

*"In order for me to write poetry that isn't political, I must listen to the birds, and in order to hear the birds, the warplanes must be silent" -Marwan Makhoul-*

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For the last six years, Connie had been a practicing talk therapist. She was aware, in an abstract way, that there were a lot of people who used that term for themselves, but skipped a lot of the important steps. Steps like actually getting an education, for example, or actually maintaining that education. Connie complained about that a lot, when she talked to others in her field, and had accidentally offended more than one person through it, but she didn't *really* care that much. Well on her way to her fifties, Connie had less time to suffer fools than she used to.

Recently, she'd found employment with a group called the Order of Endless Rooms. The pressures of being a therapist during the time of COVID were, to put it mildly, intense. With more personal time for introspection, everyone being online and exposed to more information, and a few other less pleasant factors, there was a massive disparity between the number of therapists available, and the number of people who suddenly realized they probably actually needed to talk to someone. And as Connie was aware, being a healer in any context didn't make you immune to harm.

So she'd taken a side job, to fill a couple of months of personal leave she was taking. And then, she'd kept that side job. Turned it into her main role; still seeing old clients but not taking new ones, slowly transitioning to a dedicated support member for the Order.

The existence of nonhuman life had been a bit of a shock, to put it mildly. She was still trying to sort out how to approach dealing with the camraondas. It was one thing to be responsible for your own education on new information and techniques, it was quite another to write the book yourself. At first, she had thought someone was playing a joke on her. But if they were, it was sustained to a level that no casual prank ever had been before. And while the camraondas didn't map perfectly to human psychology, they were almost *all* deeply traumatized by what they'd had to live through, and human therapy techniques were at least a start to helping.

She'd settled into a nice routine here, seeing a wide range of Order members for everything from casual sessions to talk about a single concern, to long term cognitive behavioral therapy, and also working with her counterparts to *actually* write the book on therapy in a world of different species and literal magic.

The literal magic was also a shock, but human neuroplasticity was an impressive thing, and she got used to it fast enough. She was still waiting for approval to try using skulljacks for trauma assistance, but it was frustratingly understandable why it might be a good idea to move slowly on that.

Which brought Connie up to today. Adapting to the Order's way of doing things, even if she did still get regularly shocked by whatever new crisis came up, or some bizarre magic effect settling over the building and telling her how many fish were within a hundred meters of her person.

Today, she was being shocked yet again. It had been normal so far, but as she came back from a pleasant lunch upstairs, nodding politely to the knight she was pretty sure was Dave in the hall as she reentered her private room that she used for her sessions, she found someone sitting on her couch.

Well, not sitting, really. Curled up on. A tense knot of a body, pressed into the corner where the arm of the couch met the cushion like they could somehow burrow into it. Staring at the door, at *her*, with a hyperalertness that was impossible to miss.

This had happened before. Her main complaint was that some people just didn't schedule their drop ins, though for many new arrivals to the Order, the idea of scheduling wasn't something they'd had forty years to get used to, so she let it go. What hadn't happened before was her seeing anything like the person on her couch.

Connie assumed it was a person. She couldn't imagine anything that wasn't sitting like that being anything other than a person. There was a tension to them that she'd found consistent across all her patients that had physical bodies. This one had black fur mixed with some kind of beetle shell, but it was still looking at her with mismatched eyes that were obviously intelligent, even if it had more eyes than she was used to. The extra arm wrapped around curled legs that were bent too far inward for a human just made them look *even less* comfortable with themselves. A trio of three-fingered hands tightly gripping their own thin limbs through the long skirt they were wearing. Under the hood of the sweatshirt they were wearing despite the summer heat outside, Connie could see a triangular outline of a head, and a stunted muzzle poking out with misaligned fangs jutting from the sides.

"Hello." She spoke softly, setting down her stack of documents with an enforced casual motion. "Is there something you need help with?"

For a long moment, Connie wondered if the rat creature actually could answer. But given how her life had been going around here, and the fact that it was wearing clothing, prompted her to treat this like a new client. So she went with her standby; be patient, wait for them to answer. Everyone needs time, sometimes.

It took a few minutes, of her leaning slightly on her desk, before the person opened their mouth and tried to say something. It took them a couple false starts, and Connie got a slightly unnerving look at exactly how many fangs they had, along with the softly glowing blue of their saliva while they worked out how to start.

"Said I could... talk to you." Keeka said in a voice that was both wet and strained.

Connie nodded. Good. They were both a person, and in the right place. She shifted her office chair from behind her desk to the middle of the open floor, the ritual of deliberate setup and placing herself in a completely exposed location a familiar one to her. Then she found a new notepad, and sat, smoothing her shirt briefly before she looked up at the person talking to her. “Yes.” She said with a soft smile. “That is what I am here for. I’m Connie, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Keeka.” Her patient said. Then, after a pause, nervously added, “I am... Keeka.” He spoke like he wasn’t used to using full sentences.

The name sounded sharp coming from his muzzle. Like an alert sound, not a word. But Connie just rolled with it. “Hello Keeka.” She said, butchering the tone, “What would you like to talk about today?” Oh, she had so many other questions. But personal curiosity was for the dining room and the discussion server later. Now was the time for professional targeted compassion.

Again, there was a long pause before an answer. But when he spoke again, it was an almost strangled utterance of “I don’t know.” Which was, Connie knew, a lie. No one could hold that much tension in themselves without having something they *wanted* to talk about. But she didn’t say that, she just waited. “I don’t know. I don’t... know what I... should say.” He looked at her, hood sliding back to reveal more black fur and grey chitin, an asymmetrical cluster of what seemed like antenna in place of ears. “What do I say?” He asked.

Connie folded her hands in her lap, ignoring her notepad for now. “There isn’t a right answer.” She told him. “This isn’t a test, this is just a conversation. You can say anything. But if it would help you to have a starting point...?” She watched as he gave a jerking nod of his roughly triangular head. “Well, something brought you here today. What is bothering you, right now?” She watched him struggle to speak, before adding, “It is okay to take your time. There is no hurry. I do not know your species, but it is usually helpful to pause...” she waited for him to listen, and then, “and take a deep breath,” she inhaled along with her patient, “and untense.” She finished with an exhale.

Keeka repeated the breathing exercise one more time, tension fading slightly to be replaced by a light twitching shiver of hands and folded legs. “There are more of us now.” He said.

“What do you mean by us?” Connie prompted. No leading questions, ask directly. That was important. Ambiguity was fertile ground for anxiety, and her job was to remove that, not grow more.

“Me, and... my... other.” Keeka stammered out. “Like me.” He looked down at his own body.

Connie didn’t press it, but she did leave an open invitation. “It’s important you know, for all our sessions, that you do not need to share anything you are not comfortable with. But if you do, you are safe here. Nothing you say to me leaves this room, alright?”

“Ah... alright.” Keeka flinched. “Me and my p... partner.” He stared at Connie, as if daring her to argue, clawed fingers digging into his fur in a reflexive tightening.

She nodded. “Thank you for sharing.” She told him simply. “So, there are more of you, and this has made you uncomfortable?”

He nodded again, a sharp bob of his head that splattered a tiny drop of glowing blue saliva onto his sweatshirt where it hissed and smoked briefly before fading out to a small scorch mark. There were many such marks on the hoodie. “Worried.” He stopped, and took a shaking breath, shaking his head and repeating himself. “I... am worried. I am worried, about them. That they will hurt us.”

Connie stopped the note she was making, and looked up to meet Keeka’s eyes. “When you say hurt, what do you mean?”

“Claw or bite. Break our shells. Kill us.” Keeka said it like it meant nothing, and the seemingly casual attitude toward violence shot ice through Connie’s blood.

Many members of the Order were familiar with combat. But this was different. This was a blunt acceptance of something intimately painful.

“I am not sure that you need to talk to *me* about this.” She admitted. “If there is a threat to you like that, I know several people who can help you be safe. But my role is to help you through your own emotions, not a physical threat.”

“They... James says... they are like us.” Keeka said. “He says they were just afraid. That they won’t hurt us. But he doesn’t know.” He pulled himself tighter into a ball again, the small relaxation he’d experienced vanishing in an instant.

Connie made a note that James was involved in this, and to ask permission to speak to him. “What doesn’t he know?” She asked patiently, but Keeka didn’t respond. Not just right away, but at all. He went silent, and gave a small shake of his head. “That’s alright. We can talk about something else. Would you like to tell me about your partner?”

His eyes brightened for a brief flash, before the person on her couch receded again and gave her a suspicious look. “You don’t know him?”

She gave a friendly shake of her own head. “I didn’t even know people such as you existed until this conversation. There’s quite a lot going on around here, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” The word was almost a squeak. Connie made a note to try to determine if that meant amusement, or something else. “Very... *it is* very busy. Things keep changing.” He paused. “We keep changing.”

“Good changes?” Connie asked.

“I can speak.” Keeka said. “And it doesn’t hurt. People help us. It is dry.”

“Those sound like good changes.” She said, listing them on paper, and listing the reasons they would be *changes* in her mind as things to only touch lightly. “But how do you feel about them?”

Keeka pulled his knees further up, planting his chin on them and looking at her with consideration. “Strange.” He settled on. “It is good. But why do I feel... like I should feel bad, for feeling good? Do you know?” His eyes were focused on her, wide and hoping for an answer.

Connie quirked the corner of her mouth up. “Before I answer, I have a technical question, and if it is too personal, you can tell me you don’t want to answer. Are you human?”

“No.” Keeka said instantly.

She nodded. “Well, then I can’t tell you with certainty. But for humans... our minds want us to be useful. Useful to ourselves, useful to our community, useful to our partners.” She motioned to him with her pen as she said the last line. “When we are doing that, it feels good. When what we’re doing is part of a group, and everyone is helping everyone, it feels better. But if we *don’t* feel like we are useful, then anyone helping us can make our minds turn on themselves. We would call this shame, or embarrassment. We feel like we’re failing because we need to rely on others. Does that sound familiar?”

Keeka nodded. “Like I am not good enough.” He said in a wet hiss. “Arrush helps. What do I do? Doesn’t need me.” Their sentence structure and speaking pattern started to break down into clipped fragments.

“Is Arrush your partner?”

“Oth- no. Yes. Partner.” Keeka said, breaking eye contact to stare at the wall.

Connie nodded. “Then it sounds like you’re very much like a human.” She said in a comforting tone.

Keeka whipped his head back around, a few blue droplets splashing to the couch and carpet. “What?” He demanded with a confused and harsh voice.

“Oh yes.” Connie told him. “Many of us are conditioned to not show vulnerability. To push away that shame, and not acknowledge it. Because it is hard to trust people, isn’t it? Especially if you’ve been hurt before.” Keeka nodded again, slowly and suspiciously, like he knew he was walking into a trap. “But also, in a lot of ways, all of us already know, deep down, how silly that

is. Let me ask you a question. What if *you* were the one helping, and.. Arrush? Arrush was in your position. What would you do?"

"...I don't understand." Keeka said.

"Would you hate him?" Connie prompted. "Would you be mad at him?"

"No!" The word was sharp and loud, approaching a battle cry, complete with Keeka starting to uncurl one of his arms, claws extended, before he caught himself. "No!" He repeated, quieter.

Connie didn't react to the motion, except to make a note to get Planner to schedule her an appointment with the partner, if possible and he was willing. "Most of us are like that." She told him quietly, as he tried to push himself even deeper into the couch, claws scratching and pulling at the seams of his skirt. "You *know* you would never hurt anyone who was vulnerable with you. Especially not someone you cared for. But we can have trouble seeing that others would do the same."

"Does this make me bad?" Keeka asked her in a tiny voice, a sizzling liquid pooling in the corners of his eyes. "I keep making mistakes."

"Of course not." Connie said firmly. "It makes you a perfectly normal person." She told him, moving slowly to offer him a box of tissues that he took with two clawed hands, leaving his third arm still holding his knees in place. He didn't do anything with the tissues, just sank his claws into the soft cardboard, but at least it seemed to help. "Would you like to tell me what you're worried about?"

It took a minute, and Keeka wiping burning tears away on the scorched trail on the arm of his sweatshirt, but he did eventually answer. "I think... I am scared." Keeka said in a near silent hiss. "Of... of... of everyone."

Connie nodded slowly. "And do you know what?" He looked up from the box he was slowly dismantling, eyes snapping to hers. "That's perfectly valid." She told him. "It's okay to be scared. It's okay to not know. And if you'd like, you can come back, and we can talk about it more, and try to understand it. Does that sound good?"

Keeka wiped away another set of tears from his left eyes. "Yes." He whispered.

"Now, if you need to talk more today, I can reschedule the next person. But if you think you'll be okay for a few days, Planner can make time for you in my rotation. What would you prefer?"

"I don't want to... be in the way."

"That's not what I asked you." Connie's voice was firm. "Just because you need help does not mean you are in anyone's way. Especially not here."

Keeka flinched, but then took a breath and steadied himself, looking up at her. “No.” He settled on. “I will come back.”

“Alright. I’ll have Planner contact you soon, okay?” Connie stood and moved her chair back. “And I can’t make you do anything, but I think you know it would be a good idea to share with your partner what’s worrying you. I think you know he’ll understand, don’t you?” Keeka nodded, and watched as Connie opened the door, cocking his head at the motion she made before he realized he was being invited to step out.

He jolted to his feet, and Connie raised her eyebrows as his form seemed to unfold like a puzzlebox. Strangely jointed limbs, legs that made odd angles under the long skirt, and a torso that was a little too thin and tight, plus a neck that was a bit too long, made for an uncanny looking body that was far more obvious when standing. He seemed to notice her discomfort and tugged his hood closer over his eyes. “Sorry.” He muttered.

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” She told him, leading him out to the small waiting room, and noticing that there was someone different sitting on her couch. “Oh. Good afternoon. Dave, right? Did we have an appointment?”

“Oh, no, sorry!” Dave said, shoving his phone in his pocket and waving awkwardly. “I’m just here for moral support. How’d it go?” He asked Keeka.

“Good.” The ratroach answered, before slipping past and out the door in a rapid rush of limbs.

Dave snorted a laugh, and stood up. “Thanks for seeing him on short notice.” He told Connie. “He hasn’t been doing okay, and wouldn’t really talk to anyway.”

“Well, some warning would be nice next time.” She told him. “What... if I could ask, what is he?”

“Oh! I thought I left a note!” Dave said. “Whoops! Also they’re ratroaches.”

“That is a terrible name.” Connie informed him. “Come up with something better. Also don’t just let him leave without you if you’re his support.”

“Right!” Dave exclaimed, jolting to his feet. “Sorry ma’am!” He followed out the door, looking both directions to try to figure out where Keeka had gone. “Uh...” he started one way, vanishing down the basement hall, before rushing back across in the other direction.

Connie sighed, went over, and closed her door, before turning to the *incredibly* patient and quiet camraconda on the other waiting room couch. “Good afternoon Smell-Of-Grass. How has your week been?” She asked as she led them back into the other room.

“Pleasant. I have decided summer is the superior season.” They said in their digital voice.

Connie smiled, and shut the door. Never a dull day around here.

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One of the major perks, James had decided, of getting into the kind of physical shape that was sort of required to not die deeper into any given dungeon, was that he could be more physical with his partners.

Which is to say, he could drape himself over the naked back of one Anesh’s who was laying on their bed, while his upper body curled into another sitting on that same bed but propped against the wall. And he could easily keep himself pushed up in just the right way so as to not crush anyone, and it was barely tiring at all. It was a little tiring though. But it was also comfortable, and had that kind of electric excitement that came from close and intimate skin contact with a person you loved, even if you weren’t actually having sex.

And they weren’t, currently, having sex. Because at the moment, both Anesh, unsynced from each other, were trying to apply their slightly different perspectives to making a very specific blue orb item work properly. And James was being a distraction.

“So the problem made itself, you see?” He was rambling. “The existence of cars and cheap gas basically ‘solves’ in massive air quotes the problem of the sprawl. And because our architecture technology has sorta advanced a ton, *after* the advent of the automobile, we’ve mostly been designing for a world where people can drive.”

“Yup.” Both Anesh said, staring at the blue orb they had sitting on the bed in front of them, along with a few other things that didn’t really belong on a bed. At least, according to the very narrow list of things James believed belonged on beds.

In the background noise of their shared apartment, the hissing sound of pouring water cut off with a small squeak, and shortly afterward, a damp Alanna stepped out of the bathroom attached to their shared bedroom. “You know, now that I’m getting used to the giant magical bath...” She mused, running a towel over her limbs.

“Right?” James said. “Best cultural decision someone else made, honestly. Showers don’t compare.”

“It’s a close race, but you’re right.” Alanna flopped on the bed with a wet lashing sound as her damp hair impacted the balled up comforter on the end of the bed. “So, what’re you cuties up to now?”

“James is distracting us.” Both Anesh said simultaneously.

“I’m-“ James cut off as Anesh got there before him. “Alright, fine, I’m distracting Anesh. But also I’m talking about city design.”

Alanna nodded, pulling herself forward to weasel into the pile of limbs her partners had become. “And what is Anesh doing that you’re distracting?”

“Trying to remake a telepad.” Anesh said. “And it’s annoying.”

“Right.” Alanna twisted away from looking up at Anesh’s face to focus on James. “He’s not supposed to be working right now, so tell me about cities!” She said with a somewhat suggestive grin.

James laughed shortly, before rolling in Anesh’s lap to face her and getting shoved off onto the blankets as Anesh lunged to save the blue orb he was working with from being crushed. “Okay, so, cities are big, right?” James started.

“So I’ve heard!” Alanna answered. “Wait, is this going to be another ‘just use the orange orbs to solve everything’ thing? Because you know we can’t make that work on a civic scale without... a lot more orbs. Like a lot a lot.”

“No!” James rolled his eyes. “And I only thought that for a month before someone corrected me. No, this is just about normal-ass human follies. We keep building *out*.” He punctuated the word by throwing his hands over his head to thump into a pillow, Anesh again narrowly pulling the orb he was working with out of the way of James’ hands.

Alanna nodded as she settled in and got comfortable on the bed with them. “Out, like, as opposed to what? Down? You wanna build Tokyo Three?”

“I... actually that’s... okay, *no*, for a few reasons, but also sort of. But verticality *is* what I’m talking about. Like... okay, think of the strip mall near us. Picture it in your mind’s eye.”

“Please stay out of my mind’s eye.” Anesh muttered. “We are working.”

“Sure, I’ve got it. What about it?” Alanna asked.

“Alright. So, you’ve got a bunch of big box stores, a grocery store, a handful of restaurants, and then a bunch of other random little places. And exactly zero two story buildings. And then, a billion square acres of parking lot.”

“Okay, yeah, I hadn’t really... thought about that before, I get where this is going I think. Also it’s just acres. Acres are... acres are square footage, I think?” Alanna twisted her body to reach for her phone sitting on a nightstand, anything sexy about the motion of her nude form eliminated when she kneed James in the ribs. “Yeah,” she said as he gasped for breath, before tossing her phone onto a pillow, “it’s just acres.”

“Ohhhkay!” James wheezed. “Well, the thing is, literally every part of the property could be better used, with *one extra floor*, right? And I understand that it’s expensive to build stuff, but we’re not really talking about ‘cost to the developer’ here, we’re talking about, like, ‘social structuring’. It would be possible even in our capitalist hellhole to create incentives to build up. You put the smaller retail stores and offices for things like insurance or banking on the second story, and then the food on the ground floor. The major outlets that do high volume retail stay on the ground floor for shipping reasons, which is its own thing that could be fussed with, but that’s not for now.”

“Okay, question.” Alanna poked him, cutting off his explanation with a motion that went from a prod to a light caress and then a less light tickle of his stomach. “Accessibility.”

“...is that a question yet?”

“How do accessibility?” She asked. “See, it’s a question because I used that sound at the end where it goes up in pitch.”

James tried to grab and gnaw on her hand, getting a laugh from his partner before she escaped, and he refocused. “I mean, it’s more expensive, but you just use some of the upstairs space as communal walkways - maybe even external space, build it like a pyramid, I dunno, that’s probably bad for some reason - and then have central elevators or escalators. Stairs too, obviously, but there needs to be ADA stuff, obviously.”

“That really does sound like it would be more expensive.”

“I mean, I dunno what the upkeep on an elevator is like, because that’s Karen’s domain, and I’m gonna message her in a second to ask. But, how many would you really *need*, compared to how many more businesses you could put in a central space? It *must* be in favor of elevators, right?”

“It’d screw up parking.” Alanna pointed out. “Parking already sucks there, during the day.”

“Yeah, so, like... parking already sucks. And they’re using the majority of the physical terrain for it. Which makes me think parking might be a terrible idea? But also, allow me to introduce you to a novel new architectural innovation that I call ‘the parking structure’.” James clapped his hands together and arced them away from each other like he was forming a rainbow.

“Designed in 2019 by John M. Parking-Structure, the parking structure is a structure that is built to facilitate parking. It accomplishes this by being a parking lot, but tall. In this essay I will-“

Alanna rolled herself forward and lunged, tackling James into the mattress with a yelp. One Anesh became a casualty of the sudden assault, while the version of himself that was sitting against the wall holding an orb and a notepad in each hand simply allowed his boyfriend to be

swept away, trying his hardest to ignore the noises that were either screams or giggles depending on how you interpreted it.

“Light rail!” James gasped out, reaching for an Anesh who simply cocked an eyebrow and left him to his fate as Alanna tried to blow raspberries on his neck. “Light rail!”

“You can’t get out of this by yelling civic devices this time, Lyle!” His girlfriend challenged him, pulling him back down, while the other Anesh dragged himself away and crawled around the bed on the floor to prop himself back up next to his double.

“These are inconvenient working conditions.” One Anesh said to the other. “For an inconvenient problem.”

James rolled over Anesh’s legs, trying to grab onto his boyfriend as Alanna continued her assault. “All blue orb creations are inconvenient and also help me!” He gasped out in a voice of frantic laughter, before Alanna pulled him to the side again.

As his partners continued to play fight, Anesh couldn’t keep a smile off his faces. He actually was trying to make this work, and they were a massive distraction, especially when they were doing that naked. But they were still adorable, even if they were introducing inconvenience to his work.

Anesh paused, and shared a glance with himself, as their mostly parallel thoughts intersected. “It couldn’t be that easy, right?” He muttered in two voices.

In his hands, he readjusted his grip on the small fifty page pocket notebook, the rank two blue orb, and the yellow he planned on powering it with. Then, he took a deep breath, and *imagined*. But this time, instead of trying to push away the distractions and annoyances, he let them all in. Alanna and James making noise and bumping him, the iLipede hovering within worrying range on the desk near his head, the slightly uncomfortable warmth of the apartment in summer when the AC wasn’t good enough even with the green orb that powered it. He just... let it color his thoughts.

The telepads were *annoying*, weren’t they? They were capricious, finicky, and sometimes they sent your girlfriend to Florida for a few months. They required annoying precision and had stupid caveats and wouldn’t let you go to the moon.

Suddenly Anesh realized why James thought the blue items were ‘alive’ in a way, and more why he thought they were ‘sarcastic’ in a bigger way. And all his memories of running D&D games for his friends surged to the fore of his mind. The telepads were like a GM, *telling the players to stop fucking around*.

The orbs in his hands vanished, swirling into the notepad in a haze of dust. And just like that, Anesh had a telepad.

Or something like it.

He was absolutely sure this one was going to have some new and silly issue.

But he yelled in triumph anyway. “*Finally!*” He cried, loud enough that it startled James and Alanna out of whatever they were doing. “My Magnum Opus!”

“Like from Bloom County?” James asked, the electric energy of laughter still flowing through his voice.

“Like from I made a telepad!” Anesh announced. “Or something telepad-esque!” He briefly paused as he said the word, realizing just how much James had rubbed off on him since they’d become friends, and then more than friends. “You two are very sexy like that.” One of him said, and both of him flushed as his brain caught up to what he’d said on a spontaneous whim.

James and Alanna made doe eyes at him, before they attempted to drag both present Anesh into their tangle of blankets and limbs, for a very different kind of affection than they’d been showing each other.

Roughly an hour later, after they’d all showered *again*, James found himself in their kitchen, throwing together some simple tuna melts for their dinner before he asked his partners if they wanted to go on a walk with him and enjoy the fact that it was eleven PM and still eighty degrees outside. When Anesh walked in, flipping through the blank pages of his new possibly-telepad, James gave him a goofy grin before speaking. “Hey, can you grab me an onion? I’m makin’ some food.”

“Sure. What kind?” Anesh said, quickly slipping the telepad into his pocket.

“Red.” James said.

Anesh nodded. Then looked around. “Uh... where are the onions?” He asked, suddenly realizing James was the one in the kitchen and he was standing amid the couches and table of their living room.

“Basement.” James said with a toothy smile. “The pantry is the door on the left.”

Anesh tapped his knuckles against his forehead for a second before he sighed. “Right.” He said, and turned to the door in their second floor apartment’s hallway, popping it open and taking the thin set of stairs down into a space that was, somehow, *not* the apartment directly below them.

When Alanna came out and asked where Anesh was, and James repeated the word 'basement', she gave another sigh, but one that was a lot more wistful. "Fuck, man, life is getting really fun, isn't it?" She asked James.

"That reminds me!" James said. "Speaking of fun things! We have a choice to make tomorrow."

"Of whether we go into Officium Mundi?" Anesh asked. "At least one of us is." He and his duplicate juttred their thumbs at each other. "Because, you know, the whole thing about flooding the market for platinum. And also something about cancer."

James shook his head. "No, though the platinum thing is gonna start being a problem soon according to the people who are better at the commodities market than I am. Though that wasn't what I was talking about." He pulled the sheet tray out of the oven, and started sliding sandwich halves onto plates to be assembled to the whims of his partners. "I'm taking about the new place, that we got a call about a couple weeks ago."

"The library!" Alanna lit up like a beacon. "I'm in! Also it's real?"

"The scout group confirmed it." James nodded. "Charlie left a message on the server. We've got a whole new section for library things, and a channel just for people coming up with bad names."

"Have I met Charlie?" Alanna asked.

Anesh gave a shrug, and answered while James tried to deal with the oversized bite of food he'd taken. "Probably. He's been around for a long time as part of the support group for Office survivors. Didn't really engage with the rest of us, but from what Sarah's told me, he kind of adopted one of the new camraondas. They don't do Response stuff, or a lot of delve activities, but they're getting more involved and they volunteered to check out the library." He paused. "Also I think Charlie is one of the people who's made a good .mem file? But I'll have to check."

"What for?" Alanna asked. "Like, not what for why did he do that, but what for, what skill did he make a file for?"

"Kayaking." James said.

"Fuck, I wanna go kayaking now." Alanna muttered. "Can we go kayaking?"

"...Yes?" James said. "I mean, yes, sure. Like, we basically can do whatever we want, whenever we want. We are self-actualized and free. You wanna go camping? Let's fucking go camping. Anesh! Go get me a tent!"

Anesh eyed James over the plates he'd just been passed. "Where's the tent?" He asked, already knowing the answer in his heart.

"Basement!" James told him.

Anesh nodded. "No." He said while one of him ate. "Also I would like to check out the library with you two tomorrow. So no camping right now."

"Alanna, we'll have to postpone kayaking." James sadly informed her.

She shrugged. "Maybe there'll be a river of liquid books or something that we can use."

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"Dave!" James caught his friend in passing as they crossed paths at the door to the lair. "How've ya been!"

"What? Oh!" Dave snapped his head up from his phone. "I'm good, actually. Busy, though, I guess. I've been helping with the new paper dragons, and they're kinda silly while they're growing up. And, uh, I guess that's mostly it?"

"Hey, that sounds like enough, honestly." James chuckled. "I got tackled by one the other day; they're almost big enough that the basement is gonna get too small for them in a couple months."

"Yeah, I feel bad about that." Dave nodded. "We're gonna have to be careful in the future. Cause you know, since we know that they can grow at roughly the same speed, we can sort of time it so that they're ready to migrate to outside when it's summer?" He shrugged. "That way we have some leeway on when we get their feathers laminated, so they're more waterproof."

"Oh, man, I didn't even think about that." James replied with a wide eyed look. "But, like, we can work around that, right? Make a few big barns for them, so they have some shelter that's big enough? We've got that plot of land out in... Yamhill? Yakima? One of the Y-places. Yamhill I think. Also, wait, is Pendragon waterproof? She must be, right?"

"Pendragon's mostly aircraft aluminum right now." Dave said. "But I don't think that's part of a natural life cycle. Not that I guess anyone knows what that is, for these guys. Maybe they could just stop growing at roughly dog size?" He shrugged. "I dunno, I think they might all grow up different. It's a learning experience."

James nodded along. "We get those a lot around here, huh?"

“Yeah, it’s really exhausting.” Dave confirmed. “Oh, speaking of, Karen’s somewhere around here and wanted to talk to you about securing the lease on the building that Officium Mundi is in.”

“She absolutely does not need my permission to do that.” James said flatly.

It had been an uphill battle, but James had been trying to remove himself from a command position. Not that he was abdicating his responsibility to be a leader, but he didn’t want people going through him for the final say on decisions.

The Order was, as he was intentionally pushing it to be, in a weird relationship with the nature of power. It was something that was very hard to codify, but what they all actively wanted was a situation where people solved problems on their own initiative, and could have an easy time calling for support when they needed it from each other. An organizational structure where no one was at the top.

Oh, there were people who were leaders, especially of the individual divisions that had formed. But while there were certain set powers vested in those who had been voted into their roles, like veto power due to the safety (or abject lack of safety) of a Research experiment, or the final call on Response deployment, at the end of the day it was a much more fluid power structure than anywhere else James knew of.

It was founded on trust. Not just personal trust, but collective, group trust, in the structure of the Order pushing people to do their best, and everyone being on hand to curb any attempted abuses.

It wasn’t perfect. But it was working. Their form of direct representational democracy might not scale well into the future, but at the moment, it let them respond to new problems rapidly, while still letting everyone’s voices be heard.

James looked forward to seeing how problems evolved from this, as time went by. Especially as they expanded. But for now, he needed to establish that he was *not in charge*, even if people were welcome to take his advice and follow his lead.

“Yeah, she knows she doesn’t.” Dave said, bringing James back to the present. “She already did it. I think. It’s actually kind of wild that we’re rich, by the way. But she had some questions for you, and anyone in Research or Ritual, about how the dungeon might change if the building is under our control and not being used as an actual office. Because, you know, the dungeon is an Office.”

“That is... a good point.” James hummed. “Maybe we just sublet it? No, wait, that’s... horrible. Actually, this is weird. Can we talk about this later?”

“I mean, talk to Karen about it. I’m busy with other stuff. Oh! Also! Keeka wanted to talk to you, but he’s afraid to say that, so I’m telling you.” Dave nodded with a very self-satisfied look on his face, for remembering to share that detail.

“Thanks, Dave.” James said, with minimal sarcasm in his voice. Then he sighed, and tried again. “Actually, thanks. I need to be doing better about... a lot of interpersonal stuff. Do you know where Keeka is?”

Dave shook his head. “Nah, he vanishes when no one is looking. In the building probably?” He offered unhelpfully. “Anyway, I need to get going. I’ve gotta pick up my mom from a doctor’s appointment.” He jingled his car keys.

James almost asked why he didn’t just teleport, but refrained, instead stepping back and motioning to the door with an elegant bow. “Alright, I’ll talk to you later. Oh, you wanna come to the library with us tonight?”

“Nah, like I said, I’m busy. No real time for a new book.” He gave James a short shrug, and pushed his way out the front door.

“No, Dave, the...! Dammit.” James sighed. “I mean, I *feel* like he knew what I meant. But...” He turned and looked around for anyone who was nearby. “Do you think he knew what I meant?” He asked anyone within twenty feet.

No one gave him a good answer.

With a deep sigh, James just solved the problem with a text message, and headed into the building to find the stealthiest ratroach in the world before he had to head out to explore an extradimensional library.

Then, after thinking about that sentence, he rescinded the sigh, on the grounds that his day was going great and his life was kinda fantastic.

