

"Our friends' hopes and dreams are etched into its body, transforming the infinite darkness into light! Unmatched in Heaven and Earth. One machine, equal to the gods!" -Simon, Tenga Toppa Gurren Lagann-

James woke up in a hospital bed, and was shocked to find that he didn't hurt that much. He still lay unmoving on the firm mattress, blinking his eyes sleepily against the light. No overhead fluorescents, thankfully; it was half-dark in the room, but the lights in the hall were on and the curtains over the glass walls weren't fully pulled.

Before James could take inventory of his injuries or pay attention to the worming dungeon thoughts, though, he was stopped by the realization that he was strapped to the bed. Or at least, his arms were. Suddenly a lot less comfortable, he kept his eyes lidded just in case someone was watching, and started trying to figure out where he was.

He didn't need to worry that much; unless he'd been captured by a group who had also kidnapped half the people he knew and then put them in chairs in his hospital room, he was certainly in the Lair somewhere. Sarah was curled up in a chair asleep, her thin limbs coiled like a snake to fit inside the padded arms of the piece of furniture, her hair a scrambled mess. Beside and partly under that chair, TQ was coiled up much *more* like a snake, the camraconda's shallow breath causing a light twitching in his frame. Alanna seemed to have fallen asleep sitting on the floor with her back to the wall, and Arrush had done exactly the same thing, the two of them leaning against each other in a scene that looked bizarrely familiar to James for some reason. Keeka was awake, though not looking at him, the ratroach instead watching Anesh's face as he made James' boyfriend listen to something on a pair of padded headphones, with Anesh seemingly trying to decide if he was going to explain to the poor ratroach that he had no musical taste and couldn't understand what Keeka was sharing.

Everyone that wasn't a camraconda had bandages wrapped around their forearms.

James decided to come to Anesh's rescue. "How did you convince Deb to let you all cram into this room?" He said softly.

Well, he tried to say that. What came out was instead some kind of hoarse croak that was part gurgle, part cough. It was deeply unpleasant, and still managed to get the attention of the two people in the room who were awake.

Anesh tugged the headphones off and handed them back to Keeka, the ratroach almost unthinkingly grabbing them and passing them behind his own back with one of his ancillary arms to drop them into a handbag on the floor. "You're awake!" Anesh kept his voice low, and James felt a sudden swell in his heart as he heard the familiar accent again. "Oh, hell, are you alright?" The words came as Anesh saw James starting to silently tear up.

“I’m fine.” James had to try a few times to get the words out, eventually struggling in a heavy breath and letting it out slowly before he tried talking again. “Yeah. I’m okay. Why am I tied to the bed? It’s not Thursday.”

“W-what is Thursday?” Keeka’s chittering whisper, full of earnest curiosity, got a coughing laugh from James and a deep blush from Anesh.

“I’ll tell you later.” James said, the words coming out a little off for some reason. “So…” he rattled the straps on his arms, though hopefully not loud enough to wake anyone who had decided to nap in his hospital room.

Anesh gave him a worried stare. “You were clawing at your face in your sleep.”

“Right.” James sagged back into the bed. “Well, I’m not gonna now. Can I have my hands?” He waited while Anesh and Keeka got him free, feeling a massive release of his anxiety about being trapped as they both got one side of him out of the bindings. Keeka’s enthusiasm was infectious, but James was pretty sure Deb was going to have words for the ratroach when she saw that he’d punched a hole through one of the straps with a claw. “Okay.” He sighed as he flexed his fingers. And then took inventory of how much he hurt.

Shockingly, it wasn’t that he’d only just woken up and hadn’t had time to catch up to how he was feeling. James felt… generally okay. There was a stabbing ache in his shoulder where it seemed like there was still a chunk of himself missing. He’d lost the tooth that had been loose at some point, which he’d need to get used to, though that explained why his mouth felt weird. His left middle and ring fingers were splinted together, which meant he’d absolutely run out of get-out-of-broken-bone-free charges from the purple orbs. And… the rest of him felt fine.

Gently, James raised a hand to his face and poked at his cheek, just under his eye. But all he felt was a cool sensation from his fingers on hot skin. A little tender - *very* tender actually - but no pain.

Briefly, he took a moment to let the dungeon’s notifications announce themselves in his brain, before he moved on to the most important thing. Well, just one notification, really.

[Survivor : Abyssal : +8 Skill Points]

James had a lot of questions about the Underburb’s naming scheme, but he didn’t feel like thinking about that shit place right now. He had one critical thing left to check.

“Hey, Zhu.” James whispered to himself. “You still there?” He waited, but didn’t get an answer. And he didn’t really know how to feel for if the navigator was still in his mind; the lines between where his thoughts ended and Zhu’s started was too blurred for James to just point to a single thing and know for certain.

Anesh gently set a hand on James' arm. "He's fine. El and Speaky gave him back his heart basically as soon as you got here. Planner's been checking in on him, and says that he's recovering, though..." he glanced back at the door with an uncomfortable expression, letting the pause stretch out.

"Though?"

"He thinks Planner is... not a doctor." Keeka chimed in.

"Planner *isn't* a doctor, and I don't mean that to be rude, but we should look into..." he trailed off, seeing James struggling to hold back a yawn. "Sorry. Hey. Welcome back." Anesh sheepishly shifted his hand off of James' bare arm. "You looked like you had a bloody unpleasant time."

The statement was so absurdly under representative of what he'd been through, James almost started to laugh. But no matter how unexpected it was, he couldn't so easily shake off the terror of the last couple days. "It was... not great." He said, voice cracking. "The... the others. The other people I was with?"

Anesh's face twisted into a frown. "Most of them are fine. The older man didn't make it. Deb is quarantining now, but since her immune system isn't compromised, she should be okay." His boyfriend held up a hand to forestall any questions. "We'll talk about it when you're okay. Just... just rest, alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm awake. I'm just... worn out." James tried to shrug. "Why are all of you here anyway?"

"Wanted to be here." Keeka said, nervously glancing between Anesh and James. "Is...?"

Anesh nodded, letting a small smile in. "We wanted to make sure you were okay. I'm told that this is a thing that you do for people you care about; wait in hospital rooms for them to wake up." He leaned down and planted a kiss on James' cheek that stung on his skin. "I'm glad you're okay." He murmured.

"Wait, shit, was I in a coma again?" James asked suddenly.

"No, you-"

"James?" The sleepy voice came from the side of the bed behind Anesh, and a second later Sarah unfurled herself to sit up on her knees in the chair she'd been sleeping in. "James!" Her voice rose excitedly, and the room came to life.

There was a thunk from under her chair, and a frantic hiss, before TQ pulled himself awake and rose up to his full height next to the bed. From the floor by the door, Alanna and Arrush jolted up at the same time, awkwardly pushing off each other as they used the wall to haul themselves

up. Someone flicked a light on, while Anesh stepped back and let everyone cluster around, making James feel like he was far more hemmed in than when he was strapped to the bed.

“You’re up!” “You’re alive!” “We were so worried about you!” “I am glad you did not die again.” A wall of varied voices cascaded over each other as everyone started talking at once. James let himself get fussed over, mostly trying to hear what Sarah was saying as she rambled about how his skin had almost fallen off but that she was glad to see he wasn’t dead.

Something clicked in his head. “Everyone’s okay, right?” He whispered the words, but the crowd of people shut up instantly when he spoke. “I... there was some kind of dungeon disease... and I...” he looked up at them from his hospital bed, suddenly feeling like he needed to get up very badly.

“You’re fine.” Alanna said, tossing herself onto the side of the bed to give him a sideways hug. “Deb stopped it from getting out of the building, and for reasons that sound made up to me, no one in the Order died.” She picked her words carefully, but made it sound casual enough that James didn’t question it. “How do you feel?”

“Yeah, are you okay? Your face melted off.” Sarah leaned onto his other side.

“It was very metallic.” TQ nodded, camera head bobbing over the edge of the bed.

“Metal.” Alanna corrected him.

“They mean the same thing. This language is stupid.” The digital voice somehow managed to sound pouting.

James sighed out contentedly. “I’ve been saying that about English for a while. But I still love it.” He flexed his good hand again, and poked at his neck and face. “I feel good, honestly. Does anyone want to tell me what the hell happened?”

“Yeah, but first, we should tell the docs that you’re up.” At the end of the bed, Anesh squeezed at James’ foot through the hospital blanket. “I’ll be right back.” He opened the door of the room and stepped out into the bright hall, looking around before heading off to the right and out of sight.

And then the others, mostly Alanna, though Arrush and Sarah had bits to say as well, filled him in.

After the assembled combat team that represented a worrying amount of the Order’s people had confirmed they hadn’t teleported anything hostile out of the dungeon, they’d quickly gotten everyone into quarantine and given medical attention. James had been a bit harder, since he’d been *melting* at the time, but they’d dipped into the Order’s stockpile of potions to give him repeated doses of the one that improved skin health. After the disease had failed to kill him and

died off, it had rapidly been able to bring him back to a state that wasn't sloughing his outside layer off.

"Why am I still bandaged then?" He asked, peeking under the blankets to look at his legs, and also holding up his wrapped arms. "Like, I was *definitely* bleeding. If the skin potion can fix cuts..."

"It can't." Sarah explained. "Deb said it had something to do with the nature of the injury." She put air quotes around it. "Your skin being out of place is fixable, your skin being ripped isn't."

"Okay, but like... my skin was ripped. I felt it. I was oozing and stuff." James patiently inquired, ignoring the novel sound of a camraconda making a gagging noise when he said 'oozing'. "Soooo..."

"Man, I didn't make the rules for the potions." Alanna threw her arms up, nearing clipping Keeka before making an apologetic motion and giving the ratroach more space. "Also we should move on before Anesh gets back because he *has opinions* on these things."

Everyone who had been alive when they'd teleported them out of the dungeon had lived, except for Johns, who had still been technically alive but only briefly. James had heard Harlan say something about that, but hadn't really processed it before. The man had been so close to getting out with them, and just one small slip had triggered a disease trap that had just... killed him. No one even know how.

James had questions, obviously. They'd known where to find him because they'd had Zhu's location - something that was apparently an 'organ' of sorts for navigators - but the method of teleporting them had been something the Order hadn't had before. And he knew that attempts at making mass teleport dungeontech had all failed.

The explanation had been pretty simple. They'd stolen it from the Wolfpack. The splinter faction of Harlan's people had been doing some kind of fuckery in New York again, as Alanna put it, and it hadn't been too hard to tip a bad situation over the edge and slip in and steal their teleporter.

And James remembered something Harlan had said in the dungeon.

"Who died?" He asked softly. Because Harlan got kill notifications. And *nine people* was a hefty cost just for his stupid ass.

"Several other people." Arrush hissed, the ratroach speaking up for the first time during the improvised debriefing. He dipped his head to look at the floor. "It was... bad." He added, leaning into his partner as Keeka settled a pair of claws on Arrush's back.

“It was *really* bad.” Alanna nodded. “No one in the Order died, though Charlie got shot in the knee and Ann almost had a tit chopped off. We didn’t do a great job of keeping the fight contained though, and the Wolfpack had... uh...”

“A disgusting lack of regard for civilian casualties.” TQ said flatly.

“Also they’re *really* hard to put down.” Sarah added, her normally cheery voice not exactly matching the words she was saying at all. “Mostly though, we tricked them into a fight with the police, and a security team for a real estate guy, and... this doesn’t matter. None of us died.”

“Okay.” James relaxed again, wondering how long this roller coaster was going to go on for. “Where is Harlan anyway? Here?”

“Ah.” Several people looked very embarrassed, including a returning Anesh, who brought with him one of the nurses, and two more Anesh.

While the nurse checked James’ vitals and did a blood draw on him from an arm that had seen so much punishment that he didn’t notice the pain, he got the rest of the story.

They had, for safety reasons, performed the teleport in the middle of an empty lot out in Yamhill. Sarah had started to launch into a spirited explanation of how they’d bought a farm for cheap because it used to be a pumpkin patch but COVID had ruined the business and it had been pretty easy to trade a lot of hard cash for the place. She’d been slightly overruled on giving the entire life story of the previous owners, though. The short version was, they’d had a very large gravel parking lot to work with that they could use as a buffer, and while it was still a risk that a random raccoon would carry a dungeon disease across state lines, that was already kind of a risk anyway.

“Raccoons would never do that.” Keeka had muttered.

“I’m really sorry to tell you this, but raccoons are both adorable, and absolute filth sacks.” Anesh replied sadly, shaking his heads in solemn regret.

Regardless of the virtue of the average trash panda, the fact remained that they’d been in the middle of nowhere, with no one nearby, and expansive fields that had been left fallow for acres surrounding them. Even the main road was a half mile away.

So naturally Harlan had gone completely unnoticed as they’d stolen someone’s cell phone, two guns, and the previously stolen teleporter, and vanished.

James felt slightly guilty about the phone part, because he had reinforced his insistence that Harlan get a way to keep in contact after they were out. Even after Harlan had wiped their memories of James, he’d repeated the joke at least once. The other stuff wasn’t on him though.

“So we *don't* have a mass capacity teleporter that can be used to fix global logistics forever?” He asked. By this point in his life, James was getting used to learning that none of the magic he found would ever actually be *useful* on a global scale, but it still sucked every time it happened.

“Funny story, actually.” Anesh said, grinning. And then James looked around the whole room full of grins, and found he was suddenly worryingly optimistic. “Did you know that their teleporter thing is in the form of a set of steel gears, with a diameter of slightly under ten inches?”

“I... no. Of course I didn't know that.” James kept his optimism, but gave his boyfriends an incredulous look. “Why would I know that?”

“I dunno, you were hanging out with Harlan for however long you were in there.”

“A day and change.”

“Okay, so, no time dilation, good to know.” Anesh was in the flow of conversation now. “Regardless, do you know what *else* is ten inches in diameter?”

“I feel like at least one person in this room doesn't need to hear about our sex life, but I cannot for the life of me tell you who it is.” James replied instantly, and then started to wonder if whatever painkillers were in his IV had removed his conversational filter. “Uh... which is to say...”

It was too late to stop Alanna from cracking up, Sarah from trying to suppress a grin, and the pair of ratroaches from tinting the flesh around their eyes a bright green in embarrassment. TQ just swiveled his head from person to person before focusing on James and saying “It is not me.” And then returning to being the calmest person in the room.

“Anesh I love you quite madly, and this is hilarious, but I got hit in the head repeatedly. So... Can you just...”

The best part of Anesh having multiple bodies was that two of them could facepalm while the third one replied unimpeded. “It's the copier, James. The magic overhead copy ritual. It's that. You wanker.” The word was said without any vitriol; despite the performative exasperation it was clear Anesh was still happy that James was back and safe.

“So... we have... teleporters?” James let his hopes go up even higher.

They did have teleporters. They could copy them two at a time, and they didn't know the limitations yet, but Harlan had stolen an original of an item that was no longer meaningfully scarce for the Order.

There was still more they needed to fill James in on, though.

Almost everyone who'd been in the Lair when the outbreak had happened had a skill point by now. Deb had run herself even more ragged than normal trying to manage it and figure out what was going on, especially after five of the six people James had teleported in had died.

He'd been even more devastated to hear that. He'd thought he was giving them a chance. Though it quickly became clear that he *was*; at least one of them would have been dead in minutes if not for his intervention. It was just that something had been done to them that had, in Alanna's words, "nuked their white blood cells"

She hadn't had the terminology down, and so Sarah and TQ had taken over explaining that blood tests from everyone who'd been sent to the dungeon had essentially been working as if they had some kind of autoimmune disease. Almost no white blood cell functionality, which was why the fatality rate for a lot of the disease was off the chart compared to a rate of *zero* from the Order itself.

Not everyone had gotten skill points, though. A few people had never gotten the Survivor notification, and were, in fact, still infected. There was no outward sign of the disease, but they were absolutely carriers of it, and were all under quarantine until something could be sorted out. The medical information wasn't too technical, but James still noticed that it netted him a couple points in his Biology lesson. Pushing him just over a hundred points, and marginally closer to the forty two hundred he needed to secure more of the life saving Endurance upgrade.

When the conversation moved on and Arrush said something about placing the dropped skill points of the dead in their grave vault, the prior information helped assuage James' confusion. He'd *seen* someone who had survived the first round of disease die later and drop nothing. But, then, if she'd been a carrier, she wouldn't have had a skill point to drop. He wasn't sure if that lined up, but his memory of the last day was muddled at best. It all felt like one big blur.

The other survivors were okay though. Sienna, and Aurelio, and the man who had apparently just been named Steve after someone had checked his ID when he'd been out cold in one of their hospital rooms. They were alive, even if some of them weren't doing okay at all. Sienna, especially, had watched her friend die in front of her, and hadn't stopped crying except to sleep. Which, really, James completely understood. They could have all the time they needed, now that they were out.

They'd taken a break when James had realized that he was starving, and needed food. Actually, less of a break, and more of a scattering of the group. TQ and Sarah had both said goodbye now that he was up, and headed out, though the camraconda had looked like he maybe wanted to linger, and James had spotted the quick hug Sarah had thrown onto Alanna before leaving. He couldn't help giving her a coy smile as she met his eye on the way out, his friend blushing before vanishing down the hall.

Arrush and Keeka had also left, after getting their own awkward hugs from James. They'd more or less forced themselves to stay awake, but rest was something they really needed right now. The dungeon plague hit ratroaches especially hard; the lesions it formed in arms causing ruptures in their chitin, cracks and drilled holes that were incredibly painful. They'd stuck around to make sure James was okay, and when he found out how little they'd slept and how much pain they were in, he'd sent them away. An Anesh went with them to make sure they got home okay, with Keeka taking the opportunity to try to see if *this* iteration liked his musical tastes.

"So, are you actually okay?" Alanna asked after the nurse had come back to remove James' IV, make sure he didn't still have a fever or something, and tell him not to exert himself for the next week.

He planned on ignoring that order already. "I'm fine." He said. "I'm... fine. I feel hollow." Alanna and both Anesh shifted closer to him at the words, as he tried to pull on the clothes they'd brought for him from home. The slacks didn't fit him anymore, and he suddenly realized he was going to run out of clothing if he kept attritioning it to dungeon delves and not replacing it. "Partly because all I had in the last two days was a muffin and some exercise potion. Partly because... I dunno. It hasn't hit me yet. I almost died again. Four or five times, I guess. And everyone else died. Wow, a *lot* of people died." The words came out steady, like he was mildly surprised and not falling apart. "And I just feel... eh."

"You're not okay." Anesh said softly.

"Nah. But I want lunch. Or... dinner? What time is it?"

"Two."

"Lunch then." He nodded. "Is Nate back yet?"

"No, he's still missing. The rogues are on it." Alanna tilted her head. "Which is also worrying. We should get him a navigator so we can bail him out of trouble too, after this."

James nodded. "Yeah, it would be a shame if I had to cook for myself." Alanna and Anesh turned and gave him concerned looks before he held up his hands. "That was a joke!" He tried to smile, and found it hard. "I'm kidding. I don't want... ah, fuck it. I'm sorry. It's been a hard couple days, huh?"

"Hasn't been great." Alanna said as she helped him steady himself when he rose off the bed.

The tile floor was cold under his feet, but James didn't bother with socks. It was still more comfortable than any of the walking he'd done in the dungeon. He almost stopped on the way out to check on the other survivors, who were still recovering in their own rooms, but Alanna set a hand on his shoulder.

“Give ‘em some space.” She said simply, with a glance into Sienna’s room at where the girl was staring at her ceiling with a vacant expression.

“Yeah...” James answered as they continued. He tried to change the topic as they left the hospital, and he checked out with the nurse on duty while the sandy haired man tried to remind him to maybe not do anything but sleep for a while. “So, what happened to the giant thing Zhu and I killed?”

“Oh, the mobile home?” Anesh asked like he hadn’t been waiting to deploy the pun.

James shook his head. “Sorry buddy, I beat you to it. It was too easy.” Anesh swore under his breath. “But yeah, did you just leave it in our new parking lot? How long has it been, actually? A day?”

“About that. And sorta!” Alanna cheerfully explained as she positioned herself to cut off line of sight from the group of researchers and engineers who were watching them as they left the basement. “You’re gonna love this, if you don’t already know.” She paused, like she was thinking of asking a question, then just shrugged and continued her explanation.

The mobile home was full of furniture.

They’d considered towing it somewhere out of sight, but the Order didn’t actually own any secret underground parking garages or scrapyards. So, in an effort to not have vehicle sized dead dungeon life just sitting out, even if it was in a somewhat isolated spot, they’d started dismantling it. And quickly found that the mobile home thing was somewhat literal; it had a whole living room growing in its body.

There were a bunch of wild theories going around, which were really more like random guesses than theories. Maybe it was the pupa form of a whole house, maybe it was how the dungeon grew its magic items, maybe it just ate furniture, maybe it ate things that were typically *on* furniture like people and this was like a shark not digesting larger objects it consumed.

It didn’t *really* matter, because James didn’t expect to become intimately familiar with the life cycle of these things, and the real prize was that at least some of the furniture was just magic.

They didn’t know a lot about it yet. Which was to say, they had no idea what it did at all. They only knew it was magic at all because they’d semi-accidentally broken a lamp, and gotten a skill crystal. The Order had no idea what it did, but they all knew what it meant when a broken item dropped a McGuffin.

They made it upstairs, after an elevator ride where James realized that when he stopped his forward momentum and just had to stand still, he was at risk of falling over. Alanna and Anesh did too much work helping him to a table in their dining area.

Alanna was in the middle of doing that thing she did where she projected an implicit threat to everyone that was watching James as he came in, when James squeezed at the arm of hers he was holding onto. “Hey.” He said, leaning in against her and then remembering Alanna was a head taller than him and this wasn’t exactly a stealthy way to whisper in her ear. “It’s fine. Everyone here is fine, stop looming.”

“I don’t loom!” Alanna said indignantly, looming over James.

“You’re literally looming right now.” Anesh told her. “I don’t even know what that word means, and I know you’re doing it.” He helped James sit in one of the nicer chairs they’d gotten before grabbing a seat nearby while his duplicate split off to head to the kitchen to grab food. “So.” He said as Alanna sat, and tried to be less intimidating. “We have some questions.”

“I do too. What’s lunch?” James asked.

“Whatever I decide looks good.” Anesh said flatly. “Don’t worry, I trust myself.”

Alanna suddenly turned her vision toward the hall that led into the large room, waving down someone who had just come in. “Also, Sarah’s here, so we may as well add her to this.”

Sarah joined them, just as Anesh set a sandwich in front of James and took another seat. “Hey! I’m back!” Sarah said, stealing one of James’ chips.

“You were gone for five minutes.” He told her.

“I checked in with Ben. He and JP are doing a thing, but *everyone* wants to hear about the new dungeon.” Sarah said. “So I’m compromising with them, and recording this!”

“Are we talking about-“ James didn’t get very far at all before he was interrupted.

“Yes!” Alanna said, leaning forward. “Tell us what it’s like! Tell us *everything*! I’ve been so good, I answered all your questions, tell me about the monsterrrrs!” She grabbed at James hands, only getting one as he dodged the other to toss a chip into his mouth and savor the crunch. “Can I beat up a whole house?! I have to know!”

So James started talking, and his friends and loves settled down and let him. He took pauses to eat bites of his sandwich, and it was pretty quickly obvious that the people at tables around them were listening in too, at least a little bit. Something like this was disruptive enough that the whole Order noticed, and wanted to hear what had happened, though at least the whole dining room didn’t cluster around like he was on stage. James was fine with a few people eavesdropping, but he wasn’t ready to actually talk to a crowd.

He started at the start. He and Alex had met with Harlan, things were going okay, and they actually learned some stuff that Alex had already passed along. Then, someone had... well, teleported the cafe away.

"We'd thought you were dead." Alanna had stated. "Not for long; by the time I heard about it, it wasn't very long before we knew you were alive. But... hey, you aren't allowed to die, okay?" She tried to keep the emotion out of her words, and largely failed. But no one held it against her.

James continued to talk about the first few moments. Being dropped into the dark, trying to keep people from running off, the first encounter with a street lamp and one of the hedge dogs.

And then realizing he had a backup telepad, and choosing six people to send out. How he'd rapidly realized later that this had been a horrible idea, but that it had seemed like the only way to save them at the time.

Sarah scratched at her arms as she met James' eyes. "They never would have made it in the dungeon." She told him. Sarah was, easily, the kindest person James knew, but her voice didn't waver as she told him what he needed to hear. "You gave them a chance. And the worst case didn't happen."

"Yeah, you made the best call possible at the time." Alanna added with a shrug. "Though, we should have a quarantine teleport spot, just for this kind of thing. Now we know, right?"

James wasn't sure if he felt any better, but at least *they* weren't blaming him for infecting the whole building with a potentially deadly disease.

He kept going, trying to skip past the part where two thirds of the people in the cafe died, and thankfully everyone mostly let him. He had to circle back to talk about losing someone to the hood hive thing, and then moved on to getting Zhu to find them a safe spot, that kept them moving through the suburbs.

"It's *really* suburbs, too." James said. "I feel like if I were driving through, I wouldn't notice anything was wrong. It's just houses, forever. Sometimes an empty lot. And that's *it*. There's gaps between neighborhoods that are just dirt with little paved walking trails, but there's nothing there." He crammed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth and chewed rapidly, regretting the decision but still hungry enough that he didn't regret it *that* much. "Oh, it's also missing specific things."

"What do you *mean*, 'it's missing things'. You can't just say that." Alanna challenged him.

James had a list. Trees, street signs, cars - but not garages, weirdly - garbage cans, all things that should have been around. The small details that made a suburb feel like a place that at least people lived. But all completely absent from the Underburbs.

“I’m sorry, what did you just call it?” Alanna had a grin on her face, contrasting the somewhat spooky tone James had been talking in.

“Stratified Underburbs.” James said. “We’ll get to why.”

The rest of the story was pretty straightforward. Walk until they got tired or got in a fight, then rest or survive, then keep going. More monsters, more losses, more horrifying diseases. He talked about getting drowned by a swimming pool’s worth of angry algae, about losing his once a year anti-cancer charge, about having aphasia and dizziness and *something* else inflicted on him.

And then, when they’d finally gotten somewhere Zhu said was safe for a bit, James had climbed a hill and nearly died just looking at something.

But not before he’d seen the shape of the place, laid out and beautifully horrifying in its shape. Whole tiers of neighborhood, places where the ground just gave away and houses tilted precariously toward the void, thousands of glinting distant points of orange light, massive striding figures above it all. A whole world, as big as any dungeon they’d ever seen, like a layer cake of regions.

“Okay, yeah, that checks out.” Alanna agreed with his name after hearing. “Wait, so, it tried to electrocute you when you looked at it?”

“Oh, right!” James brought his hand up to poke around his eye. “My face isn’t fucked up this time! Holy shit, this is so new to me. And also this time I kinda wish you guys got to see it, I had this *really* cool scar...”

“We can get you new scars.” Anesh patted his back from both sides. “I am certain you will find a way.”

“You’re probably right.”

The moment of levity didn’t last, as James took a breath, and started talking about their need to move again. Him and Harlan clearing a house, finding an actual human corpse, Harlan losing their record, bringing the others up so they’d have a place to hide for a while, and then...

Something huge, something he couldn’t save anyone from. He could *fight* something that size, especially with Zhu and a few tricks, but he couldn’t save everyone. Maybe if he’d been faster, if he’d thought more clearly, if he’d been fresher into the fight and not exhausted and battered. But the point remained, he wasn’t. And so people died.

James had watched a man get bitten in half. That wasn't something he could easily forget, and while he again didn't put a lot of detail into it, he did slide the rest of his chips over to Sarah. Who also didn't want them.

And then... he'd just laid there and waited. To see if he'd die or not. Except he didn't, and that was when the Order had carved a hole in space and plucked them out. Trading a chunk of parking lot in this world for a chunk of fake backyard and one large corpse in the dungeon.

Which, it turned out, might be a great trade, if the furniture was all magical somehow. James felt like an idiot now for looking for magic items that were tools or hand portable, when of *course* a place that just made ten million bedrooms was going to have enchanted *furniture*.

"So, what about Harlan?" Sarah asked. "Are they new best friends?"

"No." James said. "Friendship with Harlan is over. Magical chair is new best friend."

Sarah giggled, but then waved her arms to cut off her own laugh. "No, seriously, is that a meme or are you... *tell us about Harlan you goof.*" She demanded.

Since she asked so nicely, James complied.

After the sixth time he called Harlan a callous asshole, the others started to pick up a trend in how he viewed the ambiguous mercenary. Harlan didn't care, because they didn't have any connections, because they fed their connections into their ammo so they could kill people. Apparently, they killed actual dungeon monsters that were just out in the real world, too. A fact that made James feel like the Order needed to double down on its security of the ratroach and camraconda populations. He didn't want some random outsider killing his friends and family just because they "weren't supposed to be here".

The real problem, though, was that Harlan was obviously aware of their own condition. And it didn't take long at *all* before the cracks started to show. Underneath everything, there was a fundamentally vulnerable and fragile person who needed a hug, and a detox course. The problem was, that person was underneath a fucking asshole who shot all their problems.

"Oh!" James snapped his fingers as he remembered something. "*No one* uses the memory bullets, okay? They rip chunks out of infomorphs, and I think only Myles doesn't have at least someone in their head around here."

"Oh, he does." Alanna shook her head. "Poor guy got infected with the thing. Since he has a skill point now, he said there wasn't a point to trying to avoid magic, so he's been slamming back powers like it's two fifty AM at the bar and he has a quota to meet."

"I... Alanna I don't drink. Do bars close at three or something?" James felt his headache coming back. "Actually I don't care. Good for Myles. What's Nate have to say about that?"

"Nate is... still missing. Are you okay?"

"Right, shit. Sorry." He rubbed at his eyes. "I'm not feeling great." James admitted. "And my head hurts."

Sarah fidgeted in her chair. "I can give you a nap?" She asked, starting to reach over, but waiting for James to accept it. "It might help."

James cracked one eye open and cocked an eyebrow at her. "It's two pm on a... friday? You have stuff to do today, and I *know* it. I need to just go to bed anyway." He tapped her hand away. "Besides, it's not like another crisis is going to show up in the next twelve hours."

"You fucking liar." Alanna accused him. "Oh! Speaking of! Anesh, do you have the thing?" She perked up excitedly as Anesh nodded and set a case one of him had been carrying around on the table. "So!" Alanna pointed at James. "We love you, a lot."

"Why does this sound like a threat?" James asked, glancing at Sarah. "Do you also love me a lot? Is this how my relationship is ballooning out of control today?"

"I do, but not like that." She gave him a lopsided grin. "Your relationship gets to go off the rails in totally different ways."

"Sure. Alanna, continue." James made a sweeping gesture with a hand as a sort of apology for interrupting.

His partner nodded at him regally. "Yes, well, it was a threat, I've decided." She said. "Anyway. You need to stop nearly dying. So we've prepared a care package." Alanna scooted her chair over next to Anesh, bumping her shoulder lightly into her boyfriend before starting to pull stuff out of the box. "And as soon as you're better, we're going to actually work out a training plan that gets you used to using *all* of this, got it?" She said as she set a trio of plastic baggies filled with paper scraps down, and then added a relationstick on top.

It was actually kind of surprising to everyone when James just nodded once, his face settling into a determined frown, and said "Yeah. I agree."

Alanna paused in trying to pile orbs in a way that didn't roll off the table. "You really aren't okay." She stated.

"Not yet." James said. "So, what do you have for me?"

<| Connection Open : James Lyle - Alanna Byrne : One Corridor Established : One Corridor Empty |>

<| Connection Open : James Lyle - Anesh Patel : Two Corridors Established : One Corridor Empty : One Corridor (Speed) |>

<| Connection Open : James Lyle - Sarah Moyle : Two Corridors Established : One Corridor Empty : One Corridor (Rest) |>

The first batch of relationsticks went to the people around him, and James was positive that they'd have them opened fully within a week or two. There were a handful of the things that Alanna and Sarah had each added to the pile, that he was told to actually *make use of* this time, and James didn't protest. He had a few people in mind for later already.

[+1 Skill Rank : Medical - First Aid - Splints]

[+1 Skill Rank : Athletics - Breath Control]

[+1.7 Skill Ranks : Athletics - Martial Arts - Kickboxing]

[+1 Skill Rank : History - Organizations - NBA]

[+2 Skill Ranks : Bureaucracy - Documentation - Forgery]

[+1 Skill Rank : Dogs]

"One of those is just a random size two we didn't have space to copy, but figured we'd give to you anyway." Alanna explained. "One is for fun. The others are..."

Her voice faded out as James found himself face to face with the Teacher-thing that existed as a way of making stat upgrades unpleasant. He didn't wait for the thing to scream at him, just told it he wanted more Aim and let it send him out of the shattered and filthy classroom back to reality.

Lesson Continues : Biology IV (410/4200), Lesson Continues : Basketball IV (6/4200), Merits : 266, Credits : 2

"Alright, cool." He said, flexing the growing mental muscle and starting to track random throwing arcs as he tried to figure out how he could hit various things with the crumb covered plate in front of him. "What else?"

"Drink this." Anesh handed him a sealed glass bottle.

James tipped back what was obviously a potion without question, and tried not to think of a joke about how easy it would be for Anesh to poison him, because that would be a shitty joke. Instead, he nearly gagged on the stuff. After making a disgusted noise deep in his throat, he gave an airy cough and glared at them all. "What the shit did I just imbibe? It tastes like thick raspberries, and I mean that in the most derogatory way possible."

"Potion. Here. Read this." Alanna handed him a battered paperback. "Sewer lesson. This one's all yours, no copies, no idea what it is. Well, I mean, an iLipede says it's technology related, but that's all we got."

“Shouldn’t I have taken this first? Before all the other stuff.” James asked, preparing to crack the book open.

Anesh shook his head. “No. Because the more lessons you have, the more each level of each new lesson costs. You’re already looking at years before your next levels in the other two, right? At that time scale, it’s not really practical to care if what comes *after* it is one or two hundred years of work. Either you’re immortal by then, or it’s moot. So we wanted you to level those up first, then take this one, so you could maybe get two or three points in it. Also, the potion makes you read better, so you’re our test subject.” Anesh ran a hand through the short black mop of his hair. “The problem is it’s hard to measure how much each lesson causes a problem. The Sewer seems like it’s changing the numbers constantly. All we know is it compounds. And also, if you don’t want to, you can skip that one...you already did it. Okay.”

James looked up from where the paperback had crumbled to dust in his hands. “What? Oh, right. No.”

Lesson Begins : Computer Science I (0/350)

The fact that it had suppressed the rising cost per level by a fraction of the rapidly ballooning requirement was important. The information got spread onto the Order’s server quickly, and James made a note to thank Arrush for the idea the ratroach had proposed a couple weeks ago when he had the chance.

His friends had more stuff in the pile, and James kept accepting the power without reservation. Not eagerly, but with the kind of firm belief that if he did fuck up again, it wouldn’t be because he wasn’t strong enough.

“So, this is a red for surprise. Which is good for a lot of things, actually.” Alanna moved one of the remaining orbs forward.

“And the purples are for a lot of stuff.” Anesh added. “Some of me have used a few of them, they’re all benign. And since you only have one body, they might add up well with your other ones.”

“Sorry, what?” James paused. “Explain that.”

“The... what?” Anesh looked at him confusedly. “They’re purple orbs. How hard did you get hit on the head?”

James rolled his eyes, noting that the dining room around them had sort of gone back to their own conversations, or thinned out more as people went back to whatever they were working on now that his main story was over. “The body thing. Can I have another body? I know trying to get the body duplication thing with you doesn’t work, but do we have another plan?”

“Oh! I have plans for this!” Sarah shot her hand into the air. “You can make a copy of Anesh, and then put your consciousness into it, and then reshape it to be you! Or, or, you can see if the succulent pots will grow a whole human and then go from there! Or you could just be a hive mind with someone!” She slapped her hands on the table. “Be a hive mind with me James!” The words were in a low tone, and obviously a joke, but James did actually consider it for a second.

“Nnnnno, no, that would make it weird.” He decided. “I don’t think I can match... this.” He waved at her.

“Everything is already weird, surrender to it.” Sarah made a grumpy huff, but was still smiling as she folded her arms at him.

“*Anyway.*” Anesh said. “The shell upgrades upgrade your shell. The one you’re in. You know this.”

“Yes, and for *you*, they sync up when you plug all your bodies together.” James cocked a finger at each Anesh in turn.

The two of his boyfriend shared a look. “No?” They said together. “Why would you think that?”

“Because that’s how it’s always been?!” James protested. “Am I going insane here? How hard was I hit in the head?! We built a mech in a way that people could disassociate into it for exactly this reason!”

Sarah cleared her throat. “I don’t wanna ruin your whole... this... but we built Checkov so that we could teleport big things? It *has* shell upgrades, because if you do the LSD pseudo-erotic-hypnosis thing to think it’s your body, you can give that body purples, but...”

“Wait, no, hang on. I have another question.” James sighed deeply.

“I will not be answering questions at this time.” Sarah proclaimed, brashly ignoring her own blushing face.

“Cool.” James drawled. “Okay, new vector on this. Anesh, you and I have been the same person before, and it absolutely divides our purples up.” He watched as Anesh’s face went through a riot of emotions, with a look of confusion fading to contemplation on Alanna’s as well. “Don’t tell me you don’t remember this. We had a whole thing about all of us being briefly Canadian every time we blend with each other, it’s... a thing we do? Kinda romantic, kinda hot?”

“Oh, no, I know how we all feel about it, I was there.” Anesh drummed his fingers on his chin. “And you’re *right*, although also we only sort of assume the orange does that, but who cares. We *do* share purples when we’re a hive mind. So... why doesn’t the robot have an extra heart

or something from that time El got in it? Why don't we" he and his duplicate pointed to each other as they talked, "*keep* the shell upgrades the same way we do with skills, or spells, or *anything else?!"*

Before his boyfriend could have some kind of meltdown about a thing that, fundamentally, wasn't important right now, James cut in. "Give me the orbs, I don't care." He said simply. "We'll figure this out later. I'm sure Research has a list of reasons and dumb corner cases."

"They do!" Sarah said brightly, not looking up from her phone as she scrolled through the list. Alanna peered over her shoulder as she made a dramatic hissing through her teeth. "Some of them are weird!"

"The point is," Anesh said, calming down and rolling him the orbs over the table's smooth surface, "that a couple of these are copies, and a lot of them are overflow that we don't have the time to duplicate."

[+1 Emotional Resonance Rank : Surprise]
[Shell Upgraded : Dopamine +/- 1.2 pg/ml toward optimal]
[Shell Upgraded : +6 facts memorized / day
[Shell Upgraded : Pressure Resistance - Eyeballs - +45 PSI]
[Shell Upgraded : Grip - Endurance - +3 Seconds]
[Shell Upgraded : Skin - Foot - Fracture Threshold - +1,444 Newtons]

"One of these is familiar." He said slowly. "Actually, one of these I think is like the very first one we ever got. Though... feet-based." He glanced at Alanna. "Also the surprise orb first was a good idea, because one of these also might actually be a depression cure and please tell me it was one of the copies." He tried not to sound like he was pleading, but it didn't work.

Anesh smiled softly. "We have a bunch of copies of that one, yeah. I wish we could copy things faster. We have so many orbs now that can really help people, and just..."

"Not enough time." Sarah complained. "Not enough coffee. Not enough magic! We need more magic in our lives. Speaking of, eat this." She handed him a candy bar.

James looked at the wrapper proclaiming it was called Wispa Gold. He raised his eyebrows at Sarah, but still opened it and took a bite. "It's... okay? It's fine. Was this magic?" He asked around a mouthful of sugar.

"No, it's Australian." She said, watching him.

"Sarah's been doing this to people lately." Alanna explained with a roll of her eyes. "I think it's part of a larger ploy to convince us Australia isn't real."

“I just like sharing candy.” Sarah admitted with a shrug and her usual happy smile. “So, what next?”

What was next was a curated blue orb for him to absorb. He’d used up the last of his [Break Electronic] power doing basically nothing except ruining some random cellphones and laptops in the backpack one of the survivors had, so he was open to fairly painlessly absorbing the thing. He was also insistent that he was *not* going to replace [Manipulate Asphalt], so far the most powerful spell he had, as long as he was close to a street.

[+9 Uses : Move Person]

“Uh...” Was about all he could think to say as the orb slipped into his palm, the thoughts of shaping a tool fresh on his mind.

“Yeah, bet you’re glad you had the surprise orb first!” Alanna said. “So, this one has rules.”

“I fuckin’ bet.”

The rules were more like guidelines, really. You could move yourself, but it would give you a hell of a headache. And no one felt like they could move themselves farther than about ten feet without making that headache fatal, so they didn’t try. You could move someone else, but no more than about a city block. You also couldn’t throw someone into open air or underwater without cutting down the distance immensely, and you absolutely could not bury someone in the ground. But still.

“This is so cool.” James said. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Oh! One more weird thing!” Sarah added. “It can move you through a door, or a wall with a door, but it’s harder if the door is locked?”

“That seems like bullshit.”

“That’s why I said! But I used a cute word.” Sarah proclaimed.

Alanna snorted. “You said it was ‘gubbins’, which I am positive you only know because Anesh keeps saying it.”

“Don’t tread on my heritage.” Anesh interjected. “I have more gifts. Here.” He handed James a plastic baggie.

“Yeah, what is this?” James asked, holding it up and looking at the bits of paper inside.

What it was, was the result of twenty different delves into Route Horizon. Scraps of atlases, tourist pamphlets, road guides, and roadside signboards. Sorted, matched, and, critically, copied.

They absolutely could copy the maps that gave Route spells. And they could do it a *lot*, because little bits of paper didn't take up much space at all. Everyone in the whole Order could have any spell they found, for almost no opportunity cost. Now, giving everyone the Velocity to use them was another story, but at least they had half of it down.

James pulled the fragments out of each bag, and, gently, assembled them on the table. And then, he was somewhere else.

Below him, rolling in the void, was a sphere. A world. *His* world. Not just dark, but empty of almost anything.

But not empty of everything. There was a small point that he was personally very familiar with; a small splash of hiking trails and streets in South America that was Maker's Hand Upon The Wheel. And now, there was something else. A tiny light in the inky nothing, a beacon that called his attention to the spinning orb.

He peered toward it, feeling the channel between the Velocity in his heart and the outside world. A place he could *go*. Not a real place, but a place inside here, inside the map carved into this nowhere soul of his. It was the smallest dot on the map he felt he might ever see. A single line of a road, and the interior of a museum building that it crossed paths with. And that was it.

But it was enough. And he opened his eyes with the name of a spell on his lips.

"Pave." He said out loud, the experience of the grand perspective leaving him slightly breathless.

Everyone else nodded, giving him a moment to enjoy the sensation. It was something unique, when it came to grabbing new magics. Something that felt powerful all on its own. And it wasn't like anyone needed to explain the spell to him. It was basically just punching but from a distance. Two velocity and you got to hit someone from twenty meters away. Underwhelming, but... something. A tool for the box.

Then James did it again, and got something a lot more fascinating.

From a few connected chunks of Tokyo streets and train networks came Bones Of Flashing Metal. Four velocity a minute, to increase his own ability to withstand impacts relative to how fast he was going. Negligible at lower speeds, but not *nothing*. And also, it *worked in reverse*, letting him trade the strength of his bones for more speed, even if he was on foot.

James loved it, and was certain he was going to hurt himself with this.

“This is amazing.” He muttered, looking around at everyone. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you’re the one who needs it.” Alanna tried to be dismissive, but he could hear the care coming from her. “Anyway. You wanna say goodbye to anyone before we get you home? Maybe some adorable gay rats?”

James smiled, too tired and too aware of Alanna’s general vibe to actually be embarrassed at the moment. “I would, yeah.” He said. “And then maybe get some sleep before the next crisis I’ll be dealing with.”

“Oh why would you say *that*.” Anesh groaned.

“See, the great part is, I actually saw Reed and Ben run by earlier from down the hall.” James pointed to where he had a sliver of line of sight to the front lobby of the Lair. “So I actually know they’re probably trying to find me to tell me there’s a problem.”

Sarah steeped her fingers and looked between Anesh and Alanna. “If we put him in a bag, we can carry him out without anyone knowing.”

“If we teleport, we don’t have to do that.” Alanna was pulling a telepad out of a hidden pocket in her coat already.

“We can still do the bag thing.” Sarah offered.

James cleared his throat. “Do I get a say in this?”

“No!” The other three chorused, which got a coughing laugh out of him.

He was just about to say something when a voice from behind him got his attention. “Oh, hey boss.” Harvey’s deep baritone got his attention. “I know you’re busy, but do you have a minute?”

“He doesn’t!” Alanna proclaimed, lunging forward to grab James’ hand, another arm hooking around Sarah’s. “Anesh!” She called, their boyfriend slapping his hands onto James’ shoulders before one of them helped Alanna tear the telepad and send them all away.

Harvey stood staring at the table, blinking. Then he sighed. “No would have worked, too.” He shook his head.

The group reappeared in the basement an instant later near the Order’s apartments, and collectively fell on their asses. James found himself laughing so hard he couldn’t breathe, while Anesh just grumbled good naturedly as he picked himself and his boyfriend up.

“Okay.” James said. “You know, I think if people are gonna come to me with literally every problem, then *maybe*, just maybe, in my capacity as Official Paladin Of The Order Of Endless Rooms, I should consider getting an authority larva too. Just for fun.”

“Or,” Anesh offered helpfully, “maybe mint more paladins.”

James blinked as he steadied himself, halting suddenly from his walk toward Arrush and Keeka’s apartment. Slowly, he turned back to face Anesh. “You know what?” He said. “That’s a *great* idea.”

“I’m suddenly terrified.” Anesh stated worriedly.

“I’m kinda turned on.” Alanna admitted. “He’s got that look.”

“I’m neither of those things, I’m actually heading home!” Sarah proclaimed. “Gotta get Auberdeen a walk in before I have Attic things in half an hour and then youth group things and then potion things and then-“

“I fucking knew you had stuff to do.” James accused her.

“Get him home safe.” Sarah flushed as she broke off her list of daily tasks, leaning over to hug Alanna, before fist bumping Anesh and then pulling her own telepad for home. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Alright.” Alanna said. “Go check in with them, we’ll hang out here, yell if you need anything.” She leaned an elbow on Anesh’s shoulder. “Then we’ll get you home before Ben figures out where you are. You can do a full debrief tomorrow, it’ll keep.”

James nodded, and went to say a quick goodbye and thank you to Keeka and Arrush, and use one of his gifts with them too, before he forgot.

Arrush greeted him at the door, looking like he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be doing, which was pretty typical. “Hey.” James started with a soft smile. “I hear you came to bail me out earlier.”

“I...” Arrush shifted his tall frame to the side as Keeka poked his head past him in the doorway.

“He did.” The smaller ratroach declared as he wove himself through three of Arrush’s arms. “He was worried.”

“Just him?”

“...We were worried.”

James snorted a laugh. “Well, I just... wanted to say thanks. I’ll probably be saying that to a lot of people, but I wanted to start with you two. Thanks.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, fingers tracing the outline of his skulljack. “And for being there when I woke up. It was good to see you both.” James looked up at Arrush, who had tilted his triangular head upward and was sheepishly scratching at his own neck. He wanted to laugh, but didn’t want to further embarrass the big ratroach.

“Everyone helped.” Arrush said. “I... did little.”

“Eh. Don’t care. Still appreciate you.” James said. “Anyway, I have a couple things, if you two are interested.” He held out a pair of his relationsticks to them. “These actually sting to use, but... I mean... if you know what they-”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence before both of them grabbed and snapped one of them, small circles burning their way into chitin and skin as they linked themselves together. For James, it meant his hand was starting to look like art. For Arrush and Keeka, it was one new circle apiece, next to the one they shared with each other.

<| Connection Open : James Lyle - Arrush : One Corridor Established : One Corridor Empty |>
<| Connection Open : James Lyle - Keeka : One Corridor Established : One Corridor Empty |>

“What... was the other thing?” Keeka asked, rubbing the back of his claw against his leg like he could make it stop stinging just by doing that.

“Oh! Wanna come over for dinner tomorrow night? I’d say *now*, but I’m supposed to be sleeping, and there’s a whole thing about-” He didn’t get any further into his explanation before both of them hissed out acceptance of his invitation. James *did* laugh, that time, and then offered a hug which they both awkwardly accepted as well, weaving too many arms around him in a move that he found relaxing enough that he threatened to fall asleep on his feet there, surrounded by fur and chitin and whatever fabric blend their hoodies were made out of.

But he was exhausted, and wanted to go home. So, relationsticks put to work, reassurances and hugs given, he finally headed to his own bed. He figured he’d read for a bit, relax, let himself mentally recover, something like that. This lasted about two minutes before he was out like a light.

The crises could wait for tomorrow. He’d be more ready then.