

*"Is the nature of what's real in how it starts or how it feels?" -The Stupendium, Open The Sky-*

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James pushed himself up onto his elbows, goosebumps covering his skin at the sudden cold that had dragged him back to wakefulness. He forced his eyes open, ignoring the itchy feeling of small bits of dust or dirt stuck in his eyelashes, and took stock of the situation.

It was still quiet around them, though the mist had shifted and the top of the hill that James could see when he tilted his head back was covered in darkness. A pitch black hole in the world where visibility didn't just get foggy, but outright stopped. Worrying, but Sienna was keeping an eye on it; the girl was fidgeting too much with the gun, but she was keeping her view moving from where she was sitting and probably exhausting herself paying too much attention.

Harlan was also still up, and James would be willing to accept it if Harlan said they didn't sleep. Their coverage was more focused and still, and also felt far more potentially lethal to anything approaching.

Then James took stock of his own body, and instantly regretted it. Everything hurt. Some of it more than other bits, but it all blurred together and he couldn't find any one part of himself that felt *okay*. His face felt like it had lines of itching fire drawn all around one of his eyes, his nose ached from where he'd slammed into the dirt, his lungs hitched when he tried to breathe too deeply, and there was a worrying scent of smoke even though he couldn't actually smell anything. One of his calves had been replaced by a massive bruise, the other one had a scabbed over gash he hadn't even noticed, the skin on his hands was cracked and probably smelled like gunpowder, his forearms were still covered in red marks that hadn't really healed and threatened to pull open whenever he exerted himself, and the hole in his neck where the anti-cancer purple had plucked an invasive tumor monster out of existence felt like an especially unique form of ache.

Also one of his teeth was loose, though he had no idea how that had happened.

"It's not even the tooth with a cavity." Were the first words James said that day, as he considered letting himself drop back to the relatively safe patch of asphalt and his backpack pillow, and see if he could get away with a few more hours of sleep.

As he pushed himself farther up to a sitting position, and started poking at his mouth, an orange feathered outline started to creep in around his arm, and then rose off it as a second limb. Then, abruptly, Zhu jabbed him in the cheek.

"Awk!" James yelped. "Ow! Why?!" His startled shout, even though he muffled it, still drew jumpy looks from the survivors around him who were awake. Sienna in particular looked like she was almost about to shoot him. "Zhu, what the fuck?" He muttered as he pulled himself up

to the bench along with the bag, and started fishing around in it for a bottle of the least sugary drink he could find. "Also fuck I wish we had water..."

"You *asshole*." Zhu's voice was like tires failing to find traction.

"Okay I need you to know right now that I only remember maybe a third of what just happened." James said rapidly. "Estimate, obviously. Because dreams are weird. Did we... did Speaky actually show up? Was that real?" He knew his voice sounded somewhat desperate, but while he kept quiet, he didn't hold back from cutting to the point.

Zhu's followup jab came up short. "Oh." He seemed almost disappointed, but he still stopped poking at James, all the verve going out of his manifested feathered limb. The dusty orange glow seemed to dim as he slumped down against James' flesh. "You said something stupid." He accused.

"I believe you." James answered simply. It was partly a lie; he knew exactly what he'd said, and why he'd said it. The surrounding details of the dream were fuzzy, but the words stood out. He took a deep breath, and regretted it as the sickly flavor of the air here seeped into his lungs. "Well, that means..."

"They know where we are. As best I could share." Zhu said. "This stings."

"What did you do?" James asked, instantly suspicious at how the navigator said those things in context. "...Zhu...?"

Zhu helped push James up to his feet with an ethereal feathered tail, the two of them groaning in concert as they rose. "I gave her... where I am, I guess? I looked for it, and found it was part of me, and then I separated it and handed it off. It's just... where I am." He thought for a second as James braced himself on the strangely mundane wooden bench. "I will need that back, yes."

"So they really are coming for us then." James felt the relief like a physical thing. A weight lifted and a warm breeze and a relaxing of tension he didn't realize he was holding. The dizziness hit, and he toppled sideways to the asphalt with an abrupt impact that drove a sharp pain into the shoulder he landed on. "Ow." The word came out as a barely coherent drawl. "Oh good." He added as he felt Zhu's manifested form slump against him.

"Shit." James heard the word from someone else, and then a second later saw Johns' come into his view. He rolled his head to track the EMT as the older man set a hand on his forehead. "Doesn't feel like a fever. Dizzy, right?"

"And everything else." James tried to say. "Weren't you asleep?"

"Here? Briefly." Johns said. "Don't try to stand up again."

“But I *need* to stand up.” James found his head swimming, but now that he was back down on the delightfully unmoving ground, talking was coming easier. “For a variety of reasons. Including that I want to piss on this entire sub dimension but will settle for a small patch of it.”

Johns snorted. “Sure. You can do that in half an hour, when you shake this off.”

“How many people...” James started to ask.

The EMT answered before he finished. “Everyone. Sienna woke me up when it hit her. You need to be awake, and stay down for about half an hour.” He glanced over at where the dark mounds of other people sleeping on benches or under piled jackets were still at rest. “Harlan walked it off, because they’re probably not human or something. Mauro... hit his head.”

“Man, you can’t just say that and-“

“Concussion. Maybe internal bleeding.” Johns’ voice was tight. “The dizziness passes, the blunt force trauma doesn’t go with it. He *might* be okay, but he might not.”

“You let me sleep through all this?” James demanded.

Folding his arms and nervously scratching at his increasingly unkempt facial hair, Johns tilted himself back to rest on his heels. “You needed it.” He said. “We all needed it. What’re you gonna do, anyway? Punch out the disease?”

“He’d try, you know.” Zhu said, waving his arm off of James.

Johns stared at the navigator’s feathery form with lingering eyes while his mouth twisted into a curve. “What *is* that, anyway?” He asked James. “Are you haunted or something?”

“I’m right here.” Zhu sounded offended, but James could feel the navigator pulse with mild amusement against his scraped and split skin. “You could ask *me*.”

“Alright, what *are you?*” Johns sounded less amused than Zhu was. “Because you look like some kind of bird parasite and it’s creepy. Didn’t have much time to think about it earlier, but you’re growing out of this guy’s *skin*, so...”

James pulled his arm across his chest and rolled away from Johns, taking half of Zhu’s form with him. “Fuck you.” He spat out. “You wait until *now* to do this? Fuck off and let me collect skill points in peace.”

A pair of hiking boots and the legs of damp jeans appeared in James’ line of sight as Johns circled around and sat on the bench he was facing now. “Sorry.” The apology sounded hollow. “This place is getting to me.”

“Yeah, which is probably why you should be calling my friend a parasite.” James snapped back. “Since he’s why we’ve got a chance at all.”

“Too bad I can’t get you selectively lost in the roads.” Zhu grumbled.

The vitriol from them put Johns on the defensive quickly. “I said I was sorry!” He said.

James rolled his head just enough that he could angle his eyes up to look at the man’s haggard face. “Man, look. I’m part of a group of anarchist wizards who want to build a brighter utopian future for everyone, and I solve a lot of my problems through just being nice to people. I can forgive a lot. I will forgive that, too. But you’re not really apologizing, and I’m still pissed at you, and my fucking *bones* hurt, so please just stop ‘trying’ for the next twenty seven minutes until I have the option to walk away.”

“...sure.” Johns said. “Anarchist wizards?”

“No hierarchies of power that don’t serve an ethically sound and practically useful goal. Also we have magic.” He sighed. “Assuming we survive this. I still... I’m freaking out that I just killed half my friends sending them a plague bomb.”

“I understand. But I think it’ll be okay.” Johns unfolded his hands and stared at the red holes on his forearms as he spoke. “Out there, we’ve got antiseptic, saline drips, and, I dunno, *water*? Your people will be fine. Unless anarchy means you don’t believe in indoor plumbing.”

“I’m gonna fucking bite your ankles.” James snorted a half-laugh, catching Johns’ comment for the attempted joke it was. “Anything else happen while I was asleep?” He sagged onto his back, Zhu’s tail pushing up between his legs as the two of them stared at the false grey sky. James knew there wasn’t really open air overhead; the light mist covered it up, but there was most likely another layer of dirt and asphalt and whatever else this place was made of.

Was it hovering, like a floating island? Or was this a situation where the whole place was just a series of massive caverns, the sides sometimes split open to let delvers get from one to the other. Maybe neither. Maybe it was a structure in truth, like a false indoors, and there were massive stairs around here that could take them up or down.

“Are you even listening?” Johns said

James blinked and snapped his attention back to the other man. “No. I was thinking about stairs.”

“Everyone’s bites are infected.” Johns repeated. “It’s not bad, yet. But... this place.” He spoke the last words through gritted teeth. “Do you *have* a plan?”

“Yeah. We wait.” James said, voice tense. It wasn’t a great answer, but he was going to be honest with everyone.

Before he could elaborate, Johns snorted at him. “That’s it? That’s not a plan.”

“Zhu’s acting as a beacon for our friends.” James continued like he hadn’t been interrupted. “This place... well, teleporting into dungeons is usually a pretty bad idea. And here especially. At least for the way we work. There’s no *addresses*, which makes it really hard to work with.”

“There are several thousand houses right there.” Johns pointed over toward the stained wood of the fence row a few hundred feet away that separated their little spot on a walking trail from more neighborhood. “Wait, do the houses here not have addresses?” James nodded at him and Johns gave an annoyed grunt. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” He admitted. “So, you can teleport. And you need an address. Why not just make one?”

“The Order has some tricks.” Zhu chimed in. “You may share, if you are less of an asshole.”

“Man, who taught you to be crass?” James chuckled as Zhu answered the question by curling his feathered arm up and poking at James forehead again. “Sure. Anyway, it sort of works. I could draw a specific symbol on the ground and we could use that, but the magic gets really fucking finicky about that sort of thing. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it’ll accept *wildly* subjective inputs. But not always. And when we’re talking about a place where looking at the wrong thing can kill you, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” He shrugged, and regretted it as his shirt tugged on the black asphalt he was laying on. “Also we didn’t have time to set up a code, and yeah, that *really* should have been a standard thing *before this*. I’ll keep that in mind.” James ignored that Johns hadn’t actually said anything. “If Speaky comes back, I’ll ask.”

“Who?”

“Oh, they’re a ghost fish that can speak through dreams.” James ‘informed’ him. “They’re a friend of mine’s kid. Very excitable, very-“

[Survivor : Low : +1 Skill Point]

Zhu must have gotten the message at the same time James did, as the navigator started helping them push their way to a collective standing position while Johns rapidly spouted out a “Hey hey hey!” And tried to stabilize the two of them.

“I’m fine.” James said, lying more flagrantly than he ever had before. “Anyone figure out what to do with skill points while I was sleeping?” He asked suddenly.

“I was hoping you knew. Thought you went on a dream quest or some crap.” Johns eyed him expectantly.

“I wanna know what the fuck these things are for...” James sighed. “Whatever. Get some sleep. I’ll keep an eye on stuff.”

Johns looked like he still had questions, or concerns, or just like he needed an outlet for the raw panic building behind his eyes. But when James confidently offered him the pillow backpack, the exhausted man slumped and just accepted it, pulling his legs up on the bench and curling in a way that was going to leave his back sore when he woke up.

James shook his head at how easily Johns had dropped into unconsciousness. The others were dead asleep too, a whole day of forced march, needed as it was, had left them exhausted. No one had been prepared for this. Still, Johns’ speed from waking to sleeping was impressive, and James wished he could have had that outside of life or death situations.

He checked in with Sienna, and then went to find a spot to pee that wouldn’t be a problem.

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Breakfast was a slightly crushed blueberry muffin that hadn’t been good when the day had started and hadn’t gotten any better. James ate it, washed it down with orange juice that was too sweet, and spent ten minutes staring into space while his brain slowly went through its startup process. Mostly he was trying to figure out how much orange juice he’d have to drink for his enhanced vitamin C processing to have an issue. He didn’t remember the number, only that he had it.

He eventually stood with a sigh, hoping that moving would help a bit. He and Zhu were still dizzy, a little, but at least it wasn’t threatening to kick his feet out.

With another deep breath, followed by checking the compact pearl of Breath magic that was nestled in his lungs to see how much of that he had access to should he need it, James took a few shaky steps and headed to say hi to Harlan.

“I don’t suppose *you* know what skill points are for.” He asked rhetorically.

Harlan flipped the notebook they were staring at closed, and pulled it back into the palm of their hand, the object melting away into ink and sliding onto their skin. “Nope.” They said, which was actually more of an answer than James expected. “You sleep?” Was also more conversation than he’d been prepared for.

He planted himself on the path next to Harlan, taking a moment to stare off at the slopes of the trail they’d taken to get here. It was all just dirt, with a few patches of untrustworthy grass. No trees or other vegetation; James used to live in a suburb when he was a kid that was *worryingly* like this, and the analog to this path near his childhood house would have had wetlands all around it. Brambles and reeds and just anything to break up the line of sight. Not this barren line that looked like a scar on the world.

"I slept, yeah." He sighed. "We've got a rescue coming. Somehow. Eventually."

"That's... good." Harlan said the words like they were uncertain of both their answer, and the language they were speaking. Briefly, they flicked their eyes sideways to take in Zhu's manifestation, before shooting a glance back at where their own magical tiger was curled up and being used as a living pillow by one of the girls. They didn't say anything else.

"I like to think so." James said in reply to Harlan's previous words. "Anything going on? You get hit with the dizzy thing?"

Harlan nodded once, swiping a finger along the edge of their turtleneck. "Walked it off." They answered. "Medic tried to make me sit. Didn't feel like it."

There was something off about their voice that caused James to take a mental step back and evaluate what was going on. A pang of sympathy in his heart pushed him to ask something that he hadn't thought to actually ask *Harlan* before. "Ha- um. Are you doing okay?" He stopped himself before he repeated their name again.

"How would I know?" Harlan asked, genuinely curious. "You know, my notebook. It rearranges itself whenever I bring it out. Sorts by what I'm looking for. Indexes."

"Convenient." James was a little jealous.

"How do I know when I wrote anything?" Harlan asked suddenly. "My handwriting changes sometimes, because of course it does. But how do I know?"

James went silent next to the mercenary. He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself before he spoke without thinking. His eyes met Zhu's damaged one, the two bonded lives sharing a moment of mixed pity and horrified anxiety. It was, James figured, impossible that someone as ruthlessly smart as Harlan, had never asked that question before.

"You..."

Harlan ignored him, and just kept talking. Like they were speaking to themselves, and James wasn't even there. "I think I've done this before." They said. "I think every time, I panic. I think I put it into a seed round." Harlan didn't look at James. Didn't break eye contact with the artificial horizon as they rolled a nine millimeter bullet between their fingers. "You think so too, don't you?"

"Kinda." James admitted.

"Smart." Harlan gave a sharp nod. "You're smarter than me, I think."

James sighed. "You aren't allowed to have an existential breakdown here." He said sternly. Harlan's single bark of laughter in response caught him off guard. "What?" James asked.

"You. Giving me orders."

"Yeah, well, I'm the smart one." James said with a hint of a grin. "Look. When we get out of here, I'll help you with whatever you need, okay? We can sit and talk and you can realize just how fucked everything is and fall apart, okay? But right now, we're needed."

"How do you know?" Harlan asked him, open curiosity in their voice that wasn't there before. Like this was the first time they'd ever had the chance to really ask questions like this. "Can you actually see the future?"

"No. I've just done this before." James answered. "And the breakdown afterward is usually pretty bad. I cry a lot. I—" His voice caught in his throat for a second and he felt something hot in the corners of his eyes. Zhu's tail wrapped around him, offering small comfort. "I've got some coping methods. My partners help. Keeping busy being constructive helps. I still have nightmares, and trouble sleeping." Why was he even telling Harlan this, James briefly wondered. But he was talking, and stopping didn't feel right. "I have, compared to most people, a lot of emotional breakdowns, probably. Though it's not a contest or anything. But *right now*, everyone else needs us to look good, so they don't freak out. Because if they freak out, their chances go down."

"I know *that* much. I've got leadership and group tactics locked down." Harlan snorted. "Also your way sounds like shit. 'Just be a disaster'? That's your advice? Are you sure you don't want any of these?" They held out a hand, a magazine appearing in it that they offered to James like it was a candy bar.

"I can't. Won't, rather." James shook his head. "Aside from getting into the weeds on what it means to be a person, and who 'you' is if you selectively prune memories, I actually just can't use them without hurting Zhu."

"It's agonizing!" Zhu added for effect.

"Yeah. So, not an option."

Harlan gave the orange wraithlike outline of feathers a look like they were trying to peer through the fabric of reality to some ultimate truth. "Hm." Was all they said. "Okay."

"Are you *also* going to be an asshole again?" Zhu snapped out like an engine turning over.

"No, just thinking." Harlan said.



James nodded. "Good. I can't be the only smart one." He said. "So, anything moving near us while I napped?"

"A few of those dog things. I didn't shoot them." Harlan sounded morose about that. "But if this context is awake, it knows we're here."

"Okay, hold up. That. Explain that, now." James snapped his fingers lightly. "You say context, we say dungeon. I get that. But *awake*? How do you even *know* about this, and what does it mean?"

"Notes." Harlan said like it was obvious. "So, learned it at some point. Wrote it down. Bet it was a good secret weapon." James blinked hard and bit his lip as he let the probably unintentional pun wash over him. "Awake, dozing, dead, empty. Empty ones are theoretical. Dead ones are dead, they get chewed up by the real world, and break down pretty fast, so they're usually lethal to go into. Dozing is a context on autopilot. It might make monsters or tools, and it can expand, but it's just working off a script. Awake is bad. Awake will fuck with you. This one probably woke up when we dropped a cafe in its gut."

"And now it'll be hunting us down." James winced. "Cool. So, I'm taking this with a grain of salt the size of Mt. Hood, because let's face it, your notes are an unreliable narrator. But if that's true, shouldn't we be killing anything that sees us?"

"Maybe." Harlan said with a shrug. "If it matters, it doesn't matter if we do or not though. What, the context has near omniscience through its troops, but if we kill them fast enough it won't notice? You're supposed to be the smart one"

"Touché." James tilted his head as Zhu tried to muffle a noise like a laugh. His brain was having a hard time keeping up with the idea of Harlan as this non-antagonistic. "Anyway. We just need to... wait. I guess. And hope the place is asleep."

They stood there facing out toward the long strip of asphalt and the endless repeating rows of backyard fences that framed it. James was nervous, still, that something was going to happen. But he was trying his best to just stay calm and keep watch while the others slept.

Eventually, Harlan spoke again, unprompted. "Don't really have anything to cry about."

"What?"

"You said you coped by crying. I don't do that."

James blinked. "Because you're, what, too tough to cry?" He tried not to sound too insulting, even though if that was accurate, he absolutely meant it in an insulting way.

Harlan didn't shrug or shake their head, just kind of answered in the tone of someone who didn't find the conversation especially important. "Nothing to cry about." They said. "Nothing has ever gone wrong in my life."

James and Zhu exchanged a look that said a lot about how little they believed that. "Uh..." James started to try to say something, and couldn't find a single word for how bad this was.

"Do you understand," Zhu asked slowly, "that everything you just said is like being emotionally assaulted with a series of orange traffic cones and road flares?"

"No." Harlan said, the word simple and sad. "I don't. That's what I'm talking about. Everything is secondhand. People died. Okay, so what? People die all the time. They weren't close to me. I know I'm supposed to care about kids, I've got a note; are these people kids to me? *I don't know how old I am.*" Their voice wavered ever so slightly, but didn't crack. "If I hang onto any of this, is this what's going to happen to me? Getting more frantic, less reliable? I can't afford that, paladin. I can't. *We* can't, not now, not here."

"So you're freaking out because you're starting to feel stuff about things that happened to you." James summed up. "Alright. Cool. How in the fuck have you lasted this long as a mercenary?" He muttered the last part. "How bout this. You keep your memories intact, because it's going to make us more effective at working together. And afterward, if you're bothered, it won't matter and you can dump 'em. I promise to not care."

"That isn't—"

"Also I know you're out of empty bullets anyway so it isn't like you have a choice." James added.

"You—"

"I would like to interrupt, and not only because your conversation going nowhere is almost painful to experience." Zhu said suddenly.

James bit off a laugh. "You know, asking if you can interrupt is—"

"Oh, I apologize, I am not asking." Zhu interrupted again, feathers along James' arm and shoulder rippling in a way that was partly partly and partly painful on his wounds. "I have been... poking around." The navigator said. "We will be here for some time, yes?"

"As long as it takes the others to come get us." James confirmed. "I mean, unless you can get us out."

“No.” Zhu confirmed. “But... I believe I can take you to one of the structures, that would be relatively safe to explore.” He rotated his eye to move between James and Harlan. “The two of you, specifically.”

Harlan grunted. “Leaves them unprotected.”

“Sienna has a gun.” James said defensively, and then withered under Harlan’s flat stare.

“Okay, fine. We give the gun to Mauro or the other guy who *doesn’t* have a concussion. Look, I’ve got a magic sledgehammer, I don’t need a pistol. Though I *do* think we would need to be quick about it.” He stopped, and remembered something about how navigators made maps real. “Sorry, Zhu, what’s the cost for this one? Can we know in advance, or is this a rocket fuel thing again?”

“One personal crisis for you.” He said instantly. “I know that you-“

“Oh perfect, that’s easy then.” James said, getting an exasperated sigh from the navigator and giving his friend a smile in exchange. “Harlan, you up for it?”

“Why?”

James ticked off reasons on his fingers. “A few things. One, we might learn more about this place. That’s small though. Two, we might find what skill points are for, which is mostly just for me and Zhu, but *does* help keep us alive. Three, loot. Especially food. We’ve got one backpack of smushed muffins and bagels left, and that’ll last for a couple days if we need it to, but a supply source would be nice. Alternately, since we know this place makes magic items, something else that keeps us alive. And four...” James looked back at where the others were sleeping, and Sienna was nervously folding her hands around the grip of James’ gun, as she’d been doing for as long as he’d been awake. The girl was shooting them looks when she thought he didn’t notice. “Four. Everyone’s looking at us to save them.” He said. “And in a place like this, with how bad it is, how hurt everyone is getting, I think it’s worth worrying about people snapping. If we’re being proactive, it’s... something for them to focus on. It’s not just waiting.”

“I already agreed with you after two, but nice speech.” Harlan said. “Once they wake up?”

“Yeah.” James said. “Gives me a chance to let my magic blood do its work.”

“...Really?”

“Probably.”

“I have another reason.” Zhu said softly. “I can feel the journey that took us here coming to a close.”

James frowned deeply. “The one that said this was a safe place.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. That’s much more direct.” Harlan looked like they were almost grinning. “We kill everything in the safest building, and move everyone there.”

Zhu rippled their feathers in agreement. “That seems... best.”

“You’re allowed to make tactical calls too, dude.” James told him.

Harlan ignored the moment. “Okay. Let’s move out.”

“Fucking calm down, give me five minutes, I wasn’t kidding about the blood.”

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“I don’t get why we didn’t just take the one that we came through the backyard of.” Harlan said as they and James faced a somewhat rickety fence.

They were on the opposite side of the fence from the house they were going to tackle, having backtracked along the path to a single curved fork, followed it for a minute, and then been told by Zhu that this was where they were going.

The process of leaving the others behind had left James tense and on edge, and there had almost been a shouting match about whether he was abandoning everyone. Leaving his gun behind had helped a little, but not much. Harlan leaving the tiger behind would have helped more if it weren’t for Mauro unhelpfully accusing Harlan of being exactly the kind of cold bastard that would sacrifice a pet to cover their own ass.

Harlan hadn’t said anything in their defense, which... well, James wasn’t feeling great about this as they arrived. Especially since the main reason was he’d wanted to help everyone feel like they could trust him. Zhu insisted their little circle of asphalt was safe, though, and James *did* legitimately think they’d be safer if he could find one or two more magic items.

The fence was on the edge of darkness. James had yanked himself up onto it to look over to the other side, and most of the yard was covered in misty light, but everything farther along the path out here was pitch black. It was a tactically stupid spot to stop, and a further reminder that he didn’t have magic night vision.

He stopped himself from muttering about magic night vision as Zhu answered Harlan. “Because it wasn’t survivable.” The navigator said. “I found you one that you can survive. You’re welcome.”

“We already killed the entire swimming pool.” Harlan protested. “And I can survive more than your boyfriend, you don’t know me.”

“My... what?” Zhu didn’t actually have eyebrows to raise, but got the same effect by shifting an iris of feathers out away from one of his eyes. “No, that is not what is happening here.”

“Oh.” Harlan didn’t look that put out. “My notes just say your romantic life is nonstandard.”

“Mine or Zhu’s?” James asked as he pressed a hand to the wood of the fence. Dark with age, it had some give to it. He supposed that the mist here would cause some kind of long term exposure damage to everything, eventually. As he stepped back and took a readying breath, the group heard a car drive by somewhere in the distance. “Wow I wish it would stop doing that.” James breathed out.

“Yours. Also are we doing this or not?” Harlan asked, standing clear and keeping their pistol in a ready grip, muzzle facing the dead dirt of the ground.

James nodded, and hefted the sledgehammer he’d brought. “Get ready, if the noise attracts anything.” He said. And then flourished the weightless tool, before bringing it around in an explosive motion to crunch through one of the planks. The sledgehammer, weightless to *him*, still shuddered against his palms as the force of the impact vibrated back when he slammed it through the fence’s support.

He yanked the hammer back, and then repeated the motion. He wanted to be precise, but it still took a couple extra hits before he broken the support beams at the top and bottom, and Harlan kicked the section James had gone to town on with a heavy boot, toppling it inward.

“Hear anything?” James asked. Harlan shook their head, and swept past him, ready to shoot anything that moved. “Alright, well, that’s not an *answer...*” He grumbled as he adjusted his grip and followed, keeping an eye out for any loose sticks on the ground.

“We’re not dating, are we?” Zhu asked in a confused voice as James followed Harlan through the empty dirt of the backyard.

“Not the time.” James answered, scanning the building ahead of them. It had a back porch, with what was hopefully sturdier wood than he’d just punched through. Two stories, cookie cutter layout, white siding that bubbled with weird little fungal protrusions. It was dark inside, but James could see tattered curtains on all the windows, catching the thin light from the yard.

The yard itself was utterly empty. Not even pretending to be normal, like the front yards they’d passed several hundred of on their hike through the dungeon. Just dirt, and an instantly suspicious pile of firewood stacked against the porch.

“Are we doing fast or safe?” Harlan asked as they eyed the steps of the porch like they were trying to figure out the best way to navigate the terrain, but also keeping in mind that they might need to shoot the terrain.

James tapped the sledgehammer on the ground with a few heavy puffs of dirt, still trying to get used to how weird it felt to move this thing, and how dangerous it was if he accidentally pulverized his own foot. He kept sweeping his gaze over the back wall of the building. “Hm. Survivable doesn’t mean easy. Let’s do it safe, though since the cost is a crisis for *me* I figure I should go first. That way you- *shit*.” James abruptly changed tone as he saw movement from one of the second floor windows.

“What?” Harlan asked, starting to follow his line of sight.

“No, stop. Don’t look.” James said, turning his own eyes away. “Actually, wait. Can you hit the window without looking? Second floor, far right.”

“Yes.” Came the instant answer.

“Alright. Watch me. When I start to move, kill whatever it is.” James looked back upward, and was unsurprised to see someone watching him down from the upstairs window.

It was a grinning face, looking like it was sketched against the world in white and black, all color draining away around it. It didn’t quite look like static, but the wide, inhuman eyes and the sloughing flesh of the head made it indistinct and hard to pin down where it started and ended compared to the walls and curtains it was peeking through. The kind of face where, if James woke up in the middle of the night and saw it next to his bed, he’d assume he was still in a nightmare. Just looking at it made him feel uneasy, like it was trying to kill him with its eyes alone.

Eyes he could get lost in if he wasn’t careful.

A pair of gunshots shattered glass, and splattered artificial monochrome flesh. James snapped out of the moment he’d been trapped in, and realized that he was *inside* just as the thing hit the floor behind him. Not only was he inside, he was sitting on the edge of a bed, on a threadbare blanket.

Something was wrong, and as he handed off the sledgehammer to Zhu so he could push himself to his feet, his hands made contact with something bony and light under the blanket. James jolted the rest of the way up, hearing the bare wooden floor creak under his feet. The body of the thing in the window was gone; or maybe it never was. There was a spray of white and black sketched static across a dusty old wall mirror and chest of drawers where Harlan had shot it, and it had *absolutely* collapsed, but there was nothing left of it. James couldn’t see well enough with just the thin light from outside and Zhu’s glow, so he rapidly fumbled out a phone

and flicked the flashlight on. "Hit anything that moves." He told Zhu, sweeping it around the room.

Nothing was moving. It was just a bedroom. Old and rotting, wood furniture that bubbled with white fungal bulbs, the place looked like a guest room from his grandma's old house. Though one that hadn't been cleaned in a hundred years. Lace was thin and falling apart, paint was peeling.

"Paladin!" He heard Harlan yell from outside. "You alive?!"

"I'm good." James called back from the window, not turning his back on the room, not matter how much extra vision range Zhu had. The place made him nervous. "Nice shot."

Harlan didn't comment on James having been teleported inside and upstairs. "You want me to come join you?" They didn't wait for an answer, and instead, broke James' expectations by pulling their rainbow parrot tattoo out, and sending it up through the window.

"Hey." James greeted the glittering bird, which perched on the chest of drawers and tilted its head back. He wasn't sure if Harlan was going to try to go through the whole house, which would be bad, because they didn't know if it was clear. But before he could suggest that he just hop out the shattered window and they sweep the place normally, the parrot kept tilting its head back. And back, and back, and back, until it formed a fractal loop of itself; a stretched gap in everything that was too wide and yet still parrot sized.

Then Harlan stepped through it, and the parrot snapped back to normal.

"What the fuck." James and Zhu said in unison.

"What's with the corpse?" Harlan asked as they unwove their parrot into ink and pulled it back under their turtleneck as a tattoo.

"No, hang on. Harlan, what the fuck. You can't... come on. *Come on. Tell me about this shit.*"

Harlan dropped to one knee and started scooping up the dropped bullets James hadn't noticed. "No." They said. "So, the corpse?"

"The..." James swept his light back over to the bed, and winced. The bed *wasn't unoccupied*. Dressed in a set of silk blue and white striped pajamas, a partially mummified body lay staring up at the ceiling with empty eye sockets. "Ah.... That corpse." James was deeply uncomfortable around death, but at least this one wasn't looking like a zombie about to attack them. He walked over, keeping the light up, and pulled the blanket down. "Huh." He said. "This guy's wearing clothes."

“They’re called pajamas.” Harlan’s voice said, accompanied by the noise of drawers opening behind him.

“No, you fucking...” James took a deep breath, feeling Zhu shuffle against his neck. “The nightwear is, like over normal clothes. Jeans and a sweatshirt, though old. Stains and holes and stuff.” The body had its arms folded over its chest, dried and blackened flesh pulled tight against dead bones. One of the arms, though, was obviously damaged; the forearm hanging at a strange angle, like the bone was shattered. “He was killed, then put here.” James surmised. “Wait, is this... is this a dungeon construct? Or is this a normal human who got stuck? Zhu, is this why this house?”

“I don’t know...” Zhu said slowly. “He has a map on him though.”

“A...” James yanked the blankets the rest of the way off, spotted a shattered knee and twisted leg, but also saw the bulge of a wallet in the worn and faded jeans the body was wearing. “Okay. If there’s spiders in here, I’m screaming.”

There weren’t. But despite his recent experience, there was something somehow worse about going through an *old* corpse’s pockets for a wallet than someone who had just died.

They had a driver’s license in the wallet, tucked in a pocket with a folded roadmap, but while the name had been seemingly destroyed, James still managed to get a vital piece of information from it; the style was at least two generations old. He didn’t think he’d ever picked up a skill rank in drivers license templating, but he had a pretty solid guess that this one was from the sixties. Also from Maine. That last part didn’t mean much, though since he’d been teleported into this place, the dungeon could be anywhere, and Maine was as good a place as any. Still in the US, which was sort of statistically unlikely. The wallet also had eighty bucks in old style twenties, which James was pretty sure were real.

He turned to share with Harlan, and found the mercenary dumping shredded clothing and decayed pillow cases out of the drawers and onto the floor. “What the fuck are you doing?” He asked.

“Looking for anything useful. Contexts make the good stuff durable. This stuff is just props.” Harlan said.

“Okay, first off, that’s absolutely not true. Even just here, look.” he held up his arm, and by association Zhu’s, and tried not to think about how Zhu could be holding the hammer that was weightless for the wielded but no one else when Zhu was attached to him. “This thing has paint scraping off and a partially splintered handle. This place enchants crap, proveably.”

“Huh.” Harlan said without inflection. “Okay.” They switched to pulling out old hairbrushes and other cosmetic tools from another drawer, and facing the window while taking a few random swings with each of them, before discarding the items to the pile.



James wanted to scowl, but held it back. Harlan's approach wasn't *bad*, just rapid and uninterested in any kind of detail tools they might find. Which, well, maybe they didn't need a scarf that made you good at expressionist painting right now. So it was hard to fault the approach. He took the dresser while Harlan kept up their own ransacking. The house was quiet, the rotting wood of the door wouldn't muffle the sounds of anything approaching. In fact, it was the silence that made James most nervous.

Homes weren't silent. Buildings creaked and shifted, appliances hummed, pipes could be heard through the walls. Here, there was just... nothing. This was something shaped like a house, but more like an abandoned shack in the middle of nowhere. Except it wasn't abandoned, and that silence couldn't be trusted.

The dresser had socks that were thinner and more full of holes than the worst pair that James owned, which was saying something. He moved carefully, checking for traps just in case. This *was* a dungeon. He was two drawers down and expecting this was going to be nothing, when he found something weird. Tucked in the back of a drawer behind a stack of tattered boxers, was a surprisingly colorful cardboard box of playing cards.

He pulled it out, and held it in his fingers, looking at it like he might somehow be able to sense if it was magic. He couldn't, though. His weird sense of dungeon items seemed to work best on the Office, which might just be confirmation bias. Still, this one was *odd* enough that he pocketed it anyway. "Okay, you find anything?" He asked Harlan.

"No. Also..." Harlan was staring out the window. "I should tell you." They said, like they were declaring the decision to themselves. "Yeah. Kill notifications."

"For the window skulker?"

"No. For my guys outside." Harlan held out their hand like they were reading off the back of their fingers. "Nine kills, two deaths. Something's happening. Someone's taking out my people."

"Shit." James let out a tired snort. "We can't do anything about it."

"No. But I'm telling you anyway. I won't be sticking around when you're people pull us out."

He nodded. "Fair enough. I'm giving you a phone though." James told them. "Let's clear the other rooms up here, then hit the kitchen. Magic knives, maybe."

The other bedroom had two more bodies on a king sized bed, one of which also had an old ID, and both of them had injuries from before their untimely deaths. Still nothing attacked them, nothing made James feel sick, nothing exploded. He was really, *really* hoping the personal crisis had been letting himself get teleported inside twenty minutes ago. But he couldn't

promise himself that, and Zhu literally couldn't confirm it, so he was on edge as they searched the place.

There was a smoking jacket hanging in the room's closet, which James had reluctantly taken. He'd lost his own coat at the start of this, and he was actually kinda cold, but he didn't expect this one to protect him much. If he was lucky, it would do something wizardly.

When they got through with the room and went to check the bathroom, they were all starting to get frustrated by how placid the environment seemed. "I legit expected this place to *try* to kill us." James said as he carefully opened the cabinet under the sink. Harlan was standing by the far wall, looking out of the small frosted glass window over the toilet, checking the street in front of the house as James quickly slammed the cabinet shut before the weird mushroom growths under it could prove to be dangerous. "Well, unless you want a toothbrush, or a shitty shower, I don't think... what are you doing?" He asked Harlan.

"Making notes." Harlan said, not looking up from their magical tattoo notepad. "Whoever I am in the future can make use of what I got off you."

"Hm." James leaned over the bathtub, looking for... well, anything, really. He didn't find it. The showerhead was dripping water, though, tinted red with rust. The bathtub wasn't filling up though, despite being stopped up, which was odd. He kept talking to Harlan idly as he knelt. "On the one hand, I think your constant self-oblivation is kinda awful. But it's also, like, weirdly optimistic of you to help a version of you that you'll never know."

"It's an expression of faith in who I know I can be." Harlan nodded, snapping their notebook closed. "You might even understand. The notes on you are sparse, but you keep acting like a good person, so I may as well trust you."

James hummed again, and reached down toward the bottom of the bathtub. His hand was barely above the rim of it when Zhu suddenly bristled. "Wait-!" The navigator started to yell.

But James was already in motion. And suddenly, he wasn't touching the empty space in the tub, but the *water* it was full of. His eyes widened as, almost in slow motion, he saw ripples expand on the overfull surface of the tub. And then they kept ripping, expanding. The water, so still it had been transparent, ballooned outward like it was exploding. For a second that went on for a very long time, James watched as the liquid that had been compressed into something unnatural unfurled itself.

Then he was slammed back into the sink and its cabinets. A shattering sounded and was quickly muffled by the water as Zhu lost his grip on the hammer and it annihilated the mirror behind them. James found himself gasping as the air was punched out of him, but the reflex just had him breathing stagnant water that was still rushing past to fill the room and shoving him constantly back against the wall.

A muffled thump announced a gunshot, and then another, as Harlan blew out another of the house's windows. James started to get dragged along the floor in the current as the water poured out the bathroom door, but he grabbed onto cabinet handles, his grip reinforced by Zhu's hand, and held his breath as the water kept rushing around them. His lungs burned, but *this time*, he wasn't being choked to death by something alive. This was just water, and if he could hold on long enough, he'd get to breathe again.

With two holes, even if one was kinda small, the flood quickly poured out of the room. James tried to breathe, but found himself unable to make the process *work*. It took three tries, and an increasing fuzziness at the edges of his vision, before he coughed up the water he'd sucked down, and pulled in fresh air. Next to him, Harlan pulled themselves out from the space behind the toilet where they'd been slapped down by the wave, similarly coughing.

James stood, and realized he was getting too good at walking off having the crap kicked out of him. "You good?" He wheezed at Harlan. But he got no answer. "Zhu, you okay?" He coughed.

"I'm alive." Zhu said. "Ow. I might need to sleep again. Ow. Why do you bother with a body when it feels like this all the time?"

"Verisimilitude." James answered, partially stuttering the word. "Harlan. Hey. You alive there?" He started to reach out for them, when the mercenary slowly raised their head from staring at their empty hand.

"Gone." They said.

"What?"

Harlan gave James an empty, lost look. "It's gone."

James pulled his new coat off and started wringing water out of it. Everything he had on was soaked. His *hair* was soaked. Again. He'd only just gotten... well, marginally less damp. And the worst part was, it all smelled like rust. Shaking out the smoking jacket, he grimaced. The pack of cards in the pocket would be *melted* by the... his brain made the connection. "Your notes." He said suddenly.

"Gone." Harlan said. "I wasn't done checking it. I... I..." they were shaking, standing there unmoving while they dripped into the two inches of water still covering the floor. "I... what... do I... it's gone." Their words were getting more frantic.

"Hey..." James started to say, reaching out for them.

Harlan moved like a snake, slapping their hand away and leveling their gun at James' face. "It's *gone!*" They screamed, eyes wild. The manic expression rapidly gave way to something

searching, looking for *anything* in James' own terrified eyes. "Who are you? Really? Was this what you wanted? Was this your play?!"

Slowly, James held his hands up. There was something deeply terrifying about having a gun pointed at you. Mentally, he directed one of his shield bracers to block nine millimeter rounds, just in case, but if Harlan was using their weird memory bullets it wouldn't keep him alive. He was one frantic trigger pull from death, and Harlan's stability had vanished with their notebook. "We've been talking this whole time." James said slowly. "You know who I am."

"A name, a rank, you must be looking for something because memories of you got me seeker bullets." Ah, that was how they'd hit the window while shoved into the wall underneath the window. Their words weren't calming down though. "Everything's gone! Where are the others!?"

"The... we left everyone about a quarter mile away. Along with your tiger. You remember your tiger, right?" James desperately tried to keep his voice from wavering, but he was freaking out. This was not how this was supposed to go.

"Tiger. Right. Tattoo." Harlan nodded, the gun dipping slightly. "Are you a target? What's with the bird arm?" They demanded suddenly.

Zhu shivered along James' arm. "Oh no." The navigator said. "They don't remember us at all."

They didn't. For whatever reason, perhaps in a moment of panic, they'd burned away every memory of James and Zhu into their bullets. Maybe Harlan was used to fighting living things, and had thought the water was hostile and in need of killing, maybe it was just a reflex. It didn't matter. Because in that same moment, their notes were lost to them.

And in James' head, a sudden dark impulse started to form.

"Oh." He muttered. "This is what you meant."

Zhu had said he'd have a *crisis*. Not a mishap or an injury or a getting-shot-by-Harlan. This was about something that he'd have to make a choice on. And, suddenly, he saw a choice in front of him. And it was one he hated.

The violent person in front of him hadn't been especially stable to begin with, but now, they were one step from plunging off an emotional cliff. James absolutely didn't want to fight Harlan, but he also didn't want them to leave. Like it or not, their group needed the extra protection. And, though he didn't like it, he had an idea. A really, really shitty idea. The kind of idea that made him feel like an utter bastard just for coming up with it.

But, while he *could* try to talk Harlan down, calm explanations didn't always work on people pointing guns at him. Unless, of course, he cheated.

“Speak up!” Harlan snapped, stepping forward and leveling the barrel of their gun at James’ forehead. “You’re a dead man anyway, but if you tell me what I want to know, I’ll-“

They were interrupted by the cruelest words James had ever spoken. “I’m your backup.” He said quietly.

Harlan froze, head tilting ever so slightly, eyes widening as the snarl on their face froze. “What?”

James lowered his arms, moving as casually as he could force himself to as he yanked the sledgehammer out of the mirror and gently set it against the wall just outside the bathroom’s door, which was now hanging precariously by a single hinge. “Your backup. You keep notes, but that’s not good enough. Because...” he waved a hand at Harlan. “So you have backups. Because sometimes you’re not stupid. It’s an expression of faith in the future.” He echoed their words back.

“You expect me to believe that?” Harlan snapped. “I only know your *name*.”

“Yeah. That’s usually what you leave yourself with.” James lied, feeling a pit open in his chest. “It’s fine. I don’t know everything, but I can get you up to speed.”

Harlan looked like they were trying to decide if they should shoot James or not. “What’s my name?” They demanded.

“No idea.” James answered instantly.

“It’s Harlan.” Harlan narrowed their eyes.

James gave them a soft frown, eyes sad without needing to act the part this time. “No.” He said. “It really isn’t.”

Harlan stared him down, and then, abruptly, slumped their shoulders and dropped the gun to their side. They made a noise that was something like a strangled sob. “It’s all gone.” They said again.

“I know.” James said. “But right now, we need to get out of here.”

“Right.” Harlan nodded. “Right. Yes. The context. I’m not an idiot.” They glanced at Zhu again. “What’s that?”

“Hi.” Zhu said. “I’m... a friend.”

Harlan frowned. “That seems like a lie.”

“Yes. I dislike you.” Zhu said.

James pulled Zhu out of Harlan’s sight for a second as he flipped the waterlogged coat over his shoulders and slipped it on. “Banter later.” He said. “Let’s go check the kitchen, make sure the gunfire didn’t attract anything that wants to kill us, then... ow.” He paused as he brushed his ear and noticed it was bleeding. “Okay, that sucks. Then we head back.” He sighed as he felt the lump of the deck of cards in the coat’s pocket, and went to pull out what was probably a sodden lump of paper at this point.

But when his hand dipped into the pocket, it met something else. With a confused look, he pulled the object out, and found he was holding a rock. A crystal, really. Cut like a trapezoid, clean edges and glittering facets, a golden color like an agate. “What’s that?” Harlan asked.

James rolled it over in his fingers. “I don’t know.” He said. But as he started to feel a pull from it, as the stone began to quietly but insistently ask him how many skill points he wished to give it, he felt a sense of relief. “But I think it’ll help.” James drew his eyes back up. “Okay. You remember why we’re here? Clear the building, make it safe for a group of survivors about a half kilometer from here. We’ve got one side covered. Let’s got raid the kitchen.”

“Yeah.” Harlan said. “Yeah. Okay.” They took a few splashing steps past James through the bathroom’s ruined door.

“You can wring out your turtleneck you know.” He said, hearing them squish as they walked past. “Might help.”

Harlan snorted. “Sure.” They said, the walls coming back up. The professional front, the tactical view of the world. “Let’s go. I’ll have questions when we’re clear.”

James nodded, and the two of them got back to work. They had a whole kitchen to clear out before they could bring anyone back here.