

We collectively stepped over the several kobold corpses, heading further into the cave. The massive space dwarfed any underground structure I had ever been in and felt like a massive auditorium. As we crossed the large room, I suddenly stopped, looking around to realize we were crossing a natural stone bridge over a slowly flowing pond of water. We tried to see the bottom or even the edges since it seemed to continue under the cave itself, but our lights just weren't up to the task, even if the water was crystal clear.

"Do you think the water was already here?" Barry asked as we stepped off the bridge onto the other side. "Or did the system make it?"

"It's flowing," Kate pointed out. "Has to come from somewhere."

"Danten isn't exactly known for its underground cave systems," I pointed out. "but there's no real way to know."

The water debate settled for now, and we crossed the final distance to the raised platform. When we reached the steps up, we stopped and looked around, all of us shifting uncomfortably.

"Anyone else feeling that?" I asked, looking around before focusing on the blue crystal.

It was a solid, light blue cluster of crystals, looking like a wild array of geometric shapes. What little I knew about crystals and rocks told me that it was unlikely to have a pyramid-like growth fused to a chunk of more rectangular growth, attached to a hexagonal base, connected to a different pyramid, and so on and so forth. It was kind of a mess of crystal growths and protrusions, but it still somehow looked like it had grown like that.

"Yeah, feels like the hairs on my neck are standing up on end," Barry said, shivering slightly.

"Like I can feel the power coming off of it, but I don't know what sense is picking it up," Jessica added.

"It's creepy," Kate said simply.

"Yeah... I suddenly don't want to touch this thing directly," I admitted. "Anyone got any gloves?"

When everyone confirmed that they didn't, which, to be fair, I fully expected, I passed Jessica my spear, the younger woman clipping her machete to her hip before taking my weapon. I then carefully pulled my jacket off, playing with it for a minute as I found the best way to use it as a barrier between me and the crystal.

Once I was ready, I climbed the steps, stopping and reaching out with my jacket. I expected to have to yank the crystal free, maybe even have to use the spears to snap it off of the larger stone plinth. So when I pulled hard on the chunk of shining rock, and it came free without resistance, I stumbled back a step, cursing under my breath. Thankfully, I caught myself before the edge of the platform.

I spent another minute securing the crystal by trying off my sleeves and carefully zipping my jacket up before slowly making my way back down the stairs.

"How heavy is it?" Barry asked.

"Lighter than I expected, but it still feels like stone," I explained. "It's bizarre, and the sooner I can get rid of it, the better."

We quickly headed back through the cave, over the bridge and the kobold corpses. Since I was now basically unarmed, I was in the center of the group, with Kate and Jessica in the lead and Barry behind me. We continued that way all the way to the last cave, where we finally stopped.

"Someone grab a bunch of the mushrooms, and someone else grab a bunch of the fruits. Keep them separate in case one of them is pure cyanide or something," I said, stopping near the entrance to the final stretch of the cavern interior. "Make sure not to touch anything for the same reason."

Jessica and Kate both nodded and started pulling off their jackets before I raised my hand and called out.

"You know what, on second thought, let's not sacrifice your jackets," I said, both of them stopping. "Why don't we head out of the cave, grab a cart and come back. I'm sure we can find a couple of backpacks or bags around the school."

We quickly left the cave behind, dropping the crystal off in the kiddie carrier, before disconnecting one of the carts and leading it back to the cave, or at least the pool room. While Kate and I were doing that, Barry and Jessica went out to search for bags, quickly returning with a backpack and a large canvas tote, as well as some towels. Together, we went back down into the cave system, where Jessica and Barry used their towels to gently pick the mushrooms and large green fruits, which Barry was already calling root fruits.

We debated dragging one of the kobolds out to bring back with us but eventually decided against it. While I didn't think they were quite sapient, they were alive enough to at least crudely communicate, which meant eating or carving up one for parts was a bit beyond the pale. When our gathering was done, Barry and Jessica carefully put their now full bag on their backs or around their shoulder before we finally made our way out of the cave system.

Once outside, we unloaded it into the cart, and it didn't take long for us to drag it back to the entrance and hook it back up to the bike. Once we were set, we pulled the bikes out of the front entrance, stopping just in front of the school. Before we left, I used my walkie-talkie to warn the bastion we were on our way home, which we agreed was smart so that the civilians got a chance to clear out of the large area around the main building. While the small monsters couldn't make it through the bastion barrier, if we were getting chased by something bigger, like a dino-dog, it would be better if there wasn't anyone out and about.

We arrived back at the bastion without much issue. By that point, we had traveled the route between the school enough that everyone, save Kate, knew it by heart. Unfortunately, we ran into a scene about halfway back. A pair of raptor corpses, torn to pieces, surrounded by large footprints that could only be from more Dino-dogs. It seems that the three we killed were not the only ones in the city. This was also our first undeniable example of a monster killing another monster. It was good that we weren't the only ones in danger, though it did make me worried that the more dangerous beasts would eventually kill off the smaller, easier-to-hunt ones.

After arriving back, we quickly unloaded everything, carrying them up to the kitchen living area and showing off what we had gotten. Everyone felt the same way about the crystal as we did, and thankfully, Sally had a simple explanation for it.

"It's putting off enough magic for you to feel," She explained, floating around the crystal, which I had placed on one of the tables. "It's not much, but enough for even people with low magic affinities to feel. Normally, by now, you would be exposed to enough magic that you would be used to it, but with the system failing to initiate, actual sources of magic are rare. "

"What about our spells?"

"That magic is stable, and technically not yours, but the bastions," She explained. "It's safely sealed in your tattoo, so you hardly feel it at all."

We spent some time discussing the magic around the crystal before Barry brought attention to his pack, filled with mushrooms.

"What about the mushrooms and fruit we found?" He asked. "There was a lot of it in the cave. If we harvested it responsibly, it represents a significant amount of food."

"If it's edible," Jessica added.

"The hardware store should have some stuff to test water, which should work if we blend them up into water first," Alissa pointed out. "Plus, if we go back to the Urgent Care, we could probably test for some more stuff."

"The fire station had some testing equipment as well," Charles pointed out. "I would have to check to see if we brought that with us."

"Sally, how sure are you that our healing spell will fix poisons?" I asked, looking over at the floating projection. "You mentioned it would before..."

"Depends on its level of lethality," She admitted. "With enough people casting it, though, there isn't much it wouldn't take care of."

"Alright, so we test them both as much as we can, then... I'll-"

"Then someone will have to volunteer," Amelia said, sitting down beside me. "We have plenty of people here, Aiden. No reason you have to shoulder that burden by yourself."

I winced and looked around, seeing that a few of the civilians looked willing, as did most of the people who had gone on jumps with me. I sighed and nodded in understanding.

"Fine, alright. We run tests first, then we can all switch to healing spells, and someone can test them," I said with a nod. "But only one person and test at a time, in case it's some sort of super system poison and we need most of the people to cure them."

"That seems unlikely," Sally said. "Such a potent poison would not be so simply available. It would most likely need to be made through other means."

"Better safe than sorry," I responded. "Now... it's time to see if all our work was for nothing. How are you going to use this crystal, Sally?"

"I will need to bring it into my heart," She explained. "Or, most specifically, I will need you to carry it so I can bring you both into my heart."

I nodded and, now with a pair of leather gloves, grabbed the crystal. Before we disappeared, Sarah spoke up.

"What should we do?" She asked. "Should we leave the building or something?"

"If you would like to watch the changes happen, you should leave the bastion and travel to the edge of the barrier and look in," Sally explained. "However, you should be fine if you remained inside. Unless he purposely modifies them, nothing will change to already created interiors."

"Probably best to leave," I said, getting a solid nod of agreement from Sarah, who immediately began guiding everyone out of the building.

Sally and I waited, watching as the entire building emptied out. The last person to leave was George, who looked rough and pale and was assisted by Alissa and Amelia. Once everyone was gone, I counted to ten before giving Sally a nod. A split second later, and we were in the familiar, rune-covered room that contained Sally's actual body.

"I will need you to place the crystal into the central beam," Sally said, her actual body pulsing slightly as she did. "Below my body, if you would."

I nodded and stepped closer, carefully pushing the crystal into the beam of light. The more I pushed inside, the lighter the crystal got until, eventually, it was floating there on its own. Its odd, almost random structure looked strange, floating under Sally's much more refined, simple, and darker blue shape.

After a moment of silence, I opened my mouth to ask what was next, only to snap it shut as the crystal started to decay and fracture, shards breaking off and fizzling into nothing, seeming to be absorbed down into the beam. It only took a minute for the crystal to entirely disappear.

"Ah! That's it, the process is worked perfectly," Sally said once the absorbing process was complete. "Are you ready to design the addition?"

"Yeah, how are we-"

I couldn't help but yelp when suddenly we were floating above the bastion. Similar to when Sally first built it, I could look around and see the entire open space. I could even see everyone grouped together, about a hundred feet from the barrier and much further from the bastion itself. Unlike before, however, we were closer to the bastion, probably so I could see any changes up close.

"Fucking hell Sally! Maybe a little warning next time?" I asked, shaking my head as we floated there. "Okay... Jesus... How much energy do we have? How much of a change will we be able to make?"

"That... Let me show you."

A chunk of stone, a copy of what the bastion was made out of, suddenly appeared next to it. Judging by the fact that nobody watching even reacted, it must have been an illusion. The chunk was roughly square-shaped and was about a meter shorter than the bastion walls.

"This is a rough estimation of how much total mass I will be able to make," Sally explained. "It is not exact, as mass is not my only constraint, but I will warn you as we get close to the limit. Just keep in mind that normal walls will likely be one-to-one mass wise, but creating rooms and space while adding in detailed structure will be at a much less efficient ratio."

"Alright... well, let's start by adding some walls..."

We spent about fifteen minutes going back and forth, trying to design a proper addition. Eventually, we settled on creating a large addition off of the side of the bastion where the parapet entrance to the storage was. The addition was sizable, a large rectangular structure surrounded by the same parapets as the central bastion, only thinner, about two meters wide. It was also three meters lower than the original, connected by a set of stairs, to compensate for the lack of materials. The walls were still solid and five or six meters tall, so it was still safe from things like Dino-Dogs.

In the end, the addition was a large rectangle with the same footprint as the original tower, turning the entire structure into a longer stretch. In the middle of the addition was a simple building, with one floor above the parapet level and one below, the bottom mostly empty for more storage, and the floor on top split into rooms. Half the top structure consisted of eight nearly identical double bedrooms, similar to what we had on the main tower's second floor. The other half was a living, kitchen, and dining area similar to what we had in the main tower, but slightly larger much larger. This meant a new space for sixteen people, more storage, and plenty of space for them to cook, eat, and congregate.

The actual building process began when we were finally confident in the design. Just like when the bastion was first built, the ground was erased, and the foundation soon appeared from thin air. Next was a surrounding of gravel, and the solid stone walls surged upwards. The building was the last thing to form, growing out and over the storage area below.

When the process was finally complete, I snapped back to myself, still in Sally's heart, before immediately reappearing back inside the bastion. Sally followed behind me as I made my way down the stairs to the parapets, then around to see the newest addition. Already, some of the kids were running up the stairs, eyes full of wonder, having just witnessed the creation of a new bit of castle from nowhere.

"I plan on adding a second floor full of just rooms with the next crystal we find. It should be nearly more rooms sixteen, so thirty-two beds," I explained as Sarah and Charles made their way to me, Barry and Jessica were not far behind. "After that, I was thinking about building some walls to keep the larger monsters out."

As I explained myself, people started moving into the new space, exploring the rooms and eventually choosing quarters for themselves. Some people were tempted to try and claim an entire room for themselves since we appeared to have extra, but I squashed that quickly. I pointed out that if you were staying in a room by yourself, you had no way of knowing who would be filling the other bed eventually. At least picking someone to live with now meant you could pick the person. That settled the issue pretty quickly.