

We appeared right where we had left, in the Bastion kitchen. A few people were sitting around, nursing mugs of tea or coffee, all of them jumping a bit when we arrived, but as a whole, the group quickly calmed down. Among them were Charles and Sarah, the other two civilians who had come with us, as well as a few others. George was sitting just a few feet away, wrapped up in a thick blanket, looking like warm death rolled over. Alissa was sitting next to him, listening to his pulse, a compressor band around his arm as the nurse counted under her breath. As she finished her count, we stretched and tried to shake off post-jump pins and needles.

As the pins and needles, the intense sensation of returning to your original body faded, I claimed a seat at the nearest table. George managed to nod as I sat down by him, while Alissa gave me a look from beside him. Jason was also there, standing beside him, looking unsure and nervous. I had barely settled down when Charles and Sarah joined us, and before long, most of the seats were taken, the newcomers leaning in intently.

"How you feeling, George?" I asked sympathetically. "What happened, anyway? I woke up and... well it was already to late."

"I feel like death," He said, lifting his head to look at Barry. "You're full of shit, kid. I don't know what flu you catch, but this ain't it."

"I mean, I did say it was like a really, I really bad flu," He pointed out. "Maybe age makes it worse."

The older man gave the boy a hard look, Barry wincing as he realized what he said, mumbling out an apology. George let out a long groan and leaned over the table. After a long moment he continued.

"I fucked up," He explained, shaking his head. "Forgot where I was. I thought I saw something moving in the shadows, but it was too fast for a zombie, so I thought maybe it was a person crawling around or something. I got closer to the windows to look, and one of them burst through, taking me to the ground. Then one of them go their teeth on my neck..."

He stopped then, shivering violently, in a way that made me doubt it was because he was cold. Alissa, who was still sitting next to him, patted his back. We paused for a while, all of us needing a moment settle after the long few days we had just endured. Eventually, Charles curiosity overwhelmed his empathy.

"So... how did the rest of it go?"

"It went... as about as well as it could. We have been fortunate that all of the missions we have got so far have been doable," I admitted Sally, who had appeared over my shoulder, humming in agreement. "This was the longest jump so far, which took a toll. We spent two days escorting the doctor through the city before hopping into a river. Save the dogs and an ambush

by a pair of lickers, the trip was mostly slogging through small groups of zombies, sneaking through the city."

"It wasn't fun," Barry said, shaking his head. "Gonna be having some interesting dreams I think."

All of us winced, and I couldn't help but nod in agreement. We had done our best to ignore the mental stress, putting it off so that we could complete our task and return... but it was still there. I was exhausted despite technically being in the same exact physical state as I had been before we left.

"I think... we are going to take the rest of today off," I said, shaking my head. "I know we had planned on heading out to the school later today... But we need some time."

Some of the civilians, many of them having slept outside on the ramparts in tents and lean-toos, did not look particularly happy about the news. To their credit, no one denied we earned a rest. After chatter spread through the group for a moment, I raised my hands to get everyone to settle down.

"I know it's not the best news in the world. I want to get you guys in proper places to sleep just as much as you do. Every person who has a place to stay gives us a bigger edge at surviving," I pointed out. "But we just can't. We need time to recover from that hell first. If it makes it any better, we could move some stuff around here and in storage to make a little extra room. If we stack the tables and do some moving, we might have enough room to house everyone inside. But this is not a permanent solution, so please don't assume that if the POI crystals don't work, then you will be living in here."

"What should we do in the meantime?" Sarah asked, holding her glass of what looked like coffee.

"For now, just enjoy the day," I said with a shrug. "If anyone really wants to keep busy, there are two apartment buildings right next to the bastion, both of those should be clear. A quick check to confirm that, and you could spend some time grabbing anything useful from them. But again, you don't have to."

"What would we be looking for?" A man asked, a potbellied older gentleman with thick glasses and a receding hairline.

"Food, supplies, hell, even entertainment. Don't forget the bastion powers small to medium-sized devices, as long as the total solid mass would fit in a cubic foot."

The mention of powered entertainment seemed to intrigue more than a few people. We spent a few minutes more discussing what they could do before Barry poked my shoulder.

"George needs to crash," he said, nodding to the clearly struggling man. "But he isn't going to leave until we do the rewards."

"Right, fair enough. Sally?"

The blue crystal projection bounced away from my shoulder to float over the center of the table, bobbing slightly as she went. Having heard our conversation, everyone around us quieted down, listening intently.

"Congrats on completing another successful jump!" she said happily. "Your first reward option is quite interesting! All residents get the ability to imbue a spell into their simple weapon. What happens next will depend on the weapon and the spell, but it will have some sort of effect, including potentially magnifying the spell's power, range, delivery method, or more!"

"That...interesting... but what exactly does it mean? What does the imbument do? And what qualifies as simple?" I asked, trying to imagine what Sally meant.

"That depends on the spell and the weapon!" Sally answered. "And simple weapons are stuff like spears, swords, and bows!"

"Any guarantees that they won't be useless?" Jessica asked.

"Nope! Imbueing a sword would probably make your healing pretty useless!"

"Fine, what's the alternative?"

"The alternative is that you alone get a fifteen percent increase in your strength and dexterity," She explained. "This buff will be mostly conceptual rather than actually tangible, independent of your actual strength and dexterity."

"I... Just what kind of effects could imbuing weapons have?" I asked. "Do you have any more information about it?"

"It's tied to the nature of the spell and the nature of the weapon," She explained. "Match them poorly, and it will likely just change the form of the spell with no real increase to damage or range or anything. But if you manage to line them up then you could see genuine shifts in power levels or effects."

"If I may..." One of the civilians said, raising their hand to get our attention. "What's the likelihood of you getting more magic beyond our four minor spells?"

"Quite likely! Magic was a very large part of the system, so there are dozens of small bits of infrastructure I can use that pertain to it," Sally answered happily. "Plus, it is already a semi-frequent option without that."

"So, even if none of our current spells work well with what we have, the likelihood that we find something eventually is pretty high," I finished, nodding to the civilian, who smiled in return. "Good call. I think that settles it. As much as I would like to increase my own abilities, it isn't a worthy option. The larger and larger our group grows, the less one individual being particularly powerful matters. Let's go with the spell imbuelement, Sally."

"Are you sure?"

"Unless anyone thinks otherwise?" I asked, looking around. When no one spoke up, I nodded to my construct partner.

"Alright! Commencing Reality Adjustment!"

Sally let off a bright pulse of light, almost too bright to look at. After a moment the light faded, leaving all of us a bit blinded. When we recovered, Barry looked around, then down at his hands.

"I don't feel any different," He said with a frown.

"You didn't feel after we got magic, either," Jessica pointed out. "Sally, how do we imbue our weapons?"

"Just cast the magic through the weapon," She explained. "Super simple!"

Rather than rush off to start testing stuff, the jump team split up and left the gathering area, save for Kate, who assured us she was fine. Charles and Sarah took control of the situation, talking about experiments and what everyone was going to do as I stepped away. As I was climbing the stairs to my room, Amelia, who had been hanging back in the crowd, moved to follow me. She looked steady and completely recovered as she joined me on the stairs.

"How are you doing?" She asked as we climbed, her voice just as gentle as it had been when she first woke up. "It sounded like it was a rough time..."

"It... was rough, to be honest," I admitted, stopping at the top of the stairs, leaning against the railing. "It's funny, we arguably lived through a worse world-ending event... but somehow the zombie apocalypse felt worse. More visceral."

"I can imagine. Here, our fallen turned to dust. There, the fallen get back up again and try to pull you down too," She said, shivering and wrapping an arm around herself. "It sounds absolutely horrible."

"That... yeah, that about sums it up," I admitted, shaking my head. "I think... I think it was probably our worst jump yet, in terms of stress and shock, at least. But we made it, got our mission done, and earned our reward."

"Doesn't mean it didn't cost you," She pointed out. "I'm glad you decided to take some time, even though I think you should have taken a few more."

"Yeah, I wish we could as well," I said with a chuckle. Unfortunately, we need to start expanding. I'm hoping that if these POI are actually the key to expanding the bastion, we will be able to start pushing out further into the surrounding area. Who knows how many survivors are around us and what kind of danger they may be in?"

"I understand. There's not much time for taking it easy and letting yourself recover," Ahe agreed. "I just wish I could help more. I'm afraid I'm much like Roger. I would only get in the way if I left the bastion."

"There are plenty of ways you can help without jumping or helping us explore," I assured her with a smile. "People working here will be just as important as people going out and exploring."

"I know. I'm sure I will find something to contribute," She agreed. "I just don't like being unproductive in the meantime."

"I'm sure- " I started to say before closing my mouth and tilting my head, an idea popping into my head. "You know... there are some kids here, and I'm hoping that number will go up. They are going to have a lot of free, empty time on their hands. I know you were a high school teacher, but eventually, we will need to worry about educating the younger kids...."

"Oh... you know that's a good point," she agreed, perking up quite a bit at my suggestion. "We obviously wouldn't need to worry about everything, but reading, writing, and basic math would still be important... That's a good thought! Thank you, Aiden."

"No problem. I'm glad I could help," I said with a smile. "Who knows, if these crystals work the way Sally hopes they will, we might be able to make you a classroom eventually."

"And here I was trying to make sure you were okay, and you ended up making me feel better," She said, her smile shining just a few lumens brighter.

"Well, that makes me happy, at least, so it looks like we both succeeded."

We laughed before I excused myself to go to my room. Sally gave me one final smile before making me promise to find her if I found myself needing to talk or vent. I agreed, before watching her return downstairs to the dining room. When she was gone, I turned back to my room, opened and closed the door, and flopped down into my bed.

"Sally," I said, my voice muffled by my pillow.

"Yes, Aiden?" My partner asked, floating somewhere above me.

"Wake me up in a few hours," I instructed. "I need a nap."

Surprisingly, despite still being weighed down by everything I was still wearing, I fell asleep pretty quickly. Unfortunately, it was almost immediately apparent that Barry had been right. After the third time waking up with a zombie, this time a zombified George, chewing on my neck, I gave up on sleep and climbed out of bed.

I made my way out of my room, stopping at the top of the stairs to let out a long breath. When I was done, I put on the best rested and calm face that I could before making my way down. The younger kids were sitting at the tables, doodling on coloring books, while Amelia sat nearby, reading a book. She looked up to check the kids, spotted me, and smiled, but her smile dimmed as she somehow saw straight through my put-on face. I waved off her concern and gave her a double thumbs up before stepping out the door and making my way down to the parapet.

As I made my way down I spotted Danny and Charles, the latter of which was once again wearing a clean fire chief shirt, which somehow looked freshly ironed. He spotted me coming and waved me over.

"Hey, Chief," I said with a nod. "How did the experiments go?"

"Well... The good news is that we got a real strong reaction from the flame burst and the spears," He explained. "Turns the burst into an actually focused blast of flame. Real dangerous, already got a few burns, but thankfully, the kids healed them up quick. The bad news is that nothing else is really stuck. They worked, but nothing new or interesting. Tried that old machete, and nothing interesting happened with it either."

"That...might mean something," I said after thinking for a moment. "I mean, if anything has a connection to fire, it's a dragon tooth. And the fact that nothing interesting happened with the machete-"

"Means that it might only work with stuff we make from monsters," Danny finished while nodding. "We got that, yeah. Roger is already working on a few more things using Dino-Dog parts and the dragon claws, but we could use more variety."

"Well... it's a good thing there's a large chance the Pool Cave has something new," I said, shaking my head. "For better or worse."