

“soon the dogs will howl like a god learning the word for light and nothing will howl back” -C. T. Salazar, *Noah’s Nameless Wife Takes Inventory*-

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James was ambushed by a flock of ravenous engineers as he was on his way to do... something. He didn’t really know what. He was trying to play into his job description of a roving problem solver, so he was spending his day moving from group to group seeing if there was anything that could be fixed through communication, a new perspective, or his unique ability to survive a worrying amount of punishment.

So far, he’d spent the morning mostly being a mediator between two of the ex-Alchemists, who had wanted to just talk to some of the inhabitants that their actions had created.

It had taken most of his time in this process to figure out if Nile and Red - both of whom had seemingly decided to never use any other name - were interested in the inhabitants for a mechanical purpose, or an emotional one.

They had, both of them, had a small part in the program that the Alchemists had undertaken to develop the potion that made the inhabitants. That killed whoever drank it, and replaced them with something *else*. Something that wore their old life like a mask. Something meant to be the perfect infiltration unit.

The inhabitants didn’t see it that way. They saw their lives as violations, and none of them were especially keen on being used as *anything*. The Order didn’t really know what they’d want to do with them anyway; it wasn’t like they had a pressing need for assassins, and the inhabitants weren’t *that* much more dangerous than a baseline human to begin with. So they lived around the Lair, many of them having moved into the newly built apartments now that those were better set up, and... just sort of lived. Sometimes participated, but didn’t really do much on their own.

And the Alchemists... well, they weren’t prisoners, really. But they were basically here to learn how to behave like members of a society that both had magic, and didn’t suck, and while no explicit threats were ever levied, it was made clear that they would not be allowed to leave if they were going to go back to hurting people. Nile was bitter about it, especially losing all his money. Red didn’t care as long as she got to do more actual alchemy, and with the Order producing more and more of the sap they used, she was *thrilled*.

But should there be a meeting set up between them and the inhabitants? That was the question James set out to answer that morning. Were they just looking to renew their old research? Curious about what had happened at the end? Looking for reconciliation with Colorado, their old colleague that was one of the people an inhabitants had destroyed and replaced? Just looking to *apologize*?

The answer was somewhere in the middle of all of those. They just wanted to talk. They just wanted to... learn, really. Not altruistic, not selfish. They were just curious.

James had talked to the inhabitants, and gotten some mild interest from a few of them, and had set up the meeting.

Then he and Zhu had helped Momo clean up her mess, where her and her 'apprentices' had accidentally let loose a small infestation of factals in the basement. Momo said they were trying to train them to eat Youtube ads. James told her to get better containment, and try again until that worked.

Then the engineer thing, which was still happening.

"Guys, I'm on the way to a thing." James said as Mars and Chevoy cornered him in a basement hallway. They weren't the only ones there, they'd hired a bunch of help from people they'd gone to school with, or knew from the internet, a sentence James would have found worrying if he weren't the kind of person who had several close friends that he'd only ever talked to online and only knew by their screen names. "Can you make this quick? Wait, is this the space elevator thing? Please do not explain that to me, I *don't* understand, and I can't wrap my brain around it."

"No no no no. Well, I mean..." Mars tilted his head toward Chevoy. "We could ask about funding for..."

"No!" She barked out, folding her arms. "Stay on task!" Chevoy swatted down Mars' tangent. "James, we have something important we need to tell you about the skulljacks."

"I swear to Rufus, if you tell me about the memory issues on a forced loss of connection, I'm going to throw you into the sea." James deadpanned.

Chevoy shook her head slowly. "No, you should have been told about that. No, we need to talk about the emotional bleed."

James nodded. "Yeah, what about it?"

"You... know about it?" One of the new guys asked. "We thought we'd discovered it."

"I know a lot of things. Though I appreciate you telling me, just in case I-"

Chevoy cut him off. "I don't think you understand. Our tests with .mem files for even basic stuff, pure academic knowledge without haptic or motor data, still show a marked change in certain attitudes *outside of the field being shared.*" She eyed James "You know about this?" The words were somewhat accusatory.

“Chevoy, that’s... that’s a *massive* reason to streamline the creation and use of .mem files. You get that, right?” James asked slowly.

The engineers shared an awkward look, before Mars cleared his throat. “...Why?” He asked.

“Because we want to live in a world where power is paired with responsibility.” James answered, leaning against the concrete wall and trying not to fidget nervously as he answered. “Because the fact that we can replicate knowledge is secondary to the fact that we can make gaining that knowledge something that pushes a person to be kinder, gentler, and more empathic.”

“You want them to be mind control.” Someone said.

James barked a laugh. “Hardly. But I want each .mem to share two things. The knowledge, and the *maturity to use that knowledge*. Maturity is something that can be learned, after all. So yeah, thanks for letting me know. If you can find a way to make files that are just emotional resonance, that’d be cool too. But also... well, find a way to check them, I guess? We want to verify, before we let anything out into the world, that we aren’t going to poison people’s minds with secret hatreds or whatever.”

“...we can do that.” Chevoy said, setting a hand over Mars’s mouth before he could say anything. “Do you want us to figure out how to make mind control, too?”

“Absolutely not.” James said. “Though if you can find a way to break any hypothetical brainwashing in advance, that’d be nice to have in reserve. Now, I actually really have to go. I’m late for a pleasant country drive.”

“Alright boss. We’ll get on that.”

Mars knocked Chevoy’s hand away with an exasperate grunt. “Also you can teleport, you’re not late for anything.”

“Wait, the teleporting is re-?” Was the last thing James heard from one of the newer people before he blinked out of the basement hallway.

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The engine of the old Crown Vic made for a low humming background noise that drowned everything else, but only a little bit. The tires on the road, the whoosh of the air conditioning, the engine rumble, all of it created a panoply of sound that meant talking had to be done a little louder, and words sometimes got lost. Well, that, and the ear protection they all had in, in case they needed to go loud with their guns.

Overhead, the twin suns of Route Horizon hung like orbs of molten iron. Orange and shimmering, the heat from their light baked the endless winding desert road. Every few

minutes, there was a rattling bump as James failed to dodge a speed bump, and behind their line of three cars, a small school of the moving asphalt lumps chased after them with a lazy flow.

James was driving one of the cars they'd bought for nothing and healed back with the miracle gas, an old police interceptor vehicle that still smelled like burning leather on the inside. It was just him and Alanna in the front, and they were rotating who drove every time they stopped. So far, they'd stopped once, and it had been to wait for El's car to regenerate after a quadruped that was basically just four legs and a body made of the folded street signs of its legs had leapt in front of her car and cratered her hood.

They'd passed gas stations, parking structures, and rest stops. Driven on past the solitary billboards in the distant sand. James had loved the one that just read "Rock Thoughts". Like most media in dungeons, it appeared totally random, but he and Alanna got lost in the fiction of it. What was it *advertising*? Was it a band, maybe? What kind of music did they play? It *couldn't* be rock. Probably some kind of new wave rhythmic chanting.

One car up, El's customized cherry red convertible led their pack by about a quarter mile. She had a few passengers; the delve team she'd been coming in here with every month or so ever since rejoining the Order and everything had settled. No one had new magic yet, except for more Velocity storage, but her car had been retrofitted with a passenger side door that repositioned you into the seat if you touched it while trying to get in, a hubcap that made the wheels nearly invincible, and a spark plug that made the headlights something like three times as bright but only for the driver. James wanted that spark plug. And then to copy it and put it in every car he ever had to drive past at night.

Behind them, Mark and his wife Marcy followed in a box truck. If you'd told James that the husband and wife would have been enthralled by the call of adventure after their first dungeon delve together, he probably would have believed you, but it still surprised him to see it happen. Their young daughters had become a more common sight around the Lair, and they were both adorable and utter terrors. For now, they were bringing along extra cargo capacity. Because while the cars James and El were driving were nimble and swift, they didn't really have *trunk space*.

And right now, they were headed to somewhere they would hopefully need to make use of that trunk space.

Route Horizon was odd. Its roads and buildings shifted and moved around a lot. But, they'd discovered, it wasn't some kind of abstract or metaphysical process. The roads *physically moved around a lot*. And that meant that, once they realized how it was happening and that there was a pattern to it, navigating was actually possible. Even more possible with navigators as a species and not just a role in the party. And there were several; Zhu was having a grand time, an orange spear of light flowing alongside their car, with two of his brethren from the vehicle up ahead.

El had originally had a way to sort of find her way, even as things moved. And it technically worked, but it only worked because how the dungeon rearranged itself was a pattern. It was an endurance test, as anyone who had ever driven a long road trip would tell you, but it was also a puzzle box, waiting to be solved.

Kirk, one of the Horizonists who were still with the Order as part of their ongoing program of restorative justice had been the one to spot the farm. It was a handful of weathered wood buildings amid a patch of fenced off dirt amid the sand, with tall grasses and vegetation no one could identify at a distance surrounding in. A number of drivable paths led through and around it, but they'd have to cross the desert itself to get there.

James was almost positive it was a trap. But he was still excited.

And also bored.

It was a long drive, and there wasn't exactly a lot to do while you were driving inside a dungeon.

"Question for ya." He asked Alanna, his girlfriend rolling her head to look at him from where she had been carefully watching out the window and the second mirror they'd put up on her side of the car. Alanna gave him a long hum as she turned her eyes on James, and he quirked a smile at her antics. "Do you think people are gonna end up worshipping the dungeons?"

Alanna gave him a silent stare for a minute, before pointing out the windshield at the car in front of them without turning her body. "Literally right there are people who used to, and I think *still do* literally worship the dungeon, James."

"I mean, more 'worship' like religions." James said, before self-correcting. "Okay, *yeah*, I'm aware that it's somewhat religious to them, *fine!*" He tried to escape Alanna's disbelieving glare. "But like, I think Annette's still catholic or something? But also, you know what I'm getting at, you butt. I mean, I wonder if this lifestyle is going to, over the course of generations, lead to a canon and mythos for the dungeons that presents itself in the form of ritual, and in- and out-groups." James rolled his eyes as he double checked his speed and eased off a bit to make sure he didn't close in on the lead car. "Is that better?"

Alanna nodded, shifting back to her sentry watch out the window and adjusting the shoulder strap of her rifle. She normally didn't *fit* in cars in a comfortable way; they just weren't built for people over a certain height, much less people over a certain height wearing body armor. But this one had *leg room* for her, and she loved it. "Much better." She said as she got herself situated. "Also, I dunno! Might be a problem, long term. Should we talk to the Horizonists about it?"

"I kinda wanna talk to Kirk, at least yeah." James drummed his gloved fingers on the wheel. "He's the most... 'devout', I guess you could say. If we actually wanted to influence this whole thing, now would be the time to do it."

“Wait, hang on.” Alanna cleared her throat. “To be clear on this, do you want *more* dungeon religion, or *less* dungeon religion?” She asked him.

Awkwardly clicking his tongue, James shot a side glance her way. “I mean, I kinda just want less religion in general. I feel like it’s gotten in the way of me being immortal, so I feel personally offended by its continued existing power structure.” He admitted. “But that includes dungeon cults? Using the old term for ‘cult’, like, the cults to various gods. Also, did I tell you that when I was out with Max doing recruitment a day or two ago, we got yelled at by a group of parents accusing us of tempting their children to Satan? It was fucking hilarious and also upon reflection absolutely depressing and gross.”

“Ah, getting back to your high school roots. Both in terms of the antiheism and the getting yelled at by parents.” Alanna said in a joking tone. “I remember you being *angry* a lot. A very righteous and aggressively atheist teenager. *Not*,” she added, “that I have a moral high ground here.” She trailed off with a tone that drifted from amused to kind of melancholy as she remembered just how bad her own high school life had been.

“Totally fair. I wasn’t a very happy person.” James sighed. “I like to think I’ve gotten better about it. But my point stands; despite not wanting to be a jerk about it, I don’t *like* religions, and I don’t think I particularly want any that are backed up by literal magic.”

There was a brief pause, and then Alanna asked a question she’d sort of had for a while. “Is this just where religions came from?” She asked. “Dungeon magic as miracles, or whatever? Delvers as demigods, all our old monsters just mob spawns?”

“It is *really* tempting to say yes to that.” James chuckled. “But I kinda suspect that cannot possibly be true? Like, it just doesn’t make sense, on a timeline level. We’ve been doing this for a few years, and we’ve got multiple different species living outside the dungeons with us, not to mention that we’ve seen attacks from dungeons before outside their territory. There’s just no way that they could have been around for thousands of years and *nothing weird leaked out*. At the very least, there’d be some kind of miracle medicine or bizarre material science or weird species that accidentally got a stable population on Earth, *right?*”

“Insulin, ferrofluid, platypus.” Alanna answered instantly.

“Wow, you just had that ready to go, huh?”

“Oh yeah!” She nodded. “Also, there’s something glinting in the desert to our right.”

“We’re taking the next left fork, it should be fine. Radio the others though.” James said, and waited while Alanna did so. “But yeah,” he said after she finished and confirmed they were going to veer off in a few minutes; he could see a rocky cliff coming up that would probably split the road in two, “I feel actually really awkward about this, because I *want* to just say ‘fuck it,

none of this in my utopia', but also I know for a lot of people their faith and belief are deeply important? I just kind of hate how it seems to do a lot of work to form divisions and power blocs that make life worse."

"I think if you asked most believers of any religion, they'd probably say they don't like that either." Alanna pointed out. "And I just realized that's part of your point, isn't it?" She hummed as James nodded vigorously. "Right, because if they actually didn't like that, and actually were a majority, they could just... stop it. It's the cop thing all over again. God dammit." His partner tilted back and hammered the back of her head on the seat a few times. "Do you ever wonder if it's not worth trying to save the world?"

James shrugged, trying to keep it light. "Sure, but I'm committed to the bit." He said. "Besides, a lot of the potential harm actually goes back to one of the core problems with everything, which is poverty. Remember the guy back in school who ki..." his throat closed involuntarily. "Fuck. The guy who killed himself in the parking lot? Because his parents reacted badly to his sexuality? That sort of thing isn't from *one bad event*. It's a pileup; he lost his family, sure, but then he was facing homelessness, shame, social ostracization, and a dozen other things all at once. What I *want to do* is build a world where no one's parents *ever* pull that shit. But if we can't, we can at least work toward the other stuff."

"So, your point," Alanna slowly asked, "is that we should make things better as a safety net against people being unforgivably cockbags to their kids?"

James snapped off a nod. "Yes."

"Yeah, okay." She agreed. "I like that. I'm thinking of running for city council somewhere soon, mind if I use that as a campaign slogan?"

"What, like, as a hobby?" He asked, letting out an 'oof' as the Crown Vic's suspension was put to the test as they ran over a speed bump that had shot out behind El's car. "Like you don't have enough to do right now?"

Alanna shrugged. "I dunno!" She said, taking her turn with James' favorite phrase as of late. "What am I supposed to do? I'm smarter than I've ever been, it's time to start--"

Whatever she was saying was cut off as their radio came to life with a crisp click and the compressed sound of Kirk's voice. "Contact front! Up high!" He sounded worried. But then, James had noticed, Kirk always sounded worried in here. According to the possibly-ex-cultist, it was because his spell to secure a safe journey didn't *work right* in the dungeon.

James leaned forward so he could look upward through the windshield. The road did split ahead, maybe a couple miles up now, and the massive triangular formation of red rock that cut through the sands and divided the artificial highway stretched up high enough that he was

almost looking into the sun to see the top of it. But there on its side, something silver that glinted in the sun's rays was rapidly hurtling down the cliff toward the wide and winding road.

"Shit." He muttered. "I see it. We're falling back, Mark, take mid." He ordered the truck behind them before passing the radio to Alanna and gripping the wheel tightly as he pulled to the side of the road and started dropping their speed, letting the box truck start to gain on them.

"This is new." Alanna said, trying to get a good look through a pair of binoculars. "I count six. Kirk?"

"Kirk's busy." The voice of a camraconda came back. Sunrise-In-Clouds making for a powerful addition to the normal exploration team here. "We also count six. Wheeled things, smaller than us, closing fast, El says hostile. We are accelerating." The last word was strained, even through the radio, and James watched as El's car shot away from them, her magic pushing them beyond what a vehicle and driver could reasonably handle safely in an attempt to flub the incoming ambush.

The truck had just passed them when they flew past the rock outcrop, the right side of the road that had been empty desert suddenly taken up by a wall of stone that offered both cover, and one fewer escape route option if needed. James glanced at their speed, and winced; that old box truck was going under ninety, and that was a problem.

Because here in the Route Horizon, there was one big rule for surviving contact with most of the native life forms: speed was your best defense, *and* your best weapon.

The things here were fast, and a lot of them had some kind of projectile weaponry, but they weren't computer guided aimbots. The faster you were going, the easier it was to simply not be hit. Also, a lot of them had even more dangerous attacks they could use when they had a target trapped or pinned, so slowing down was a horrible idea. It meant you could get dragged to a position where the monster could do basically anything it wanted, and you didn't have much of a defense. Meanwhile, if you were fast enough, and maneuvering well, you could force an engagement on your own terms. And for a group like the Order of Endless Rooms, where their delve teams had gunners and camracondas, that edge was a massive force multiplier.

Route Horizon was incredibly dangerous. But for them, it was a place they could both cut loose, and really actually test themselves. Maybe a little cliché, but to James, it was a different flavor of exhilaration from his delves into the Office or the Sewer.

"Zhu! Line up a shot!" James called to his navigator as he dropped back by a few MPH to behind the truck. Next to his window, the orange lance of the informorph pulsed once, then wordlessly split in his vision into a web of lines that quickly crumbled away or snapped off until only a few were left. He picked one, and followed it, edging the wheel to the right just as the first of the creatures started to hit the road in front of them.



They had chrome domes for bodies, with crystal bulbs that glinted with internal lights as they spun down off of the cliff. Eight feet across, with some kind of metal mechanical system around the edge of the domes, they had one massive wheel on their underside that kicked up plumes of stray sand and dirt as they touched down and shot off in pursuit of El's car.

Well, some of them did. Two of them, swerving back and forth in a helix pattern, drew up alongside the truck. And with where he'd put their car, James got a good look at them as the mechanisms around their edge unfolded into a set of eight multi jointed legs, just as chrome as the rest of them.

Then the one that was on their side locked its legs into position, and started *running* with them. Well, not exactly running, James realized as a spray of asphalt scattered across his windshield. They were slapping the ground, and adding to their speed with enough force to tear divots in the road. Keeping up with the truck, and using the legs to maneuver themselves closer.

Over the radio, Marcy was yelling something about spiders. James didn't hear it, as Alanna kicked her door open, locked it into the gunner position they'd built into the car, steadied her foot on the unfolded platform barely a foot over the road that was screaming by under them at ninety miles an hour, and started taking shots at the spider in front of them. The sounds of the explosive gunshots roaring alongside the rush of wind moving past the car, and underlined by copper *tings* with every pull of the trigger.

She was in the perfect position for clean shots, thanks to where Zhu had guided them. And after the first few bullets hit and sent shards of broken chrome and crystal scattering into the road, Alanna stopped making ranging shots and started using bursts of fire to herd the spider thing off the truck before she hit the wheel enough that it more or less exploded in a spray of rubber and the creature's body tumbled into the rocks.

James realized he was grinding his teeth, and tried to relax his jaw. One down, but one more on the other side. "Maneuvering!" He yelled to Alanna, and gave her a second to drop her rifle to its sling and grab hold of the car before he pulled the wheel, crossing three empty lanes in a couple seconds to put them on the other side of the truck.

Where the other creature had gotten some kind of grip on the front cab with two of its legs.

The other legs weren't bothering to propel it anymore, they just bobbed lazily in the air while the wheeled form stole momentum from the large vehicle. It was absolutely trying to rip its way in to get at the driver, though. And Mark was seemingly uninterested in letting it; James saw the driver's side door slam open repeatedly, Mark's boot visible as he kicked the creature back.

It loosened it enough that the chrome arachnid swung away for a small moment, and Alanna decided to start shooting in that window. Then James heard her swear as she fumbled a reload and one of her magazines vanished behind them at high speed, just as the spider dropped its

grip on the truck, and spun back toward their car. At these speeds, it didn't even have to accelerate toward them, just barely slow down and let James get closer in the blink of an eye.

But he was forewarned from his navigator on where to dodge, and his reflexes were well beyond human at this point. James whipped the car to the right, choosing the direction that would push Alanna *into* the vehicle if she lost her grip. Then steadied out, eased a little more speed out of the car with an airy roar of the engine, and pulled a loop around the front of the spider that was working to regain speed with rapid explosive steps.

He put ten feet of distance between them and gave Alanna a clear broadside on the creature. And after correcting for their speed, she emptied her magazine into it, chunks of semi-metal material joined by sprays of liquid as her bullets punched through the dome and the spider toppled to the road in a splay of limbs, vanishing behind them rapidly.

Then his partner swung herself back into the car. "Two down!" She called into the radio.

"Took you long enough!" Someone said back as James brought them up next to the truck and Alanna exchanged a thumbs up with Mark. He glanced over and winced as he noticed a couple jagged holes in the side of the truck. They were already healing from the magical gas in the tank, but those were a good reason to keep distance from these spider things in the future.

Their vehicles slid back into their convoy position, James smirking as they passed by the tangled wrecks of the other spiders. If speed was a weapon here, a camraconda that could freeze you directly in front of your buddy was a tactical nuke. Technically, it wasn't really freezing; the would have had enough momentum that a camraconda would have only slowed them down. But when things lined up, that was enough. And El and Kirk had gotten *really good* at lining stuff up for their teammate.

"Do we wanna loot those things?" James asked. "They could have navigator seeds."

"No stopping in spider territory!" Marcy's voice chastised him over the radio.

El added onto that. "Yeah dude, this is a bad spot to turn around. I'm out of velocity, too."

It felt bad to just kill the things and leave them behind, but James agreed; no point surviving a fight just to get stuck in a bad position trying to profit off it. Also, that cliff next to them could have a *lot* more of these things lurking on it, so he agreed that they should keep their momentum up.

"I dunno man!" Alanna said after she flicked her safety back on, confirmed they were in the clear, and dropped back into the car, shutting the door with a hand that vibrated from adrenaline. "I'm seeing a compelling reason to worship the chrome spider death machine factory!"

“Oh fuck off.” James burst out laughing, and Alanna joined in, the two of them dropping into a companionable quiet as they steadied their nerves after the fight.

Compared to that, the rest of the drive to the farm was practically placid. Which, James figured, was how most long road trips were, really. Long stretches of boring punctuated by brief moments where everything was trying to kill you. Normally, those parts were called ‘cities’, but here it was more literal.

They made it to a seemingly indistinct stretch of desert road, and everyone took the chance to stretch their legs or coils as Mark dragged a few big pieces of plywood out of the back of the truck and laid them down as a makeshift bridge over the trench of spiked metal that tended to line the roads in this dungeon. Personally, James amused himself trying to figure out if the plant growing just off to the side of where they’d stopped that looked like a skeletal network of green spurs was *actually* just mundane sagebrush, or if the dungeon had made it. It was tricky; he wasn’t a botanist. Yet.

He also noticed that, separate from everyone else, Kirk had stepped away and was silently staring out to the horizon of the road while the others had some kind of excited conversation.

James rose from his crouch next to the plant, dusted his hands off on his armored panda, and stepped over to the other man. “Hey.” He greeted Kirk simply.

“Oh. Hi.” Kirk nodded at James. He was fidgeting with a cigarette in his fingers, but it was unlit. “We ready to go?”

“Almost. What’cha up to?” James asked.

“Eh. Kinda wondering if the magical addiction removal wasn’t a secret curse.” He said, tucking the cigarette behind his ear. “Kinda miss these things, and now they taste like shit.”

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short. They *always* tasted like shit.” James grinned briefly as Kirk snorted a laugh. “We have an addiction cure?”

Kirk gave a shrug. “Sorta. I finally got to do my first Winter’s Climb trip a couple weeks ago, and I picked the book for that.”

James scrunched up his face at the incomplete answer. But he *vaguely* remembered seeing a delve report that said they’d gotten a biology textbook from there that gave a spell for this. Maybe. “Wait, is this the one that replaces the addiction with needing more water?”

“Yup!” Kirk nodded. “Now I’m thirsty all the time *and* I can’t enjoy smoking! I’m a tragic figure, me.”

Shaking his head and huffing out a laugh, James glanced over at the mid-forties ex-cultist. Well, maybe ex. He sighed, and shook his head with a tiny motion. "So, how's this place been treating you?" He asked.

Kirk was back to staring off toward the horizon, the dual suns overhead slowly cooking both of them if not for the liberal pre-delve application of sunscreen. "Fantastic." He said simply. "There's just so much here to see. And even with the place waking up, it's a wild ride to be here."

"Waking up, as in, becoming more active?" James asked.

"Yeah, though I think it's kinda literal. I've read all the stuff about the dungeons that you guys know. That we know, I guess. This one's the most talkative, by a mile. I'm just hoping to be here when it decides to open up and talk to us." Kirk smirked as he saw James' expression. "Yeah, I know." He added. "Still basically in the cult mindset, right?" The man gave an apologetic shrug. "Seems weird that you're *not*. That anyone isn't. These are special places, my man. I don't get how anyone can be here and not feel that connection."

James pursed his lips and tilted his head. "Well, I can agree with that." He admitted. "Can I be straight with you on something?" He asked.

"You have at least three boyfriends." Kirk said with a snide tone. And then froze. "Sorry, I just realized that might be over the line. Been hanging out with Momo too much."

"It happens. And you're also only technically wrong. *Anyway*, don't worry about it. Because what *I'm* worried about is if the reverence for the dungeons, and the Route in particular, is... well, is it gonna be a problem?" He turned and faced Kirk directly, the other man not meeting his eyes. "I mean, long term. Because the last time..."

"Yeah, I know." Kirk sighed, a depressed noise that dragged on for a while. "I know, okay? The old man... was a fucking monster. A billion times worse than anything in here that just happens to be shaped like a spider, right? And you don't want a repeat of that." It wasn't exactly what James was getting at, but it was close enough. "Nah. We won't be a problem. I'm not reforming the faith, I'm just in love with this place. Since I'm stealing bad ideas from Momo today, 'spiritual, not religious'. Is that... will that be okay?" He asked, like he was worried James was going to strand him here or something.

James gave an uncertain shrug, but when he started talking, he found the words he was looking for easily. "Dude, you're talking about a personal philosophy based on appreciation for the world and love of discovery. That was never gonna be a problem." He smiled in earnest and tapped Kirk's shoulder with a gloved fist. "You're fine. Now come on, Mark's been done for a while and everyone's waiting on us."

The next twenty minutes were far, far worse of an experience than a mildly awkward conversation. As their convoy carefully shifted over the spike pit ditches and onto the sand, the quality of the journey took a sharp downward turn.

“lilii haaaaattteeee thissssss.” Alanna’s voice rumbled along with the vibrations as they cut across the rocky dirt, their cars jerking and shaking with every bump.

“You think this is bad?” James said with wild grin as he twitched the wheel to take them around a tire-sized hole El had just driven through. “El’s car has *no* suspension. We got so lucky with the police car. We should get more of these, this is *great*.”

Alanna shared this factoid over radio, and James spent the next ten minutes of the drive laughing boisterously as Mark started inventing new swear words that his wife was okay with him using to describe the truck they were in.

Eventually, though, they reached the farm. El and James split their cars and skirted the outside and its thin wire fence, until they found a gap that led in. There was something *off* about the fence that no one wanted to test right now. So instead, they drove over a dirt trail through a cornfield that was *far* bumpier than the open desert.

Their passengers were on high alert, but nothing jumped them through the withered brown and yellow stalks of corn, the crop having baked under the eternal day of this place. Same thing when they got to the farmhouse.

James and Alanna went first, guns up and checking each other’s blind spots in a practiced series of fluid motions. The old door, scraped white paint peeling off, had opened to let them into a simple two story building that was either truly empty of life, or had some *very* dedicated mimics in it. Dust covered the furniture, cabinets sat empty with doors hanging on broken hinges, sinks dripped with regular spurts of brown water that pooled in their basins. The building wasn’t derelict or falling apart, but it certainly felt like this was a place that no one had been in for a long, long time.

The barn was mostly the same, except for the tractor that had been split into a thousand pieces, each of them pinned against the far wall like a dissected frog. Faded green and yellow paint mixed with oiled internal components, gears, chains, belts, and electronics, all of it splayed out like an angry god had dismissively slapped a vehicle that had offended them.

“Alright, so. Kirk had said when they’d cleared the barn and taken time to approach the scene. “I feel like your litmus test should be, if someone wants to worship at *that* altar...” he pointed to the slab of dull grey metal sitting at the foot of the display. “*Then* you should worry about whether or not it’s a problem. Because that’s fucking creepy.”

“It’s not creepy, it’s a Part!” El’s grin was wide and wild as she inched forward. “You guys sure there’s nothing here? This whole place is empty?”

“Not that we could find. And the life here isn’t exactly stealthy.” Alanna shrugged.

Sunrise-In-Clouds gave a bobbing nod. “Yes. But I will sit back here and watch just in case.”

“Okay, I’m gonna touch it.” El said.

James held his breath, but nothing happened when she poked it. And then took the time to read the etched words on the altar, that detailed what the part was, and how it worked. An odometer that gave the car an extra twenty percent fuel efficiency. Nothing world-shattering, but still, something neat.

“Why is this place *here*?” Mark had asked as they had all collectively scoured the farmhouse. “It’s just an empty building in the middle of nowhere? Why *build* this?”

“Ah, the eternal question about why dungeons do anything.” James nodded appreciatively as he found a half-burned folded road map in a kitchen drawer. “Short answer? We have no idea. Longer answer... well, we have a pretty solid theory with a little confirmation that dungeons actually have to provide challenges to people. The nature of what counts as a challenge seems a little flexible, but... well... we had to *get here*, right? That’s kinda tricky. But it’s not ‘fight for your life’ tricky.” He stopped and leaned on the counter in a plume of dust, turning to face Mark. “So, like, maybe it’s easy enough for the dungeon to build places like this, and it gives it a liiiiiittle of its bizarre metaphysical nutrient supply, without it having to spawn new creatures or rewards all the time? Like, it just sits here basically photosynthesising? I’m not actually telling you this is the answer, I’m guessing here.”

Mark grunted as he yanked a stuck cabinet open with a spray of splinters. “We need some experts for this. No offense.”

“Mild offense taken!” James held a hand to his chest. “I’m the closest thing to a dungeon expert we’ve seen!”

“Yeah, and you’re guessing. We should hire actual scientists.” Mark said. “What kind of scientists do wildlife analysis?”

“Zoologists?” James raised his eyebrows, unsure of his own answer. “I’ll google it when we get out.”

They continued their thorough sweep of the farm’s buildings, Alanna and Sunrise sitting outside, both with their guns cradled like they expected something to happen at any second. The tension ebbed and flowed; they’d get used to the barn being empty, and then something would creak or some dust would fall and everyone would be on edge for the next few minutes until it was quiet again. But at no point did anything lunge out for their throats

By the time they'd plucked everything they could find that looked even remotely useful out of the place, they'd gotten a kind of sad loot haul for the time it took to get here.

A half dozen scraps of maps, a couple of them larger than a square foot in area but none of them matching each other. A half full gas can that could not possibly still be good, but might be, if it was magic gas in some way. An equally half full bottle of something that was probably moonshine. And that, along with the magical car part, was *it*.

"You didn't need us here for you kids at *all*." Marcy had said as they'd gotten back in the cars, looking with mock disapproval at James and El. And he found he didn't really have a counterpoint to that; this had been kind of a bust.

"I'm gonna head home and sleep after this." He'd told Alanna as she drove them back, miles of dungeon road vanishing under their wheels as they took the hour long drive toward the entrance to mundane Earth. "What're you up to later?"

"A nap sounds good, yeah. But you might have just cursed yourself."

"Why'zat?"

"Literally every time you say you want to rest, something comes up. You couldn't even go to the beach without having to solve eight different interpersonal problems."

"...I like solving interpersonal problems." James grumbled. "No one shoots at me over... *almost no one* shoots at me over-"

Alanna cut him off with a bellow of laughter. "Alright, alright!" She said taking one hand off the wheel to pat him on the leg. "Just remember that I warned you!"

And then, of course, her warning bore fruit. An hour and a half later, as they parked their cars in the Townton base of operations, James got a phone call from Nate. He'd actually gotten several calls, but it turned out, dungeons didn't have cell service, and this was the first one he'd answered.

Yes, Nate admitted, they were backing off on the New York thing. Yes, the rogue division wasn't pushing leads or getting into dangerous situations anymore. *But*, all that aside, he had an address, and as long as James had some free time, maybe they could check it out with overwhelming force instead of just getting another rogue arrested.

James looked over at Alanna as he hung up. "I'm mad at you for this. I wasn't cursed until you said it." He lied.

His girlfriend gave him a waggle of her eyebrows. "Hey, I'm up for it if you are. We've been sitting down for *hours*, let's go get into trouble."

“That’s the opposite of what Nate wants.” James said.

“Nate doesn’t get what he wants.” Alanna told him. “Nate wanted to inform on us to the FBI. Now Nate gets paid a quarter million dollars a year to be a chef.”

“Is that actually what we pay him? Shit, we’re gonna go bankrupt.”

“...you really need to read the things Karen puts on your desk.” Was the last thing Alanna said before James waved a rapid goodbye to El and yanked the telepad page.

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When they got back to the Lair, James found Nate in the above ground back room that was part refurbished warehouse, part public meeting room, part briefing and planning area, and part maker space. James, in his head, just called it the briefing warehouse, and he saw no reason to change that as he entered to find Nate nodding to something that was being relayed to him from the solid green shape of an authority hovering just over his shoulder.

In a technical sense, Nate was exactly the same guy James had seen running a barbeque on the beach a few days ago. But gone was the gruff satisfaction of handing out food and poking at a grill in a way James was certain didn’t do anything, the apron and black cloth skullcap. In place of that man was someone who radiated a feeling of stilled danger, who stood over a table covered in the blueprints of an apartment building, staring at them like he could burn a hole in reality just by glaring at it hard enough.

“...just walked in. Any changes?” Nate was saying as James approached. Alanna had split off from him when they’d gotten back, and Zhu was napping inside his heart, so for now it was just him that nodded at Nate, and then to Sarah, Alex, and a guy he’d never seen before who were also present, while Nate kept talking. A half dozen other people were hanging nearby, seated at desks or tables but not doing anything except attentively watching the central operation. “Alright. Hold position there, and we’ll send you a problem.” He looked up at James. “Good, you’re here.”

“Ah, hang on!” James grinned as he folded his arms. “Am I the problem? Is that how-“

“Yes.” Nate cut him off, and James faltered as his casual banter was cut off by rapid no-nonsense professionalism. “I’ll make this quick. We’ve been investigating the situation in New York, against your express orders.”

There was a slight pause. “Yeah, I know?” James looked around. “Did anyone think I’d be upset about this? I didn’t *give orders*, holy shit Nate. I just said we should take it from a different angle.”



There was actually a whole lot that James wanted to say here. He'd been thinking a lot about the responsibility to solve problems, and the relative visibility of problems on a global scale. About how the Order's access to teleportation meant that they were far less limited than a lot of other people, but paradoxically, they were going to see more problems they *could* solve, and that he was terrified they'd stretch themselves far too thin before they were ready. About how it really did feel like there was a difference between issues that were background noise, issues that were distant, and those problems that did manage to wander their way to directly in the Order's line of sight.

"Good." Nate nodded simply, cutting off any chance James had to talk about this. He shot a glance at Sarah, who gave him a knowing smile and a silent promise that she'd listen to him ramble later. "We've located what we think is an active bolt hole for our killers. Or, if not them, someone with similar antimemetic ability. We have two rogues on stakeout right now, but we're not going in yet."

"...because you want to make this a problem for someone." James said, catching on.

"And that's where you come in." Nate confirmed with a smile that didn't touch his eyes. "And also why Sarah and the others are here." He passed James an earpiece while Sarah tapped the book she had on the table with a cover like a shifting dark starfield. "I want you to go kick in the door, and turn the trap on whoever shows up."

"And when I get shot at..." James was only asking as a formality. He'd been shot at enough that it was almost becoming normal for him, and wasn't *that* terrifying.

Nate slid a plastic bin across to James, with a series of shield bracers in it. "All charged, all set for different calibers."

James started pulling out the copper and bone accessories and finding places for them on his arms. He was already wearing one under his armor, and it took a little effort to get another three on in a way that was even close to 'comfortable'. "Is it possible to trigger these separately?" He asked.

"Yeah, but don't." Alex answered him. "It takes a lot of focus. So only switch if you need to, because once you do you're probably switching all of them." She gave James an appraising look, eyeing his delver armor before looking around and finding a coat to toss him. "Here, be a little less conspicuous until the problem starts."

Nate passed him a mostly-used-up telepad and a cell phone. "Address is ready to go. There's a wifi hotspot on here so you can connect with your skulljack, and the Order spooky shit email has a half dozen swords and guns in it that you can download if you need. Drink this," he handed James a labeled exercise potion, "so you're fresh. Alex and her team are your backup, if this escalates. The building is mostly empty, and we'll have rogues watching the approaches, so don't be afraid to make a mess. You ready?"

“Fuck, gimme a second!” James almost laughed as he downed the potion and felt the soothing sensation flow through his limbs. Especially his sore legs. “Okay. Wifi, shields, empty building.” James took a deep breath, and realized that he might not be ready. He might actually be super nervous. His heart was hammering against his chest, his hands shaking lightly. He double checked his gear, clenching his hands into fists to try to bleed off some of the nerves as he figured out how to get the P90 he still had slung across his front to sit partly concealed by the coat Alex had given him.

It had snuck up on him. This wasn’t a sudden struggle for survival; this was something else. This was walking into a dangerous situation on purpose. And James was pretty sure he’d flinch at every loud noise during it.

But then he remembered that the people they were after were closer to monsters than half the things in the dungeons.

“Give him a second.” Sarah was saying as James closed his eyes and nodded to himself.

Then he opened his eyes again. “Okay.” He said. “I’m good. Let’s go mess up someone’s day.”

He reached out and tore a page, and a few seconds later to those watching, he was gone. Somewhere else. Then they established a connection, and got audio and visual through James’ skulljack and phone. Nate went back to talking to the other rogues on site, and Alex went to check up on the follow-up team.

And Sarah just watched the screen they’d set up. Trying not to let anyone see the gnawing fear in her own heart.

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When James appeared in the lobby of the apartment building, he wasn’t actually prepared for the environment.

In his mind, ‘apartment building’ meant a two or three story structure with outside access to each of the units inside. It was pretty uncommon, around his hometown, to see buildings that were much taller than that, or that had internal doors.

This one was much larger. Though Nate had told him the floor, so he wasn’t too surprised that the elevator’s readout showed the building as having fourteen floors. Two whole walls of the lobby were taken up by fake-brass mail slots, and a potted plant that was dying despite being fake sat near the window to the outside street. The windows had a couple spots that were covered with duct tape, and the tile floor was cracked and scuffed to hell and back.

It smelled like mildew and decay, and James hated it.

He also refused to take the elevator, so he started on the stairs, walking at a calm pace as he answered the incoming call from Nate, and started streaming his ocular feed. He was in no hurry. He also got looped in on the call with the other two rogues nearby, and had to bite back an angry comment when he learned that one of them was Lin. That girl had too many broken bones to be back in the field after only a few days.

Of course, the Order did have a cure for broken bones, in the form of a couple different purple orbs. But still, he'd rather she just take a fucking break.

The layout of the building made it self more or less known when James took the time to walk one of the floors. The elevator was part of a central column, with three other studio apartments packed around it, one door facing each direction. And then, larger units on the outside, with stairwells on two sides of the building. It wasn't a perfect square, and there were actually two hallways down the middle, with a second clump of studio apartments forming a second 'middle area'. Maintenance closets and trash chutes dotted the halls as well.

He didn't pass anyone as he checked the layout, before he went back to the stairwell and climbed the last few floors.

"What's up with how empty this place is?" James asked as he opened the door to the stairs, old grime wiping off the handle and onto his glove. "Is this wizard shit?"

"Probably not." Ben's voice came through their connection. "This place got bought by a different management company, that applied for it to be low income housing, which ironically priced out a lot of the residents. We talked to someone at the company, and read their emails, and they're basically waiting for the leases to run out before they bulldoze the place and sell the land. It's an insurance thing. Probably illegal."

Lin jumped in. "We think it's getting used because it's empty, not empty because it's getting used." She clarified. "There's a couple other assholes using it too. We'll fill you in later."

"Yeah, good call." James said, stopping outside floor seven and taking a deep breath as he set a hand on the door. "I'm here. Going onto the floor now. Anyone come in after me?"

"No." "Nope."

"Alright." He said, and reached out. And then paused. The bar to the door here had a clear mark in the middle where the dirt and dust had been rubbed away. "Did either of you come in here?"

"Absolutely not." Lin's voice had a rough note in it. "Not after last time."

Well that didn't bode well. James took a breath of the unpleasant air in the stairwell, the cold concrete somehow not adding much to the flavor, and pushed the door open.

The apartment they were going for, the one that didn't appear on any records, was on the west side of the building. He'd taken the east side stairwell, which had required getting directions from someone who could actually navigate, so James had a little distance to cover. He tried to keep his footsteps quiet on the old wooden floors, hoping the buzzing of the lights overhead would drown them out.

He moved forward to the corner of the building, and took another moment to collect himself before peeking around it. No people, and no door to an apartment on the outside wall either. "Now hang on..." he muttered.

"There's a door there." Sarah's voice spoke in his earpiece. "We're having trouble seeing it, but it's there. So confirm that whatever they've got, it works on records and senses, that's cool. You should be able to see it if you get right up close."

"I'm not a fan." James muttered. "Alright. I'm gonna-" He stopped talking instantly, and pulled back around the corner, as a noise sounded in the quiet hall. The sound of a metal latch clicking open, as the stairwell door on this side of the building was pushed open.

He tried not to hold his breath as he listened to footsteps - *heavy* footsteps - thump out into the hallway, before receding from him by a short distance. James tried to relax and loosen up his muscles, just in case he'd need to move quickly soon, while he kept his ears open. A few seconds later, he heard a vaguely feminine voice make a grunt of exasperation, before he started hearing tapping on wood.

"What the fuck is that?" Nate hissed over the open call. "Anyone?"

"No one went in!" Ben's voice insisted frantically. "I fucking swear, no one went in!"

James nodded to himself. That left two options. Someone who was already here, or someone who had entered the same way he had. Or helicopter, maybe, but he figured Ben would have mentioned helicopter. He tried to put some thought into the situation. They were tapping the wall, and moving down the hallway; they were *looking for the same thing as him*. If this was a trap, it wasn't a very good one when the single person you sent to spring the trap couldn't find the right apartment.

He made a choice, and stepped out around the corner.

The woman who was tapping at the wall didn't notice him right away, she was busy rapping a gauntleted knuckle on the wall every two steps as she paced down the hall, and was about halfway to where the door *should* be. She had dirty blonde hair in a kind of short spiky style

around her head, bright eyes sunken back in a face with more than a few scars on it, and dull grey plate mail covering most of her body in a way that made her look like a walking tank.

It said something about James' life that this was familiar. He didn't untense, but he let a word slip out just out of surprise. "Camille?" He asked, confused.

The woman's head snapped around to face him, and James realized he'd made a mistake. The face was the same, the armor was the same - though more intact than he'd last seen it - but this was *not* the woman he had met and fought alongside. But he had no doubt that this one was also a daughter of the Last Line Of Defense. And also, and this was important, a massive threat to his immediate survival odds. The fact that she looked as confused as him didn't seem to help much.

Especially when her hand dipped to her belt, and she unhooked the three foot long bladed mace that was hanging there.

"Oh fu-" James' hand flung his coat wide as he ducked into a crouch and reached for his rifle. In his ear, Sarah started singing, and he felt the connection from the Attic's magic form between them and the network of others, a half dozen traits pouring into him. He shoved the modifications his purple orbs made to his mind to their utmost, and did his best to let the agility his Sewer lesson gave him do its work properly.

And it was barely, *barely* enough.

Not-Camille took three thundering steps toward James, her mace flicking out into her hand in a grip that kept it just inside the narrow walls around them. She covered the thirty feet between them in seconds, and James had only barely gotten his gun up when she was right there and swinging at his head like she was playing tee-ball.

He ducked, feeling the mace swing past with force enough to rustle his hair in the breeze, and turned the duck into a forward roll. Working to put some distance between them. The armored woman wasn't exactly off balance, though, and as James tried to slip past her on the floor, she pivoted and nailed him in the flank with a plated kick.

He felt the air rush out of him as he slid away, slamming into the wall opposite the blank space where there should have been an apartment door so hard that dust and a chunk of plaster rained down from the ceiling. That had, James knew, been the closest thing to a glancing blow that she'd be throwing around, and if his bones weren't supernaturally durable he was positive he'd have lost a few ribs there.

They were now well past the line where this could be resolved peacefully. James rolled out away from the wall as the woman strode toward him, brought his bullpup up in the steadiest one handed grip he could, and started unloading on her.

He'd come from Route Horizon, so the bullets they were using were the kind that were meant to shred *engine blocks*. Which made James actually more than a little pissed off when the first half magazine he poured into her ricocheted off her armor and into the walls and floor. He tried to shift his aim up to her exposed face, but a sudden burst of orange light from Zhu was enough warning for him to drop his gun and slap his hands against the floor, pushing himself back as the woman lunged forward faster than she should have been able to, her mace going straight through the old wood of the floor and exposing the insulation and wiring below.

James followed the path Zhu set for him, pulling on a lot of balance from his link through Sarah so he could rapidly roll sideways and pop back to his feet. His foot slid back to where he was against the 'empty' wall, and one hand grabbed his hanging rifle and sprayed shots across the hall while he tried to come up with a plan.

In his head, he heard Nate yelling a negative at Alex, but it was in the background to Sarah's soft voice singing to him. The connection method she was borrowing from one of the others in her web of relationships actually helping him focus quite a bit. But he had only a second before the woman was back on him, pressing the attack.

She came at him with an uppercut of her weapon that smashed James' gun so hard it flipped out of his hands and over his back, the strap pulling on him as the rifle slammed back into his body. Then she twisted, armored shoulders moving with intense strength to stop the overwhelming momentum of her swing as she reversed its direction and brought it back down at James' head.

He didn't just sit there. Instead, he ignored Zhu's dodge recommendation, and stepped into her personal space. When the woman snarled at him and tried to kick out, James grabbed her leg under one arm, wrapped his hand under her knee, and pirouetted to the side. She could be as strong as she wanted, but leverage waited for no one. And when she slipped slightly off balance, James capitalized on it, planting a hand on her shoulder and pushing into her, asking the people through Sarah for quite a lot of raw strength as he slammed the armored woman into the floor hard enough that it shuddered the building. He also narrowly resisted the urge to yell "Judo!" at her as he did so, and felt he should win an award for that alone.

She dropped her mace and tried to grab him, the metal clanging to the floor, but James wasn't interested in having his bones snapped by someone who was that obviously overpowered. Instead, he turned the slam into a roll and not a pin, continuing down the hall away from her. She did manage to grab his arm and wrench it in a way that would have snapped the elbow of a human that couldn't bend their elbow well past what was natural, but let go when that didn't seem to have done anything.

James sprung back to his feet, ache in his arm already fading, then whipped back around and aimed a kick at the side of her head as she was slower getting off the floor. His foot definitely impacted her skull, but aside from an angry grunt, it didn't seem to do much, and James danced away back down the hall, hooking her mace with a boot and sending it skidding across the wood

behind him. When the kick didn't seem to work, he mentally flicked open the Order's emergency email account through his skulljack, opened an attachment for a handgun, felt the object drop awkwardly into his hand, and filled the hallway with a trio of explosive bangs as he tried just shooting her again.

It didn't work, even when he shot her in the unarmored head, which was both disappointing and terrifying. Then she spat out something - literally spat, a kind of dusty smoke flowing from her mouth - and James hopped back as the cloud rapidly formed and stabbed forward. He got mostly out of the way, but it enveloped his hand before it disappeared, taking with it the sleeve of his coat, the bracer plate of his armor, most of the pistol, and a lot of his confidence that he could actually win this fight.

He tried to keep breathing, pushing away as best he could the urge from his adrenaline to do something stupid. "Okay. So we've both had a minute to..." James began to say.

He barely got a chance to start sassing her as she got back to her feet, mace appearing back in her hand. James resisted the urge to swear as she closed in, but he *was* at least starting to feel actually confident that she couldn't *kill him*. He hadn't even had to set his shields to 'getting hit by a fucking mace, in this, the year twenty twenty two', and he absolutely could have if he wanted to.

Then he had a stupid idea. Pressed himself against a specific part of the wall, and then dodged her next incoming swing at just the right moment.

And let her smash through into the room they were both looking for.

The door was occluded, sure. But she was putting structural holes in things with that stick of hers, and James was right that an ancient apartment door wasn't going to stand up to that. Not-Camille's swing shattered the deadbolt of the door that was now blatantly visible and had been the whole time, a spray of asbestos dust and wood splinters scattering in her wake.

And she actually paused, and looked at the door like she was uncertain what to do about this new development. *James* didn't pause though. His blood was on fire, and he had no expectation of negotiating with this woman. She had tried not just to kill him, but hit him so hard that it would delete his Facebook account, and he wasn't going to take her hesitation as anything other than a chance to end the fight. A hand that gripped with the strength of too much adrenaline wrapped around the hilt of his trusty hatchet, yanked it out of its clip against his back as he felt his rifle bounce against his spine, and brought it around in an arc of a swing with every erg of force he could muster.

The woman noticed at the last second, getting her arm up between her face and his blade. The axe blade punched into her armor with a screech of tearing metal, and James felt the impact rattle his arm, but he still rapidly yanked it out and made for another strike.

She juked to the side, and he corrected, the axe slamming into the haft of her mace as she brought it up. And for a brief window, James put his enemy on the defensive. His swings were empowered by a half dozen sources of force and speed, and he was legitimately annoyed *this* was working when bullets didn't, but he didn't care.

He stepped back from their clash, not wanting to waste strength to try to match her. Both of them stood, on either side of the open door. James breathing as calmly as he could manage, the armored woman taking rapid inhalations as they sized each other up.

She looked down at her wrist, and the rip in her metal plate armor, and then back up at James. *Then* she opened her mouth to talk, and he briefly considered shooting her again before she started speaking. "I misjudged." She said, and James froze as he heard Camille's voice come out of her mouth. "Which pillar's child are you?"

"James!" Nate's voice cut into his ear, and he felt a lot of the strength he was getting from Sarah's connecting song disperse rapidly, leaving him woozy. "Don't you fucking mouth off to her! Keep her talking!"

James nodded, swallowing a mouthful of sass as he tried to make it look like he was dropping his murder mode on purpose. "An understandable mistake." He said, trying to channel the inner part of him that secretly wanted to talk like a character in a high fantasy novel all the fucking time. "They are... a private individual."

The armored woman made a noise that was *almost* a laugh, but was slightly too disinterested and cold to really count. "A relatable feeling." She said.

James nodded again, trying to give her a sympathetic look that was still a little condescending, building a character as he went. "Well. If we aren't going to kill each other, perhaps we could see what we came here for?" He gestured to the open door, before looking down at a hand still holding a death grip on his hatchet, and trying as hard as possible to be pointedly casual as he returned it to its sheath clip.

The woman eyed him for a long moment, before giving a simple nod, replacing her mace at her side. "Agreeable." She said, turning away from him like he was beneath notice, and stepping over the door she'd slammed off its hinges largely by accident a minute earlier.

James resisted the urge to say something under his breath, instead just following after her. In his ear, Nate spoke calm directions, which he did his best to focus on. "Sweep the interior slowly, we can look over it later. Telepad out if she gets hostile again. We don't think *this* is the trap, just a coincidence. Stay alert."

He nodded, wondering with some worry if the woman he was following could hear what was being said to him. He also wondered if this earpiece was magical, since it had stayed in his ear properly when he was being thrown into a wall, and that was pretty damn impressive.



The inside of the apartment was unremarkable, except for the door sitting in the entryway. Two doors on either side, a cramped bathroom to the right and an empty bedroom to the left. Wood floors, which made James mark it down in his internal estimation even further. Straight ahead was the kitchen and 'living room', which still felt too small. He kind of got the impression the ceiling here was a little too low. Not by *much*, but by enough that it got to him.

There were a couple windows that would have looked out over the nearby buildings and roads, except they had sheets of brown butcher paper up on them, held in place by strips of blue tape. The kitchen wasn't entirely empty, the old laminate counter having a coffee machine and a toaster on it, along with a half empty bag of bagels and a stack of paper cups.

There was also a wooden table and a few chairs, as well as a stack of banker's boxes against one wall. So, the place wasn't fully uninhabited.

"Hmm." The woman said, walking over and picking up one of the cups, looking at it like she was seeing into the secrets of the universe. James walked past her, trying to project confidence, and looked around the room like he was here for something specific.

"So." He said slowly. "Nice place they've got here."

"Is it?" She asked, with a kind of apathetic curiosity. "Strange. And there is no one here."

"I see that." James tried his hardest not to be sarcastic, he really did. "And not much of anything else besides." He stepped over to the cardboard boxes and carefully lifted the lid off the top one. Empty. "Which makes me wonder why we've ended up here, at the same time no less." He pointedly asked as he replaced the box lid.

The woman glanced over at him with an appraising gaze that flickered across her face in a rapid change from how she looked at the rest of the empty apartment. "Do we need a reason to do our duty, and hunt outside influence?" She asked.

James snorted. The question was so obviously a test. He didn't miss that she had easily let slide that he didn't list his 'pillar', or that she hadn't followed up on him knowing Camille's name. He was keeping an eye on her, not ready to get blindsided. But he could maybe get a little more out of her, and fortunately, he knew a couple names he could drop, or at least allude to. "I forgot that your dad's hardly the *last* line, the way he goes around swinging at things, huh?" He prodded.

"My father's actions are needed." The woman bristled.

"Right, which is why you're preemptively striking at empty rooms, just because they're slightly secret." James rolled his eyes at her. "Come on."

It was almost worrying how little social defense this woman had, compared to how much armor she was wrapped in. Just like her... sister?... James wasn't sure, but just like Camille had been. She visibly flinched from his words, and seemed to struggle to compose a reply that validated her actions. "The Chain Breaker is plotting once again. Using the actions of others as a smokescreen while she takes action around this accursed city. She is hunting something, and must be stopped."

"Okay..." James trailed off. That was a new proper noun mixed in there. It also complicated things. It meant they weren't just tracking one group, but at least two. It also didn't explain why the police seemed to be stumbling around all the places of interest, like particularly violent speedbumps.

"And you? Why are *you* here?" James glanced up, and noticed that the woman had stepped out from the kitchen counter and was staring at him once again, hand set on the hilt of her mace.

He considered lying, considered telling the truth, and then paused as he held up a hand to her and listened to the voice in his ear. "James, did you hear that?" Nate said. "There are police entering the building. Might be time to leave."

James went over to one of the windows, ignoring the increasing hostility at his back and refusing to answer, and tore down the sheet of paper. Behind it, through the cracked and filthy window pane, he could see down to the street below, and the dots of police cars that stood out parked at haphazard angles. "Huh." He said. "Guess that's the trap. Any comment on this?" He asked the woman who was still looming behind him.

"Unaltered officers?" She asked, her stride bringing her next to James and the window in a rapid pair of steps to look down at the street. "What is this?"

"More or less my question." He replied. "We should get out of here before they get up-"

His comment was interrupted by a furious slurred bellow from the door, telling him to drop his weapon, and then the sound of gunshots. One of the shield bracers James was wearing flickered a dome of golden lines of light, several times in a row as shots slammed into the otherwise invisible protection.

The woman was already moving by the time James turned, dashing out of the lights like they weren't even there, closing to the doorway as the thick man in uniform continued to mechanically fire his weapon into her. James started moving too, following after her without really knowing what his plan was aside from trying to extract more answers from her before she inevitably realized he was just performing an impromptu interrogation.

Then she slammed her mace down in an abbreviated overhead swing in the cramped hallway, smashing into the cop's collarbone with a spray of gore and the snapping of bone, the man's

gun clattering to the wooden floor as he folded to the ground. Then she kicked him away, like I he was a piece of rubbish she'd taken offense to, the body spinning out into the hallway to slam into the same wall she'd kicked James into five minutes ago. Blood beginning to pool under the man's lifeless eyes as he stared up with a shocked expression.

"Oh fuck." James heard someone gasp out from his earpiece. And he agreed, feeling nausea creeping up his throat.

"Ah." The woman staggered back, one gauntleted hand dragging a furrow through the drywall as she did so.

James rushed forward to grab at her arm. "You okay? Thought you were... bullet... proof." He trailed off as he saw the craters punched through the front of her armor, red splatters oozing out of them. "Shit, okay. We need to get you-" The ding of the elevator was as loud as a church bell in the otherwise quiet hall.

The woman's gauntlet wrapped around James' forearm, squeezing hard enough to bring a sharp pain to him. He winced, but didn't pull back. "Long..." she grunted out as she tried to speak with bullets in her chest. "This is... betrayal."

"Not from me though, so let go." James ordered her sternly. "You want to get out of here?" He asked.

"Fuck no!" Nate's voice came through loud and clear.

The woman gasped a breath. "Yes... help me." She demanded, still arrogant even while she was bleeding.

"Then let go of me." James said. And this time, she did. His hand dipped into the pouch on his armor where his emergency telepad was stored. "Alright." He said. And then considered saying a dozen different things. Questions, quips, anything. But instead, he just stepped back and tore the telepad.

In the basement of the Lair, James reappeared. Slightly out of breath, with a disconnected phone call from a system that didn't know how to handle someone covering three thousand miles in the blink of an eye, but otherwise intact. And alone.

He sprinted upstairs, and into the briefing warehouse, where the others were still tracking the rogues in the area who were following events on site. A lot of the people, the ones Sarah was linked to, were looking dizzy or exhausted, and James gave all of them an appreciative nod, which many met with small smiles and nods of their own.

"Good call." Nate told him with his own affirming nod.

And James knew that he was probably right. But still. It didn't feel good, leaving someone to die like that. Even someone who had legitimately tried to kill him, repeatedly.

He felt less bad when Ben told them that the woman had jumped out of the seventh floor of the building, landed on the person she'd carried with her, and limped away at high speed.