

I stopped outside the room and knocked, waiting to hear a muffled "come in" before opening the door and stepping inside, the heavy door moving silently.

Amelia was sitting up against the head of her bed, a bowl of what looked like broth in her lap. Jessica was sitting next to her on a seat while Alissa and Molly sat on the edge of Jessica's bed. As I closed the door behind me, I nodded to Alissa before focusing on Amelia.

"Hello," I greeted with a smile. "It's good to see you awake. My name is Aiden Corlan."

"It's good to meet you, Aiden," Amelia said softly, clearly still very weak. "It's hard to believe it's been so long since I... well. It only feels like a few hours ago. I wanted to thank you for taking everyone in. Your... bastion sounds like something from a fantasy book. It's... hard to believe."

"If Sally hadn't chosen me, I would probably be in the same boat as you," I assured her. "Luckily, we have a few ways of proving that some weird stuff is going on. Between what we did to heal you and... well, let me introduce you. Sally? Feel like joining us?"

The bobbing, blue projection faded into view from behind me, coming in through the closed door and floating around me until she was beside Jessica.

"Greetings, Amelia! It is good to see you awake," She said happily.

"Incredible... of all the things we have seen..." She said with a large smile on her face. "And Aiden said your name is Sally?"

"My full name is Sapphire, actually, but Sally is what people call me," She responded. "Please, call me Sally."

"I will, Sally. Thank you for helping to make the bastion."

"It was my pleasure," The construct assured the bedridden woman. "It was what I was created for, after all!"

Amelia continued to smile, though after a moment, it faltered slightly.

"To have such an amazing chance... I only wish more could have made it."

"... I'm sorry," Jessica said, looking down at her hands. "I-I tried, but they cut us off. Three raptors attacked us and... the ones that got to you and everyone else, they snuck past while we were fighting. I'm sorry."

"Jessica Reed Wensor, you and your hunters fought off six of those reptiles with spears and a shotgun," Amelia said, reaching out and grabbing her younger sister's hand with surprising vigor, squeezing it tightly. "I am proud that you and Barry managed to survive, never mind save Roger and me. Caleb, Andy, Lisa, and Kira would have been proud of you, too. Do not take on guilt that is not yours."

Jessica, who was crying and holding on to her sister's hand for dear life, nodded hesitantly before Amelia pulled her in for a hug. I stepped forward and pulled the bowl of soup away just in time to keep it from being spilled. Amelia mouthed a thank you as she held her sister, rubbing her back. I simply nodded and placed the bowl, which I could now see was mostly empty, on the table beside the bed.

While Amelia held her younger sister, we continued to talk about everything that had been going on. She was shocked to hear about the dragon but glad we had found two more survivors. The possible explanation behind what had happened to the dusters brought the mood down quickly, however. The room was quiet for a long moment before Amelia spoke up again.

"Could I ask, what are your plans going forward, Aiden?" She asked. "You are clearly in charge, if no other reason that you hold the keys to the castle, so to speak."

"Literally, too!" Sally added, bobbing away over my shoulder.

"Of course, literally too," Amelia agreed with a small smile. "What is the next step?"

"Well... big picture, we need to prepare for more people, and find more people," I explained. "Small picture, we need to secure sources of food that isn't just MRE and canned crap. We need to work on our weapons as well. We have guns and ammo, but I'm hoping that the dragon parts will help us as well."

"I still struggle to envision Barry killing a dragon," Amelia said, shaking her head. "I still remember him as a little freshman."

"To be fair... the truck did a lot of the work," I pointed out, only to hold up my hands in defense when Jessica gave me a harsh look. "Not that it wasn't incredibly brave or impressive, 'cause it was. He just didn't punch it out or anything."

She rolled her eyes, sitting back in her chair, which she had returned to as we talked about what had been going on.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," Amelia said. "Please continue."

"We need to prepare to expand as well," I said with a frown. "We need to find more people, and if we wait, chances are we will end up with a shanty town around the bastion, which would be bad in all sorts of ways. Better than getting eaten, sure, but not by much. Beyond that,

we need to keep making jumps when they become available. There is no way to know when the next big reward will come along and turn the situation around completely."

"What sort of rewards are possible?" Amelia asked. "Sorry, I know I'm being a bit nosey but-"

"It's fine, I don't blame you for having so many questions. I know I had just as many," I assured her with a smile before looking over at Sally. "Sally, what kind of rewards are possible?"

"Basically anything," She responded easily. "But part of the process of refining them is cutting out some that would be useless. For example, I could have offered Aiden the ability to make his weapon instructable for a period of time for the last jumps rewards."

My eyes went wide, and I could see Jessica opening her mouth to shout something, but Sally cut us off before either of us could.

"But because of how ridiculously energy intensive such an ability would be, it would only last for a fraction of a millisecond, with a charge time of a week, making it functionally useless. But the energy was pulling in a direction, so the best I could do was offer a partial but constant reinforcement of his weapons."

"I see. Well..." The woman suddenly stopped talking and closed her eyes, her breath hitching for a moment.

"Amelia?" Jessica asked, suddenly concerned. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, it was just a wave of exhaustion washed over me..." She admitted, patting her sister's leg. "I'm okay, I promise."

"I think it might be time for you to get some more rest, Amelia," Alissa said, getting up to check over her patient. "Tomorrow, we can use our healing spells on you a few more times, see if-"

"No, no, I'm fine. You're right, I just need to rest," The pale woman assured the nurse. "Once you and Roger are healed, you can use your... spell on me as much as you'd like, but I won't hog the healing while I've already recovered so much."

Jessica and Alissa fussed around the recovering woman a bit more, during which I saw myself out. As I shut the door, I caught the woman's eye for a moment and could see how thankful she was. I nodded and smiled back at her before closing the door and taking a long breath.

I was very glad that she was awake, and not just because it was nice to get a bit of good news. Jessica had been walking a wires edge, clearly still holding guilt and responsibility for

what had happened to their group, despite it clearly not being her fault. I don't know what exactly would have happened had Amelia not woken up, but I knew it wouldn't have been good.

Despite the temptation to slow down for the rest of the day, there was still a lot that needed to be done, and it was still relatively early in the day, way too early to be sitting around doing nothing. I went down to the kitchen and found George, who was having a light meal with Jason.

We were discussing doing a run to Abe's house, one of at least three that we would need to do in order to move everything from the bunker over to the bastion. Jessica joined us after a few minutes, explaining that Amelia was asleep and that Alissa was pretty sure she would be out for a while. We discussed our plan for a bit longer before I went around and explained our mission to the rest of the group.

The plan was for Jessica and I to ride the bikes and for George to drive the golf cart, which was now fully charged thanks to the small charging system it used. Between the two bike carts and the small trailer we got from the high school, we would be able to transport a large amount of supplies in only a few trips.

Our plan set, we strapped up and headed out, making a beeline to the outskirts of the town. The trip took a bit longer than I had hoped, as with the trailer attached to the golf cart, we were forced to take more than a few detours, skirting around traffic jams, fallen trees, and quite a smaller few delays. We quickly loaded up the trailer and carts, going light on the trailer as we weren't really sure what the golf cart was capable of hauling quite yet.

We returned just as the sun was going down, Jessica and I with tired legs. We had rushed to make it back with plenty of time to unload everything. We had focused mostly on the MREs stored in the bunker, hauling them up out of the bunker and stacking them carefully on our carts and trailers. Despite having so much space, we couldn't even grab everything, with several more boxes of foodstuff remaining.

Once home, we quickly unloaded our boxes of food, stacking them in a pile in the storage room. The MREs were too perfectly stable to use as anything other than emergency food, so there was no reason to keep them in the pantry upstairs, no matter how big it may be.

The next morning, Molly, Jason, Alissa, Roger, George, and Barry, who had to be guided downstairs to get his spell counter tattoo, all used their spells to heal Roger and Alissa. With nine casts between each of them, their already mostly healed wounds completely disappeared, leaving them both limp-free.

"Oh yeah, I will happily retire when we get a few dozen people who don't need their spells," Alissa said, happily rubbing the now-healed patch of skin where her injury had been.

"Don't be so sure. We have no way of knowing how multiple heals would affect unset broken bones or illness, and I don't even want to think about the worst-case scenarios with cancer," I said, getting a hard look in return.

"Aiden, what the hell am I supposed to do about cancer?" She asked, looking at me like I was stupid. "We could barely handle it back when we had actual doctoring and medicine going on."

"Fair, but don't start planning your retirement party just yet."

With everyone healed and back in tip-top shape, we made another two trips back to Abe's house. The first was to grab the rest of the food and supplies, and it was done in record time. The last one was we left the bastion with a few tools loaded up on the trailer. I wanted to see if we could get inside the safes, and I wanted to get whatever was inside back to the bastion.

The ride to Abe's was more or less what we had come to expect at this point, as we had the route more or less perfected at that point, unsurprising considering how many times we had made the journey.

George and the recently healed Roger, who reluctantly agreed to go, stood watch up top while Jessica and I made our way down into the bunker, carrying crowbars and some of the same tools we had carried out of the bunker only a few days prior. Once we had everything down there, we both stood in front of the safes, discussing our plans.

"So, I figure the front faces are the most protected," I said, pushing my hand against the solid feeling gun safe. "So I say we tear out this locker, the shelves, and the lockers so we can attack them both from the sides. Might have to get a bit rough to get everything out, but it's not like we are going to use them again."

"I get the feeling you might be overestimating these safes, but it's as good a plan as any," Jessica admitted, bending down and picking up two crowbars, handing one of them to me. "Let's get breaking."

It didn't take us long to tear out the storage on either side of each safe, which let us use the cordless angle grinder to cut into the sides.

We spent about two hours cutting off the metal panels, breaking through some concrete filler, and then cutting through a second metal panel. Once through that, we had to smash through a wood and cloth interior to finally expose the goodies inside. As I pulled out a chunk of wood and cloth, throwing it to the side, I stuck my head into the safe and looked around. When I pulled back, I looked at Jessica and shook my head.

"It's empty. What about yours?"

She looked at me with wide eyes before shoving me a bit when I started laughing. We then spent the next hour ferrying guns and ammo from both safes back up to the surface. In the end, we came away with three AK-47s, two more AR-15s, four more shotguns, and seven different Glock variants, as well as a boatload of ammo.

"Jesus, what was he preparing for, World War Three?" Roger asked when we dropped another bag of ammo into the golf cart trailer.

"Most likely aliens," George answered, shaking his head. "Abe could never decide if it was going to be the space aliens or the illegal aliens, but he was sure it was all going to be one of their faults."

"Sounds like a cool guy," He responded dryly. "What are the chances that all of those can go full auto?"

"No bet."

Roger snorted and went back to looking around, keeping an eye out for anything worrying. The young adult was still visibly nervous but seemed to be handling himself so far. When we were finally done ferrying the arsenal up and out of the bunker, George stopped us before we could leave.

"Listen, before we go... since we won't be back here for a while most likely... Could I have a few minutes to go to mine and Jason's houses?"

"Yeah, absolutely!" I said, a bit surprised I hadn't even considered we were still close to their homes. "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"It's okay, son. Not sure I was even going to... but I realized I couldn't leave without getting a few things."

Roger and Jessica stayed to guard the bikes and cart, while George and I walked first to Jason's house, then to his own. I stayed outside for both of them, listening and watching for anything dangerous. When he stepped out of his house, he was in the process of tucking a diamond ring, looped with a thin chain, down under his shirt.

"Alright, kid, let's go. Before I can't leave."

I nodded, and we both left, heading back across the neighborhood. A few minutes later we were on our way home.