

*“Soon enough, life will offer you an answer. But for the moment, you are Dorothy, sitting up in her bed, trying to decide which pair of slippers she wants to wear today. Black, or ruby? Black, or ruby? Until she decides, she’ll be caught in a maddening state of tension, trying to live in two worlds at once. Padding around the farmhouse as it spins inside the twister, with rubies shining in her bloodstream, her auburn hair slowly turning grey. Spare a thought for poor Dorothy, the orphan girl of Kansas, who dreams in color but lives in black and white.” -Ozurie, The Dictionary Of Obscure Sorrows-*

---

James had been awake for a while, but didn’t want to move. He was warm under the blankets, and also under Alanna, who had sprawled half across his legs while she slept. Alanna slept in a very chaotic way; sometimes in motion as if she planned to jump out of bed, sometimes latching onto James or Anesh and going so still it was hard to tell if she was still breathing. Right now was a mix of the two, as she rolled over in her sleep to get a better hold on James’ limbs through the thick blanket.

So, entrapped, and also feeling a kind of hollow weight in his chest holding him down, James lay on his back and stared up at his ceiling. And also kind of at his partner’s nude form.

It was hard to not let his thoughts drift, and land on the sense of overflowing love he got when he looked at the woman currently muttering something into one of his knees in her sleep. James found his partners beautiful, every time he looked at them.

And then he dropped back against the pillow, tears forming unbidden as that feeling got washed away and overwhelmed by a very painful guilt.

James wasn’t blind to the things that happened to him. He had a therapist, and even though he spent most of his days being too busy and late to things, he *did* keep up on that. Survivor’s guilt was bad enough, when it wasn’t layered on top of the obvious PTSD he joked about not having. It had been something he’d struggled with twice in his life before; when he’d gotten out of Officium Mundi, and then later after Status Quo had killed a chunk of his friends and companions.

And then maybe also when he’d witnessed an entire city being executed in Townton. Possibly also when he’d had to take a potential one way trip into the Akashic Sewer to stop it from killing a whole high school, and watched one of his best friends get nearly murdered by some ancient fake god thing. And then maybe also when he failed to save a bunch of potion people from the Alchemists. And...

James couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh, or scream. His life had turned into a series of events where he was in the right place to help, and failed to do a good enough job. He always seemed strong enough to save himself, though.

Twelve percent. The number wouldn't get out of his thoughts. A twelve percent survival rate. Which still had a chance to dip, given what he knew about suicide rates for dungeon survivors. He'd failed so utterly that he only got barely more than a tenth of those people out safely. And as much as he wanted to throw himself back into paladin duties, to get back to checklisting problems and making people's lives better and doing *good*...

He was so tired. Not just tired, he was hurting. A deep wound in his heart that was so intense it made his old surgery scar ache. James idly brought a hand to his chest, and traced the line where his scar *used* to be, before it had been wiped away in Deb's struggle to keep his face from sloughing off. It wasn't like it was a big loss, he barely remembered getting that scar. He'd been shot right in the heart, and barely remembered that moment. How utterly fucked up. Even worse that he was pretty sure it had been in or around that moment that he'd lost another friend, or at least ally, so thoroughly he didn't even remember them.

James wasn't doing okay. But he also didn't want to wake Alanna up, so he did his best not to sob openly, and just stared at his ceiling. The room was dark, despite it being midday outside, with only a half dozen LEDs from various electronics and one fist sized yellow orb on the shelf overhead providing light. James' eyes had adjusted to it enough that everything looked like faint blue silhouettes. It was cold, too. Forty eight degrees Fahrenheit outside, and foggy, according to the red totem that told him the weather that James was *sure* they'd removed from the apartment at some point. Or at least moved far enough away that it wouldn't overlap the bedroom.

He didn't know what he should be doing. He was taking the day off to decompress, which, as he lay in bed and let his thoughts run rampant, seemed like a worse and worse idea. James didn't *want* to decompress. He wanted to distract himself.

Distracting himself was how he'd handled being terrified of everything his whole life, and it had worked out really well so far. As long as he didn't think too hard about the future, or his own mortality, or everything that had gone or could go wrong, he was *fine*. If he just got up and found something to do, maybe cook a late breakfast or find something on YouTube, or maybe even just go back to sleep, he'd be fine.

"You are not doing fine." The whispered word came from half next to his ear, half inside his head, as Zhu's sleepy manifestation started to coalesce. The navigator's orange light feathers sprouting along the arm James had curved up on his chest, a trio of eyes opening a month the manifestation to glower up at him before the gaze softened to something concerned. "More than normal."

"I have a normal amount of not fine?" James kept his voice low. He tried to make the words come out amused, but didn't really manage it.

Zhu brushed against his skin. "You do. You are always in tension with yourself. But... this is worse. What can I do?"

"It's fine." James whispered back, feeling like moving would take too much effort. "I just need to sleep more."

"Mmh?" Alanna's voice joined them in the dim light. "Oh hey. Morning." She smiled up at James, languidly stretching as she pushed off his legs. When James didn't reply right away, Alanna cocked her head to the side. "You alright?"

"Eh." James said.

"No!" Zhu chimed in abruptly, his own voice somewhat strained.

The tone made James look down at the manifestation on his arm to see the navigator's eyes all pressed closed. For a brief moment, actual amusement did its job and took over his thoughts. "Zhu's embarrassed." He clarified for Alanna. "You know, because..." He waved a hand up at her naked body.

She glanced down at herself, poking a finger into one of her breasts like she was inspecting it for the first time. "Oh, huh. Yeah. Never really thought about it, but is it weird for you two to share headspace in the bedroom?"

"I *also* hadn't thought about it." James latched onto the distraction like a drowning man to driftwood. "Oddly enough, I don't think it bothers me? I've been really comfortable with everything small lately. Though I might be self conscious next time you or Anesh take your pants off."

Zhu's feathers flicked wildly in all directions as if blown by unseen wind. "I find it embarrassing!" He told them. "I do not want to be some unwanted voyeur! That is why I nap."

"Heh. Well I don't mind if you watch!" Alanna stretched her arms over her head. "I already handle James and Anesh at the same time, what's one more?"

"I can't even..." Zhu trailed off. "Well, I *haven't*... that is..."

"Alanna, stop flirting, we just woke up." James said with a smile that was starting to crack around the edges and an exhausted voice.

She dropped back to kneel next to him with a worried expression. "Alright, innovative new options for our orgies aside, what's up? You... you don't look good. What's going on?"

"Tired." James said.

"Tired because I woke you up falling on you, or tired because... because you're not doing okay?"

He nodded, adding in a small voice, “That one.” The hot pressure just behind his nose that heralded a fresh wave of tears for no particular reason except for all of them at once.

Reacting to his choked words, Alanna just nodded, and slipped herself back under the blankets. Pushing under James shoulder to roll him onto his side, so that she could more easily snake an arm underneath him and wrap him in a hug that was both warm and also had him being elbowed in the side. It was still something he hadn’t realized he needed, and before he knew it, James found himself shaking as he just pressed his face into his pillow, and let himself cry, while his partner held him tightly against her chest.

“I should…” Zhu started to say.

Alanna hushed him instantly. “Just fucking hug him you dumbass.” She said, and after a moment of slight trepidation, James felt a blanket of feathers start to run down his side, another hand settling over his arm, and a sinuous feathered tail wrapping around one of his calves.

None of it made anything go away. James had still failed, both himself and especially the people relying on him, in a monumental way. But at least for a little while, he didn’t feel like he had to keep everything together. He just let himself drift, and be held, and be elbowed in the ribs.

And eventually, he did feel better. Not like anything was really fixed, but like he could keep going. Everything that happened happened, and couldn’t be changed, but the energy to do what he’d always done was back. The motivation to get back up, and keep going, and try to do better next time.

“I tried to lie to Harlan.” James whispered, just barely loud enough for Alanna to hear. A small confession, just one more thing that was nagging at him, but still something personal and painful.

Her arms shifted around him, and James was abruptly aware of just how nice his own skin felt, compared to when it was recently in the process of sloughing off. “Lie how?” Alanna asked.

“They lost their little notebook, the one they keep their memories in. I told them they knew me, told them I could help. Basically tried to brainwash them, really.” James shrunk down against his partner.

“Wait, when was that?”

“Day two, I guess?”

“So, after you’d spent time with them, you told Harlan they knew you, and you feel bad?”

“I’m missing some of the context.” James murmured. “I was going to bring them back. Tell them they were a member of the Order. Just fake a whole life for them.”

Alanna ran a hand through James’ hair, saying nothing as she almost instantly got her fingers tangled in the long strands. When she did speak, it was to ask a question. “I’m not gonna say that’s not fucked up. But. You didn’t lie about wanting to help them.” She leaned forward to nuzzle the back of his neck. “You made a call. And yeah, I think you fucked it, not just since obviously Harlan didn’t really believe you. So don’t do that again. Do better next time. Oh, and apologize to Harlan when we see them again”

The acknowledgement that there would probably be a ‘next time’ was worrying. And yet, the words were soothing, even though, or perhaps because, they were so blunt. “Thanks.” James muttered into Alanna’s arm. “Again.”

“Hey, it’s what I’m here for, right?” She said cheerfully. “I mean, among a long list of other things. I’m pretty great, all around, really.” Alanna squeezed James as he laughed.

Then he stilled, and spoke simply. “You really are.” James said with an utterly earnest voice. “You are. You and Anesh. And you too, Zhu. My life is filled with people who are pretty great.” He squirmed free from her grasp and pulled himself up to a sitting position, the mattress warping under him. “You want some breakfast?”

“I’m actually just here napping before I head back to Response duties.” Alanna said, letting herself flop onto her back. “So I ate already. Also, hey, is there a reason we don’t have one of the apartments in the Lair? I keep meaning to ask on this. We’d be closer to everyone we know. Oh, and you could smooch your new boyfriends whenever you wanted!”

“They aren’t...” James rolled his eyes.

“How many boyfriends do you have?” Zhu asked, sounding actually curious. “How do you count Anesh?” The infomorph was still pointedly trying not to look at Alanna out of residual embarrassment, which made some sense. He was in large part grown out of James’ own thoughts and memories, and James had a hell of a time getting past his own anxiety riddled hangups.

“I count him as one, unless it’s funny.” Alanna said sagely. “So in this case, James has seven boyfriends.”

James ticked off on his fingers, silently mouthing names. “That... that doesn’t add up.” He said slowly. “Like, there’s no version of this where... wait are you counting Zhu? We aren’t dating!”

“Are we not?” Zhu asked in a perfectly reasonable tone. “We do go everywhere together. And sleep together!” Even as a being made up of information and not biology, Zhu couldn’t keep their deadpan voice from cracking into a giggle as they revealed they were poking fun at James.

“That *still* doesn’t add up!” James threw his arms up, Zhu’s feathers not reacting to the sudden movement at all. “Whatever. It’s fine. I have *some boyfriends*. Is that what you both want to hear?”

“Absolutely.” Alanna nodded. “I think it’s cute, and hot, and other nice words.” She reached up a hand and cupped James’ face. “I love you so fucking much it’s not even funny. And I love how many people you have your own love for. So, yeah, I do wanna hear that you have some boyfriends.”

“Mmmrgh.” James made a flustered noise at the words from his girlfriend. “Fine.” He eventually grumbled, folding his arms and turning away. “Alright, fine. Also I think we haven’t switched apartments because moving is a giant pain, and this one is magic. Also can I get a teleport ride back to the Lair with you?”

“I thought you were taking today off.”

“I want to check in with JP about the giant hypno-plant.”

Alanna stopped with her legs hanging over the edge of the bed, halfway into pulling on a pair of pants. “The what?”

“Oh, yeah. You should hear about that tonight. We found... well, a bunch of people, and a giant hypno-plant, and it’s a whole *thing*. It’s actually still there, we didn’t kill it or anything. Honestly I think it’s pretty cool? Like, it *looks* awesome, and it didn’t actually kill anyone, so that’s a plus. And then it might be the first mixed physical and infomorph thing we’ve found in a while. I dunno if the awe dragon counts.” James realized he was kind of rambling and trailed off. “Anyway that was yesterday. And then I realized I was... uh...” he took a deep breath.

His partner stood up, tugging on her jeans the rest of the way and leaning over to ruffle his hair. “You realized you never take breaks, and you’re still human?”

“For *now*.” James vowed, half joking as he clenched a fist and turned a determined gaze up at the ceiling.

“Oh yeah? What’cha gonna transform into?” Alanna asked as she dug through the clean laundry hamper that they used in place of an actual closet.

“You’re the first person to ask me that!” James cheerfully replied, crawling to the edge of the bed to playfully swat at her butt before getting an indignant outburst from Zhu. “Oh, sorry!” He apologized rapidly to the complicit navigator, though not to Alanna, who just soaked up the attention. “Anyway, I’m not sure yet! I’m thinking some kind of lizard moth. Like how the Sewer keeps making everything two creatures smashed together, only doing a good job this time? I want a lizard tail.”

"I have a lizard-ish tail..." Zhu muttered.

"You do! And it's great! And I want one! Zhu, you know I can't actually feel through you when you're manifested, right?" James asked.

Zhu rustled in acknowledgement while Alanna let out a disappointed noise. "That ruins at least one of my plans!" She said with a mock forlorn swoon. "Don't ask which one."

"Kay."

"Also, moth? Really?"

"Mothgirls are in right now." James nodded energetically. "For obvious reasons."

Alanna had a delighted grin on her face, barely keeping it from devolving into a laugh by biting her lip. "Buddy, you're just raising so *many* new questions."

"It's my mutant superpower." James said, getting out of bed and starting to get dressed himself, wondering if they had any of the exercise potion in the kitchen that he could use to stop every part of his musculature structure from aching. He grabbed the telepad Alanna was looking for off his desk and held it out to her just as she turned toward him. His partner took it with a wordless gratitude and a sudden kiss. "Also it'll probably a *while* before we're doing transformations for the purpose of personal amusement."

"Well *I'm* looking forward to it. I like how I look, but I know you're still working on it." Alanna said as she double checked the address written on the pad for the Lair. "Zhu, you make sure that he stays out of trouble, okay?"

"Yes!" Zhu saluted.

James shrugged. "I'm working on lots of stuff. Anyway. Hey, don't get into too much trouble today, okay?" He said, leaning in to kiss her again. "I'll see you tonight." Alanna just gave him a grin and a thumbs up before she vanished.

"You are still not feeling better." Zhu said from James' arm, getting a jump out of him.

"I *am*." James protested lightly. "Just not perfect. But absolutely better. And... thanks, you know? You're more supportive than I think you know."

Zhu preened at the words. "Yes, I learned it from watching you." He said. "Among other things."

James groaned as he opened the door to the bedroom, letting in the cold grey light of late February, his night vision vanishing as he blinked away spots. “Okay, I’m actually sorry about that. I didn’t *think*. And Alanna being maximum Alanna today probably didn’t leave you feeling comfortable, so... I’ll talk to her about that later, okay?”

“It...” Zhu’s orange glow shifted, feathers rearranging along James’ arm to group up at his shoulder, small eyes reopening to look at him closely. “It was unexpected, but not *unwelcome*.” The navigator said eventually as James headed to the kitchen, stopping briefly to perform the idle and mundane chore of making sure the clothing in their dryer was actually dry. “How *could* it be? I may be someone different, but so much of me is built from you.”

“That... that’s fair.” James nodded. “This hasn’t come up much before.”

“I am more awake now.” Zhu nodded against him. “I don’t mimic your feelings, exactly. But every completed journey makes me more alive. And my own feelings are growing. Confusing as they are, I welcome them.”

With an uncertain nod, James passed through the living room and rounded the corner into their kitchen, and started trying to find some leftovers to eat. “Well, you know, just tell me if you need anything. I am also here for you, after all. We’re in this together.”

“That’s why I’m here at all, yes.” Zhu spoke, eyes flickering to look out the back patio and toward the walking path that lay beyond the wall of brambles that separated the apartment’s parking lot from the world. “I feel a strange urge to go with Alanna’s joking. As if there is a whole new set of destinations waiting there.”

James settled on making some kind of sandwich abomination from a few different things in the fridge, pulling stuff out onto the counter as he looked around the quiet and empty apartment. Auberdeen wasn’t even here today, and Sarah and every copy of Anesh were out doing Order things for one reason or another. “Okay, so, I wanna get something clear here. Alanna’s *not* joking.” Zhu gave him a disbelieving look. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, she’s having *fun* when she says it. She likes flustering or embarrassing people she likes. But she’s actually flirting with you.”

“Does... does she know that I am only barely a physical object, sometimes?” Zhu asked.

“I want you to think about every conversation you’ve had with Alanna, and ask yourself if that would be a barrier to her.”

The navigator made a noise like crunching gravel. “Hm. Fair.” He said. “But... we do not know each other...? Not very well.”

“And yet, she knows you, and trusts you, and thinks you’re cool.” James shrugged. “I dunno, it’s not like there’s a required threshold before you start wanting to be with someone. I just



wanted to make sure that you know that she's being one hundred percent honest when she talks about sex."

Zhu's feathered form rustled, like a wave of air pressing feathers down in a moving line. Small shoots of darker orange running like ink in water through his body. "Ah." He said.

"More or less my reaction too." James said as he finished putting some weird pickled chilies Anesh had bought on his sandwich. He closed the bread, and tested a bite of the mix of different fridge things. "Hm. Not bad. Never doing this again." He took another bite, flavors of leftover fish and pickled chilies and sliced onions exploding in his mouth. "Do you want some?" He asked Zhu.

"I do not eat. I'm not sure if I will learn for *that*." Zhu informed him. "And I am... going to go back now. To think."

"Yeah, no rush. You're not the only one who needs some quiet time." James dusted breadcrumbs off his fingers and reached his hand over to his arm to tap Zhu's manifested limb in a friendly gesture. "Just... I dunno, remember that I love you too. No matter what form that settles in. Even when I'm all fucked up." Zhu made a noise of understanding, feathers rustling one more time in a gentle motion across James' arm, before the dusty orange light broke into motes that faded away to nothing and he retreated to his place running in the back of James' mind.

James stood in the kitchen, silently finishing his sandwich in an empty apartment, feet getting cold as he stood there alone.

He realized abruptly, as he was staring at an Officium Mundi propaganda poster on the wall, that Auberdeen was probably off meeting with a college advisor. He'd missed the original date, what with being indisposed. Or attempted to be disposed of. Or... there was pun there, but he didn't want to put in the work to reach it. He was gone.

Fuck, he'd been *gone*. James washed his empty plate and hands in the sink with slow motions. Comfort and support from the people around him was helpful, it really was. But he'd been nearly dead again, over and over. The clean and easy win with JP yesterday didn't actually make him feel better, it just made the contrast even *sharper*, that when he was mostly on his own, he'd fucked up spectacularly.

At least, it felt like it was him. He did *know* that it wasn't all his fault. If nothing else, the guy who had tried to murder Harlan and decided that twenty-ish people were acceptable collateral damage bore an amount of responsibility. James had failed to save them, but he hadn't been the one to *kill* them.

He abruptly felt tired, and dizzy. Vision blurring, he toppled forward heavily onto the kitchen counter, making some kind of sound of confusion as he tried to keep himself upright long

enough to drag his legs over to one of the couches and drape himself over it. The feeling was sudden and out of place; this wasn't how he felt when he was depressed, or even mildly disassociating. This felt almost entirely physical, and he didn't like it. Once he was laying down it started to fade, but he resigned himself to getting to a doctor soon to get checked out.

Despite the fact that he'd told people he was hit in the head repeatedly, the dungeon hadn't *actually* gone down that way, and this probably wasn't head trauma.

Then the sleepy and dizzy feelings passed, and he was fine again. Like he'd gotten a second wind. Or maybe it was just his Endurance kicking in.

"Oh!" James practically barked the word into the couch cushions that his face was muffled by as he had a stray thought. What, really, were the odds that his Endurance wasn't just physical, but mental as well? Was he failing to take care of his mental health because the magic stat that let him push through was *helping him ignore the problem*? "Shit, I wonder if *that's* gonna have some negative implications." He wondered aloud.

No one answered his dry comment. So after a bit of laying on the couch and wondering if a nap might be a good idea, he made the decision that it was too late to do anything about it, but that he could keep an eye out for it going forward. Sometimes that was just the best option on offer. Oh, and probably also tell his therapist too. Dungeon affiliated therapy, James figured, was gonna be a *really* important field in the future.

"I should go... do something." James spoke aloud to himself as he rolled onto his back and stared at the living room ceiling. He was briefly distracted trying to figure out why there were holes in the living room ceiling, a trio of black dots in a triangle. Had they hung something there a year ago and he'd forgotten? "I could fix the ceiling." He offered himself, and instantly rejected that idea. If he was getting randomly dizzy, standing on a step ladder to fill holes sounded like the *worst* idea. James was dumb sometimes, but he wasn't *that* bad. Mostly his idiocy came in the form of being oblivious to things.

Which was actually, he thought with a grin, why dating Alanna was perfect. Someone who would just bluntly *say things* was exactly what he wanted.

Though he was more than willing to admit that if Alanna actually did want to include Zhu in their sexy times, that he was going to be very shy and awkward about it. Self knowledge, James decided as he thought about it, was the key to success.

The whole thing mostly just sent his mind racing down the potential future society that included infomorphs in it. Relationships among only humans were already complicated and messy sometimes. He was *absurdly* lucky to have partners that were about as chill as he was about most things; most people did not get that. A lot of general behaviors in modern society were really, really bad for relationships. And that problem wasn't going to magically vanish just because your partner was a ghost fish that lived in your brain.

Or, or, someone *else's* brain. Cross-person infomorph romance was going to be a hilarious nightmare of logistics and communication. James hadn't felt comfortable dating anybody when he'd lived with his parents, and there at least he'd had his own bedroom. How much worse would it be if you had to drop in on a dream to ask if you could be pushed into manifestation so you could go out with your host's best friend?

Daniel and Pathfinder had kind of oopsed into what was possibly the cleanest option, which was dating each other. Though, the ethics of dating someone partly made out of your own thoughts was a little weird, and James realized it was somewhat ironic to think that while as part of the tangent-laden train of thought that included a threesome with his own navigator. But at least, on a fundamental level, dating an infomorph that was partly you was a strong expression of self-love.

That thought brought him up short. Because James... well, James *didn't* like himself. Not really. He was working on it, obviously. Half of his therapy wasn't for weird dungeon hypnosis or survivor's guilt, but just for the kind of bitter self loathing that he'd lived with for most of his life and was trying to break out of the habit of.

He wouldn't say he *hated* himself. But James didn't really like James that much. Part of why being something else was appealing; he'd already rather be *someone* else too.

Except... Zhu was partly made from him. And he cared about Zhu a lot. It wasn't something he'd put serious thought into yet, because their entire connection was so new. But James did care. Zhu had been there for him when he needed it, and the navigator's senses of both humor and ire fit with James well. And Zhu cared about *him*.

It was certainly interesting, at least, how hard it was to hate yourself when 'yourself' was someone else. The thought had him huffing out a breath of quiet laughter when he fit the pieces together. Crossing his arms as if he could scorn the universe into not having that kind of dramatic irony.

It didn't work. But it felt good to try.

"God dammit, I am gonna end up with 'some boyfriends', aren't I?" He muttered, rolling off the couch and pushing himself up from the crouch he fell into next to the table. "Whatever. As long as everyone's fine with it. I'll build some kind of harem room in our next apartment and *really* dig at JP over this." It was probably an empty threat. James didn't even like the stereotypical harem aesthetic. Silks weren't his thing.

At least there was one perk to dating an infomorph that lived in your head; dream meetings offered a relief from the time pressure of the casual polyamory that James had going on. Possibly. Again, he was still in uncharted waters. James almost decided to go find Daniel and

ask him about it, before remembering that he was actively taking a day off from anything Order related.

The abrupt tiredness wearing off left James feeling like he actually had more life in him than before, and sitting at his desk watching stuff on YouTube didn't actually feel like something enticing anymore. So he settled on a walk to break down the almost nervous energy that he had going on. Just a random walk around outside in the already darkening cold air.

He regretted it before he was even all the way down the steps from the apartment to the parking lot. His coat barely did anything for the sharp wind, especially on his face, and the concealed holster on his back let the frigid air flow against his skin more than he wanted. The various other magic items he was wearing on his arms didn't help either.

James had hoped he'd start to feel more comfortable walking around with a dungeontech arsenal on him, but if it was going to happen, it wasn't going to be soon. And yet, he'd pulled the stuff on... not without thinking, but without consideration, really. His only thought had been that if he was going outside, if he was going to leave the safe place of his apartment, he needed to be armed. And shielded. And armed again. Just in case it happened again.

That was a vibe he was going to have stuck in his head forever. For the rest of his life, every time he stepped outside, James was going to consider, either subconsciously or actively, the *what if it happens again* factor of his day.

It had been controllable before. There had been crises, dangers, threats, yes. But they'd been things that he'd hunted down, or things that just couldn't happen again. Like how Status Quo couldn't hurt anyone now; they were all either dead, or scattered, and their ability to wage war was effectively removed. Or how a lot of the dungeon problems, James *could* have just... not done anything about. People would have died, he would have felt guilty. But he could have rationalized that it wasn't his problem, wasn't his fight, and left it alone.

This was different. This was...

It was experiential knowledge that at any moment, someone could try to hurt him, and probably succeed. It was the lived events that reminded him that he would always be unprepared and not good enough. And the constant nagging thought that maybe *this* would be the day that everyone in the grocery store was killed because he wasn't fast enough. That nowhere was safe, and that any given moment could turn to a litany of violence without warning.

James made it about three hundred feet down the walking path behind his apartment before he started hyperventilating, and dropped onto his ass in the partially frozen soggy grass to the side of the pavement. An internal struggle popped up, as he intellectually knew that the abrupt panic attack needed to be controlled, but he *felt* like maybe he should just claw his skin off instead and maybe that would help somehow.

He tried to breathe steadily, and couldn't manage to do it quite right. He pulled out a trick his therapist had taught him, and clenched every muscle he had at once, held it, and then relaxed. That actually helped. At least, it made his heart stop doing the thing where it tried to kill him, and his hands stop shaking uncontrollably.

It wasn't clear how long he sat there, though it wasn't long enough for the damp grass to fully soak through his pants. But it was long enough for a middle aged man walking a dog to get ten steps past him, then stop and turn. "You need help?" The older gentleman asked in a voice like he regretted talking to a stranger already. The dog, a boisterous little beagle puppy, took the opportunity to strain against their leash to get to James.

The situation made James laugh. It was the perfect mix of concern for another human, and absolute unwillingness to *talk* to another human. He loved it. It was the modern condition in a neat little bundle. "I'm... ow. I'm okay." He said, giving the dog some pets as the pupper tried to crawl up onto his lap. "Just... you know what, you don't need to know. Thanks though. Cute dog!"

The man's eyes brightened. "Yeah, she's been great! The kids love her." He smiled as he stepped over and reached down to try to nudge the puppy off of James, offering him a hand up while he did so which James took. "You sure you're okay? You didn't look good."

"Thanks, but I'll be fine." James partially lied, trying to redirect the conversation back to the dog, which was much safer. "So, just got her?"

"How'd you know?" The man asked with a chuckle.

"Well, *puppy*." James laughed, maybe a little too loud. "But also just the way you said she's been great. Like you're getting used to it."

"Ah, a *detective*!" The man nodded. "I didn't want a dog, personally. I'm allergic. But she showed up on our doorstep one day, and the kids wouldn't let her go to the shelter. No idea where she came from."

James paused, the smile slipping from his face as he tilted his head and looked down at the beagle. He tried to remember, but couldn't quite decide if the dog was familiar or not. "Huh." He said slowly. "I... hm. She seems friendly?"

"*Really* friendly." The man confirmed. "Worst guard dog. If anyone breaks in, she'll show them where the treats are and ask for one before she barks."

It was probably a coincidence, James figured. But they were still in the area. And how far could a magically spawned dog get before finding an owner for a Very Friendly Dog? Everyone loved a very friendly dog.

They'd never managed to figure out where the dogs that visited their apartment came from, or went. And this was just weird enough to be a potential option.

"Well, thanks for the hand." James said, dusting his pants off.

"Yeah, have a good one." The man gave an almost dismissive wave, briskly walking away with a tug on the leash now that he was no longer socially required to stick around.

James watched the dog as he stood on the path surrounded by greenery and tried to get his shoulders to untense. That had been weirdly pleasant; his experience with random people that weren't in his weirdly specific social group was that there was a fifty fifty chance they'd be rapidly horrible in some way. This, though, was the right mix of amusing and silly to break him out of his downward spiral and get him moving again.

Moving sounded good, though. He decided to go the opposite direction, and not stalk the guy, just so it didn't feel awkward.

Once he got used to the cold, James started appreciating the walk a lot more. There was a kind of misty fog hanging in the air that made the distant fir trees look like they were shadows looming in the distance. But friendly, familiar ones. The kind of lurking forms that were like old friends in an orbit around you. Warm voices from the living room while you were dozing off.

He crossed a familiar footbridge. New enough that he knew it had been built in his lifetime, heavy wood beams still sturdy, weatherproofing intact. But old enough that he remembered a hundred walks across it, and a dozen scars from kids carving hearts or the weird S into it gave it character.

James was mostly thinking about how he was going to age faster than a lot of people. Somehow doing it while keeping his brain from touching on the end cap of that subject, which was that he was going to *die* sooner too, a thought that assuredly would have dropped him into another downward spiral. But mostly, he focused on the magic of it.

His apartment had an extra hour for sleep. Which, in addition to ruining his ability to keep a schedule even further, meant that he often lived twenty five hour days. Roughly every three years, he lived a whole extra month.

It was a small thing, but it added up, and James was positive it wouldn't be the last. The Order's policy of stacking green orb buffs on places like the Lair to act as an organizational force multiplier meant that there'd be at least one or two more of those in his life at some point.

And yet, oddly, it didn't bother him. Because, while from an outside perspective it might look like he was trading days of his life for slightly more productivity, from *his* perspective, it was exactly as much life as he would have had anyway. He just got to react to big events slightly better. And sleep more.

Or, rather, sleep as much as he probably should be anyway, only without being late to things. He should sleep more. James stifled a yawn as he strolled, not going anywhere specific and taking his time doing it.

If, as he was worried, his Endurance was affecting his emotional state, then he needed to stop pushing himself for a bit, or he'd never start recovering. So he tried to let that happen. Stopped trying to be 'fine', and started just trying to let things be. Didn't think of anything except the stray thoughts in his head, didn't worry about tomorrow, just watched the trees on one side and the cars on the other as he emerged to a sidewalk by a main road and kept going.

When he realized that he was closing in on where the cafe used to be, James faltered. This was probably the kind of thing better faced in a month, after a lot of therapy sessions, and with a friend. Which was why it was a bit frustrating when his legs kept moving anyway, and he found himself skirting a familiar strip mall parking lot, and approaching an empty lot roped off by police tape.

Standing in front of where the door to his comfortable evening outing destination used to be, James stuffed his hands in his pockets and tilted his head up like he was tracing the outline of a building that wasn't here anymore.

It didn't hurt. He found that strange. Maybe he'd finally snapped, and this was what it felt like to just no longer be able to give a shit. Or maybe it was because the building was the *least* valuable thing that had been taken away. He didn't know.

A group of teenagers walked behind him, laughing a little too loudly. A couple got out of their car and made their way to the bar and grill next door. An older man crossed by to slowly descend the concrete steps to the pond behind the strip mall, maybe to feed the ducks.

Life continued. Just down one cafe.

James had kind of expected he'd be angry about it, but he wasn't. He wasn't sure what he was. Sad? Sad didn't seem like it *meant* enough. Like the word was too small to contain the vast yawning and sorrowful hole in his chest. But just because it didn't feel appropriate didn't mean he didn't feel it. *Sad*. Sad that he wasn't enough, sad that it happened, but most of all, sad that he had to keep on living. That the world wouldn't stop turning just because there was one more tragedy on the growing pile.

Two hundred feet of parking lot away, a police patrol car sat idling. James wondered if it was the same one that had been there when the building had gotten uprooted and flung across reality.

Intellectually, he was aware that it was somewhat unreasonable to expect a single cop to stop... *that*. All of that. They were either hit so hard by the field effect and the Order constantly

breaking the chain of evidence with blue orbs that they were probably constantly confused about why they even *had* someone constantly watching this parking lot, *or* they were all potential puppets of the Long Arm Of The Law, and it was really hard to get mad at someone that you pitied. But he was still kinda annoyed.

“The problem,” he started saying, hands still shoved in his pockets as he stared at the hole in the foundation where he used to get coffee and flirt with his partners and tip with skill orbs, “is that superhero comics suck.”

“Sorry, what?” A teenage kid with a column of poofy hair that James was instantly jealous of took his earbuds out as he walked by.

“Oh, no, I’m talking to myself. Again.” James kept staring at the empty chunk of building as the kid gave him a weird look and hurried off. “They do though.” He said softer. “If we live in a world where we have threats that only people with superpowers can stop, problems only they can solve, then... we need more people with superpowers. And every person with superpowers is a chance for *this again*.” He snarled at the wreckage. “For more problems.” He sighed. “Maybe I should just go talk to the cop. See if I can get Long on the line and... and just ask him to work with us. Ask him to *try*.” James glanced over at the bulky police SUV again, dotted in lights and decals. “What’s the worst that could...”

He got about six steps into his walk, just dropping off the curb and onto the parking lot’s black asphalt. Then a plume of orange light cascaded down his arm and back as Zhu jumped out into reality. The newly manifested limbs off-balancing James and getting a startled yelp from him as Zhu appeared. “Right. Leaving!” The navigator announced, dipping his hand into James coat pocket and ripping the telepad waiting there.

James didn’t even waver as the ground under his feet changed to the landing pad in the Lair. He still had his hands in his pockets, staring at a man who was now five miles distant.

“I coulda taken him.” He offered calmly to Zhu. “If it went badly.”

“Yes. I know.” Zhu’s voice sounded like an engine rolling its eyes. “But Alanna didn’t ask me to help you win fights, she asked me to *keep you out of trouble*.”

“Fair.” James sighed as he stepped off the platform and checked in with the person from Recovery on duty today. “But what if... what if we got in a *little* trouble? Like, fun trouble. Just so I have something to do to keep me out of *big* trouble?”

Zhu pulled half his feathers back into wherever he kept his manifestation when he wasn’t active, shivering along James’ arm as he did so. “You don’t need to spend this much effort convincing me. I am simply here to prevent brawls.”



“Great! Let’s go see... oh, wait, I ended up at the Lair anyway.” James deflated slightly as he realized what had happened. “Holy shit I’m bad at taking days off.”

“We could see if Dave and Pendragon are in, and go flying?”

“That does sound fun. We could also try to get a D&D game going. It’s been a while, and I bet there’s people around here who’d be into it.” James hummed to himself.

Zhu shook himself. “Your hobbies are all stationary!” He protested.

James nodded and let a smile creep into his voice. “It’s true, you’ve got me there. How bout we just go hang out with whoever we run into first, and then pretend that was a plan?”

“That’s a good plan.” Zhu said, an orange dotted line of light flickering into James’ vision and directing him to take a left at the end of the basement hall. “Let’s wander this way.”

“What’s that way?”

“Our therapist’s office. She has a time slot open. I checked.” Zhu said. “If we wander that way, aimlessly, it is likely we will run into her!”

Slowly opening his mouth, James found that he didn’t really have anything to say in response to that. Finding himself with his hand held up, fingers in a flat line like he was prepared to deliver a retort, he equally slowly lowered the limb back down and closed his lips together, humming to himself. “Yeah, okay.” He sighed eventually. “But after that we should try to roll some kind of pickup RPG.”

“I will accept this deal.”

“I...” James paused, leaning on the wall to let a line of camracondas pass them in the hall before he started walking. “I don’t...” he took a breath. Tried to think of what he was trying to say. Then found it. “Thanks, Zhu.” James muttered. “Maybe a little silly, but thanks.”

The navigator opened a pair of eyes to look back at James’s face from his arm. “You’re welcome. Now, let us go confound modern human psychological models by implicitly asking whether or not both of us talking to a therapist together is couples therapy or not.”

James chuckled. “Hey, when did you have time to check this anyway?”

“I am mysterious and powerful.” Zhu replied.

“That’s my line.” James gave a mock gasp of shock.

Zhu flicked at his neck with manifested orange feathers. “*Our* line.” The navigator said. “Now, onward.”