

*"No, you fucking asshole. This isn't a game and you're not the hero. You don't get infinite chances to do the right thing. That's not how the world works." -Kim Kitsuragi, Disco Elysium-*

---

Assembling everyone on the sidewalk was a nerve wracking task. Not just because they'd all just woken up among the dead, but also because it meant leaving the safety of the cafe.

That safety was a complete illusion, of course. The exterior walls were whorling and changing every time no one was looking at them, and the interior was undergoing a similar change with the furniture. The kitchen had been left unattended for ten minutes and the wire racks had rearranged themselves into skeletal cabinets, which James ordered everyone to not risk taking anything out of. The building was being reclaimed. It was a blockage in the dungeon's bloodstream, and the larger body was working diligently to erode it away into something that wasn't a problem. And once Harlan reclaimed their parrot into tattoo form, leaving the interior a lot darker even with the grey light, it was only going to get worse.

Outside didn't really feel safer, though.

Half the people stumbled as they moved, the events that had been forced on them over the past few hours still not fully understood or processed. They'd almost died. A lot of people *had* died. It was a grim kind of luck that none of them had lost friends; those who had known each other had all died together. James wasn't sure if that was coincidence or not, but it was a wretched and toxic form of relief.

James and Harlan were the only two who moved like they were ready for action. Though James was faking it, and was almost certain Harlan was too. He'd killed people before. Humans and others. But it was never like this. Never so close and impersonal and unfair. This was just a pure expression of grim mortality, shoved in his face to remind him that he was *going to die* eventually, and he hated it. You couldn't shoot that kind of problem.

He double checked his bullets as he considered the problems he *could* shoot. He ended up preemptively switching to his last backup magazine, leaving the one that was two thirds full clipped to his belt. There was also that single weird bullet Harlan had tossed him, which he just left in his jacket pocket. James was almost certain he'd be resigningly using that later, but for now, he didn't load it, either into his gun or with a memory. Not that he was sure how that worked anyway, which was *even more frightening*.

He'd tried to find the sword he'd left with a barista here a week ago, but he couldn't remember if he'd picked it up afterward, or maybe just couldn't find it. He also hoped against reason that he'd remembered to bring anything else of dungeon delving utility, but while Alex had brought a pouch of blue orbs and Alex wasn't here, and all James had was a few of the cancer cure purples that he gave out to people when he had the opportunity. He had his bracers, and his gun, and that was *supposed* to be enough. Couldn't tap into the relationsticks from here, didn't

have a loaded thermos of magic coffee and a backup set of armor, hell he hadn't even thought to wear a magic shirt that he could break and absorb. So terrifying bullets were the way things were going. That, and manipulating asphalt, which he still had a few hits left of.

"Okay." He said once they'd successfully rolled the cart containing the still-unconscious injured girl over the bark chips and out to the sidewalk. "Everyone stay close in. If someone starts to wander off, get my or Harlan's attention. If you see *anything* approaching, don't panic, just call it out and we'll deal with it." James had armed everyone with clubs as best he could, but he knew that wouldn't be enough for long.

Still, at least this dungeon made creatures that were a lot fleshier than he was used to, and blunt force trauma was at least an *option*. There was only so much you could do to half the life from Officium Mundi with just a crowbar; metallic chitin was a hell of a material.

Around them, James got a good view of the empty street, an almost perfectly smooth paved surface that stretched in both directions for long enough that it faded into the thick mist. The sidewalk on either side was pristine white concrete, like it had been set yesterday and was unsullied by the elements.

He'd already gone over the whole "don't touch anything it'll probably try to kill you" thing. He hoped it would stick.

The group fell into silence as around James, Zhu puffed himself up. Feathers and eyes ruffling as the navigator took the equivalent of a deep breath before *changing* something. No one could feel it, but they could see him deflate slightly with a hiss.

"Directions." Zhu said in a pained voice. "Turn right and begin walking. Ignore three way intersections. Always take forks to the left. *Do not go into the houses.*"

"How long are we walking for?" James asked.

"Forever. Never. I don't know." Zhu choked on the words. "I will guide you when you reach the first decision. I... must rest. I am sorry." The orange light folded in on itself, the sleeve and tail he'd formed around James retreating until only a few spectral feathers drifted away on the breeze, quickly vanishing to nothing.

No one said anything. James took a deep breath, and regretted it as the cloying smell of the air filled his lungs. "Bleh. Alright. Well, you heard him. Let's get moving." He stepped into the road, and started walking, his head on a swivel as he panned left and right, watching for *anything*.

The others followed. Someone made a joke about it feeling weird to walk in the middle of the street, and got hushed.

It would have been best if they could move in silence, but they had someone unconscious who needed to be moved, so they'd covered the old metal cart the cafe had in pillows and stuck the barista there to pull. And that cart was *squeaky*. Not horrible, but every little noise of it seemed louder than everyone's footsteps combined. Still, it was needed. Johns walked next to the cart, and the tattoo-summoned tiger Harlan had eventually given in to allowing to pull it. The man was keeping a fierce eye on the one patient he had here who hadn't died yet.

There were houses all around them. It was hard to see very far in the mist, but it quickly became clear this street was a lot like a neighborhood. House after house lined its sides, shapes visible as they got closer, with details occasionally peeking out through the haze. Windows and potted plants on the porch and wind chimes hanging over porches. All of it almost aggressively mundane, from what little they could see.

Except for the dogs.

James spotted the first one, and called everyone to a halt as he pointed it out. It wasn't like the bulbous fleshy quadruped that he kept calling a 'dog' in his head. Instead, this one grew out of a hedge that lined the front lawn of one of the houses near them. A barrier between sidewalk and property.

The dog had seemed to slide through the leaves and branches of the hedge as their party approached. But it didn't leave the sidewalk as they passed by. It was covered in leaves around its eyes and mouth, tightly pressed and wide green shapes that seemed like they were trying to seal it up. Its skin was like a thick gourd, no fur at all, which made it look a lot like a German Shepard that had been skinned alive and was still growling at them anyway.

And from its back and flank, James saw roots, or maybe just branches, that connected it back to the hedge. "Okay. Looks like it's stuck to that thing. So we can just--"

An earsplitting crack cut through the air, followed by several more. The dog jerked as splatters of sap and pulp sprayed out of the impact sites from where Harlan shot it. James whipped around to glare at the mercenary, but Harlan didn't even look back at him as they strolled over to where the dog had collapsed, shot it again in the head, and then started plucking freshly spawned bullets off the street and out of the growing puddle of sap before holstering their pistol and rejoining everyone. "What?" Harlan asked, seeing James' look.

A wet howl sounded from maybe two blocks away. James just pointed a finger up into the air next to his head. "That." He said. "You fucking idiot."

"I needed to reload." Harlan explained, showing off a handful of sticky nine millimeter rounds. "Look. Net plus five. That's a good one. I'm gonna shoot all of those."

"Why do you keep shooting things?!" The barista, Zari, suddenly exploded, the words coming out as a scream. "What is *wrong* with you?!"

Harlan didn't exactly look confused by the question, but James noticed their hand twitching toward their breast pocket, where he knew they kept their little notebook. He intervened, holding a hand between the two of them. "Harlan has... some personal issues." He said. "Also, that thing *would* have tried to kill any of us that got close, so don't feel too bad."

"You cannot possibly know that." Aurelio folded his arms. "Also, what is that howling?"

"A, yes I can, B, probably something else coming to kill us." James said. "Let's keep moving."

Whatever the howls were, they didn't close with the terrified group right away, though everyone did move with an eagerness to get away from the area that James tried to keep under control. Rushing would just tire them all out, and they probably had a *long* way to go.

They started walking again, James trying to adjust his pilfered backpack to sit without digging into his shoulders. He missed the *good* backpacks the Order bought. And wasn't *that* just a damning statement about how products got made and distributed.

"This is so fucking weird." Johns said out loud as they passed yet another house on either side of the road. "What *is* this place?"

"Dungeon." James said, answering him, and everyone else who was looking around at the space around them with growing confusion. "For all the reasons I'll explain later."

The problem here was, if any of these people had just run out of the cafe, they might have assumed they had entered a perfectly normal suburb. It was only like this, going slow, that the bizarre details started to reveal themselves.

There were only a few streetlights for one thing, where anywhere on Earth that looked like this would have them evenly and probably one per house. Here, they could pass a half dozen lots without seeing one. But when they *did* see one, it was with a feeling of seeing a predator without the walls of a zoo enclosure around it. The translucent toothy maws that grew off the lamp poles like Venus flytraps were a bit more visible in the light, and their dancing shadow shapes waving in the breeze as the extinguished lights 'slept' made everyone flinch away and walk on the other side of the road as they passed them.

"What the fuck *are* those?" The goatee man - Mauro, James did eventually remember to ask his name - demanded after the second one passed by and he realized the bad vibe wasn't just a *vibe*.

"Enemies." Harlan answered stoically. "Look like ambush predators. Plant type, too. This whole place feels like a garden."

“You need to learn how to pronounce capital letters.” James muttered, trying to decipher if Harlan meant ‘plant’, ‘garden’, or ‘type’ as dungeon-specific nouns. They didn’t answer him though, which was probably for the best right now. “But yeah, stay away from those. They seem to be asleep now, since it’s light out, but they will try to eat you.”

Two blocks later, the streetlights had stopped being isolated. They dotted the sidewalk in pairs opposite each other, their translucent fronds swaying in the quiet breeze. Everyone moved closer to the middle of the street, and hoped the squeaking wheels of the cart didn’t wake them up.

James’ heart was beating pretty fast as they moved. No amount of experience in other dungeons ever really prepared him to throw himself in front of new hostile life and see if it murdered him. But he was doing it anyway. He had to, really, if anyone was going to get a chance.

Around them, the grey mist swirled. The front facades of houses occasionally became visible when the conditions were just right. There were no breaks between the buildings, no walking paths or parks or anything at all except house after house. Sometimes dark wood fences would cut their yards off from each other, sometimes they would be wider or have an uneven brick courtyard instead of a lawn, but the houses kept going.

Overhead, the sky swirled exactly the same as the mist. There were no clouds or open air to be seen, just more of that endless bland fog.

“How big *is* this place?” Zari’s quiet question got a few other people asking the same thing.

James kept his eyes forward as he answered in a low voice. “Big.” He said. “Don’t think of it like a building. These places fit way too much space into basically nowhere.”

“Is that... is that a Dr. Who quote?” She asked him, confused.

Before James could answer, Aurelio gave a short laugh. “No. I’d know if it was.”

James cracked a smile, choosing to chalk up the unpleasant tone to the stress, which he planned to keep doing for the whole expedition out. “Alright, well, good to have an expert. But no, dungeons tend to be huge. Especially older ones. I’ve never seen this place before, but it feels... it feels unpleasantly well constructed.” He sighed. “I hope you’re all ready for some walking.” He said.

The middle aged woman in the cardigan, who shared her name as Milly, spoke up. “Can I get a turn on the cart? I wore heels.”

“No.” Harlan’s voice was unamused, because Harlan didn’t seem to experience amusement.

“Probably not, this kid’s not gonna be able to walk for a while.” Johns said more compassionately.

“Shoulda gotten some shoes off one of the...” James didn’t finish the sentence.

Milly’s voice turned angry. “I am *not* wearing a *dead person’s* shoes!” She snapped. Not loudly, at least, but certainly enough to express her anger.

“Well, get used to walking.” James said, resignedly, slightly distracted by something on the edge of his hearing. “The ground doesn’t *feel* sharp or anything, so you might get away without shoes for a while, but... look, this situation sucks. I don’t want you to die because of footwear, okay? But I don’t have a good answer, and I need everyone to be quiet because I’m trying to hear a thing.”

He strained his ears, holding up a hand to wave them all to a stop. They were in the road between a pair of sloped driveways, the garages of the houses on either side each cracked open just enough to let someone think they could wedge themselves under the gap. And James, with his slightly improved hearing range, was desperately trying to figure out what his brain thought it was hearing on the edge of the quiet wind.

“Hey, why are-“

“Ssh!”

He ignored the people around him, looking upward and holding his breath. There was a noise he was familiar with, right there. And as it got slightly closer, he identified it suddenly.

“Car engine.” He said out loud.

“What?” Harlan’s head snapped around in precise looks up and down the street. “No cars. You sure?” They paused. “No, I hear it too.”

“It’s far away. Moving... parallel to us, I think.” James let out a breath. “We’re good.”

“Well. Let’s not go crazy.” Harlan said, still watching down the street. “Also there’s darkness chasing us. That seems bad.”

It was amazing to James how someone could say a thing that caused every one of the other survivors to flinch, stare, and start asking if they should run or something, with such a completely placid tone. “That looks bad.” James agreed. About three or four hundred feet behind them, the mist had swirled in the breeze, leaving a gap along one side of the road that no light occupied. Just a dark hole in the world. “Wait, hang on. Is... is the *mist* the light source? What the fuck?” He looked around, holding up a hand like he could somehow determine that. “Man I wish I glowed in the dark more than I do.”

“Why...” Johns gave him a suspicious look, bushy eyebrows raised up to his creased forehead.

“Magic.” James said. “Okay. Everyone keep moving. We’ve got a ways to go. Also, Mauro, what were you saying about something while I was trying to hear a car?”

The man twitched as James addressed him, which was a strange look on the stocky figure who was taller than James. “Uh, oh, the trees.” He answered, pointing over Harlan’s tiger and at the dirt or sod patches set into the outer edge of the sidewalk at odd intervals. “There’s no trees. Like neighborhoods always have.”

“No mailboxes either, so far.” Aurelio added, jumping in like he needed people to know he’d noticed something.

James frowned. “Weird. Actually no trees *anywhere*, even the empty lot. Just telephone poles. Alright. Well. Watch for that, I guess. Not sure what’ll go wrong when it comes up.” He didn’t mean to sound so upset, but it happened anyway. Half the people he’d promised to save were already gone, and he wasn’t feeling great about their odds anyway. Even his own, no matter what Harlan said.

Time passed, along with distance. Miles, at least. At a certain point, everyone had individually demanded to know how large this place was, and James still didn’t have a real answer. The scenery never changed, except whether there were more or less street lamps, and how many cars could fit in the nearby garages. The biggest events were seeing a literal white picket fence, or the occasional gourd dog that growled at them somehow as they skirted the hedges.

At a certain point in a dungeon, the boredom set in. The worst kind of boredom James knew of. He had something he had to do, he had people he needed to save, and there was the potential to be killed in a half dozen ways that he wouldn’t see coming. And yet, he was just walking. In a mostly straight line.

They came to a fork. James remembered Zhu’s directions, went the correct way, then double checked with everyone that *left* was correct, just to be sure. There was a house at the tip where the road split into two, and the way it was pressed up against the property line gave them all a much better view of how worryingly mundane it was. Just... a regular house. White siding and a few bits of red brick here and there. Windows with curtains pulled, a porch with a swinging bench and some potted plants.

If you looked closer, you could see that there were clusters of fungal blooms along the siding, that the windows seemed to be glistening as they shifted to focus on the passing humans, and that there were actually quite a lot of plants growing out of the wood and brick of the house. The garden was a good cover for it, but the garden was bare, and the foundation of the building was where all the puffy blooming red flowers were really coming from.

They passed by quickly.

By the time James' legs started to feel an ache coming on, he was absolutely certain most of the people were starting to get exhausted. A few of them, like Johns and Harlan, had the kind of physical conditioning that could keep a hike going for a while. But they'd been walking for miles, at least five, maybe more. And someone in heels, or who self-admitted they spent most of their time lounging around being woefully frail, or who just hadn't slept much before coming to work, well, these weren't the people who were prepared for a long walk like this. Much less a delve.

He called a break, and let everyone get something to drink, and rest for a bit. It was strange just sitting down in the middle of the street, but no one wanted to get near the sidewalks after what they'd seen.

Meanwhile, he moved to check on Johns and the injured girl, her friend still hovering nearby. "How's she doing?" He asked.

"Well, she didn't bleed out. But she's not waking up." Johns didn't sound hopeful. "She's been out this whole time. Cat's doing a good job keeping her steady though." The tiger preened at the medic's praise as Johns scratched its neck. He'd gotten pretty comfortable with the big cat once it became clear the tiger was actually more like a housecat than an apex predator. "I dunno, man. How much longer are we here? She needs a bed, an IV, and probably a million antibiotics."

"... a while." James said quietly. "Days, maybe more. Zhu can't even see the exit."

"Is she going to..." Zari asked, the girl kneeling next to the cart and pushing the other girl's hair out of her face. "I mean... you know."

"I dunno." Johns said. "I dunno anything about this place. Hey, what the fuck am I supposed to do with skill points, anyway?"

"If you find out, tell me. I'm collecting the fucking things." James grumbled. "And, Zari, I... your... hell, I wanna just say something reassuring, but we can't do anything except try to get her somewhere safe, right?" He winced as he saw the younger woman fighting back tears. "It might not be okay. But she's held on this long. She's tough, right?"

"Yeah." Zari sniffed. "Yeah, she-"

Whatever she was going to say as the injured woman on the cart next to them jolted upright, rolled off the cushions to hit the asphalt on her hands and knees, and then immediately started vomiting. The sound of someone throwing up was always enough to make James gag, and this was no exception; rough retching that was abruptly cut off by a wet splattering as the barista splattered a mess of stomach acid and blood onto the pavement. In a clear moment of panic,



she got her bearings just long enough to look up at everyone watching her and tried to say something before her chest heaved and she threw up a second time.

James desperately tried to not think about the fact that the growing puddle of vomit on the street smelled like freshly baked bread. The aroma slowly turning to that of sour acid as it infected his nose.

Ignoring the nightmare scenario of everything that was going on, Zari and Johns rushed to help if they could, the girl pulling her friend's hair back again, and Johns pushing everyone back to give her space.

After the third explosion of vomit that was now more blood than anything else, the girl's face screwed up in angry concentration, as she shoved a hand out to push Zari back, pitched herself up to rest on her heels, and then bit down on her tongue so hard she started to bleed. Her chest jerked like her body was trying to force her to vomit again, but she just kept her eyes pressed closed, refusing to breathe, to open her mouth, to react at *all*.

Thirty seconds that felt like a solid hour later, she let out a gasping breath. "Oh hey," the young woman said in a woozy tone, "I leveled from that. Cool." She looked over at Johns, swaying back and forth as her head started to pound. "Can I have some more juice?"

As someone cracked open the plastic seal on a kid sized bottle of orange juice for her, Johns frantically checked her pulse and pupils. "She looks... fine." He conceded eventually. He'd had to pause a couple times as the group wanted to move away from where the girl had been sick. They'd gotten about a block before he'd demanded they stop, the cart's wheels giving one last squeak before the EMT got a chance to do an actual checkup of his patient. "If we live through this, we'll be world famous for finding illnesses that vanish after they're done with you." He added.

James tensed up without meaning to, the urge to scratch at his arms out of stress prevented only by the bracers he was wearing. "Ahhhhh..." he let out a low whine. "Uh..."

"Right." Johns sighed. "It'll be fine. Better doctors over there than here, right?"

"What're you talking about?" The girl on the cart asked, toying with the empty plastic bottle she now had.

"I teleported people who were infected out of the dungeon, and into mundane Earth, before I knew about the whole murder plague." James said.

"Oh." The girl looked down. "Uh... but won't people just sleep for a few hours then be fine? They'll have skill points, too, which, what do those *do*? And why do I know about them at all?"

*"I still don't know."* James snapped, before taking a rapid step back, trying to unclench every muscle in his arms that had tightened up. Everyone was staring at him, which wasn't helping his abrupt anxiety attack at *all*. "I don't know anything about this place! I don't even know why we got sent here, except that it seems really lethal and someone wanted to kill Harlan! And Harlan's too fucking insane to keep their memories intact for more than five minutes, so I can't even ask them! And *you* woke up, got attacked by a dog - sorry for not being faster there - and then passed out when Johns was stitching you back together. *Half of everyone else* just didn't wake up! So yes, I'm a little upset about maybe unleashing a plague!"

There was a stifling, awkward quiet, as everyone except Harlan edged away from him slightly.

Then Milly, in a voice that reminded James of his mom in the worst way possible, said, "You need to calm down."

Historically, this was the stupidest thing available to say to someone who needed to calm down. It basically never worked, and just made anyone who it got said to feel angry because they were being talked down to. It was *such* a dumb idea that the very existence of the words right now caused James to bark out an unexpected laugh. After all, he did need to calm down. But really, if there was anything he wasn't expecting, it was for someone to actually think saying that out loud was smart.

"Sure." He said in a forced bland voice. "Let's keep moving."

"Can I keep riding the cart?"

"Yes." Several people said at once. "Also, sorry, what's your name?" James asked the injured barista.

"Sienna." She said in reply. "I already know who you are."

"I'm never gonna get used to hearing that." James said, taking point and letting Harlan bring up the rear as they started moving again, wheels squeaking, footsteps echoing in the mist, and everyone else complaining that their feet and legs hurt.

The next few miles of street were worse than the last few. Sienna was awake and alive at least, even if she couldn't walk. But there wasn't a lot of talking. Oh, people had questions, or whispered statements of anxiety or concern. But they weren't having a conversation. The whole place was too still, too tense, for that.

It *felt* like there was something lurking just past the thickest parts of the mist, waiting for them.

House after house passed them by. Still, there were no trees, or cars. The road curved, though, arcing left and right as it wove through the space. It didn't mean anything; either the

mist kept them from seeing too far ahead anyway, or if it weren't here, it would be dark. But still, it at least offered something like variety.

The next time they came to a fork, James tried to remember which ways the road had curved, and which way they'd be going once they took this new split. He couldn't be sure, but he had a gnawing worry that they were going in circles, despite following Zhu's directions.

The fork also had something different at the tip of the sidewalk where it met their current path.

"Don't go near that." James said openly, pointing at the fire hydrant.

"I could shoot it." Harlan offered, almost eagerly.

"Don't go near that or shoot that." James restated.

Behind him, he heard Aurelio's voice ask, "What's wrong with it? It's just a fire hydrant."

Followed by Zari's indignant answer of, "Have you been paying attention to this place? The fog and the no cell service aren't the *problem* here." Then a pause, followed by, "We should throw something at it."

James glanced over his shoulder and caught Harlan's eye. "If you're not gonna hire her when we get out of here, I am." He said.

"I have a...!" Zari trailed off sheepishly.

"You have a job?" James asked with a friendly grin. "At a cafe, maybe?"

"Shut up."

They kept walking.

And walking.

And walking.

Breaks were getting more frequent, though. No one here really had the endurance to hike for hours on end in a situation like this. Milly was wobbling on the heels she refused to lose, and despite looking like a tough guy, Mauro was gasping for breath. And it was with a grimace to use up the resource early that James pulled the sealed flask of exercise potion out of his pocket and called for a quick break. He and Harlan were good, and Johns said he was alright too, plus Sienna still had a ride. But that still meant a six way split for... well, he didn't know how many doses it was supposed to be. But they had to ration it.

“Small sips only.” He told everyone, passing it around. “Try not to drool on my flask.”

The recovery was instant, and the faces of everyone lightened as they started moving again, all of them feeling a little more ready to go than when they started, much less when they had driven themselves up to their limit.

It didn't change the fact that they were still walking through row after row of houses. Though the smell in the air did change briefly to barkdust and running water, even if no one could figure out where it was coming from. The change was gone a block later.

They heard another engine after another dozen houses, this one closer, but still out of sight, and still driving away from them. Shortly after, there was a scare when someone tripped as they were passing a hedge and the gourd dog had strained against the roots that tethered it in place to snap at them, but no one got hurt except for some scraped hands.

James' arms were starting to really ache from all the sores on them. They'd mostly scabbed over, but it still hurt, and he wasn't taking the shield bracers off if he could help it. He considered dividing them up, and he might still do that if they had to split up, but right now, he figured if anything tried to kill them, he'd be between it and the party anyway, so he kept what defenses he had. He did take the time to mentally switch one bracer to 'bite' and one to 'nails (material)'. He wasn't sure if he had to be that specific, but he didn't want to find out once after the fact, and he didn't actually *need* to stop fingernails anyway.

He also considered giving people skulljacks. But there wasn't much he could do with that here. He only had one spare length of ethernet cable, *if* he dismantled his braid, and it would be short. Mem files had to actually be stored somewhere, unless you were making one on the fly, and he just... wasn't. So giving everyone martial arts skills was out too. Maybe he could copy some of Harlan's memories to help them with their idiotic bullet loop, but Harlan seemed like they'd be resistant to any new body mods. Also the thought of Harlan with a skulljack was more worrying to James than Harlan with self-inflicted amnesia.

So he just kept walking, took small sips of water, and kept alert. Because he'd need to be, as the most competent guard here.

He did abruptly stop when a thought wormed into his head, though.

[Survivor : Low : +1 Skill Point]

“Anyone else get that?” James asked the group.

“Get what?” Johns sounded concerned. Which made *James* concerned.

So far, they'd all gotten skill points from this place for either killing things, or shrugging off various infections.

And if James had just gotten a skill point for the latter, but no one else had, it meant either he'd been personally infected with something and not noticed, or they were *all* infected with something, and he'd beaten it, but *no one else had*.

But the last few hours - more like eight hours, now, they'd been walking steadily for a long time - had been so hectic that it was hard to isolate a single thing that could have infected James.

Besides, it wasn't like they had any medicine that would help anyway. Or anything to do except keep moving.

"Who do you think lives in these?" Mauro asked at one point, gesturing to the houses around them. He wasn't any less terrified of the whole situation, but there was only so long the human brain could keep up a single good panic. At a certain point, boredom and curiosity took over again. "We keep going past them, and none of them even have lights on."

"No one friendly." Harlan answered bluntly.

"It's possible there're things living in them." James said, noticing the group shifting their attention to him. They'd started to learn to ignore Harlan's attempts to participate. "Not human, but maybe something we could talk to. But... this doesn't seem like the time to check. And Zhu was very clear to not go into the houses."

"What *is* Zhu anyway?" Sienna asked from the cart she was still being pulled forward on by the unwavering dedication of the tattoo tiger. "I only saw him a little, before..." She scratched at her sleeves, trying not to claw directly at the sores on her arms.

"Don't scratch that." Johns said instantly.

James bit off the same words, and instead answered the first question. "Zhu's basically a living part of a map. Or maybe *the* map. It's unclear. He lives in my head, and we're friends."

The last person who James didn't know the name of spoke up. "That's fucking weird." He said. "I wouldn't do that."

Aurelio added his own opinion in the form of "That's fucking weird. I'd do that."

"It's not that weird." James said, exhaustedly, not even feeling like being amused by this. "Also thanks for your scathing opinion on how you'd live my life, mister...?"

"I'll tell you if we get out of here."

"Well, in my head, I've been labeling you as R.E.M., so get ready for me to say *that* out loud if I need to get your attention."

One of the girls started to ask why, and Johns held up a hand to stop them, shaking his head in disbelief. “No, no. That’s *mean* man. Also how are you making music jokes *here*?”

“It’s joke, or scream. I usually choose joke.” James said. “Anyway, it’s cause he’s losing his religion, and I’m very funny.” He told Zari. “Now, this break has gone on long enough, let’s keep moving.”

“We’ve been moving.”

“We slow down when we’re talking.” James said, doing a quick count of everyone. And then jolting in wide eyed alarm as he noticed someone missing. “Where’s Mauro?” He demanded, rapidly scanning the space around them.

He barely spotted the big man ahead of them, on the left side of the street, maybe two hundred feet away. James made his best attempt to command Harlan to stay, and sprinted after him, unsure how he’d gotten so far ahead without anyone noticing.

“What are you *doing*?” James hissed as he caught up.

Mauro turned to him with a look of irritated confusion, framed by his goatee. “What you told us to, I’m watching for anything weird.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Like the one house with a light on.” The he blinked, and looked over James’ shoulder. “Where is everyone?” The instant fear in his voice was enough to inflict the feeling on James, too.

“Get away from the house.” James said, reaching out to tug on the man’s arm. Mauro nodded, and moved to put James between him and the spot he’d been looking.

The house looked exactly like every other one here. Not identical, but close enough, with just minor variations in the color, the style of porch, the garden, or where the roof peaked.

But it did have a light on in one of the downstairs windows. If this were a normal house on a normal street, James would say it was the living room. As it was, he didn’t know what it was supposed to be, but it had an ominous feeling to it. The light was warm and welcoming, and every delver instinct he’d developed over the last few years told him to *not trust it*.

He started backing away, pushing Mauro back toward the group. Then, there was a swirl in the mist as the breeze picked up, and a creeping darkness slipped between him and the house, up the steps and over the wooden front porch. It was still light around him, though that light was thin and grey, but the front of the house for a moment was dark.

Except that window.

It was so innocuous. Just a tall rectangular pane of glass. Curtains drawn, a light behind them making it stand out. Nothing weird about it at all, if you discounted the little warpings like the way the trim bubbled in some places.

And then, just before James turned away to rejoin the group, he saw the face.

It was like a static sketch of a face. Black and white lines, all contrast and scratchy impressions. Oversized white eyes with black specks shot through them, and a mouth that hung open in a ghoulish silent scream. It was *watching* him; peeking out from around the side of the curtains, one hand made of similar static buzzing as it gripped the edge of the window from the inside.

James made eye contact with it, his hand going for his gun, just in case it decided to leap out and kill him. He narrowed his eyes, keeping the thing in his sights as he waited for it to move, or blink, or something. But he was pretty sure that-

His vision of the face in the window vanished as a flare of golden light erupted around him. The thin lines of the shield bracer were more visible than normal in the darkness he found himself in, but *below* him, the individual lines of the cage the shield formed were more like solid panels of molten gold. James jerked back, stumbling over his own feet and slamming shoulder-first into the grass he was standing on, and didn't have time to think about. Then the space around him lit up *again*, all around his body as he tried to claw himself to his feet while his heart beat a hundred times a second and he couldn't grab anything.

Shoving himself forward, his shoes not finding much traction on whatever he was standing on, James flung himself into the dimly lit mist and onto the sidewalk, sprawling hard before he shuffled forward off the curb and into a hunched stance, other human hands helping him up as he tried to figure out what had just happened.

Behind him, the lawn he'd been standing on, still partly visible, rippled and smoothed itself out. The blades of grass James could see straightening themselves out to return to a perfectly manicured surface, even as the sod pulled itself back down around the edges and retracted the foot long fangs it had tried to snag his legs with. Multiple circular rows of teeth, like layered maws, retracted into the grass, and left it looking like the perfect suburban garden again.

James checked his shield bracer. One use left on the one he'd set to 'bite' in preparation for the dogs.

"What the fuck." The words didn't come out right, spilling out of his mouth like his tongue was made of lead. He started laughing uncontrollably as the adrenaline faded. "What the *fuck?!?*" That came out more reasonably.

Someone said something to him, asking if he was okay. James just laughed harder, his vision spotty and breath coming in gasps. He wanted to sit down and stare at something soothing for an hour. But he knew he couldn't.

James forced his emotions into the proper shape. A lifetime of experience fighting through depression to get shit done, helped along by a few of the red orbs from the Office, and it took him only a couple minutes to get his breath back, and apply his best defense against near-death panic. Snark.

“Okay. Okay.” He still found himself tripping over words. “Add ‘do not look at windows’ to the list of things to not touch, shoot, or interact with. Good. Good. We’re learning. We got this.”

“Give me one of the shields.” Harlan told him as James explained what had happened, urging the group onward even as his own legs were shaking so bad that he found himself moving like a puppet on strings rather than a normal walking human.

James looked at them dumbly. “What? No, you don’t use stuff, remember?”

“It’s not soulmarked or some shit. Give me one.”

“You’ll give it back when we’re done, right?” James narrowed his eyes at them. But he was already unclipping the bracer from his upper arm. Harlan nodded, and James started to pass the bracer over, before he stopped. “Wait, hang the fuck on. Are you going to feed the memory of saying this to a bullet and then pretend you aren’t accountable for giving me my magic item back?”

“Yes.” Harlan said, utterly without shame.

“...I’m not letting you steal my stuff. But also take it.” James gave a quick explanation of how it worked.

Everyone else wanted a bracer too. The fact that he only had a finite number of them didn’t seem to matter to the scared civilians who all had compelling reasons why James should give them one of the defensive objects. The argument threatened to escalate, and their walking pace slowed, voices being raised, until James snapped.

“I’m trying to keep you fuckers alive!” He yelled, his voice cutting through the lightly breezy air all too well. “It’s my job to stand between you and the things that want to kill you! I can’t *do that* without this! A bracer could keep one of you alive slightly longer, and then run out, and then you’ll die anyway. But *I* can maybe keep *all of you* alive the whole time! Okay?!”

They shut up, some of them glaring, some of them giving grudging nods. To the side, Johns coughed lightly. “I already knew that, which is why I didn’t say anything.” The EMT offered.

“Great, cool, awesome. Can we please keep going?” James said in a pained tone.



“How much longer?” Milly asked. She’d had to hand off the bag of food and collected electronics she was carrying, the weight having been too much for her. Out of everyone here, including the self-described layabout poet, she had the least physical stamina. Mauro had taken it off her, and hadn’t said anything about it. “I don’t know if my legs can keep up.” She didn’t sound like she was whining anymore. Just stating the fact that she couldn’t keep doing this.

“I don’t...” James stopped, as something came into view ahead of them. Something they hadn’t seen before. “Well. Maybe not too much longer.” He said, pointing ahead of them.

To where the road split, a cross street cutting perpendicular to where they were walking. Through the thickening mist, he could just make out a couple metal signposts on the corners.

“Is this what we’re looking for?” Sienna asked.

“It’s an intersection?” Her friend answered slowly. “Wait, were we supposed to find an intersection? It’s been *hours*.”

“We were. It has.” James nodded. “And this is it. So let’s get there, settle in, take a break, and I’ll wake up Zhu.”

And hopefully, if they were very lucky, this would be their first step out of here.

