

It took about thirty minutes to get Molly and Alissa calmed down and into the bastion. In their defense, a large chunk of that time was because when I first tried to stand up, my legs told me to go to hell, and I collapsed. When I had recovered enough, and we were all eventually inside, we sat down around one of the kitchen tables. Molly had a soda, while Alissa and I both had steaming cups of coffee. By the time I had gone over everything that had happened in the last two weeks, Molly was finishing her soda, and both of our mugs were empty.

"This... I can't imagine... Fucking hell," Alissa finally said, shaking her head. "The worst part is I believe you... I certainly don't remember this building being here when we got here or from when I was younger."

Alissa, amid my explanation of what my first week was and how I had basically hidden in my small apartment, explained she had grown up in Danten but had moved away for work. She was back in town for her brother's funeral.

"In a way... I think he was lucky," She admitted softly, looking down at her mug. "Seeing everything falling apart... it would have ruined him. He loved this town."

We were quiet for a while before, for the first time, Molly spoke up.

"You got to meet Harry Potter?" She finally asked in a mousey, soft voice. "What was he like?"

"Well... he was still a baby," I explained with a shrug. "My mission was to keep him from being placed with the Dursley. Had to yell a bit at Dumbledore, which was a shame. I always like his character."

"Wooahh...." The young girl said with wide, wonder-filled eyes. "Mom, can I-"

"Absolutely not," Alissa said before her daughter could even finish. "Over my- ...No, Molly. You can't go with him."

"Aww... but Mom, Harry Potter!"

"Unfortunately, it will likely be a very long time before I locate a mission opportunity in any Harry Potter universe," Sally explained, weaving back and forth for a moment. "It is not quite random, but there are a lot of universes out there, and I have very little control over what comes across my sensors."

"How's that going, by the way?" I asked, looking at Sally as she floated in place. "Any luck finding my next mission."

"Unfortunately, none so far," She admitted, her light dimming slightly, only to immediately brighten again. "Oh! But I did figure out why the healing rate was so impressive!"

"... that's right, you did mention it being more than you expected," I said, rubbing my chin as I thought back to this morning. "Why is it?"

"Well, it seems as though despite the system failing to initialize, some of the frameworks for magic and adjustments still exist," She explained happily. "Apparently, there was supposed to be a healing bonus for established settlements, and my adjustments fit nicely into that framework."

"That's good.... right?"

"Very much so! The framework meant more of the gathered energy went to increasing the potency rather than building the effect itself," She explained, spinning in place in a way I could easily interpret as excitement. "With some more research and experience interacting with the existing framework, I should be able to occasionally offer reward options that are much more powerful than they would normally be. Though they will likely be influenced by the framework to feel a bit more like they are part of a system."

"I'm sorry, you've mentioned a system several times yet, and I didn't quite get it the first time you explained it..." Alissa admitted. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"It is a common concept through many realities," Sally explained. "Sometimes it is natural to a reality, sometimes it is created by a powerful race, or various other concepts."

"Yeah, but what is it, and why were we supposed to get it?"

"Oh... well, do you play video games?" Sally asked.

"I'm a full-time nurse and a single mother," Alissa responded with a raised eyebrow. "Where would I have time to play video games?"

"Fair enough. Imagine everything you can think of having a number attached to it," I explained. "The durability of your shoes is fifteen out of twenty, and they provide twenty protection from the elements, while my boots have a durability of twenty out of fifty and provide forty protection. A bottle of water provides twenty hydration, while a can of soda only provides ten, but also increases your energy by five."

"Even you would have numbers attached to you," Sally continued from where I left off, picking up what I was doing. "Strength, Charisma, Intelligence..."

"In a normal world, even if you went around and calculated numbers for everything, it wouldn't really do much. But in a system, the limits are removed, and ways to increase your numbers and the numbers of stuff you use are added," I said, continuing on again. "Water taken from a pure, blessed spring offers a hundred hydration and increases your intelligence by five points for an

hour. Working out for two hours might increase your strength by one. Work out every day for a month, and suddenly your strength is fifty, twenty more than an Olympic lifter, making you officially superhuman."

"So you're saying the system would have let us push past human limitations," Alissa said, slowly nodding. "So where is it?"

"In this reality, it failed to activate. Essentially, an ancient race of aliens, millions of years old, thought they knew all the answers," Sally explained. "They thought that all life forms were doomed unless everyone could be on the same equal playing field. So, they made it so that when a species reaches a certain point in their development, their planet undergoes an apocalypse, and the system is introduced."

"But they fucked up. The apocalypse part works, obviously," I added, shaking my head. "The system is broken, though. It never activates. Without the bastion, we were basically fu- screwed. We were screwed."

I managed to stop myself from cursing, getting an appreciative look from Alissa as she struggled to internalize what we were talking about. After a minute, she turned her head slightly, clearly having thought of something.

"So... can we expect a blessed spring to show up somewhere?" She asked curiously. "Cause that sounds like something we should be on the lookout for."

"I... Don't know... Sally?" I asked, looking over at my floating friend.

"That's a good question, one I don't actually know the answer to," The blue projection admitted. "I couldn't feel anything when I was building the bastion, but that was only a few hundred meters past the clearing. I can say that the forces of the apocalypse are still at work. Things may continue shifting for months before everything settles."

"Then we just keep our eyes open?" I suggested, Sally bobbing in response.

"So, other than waiting for more weird stuff to spring up..." She asked, brushing Molly's hair out of her eyes. "What do we do now?"

"We do our best. Take missions as Sally can offer them, hopefully turning this little bastion into a proper safe haven for a large group of people," I explained with a shrug. "With any luck, in the process, we will get stronger too, so that we can actually deal with some of the threats growing around us. Who knows if it will work.... But we need to try."

Alissa nodded slowly, coming to terms with what I was suggesting. It was certainly a lofty goal, but with the existence of the human race possibly on the line, it wasn't exactly a difficult choice.

"If I said no, that I didn't want to help, that I wasn't interested in going with you on these missions, what would you do?" She asked, watching me carefully.

"Well, I'm not gonna kick you out just for that," Assured her. "As long as you pull your weight somehow, then you're welcome to stay. With your skills as a nurse, I don't think you will have a problem with that, even if you don't want to jump with me."

"Good. I'll have to think about it because... I honestly don't know. Kinda struggling to wrap my brain around it."

"Trust me, I get it," I admitted, chuckling. "For now... well, it's getting late. Why don't I show you where you two will be sleeping?"

"I need to check my bandage first. I don't want to bleed out in my sleep."

She spent a few minutes making sure that her leg was still bandaged correctly and that her arm was still fine before I helped her up the stairs to the second floor. I pointed out the bathroom, then my room, before helping her into the room she would be sharing with her daughter. Molly seemed to be amazed by the accommodations, and considering where they had been living for the past week or so, I wasn't surprised. Before I left, I helped Alissa take off her Kevlar vest since her arm was injured.

When they were all set, I headed back down into the kitchen and dining room area. I hadn't really had time to do a full inspection of everything we had, and I wanted to have at least a general idea of what we were working with.

A quick look through the kitchen showed that food-wise, we were actually doing pretty well. Sally had mentioned that she had stocked the kitchen, and she had been correct. The large fridge had plenty of food, and a few of the cabinets had spices and shelf-stable cans and packages. There was even a bread drawer filled with several loaves of yummy gluteny goodness. There was easily enough food to last the three of us at least three weeks, especially if the stasis or whatever that Sally had mentioned would keep our food good for longer worked as well as she said it did.

When I was done looking through the kitchen, I started going through my backpack, unloading everything and inspecting it. I had been in a rush when I grabbed everything, so it was worth going through to ensure everything I got was in good condition. I left the trauma kit by the door, where I had put it when we came in, since I had no idea how to properly inspect it, and Alissa already did. When I was done, I brought the rest of it up to my room, setting aside a multitool, a pocket knife, a flashlight, and a pair of sunglasses for Alissa. I stored the spare pistol in one of the drawers of my nightstand.

"Sally... You said you could lock and unlock stuff... That wouldn't happen to include cabinets and draws, would it?"

"It would," She answered, appearing next to me. Before I could ask, the drawer with the pistol locked shut.

"Thanks," I responded, sitting on the edge of the bed, starting to pull my own Kelvar off, as well as my holster.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" Sally asked, floating around the room, stopping by the window.

"I want to get the duffel bag back," I responded, hooking my holster on the edge of my nightstand. "Part of me is tempted to try and get a car started, but honestly, there really isn't a point with how clogged up some of the roads are. Stocking up on stuff while looking for more people is probably our best bet, but really, I'm just killing time until you find my next jump options."

"That reminds me. I wanted to clarify something I forgot to mention earlier. Choices that have already come up but that you did not take will appear again more frequently," She explained. "It hasn't happened yet, but it is likely to happen in the future."

"I mean... that's good, I guess?" I said, unsure of what it would actually mean in the long run. "Why not just hold on to the one we don't pick and start looking for a new second? That way, I could immediately just jump again and tackle another mission."

"In order to maintain even a temporary handle on the jump location, I must retain a level of balance, which is provided by searching for two at once," She explained. "That balance is ruined when you enter your jump location. Essentially, the unchosen option is torn out of my grip. Besides, even if by some miracle I immediately attach to a new destination, you do require a break. While jumping does not physically drain you, there is a sort of... metaphysical draw that requires some recuperation. Nothing dangerous as long as you have at least twelve hours, preferably closer to twenty-four, in between."

"Alright. That makes sense as far as I can tell," I said with a shrug. "Which really means fuck all since I have no idea how any of this works."

"Don't feel bad. Understanding inter-reality concepts and the mathematics behind them is not easy. Few biological minds can handle it, at least not when they are locked to three dimensions."

Sally and I chatted for a few more minutes before I finally called it a night. I told Sally to lock up all the external doors and windows but to allow Alissa and Molly to leave if they wanted to. Then, after some thought, I added that she should only let Molly go if Alissa was with her. She

agreed and promised to keep watch around the bastion before vanishing. I turned off the lights and quickly crawled into bed, exhaustion from the long day quickly overwhelming me.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of cursing outside my door. I stood up and quickly pulled my pants on, stepping out into the hall to find Alissa leaning heavily on the wall a few steps away from the door to her room. She was pale and visibly fighting against any more swearing.

"Hey, woah, are you okay?" I asked, rushing to her side and helping her sit down along the wall. "What happened?"

"Tried to limp to the bathroom," She said, between stained breathing. "I slipped and hit my leg."

"Shit. Did you tear it open again?" I asked, looking down at her leg, looking for any sign of bleed-through.

"No, I don't think so," She said, shaking her head. "I used some stuff from the trauma kit to close it well and bandage it better. Thanks again for finding that, by the way."

"Just glad it had anything worth keeping," I said, shaking my head. "Someone should have done a better job at searching the offices."

She shrugged and, after a minute or so, seemed to be mostly recovered. I offered her my hand, helping her stand. Without a comment, I helped her into the bathroom, only leaving when she could lean on the sink counter for support.

When she was done, I helped her back into her room, letting her sit on the edge of the bed. Molly was waiting for her, clearly nervous about being anywhere without her mom.

"Thank you," She said, putting an arm around her daughter.

"I'm sure you'll pay it back eventually," I assured her before looking around. "Sally, you there?"

"Yup!" She responded, popping into existence next to me. "What's up?"

"What time is it?"

"About six in the morning."

"Right... well, I guess I'll make some breakfast," I said. "You guys want some eggs?"

"Could I have some toast too?" Molly asked, before pressing against Alissa. "I-I-if that's alright."

"Shouldn't be a problem," I said with a smile I hoped was encouraging. "I'm going to finish getting dressed, then I'll be back to help your mom down the stairs. How does that sound?"

The nervous kid nodded, and I smiled. After a glance at Alissa, getting a nod in return, I left the room, shutting the door behind me.