

*“For people who hate socialism, libertarians sure do like being publicly owned.” -Aubry G-*

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“James’ phone, this is James.” James said into the phone he’d hastily pulled out of his pocket and left on his kitchen counter as he made breakfast for his partners.

“You know that it’s impossible to dial wrong numbers these days, right?” JP’s voice, made slightly tinny through the speaker, asked him.

James rolled a sausage in the pan with one hand while the other folded a pan full of scrambled eggs. “I’ve heard that.” He said, only barely actually paying attention to JP as he let a half dozen different cooking skills guide how much salt he added to the eggs. “But what if someone had kidnapped you and was calling me for ransom? They might need to know.”

“They would still have *pushed the button for James* on my... why am I engaging with this?” JP trailed off.

“Your guess is as good as mine!” James said, plucking a sausage out of the pan with his tongs and leaning slightly to hold it out to Auberdeen, the dog gently taking the cooked meat in her teeth before shambling away to the plate she had on the living room table, the dog carefully making herself comfortable before taking small, precise bites of the sausage. “Anyway, what’s up?”

“You busy today?” JP asked.

“I’m thinking of going to the beach.” James said. Something about how JP had asked the question set his anxiety off, but he forced an easy tone regardless. “Sand. Sea. Lack of sun because it’s September.”

“I am excited for sea.” Zhu said in a soft voice, a single small translucent orange limb splitting off from James’ forearm as he helped stir the pancake batter.

James smiled. He’d made a promise to take an *actual* road trip, after all. As thanks to his navigator, Zhu, who, despite taking a name that didn’t actually work that way, insisted on the first-name-last-name format. And also the beach just sounded fun. James was considering trying to grab whoever was available at the Lair and just making a day of it. Go dig a hole in the sand and put fire in it, roast some marshmallows, build badly thought out sand castles. He knew Alanna didn’t like sand, and Anesh was busy, but it didn’t have to be a *romantic* trip. He could just grab some friends and go.

The whole quick thought process actually really highlighted to James the kind of fundamental shift in his life that had occurred, ever since ‘dungeons are real’ because a thing he had to

contend with. He had an order of magnitude more actual freedom *now*, when he regularly got in life or death fights, than when he worked at a call center.

Not that tech support wasn't important, or even that he had fewer things to worry about; if anything, James had far more responsibilities now than he ever had before. But all of those responsibilities were ones he'd accepted, or asked for, *himself*. And if he ever needed help, it was only a quick question away.

Then JP started talking again and James wondered if maybe he should invoke that ability to make someone else do the work. "We've got a rough lead on something. Maybe. I think we found where at least one of the long range shootings happened from."

"Okay." James' voice was tight. "Now, you know that I'm not the lead on this investigation. So, what went wrong?"

"The New York City police department." JP said. "Who currently have one of our rouges in custody. Almost as soon as she was in the apartment, the cops showed up. And it looks like it was meant to end badly; I think she was spamming a blue power just to keep it non lethal." JP's voice was weirdly steady as he explained to James over the speakerphone, James trying to rapidly wash his hands and put breakfast on hold as he processed the information. He handed off his spatula to Sarah as he picked the phone up and kept listening. "We don't know what kind of trap it was, but it was a trap. And it ended with our rogue in a precinct holding cell."

"Okay. Get her out." James said flatly.

"Two problems with that." JP said. "One, it would require us to use a lot of our tricks not just in public, but offensively against a police precinct."

"We already tacitly do that by doing their jobs in front of them, and I don't care. I doubt a lot of people in the Order would, but we can still seek consensus on it." James' felt anger creeping into his tone. "So teleport in and take her out of there."

"Okay. Problem two." JP paused. A hesitation James didn't usually hear from his brashly reckless friend. "We tried that." He admitted. "Almost right away."

James raised eyebrows that no one but Sarah or Auberdeen would see, tilting his head as he waited. "And...?"

"And it didn't work. Can't teleport in."

It took a minute for James to process that information. But when he started to, his brain began making a lot of connections. Connections to the last time people couldn't teleport in or out of a place. To when a small sized city with a few thousand people in it had been wiped off the maps.

It had, during the deadly events that had occurred there, been sealed off. No teleportation in or out. No actual leaving at all, really. Because the Last Line Of Defense had sealed it. Trapped the town in a way that kept everything inside, that James still didn't really know the details of.

Similarly, something like that had happened on a much smaller scale when he'd been stuck in an ambush against a member of the defunct Guild of Alchemists. A group of kids with magic that punched way above their weight class trapping roughly a city block in a dome that stopped exit as well.

His brain pinged an older memory. And he thought back to the first time he'd met something like the Last Line Of Defense. A creature that, if it ever was human, had given that up a long time ago to become something else. A weaponized individual, that he'd been calling the Old Gun. And he thought of how, in the dungeon under a high school, she'd told them something when they first faced off. That she'd *let them* teleport out.

"Uh oh!" James said enthusiastically into the phone. The way he said it got a sharp snap of a look from Sarah, who was familiar enough with him to know that when he did that, he was actually trying to convince himself not to panic. "Okay. This is... bad." James paced behind their couch as he talked. "But not impossible. Telepad effects in the immediate area?"

"Still works. Haven't literally tried it on the steps of the building, but around there is fine." JP told him with businesslike rapidity.

James nodded to himself. "Okay. Then we just need to get her - it's Lin, right? I assume it's Lin. I feel like this is what you'd send Lin out for - get her out of there, and then make a more complete evac once out of the building."

"The building that is a police precinct." JP reminded him.

"Yeah, which is why you're calling me." James said with a kind of grim determination. "Because this is gonna be a problem. Has she actually been charged with anything?" His brain started moving pieces around the board. "What's the size of the precinct? Where is it? I don't know shit about New York, this might be a challenge." He felt like he was starting to ramble to himself. "Would an infomorph be able to just walk us out? No, probably shouldn't rely on that. They've got the building fucking *warded*, we can't trust half our magic, huh?"

JP gave him some answers, and James processed the information intently. Letting the anxiety of an unexpected situation morph and change into a problem that he had the tools to solve. Because, when you got down to it, he *did*.

A city's police force had taken one of his people prisoner, when they'd *meant* to just kill her. He'd start with asking nicely for her release, but at the end of the day...

James hadn't actually been afraid of police retaliation for a while. Maybe he should have been. The Order was, after all, breaking a *lot* of laws. And as he'd seen earlier this year in Utah, members of the force were unique susceptible to a form of mind control from *something* out there. But really, he wasn't *afraid* of them.

Maybe he should be. It was probably serious hubris to think that he was bulletproof all the time. But in a situation like this, where he was on the ambusher side of a potential preemptive strike? This was a puzzle to solve, not a threat to fear. Lin - or Yin? James couldn't remember and he was actually pretty sure the girl switched her name to confuse people - wouldn't languish in a cell for long.

"Alright." James said. "I'm on my way into the Lair. I'll meet you there."

"Already here, upstairs." JP said. "Redding's coming in too, if you actually wanna start with asking nicely."

"Yeah, let's go that route before the unadulterated violence." James clicked his tongue. "See you soon." He thumbed the call away and slipped his phone into his pocket, before looking over at Sarah. "So." He started.

She looked at him with obvious concern. "Are you gonna do something stupid?" She asked, still standing in their shared kitchen over a pan of scrambled eggs.

It wasn't like James had a good answer to that. Aside from the obvious. "Yes."

"Want help?" Sarah asked. It was such a simple thing, and it came from her so easily. But it meant a lot to James. An overwhelming amount, really. She knew, these days, that when he said something like that, what he meant was that it was gonna be risky and it was gonna be dangerous. And she asked anyway, without hesitation or fear.

When James thought about the future he wanted to build, and the people he wanted to live in it, he didn't think of himself. He got angry, he wasn't as smart as he could be, and he was also profoundly lazy when allowed to be. And he was improving himself; not just getting more skill orbs or weird stat points, but *actually* improving. Learning more about the world and the connections between people, digging down to the root of what was important, trying to be kinder, trying to be happier. Becoming more mature, a *better person*. But when he thought of his ideal city, what he thought of wasn't a city populated by people like him. It was a world filled with people like Sarah. Who were also still growing, but who were just a little bit ahead of him.

Maybe he'd get there someday.

For now, though, he just answered with "Not yet. I dunno what we're gonna need, and if we need anything it might be... uh..."

“You might need to start a fight.” Sarah said. “Yeah. I know. And we’ve been preparing for that, you know? You’re not the only person in the Order, James.” She smirked at him a little. “We need a better *system* for this kind of mobilization, but we can do it. So go meet up with JP, and sort it out, and I’ll pretend that you and I swapped bodies when Anesh and Alanna wake up and I serve them breakfast.”

“Oh, they’re already awake.” James said with an honest, warm smile. “They’re just doing stuff that excludes me.”

‘...is this another sex thing?’ His best friend asked, narrowing her eyes at him. “You aren’t allowed to tell me if this is a sex thing.” Sarah blinked, and then started lightly rambling to herself. “Not that I don’t wanna be sex-positive, though. And you *are* my friend? So I guess if you wanna talk about your sex life we can do that. And, *and*, I’ve got that Sewer lesson for sex-ed anyway, which is still weird, but I also haven’t gotten sick since I got it, and I’ve changed my mind.” She nodded deliberately at him. “Alright James.” Sarah said dramatically. “Tell me about your sex life.”

“No.” James shook his head, trying not to laugh. “I mean, yeah, I’m also trying to be more sex-positive. But not, as in, no, they’re just talking about soccer. Though they were doing it in the shower, so it *might* be a sex thing? I don’t actually know. You could go ask!” He cheerfully called as he tore a page off his semi-emergency telepad. “See ya!”

“James-!” Sarah glared after him, but couldn’t stop smiling as she did so. Turning to Auberdeen, the dog daintily eating the remainder of her sausage from her vantage point on the couch. “Can *you* got get them?” She asked.

Auberdeen just woofed at her. Which, really, could mean anything. At least until Sarah got a language skill to speak Canine-English.

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“Redding.” James greeted their lawyer like he hadn’t just appeared out of thin air in the high rise office space the Order technically had the lease on. He didn’t even miss a step, just falling into step as he started walking away from the stairwell he’d just manifested next to, toward the conference table they tended to use for meetings.

“Lyle.” The lawyer’s voice was smooth and easy, showing no sign of the recent heart attack he’d experienced when someone had teleported into the space a few feet to his left. “You know, some of us have to actually drive in to the office.”

“You literally do not.” James told him. “Also, *also*, you adopted one of the new paper dragons, didn’t you? You can *fly* into the office!”

Redding cocked a thick eyebrow at James, doing a much better job of the motion than James could ever manage. “Hermes is-“

“People need to stop naming things after gods, we’re gonna run out of names.”

“-the size of a small pony. I’m a two hundred pound man, post-briefcase. And also it’s September, not good flying weather.” Redding shook his head.

“It’s thirty degrees outside in *Oregon*. I don’t even wanna know what it is here.”

“Fine, he’d catch fire then.” Jake didn’t stop walking as they talked, determined to not let James bog him down in this conversation. “What are we doing here today? I was called rather abruptly.” He didn’t exactly nod to James, but somehow physically alluded to the teleporting in, “And apparently before you were.”

“One of our rogues got arrested.” James said. “We’re going to try *diplomacy* first.”

Their organization’s lawyer stopped, and cleared his throat, getting James to pause just within reach of the living potted plant they kept in this office. “You do realize you have me on retainer as a *property law* consultant, yes?”

“Yeah, well, want to put those skill orbs to use?” James asked, swatting away a flourishing green plastic fern that was poking at his face. “Because I *know* you’ve gotten at least a half dozen yellows that an iLipede identified as ‘legal’. And I’m not saying we’re gonna charge you for them or anything, I am legitimately asking; *will you help us here?*”

Jake stared at him, before turning to glance out the pane glass windows at the city outside and giving a small snort. “Yeah, I’ll help.” He said. “Let’s go.”

The two of them rounded the corner and through the door to where they held meetings up here, with James constantly forgetting that there was actually a door there. They left it open all the time, and so it mostly just felt like there were weird glass walls sticking out from around the open area that no one had found a better purpose for than a big table and a bunch of chairs. JP was already there, coat draped over the back of a chair, talking to someone on his phone, and he looked up as the two of them entered. Said something rapid, and hung up, before focusing on the new arrivals.

“Good, you’re here. Here.” He slid what looked like a pair of pistol cases across the table. “Shorter on time than I thought.”

“Whaaaaat is this?” James asked as he spun one of the cases around and popped it open, looking at the contents with suspicious eyes. Inside, thankfully, wasn’t a gun, but instead a couple rows of orbs, two slim silver flasks, a cell phone, and a USB stick. “JP, you can’t get us drunk before an op. I don’t even drink anymore.”

“I drink.” Redding said, opening a flask and sniffing it before grimacing. “But not that.” He turned the flask over when he realized it was labeled, a thin strip of a sticker titling it ‘reading juice’. He didn’t stop grimacing.

JP scowled at them. “They’re rogue armory kits. I keep a few on hand in case I need to promote someone. Now stop fucking around and take your orbs.”

“Ah...” Jake paused, looking down at the purple orbs in the case. “Now...”

“You not okay with body modding?” James asked him, not unkindly.

“Well, I’m not saying that.” The lawyer cleared his throat. “But I’ve seen some of what these can do to people, and... oh, hell, I’m just nervous about the things.” He admitted.

James nodded. “I get that. The ones here are all tested though, and there’s a list in the... JP there should be a list in these cases. Do you not... okay, JP’s just gonna glare at us. Look, it’s not required. But also, just as an FYI, the ratroaches aren’t humans modified by orbs, if that’s what you’re thinking of.”

“I know that, I listen to the podcast report.” Jake snorted at him. “I just don’t wanna end up with knife hands or some shit.”

“Tell you what, I’ll vet them for you.” James said, and swept his hand through his own case.

[+1 Skill Rank : Language - German - 18th Century]

[+1 Skill Rank : Language - Japanese - Modern]

[+.4 Skill Ranks : Language - English - Eastern Chinese]

[+1 Skill Rank : Etiquette - Academic - European]

[+1 Skill Rank : Etiquette - Australian]

[+.8 Skill Ranks : Firearms - Pistol - Beretta 9mm]

[+1 Skill Rank : Communication - Negotiation - Contract]

[+2 Skill Rank : Perception - Spatial Awareness - Damages]

[+.3 Skill Ranks : Communication - Conversation]

[+1.3 Skill Ranks : Athletics - Running]

[Shell Upgraded : Dermal Electrical Discharge - 8,200 Volts]

[+1 Emotional Resonance Rank : Curiosity]

[Shell Upgraded : Vocal Precision - +/- .2 octaves]

[+2 Skill Ranks : Fabrication - Cookware - Clay]

[Shell Upgraded : Hearing Range - +1.3 Meters]

[Shell Upgraded : White Blood Cells - Antibody Development - +8 hours/day]

[Problem Solved : Personal data secured]

[+1 Skill Rank : Ducks]

“I have so many questions about what the fuck you guys have been doing that you need a skill orb for fucking *ducks*.” James said, shaking his head at JP.

“It’s the blue. If you’ve got your data in any marketing systems or FBI databases or anything, it scrubs it. Otherwise, it orders you a pastry from the closest bakery.”

“Why.”

“We don’t know, shut up.” JP rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Just tell him what the purples do and let’s move, please?”

James nodded, dropping the humor as it became apparent that JP was actually being serious and not just screwing with him. “Right, sorry.” He said. “Uh, Jake, voice control, hearing range, faster antibody production, and the ability to electrocute people with your hands.”

“Range like hearing dogwhistles?” Jake asked. “No, what am I saying. What was the last one again?”

“Range like literal physical range. And a mild shock you can conduct through your skin.” James flexed his hands, feeling *something* moving just under his skin. Everywhere, under his skin. It wasn’t bad, really. It was *part of him*, and it fit like it had always been there. And he was pretty sure he could push it out into whatever he was touching, if he needed to. “It’s not bad. Kinda weird though.”

“I’ll skip that one.” Jake said, and James pointed to which labeled orb it was. Rapidly, the lawyer took the rest of them, then looked up at JP. “What’s with the phone?”

“It’s a phone.” JP said. “Leave your own here for security. The USB is a mem file for evasion tactics, vetted for emotional residue. Not important, no time.” He folded his arms. “You ready?” He asked.

“Why *are* we in such a hurry all of a sudden?” James asked. “You need to keep us informed of this shit, man.” JP wasn’t the kind of guy to normally be anxious, and his obvious nerves were setting off James’ own, much deeper anxiety. “What changed, between you calling me, and me dropping breakfast to get here?”

JP’s face twisted into something like anger, before he realized that he actually hadn’t told James what the full situation was. He took a stabilizing breath, trying to hide his own emotional cracks as best he could, which was actually pretty well. JP had a lot of practice at it. “Yin’s still in the same situation. But since half an hour ago, we’ve had two different groups get almost caught out. One outside a hotel room that they found that was booked by nobody for the next month, and one leaving a rent-a-car company after asking some honestly pretty basic questions.”



“Police both times?” Redding asked, with a voice like he’d waited his whole life to be a real detective and was finally getting the chance.

JP shook his head. “That’s the thing. No. But a lot of guys each time, and both groups teleported out without getting shot. But it’s starting to feel like actually looking into this at all is a fucking trap.”

James sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Oh.” He said.

“What?” Jake asked, the lawyer too confused to be alarmed. “You see a pattern already?”

“No. Yes.” James spread his hands. “It’s a trap for *us*.” He said.

“Well yeah.” JP stared at him. “That’s the fucking problem. We need to—”

“No,” James cut him off “you don’t get it. It’s not for *us* us. It’s for people *like* us. You didn’t send people in and tell them to go for the most obscure lines of inquiry first, right?” JP shook his head, but before he could open his mouth to answer, James pressed on. “Exactly. We’re new to this, we start at the basics. Ask questions, look for leads, find where the shots came from, right? The *obvious* starting points. The obvious starting points for an investigation that *shouldn’t be happening*, because no one can remember that the attacks even *happened*.”

“Aw fuck.” JP muttered, pulling his phone out. “It’s a trap for *us*.”

The words stalled his sudden rush to get moving. JP was a lot of things, and he’d obviously changed a lot since James had last actually hung out with the guy, because ‘devoted to his people’ wasn’t something James had on his bingo card for his friend. But there it was, and obviously JP was in a hurry to get Lin out of danger. But the thought that this wasn’t just a single coincidence, but an active trap, meant that rushing into *anything* was a terrible idea.

Rushing was how people got hurt, in the dungeons. And James saw no reason to not stretch that rule out to the mundane world as well.

The mundane world... where there was some way to get at least two different groups... one of them the New York City Police Department... to violently ambush people who got too close to the truth of a specific event.

So not that mundane, really. But at least they still hadn’t actually met a real vampire yet, so things were still *within the vague realm* of normal.

All that aside, there was a difference between mounting a rescue - legal or otherwise - and walking into a trap. Not that James was *against* walking into traps; he was a big fan of the trope of just strolling into the villain’s secret lair, and had in fact gotten to do that at least once before. But JP was a bit more reserved in his theatrical heroics, and for all that Redding had been

invaluable to the Order as an interface between their nonsense and the legal technicalities of the mundane world, he *wasn't* a combatant. Or particularly dramatic.

“So, what do we do?” James asked. “I don’t have a clear plan here.” He admitted.

“I’ve got a starting point.” Redding said, slipping into the confident voice he used when he was doing actual lawyer things and not just desperately trying to keep up with the flow of madness around here. JP and James looked at him expectantly, like he’d thrown them a lifeline. “They can’t hold anyone they haven’t charged for more than forty eight hours. So let’s just go ask what she’s been charged with.”

“That still requires walking into a trap.” JP pointed out.

“No.” Jake corrected firmly. “Because the trap was obviously supposed to kill her. And because people are forgetting things around this series of events, right? So. What are the odds that, devoid of any kind of defenses, the precinct she’s in already forgot Lin is... I’m sorry, JP, is it Lin or Yin?”

“I don’t know.” JP answered honestly. “I’m actually not entirely convinced that we’re not talking about different people. Which I mostly just find kind of impressive on her part. Love a woman who can bluff being multiple other women.”

“Wow. Okay. That’s...” James refrained from following that line of thought. “So. Jake. Save us from this. You think they’ll just let her out?”

“I think they might not know why anyone got in a fight to begin with, or if it actually happened. And I really, *really* think, that with infomorphs backing us up, even if we do make them suspicious, we can just pave the evidence on the way out.”

James nodded. “JP, get EI up here. Jake... while EI is on the way, confirm this for me. You are saying that you think it’s okay to offensively wipe the memories of police officers? I’m not... ruling this plan out, I’m just checking.”

“Yeah, fuck ‘em.” The least lawyerly thing Jake had ever said slipped out of his mouth with a casual shrug. “I’m a *property law specialist*, man. I’m not academically prepared for this question. But I’m also a black guy in the US, so... draw your own conclusions.”

“Alright, fuck the police.” James said, turning to JP. “Where’s EI? Let’s get th-“ There was a snap of air and EI appeared in a kneeling position *on the conference table*, letting out a startled ‘awk!’ noise as she rolled off the edge, blonde hair trailing behind her as she slammed into the floor and popped back up like nothing had happened. “Alright, EI’s here. EI, we’re gonna go break someone out of prison, you in? JP, she’s in. Telepad. Let’s go.” James nodded to her.

“Wait for me to answer you fucker.” El gasped out as she rubbed her shoulder. “Also yeah, we’re in, fuck the police.”

From inside the wreath of her hair, a tiny voice echoed her. “Do not be silenced by violent authority!” El’s bonded infomorph and pseudo-daughter squeaked out. For someone named Speaker, she was still unbelievably shy, and even though a strong enough infomorph to stay manifested most of the time, kept hidden within El’s hair. The occasional flash of deep sea blue or ethereal green mostly just making El look like she had the world’s weirdest dye job.

“Alright.” James grinned at her. “Any objections? To this plan, before we go?”

“Should I have a gun or something?” El asked.

“No.” The other three said instantly. “Okay, no further objections from El. Grab on.” JP continued, extending a hand to James, who took it and chained it with the others, before JP unceremoniously yanked the telepad he’d already written down off the pad and sent them hurtling to somewhere else.

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In the end, the process was almost comically simple, compared to the level of panic James had as they walked up the steps to the precinct.

Yes, he admitted to himself, he wasn’t actually that concerned about police *retaliation*. But that didn’t mean that his gut didn’t turn to knots when he walked up to their front door and dared them to do something. They maybe couldn’t find his home office, but they still had guns, grenade launchers, APCs, and outdated brutalist attitudes toward use of violence. Though, also being fair, these specific police probably didn’t know who he was personally.

But it hadn’t gone that way. Instead, Jake and JP had introduced themselves as lawyers here to see a client, the sergeant at the front desk had been mildly unpleasant, but had ultimately directed them to the part of the building they needed to be in, and James and El had followed with no one fully able to focus on them long enough to kick them out. Though James filed the fact that JP just introduced himself as a lawyer away under ‘ask about that later’.

They’d talked to someone else, followed an actual guide to another part of the building, and just like that, had a room to talk to Lin in.

She did not look good. A bruise roughly the shape and size of Alaska covered half her face, her shirt was missing a sleeve, and that arm had a mess of bandages on it. Some of her hair was matted with what James suspected was blood, but he didn’t ask, as he and El needed to keep quiet to let their infomorphs keep doing their job.

“What can I say?” She asked.

“The basics, nothing classified.” JP told her, glancing around the meeting room they’d been put in. There were windows with old blinds, most of which were shut. It seemed like almost no security for a prisoner, but then, it made sense. There was no record of Lin being violent or an escape risk. “But keep it quick.”

“I didn’t even get through the door before they showed up.” She said rapidly. “Called you halfway through the fight, so you know the end. Used the blue that makes plans to scramble them. I don’t think they *had* a plan, you know? They were really confused afterward. Didn’t know why they were arresting me, one of them said he didn’t know why they’d bothered coming out this far for a noise complaint.”

“They didn’t have records on hand for me.” Redding said. “I’m new to this, but they should have. What were you charged with?”

“Drunk in public, or something.” Lin told him, wincing as she turned too fast. “Why?”

“I’ll be right back.” Redding said, slipping out of the room. JP glanced back at EI, and nodded after the lawyer, and she gave a vicious grin and followed him, the ghostly tail of fins and eyes trailing down her neck trailing after her.

JP turned back to Lin. “Alright. Bad news first.” He set a telepad on the table, and Lin’s eyes flickered with brief relief before he tapped it and softly said, “Doesn’t work here.” Her face fell in an instant, though she tried to cover it. “Good news, Redding knows more about criminal law than he lets on, and worst case scenario, we just walk out of here with you.”

“...Thanks.” The young woman said. “I... kinda worried.”

“We know who we are.” JP said, and the two of them shared a snort of laughter, making James feel like the outsider looking at an inside joke playing out. “Okay. So, assessment?”

“Outside control.” Lin said almost instantly, glancing over JP’s shoulder to James, frowning as her eyes tried to focus on him. He waved, a flutter of incorporeal orange feathers trailing off his hand as he did so, Zhu keeping his visit from being interrupted. Not *quite* the same as being invisible, but pretty close. “I remember the Utah thing. The way the cops moved there? They moved like that. Like they were fucking zombies or something.”

JP sighed, and James suppressed a spike of fear as he glanced toward the door. “Shit.” JP said simply. “Okay. That’s... bad. That means a lot of things.” He broke off as the door opened, and Jake walked back in, followed by a uniformed officer with a mustache that made him look like he was preparing to tie a kidnapped woman to some train tracks somewhere. “Yeah?” JP asked simply.

“You’re free to go.” The officer said, tossing a document onto the table. “Don’t leave town, in case someone needs to talk to you, and don’t get in trouble again for a while.” He probably didn’t mean it in an unkind way, but it took a lot of willpower for James to not laugh out loud. Or punch him. The officer’s eyes slid over James as he turned to leave, pausing only briefly as he stared at the corner of the room. James gave a hostile smile, and waved, but the officer just shrugged and walked out.

Redding casually pulled a chair out and sat down. “You were arrested for drunk and disorderly, but no one ever administered a BAC test. Also there’s no record from your arresting officer, no record of you being booked, and, wouldn’t you know it, it doesn’t seem like there’s even a trail of in-car GPS or body cam footage for anything at that location for the last day. Which is shockingly unsubtle, and we should talk to EI when we get back about that, but for now... well, they *could* hold you for a few days to come up with a charge. But I let them know that we’d be happy to forget about how much their precinct dropped the ball, if that didn’t happen. Ready to go?”

“Can I get my stuff back?” Lin asked.

“There’s no record of any of your possessions being logged as evidence.” Redding said.

Lin’s face fell again, but she took a small breath and nodded anyway, letting JP and Jake flank her as they left the building. James tagged along behind, starting to enjoy the experience of being an almost unseen ghost in this building.

He’d never actually been in an operational police station before. There were more desks than he’d expected, and more people just moving around from place to place. The halls were too small, the walls absolutely covered in papers and notices that he didn’t know how anyone had the time to read.

The walk was pretty long, and they had to wait for an elevator for several minutes, but eventually, the four of them stepped out into a back parking lot and headed for the street.

“That was easy.” James commented, and Lin let out a yell that turned from surprised to violent as she spun and aimed an open handed strike at his neck. He jerked back, still getting hit on the cheek, yelling in surprise himself. “Ow! Why?!”

“Where did you come from!?”

“I’ve been here the whole time!” James protested. “I waved at you!”

“I know! I didn’t know!” Lin yelled back. “Wait, did you mind control the police? Is that why this worked so well?”

“No, but EI might have.” JP admitted.

Redding cleared his throat, looking around the New York sidewalk. There was a steady flow of people, but most of them weren't even pretending to pay attention to the group. "Actually, it was mostly easy because they're not interested in more attention right now." He said. "Being forced to rehire all their anti-vax officers is getting them bad press, and 'police beat and arrest young Asian-American woman, do not know why they did it' is *not* a good headline." He looked around again, like he was searching for something. "Does anyone know where EI actually is?"

"She was with you." James told him.

"No, we split off. I was serious when I said they didn't record a lot of things." Jake gave James a grim look. "They literally just threw her in a cell and walked off, and no one remembered it."

"Okay, worrying." James said, pulling out his phone to text EI.

But before he could, she popped up at his elbow. "What'cha'll waiting for?" She asked, handing a small box to Yin, who took it with a confused look that quickly turned excited as she cracked it open and saw her personal effects inside. EI pointedly did not hand anyone else the other two boxes she had under her arm.

"Where were you?" James asked her.

"Evidence lockup." EI said with a sharkish grin. "Good news. We can't teleport through the building, but we sure can just walk out with whatever!"

James screwed his eyes closed, trying to not get angry about how stupid that risk was right ow. "Let's go find somewhere we can teleport out of here without attracting too much more attention than literally robbing the police." He said. "And I can be very disappointed in EI once we're back in the Lair."

It didn't take long. And James reappeared back at their base with two conflicting feelings in his chest. One, that it was comforting to be somewhere he knew had a measure of security, and his own people around. And two...

That it really had been easy. Alarmingly easy, really. Maybe whoever had put this all together just hadn't been expecting press-shy cops and bad record keeping to be their undoing. Maybe abusing navigator and assignment powers to bend information and memory and perception around themselves was just too much of an advanced edge against anyone who didn't have some kind of defense against that.

Or maybe there was something else going on.

Lin agreed, almost the instant he shared that thought, and they dragged Planner's attention away from whatever they were doing to pick Lin over for any sign of an alien informorph, while

JP and Reed went over her belongings for anything that looked like it might have been a planted bug.

But there was nothing there. And James didn't want good caution to tip over into paranoia. So he chalked this up as something that wasn't exactly a *win*, but was a smooth recovery from a potential disaster. JP and Nate pulled back a lot of their investigating rogues, settling for trying to poke at the edges of the attacks and be nearby should 'anything happen', instead of poking their collective noses straight into the problem. But either way, they were still no closer to actually knowing *what was going on*.

It was entirely possible that the killers had already done their work, Nate told him. That the political angle was all a smokescreen to cover a relatively simple hit. That there would be no followup attack..

But it was also possible things were going to get worse. And the Order was on the back foot again, out of position and unable to respond to the very thing they were *desperately trying* to keep people safe from.

James hated that feeling. Hated feeling like the world was too big and he was too small and he and his people couldn't be everywhere and help everyone. And the worst part was, they were *so close* to being able to do so much more. Like they'd been on the edge of being more active and more useful for the last few months, but not quite tipping over.

"I think we need more people." James had told a few people. Nate, Harvey, Karen, the people who were more or less in charge of parts of the Order. "I dunno if now is a good time, but I think we should bring in some more hands for this. For everything."

And every one of them had, almost instantly, handed him options. He had a whole batch of interviews or interview-adjacent meetings lined up for the next few days.

But today, it was still not even noon, he still hadn't had breakfast, and he had a promise he actually intended to keep, providing a police department on the other side of the country didn't notice his antics and start causing problems.

Which was why James, in the middle of a Pacific Northwest September, stepped off the elevator into the main floor of the Lair wearing sunglasses and carrying a beach ball.