

*“Under the present brutal and primitive conditions on this planet, every person that you meet should be regarded as one of the walking wounded. We have never seen a man or woman not slightly deranged by either anxiety or grief. We have never seen a totally sane human being.”*  
-Robert Anton Wilson-

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“He’ll wake up when he wakes up.” James said, crouched down in the middle of the road. He didn’t sit. His legs felt like they were on fire; he’d stretched, because he’d just gotten into the good habit of it, but his increasingly active lifestyle and all his magical exercise boosts didn’t actually mean he was inexhaustible. Especially when he’d given the exercise potion to everyone else and not taken any himself. Three points in Endurance actually did get him a lot closer to inexhaustible, but it didn’t mean his legs weren’t screaming at him, or his feet weren’t feeling like he’d just spent eight hours hammering them into paste. Which left him not sitting as he answered the question, because he was pretty sure if he sat down, he’d just flop onto the pavement and lay there while something ate him, too tired to get back up.

The intersection was where a bend in the street they’d been walking was crossed by another stretch of pavement. To one side, James could make out through the thick luminescent mist a sloped cul de sac. To the other, just more road. More houses. More *nothing*.

They still hadn’t gone into a house, or even past one. Slipping through to a backyard or to see if there was anything on the other side of the aggressive repeated architecture just seemed *too dangerous*.

James hadn’t really noticed it, but the survivors - Harlan still didn’t count - were all... not doing well. Emotionally. He had a little emotional armor mostly from his experience, and from knowing what he needed to do. These people were, as soon as they stopped for a break, *falling apart*. It was likely none of them noticed, but they kept *close* to each other as they waited just before the intersection. Jittery motions and nervous looks fired off at any noise at all came from all of them, and if it weren’t for how tired everyone was, he was sure they’d be snapping at small slights.

They were afraid, and tense, and there wasn’t much he could do about it right now, because he was exhausted too. And his arms hurt. The scabs from the first disease itched like someone was randomly jabbing him with a fork, and it didn’t help that he absolutely didn’t feel safe taking off the shield bracers.

Someone said something, and James opened his eyes. He’d almost dozed off there, crouching here. Harlan was talking to him. “What?” He asked blankly, looking up at the unamused face of the arcanelly ambiguous mercenary. “Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“You trying to joke all the time makes you sound like a real asshole here.” Harlan told him.

James closed his eyes again. "That's the third time you've said that to me." He said, trying to decide if this whole transient memory thing Harlan had going on was sad, or aggravating. "Actually. Is this why you don't have a good sense of humor? You probably just have one joke that you know works on your... squad mates I guess? And then you tell that joke over and over, and they laugh every time, and it feels like a comforting touchstone even though it's always new to all of you." James felt himself starting to ramble, but his brain wasn't doing a great job keeping his thoughts contained. "I bet movie night for you is fun. You get to watch things for the first time multiple times. Mmh, but then, you don't get to do critical analysis of movies that well, do you? Okay, yeah, that probably sucks. Hey, how do the bullets work, anyway? Like, can you feed it *any* memory? Is it just you? We've got some time, I wanna ask while I can." He waved a hand and cut off Aurelio's attempted joke about bullets working like bullets. "I mean the magic bullets Harlan has, don't interrupt their explanation."

With a face like a very confused stormcloud, Harlan looked down at James. "I wasn't going to give an explanation." They said. "I was asking—"

"You should." James cut in. "This is actually important, and could keep us alive." Harlan blinked, and stopped talking entirely, making short motions to shift their head around to look at everyone in the small group, before looking back to James with a blank expression. "So?"

"So what?" Harlan said.

"So... could you explain the bullets?" James prompted. "Since we have some time while we wait for Zhu to wake up? It's not like I can rush him." There was something about the way Harlan just let conversations die that was familiar to him, but he couldn't quite place it.

Harlan shrugged. "Since you answered my question about the map." James didn't remember doing that, but okay. "Anyone can use them. Just focus on what you're giving up, or it takes the most recent relevant memory. Routines are bad; it'll use them, but take the whole thing, and it doesn't do anything special. We've got a few 7.62 mags that amplify specific events or emotions across a whole load, but generally you're looking at one thought per bullet." Harlan flicked the magazine out of the pistol James hadn't seen enter their hand, and started running a thumb down the loaded bullets. "You can get a feel for it, eventually. Irritation, annoyance, humor, worry, a lot of these would be good for a lockdown spread, but it's generally better to have anything over nothing no matter what. Oh, also, if you have one loaded, and you kill something, it makes more. Don't ask why."

"Yeah, I gave up on asking why a long time ago." James sighed.

"Excuse me." Milly said, the leaning in on their conversation and pulling her red cardigan tighter as she did so. "If magic is real... why did you use it to make bullets?"

James gave a depressed laugh. "Oh. Oh, no." He shook his head. "We didn't make anything—well, *Harlan* didn't make anything. I've made some magic, sort of. We're just scavengers

though, in the grand scheme of things. Places like *this*” he waved his arm in an arc through the thin mist around them, “make magic. We just find it, and try to figure out how to use it to fix things. Or *kill people I guess, Harlan.*”

“Stop judging me. You’ve done worse.” Harlan posited.

“I absolutely have not.” James snorted.

Milly cleared her throat with matriarchal poise. “Could you fire a bullet that someone else had put a memory into?” She asked. “Because I have a worthless clod of an ex-husband who I would not mind losing pieces of.”

“Sure.” Harlan said, sending a nine millimeter round through the air with a flick and a *ting*, a simple throw that the tired woman on the other end still fumbled to catch properly. “Don’t give it too much though.”

“Hold up.” James started to say.

But he didn’t get there before Milly scrunched up her face, stared at the bullet she’d been given, and made a low hum of concentration. There was a brief dance light from her hand, a line of thorny red fire that crackled like electricity as it wove around the bullet before being tugged inside it. Then she let out a long breath, and let her shoulders slump.

“That can’t be safe.” Mauro offered.

“What did you... give up?” Aurelio asked, James pointing a finger at him and nodding to echo the question. Harlan gave a huff, and Aurelio caught on quickly. “Oh. I guess you wouldn’t...”

“I do feel... lighter, though.” Milly said. “Thank you.” She handed the bullet back delicately, handling it like she was worried it might go off at any second.

“Pretty good one.” Harlan admitted, tucking it into a spot on their belt. “At a certain point, you don’t have big ones like that anymore. This’ll probably kill anything under a few thousand pounds outright.”

James tried and failed to hide his concern. “Uh... wat.” He made a pointed coughing sound. “That seems... dramatic.”

“Oh, please. I’m sure you can do worse.” Harlan said.

“I really can’t.” James answered honestly. “My specialty is making new people feel welcome in our world, not heavy ordinance.” He paused, and glanced at Milly, who was wearing a thin smile on her face, her lipstick outlining the emotion in faded red. “Oh.” He said, struck with a sudden thought. “That’s why...” James let the thought trail off unspoken. But it was hard to unsee,

once he'd made the connection. There was a reason that Harlan was so reckless with pouring even recent memories into their bullets. There was a method to their madness.

Or rather, there was a method to their addiction.

Milly had just given up what she must have thought was one of the worst memories of her life, and even not knowing what it was, she was clearly okay with it. More than okay. She was *happy*, in a situation where they were all stressed and afraid. How long would it take someone, chasing that feeling, to get down to just a pruned foundation of a personality, a notebook of suggestions from their past self, and a desire to feel *anything* like it again?

He was pretty sure Harlan knew. His mind danced with ideas of how that kind of life would be lived, how that sort of spiral into self-annihilation would change a person. But he didn't have much time to process that. And he probably wouldn't until he was out of here.

This place just had too much pressure to make him comfortable getting too lost in thought here. Like the fact that the mist was thinning from back the way they came. Normally, something that would be *good* for visibility. But here, the only light came from the mist itself, and as the breeze moved it in currents, the street the group had passed over started to darken.

"That can't be good." Zari said, standing up with James. The girl tried to make it sound confident, but James knew that voice. That was the voice *he* used when he was bullshitting.

"No it cannot." James said, drawing his pistol and double checking it again for the hundredth time. "I should have brought more weapons."

"I should have brought a real gun." Harlan said, shifting position to the side of the group as the darkness spread.

The civilians backed away. "What do we do?!" Aurelio didn't do a very good job keeping the fear out of his voice. "Aren't we supposed to wait here for directions?!"

"Yeah." James said. "This is fine. We've got some time, and there isn't anything..." He just decided to shut up as the light swept out of a whole two block section of the distance they'd covered. And, one by one, the streetlights they'd past flickered to life. A warm and inviting orange glow cast down onto the ground in puddles of light.

From out of the darkness around one of the streetlights, a group of figures stepped into view. Even from this distance, everyone could hear them laughing and talking, even if they couldn't make out the words. Or maybe they weren't words at all. The figures were all of different heights, but clearly wearing hooded sweatshirts, their faces concealed. And of the ten to fifteen humanoid shapes, maybe four of them were... dragged along, James thought might be the best way to say it. They lagged behind, and only moved in jerks and spurts when the mob moved far enough forward.

“Oh, fuck these things.” He said, and raise his gun to take aim. It was a long shot, but he was pretty sure he could make it. Next to him, Harlan took a similar shooter’s stance, quirking an eyebrow at him. “Okay, *now* you can shoot things.” James said.

“What do you mean?” Harlan asked.

“Oh my god, I hate you so much.” James zeroed in on the lead hooded figure. But before he pulled the trigger, the crowd hit the edge of the light, and stepped into the dark again. He waited for them to emerge into the next spot of illumination, but they didn’t. “Everyone, cover your ears. And get behind us. Watch the intersection, don’t let us get jumped.”

Then the crowd stepped into view again. On the other side of the street, half the distance between them and James gone. He was *pretty sure* they hadn’t teleported, but it was really hard to tell when the darkness outside the light was so pitch black.

He adjusted his aim, and opened fire. Next to him, Harlan did the the same. Each of them taking two slow ranging shots, before the next three bullets went for headshots on the various figures. Bodies jerked and slumped, but didn’t fall, as their gunfire cracked through the otherwise quiet neighborhood air, and then after they stopped shooting, the sound of the crowd of figures laughing and talking came back again just like it had been.

“No kills!” Harlan announced, just as the mob of laughing hooded humanoids exploded into motion, rushing their direction with a sudden burst of speed.

“Lost em!” James added his own voice as he failed to track the group into the darkness. He *knew* he’d hit some of them, but none of them had gone down. Which meant whatever they were, they were alarmingly durable. He grit his teeth as he got a really bad idea, and took his steadying hand off his gun to dip it into his pocket and grab the empty memory bullet that Harlan had given him.

Before he could do anything, there was a chorus of screams and yells from the others, and Harlan barked out something else. “On your left!” Their voice was direct, and James reacted instantly as the words cut over the other voices, spinning ninety degrees and dropping into a crouch as one of the sticky orb dogs rushed out from between a fence and one of the houses. It rushed him faster than he could realize he was being charged, but deflected off the shield bracer’s dome when it got five feet away and lunged for him. Rusted nail teeth scraping along the light as James lined up a shot and splattered the foul smelling insides of its ‘head’ across the street.

Then the light went away around him. The wind peeling the mist away and leaving him in the dark. He could see the spaces around him that were still lit, but he couldn’t see the ground under his own feet. He rose as steadily as he could anyway, and started taking slow steps

backward, trying to force his eyes to adjust to the dark as he walked himself backward toward everyone else.

He felt the air move an inch from his skin, and threw himself to the side as something tried to grab him. Or hit him. Or eat him. Probably not that last one, his bracer had three charges left and would have stopped it. He didn't have the focus to switch his third bracer on its own, so he just trusted his ability to shoot before he got grabbed. Letting his Aim extrapolate position based on arm length, speed of movement, and some impulse that he was pretty sure was precognition at this point, James brought his gun up and squeezed off shots one at a time into the dark.

Then he ducked, pushing his enhanced reaction time to the limit as something tried to rip his head off. He kicked out and hit something that *felt* like a knee, and suddenly knew he was surrounded. Laughter and mimicked words suddenly blossomed to life around him, and he felt his blood go cold even as he shot two of the sources.

He couldn't see. He could feel grabs coming, he could even react to it, but his body was sore and tired and didn't obey him perfectly even on a good day and he couldn't keep doing this.

Though he was pretty sure Harlan shooting at him wasn't making it better. The first few shots from Harlan he didn't even know if they were aimed his way. But he knew for sure when one hit the shield of his third bracer, still set to 9mm.

And James was reminded that the weird fucking bullets the Wolfpack used didn't play well with his defenses.

The dome of protection whined and screamed as the bullet hit it. And for a few seconds, James was surrounded with light, and he could see. The hooded figures - none of them had faces, there was nothing human under the cloth - were surrounding him in a cluster and seemed to be flinching at the flare.

Time seemed to crawl to a standstill. James breathed in. There were sixteen people, half of them slumped like they were sleeping on their feet. But they weren't people; they were sweatshirts over twisting wads of coiled red flesh. And across the ground, lines that looked like exaggerated exposed nerves fed from each of them into other figures; each of the hooded things was a node in a network. Like a walking mind. No wonder none of them had gone down; they weren't people, they were more like limbs. Maybe. James didn't have time to consider if he was wrong. He saw the one that was the 'center'. Not in the middle of the pack, it was off to the side, innocuous. He'd hit it a few times already.

James breathed out, and let the Winter's Climb magic manifest him a helping hand. With one hand, he grabbed the bullet Harlan had thrown him while his other ejected the mostly empty magazine from his pistol. He was already loading the round as he grabbed his memory of being

told that Research may have devised a space elevator and was doing some tests and crammed it down into the tiny murderous seed.

As the bullet that had clipped his shield punched through and zipped off into the dark, the whine of the shield bracer was replaced by Zhu *screaming*. Then James finished slapping the magazine back into place, and, feeling his vision going spotty in the sudden darkness and with his lack of oxygen, leveled it at where he knew the central thing was, and shot it.

There were no special effects from Harlan's bullets. Not when they were fired, anyway. Instead, there was just a series of thuds and a sudden lack of anyone trying to kill him as the whole cluster of bodies dropped away, and a rattle of metal on pavement along with the meatier sounds.

[Killer : Shallow : +3 Skill Points]

"Zhu." James gasped out. "Hey. Zhu. Hey." The navigator was roiling in James' mind, the screaming turning ragged as James' own words became panicked. He pushed himself to move, trying to talk as he walked back toward where the light still was. "Hey, talk to me. What's going on? What happened? Zhu?"

The navigator didn't stop screaming as he layered speech over the cry of pain. "Hurtsssss." He hissed in James' thoughts. "Why?! Why?!"

"Why what? What happened?" James felt a shared phantom ache from where something had torn a chunk out of Zhu. Not a big one, but something abrupt. "What's going on?" James asked as calmly as possible, which wasn't really that calm at all.

"You did *something* that—" Zhu stopped talking with words and drew an arc of an orange arrow in James' vision. James, exhausted but still paying attention, lurched to the side just as something rushed past them, fleshy brown and green orbs of a body barely visible in the glow of Zhu's stabilizing projection.

The navigator swept the serrated tail that he had sideways as James dodged, and James added a pair of mundane bullets to it, which caused the dog thing to sprawl in a wet pop onto the road as it bounded into the lit grey mist. But it wasn't the only or even the first of the creatures to pour out of the surroundings and toward the survivors. James caught a glimpse of them beset as he turned his back to the dark and rushed toward the light of the intersection.

A mental tug that wasn't meant for him washed past, and three of the pack of the pustulent dogs pivoted to charge Harlan, who walked out of the dark off to James' left with a rationed calm, their handgun held out steadily, putting shots into the creatures that mindlessly charged them. But those weren't the only dogs.

Two more were running at the group of survivors from the sides, and unlike James, no one else here had the reflexes to form battlefield strategies on the fly. James tried to shoot the one that was on a straight line for the cart with Sienna still sitting on it, the girl screaming as she threw herself backward when she saw the threat, but still barely able to stand. He knew he could hit it.

Which was why it was bad when his gun clicked empty, and James swore loudly as he realized he hadn't been counting bullets.

He started running, already knowing he was too late, ignoring the continued shooting and wet howls from Harlan's direction as he raced to try to save *anyone*.

The dog slammed into the cart, the tiger still harnessed to it skidding sideways in startled feline terror as it was dragged along. Then the dog thing opened mouths on two of the orbs that made up its roughly quadrupedal body, and snapped forward at the already wounded girl.

Her friend nailed it in the head with a club made out of a chair leg.

Not hard enough. James knew firsthand how hard it could be to commit to *hurting* something, even when it was trying to kill you. But the blow knocked it back slightly, and a second later snapped at her, causing Zari to scream and weakly fling the club at it as she jerked backward. But that second it took to reposition and shake itself, some of the balls of flesh along its flank vibrating as it did so, James reached them.

James could run *very* fast when he needed to.

He hit the dog with a flying tackle, shoving off the ground with both feet, no longer containing his boosted acceleration as he slammed his knees into the side of the creature hard enough that bits of it squelched and ruptured under him. With his right hand, he grabbed at one of the orbs, fingers sinking into loose leathery skin as momentum carried him forward and he wrenched his arm practically out of his shoulder socket imparting some of that momentum onto his prey.

His left hand and the icy limb he was still working with slapped his last half-empty magazine into his gun as the dog rolled across the street and collided with the sidewalk in the direction it had come from. Then James shot it.

Behind him, someone screamed again, and he whipped around, seeing the man who hadn't given him his name swinging like he was going for a home run as the dog savagely ripped a mouthful of flesh out of the collapsed form of Milly. This strike was meant to *hurt*, and it popped one of the orbs before the dog howled with a sticky voice and tried to scramble forward onto him.

The man backed up, putting Aurelio in a good position for a hit, but James could already see the him freezing up. These people *weren't fighters*, as evidenced when another dog came running out of the darkness for them, claws clicking with hostile taps on the street when there weren't



gunshots or screams drowning them out, and Mauro and Aurelio turned and ran for the intersection.

“Turn right!” Zhu shouted at them as James rolled sideways, put himself in a prone shooting position, and took out the incoming threat with one of his last shots. He was pretty sure he had four left. “Right! Into the cul de sac!” The navigator’s voice was thick with pain and fear, but James could feel him pulling directions out of the air around them. A kind of vibration to match the kick of the gun that was leaving his palms feeling like he’d just sandpapered them. “James, we need to go! You two, go! Follow them! Right, right!” Zhu cast a feathered hand in the direction of the running survivors, pointing the two girls and the tiger that way as Zari helped Sienna back onto the cart they’d righted. “Go!”

“One more.” James said, staggering up to a knee, then pushing himself further to his feet with a heavy breath. “Hey, REM! On your left!” He grabbed the mop pole out of Aurelio’s hands as he dashed by the paralyzed man. He was a little too late, as the dog caught a mouth full of rusting nails on the unnamed man’s leg just over his knee right before James got there. He screamed, swinging down over and over with his club, as James brought the pole he was holding around in a sweeping arc, imparting as much force as he could as he slammed it into the dog’s flank.

The pole snapped in half, the crack of the impact half wet flesh and half wood breaking. James pulled it back on the rebound, finished pulling it into splintered halves, and jammed both of them into the dog that was still savaging the other man’s leg. It was messy and didn’t work perfectly and James’ hands hurt, but he drew blood, and the creature let go of its target to try to bite him instead.

[Killer : Low : +1 Skill Rank]

Finally, finally, it collapsed and died as James drove one of his makeshift stakes into its mouth. He decided he was going to fucking kill whatever thought this counted as ‘low’. And then he pointed in the direction of the intersection. “Go.” He hoarsely muttered. “Catch up. We’re right behind you. Johns, where’s Johns?”

“Here.” The EMT’s voice was tight and professional as he crouched over the prone form of the older woman. “She’s lost a lot of blood.” He said clinically. “Lacerations and puncture wounds. She’ll need surgery.”

James staggered the few steps it took to get to them, looking down at where the calm man was trying to carefully put a tourniquet on the arm of a figure that was staring up at the grey sky with empty eyes and a face half torn off. “Johns.” James croaked out.

“Is anyone coming?” Johns asked, flinching slightly as Harlan shot the last dog that was on them. “How long until a bus gets here?”

“Man. Come on.” James didn’t know what to say, or what the hell he was supposed to do with someone who had apparently decided he’d had enough of reality right now. “We’ve gotta go.”

“I can’t leave-“

“She’s gone.” James’ voice threatened to break. “Please, she’s gone, and we have to *go*.”

“I... but...” The EMT looked down like he was only just now paying attention to what he was doing. “Oh.” He said. “Well fuck.” The words came out so simply. The same way a person would comment on burning dinner, or dropping their car keys. “We... need to go.” He latched onto what James said.

“Yeah. Go grab Aurelio before he wanders the wrong direction. Head right, into the cul de sac. I’m gonna get Harlan and catch up.” James didn’t want to do that. He wanted to go sleep for a month, preferably in the bath under the Lair where he could be warm and have less *goo* on him. But he still hauled Johns up and the two of them split past each other. “Harlan!” James sighed in relief as a curl of mist moved past and illuminated the professional soldier crouched next to the pile of hooded bodies, sweeping up bullets. “Come on!”

“Yeah, I’m done here.” Harlan answered, hurrying back over. “Don’t forget your mag.” They said, pointing to the ground near one of the splattered bodies. Just a casual little comment as they jogged past. “I heard the ghost, I’ll take point.” Harlan moved like they’d been reenergized. Or maybe they were just in better shape than James was.

“Give me some of the...” James couldn’t even get his words to come out right, and Harlan ignored him as they moved. So he just sighed and started moving back, eyes open for any more enemies. “Zhu, are you okay?” He asked as he walked.

“I am not.” The navigator said. “What did you *do*?”

“I fed a memory into a bullet. Bad idea, obviously.” He said. “Don’t suppose you know what it... was?”

“No. Your memories *are* me. Please... please don’t...” Zhu’s voice shook as they passed by Milly’s body, James stopping to silently find her ID in her pockets and add it to his growing stack. “Don’t...”

“Never again.” James said simply. “Though at least we know Harlan’s probably immune to infomorphs, if they’re eternally doing *this*. Who the fuck would want to live in their head?”

“No one. Ever.” Zhu shivered across James’ tailbone. “Thank you. And I’m sorry.”

James swept his gaze once more over the houses before he started moving through the intersection toward the others, Johns moving out to grab Aurelio who had wandered the wrong

way somehow. He didn't blame either of them for being dazed or confused or just flat out broken. This day had gone so bad, so fast. Most normal people probably would have fallen apart by now. "God, Milly, I'm sorry." He said to himself, taking a long breath through his nose as he tried to fill his lungs and found he couldn't quite make his breath feel like it was enough. The downside of the Winter's Climb magic siphoning off some of his air every breath he took.

He almost thought he saw motion in one of the houses, but he snapped his eyes shut and looked away, not wanting to test his luck there again. And then he moved to catch up with the others. Johns half jogged to reach him, Aurelio trailing behind, which was why the historian was the closest to the manhole cover in the middle of the intersection that James hadn't even thought to think about when it erupted.

It was a thick green mist, matching the vibe and light, if not the consistency, of the mist around them. In under a second, Aurelio was consumed by it. The manhole cover didn't even rattle or hiss as the substance spewed from it, it just disgorged the cloud, which then started to slowly disperse around it.

Johns didn't see, but he saw James' face turn terrified and instantly obeyed the shout to run, only turning to look back as he passed James and the two of them backpedaled away from the stuff. It took a minute for it to really disperse into the mist around them, the green fading to grey as it mingled with the air, until it was undetectable just by looking. "Well that's fucking terrifying." James said. "Shit, Aurelio!" A pulse of fear mingled with guilt hit him as he remembered the other man.

But Aurelio just walked out of the mist at a hurried pace, looking like he was holding his breath. "Am I melting or something?!" He demanded frantically as he approached James and Johns. "Is my skin falling off?!"

"No and don't touch us!" Johns barked. "Stay back!" He held a threatening hand out, and Aurelio obeyed, despite the horrified look on his face. "He's probably contagious, whatever it is. Just like when we got here."

"Not everything is contagious." James said. "I think. Maybe. Okay, probably. But we can't leave him." He looked at Aurelio with pity. "Keep your distance, okay? Until we know what just happened. If you get a survival reward, speak up, and we'll see if we can figure it out."

"Yeah... yeah, of course." Aurelio looked down at his hands with worry. "What about..." He rolled a shoulder and tapped the strap of the backpack he was wearing, "the food? Should I..."

"Ditch it." James said with a defeated groan. "Is there anything in there but baked goods?" A shake of the head in replay, the elegant curl of his hair bobbing as Aurelio answered wordlessly. "Alright, just toss it. Less weight at least."

They rejoined the others standing in the middle of a ring of asphalt surrounded by houses that towered over them on the slope of the cul de sac. Aurelio kept his distance, but everyone was on guard as they stood there. “Are you alright?” Zari asked James as he dragged his legs forward.

“No.” He said. “Milly’s dead. Aurelio might be infected with something, so he’s staying separate from us for now. Is anything else wrong?”

“My knee hurts like Satan pissed on it.” The unnamed man said with a wheezing nasal voice.

“Cool.” James didn’t ask how that would translate to pain. Something to do with... sulfur? He assumed? “Zhu, save me from this. What next?”

“Between those two houses. Fight through the yards. We will find a walking path, and it will lead us to... to... another neighborhood.” Zhu’s feathered arm faltered back to layer against James’ armored and cut flesh. “I am sorry. There is more walking.”

“When do we stop walking?!” Mauro threw up his arms, and looked like he immediately regretted the exertion.

“When you’re dead.” Harlan said, slapping him on the shoulder. “What’s the over under on looting the houses? This place looks modeled on American suburbs. Might be some guns.”

“*Do not go into the houses.*” Zhu’s voice echoed like crunching gravel. “You... you do not come out again if you go into the houses.”

James winced. “Okay.” He said quietly, pulling out the flask of exercise potion and taking a tiny sip, letting the liquid push him back to something that would hurt less as his Endurance kept him going. “Everyone take a sip. We’re almost out of this, but... well, shit, it’s not like we’re gonna last without it.” That was the wrong thing to say. But he didn’t have the energy to take it back now. “Let’s... let’s take a breath, and then get moving. Harlan, does your tiger need rest ever? I never asked. Sorry tiger.” He was rambling again. The tiger looked at him like it was offended at the thought of needing to take a break. Or maybe he was imagining that.

The wind swept in again near them, and the left half of the cul de sac plunged into darkness as the strands of mist were blown away. The sound of a distant car engine mixed with the noise of children laughing from a nearby building. There was a sweet smell in the air, and a texture like wet dust with every breath.

A streetlight on the other side of the cul de sac flickered to life, the light turning on with a comforting orange radiation as the lamp post straightened up and did its best job to mimic a stationary object.

“Okay.” James said, looking toward the gap between the houses that Zhu had pointed to. It was a thin gap between the buildings, with the boxy forms of air conditioning units blocking it off from being a straight line. A fence at the end of it cut off the backyards of both homes, rough wooden planks and gates that didn’t have obvious latches. “Let’s get moving.”