s mostly empty dining room. A camraconda and a ratroach were sitting in a corner, silently eating stuff from the snack bar together. A handful of responders were nursing coffee and complaining about being up early for training. But otherwise, it was still and cool. So early that there wasn’t even any sunlight coming through the magically altered high window. There *were* a few staplers hanging out in the support beams and ventilation pipes overhead, which James did a double take on. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but if it was a distraction, he didn’t find it. “I’ve got a bit.” He answered.

“Right. So, I guess you’d be one of the people to ask about this early, huh? We wanna do something that might screw the economy.”

“The teleporters?” James asked without thinking.

“...No, but... no. The perpetual motion machines.” Bill said, looking like he’d just tried to go up a flight of stairs and thought there was one step too many. “This fucking place.” He muttered, before continuing. “It’s not a complicated thing. You’ve got the magic for it, that one Climb spell that makes a heat teleporter.”

“Yeah, that one is cool.” James nodded to show he was paying attention.

Bill grabbed a paper napkin off the table and pulled a stub of a pencil from his pocket. “Yeah. So, it works like this.” He sketched as he spoke. “Turbine in the middle, sealed box, tunnel from one side to the other. In a contained space, the pressure tries to equalize, which causes wind, which generates power from... nothing. From ‘magic’, but magic doesn’t seem to run out.” He met James’ eyes. “*Does magic run out?*” Bill asked. “This matters for later.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.” James said. “But talk to Research.”

“Well, one of these things can produce, based on what we’ve seen from using the thing to do heating and cooling, about four kilowatts each.” Bill stared at James like he was expecting something. “That’s a lot.”

Embarrassedly raising his hand, James asked a question. “I... okay, how much... is that? I know I know a lot of stuff, but I don’t know electrical systems that don’t involve lamps.”

“So you have a reference, the average coal plant makes about two hundred megawatts.”

“Okay, back of the napkin math here, that means we’d need... fifty thousand of these to match a single coal plant?” James was a bit disappointed.

Bill caught that. “They can scale up, and the four kilowatt one is the size of a toolbox.”

“Beg your fucking pardon?” James choked on his coffee. “Okay, I’ve been out of the loop on this for too long, I see!” He tried, and failed, to wrap his head around the size requirements for that. “I have a ton of questions, that I bet you could probably answer with a presentation at a general forum, sooooo... I’m just gonna stick with ‘fucking *good job* man’ and then figure out what I wanna ask about this later.” James offered a high five, which Bill took a second to halfheartedly reciprocate. “Wait, so, what do you wanna do in terms of partnering with someone else? That was the issue, right?”

“Yeah, that. Well, you know how this spell works.” Bill made it a statement, but James was at this point *certain* the other man knew more about his magic than he did. “Building a big facility would take a shitter of effort, and a single earthquake can cripple the whole thing. So we need

something that'll *last*. Best case, we can get a government to build us a Hoover Dam, but I'd settle for overengineered bunkers in seismically stable locations."

"...I...uh..." James pressed his eyes shut and wished the coffee would work faster. "I am not awake enough for this. Wait, hang on, aren't the risks of things moving made way less serious if you scale up? Like, if you're running one massive turbine in a big chamber, then even a couple inches of drift wouldn't break it entirely."

Bill grunted and looked down at the napkin he'd doodled on. "Good point. Still doesn't change anything. We want to try to get outside help so we can make this happen in a year, rather than do it ourselves in a decade."

"Well, I'll probably have opinions on that later." James nodded. "But overall, I'm totally on board with the perpetual power production... punts." Bill didn't laugh, so James gave himself a silent internal chuckle. "Actually, we've *got* the space in a basement, and I think we have a whole new wave of greens to crack in the coming weeks that'll probably add even more. Is there a reason we don't build a prototype here? Like, a big one."

"Money, mostly. Turbines are actually expensive, and it's not like we know how to build one from scratch." Bill said, and then glanced behind him like he expected something. "Huh. Normally that works."

"What... oh." James got it. "Well, I'll talk to Karen for you later about the money. Get to work planning a large scale version. If nothing else, it'll save us a lot of money on our power bill every month." James tilted his head slightly as his phone, connected to his brain via skulljack, announced a message to him. "I've gotta get going." He told Bill. "I'm serious though, we can sacrifice a chunk of basement for this. Or, I dunno, build it in space. The engineers had a space elevator idea in the works, right?"

"They... they have been working on that for months..." Bill gave James a worried glance.

"...huh." James didn't like how that made him feel. "I... hm. Okay. Weird. Guess I'm more out of the loop than I thought." He stood, feeling a little dizzy before he blinked it away. "Anyway. Gotta get back to work. Talk to you later."

He left the dining room with Bill frowning after him, but otherwise feeling *really* good with the idea of free magically produced electricity.

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James and JP didn't really hang out much these days. Not that they weren't friends, but there was a certain feeling that they probably weren't gonna play D&D again anytime soon. Which sucked, and they both felt that maybe they should *make* time, because their lives were really

getting deep into the weeds of the weird and wild. But also they each knew they'd get distracted from that before it happened.

"You ever notice how the only time we really talk to each other is when we're doing some kind of mission that's gonna upend our lives all over again?" James greeted his friend as he met JP in the front lobby of the lair. His friend and partner for this job was wearing a mix of magical gear from two dungeons, one military surplus store, one black market arms dealer, and also whatever Momo had cooked up. "Wait, no, fuck the heart to heart stuff." James pivoted. "I wanna make fun of you for looking like a late game World of Warcraft character."

"Well, you can try, but I won't admit to knowing what that means." JP smoothly quipped back with a little smirk. "Also your stuff's over there." He angled his chin toward the counter where a stack of stuff for James was sitting. "I even got you a sword."

"Yeah, I notice you have a sword. What's up with that?" James was actually kinda jealous of JP's sword; it looked like an actual professional longsword, strapped to his back with the hilt poking over one shoulder. "I know you are, on a purely historical level, the most likely of all of us to kill something with a sword, but..."

"They work best with the earrings." JP tapped the dangling trapezoidal shape of a Status Quo item on his left ear. "Also style *matters*, James."

"Does it? Does it really?" James asked as he strapped on multiple shield bracers, his own earring, the gun bracelet that was bound to the single shot grenade launcher that he slung over his chest, leg pouches with additional grenades, a necklace strung with emergency blue orbs, a belt of flasks labeled as different potions, two backup sidearms, and a backpack with some extra stuff in it for good measure. It was surprisingly light, overall, but he did feel a bit like a walking curio shop. "Why is my sword a rapier? Why can't I have a cool sword?"

"Your sword was literally hand forged by a friend of mine, so shut the fuck up and wear it like you mean it." JP tried and failed to slap James on the back of the head. "You ready for this?"

"I feel overgeared."

"You just nearly died because you went outside with 'only' a dozen magical doodads."

"Touché. Ben knows we're doing this, right?" James asked.

"Ben knows everything that happens around here." JP replied without actually answering.

James folded his arms and stared at his nominal friend. "*Tell Ben we are going now.*" He ordered.

“You don’t give me orders.” JP said with so much conviction James almost believed it. But even as he was speaking, he had his phone in his hand and was sending a text. “Okay, he knows.”

James waited. “And?” He asked, as JP failed to provide any additional information.

“And he has a lot of mean things to say. So. Ready?” He offered James a hand, pocketing his phone and pulling out a prepped telepad.

“JP...”

“I’m mostly kidding. We’ll be fine, everyone knows what’s up.” JP didn’t miss James’ disbelieving look. “I mean it. Come on, you’ve got Zhu with you, I’ve got Planner and a navigator egg if I need it. We’re landing a distance away. If anything starts to go wrong, we’ll teleport out and... and... I dunno, come back with an army? We don’t have an army.”

“We kinda are the army, man.” James shook his head. “I mean, you gave me a grenade launcher.”

“Yeah, be careful with that.” JP’s mouth was set in a line. “How many friendly fire charges do you have, anyway?”

“Nine.” James said, double checking the stats the bracelet dumped into his mind. “Almost ten, in a few minutes actually. So ten.”

He still felt like they should be bringing more people. But his joke wasn’t exactly off base; he and JP represented a significant portion of the ready force the Order had right now. A lot of people were exhausted, or just tied up with other responsibilities. And while James didn’t think of himself as expendable, he *did* think of himself as capable of getting out of most bad situations.

Worst case, he and JP confirmed that the people who had gone out and hadn’t come back were dead. Best case, they brought them back alive. There was a lot of middle ground, but unless something electrocuted him the instant they landed, he was pretty sure he and JP would survive this.

“Alright.” He said, taking his friend’s hand after a quick checkin with his dozing navigator. “Let’s go.”

The telepad dropped them in a nondescript stretch of road in Indiana, about a mile from their destination. “That way.” JP pointed, and the two of them started walking.

It was a pretty nice place, the sun coming up over the trees and lighting up the overgrown fields around them. It did feel weird, though. Too empty. There was a lot of birdsong, and James spotted deer grazing by the side of the road or off in the fields on multiple occasions. But there



were no people, and no cars, and roads without cars had an inherently kind of haunted vibe to them.

“So, what’cha been up to lately?” JP asked as they walked.

“You *know* what I’ve been up to lately.” James felt a small spike of anger at his friend, shifting the straps of his backpack and wondering if he should have dressed warmer for this in the chilly morning air. “Getting thrown into dungeon hell.”

JP nodded like he hadn’t just offended James. “Yeah, the skill points were a weird pickup.” He said. “But I meant actual fun stuff. I know you wanna tell me about whatever media you’re into lately. Or, if not that, some hot gossip.”

“Are you... are you trying to get intel out of me? Is this a spy thing?” James was almost incredulous. Then he remembered who he was talking to. “Wait, no, you’ve always done this. JP are we friends or am I an intelligence asset?”

“You can be both!” JP’s joking tone made it clear enough which one he thought was actually true. He glanced behind them down the road, but saw it still empty. Ahead, the asphalt was starting to look cracked, shoots of grass and wild plants stabbing up at the sky as they broke through. “I just figured you’d want to tell me about your new boyfriends or something.” He offered as the two of them approached a bend in the road.

James couldn’t keep a grin off his face as he swept his line of sight over the treetops. “Okay, they’re not my boyfriends.” He said. “Yet. Maybe. I dunno. Look, life is weird.”

“Yeah, life is weird because *you* ended up with the fucking harem.” JP sounded put out.

“A) no it’s not, B) are you *jealous*?” James couldn’t keep the laugh out of his voice.

JP snorted, but still smiled easily. “Eh, little bit. Like, *I’m* turning into some kind of protagonist, how come *I* don’t get a harem? Then I think about that question and who I am and I more or less get a solid answer. But hey, you know what? You’re happier than I’ve ever seen you, so I’ll fucking get over it, you know? I’m learning not to be such a baby.”

The words took James by surprise a bit. “I... uh. Yeah, okay. Thanks? Also good for you. Like, really, not mocking or anything.” He glanced over at JP, who was watching a group of about twenty deer in the grassy field off the road that were watching them in return. “Also, are you sure we’re in the right place? We’re supposed to be going to a coal plant, right?”

“...Yeah...” JP closed his eyes in a quick blink, accessing his phone via skulljack. “GPS has us... nowhere.” He said.

“Middle of nowhere, or can’t find us?”

“Middle of nowhere. Doesn’t show the road or anything.” JP didn’t sound overly concerned. “It *should* be just up ahead, though. But this is weird.”

“I never actually thought to ask *where* we tend to build coal plants.” James mused. “Middle of nowhere doesn’t seem like the worst idea, but... this feels... not normal.”

“No shit.” JP double checked some of his gear with quick taps as they started to follow the curve of the road, past a sign that warned about large trucks on the road that was half covered in moss, and into an area where the trees were plentiful and leafy green, even at this time of year. “I feel like... oh.” He stopped talking.

JP not talking was, James had found, a big warning sign.

The big warning sign that read ‘keep out, private property’ was also a big warning sign.

The fact that the sign was part of a gate and chain link fence laid across the road, that looked like it had spent the last hundred years rusting and being reclaimed by local plant life, was a *much* bigger warning sign.

And beyond it, suddenly visible through the vegetation, was a structure. A series of them, really. A couple big rectangular buildings, one of them with machinery on the side that James didn’t recognize. A huge open lot with hoppers and conveyor belts. And at the back, six big conical smokestacks. Like unfinished pottery.

All of it was broken. Not just run down, but looking like nature itself had some personal beef with the place. The smokestacks especially had holes in them when they weren’t simply collapsed at the midpoint. The branches of trees growing from inside the buildings and trucks still in the lot shot through windows and walls alike, vines of ivy as thick around as James himself crawled up the sides of the crumbling smokestacks. And across all of it, a riot of colors ran. Flowers in purples and reds and yellows bloomed across the whole facility, some of them in small bunches that just left the impression of a blot of color on the landscape, others as massive petals that could easily cover a whole car.

It was a hypnotic sight that made him want to approach and see the things up close. Which is why James decided to test something. “Hey.” He said, getting JP’s attention. “Turn around and look away.”

“Okay, why?” JP asked, doing so anyway.

“Tell me about the coal plant.” James didn’t take his eyes off the place.

"It's right ahead of us, wrecked, and covered in plants." JP said. "I've got a blueprint, which you should have in your files too, that we can reference when we get there. Also, I just realized that I'm suddenly nervous about going in there, and I wasn't four seconds ago."

"Cool. Cool cool cool." James nodded, not taking his eyes off the largest purple bloom that was camping out at an angle on the corner of one of the main buildings. "I *really* want to go in there. Hey, do me a favor, can you manifest Planner?"

"Fuck, alright." JP sighed, already seeing where this was going. "It shouldn't take too much effort, after all, I have a meeting with Ben penciled in after this, and I wouldn't want to be late, and... hey Plan." He nodded to the trio of blue and green radiating tentacles that drifted out of the space around him.

"Hello. Your time is being wasted." Planner informed JP in their pen-on-legal-pad voice. "Turn around again, please."

"Why am I the test subject in this..." JP caught sight of the overgrown coal plant again. "Aw fuck. Okay."

"I have it." Planner said smugly. "Screening your minds now. It will not entice you. Proceed, I can sustain this for an hour at least."

"Thanks." James sighed as he felt something like a cool blanket wrap over his thoughts, and the growing desire to go hug one of the massive flowers faded.

The two of them moved in, not drawing their weapons yet, but alert for anything that might be going wrong.

The gate was already open, and the way the break on the lock didn't show rust like the rest of it, it was probably done recently. It looked likely that the previous rogues had just walked in this same way. James and JP moved in, both of them affixing filter masks on their faces just in case.

Experiences with the Sewer, and now the Underburbs, meant that no one in the Order wanted to get caught off guard by anything that made *spores* again.

The road past the gate was covered in ground cover, coiled small vines and leaves that made every step feel a little springy. James went first, in case it was a trap, but it seemed like it was just normal clover or ivy or something. The ferns that were cutting the asphalt apart were certainly healthier than he'd expect for something growing in the street, but they didn't seem hostile or magical.

The parking lot for unloading coal was bigger than the entire Lair, possibly counting the arcane floor plan, which made James feel weird. He'd never actually visited a powerplant before, and

the sheer scale of engineering on display was impressive, even if the first truck they passed had its front hood punched open by what looked like bamboo spearing through it.

“That cannot be native.” James said, pointing. JP glanced, and nodded, eyes sharp. “I’m not seeing any skeletons though.” He added.

“Maybe they got eaten.”

“Possible. Are bones good for plants?” James carefully stepped over a thick coil of a vine, its texture looking like weirdly rough felt, covered in small white puffs of a flower. “I’m just saying that with a scene like this, I actually *expect* to see skeletons.”

JP hummed. “It doesn’t really fit.” He said. James gave him a questioning “Oh?” And he continued. “Priority Earth, from before whatever happened to them, absolutely did this. And it’s clearly some kinda magic weapon, since it’s got an antimeme on it.”

“Also the flower the size of a schoolbus eating the main office over there.” James added.

“Sure. But also, their organization used to be... I don’t wanna say ‘ethical’, but from what the rogues put together, I think you woulda liked them. At the very least, in all their little reports about this, *they* didn’t think they’d killed anyone.”

That was a bit of a shock. “...Huh.” James grunted out as they approached the edge of the loading dock and where the slanted conveyors started. “Okay. Well. We need to find where Nate and Lin went, at any rate. Zhu, you there?”

A rustle of motion, and a plume of feathers unfolded on James’ shoulder, running down to where another arm split off just over his elbow and a tail sprouted out of his back. Zhu bringing himself into the world, rested and while not fully recovered, still ready to go. “Hello!” He greeted JP and Planner enthusiastically. “This place is *odd*.”

“We’ve noticed.” JP said dryly. “Where are we checking?”

“I am searching.” Zhu flicked his manifested eye on James’ shoulder upward in exasperation. “I am not a machine.” The two humans waited impatiently, scanning the windows of the nearby buildings for motion, or looking at the way the ivy was clawing cracks into the concrete. “Oh. Uh...” Zhu’s suddenly uncertain voice broke the noise of rustling leaves and the distant cry of some kind of hawk.

“What’s up?” James asked quickly.

“I’ve found the direction they went.” Zhu said, small lines of orange light shooting outward, flickering in and out of visibility as they stabilized.

“And?”

“And also where the others went as well.” Zhu added, and a dozen other lines popped up around them. James traced a few of them back to nearby trucks, but others were either paths to or from the buildings, or the front gate, or somewhere else around that he couldn’t identify. The one thing they had in common was they were converging on the blocky building that the blooming purple flower was mounted on like an organic satellite dish.

JP loosened his sword in its sheath. “Well, that makes this easy. Wanna place bets on how long until something tries to kill us?”

“No.” James said, checking that he knew where the safety on the grenade launcher was for the tenth time.

“I do!” Zhu said. “I bet on six!”

“Six what?” Planner’s voice sounded as if from very far away, like the assignment was distracted.

“Anything.” Zhu answered smugly. “Any multiple of six.”

“I’m not even taking *that* bet.” James said as he and JP moved forward, keeping distance between each other in case they needed to fight, their boots crunching on the vegetation that had fully overgrown the asphalt between buildings. “Front door, stairs on the side, or just climb one of the big metal things and climb in a window?” James asked.

“I’m feeling spicy, let’s try the front door.” JP said, lightly stretching his arms in a warmup.

The interior was mostly dark, with just a few beams of light cutting through windows covered in moss. The group added their own lights to it, and saw a cramped entry room with a rotted wood desk, smashed signs on the walls, and an overgrown pile in a corner of high vis vests and hard hats.

The thick vines on the walls that kept looking like they were moving in the corner of James’ eyes didn’t bode well either.

Following Zhu’s tracks, they pressed on through the building, tensing briefly when Planner told them something had just tried to redirect them. But nothing jumped out at them or tore into the group. It was just... an overgrown building. Dark and foreboding, but not actually *doing* anything. The worst threat might be the whole place collapsing on them.

The hallways were too cramped for them to walk side by side, so James followed behind JP as they moved into the depths of the building, since with the friendly fire ability he didn’t have to worry about killing his friend quite so much. Part of him wanted to know what all the little offices

on each side of the hall were *for*. What was the day to day like here, before all this happened? Shipping manifests, maintenance reports maybe?

The papers were long gone, turned to mulch by the moss and the crawling vines that laced the interior like veins. The desks and chairs were little more than shattered shells of what they once were, held together by the plants that were slowly chipping them away to nothing.

“Shit.” JP’s voice came from ahead, and James snapped his eyes up. “Found a boot.” JP said, nudging it with his toe as he looked back at James.

“Okay...” James pointed his light at the floor, and realized the problem. The boot was too new. Nothing growing out of it or over it. “Ah. Okay. Let’s keep... let’s keep moving.” His heart dropped. The odds that they were going to find their people alive at the end of this didn’t feel very high.

Which was why he got a pleasant surprise when he and JP emerged out of the back halls, out of a doorway that hadn’t had a door in it for a while, to see *people*.

The red brick of the floor was cracked and shattered by dozens of thick twisting vines, the ceiling back here torn away, exposing the catwalks and heavy machinery to the sun. A multitude of thick and colorful flowers bloomed, each of them with petals wide enough to shelter under, and each of them shifting in a nonexistent breeze.

“Ah. Yes.” Planner sounded concerned. “It is those. They are pulling at you.”

“Oh, good.” James and JP said in unison, both of them hiding grins under their masks. James let his eyes follow one of Zhu’s lines of light, and pointed. “There. What the fuck is... uh... *that?!*”

‘That’ was a wad of vegetation, stuck to the side of a massive tubular machine that James politely assumed was very important and very expensive, but currently inoperable. Vines and moss grew out of it, trailing down to the ground and around the rest of the machinery, but the green and brown didn’t look even close to natural, unlike the rest of the place. Instead, it looked like a cocoon, or some kind of growth sac waiting to erupt.

A clatter on the floor almost made James’ heart stop as he took a step forward. After he’d steadied himself, and decided not to fire an incendiary grenade into the floor, he bent down to grab what he’d kicked. “Found a shield bracer.” He said. “And...” he tugged at a piece of black fabric half-consumed by a flower. “Pants.”

“Around on the other side of this thing.” Zhu said cautiously. “I cannot... I don’t think anything is *wrong* here? Nothing stops the journey.”

Which was weird. But JP kept watch while James circled the machine and found another of the vegetation cocoons. And then another. And *another*. They lined the walls and the flat surfaces on the equipment here, hung from under grated catwalks and in a couple cases just stood freely like pods growing out of the ground.

It was deeply disturbing.

It didn't get better when, after they made sure they had a secure position and James was ready to light up anything that came at them, JP sliced the edge of one of them open, and a slime covered and hairless nude human figure spilled out.

"Oh holy fuck, that looks *gross*." JP said, grateful for his filter mask as he jerked back from something that almost certainly smelled awful, sword still out in his hand, earring glittering in the aftereffects of his perfected slice. "Fuck me, is this place *eating* th... no, wait, oh shit, James!"

His call brought James running, and James arrived just in time to see the figure on the ground make a wheezing noise as they sucked in a gasp of air, arms flailing, snapping the small vines that had grown out of them and into their cocoon.

James dropped his launcher back to its sling and ran forward, kneeling next to the struggling figure. Helping them snap the plants they were struggling to claw off themselves, and pulling a flask of lung purifier off his belt to push to their lips and tip back a swallow of.

The potion worked fast, and soon the person was breathing steadily, whatever was blocking their lungs removed. Blinking hardening goop out of his eyes, the man on the broken floor looked up at James and croaked out a question that he couldn't understand.

"It's alright, we got ya." James said softly. "Everything's gonna be fine."

"We should move fast." JP said, looking around. "Because if that pissed it off..." Normally this would be the time that the walls erupted and the dungeon doubled down on killing them. But... this wasn't a dungeon. Just the heart of an attack on a piece of infrastructure. And one with some strange victims in it. "Huh. Okay." JP said after nothing tried to kill him.

"Let's get the others." James said, and the two of them went to work.

One by one, they added to the list of people pulled from cocoons. The vegetation was spongy, and tightly woven enough that cutting through was hard, but with the Status Quo earrings they could at least make short work of the ones that were in awkward places before they ran out of their limited charges of the ability.

Nate and Lin were on the outside of the cluster of pods, and they were far more alert once they were cut free. As Nate coughed out a mouthful of slime before James could give him a dose of lung purifier, he rolled sideways and glared upward at the two of them. "If-" he coughed again,

“-if James says one fucking word about anime, I’m killing you both while you sleep.” He threatened.

“I was gonna say that you look fuckin’ weird without facial hair.” James offered. “Also we found your pants. They’re a lost cause.”

There were thirty four people total in the pods, and every one of them was alive. It took multiple telepad trips to get them out, but James and JP managed it pretty quickly. Ben and Myles tried to help after the first run, but Planner wasn’t actively screening for them and James had to stop them from stripping their gear off and sitting placidly under one of the big flowers. It took a few tries to get some of the rescues out of the same effect, too.

Aside from the weird semi-hypnotic effect the flowers seemed to be putting off, which was easily deflected by an assignment that was paying attention, nothing tried to kill them. It was a refreshing change of pace, even if they were still standing in the ruins of a piece of expensive infrastructure.

James declined Lin’s offer of help burning the whole place down. He did, however, make sure to put a big glowing red note on their internal file for the place after they’d wrapped up and headed back to the Lair.

And he was secretly kinda sad he didn’t get a chance to make a tentacle joke before Nate cut him off.

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Relearning that the space elevator was both a real thing, and a thing that he had personally had conversations with people about, kinda sucked.

Not because it was a space elevator; that part was rad as hell. Though the entire engineering team working on it, which had expanded to include three other full time members and about a dozen grad students who were using it as a source of internship hours through a convoluted scheme James didn’t need to know about, were keenly aware of the fact that the Order of Endless Rooms was destined to be a purely terrestrial organization for a while yet. The safety protocols, precision design and fabrication, and general level of overengineered redundancy needed to make space exploration and exploitation even remotely possible were still outside their grasp. But regardless of that, they *had* sent up unmanned test ‘flights’ of the prototype, and it worked. They could get to the edge of space.

At which point the magical devices had a tendency to experience very infrequent but also very unpredictable failures.

But still.



No, what sucked was the number of times James heard “as you know” or “like we talked about”, and had to remind them that he had fed that part of his brain into a woodchipper so that he could kill a monster shaped like a bunch of overly fleshy teenagers. Though he did get some perverse enjoyment from saying ‘overly fleshy teenagers’ over and over.

Eventually they got to what they were trying to ask him. Which was if the Order was going to create and manage its own space division, or if they were just planning to rent out the miracle lifting machine to someone else. Because either way, they wanted to start testing if they could reliably put things in a stable orbit, but doing so was *probably* going to attract attention, no matter how magic they were.

They were engineers, so they didn’t say “magic” exactly. But James had the whole conversation while he was in the middle of trying to scrape plant goo off himself, so he wasn’t going to get into it at the moment.

He told them he’d ask around, and they should start an open discussion about it.

There were a lot of things he was qualified for. Space program diplomacy wasn’t one of them.

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Later in the afternoon, while Nate was going through a debriefing, and after having the lunch version of a drive by with his partners, James borrowed EI for about an hour.

Partly for the company, partly because he needed a good driver.

“Okay, you do get that this isn’t gonna regenerate your Velocity as fast as you want, right?” EI asked him as James arranged himself in the back of the rental van they’d picked up. With some help from TQ, who had been lurking around, James had maneuvered a writing desk into the space, and then ruined any chance of getting his deposit back by affixing a Velcro strip to the wall that he could stick pens and measuring tools on. They could have used one of the Order’s vans, but they were all in use for other stuff today, and it would have taken way too much effort to heal one of the derelicts in Townton and then load someone suitably hypnotized into the mech to carry it back here.

“What do you mean?” James asked as he made sure he had a bunch of backup paper for this.

“I mean, you’re not gonna be *driving*.” EI told him, rolling her eyes under the glowing teal halo of Speaker as the young infomorph orbited her head in a swimming loop.

James did one last check of his stuff, including the crystallized sensation of motion that resided in his chest, the stockpile of five points of Velocity that he had, recently added to by splitting one of the relics with a few other delvers. “EI, I use this magic way less than you. I have one...

okay, three spells now, but one spell I actually know what to do with. What's the weird interaction I'm missing here? Pretend I'm stupid."

"Pretend? Wait, no fuck me." El's voice instantly turned frustrated as she realized that she was doing that thing where she defaulted to mocking people again. "Forget I said that. Also it's... because if you're not the driver, you get less. That's all."

"*Really?*" James drew the word out with curiosity, leaning against the side of the van and folding his arms in thought as he stared down at their parking lot. "So, like, is it a binary thing? Driver or not driver?"

El knew that tone. That was the tone Momo got before whatever they were doing went off the fucking rails and into the Tangent Zone. "No, man, come on. We're paying by the hour for this thing."

"We have a billion dollars and we're going to rule the world, who cares." James rattled off the words with a flap of his hand. "So, what if it's a plane, with a copilot?"

"Oh my god." El palmed her face, resigning herself to this. "Uh... sure. Yeah, whatever. I mean, it works that way in a car, too. Passenger seat gets more than back seat. I think Kirk and Kelsey were running a bunch of tests on it, but I'm not gonna fucking lie to you and say I was paying attention. Except to the part where the passenger gets more if they mess with the radio."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah, that made me laugh." El grinned.

James also smirked at it, partly because he imagined that anyone trying that in El's car would rapidly find out that their magic was less important than her indie rock. "Okay, that's cool though. That kinda implies that the more in control you are, the more... ratio you get? I guess? It makes *sense*."

"Hey, can I ask you something?" El said abruptly, reacting to James words.

He looked up at her with one of those expressions where he hadn't quite figured out what his face was supposed to convey emotionally; wide eyed but also half-smiling. "Yeah, sure, what's up?" James asked El

She pivoted, tipping backward and balancing on one heel to lean against the side of the rental van next to him. "You say that sometimes. The 'that makes sense' thing. What... uh..."

"What's up with that?"

“No no, I’m... okay, look. Momo says that a lot. Like, all the fucking time, when she finds out how some magical shit works.” El stared out at the parking lot, tracking the path of someone coming in for the day on a bike. “What’s up with *that*? Like, what am I supposed to say to that? Are you two on some kind of weird wavelength together or something?”

James glanced over at her, and saw a kind of deeper concern written on her face. “I’m gonna be straight with you - pause for laughter - I have no idea what Momo means when she says most things. The fact that we both say that is probably a coincidence.”

“Yeah...” El didn’t sound convinced. “Eh, whatever. It’s probably - ow what the shit Speaky!” She jerked forward as the informorph still floating around her head tried to chomp on her ear. “Why!”

“You are not saying the thing you said you wanted to say!” Speaky chided her with a squeak of a voice. “Say the thing!”

“No! You can’t make me!” El pulled away and dashed around the van, the semi-serpent fish in hot pursuit.

James waited until the second lap to start trying to talk to El again, finding humor in calmly talking in bits and pieces while she ran past, dodging her companion. “So, you seem... concerned about... something involving your... girlfriend?”

El pulled up in front of him, out of breath, as he finished his question. “Yeah.” She panted. “I mean, I’m concerned about the last word, man. Is she actually my girlfriend? Neither of us know what the fuck we’re doing, but... but... god dammit, I actually fucking like her and I didn’t mean to, and I’m almost entirely certain I’m too stupid to date her.”

“There! Was that so hard?” Speaky’s skin sparked with teal and crimson lights as they settled back into a placid orbit around El’s head.

James pressed his lips into a thin line. “Yeah, it can be.” He muttered to the fish thought, before addressing El again. “Look, I’m not great at relationship advice. And I actually don’t know Momo that well at all. But maybe talk to her about it?”

“She’s just gonna say it’s not a problem, and she doesn’t think I’m stupid.” El whined.

Blinking at her, his gaze slipping into a disappointed frown, James felt his sympathy draining. “Yeah, wow, weird.” He said flatly.

“Oh, come on! You’re fucking depressed, you know how this works!” El challenged him.

Chagrined, James laughed. “Okay, touché.” He said. “But still. Talk to her anyway. That’s my template advice for everyone. Honestly? I’m sorta fascinated that you’re dating Momo at all. I

legit figured that she was actually serious a couple weeks ago when I asked her if she knew what flirting was and she told me that she only, and I quote, ‘flirts with danger’.”

“Well, danger is my middle name.” El said, flicking her bangs back in the suavest motion she could manage.

Suitably impressed with how fucking good that rebound line was from her, James swallowed a laugh. “Also, while I’m fine lounging around and just talking, do you wanna do this thing really quick so we can get it over with?”

“Oh. Yeah, sure. Just so long as you know about the Velocity thing.” El popped the driver’s door and hopped in, adjusting the seat as she called back to James. “Also, *why* are we doing this? You never told me!”

“It’s worked before.” James said. “It literally worked in Townton. I guess the spell just doesn’t take enough to drain faster than it comes back.” He mentally nudged Zhu as he braced himself in the back, the navigator waking up and manifesting just enough to spool out a sinuous feathered tail to provide an extra point of contact with the floor. “And I’m getting a jump on fixing a problem with what Mark and Davis keep calling ‘dystopian hellscape floorplans’. And you’re helping! Now drive, and get us on a highway before you start violating speed limits.”

It had been a long time since James had picked up an architecture skill rank, but the process of drafting a building plan was still bizarrely known to him, in the very alien way yellow skill orbs often caused. But despite actually having a lot of the knowledge of how to build an arcology, he’d never actually put it to use beyond just using it as a jumping off point to add to it with research and planning.

It had been less time since he’d picked up Maker’s Hand Upon The Wheel, a Route Horizon spell that ate a little Velocity every minute of its use, and gave him increased creativity and fine control when it came to making things, relative to his current speed. He mostly used that one in the kitchen, while at a standstill, but for something like this, it seemed prudent to go the extra literal mile.

The problem, fortunately identified early, was that while the apartments the Order had magically spammed in its basement were wonderful on the inside, the connecting hallways weren’t. Neither were the interior exits and entrances. And the newly formed courtyard itself, while it had been semi-remodeled into a little park, was still rough around the edges.

Fortunately, this was fixable in about an hour for someone with the right skillset. A lot of the outline of his project was already done, but James figured he could accelerate the process of detail work a little. And as soon as his drive took them onto a highway and started to speed up, he triggered his spell, and felt his brain start *working*.

There was a weird feeling James was familiar with, of trying to do crossword puzzles before bed, and getting about half the stuff right. Then waking up the next day and finishing them while taking way too long in his apartment's bathroom, and realizing that he'd been unable to come up with criminally easy answers while his brain was sleepy. It was a weird reminder that the brain was a mechanical object, that changed how you thought based on things like exhaustion or hunger or if your depression medication was out of whack because you were stuck in a dungeon for a couple days.

This was the opposite. Now, his mind unfolded, and suddenly everything seemed so simple. The knowledge he already had became amplified, and so easy to apply. It took more effort to stay upright than it did to rapidly strike lines across the draft page, add notes and measurements, and blend practical use of orange totems with theories on residential psychology and living space design.

It was exhilarating, in a way that James didn't really feel very often. He was *making* something, even if it was just a blueprint for the actual hard work to be done later.

El stopped trying to get his attention after he'd accidentally ignored her the first two times, and just started listening to Tame Impala songs on loop while she humored him and enjoyed the experience for a few hours.

By the time they pulled back into the Lair's parking lot, James was satisfied with what he'd come up with. It would still need double checking, and more work, and of course, actually rearranging the whole basement safely to put it into action. But, critically, he'd gotten what he *really* wanted out of the experience.

He knew it worked. And not just once. This was something he could do every single day, and the only downside was that his hand hurt because he had shit pencil technique no matter how many skill ranks in the important stuff he had.

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The hospital in the Lair's basement was seamlessly put together, thanks to the way the orange totem that fractaled out its rooms let them all perfectly link together regardless of the actual physical space required. If you looked too closely, you could easily get a sense of unease that sometimes doors maybe didn't *quite* line up, or that the pair of adjacent hallways weren't as far away as the rooms between them when you actually went to cross the space. But that unease was countered by the fact that they had a functioning, clean, and well stocked medical wing.

Also magic was everywhere in the Order, so you just kind of had to get used to it.

Tonight, though, one of the rooms was anything but normal. The space had been cleared of a lot of the normal equipment, and repurposed to work toward a single goal: the complete reshaping of a body, as dictated by its owner. A task made possible by what was still one of the

things on the top three of James' "worst dungeons" list, in the form of the large amount of shaper substance that the Order had collected from the Akashic Sewer.

James wasn't here to remake himself tonight. He might, in the future. He wasn't kidding when he'd told his partner that he actually would like a tail; relying on Zhu was fine but it actually would be cool in general. Some kind of thick lizard tail, he figured. But not now.

Right now he was moral support. One of a few people who were sitting in the front area of their hospital, trying to help Keeka wait for his appointed 'surgery' without utterly shattering under the effects of the nervous energy he had. James was sitting next to the twitching ratroach, while Arrush was on the other side, and despite the fact that he was probably calmer than either of them, he could still feel his heart beating as they all waited.

It hadn't happened in a long time, but James knew the feeling of seeing a relative or friend into surgery, and just... never seeing them again.

He didn't think that would happen. Deb was incredibly dedicated to making this work, they had a lot of magic on their side, and... and it *had* to work. That's what James kept telling himself, anyway. But he was still nervous, and trying not to show it.

"So, has he told *you* what he wants to be?" James asked, leaning around the ratroach who was fidgeting with his hospital gown to ask Arrush a question.

The tan furred ratroach stopped clawing at his own chitin and tipped his muzzle toward James. "No." He said, containing a stammer as he tried to project calm himself. "He says it is... a secret."

"I think he's gonna be a butterfly." James suggested.

Across from them, Sarah perked up and added her own voice. "I bet he's gonna go for something like an elf!" She suggested. "What about you, what do you think?" Sarah leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees as she smiled at Arrush in that way she did that lit up a whole room.

"Stop guessing!" Keeka frantically waved her off, pressing two of his hands into his boyfriend's face as he pushed Arrush back too. "It's a secret!" He declared.

"Fair." James smiled at him. "I suppose we'll find out pretty soon. How ya feeling?"

"Good!" Keeka said, claws running through his fur. He was currently on a partially magical blend of painkillers, and they were just waiting a few more minutes to make sure they all took effect properly. "I feel *good*. And terrified! But also floaty. Arrush! We should have sex now in case I die."

James bit down on the knuckles of his hand to keep from exploding with laughter as Keeka stared up into his boyfriend's green-flushed face, a line of corrosive saliva running down the corner of his muzzle and hissing on contact with his gown.

"Sorry guys, not now, and *not* here." Deb's voice interrupted them. "Keeka, how are you feeling?"

"G-good." Keeka suddenly displayed a lot more of the nerves that he was showing earlier.

"Alright. We're gonna do a quick cognizance test, and make sure you're still alert enough, then we'll get you situated and prepare to start, okay?" Deb's voice was reassuring, and she really did strike a professional figure looking down at her clipboard and standing there in her scrubs. Technically, she wasn't a doctor. She'd been a nursing student when she'd 'joined' the Order. But with months of selective yellow orb use, and her own tests with the skulljacks and their ability to make memory files, James was sort of aware of the fact that Deb might just be the most generally medically proficient person within a hundred miles. And that was saying something, given where they were.

He watched with the rest of them as she ran through a set of questions with Keeka, starting with simple math or word puzzles, then moving up to deeper questions that tested his ability to react and think through more complex puzzles. Eventually, satisfied that his brain was still capable of processing, Deb flipped her clipboard and took a deep breath. "Okay." She said. "Come on back. No one else is going to be allowed in the room for this, but it's okay to walk him down the hall." She eyed Arrush, with a concerned glint in her eye. "We just can't have people nearby for certain effects. And no interrupting. No matter what."

Arrush nodded, and he and James helped Keeka up, the smaller ratroach's split tail flicking from side to side behind him as he took halting steps after Deb. Sarah opted to stay in the 'waiting room', saying something about not cluttering things up, but still gave them a thumbs up and another reassuring smile.

The whole process, the semi-surgery, was another example of stacking as much magic as they could to make something greater than any one part was probably meant to be.

The shaper substance was meant to rearrange flesh and bone, at the cost of pain for every tiny mistake. Anything that wasn't done perfectly, the magic filled in constant pain as it smoothed over the errors. Also, every time you used it, it got... easier. Easier to change yourself. Easier to make your body what you 'wanted'.

Easier to push past what you could safely do, and have those small errors filled in with more pain.

So, the safest way to do it, was to do it once. A change from the original plan of four or five smaller procedures. Not that they couldn't do more later, but that doing everything in one swoop was just easiest, and had the lowest long term risk.

Backing up the shaper substance were a half dozen other magics. A potion that suppressed muscle pain. Red totems that gave you specifications on the liver, lungs, and heart, of every living organism within range. Another totem that let the surgical team on standby monitor pain levels. Blue orbs on standby that could help keep a patient awake, or regulate the dosage of painkillers. And a doctor, waiting nearby, with her own growing medical authority, and at least one form of weird healing magic, just in case. Also a camraconda nursing assistant on standby. Also just in case.

All of this was underlined by patient education. The more you knew about your own body, the better you could control the change. So as much knowledge as could be provided was available. For a ratroach, it required a lot of independent research from the Order; X-rays and biopsies and blood tests and sorting out what parts of their biology were literal magic from the ones that were just created and ticking along with mundane physics. But every report Deb and her staff wrote was passed along, and made easily understood thanks to the potion that spiked reading comprehension, and the growing stockpile of copied yellow orbs that improved biology and medical knowledge on their own.

Keeka had declined a skulljack link for this, but it was still on the table in case of emergency, too.

Nothing was really the silver bullet that made the process safe. Nothing was the big step that took it from a risky and one-off procedure to the kind of thing that could become standard medical practice. It was more the protocol. The cumulative addition of more and more small things, until eventually, Deb decided they could try it with minimal risk, and for the ratroaches especially, the reward far outpaced the challenges.

So James stood back and watched nervously as they made it to the prepped room, and Keeka wrapped Arrush in a tight embrace, hissing something that made his large boyfriend flush again, before he pulled back. James offered a hug, and got a similar crushing grip from the ratroach, so hard he heard small pops from Keeka's chitin.

"Good luck." James said, forcing a nervous smile.

Keeka just cracked his muzzle open in a loopy grin, his antenna bobbing against his scalp as he stared up at James and Arrush with the scattered eyes on his face.

And then he followed the patiently waiting Deb into the room. She made sure to check Keeka again on a number of things as one of the other nurses helped him take the gown off, and lay down on a smooth and recessed bed. Deb and her assistant started checking a dozen different things James couldn't really keep track of, including running an IV into Keeka's arm, fitting a



magically reshaped mask over his face, and punching in a code to a keypad to unlock a refrigerated chest with a series of glowing canisters in it.

“That looks like the coolest movie prop.” James muttered as they watched through the room’s window.

Deb stepped back out briefly, trading words with the man who was helping her until she was satisfied that everything was in order, and he headed back down the hall. “Alright.” She said to James and Arrush. “This place is off limits. You two go wait. *No* distractions, no interruption. I am... very confident that everything will work out okay, but you can’t be here to watch, alright?”

“Sure.” James said, setting a hand on one of Arrush’s smaller arms. “Let’s go get a snack.” He offered.

“Will... are you sure?” Arrush suddenly asked. “Really sure?”

“As much as I can be.” Deb said. “Your boyfriend is smart. Smarter than I expected, if I’m being honest. He knows what he’s doing, and we’ve got the tools to make it work. Trust him, trust me, and maybe you’ll be next when it all works out, okay?” Arrush nodded, and then he and James followed Deb’s jerked nod back down the hall and headed back to the waiting room. Though Arrush did keep shooting looks backward.

“It’ll be fine.” James murmured. “Though, the waiting is the hard part, right?”

“R-right.” Arrush stammered out, as they rejoined Sarah.

“We could get lunch?” Sarah offered, and instantly backed out on. “No, that’s silly. I can’t eat *now*.”

“Because of the stress, right?” James asked.

“Hm?”

“Because of the...” He stopped, and folded his arms at her. Arrush gave a single snicker of a laugh at the motion, which James counted as a win.

Sarah took pity on him. “Well, yes.” She admitted. “And I’ll be doing this again for a few more people. Smoke and Ishah and Banana when it’s her turn and also Allo and Corro when they finish growing and learning the foundations they need, and...” she sighed. “There’s so many people that need this.” Sarah said, and met Arrush’s eyes. “I know you might just be afraid right now, and that’s... *of course* you are. Totally normal, and valid. But Keeka... your boyfriend doing this first is going to make it so much easier, and safer, for *everyone* that comes after.”

Arrush's fangs came out in a hesitant smile, drops of corrosive tears forming in his myriad eyes. "Yes." He said. "He is... very brave. And very perfect."

"He is." Sarah said, insistently. "Not as a joke, at all. I know we joke a lot around here, and it's great, but... but he's more courageous than a lot of us. And I wanted to make sure you knew." She sat back, and closed her eyes so she wasn't staring into the fluorescent lights overhead.

"Yeah, everything she said." James echoed, leaning his shoulder into Arrush.

The tan furred ratroach just curled in on himself, smiling yes, but not knowing how to handle the overwhelming deluge of emotion. "I... thank you." He whispered out in his chittering voice.

"Of course." James said with a smile. "Now, we have a while to wait, and I... I *cannot* sit here the whole time, or my anxiety will kill me. Do either of you want to come with me and see if Research has any busywork, so we're still right in the area if we're needed?"

"Yesss." Arrush hissed appreciatively.

Sarah grinned at them. "You two have fun. I'll wait here. I've got an outline for a podcast tonight to put together."

The next hour passed in a stressful blur as the two of them helped Reed harvest sap pods. They were up to a few hundred magical succulent pots, all growing the material that was needed to make potions, and doing so at a pretty rapid rate. It seemed like the magic succulents inherited the 'one pod a day' trait that the tiny magical tree itself had. So James and Arrush turned their nervous energy toward filling a bucket with the material as they made their way down the rows of plants. They didn't talk much, partly because James just didn't know what to say. When he did talk, it was just him saying something that crossed his mind out of a nervous habit to fill the silence.

The hour after that they passed in the waiting room again, sitting across from Sarah who was tapping away on her tablet, and just... hoping it was done soon. The stress didn't go away, but it was something James was starting to get used to, or get bored of. He could only freak out for so long before he just exhausted himself. So he caught up on youtube videos while Arrush read a book that someone in Research had loaned him, and they kept waiting.

At one point, they were visited by the hospital's emotional support infomorph, who James had actually not met, but apparently lived down here fully manifested all the time. She was a pink and dark purple glowing eel thing, with dozens of small eyestalks coming off her body at angles that didn't add up, and she wrapped around their legs in a comforting gesture as they watched her pass by. She was warm, and distracting. Her name, apparently, was Mercy, and James decided that he had only known her for a few minutes, but he was already prepared to kill anything that threatened her.

They weren't totally alone down here. There were a few injuries from Response that were tended to, and one of the kids from the intern program who came down to get vaccinated without their parents knowing, which apparently Deb had a line on somehow. Also someone who had a sliver of glass two inches long in their neck, who seemed way too calm as one of the hospital staff led him back to a room. But it was still mostly quiet; just them, and one or two of the staff working on things behind their central desk.

Then more waiting. He had to reassure Arrush a few times, that if anything had gone wrong, they would have heard about it. Deb wouldn't just keep them in the dark. But Arrush kept getting increasingly twitchy, and the multiple hours of waiting were wearing on all of them.

And then Deb was there again. James blinked, wondering if he'd been asleep, if she'd teleported in, or if he really just wasn't paying attention.

"Well." The woman started. "Everything went fine." There was a collective rush of tension leaving. Arrush let out a laugh that sounded like a series of high pitched rapid squeaks. "Keeka is asleep now, and will be in recovery for at least a day or two before he can walk under his own power again. I'd like to keep him here for observation, but we're moving him to a room with a real bed now."

"I knew it." Sarah sighed contently, stretching as she rose to her feet, and then leaning down to wrap a surprised Arrush in a sudden hug. "I knew it!"

"Hey, yeah, see? Everything worked out." James added. "And now my heart rate can return to slightly above human normal!"

"...Excuse me?" Deb asked, raising her eyebrows at him.

James withered under the look. "I... uh... nothing?"

"We'll talk later. Would you like to see him?" She asked.

"Yes!" Arrush bolted to his feet, claws flicking against each other, all of his hands clenching and unclenching at odd intervals. "Yes, please." He repeated.

Deb just instructed them to follow her, and led the group down to one of the rooms, which she let them into without any dramatics. "Let him sleep." She advised. "He'll need to rest for quite some time, and he'll be able to answer your questions when he wakes up." Then she stepped back, and let them pass.

Arrush went first, and then froze in the doorway as he saw his boyfriend laying peacefully under the covers of the hospital bed. James and Sarah waited for him patiently, sharing grins of barely contained joy as they followed. "Last chance to get a bet in." Sarah whispered.

"I'm still going butterfly." James whispered back.

And then Arrush stepped forward, and they saw what Keeka had made of himself.

He looked... almost exactly the same as James remembered. But no, that wasn't quite right. There were so many differences, but every one of them was small. His muzzle wasn't misaligned anymore, and the lines of his snout were smoother. The chitin across his body seamlessly blended with furred hide in the places it met, and that chitin was also now in smooth whorls that weren't *exactly* symmetrical, but weren't in places that would cause problems anymore. It ran in arcs around joints and in bands down his neck, instead of simply being haphazardly slapped on. And the fur he had, while still showing curls in places, was thicker and smoother than it had been before. An almost glossy black in places. The dome of his head was now furred, with his antenna sprouting out of dots of smooth chitin and all sweeping backward without any spines on them to end with a shape James could only describe as a honey dipper. He still had four arms, at least, but they *were* more symmetrical now. The two smaller limbs coming out of his torso behind his ribcage, and sporting joints that could swap between facing his front or back. He still had an array of eyes, but it looked like he'd opted to cut the number down by one, so he only had six, and he'd rearranged them slightly for better stereoscopic vision. It was hard to tell with all of them closed.

He was drooling on his pillow as he snored. His chest rising and falling with heavy motions, and no obstruction. The saliva dripping from his mouth still glowing blue, but not putting any holes in the hospital equipment.

James couldn't see if he'd kept the rat tail. He hoped so. Tails were cool.

He stepped up next to Arrush, who was staring down at his boyfriend, corrosive tears forming and then falling down the sides of his face. His breath coming in short bursts as he tried, and failed, to stop himself from crying. "He... he..."

"Hey." Sarah said, taking hold of one of Arrush's hands. "Are you...?"

"Do you need anything?" James added as she trailed off.

Arrush took a long breath, using the basic breathing method his therapist had suggested to try to make sense of his emotions. He closed his eyes, and then opened them again, and looked down at the person he loved with fresh sight.

"No." Arrush said, leaning against Sarah's touch. "I don't need... anything. He looks... he... is perfect."