

*the internet is an inherently haunted place if you think about it like. it's so weird to see long abandoned discussion boards stuck in a snapshot of the past, old conversations between kids from over a decade ago who have now grown into their own lives, obituaries taking the form of half finished profiles. and the silence that fills the gaps between. there's a constant ghostly record of each generation's thoughts, fads, their sense of humor. back when the future was at their fingertips. even stranger, people you used to know exist openly in that space, and they watch you watching them. if you want, deceased musicians can play through your headphones. there's always an underlying sense of reminiscing and time escaping our ever shortening attention spans. What a fuckin' graveyard -fairycosmos, via tumblr-*

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The interesting part about the treasure chests that Clutter Ascent made was that they mirrored the nature of jigsaw puzzles in a bunch of different strange ways. Not in the actual unlocking puzzle itself, though. There were no pieces, no box top to reference, and no dining room table occupied like a battlefield of cardboard. Instead, there was just the empty blackness, and the abstract feeling of digging for a corner piece.

When you tried to open one of the various dressers, trunks, armoires, or bins that Clutter Ascent had designated as places that gave you a reward, the first thing that happened was nothing. Suddenly, you'd be somewhere else. Not even you, floating. Just a disembodied observer in an empty dark space. But, if you focused on a sensation; a sound, a scent, a sight, anything, and it happened to be what the puzzle was looking for, it would lock into place. And when you'd built enough of the scene, it would let you go to collect your prize.

A thing the Order had discovered fairly quickly was that it was possible to pull people out of the puzzle boxes, just by physically pulling them back. It wasn't a lethal trap if you somehow couldn't remember the scent of mint properly; someone could always get you out. The other thing was that the puzzles *were* solvable. No one had ever gotten one that they couldn't eventually put together, even if it required a lot of digging in their memories, or even extrapolating sensations they'd never personally experienced. They were always possible for whoever opened them.

James loved them. They were a beautiful toy, part art and part experience. A little terrifying, too, which seemed to be where he liked his entertainment to be these days, which might say a little too much about him.

He'd come to Clutter Ascent to check on a couple things, since literally anywhere was on your way home when you teleported everywhere, and after he'd finished that, he'd stopped at a set of drawers that had seemed perfectly placed in the radiant beam of a sunset through a high window to start digging for a corner piece.

The first part, he'd gotten almost by accident. His brain still processing the smell of dust and old wood from the attic had led to small traces of one of those scents sticking around, and James

had followed it to the smell of pine sap. Letting it become more and more overwhelming as he leaned on it until it fully clicked into place. Then he let himself remember where he'd smelled this before, childhood scenes of going to pick out a Christmas tree with his family leading him to add splashes of green pine branches and wet earth. A grey sky, so thick with clouds you couldn't tell how far down they reached, and a miserable drizzle of rain.

Bit by bit, he painted the image the puzzle was looking for. A proud and towering pine tree that stood alone, the ground around it covered in dead needles and slightly dryer than the dirt beyond its protection. James had a lot of trouble getting the texture of the bark right, but eventually, even that he got right, along with the beads of aggravatingly sticky sap rolling down it at their own pace.

When he'd put the last touches on the puzzle's scene, he opened his eyes, the drawer he'd reached out to touch sliding open easily in his hand. Inside, a pair of the small wooden dowels that the Attic liked to make sat, and for a brief second James thought they might have been glowing.

He pocketed the treasure with a smile, and a soft thank you to the dungeon.

This was the kind of challenge he wanted more of in the world. Something that pushed his creativity, that wanted him to be clever and cunning, but that wasn't trying to shoot or eat him.

James decided he'd see if Alanna wanted to share one of the relationsticks with him. There was, as Sarah was proving, no apparent maximum limit on how many you could have, and he thought it might be a nice gesture to be bonded to both his partners. Then James frowned and started second guessing himself, worrying that this might be taken as a kind of weird overcommitment.

He was perfectly happy to spend the rest of his life with Anesh and Alanna. But he also didn't want them to think that he *required* that, and now that he'd had the thought, it was hard to not think of offering someone a relationstick as a kind of enforced permanence to whatever relationship you happened to have. Like marriage, only fiat-backed.

Also now that he thought of it, relationstick bonds were going to make messy breakups a whole order of magnitude worse, if that became a thing. James still thought he could shape a society that would statistically have *fewer* messy breakups, but he wasn't gonna delude himself into thinking he could wipe them out forever. And the presence of magic... well, it didn't make things *worse*, exactly. But it did make things *more*.

He resolved to talk to some people about it, and working it into how they were planning the world they wanted to live in, at a later point. For now, James headed home, strolling calmly back to the dungeon's entrance.

He could have teleported out, of course. But using the telepads in and out of dungeons caused a lot of nausea, and sometimes random bleeding from the eyes and ears, which seemed bad. Besides, this way, he got to almost get run over by a small pack of multi-limbed furred creatures. The small blends of raccoons, spiders, and geckos blurring past as the five or six new life forms the dungeon had made hissed out newly learned words to each other and played among the stacks of old cardboard boxes and dusty furniture.

James loved this dungeon.

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“I don’t get how you’re not more angry about this.” Alanna said.

It was a little later in the evening. James had taken the day to just relax around his apartment. He’d actually gotten to spend more than five minutes playing a video game for the first time in a while, caught up a little on his growing podcast backlog, cleaned their kitchen, been distracted by one of Anesh checking on him, been more distracted when their mild flirting had turned into about an hour of sex and cuddling under the warm blankets of their shared bed, and then made dinner.

Making dinner had become something James was really happy to do. Anesh had said a while back that the yellow orbs had a secret power they didn’t advertise, which was to let you skip the boring parts of learning something, and get right into knowing exactly how you were improving. And cooking was like that for James. He had magically bolstered knowledge on how to hold a knife, how to add spice to taste, how to make pancakes, and a couple other things besides. But since he knew a bunch of that stuff, he also knew how to *learn more of it*. He’d gotten a head start, and honestly, he could have just been satisfied with what he got. But he hadn’t done that.

He was pretty sure that, at this point, if he got another skill orb in cooking, it would only round up maybe a half a rank. James felt like he’d learned a lot, off that leg up.

And now, he was sharing dinner with his partners, Sarah, Ganesh, and their canine roommate Auberdeen. He’d asked Rufus if he’d wanted anything, but the growing stapler had declined the invite, possibly because he didn’t actually eat organic food like some other dungeon life did.

It still baffled James that the camracondas could eat human food. Maybe Rufus *could*, but just didn’t feel like spaghetti and meatballs.

“Sorry,” James said to Alanna as he swallowed the mouthful of garlic bread, “I was thinking about... nevermind. What am I not mad about?”

“You got *shot!*” Alanna rolled her eyes at him, clearly actually irate about the whole thing. “And then you took the day off!”

“Okay, first off, I got better.” James told her, slowly twirling his fork in the spaghetti pile on his plate. They were actually all sitting around the table in their living room to eat, like they were a family or something, but this had the unfortunate side effect of meaning that any excess sauce splatter was at risk of going onto the couch James was sitting on, and he really didn’t want to worry about that today. “Also... I dunno, what was I supposed to do? Declare revenge, sweep in, and annihilate the offending party?”

“I think a lot of people would say yes to that, actually.” Sarah interrupted. She was in the process of cutting the meatballs on Auberdeen’s plate into quarters so the shaggy beast of a dog could daintily pick them off one by one, turning her head sideways to take precision bites off the table. Auberdeen didn’t have any garlic bread, a fact the dog was offended by, even if she did understand every part of the food was bad for her. “I mean, James, you’ve talked to a lot of people about restorative justice, right? How often do you just run into someone who tells you it would be easier to shoot everyone that does certain crimes?”

“Constantly. But those people aren’t *Alanna*.” James countered.

“Hey!” Alanna protested. “I could be one of...! Wait, no. Sorry, I got carried away there. But actually, real talk, I *did* used to be one of those people. It took a while, and a lot of James and Anesh sharing verified statistical studies with me, to get me to pull my head out of my ass.” She gave a small snort as she remembered how she’d used to think. “It wasn’t even that long ago, you know? I’ve always thought we should fight to make the world better. But there was a big stretch where I was flat out wrong about what ‘better’ meant.” She paused, stopping with her fork halfway to her mouth. “Okay, I just realized what I said. Sorry James, I dunno what you should be doing.” She admitted.

Anesh slurped a stray noodle into his mouth, the tiny flick of the tip at the end sending a drop of sauce splattering off to destinations unknown as he ate his own dinner with less regard for their furniture than James had. “I have a suggestion!” He said.

“What’s your idea?” James asked with a happy smile.

“Just hang out here and make us pasta until this all blows over.” Anesh said.

“I’m not gonna lie, I kinda figured you’d have liked the kebab I made the other day more than this. You’re really into this, huh?” James smirked at his boyfriend. Both of him.

While one Anesh took another mouthful of spaghetti noodles, the other one leveled his fork at James. “That’s a stereotype and you know it. Also your kebab needs a lot of work before it lives up to the legacy of proper London street food.”

“Isn’t kebab meant to be... not... British?” Sarah asked, raising her hand like she was in class.

James gave her a half nod, wobbling his hand in front of himself. "Sort of. It's obviously got an origin in the Middle East, *possibly* Turkey but no one can agree. But there's a lot of cities around Europe that have sort of assimilated the idea and really ran with it." He shrugged and added, "I'm not really sure about how a lot of people feel about the ethics of stealing food ideas from other cultures, but honestly, since you can't actually *take anything away*, I'm kinda cool with it. Anyway apparently my cooking isn't able to match random food carts from Anesh's hometown. So my ego takes a hit!"

"I love you though!" Anesh protested. "And your Italian food!" The other Anesh at the table added.

"Calling this Italian food is probably an insult, being honest." James informed him. "It is good though. I put a lot of basil in the sauce, from the Lair's basement garden."

Alanna paused mid-bite. "Is the basil cursed?" She asked. "Or some grim experiment?"

"No, it's fresh." James rolled his eyes. "Anyway, yeah, I don't know what to do about the whole... thing. Alanna's not wrong, I don't really feel that angry. I mostly just feel... tired." He found his hand shaking, and tried to slowly set his fork down on his plate, which almost worked the way he wanted it to. "I'm... I don't..." James suddenly felt a rush of distress overwhelm him. Remembering the sensation of being shot, the sight of his own gunfire taking half someone's head off, the sound and smell of gunfire. Older memories, too; similar scenes from scouring any resistance from the Status Quo building, or the sight of people he cared about being gunned down in the Lair during their retaliation.

He jolted as Auberdeen let out a low, bassy woof, and Sarah gently set a hand on his arm. "Hey." She whispered to him. "You need a minute?"

"No." James answered, noticing his partners giving him worried looks too. Even Ganesh, who was currently hanging out on the mantle over their fireplace, had stopped and was watching him with the closest expression to concern that the little drone could produce. "I'm not a soldier." He answered, his voice tight. "I'm not supposed to fight people, you know? I don't think anyone is. I don't think soldier is a job that should exist. So I don't know how to give the right answer to what I should be doing. Fighting back just feels so stupid, when we have enough magic now that we *shouldn't have to*. So I'm just gonna... do nothing. Cook some food, do a dungeon adventure or two. Normal stuff. Maybe I just don't fucking care if a bunch of mercenaries get in a fight with a bunch of finance execs."

"...Except that you absolutely do care about the people caught in the crossfire." Sarah reminded him.

James took a deep breath, taking in the smells of pasta sauce and a freshly vacuumed apartment. "I do." He said with a huff. "But I'm not mentally fortified to handle it all the time. So, you all get pasta."

Alanna rolled out of her chair, moving to stand behind James and envelope him in as much of a hug as she could with the couch in the way. “Sorry.” She muttered into his hair. “Didn’t mean to fuck up your night.”

“I get it though!” James told her, reaching up a hand to ruffle her hair. “I’d probably be more pissed if it’d been you, not me, you know? So I get it. But also, we’re gonna have a planning meeting tomorrow when there’s a little more time to process the intel, and then make an informed decision on how to proceed. In the meantime, I don’t feel like I’m unsafe here, so... yeah.”

“We have so many planning meetings.” Sarah gave a dramatic swoon. “I miss the days of being an emotionally agile group of misfits!”

“Sarah, I dunno how to tell you this, but we’re still way more flexible and adaptable than basically any organization of our size.” James gave an equally dramatic sigh. “I dread being in charge of the world. I’m barely mentally capable of going back to my old job now that we own the building. I can’t imagine actually having a brain capable of doing a government.”

Alanna perked up. “That reminds me, are we doing an ohm run this week?”

“Ohm?”

“Oh-em. Officium Mundi.” Alanna explained. “I mean... if the building makes you uncomfortable...”

James backtracked instantly, while Anesh and Sarah gave each other a knowing look at the expression on his face. “Oh! It’s not that bad! I’m being a ham, and I’m not giving up my dungeon time! Even in the middle of an ongoing large scale operation or whatever we’re calling this spy nonsense. Dungeons are how I relax.”

With a slow blink, Sarah opened her mouth and looked at the others for support. Anesh just shook his head, resigned to this, while Alanna gave her a grin that was only barely sheepish because she, too, relaxed in the dungeons. “James.” Sarah said slowly. “You can’t just use the dungeons as vacations. They’re awesome, but... man, I was gonna try to distract you from everything serious talking about how we should be seriously thinking about ‘builds’ for our magic, and you’re really ruining my clever plan by being weird.

“First of all, I’m not weird. Plenty of people find the dungeons refreshingly direct. Look at Alanna.” James pointed up at his girlfriend. “Also, while you’re looking at Alanna, I was going to try to distract myself by drawing attention to how you still need to talk-“

“Nope!” Alanna leaned down on James’ shoulders, the pressure actually somewhat uncomfortable as her mass ground the rough material of his shirt into his skin. She cut him off

without actually knowing what he was going to bring up, but judging by how Sarah had turned bright red, Alanna was sort of regretting it. Still, this was more important. “We’re gonna talk about how you need a non-magical hobby!”

“I *have* a non magical hobby!” James protested.

“Yeah, I’m with him here.” Anesh said, levering the last thin piece of garlic bread he had at James. “I mean, first off, we’re all messed up anyway. But James does cook, which is mundane.”

With a wince, James bit his lip and made a long ‘Eh’ sound. “To be fair...” he admitted, “I did use my Horizon spell when chopping garlic. And a lot of my cooking knowledge is magic. And also every time I make paella it’s with magically spawned saffron. And...”

“James I love you, why do you do this to me?” An Anesh asked while the other one just crammed the last of the garlic bread into his mouth and buried his head in his hands.

“Being difficult is fun when it’s not serious.” James answered, and instantly regretted it as Auberdeen took his words to her canine heart and started trying to weasel her white furred nose up under his arm and onto his plate where the meal he’d been only half focusing on still sat, complete with a surviving meatball. “Also, I play basketball! I fence!” He protested as he tried to wrestle Auberdeen away.

“You magically become a better shot by improving at basketball, that doesn’t count.” Sarah reminded him. “And... something about fencing... that makes you wrong.”

“Maybe he has a magic sword?” Alanna suggested.

“I bet he cheats somehow.” Anesh said in unison with himself and a sagely nod. He was one of the handful of people James actually spent time learning practical swordfighting with, so he took his opportunity for a small amount of revenge for every dumb tactic James had pulled in their time together.

James rolled his eyes. “I mean, probably. But also being real, we don’t have a lot of time for that. I could, I dunno... take up drawing? I bet Maker’s Hand would totally work on that, and I’ve got a few skill ranks. Maybe I could make some cool dungeon landscape art.” He snapped his fingers. “Actually, I wonder if that would do anything with the new glove power I made the other day! That’d be cool to find out.”

With a long and drawn out groan, Sarah threw herself out of her seat and rolled across the floor, passing under the table to karate chop James in the ankles. “Noooooooooooo.” She chastised him. “Something with *less magic* so you can *relaxxxxxx*.”

“Sarah, literally nothing in our lives is ever going to be separate from magic again.” James said softly, pulling his legs back up to avoid her, and losing his grip on Aberdeen as he did so, shortly after losing his last meatball. He gave an amused huff as she absconded with the morsel, spaghetti noodles trailing behind as she snapped it up and shuffled back at high speed. “Everything I’m interested in, I’ve always been interested in, but now I can do it better, splashier, and with more weirdness. This is...” his voice threatened to catch in his throat. “This is literally all I ever wanted. I can pick anything that interests me, and just dive in. This is the *dream of humanity*. Our civilization is built by people standing on the shoulders of giants, and now we can fucking teleport up there and skip the climb. I’m just not interested in pretending that there’s some kind of emotional trade off in doing it the old way.” He trailed off, not sure if he was making his point properly.

After a minute, an Anesh that had been taking a pile of dishes to the kitchen walked by and draped himself over the arm of the couch next to James, staring up at him and Alanna. “You’ve been saving that up for a while, huh?”

“Yup.” James smiled at his boyfriend.

“I guess I understand.” Sarah couldn’t keep a smile off her face as the two of them made doe eyes at each other. “Which means-“

“Which *means*,” Alanna cut her off excitedly, “that we should talk about *builds*!”

James grinned and settled back as Anesh wiggled into his lap while Alanna grabbed the last couple plates on the table, excluding the bowl of grapes they were all still picking at, and took them away. “Okay, sure.” He said, stretching out and letting his hands playfully rub Alanna’s arms overhead until the angle made him flop back down again. “We’ll allow this.”

“We?” Sarah exclaimed. “Okay, yes, we. I’m interested too. We have *so much magic now*, it’s kind of hilarious.” She couldn’t keep the grin off her own face.

With a snap of her fingers, Alanna nodded. “Exactly!” She said. “We’ve got skill ranks, species ranks, office items, status quo items, shell upgrades, infomorphs, different infomorphs, *different infomorphs*, sewer lessons, horizon spells, mountain spells, blue orb spells, orange orb repeatable jobs, *making our own blue items*, new weird magic from Utah that no one has explained to me yet, horizon... car... things...”

“Potions, too.” Anesh added.

“Magic coffee.” James contributed. “Which is like a potion, so I’ll shut up.” He said as Anesh reached up to swipe a finger across his nose with a laugh.

“Relationsticks? You forgot the important one?” Sarah put a hand covered in tattooed circles to her chest with mock horror. “Alanna, I thought we were friends!”



“/ thought you were-“ James didn’t get a chance to finish his teasing sentence before Alanna rolled over him.

His girlfriend was pacing now, using the slightly less limited space that their apartment, continually enhanced by green orbs, had between their living room and the porch. “The thing is, we’ve got all this stuff, but we don’t really make it coherent!” She said, her hands folding and unfolding as she moved and spoke like she was giving a college lecture. “We can even control for a lot of variables that we couldn’t before. We already copy purple orbs to outfit people for Response or whatever weird spy agency JP is trying to build. We’ve got the Climb spells too, which we already know about and can reuse. And magic items we can *sort of* recreate on demand now if we have the blues. So, why aren’t we being more proactive about making streamlined paths to power that we can hand to people who need them for their specific jobs?”

“Okay, do you want the good answer, or the bad answer?” James asked.

“Bad answer, obviously. I want to feel smug for a little bit.” Alanna said.

“It’s kind of a lot of work.” James said. “We’d basically need to have part of our admin team working full time to keep track of things, and while we could do that, I don’t think we have what it we need *right now* to really make it shine.”

“What’s the good reason? Can I jump in and ask?” Sarah asked anyway.

James nodded at her. “Yes, I’m taking control of this TED talk.” He said stoically. “The good reason is... okay, you know how Nik switched from Research to Response? Or how Alex is working in the hospital now? That kind of thing. That’s why. There’s a sort of holistic chaos to how we organize ourselves right now, where someone getting a new skill orb or power can make them suddenly suited to something they find a lot more of a connection to than they had before. And I worry that stratifying how we hand out magic to non-delvers who don’t have direct access will make it... well, stratified, really. Where people would get stuck in jobs they didn’t want, just while they’re *better at them*.”

Alanna nodded and folded her arms blowing a strand of her hair out of her face as she gave a grudging nod to James. “That’s a good point. But also, nothing says that we can’t still have that, while also having better designed kits for specialist roles.”

“Fair.” James admitted in turn.

“My point is... why don’t we do that?” Alanna asked. “Like, why don’t we actually try to *optimize* for a second, and stop bouncing around whatever random magic is disrupting our lives this week?”

“...Because...” Sarah raised her hand tentatively. “Because it keeps disrupting our lives?” She asked.

“Okay, so, being fair to my lovely partner, we *do* have the armory packages.” James said. “This is just, what, an upgrade to that?”

“Exactly!” Alanna grinned. “Like, what can we put together to give a small team the best shot at any new dungeon? Just as an example.”

“Okay.” James nodded. “I’m into this. So, are we being hypothetical here, or realistic?”

Anesh gave him a questioning glance. “What’s the difference?” His boyfriend asked.

“We don’t have unlimited resources, and the copier is best spent on curing cancer.” James said. “It’s kind of... I mean, it’s a little overwhelming. Fixing cancer isn’t literally the maximum utility we can get, but it’s hard to argue for anything else most of the time.”

“Okay, realistic.” Alanna said. “Like, using minimal resources, maybe... maybe *one* copy. What can we get?”

Sarah chimed in. “Well, the easy thing we should focus on are things that we can’t or don’t need to copy, right? Relationsticks, and mountain magic.”

“Wait, can you not copy the sticks?” James asked.

“You *can*, but you don’t need to, and copied sticks don’t actually have any special properties. Like, they don’t repeat anything, or work the same as their copies. Does that make sense? Did I just muck up that explanation?” Sarah scrunched up her face, then shook her head rapidly. “Copied sticks no!” She declared. “There!”

“So, if we’re thinking of a three person team, let’s say.” Alanna bravely rolled on, trying to keep the contagious laughter Anesh was currently dying of from overtaking her. “Relationsticks are easy, but unpredictable. What division of mountain spells then?”

“I mean, some of the mountain spells are pure utility, and not actually... delver suited? Like mine!” He grinned as he mused on his ability to break physics by making a one way temperature connection between two points. “But if you wanna look at this as a delver team, you could just go tank-DPS-healer, and say Mountain of the Self, Fractal Avalanche, Iced Veins, right? Invulnerability, a charge attack, and a quick blood recovery spell, that’s basically every RPG party’s perfect thing, right? And the investment is just carrying them up the Mountain to open up the first spell slot, we’ve already got the books.”

“That’s kinda boring though.” Sarah said, before waving Alanna off with a frantic flap of her arm out from under the table. “Yes, I *know* that boring works, don’t sass me! You are absolutely not allowed to sass me when you still haven’t picked a spell!”

“Wait, seriously?” James raised his eyebrows at his partner. “Even Anesh picked a spell. Though, granted, Anesh picked the math one.”

Alanna’s cheeks reddened slightly. “We keep finding more textbooks! We’ve got, what, two actual dedicated Climb teams? There’s a lot more selection now, and I wanna wait for one that’s perfect for me.”

“What *is* our list now?” Sarah asked, now just resigned to laying on the floor under the table. “I haven’t actually been to the mountain yet, because I’ve-“

“Been busy” Everyone else chorused at once. Even Auberdeen gave a double woof that mimicked the cadence of the well-loved words.

Sarah squeaked at them. “You’re all awful!” She lied. “Someone tell me about magic!”

James smiled and called up the list from the Order’s server through his skulljack link to their internet, stealing Chevoy’s idea wholesale. “So, we’ve got the four we said so far. And then there’s one that steals heat from around you into a target object, one that makes a snow beast, one that makes a temporary limb out of ice, one that makes it so you can’t fall over, and one that removes friction temporarily. Oh, also, there’s a note that the more damaged a book is, the lower its duration, the higher the breath cost, and generally the worse it is.” He paused. “Did I just say ‘snow beast’?”

“You did.”

“I want that one!” Alanna declared. “I changed my mind, that sounds metal as fuck.”

“It’s the size of a cat and if you don’t supply the snow, it doesn’t last long.”

“I changed my mind!” Alanna counter-declared.

James snorted. “Anyway. No one has tackled another fairy ring yet, because the dragons are actually terrifying, but it’s worth noting that we can maybe make a new book out of something else if we get there. And that one would be at ‘full strength’.”

“We should try to put a Horizon spell into it, just to see what it does.” Anesh suggested. “Get Dorothy up there, and have her feed it the spell she has that lets her telekinesis a ball of petrol. Let the Climb figure that wankery out.”

“Or, or!” Sarah pressed her fingertips together, popping up over the edge of the table. “Give it a relationship? Would that work?”

“Who even knows anymore?” Alanna sighed. “I feel like we got really off topic here.”

“I mean, what are we supposed to even theorycraft here?” James asked. “Like, do you want me to say that we can rapidly empower people with Sewer books by making .mem files and having a copy run for the same book over and over? On a practical level, anyone who takes it would *never* be able to advance past the first rank or two, because they’d be sharing the lesson with a hundred other people, but if they all take the same .mem we could rapidly give anyone we wanted a couple ranks in a stat. Is that, I dunno, *worth it?*” He shrugged. “Or we could talk about potions! Oh! Let’s talk about potions! You know how the Stacks orbs work, right?”

“I don’t?” Alanna said, and Auberdeen agreed with a questioning bark. “We don’t.” Alanna pointed at the dog. “Sorry, kinda out of the loop. I’ve been-“

“Busy.” Everyone said, and she rolled her eyes at them.

“Uh, as far as Reed and I have tested, they’re a 30% boost to learning per rank.” James told them. “Or, okay, well, I say ‘learning’ because I’m applying my own cultural bias of what a library is supposed to be. They’re more like a 30% boost to... uh... an abstract blob of things that include learning? Look, you know how the potion that fixes skin takes a goat heart, right?”

“...I absolutely did not know that.” Anesh cleared his throat. One of him had left the room at this point, probably to go get some sleep. He’d been awake for a while, and this him was getting kind of sleepy himself. He was a little jealous of his other him, who got to fall asleep to the comforting sounds of James being confusing from the living room. “Why does it do that?”

“Don’t ask questions about the alchemy.” Sarah dragged herself up to rejoin the conversation, planting her arms on the edge of the table and plopping her head down so she could stare at Anesh with pursed lips. “They don’t make sense.”

“The point is, the goat heart is a part of it, and when someone who had a species rank in the relevant kind of goat made it, it *lasted longer*.” James finished his thought, desperate to not get sidetracked too far. “I would guess, and Research has theorized, which is like guessing but professional, that it lasted longer equal to 30% of whatever percentage of the brew the goat heart represents.” James looked around, and realized that Alanna and Sarah were quietly talking about feeding different dungeon abilities to mountain spells, and he’d lost the train of the conversation. “Anesh, you care about the goat, right?” He murmured to the boyfriend laying on the couch with his head in his lap.

“No, but I’m comfortable here.” Anesh said. “But actually, that’s kind of interesting. We should figure out if we can get enhancements for any other brews. Are there species ranks for plants?”

“Not so far?” James questioned. Then he just checked the Research database, remembering that he was a transhuman entity that had the internet in his brain. “No.” He amended. “There are not.”

Anesh clicked his tongue. “You know, all this sidetracking aside, Alanna does have a point. We could stand to have easily accessible power sets, for anyone who wants to get into a certain role. The problem is, so many of the choices are permanent. You can’t swap out spells, or undo an orange absorbing. If someone takes the powers to be a perfect truck driver, and then decides they *hate it*, we can give them a different job, but their magic will always be truck-focused. That’s... I mean, this is just a gut feeling from me, but *you* can probably tell me why that’s bad?” He looked up at James with worried eyes.

James paused in idly stroking his boyfriend’s head, and gave a wince. “Yeah, pretty much.” He said. “This is basically just replicating some of the worst problems of a cyberpunk world. There’s also the question of making certain powers a *requirement* once they’re available, even if that locks out choices to the individual. I don’t... I mean, I get where Alanna’s coming from. I do.” He and Anesh both looked over to where Alanna and Sarah had thrown up their arms at the same time and yelled the word ‘friendship’ with complete enthusiasm and beaming smiles. “And I don’t think she’s thinking of building a dystopia. Hell, if we build society the way I want it, this’ll never be a problem. But we *need* to be aware of the problem before it becomes a problem. One of the perks of keeping the magic mostly random and hectic is... well, we can’t abuse it. And if we can’t abuse it, we can’t abuse each other.”

“Oh, that’s not true at all.” Anesh gave a sad shake of his head. “But I get what you mean.” He stifled a yawn, holding the back of a hand to his mouth. “I feel like this is something we’re going to make sure we have absolutely locked down before we start inviting people to our magical city state.” He added, and got a frantic agreeing nod from James.

They sat like that for a bit, both of them relaxing in the warm apartment while Sarah and Alanna remembered how to not be slightly awkward around each other and, as far as James could tell, excitedly blurted random words at each other while Ganesh and Auberdeen acted as some kind of judges.

“I feel like I missed something here.” James told Anesh. “What are they doing?”

“Thinking of things to make mountain spellbooks out of.”

“Ah.”

“You know, if we’re talking synergies,” Anesh gave James an innocent smile as his boyfriend made an exasperated sigh, “you mentioned Arrush’s idea for using the reading potion before using a Sewer lesson. Did that work?”

“Hasn’t come up yet. No new Sewer delves in a while, it’s kept the door hidden or shut.” James said. “But I’m gonna try it if I can. I *think* I can handle a third lesson. I’m basically at the point where I’ll only get a rank from biology or basketball every decade now, so making it worse isn’t actually something I have the time frame to contextualize as ‘bad’.”

“Hm. We’ll need someone without one to test it too, for reference.” Anesh mused. “Anyway. Why not also try that with the mountain spells? Alanna still needs one, and we can try it with her.”

“I’m sure she’ll agree to that.” James agreed easily. “Also... do we maybe want to try tackling Winter’s Climb again in the next week or so? Assuming nothing goes horribly wrong in the next few days. I *think* we’re good enough now that we could make it up a lot farther, if we play it safe and use what the advance teams have learned, you know? And I want to go high enough that we get more spell slots.”

“I like that plan.” James leaned down to spontaneously try to kiss Anesh, with his boyfriend having to rise up to meet him. “I like you, too, in case that wasn’t clear.” He said.

“Oh good, otherwise this would be weird.” Anesh smirked. “Also, I’m kinda getting tired. I think I might go to bed. Thanks for dinner, by the way, if I didn’t say it. That was great.” He said.

“Aaw!” Alanna’s attention on them brought their attention to where she was standing at the other arm of the couch. “I was gonna ask if anyone wanted to go on a walk! I’m tired too, and I want coffee!”

“It’s 7 PM?” Anesh said. Then remembered who he was talking to. “Nevermind.”

“I’m more concerned with it being freezing outside.” James said.

“Don’t you not get cold?” Sarah asked him with a suspicious look. “I swear I’ve seen your character sheet, and you don’t get cold.”

“No, *Alanna* doesn’t get cold. I don’t get hot.” James corrected her.

“Bah. You’re plenty hot to me.” Alanna declared.

“Oh my god.” James started shuffling himself down under the table, throwing Anesh off as he tried to escape.

“Wow that’s adorable.” Sarah grinned at them. “Anyway, I’m out for walking. I need to head over to Clutter to check on a raincloud, and then I’m going to one of the new species adaptation meetings as the token human who can answer context questions.”

“Say hi to Banana for me.” Alanna told her. “James? Walk?” Then she pivoted her gaze slightly. “Auberdeen? Waaaaaalk?”

The dog woofed enthusiastically, and James, feeling the growing peer pressure of almost half the people in the room, relented. “Alright, alright. Let me go find the dress shirt I got from Officium Mundi that stills wind around it so I at least won’t completely freeze to death.”

“I *knew* you had a thing to not get cold!” Sarah exclaimed.

They milled around for a bit, which was a weird way of saying they lingered in their own apartment sharing company, while James got dressed and Alanna and Auberdeen got in a staring contest over whether or not a leash was necessary. Anesh gave Ganesh some attention, though the little drone declined the invitation to come with them. He’d more or less retired from dungeon activities at this point, which Anesh was fine with. His small friend never seemed to be as excited about it as the others, possibly because he’d grown up in the Office before anyone really put thought into how they could make the lives of their dungeon life friends better as opposed to just treating them as convenient allies.

Sarah threw the door open at one point when there was a scratching at it, letting a wash of cold air come in and give half the people in the room shivers as she knelt down to give a series of pets and accolades to the dog that had magically shown up on their door. She invited the German Shepard puppy into the apartment if they wanted to warm up and maybe have a meatball before leaving, and the dog cautiously accepted, even though unlike Auberdeen they probably didn’t actually understand the words themselves. Auberdeen assents to this foreign dog with grace and poise, which devolves into unfortunate sniffs and an attempted dive tackle from the puppy fairly shortly.

By the time James comes back, the new good dog is fed and on his way. They still haven’t found out if the dogs come from nowhere, or somewhere, or where they go to afterward, but they’re always happy to be around, and so far only Auberdeen has actually stayed with them for very long. She didn’t seem inclined to leave though, and James was fine with that.

“Alright.” James and Alanna gave Anesh a shared kiss goodnight before he opened the door again. “Sarah, I’ll see ya later. Anesh, sleep well. Let’s go freeze to death for a mocha.” He bravely strode out into the night, Alanna and Auberdeen following him with a smile and the dog equivalent of a smile on their faces.

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James had a thick coat that he was still getting used to, a pair of perfectly normal but impressively warm gloves he’d stolen from the Climbing gear, and might actually have had some magic power that kept him warm that he’d forgotten about.

He was still cold.

He took a minute, as Auberdeen rampaged through the frozen grass that surrounded the walking path he and Alanna were on, to be envious of the white furred beast. For one thing, she didn't seem to be cold at all, and right now, that felt like enough of a superpower to him. But also, he coveted just how easily Auberdeen switched off the part of herself that understood three languages and was a trained aircraft pilot, and just... became a dog. How quickly she just let go of everything serious, to run around and play in some grass.

It was a feeling that James remembered, in the abstract. He must have felt that way as a kid, right? But then he remembered how he'd gotten in trouble multiple times *while in kindergarten*, for not wanting to do the gym exercises the teacher told them to, because he was afraid of looking silly.

Maybe he'd always been an awkward mess. "Hey, Alanna?" He asked his girlfriend, who was also not wearing a coat and also didn't seem cold, and who he was equally jealous of.

"Sup?" She said, turning away from watching Auberdeen try to decide if she could hop the drainage trench with a glowing smile on her face.

"Am I an awkward mess?" He asked her.

"Yup." Alanna gave him a sagely nod. "You kinda always have been, honestly."

"*I knew it!*" James huffed to himself.

Alanna gave an airy chuckle. "Weirdly, it kinda all goes out the window whenever your life is in danger. You're really good at giving dramatic speeches when someone's trying to shoot you."

"Oh fuck off." James gave a snort of a laugh and leaned over to bump shoulders with her.

"I'm serious!" Alanna said, still in a cheerful mood. "It's like the threat of death turns off the part of you that's worried all the time, and then it's just *bam!* Professional speechwriter stuff!"

James felt his neck and cheeks heating up despite the freezing air. "Oh my god stop." He muttered ineffectively. "I'm never gonna talk again." He grumbled.

Alanna just laughed, and they kept walking for a bit as Auberdeen crashed through the underbrush and rejoined them with a regal bearing like she hadn't just been frolicking in the frozen foliage.

It wasn't long before one of them spoke again, though. Not that they couldn't exist in silence, but both Alanna and James were just more at home constantly sharpening their thoughts with words. "So, I've been thinking." Alanna started, and James gave a hum but didn't interrupt her. "Those people up in Alaska. Priority Earth, or whatever."



“Classic ecoterrorists, yeah.” James agreed with a nod. “Except for the magic, and the targeted assassinations. I *think*? I feel like most ecoterrorists don’t go for assassinations.”

“Right, that’s sorta what I wanted to ask about.” Alanna said. “So, obviously car bombs are bad. I wanna start there, before I say something stupid.”

“I assumed we were on the same page there.” James told her.

Alanna gave a rapid and floppy nod. “Right!” She said, before continuing. “But what if, and *go with me* on this journey, they aren’t *totally wrong*?”

“Is this gonna be about using violence to achieve change?” James asked. “Because I don’t wanna do that.”

“We’ve done it before.” Alanna pointed out. “Smaller scale, yeah, but... we didn’t just let the status quo stick around, and I mean that as a double entendre. I don’t think we should pretend that violence doesn’t fix some problems.”

James winced, and made an uncomfortable ‘ehhhh’ noise in his throat. “Okay, so, I get what you’re saying.” He said. “But I’ve had this conversation a lot, since we got the ability to teleport anywhere, and I feel like I really need to highlight the fact that a lot of our fights have been defensive in nature. I want to make a distinction, at least for this little chat, between ‘violence’ and ‘self defense’.”

“I’m cool with that.” Alanna says. “It doesn’t actually derail my point, anyway. Which is that I think maybe blowing up certain infrastructure targets owned by certain industries or governments *is* self defense, in a way. The oil industry is strangling the planet to death, trying to hold on to relevance. At what point does their suppression of information and technologies become a literal attack that needs to be stopped, you know?”

“Oof. I’m the wrong person to ask about that, because a big part of me wants to say ‘immediately’, and then start making plans to go break shit.” James admitted. “And I have this feeling like breaking shit just isn’t a good way to build a healthy utopia.”

“But that’s the thing,” Alanna said, almost sadly, “breaking shit works sometimes. Why is that feeling wrong, just because it’s slightly destructive?”

“Okay, you say ‘slightly’, but I am *pretty sure* you’re talking about something like annihilation of large scale infrastructure and logistics networks?” James pointed out. “Also, for the oil thing at least, it’s because at this point, civilization actually relies on it. Oh, don’t get me wrong, it *must* be replaced, or we’re all doomed. But if we start with the breaking and not the replacing, then we’re going to kill a lot of people.”

Alanna shrugged. "I feel like we've got the magic to do it bloodlessly?"

"We could certainly try!" James nodded as they came to a wooden footbridge, the sound of Auberdeen's claws on the wood making clicks that blended with the sound of water flowing below them. "But even if we're trying to not kill anyone, that doesn't mean they won't score kills on us, or that something won't go wrong, or, and this is kind of the important part, that there would be a staggering amount of collateral damage." James took a deep breath. "I wanna repeat that thing about how this makes me *very angry*, because we've inherited a system that sucks. To quote a fun Offspring song, 'shit is fucked up'. But if we shut down the production and use of oil, we are condemning millions of people to starve to death. There are huge parts of the world where trucks or cargo ships are just how food gets put where it needs to be. We could blow up every coal plant on the planet in an orgy of arcane violence, and vastly improve the stability of the environment, and also kill pretty much anyone who relies on modern medical technology or 'the existence of interior heating' to survive."

"Actions have consequences." Alanna summed up as he took a pause. "I get it. But that's all big scale stuff. What *about* smaller things? Why aren't we shutting down disinformation campaigns by breaking a few keyboards, or yoinking people out of prison for their weed-crimes?"

"I mean, we should do those things, sure." James agreed, after a brief pause while they walked past a couple out for a chilly night time stroll. Neither of them really wanted to talk about what amounted to domestic terrorism *that* openly. "Oh, actually, I kind of wanted to talk about something like this. Remember Frank?"

Alanna shot a look his way. "Frank, old guy Frank? Murderer Frank? Frank who tried to feed Daniel to the dungeon Frank? That Frank? The Frank that tried to shoot you?"

"Yes, that Frank." James nodded. "Thank you. So, I'm kind of feeling bad for putting him in prison?"

"Okay, two things." Alanna held up a hand. "One, the police put him there, we barely had to do anything. He legitimately had all the evidence against himself already, we just... made it slightly visible." She kept going before James could debat that point, but he wasn't planning to say anything anyway; she was *right* after all. "Second thing? Fuck Frank."

"I mean, sure, but..."

"No." Alanna stopped, James getting a few steps up the slight hill they were on before realizing she was standing still, arms crossed, behind him. She looked up at his face as he turned to look at her, seeing him framed by the streetlights ahead of them in the cold air. "No, James." Alanna said, voice firm. This one, *this thing*, she knew for certain. "I know what you're gonna say. You want to break Frank out, and run him through the same kind of restorative justice thing

we're doing with the Horizonists and the Alchemists and that one sex cult leader guy that JP brought back last year. But I'm-

"The *what?!?*" James cut her off.

"-I'm telling you right now." Alanna ignored him. "You don't need to feel bad about *Frank*. Fuck Frank!" She unfolded one arm just enough to point at James, driving home what she was trying to say. "Frank wasn't just a murderer, or a capitalist, James. He fucking sold people into the worst kind of slavery possible, then he used the money to buy a bar sit on his ass being self-righteous all fucking day! Your idea of a perfect future had a whole different picture of justice, and I'm cool with it, but we're not *in* that world yet. We're in the world where there's people in jail for inconveniencing banks, or saying they'd like a government that doesn't imprison people at random, or just smoking the wrong plant! Hell, there's literal murderers who are more deserving of a place in your utopia than *that guy*. If you want to put Frank on the list of people we should help, that's cool, but if he's not at the very fucking bottom, I'm gonna be *really* pissed at you!"

While she was talking, Auberdeen had stopped between the two of them, and was moving her furry head back and forth, looking at the two humans who were having an ideological dispute. On the road just past where James was standing, a truck rumbled by. The wind picked up. The night got even colder, and while Alanna didn't notice, James jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Are you..." James ventured, "upset because he shot you?"

"My hand hurts all the time!" Alanna's abrupt answer wasn't devoid of humor, but it didn't do much to diffuse the tension. "And... and it's a bit harder to fix things when someone did permanent damage like that." She muttered, fingers clenching.

"Yeah." He said, eventually. "I know." He turned, and kept walking, and Alanna and Auberdeen rapidly caught up to him, his partner keeping some space from him just in case she'd actually made him mad. But that wasn't exactly what James was feeling. He was just... tired. "Tired and overwhelmed." He said out loud. "The emotional combination I get every time I try to think of fixing anything big." He looked over at Alanna. "I keep looking for... footholds, I guess? Places we can just *start* to crack in at things. And... ah, fuck it. I just wanted to find a place to start working our way through how shitty and ineffective our justice system is, and Frank's the guy I *know* we put in there."

"Sure." Alanna shrugged, moving closer to him as they stepped off the walking path and onto the normal sidewalk, black asphalt traded for white concrete, trees for lamp posts and too many cars nearby. "But you know we can just pick anyone and start there, right?" She paused. "Or, alternately, because we just flat out don't have the facilities for it now, we can keep working on *your* thing."

"My thing?" James raised his eyebrows, considering making a lewd joke.

“Your *city thing*, you dork.” Alanna laughed. “Don’t think I can’t sense a suggestive tone! But yeah. We’re not a hundred years away from it, we’re *getting there*. Don’t we have a whole apartment complex packed into a single basement room now? We’re fucking making progress!”

“I... yes?” James felt a swell of shared pride at how far they’d come, but he still had a question. “I don’t see how this relates.”

“It relates because we’re right there!” Alanna said excitedly. “You don’t need to stress about fixing the whole justice system right now, dude. You can wait just a little longer until we’ve got an established place to work in, on our terms, and *then* set up a thing for it.” Alanna smiled at him. “You remember roughly four hundred years ago when you told me about the dungeon, and you said you and Anesh were worried about how I’d react, because you weren’t using the power for good?”

“Vaguely. My old-man memory is pretty hazy.” James smiled back.

“Yeah, well. I told you that it was fine, because you were *going* to do good. The responsibility of power is to be used. That means, you actually have to be able to use it first.” Alanna wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him closer, effortlessly shifting James with her physique. “But also, fuck Frank.”

James burst out laughing. “Ahhh, man, and here I was thinking we’d spend this walk talking about how to deal with someone having a crush on you.”

“On me? No one has a crush on me.” Alanna said with absolute and wildly inaccurate conviction. Even Auberdeen didn’t believe her, the big dog giving Alanna a headbutt and a chastising deep woof, while James just tilted his head up and stared at her until she let him go and stepped back. “What?!” She challenged.

“Alanna, you... we literally spend time as the same person every few nights. You *know* that’s not true.” James told her softly. “Like, jokes aside, you do know that, right?”

Alanna flushed, and looked away. “I don’t like thinking about it.” She said.

“What? Why?” James asked. “Is it because it’s Sarah? I know... actually, I don’t know a lot about how you feel about a lot of stuff, despite us having shared brains. Is something wrong?” He pulled a hand out of his pocket and laid it on Alanna’s arm, then briefly considered using her as a heating pad when he realized how warm her skin was in the freezing air.

His girlfriend just shrugged. “I dunno.” She said. “It was easy, with you and Anesh, you know? Because... man, this is gonna make me sound like an asshole.”

“Because we’re both awkward messes, and you felt like you could be in control?” James asked with a smile. “Nah, doesn’t bother us.”

“*Right?*” Alanna demanded. “You’re so *chill!* Even when I got back from having amnesia in Florida, a fate worse than death, it was so *weird*. And I love it, and you, and it makes it easy to be with you both. But Sarah is, like... this chaotic ball of energy who seems constantly on top of everything? And it’s a little intimidating?” Alanna shrugged sheepishly. “Like, how do you tell someone that you feel like you aren’t enthusiastic enough for them?”

James tried to stop his mouth from hanging open. “Dude, you work for a magical emergency response unit, you sometimes do multiple dungeon delves a week, you’re constantly working out or helping around the Order, and you helped build those apartments in our basement. I don’t think you even know how to sit still. And you think *Sarah* is intimidating?” James asked her incredulously.

“She’s so cheerful!” Alanna burst out. “I’m not a happy person, man! What if she finds out I’m secretly an asshole about everything?!”

“First of all, that’s not true, stop being a dick to yourself.” James flicked at Alanna’s nose, and missed, because the person who could dodge bullets didn’t have a very hard time avoiding a low speed finger. “But also, I dunno, maybe you should talk to *her* about this.” He sighed. “We’ve already talked about our own relationship, so you know it’s cool. Also...” He was about to say that maybe Sarah wasn’t as put-together as Alanna seemed to think she was, and that maybe his friend could really use some emotional support from the people she cared about. But then he paused, and figured he’d ask Sarah before sharing that little bit of information. “Also just go for it, you know? Anesh and I love you partly *because* you come across as an emotional bulldozer sometimes. Just do that, but again.”

Alanna grumbled wordlessly for a minute. “Bah.” She eventually said. “I wanna go back to talking about prisons. Or, I dunno, *your* crush. Can we do that? Can I eject from this line of interrogation?”

James stifled a laugh. “Sure thing.” He said as the cafe they were headed for came into view, the two of them crossing the asphalt desert that was a parking lot to cut across to its front door. “Though honestly, I was gonna ask you advice under the pretense that you knew how to handle someone being infatuated with you, and *now* I’m not so sure.” He joked. “Also, do we wanna get drinks before... we... keep...”

He trailed off as they approached the outside of the cafe.

It was freezing outside, so naturally, most of the wrought iron tables and chairs that sat on the concrete patio around the building were unoccupied. Most, but not all. One of the tables, the one that James actually quite liked to share with his partners, that was right between the sidewalk and the front door, was occupied. A single figure leaned back in the metal chair that

must be absolutely freezing, illuminated by the lights coming through the cafe's big glass windows behind them. They had a half eaten pastry sitting on the table in front of them, next to a brazenly displayed handgun, but weren't really focused on anything except watching the approach to the cafe. The black turtleneck covered most of their arms and neck, but James could see multiple bits of tattoos on their skin poking up from around the edges of the fabric.

"James." Alanna said sharply, her body tensing up as she realized who was waiting for them at the same time he was.

"Paladin." The person sitting between them and their destination greeted him.

"...Harlan." James said flatly, feeling the adrenaline in his system start to spike. Feeling a half dozen different rushes of energy as he let go of the familiar mental restraints he had on many of his purple orbs. Feeling a sudden and terrifying realization that something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Something aggressive tugged at James' chest. Something hostile and a little alien to him.

He and Alanna moved in tandem, while behind them a dog started howling, and everything went to hell in a real hurry.