

*"I am an anarchist not because I believe Anarchism is the final goal, but because I believe there is no such thing as a final goal. Freedom will lead us to continually wider and expanding understanding and to new social forms of life." -Rudolf Rocker, The London Years-*

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The back room of any space that you frequented, but didn't even really *work at*, was always something that fascinated James. Not that he'd ever spent time daydreaming in class about what was in janitor's closets or the mystical upstairs of the grocery store, but... well, maybe a *little* daydreaming.

There was an invisible, social barrier there. Not a magic shield, but still something that kept people out. Which invited the question of what was so important that it needed to be kept secret. What strange and important things were kept *in the back* that made every employee door feel like a mystery to be solved?

The answer, as he'd gotten older, had been disappointing. As most answers about the world were. What was so important? Kitchen stuff. Storage. Maybe some offices. Normal, boring, mundane things.

But each time he stepped into a new place, there was a feeling like being in a stranger's house. Like even though he'd seen a commercial kitchen a dozen times from a dozen jobs, this one was something new and unique.

That feeling came back the instant he vaulted over the cafe's counter. He'd been coming here for years. Since he first moved to the no-longer-nearby apartment, since before he lost Sarah, since before he found the dungeon. And after that too. After *everything*. He'd always had a place to go to get coffee, where he was on friendly terms and recognized with a smile, but still kind of an outsider even as he was tipping with skill orbs and bringing dungeon life to hang out.

And now he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. Somewhere that could be a *mystery*.

The kitchen didn't have a door, just an open arch that was done up with faux brick to make the place look older and more rustic than it actually was. The back area was a standard cramped cafe kitchen, complete with a set of dirty stainless steel counters and racks of stored baked goods in plastic bins. It also *did* feel properly mysterious as the rainbow light from Harlan's tattoo parrot perched on a ventilation pipe overhead made the whole place look iridescent.

"What's going on?!" James' yell competed for space with the ongoing scream of terror. He swept his gaze across the dozen people left, trying to triangulate what was going on. It wasn't hard, they were mostly all pressing back against one of the walls, while under the rainbow lights someone writhed on the floor on the opposite side.

It was a bit hard to tell, what with the fact that Harlan had shot someone and another man had lost an arm not even an hour ago, but there was the smell of fresh blood. James gulped back a gag as he hurried over to where the EMT - he really needed to ask this guy his name - was crouched over one of the students who had made a break for it earlier.

“What’s going on?” James demanded.

The EMT looked up, a blue protective mask over his mouth and gloves on his hands. “He started babbling, then collapsed. High fever, and he’s got... well, this.” He turned over one of the student’s arms, a cut away sleeve showing oozing sores. “Did he have a bag? Any medications?” The EMT was calling to the others, but they weren’t listening. Instead, there was another yell, another scream really, as the crowd of people tried to push away from someone else who had just fallen to the floor. The other student James recognized as one of the lucky uninjured ones who had run earlier.

“Everyone calm down!” Someone bellowed. *James* bellowed. He caught himself off guard; his words coming out more forceful and aggressive than he’d meant. But the sound and the force of his words dragged everyone’s attention to him; made them listen. “Step away from her. You, you’re their friend. Are they on any medications they need? Is this normal?”

The last guy in their group, a fairly young Asian man with big round glasses who was crouched over his friend as the rest of the cafe moved away, looked up at James with a strained expression. “N-no. Nothing. Her arms... are bleeding. And I don’t... feel good. Everyone should get... away. Get away from us. I feel sick.” He said the last sentence like it was an amusing revelation, the same way a person would say “Oh hey, I found five bucks in my wallet!”

“Shit.” Harlan was already back out of the room.

James didn’t blame them. “Okay. Everyone stay calm. Move back out to the main... hall, thing? Dining area? We’ll keep them here and make sure they’re okay. But get comfortable. If you feel yourself getting feverish, lay down, don’t fall and hit your head. I... any other advice?” He asked the EMT. “Anything we need here?”

“Water. But we don’t have water.” The man said. “Just stay away from each other. We don’t know what this is, but it’s likely we’re all already infected if it’s at all airborne. So yeah, sit down, and stay hydrated if you can.”

“I.. I’ve got a bottle.” An older blonde woman with a face full of piercings offered. “And some Tylenol?” She caught a nod from the EMT, and ran to grab it. But she was the only one who offered up anything.

“The toilet tanks are gonna have water in them.” James muttered. “What are the odds that’s safe to drink?”

“Zero.” The EMT said as James crouched next to him. “James, right? You said earlier, I think, but I wanna make sure.”

James nodded, and took the spare set of latex gloves the other man offered him from a pocket. “Yeah. And you?”

“Johns. J club, represent.” The word had the cadence of an old in joke James wasn’t privy to. He shrugged at the lack of reaction as he got James to slide him the cafe’s first aid kit, and started wrapping gauze around the man’s arms. The student was the same age as him, really. “Check on them.” He pointed to the other two, ignoring a weak moan from the guy he was treating.

James did, stopping the woman who tried to come too close to hand him a water bottle. He had her roll it and the painkillers across the tiled floor instead, as he made sure neither of the other two had hit anything vital when they collapsed. The girl had a rapidly growing bruise on her forehead, her friend was okay though. Except for the fact that James could feel their fevers even through his sweaty palms, and the smell of blood was intensifying as lesions opened up along their arms like their skin was magnetically charged and in opposition to itself.

“Got any more bandages?” He asked Johns, looking up after he’d arranged the two in a somewhat more comfortable position, with a folded coat and a sack of coffee beans under their heads for pillows.

“No, and I’m not feeling great already.” Johns said. He didn’t make any attempt to hide the anxiety and fear in his voice. “This is bad. This is too fast. If this spreads, everyone probably has it. You said... you said we were somewhere dangerous. Is this what you meant?”

“Never like this before.” James’s voice was soft, but there was no noise to cover it up. No buzz of lights or whirl of air conditioning or anything but the occasional frightened word or cry from the other half of the cafe. “Never *disease*. Fuck, man, I sent people out. I thought... I sent them back.” James felt a throb of a headache. “I have never fucked up so bad this fast before.” He looked down at where blood was starting to well up from the sores in the arms of the two med school students. “Are there more bandages?” He asked. And got no answer. “Johns?” James glanced over. The man was sitting against the back door, half concealed by a big grey garbage can.

“I’m good.” He muttered back. “I just need a minute.”

James stood, and made his way over to join him, sitting on the dirty kitchen floor with his back against several unopened cardboard boxes full of... sugar? Probably sugar. The man across from him looked ashen, even under the green and purple and red lights of the obediently lingering magical macaw.

“You don’t look good.” James said.

“I think the Tylenol is actually helping. Gonna sit, then try to get those two to swallow some too. If it spreads by touch, at least we’re it, though. If it’s airborne...” Johns swiveled his head to stare at James. “There’s not enough for everyone. Oh, shit. You. You need to...”

“I’ll make it.” James said, with utter confidence. “If two hundred milligrams of acetaminophen was gonna be the difference, then I’ll make it.” He paused. “Gimmie the pills, I’ll get those two to take them somehow.”

It took an effort of will to move again, and more to get the half-unconscious, half-delirious students to choke down the Tylenol. One each, all they had left. There hadn’t been anything else in the first aid kit, and no one had volunteered anything. He stumbled his way back to the EMT, who was starting to breathe heavily. “You should get your arms wrapped with something before...” James trailed off.

Wrapped with what, exactly? Maybe he could cut one of the stained aprons into strips, when he could stand up again.

It had been so, so long since James had been into a dungeon without properly being supplied. First aid, weaponry, things like the exercise potions in his pockets. To be in a situation where he didn’t even have bandages was bizarre to him.

He realized he was rambling about it when Johns interrupted. “Man, you got healing potions, and...”

“They’re not healing potions.” James thought he said. Then he decided to close his eyes for a little bit, as his headache got worse, and his arms started to itch under the multiple shield bracers he was wearing.

He didn’t hear what John said next.

James was familiar with being sick. When he was a kid, he got the flu once a year like clockwork, because his dad had told him that getting a flu shot just gave you the flu, so that never happened. The feeling of drifting, of feeling like he was burning inside and chilled outside like some kind of reverse microwaved Hot Pocket, and of having no real control over his thoughts, all of this was stuff James knew.

As he’d gotten older, and started living on his own, he’d had to manage it in different ways. Usually, he managed it by spending three days in bed sleeping and waiting to feel properly hungry again. Later on, he’d dealt with it by getting a flu shot, on the grounds that if he was going to have the flu anyway, he may as well do it on his own timeline. Then he’d stopped getting the flu, mostly. But still, he *knew* the feeling of a fever, of that sort of hot delirium that ran his thoughts around and around in frantic manic circles until his mind collapsed into exhaustion.

He'd only been sick once since he'd gotten his Akashic Sewer lesson in biology up to multiple ranks in Endurance. He'd almost felt sorry for the disease. It wasn't that it affected him less or anything, it was just that at no point did his body slow down or falter. He just pressed through, and being in near-peak condition the whole time had made the whole thing go by far faster.

This time was different. The delirium had snuck up on him fast; a matter of minutes, no chance for him to know that he was sick at all. No mild sore throat or clammy hands or anything to precede it. This felt less like being sick and more like being stabbed by a disease. This felt like an *attack*.

He realized at a certain point that he could barely keep a coherent thought going, and that his mind was going in circles.

And then he passed out.

He was mildly surprised when he woke up again.

There were a few things that occurred to James in rapid succession. The first was that he was abruptly clear headed; there was no gradual return to focus and consciousness, there was a cliff that he'd plummeted off of and arrived back at a position where he could think properly. Second, someone was screaming again. Beneath the noise he could also hear someone sobbing, and another voice weakly and frantically praying for salvation. This was a bad sign, and he found himself springing to his feet like he hadn't just been out cold for who-knew how long.

The third thing was that his arms *hurt*, his shield bracers were slick and his shirt sleeves damp with blood. If it weren't for the fact that he had a lot more blood to spare than the average person, leaping up probably would have made him lightheaded.

The last thing was the insistent piece of information waiting for his review. It sat, inert and obviously foreign, at the side of his thoughts. Not something he could see, but something that was impatiently waiting for him to acknowledge it so that it could tell him something and then be away from his mind.

James almost wanted to force himself to ignore it out of spite. But even that thought was enough.

[Survivor : Low : +2 Skill Points]

Fascinating, and not what he had time to play with right now.

He was out of the kitchen as soon as he was up, heading toward the source of the screaming and arming himself by grabbing a backpack on the floor on his way past. On the way out, he

deftly hopped over the forms of the pair of med students he'd tried to make comfortable, not having time to check if they were alive.

The main area of the cafe was less dark than James had left it. An oozing grey light filtered through the windows and glass doors. Well, the windows that were still intact, anyway. Through the strange misty light, James could see several thick, rough roots that had crawled through at the base of several windows, forcing their way through and shattering the glass into heavy chunks that littered the floor. He barely processed the fact that the roots seemed to be almost entirely at forty five and ninety degree angles as he dashed around the counter and swept his eyes over the room.

When James let go of his iron grip on the purple orb effect that made his brain process things faster, he didn't exactly see more. It was more that all the small connections between information threatened to overwhelm him. He'd been practicing, but it was still very, very hard to learn to live with. But it still let him race through the scene he was presented with.

There were three people who weren't unconscious. All of the unconscious patrons - and Harlan - were either laying under tables or sitting in chairs while leaning forward onto the tables in front of them. One was passed out on a sofa, which was bizarre, since the cafe didn't *have* a sofa in it and it looked like it had an upholstery pattern that matched the walls. Half of them, James could see were breathing. That was good. The other half he couldn't tell. That was less good.

There was a woman in a red cardigan that he could practically feel the itch of nestled against a dividing wall under a table, crying. There was the man who had tried to call this a practical joke sprawled on the smooth stone floor next to a chair he'd fallen out of, holding a crucifix in his hand and stumbling through a begging prayer. And there was one of the baristas, screaming as a lumpy, bulbous quadruped leaned over her and let one of its orbs split open to reveal teeth like iron nails. She was already surrounded by a trail of blood, and James could see her struggles getting weaker.

He took this in over the course of a second. And then he pivoted in his dash, kicked himself forward, and whipped the shoulder bag he was carrying out at the thing in a low arc that maximized how much force he could put into the swing.

It connected with a wet crunch, and the feeling of something heavy in the bag cracking. James gave a silent apology to whoever's laptop he'd just ruined as he yanked the strap back on the rebound, spun, and whipped the bag around him in an arc. The gross bulbous dog thing had only just started to react to him slamming something into its head, and was making some kind of low whine as the bag came back around and slammed its edge into the thing's face again.

James didn't bother to follow up with the bag, its momentum was too awkward now. Instead, he let it go, grabbed one of the wooden chairs near him, and brought it down as hard as he could on the staggered monster. One of the smooth orbs along its back popped open as he did so, spraying something vile into the air, but James didn't relent and just hit it again, the chair

cracking as the screws holding the legs in place tore out of position through the wood. The furniture never meant to be used as a weapon gave him one more good hit as he slammed the thing back against the low wall under the broken window it had come through.

Then James triggered the kick attack on the old Status Quo greave he was wearing, and slammed his foot through its weakened head. It popped like a ripe cantaloupe, and unleashed a smell like a *far* too overripe and rotten cantaloupe. The whole form went limp as it died, spasming in one rippling motion before it flopped down. James would take a closer look at it later.

Over the smell of blood and whatever foul fluid was leaking from the broken and dead creature and into his shoe, James felt something increment inside himself. Nowhere specific, just the feeling of finishing a thing.

[Killer : Low : +1 Skill Point]

“Great.” He scowled. “Shit.” Rapidly, he remembered what this thing had been doing here, and quickly turned to check on the injured woman. “Are you oka- no, that’s stupid. Where did it get you?” He asked, looking around for something he could use to stop the bleeding. There were some clean towels under the counter, he remembered, and quickly dashed to grab a couple before running back.

“My leg... my leg.” The barista was crying, the words slurred and almost incoherent. James pushed up the side of her skirt, revealing a legging that had been shredded, and a jagged and bleeding *chunk* missing from her thigh. “It hurts!” She gasped out, babbling. “Please, it hurts!”

“Okay. You’re alright.” James saw the red marks on her arms, just like his; wet scabs forming over whatever wounds their rapid illness had inflicted on them. He looked around; everyone who’s arms he could see had those same marks. “Alright.. Hold this here.” He pressed the towel to her injury, and got her hands into place. “Keep the pressure on. Fuck, that’s bad...” He tried not to think about how an injury like that needed to be stitched up by a professional, preferably with anesthetic, and not *him, now*.

He needed help. At the very least, he could see if Johns was awake, and get him to do it with more skill than James had. Briefly, James tried to see if he could make use of the skill points he’d just gotten for spontaneously learning how to suture a wound, but if it was possible, it was a trick he didn’t know yet.

James got the attention of the two other people who were awake, having to snap his fingers a few times to get the guy to focus on him. He was clearly in shock in some way, and so James got him seated and let him be, while the sobbing woman, while *obviously* distressed, was at least capable of giving a nod and tearful sniff when James got her to hold the makeshift bandage on the barista’s leg.

Then he turned and ran for the back again.

“Johns! Hey, man! Come on, I need your help here.” James shook the EMT, who cracked an eye open at him.

“Stop yelling.” Johns said in a dead tone. “I’m here.”

“Come on, you gotta help me, there’s...” James trailed off as he realized the other man had already woken up before he got here, and had shifted positions. “What’s up?”

Johns motioned a hand toward the guy next to him. “He’s dead.” He said. “They all are.”

“That...” James didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to say *anything*. There weren’t words for that kind of casual and abrupt encounter with mortality, for how fucking *unfair* it was that someone had thrown these people in here to die. They weren’t *kids* exactly, but they were all James’ age. What if that had been him? What if he’d been casually trying to scramble through college with his friends instead of delving, and choosing to get coffee at the wrong time had fucking *killed him*? “I can’t... there’s no time. Some people made it, but one girl’s bleeding bad. I don’t know how to stitch a wound, come on.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m dead too.” Johns said, not standing up from where he was sitting, his knees up by his chest, wrists idly resting on the knees of his jeans. “I got skill points. That’s new to me. Seems like the kinda thing my brain would do right before I die. Never was much of a ‘go into the light’ kinda guy.”

James took a sharp breath. “Dude, I swear, I will explain everything to you in ten minutes, but could you get the fuck up and come help me? I don’t have time for this right now, I need to go make sure there isn’t anything else crawling in the windows.”

“...not helping.” Johns said, still not standing, but at least looking up at James.

James stuck a hand down to him. “Come on. There’s people that need help.”

With a sigh, as he concluded that he wasn’t actually dying, Johns let James haul him up and out to the injured woman.

“Wha- what the *fuck* is that thing?!” The man stopped behind James, pointing at the dead monster James had left against the wall.

“Don’t worry about it.” James said. But he did realize that next to a corpse wasn’t a great place for surgery, so while Johns started quietly asking the trembling and bleeding woman questions and getting what he needed out of the limited first aid kit, James hefted the thing and rolled it out the broken window.



It was a bizarre life form, even for his standards. He had thought it was covered in bulbous growths, but it actually *was* those growths; squishy balls of muscle and fluid, wrapped in a rough skin that had the texture of a particularly uncomfortable couch James had once owned. There were absolutely bones of some kind in it, but each nodule of the monster seemed to serve a function, and they fused with each other where they met to create a kind of grotesque wad of a living thing. He was careful as he shoved it away to keep his hands away from the nails in its “mouth”. They *were* nails, too. As in, rusted construction nails. Finger length and slightly crooked. James didn’t want to touch those at *all*, and the closest he got was to make sure his shield bracers had registered them just in case.

James couldn’t help but get a good feel for it as he hefted it up and out the cafe to splatter onto the ground outside. It really did feel *exactly* like bad couch upholstery.

While Johns worked, getting the other woman to help him as he painfully sealed the chunk in the barista’s thigh as best he could, James checked on everyone else.

The big man with the cane who’d said he’d been an SCA member was gone, eyes glassy and empty as he stared out the window. Another man had seemingly bled out, his arms not just covered in sores but further torn up like he’d been scratching at them. The other barista was just waking up, tears welling in the corners of her eyes but at least alive. Aurelio was alive too, though still unconscious and breathing sporadically. The woman with the worn and studded face who’d given up her water and painkillers was dead, and James felt a deep and painful guilt more than for anyone else, that she could have *lived* if she’d been a little more selfish.

One by one, James checked on people. There were, all told, nine among the living still in the cafe. Ten if he counted Zhu, who had been dragged out of his manifestation when James had passed out.

The building was filling up with corpses far too fast for his liking. James considered moving them somewhere, but... where? One of the bathrooms, maybe? The idea fell apart when he realized just how heavy a body was; humans weren’t light objects, and when one of them couldn’t help you move itself, it looked like it would rapidly become too much effort to collect them all somewhere.

Especially since they had to leave.

They had to. They couldn’t stay here. This place was a death trap. At least if they started trying to make it out, they might find some of the dungeon’s own magic to help keep the survivors alive.

It didn’t help make the cafe feel safer when James noticed that the wall near where the roots had punched through the windows was different than it used to be. He was *really familiar* with that cafe wall, and he knew it didn’t look like this. The low wall had risen up, the window compressed; it was more like the kind of window you’d see looking out of a kitchen in a home

built in the 90s, not the big bay window of the cafe. The material was still the same, but something was changing here, subtly. One of the hanging lights overhead had similarly started to warp into a kind of dangling glass chandelier, albeit made out of the same orange plastic the covering used to be.

The dungeon was creeping in, and he still didn't know what it was. At least it was lighter outside, however much time had passed having brought them out of the night.

He started to make a mental list of what they could do to prepare. Pack up the food that was left here, break off some chair legs to use as clubs maybe, consider killing Harlan out of anger before they woke up.

That last one was mostly a joke, and James was too late anyway.

"You move wrong." Harlan said abruptly, looking at James from where they were leaning against a wall next to a dead power socket. They were in the process of pocketing a notepad in a clamshell case, James having barely caught them flipping through it for something specific.

James bit back a wince or a scowl or something like it. "Oh good, we're up to the part of our burgeoning friendship where you say rude things and think it's fine. Great."

Harlan didn't seem to take any implication from that. "You jerk around too much. Thought you were just spun up for some reason. But it's not that, is it? You're messed up."

James blinked slowly. "You thought I came to a meeting with a potentially hostile and unknown group, while high on... I actually don't know drug slang, I'm sorry, what does that one..no, nevermind, I decided I don't care." He gently clapped his hands together a couple times. "I've got a thing that makes me accelerate faster. It's actually the least convenient superpower, because I'm *constantly* having to moderate and hold back on how fast I move. I'm more or less used to it by now, and I get a lot of practice in, so I can use it when I need it, but yeah, sometimes my random pacing is gonna look weird."

There was a brief pause, while Harlan gave James a truly worried look for the first time. "How many different alterations do you *have*?" They asked.

"Like, sum total? Or different sources?" James continued without waiting. "Because I can't answer the first one. And depending on how you count... seven to twelve, I guess? I can't actually remember if I'm currently resistant to venom. That one changes. Let's not test it." He appraised Harlan who was now giving him an unrestrained horrified look, their lack of any retained experience with social situations making them comically easy to read when things went off script. "You... you don't, do you? Have nearly that many. You know about a half dozen dungeons, and you don't... uh... why?" James was truly puzzled as he realized what was going on.

“All I know is I’m not supposed to.”

“Because you told yourself, huh?” James was trying too hard to be civil with Harlan. Here, now, they absolutely could not afford to be enemies, or even mildly antagonistic to each other. But boy was Harlan making it a challenge.

Harlan nodded. “It was a long time ago. And it’s one of the most important parts of the Wolfpack.” They held out an arm, flexing fingers as they stared at the black cloth covering of their sleeve. James knew they were really thinking of another tattoo underneath. “Ink and cordite, and a couple other small things we know are safe. Everything else is off the table. A risk, maybe, or something worse. It doesn’t matter. It’s the one thing above everything else that we pass down. That has to be trusted.”

“So, the skill points you just got then...”

“Won’t use them. Usually there’s a way to feed it into the bullets, anyway.” Harlan shrugged, running their hands along their sleeves without showing any reaction to if that hurt with the open sores underneath. They rose to their feet. “What now?”

“Now we get moving.” James said, motioning through the shattered window. The roots weren’t growing visibly, and the outside was shrouded in mist, but it was still the best chance any of them had. “Zhu. Are you still...” He’d forgotten to check on his companion.

Zhu folded into place out of James’ arm, a simple line of feathers and eyes. And small holes. “Tired.” He said. “That hurt. And... what are skill points?” Zhu sounded confused.

“A mystery.” James grunted. Though, the fact that *Zhu* got skill points was alarming. Was Zhu sick too? “Zhu, we need a path.”

“Can’t.” The navigator didn’t sound like he couldn’t; he sounded pleading. Like he didn’t want to. “It’s... this place is wrong. It hurts to try to map.”

James sympathized. It hurt to be here, and he’d only been around for... well, an hour plus however long he’d been out. “We can’t stay.” He repeated again, softly, coaxingly. “I have to at least try to get these people out. And, shit, I don’t wanna die here and take you with me either. You don’t have to get us to the exit, just... somewhere less dangerous. Can you do that?”

There was a stretched out silence from Zhu, punctuated by a stifled scream as Johns attempted field surgery on the wounded barista and the injured girl’s coworker tried to distract her with a stream of empty words. “I can try.” Zhu decided. “I will try. But it costs when I do this. Don’t you know?”

“Sort of.” James said. “We should have talked about this more. Do you know what it’ll cost?”

“Maps resist being made real; resist with strange coincidences and roadblocks. I know... I know what will happen, in the abstract. But knowing anything specific about a route is part of a route. The rocket fuel problem, across an atlas.” Zhu’s words were semi-cryptic, but James got it. If it cost him adding problems to a trip to know about the trip, then the more he tried to know how many problems would be there, the more problems would spawn. “Should I begin?”

James shook his head, suddenly feeling a bit dizzy as the remnants of his abrupt fever jostled loose. “Wait until we’re out the door.” He said.

And then he got to work organizing what he could. He set two people, the man who had given up on praying by this point and the dude with a goatee dressed as close to ‘normal’ as James had ever seen, to work gathering every bit of food in this building and packing it into bags. They were both... not doing well. And really, how could *anyone* be doing well, surrounded by corpses like this? “They’re all dead.” The goatee guy kept repeating, his eyes unfocused, swaying on his feet.

James didn’t know how to help, except to shove them into action, give them a task, and get them out of here. “Even split, so if we lose one, we don’t go hungry.” James ordered. “Try not make anything too heavy. And yes, I am aware God has abandoned us here. I’m working on it.” His reply to one of the men’s dazed and muttered comment seemed to snap the man out of his stupor.

It was only after going through the thought process of why, for logistical reasons, they couldn’t really boil and store the water from the toilet tanks that the uninjured of the baristas pointed out that the cafe *sold* bottled water. There just wasn’t any up front at the time, but they had a stock in the back. It wasn’t a lot, but at least they had a little bit to work with, and their improvised doctor was especially grateful.

As James got Aurelio to start breaking off chair legs and wrapping them in cloth to use as clubs, he started going around to the dead.

Aurelio stared at him after the third time he pulled out one of the deceased’s wallets from their pockets or purse. “Are you... looting everyone?” He sounded partway between curious and disgusted.

Without looking at him, James just fanned out and held up the stack of plastic cards in his hand. “IDs.” He said. “For when we get out of here.” He added, and said nothing else about it. These people had lives, and families, and friends. They couldn’t just vanish and be forgotten. James collected their driver’s licenses or whatever was close enough, and anything that looked personal. Wedding rings, locket, a couple folded photos. And phones, obviously. Those went in a bag. Lightweight personal electronics got heavy when you had twenty of them.

Soon enough, there was nothing left to do except wait for Johns to finish trying to repair the hole in the woman he was helping. James moved over to stand by them, looking out the windows

into the grey mist that covered everything around; the world was lit now, but visibility was only slightly better than when it had been night. “How is she?”

“Out cold. Alive.” Johns said. “It’s good this place has orange juice because she lost a lot of blood.”

“But she’ll live, right?” The other barista asked.

“Sorry, what was your name?” James cut in. “I know I should know by now, but...”

“Zari. And why would you know?” She seemed almost confused by the question, though still looked worriedly at her friend.

James shrugged. “I’m here basically all the time. I know half your coworkers by name.” He admitted. “Anyway. More important is, can we *move* her?” He asked Johns.

The man shook his head. “She can’t walk, at least.” He explained. “And I dunno, man, can you slap together a stretcher?”

“Probably.” James said, thinking about it. “But... isn’t there a cart in the back for deliveries? Like, that green metal thing?” Zari nodded at him. “So stick her on that. Steal some of the mystery couch cushions. Hell, get Harlan’s stupid tiger to pull it.”

“...What... tiger?”

“Harlan! Call out your pokemon! We’ve gotta get going!” James called by way of answer.

Getting Harlan to agree took the most time. Followed by rigging up a harness, and getting the *tiger* to agree.

While everyone worked on that, James headed out the back door and walked the perimeter of the cafe, gun at hand. It was quiet, and, he really wanted to mentally add, *too quiet*. The building, he noted, was changing on the outside. The materials were mostly the same, but the stone overhang on the patio was being pulled back to look more like a slanted residential roof, what was left of the stone patio itself was being broken into cobblestones not a flat paved surface. It was obvious the dungeon was doing something, making this place look more like a house than a business, but it was doing it in a way that felt like *erosion* to James.

It was very creepy.

Creepier was the fact that, as he took careful steps and watched the surroundings for anything hostile, or the source of the strange roots punching through the building, he thought he saw flickers in the grey mist around him. Motion. But never approaching or threatening or even really something he could pin down.

As he turned around to the side of the building, where it would have had a thin gap between the next restaurant over and now had open space, he spotted two things in quick succession. First, and vitally important, was one of the bulb dogs. It was standing near the dumpster, sniffing at it with several of its flesh orbs that appeared to have intake holes. Like it was covered in noses.

Well, near what used to be the dumpster. It was still a set of garbage cans, made of the same thick and rusted metal, and heavy plastic cap, as the dumpster was. But it had changed. Was *still* changing, really. Along with the wall behind it, it was in the process of warping into something else. Though as James got a good look at it, he could literally see the changes slow to a crawl.

The dog whipped its 'head' toward him, opening its mouth to show a row of rusted nail-teeth. It looked like it was going to make a noise. James preempted it and shot it three times in different orbs, bursting them like rotted fruit and toppling the creature to the ground. Weak scream came from behind him in the cafe at the gunshots, but James would reassure them later.

[Killer : Low : +1 Skill Point]

The changes stopped crawling, and just stopped. And James started to put together what was going on.

A long, long time ago, one dungeon had asked him to save another one. What he now knew to be Route Horizon had told him to remove what it (she?) called 'poison' from Officium Mundi. She'd been talking about people, not property, but the point remained that something from outside couldn't stay in a dungeon forever without hurting it. Or, perhaps, being a delver; being *involved*.

The cafe wasn't involved, absolutely not. So it was just sitting here. Waiting. Poisoning the dungeon. Maybe if they defended it long enough, it would kill the place. A fitting end for this shithole that spewed disease at them at the earliest convenience.

The other piece of information he had was that dungeons could, and did, change things. Warped their environments to screw with people. But, as he'd seen when the Akashic Sewer had been kicked out of its home turf, they couldn't do it instantly. And it seemed like things like humans watching them slowed the process down even more. Which he now had another piece of data to start to confirm, judging by how this had been.

Why the dungeon needed one of its orb dog things here to enact changes, he didn't have a clue on. But killing it had certainly stopped the process for now. But that did mean...

"More of them are gonna be coming. This place... if it's a problem for the dungeon, it's not gonna leave it alone, is it?" James asked.

“Would you?” Zhu curiously replied.

“No, I shoot most of my problems.” James admitted. “I mean. Okay, that’s not even close to true. But I am getting uncomfortable with how comfortable I am shooting my problems.”

Zhu flicked orange ethereal feathers up at James’ chin. “Humans are bizarre.” He said, as if he wasn’t copying half his mannerisms from James directly. “Also... I think I am ready, if you are.”

“Yeah.” James said, looking out into the mist around them. Those things he could only see as shapes last ‘night’ were more easily visible now. Telephone poles, or maybe cell towers, something like that. A crowded cluster of them near the cafe. As he rounded to the front and pulled open the door to let himself back in, he could see an off-white sidewalk and a perfectly normal strip of asphalt across from where the building had ‘landed’.

And beyond it, the shapes of houses. Barely visible through the mist, but there. Two story, two car garage, suburban cookie cutter structures. Peaked roofs and dark windows.

There was something twisted about them. But the mist ebbed and moved and James lost sight of the distant building. “I hate this place.” He muttered, before raising his voice to the survivors. “Alright! Everyone use the bathroom before we go, and this isn’t a joke, because I swear to god you will not like whatever toilets this place has spawned!”