

"Well, what do you think?" She asked, bobbing in excitement. "Pretty cool, right? I even managed to stock the kitchen band and shift the storage, so stuff would take much longer to go bad than normal! Not bad if I do say so myself."

"I... Okay, I'm convinced this isn't some sort of hallucination, "I admitted, looking down over the modified space. "If for no other reason that there is no way my imagination could come up with all of this."

"Right. But what do you think?" She said, seemingly hungry for my approval. "How does it look?"

"It looks good, easily defensible. The stairs are the only weak point I see..." I said after a moment of thinking. "What's inside?"

"A few bedrooms, a kitchen, a storage room, a couple of other rooms, we can explore more after I give you your second 'reward'"

In an instant we were back in the white, blue rune covered room. Sally was back in the center of the room, slowly bobbing as if waiting for me.

"How exactly is this going to work?" I asked, feeling tense and anxious. "Is this going to hurt?"

"No. Well, yes, but I'm going to knock you out first," She explained. "And I'm going to infuse you with energy, repairing all sorts of stuff and then encouraging your body to improve itself. There won't be enough energy to push you anywhere close to superhuman, but there should definitely be enough to make you just under olympic level in general."

Mentally I imagined a combination of Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt, but she was quick to destroy those hopes.

"Imagine someone between a special forces soldier and a realistic version of Batman. The peak of what's actually possible, rather than some sort of stretched, altered reality version of what a human can do."

"Alright, I'm ready. Should I-"

"Commencing Reality Adjustment!"

Darkness swallowed me instantly before I could say anything about being cut off or about giving me a second to prepare. When I woke up, it felt like only moments had passed, but judging from the sunlight coming in from the window, it had been much longer somehow. I was lying in a bed, a normal twin that was relatively comfortable, better than the old queen I used to sleep on, at least.

I sat upright quickly, sliding to the edge of the bed and standing up in one smooth motion. I gasped in surprise, stunned at just how different I felt. My body felt loose and ready, the normal morning tightness and soreness nowhere to be found. I stretched, moved, and jumped in place, marveling at how easy it was and how flexible I felt. I flexed my arm and couldn't help but laugh as my bicep showed serious definition. I looked down and pulled up my shirt, finding a decent set of six-pack abs.

"I tried to get those for years after college," I said, shaking my head. "Turns out it only took the end of the world..."

I dropped my shirt and looked around, finally realizing that I wasn't anywhere that I recognized. The room was maybe five meters wide in both directions and maybe three meters tall, with two doors. One was open and led into a bathroom, while the other was closed. I made my way into the bathroom, crossing the hardwood floors while running my hands along the stone brickwork that made up the walls. A closer look showed that the wall was actually entirely one smooth slab of stone, the bricks were just carved in as an accent.

I stepped into the bathroom and looked around, noting it was mostly normal despite the medieval castle look. I flicked on the sink and smiled as cool, clear water sprayed out. I washed my hands and splashed my face, looking up at the mirror, my usual dark blonde hair, blue eyes, and smoothly shaven face looking back at me.

I left the bathroom and spotted a small fireplace in the corner of the room, not far from my bed, as well as the tools to tend it and a spark guard in place. There was a desk in front of one of the room's two windows, as well as a wardrobe and a bureau. The whole room had a simple castle aesthetic, the furniture made from wood and simply constructed, with very little in the way of flare. I found myself nodding in approval, enjoying the general look.

I made my way to the second window, passing quickly, discovering that it was not a floor-to-ceiling window like I had assumed but rather a glass door onto a small balcony. I opened the door inward and stepped out onto the one-meter by-three-wide space, leaning on the stone carved railing.

Looking straight down, I could see the parapet-like walkway that surrounded the base of the bastion, as well as both sets of stairs. I looked out over the clearing, the expanse of empty space seeming much bigger from this angle. I looked up and could see the raised portion of a few more windows.

"How's the view?"

I spun, shouting in surprise as Sally suddenly spoke up from behind me. She was there, floating about three feet off the ground, giving off just enough blue light that I could see it on the ground.

"Sally! What the... Jesus Christ, what if I had gone over?" I asked, gesturing behind me at the balcony.

"Oh shoot... I'm sorry," She said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I'll be more careful in the future!"

I just shook my head, stepping back inside from the balcony and closing the glass door, latching it shut.

"This is incredible, Sally... You've really outdone yourself," I said, feeling genuine hope for the first time in weeks.

"Thank you! I should warn you, I used the energy given to us when I was first created to form this bastion. It is substantially larger than what we are usually able to siphon off the changes you make in other realities," The floating gem explained. "Do not be disappointed when the next rewards lean closer to the second 'option.'"

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, walking around her and heading for the door. "I'm going to explore the building and see what else you made."

"Oh! A tour!" She happily said, following behind me. When I stopped to open the door, she simply passed right through it.

"Wh- What the hell?" I asked, opening the door to find her bobbing on the other side. "How did you do that?"

"Oh! I'm not actually here right now," She responded. "I am incapable of physically leaving my sentient matrix. Thankfully, I can project myself like this! As we shift reality more and more, my range will increase, but for now, I am restricted to the central building of the bastion."

I reached out, unable to resist the urge to test her words for myself. Sure enough, my hand passed through her completely. I swallowed and nodded, adding one more thing to the pile of crazy.

"Right... Tour?"

Sally bobbed and pulsed once before floating away, her excitement easily recognizable despite her being a featureless gemstone the size of my head. She bobbed along, almost bouncing back and forth as she led me forward. Outside what I was absolutely going to call my bedroom was a hallway, with three doors on one side and a staircase on the other, leading up and down to other floors. A quick peek into the three rooms showed that two of them were bedrooms, while the third was another bathroom. The bedrooms were nearly identical, with two

twin beds in each, a chest in front of each bed, a single desk, and two chairs. The bathroom wasn't anything special either.

Once I stepped out of the bathroom, Sophie led me downstairs, the stairs leading down into an open room. A large dining room, with two large tables set up with at least twenty chairs around them. Attached to the dining room was a large kitchen, one clearly built to make food for groups rather than for quick single-person meals. There was a small entrance area next to the kitchen, a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands, and a thick, sturdy-looking cross bar that was held up on one side, ready to slam down and bar the door.

Rather than go outside, I turned to the large open room's other door, one that led down. It was a smaller stone staircase that led down into what was the basement of the building. Small bulbs of crystal ran along the ceiling and gave off a pleasant amount of soft yellow light, keeping the tighter space from being oppressive. The stairs led into a room that was large, just as big as the kitchen and the dining room had been upstairs, but combined. A large double-wide door was on one side, but beyond that, the room was completely empty.

"This is for storage," Sally explained, floating around the room quickly. "And those doors lead out onto the defensible wall of the castle's base."

I opened the even more impressive doorway, just one of the doors was heavy enough for me to work for it, even with my newly improved physique. Sure enough, the door led to the large six or seven-meter-wide walkway that encircled most of the building. Again, rather than go out I slowly pulled the door closed and made my way back up to the kitchen and dining room, then back up to the second floor before finally heading up to the third floor.

Going upwards revealed that the top of the stairs was capped, rather than leading to a hallway like the previous floor. The door at the top of the stairs opened up into a large living space, in the same style as the previous rooms but set up like barracks. There were five beds, each a bunk bed, with two wooden lockers standing at the end. There were two desks in one corner, as well as a table with chairs.

One end of the room had a door, which led into a more public-style bathroom, with two stalls on each side, two with toilets and two with showers, as well as two sinks. When I left the bathroom behind, I saw a steep set of stairs that almost looked like a ladder, leading up to the next floor. I climbed up and pushed open the latched hatch to find myself on the flat roof of the entire building. It was a stunning view, even though the town outskirts weren't looking the best at the moment. I frowned at the sight of smoke rising from a building several blocks away. Whatever wonder and excitement I had been feeling from what my new ally had done was well and truly gone.

"I wasn't prepared for this," Sally admitted, floating beside me. "Everything I know about them dead-ends, all of my knowledge... It didn't prepare me for seeing it face to face."

"You really have the power to help?" I asked after a full minute of staring off into the slowly dying city.

"With your help to gather energy, yes," She said confidently. "It won't be easy, and you're going to have to put yourself in danger... a lot. But together, we can do it!"

I stared out into the distance, towards the town center and its slightly taller buildings. I knew thousands and thousands of people were struggling to survive, maybe even being attacked right now, fighting off whatever monstrosities that walked their parts of the town. I knew that not far away from Danten was Boston, where who knew how many people were struggling to survive. This world was going to hell, and somehow, I stumbled on a way to save some of the people who lived here.

"Okay," I said, turning to look at Sally.

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Let's do this," I added with what I was hoping was a determined look. "If there is a chance that I could help, save some people, maybe even rebuild a small portion of what is actively burning around us... then a little danger doesn't matter."

"Fantastic! So, then, I suppose it's time for you to attempt your first quest?"

"Yeah."

"Excellent! Now, I have two options for you to go," She said excitedly, two blank projected cards appearing beside her, just like when she had presented me with my first "rewards." "You-"

"Wait, I get a choice for where my destination is?"

"Yes, did I not mention that?"

"No, you definitely did not," I answered, looking at the projections in front of me. "Is there anything else you've forgotten to mention to me?"

For a long moment, she said nothing, her projection floating perfectly still. After at least a full two minutes, she started moving again.

"Besides the final speech explaining a few details of traveling, there is nothing relevant I haven't discussed," She said confidently. "Should I do the speech now?"

"Why don't we relocate downstairs somewhere," I said, shaking my head. "Then you can do your speech and show me my choices."

"Perfect!"

I climbed down the staircase to the third floor before making my way all the way down to the first. I grabbed a beer from the fridge, one of the drinks I brought with me from my apartment, and sat down at the table, Sally floating along with me. I couldn't help but smile that the fridge was actually cold, despite clearly not being hooked up to any power.

"Alright, lay it on me."

"Okay! So, as I mentioned before, you are not actually going to these different realities. Instead, I am sending an avatar of you. It is an outwardly perfect representation of you, but very much not actually you." she explained, actually pretending to clear her throat before starting. "This means a few things. First, you will not be able to bring anything back home with you, so don't get attached to anything fancy you find, steal, or are given. This included changes to your body, as well as metaphysical changes. On the plus side, it means you don't ever have to worry about bringing something back with you, like viruses or contaminants."

"That... is unfortunate," I said after a long pause. "Even with the benefit."

"It's not as horrible as you might think. Most of the interesting things you could bring back wouldn't actually work here. Tony Stark's arc reactor wouldn't work in this world, nor would Element Zero or a magic wand from Harry Potter. The fabrics of those realities are just too different," She explained, leaning heavy on the fictional metaphors. "This also has the added benefit of not using disposable resources. If you have a first aid kit on you, it will be recreated on your avatar, but if you use it all while you are gone, you will return to find an unused kit. This works for everything from cell phone batteries to more esoteric things, though for the latter, I will have to push my influence through you, should you use them on someone who isn't an avatar."

She paused for a moment, giving me a chance to go over what she had just said, considering the repercussions. I wasn't sure what kind of esoteric things she was referring to, but not having to worry about using bullets, should I find a gun on at some point, would definitely come in handy.

"Finally, you need to understand something about the nature of 'fate,'" She said, prompting me to pay attention again. "You will be tempted to let the people you meet in on secrets you may know, but you need to resist that temptation. Realities have a tendency to pull towards the realities around them, which are realities that are similar to them. You can force reality to shift out of alignment, which is what your quests are intended to do, therefore generating the energy that we need. This will cause immediate change that will persist but slowly be smoothed back into something resembling the realities around it."

I leaned back in my chair, my head cocked to the side, and my lips pursed with a question. Before I could ask that question, though, Sally continued.

"However, if you attempt to affect that reality in a more direct, long-term method, like explaining to Dumbledore where all of the horcruxes are, then the chance he may be killed before he can do anything with that knowledge significantly increases," She explained. "Or perhaps he becomes corrupted and decides to leave them where they are. Without our continual presence to stabilize the change, the reality will slowly pull back to the 'norm' and, in the process, end up causing much more harm than good. Potentially, it could even undo the good we did in the first place."

"What kind of secrets do you expect me to know?" I asked, looking confused. "What could I possibly know about some random reality?"

"Well, I suppose that connects us back to the choices of what reality I send you to," She responded. "Your first option is a reality of magic users, where you must convince a grief-stricken man to give up his campaign of revenge to take care of his recently orphaned godson. You-"

"Wait, hold the fuck up," I said, standing up and putting both hands on the table. "Is that Harry Potter? Are you trying to send me to Harry Potter?"

"Kind of," She responded, her light flickering slightly. "It's more like a reality that, through the power of infinite iterations, is almost identical to the Harry Potter stories."

"...Are all of my options going to be stories that I know?" I asked, feeling a bit hysterical.

"Oh no, of course not," She assured me, continuing before I could feel any relief. "But plenty of them will be. The majority in fact."

"I... That is something you should have mentioned earlier, Sally." I pointed out, dropping back into my seat and cradling my head. "Jesus Christ..."