

*“Alas poor Yorik, it’s clobberin’ time.” -Ben Ulmer-*

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A thumbtack entered a pin board, bringing with it the sheet of paper that had just been moved. A moment later, a loop of green yarn around the tack was pulled taut as it was once again connected to another point on the board. “Like *this!*” Sarah’s voice cut through the hum of a powerful air conditioning unit and the rustle of a half dozen people working on their own stuff in the back room of the Order’s home base. “See? It makes perfect sense.” She shot a beaming grin of self satisfaction to the woman she was working with.

Karen, almost two decades her elder, and certainly two decades grumpier on the average day of work here, folded her arms and frowned. “This does not make sense at all.” She told Sarah, tilting her head slightly to look at the broader picture of their board. “It leaves this team without a dedicated defender.” She tapped a separate confluence of pages with a single precise jot of a red painted fingernail.

“It’s better this way, though.” Sarah insisted.

“Explain to me *why*.” Karen asked. Her time with the Order had changed Karen quite a lot. While it had failed to ease the blunt way she approached conversations, and had probably only made her workaholic nature worse, it had given her an appreciation for the way some of the people she now worked with were almost hyper competent in their fields. And she absolutely was not the kind of fool to pass up the chance to learn from the best.

Sarah nodded, and pointed to the page she’d moved. It was a printout of a simple Order dossier, a picture, some personal info, and a quick overview of abilities and specializations. This one was for a guy named Matt who had joined as part of the Response program a while back, and had been moved to delving after he hadn’t done well there.

“Okay, so.” Sarah started. She took a deep, *deep* breath. “Putting Matt on team six means he’d mostly be in Route Horizon. But he won’t *like* that. He’ll get a bad case of co-pilot syndrome real fast. Also, the whole point of this is to put him with people who will challenge his worldview in a way that will be constructive for him. But team six has two Horizonists in it, and Matt’s *very* Lutheran, in a way that makes that a terrible idea. So we put him *here*.” Sarah tapped the other cluster she’d been trying to put together. “Reform a team around Simon, because Simon *needs to not be alone*, no matter what he keeps saying in his stupid self-deprecating vaguely-necromantic way about having plenty of company from a ghost. Post them in Officium Mundi, probably use them as the first long term outpost team, because Simon and Matt are both the kind of people who thrive when you give them light instructions and high stakes situations. Also Matt actually enjoys fighting, so putting him in Officium Mundi works, even if we do make friends with things half the time. To *them*, we add one of the potions who are interested in seeing what we do, so they all push each other’s boundaries, and then Magneto, who needs more walks anyway.” She didn’t have a printout for the mongausse, the dog-shaped creature made of a magnetic field, so Sarah just wrote it in pen under Simon’s

page. "He loves Simon anyway. It'll be perfect. And they'll be a *good* reaction team to build that trust on in case we ever need someone for a quick reaction to the Akashic Sewer breaching, or any other dungeon murder-wave. Oh! And then team six! To *them*, we move Momo, and then don't tell her until later, because she'll love the place and it'll get her some *sun* finally. And they don't need a guardian because they'll mostly be doing car stuff. Besides, we can just give them orbs or dot-mems or something to give them a grounded understanding of evasion and survival tactics. Kirk and Amy already have a relationstick connection, and I *bet* Momo could form one with at least one of them. We can put Sunrise-In-Clouds on there too, because camracondas would do *great* when it's a shared vehicle balancing out motion, and Momo's relationsticked to him anyway already, and mixed species teams are a good habit for the Order to get into early so no one questions it later. And then if we get them the Attic book, they can do the avatar thing in an emergency! Plus Amy is curious about the other species, and since she's actually only part time with us, I kinda want to lure her in more." She took a deep breath, and smiled at Karen, tilting her head up slightly to look at her fellow planning committee member. "See?"

Karen stared at the simple sheets of paper pinned to their board, and the new web Sarah had woven. She clamped her eyes shut, and opened them, wondering if the words would have changed during her long blink, but it was all the same. "The *vast* majority of the words you just said have nothing to do with what is written on the dossiers we are using." Karen said slowly and deliberately.

"Uh..." Sarah looked back at their planning board. "Yes." She nodded once. "You're right. Wow, huh! We should really flesh these out a bit."

"With everyone's deeper personal emotions, so that anyone could reference your inner desires or shames as is convenient for team planning?" Karen asked. "And also your long term intentions for developing adversity-tested trust?"

Sarah held up a finger and opened her mouth, before pursing her lips and tapping the finger against her closed mouth. "Hm... She uttered. "Okay. Ooooookay, I see why... that might not be... great." She admitted. "But, isn't that what we're doing now? I mean, we're trying to organize the best teams we can, right?"

"I wonder." Karen said. "If perhaps, we have different ideas of what 'best' might mean."

"I mean, I'm trying to get everyone to be their best." Sarah said. "What are *you* going for?"

Karen clicked the pen in her hand a few times, her one concession to idle motion. "I was more interested in building teams that will be effective *now*." She said. "Though I see the value of what you're doing, don't misunderstand. But both team six, and your hypothetical team... nine... would need weeks or months to fully grow into working together well. Whereas the setup I suggested would be competent now."

“Are we in a rush?” Sarah asked, raising her eyebrows. “We’ve got more magic than we know what to do with! Everyone’s already so busy, I can’t even find time to schedule everyone for avatar practice!”

“Yes, actually, let’s back up to that. You’ve said that word twice now.” Karen frowned suspiciously. “Is this going to be something else that will get in the way of streamlining how we operate?”

With an energetic series of nods that sent her ponytail splaying around her face, Sarah smiled back. “Oh, absolutely, yes.” She said. “So, the Clutter Ascent book, the one that’s full of stars, you heard about that?”

“My daughter told me something about it in passing. It... makes the links stronger?” Karen prompted.

Sarah shrugged. “It makes them longer. It lets you bridge different people you’re connected to, and move anything that’s part of the... network? I guess it’s a network, yeah. We need better words for this, this is really more James’ department than mine. But it also lets you use whatever transmission requirement is easiest. So as long as someone has ‘just nearby enough’,” She made quote marks with her hands in the air, “then you can send a lot of different perks to a single person.”

“At the cost of the others.”

“Well yeah, it’s a zero-sum transfer.” Sarah agreed. “And people can take stuff back without warning. So it needs trust, and coordination, which... uh...” She waved her arms around wildly.

Karen almost laughed, but opted for a brief huff of air through her nose instead. “Yes, all of this, I am aware.” She said. “Would you like Planner or me to help you schedule your practice?” She offered politely.

“Well, uh...” Sarah looked away sheepishly. “I may have... a few dozen people to schedule.” She said, holding her hands behind her back. “So, yes? Please?” She grinned a pearly smile at Karen, eyes dancing with barely hidden amusement.

With a deep sigh, Karen pulled out her phone and entered a note into her to-do list. She would get to work on this later, but she *had* promised to help already. Regret was for people who didn’t actually mean what they said. “Well.” She said, turning back to the board. “We have eight people left to assign. I would put Alex on team one, but I look forward to learning why I am wrong.” She held out the page to Sarah.

The younger woman’s face lit up as the wheels in her brain started to turn.

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“Here.” Nate tossed a USB stick onto the condemned ruin that passed for JP’s desk. “Brought you a new toy, fresh from somewhere with less thunderstorms going on.”

“I think there’s a special name for it when there’s no rain.” JP answered without looking up right away. When he did, he moved with a kind of casual air that made it hard to remember he was running the ongoing cleanup effort of a city that had undergone a mass casualty event within the last year. A casual air, and a flick of hair that was somehow still elegantly disheveled in a very calculated way. “What’s this?”

“Memory file.” Nate answered, turning his bald head slightly and tapping the fairly recent skulljack port on the back of his neck. “Homebrewed, authentic ability. All yours. And whoever you think you should give it to.”

“What for?” JP raised his eyebrows as he picked up the USB. “Wait, you made this?”

“Yup.” Nate said simply. “And it’s mostly marksmanship drills. Every bit of it I could dredge up.” He sped up speaking as JP plugged the USB into his laptop and started looking for a connector cable for his own skulljack. “Momo, who I vaguely trust on this, ordered me to tell you that it’s ‘safe enough’, but that you should only run it with an infomorph on standby.”

JP froze with a short length of Ethernet cable in his hand. “...Why?” He asked in a suspicious drawl.

“Something about residual emotional contamination that I didn’t fully get. We’re calling this an *early attempt*, until I can make a better one. Turns out, James’ magical no-miss juice doesn’t work on these things, and I’m a better shot than all of you. So only use it in emergencies. Anyway, how’s the week been here?”

“James is influencing you too much.” JP sighed. “You’re supposed to be the professional. Also, it’s going alright. We’re *actually* off the eastern power grid now, which took a lot of favors and bribes to make happen, but hopefully it’ll cut down on the fires. I’m not looking forward to this heat wave though. Without an actual fire department, and with no one here being a sea witch, we’re basically just waiting for something important to catch fire that we can’t deal with.”

“That’s not what a sea witch is.”

“Sure. But I’m not kidding, it’s a disaster waiting to happen. If it weren’t for the necroads literally attacking small fires, we’d already be out of here.” JP shrugged. “Also, there just isn’t much here *for* us. I know a lot of people are into the idea of owning a city, but holy shit, we do not have the person-power for this.”

“I could get some more people.” Nate offered. “James more or less okayed us to recruit more. I *can* find people.”

“...What people?” JP narrowed his eyes.

“I’m mostly thinking of intercepting army recruiters in rural towns.” Nate crossed his arms.  
“Gotta ask, what are you still doing here, anyway?”

“Me, or our task force?”

“Second one.”

JP shoved a stack of folders on his desk aside, revealing a clipboard with a few big line items written on it in thick black marker. “Securing the dungeon entrance is the big one. Observing the necroads is another; we’ve actually got a few people with zoologist qualifications who are interested in how they’re changing, and I’m kinda wondering if they’re... people, now?”

“Complicates shit.” Nate snorted.

“That’s our lives.” JP agreed. “Also, this is a good training ground for the rogues. Actual hands on practice with breaching security on places that still have intact security, and are real, is pretty nice. But that’s sorta secondary. Oh, we were also getting personal effects from the displaced population, but that’s wrapped up now. And obviously, clearing out anything valuable. Banks, anywhere with useful tools, other high value targets. We’ve got a giant bag full of gemstones if you want it? That’s kinda incidental.”

“Could come in handy, but the Order’s set for cash.” Nate reminded him.

JP laughed. “Yeah, how weird is *that*?”

Nate shrugged, not really engaged that much with the comment. “Well, we did co-opt a bunch of millionaires.” He said.

JP just raised his eyebrows. “Yeah.” He repeated. “How weird is that?”

“Point. Dungeon’s important though, so we should keep at least an outpost here.”

“Also we’re a great dumping ground for misfits.” JP grinned, reaching out a hand holding up an empty beer bottle like a torch. “Bring me your cultists, your ratroaches, your giant invisible cats...” He intoned the words with the cadence of old poetry.

Nate looked around the cluttered back office that used to belong to a hotel manager, and now was used by JP as his desk and random assorted problem storage. “That fucking cat. Is it still around here?”

“Yes? Not, like, in this room.” JP said. “Why?”

“It hates me.” Nate answered. “Feeling’s mutual. It’s a dick.”

JP just stared at him with narrowed eyes. He held up one finger to his lips before waving it at Nate. “I feel like this, right here? This is why your mem files are gonna be a problem. Wait, hang on, *this* is why Momo asked *me* not to make any, isn’t it? Emotional residue? Is... I’m not the misfit, right? Nate, you’d tell me if I was the misfit.” JP demanded suddenly.

“Absolutely not.” Nate told him flatly, turning to leave, but pausing at the door. “You do better work when you don’t know. Also, I’m borrowing Myles back to the lair. I’ve got a couple new rogues and I want to get an actual protocol set up for sharing intel. Also get in the habit of doing recon sweeps of cities. Maybe actually be proactive about crossing paths with more weirdness for once.”

“Yeah, sure.” JP waved him off. “Get out and leave me to my work before I have Amy sic the cat on you.”

“Can’t do it yourself?” Nate cocked an eyebrow.

“The cat hates me.” JP replied without any emotion whatsoever.

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James stood in the lobby of the Lair, presiding over a growing pile of equipment, and being a part of the problem when it came to his group getting in everyone’s way.

Despite the fact that he should be good at this by now, that he’d been on a number of delves that he had actually lost count of, the process of gathering beforehand and making sure you had everything you’d need was still something that he found terrifying.

His first handful of delves had been done with almost no prep. He’d jammed what his brain thought of as ‘adventuring stuff’ in a bag, and just kind of gone, and then ended up in real trouble more than once. Also, it turned out, you basically never actually needed rope in Officium Mundi, or in any other dungeon he’d found so far.

Now, the Order had carefully balanced weight charts, custom fitted light armor, an armory both mundane and arcane, and an actual print-off of a checklist for what you should make sure you had before stepping through any Thresholds.

And yet *still* James felt like he was frantically cramming shirts into a backpack the night before a road trip to an anime convention. Not that he had ever done that, of course. He’d done his shirt-cramming at least two days in advance. Which was *plenty* of time to make it even worse when it turned out he’d forgotten something simple.

“Coffee!” Alanna announced with aplomb, slamming a cardboard box onto the floor next to James, the thermoses packed in like artillery shells rattling against each other. “The good stuff!” She added.

“The good stuff for being smart or the good stuff for being quick?” James asked.

“Quick. Duh.” Alanna snapped back to her full height like a snake uncoiling, lading a tiny kiss on James’ cheek as she went. “It’s way more useful - you need to shave, Jesus - more useful for dungeon things.”

James rubbed at his face. “It’s not that...! Okay, fine.” He paused. “Shit, am I gonna look like some kind of scruffy wizard drifter when we make contact? I should have thought of this.”

“Relax, please.” Thought-Of-Quiet told James, the camraconda speaking through his skulljack as he gently settled a camraconda manipulator setup onto the floor next to Alanna’s coffee box. The camraconda was one of the last to name themselves, and had, until recently, simply been referred to by title as the elder among the group of nonhumans that the Order had rescued. James liked him. He was almost relentlessly calm, but his blue corded coils held a razor wit that came out of nowhere when he did decide to make jokes.

He was also one of their teammates for this endeavor.

“Yeah, besides, scruffy wizard is your entire aesthetic.” Anesh told James as he returned from whatever he’d been doing. “You can’t show up looking different for your first meeting, that would be like lying.”

Thought-Of-Quiet nodded in a bobbing motion. “Your appearance is deceptive.” He added.

“Alright, I...” James paused, and looked down at his camraconda friend with a squint. “Hang on, *is?*”

“Mmh.” The camraconda slithered off silently to accomplish some unknown goal, leaving James feeling like he’d been drive-by roasted.

“Okay, putting that aside. What are we still waiting on?” James asked, looking back at his clipboard for the millionth time. “We’ve got the armor, we’ve got backup food, we’ve got tools... uh... do we have the suspiciously vague line item of ‘minor magical items?’” He asked, looking up, and then sliding to the side as he realized that someone was trying to wheel a cart of lumber through the front lobby and to the elevator. “Sorry!” He called after their retreating form as the elevator dinged. “God, why am I so nervous about this?” He muttered to himself.

Newly arriving from the basement, Momo overheard just enough of his words to answer. “Because you worry constantly?” She asked him. “Also I’m ready to go.”

James glanced over and looked her up and down, sharing a suspicious look with Alanna. “No you’re not?” He said plaintively.

“You’re wearing a bathrobe.” Alanna told her in an exasperated tone. “So unless that’s enchanted, then...” She trailed off, and then sharply sucked in a breath, at exactly the same time James did. “Enchanted bathrobes!” They both exclaimed at the same time, before James dropped his clipboard and they high-fived vigorously. “Yes!”

“It’s... I’m wearing shorts. I can take the bathrobe off.” Momo rolled her eyes at them. “Also I’m fucking loaded with totems, so, like, there’s that too. You two are dorks.”

“Thanks.” James said. “Okay, so, us three,” he motioned to his partners, before pointing at Momo, “you, Thought-Of-Quiet, where’s our medic?”

“Nik?” Momo asked, perking up.

“No, not Nik.” James said. “Wow, you fucking lit up there. Something going on with you two?”

Momo sputtered and waved her hands in a flail that could be described as dismissively, if it weren’t for how utterly unconvincing it was. “No!” She said. “He just has the same kind of cool viewpoint on magic I do, and it’s neat!”

“Yeah, that’s... that’s why he’s not coming.” Anesh said slowly. “You both recklessly disregard personal safety when it comes to magic, and we don’t need that twice.”

Alanna leaned forward onto Momo’s shoulders, smothering the much shorter girl’s head. “We really shouldn’t even be letting *you* come either, miss ‘brain damage is fine in small doses’. But James says you promised to be good, and Alex is still out with a broken arm, so you’re who we get.”

“What, you literally couldn’t find anyone else?” Momo pouted, actually kind of hurt.

“I mean, you’re high up our list of people we trust on delves.” James said, casually restoring that hurt without even realizing. “But seriously, please don’t... you know... give yourself brain damage? I know you’re still doing totem experiments, and we can’t make you stop or anything, but a lot of people here care about you and it would be nice if you could not kill yourself just to prove you’re important.”

Momo seemed to shrink down under Alanna’s half-hug. “Pffft.” She uttered, not sure how to respond to the frank vulnerability James put on display. “Pthfffft!” She added.

“Sure.” James said. “Anyway, medic.”



“Me!” A young woman’s digital voice rang out, as Frequency-Of-Sunlight slithered into the lobby, a bright green scarf covering the more muted colors of the cords of her neck, followed by Thought-Of-Quiet who added another manipulator pack to the first one. “Me, me! I’m the medic!”

“We’re the medic.” Deb said, coming up behind her girlfriend, rolling her shoulder as she joined them. Technically, she was their head doctor, but that was a title she’d been eager to pass on to anyone else as soon as she’d found a way to make a mem file of the majority of her actual college education. She still worked in their medical wing, and was a big part of a lot of their more biologically oriented projects, but Deb had never wanted the responsibility of running an entire makeshift hospital, and so she’d let that go to someone more suited, while she spent more time with her partner.

And as she had decided not to limit Frequency-Of-Sunlight’s desire for adventures, if Deb wanted her girlfriend to be safe, she’d just have to tag along and make sure nothing bad happened.

“I am also a ‘we’ that is a medic!” The camraconda girl protested. “I have a helper now! She can do the thing!”

“Sunny, I’m not... we’re not *arguing*, oh my god!” Deb threw her hands up. “There isn’t a problem! I am just also here to help!”

Anesh leaned closer to James. “This is adorable.” He muttered.

“I like how their arguments have gotten kind of cute and way less stressful.” James replied. “Also neither of them has a medkit, so I’m not checking that off the list.”

“Karen put it on the table an hour ago, you’re fine.” Anesh stage whispered back.

James blinked, and looked down at the growing collection of stuff. “Wait, seriously? I though... dammit.” He sighed. “I’m so fucking bad at this!” He exclaimed.

“Aw, you’re fine.” Sarah said as she joined them, hopping up onto the building’s front counter to use it as a bench. “Everyone here? I’ve got your little report before you all go off to your first day at dungeon school!”

“First off, the school dungeon sucks, and hopefully this one will be better.” James started ticking points off on his fingers. “Second off, why aren’t you coming with us? Third, we’re waiting for one person. Fourth...”

“Fourth?” Alanna prompted.

“Uh... Sarah, what’s fourth?”

“We’re waiting for someone, apparently. I’ll tell you then.” Sarah said, giving him a massive grin. “Also, Quiet! Hi! Thermoclese says hi! She wants to hang out when you get back!”

Momo finally pulled herself out from under Alanna’s perching on her head. “I can’t believe she kept that name.” She gave a small laugh.

“Why? People name themselves all the time around here.” James said, waving a hand across the two camraondas in attendance. “*You* could rename yourself, too. We’d support it.” He told her.

“Nah, someone already got Thermoclese. What could I ever come up with that’s cooler than that?” The young woman looked around, the half of her haircut that wasn’t shaved down whirling around her head. “Who are we waiting for, anyway?”

James held up a hand, and started counting down on it. Everyone who was having side conversations or rustling around in the gear pile mostly went quiet watching him as he ticked down from five to zero. And then nothing happened. “Huh. Okay, my timing’s off. But give it a sec-“

From the hallway behind them, awkwardly following behind a very tired group of one of the Order’s youth groups that an even more tired El was goading forward while she shot pleading looks in James’ direction that he promptly ignored, a tall, roughly humanoid figure wearing an entirely unseasonable baggy black sweatshirt approached their group.

“I would like to come along as well.” Arrush said, the ratroach’s voice still somewhat raspy and warped from a throat and mouth that weren’t properly shaped for speech, but dramatically more steady and deep from the improvements that had been made to his lungs. The difference that a single purple orb from Officium Mundi could make was often impressive to a human, but when they were applied to ratroaches, the magic seemed capable of annihilating the built-in flaws that the species had with an almost scornful wave of the hand.

James lowered his hand. “Alright. Now we’re all here. Sarah?”

“Woah, wait, hang on.” Momo held up her hands in a time-out gesture. “How the hell did you do that?”

“I’m very powerful.” James answered. “So, Sarah?”

Deb cleared her throat, and raised a hand. “I’m actually also kind of concerned. I know this is an ongoing philosophical debate with the camraondas about the nature of power, but it feels a lot worse to bring a species that is designed to feel pain on an operation that might include violence? Like, are we sure that he’s not here because he feels pressured into it?” She thought about that for a second and then added, “That sounds really bad. But I’m still worried.”

“Oh my god, Arrush, why are you here?” James asked directly, turning to the mountain of fur and chitin that was trying not to look like he was looming near them.

The ratroach pulled his hood down, fixing James with a stare from his mismatched faceted eyes as his crooked antenna bobbed free. “I enjoy adventure.” He said calmly.

“See?” James said. “He’s perfectly capable of both having a sense of humor, and lying to all of us. That’s *basically* the only requirements to be a self-actualized person.”

Momo crossed her arms into the sleeves of her bathrobe. “I still wanna know how you knew he’d be here.”

“James saw him lingering in the basement working up the courage to ask us, and then heard the elevator ding a second ago.” Alanna answered, ruining her boyfriend’s mystique. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m sorry!” She said to James, sounding absolutely not sorry. “But seriously, Arrush, you actually wanna be in on this? We might die.”

“We might not.” The ratroach answered. “And... I... don’t understand myself. But I feel like I should help. And I want to.”

“We should talk after this.” Frequency-Of-Sunlight spoke up. “I get what you mean.” The other camraconda next to James nodded at the ratroach with a sympathetic wide lens on his boxy security camera face.

“Okay!” Sarah announced. “Everyone is here now! I have something to say, and you’re all gonna listen, because I have stuff to do today and while this is an adorable bonding moment, I actually really have to go in a sec, so everyone hussssssh!” With a series of smiles, and one solemn nod from Arrush who still didn’t fully understand Sarah’s personality, they hushed. “Alright!” She rubbed her hands together. “Here’s what we know! The library is the Kilgore Memorial Library in Dumas Texas. North part of the state, so... uh... still legally Texas.”

“What is a Texas?” Arrush asked as Sarah paused.

“It’s a state.” James answered. “We talked about states in the US a couple weeks ago, remember? It’s one of them. Local government, local culture, that kind of thing.”

“Is it a good state or a bad state?” Frequency-Of-Sunlight asked.

“That’s kind of a complicated question for the scope of this briefing.” James said with a shrug. “I mean, there’s a lot of factors for something like that. Economics, social situations. Hell, within states, you can have wildly different attitudes even between cities and rural areas, and-“

“Bad.” Momo interjected. “It’s a bad state.”

The camraconda tilted her head at the other girl. "Thank you." She said.

"*The library is in Dumas, Texas.*" Sarah repeated in a tone that was the most exasperated she ever got. But really, she'd been expecting it with this group of dorks. "Now. The library is a single story building on every map and photo online, so it's kind of weird that the guy who called us said the dungeon was in the stairwell. Also Charlie and his group confirm the building is bigger than it should be. So be on the lookout for that! Planner will be providing mental screening as you approach." She sighed. "We don't know much about the dungeon itself. It opens on Wednesday mornings at 3 AM, which is familiar. It drops yellow orbs that give ranks, we think. The kid who found it was pretty shaken up, so information is unreliable. The only creature he encountered was a book that was instantly hostile."

"Sorry, a book?" Anesh said. "Like... just a book?"

"Fullllll of teeth!" Sarah confirmed. "Watch out for the tongues. Scouts didn't go in too far or fight, but can confirm that it's a lot of stacks, and that telepads work to get out. We dunno if there's time shenanigans going on, but even if there isn't, you can bail whenever you need to." She looked at all of them. "The kid's name is Vad, short for Vadik. He's tentatively agreed to come with you, and he'll meet you on site. Time difference means you'll have about two and a half hours if you leave now-ish." She pulled her phone from a pocket and glanced at it. "And that's literally all we know, and I have to go, have fun storming the library!"

She hopped off the counter, landing in a crouch, and took the opportunity to share a hug and a "Be careful" with Deb before she ducked away and headed for the stairs.

"Okay." James said. "Everyone feel good about this? Anything we forgot?" He asked as he picked up the laden backpack with his portion of gear and slung it over his shoulder.

Everyone indicated they were as ready as they were gonna be. Including a surprised Arrush when he was handed his own pre-stocked backpack.

"It is time to get to work." Frequency-Of-Sunlight intoned like a ritual. And in a way, it was. The scarf she was wearing, shifting and rippling as it moved under its own power, the authority that she was bonded to turning a slight ghostly green as it responded to her call.

"And time to take a trip." James said, in the same cadence. And felt a sensation like a sunny breeze touch him as the navigator that he shared his headspace with also began to manifest. A soft orange touch to the light around him as an ethereal feathered limb uncoiled from around his back.

A voice whispered in his mind, that until recently he normally only heard in dreams. "Are we going now?" It asked.

“Oh yeah.” James grinned, reaching out to join hands with everyone in a circle as Anesh double and triple checked the address written on their brand new, fully stocked telepad. “We’re taking the easy way though.”

“Sad!” The navigator chastised him. “But we will see a new place. And we will explore. And I will help.”

“And we’ll have an adventure.” James told it with a smile. “Now, hold on tight.”

The feathered tail wrapped itself around his leg at his urging, as Anesh looked around at everyone, made sure they were all ready, and with one last check to make sure he wasn’t about to banish them to the middle of the Pacific Ocean or something, ripped the page out of the telepad.

Their team vanished in a snap of air. And an instant later, arrived in a library that was a bit too big, ready for almost anything.