

*“Get busy living, or get busy dying.” -Red, The Shawshank Redemption-*

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A few years ago, James had been having a really bad day at work, stuck working hours that mostly served to make sure he was awake when normal businesses were closed and that he missed his weekly D&D game.

In a sentence that would be considered by future historians to be ‘an understatement’, he would later admit that this day had turned out okay.

A year after the night that he discovered that sometimes the back stairwell at work went to a pocket dimension full of hostile office supplies and warped beige landscapes, James had gone from sharing the secret with a few friends to sharing the secret with the hundred-ish people he’d rescued from the depths of the place they collectively called Officium Mundi.

A year after that, and that group of survivors and rescues had expanded and alloyed. No longer a collection of a couple dozen traumatized humans; they’d hired new, less traumatized humans, and picked up a new batch of rescued, very traumatized Officium creations they called camracondas. They were vaguely snake shaped, and had cameras for faces. Someone had said it, and someone else, probably James, had thought it was hilarious enough to make it stick.

A year after *that*, lasting through more pain than was reasonable, and they were an organization that explored and safeguarded four spaces like Officium Mundi. They had members from between eight and eleven species, depending on how you counted engineers. They had ambitions to change the world, to build something better, kinder, and stronger than humanity had ever seen before.

And now, after surviving more than he probably had any right to, James stepped out of the hot and dusty August afternoon and walked into the cool lobby of the central hub of the Order of Endless Rooms, and yawned, because three years and change hadn’t been enough to teach him better sleeping habits.

Also he’d sort of started relying on his friend Sarah for naps. James and Sarah could share sleep across a magical bond forged by one of the dungeons they knew about. It was a very silly zero-sum power that resisted any attempt to exploit it, but that was fine, because Sarah could work while she was asleep these days and James could pretend he was unbound by the mortal responsibility to go to bed at a reasonable hour.

Next to the door, someone with more sense than James had set up a bank of small lockers. Initially, he’d been against anything that reminded him of a garbage high school experience, but he’d come around when he’d realized how handy it was to have a dedicated place to throw stuff, and also that the Order was using it as an impromptu mail system. He was also *pretty* sure that

someone in Research had folded the fabric of space here, because everyone had a locker, but there was no way that this fifteen foot long bank contained two hundred cubbies.

“Morning.” James fumbled the word a little as he tried to offer a polite greeting to the two high school interns who were also at the lockers.

Almost in unison, the two kids looked out the door that was swinging shut behind James, and then back at him. There used to be large plate glass windows for this joke, but the Order had replaced them with something more defensible after an unwanted fight came to their door. “It’s two PM?” One of the kids asked.

“Yeah, hey, hang on.” James said with a smile. “Shouldn’t you guys be in school?”

“It’s August.” The other one said, not quite syncing up to James’ joke. “We’re on vacation.”

“Wow, I *really* overslept then.” James nodded, cracking the door to his locker when he located it, and instantly seeing a folded note sitting right at the front. “Huh.” He muttered, picking it up as the student interns more or less went back to what they were doing. The Order’s interns were smart, capable, and many of them had survived things they should never have had to go through, but they were still teenagers, and trading banter with the adults wasn’t what a lot of them wanted to do, even if the adults were wizards.

James didn’t begrudge them. He’d been there. So instead, he checked the note that was left for him. ‘Got dragged into nonsense with EI. Postpone until tonight? -A-’. The note had a series of hearts doodled on it.

James gnawed on his hip as he frowned at it for a handful of seconds. The abject refusal to sign this properly meant it could have been either Anesh or Alanna, and the presence of hearts changed that assessment in no way because both his partners could be incredibly sappy at times. He was more confused as to *what* was being postponed, and he racked his brain trying to figure out if he’d forgotten an appointment.

Like most members of the Order, James had a magical augmentation that made his short term memory a lot sharper. It did nothing here. He came up empty.

Well, if they were okay postponing until tonight, and for some reason leaving notes instead of just *texting him* like a normal person, then James wasn’t gonna complain. He gave the note a smile and set it off to the side of his locker before shoving his bag in and turning to head deeper into the Lair.

They called the building the Lair. Because of course they did.

“James!” A young woman’s voice caught up to him as he headed toward the converted warehouse space that they used as a briefing and intelligence collection room.

He turned with a smile, spreading his arms. “Momo! Just who I was looking for!” James said cheerfully. This was technically a lie, but since his de facto role in the Order was freelance problem solver, he could claim to be looking for anyone at any time. It saved a lot of brain space that normally got dedicated to social anxiety.

Momo was the Order’s Ritual division leader, and the reason that divisions were all R-names on purpose and not by coincidence. She liked the moniker of war-witch, a title that would probably *not* be making it into the official records, but was sort of backed up by the score of enchanted pencils orbiting her head and rotating in lazy loops. At a sturdy 5’7”, she was down about half a foot of height on James, both in terms of actual height, and hair length.

Or at least, she had been. “Nice Tank Girl hairdo.” James complimented her. Momo tended toward goth styles, and the half shaved head, half long hair look she had going probably qualified. James didn’t know *anything* about goth styles, so he’d believe whatever someone told him. “Didn’t you have a short mohawk last night? In a different color?”

“What?” Momo blinked, then ran a hand up to her head, getting her fingers tangled in her longer brown hair. “Oh, right! We found a picture frame in the Office that can grow hair. I figured I’d shake things up.”

Officium Mundi was always a roulette wheel when it came to how useful a magic item would be. Though, James was now actually considering cutting his ponytail back, if the option to regrow it instantly was just there.

He didn’t say that. Instead, he just said, “Neat! What’s up?” And let Momo say her piece. People around here had been a lot busier lately, so he was trying to be better about getting to the point, and save the long meandering conversations for Long Meandering Conversation Night. And that wasn’t for a few hours.

“Buncha stuff!” Momo clapped her hands together exuberantly, the bathrobe she was wearing swishing around her. “You’ll probably hear half of this from Reed later, but whatever. Uh... the alchemy project has more data points; turns out the potions don’t actually have different species-to-species effects, but they *do* care what species stirs them? Also literally no one can tell if it matters if you use magical materials. Which I object to!”

“Noted.” James nodded solemnly. “I’ll add it to the record.”

“The... sure.” Momo narrowed her eyes at him before continuing. “Anyway. I think I got a memory file made for how I make red totems, but no one wants to test it. Something about brain damage. So if you wanna test that, it’s around? Also do you have a list somewhere of the green orb effects on the Lair? I think something’s screwing with one of my item tests.”

“Item tests like you’re making an item, or trying to identify an item?”

“The second one.” Momo confirmed, and James felt a small rush of perspective as he realized he legitimately had to ask what the source of a magic item was. “Like, do we have any that screw with distance?”

James looked at Momo with his eyebrows raised so far they threatened to abandon his forehead. Then he looked down at the floor, as if he could see through the material, and back up at her. “We have eight basements?” He sarcastically asked.

“I know about the basements thank you!” Momo threw her arms up. “You’re no help. I’m gonna go find Anesh. Anesh keeps lists.” She spun away, ducking between a human and a camraconda who were waiting to talk to James.

“There’s a list in the shared server!” James called after her. “Momo! You have a...! She’s gone. Okay.” He sighed as his friend vanished around the corner. “Also there’s even odds that Anesh isn’t here. She’ll figure it out. Hey. What’s up, Sunny?” He turned to the camraconda who was patiently waiting to address him.

Frequency-Of-Sunlight bobbed her head in greeting, the green and blue cabling that made up her body shifting with an organic fluidity that didn’t look quite natural or quite artificial. The boxy security camera that the cabling wrapped around that made up her face was entirely artificial looking, but even so, everyone was used to the way camracondas looked by now, and it didn’t seem out of place to him.

The arms she was wearing were kind of new. Well, ‘new’. They were a few months in development, and there were a few of the basement-occupying engineers that kept tinkering with and refining them every couple weeks. The current iteration was still a kind of strapped-on backpack, that plugged into the skulljack camracondas normally used to connect to speakers and speak with, their normal biology not being exactly great for enunciation. They had a little more in the way of fine manipulation now, though they still didn’t have the same capacity to lift or throw that even an out of shape human could do.

“I have brought you an interview subject!” Frequency-Of-Sunlight declared to James with a proud tone to her digital voice.

James glanced up from the camraconda to the somewhat confused face of the human who had followed her over. “Did he know what he was getting into, or did you just kidnap someone passing by?” He asked.

Frequency-Of-Sunlight leaned back at close to her full height of four feet, her serpent body looking almost contrite as she brought one of her manipulator hands around to her chest in an offended gesture. “I would never do that!”

“You literally did do that!” James protested with a laugh. “Last month, you brought back a kid who got folded into the youth group activities!”

“He followed me!” Sunny protested. “I did not *kidnap* him, he was... incidentally kidnapped. Kidnapping occurred, irrespective of my involvement.”

“Nice passive voice.” James said, reaching out a hand to shake with the new arrival. “Hi. James. Nice to meet you.”

The man who looked about James’ age, somewhere in the mid thirties, took a hand off the heavy courier bag he was wearing to reach out a tanned hand and meet the handshake. “Miguel. And I am supposed to be here, but not for an interview. I think? Probably. Man, I dunno. I’m supposed to be doing a materials test, and I feel like I just fell into Narnia.”

“We don’t have satyrs.” Frequency-Of-Sunlight said idly, slithering away and leaving James to field this one.

He snorted a laugh. “Yet.” He appended. “We don’t have satyrs yet. I’m not gonna say we’re working on it, but I wouldn’t say it’s off the table. Also, you’re *probably* looking for Karen Ward, or Jake Redding. Around that small corner, take the elevator up, someone can help you from there.”

Miguel looked where James was pointing, then back to him slowly. ‘This is a one story building.’ He said.

“Welcome to Narnia.” James answered simply, reaching behind himself to open the door to the briefing room. “Have a good one, I’ve gotta get back to what I was doing.”

“Y-yeah, sure.” The man was leaning now, like he could somehow ambush the elevator and maybe make it less concerning if he snuck up on it.

James gave a jaunty wave, and slipped through the door he’d cracked open, softly closing it and letting out a sigh.

He was here today to mostly signal the end of his small vacation, and to help out with a building renovation project that was a bit short handed, and he hadn’t expected to already be getting ambushed with rogue problems.

Potion brewing and totem making. Magic items and duplication rituals. Trying to make friends with secret government agencies, and trying to rehabilitate ex-cultists. Building a culture, building a city, making a place for species most humans on Earth didn’t know existed.

It was *really* overwhelming sometimes.

James huffed out a small breath, closing his eyes as he let his hand linger on the door's handle. Just taking in the cool air in this back room, dry and sheltered from the sweltering sun. "It's good to be back." He smiled to himself.

"You have been on so-called 'vacation' for two days, six hours, and eighteen minutes." A voice from directly next to James informed him in a tone like a ballpoint pen scribbling over sheet paper.

"Jeez-uss!" James barked out the epithet in a drawn out voice. "Planner! You... we talked about this!"

Next to James, technically using one of the desks they had in here, the manifested form of an infomorph narrowed its central eye at him. Planner, the assignment living in the minds of about half the Order, was very friendly, once you got past their stoic exterior and the fact that their manifested form looked like a rorschach test and an octopus had a kid. Tentacles that wove from nowhere into intricate patterns, large eyes suspended by ghostly webbings of membrane between their limbs, and oddly precise yet still organic looking manipulators on the ends of their arms. Some people found Planner unsettling, until they got used to being around the person who had essentially occupied the role of the Order's designated arcane secretary and learned how they were *as a person*. Some people found Planner hot, until they got used to being around the person who had essentially occupied the role of the Order's designated arcane secretary and learned how they were *as a person*.

"We did talk about this." Planner agreed in their scribed voice. "It was among many things we discussed, including the issue of your inability to take proper breaks, and the concern of burnout." They rotated an arm toward him in a spiral pattern that started nowhere and ended with their ephemeral blue tentacle holding an elegantly drawn graph. "I have taken the opportunity to collect data on the rate of Order members who have made errors due to lack of downtime. Since you are no longer on vacation, perhaps-

"Being in the building doesn't make me not on vacation!" James protested. "I've got at least ten minutes before I'm officially working!" He held up his hands, hoping that if he was going to spontaneously manifest any magic in his life, it would be now, and it would be a ward against magical PowerPoint presentations.

"Hm." Planner made taking a note into a single uttered sound. "I will speak to you then." They said.

James nodded politely, and then scurried away, rapidly putting distance between himself and the well-intentioned ghost octopus. He passed through the arrayed desks and standing whiteboards, nodding and exchanging snappy greetings with the other people who were back here. This space wasn't usually full of life like some of the basements or the dining area were, but it was often occupied by at least a couple people.

The group of two humans, a camraconda, a thing disguised as a human, and a dragon-esque shape made out of office supplies roughly the size of a wolf, looking over photographs of a mountain slope and spreadsheets of gear weights, wasn't exactly *common*, but it was something that just happened in this place. Planning runs, analyzing patterns, making the process of exploring and delving as effective and safe as possible. Because it *wasn't* really safe; dungeons were dangerous, and people got hurt. It was basically a miracle no one had died on a delve yet. A miracle, and the result of taking things seriously.

The Order of Endless Rooms was, in a lot of ways, the custodian of the places they found. It was a fine line to walk, too. On the one hand, there was an entire *detailed* section in the Operations Manual about how they weren't a conspiracy, helpfully titled 'we are not a conspiracy'. On the other hand, once you were actually handed phenomenal cosmic power, it was really hard to justify telling people about it.

Because no matter who you told, who you trusted, if you made that information public then you were, intentionally or not, telling *everyone*. Every person, every ideology, every government and military and church and corporation. Everyone that all evidence pointed to as being exactly the wrong people to trust with that power.

James wanted to live in a world where everyone had small magics, where life was bolstered by household dungeontech and important work got done aided by spellcraft. And a lot of the Order agreed, and so they spread around power where they could. They shared their cures for cancer as often as they had them available, they escorted noncombatants through dungeons to unlock spell slots, they brought wonders out of dangerous places and worked on how to turn them into a utopia.

But they still lived in a world where they would be outnumbered if the three nearest cities combined their police departments, and the police departments had more grenade launchers than the Order did. And there was a convincing argument for not giving those people *more* ways to commit violence.

It was worth noting that the Order had grenade launchers, too. They'd sort of ended up also the custodians of a small city in Tennessee, too. Current population twenty or so Order members, several hundred raccoons, and a couple thousand necromantic asphalt constructs. It was an ongoing project. They'd looted the police stations, among other things.

He cut his thoughts off as he got to the desk he'd stacked a bunch of stuff on earlier, and grabbed the book from the middle of a pile of similar books, that was a text on Feng Shui that was both hilariously overly prosaic in places, and shockingly detailed in a much more useful way when it came to the effect that angles and lines in rooms had on human emotion.

James had gotten really into reading stuff like this. Stuff about how the world everyone actually lived in was built, and how it fed back to changing the way people behaved and thought. For a long time, James had been a fiction-only kind of person, but these days, he read a lot about

cities and transportation networks and small design choices. It helped that he wanted to build his own city, and fold in the smartest ideas humanity had come up with, next to the best magics he and his people had unearthed.

Folding the book into one of the expansive pockets of his cargo shorts, James fought off the desire to go sit in on the Winter's Climb planning session, and headed for the exit. The door on the other wall, though; partly so he could get to the stairs faster, and also partly because it gave him the best opportunity to avoid being chastised by Planner any further.

It didn't quite work. "Avoid being surprised!" Planner called over to him in their dry voice.

James was still processing that, raising his eyebrows as he opened the door, and stifling a yelp as he came face to face with Nate, the man having been about to open the door from the other side. He gave a silent thank you to Planner as he smoothed his reaction out into a steady breath..

"Oh good, you're here." Nate said bluntly. The man, ostensibly their head chef, but realistically also the person half in charge of their intelligence arm, stepped back and fell in next to James as he walked out of the room. "I need you to clear something up." He stated in a gruff voice.

Nate was shorter, older, and heavier than James, and sort of the definition of stocky with his thickly muscled arms and chest. He was bald, though James hadn't seen him without a thin black cap on for a long time, and he was tattooed on almost every patch of open skin that wasn't his face. James had never looked closely at the tattoos either, but Nate kept getting more done, so he assumed they were well loved. He was also hilariously blunt, and was so against small talk that a lot of people thought he was outright mean. He wasn't, exactly. But he also wasn't someone it was easy to comfortably hang out with.

"What's up?" James asked, getting to the point himself.

"Are we gonna be having more people or dogs with fur allowed into the kitchen? Because I'm gonna need something to deal with that." Nate stated. "I'm not gonna fucking ban anyone, and when I say anyone I mean Keeka, because the little shit keeps sneaking in to take food, but I'd like... I dunno, make me a magic item that keeps fur out of food."

Nodding slightly in time with Nate's words, James took a sharp tangent when he opened his mouth. "Would something that keeps hair out be useful for that? Like, fur is just hair, right? Or is this gonna be a magical semantics issue? Hm." He trailed off.

"Don't care, don't have a hair problem." Nate pointed out. "Fur. Focus."

James focused, but on the wrong thing. "Right, hey, did you say dogs? Do we have dogs around here?"



“*Your dog* is around here.” Nate barked out. “The giant white one who sheds *everywhere*. And who *also* keeps sneaking into my kitchen to steal food, somehow!”

“I think what I’m hearing here is that we should get a small snack shelf or something outside the kitchen. Some baked goods, some fruit, maybe some finger sandwiches. Just keep that stocked?”

Nate took a deep breath, pressing his eyelids shut, before he answered. “We can do that. But also. Your dog. In my kitchen.”

“Honestly I’m not even sure why Auberdeen is here. Though I guess if she’s smart enough to sneak into a kitchen for food-“

“And get into the walk-in.”

James pursed his lips appreciatively. “-and open a fridge door, yeah, that’s clever! I guess she’s actually learning faster, which is pretty much what Alanna expected, but this is kinda cool to see in real time. Anyway, I’ll look into the magic fur remover!”

Nate grabbed his arm as James went to open the stairwell to one of the basements. “No, stop.” He shook his head with a stern look. “Why is your dog smarter?”

“Oh, she kept eating skill orbs.” James answered. “And while I am at present *woefully* unequipped to tell you if uplifting dogs into fully sophont peers is a good thing or not, or what the ethics of sparking new intelligent life forms is, I can tell you that it is absolutely happening, and the reality we live in is one where I’m gonna ask you to accommodate an individual who has the unique kitchen-hostile combination of ‘no hands’ and ‘yes fur’ and that there will probably be more in the future.”

“Because you’re going to uplift more dogs.” Nate inhaled a long breath through his nose, chest out as he held his lungs full of air.

Clicking his tongue as he shook his head, James coyly answered, “Because more dogs are going to *become uplifted*. The passive voice is important because it means I don’t have to panic yet!”

“Get me my magic roomba.” Nate demanded, letting James go.

“Oh, you don’t want that!” He quickly replied. “But I’ll see what I can do.”

The only magic roomba they knew about so far was a beetleish thing four feet in diameter that moved at twenty miles an hour and shredded anything living it got its fangs in. Nate didn’t want that.

Well, okay, maybe he did want that. James admitted, as he trooped down the stairs, passing by a teenager hauling a heavy tarp up to the lobby, that Nate might actually get along with something like the hostile roomba creature.

The Lair had six stairwells in it, and one tiny door that led to a crawl space that no one used. Because, due to an enthusiastic use of a specific magic effect, they had six basements and a crawl space that no one used. The one that was between the doors to the two upstairs bathrooms, that *should* have just led to the dividing wall between the two bathrooms, was the one that James took now. It went down to basement four; not that anyone was good at keeping track.

Basement four had been one of the more open basements they'd gotten. Like the basement of an industrial plant, rather than the basement of a particularly cluttered middle school, or the basement of a sprawling mansion estate. It had a couple large rooms, all hard concrete and too-bright lights. Ceilings of exposed ventilation and wiring, held up with thick concrete pillars that were sturdy enough that no one worried about the few long thin cracks in them.

They'd used this floor alternately as a shooting range, random magical artifact storage and testing, and then as an engineering floor for building and storing a mech made out of asphalt and creative uses of a lot of those earlier magical artifacts. Technically, they still used one half for that. But the other side was getting a renovation.

The Order of Endless Rooms had a problem. They'd grown, over their time here, to a roster of over a couple hundred people. And a lot of those people lived in this building; some because they liked it here, some because it was hard to get an apartment without citizenship documents or a human form. But for whatever reason, the Order was interested in accommodating everyone they could.

So they were building apartments.

Or, more accurately, the work team that was down here day and night for the last week was building *one* apartment. To the highest degree of quality they could manage, and then a little better.

And then they were going to activate a totem built around an orange orb pulled from Officium Mundi, and copy that apartment a couple hundred times, layering the combined total space into this single room.

The basement smelled like sawdust and plastic and a dozen other small flavors that came from construction sites. Loud music from a speaker set up behind the skeleton of the unit they planned to copy thumped through the air. And in the middle of the floor, a small suite of rooms was slowly coming together, a construction that took into account the different style of needs in terms of insulation and wiring and plumbing, designed not just to be uniform, but to be *copied*. It was, all things considered, pretty cool.

“So, the last time I trusted you with something like this, in this room, you blew up my car.” James called to Reed as he got out of the stairs and skirted around the outside of the organized pile of materials laid out on blue construction tarps.

Reed ignored him. Partly because he was busy, but also because James had made that comment before, and his friend and possibly boss had taught him that repetitive comedy shouldn't be rewarded. Instead, the curly haired young man brushed some invisible sawdust off his shirt, winced as he put too much pressure on the scar that marked a missing internal organ, and pretended he was just really focused on getting the measurements right.

To be fair, he was. The last time they'd messed up some measurements, he'd blown up James' car. And his own kidney, among other things.

The orange totems required exacting measurements. But once you had them, they were almost concerningly stable. And the blueprints that Bill and Mark had submitted for this project had been checked and rechecked, but he was still down here doing it again, while he watched one of the older men try desperately to teach a kid barely younger than he was how to use a belt sander.

“Yo.” James said softer, stepping up to Reed's card table workstation. “How's it going?”

“Not bad. Not bad.” Reed nodded, choosing to begin acknowledging James now that the joking was done. “Still wishing the unfolding totems could copy magical stuff. Oh, we finished the furniture test; it doesn't work. Doesn't care if it's a chair or a wall or whatever. The oranges won't copy magic.”

“Disappointing!” James tsked. “But hey, this is still pretty powerful on its own. We'll just have to find other ways to really do arcane quality of life improvements.”

“Centralization, I guess.” Reed shrugged. “Like how we stuck that microwave that adds nutritional content to things in the Response break room. Oh! Mark wants you and Arrush to be available for when we activate the totem, so we can start setting up heat channels or something. I don't actually *get* the engineering method behind it? But he's basically got environmentally friendly air conditioning, if you two can do the thing where you make a ring of heat exchange points. And it does collapse when we take the totem down, I checked. So no concern about... you know... making some kind of wizard minefield in a thousand years.”

“Gooooood? Good.” James nodded. “Yes. Good. Except hang on; we went to great lengths to get Mark a Climb spell slot. He *has* the thermodynamic tunnel spell! He can do it himself!”

“He says he's old.” Reed countered.

“He's forty five, tops!”

“Mark is, like, almost fifty?”

James blinked. “Seriously? Shit, I did not realize that. Okay, well, that doesn’t... *really* stop him from doing the thing. But I can help out with it anyway.” James gave an amused huff, breath coming out in a powerful burst even when he didn’t mean for it to. “Alright. Well, I’m just here to help with some random stuff today, so I can gripe about having literal magic later.”

“Random stuff?” Reed questioned.

James shrugged, casually looking over his shoulder and down the hall toward the elevator at the sounds of a group of camracondas moving past. “Bill said something about getting someone to hold heavy things. I can hold heavy things! I am very powerful.”

“That’s true, he is!” A woman’s voice cut into the conversation, scratchy from use and a little tired, but still enthusiastic. James turned with a grin of his own to see Alanna coming toward them from out of the single half-built apartment unit in the middle of the basement’s floor space. “Very powerful, and other things!” Alanna circled the table and draped herself over James’ shoulders, getting a grunt of exertion as he pushed back against the sudden weight.

Alanna was a half foot taller than James, black hair pulled back into a tight ponytail that was nowhere near the match to his own, but gave her a certain sharp look anyway. She was wearing a plain tee shirt and shorts that showed off the tanned and heavy packed muscles she was proud of working for, and was sweaty enough that she was *incredibly* uncomfortable to be fallen on by. James put up only a token resistance as his partner crushed his shoulders, though.

“Oh hey!” He gasped out, shifting his stance to keep her from literally flooring him. “I guess Anesh left that note then.”

“What? Oh! No, that was me. I just finished what I was doing early, and Bill roped me into living stuff into place for Myri to freeze.” Alanna jutted a thumb to where a black and orange camraconda slithered out of the construction site, and James stifled a chuckle as the snake moved over to a line of large bowls full of water, dunking her head into one without reservation. “God, I keep forgetting they’re waterproof.” Alanna muttered.

James knew the feeling. It was hard enough to keep track of what *he* could do, and he’d been this species his whole life. He tilted his head back as far as he could, wiggling in Alanna’s embrace, to try to plant a kiss on her neck. Or escape. Either one. “So, wait, you stole my job?” He asked as she repositioned above him, staying just out of reach of his antics. “I was supposed to help today!”

“You were on vacation! It’s been two days!” Alanna glared down at him. “Also yes, I was here and it seemed helpful. Also El says hi.”

“No she doesn’t.” James gave a disappointed smirk

“No, she doesn’t.” Alanna admitted. “She said a lot of things, some of which were nice though. So take the greeting and like it. Anyway. Wanna grab dinner?”

“I just got here! I didn’t even get a chance to do anything!”

Alanna snorted. “We’re done for the day, and I *know* you need to eat something with vegetables in it before we go into the Office tonight.”

“Oh, is it Tuesday already?” James innocently asked, like he didn’t already know, then yelped as his partner started gnawing on his ear in retaliation. “Alright, fine! But you have to tell me what we’re postponing until tonight! I completely forgot!”

Alanna laughed. “Oh! Nothing! I didn’t think you’d be back today, so I left a note for any time in the future when you were feeling overwhelmed!”

James whirled away out of her grip, and turned to place his hands on his partner’s shoulders. “That was very nice of you.” He said solemnly. “I love you very much. Please stop ‘helping’.”

“I’m helping!” Alanna exclaimed, throwing herself into James for another sweaty hug, persisting with a laugh even as her boyfriend dodged her first attempt and led her on a chase back toward the stairs.

Stopping at the card table Reed was using, Bill cracked open a can of soda with a snap and hiss. “Was that James?” He asked the younger man who was doing yet another check and not looking up from his laptop.

“Yup.”

With another hiss, Bill popped open a second can, grabbing a metal straw from the glass jar full of them on the side of Reed’s table, popping it in, and lowering it to the ground so the camraconda that had followed him could have a drink. “Did he just walk off with my heavy?” He asked.

“Ayup.” Reed nodded.

Bill stared at the door, the man rolling the aluminum can in his thick hand, letting the cold metal soothe his fingers. After a few seconds, he tilted his head back and drained half the drink in one go. “God dammit, I’m gonna have to get an actual pulley system setup for the last support beam.” He grumbled. “Unless... someone... anyone... made a totem that didn’t need vertical support for its own interior weight?”

“Nope.” Reed shook his head.

“Well fuck.” Bill grumbled, chugging the last of the soda and flinging it into one of the open heavy plastic trash bins around the site. “Okay, I’m gonna go get a pulley system set up. Is there any magic rope down here?”

“Uh...” Reed actually looked up, thinking about the question. “Surprisingly no? I could make you something, if you give me an hour.”

“Nah, I’ll figure it out.” Bill grunted and rolled an arm. “Alright, back to work.”

“I am a magic rope, in some contexts!” The camraconda, Myri, said from under the table where she’d just finished her soda. “Also I am still on break. Be patient!”

“Oh!” Reed nodded, remembering what James and Alanna had just been talking about. “Speaking of breaks, Officium Mundi opens tonight. If you’re doing that, maybe take a rest.”

Bill waved him off. “Nah, I’m going to my kid’s soccer game in an hour. I leave the whole ‘risking your life’ thing to you kids.”

“Oh, I leave that to James.” Reed said, turning back to his laptop. “He’s the professional here.”

Upstairs, the professional dungeon delver, charged with reflex enhancing magical coffee, caught a grape in his mouth as one of his partners kept throwing fruit at him when she thought he was distracted. At the tables around them, people of a dozen different backgrounds and roles ate, talked, and laughed when James failed to predict the arc of a slice of orange properly and was sent tumbling to the floor.

They found strange places and explored them, they strove to understand and apply the magics they collected, they protected everyone they could, they worked to make the world a little safer. They built cool things and fought monsters and argued about systems of government. They tried to be good people.

Piece by piece, they made their own culture, and their own place in the world.

James was still grinning wildly as Arrush helped him up, the towering ratroach bracing James with two of his arms while another hand hauled him to his feet. He gave a reassuring thumbs up to Alanna, showing that he was actually fine as he dragged his chair back up as well.

People kept trying to encourage everyone to take time off, to take a break, a vacation, even just a weekend. But really, how could he ever feel like he was relaxing away from here?

This place had become his home.

It wasn't pointless toil to work to make his home better. It wasn't burnout to spend time around the community he'd build, and that he loved.

James explained this to Alanna, and then admitted that also yes he had cut his vacation short to go on the dungeon delve tonight, getting a laughing "I knew it!" out of his partner. But that didn't make the other stuff untrue either.

It was, every time he came through the door, good to be back.