

*“Another persistent rumor is that Jesus died and came back to life. Given this (and the fact that he has only been referenced in dialogue, never established in person) he may simply be a metaphor for Optimus Prime” -Transformers Wiki entry for Jesus-*

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“What’s it do?” Johns asked, holding the small crystal James had handed him like it was a live grenade. “Is it going to kill me? Wait, *is* it going to kill me?”

“You know as much as I do.” James said, and winced as Johns just tipped his hands and let the crystal drop to the dirt.

James was trying to wring the water out of his socks, and failing. Briefly he wondered if his ability to generate electrical current on his skin would let him dry them faster, and then decided he’d rather settle for wet socks than risk setting them on fire or something worse.

His day hadn’t been going well anyway, and adding being soaked to his growing list of conditions had left him in a sour mood. That, and Harlan.

Harlan hadn’t said anything on the walk back. Not that James had really tried to make conversation, though Zhu had made a couple attempts at getting a response from them. It didn’t work; the mercenary was back to being stoic. Not just stoic, *silent*. Regularly, they’d make motions as if they were grabbing for something that wasn’t there, looking for a notepad they didn’t have any longer.

Part of James wondered exactly how much of their personality Harlan had offloaded to a flowchart and a series of single page dossiers on people. The rest of him wondered how the everloving fuck Harlan managed to need enough bullets that they were reduced to this state in the first place. He could just ask, he supposed, but now didn’t seem like the time.

Maybe there never would be a time. That seemed to happen to him a lot. There were so many things he hadn’t gotten answers for, or seen the conclusion of. He *still* didn’t know if the company he’d worked for sometime that felt like between one and a thousand years ago had actually known about the dungeon. And there were so many magical superpower interactions he had yet to exploit. He had *ideas*, and the thought of dying here without getting to start really messing with the status quo was annoying.

James was past being afraid of dying. Sort of. He was still afraid, but he walled off that fear with a shell of bitter irony. Which was surprisingly effective.

“Are you... okay? You listening?” Johns’ voice reached him.

Blinking as he looked up, a sock hanging loosely in his hand, James stared at the EMT. “What? No.” He said honestly. “It doesn’t matter. Harlan and I cleared a house out, and we should get everyone moving there. It’ll be safer than here is gonna be.”

“Here’s out of the way, and safe.” Johns protested. He kept his voice low though; a few of the others were still sleeping, or at least pretending.

“You don’t even know what out of the way means, in a place like this.” Zhu sounded as tired as James felt; the navigator *wasn’t* waterproof, and was still somewhat soggy, not willing to give up his manifestation out of worry that he wouldn’t be able to recreate it anytime soon. “The rest stop is closing. We need to go.”

“I’ll help wake everyone up.” James offered, tugging his sock back on with the feeling of cold wet cloth scraping his skin. A hand on the park bench pulled him upright, and he had the sudden thought that they might be the first humans to ever sit on these benches, ever.

It didn’t seem likely that anyone else had gotten this deep into the place. Or maybe this wasn’t deep at all. Maybe they’d been sitting near the exit the whole time.

[Survivor : Low : +1 Skill Point]

He didn’t even want to know what that was for. It was probably related to the pain in his knees, but the more he thought about it, the more James wasn’t sure if his knees had always hurt and he was only just now acknowledging it because it was either that or get Super Cancer again.

It didn’t matter. He had people to wake up.

Sienna and Zari were napping on a bench, the skinnier girl laying on her friend’s lap, though they’d both managed to fall asleep. Sienna woke at his touch on her shoulder with a panicked gasp that set James’ heart racing, and Zari jerked awake at the sudden movement. The tattoo tiger, which Harlan still hadn’t actually recalled, made a comforting rumble from under the bench where it was hiding. He told them all what was gonna happen, and to sit for a while longer while he woke the others. Have some juice, try to get ready, even with the leg injuries.

Aurelio was already awake and James suspected he’d only been pretending to sleep. He had dark rings under his eyes behind his glasses, and he was busy picking bits of dirt out of his scarf. He didn’t have much to say about having to walk farther, just glared at James. But despite the aloof attitude, he was still keeping an eye on Mauro, who didn’t look like he’d recovered from cracking his head on the edge of one of the benches. James made sure they had something to eat, lightening their remaining pack of food further.

The last member of the group, the nameless man who still had James’ gun, got to keep the gun and get told that he wasn’t going to have a chance to rotate out for a nap. He made a comment

about being in hell, and James didn't bother to come up with a snarky reply; just handed him one of the small juice bottles, and moved on.

Not that there was anyone to move on to.

Six people. Out of over twenty, at the start. Granted, he'd teleported a handful of the most vulnerable out early. But that still gave this place about a fifty percent survival rate so far.

James had hauled the asses of fifty people, give or take, out of miles of travel through Officium Mundi, and they hadn't lost *anyone*. He'd thought it was because he was just... competent. But now, it seemed more like it was because the dungeons just hadn't cared enough to murder him on a whim.

It wasn't a great thought. But he wasn't in a great place right now. Emotionally, or geographically.

"Movement. Three 'o clock high." Harlan's voice got James' attention. Their voice was... not monotone or robotic, Harlan wasn't some kind of tabula rasa golem or anything. But there was a lot that had been there that was... gone now. Or pushed back down below the surface. Warmth and comradery, or at least what passed for them with Harlan, were hidden away again, and kept away from the strange James had become.

He wanted to complain, but instead he took too long trying to figure out what his three o' clock was, and then check it. It was the hill behind them, where the asphalt path rose up. It still looked painfully familiar to a place he'd known as a kid, and James kept expecting to see blackberry bushes and cattails around the edge of it, instead of just dirt and dead grass.

It was dark at the top. "What're you seeing?" He asked Harlan, wondering if he should have taken his gun back.

"Movement." Harlan repeated in a voice like they were annoyed to be asked. "I can't see in the dark." They opted not to add the 'you fucking idiot' to the end, but James heard it anyway.

"You can see better than anyone else here." James reminded them, playing the part of the guy who knew about Harlan's past. "Doesn't matter. Let's get moving. Everyone's up, and the wind is picking up. I don't want to be here when the mist leaves us."

It didn't take long to get them set to move. Harlan's tiger got harnessed to the little cart they had again, to pull Zari along with them as the girl had taken the lead on 'worst leg injury'. James felt the perverse need to make a comment about how between her ankle, the walking religious crisis's knee, and Sienna's thigh and hip, they'd completed the bonus objective of having one full leg destroyed. He suppressed that urge as he set Harlan to take point, made sure Aurelio was good helping Sienna walk with them.

James took the rear behind the staggering, exhausted, and injured batch of survivors. If anyone came after them, he was pretty sure he could just hit it with the magic hammer hard enough to deal with it. And if that didn't work, he could probably survive long enough for Harlan to shoot it.

"So, what does that do?" Johns asked as they started moving, pointing to the crystal that James had picked up out of the dirt. "Did you try it yet?"

"No, I'm hesitant since every time I use a new magic I end up stuck with something silly. Like, did you know if I eat enough apples it spawns saffron?"

"...what?"

James forced his legs to move, and felt the pain and exhaustion get sidelined as his Endurance took over. It still sucked, but he knew he could keep pushing for a long time like this. "Exactly." He told Johns, tossing the crystal and having it snatched out of the air by Zhu, who then repeated the gesture with him. "What. It's a stupid power, and I wanted one of the better ones."

"One of our researchers spawns server hardware. His boyfriend creates more boyfriends." Zhu supplied in a weary voice.

The EMT got that look on his face that humans had when they were getting really pissed off that they couldn't figure something out and felt like someone was withholding answers. "What the fuck does this have to do with that?" Johns asked with that low level anger in his words.

"I don't want to put fifteen skill points into this thing, and learn that I only get to do it once, and it locks me into being good at scooping ice cream or something with no choice to use more in the future." James explained. "Not all our magic is like that, but *enough* is that I'm hesitant."

"I'll test it." Johns offered suddenly.

"What, really?" James glanced over, their conversation the only noise nearby that wasn't the wind, the squeak of the cart's wheels, or the noise of everyone walking. They were going slow, and he kept having to limit his own walking speed to stay at the back. "You asked if it was gonna kill you earlier."

"If it isn't gonna kill me, who wouldn't want magic?" Johns asked with a shrug that he'd never admit was embarrassed.

James gnawed at his lip. "You'd be surprised." He grumbled. "But sure. It's not a secret or anything. Here." He tossed the crystal over to the other man, who fumbled it to the asphalt with a clinking sound that had James wincing again. "Sorry."

"My hands hurt." Johns defended himself as he paused to bend down and grab it. "So, what do I do, just... oh."

He wanted to ask about it, but James put that on hold to keep an eye on the fence to their right. Across thirty feet of dead dirt, barely visible through the mist that kept them from seeing very far at *all*, a swirl in the breeze had brought a fresh bloom of sickly floral scent, and taken a chunk of the light away from the barrier between them and the endless houses they were walking behind.

His grip tightened on the hammer in his hands. It weighed nothing, and yet still felt too heavy. James abruptly became aware of the pounding of his heart and how fast his breath was coming. He paused, letting Johns keep pace with the others while he watched the patch of impenetrable night that was creeping toward them.

Then another breeze smoothed some mist over it in an eddy, and revealed there was nothing there at all.

James wished that he could just let a breath out and see that he was afraid of nothing. But really, he couldn't. Couldn't get complacent, couldn't let himself not be ready to literally jump at shadows.

Distant engine noise, from somewhere in the direction they'd come from, made him shake himself back to attention, and catch up with the others. "Alright. What'd you get?" He took the crystal back from Johns and pocketed it, ignoring the rock's offer to take his skill points.

"Uh... nothing for the first two, and then when I gave it my last point, it... I guess I leveled up in card tricks?"

"How did it phrase it?" James asked, curious.

"Plus one skill rank?" Johns was looking at the back of one of his hands. "Is that normal?"

"Weirdly yes." Zhu mused from James' shoulder. "Do you think it might overlap?"

"It could." James slowed to a stop as they waited for Harlan to give an all clear from where they were taking a fork in the path, and heading to where he and the mercenary had swept one of the houses earlier. "That's kind of a weak prize though."

Johns looked excited, though. "Sure, sure, but what if you found one of these for... heck, man, *anything* useful. Survive a cold, skip a term of college? Seems like a good deal to me. I wish I had more points to give it though."

"I don't..." James had been about to say that they probably wouldn't be exploiting this place. But that was... probably not true, was it? At the very least, the Order would be finding it and trying to get him out. They were going to have more than a few of these crystals, probably. "Wait, hang on. More points?"

“It can keep taking more.” Johns said. “I think. I only had three though. You said you had *fifteen?*”

James shifted the sledgehammer to his other hand so he could wipe his palm on the edge of his shirt. “I’ve been shooting a lot of things.” He said. “I don’t need five ranks in card tricks though. Although five... if it *is* the same as what I’m familiar with, that’s gonna put you at ‘get a gig in Vegas’ levels. You’re right, if we can find something useful, this is... well, still a bad trade.” James couldn’t stop thinking about the casualties needed for this.

Johns didn’t seem bothered. Or if he was, he hid it. Maybe he was just more used to seeing people die than James was, working in an ambulance as he did.

But still. James had skill ranks in cooking, in driving, in a handful of martial arts or weapon skills, in *talking*. How long would it take to find a skill crystal that would give something useful? How many fewer injuries would he have incurred in his career as a fledgling hero if he’d been able to *choose* what he got better at, instead of having to take what he got from orbs and learn the rest on the fly or in his spare time?

Sometimes dungeons were dangerous.

That didn’t mean the Order didn’t find a use for them.

He kept quiet as they moved, their walking pace far slower than it had been ‘yesterday’, but still making progress. Keeping ahead of whatever esoteric and unknown danger was out there. Hopefully. James didn’t pick up the conversation until he noticed one of the men ahead of them stumble. “You should go check on Mauro.” He told Johns.

The EMT didn’t make eye contact. “You say that like you think checking on him is gonna do anything.” He waited for James to say something, and when no answer was forthcoming, continued. “He shouldn’t be walking. None of us should, actually, but him most of all. And yeah, I get it, your ghost friend says if we stay put we’re in trouble, sure. I *believe you*. But that doesn’t mean that I can do anything about hemorrhaging. He’ll be okay, or he won’t, and there’s... I can’t fix that.”

“I know.” James said quietly.

Johns sighed. “I’ll go check on him.”

“Thanks.”

They kept moving, with the old cart that Zari was on ending up near the back of the line after Johns sped up to pass her and her tiger-driven chariot. James gave her a smile he hoped was reassuring, as he once again paused to sweep his vision over the rolling path behind them.

The girl surprised him by talking, even though her voice betrayed the tremendous amount of pain she was in. “It doesn’t make anyone feel better when we can hear you, you know.” She sounded almost angry, though James didn’t hold it against her.

“It’s not for you.” He said simply. “It’s for him.”

“He’s gonna die, isn’t he?” The way Zari said it, it was like she was trying to sound stoic, though she utterly failed. It didn’t help that one hand was clawing at one of the battered couch cushions they’d stuck on the cart, nervously scratching at the material as she spoke.

James felt his face twist into a nervous smile, and hated how grinning at things seemed to be his default way to handle stress. It was all fine when he laughed at people who were trying to kill him, but this wasn’t the time for this particular reaction. “He could be fine.” He said, honestly. “Hell, Aurelio didn’t die, and he breathed in *sewer gas*, so, hey. Anything’s possible. Mauro might just have a bad concussion. Fuck, I hope that’s all he has.”

“This sucks.” Zari’s voice cracked as she spoke, almost sobbed, the words.

James took a deep breath, and regretted it as he *again* forgot how much it sucked to breathe too much of the air here. “Yeah.” He said, wavering slightly. “Of course it sucks. We’re victims of a fucking terrorist attack, kid. Someone suicided themselves to dump us here, just to hurt one person, when really, all they had to do was *ask* me and I’d break Harlan’s ankles myself. Everything about this sucks, and I’m trying to... I just... I...” James sucked in air, blinked away the hot feeling of tears forming in his eyes, and struggled to find words to say next.

Zhu’s arm on the back of his own centered him. “We keep moving. We do what we can. We trust everyone else.”

“Yeah.” James said, steadying his breathing.

“Can I have an emotional support spirit?” Zari asked, the half-joke slipping out through teeth she was grinding against the pain in her shredded ankle.

It caught James off guard so much, the absurdity shattered the anxiety that was clawing at him. “Heh. You have a *tiger!* Though I guess they’re Harlan’s. So, yeah, sure, we’ll see what we can... do...” he trailed off as movement in the mist behind them caught his attention. “Hey, cat.” He got the tiger’s attention with a tap to the flank, the massive beast looking at James with a bizarrely placid face. “Faster. Get the kid out of here.” The tiger glanced behind them, then rapidly shifted against the makeshift harness and tugged the cart forward, Zari yelping as she held onto her awkward seat. “Everyone move! Incoming! Harlan!” James shouted a warning before he planted his feet and prepared.

Behind them, the mist swirled. It was hard to see too far away, but James could make out twisting shapes maybe sixty feet off. Close, too close, to really react to with anything but telling

the others to move. They'd been steadily rising in elevation as they got toward where he and Harlan had cut a hole in a fence a couple hours ago, so he at least would have the high ground here. But there was a darkness in the distance, pooling down at the bottom of the slight basin this back corridor through the neighborhoods formed, and it must have been from there that things were heading his way.

James ignored the sound of an engine, and the impossibly awful sound of a child laughing from one of the nearby houses just on the other side of the fence row, as the first shape formed into something more visible. He took in details at speed as they closed in. Low to the ground, maybe coming up to his waist; he shifted his stance and the grip on the hammer to aim low. Four legs, bounding like pack animals; he focused and toggled his bracers to nails and bites, splitting his shields to the things that stopped the bulb-dogs. Numbers, three in the vanguard, more shapes still coming behind them; this was going to be tough.

The first one closed enough that James could see the orange and green coloring on the pus filled bubbles that made up the dog's body. Half of them hung open, sucking in air and outputting puffs of mist as it ran, and he pivoted into a swing as the lead monster closed the gap.

It was a perfect swing. An enemy that had committed to an attack would have been nailed by twenty five pounds of metal that James had sped up to an absurd degree by virtue of his arm muscles not having to worry about exactly how many pounds he was moving. By all rights, the dog should have been turned into a smear. But he *missed*.

"Fu-" he got half a swear out before the bulbous thing clipped him on the flank as it tore past him. His shields didn't do a damn thing, because it wasn't trying to bite him at all. It didn't even *mean to hit him*, it was just an accidental impact as it blitzed past.

A riot of orange lines lit up his vision as Zhu caught something from the air. "They're running!" The navigator yelled. "Stand... here!" James stumbled into the spot Zhu had demanded just as another cluster of the things ran by, these ones looking like their flesh orbs were drooping, maybe with exhaustion. "Here!" Zhu designated another point, and James, having regained his balance, slid back just in time to be out of the way of the next batch.

"What the fuck." He huffed. The people in their group were screaming, and a burst of gunfire sounded as Harlan and Other Guy took shots at the passing creatures, but James had acted like a rock in a river, and the stream of them had split around him. Most of the dogs didn't get close to the others, they just tore strips out of the dirt as they ran around. Which was, James decided instantly, fucking terrifying. "Oh hell, what are they running from." He whispered, straining his eyes to see into the mist.

As it turned out, what he needed to see wasn't in the mist at all. It was in the darkness below. He caught sight of a flickering white light, like a will o wisp in the gloom, and then another one near it, bobbing up and down before winking out. In the silence that followed the stampede of

bulb dogs, the humans holding their breath and waiting for the other shoe to drop, James heard a pained and wet howling yelp from below them. Followed by a sick crunch as the howl cut off.

“Zhu.” James said, staring at the darkness like he could somehow will it to disappear. “Can you do the dodge lines for everyone else?”

“No.” The navigator said regretfully.

“Shit.” James whispered, as below them, one of the white lights reappeared. A thin slit of luminescence, visible from a distance because of its contrast, and because the mist tended to hug the ground. Then another one. Then another. They moved in fluid arcs, rising up until there were eight in total, forming two opposite crescents in the air. All of them widening to circles as they twisted back and forth.

James wasn't an idiot. He'd seen enough weird dungeon life to know when he was looking at eyes.

“How far from the house are we?” He whispered.

“Two hundred meters.” Zhu replied in the same hushed tone.

“How fast do you think that thing is?”

“Oh, I'm sure we're about to find out.”

Swearing one more time, James started backpedaling as the set of eyes turned and focused in his direction. Slipping one of his bracers to 'automatic' just in case it tried to kill him for looking at it, he yelled another warning for the others to start running, as the thing below them started moving.

This time, James didn't ignore the engine noise.

He turned and started running. The others had gotten a lead, and they were pushing through the injuries and exhaustion to do so. James caught up fast, and with a shout, got his pistol back from the guy holding it. They were almost to the spot where he'd punched through the fence, and while the house didn't exactly feel like it would offer a lot of safety, at least it was a potential hiding spot if they moved fast enough.

Then it was right in front of them. He veered off the path and slapped a hand against the rough wood. “Go! Move!” He yelled, ushering the people through one by one. Harlan stood on the other side opposite him, staring with hard eyes at the thing approaching, and James couldn't stop glancing over his shoulder every two seconds. The eyes vanished as it left the darkness, and the noise of an engine grew as the thing closed on them. James supposed it would have

been too much to ask that the sounds actually were illusions meant to distract or frustrate.  
“Come on! Zari, come on, you can make this. You gotta run.”

“I know!” The girl snapped as she grabbed his hand and limped off the cart, the group abandoning it in the dirt as Harlan saved time by just dragging their tiger back into tattoo form.  
“It hurts!”

“Just head for-“

“Incoming.” Harlan’s clipped tone was punctuated as they raised their pistol and started firing past James. They got off two shots before the shape approaching out of the mist was on them.

The dogs were pretty fast, but they had nothing on this thing. It was going fifty miles an hour, it had closed the gap between where this path split and where they were in under a minute, and it didn’t let up as it approached. James barely had time to register the shape of it before it was threatening to kill him.

It was eight feet tall, but it was *huge*. Stretched out to the size of a semi truck, eight headlight eyes forming a split ring at its front. It looked like it was plated like some kind of beetle, but it had a head that looked like a boxy mass of glass and metal that its eyes came off of on antenna. Radio antenna, nothing organic about those. The back of it was colored in beige and grey and blue, angular designs instantly calling to mind the patterns of camper vans and mobile homes that James had seen throughout his life. Underneath it, though, it had a semi-exposed underbelly that looked like a plexiglass tank sloshing with liquid that absolutely wasn’t water. Thick metal limbs kept it upright as it rushed forward; orbs on the end of them kicking up plumes of dirt from either side of the path as they spun like some kind of tire rather than pushing it along at a run.

James didn’t even see if Harlan’s bullets annoyed it as it snapped at him, and he just didn’t have the time to react. The massive head started to close around him, and it was only a flare of light from his shield bracer that stopped it. He dropped to his knees, then went prone and rolled under the metal jaws before the bracer ran dry, and threw his hands over his head as the wheels spun past on either side.

Momentum crashed it through the fence, Harlan diving out of the way and coming up on one knee still shooting. It had turned ever so slightly to get to them, and at this speed, nothing stopped it from demolishing the rotting wood like it was cardboard. The sound of the impact and the splintering wood, mixed with the roar of the thing’s engine that was a lot more literal now that it was screaming it *at* them, almost covered up the scream that abruptly cut off as it smashed Zari into the dirt.

James pulled himself to one knee next to Harlan, ignoring everything but the target. Leaving the hammer in Zhu’s hand, he took aim and started trying to shoot out the thing’s tires, if that was even an option. But as it braked to a stop halfway through the yard of the adjacent house and

started doing an almost comedic dance to turn itself around, he realized it would still be able to walk like that anyway and just switched to hitting *anything* on it.

Harlan's bullets took hand sized chunks out of the metal of its body, and while whatever they'd given James was less effective, he at least felt like he was dealing damage to it. But the thing was the size of a truck, and when it revved its engine in a howl at them and bent its horned head down to charge back their direction, James didn't waste time before pulling himself to his feet and running for the nearest unbroken part of the fence to break its line of sight and have a chance at dodging. Opposite him, Harlan wordlessly did the same, and they were just barely quick enough before the mobile home smashed its way out through the ruined fence, sending more pieces of rotten wood flying, thrashing around as it tried to grab either of them.

Behind it, James saw the other survivors struggling to keep moving. Someone had tripped, and he saw Mauro trying to drag them to their feet, but the mobile home, not having found James or Harlan, was happy to go after anyone moving.

Mauro saw it. Pulled Aurelio to his feet with a yank, and shoved the kid toward the porch. Then he turned, flipped off the massive monster, and started running the other direction.

"Hey!" James yelled, emptying the rest of his magazine and swapping to another with an icy arm he brought to life as the need arose, ignoring the slight chill in the heat of battle. "Over here!" He gestured. "Harlan! House! Go!" The mercenary shot him a nod, and started sprinting behind the thing, hopping over Zari's unmoving body and snapping off shots at it as they went.

The monster ignored them, ignored the bullets, and lunged forward at the one moving thing that was in its line of sight. Mauro saw it coming, and concussion or no, he still threw himself down trying to dodge the charge. But the thing's head opened up, and James got a good view from a new angle of the grinding machinery inside of it. This wasn't its engine, this was like some kind of nightmare processing facility.

Then its jaws closed around Mauro's upper body, and ripped him in half.

James would have screamed, but he didn't have the energy to spare. He had one stupid idea, and he needed this thing's attention to even try it. "I have an idea." He rasped at Zhu.

"I hate that sentence." The navigator replied.

He just needed its attention, and specifically, he needed it to *not look at the house*. Not for his idea to work, but just so it didn't kill everyone else. Harlan stopped shooting, and James took up the slack, pouring the rest of his bullets into its side, taking out divots well beyond what nine millimeter should have been able to. He tried to get his Aim to point him at weak points, but there weren't any to be found, so he just used up what he had left, then transferred the gun to his ice arm and started waving his hands. "Hey! Come on! Fucking eat me, you architectural

abomination!” He punctuated it by triggering one of his two blue orbs, Break Electronic so far having had zero use in this place, but maybe this thing had some parts he couldn’t see. If it did, it didn’t care about them, and the Office pseudospell splashed off it without effect, but it still turned toward James anyway, gore dripping from the seam of its mouth.

“I hate this plan!” Zhu yelled over the engine noise.

“Just hit it if you can.” James said, pushing up his sleeves and stepping back until his feet touched the path they’d been walking on.

A lot of people in the Order had different opinions on how to use the absorbed blue orbs from Officium Mundi. Fundamental to the process was visualization. You couldn’t do what you couldn’t describe, and so, to that end, people found different ways to help with the process. Speaking was common, describing the task at hand to sort out the different parts of it. Though some people thought it made them look cool to do it all silent and stoic. Those people were mostly just Momo though.

James, though, was a mover. He learned by doing, and he worked best when he could be hands on. So he guided magic through gestures. He knew he didn’t *have* to, but it helped.

He was kneeling as the thing roared and charged, and James prayed to whatever non-hostile entities might be listening that it not have any ranged options. His fingertips pressed against the dungeon asphalt, and he started layering magic.

Maker’s Hand Upon The Wheel didn’t work well if you weren’t moving fast, but that didn’t matter, it still added an element of improved control. He wasn’t sure if he’d need it, but no sense taking chances, and he wasn’t using the Velocity for anything else. The real weapon though was Manipulate Asphalt. A magic he hadn’t dared use before, just in case the dungeon took offense to it. Route Horizon certainly seemed to react whenever they used it there; instantly wrenching control of the material back and locking down areas around delvers. James might only get one use of this trick, and since if it didn’t work he might just die, now seemed like a good time.

He wished he had Alex’s Timing power. He had a hard time judging how quickly something that could accelerate as fast as this beast would be charging him. But despite the spike of adrenaline as it rushed him and its machinery filled maw opened to try to devour him, James waited until the last second to mentally grab as much of the asphalt under his feet as he could, fling his arms up into the air, and turn it into a single sharpened spear. He ignored the feeling of something clawing its way up the magic back toward him.

Momentum and perhaps a lack of intelligence carried the thing toward James anyway, and there was a screeching metal cacophony that tore at his eardrums as it impaled itself on the spike. The front set of limbs it had lashed wildly in the air as it was held just off the ground, slowly sliding down the spire James had made with a grinding squeal of materials that weren’t meant

to be subjected to impacts like this. It was still alive, even though he'd speared it through the 'neck', and he and Zhu sought to rectify that.

The navigator didn't have the same range of motion James did. Not that he had *less*, it was just different. That didn't stop him from swinging the sledgehammer upward at the exposed belly of the beast they were now crouched under the front of. The plexiglass tank - probably some kind of stomach, James found himself impossibly musing as he watched the liquefied blood and ichor in it slosh around - didn't survive the first hit. It didn't shatter, but Zhu wasn't limited to having to reset his muscles to keep moving, and instead James jutted one arm out and let Zhu windmill the hammer in a loop that continually tore new holes along the underside of the thing as it struggled to pull itself off the spear.

The fluids in its underbelly gushed out, and James was soaked in the stuff in an instant, but he didn't care. He dodged to the side as one of the flailing airborne legs tried to smash him away, then grabbed onto the joint where it met the mobile home's body and started pulling himself up, all the while Zhu expending what energy he had left to snap the limb behind them with a howl of the engine and a scream of twisting metal.

Gunfire sounded again, Harlan closing on the exposed rear of the creature and pouring the rest of their bullets into it, strategically blowing off legs and tires, leaving it crippled, as James found tiny handholds on the shell and hauled himself and Zhu up toward the monster's neck. A bullet tore a groove out of the hull just over his head, and James flinched back in a blink, but didn't let go. He kept pulling forward, shoving past the ache in his arm muscles to drag himself up onto its back. The thing swiveled several of its headlight eyes around to look at them as they approached, and James tried Break Electronic again, but got no result. Zhu nailing one with a hammer worked though, not that it could do anything but look at them and thrash as James planted his feet against where the asphalt spike was poking through its frame on the top.

"I hope there's some kind of hell for you." He spat out as he twisted himself to hold his arm out, and Zhu brought the physics-apatetic hammer down on where its head and body met. It took four hits to peel back enough of the metal that the monster's insides were exposed, and one more after that to shatter enough internal gory machinery to bring it to a motionless death.

"Dead." Zhu gasped out, the hammer falling from his hand as his manifestation started to fade out. "Five skill points, deep." James caught the hammer, the weight vanishing before it crushed his foot.

"Get some sleep." He said, before his own legs gave out and he dropped onto his ass on the back of the dead beetle-shaped mobile home. "Good job." He lay back, but the way the thing was shaped meant that his head didn't have any support and he just started to rapidly get a pain in his neck as he tried to recline on the slain monster. But James didn't make a move to get up. He wasn't sure he could. He barely had the energy to wipe the drying sludge from the thing's shattered underbelly tank off his face.

He just sat there, alone and hurting, staring at the fake sky. Until there was a thunk from next to him, and a human hand grabbed onto one of the ridges. It didn't take long for Harlan to pull himself up. Not all the way, James was pretty sure they were standing on one of the leg joints as they popped their head over.

"Impressive." Harlan said. "Thought you were dead there."

"Yeah, well," James rasped out, "that's why you call me paladin, I guess."

"Do I?"

"Much to my chagrin, yes."

Harlan made a small noise of curiosity. "Okay, paladin." They tried it out. "Yes, I see it."

"How do you even know what a... I mean with how much you delete your..." James gave up on trying to ask, and just focused on working up the energy to roll onto his shoulder so he could try to stand again.

He was still working on it when Harlan spoke again. "Three dead. Not a good rate. Has the whole place been like this?"

"Zhu's not dead." James said, his heart still hurting for the two survivors who made it this far just to get crushed to death by this fucking thing now. He considered hitting it with the hammer again, but even weightless, it was still too heavy for him to lift at the moment.

"Oh, I didn't mean your passenger. The medic ate it. Tripped a plague trap." Harlan's voice was so... careless.

James had a moment of just thinking that maybe he should kill the mercenary now, while he had the opportunity. No one should ever talk about someone dying that way. The anger didn't last long though, he just didn't have the stomach for it. Instead he felt sick to his stomach as he realized that three of the six people he'd been trying to save - Harlan didn't count - were gone. One tiny burst of frantic action, and half their group was dead.

He'd told the last iteration of Harlan that he'd spend a lot of time crying when he got out of here. But now, sitting on top of the thing he and Zhu had ripped apart with blunt force, he decided to stop waiting. Hot tears formed channels down the sides of his head, dripping past his ears as he shook in silent sobs.

All he'd wanted, for a long time, was to be some kind of hero. James hadn't started out that way; when he'd found the Office, he and Anesh had spent a *while* just trying to use it for their own gain. It was only when he'd been freed from the looming specter of poverty that he'd been able to start making proactive attempts to try to improve the world. To try to help people.

Alanna had helped; hell, Alanna still did help. He couldn't do any of this without his partners. But there was a tipping point where James had gone from someone trying to survive to someone trying to be *heroic*.

And now here he was, down to a survival rate of roughly twelve percent for people under his care - Harlan still didn't count - and he couldn't even make himself get up to check on the living or attend to the dead.

Some fucking hero.

James gave up on struggling to control his breathing, just letting his body's reflex to cry run its course. Harlan left at some point, but he wasn't really paying attention, and didn't care. Eventually, though, he didn't have anything left, and he knew he couldn't just lay here forever. If for no other reason than that his neck was going to hurt forever if he didn't move.

He reached up a hand to wipe away the tears on his face, and also some of what was left of the blood and ichor. And felt a throbbing pain as his fingers made contact; like the ache of a loose tooth.

Pulling his hand back, it came away wet, and James held the limb over his head to stare at his fingertips; specifically at the sting in the way the skin on them wasn't sitting correctly. The skin on his hands in general really. It was cracked and bleeding, and as he watched, a wet chunk of skin sloughed off entirely. It came with a cold sensation, which reminded him quite a lot of what had snaked its way into his body while he was manipulating the asphalt of the footpath.

"If you hadn't just murdered so many people, I'd be impressed that you thought to trap magic itself here." James muttered, and felt the skin of his cheek peel open as he spoke to himself.

This did not feel survivable, he thought. So he slowly lowered his hand, and lay back on his awful corpse bed, and just waited. Maybe he'd get a survival message. Maybe he wouldn't. He hoped Zhu would forgive him for just giving up here, but there didn't feel like a lot James could do about it.

He ignored the sounds of screaming and crying and muted voices from below as the others came back out of the house and found the bodies of their friends. He just stared at the false sky and tried not to move.

Which is why he noticed when he realized he was looking at blue sky and clouds. Not a lot of them, but a small disc of the space overhead had been replaced by something... normal.

He coughed, tasted blood as his tongue split open, and tried to yell as gently as he could. It came out as a strangled noise, but it was loud enough to get someone's attention at least. "You need a hand?" Harlan's voice came from the side of the dead beetle where they hadn't actually left, just stopped watching James directly.

“G-ugh. Get everyone over here!” James spat out the words as fast as he could, not daring to turn his head, and instead getting a clear view as the disc of sunlight and clouds grew and spread across the fake sky overhead. “Now! Go!”

Harlan started barking commands at the others, snapping them out of their stupor and grief, or in Sienna’s case just grabbing the young woman roughly by the arm and shoving her toward the dead beast. They started to notice what James had, as the alteration to the sky grew and grew, and began to come down on every side of them like walls, or a curtain being pulled shut.

With the effect halfway to the ground, James dared to turn his head slightly, and saw treetops. Frantic voices below him gave away the confusion and fear of the others as they wondered what was going to try to kill them this time, and he wouldn’t blame them if they thought this was the end. But James knew what it was. He’d seen this before.

The effect touched the ground, and he wondered if it was going to form a sphere and carve out a chunk of the dungeon, like some kind of cosmic melon baller. Maybe the place would choke on the Earth dirt shoved into it.

Shouts sounded from around him. A voice amplified by a megaphone telling everyone to stay put, mixed with the noise of rushing wind. Someone asked if there was anything hostile nearby, and one of the survivors - James couldn’t focus enough to place the voice - gave a negative back.

He closed his eyes. He wanted to be awake to tell them their dramatic rescue was a little late. But he didn’t know if he could manage it.

“James. James!” Alanna. It was Alanna talking to him. She was right next to him, too, but her voice sounded weird.

He cracked an eye and saw her face, covered in a full gas mask, one eye still visibly worried under the clear material, the other covered in an eyepatch. “Don’t touch me.” He whispered. “Skin thing.”

“You’re gonna be okay.” She said rapidly, like she was trying to convince herself more than him. He saw her pull her armored hands back, which he appreciated. “It’s gonna be alright, okay? Just don’t fucking die, you asshole.”

“I...” he didn’t know what to say. Everything hurt. His heart hurt. “I knew you’d...”

“Shut up.” Alanna sniffed inside her mask, before turning back to someone James couldn’t see. “He’s up here!” Someone yelled something back to her, and she choked out a laugh. “Of course he is! Where else would we find him?!” A little panic crept in at the end, and James started to wonder just how bad he looked that she was worried he was going to die.

He wasn't going to die. He had too much to do. But if everyone was safe, and the rest of the Order was here to handle things, he was going to take a nap. He decided he'd earned it.

Twelve percent.

But it wasn't zero.

James closed his eyes and let the dark take him into dreamless sleep.