

Despite my declaration to meet the neighbors, Alissa was determined to check me over for any life-threatening injuries before I did anything. She went as far as to shout at me from the roof of the building she had been shooting from, telling me to stay where I was. We also had to deal with the still technically alive Dino-Dog, which was still collapsed near the fire station.

It only took a minute or so for Alissa to rush down to me, quickly checking me over. My back was battered and bruised enough that I winced when she pulled my shirt off to check, and I had apparently also sliced my arm open at one point. Once the adrenaline started to fade, I could feel all of it, especially when Alissa poured hydrogen peroxide on the cut before bandaging it closed. I would be fine once we had a chance to use heal on me a few times, but until then, Alissa ordered me to take it slow.

When our resident healthcare provider gave me the all-clear, we started making our way to the fire station. Unsurprisingly, no one came out to greet us since they were waiting for us to give the all-clear. With me slightly injured, Barry volunteered to finish off the heavily wounded and unconscious Dino-Dog. He was about to approach it when Jessica grabbed his arm.

"Someone should shoot it a few times first," She suggested. "Make sure it's not playing dead."

George volunteered, dumping the remaining four bullets in one of his magazines into the creature's nose, which we knew was most likely a sensitive spot. When the creature didn't react, Barry approached it carefully before slamming his spear into the creature's eye, throwing his whole weight behind it. The massive canine monster spasmed and twitched, but Barry held firm and drove his spear in deeper, carving up the creature's brain. The monster went still with one last heavy spasm, its breathing stopped with one last shudder of breath.

"Well... well done," I said, patting Barry on the back after he yanked his weapon free and wiped it clean on the monster's fur. "Nice work."

"Thanks... gonna have to thank Roger again," He said, shaking his head. "Not sure our original spears would have been able to do that."

Together, we made our way closer to the fire station, entering through the smashed-open garage doors. George entered first since he clearly knew the building, immediately turning to an interior door. As he made a beeline to the door, I followed, looking around. The fire department had two large trucks, both of which had been used to protect the civilians. One was parked along the back, blocking a small garage door that was built to connect to the back parking lot. The other was against the side wall, blocking a few doors. Two smaller trucks had been used to block the front garages, but the dogs had pushed them aside.

This left the middle of the garage mostly clear, creating ample space for the civilians to live in. They had set up what looked like tents, cots, a living space with couches, and even a few

grills. Unfortunately, Dogs had torn everything apart, with most of the camp completely destroyed.

"Charles! You there?" George called out as he pounded on a door along the side of the garage. "It's all clear out here, as far as we can tell."

It took a few minutes and a few more times calling out before the door finally opened to reveal an older Asian man, probably somewhere between Georges's age and mine. He was wearing the white fire chief's uniform, but it had clearly seen better days, with a few stains that looked like blood and oil.

"Jesus Christ, George. You said you were making pipe bombs, but where did all those guns come from?" He asked, stepping out and shaking George's hand.

Behind him, I could see two men and a woman dressed in darker blue firefighter uniforms. They looked tough, ready to fight, but hopeful that we had actually dealt with the giant canine monsters.

"We claimed Crazy Abe's bunker," George explained. "Guns, ammo, MREs, the whole shebang. It's even where we got the powder to make the pipe bombs."

"Guess that means Abe didn't make it then? There is no way he would give any of that up," Charles guessed.

"No, we found his dust on his bed."

"Damn. He was crazy and at least a bit racist, but if there was ever a time for a crazy survivalist..." Charles trailed off. "Is that where you staying? I didn't think his bunker was big enough for all of you."

"We are staying in town," I explained, stepping forward and holding out my hand. Charles gave George a look, who nodded in return. The fire chief sized me up for a moment before taking my hand.

"You must be Aiden. I'll be honest, I was surprised when George explained he wasn't in charge."

"Well... we don't always get to choose our roles, but we still gotta play the hand we are dealt," I responded with a shrug. "It's been working so far."

"That's true enough," He agreed, before turning back to one of the firefighters. "Danny, go tell everyone else that they can come out, the big fuckers are dead."

The shortest of the three, a guy maybe a few years older than me, nodded and headed back into the building, disappearing around the corner. After a few seconds, we could hear a lot of voices getting closer. Before long, a wave of people had pushed out into the garage. They looked tired and stressed, but all of them looked thankful to be out of whatever shelter they had under the station. There was a mix of women, men, and a few children.

When the civilians had moved into the garage and started picking through the ruined camp, Charles pulled us into the main building. Alissa, Jessica, and Barry headed to talk to the others while George and I followed Charles.

"I gotta say, you guys seem like you're doing quite a bit better," He admitted, shaking his head. "We've desperately been looking for better weapons, and here you guys are walking around armed to the teeth. Literally, in your case."

He pointed to my spear, which I had leaned against the door after entering.

"We have... a bit of an advantage," I admitted, getting a strange look from Charles. "Let's just say a lot more is going on here than at first glance. But we are lucky, and we have room to expand..."

"You offering us a place to live?"

"I am. A place with water, electricity for small things, protection from the feline monsters, the raptors, and even the canine creatures."

"That sounds too good to be true," Charles replied bluntly. "I can't think of any place like that in town, and even then, generators only last so long. What building did you claim?"

"The old fire station," I said, not entirely lying.

"That ugly thing?" Charles asked. "I guess it was mostly concrete... but how are you powering it?"

"Luck and ingenuity," I responded, getting a harsh look from the slightly older man.

"Look, kid, I lost three men in the last week, and my sense of humor died with them. I do not appreciate getting the runaround."

"Charles, you trust me, right? You know my record," George says, stepping forward. "Trust me when I said he's got a reason for holding back."

"What? What is the reason?" He asked, calming slightly but still unhappy about not getting direct answers.

"Because I'm not sure you will believe us," I said with a shrug. "But we can start by at least proving that there is more going on here than just monsters and people turning to dust."

I left the interior of the building, calling for Barry and Jessica as I did. Once, we were standing on a concrete pad in front of the garage, and we had an audience, I had both of them demonstrate their magic. Jessica used her bramble, the thick, viciously thorned vines growing out of the concrete instantly. Once they faded a few minutes later, Barry held his palm out and conjured a blast of fire. Audible gasps followed each display, both from the firemen and their civilian charges.

Whatever annoyance that Charles had disappeared when he witnessed the magic, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

"All we ask is that you give us a chance to show you," I said, my hand on his. "I know it's unbelievable, but the world is insane right now. What's a few extra twists?"

The slightly older man chewed his cheek, the gears almost visibly turning in his head. Eventually, he nodded.

"Alright. A couple of us will go with you to see your 'bastion,'" He agreed. "But some of you need to stay behind and help protect the people."

"That's all we ask. Get your group together, and we can head out," I said with a smile.

The older man nodded and left to talk with his men and the civilians, leaving me with the rest of the group. I turned to Jessica and Barry, who were both holding their spears, watching me closely.

"Do you guys mind staying here?" I asked. "I trust you guys to handle anything that comes knocking, and we are going to be gone for a couple of hours..."

"Yeah, no problem," Barry said, Jessica nodding in agreement. "Should give us a chance to talk to the civilians, share what we know. Worst case scenario... maybe some of them will come with us even if the chief says no."

"Thanks, and a solid plan, just don't get pushy. Feel free to spend some time working on the Dino-dogs. Maybe see if they have any pieces worth our time." I suggested. "I doubt they will stand up to dragon parts, but what can you do?"

It didn't take long for Charles to gather a group of people to leave with us, settling on himself, Danny, who was one of the firefighters and one of the civilians. Charles introduced the civilian as Sarah, who was apparently the quasi-leader. I happily shook hands with both of them before we finally left to head back home. Luckily, it was still relatively early in the afternoon,

meaning we would be able to get back home to the bastion, show off everything, and then get back to the station.

I was *not* looking forward to staying the night at the station so we could leave the next morning, but I wasn't about to leave them undefended, not after what they had just been through.

When we finally got within sight of bastion, all four of our guests stopped in shock. I had to cover a laugh when they stumbled over each other.

"What... what is that?" Charles asked, the first of the group to recover. "What..."

"That's the bastion," I explained. "It represents humanity's greatest hope of thriving through this apocalypse. C'mon, once we get inside, we can explain in more detail."

The three of them followed us with dazed expressions. Eventually, we made it onto the large field around the structure before making our way to the first-floor living space. Roger was already waiting, an AR-15 leaning on the table nearby.

"How did it go? Where are Jessica and Barry? Are they okay? I thought-"

"Roger! It's okay. The fight went fine. We stumbled on a snag when the third Dino-dog we guessed might be waiting ambushed us, but everyone made it through," explained, patting the young adult's shoulder. "Charles just wanted us to leave a few people behind to help protect the others while he saw the bastion for himself."

"Oh... well, Hello," He said, taking a breath to calm down. "I'm glad everything went well. Did the pipebombs work?"

"Definitely. Not entirely sure how well they would work against bigger things, but they took out the first two dogs relatively easily," I responded, guiding our guests to the table, waving to Jason and Molly, who were sitting at the stands, giving them an encouraging thumbs up.

Jason gave one back, and Molly simply smiled.

Once everyone was seated and water was distributed, I began a now familiar process. It took a while for me to explain everything in a way that everyone understood, which is not surprising considering how some of the subjects are hard to wrap your mind around. Sally helped prove that the bastion was different beyond having just popped into existence recently. All three of them were Danten natives, so suddenly having several buildings disappear and get replaced by a large grassy clearing and a medieval-looking building was a bit jarring. Still, it was hard to prove things they couldn't see, like the fields that prolonged food longevity, increased our healing speed, and discouraged monsters from coming too close.

"Look, even if you don't believe that that aspect of the bastion is real, that somehow we have gained the use of magic but decided to also lie about everything else, the bastion is still the superior defensive point," I explained. "The stairs are the only way up to the living space, meaning we could easily defend it. Between that and our guns, it is much better than being crammed in a shelter."

"Do you have enough room for all of us?" Sarah asked, looking around the first floor, eyes trailing over the kitchen.

"As of right now, no," I admitted. "At least not real permanent beds. We have six remaining beds on the top floor, in a sort of barracks-style room. There is also a large storage room below us, but I plan on turning that into a long-term food storage eventually since it should also be affected by the food stasis Sally managed to get us."

"So, where do you expect the rest of us to stay?" She asked, managing to remain respectful despite being concerned.

"There are dozens of options, but not all of them are simple," I replied. "We could build a long house so that everyone has a warm, sheltered place to sleep, and then started working on individual structures. We could start trying to drag in larger, roomier vehicles like vans, clear out their interiors, convert them into small sleeping spaces, and then make communal living areas to make up for the tight sleeping quarters. I'm sure if we worked together, we could find quite a few campers around the town. Moving them through the streets would be a pain, but they would be a great temporary setup. All of those require a lot of hard work, but the quicker people have real, personal beds, the better."

"Why would that matter?" Charles asked, looking confused.

"It's part of how the powers work. In order to have access to several benefits of the bastion, you have to call it home," I explained. "That means you have to have a bed that is your own, have slept within the perimeter at least once, and the bastion must have enough food to support everyone who calls it home for five days. The last two are relatively easy. We have enough MREs and canned food for everyone, even if we aren't eating those day-to-day yet. It's the last one we are going to have to work for."

"...I don't want to imply anything, but you do understand how living in the high and mighty tower while everyone else lives in small shacks will look, right?" Sarah pointed out. "I'm not saying you're going to lord over us..."

"I get that the optics aren't great," I agreed with a frown. "Believe it or not, it was something we were just starting to wonder when your message got through. But I swear I will be helping you build all along the way. If it's really a point of contention, I will give up my room and sleep down in the fields as long as I have something I can call my own bed. Maybe we could do a monthly rotation, though I would suggest we put the kids indoors whenever possible."

Whatever response she was expecting, an honest understanding and a genuine desire for things to be fair, was apparently not it because she looked at me with wide eyes. Before she could comment, Sally bobbed into view above the table.

"I... might have a solution to our housing issues," She said before going silent. "I've been spending most of my free time studying the failed system structure... and I think I found something that might help."

"What is it, Sally?"

"We go dungeon diving!"