

We walked quickly through the streets, Jessica beside me and Barry walking just behind her, to her left. As we moved between buildings, cutting between two shops with smashed front windows and obvious signs of looting, I considered how my two new friends would react to the bastion. Part of me wanted to broach the subject beforehand, mainly to keep them from freaking out too badly, but I had no idea what I could say. Especially because the few things that did occur to me made me sound suspicious as fuck, and would probably make them turn around and leave.

As strange and fucked up as the last few had been, I'm not sure I would follow someone who said they were going to lead me to a magic castle where everyone is safe.

Eventually, I gave up that train of thought and focused on just getting back home. Thankfully, we didn't run into any problems, somehow managing to cross through the town unimpeded. When we finally turned the last corner, and the massive clearing around the bastion came into view, both Jessica and Barry froze, the latter almost walking into the former.

"What... where did that come from?" She asked, looking around as if to confirm we were where she thought we were. "What is that? This clearing wasn't there before... We were just through this area four or five days ago..."

"It's the bastion," I answered. "And it hasn't been here that long. That's why you don't recognize it."

"I... There were apartments here..." Barry said. "A friend of mine used to live in one of them..."

"Yeah... a lot of stuff was cleared out when it was being put together," I explained before starting to walk again. "C'mon, I've already been away much longer than I said I was going to be."

It took a few more prompts to get the two to move, but eventually, they did, following after me with still confused looks on their faces. That confusion only got more and more intense as they got a better and better view of the large field. They stopped again when the bastion itself came into view.

"What the hell is that?" Jessica asked again. "There... I don't..."

"I promise, I can explain inside, where we don't have to worry about hungry monsters," I said, nodding towards the bastion. "Please, just follow me."

Finally, after getting them to follow again, we stepped out onto the clearing, my two younger friends nervously walking out onto the grass. Before I could even open my mouth to call for her or warn our guests that she was coming, Sally appeared in front of us.

"Hello! I-"

The loud report of a shotgun blast going off echoed across the field. Thankfully, it was only a single shot, but it was still deafening. I whirled around with my hand on my pistol, only to find Jessica aiming squarely at Sally, who was now silently floating. By some miracle, Sally hadn't appeared in front of anyone, so Jessica's quick reaction time didn't get anyone hurt.

For a long moment, we stood there frozen until, eventually, I stepped forward, slowly reaching out and pushing the barrel of Jessica's shotgun downward. She held it steady for a moment before reluctantly letting it go down. If her face was anything to go by, it was only her wonder and confusion that let me get away with it.

"I think... we should head inside, where I can properly explain what is going on," I said calmly. "And Sally here can *Apologize* for catching you off guard."

Reluctantly, after a moment of thinking, Jessica nodded, and slowly, the tension released in both Barry and Jessica.

"Y-yeah... C'mon Jessica, we should get inside anyway... shooting attracts the creatures," Barry pointed out, Jessica eventually nodding in agreement.

I led the duo to the bastion, slowly making our way up the two flights of stairs. I paused at the door, my hands on the thick metal reinforcements built into the wood. I turned to Sally, who had been floating along beside me silently.

"Go tell Alissa we have guests and that everything is okay," I instructed, the projection bobbing once before vanishing.

I waited several seconds before pushing on the door, which unlocked with a solid clunking sound, allowing us to step inside. Alissa was hobbling away from a hidden corner of the room, dropping heavily into one of the chairs. She was holstering the pistol I had given her, looking annoyed but trying to push it down.

"You better hope the barrier or whatever it is stands up to whoever comes looking for that gunshot," She said, shaking her head, annoyance clear in her voice. "I-"

"Alissa, it wasn't her fault. Sally decided to do her appearing act to someone who was clearly armed and on edge," I explained, looking at the projection crossly.

"I apologize," Sally said simply, her usual bubblyness completely gone. "It won't happen again."

I continued to eye her for a second before gesturing for Jessica and Barry to come in, walking further into the first floor.

"Come in, sit down. Do either of you want anything to drink?" I asked, stepping over to the fridge, grabbing myself a beer, and putting my bags down gently by the stairs.

"I would prefer an explanation," Jessica said.

"I'll have something," Barry said, the slightly older woman looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "What? I haven't had a cool drink in a whole week."

Jessica rolled her eyes, but I chuckled and returned to the fridge, grabbing a soda before sitting beside Alissa. Silently, I passed him the cold can, which he took eagerly. He cracked it and took a sip quickly, visibly straining to not make any additional sounds as he put the can down.

"So... what the hell is going on?" Jessica asked after another short pause.

"Alright, so do me a favor and keep an open mind..."

I spent about thirty minutes explaining just exactly what was going on. Sally cut in occasionally to explain details but mostly kept to herself, floating just over my shoulder. Overall, they both listened intently, only sometimes asking questions or refuting something I said. For obvious reasons, they both were very interested in the idea of the field around the large clearing, as well as the reduction in healing time. By the end of my explanation, I could see Barry was all in, while Jessica was unsurprisingly more reserved.

"So all of this, everyone who has died, is because some aliens tried to play god?" She asked when I was done. "Why? How?"

"Clarke's third law," Barry said, leaning forward excitedly. "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. It does explain a whole lot! I mean, look how much the pool changed."

Jessica gave Barry a harsh look, but I leaned forward with interest.

"You guys have a location that changed?" I asked eagerly. "How much? In what way?"

"We are staying in the high school," Jessica admitted after a long pause. "We woke up one morning to find that the school pool had been drained, and a cave had formed down into the floor."

"Like a sinkhole?" Alissa asked, also leaning forward.

"No, there was no rubble, no cracks," She responded, shaking her head. "It was like a cave had formed over a hundred years, with time to settle and fade into the pool floor, except it happened overnight, and the surrounding area seemed completely normal."

"I... I need to do this jump first, but eventually, I want to go down into the cave," I said, leaning back into my seat. "According to Sally, parts of the underlying system are expressing themselves-

"Do you think the cave is a dungeon?" Barry asked, his eyes wide.

"Unlikely, but it could contain something useful," Sally answered. "Dungeons were supposed to form all over the planet, but they are complicated aspects of the system. Nothing that large or complicated was able to initialize."

"How do we know that this is all working?" Jessica asked suddenly, trying to redirect the conversation. "The healing and the barrier sounds nice and all, but what proof do we have?" "Beyond our word?" I asked. "Not much. I mean, you can clearly see we have water and power for the lights. Just look at the fridge. It's made of wood and doesn't have a cord or a plug, but it's still running. I mean Sally herself is-

"Yes, and that's all strange," She said, cutting me off. "But-

"Jessica, stop," Barry said softly, reaching over and putting his hand on her shoulder. "We need to trust, or it's only going to get worse. Besides, the fact that Alissa is a nurse means we need to give them a chance. For their sake."

"What's going on?" Alissa asked, leaning forward. "Do you have injured people?"

Jessica was silent, studying both Alissa and myself before looking at Barry. The younger survivor nodded encouragingly, and Jessica seemed to sag in defeat.

"We have two injured right now. Roger is awake and slowly recovering but mostly stuck in bed, but Amelia is... Ames passed out and hasn't woken up."

"What happened?" I asked softly.

"Have you guys seen the velociraptors yet?" Jessica asked, getting nods from both Alissa and myself. "A pack of them ambushed us. Waited for a hunting party to go out and pounced. We managed to fight them off, but... not before they got inside. They... they got six of us."

The utter defeat in her voice was harrowing, like someone who had already been grasping at straws only to get those ripped from her hands. Yet she was still clearly trying, something that was impressive just by itself.

"We've been trying to recover since then," She continued, shaking her head slowly. "but with Amelia out and Roger incapacitated..."

"You need to bring both of them here," Alissa instructed in a no-nonsense tone. "I need to examine both of them and maybe send both of you out to grab us some supplies from a CVS or something. Are there still pharmacies in town?"

"How? Roger can't walk very much, and I don't know if Ames will survive being carried on my back," Jessica asked.

"There's a cart," Barry said, excitement rising. "In the equipment garage behind the school. It's where all the sports teams keep their stuff, and there's a cart they use to haul stuff around. It should fit them both, and we can pull the cart ourselves."

"And I will help," I assured them, both of them turning to look at me, Barry looking grateful and Jessica still looking wary. "I need to take care of this jump, but that shouldn't take long at all. Right, Sally?"

"The most you will be gone from this side is an hour," she confirmed. "Even if you take several days on the other side."

"Okay. Do you guys feel confident making it back?" I asked, immediately holding my hands up when Jessica gave me a harsh look. "Hey, I dragged you here. I needed to ask."

"We can handle ourselves," Jessica responded, Barry nodding in agreement.

"I'm sure you can," I agreed seriously, they had survived until now after all. "Go home, prep yourselves as best you can. When I'm done, I'll make my way to the school and we can tackle turns pulling the trailer. If we are lucky, you guys can sleep the whole night without having to worry about anything sneaking up on you."

"... Can we have a moment to-"

"Jessica, for the love of god. I know Caleb put you in charge, but you don't need to act tough," Barry said, sounding exasperated. "This is what we need to do."

The stoic, tough facade that the young woman was wearing cracked just a bit at the mention of Caleb, who I assumed was one of their group who didn't make it through the lizard attack. She rubbed her face, slowly nodding in agreement before speaking.

"Fine, fine. We will return to school and start getting everyone ready," She agreed, slowly standing from her seat. "We will wait for you for a few hours, but eventually, we are going to move on our own. I don't know how much longer Ames has. Her condition is... I don't know."

I held my hand out over the table, and Jessica took it, shaking my hand once before looking at Barry and nodding towards the door. He nodded in return, standing and looking back at me.

"Thank you for the drink," He said, reaching out to shake my hand as well.

"I'll see you guys soon, but good luck."

I walked both of them out, Jessica taking the lead as they both walked down the stairs, stepping onto the grass. I resisted the urge to go after them, trusting them to take care of themselves for now. Instead, I closed the door and walked back to where I had put my bags, immediately starting to go through them.

"Did you get everything you needed?" Alissa asked, craning her neck to see what I was pulling out.

"I think so. With any luck, it will pass a cursory look from security."

"Well, put it on and come back down," She said with a smirk. "I'll tell you how it looks."

I nodded and quickly headed up to the second floor, only to spot Molly trying to rush back into her room. Clearly, the young girl had been listening the entire time. Shaking my head, I stepped into my room, stripped down and pulling on my new clothes.

I had to admit pulling on the suit felt strange, given what was going on, but looking sharp was a feeling that I enjoyed. There was something about looking good, knowing you looked good, that gave you confidence. Given I had recently lost all of my pudge and sag and gained six-pack abs and not an insignificant amount of muscle definition, the feeling was only amplified. I pulled the tie on and straightened it before clipping a pen in my pocket and a pocket knife around the inside rim of my pants.

I spent another five minutes trying to put on the concealed carry holster I found in one of the police station lockers. The Glock 17 was a bit big to try and hide completely, but after a few minutes, I figured out just how to hold myself to hide it. It wouldn't beat a pat down, but the suit jacket covered it enough to prevent anyone from spotting it without one. I took a deep breath and left my bedroom, walking back down to find Molly sitting beside her mother, both of them turning to look at me.

"Nice, you look halfway decent, at least," Alissa said. "Might want to lean into a devil may care rich kid vibe if you can, would wrap it together nicely."

"Good plan, solid," I agreed, fiddling with my cufflinks, my nervousness leaking out a bit. "Can you spot it?"

She looked at me for a moment, looking me up and down before shaking her head.

"Spot what?"

"My gun."

She looked back down and squinted a bit, before shaking her head. I reached back and pulled up the jacket on my right side, revealing the pistol.

"That's probably about as good as you're gonna get," She said, nodding in approval. "Are you ready? Got a plan and everything?"

"Yeah, yeah, I think I do," I said, slowly stretching before looking around. "Sally?"

"Yes?" She asked, appearing by the kitchen area. "Are you ready?"

"I am."

"Then good luck!" She said, bobbing happily for a moment. "Commencing Avatar Reality Projection!"