

*“Worlds become real when we care about them, not when they look similar to our own.” -Alex Golub, Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game-*

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“What the fuck happened?” Alanna asked as they took off, Pendragon’s wingbeats pushing what felt like solid bars of cold air through the closing flaps of her flank as she and Dave eschewed petty things like safety regulations in favor of a quick escape.

“I must have screwed up somewhere.” James said. “Used a light... ow... by a window. Tripped an alarm. Whaaaaataahhhh... *whatever.*” He was panting heavily; despite not actively bleeding to death, the mix of an adrenaline crash and a sharp pain through his neck where a bullet had gone in and then been yanked out, left him feeling pretty awful. “My fault, whatever it was.”

“James, I can’t hear you!” Alanna called over the rising noise of shifting dragon as Pendragon’s wings worked them into the air. He hadn’t noticed before, when he could raise his voice properly, but it was actually pretty loud riding like this.

James swallowed, and tried again. “I got spotted!” He said, voice only cracking a bit. “One of the second group, the grey shirts. I think I killed her, but she shot right through the bracer.” He tried to call up the statistics of his shield bracers to see if he could tell what went wrong, and was a little alarmed when only three of them responded. He raised a hand to poke at his armor, where the bracer would have been underneath, and felt bits of broken metal shift around, poking into his skin. “*Right* through it.” He added. “Holy shit, she hit me so hard the bracer blew up.”

“James,” Dave and Pendragon’s voice rumbled down the interior of their body, “teleport us out now please.”

“Right.” James cut off. Explanations could come later. He fumbled a hand up to his mouth and pulled his glove off with his teeth, moving shaking fingers to the pouch he kept his telepad in, to get them out of there. His hand came back sticky. “Oh!” He said with an amount of surprise.

“Oh *what?*” Momo demanded from the seat next to him.

James nodded like a lot of things made sense now. “Oh, I’ve been shot again. Or was shot again? I got shot twice. This explains a lot.” He said.

“Why the fuck are you so calm about being shot?!” Momo and Alanna yelled roughly in unison. Some of the words were a little different between them, but the idea was the same.

The reason that he wanted to explain was that it meant he knew why he felt an uncomfortable ache in a weird place, which was now ramping up to a much more noticeable cutting pain. It was good to know what was wrong, and besides, Nik could fix it, and James had *three* ranks in

Endurance now. He was pretty sure that as long as he needed to keep going, a bullet wound wasn't actually enough to hurt him that badly any more. But he didn't say that, because there was a more pressing issue to relay. "Uh, my telepad got shot too." He called out, pulling a blue orb out of his pouch from where the bullet had shredded the magic item. "Anyone else got one?"

"I do, hang on." Alanna said.

"Well, use it fast." Pendragon's rumbling growl overtook Dave's more human voice. "Because that Hind just took off. And it's heading right for us."

"It's not a—" James started to say, but was drowned out by the rest of the team speaking up.

Outside, Dave and Pendragon snapped her neck back to face forward as the MI-24 closed on her and things rapidly turned chaotic.

It was interesting, to their shared mind. Together, both of them were smarter, in different ways than each of their disparate minds were familiar with. Pendragon could think in broader concepts, could see bigger pictures. Strategic thinking became possible, things like forming multiple plans for evading or killing a Russian surplus attack helicopter. For Dave, thinking became more fluid, more cunning, more reflexive. The ability to natively grasp and react to emotions and small cues from others suddenly becoming natural as he had Pendragon slipped together. It made for a powerful combination. But even still, when they were linked, they tended to think of themselves as 'Dave and Pendragon'.

When someone started shooting at them, though, that slipped away. They slipped deeper into each other. Two minds working together truly became one mind with two bodies, and even then, the two bodies thing was mostly just semantics. Together, they could react faster, think quicker, and fly *better* than either of them could alone.

And that was happening now. But also, this time, they had passengers who wanted in on the fun. Minds started to spark to life in their network, the secure connections Pendragon had built into her body being brought to life as fumbling hands snapped cables into place. And the passengers rapidly converted to 'crew' as they added their own individual talents to the chase.

The attack helicopter was, it turned out, faster than Pendragon. Quick math and a piece of trivia from someone in their network showed that the enemy vehicle was rapidly getting up to a speed of about 200 mph, and Pendragon capped out at 90 when she was feeling energetic. And it could *obviously* see them; as Dave's part of their tactical mind guided the combined entity on a sweeping curve that took them behind a line of raised trees on a hill, the attack helicopter just pivoted to cut a straight line toward them.

So they abandoned stealth. Dropping the hold on the magic organ that kept them from reflecting light, and instead opening up their wings to their full length. Looking nothing like a conventional aircraft might give the opposition pause.

It didn't. But it might have obscured Simon and Nik launching a dozen drones around them, tiny eyes that provided more and more information as they listened to Alanna swear when she dropped her telepad.

"Someone get us *out of here!*" The dragon yelled as their pursuer opened fire.

An interesting quirk of the shield bracers was that you had to actually have an attack pass through them before you could block it. Which meant, after the line of tracer rounds caught up to them while they were mid-diving roll, the first few slammed into Pendragon's back.

They'd never tested the limits of the binder that she'd eaten months ago. The one that was part of her spine now, that converted kinetic force to paperwork. And now, they got a chance. Inside, someone screamed something in panic as the machine gun fire started to hit, but outside, Pendragon snapped her wings out of the roll, and felt them flourish outward as they tripled in size, before the bracer's Dave's body was wearing kicked in on automatic and the bright gold segments of a dome started deflecting the incoming fire.

They took a low swoop, snapping off smaller trees near the ground and shedding the mundane paper that was molting from her wings like crumpled snow as they took a straight line underneath the oncoming aircraft. Dirt and snow kicked up in a plume near where Pendragon's chest almost kissed the floor of the Earth before a powerful beat of their wings sent them on a new trajectory. From their side, holding on with a half dozen mechanical limbs, Thought-Of-Quiet leaned out and looked up, locking the helicopter in place for long enough for Pendragon to pass. Only a brief window, but a reprieve from the machine gun fire.

It didn't work to dodge it, but it did buy some time where they were moving in a straight stable line. The MI-24 just pivoted, and Pendragon felt a part of her mind chastise itself for forgetting how helicopters worked. Then, with a flare of fire, one of the missiles underneath it launched.

The drones outside the dragon noticed it instantly, and Simon, who was a master at skulljack piloting by now, interposed three of them between the missile and Pendragon. It plowed through the first one like it wasn't there, but the second one was loaded with one of Momo's context bombs, and something about it must have confused the missile's guidance system. Either that or they just got lucky with James and Momo leaning out of their flank and firing back under their wing, because it detonated a few hundred meters behind them.

Then, through a fumbling connection as they swept across the terrain, trying to gain altitude without losing speed, El offered a solution.

Pendragon accepted without hesitation. Handed the girl a set of mental controls that they were familiar sharing. And then, with a new 'pilot' installed, let El's magic kick in. A spell from Route Horizon that bolstered the speed of anything she was driving, and gave her the reflexes to make it work.

She used it twice in a row, overlapping the magic and rapidly taking them up to almost double the speed of their pursuit. And with the wider angle on the untamed land behind them, Thought-Of-Quiet directed them into a banking sweep that let him focus on the helicopter for almost a whole minute. They'd made the mistake of shedding their momentum to line up a shot, and the camraconda took advantage of it by stopping them from chasing.

"Got it!" Alanna's voice sounded after what felt like an eternity but was actually more like forty seconds. And then, abruptly, they were somewhere else.

Still dark, still cold, but the constant low wind and spitting sleet was replaced by high powered gusts. The combined entity that was Dave and Pendragon plucked control back from El, and elicited shouts and grunts from their passengers as they banked upward. Wings and tail spread, tugged painfully by air resistance at the speeds they were going, as they shed velocity rapidly. They twisted as a wing joint pulled with a sharp jolt of pain, and turned the motion into a spiraling descent. Yes, the people riding along would be tossed around a bit, but that was preferably to crashing into the highway overpass they'd gotten close to.

It took a couple minutes to figure out their position from the roads and lights below them, but as soon as they did, it didn't take long even with a hurting wing to get back to the Lair. They'd emerged from the teleport near it anyway, and with the constant decrease in how long it took to return, it wasn't long before they were landing on the roof.

As Dave and Pendragon's shared mind pulled itself apart, and left behind small notes of complex emotions that neither of them really felt that well on their own in each other, Dave unclipped his skulljack and slid out of his partner's torso with a question on his mind. "Hey," he asked James as he circled around Pendragon and offered his friend a hand down from her flank, "does the travel time green in this place help with teleporting to it? Like, if we hadn't had it, would Alanna have fumbled her telepad and it would have taken another five minutes or something?"

James stared at him with a look Dave didn't really identify. "I've been *shot*, and you ask me *that*?" He asked.

Dave thought for a second as Thought-Of-Quiet and Nikhail rushed over to them. "Uh... are you okay?" He asked James.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine." James gave a laugh that rapidly turned into a gasp and him clutching at his torso. "Also go ask someone in Research, I've gotta get taken to the hopsital." Dave nodded at him, and James held up a hand to the camraconda before he got frozen to be safely moved.

“And... thanks.” James added. “For getting us out of there. Good job.” He held up a hand, and Dave gave a grin as he returned the weak high five. “Alright, Thought, do the thing so I don’t bleed anymore on the way downstairs.” James said, before the camraconda promptly fixed his gaze on him and stopped all his movement. Including that of his leaking blood.

Alanna carried him the rest of the way down into the building, and to the elevator to their basement. James didn’t remember much of it, which was good, because Deb wasn’t exactly happy with him when they showed up in her hospital.

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James hadn’t exactly lost consciousness. Or at least, so he assumed. He had a kind of blurry impression of Alanna helping him get his armor off, and Nik using his Climb spell to put more blood back into him, an oxygen mask settled over the younger man’s face as he did so. He also remembered that it had stung when Deb had done a more professional job stitching up his wounds than the Aidimy’s rough sealing. But he couldn’t quite fill in all the blanks to how he’d gotten into one of the white beds they used in the medical wing.

That was fine, though. It was a little too cold here, but he noticed Alanna and Anesh outside the window, talking to each other, and he felt fine. Especially since he wasn’t bleeding anymore.

The absolute wall that James felt like he ran into, when Endurance stopped working, was something he really needed to be more aware of. The limitation of the lesson’s reward seemed to have only gotten more dramatic with its new level. Before, if he pushed himself, and then had some downtime, it faded away slowly. Now, he could go a *lot* farther with the effect, including sprinting a half mile through the woods with a bullet in his torso, but as soon as he wasn’t *pushing* anymore, it was like dropping off a cliff. No easy fading back to normal for him, anymore.

His partners joined him as soon as they noticed he was alert. “Hey.” Anesh said with a smile that camouflaged his anxiety. “I hear you had a small adventure.”

“Is *that* how Alanna described my heroics?” James asked, letting his voice stay quite as he realized how much it actually hurt to talk.

Alanna cleared her throat. “Well, no.” She said. “I told him you did something stupid, and he assumed it was noble or something. When in *reality*, you took a dumb risk for no reason, and got shot. Twice.”

“It wasn’t for no reason.” James said, his mouth a flat line. “We needed actual intel. Someone tried to kill one of us, I wasn’t gonna just...”

“I know.” Anesh said, setting a hand on James’ shoulder. “Alanna’s taking the piss, don’t stress yourself.” He said with a sigh. “I’m glad you’re okay. Deb said it wasn’t too bad, but still.”

James gave a tiny nod. He knew how Anesh felt, really. “Still. I think it was worth it.”

“How, exactly?” Alanna asked, folding her arms.

“Yeah, I’d like to know that too.” JP’s voice joined them as the sharp faced man slid the door to James’ hospital room open and poked his head in. “You wearing pants? I don’t wanna come in if you’re not wearing pants.”

“I am...” James paused and checked under the blanket that was covering his lower body. “Yes, I am wearing pants.” He said. “As far as you know.”

“Cool.” JP stepped in, leaving the door open to the white tiled hallway outside and letting the low chatter of the two medical staff on duty and a few beeping machines form a blanket of background noise. “I’m here to debrief you. Nate’s got everyone else. Alanna, he actually wanted to talk to you, too, when you have a minute.”

James’ partner raised her eyebrows. “Not you?” She asked.

“I mean, half of what I’m here to do is make digital copies of James’ stored memories, so it’s not really a group activity.” JP said with a trademark smile. The kind of smile that put someone at ease, if they hadn’t met JP before. “You can stick around, obviously. Though if you do head up, let Arrush know he doesn’t actually have to keep lurking around outside if he’s worried.”

“You could have done that.” James pointed out. “You obviously...”

“Not my department!” JP said, setting the thin laptop he was carrying on the rolling cart next to James’ bed.

“I’ll-“ Anesh started to say, but Alanna cut him off. “I’ll get him.” She said, guiding Anesh with one still-armored hand back toward a padded chair up against the wall. “You stay with him, JP’s right, I should go to Nate’s debrief anyway while it’s all fresh.” Alanna turned her head toward James and gave him a fragile smile. “Glad you’re okay, though.” She said, before turning and heading out of the room.

“Is she alright?” James asked Anesh.

“We were worried about you.” His boyfriend said simply. “You know Alanna’s not as tough as she pretends to be, you’ve *been her*.”

James gave a nod, lips pursed. “Yeah, that’s true. I shoulda realized. She’s gonna be feeling like me being hurt is her fault, and terrified of experiencing loss again. I should... we should talk to her later.”

“This is a fascinating look at how your relationship works,” JP said, looking up from the laptop screen, “but... uh... can you wait for me to leave?” He half-asked, half-demanded.

“No.” Anesh and James said in unison.

“Great.” JP said, passing James a skulljack cable. “Here.” He said. “Let’s get through this quick. Nate’ll have more specific questions for you, I’m just here to get an archive to take upstairs.”

Then, after getting Anesh to stop holding James’ hand because it was messing with the memory imprints, JP started running through the events of the last couple hours with James. Asking specific questions about things James had seen, asking him to focus on details like faces, clothing, building styles, things like that. Especially he had questions about the documents that James had gone over. James had a bunch of saved visual snapshots stored in his skulljack braid, which he transferred over, but he also added his own memories of stepping into the different rooms of the cabin, just in case someone else could make sense of details that he’d passed over.

“Do you have that recorder on you?” JP asked when James brought up finding the body in the cloaked storage room.

“It’s in my armor.” James said. “Along with the book I took.”

“Got it.” JP nodded. “We’ll probably be upstairs for a while, so come up if you’re feeling recovered and Deb lets you escape. And, I dunno, anything we should focus on?”

James closed his eyes and tilted his head back into the rough pillow. “Uh... check the images for the blueprints they had. I dunno if it comes across in the memory file, but they *felt* off. Like, the same way magic feels off, off.” He thought about swinging his vision back to JP, but decided he was comfortable now posed like he was taking a particularly aggressive nap. “Also there was definitely something weird about the people, but I have no idea what. Ask Simon and Nik, they got a wide angle view, and...”

“He’s gone, you know.” Anesh’s voice drifted to James. “And you’re muttering.”

“Oh.” James blearily pulled his eyes open and tilted himself sideways to look at his boyfriend. “Sorry, guess I’m more tired than I thought.”

“You did get shot, twice.” Anesh’s voice was quiet, and James could hear the unspoken fear, lacing his words and painted on his face. “And I think it’s time we asked, now, *seriously*, if maybe abandoning this hunt would be worth it.” His voice had a pressure to it that James didn’t hear often from his boyfriend. A kind of implication that it wasn’t just *time to think about it*, but that they were *going* to spend time seriously talking about it, and lean toward dropping the whole mess.

Even addled on painkillers he must have taken at some point, James caught the concern. "I'm fine." He reassured Anesh. "Really. Really! I'm kinda tired, and I think Deb gave me something too strong, but... actually, hang on, I have an idea."

He focused. Changed his perspective. He needed to get through this conversation, needed to finish talking to Anesh. James made himself *know* that he couldn't be sitting here in bed.

And as he did so, he felt Endurance start to kick in again. The strange stat upgrade not making him less tired, but making him more capable of pushing through it. Driving back the fog from the painkiller and the ache from the wounds. And then, linking up in strange ways with some of the purple orbs enhancing his body already. Pushing his shell to replace his blood faster, to seal the stitched wounds with clotted blood and regenerating flesh. Not a superhuman feat, exactly, but fast enough that it would be noticeable, and useful.

James pushed himself up, kicking limply at the blankets on his legs as he tried to stand. "Alright, let's go... talk to the others." He said. "I'm good."

"Are you... quite sure?" Anesh asked with a raised eyebrow. "You don't want to just lay here and relax? See how many times Arrush is going to pace by the room before he comes in?"

"Wait what?"

Anesh nodded. "Oh, yes, he's done it twice now. It's cute, actually. I think I'm starting to really *understand* you and Alanna, in a way."

James faltered in his mental push to 'keep going', and felt his brain start to drift. "I'm sorry, did you not before?"

"I mean specifically!" Anesh gave a small laugh. "That whole incident where you were encouraging me to date someone else, and I was... oh, I don't know, not *getting it* I suppose. But it's a lot easier to understand when I'm living your side of it, not just hearing you explain it."

"Do I explain things bad?" James asked. Then realized something else. "Sorry, hang on. What is happening here?"

With bushy eyebrows pushed up as far his face as they could go, Anesh looked at James incredulously. "Are you... wow, Alanna's not the only one who can't... okay, this is hilarious. James, Arrush is *very* into you. Have you not noticed? He's infatuated. An Arrush crush if you will."

"...What?" James lost his faltering grip on his mental state, and slumped back onto the bed. "Wait... really?"



“I’m kinda surprised you didn’t notice.” Anesh told him with a kind smile. “We can talk about it later. For now, unless I made you too uncomfortable, I’m gonna tell Arrush to stop sneaking past and just come in here.”

“I... yeah, okay.” James said, head spinning for two reasons. “Yeah. And I’m... gonna take a nap, I think.”

“You do that.” Anesh patted his boyfriend’s hand as he rose to open the door. “Everyone will be fine without your constant supervision for a few minutes.”

He really did believe that, too. Especially since every time James was engaged in constant supervision of something dangerous, his boyfriend kept ending up shot, or corroded, or stabbed, or subsumed into a hostile hive mind, or *something*. It was always something.

Anesh watched James as his eyes closed and he rapidly slipped into a light sleep, and sighed. It was always something, wasn’t it? He didn’t know how to feel about the way their lives had turned out. About how every week, it seemed like the man he loved with more than one heart was stumbling back into their home bleeding, and every *other* week, Anesh was there with him getting shot at himself.

It terrified him. He wasn’t like James, he wasn’t actually afraid of death. But he was afraid of losing the people in his life. And he didn’t know how to say it. He certainly wasn’t going to wake James up *now* to tell him about it.

So instead, he took a few quiet steps over to the sliding door to the replicated hospital room, slid it open, and tapped a passing Arrush on one of his arms. “Hey.” Anesh said quietly, wincing as the big ratroach that he had to tilt his head up to look at flinched. “Would you mind keeping an eye on James while I go deal with something?”

“Ah... ye...yes?” Arrush stammered in a rasping attempt at keeping his own voice down.

Anesh smiled at him, a new and comfortable feeling blooming in his chest. “Great. I’ll be back in a bit.”

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James hadn’t ended up joining them for the debriefing, but that was fine. Hours later, Nate, JP, and Ben, along with a handful of other rogues or support staff that were lingering around the warehouse in case they were needed, sat in the back of the Lair and tried to make sense of everything.

Ben opened his eyes, mentally moving away from the memory records they’d gotten off of James and the others. “Something’s wrong with this.” He said.

“Ya think?” JP asked, not bothering to look up from the oversized paperback he was leafing through, his feet up on the desk next to them, chair tilted back at an angle that made everyone within a half mile nervous.

Nate resisted the urge to kick JP’s chair out from under him. “There’s a lot of shit wrong with this.” He said. “So you’re gonna have to pick something specific.” He was rolling over the recorder that James had brought back in one hand. It had needed new batteries, but it had played just fine, and it hadn’t made anyone happier.

“Hang on.” Ben sighed, sending a prompt across the skulljack to replay a specific thing, so he could try to figure out what was bothering him.

“While he’s doing that.” JP said, not looking up from his new book. “Can I just say, I expected ecoterrorists to have a bit more panache?” He flicked a finger against the corner of one page. “Listen to this. ‘The Earth is more than a resource, it is a living entity. We must strive to put the needs of the world itself above any others, including ourselves.’ And then a deeply detailed attached chart of carbon emissions over time. Like, okay, I *get it*. But this is just... it’s boring? It’s so dry, and even if I were interested in assassinating car company CEOs, this wouldn’t convince me to go with *these guys*.”

“Sure, they’re hippies who believe in nature spirits.” Nate stared over at JP, who caught some of the older man’s gaze out of the corner of his eye. “But you can’t honestly say, *now*, that the Earth *isn’t* a living spirit or some shit.”

“Sure I can.” JP deflected instantly. “I might be wrong, but I can say it.”

“...Fucks sake...” Nate muttered. He wasn’t feeling particularly like engaging JP at this time. What had been recorded, and the picture they were putting together, was a little too grim for him to be making jokes. He wasn’t like JP or James, he didn’t deflect from shitty situations with snark. He faced it, got really angry, and then got drunk later.

JP didn’t notice, or care, what Nate was going through. “Look, from what we saw, James found this book in a stack of the things that hadn’t been touched. I think even *they* knew their literature sucked.” The words made Nate frown, and he depressed the rewind button on the tape recorder in his hands. “Aw, man, don’t play that again.” JP sighed.

“No, there was something...” Nate said, and hit the replay button.

A woman’s voice started speaking. What might have been the perfect voice for a stern librarian or a particularly unpleasant middle manager rendered disturbingly human, twisted into a higher pitch by a pain that had her panting rapidly between words.

“My name is Lily Cane. I’m a freedom fighter. If you find this... if you find this, I’m dead. I’m dying. I...” Nate fast forwarded a few seconds. “...don’t know what happened. Maybe they

turned him. Reynolds was a plant the whole time, we knew that though. If you're trying to... trying to figure out what happened? Reynolds was a fed, but it was Marks that shot me." Nate skipped again, and JP pulled his book up, trying not to listen. "...can't get in. They can't get in. They're gone. They can't get through the door..." The woman's words were laced with manic laughter, the kind of laugh from someone who couldn't stop themselves taking perverse fascination with their situation.

"There." Nate said.

"Can you please just make a transcript of..."

Nate cut JP off. "Shut the fuck up." He said. "For just one second. Shut up. Did you notice?"

"Okay, I've got it." Ben said, opening his eyes, and then stopping as he saw the glares between Nate and JP. "Uh... or I could just..."

"No, go ahead." Nate set the tape recorder down on the desk on top of printouts of all the faces of the people that they could get clear pictures of from the camp. "What've you got?" He didn't turn away from staring down JP, but the other man wasn't interested in conceding either.

Nervously, like his dads were fighting, Ben cleared his throat and tried to explain. "It's small, but... did you notice that everyone in the camp is male?"

"...That's not that weird, is it?" JP asked.

"Hm." Nate glanced down at the recorder. "That's... odd." He said. "Okay, think." He told JP, trying to turn down the hostility so his partner in crime would listen. "If they're a group that believes in nature spirits and the soul of the planet, do you really think they're gonna discriminate?"

JP shrugged. "How many women do you know that want to live in the Alaskan wilderness and occasionally take shots at politicians?"

"Six." Nate answered without having to think about it. "How do you *not*... oh, whatever. Ben's right, that's off. Especially since Lily here," he tapped the recorder, "was obviously one of them. And not a fringe member, either."

"Right," Ben cut in, "but also, the helicopter crew *did* have female members. The woman who shot James was also Hispanic, which none of the other members of the main camp were. They're *all* white, which... just demographically, even for Alaska, doesn't make sense. Especially not for an ecoterrorist group like Nate said." He thought for a second, then made a note on his laptop that he should ask Nate about hiring any of those six women he apparently knew.

“So we’re looking at two different factions.” JP said. He might look dismissive, but he was still thinking about the situation, letting his mind make connections. “Two questions then. Who are they, and why are they working together? Well, a third question, why are they killing random businessmen in New York?”

“I think we can safely call the main camp Priority Earth.” Nate said, pointing at the book JP had set aside. “Or at least, we could have. They seem to have undergone some kind of schism. And I’m not gonna make you listen to this again, but…” he glanced down at the recording with a flick of his eyes. “When she said “they can’t get through the door”, did that not seem odd to you?” Nate asked.

“Why?” JP said. “The door isn’t that interesting.”

Ben and Nate turned their heads at the same time to look at him with suspicious eyes. “Hey Planner?” Ben said. “Can you tell us if we’re being influenced?”

From out of the drawer of one of the desks, an ethereal tentacle unfolded, followed by another, and then another. Shortly, Planner linked their limbs in a ring around the three men. “I am watching. Please attempt again.” Planner’s voice, like a pen on parchment, resonated in the air around them.

“Literally all I said was that the door isn’t inter-“ JP cut off as Planner’s tentacles snapped upward like a Venus flytrap, ripping something out of the air. “-esting okay fine I see the problem now.” JP said. “How did *James* get through that?” He asked suddenly.

“Zhu is much more adept than I am at guiding people *past* effects, especially those that are physical barriers.” Planner said. “But thank you for the snack. I will be nearby, should you need me.” Their limbs pulled back, no actual central source, just them letting their manifestation go as they continued their daily life around the building.

Nate glanced around the warehouse. “We should get a fridge in here. Or a keg or something. I should be able to have a beer when we’re doing this shit.” He sighed. “Okay. So, now that I can actually focus on it; we’ve got two possible readings here. Either the dead chick is saying that the people looking for her have physically left, *or*, she’s saying that they’re *gone*. *She* got through that door fine; and I think it’s like this building. They set up a… well, a Planner-style password. The right people could just walk in. But whoever was after her couldn’t.”

“Oh.” JP snapped his fingers. “And she said one of her own people shot her.”

“Right. So, if he’s chasing her, say, why couldn’t he get through the door?”

Ben chimed in with a bitter expression on his face. “From a few of the other memories James recorded, looking at pictures and the dossiers of people we suspect were members, they absolutely had a diverse membership…”

“This is...” JP licked his lips, trying to keep from having an emotional reaction that would ruin his ability to think critically about this. “Okay, this is grim and horrible. Obviously something *happened* here. But I think we’re losing sight of the bigger picture. What does *this* have to do with *anything*?” He held up a hand to Ben. “No, clarifying. Anything that is relevant to our situation in New York and our tenuous offer of aid to the FBI.”

“Well, these are the guys who are at least responsible for the car bomb.” Nate said. “They’ve got memetic capability, at least a little. And they’re positioned to be the people who’d want to kill a bunch of executives that fund the oil industry. But you’re right, that doesn’t... pass me that book, yeah?” He pointed at JP, and got slid the copy of *Priority Earth* across the desk, sending a couple pens scattering to the floor. They all ignored them. Nate flipped to the back of the book, and made a grunt of frustration as there was no author bio on the back page. “Damn.” He muttered. “Worth a shot. Anyway. We don’t have any other leads, and this is a clear target that we can pursue. No matter how pissed Anesh and Alanna are that their boyfriend got shot again.” He tossed the book back onto the desk, rubbing the back of his hand across the bridge of his nose.

“I’d be pissed if my boyfriend got shot, if we’re being fair.” Ben added with a shrug. “Also, we should be up front about this at least with each other; James is *right*. We *absolutely* want to steal their teleporter.”

“Do you even have a boyfriend?” Nate asked, letting himself get distracted. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that, just... you’re here as often as I am.”

“Oh, no, it was just an example. I don’t have... uh... time to date anyone, are you nuts?” Ben scoffed as he deflected the question, looking at his phone as he stood up and stretched. “Also Davis is on the way up. Says he wants to talk to us about this, specifically. So I guess I’ll go get dinner later?”

JP groaned, and the others tried not to replicate the sound. They’d been at this for a while, and were no closer to a satisfying truth than when they started. Their attempt to link the different pieces of information together had lasted so long that the team they’d sent had all left, and they were down to sharing the warehouse with two Rogue trainees, an intern that was working on something else, and a Winter’s Climb delve team that were doing some kind of deep breathing exercises or something.

They’d put together bits and pieces of information from the documents and memory snapshots James had brought back, like how the blueprints themselves were a kind of magic the *Priority Earth* organization had discovered. But while they could look over the pages James had glanced at that explained the relevance of rune position on the blueprints, they didn’t have enough examples or information to know what the things *did*. Only that they weren’t teleporters, so it was something else. They knew the group was armed, and had gone as far as blackmail

or threats, even murder, before, but never enough to cause the level of chaos that they had this time. And, as far as they could tell, nothing had *changed* to push them like this.

Personally, JP was tired of slamming his head into a wall that he couldn't talk his way past. The others had gone off to rest or hand in their equipment or just do other shit. El got to go on a *date*. Even Dave was having more fun than him, his best friend currently watching his giant pet dragon play with the other, smaller paper drakes in the back parking lot. And JP was still sitting here, trying to figure this mystery out, and coming up with a whole lot of 'answer unclear's on the magic eight ball.

"What's Davis want, anyway?" Nate asked, in the voice of a man who regretted taking a job and missed the simpler chaos of running a kitchen that cooked for two hundred people every day. "Does he have a magical solution to this shit?"

"Is it a magic eight ball?" JP asked, breaking out of his thoughts.

"Would you believe me if I said yes?" Davis called to them, entering the room through the side door and heading over toward where the three of them were clustered. A few heads turned toward him, but everyone focused back on their own work fast enough as he easily strode over to the three men working on their newest problem.

JP pitched himself forward, finally letting his chair drop back to all four legs as he looked at the older man who still insisted on wearing an actual tie to his 'job' in Research. "I suppose it was only a matter of time before the Office produced a magic eight ball." He admitted. "Are we done denying that fate is real and we're all puppets?"

"I'm not, fuck off." Nate said bluntly.

Davis cleared his throat. "I actually meant a solution, not a literal eight ball. Though it is an Officium Mundi solution. You can thank Chevoy for this one, actually. She's the one who thought to try it." He pulled out a printed page and handed it over, explaining as he did so. "So, we've got a few iLipedes down in the basement. Not too many, but every now and then, one follows us back, and we tend to keep the ones with interesting apps."

"Don't need the backstory." JP said.

"I'm kinda interested!" Ben offered. "I barely get a chance to explore this place! What's an iLipede? Like an iPhone millipede?"

Davis gave an approving nod to the excited young man. "Exactly! Come down sometime, you can pet one. Anyway, we've got one that shows us manufacturing specs on things it has time to process." He pointed to the paper that Nate was currently glaring at like he could incinerate the information itself with his mind powers. "So Chevoy gave it the bullet Deb pulled out of James."

“Are you *fucking* kidding me.” Nate’s voice carried a cold anger so potent that even JP flinched back from him briefly.

“It gets worse.” Davis said. “Since that worked, we tried the bullets that McHarn gave us from the scene of one of the attacks. Same result, mostly. Same manufacturer, anyway.”

“Boss?” Ben prompted, trying to look around Nate’s shoulder to see the page.

Nate handed it over, drawing a long breath through his nose. “Harlan’s Wolfpack.” He said in that bitter cold tone. “*Made* the bullet. That’s... stupid, for one thing. And I wanna say impossible. But there it is.”

“Yeah, so, unless there’s some kind of massive conspiracy, or specific magic power, to trick people who can specifically see who made bullets...” Davis shrugged. “Looks like they’re back.”

JP sighed deeply. “I was really hoping you were going to tell us you got that stupid faction orrery working and solved the case for us.”

“Oh, hah. No.” Davis chuckled. “That thing is a mess. I’ll make a project page for it for you though, so you can get updates.”

“...Thanks. I think.” JP shook his head as the Researcher left them.

“So... what now?” Ben asked. “I mean, this does solve one thing, right? The helicopter crew are Wolfpack. Obviously. We never got a good look at it the first time, but Dave did say he and Pendragon almost hit an invisible helicopter in Utah. So it’s gotta be them. But...”

“But why?” JP asked. “Who cares. Obviously they aren’t as nice as we thought, if they’re trying to kill our rogues.”

Nate stood up, shoving the page Davis gave him into the desk. “I’m gonna find a beer, and drink it.” He said. “And then, when I’m less pissed off, we’re gonna figure out what to do about this.” The man clenched a hand into a fist. “Maybe after I take that offer of going on a Sewer delve and punching the shit out of something.”

He turned to storm out of the room, his angry mood billowing out around him. Behind him, someone made a comment about how you shouldn’t touch anything in the Akashic Sewer with your hands, but Nate wasn’t listening.

He was tired, and pissed off, and that was a bad mood to do any planning in. He needed a break, and so did everyone else. Probably could have phrased it better, but this’d have to do for now.

It wasn't even that the Wolfpack was involved. Though Nate did have a personal dislike of them, and how they had twice now shown up and messed up a perfectly good plan. Well, three times, counting this one. It was more what the Wolfpack were demonstrating.

Magic bullets, invisible helicopter, long range teleportation, control of certain dungeon access points, meddling with the affairs of a bunch of different groups...

The Wolfpack felt *really* familiar. Which was why Nate was *not* comfortable being on the back foot with them.

After all. Everyone who'd been on the back foot against the Order was at this point either dead, memory wiped, or a provisional member. And he didn't think Harlan's Wolfpack would be as big on recruiting.