

The old reliable mobile home made its way across the landscape with shaky grace.

Eight stories tall, the hermit geist that had taken the apartment building trudged forward through the Joyous Green Field.

It did not like it.

The residents of the apartments liked it far less. Unlike the hermit geist, many of them had to breathe. This is often a design flaw in mortal beings.

There were many ways for a traveler's journey to come to an end. Setting down foundation, growing weary, adding their bones to the landscape, all common. Sometimes, a traveler's conveyance would break down, in some fashion. Sometimes, this would lead to a new settlement. Especially in the places that were more hospitable. Out of these places, with a little luck, a spark of civilization could be rekindled, eventually to send out travelers of its own.

Most times it simply meant the travelers continued on foot. Most did not last long.

Right now, the hermit geist was struggling to move its legs through the meter deep layer of water and sludge.

The Mechanic sat with their legs over the edge of a balcony, watching the mechaform leg below for any kind of jam or error. The old half- was keeping an eye on their progress, and a veil of spirt soaked cloth over their mouth.

The leg rose, water pouring from the small gaps, algae streaming off the joint in runners of pure green. The leg fell, water splashing into the air, briefly quelling the dance of a million white spores in the space the cascade filled.

The Mechanic nodded, and went back inside. That leg wouldn't be needed for another hour.

They passed the Gardener in the hall. The fourth floor was mostly hall; many of the walls knocked out by a previous pair of travelers. Pairs were rare. It was often those alone, or those in trios. They'd made the space a palatial suite, before they had left. Before the Mechanic's time. Far before the Gardener's.

The two exchanged nods. They didn't waste breath on conversation. The spores were leaking in.

The Mechanic moved on, to the third floor, taking the ladder in the empty shaft down, on to the point where the next leg grew from the eternal rebar frame of the building. They watched for mechanical deficiency, slowing their breath as much as they could.

The leg moved. The joints creaked, strained, dripped water in a fountain that flowed back through the joining in the exterior wall in small streamers. But the leg rose, and fell. Outside, a splash accompanied the tilt of the building as the geist moved forward another step.

The Mechanic had time now, before the next step. It would be a duel pair of legs, they knew it. Efficient creations, they wouldn't need the Mechanic's watching. Instead, they leaned against the wall, and waited.

Eventually, a lifetime later, the building tilted, the soft rattling of unbound objects spilling around old floors and immortal walls filling the air. The Mechanic wanted to sigh. They didn't. The spores were thin here inside, but not absent.

Before the next step, the Mechanic passed down to a lower floor. Carefully, they froze as the building's Librarian moved by. You didn't make eye contact with a Librarian, if you valued your journey. Too often, the creatures would interpret any gesture as an offering of a letter. And losing all your letters was often quite dangerous.

The building's Record had grown recently. The Librarian should have been sated. But here it was, wandering the halls. It didn't have to concern itself with the spores in the air. Only the keeping and pruning of the small Record. A seed, planted in a gamble against the end of all knowledge. Maybe someday it would sprout.

The next step was a heavy one, the hermit geist's long leg plunging into a sinkhole in the marshy ground outside. Instead of a meter of water, three greeted its footfall, and the apartment lurched an extra ten degrees as the leg sunk into the lake.

The Officer grumbled in her room, shaken out of bed. She hadn't strapped herself in, had thought they were going somewhere else. Somewhere with fewer holes.

Now was as good a time as any to get up. On legs that had long since learned to stabilize on the tilting floor of her room, the Officer rose, and began her day.

Counted bullets, did the math on how many shots she had with her weapon, mapped out what she wanted her next victories to go to.

Her planning was interrupted by another step that rattled the floor and left her mind on edge.

She left her room to roam the halls, restless. The spores in the air burned, but she ignored them. The Officer had seen worse.

Outside, a leg rose, crept forward by a quarter mile, and slammed down. This one did not make a splash. The metal and stone claw instead sinking into thick mud, and poisonous reeds.

On the roof, the Courier felt a tension leave its furnace heart. The water was more a terror to it than the spores in the air, and so it sat here, watching ahead of them. The Reporter had loaned it a tool, though the Courier couldn't use it too well.

Another two steps, and the apartment pulled itself out of the lake, and into mire. Muck and mud sticking to the claws and feet of the hermit geist's legs, a sticky black reminder of the mutable nature of the flesh of the world.

The Reporter made lunch, burning through a pair of batteries they'd traded for at the last town to run a half dozen fans, keeping the spores mostly out of the kitchen.

Another step. Then another. The building lurched as mud pulled a leg a little too hard, and the apartment had to exert force to compensate. Creaking groaning signaled a wall that was stretched to its natural limit.

But the leg pulled free. Another step. The travelers left the Joyous Green Field behind.

When the Reporter called them for lunch, he forgot to use the bell. His call was answered, by all those seeking a room mostly free from the lingering spores, and also by the Librarian.

Everyone remained still while the Librarian honed in on the Reporter, and the day's chef gave up on holding his breath, and simply handed over a letter with a sigh of defeat.

The Librarian had scurried off, and they had eaten together to celebrate their escape. None dead, this time. The Courier even came by to let the Gardener know that her plants had been kept from falling off during the tilting.

The travelers had broken company, and returned to their evenings. Flush with a fresh victory, if not a new secret.

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To Whom It May Concern;

It pains me to say it, but I am enjoying myself.

I cannot remember the last time, in that grim and insular township in the Valley Of Grey Stone, that I felt any particular compulsion to smile. But now, now, I am a man rejuvenated.

They tell me that I am a fool. That better others have perished. That no one who has claimed the room I now rest in has ever lived long as a traveler, and that I have made an old mistake.

It's not too late to change, they say. That is very kind of them, and cruel in a way they do not know. Well, most of them. Officer, I think, knows why it is cruel, though she does not say. The old woman understands what it means to break chains.

There is a worry, too, that I am too close to Tourist. Nonsense. Tourist is looking for themselves. I am looking for others. I believe this so strongly, I have even shaped a tool for it.

Used my first victories. The first I've ever accumulated. I don't know how to feel about it. I barely know what I was doing. Was it really such a victory, just to leave home? Perhaps! Perhaps it was!

Home. What a cowardly word. I hid behind it for so long. I should have become a traveler a lifetime ago. With a backpack and a staff if needed. Now that I can see beyond that stagnate valley, I can see through time at my life, and everything I have missed.

I have so many letters to fill. So much time to make up for. And so many things to learn. Guide has offered to teach me to prepare sliced arit for the late meal, and I will take that offer. The traveler is a fountain of friendliness.

They couch it in pessimism. They say I'll need to know, so I can feed the others when they're gone. But I think we'll be companions for a while yet. I think they know it too.

I go now, to take the next step into a terrifying and beautiful journey. And to learn to use a kitchen's blade.

Traveler's Word,  
Reporter

