

"If my fall made you smile, you might not want to witness what's about to happen when I get up."
-Yvonne Pierre, *The Day My Soul Cried: A Memoir*-

There were a finite number of things El expected would be possible during her average day. It was a *big list of things*, to be sure, but it was bounded at some point.

Invisible helicopter was, actually, on her list. Sort of.

She tried to do the thing she'd vaguely heard of, where she projected an aura of "it's okay, I'm supposed to be here", as she pulled into the barely maintained gravel parking lot for the nearby walking trails. And felt kinda lucky, because a half hour later and it would have been so dark that this would be utterly, hopelessly suspicious.

Their target had already parked, but there was a minivan leaving the lot and what looked like a haggard parent trying to shepherd a trio of young boys into another car, stowing a bag full of soccer balls into their trunk. And so the place was busy enough that El putting a modified convertible a few car lengths away from the dude wasn't a problem. Or at least, he didn't react.

And he was still in his car, too. "Same guy." Jim informed her from the passenger seat, looking over and getting a good look with the affiliation glasses for the first time. "Joao Marten, apparently a 'soldier' for whomstever Priority Earth are."

"Don't say that." El rolled her eyes as she killed her headlights but left the car's engine running.

"Soldier?"

"Whomstever. That's *our* meme."

El was aware she was bullying him slightly. She didn't care, Jim still annoyed her, and being useful didn't change that. Also, El knew, *Jim* didn't care. The guy seemed to act like being an asshole to someone was the same thing as affection, and so... oh. A thought crossed her mind. "Oh, shit." El thought to herself, "I do the same thing, don't I? Is this why..."

Her moment of introspection crumbled as their pursuit target got out of his car. The man slinging a bag over his shoulder as he ran a hand over a forehead that was sweating despite the cold night. El and Jim both shut up, and looked inconspicuous, as the man's gaze swept past her car without stopping. Then he turned and started marching into the field, the park grass near the trail that he walked over quickly giving way to taller and unmown plants that formed the majority of the empty field.

"How windy is it right now?" El asked, watching him go.

Jim tilted the phone he was talking into away from his head. “Not.” He said.

“Cool. Well, that explains where the chopper is.” El nodded, pointing at where the grass was bowing downward. “Do you hear anything?”

“Hey, so, be advised; the helicopter is invisible, inaudible, and currently landing.” Jim said into the phone, like that was a normal thing to say.

Maybe it *was* normal. El’s sense of reality had pretty much gone fully out the window about the time she started being a camp counselor for a multi-species youth group.

She watched closely, burning more of her Velocity to keep An Eye Of Steel And Glass running as she tracked the MI-24 while it set down, apparently still running if the motion of the grass was anything to go by, and the man picked up speed, sprinting across the field toward it.

Then, for a brief moment, there was a helicopter sitting in the field, only a few dozen feet ahead of the running man. He ducked, putting a hand on his head like he was worried his short curly hair was going to get sucked up into the still spinning blades.

“Backup’s here.” Jim said abruptly.

El already knew. She could see the other vehicle in the area. Though it was weird to see a mode of transport that had ‘Dave’ as part of its name, even if the rest of it was a little cooler. “Where are they?” El asked herself, casting her eyes up for the dragon and its cargo of people.

They were cloaked, of course. And judging by the lack of response from the aircraft on the ground, it was working. Then the helicopter tilted up, and started to rise off the ground, flickering away into invisibility again, even if it was still clearly *there*.

“Can they even see follow that?” El asked.

“No. But you can.” Jim reached into the back and grabbed a bag of emergency kit. “Go. Go! They’re landing in the same spot to pick you up!”

“What?!” El barked. “I am not...!” She trailed off. Then grabbed the bag that was being roughly shoved into her lap. “This is so fucking stupid.” She said as she kicked her door open and swung her legs out. “You get my baby back to the Lair safe, or I’m gonna be *real mad!*” She yelled at Jim as she started sprinting across the field at the same trajectory that the man they were chasing had taken.

Pendragon didn’t really bother to make herself visible the same way the helicopter did. Instead, as El tried to settle the bag in a way that wasn’t a pain in the ass to haul, and regretted not bringing a coat as she left the warm embrace of her car’s heater, the paper craft dragon just cracked open some of her scales along her growing flank, and let El see where her seat was.

EI adjusted her angle, threw the bag into Pen with heave, and then pulled herself up, getting a hand from whoever was in the seat next to her as someone reached an armored glove down to pull her up.

“Thanks.” EI grumbled as the sheet paper scales closed back up, and a soft interior glow lit up the mostly enclosed space around her. She’d only ridden in Pendragon a couple times; everyone who might be on a crisis operation had to get some practice with it. So EI knew at least that if she wanted to contribute her eyes, she needed to share somewhat. The skulljack port behind her curved and padded seat was easy enough to find, and she stretched the extra cable to the back of her neck quickly as she felt the lurch in her stomach from Pendragon’s beating wings pushing them into the air.

“Thank you for choosing Dragon Air.” A voice that was a strange mix of Dave’s low tenor with all the awkwardness stripped out, mixed with a somehow feminine growl, echoed through the area. “Now climbing to a cruising altitude of several hundred feet, the next leg of our journey will be chasing an invisible Russian military surplus attack helicopter through the local airspace of Pennsylvania. Rough ETA of 8PM, local time, if you had plans for the evening.”

“I *did* have plans for the evening!” EI yelled at him through the internals of the dragon she was riding.

“He can’t hear you.” James’ voice came to her from one seat to her right. “Or at least, he’s pretended to not be able to every time he’s done this joke.”

“You teleported here. How many chances has he had to do this joke?” EI grumbled as she sent her mind out across the skulljack link, touching on connections to other minds that she strayed away from, trying to find the glowing beacon that was Pendragon and Dave themselves, to offer the simple feed of a set of eyes.

“Twice, but I’m on edge, so it’s already old.” James called to her as EI slipped into the feed from her organic cybernetic port.

And then she was not quite entirely herself. Which EI *hated*. But she wasn’t entirely EI at the moment.

Unlike a lot of people in the Order who took a lot of opportunities to play around with the illusion of individuality and consciousness by forming hive minds as *practice*, EI was a lot more... well, fucking terrified seemed like a good way to put it. And when you plugged into a network with another mind on it, there was a kind of sliding pull to just let the connection do its thing, and become *one*, and she wasn’t great at resisting that while still making use of the skulljack connection.

She flapped their wings, great beats of altered synthetic material pushing the air down as they headed in the rough direction of where the target was. Wind streaming past and fluttering

indestructible paper and durable aluminum, an intangible something pushing against the world, rendering her weight less of a problem, turning her tail into a whipping propeller that drove her onward. Ah, but she needed to see the helicopter! Which was fine, she had a spell from the Route that could...

Then EI was pushed back slightly, only a moment later after slipping. "Here." Dave/Pendragon's thoughts touched hers. "Bad time to learn. But like this."

In her seat, she took a gasping breath as she remembered she had to use her own lungs, and tried not to throw up. But they were on the clock, and EI wasn't gonna let something as petty as existential dread about her own individuality keep her from toughing it out. She grabbed the line the pilot and their ride offered her, and tried again, this time keeping carefully to just sharing their sight.

An Eye of Steel And Glass almost certainly looked a lot cooler when it was cast through an actual dragon, EI figured. Through borrowed eyes, her vision instantly snapped to the only other vehicle in the air over the trees and power lines below them; a military grade attack helicopter that was invisible to sight, but not to her magic.

"Got them. How long can you keep this up?" The voice reverberated through the inside of the dragon.

"At this speed? Hours, probably?" EI guessed, yelling back to Dave, trying to split her focus between that and keeping the visual connection going. "If we're gonna be doing long haul, though, Pen should really get some comfier seats. Maybe windows?"

"I am not a minivan." That strange dual voice slipped through the interior of the dragon.

EI smiled to herself. "It's fine! I shirked adult responsibilities too, for... uh... what the fuck?" She broke off what she was saying and pitched forward, eyes widening.

"What what the fuck?" She heard James yell from somewhere else. "Don't just say that, tell us what's going on." He sounded firm, but not hostile, a voice that a lot of people weren't used to hearing from James.

EI swallowed, rapidly pulling herself together. "I can see more through the spell." She explained. "Like, other vehicles? A tanker truck, a couple jeeps..."

"Can't spot anything below us through the drones!" Simon reported.

"No, not *below us*!" EI called back.

"Yeah, we see them too." Dave and Pendragon's mixed vocals sounded perplexed. "They're right ahead of us. Uh... for reference, we are fourteen hundred feet off the ground."

“Shit.” James’ voice was abrupt as he realized something. “Portal, you think?” He called up to Dave.

“If it is, we can’t see... no, there it...! No. No, can’t see it.” Dave sounded irate. “But it should be right ahead of us. El, I don’t know this magic, how close is the heli?”

She withered in her seat. “I have no idea! This is for *inventory*, not tracking invisible gunships!” She yelled defensively.

“We do *not* follow them.” James said in that comfortably commanding tone he was more and more falling into. “Let them go, but see if we can get *anything* useful before they’re gone.”

They didn’t have a whole tone of information gathering tools with them that worked on unknown invisible magic. But Simon let out a couple drones to try to get closer, and anyone who had a small way to see something connected to Dave and Pendragon through their better designed skulljack links and started looking.

There was *nothing*. Or at least, nothing of value. Just the empty night sky, Pendragon’s heavy wing beats keeping them above the trees and power lines and streetlights with a steady light bobbing motion. They *knew* they were tracking something, but they couldn’t see it, *or* its escape route.

It was infuriating. The feeling of being powerless. And, to James personally, it was pretty annoying to have spent a not inconsiderable amount of time preparing to confront this new foe, only to end up in the back seat of a dragon that could only barely see what was going on.

“I don’t think we’re gonna catch them.” Dave and Pendragon’s mixed voices reached the passengers.

Alanna thumped her head against the internal ‘wall’ of magically organic paper and plastic, letting out a low groan that was matched by Nikhail, the two of them having been actually *excited* for this. James just kept his thoughts to himself, quietly keeping track of everything going on as they flew, but mentally prepared for them to head back to the Lair.

“Hey!” Momo’s voice was still excited as she called to the others through Pendragon. “Now my dinner plans are back on the table!”

Someone groaned at the pun. El just smirked, and opened her mouth to call something back. Which was, of course, when the sky changed.

She saw it through her standoffish connection to Pendragon’s eyes. The world was dark up here, but down below there were streetlights and the headlights of passing cars. The sunset was done, and now it was time for *night*, the world declared. Overhead were clouds, not a star

in sight, the moon so thoroughly covered she wouldn't have been able to see where it was with her human eyes. But then, abruptly, the darkness was split.

A ring of expanding brightness. Not especially glowing, to be sure, but the pale white light was practically blinding against the darkness around them. And then the hole in the sky started to grow; creeping up like a wave lapping at the shore, like it planned to swallow the sky itself. There was shouting inside the dragon, El was pretty sure she heard James yelling at Dave to break off, but she couldn't focus on anything except the change of reality ahead of them.

Ahead. Overhead. Below. Everywhere. The night was replaced by a grey and cloudy twilight, darkening rapidly but still bright by the standards of night, specks of snow or icy rain whipped around by the wind. Below, the road vanished, replaced by a muddy field and a collection of cabins and tents.

Pendragon craned her neck back to watch as the changes took hold around them, beating her wings in rapid movement as the growing bubble of another place snapped itself closed what seemed like just behind her tail. And then the cold hit. The wind was sharper, wetter, and worse here. Discomfort shot through the dragon, until through her connection to Dave, the two of them nudged the Object inside of her that caused heat, and used it to warm her blood to acceptable levels.

"What the *fuck* was that?!" Alanna demanded, the chill already seeping through the frame around her. "James?!"

"No idea, but we're taking it." James let out a wondrous breath. "That was *amazing*."

It took him less time than the actual process had to realize just how useful something that could move everything in a zone of space was. The Order could teleport. They couldn't teleport like *that*. Whoever had this should have been using it to revolutionize global shipping, not an *escape route*. Though being fair, they used the telepads as an escape route basically non-stop, so who was he to judge?

But as quickly as James realized the value of the thing, he wasn't so quick that he had time to really consider it. "They decloaked." Simon broadcast to them via skulljack through Pendragon. "Also, our link to the Lair dropped. No coverage out here. Switch to radio?"

"Hold off on that." James ordered. "We don't know what we're dealing with, I don't wanna learn they can pick up radio *after* the fact." He took a deep breath. "Dave, how're we doing? Is Pen okay here?"

There was a pause before the two of them replied as one. "I'm alright. It's cold, though, and the snow's getting into my wings. And yeah, they're visible now. That thing looks *very* military! They're setting down in the camp. What do you want me to do?"

James briefly blinked away the confusion at Dave and Pendragon's choice of the singular pronoun, before running through a list of options. "We could teleport out, but this is the perfect opportunity. Can you set down nearby? What's the area look like?"

"Kind of a slope." Simon reported, sweeping the area with a drone camera clung to Pendragon's underside. "There's patches of snow, but it's not a blanket or anything. Their little camp looks like maybe four buildings and a dozen tents or campers. Bunch of pine. Trees, but they're all spaced out. Rocks everywhere. We also came in close to the ground; I think we're higher up, elevation wise, than we were." He paused. "There are people getting off the helicopter. Five of them, I think one is our guy, he's dressed different. They're going to one of the cabins."

"Good to know. Anyone have any objections to setting down and taking a look?"

El spoke up. "I'm in a fucking skirt!" She commented loudly.

"...Why?" James asked her, glancing down at his own padded and plated armor.

"I had a *date!*" El snapped back.

"I've been hearing that a lot today." James said easily. "Okay. You stay in the dragon. If we *really* need to, we can just snag someone out of the camp and ask some pointed questions via dragon, but I'd rather get in there. Everyone, gear and ready check." A chorus of voices returns to him.

Simon asked if they wanted a drone overhead, and a quick discussion ended with 'no'. It was too risky, especially out here in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. Thought-Of-Quiet spoke up briefly to comment that he was looking forward to seeing if his armor plate would make moving on dirt and rocks more comfortable. Nik uttered a chant that was becoming familiar, and let his authority come to life, ready to render aid if needed.

Then stomachs turned as Dave and Pendragon took them on a spiraling dive, pushing the passengers around in their seats while they descended. There was something no one told you about riding in a dragon, or at least *this* dragon; there wasn't exactly a magical effect that told inertia to fuck off. Dave never seemed to mind, but the rest of them got to experience a roller coaster ride as their living aircraft dropped to the wet dirt.

The part of James' brain that was constantly being a giant nerd noted with some disappointment that Pendragon didn't make any kind of sci-fi hissing noise as she cracked open the breaches in her side to the carrying compartments. But he suppressed that part of himself as he hopped out, boots landing steadily and with a crunch of pine needles as he dropped. They had a quarter mile, and a lot of trees, between themselves and the weird camp, so they moved quick. If they were going to be spotted, they already had been, but that didn't mean they should linger.

“We’re in Alaska.” Nik said as he stepped up next to James and Alanna, breath coming in steaming goutts as his authority coiled around his armored shoulder. “According to GPS anyway.”

“Alaska isn’t real.” Alanna joked.

Momo snorted as she joined them, Thought-Of-Quiet helping her down out of Pendragon with a stabilizing mechanical limb. “Don’t joke about that. Someone’ll take you seriously on the internet and before you know it there’s a new cryptofascist *thing* going around.”

“Less talking.” James said solidly, shading his eyes against the rapidly fading daylight. Alaska meant they were three-ish hours behind, where they *were* a second ago, but Alaska didn’t get a lot of daylight in the winter months anyway. If it was still light out at all, that meant they were in at least the southern half of the state somewhere. He swept his eyes out over the terrain in front of them, and felt a strange feeling in his chest.

He was, once again, abruptly somewhere new. Somewhere with a dangerous challenge and strange secrets to uncover. It was still on Earth this time, but... well, it was familiar. That was all. Pine trees and snow instead of two suns over a highway or a library with angry books in it.

“Thought, you good?” James asked the camraconda.

“Yes, the moving is easy like this.” Though-Of-Quiet answered, slithering forward, the layer of pine needles on the ground crunching under their armored body as they moved.

James nodded, and glanced at the others. Reaching up, he pulled the filter mask he had to clip properly over his face, cutting off some of the cold. Briefly, he wished he’d brought goggles of some kind. Or earmuffs. His body heat was keeping him feeling fine for now, and half of them *did* have purple orbs for temperature regulation, but they really needed to make that a standard part of the armory package. “Okay.” He said. “Spread out. Keep your eyes open. Let’s move.”

The six of them started moving forward together, spreading out in pairs as they headed in the direction of the small camp.

There was no road around here that James could see, as he and Alanna paused behind every other tree they passed to do a check for anyone ahead of them. On their flanks, the others were doing the same, the practice drills that Nate had run them through over the summer kicking in as they moved forward. In fact, James thought, there wasn’t much of *anything* here in the way of signs of civilization. In the past, there’d been times on some of his road trips when he’d stopped on the side of the road and wandered into the forests of Oregon a little bit. It never took long to get to the point where the only thing you could see around you was trees and mast and brambles. But there was always the knowledge that there was a road *nearby*.

Now, there was nothing. Just the subdued quiet of nature, the constant rush of the wind and the flecks of not-quite snow, and the crunch of their footsteps or slithers.

James tensed when a small clump of snow fell from a nearby tree. Everyone did, really. But then nothing else happened, it was just the natural world turning around them. Cold air seeped into their armor as they pressed on, and James tried to make sure he kept his gloved fingers warm enough in case he had to pull his rifle up quickly.

“Voices ahead.” Alanna’s voice murmured softly to him, and James nodded. He’d only just caught them with his enhanced hearing, and he realized that Alanna must have gotten the same armory kit that he did at some point. The two of them stopped, pulling back to kneeling positions behind a cluster of trees, and with a quick hand motion to the others, got the other two pairs to do the same.

Then they waited. James trying to keep his heart from going into overdrive, and also to keep the purple orb that made his breath come in powerful bursts from ruining his mask’s position. And then, after what felt like an hour but was more like a minute or two, the sound of footsteps reached them, along with speaking voices that he could actually understand.

“-est guy they’ve got. You’re a fucking idiot.” A man’s voice, loud enough that even the other four could hear him, came through the trees during a lull in the wind. He didn’t sound angry, but he was *loud*, his words a kind of bombastic bark that carried from however far away they were.

The reply was another man, younger, with a reedier voice. “Best guy? Come on! He’s a fucking loser! Did you even watch last night?”

“You *know* I didn’t.” The first man replied as their voices got closer. James tensed; they were coming from left to right relative to the loose line that his people had set up, but they were getting closer. “Had to keep an eye on the mercs. Kennedy’s fucking spooked by ‘em.”

“Yeah, well, watch the game, *then* tell me he’s a good goalie.” The second man said, just as James caught sight of the shape of two people, moving between the trees about a hundred feet ahead of them.

They were wearing tan and green camo, including hooded jackets. Neither of them looked particularly imposing, compared to the literal monsters James had fought, but they were both carrying rifles. Not *hunting rifles*, either, he noted. Even from here, the platforms of the classic AR-15 stood out. And he was pretty sure he saw a handgun holster on one of their hips.

Even if he hadn’t known what they were walking into, there was no way these two were casual hunters out for a day of practice. And any hints of the illusion were broken entirely when, while one of them moved away to take a piss on a tree, the other raised a boxy radio to his mouth and spoke into it. “East patrol normal.” James caught the words. “Nothing out here today. Moving to the north perimeter. Backpack.”

He glanced at Alanna at the last word, raising an eyebrow, but she just shrugged and shook her head. James refocused on the two as the man zipped up and they turned and started moving on at a new angle, still arguing about hockey.

“Those are the worst perimeter guards I’ve ever seen.” James heard Simon murmur.

James waved the others over. “Okay. Momo, Thought, Alanna. You three stay here. If we need to get out fast, you’re our rearguard. Simon, Nik, with me. We’re gonna get closer, and if we have a window of opportunity, get into one of the cabins. Anything we can learn is a win. Telepad out at any sign of trouble.” He paused, then added, “If you need to share anything, use the banked wi-fi on the USB sticks. No full skulljack link, text only if you can manage it.”

“Got it.” Momo was the only one who spoke, but everyone nodded.

“Alright.” James took a deep breath. “Let’s go, before anyone else comes this way.”

He rose to a hunched position, and started moving for the next tree, the other two following behind him. Bit by bit, they quickly advanced, checked around themselves, then moved on to the next piece of cover. If James had been the person he was when he first found the Office, he would have died of exhaustion after the first two trees, but as it was, he pressed on easily, and heard the two behind him doing the same.

The three of them took an alert route, all those days spent in the dungeons, along with a variety of different personal improvements, leaving them not exactly *comfortable*, but at least familiar with the process of forward motion. Move, stop, listen, sweep for motion, proceed to a piece of cover, listen more. Move on.

They weren’t that far out, realistically, from the camp. And it didn’t take long before they dropped down a slope, took a worn rocky footpath down past a small rock ledge, and saw where the tree ended.

The camp ahead was mostly clear of snow, everywhere that wasn’t an out of the way corner having the ground replaced with churned mud. Tracks from wheeled vehicles traced lines across the thick surface, and a trio of wood cabins, all of them with smoke coming out of their chimneys, formed a loose triangle around a central yard. Behind those buildings, up on a ledge that was a little less muddy, a row of heavy canvas tents sat in their own formation. The green material looked right at home in this strange spot of human activity in the middle of the wilderness.

The helicopter, which James kept wanting to use a low growly voice to call a Hind D, even though that was factually inaccurate, sat in the clearing outside the chain link fence that surrounded the whole place. It might not have been a real national military funding this operation, but the gunship still had the *guns* on it; along with all the other random antenna and

other greebles sticking off it, a pair of forward facing heavy chain guns mounted on its sides, which did *not* make James feel comfortable. He trusted Dave and Pendragon. He didn't 'fight a Russian attack helicopter' trust them.

There was also a semi truck, with a double tanker trailer hooked up to it. But it had been scrubbed of any markings, in a very obvious way, and James couldn't say what it was filled with. He'd be willing to bet on gas, though.

"Those trucks are armed." Simon said in a low voice, letting James and Nik trace his line of sight to where a pair of pickup trucks were parked by the cabins. They weren't the only cars there, but they were the only ones with their own machine guns in the back. "We should steal those."

"We can't solve every problem by stealing." James said as the three of them waited in the treeline in a low crouch. "Probably." He took a deep breath, watching the camp carefully as it got darker around them. "Who do we see?" He asked, and looked himself for that very detail.

A couple of guys standing behind a cabin, smoking and talking. Four other men moving from one of the smaller cabins to the bigger one. A meeting place, maybe? None of them were actively armed. Though the two coming back from the search party were. James focused to his right as Nik pointed them out, and the group watched as they approached a gate in the fence, and were let in by a guy who was armed, before they headed toward the same large building as the others.

There were also a couple of people at the helicopter itself. And in the rapidly fading light, as the camp flicked on a few thin exterior lights that didn't do much to cut through the encroaching darkness of the Alaskan wilderness, James had a thought.

"The tents, the chopper, they're different people." He said. Simon gave him a questioning glance, and James elaborated. "They're dressed in grey fatigues, all the other men are in flannel, camo, or camo flannel."

"Not the time for jokes." Simon said simply.

"I'll let you know when I start joking." James pointed, keeping his arm low, at the gate guard who was standing in the white pool of a spotlight, the patterning of his shirt a little too square to be anything else than what James was smirking at.

Nik spoke up, trying to keep his voice at a low pitch but still audible through the mask. "So, what now?" He asked. "Crash whatever meeting they have going on?"

"I've got a better idea." Simon pointed at the third cabin, an L-shaped building that, unlike the other two, actually had all its internal lights off. "Should at least give us a clue?" He prompted.

James grinned, and rose to his feet. A mental nudge double checked what the multiple shield bracers he was wearing were set to, each of them different ammunition. "Wait here." He said. "Cover me when this goes wrong."

"Wait, how do you—" Nik started to say, but Simon just took a more stable kneeling position, brought his rifle up, and clicked the safety off. "No, you can't just say that and..."

"I'm mostly kidding. I expect I won't be seen." James grinned. "But also, we've got a great angle here. Any other guards that we can see?" The others confirmed that there weren't any, but there were construction lamps keeping big chunks of the fence lit. "Okay. Wish me luck." James took a deep breath, and called on something deep in his heart.

Misadventure was a source of power for a navigator, in some way. A kind of currency to be spent to find specific things. But it wasn't the only way they grew and thrived; there were a lot of different sources for every different type of infomorph, James and the Order were learning together. And for *his* navigator, for the friend that shared his mind that loved to see new places and get into trouble, there was a secondary form of power to draw on.

"Hey Zhu." James whispered, orange feathers and tail flowing out around his armor, the navigator suppressing the normal glow as he manifested in the rapidly darkening woods. "Want to go cause trouble for someone?"

"Enthusiastically!" Zhu's thin voice was like a sneaking footstep landing near them.

James couldn't help but smile a little at just how excited his infomorph companion was for this. And then, a second later, orange lines and bubbles started lighting up his vision. Not physical, not visible to anyone else. Just a path that Zhu found for him. Directions to follow, and steps to take.

He didn't hesitate. Keeping one hand on his rifle to keep it from slapping against his armor and making noise, James rose to a crouch walk, triggered the earring he had that could make him invisible for a brief window, and started taking rapid steps across the open ground between their cover and the camp. He didn't realistically *expect* to get spotted, but his heart still hammered in his chest as he *felt* like any second someone was going to start shooting at him. But the people in the camp were busy, and the one guy on the gate didn't cover the whole perimeter. They were, perhaps reasonably, trusting that they either wouldn't get found, or that the fence would slow someone down enough that they could respond.

James wasn't interested in making it that easy for his opposition. Instead, as he got close, he rose to a full standing jog, and triggered the aerosolized dose of one of the potions connected to his mask. Breathed deeply. Felt himself start to *change* in a way that tingled, stung, and generally wasn't very fun. And then he ran directly through the fence.

He'd asked Red once, when he'd been doing his checkup on how she was adapting to her new and slightly more restricted life during her rehabilitation, what *exactly* the ghost juice did to people. She'd scoffed at his terminology, but had a surprisingly detailed answer about how it altered human physiology to continue functioning even as large chunks of it were converted to a stabilized gaseous form. He'd had more questions about how it interacted with *non*-human physiology, and she had replied with more test logs and observations. Then he'd asked her, in a casually dull tone, why it worked on what you were wearing, and she'd tried to throw a crumpled ball of paper at his head.

Which was to say, James didn't know why it worked. But it worked.

His boots squelched in the mud as he moved, and he followed Zhu's markers, dropping to a slower pace so he didn't slip, trusting in the footfall spots when he couldn't see the ground. James froze at one point, exactly on cue, when the gate guard glanced over in his direction. He could see the man's head as he turned toward the echo of a muddy footstep. But James wasn't moving, and out of the light, he was basically invisible to anyone who didn't have some kind of night vision.

Then the guard shrugged and turned away, and James took the last twenty feet to the cabin at a casual walk, circling around the back to a window with the light off, before reaching up and grabbing onto the ledge, pulling himself upward and *really* leaning on his acceleration and jump height boosts to make the small hop easier. The microdose of the incorporeality potion had worn off by now, so he could easily pull himself up onto the outside of the raised building, trying not to think about how many things that ate feet could be living in the dark space underneath him. Then he triggered the potion mist again, breathed in, and let himself slip forward into the structure.

Selective corporeality was a challenge, but James managed to step inside without falling through the floor, and found himself in a dark room, but with a point of glowing orange light that his eyes rapidly adjusted to. Light that wasn't from Zhu, importantly.

A bathroom. Empty, of course. He didn't reach out to hit the light switch, but just the fact that there was a night light in here, and a light switch in general, felt *weird*. These were cabins in the middle of nowhere, and there hadn't been a generator or power lines outside. What kept these things powered?

A question for another time. He stepped forward, hyper-aware of the muddy trail he was leaving, and pressed himself up to the door. Silence greeted him, as he turned the loose metal knob, and eased the thin wooden door inward.

The hallway was just as dark as the bathroom; darker even. And while James had a lot of weird powers, night vision wasn't one of them. Glowing in the dark was, and he might actually have been visible here with the night getting *this* dark, but fortunately he was wrapped up in his armor and mask almost entirely. He breathed out a slow relieved exhalation, and prodded Zhu to help

him out. The infomorph responded, drawing lines for walls and floors, giving James a sort of skeleton map of the building that was pitch black in front of him.

There was some kind of big open room to his right, and a few more doors leading to maybe bedrooms or something else to his left. James didn't want to risk a flashlight until he knew the place was actually empty, so he snuck down the hall to the left, wincing at the creak of the floorboards, before he approached the first door and eased it open.

A bedroom of some kind, cramped, bunk beds. The next room was the same. Both of them empty.

"I think we're alone." Zhu said to James, the unreal voice making James flinch at how loud it was, even if he was the only one who could hear.

But he was right. So James did flick on the flashlight on the end of his rifle, and used it to sweep the bedroom. The one without a window in it.

A bunk bed, both beds unmade, blankets tangled around each other. Two desks, one of them heaped high with two stacks of copies of a book titled *Priority Earth*, the other a mess of documents and pens, folded maps and printouts of web pages. James ran a finger across the desk's surface, and came away with a thick layer of dust. "The hell?" He muttered. A quick glance at the long untouched pile of books gave him pause, and he slid one out of the center of one of the stacks to slide into a leg pouch to take with him.

He checked the dresser, noting the pictures on it of a boy next to an old man holding up a fish and bearing wide smiles, and another of a young girl playing with a dog. The drawers held clothing that was more or less what he'd expect for someone living in Alaska, though there was something off about them he couldn't place. And they also seemed to have been here for a while.

As he swung the light around the room, something else caught his eye. A dark splotch near the corner where the wall met the floor. James knelt slowly, still trying to keep quiet just in case, and panned his light over it. It definitely *looked* like a blood splatter, and the skill ranks he had in investigation and forensics more or less confirmed it as he checked over it. Someone was at least seriously injured here, and then the room was just... left?

He rose back up, flicking the light off and trusting Zhu to guide him to the next door as they left the bedroom. His steps still sounded too-loud in the silent, dark building.

Still staying away from the front room, the duo headed for the door at the end of the hall. James pushed against it, but found the door wouldn't move, even though the knob turned. He quirked an eyebrow, and felt confusion from Zhu as well. But that was fine, after all, the door wasn't important.

He turned to leave, and Zhu tugged his brain back to that thought. The door wasn't *important*? Kind of a weird thing to muse on when you're infiltrating a place and opening doors.

The door that absolutely didn't matter wasn't much of an obstacle, once James focused on dealing with it; after all, if you could solve one problem with being incorporeal, you could solve a *lot* of problems by being incorporeal.

Slipping through the door and feeling his fingers and toes itch as he faded back to physical, James looked around the storage room he'd found himself in. Light from one of the perimeter floodlights came in from both the windows, the glass squares on both walls at a right angle to each other rattling in the wind. So at least he could see a little bit, and Zhu helped by painting the outline of filing cabinets and storage chests.

He glanced behind himself. The door wasn't blocked at all.

"Alright, let's see..." He whispered, tugging open a filing cabinet with as much stealth as he could use on the cold metal. He settled his rifle across the open drawer and flicked the flashlight on, creating a puddle of light down among the folders and pages, but not spilling out to the rest of the room or the windows. And then he started opening documents, and seeing what was worth protecting with a mild memplex.

Blueprints for a coal fueled power plant. Maps showing air quality shifts over time. Accounting or logistical reports on... power usage? James couldn't understand everything he found. But he could easily identify a dossier when he saw one, and there were several in here. Many of them with small annotations and additions in pencil at the bottom, the tone for the subjects changing from professional to personal over time. Others were grimly marked with red lines across pictures and bold "target achieved" lettering across the top.

And then, what he was secretly hoping for. A copy of a report on actual, literal magic. Stored next to the broad strokes minutes of a meeting talking about the actual, literal magic. The folder for that section was *thick*, and he didn't have time to read over the whole thing. But he got the gist of it. They were confused, alarmed, and *excited*. The world had felt like it had opened up to them with the possibilities.

James checked the next drawer, and found more of the same. There didn't seem to be a pattern to how stuff was stored, but as he worked through it, he started to put together that it flowed like a timeline. This was *years* of operational records.

He checked one of the chests, one of the ones that wasn't padlocked that is, and found rolled up blueprints for a bunch of small scale structures. *Cabins*. The familiarity he had with the arcane notation of architecture from a skill orb clashing with the alien nature of the runes drawn around the blueprints, the smell of salt and ozone coming off them more as a vibe than a physical scent.

James desperately wanted to bring those with him, but he had no way to carry the large pages safely. So he set them back, after storing memory pictures of them through his skulljack braid, like he had with everything else.

As he was carefully lowering the lid of the chest, he caught sight of something. In the triangle of white light coming through the window, James saw a boot and the leg of thick winter pants sticking out from behind the empty wooden shelf at the end of the room. His heart leapt into his throat, and he snapped his bullpup up to cover whoever was lurking there, but as the beam of his flashlight fell on the figure, he realized his mistake.

Whoever this was had been dead for a *long* time.

James flicked his light off and circled around, getting a better view of the corpse that had been rotting here for what must have been quite a while. He was, sadly, no stranger to death at this point. But while he'd seen people die, and taken lives himself, there was something grim and *terrifying* about the shape of a rotting face; any sense of identity or personhood stolen away by the simple act of time moving forward.

Before the empty pit that always accompanied these thoughts could open up in his stomach, James moved closer to the body. "What happened to them?" Zhu asked him in a sadly curious tone like steps on creaking stairs.

James reached out and moved the figure's hand off of where it was pressed against their outer layer of clothing, the remnant of what was once a human too light and too easy to shift around. "This, I'd guess." He murmured as he revealed the stained hole in the parka. He set their hand down gently in their lap and then paused, not sure what to do next. Did he say something? Did he pay respects to the dead? *Why* was this person even here?

His hesitation was why he was looking down at the floor, and the figure's other hand. And why his lingering eyes noticed that the person was holding something tightly in their grip. A rectangular piece of electronic hardware that James winced as he tried to gently extract, and may have broken a few fingers doing so.

"Magic?" Zhu asked him as James turned over the dictation recorder in his hands, the boxy electronic looking like it came from a couple decades ago. Which didn't mean much; James could probably have bought something like this off the internet today, if he wanted. But it might help establish a timeline.

He shook his head at the navigator. "Not magic, probably. Unless making the world work on Bioshock logic is a spell." He sighed, and tucked the small device into a pouch on his armor, fingers both gloved and frozen making him take a minute to get it right. "Okay. Let's check the main room, then get out of here." He said.

James rose back up to his feet, and took careful steps past the rows of storage toward the strange door that didn't want to be important. It didn't hit as hard on this side, and he could actually identify the weird feeling, which was generally a sign that whatever antimemem was happening wasn't actively targeting him, but James still hated it.

He was halfway through the door, passing through it rather than trying to open something that might trip a magical alarm, when Zhu started to say something. "...wait!" The navigator's voice was abruptly worried. James pulled himself the rest of the way out of the solid material, then froze. He didn't say anything, waiting for Zhu to tell him what was wrong.

The creak of a floorboard sounded. At the end of the hall, so close. James felt his blood go cold as he inched his head to the side in tiny motions, holding his breath as he did so. But the pitch dark hall, with the distant faint light coming through the windows in the main room, was all he saw.

Another creak. A plastic snap.

"*Duck!*" Zhu screamed.

James dropped to his knees, Zhu's feathered tail shoving him forward into an awkward roll as the sound of gunshots exploded in the tight hallway. One, two, three pistol shots. So close and so loud they may as well have been a cannon for as well as James' hearing handled it. Behind and over him, the window shattered, sending broken glass spraying outward and freezing wind coming into the already cold building. Wood chips showered his armored back as the other bullets hit the wall, the shooter tracing downward to try to hit him.

The fourth shot lit up the hallway in a flare of golden light as one of James' shields triggered, and he got a brief look at his attacker. The stern and emotionless face of a short Hispanic woman in those same grey fatigues the second group wore stared him down, her eyes unflinching against the sudden flare of light. Which was a mistake; James was modified to handle flares like this, but she was just trying to keep her eyes forced open, and it was going to ruin any night vision she had.

Then his shield started to *hum*, in a painful way, before the bullet fully deflected and it snapped off. His ears ringing from multiple sources of sound, he barely got his rifle up and pressed the trigger before she took another shot at him. A burst of bullets sprayed down the hallway, and *this time*, James actually caused damage to the woman ambushing him. He'd gotten so used to this not working, he was almost surprised when she jerked from the impacts, and then slowly dropped to her knees with a wooden creak.

James stood and pressed himself against the wall, panting heavily. His hands ached, and he took a breath of the exercise potion, letting a small amount of the pain fade away as he did so, his breath steadying. With a mental nudge, he opened up the file on the USB plugged into the compact electronics of his skulljack braid, and started using the stored connection in it.

The other devices on the saved connection, the skulljacks of his party, lit up in his mind. James didn't waste bandwidth, instead just sending a fast text message. "I'm made. Leaving now, same angle. Get ready to go." He got back a set of affirmatives from the others, including Pendragon, and then close the link again, about eighty percent of the internet supply left.

Then he moved to check the dead woman. Which was a mistake.

As soon as James took a step, the enemy combatant who was *not* dead, and simply dropped to her knees, made James' position from the sound, and took a shot at him. And this one was something different. The shield flared to life, but it *screamed* as the bullet tried to break through; normal physics suspended for a brief moment as momentum and foreign magic warred with the bracer on James' upper arm. He flinched back, cracking off a reflexive shot at his opponent and taking a chunk out of the woman's skull that resolved itself in painful detail against the harsh light. But even as she dropped backward, the bullet *punched through*, the Status Quo item not holding against it.

It hit James in the right collarbone, burned away at least one of his defensive purple uses for breaking bones, and deflected up, tearing into the muscle and flesh of his neck and painting the floor in front of him with a spray of his own blood. The sudden burning pain of being shot ramping up *rapidly* as the extent of it caught up to him, a strangled and pained scream coming from James' throat as he clamped a hand over the wound.

"Out of time! Run!" Zhu ordered him, and James tried to nod, but stopped as the pain surged through his neck. He triggered the breathable potion, and slipped out the back wall, using up one of the last earring charges for invisibility for a while.

Outside, as he stumbled forward, leaving his blood on the muddy ground to be lost in the darkness, the camp had gotten a little more chaotic. Men ran back and forth, one of them handing out guns from a metal cabinet on the side of a wall, and shouting filled the air. The sound of an engine starting was followed by someone driving one of the technicals to the edge of the fence, the man in the back sweeping the treeline past the camp with the machine gun, the heavy thuds of gunfire hammering as a dull and dizzy noise in James' ears.

They weren't firing in the right direction. So he kept breathing ghost potion, stumbled through the fence and up the slope to where he'd left Simon and Nik. The two of them weren't there, but a flash of green light from Nik's authority led him farther back into the trees to where they were waiting.

James got around a thick double trunk of a tree, and dropped down next to Nik, barely ripping his mask off with a spray of potion into the air before he vomited onto the dirt.

"I guess we should have believed you when you said..." Nik started to say jokingly, but then *immediately* cut himself off. "Oh, *fuck*." He snapped. "Aidamy!" The name of his authority was

said with a strong urgency, and the glove around Nik's hand unfurled into an abstract fractal of EKG readings. The medic pressed his hand forward against James' neck, and green tendrils painfully shot into his wound, scouring away outside debris, plucking out what was left of the bullet, and sealing flesh shut. Then Nik sucked in a deep breath and scooped up a handful of nearby snow, pressing it against the temporarily sealed wound, before invoking a Climb spell and letting the frozen liquid in his hand convert itself to James' own blood, flowing into his body and replenishing what was lost, before Nik let out an exhausted and shivering gasp and settling back. "That'll... hold for now." He wheezed.

James coughed away the last of his own vomit, and tried to steady his own breathing. "Thanks." He gasped. "Simon?"

"Distracting them." Simon's voice came from nearby. "We need to go." He said.

"Yeah." James agreed. "Zhu, can you guide them too?"

"If you let me." The navigator spoke to the group. Simon and Nik nodded instantly.

The three of them got back to their feet, two of them a little worse for wear, and started running through the dark woods toward their escape route, their feet never missing their mark. Without trying to be stealthy, they made it past the other three, and into Pendragon, in minutes. Alanna swore rapidly as she saw James' covered in blood as they boarded the dragon, but they were in the air he could explain.

He'd certainly learned *something*.

But it hadn't gone exactly like James thought it would.