

*The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind. Especially when we don't know what's going on. -Waymond Wang, Everything Everywhere All At Once-*

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They didn't move right away. Partly to give everyone a breather, partly so James could refill one of his magazines with bullets Harlan gave him that they said were 'alright, but not the most important memories', and partly because the front lawn of the house they were heading toward had stood up and started dragging itself away like a worm. The dripping mud of its underside leaving a trail on the sidewalk as it undulated its way around the twisted cul de sac to one of the homes that had a brick patio, pushed into the space, shivered like a dog shaking itself, and then settled in.

It looked like a perfectly normal lawn. You couldn't even see the exposed teeth after it had come to a rest.

"Fuck that." James had spat out. "Harlan, shoot that lawn." He pointed to the sod on the other side of the thin path they were going to have to take. Harlan snorted and commented that they didn't take orders from James, but then did it anyway. The bullet caused yelps of fear from the survivors who weren't prepared for more gunfire. James, though, was more unsettled by how Harlan had used exactly the same language to tell him he wasn't their boss that they had twice already now.

He was more than ready to believe Nate's assessment of this situation, now. Harlan was *gone*. They'd shot their own memory so many times they didn't even know their own mission statement. It wasn't that they were evil or anything; actually, their lack of a distinct personality seemed to have them tending toward a sort of instinctive human sense of teamwork. But this was such a bad situation, and if he had *any* choice James would have bailed out of this instantly.

"Alright." He said, not voicing *those* thoughts as he saw the lawn fail to react to being aerated. "Let's move. Sienna, you're going to have to walk. Uh... you..." He gestured to the man who'd taken a mouthful of nails to the knee, who was leaning on the one intact mop haft, "also have to walk, but we can split the cart or something later if we carry it through." James offered a hand to help the girl to her feet, while Harlan pulled back the sleeve of their bloodied turtleneck and spun the tiger back into a whorl of colored ink. That *had* to hurt, with the scabs on their arms. "Everyone else... stay close. Except you, Aurelio."

The man who'd been caught in the cloud of tainted mist was rapidly losing the elegantly disheveled style he'd had going when they'd arrived here, and plunging straight down into regular disheveled. "I feel fine." He protested, voice coming out like he was trying really hard to convince himself as well as everyone else. "Seriously, it's fine. It's *fine*."

"I believe you." James lied. "But keep your distance, just to be safe."

“But...”

Harlan spoke up with a voice that came across as cold, despite their melodious tone. “If you get close to anyone, I’ll shoot you.” They told Aurelio without a flicker of concern. “Infection protocols. Stay away, because if the choice is killing you or letting the rest of us die, it’s not that hard.”

Everyone around them showed a riot of expressions as Harlan said that, along with low mutters or uncomfortable pauses where they tried to think of what to say. Zari spoke up first, saying, “You can’t just shoot all your problems! Stop threatening people! What’s *wrong* with you?!” The woman looked like she was ready to try punching Harlan if needed. Or maybe just finally cracking under the stress and collapsing.

“He threatened me first.” Harlan replied, unoffended.

“Okay, Harlan’s emotional problems aside, Aurelio, you’re... you... we can’t...” James faltered. How were you supposed to tell someone they were a walking biohazard?

Johns spoke up, voice still ragged. “You’re an infection vector.” He said. “You *can’t be near us*. Ideally we’d quarantine you for observation for a *month*. But we can’t do that here, and even if it would be smart...”

James caught the glance the EMT shot him. “Even if it would be smart, we aren’t leaving you behind.”

As if just now realizing, or perhaps just now confronting how close to his own mortality he was, Aurelio jerked back in a single twitch of his body, blinking at them wide-eyed. “I... I don’t...”

“We need to keep moving.” James spoke to everyone. “We’re not safe here, there could be more dogs or something worse anytime. We need to move. Sienna, on your feet, we can’t drag that cart across barkdust with you on it.” He waved them all together, and then led the way out of the center of the cul de sac’s asphalt toward the gap between the two houses Zhu had pointed them at. With a hand gesture, he pointed Harlan to watch their flank, and made sure all the backpacks were still with them, all the survivors helping each other walk. He hyperventilated as he moved, accepting being a little lightheaded to recharge his Breath faster in case he needed a hand.

It hadn’t set in for most of them, he suddenly realized. Just how dangerous it was, how almost assuredly dead they were. They’d seen disease and monsters take others, but they were all in shock. It didn’t feel close to anyone. Except maybe Aurelio, now, who was stumbling along behind them and whispering that he didn’t want to die, hopefully far enough away that nothing would spread to them.

A grim part of James' brain said that he should just quietly kill the man before it got bad. They couldn't help him if he collapsed, couldn't even risk getting close even if they *had* something that could help. Aurelio was already dead, this would just be... kinder.

He squashed that thought. They'd lived through at least one plague so far. One more was just another skill point.

He led them forward, pausing before the curb of the sidewalk for only a moment. Part of his brain thought he'd seen it *move*, and he was tempted to shoot it. Instead he kicked it with a sharp strike, and then only proceeded when the rock failed to react.

The home's garage was closed, the outdoor lights were off. The driveway was one of those concrete rectangles filled with small pebbles, giving it a rough texture that James remembered shredding his knees on more than once as a kid. There were still no cars, and no signs of life at all; even the tattered curtains they could see when they got closer and the mist thinned stayed immobile. No faces looked out at them. It was just... a house.

On the right side of the house, passing by the elevated rotting wood of the front deck, a strip of barkdust traced an earthy line to a wooden gate to the backyard. Johns tugged the cart along, picking up the relatively light metal frame to carry it when the gap got tight as they crept through. The space wasn't quite wide enough to walk two by two, so they filtered in single file as the fence separating the house they were up against from its neighbor closed them off.

The air conditioning unit was a concern to maneuver around. Not because it was bulky or even operational, but because James had been wrong earlier about how normal it was. The thing *grew* out of the flaking white siding of the house it was attached to, like a mechanical tumor that still coughed and sputtered as its fan worked to... well, presumably to regulate the interior temperature.

This sort of thing usually fascinated James. It still did, really, even now. What was the *point* of this, his brain demanded to know. Did the dungeon get something useful out of having organic climate control? Was it a threat to them, or was it part of a larger ecosystem? Maybe these things were what made the light-mist, or in some way fed off the houses themselves. Did dungeon creatures crack into these fleshy machines for their own food? Could the air conditioner fight back? It certainly *looked* immobile. But then, from a distance, it hadn't looked like it had rounded edges of glistening skin, or a fleshy web that covered the fan instead of a metal grate.

Harlan kept their gun trained on it the whole time everyone came by, even waiting for Aurelio to pass before breaking eye contact with the lump of flesh machinery.

The gate was simple wood, with a simple latch on the other side that James had to crane his arm over to flip open. Nothing tried to bite him, which was good, but he still had his gun's muzzle pressed to the gate as he did so in case he had to shoot through it. He was *pretty sure*

his Aim would let him hit anything through proprioception of his hand, but it was nice he didn't have to learn.

"Fuck." The quiet man with them exhaled as they saw the backyard. It was covered in *lawn*, which no one was particularly keen on.

"I don't think this is alive." James said, pointing at it with his free hand. "Look, it's half dead." That was probably the least worrying part of the space. The yard was *large*, maybe sixty or seventy feet from the sliding glass door of the home it abutted to the back fence. That fence was a rotting mess of overgrown wood and splintered planks; a large chunk of it had been taken out by something at one point that made it look almost cartoonish, while a whole swath of the right side was absorbed by tangled blackberry vines.

There was a low stone retaining wall halfway across it where the lawn ended and something that might have been an elevated garden started. If it weren't mostly dying weeds and fallen branches. But on the lawn, there was also a swimming pool. A standing one, the kind that could be folded up in the winter and packed away. It was maybe five feet tall, the ladder for it tipped over nearby along with a handful of children's toys and pool noodles. The light sound of sloshing water filled the air here, along with a more herbal tone to the pungent smell that this whole dungeon had.

On the other side of the pool's hard blue plastic, James could see what looked like a shed. The door sat half open on creaking hinges, and he could see a shovel leaning against it, propping it open in what looked like an accidental collapse.

"Is it safe?" Zari asked. And then, when James gave her an incredulous look on pure instinct, she turned bright red and added, "I mean, is... can we... go?"

"Oh. Yeah." James said. "Harlan! Go check out the back fence! Johns, you're with me, everyone else, stay close together, follow after Harlan but don't - dude put the cart down - don't touch anything, okay?"

"What about me?" Aurelio asked from a hopefully safe distance. "Do I..." his face was ashen, though if that was from some sickness setting in or just fear, was hard to tell.

"This side of the gate, still stay back. Maybe sit for a bit."

Aurelio nodded rapidly. "Y-yeah. I can fling that." He said, rushing to grab the gate as James moved through before it snapped shut.

James pointed to the yard's nearby corner as Aurelio came through, and he threw himself into a seated position on the dirt and dying grass without complaint. Still grasping for words to say, James just tried to keep the fatalistically pitying look off his face, and turned to join Johns as they circled the pool and headed for the shed. He got a good look into the big artificial basin as

they got closer, and saw it was still mostly full of water, with a thick layer of green algae on top. "Hm. Don't drink that." James instructed.

There was a brief moment of quiet, and then Johns made a strangled noise as an unexpected eruption of manic laughter threatened to overwhelm him. He held up a hand to James as he doubled over, trying to hold back the abrupt reaction to the absurdity of the whole thing. "Is..." he gasped in a breath of air, "...is that something you do a lot? Drink random shit from places like this? Something you've got *experience* with?"

"...I... don't have to answer that." James said, which got a much less manic and much more honest laugh from the medic. "But also I feel personally called out by that statement. For reasons I will not explain."

"Hey man, you've got the health potions. I'm prepared to take your word on what to drink or not." Johns admitted with a shrug.

"They're not..." James trailed off with a sigh as they approached the shed. "Whatever. No, in the first... the first place like this I found, that set my life on this insane trajectory, my boyfriend and I found a vending machine." He tilted his head just enough to eye Johns conspiratorially. "It's very picky about what currency it takes, and is *very* sarcastic. It's also great. We keep it in our office now."

"You have someone... waiting?" Johns asked. "Shit, my wife. Ex. Whatever. I'm gonna die in here and she's gonna think I just bailed on child support." He rolled his knuckles into his forehead over one eye. "How do you *do* this?"

James grimaced. "Normally it's not this bad." He whispered. "But as for how we do this? We loot that shed, hopefully find something magic that gives us an edge, and then we follow Zhu's directions, and we go one step at a time."

"...what about the kid?"

"Aurelio?"

"Yeah. He's... is he...?" Johns shrugged idly, the uncertainty on his face looking out of place. Like he was used to being in control of his situation.

James didn't have answers. He expressed this by saying "We'll figure it out. Now, pull the door open and step to the side. Like, outward. That way." He took up a stance with his gun ready but aimed low, safely away from the shed just in case something burst out of it when Johns pulled the door open.

He braced himself as the other man reached out and poked the rusted iron handle before nervously grabbing it and yanking the shed door open, hinges squeaking like they'd never

experienced oil in their entire existence. The shovel that was propping the door open dropped to the dirt with a muffled thud, and the inside was revealed.

Nothing happened. It was just a shed. He took a deep breath, but kept his shooter's stance, long since having adapted to a world where "didn't attack me instantly" was in no way the same as "filled with hostile paint cans or something".

James inched forward, toeing the shovel out of the way and peeking inside. There was an old particle board shelf where half the shelves had snapped in half, leaving a pile of loose nails, spray cans, and broken glass on the floor. A stack of bags of compost or potting soil. A rusted old lawnmower and a red gas can. And a hard plastic bucket next to the door with a bushel of various tool handles sticking out of it.

"Looks clear." He said, keeping his gun in a tight grip as he stepped inside. "Is everyone else doing okay?" He asked Johns as the other man followed him.

"They look shook up." Came the reply.

"I'm shocked." James deadpanned.

Johns snorted. "We all are." He said. "Classic case of PTSD in the making. We're being traumatized in real time." He spread one of his hands and stared at it as he raised it over his head to look at the ceiling of the shed. "Thought this would feel different."

James gingerly picked up what seemed to be an aerosol can of lighter fluid, a prospect that sounded absolutely insane and not real. "We'll get you some therapy when we're out." He said. And then, realizing he might sound sarcastic, followed up with "I mean, actually. The Order has contingencies for this sort of thing. We do recovery for anyone caught up in this shit all the time."

"You just called yourself 'The Order' with a straight face." Johns accused him, pulling a wood axe out of the bucket of tools. "That's weird. You're weird. I hate this, and this axe isn't catching on fire or anything. How magic are magic items?"

"Random." James sighed. "Though that thing's gonna be useful anyway. Is that a sledgehammer?" He brightened up as he spotted the weighted tool.

"Sure." Johns settled the axe at his side and hefted the sledgehammer out of the bucket to hand to James, but his face fell as he did so. "Oh. No." He tossed the tool toward James with an idle flick that shouldn't have worked. Especially when the sledgehammer smashed into the far wall and put a hole in it, causing Johns to jump and bite out a curse. "Jesus! What the fuck!?"

“Don’t throw things from dungeons.” James said, modulating his heart rate to put on an appearance of calm. “It’s a thing to keep in mind. Along with ‘nerf guns can be dangerous’. You’ll pick it up.” Or die here, his brain whispered. Ignoring that and not voicing it, he grabbed the handle of the hammer and yanked it out. It caught a little on the rotted wood, but when he lifted it, it felt like moving a cardboard tube, and not at all a twenty five pound tool. “Huh. Neat.” He said, giving the wall a light tap and seeing the wood crack heavily. “Weight’s negated for whoever’s holding it, I guess. Or something like that. This seems imminent abusable, and I know at least one engineer who’s gonna want to use this for space travel.”

“You know weird people.”

“I already said she was an engineer.” James replied. “Also, hey, quick thing. Thanks for keeping it together so far. You’ve been a huge help.”

Johns just grunted, his masculinity not letting him accept the compliment without feeling awkward. “What else am I supposed to do?”

“I dunno, run screaming?” James shrugged. “Panic, do something stupid, and die? You’d be amazed what people do... well, maybe you wouldn’t, you’re an EMT.”

“Fair.” Johns sighed. “Hey, what’s up with the other guy?”

“Who, Harlan?” James shrugged. “I legit don’t know. I think someone trying to kill them is why we’re in this mess, but... I don’t know. We were only *really* meeting for the first time here, and they keep wiping their own memory because they’re an idiot. But they’re a good shot, and they’re not backstabbing us yet, so...” James shrugged. “I’m actually sort of surprised they didn’t just leave on their own. I think they think being around me increases their odds.”

“Does it?”

“Statistically? Yes.”

“That *should* make me feel better, but...” Johns scratched at his beard as he picked up and rolled a jar of some oily substance in his palm.

James snorted. “Yeah. Well. Can’t help there.” He sighed. “I’m gonna check on the others. Test these tools, yeah?” He waved a hand at the bucket the sledgehammer had come from as he ducked under the flaking paint of the doorframe and out into the...

He’d expected it to be light. But it wasn’t; it never would be here, probably. Just the same grey mist putting off ambient light that was so dim it couldn’t even be called a glow. Exactly the same atmosphere out here in this backyard as in the shed. It was disconcerting, frustrating, and was quite possibly intentional on the part of the dungeon that inside and outside had exactly the same feeling to them.

Equally frustrating was that Harlan was currently aiming their pistol at Aurelio, who was frozen in fear pressed against the stained wood of the fence on the other side of the yard, babbling incoherently about how he was going to kill all of them.

James didn't have it in him to run this time. He'd been running toward every crisis so far, and it hadn't helped. He was *tired*.

So instead he just stalked forward, skirting the plastic shell of the swimming pool and trying not to breathe too heavily while he could smell the musty green of the algae. "Harlan, what the fuck are you doing this time?!" He demanded in what was supposed to be an authoritative tone but was undermined somewhat by an errant cough.

"He's threatening people."

"I kill and your skin and eyes!" Aurelio yelled back in a panicked daze.

"Harlan, put the fucking gun down or I will shoot you." James' voice was like cold steel. He was, absolutely, done with this today. His thoughts were only barely catching on the issue at hand, slipping over the world like fingers on smooth glass. But he could still focus enough to know that he was sick of Harlan fucking around. "I'm not kidding, Harlan."

"He tried to approach, and threatened me." Harlan said, pistol still up in a one handed grip as they tilted their head to look at James. "Has this been happening, around here? I should maybe just shoot him now."

James sucked in a long breath through his nose, eyes wide and furious. "Harlan..."

"Blood!" Aurelio yelled.

"Yes, thanks for that needless interruption." James pointed a hand at him. "Sit down. Stop talking, assuming you can understand me."

"Uh... he did just start yelling about blood and murder and stuff." Zari offered. She and the others were standing by the cart in the middle of the dead patch of the yard, among browned weeds and fallen branches. "I... I don't want anyone to shoot anyone! But he's freaking everyone out!"

James watched as Aurelio carefully lowered himself to the ground, both his hands raised in front of him in a shaking terror as Harlan failed to stop aiming a gun at the man. "Harlan." He barked, and with a tiny snarl, the mercenary finally lowered their weapon. "Alright, all of you. Listen up. This is a basic lesson in fucking humanity." James was exactly the wrong combination of tired and angry as he felt himself start rambling. "Dungeons are terrifying places, full of monsters and lethal threats and all sorts of other stuff you can be afraid of.



They're also where half my friends come from. When something seems weird? *Look at it.*" He threw a hand out to point at Aurelio. "If someone is *cowering in fear*, maybe consider that *something is wrong* and not that they're actually trying to murder you! Just, like, look at body language for a second! Consider context! Don't fucking listen to Harlan!" He turned back to Aurelio. "Aphasia, right? You know what you're trying to say and no matter how you try the words don't work?"

Aurelio looked like he was struggling to speak slowly and deliberate. He took a deep breath, his mouth working silently for a minute before he exhaled and enunciated carefully. "Kill you." He said, a look of tortured frustration shooting across his face.

"Great." James said. "If we're *very lucky*, that's the extent of what the gas got you with." He looked over at the surviving civilians, who were still looking like they weren't sure if they should go back to resting, or be busy bolting away. "Everyone please calm down, but also, please make sure you aren't standing next to any of the fallen branches."

Suddenly they were all very eager to look around themselves, tired eyes sparking with renewed suspicion. "Why?!" The injured barista demanded, voice on the edge of breaking down entirely.

"Oh dog balls, there's no trees." Mauro spoke up suddenly, jerking away from the others as he whipped his head around. "Wait, is this bad?! Are we going to die?!"

"Probably." Harlan said, hand still on their gun, even if it was back in their holster that they'd shifted around to be less concealed and easier to access. "Also are *you* going to put down your weapon?" They asked James, seemingly unconcerned.

He glanced down at the sledgehammer he'd forgotten he was holding. "Oh, right. No." Though he did swing it around to leave a divot in the dirt so that he could lean on it. "Alright. Aurelio, same thing as before. You can obviously *understand*, so you just keep distance, and don't breathe on or touch anyone, got it? We're just gonna wait for Johns to catch up, and then we'll follow Zhu's-

His words cut off as the sloshing of water behind him suddenly turned into a rushing splash. Droplets of stagnate dungeon pool water raining down on him, a hefty splash of it slapping against the back of his head and soaking into his ponytail.

James was pivoting when a splatter of algae hit the dead barkdust at his feet where he'd been standing a second ago. But instead of the green and brown sludge just splattering on its own momentum, it sprayed out in strands that started curving back together, and worse, started reaching for James' leg.

It was hard for James to estimate if the screams or the gunshots started first. Ultimately, it didn't really matter. Harlan started shooting over his shoulder, with a callous disregard for actually hitting him, while the others broke into shouts or cries, edging back away from the swimming

pool at the center of the yard. Two of Harlan's shots hit the shield James hadn't adjusted away from nine millimeter bullets, and took a few seconds to pierce in and out with a vibrating squeal like glass being slowly pulled apart. The light, normally bright but not unreasonable, was still shockingly bright against the dim ambiance that James' eyes had gotten accustomed to, and as he finished swinging his body around, he couldn't quite get a good view of what Harlan was firing on.

He did carve the head of the sledgehammer through the algae claw going for his ankle though. It felt almost effortless, like waving around a cardboard tube, but the impact tore the chunk of sludge apart like tissue paper.

Then the shield light faded and James was looking up at the *rest* of the algae.

He'd been just about ready to let the simmering rage he'd been building up go in a rapid series of sledgehammer strikes, but as soon as he realized *why* Harlan was shooting, that anger rapidly shifted to a wide eyed panic. After he'd taken out the first ball of the stuff, he'd more or less already resigned himself to fighting an algae monster, but James had mostly just expected it was the surface of the swimming pool in mass. This thing he was looking at was *not*.

A dripping mass of slimy green vegetation and black rot towered over the yard. Drawn up out of the basin of the pool, the stuff coiled and spun itself into a massed oval form like a bloated maggot, strands of green connecting it like sticky veins to the liquid left in the pool. As James found himself gaping at the sheer size of it, and realizing his new magic hammer wasn't going to do much more than inconvenience the thing, the monster sloshed forward and slammed the upper half of its bulk over the rim of the pool.

The motion snapped him out of his daze, and James kicked himself backward, hopping away as the algae blob lost a coherent form and spilled out like a wave. The smell of it as it burst over the ground was like someone had hit him in the face with a water balloon full of sewage, but that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that everywhere bubbles of it popped, the algae just burst forward in explosions of clawing strands that rapidly pulled themselves back together when they lost momentum.

James wasn't slow, but the speed that the stuff closed the thirty foot gap between them was way faster than he wanted any vegetation to actually move. The hammer in his hands was an unfamiliar weapon, so he just wielded the near weightless thing like a fencing saber, spinning and slashing at the bubbles and grasping tendrils as they got near, trying to make a fighting retreat while the others ran. He had the vague impression of Harlan sprinting in an arc around them, still firing one handed while the mercenary effortlessly reloaded and hopped over the garden's retaining wall. Also he saw Johns run out of the shed at the noise, take one look at the thing, and run back into the building.

It turned out, at a certain weight, it didn't fucking matter what your form was like. A thing that weighed twenty five pounds from the perspective of whatever it hit was more or less enough to pulp any of the bits of the creature that was washing toward him.

But it wasn't one creature. It was a *sludge*. Even as it pulled up a bulbous mound of itself like a wave, something that James could have called it's head, he *knew* that smashing that would still leave the stuff all around him.

"Break's over!" He yelled to the others over the sound of Harlan's useless peppering of the thing with bullets. "Out! Through the gap in the back! Go!" Half of them were already running. The other half needed the encouragement. He just needed to buy a little time. And figure out how to get Johns out.

And throw himself sideways as the algae mass spat a harpoon of itself at his head. He tried to swat it aside with the hammer, but missed entirely with the flailing motion. But then he was on the ground, and the algae a foot from his face lunged forward.

He rolled sideways, ignoring the fresh set of screams from somewhere nearby. Crashed through a dead plant, snapping dry wood under him and feeling his shirt pull in a way that he *knew* meant he'd just lost another garment from his casual rotation. Tucked his legs in as he rolled and ended up in a crouch, and from there, shot forward in a dash that took him to the edge of the algae's position. All of it turned to follow him, the spreading pool of green that was covering the yard tugging along bits of barkdust and in one case a faded red pool noodle as it shifted like a predatory liquid.

"Harlan!" James gasped out as he ducked another incoming javelin as he ran, and then swept his arm out like a fucking anime character to blast apart an arm of the stuff that was going for his neck, the hammer cleaving through it and letting him slip past the bit still in the air that wasn't moving on its own. "Harlan stop shooting!" James yelled.

"If I keep shooting, it'll fall down eventually." Harlan yelled back from the other side of the creature.

"Fuck off! Get Johns and get out of here! I've got this!" He lied.

"Your funeral!" He heard the answer.

James slid to a stop as a thick tendril of green splattered around his left arm, jerking him backward. He hadn't seen that one coming, but now that it was here, he could very plainly see the pulsating lines of black rot moving through the whole mess of sludge. Toward where he was caught, toward *him*. "Nope." He coughed out, tugging his arm up, which cause the stuff pulling on him to stretch like chewed gum. "Nope!" James whipped the sledgehammer around and felt the tension leave as he took out the bulb on the ground that had spat at him. The rest of the algae on him sliding away in a soupy mess that dribbled down his arm as he moved.

He tried to ignore that he'd clipped his own calf with the head of the sledgehammer, and could already feel a massive tense bruise forming where he'd just pulverized his flesh by accident.

"Johns!" James yelled as he tried toggling one of his bracers to 'algae' and hoped that worked. Not the bracer that was stopping Harlan from accidentally taking his vital organs out though. "We gotta go man! Come onnnnnhhhh shit." James skidded to a stop, leaning into the slide and using one hand to slow himself on the ground. That hand also snatched up a rock and flung it in a snap motion toward the tendril that was currently pinning Aurelio to the fence. He'd tried to run, and hadn't gotten far enough before the algae had spread across most of the yard around its spawning pool.

The rock missed entirely, but James wasn't relying on a random throw. He was already running that way, changing course as he spotted Harlan covering his exit and whipped their tiger out into the world to bound toward someone sprawled on the ground behind them, but James didn't have time for that. Aurelio was screaming about blood or something as James crushed the arm of algae that was pinning him. But the stuff didn't let go, bands of it were already stuck to the fence and were constricting Aurelio against the wood. "Don't move!" James pointlessly ordered, and lined the sledgehammer up like a pool cue.

Aurelio screamed something as James pulped the ooze that was holding one arm down by driving the hammer a half inch into the fence behind him, his hand instantly coming up to grab James by the arm and yank him sideways off balance.

James felt his skin start to itch at the point of contact, but also, he realized what Aurelio was trying to do too late as a trio of curling pillars of wet green algae closed around him like a hand. Each of them bigger than he was, and James felt the fourth one that Aurelio had tried to yank him away from swish by on his side, but there was nowhere to dodge this. He whipped the hammer in an arc, but while the force of the blow parted the mass like a knife through water, just like water it flowed back together after.

And then it slammed down over James' crouched form, and everything went dark. He struggled, trying to get momentum to swing, trying to keep his eyes and mouth closed, trying to break his arms or legs free and find purchase on the ground as he was lifted up and lost all sense of what direction was down when he started to get shaken around like a rag doll.

Then something touched the skin on the side of his throat. Something that, even through the enveloping embrace of the algae, James could clearly feel. A putrescent texture and a burning chemical sting, he thrashed and let out a muffled scream as the thing pushed against him, and then *slid into his skin*, like it was jello being sucked through a straw.

Pain bloomed in James' throat, all across his neck and spreading down his shoulder. Not the pain of being thrown around and suffocated; that was already happening and also he was really hard to actually damage just by shaking around. This was something else; like his flesh was

boiling from the inside, a splotch of agony that started from the point of contact and spread out to cover from his collarbone to his cheek.

Another one of those *things* touched him, this time just under his chin. James almost screamed reflexively but resisted the urge to open his mouth. Instead, he focused and relaxed his lungs as best he could, before letting go of his mental control of the purple orb that made his breathing practically dangerous. A single huff of his remaining air shot the offending bit of rot away from him, and punched a hole in the algae besides, through which James sucked in a breath as fast as he could before the relatively clean air was closed off to him.

He couldn't move. He was trapped and pinned and this thing was *killing him*.

And then something new splashed against his face. A liquid with a pungent and dominating butane smell mixed with the organic sludge that had grabbed him, some of it running in a line down his nose and into the corner of one of his pressed closed eyes. It burned anyway.

The algae monster must have thought so too, since it recoiled away, and all of a sudden James was flung sideways to slam the small of his back into one of the flat rocks of the retaining wall. The air left his lungs and he saw spots in his vision, but as he forced his eyes open and tried to wipe the gasoline off his face without getting it in his eyes, he could see why. Johns had come running out of the shed and had flung the gas can - cut open for maximum spray - all across the thing. As James watched, the medic followed it up by flinging one of the jars of oil he'd grabbed as well, the glass shattering on the ground and adding more chemical to the creature.

James tried to say something, but couldn't get his jaw to work. He also realized he hadn't taken a breath in about two minutes, which might be a problem. Forcing his throat open and sucking in air was a struggle that was all the worse for the panic he felt at not being able to breathe, but once he got the process started, he wobbled to his feet in time to see Johns trying to get a lighter to spark in front of a spray can.

He croaked out a warning to the man, but wasn't in time to tell him about the algae that was bounding along the ground toward his side, a thick stream of it splashing from point to point in rapid arcs before it jumped up and enveloped Johns' hand entirely. James flicked his vision around and spotted the sledgehammer ten feet away from him, haft standing straight up under its weight. He started crawling toward it, but was interrupted by an almost cheerful shout from Harlan.

"Fire in the hole!" James turned his head just in time to see the mercenary cock an empty hand back like they were on the pitchers mound, and then a small puddle of red ink pour off their skin that quickly turned into actual fire. Well, something fire-adjacent. It looked like fire.

The words James wanted to say were "Why the heck does Harlan get a fireball and I can't even get a health potion?" But he didn't have the breath, focus, or time to even start talking before

Harlan flicked their hand forward, and the ball unfurled into a burning chain that they effortlessly whipped across the back of the algae mass.

The mass that was drenched in old gasoline and oil.

It didn't scream; algae didn't make any noise, obviously. Though James actually found that kind of surprising. Most dungeon things screamed in weird ways. What the whole mass did do was to curl outward from the fire, like it was trying to escape. Arms of rotting verdigris reaching out like desperate tentacles from where the fire was consuming it, before stiffening as the heat blackened it from the inside out.

In seconds, most of it was crumbling into flaky ash, with the bits that were still green and alive writhing as they tried to pull themselves back together. James made it to his new hammer and leveraged himself to his feet, then started pulping the bits that were still moving, but like before, he couldn't actually *kill* any of them and the slimy vegetation just reformed and kept moving, albeit a lot slower.

"Come on." James rasped out as he brought the hammer down with a splat on the bulging dome of algae that was still wrapped around Johns' ankle. "I hate this place so much." He punctuated the words with a manic giggle, the adrenaline and shock of his near-death catching up to him as he stumbled away.

Harlan raised eyebrows as James moved past. "You good?" They asked, skirting away from Aurelio as he stumbled over the retaining wall and ran to join the others, while Johns just took ragged breaths as he dragged himself along with James.

"No." The word came out as a pained noise, almost a whimper. "Ssssomthing in my neck. Hurts." James said the word as the understatement of the year. It felt like the time he'd splashed himself with oil from a deep fryer, only the pain wasn't going away. There was nothing to wash off, nothing to put burn gel on. Just the blood and tissue and muscle seeming to writhe inside him, his nerves feeling *all* of it. "Fuck." James clapped a hand to his neck as he felt bits of his body start to flow toward a single point of pain. Chunks of his flesh dissolving and pulling together where the thing had infested him and hardening into a single solid mass that hurt so bad his vision swam and he ground his teeth together like he could somehow drive it away.

And then it was gone.

Johns was flipping James over, as he found himself on the ground, looking up at the sky. But the pain was abruptly gone. "Shit, you're going into shock." Johns' voice said.

James batted aside one of the man's hands from his neck. "Surprisingly, no." He said with what would have been an easy joking tone if he hadn't coughed in the middle of it.

[Survivor : Shallow : +3 Skill Points]

“Wh... what the fuck?” Johns asked. “No, man, there’s a chunk missing from your neck and one of your pecs.”

“It’s sealed, don’t worry.” James let out a relieved breath, fingers prodding at the missing flesh as he rose on unsteady feet and tried to shake the barkdust out of his ponytail. “I’m immune to... *shit*.” He looked ahead of them to where Aurelio had just collapsed, and Harlan was contemptuously walking past their prone form. “Oh come on!” James stumbled forward, Johns trying to set a hand on his back to help as the two men ran for the downed survivor. “Hey. Hey, Aurelio.” James rolled him over, motioning Johns away. “He already tapped me, stay back.” James told the EMT. “What’s going on?”

Aurelio looked up at him, his glasses bent at an odd angle from either the fall or the fight, hair soaked with bits of unmoving wet algae. “Break and undo the hate you.” Aurelio gasped out in a staggered aphasia-induced voice, holding out his arm to James.

James gave a brief nod as he saw a blotch of red flesh that was currently reforming itself under Aurelio’s caramel skin. Turning into a cancerous lump as the thing the algae creature had infected him with melted and rearranged the human body into something painful and probably lethal. “Good.” He said, heart still hammering as he fished through his pockets for one of the purple orbs he tended to carry with him. He knew he had a few on him, but, worryingly, he could only find *one* of them. The relief that he had a solution to this rapidly shifted to panic that the algae monster might have eaten the others. “Here.” He said, dropping the orb into Aurelio’s grasping hand. “You just need to- yeah, that.”

“...cruel blue and tendons?” Aurelio asked, pain clearing from his eyes as the artificially induced tumor vanished instantly.

“Yeah, I’m a wizard. Enjoy not having to worry about cancer if we get out of here.” James sighed, not looking forward to however long he was going to have to lose control of his speech when this shared infection caught up to him. “Alright. Let’s go. Don’t step on the branches, I think they’re like bear traps, that one’s covered in blood.”

They *were* like bear traps, as James found out when they got out and saw that Zari had tripped one and was now being supported by the tiger as the flesh holding her right foot on was little more than a ragged mess of meat. Her face was puffy and red from openly crying; if she hadn’t already wiped her makeup off a half a day ago it would have been a mess. Johns got to work on her ankle while James listened to the others describe the way it moved like it was alive. He sighed, shot a glance at Harlan, and gave a suggestion, then the group waited just past the breach in the fence as Harlan hopped back over with a grim grin.

The repeated gunshots were a good indication that the things were alive, and that Harlan had found an excellent way to refresh their ammo.

James took the time to scan the area out of the backyard, and to not feel hope as he heard another distant engine noise. Dead dirt and one rectangular patch of grass in the middle of nothing before a thin strip of paved asphalt wove through the terrain. Unlike the other side of the neighborhoods, this one seemed to have *elevation*, and he could see in the direction Zhu had told them to go, that the path rose up and curved around a hill before dropping down the other side out of sight. In the dim light, James could see a few other rectangle patches of sod, which he just fucking knew were alive.

He toggled his bracer back to 'bite', since it had done fuck all to stop the algae monster.

"Zhu, are you awake?" He whispered, and heard his voice wobble to something that was almost a sob. There was no answer. "Zhu?" James asked again, feeling hot tears in the corners of his eyes. He welcomed the sensation, if for no other reason than it would help get the fucking gasoline away from his eyeballs. "Zhu, I really hate this place." James said softly, to no one.

In the distance, the mist swirled. On the other side of the footpath, darkness fell, and James saw more houses outlined in the orange glow of streetlights that flicked on as their natural hunting environment began. Somewhere, something pretended to be a car. And all around, a thin breeze brought a sickly floral scent to them, unchanged here on the other side of the street.

James leaned on the sledgehammer he'd brought with him, dipping his head to let tears drop to the dirt, before he wiped his nose on his sleeve, regretted it instantly as it was just covered in dried dead algae, and then snorted out a laugh.

He was bruised, exhausted, infected with something, couldn't talk to his friend, trapped, and for some reason, had decided to be responsible for everyone else here.

And that last part was all that mattered. He had a job to do.

James pushed himself back to his feet, slapped a hopefully determined look on his face, and turned back to the others. "Alright." He said. "We've got more walking to do. Stay off the grass. Also, I'm going to start talking gibberish sooner or later."

"What, only just now?" Harlan asked, rejoining them and tossing James a magazine.

"If I thought you were kidding, you know, we could be good friends." James said. "Let's get the cart set up, and get moving."