

*“Waiting is useless. The crisis is here; pick a side.” -Esâ Afontov, Netrunner-*

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James liked making food. He hadn't always; it had taken more than a few dungeon skills to kick him past the invisible line of competence where he could actually have some fun and not just struggle to not burn things. But now, it was great.

More than just making food though, he liked sharing food with his friends. Making things *for* people, especially the people he loved, was rewarding in a way he couldn't really describe. There was just something that made him happy to put in effort and get out compliments from everyone.

He had fuzzy memories of this being a thing his friend group had done for a long time, as far back as high school when the names and social web had been pretty different. But he had kind of assumed that it was them going out to eat, or ordering pizza together. It wasn't until he'd realized how hard it was to remember clearly that he'd asked Sarah, and found out that she *also* liked to cook.

She'd made food for him a hundred times, and all he had left were fuzzy recollections of time with friends. None of them with her face or voice in them. He'd forgotten his friend and replaced her with Dominos pizza.

“Stop moping you mope!” Sarah said, passing behind him in their apartment's tiny kitchen. She wanted to hug him or at least nudge him with an elbow, but since James was currently using a rather large knife to peel and chop garlic, she just settled for a verbal jab instead. “It's *fine!* We can make more friend memories now. Friendories. Friendemories. Memoriends... no that one is bad.”

“Please don't make me laugh while I'm holding a knife.” James sucked in a smile.

While he chopped garlic, he looked out over the kitchen's counter and across his living room to where the sliding glass door showed him a crappy view of a sliver of parking lot and a *lot* of grey freezing rain. Outside was, from the looks of things, deeply unpleasant right now. It contrasted nicely with the place he lived.

Ever since the great purge of delver clutter from their living room, it had become a lot more comfortable to sit around it. It wasn't like there was no clutter at all; both Rufus and James *did* live here, and as a result, there were always going to be random piles of trading cards scattered on every flat surface available. But not having arms and armor piled in weird places did make it feel a lot cozier.

A warm orange tinted glow from the room's lamps, internal heating aided by a green orb effect keeping them pleasantly warm, a pair of couches and one really big plush chair, and a table that

was *almost* cleared of its normal nonsense and replaced with an actual table setting. It was still a space that showed off what their priorities were, because there was a TV framing the whole thing and Auberdeen and Alanna were watching episodes of Cowboy Bebop with the human trying to explain science fiction concepts to the dog, who *probably* wasn't just humoring her. Also, they'd kept the "work hard and also work hard" motivational poster that had been pulled out of Officium Mundi so long ago that James didn't remember who found it or wanted it. It just felt like *theirs* now. Like a part of his home.

That, and a few other souvenirs, acted as a constant reminder of the truth of their lives. Like the necklace made out of sapphire snake fangs from Winter's Climb, the transplanted otherworldly cactus from Route Horizon, or the handful of DVD cases with hand drawn covers for tv shows they'd found on computers in Officium Mundi. Things that came from somewhere *else*, but still made their home theirs.

James finished making a pile of garlic, the smell of it overpowering everything else for him. He knew the place smelled like books and the lavender soap Anesh used and whatever the name for the scent of frantically catching up on vacuuming was, but right now, for him, it was garlic and nothing else. "Trade ya!" He offered his cutting board to Sarah, who handed him back a different small platform with some tomatoes on it.

The two of them had actually never worked in a kitchen together before, even counting missing memories. James *was* bad at cooking up until recently in his life. But right now, they were blending together like they'd been born psychically linked, and they weren't even cheating and being actually psychically linked.

James shuffled to the side as Sarah pivoted her hip and yanked the oven open with a magnetic field, before she slid the tray of garlic bread into the space with both hands and flipped it shut again. James held out a hand and a pepper grinder was deposited into it like he'd never had to ask. Every time they moved, they stepped around each other like they were dancing.

They also couldn't find any parmesan, which was intensely frustrating. "I literally have magical memory!" James complained loudly as he drew on his Velocity magic for a tiny boost to his knife control. "I cannot forget things! You do too! And we can't go to the store without fumbling half our list?"

"In our defense, it was kind of a long list." Sarah was far less bothered by him. She'd just sent Alanna on a jog to get more; the nearest grocery store was only a half mile away and Alanna took it as a challenge. "And we got distracted arguing about ice cream."

"Hardly an *argument*."

"I challenged you to a duel in the freezer aisle!" Sarah retorted.

James nodded, a goofy smile on his face. “You did do that, yes.” He said, sliding his knife along his cutting board to scoop up a row of tomato slices, and one by one adding them to the caprese he was making. “I did sort of assume you were joking because, and do not take this the wrong way, I can’t really imagine you murdering someone for a personal slight?”

“Who’s murdering who?” Anesh asked, two of him walking into the apartment’s living room from down the hall as he buttoned up his shirts. Ganesh sat on one of his shoulders, the little living drone scratching his face against one of his rotor wings.

“Anesh save me.” James greeted his boyfriend. “Sarah hates me now.”

Both Anesh glanced at James for a single blink before shrugging and going over to claim seats on the couch. “That’s not even a little bit believable, and you know it.” Anesh said, before his other body tapped at his chin and added, “Though that *does* sort of mean Sarah could get away with actually murdering you, doesn’t it?”

“My plan is very devious.” Sarah confirmed with a nod, the bun her hair was pulled back in bobbing. “I’m getting revenge for something James did in high school.”

“That’s not fucking fair!” James laughed as he leaned over the kitchen sink to set the rectangular plate he was finished with up on the counter to join other small cold dishes. He almost dropped it when Alanna burst back in, tossing a block of cheese over his head to Sarah, but James snapped out a frozen arm and stabilize it. “I don’t even remember it, why should I be punished for it?” James finished once he made sure he wasn’t about to spill fresh cheese all over his carpet.

“Ah, the Harlan method!” Alanna nodded. “Nope. Not allowed.”

“I... hm. Well shit, yeah, you got me there.” James conceded, turning to wash his hands and losing track of the conversation over the sound of rushing water as he let his extra arm melt away down the sink, and let the warm water warm his skin back up. He turned back to wipe his hands on a random towel lying around, listening to the sound of other’s laughter from a joke he’d missed. Wordlessly handing Sarah the hand towel as she slipped past him and out of the kitchen to run grab something from their second floor apartment’s basement, James looked around again. “What time is it?” He asked idly. “Does anyone know when the others are-“

A pop of displaced air cut through the room as three figures appeared amidst them. The telepad magic working effectively to turn what should have been a small localized thunderclap into a simple snapping sound.

They landed just inside the door, and of the three, the two largest of them were instantly on edge. Arrush and Keeka were right away pushed back against each other shoulder to shoulder, sweeping their eyes around the apartment like anyone in it might be about to kill them. The skirt

Keeka liked to wear spinning with him as he twisted to find people he recognized, while Arrush forced himself to relax as he sought James' eyes from across the room.

The third figure was Rufus, who had already hopped off of the shoulder of Arrush's hoodie where he'd been clinging during the teleport, and was crawling up one of the chains of paperclips on the wall to head down the hall toward some arcane goal. He waved at James on the way by, who waved back and gave him a companionable nod.

"Hey, you're here!" Alanna comically restated the obvious, in the tradition of people entertaining guests since the dawn of time. She threw her arms open in a slow motion while Sarah leaned on the fridge next to where Keeka was nervously shifting from foot to foot. "Come on in, steal a seat. Relax or something."

"Telling people to relax has never once, in the history of the human species, worked." James pointed out to her. "Also hi!" He smiled at Arrush, who's muzzle cracked into a slight toothy grin in reply.

"Why not?" Keeka asked, the hands that were clawing at his own arms loosening as he thought about the statement.

"Hm?"

"Why does telling people to relax not work?" The wiry furred ratroach restated, titling his head, antenna cascading sideways as he framed the question.

"Oh! I think it's like telling someone to not be mad? It comes across as condescending and instantly puts people on edge, which is the opposite effect." James explained.

From the other side of the kitchen counter, Alanna dropped herself over the arm of a couch and landed with her head lightly abutting Auberdeen's flank. "What about, as a random example, some kind of hypnosis thing?" She asked coyly.

An Anesh looked at her from the other side of the dog, eyes narrowing. "You used the tone you use when you get a skill rank." He accused. "Wait, are you hypnotizing us right now?"

"Absolutely not." Alanna honestly stated.

"/s your new skill something lewd?" James guessed. Alanna didn't answer for a long enough stretch that he knew he'd gotten his answer. "Alright. Hi Arrush! Hi Keeka! Welcome to my home! Seriously, though, jokes aside, come in. Sit somewhere. Slowly realize it's nice here and become comfortable but on your own timeline." James glanced over at Sarah. "Did I forget anything?"

“Offer them a hug!” Sarah stated, making the motion toward the rats who were still looming by the front door that she was open to a good hug. She stood there for a good fifteen seconds as Keeka stared at her before he slowly realized that she wasn’t kidding, and almost sheepishly took her up on the offer. “Like that!” She explained to James.

“Okay, that’s adorable, and yes Arrush you can have a hug later, but this apron isn’t for show and I *am* covered in, like, tomato sauce and flour and stuff right now.” He pointed out. “Go, sit, get Auberdeen to explain anime to you. I’ll be over in a minute once I get the last thing started.”

Slowly, they did so, both of them sitting on the far couch where James had a good view of them. Arrush actually did start talking to Auberdeen, and James realized he hadn’t made the joke clear that Auberdeen couldn’t actually talk back yet. Which, now that he thought about it, was sorta mean. Alanna explained for him though. All the while Sarah bustled around like she was a born hostess, starting to cover the table bit by bit in pitches of drinks or plates of food, explaining what was in iced tea to Arrush, and lighting an actual sconce of candles that she procured from *somewhere*.

The last thing she explained was “ambiance”, and refused to explain further as she stuck it in the middle of the table.

“You know Auberdeen is flammable, right?” Alanna reached her hands over her head to pet her impromptu pillow.

“You’re all flammable with enough effort.” Sarah said, pointing the lighter she’d used at Alanna before making it vanish with a twist of her wrist and a clap, grinning as she performed the slight of hand. Or what was *probably* slight of hand. It was, admittedly, kind of hard to tell these days if magic was stage performance or literal arcana. He didn’t get a chance to ask as Sarah ran off to find the gift they’d gotten for Keeka and Arrush, which were some reusable metal straws that somewhat clashed with the ambiance of the fancy dishware, but were practical enough to make up for it.

Soon enough, James got to a point where basically all he was doing was waiting a few minutes for noodles to boil before everything was ready. He took advantage of the short down time to find a spot to lean, sigh, and join back into the conversation he was only half part of. “So, what did I miss while I was away, anyway?” He asked. “Not the me-relevant stuff, I mean, how’ve you all *been*? I... I don’t get to ask that very often. Like, only gone for a day or so, I know, but still. We don’t do this much.”

“Yeah turns out building the future is a lot of work.” Alanna answered.

“Well, ignoring her,” Anesh kicked his feet up onto Alanna’s couch, overlapping his legs with hers in a way that was very much not ignoring her, “it was mostly okay. The apartments in the basement are getting a big courtyard garden, which was fun, but we put that on hold while the wizard plague happened.”

“Please, no, we can’t call it that.” James protested.

“Deb has a name for it, but really, you know what people are gonna say.” Anesh sighed. “Um... someone else upgraded a Status Quo glove with a blue. We have a whole stack of copied greens that we’re going to add to the lair, though we’re going to let a bunch of new recruits do it to spread out the skill ranks. What else? Alanna?”

“You’re quitting your job!” Alanna reminded him. “*Eventually*, I guess. Figured you’d be here by now.”

Both of Anesh’s bodies nodded. “I’ll be joining us in an hour or so. Probably gonna take some time to sync up, too.” One of him noticed Arrush giving a confused look to Keeka, and the smaller ratroach slowly reaching out a paw like he was going to say something before receding back. “Ah, I’m guessing you have a question?” Anesh said it with an open tone, making it clear he was okay with being asked.

“How... are you the same?” Keeka slowly asked. “Knew there were many of you, but...” the ratroach looked around the room, then shrugged.

James also took a minute to remember that only about half the people here were human, and that number probably skewed if you counted Anesh as one person. Not having clear answers on what everyone was or how they operated was actually probably going to be a pretty normal way of life in the future. There were going to be a lot of small conversations about how different species of infomorph viewed things, or what foods someone’s new ratroach partner were allergic to, or how it worked to have a one night stand with a hive mind.

That was kinda cool. But also it was probably going to be the sort of thing that would require patience, understanding, and the ability to not get exhausted answering similar questions repeatedly. Which, for Anesh, was fine. Anesh had been in college for the same general subject for something like twenty years if James was counting right. Anesh was the most patient, caring person that James knew. But personally, he wasn’t looking forward to hearing someone ask him how it felt to share his brain with a mental parasite for the hundredth time and finally snapping and throwing the question asker into traffic.

“So, I have a weird power from an absorbed orange orb... uh, the orange orbs are an Officium Mundi thing, that give you either a certification if you break them, or a repeatable ‘job’ if you absorb them... and my reward for completing the job is it makes a copy of this body.” Anesh explained. “It’s sorta limited, as I learned when we tried to also make a copy of James, who really wanted to-“

“I wanted to have two of me so bad!” James burst out, cutting in briefly. “Do you know what you can do with two of yourself!?”

“Yes.” An Anesh retook control of the conversation, while the other perched over the back of the smaller love seat he was on to glower James into silence. “The point is that I can make more of me, but then they’re different people, who just started as me. And none of me like that idea, so instead of letting that happen, we use the skulljacks to form into a kind of full hive mind whenever we have the chance, and sort of refresh ourselves to being the same person.” Anesh shrugged. “It shares most of our magic, too, which I guess is the gold standard for this sort of thing. Of if we’re ‘Anesh’ or just people who think we’re Anesh.”

“Are you?” Keeka asked.

“Am I Anesh?” Anesh asked, and Keeka gave a curious nod, the ratroach becoming more animated and less curled in on himself as the two of them spoke. “I think so. Is that enough? I dunno sometimes. Are you Keeka?”

“Who else would I be?” Keeka’s question was both confused, and utterly earnest. Then he turned his chitin plated snout down at the table. “Oh. Is this about being different?” He asked. “I am a different me than I was, aren’t I? But I’m still me.”

Anesh shrugged. “Exactly.” He said. “Anyway, it’s kinda dumb and I get the impression a lot of the dungeon magic kinda actively hates the way I mess with stuff. But nothing bad has happened yet!”

From the adjacent couch, Alanna rolled herself over, propping up on one elbow to give an incredulous look. “Anesh, I fucking love you. I would commit war crimes for you.”

“Please don’t?”

“But you seriously *cannot* say things like that here.”

James nodded as he checked the pasta he was supposedly about to serve them all. Almost done; he stared into the bubbling water as he added his own voice to the conversation. “Yeah, every time we say ‘what could possibly go wrong’, something does. It’s not a superstition when it’s actually happening. I think it might be natural magic.” He pulled the heavy pot off the stove and went to drain it.

“We’ve been over this. Natural magic isn’t a thing.” Alanna retorted.

This time, Arrush was the one who asked. “What... is?”

“Oh, there’s this running theory that the things in our mythology might actually be real, but not dungeon constructs?” Anesh explained.

Sarah dove in again. “Yeah, like mermaids!”

“The... dolphin women?” Arrush wanted to make sure he was on the right page.

“Fish in general. And I guess they don’t have to be women.” Sarah conceded. “Merfolk?”

“Merfolk are possible.” James conceded. “It’s not like we know what’s in most of the oceans. I feel like fish-dungeon is entirely possible.” He transferred the pasta to a serving dish and moved it out to the table, a subtle pressure leaving him as he stepped out of the kitchen, and knew that his job was *done* for a while. He joined them, and pulled up a chair on the opposite side of the table in front of their TV that was still playing something even though it had long since been muted. Auberdeen liked subtitles better anyway.

Alanna was still trying to list things that probably weren’t real, Sarah was giggling and trying to add increasingly improbable things to the list, and Arrush was trying to explain to the apparently blind humans that dragons were concretely real. There was a lighthearted warmth in the air that had nothing to do with the smell of garlic bread and fresh basil.

“I like this.” Zhu’s voice whispered from James’ shoulder. The navigator had been in a sleeping state for the last day and a half, and was finally waking up, even if he was clearly still weakened. Dusty orange light and the brush of feathers on his skin making Zhu’s presence known. “Even if it’s... local.”

“Okay, rude.” James laughed softly. “You doing okay?” He followed up in a quiet voice.

“I will live. Which I appreciate. I like living, so far.” Zhu said. “I will need to figure out what to do with the fifteen skill points I have acquired.”

James nodded. “Same. Though I think I’m a little higher. I should make a count before I forget.” He tried, and failed, to avoid thinking about the sensation of his skin sliding away from his face. Shuddering, he looked up at a poke from Zhu to see everyone else watching him with varying degrees of attention. “What’s up?” He asked.

“So... food?” Alanna raised her eyebrows, greedily eying the table James and Sarah had set.

“Oh! Food!” James said. “Yeah, sorry, I spaced out there. Uh... just take whatever looks good?”

An Anesh poked James’ leg with the toe of his foot. “You should explain what the pastas are to Arrush and Keeka, because they will not know.” He strategically offered.

Arrush folded his arms and imperiously tilted his snout up into the air. “I know what pasta is!” He declared, defending the limited knowledge of human cuisine that he’d acquired in his time on Earth. “But... explain to Keeka.” He blinked, his eyes both bulging and beady sharing a joking spark as he wrapped an arm around his boyfriend’s back, the other ratroach hissing and flushing green at the public affection.



Coming to the rescue of everyone who apparently hadn't seen spaghetti before, James snorted and started pointing to stuff on the table. "The red one is a meat sauce, it's got a lot of garlic in it. The white one is a wine and lemon sauce, it's gonna be thinner, and I don't actually know how to describe the flavor. Everything else on the table is what it is, and *no one is allergic to anything*, unless Alanna lied to me again about another fruit, or Auberdeen eats the things she knows she isn't supposed to eat."

"I didn't know!" "Woof!"

"So yeah, just... mix and match as you will." He started by serving himself, adding noodles and sauce and garlic bread to his plate, with an amount of salad more out of guilt over everything else than because he *really* wanted salad. And then he just let himself fall into the pattern of passing bowls around, letting his friend's voices rise to fill the room, and listening to the clink of silverware on dishes.

And then, finally, he let himself start to relax.

He was home, he didn't have anything he needed to do until the absolute wall of waiting tasks assaulted him tomorrow, and he had finished making food for the people he liked. And now, he could just sit, and eat, and let everyone *else* talk while he tried to pretend he didn't want to fall face first into his plate of pasta and take a nap.

Around him, his friends ate and complimented him and Sarah and laughed and talked. Sarah, being herself, seemed to have a personal goal of making Arrush and Keeka feel comfortable and happy.

As he watched them and ate his own dinner, James started to realize with that thought process powered by a fuzzy haze of mental exhaustion that everyone's methodology for getting food was a little different. Anesh was methodical about it, Alanna took a little of everything up front and didn't seem to care if her food got mixed up a little, *Sarah* seemed to directly try to get the flavors to blend. Arrush took a few tries to figure out how to get a good grip with tongs made for human hands and not claws, and then served Keeka first. Auberdeen had a plate made for her, but never stopped trying to convince everyone to add to it, apparently having replaced her stomach with an event horizon.

It was, he decided, a good way to tell a lot about someone. Assuming you already knew enough about them to interpret it.

"Hey, you alive sleepybutt?" Sarah settled herself around James' shoulders like a scarf as she passed behind him, careful not to crush Zhu's lazily dozing manifestation as she did so. "You look half asleep."

“Oh, uh, no. I was listening to Anesh talk about his book to Auberdeen.” James said, leaning back.

“That was five minutes ago.” Alanna informed him bluntly.

From the couch on his left, Arrush gave James a worried look, tearing his gaze away from the floor behind the table where Keeka was kneeling beside Auberdeen and lavishing the shaggy beast with pets. “You seem... tired?” The ratroach asked with a cautious voice.

James nodded. “Yes. Wait, no, are you asking if tired is the right word, or if I’m tired?”

“Asking if... I can say you are tired?” Arrush ventured.

“Oh. Yeah, you can say that.” James was afraid to ask, but did anyway. “Whhhhy would you not be allowed to say that?”

Alanna aimed a fork at James before tipping it down to spear a meatball and dropping it on her empty plate to mop up bits of sauce with. “Because trauma.” She stated. “This cannot be surprising to you.”

“It seems rude to just assume everything is a trauma response.” James said defensively.

Keeka peeked up from behind the couch, his antenna announcing his attention before the rest of his head caught up. “Most of us... most of our thoughts are... traumatic.” He said.

“It’s getting better.” Arrush added, twisting to look out over the back porch and away from everyone else.

James felt an overwhelming wave of sorrow at the motion, until he noticed that Arrush’s pointed muzzle was ringed with the aftermath of his meal. Like lipstick, if lipstick could stain tan fur, and was mostly tomato based. “You, uh...” He tapped at his own lips. “You have a little...”

Arrush looked back at him with a puzzled tilt of his head, confusion mounting as Alanna noticed too and started cracking up. Giving the poor ratroach a merciful fast explanation, Sarah pushed off James’ back with a mutual “Oof” and reached out to hand Arrush one of the spare napkins. “You’ve got sauce on your face.” She said with a grin. “Which I *think* means we did a good job!” She turned and made a motion that had James reflexive high five her, before staring at his hand like he didn’t know why he’d done that. “Good job, team kitchen!”

“We cannot name our team that.” James protested. “We need a cooler team name.”

“Team Hot And Saucy?” Alanna offered.

“Which one of them is which?” Anesh asked her, the other two Anesh each pointing at Sarah and James respectively. James hadn’t actually *noticed* when a third Anesh had shown up, but apparently it had happened while he was eating in some kind of dazed state.

Alanna cleared her throat. “What do you mean?”

“If that’s their team name, which of them is Hot, and which is Saucy?”

James interjected while Alanna was trying to formulate an answer. “A, that’s not how team names work.” He said. “B, what Alanna *wants to say* is the word ‘both’, but she’s busy worrying about it, so I’m saying it for her. C... Sarah, I’ll get back to you later on team names?”

“Kay!” Sarah squeaked out, ducking down the stairs into their basement.

“That basement makes me so fucking nervous.” James muttered, looking out the second floor window to the darkening outside before looking back at the stairs.

“Why?” Keeka asked him.

“Because I’m, like, absolutely sure that when I move out, the property manager is going to be angry. And that *bothers* me for some reason? Like, I don’t want to make people upset, and I don’t have a good way to handle it.”

“James is weirdly afraid of talking to people.” Alanna filled in as she offered a questing Auberdeen an olive as a peace offering to keep the dog away from the fourth slice of garlic bread she was wolfing down. It didn’t work, and she ended up pushing the overly intelligent dog away with one hand while yelling around her food. “You *know* this will kill you! Stop trying to eat it! Oh my god, you fucking idiot! Here, have a meatball!”

Everyone else abandoned Alanna to her fate, with Arrush and James preemptively shifting their drink glasses away from the part of the table her fight was happening on. James watched the brawl go down, sipping at his tea placidly while Arrush tensed up next to him. “Hey.” He murmured to the big ratroach, getting a twitch of some of Arrush’s eyes in his direction in reaction. “Don’t worry about it. One of the benefits of... I guess just trusting in general?... is that stuff like this becomes an act of compassion and not aggression.”

“I... I don’t...” Arrush stopped himself from stammering out words, and hissed in a long breath through his fangs. “How?” He asked, after steadying himself and silently watching Alanna and Auberdeen roll off the couch and under the table with a thump.

“When I was a kid, I had a lot of Calvin and Hobbes comic books.” James started, and then noticed Arrush’s rows of eyes narrow at him. “I’m going somewhere with this. There’s a line in one of them, where Calvin finds a snake, and wants to know more about it. He thinks about going to the library to get a book on snakes, but stops, because he *knows* he doesn’t like the

way his school is teaching him things, and libraries and books sounds a lot like school.” James snorted out a single laugh. “His friend tells him ‘if no one makes you do it, learning counts as fun’. And that line has stuck with me for most of my life.” He reached over and set a hand on Arrush’s back, feeling the ratroach tense briefly, and then push back against his hand through the material of his hoodie. “When no one *makes* you do it, then it’s an opportunity for something else. Expression, fun, companionship. Just... just *goofing around*... anything like that. Those two aren’t fighting for any real reason - fucks sake we just watched both of them eat enough food to put someone into a coma, they aren’t *hungry* - they’re just goofing off.”

“I don’t... I don’t think fighting can be fun for me.” Arrush admitted in a wet whisper that made him sound ashamed of it.

“It doesn’t have to be!” James gave him a comforting smile, pushing himself out of his chair and standing up just as another thump sounded below them and his chair fell over, followed by Alanna swearing and Anesh yelping some kind of panicked requests for them to stop. “That’s sort of what I mean about trust. If either of them want it to stop, it does. Like now, since my girlfriend apparently injured herself. You okay?” He asked Alanna, who sprawled out on her back, head sticking out from under where his chair had been a second ago.

“I hit my head.”

“Oooh, that’s a good excuse for a lot of things!”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.” James smiled at her. “Auberdeen, you okay down there?” A mournful quiet howl sounded for a second. “Auberdeen’s fine.” He nodded. “Anyway. Who wants to help me with dishes?” He waved off his boyfriend even as he said it. “Not you Anesh, you have a thing to do.”

“You cooked!” Sarah exclaimed as she ascended the stairs from the basement, whatever embarrassment she had felt earlier gone. “You don’t have to clean! Those have always been the rules!”

“First off, I’m applying Harlan’s Rule here-“

“You absolutely cannot call it that.” Anesh interrupted him, the three of him stacking their plates in a smooth motion like he was a single person with six hands and setting them on the end of the table.

James glowered. “Second of all, I’ve got a skill rank in it. I know how to do dishes, it’s kinda meditative.”

"I have another question." Arrush started, and James beamed at him expectantly. He was getting better at social interactions, but Arrush still found the utter openness James expressed much of the time to be hard to fully *believe*. "Does having a... a magic-skill... mean you need to do that thing?" He glanced over at Keeka, who was settling back in to a corner of the couch, smoothing his skirt out. "Because..." Arrush trailed off, not explaining his trepidation.

Alanna laughed as she picked herself up off the floor, muscles in her arms showing well defined tone against the tee shirt she was wearing. "Hah! Nooooo. Because if they did, I think Anesh has a skill for *warships* or something? And he'd have to spend all his time standing on a bridge in Portland and ogling the ass ends of every boat coming through."

"Those are called stern looks." James nodded.

Whatever Anesh had been about to say died in a choking laugh as James' pun caught up to him. "Alright." He huffed out. "I'm gonna go make sure I'm a single person. You have fun." The three of them started heading back toward the bedroom he shared with James and Alanna, two of his instances taking a moment to give quick kisses to each of his partners. "And thanks for dinner!" All of them chorused back at James and Sarah.

"Your boyfriend is adorable." Sarah told him.

"I know, right?" James smirked as he started collecting plates, the part of his brain that needed everything to be neat stacking them orderly even though he was just going to throw them all in the dishwasher in the next five minutes. "Anyway, answering *Arrush's* question, no, you don't need to do things you have skills for." James shrugged as he carried his pile into the kitchen, and smiled to himself as Arrush got up and started bringing more of their dirty dishes over from the table without being asked. He could have asked Alanna, but his girlfriend would have grouched about it even if she would have helped in the end anyway. This was nicer. "I've got skills for a dozen things I have no idea how to work into my life. Like, seriously, who actually needs a lawnmower fixed? I can do it! I never have, but I can!"

"Do you miss it?" Arrush asked. The words came out quiet, and he had to repeat himself over the sound of the sink and clinking dishes as James rinsed off plates. "Does it not feel... like missing something?"

James shrugged, and then handed Arrush a dish towel. "Here, dry pans and set them here." He said. "Also I dunno? I don't feel like it. So I don't know why I said I don't know! I have no desire to repair lawnmowers. Or half the skills I have, really. I put the card counting skill to use *once* for real. There's just so many random things."

Arrush nodded, keeping a constant row of eyes on Keeka over the counter as he assisted James. "I have... many of those too, now. A rank in... in horses."

"From the Library, or the Office?" James asked curiously.

“Office. The skill version.” Arrush’s muzzle peeled back to a toothy smile, bands of chitin flexing as his face twisted in amusement. “I know what a bridle is. How to set a saddle. *Horseshoes*. I have never seen a horse.”

That statement seemed weird to James. “Wait, hang on. In person, or at all? Like, surely you’ve seen a horse in a movie or something?”

“I... I... have not watched a movie.” The exposed patches of skin around Arrush’s eyes flushed green as he slumped. “Everyone talks about movies. I know what they are. But it... asking is hard?”

“There is so much to unpack there.” James muttered. “You *absolutely* can ask about movies. I think there’s a weekly movie night at the Lair? It’s labeled as ‘explain films to camracondas’, but *you are also*... oh holy shit, you probably thought you weren’t invited, huh?” Arrush nodded. “We’re changing that name.” James sighed. “So, you miss riding a horse, even though you never have?”

“I’m not sure.” Arrush considered it. “I think... I think if you needed a horse rider, I would be the choice.” He took a pot James handed him, and found a second dish towel so that two of his claws could dry it in a quick pair of motions. “Do you have a horse?”

That was a good question. “Dave might.” James said as he thought about it. “But also, you’re basically describing how the whole Order *works*, you know? People pick up new weird skills or paranormal abilities all the time, and then we move to the places that we can do the most good in. But also the places we want to be, sorta?”

“I don’t actually want to be a horse rider.” Arrush confided in him as he leaned around James to set the pot on the drying rack. There was a small moment where he brushed against James back, both of them wondering if the other had noticed it.

“Good news, we don’t really need one of those.” James smiled and sighed as he turned the sink off and dried his hands, looking over the apartment. “Where’d Alanna go?” He asked suddenly.

“She took Auberdeen out for a walk while you were distracted.” Sarah told him, looking up from the couch where she was curled with her feet under her body opposite Keeka in roughly the same pose. Her phone was in her hand, and she was deftly flicking through a half dozen different things she was reading or people she was texting. “Also hush, because Keeka is sleeping.”

There was a short moment where James realized that Keeka was not only sleeping, but also lightly drooling on his couch. And he had the uncharitable thought that maybe he should wake

him up before a hole got melted through his cushions. But then, what were couches for if not slowly being dissolved by your friends?

That was mostly a rhetorical question. He was pretty sure he had a skill for couches. But, as his conversation with Arrush had pointed out, just because a dungeon decided to make you good at something didn't mean you had to listen to it. And looking at Keeka curled up around one of the soft pillows, digitigrade legs sticking out from under his skirt, a whistling snore coming from him as his chest rose and fell in rapid motions, it was really hard to make an argument for waking him up.

"Your boyfriend is also adorable." James conspiratorially whispered to Arrush.

"He's tired." Arrush sounded... sad, for some reason? James gave him a questioning look as the towering ratroach leaned forward, several of his claws grabbing onto the edge of the kitchen counter. "He couldn't sleep. He has... he is... tomorrow is his surgery day."

"Ah." James started to nod before the words caught up. "Ah. The full use of the shaper substance?" Arrush nodded, eyes pressed closed. "Are you doing okay?" He asked quietly.

"Me?" Arrush questioned.

"Yeah, you." James tilted sideways and bumped his flank into Arrush with a comforting tap. "Keeka... he's been looking forward to this. We both know it, right? He's probably nervous, and excited, and we all know it'll go well. But... that doesn't mean we *know* it, right?" Arrush tried to look away, but James caught the glowing hint of tears forming in his eyes. James frowned, a knot of worry forming in his chest. "That's not what you're worried about, is it?" He asked carefully.

Arrush sniffed wetly, wiping his tears on the sleeve of his hoodie, the fabric smoking as the liquid corroded it. "What... what if..." He struggled to get the words out; no longer bound by his own crippled lungs, but simply unable to express himself without hurting. "When he changes. What if he... doesn't want me anymore?" Arrush asked the question that James had basically no idea how to answer 'properly'.

So instead he answered like James would. "Well, you've got two options." He said bluntly, trying to make his sound lighthearted in the face of that massive downer. "Either that happens, and it sucks, but at least you know right then and there that Keeka sucks and you don't want to date him." Arrush flinched back, looking like he was considering stabbing James briefly. "Or, alternately, the fucking cinnamon roll you're dating will be confused by the very nature of the question you've just asked. Which seems more likely? Oh! We can ask!" James leaned forward, propping his forearms on the raised counter that separated him from the living room. "Hey Sarah, can you-"

"N-no!" Arrush hissed. "No. Y-you're... you're right. I know. I just..."

“I know.” James had a sudden impulse to hug the big guy, and he acted on it with only a tiny hesitation. Stepping up behind Arrush and wrapping his arms around his chest, getting poked by ribs and chitin bands. Arrush sagged back into James with a sigh, like one hug could take away every worry he’d ever had.

And maybe it could. James knew as well as anyone how much it could suck to be starved for friendly contact. Arrush and Keeka had each other, but that didn’t mean a hug wasn’t a powerful form of comfort. And it wasn’t like he didn’t *know* what they both felt for him, anyway.

He jumped slightly as two of Arrush’s secondary arms, the ones that seemed to be able to lock into different joint configurations, grabbed at James’ shoulder and hip, even though Arrush remained facing away from him. He always *forgot*, somehow, that the ratroaches tended to have more than the human standard number of limbs. But the touch wasn’t unwelcome, and the two of them stood there until James felt his arms start to ache from overextending and pulled back.

When he did, and got to see more than just the back of Arrush’s hoodie, one of the first things he saw was Sarah with her elbows on the counter, head in her hands, beaming at him like an idiot.

“You two are so *cute*.” She whispered.

James flushed red. “Wait, why am I embarrassed by this?” He said, crossing his arms at her and continuing to be embarrassed. “You’re supposed to be the flustered one!”

“James, you don’t even know how long you’ve know me, and you *know* that is not true about us.” Sarah told him, her smile undaunted.

“Arrush, help me.” James pled.

“...*how*?” Arrush turned to give him a confused look.

“I honestly did not think far enough ahead on this.” James said, suddenly stifling a yawn. “I... ah, hm. Welp. There goes that second wind.” He drooped, blinking for so long he considered turning it into a nap. He only realized he was swaying on his feet when Arrush caught him, and opened his eyes to see all seven concerned eyes of the ratroach looking at his face with worry. “Hi.” James said with a lopsided grin.

“James go to bed.” Sarah told him, trying to pretend she was stern and failing. “Weren’t you also doing something tomorrow?”

He nodded at her, yawning again. “Yeah, I’ve got a few things lined up. Actually my whole week is busy.”



“Didn’t... didn’t you almost die?” Arrush asked in a near whisper.

“Yup. And I’m gonna pave over that emotional turmoil by solving problems and delving dungeons in rapid succession.” James admitted, walking out of the kitchen and taking the spot on the couch that had been Sarah’s, the leftover body heat making it deeply pleasant in a way that made him wonder if he should have just taken her advice and gone the extra distance to his bed. “It’ll be fine.” He failed to assuage their fears.

“Liar.” Sarah called him out. “You don’t need to *push* all the time you know? It’s okay to just take a real break. Everyone will understand, and the world won’t end without you.” She saw James giving her an eye roll, and scoffed at him. “I mean it! Don’t make me make you take a day long nap!” She threatened.

“...can she do that?” Arrush asked as he tentatively and stiffly sat down between James and Keeka, a few hands settling on his boyfriend’s outstretched legs.

James nodded with a wince. “Yeah, we share rest through our relationsticks. If I’m not paying attention, she can make me drowsy for the whole day. Which she *wouldn’t do*, because we are *friends*.” He stuck his nose in the air.

Sarah didn’t rise to the bait. “We are friends. And friends make sure friends take vacations! You can’t be at a hundred percent all the time, and you... you did just have a bad experience.” She couldn’t even figure out how to say the words for what had *happened*. “And I know how it feels. I really do! You think that it doesn’t matter if you need a break, because the world doesn’t wait. And things need to happen. And *you* could do the things, right? If we don’t do it, nobody will! But that only works until we burn out, and... and we need to take care of ourselves.” Sarah nodded to herself, hands on her hips as she made her declaration. “You need to rest. For real. And trust the people *you* elevated.” She turned and looked down at where James had stolen her spot, and saw that he was, in fact, already asleep. Sarah slowly rolled her neck, taking a roundabout path to look at Arrush, who was watching Keeka sleep. “How far into my speech did he nod off?” She asked. Arrush opened his mouth like he was thinking of an answer, but then closed it and shook his head, wiping away a line of corrosive drool. “Poop.” Sarah declared with a quiet laugh. “Well at least he’s sleeping.”

Alanna and Auberdeen chose that moment to return to the apartment, Alanna quickly calibrating the stomping steps she made when she realized that there was a quiet feel to the apartment. “Hey, I’m back.” She announced, getting a woof from Auberdeen. “*We’re* back, yes.” Alanna rolled her eyes and corrected as she looked around the room and saw the two people sleeping on the couch. “That’s adorable.” She commented.

“That’s about what I said.” Sarah agreed.

“You know, falling asleep on that couch together has a proven one hundred percent success rate of starting relationships?” Alanna waggled her eyebrows as she whispered conspiratorially to Sarah. “By which I mean, James and me. Actually when we first learned about you, weirdly. This seems a lot less traumatic though, which is nice.”

“It *is* nice. They were hugging earlier.” Sarah whispered back.

“Yesssss.” Alanna hissed, making a light fist pump. “I’m fucking invested in this now.”

“Now?”

“Okay, for a while.”

“Well, don’t push them.” Sarah said, and then bobbed her head back and forth as she realized that sounded condescending. “You already now that. Nevermind.” She tapped Alanna on the arm. “You’re the astute one, anyway.”

“Am I?” Alanna looked surprised.

“You have empathy magic!” Sarah protested. “But even before that, yeah, you always were.” She sighed. “This was nice. We should do more little dinners like this. I’ve missed you all, a lot.”

Alanna laughed, keeping it quiet so as not to wake any of the others. “We live together!”

“You know what I mean.” Sarah said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Well. I’m gonna let James sleep. Arrush, do you want a teleport or a ride back to your place?”

Adding to Sarah’s words, Alanna pressed her fingertips together as she spoke. “You can also stay here. All cuddled up on the couch. We have extra blankets and stuff.” She caught a look from Sarah, and then relented. “No pressure?” Alanna cleared her throat. “But also I literally know you want to, and I’m telling you it’s okay, and I don’t care that I’m using magic to shortcut emotional turmoil.”

“I…” Arrush looked at her with glinting beady eyes. “I *do* want to. But… I don’t want to be… a problem?”

“Okay, great. We’ll get you guys some blankets.” Alanna said, trailing after a Sarah who was silently throwing her arms in the air in defeated exasperation. “Sorrrrry. Sort of.” She told Sarah as they opened up the hall closet and Alanna used her superior height to grab some of the folded comforters off the top shelf over their washing machine. “I know I’m not supposed to abuse knowing how people are feeling, but… this makes everyone happier.”

"I know." Sarah said. "I... I know." She shrugged. "You probably know too. You know how I'm feeling, right?"

Alanna paused, standing on her toes and leaning forward. Slowly, she lowered herself back down and set the blanket on top of the washer, looking away down the hall to her bedroom door. "I try not to." She said. "Because I don't wanna fuck things up. I feel like it's okay with James, because he told me it was, and that's... uh... literally how consent works. Arrush is just broadcasting, which I can't really ignore. But no. I'm not using it on you."

"You should." Sarah said in a tiny, almost scared voice.

Alanna turned back to her with wide eyes, looking down at the shorter woman who was staring up at her as if she'd frozen herself in place so she couldn't flinch away. And in that moment of surprise, she saw a *lot* of what Sarah had going on.

Comfortable joy, but also loneliness. Compassion in three different flavors. A little tired, but a lot thrilled. She was *terrified*, but not for something so mundane as her personal safety. And she was also excited, and questioning, and waiting for something. Waiting for an answer, to a question she hadn't actually asked out loud, and didn't know if she could.

"Yes." Alanna said, almost overwhelmed by just how much Sarah *felt*. But not so much that she didn't know exactly what she was saying.

Then her friend reached up and set her hands on both sides of her face, pulled her down, and kissed her.

And then shot backward. "Wait, no! Was *that* what you were saying yes to?! I didn't ask! Ooooh, no, I didn't think to-!"

Alanna muffled her by continuing what Sarah had started.

From just down the hall, Anesh slowly and quietly closed the bedroom door again, the three of his bodies that were currently actively networked together through their skulljacks forming a single person that was *really* happy that Alanna was sorting that out. But also he had wanted to grab a book from the shelf out there, and now he was stuck.

"Hm." Anesh literally said to himself. "This is awkward for an entirely different reason than what modern media prepared me for."

His group mind, thinking in parallel, decided that he'd just teleport to the Lair and get some work done while everyone else was occupied.

After all, there was always more to do.