

Prologue

As always, the investigation of a new target reality for travel purposes posed new and unique challenges. The process is vital, of course, no one wants another repeat of the Lestronga situation. The still unchosen actor that BA Entertainment plans to send will not have the luxury of the same protections that Mr. Lestronga had, and therefore a thermonuclear detonation designed to avenge the should Alternative Earth fall will result in a significant loss of investment. This investigation in particular needed to be thorough and detailed, to ensure that the chosen actor's struggle to survive is not ended prematurely.

The planetary wide investigation and analysis started, as many of them do, with a full orbital scan. Three dozen self orbiting satellites were transferred to reality Alpha-14B4631. When all thirty six satellites achieved their predetermined orbit we began scanning for any planetary anomalies. Thirty five radioactive sites were located that matched High Priority standards, with four hundred and thirty four lesser sites located around the planet. Thankfully, none of the High Priority sites were located near the intended deployment area.

A Superstorm, located on an adjacent continent to the deployment area, was also discovered by the scans. A quantum analysis was done to determine that its danger level did not reach High Priority status. The weather prediction software declared it a non issue for the deployment area.

When the initial planetary scan was completed, twenty four of the satellites began their secondary purpose, the prevention of cataclysmic meteor strikes. The remaining twelve satellites began a more detailed scan, focused on the planned deployment site and radiating outwards. These scans are attached to the report, as per usual.

With the high detail ground scanning underway, we began the process of sociological and history study. All twenty three nearby human or sub human settlements were thoroughly bugged with a variety of listening devices, with all recorded conversations passing through the company standard psychoanalysis VI program. Seven of the twenty through settlements were deemed a high danger and were noted on the high detail map attached. None of the settlements rated a High Priority status.

Several samples were taken of sub humans when their level of aggressiveness was discovered. Between our research and the results of the sample analysis, we have concluded that it is a combination of reduced intelligence, an utter lack of consequences and an overall decrease in inhibitions and empathy that has resulted in their current state. They seem to lack any concern for their future, but are fully capable of producing children or kidnapping new members to keep their numbers up.

The other, more stable settlements may pose a threat to the chosen actor early in their deployment tour, but all seem more focused on survival than any aggressive actions. Barring the actor instigating a response, chances of them becoming a threat are minimum.

With the settlement surveillance under way, the historical investigation began, starting with our usual methods. Scans around high population centers were conducted in an attempt to gain access to educational mainframes or records, but due to the breadth of the apocalyptic conditions, the living populace rampantly harvesting ruins for materials, as well as the relatively large amount of time since start of the Collapse, as the natives call their worlds apocalyptic event, very little in terms of electronic record have survived uncorrupted. What has been found has been useless in terms of large scale historical analysis.

With a primary method unavailable we began scanning for intact educational books, gathering several thousand across the entire planet. After scanning and digitizing them, before running them through a VI pattern recognition program we have concluded that the divergent point of Alpha-14B4631 to be the American Revolution. Our own historical records indicate that our version of this war was fought specifically to escape the tyrannical rule of the British royalty. Alpha-14B4631's Revolution did focus on the control of the British royalty, but also specifically involved a distaste for wealthy individuals and families who did not assist in supporting the less fortunate, in a way proportional to their wolf. They had a particular disdain for stagnant wealth, or the idea that a wealthy individual would stockpile money that would simply sit in a bank, and therefore not enrich the community by being spent.

This shift in focus led to early American politics to be focused on lower class citizens, as the wealthy were considered to already have all they could need. This political focus led to the idea of stagnant wealth being a negative concept, going as far as to consider it un-American. While this did not prevent people from becoming and staying rich, it did mean that a wealthy individual was expected to invest in small business, social works and charity, their money working, and often growing, while also improving the lives of others.

Over time this mentality led to a semi functional state of trickle down economics, further affecting the development of the USA. This change pushed across the continents as the world progressed and US culture spread with their growing economy and influence. Internally, this led to a generally more liberal leaning government, which focused on making the lower and middle class happy, as through the shift in politics from our own history, the citizens were more aware of the power and influence they held.

In the year 2025, the economy had reached a low point. In order to assist the lower class, the US government began a government buy back program of several "dangerous" items, including firearms, ammunition and older electronics that contain harmful materials. The more conservative citizens believed it to be a government scheme to disarm the population, but the government maintained it was a fair way to get money into the hands of the people struggling through a recession.

Once the low point in the economy passed, the government program, now affectionately called the "Gun Fund", continued to stay open. Due to the anonymous nature of the process, anyone that needed a quick, questionless infusion of cash could participate. By the year 2035 the program has scrapped one hundred and twenty seven million firearms.

Over the next fifteen years, all the way to 2050, the world continued to slowly but surely demilitarize. Armies were downsized, navy vessels were mothballed or reduced to scrap, and a massive denuclearization effort gained significant traction. The world experienced an unprecedented time of peace, and governments were quick to take advantage of the smaller need for military funding to focus on public works. The number of large-scale armed conflicts steadily shrank until it was almost unheard of. Military conflict wasn't the only place where violence seemed to have been replaced by peace. Global crime rates fell precipitously, settling at a shockingly low percentage of what it had once been.

It is around this time that textbooks become useless between the gap "current events" and "history". Early sometime in 2061, a passing comet got caught in the planet's gravity and fell to Earth. The impact was massive, the crater easily visible in our first scans, and occurred inside the limits of Louisiana. The comet kicked up hundreds of tons of earth and dust, spreading it further north west.

Almost immediately, reports of weird, mutated animals and plants began making the headlines. Before anything could be done, before a cure could be researched or a warning given, the mutations spread like wildfire across the continent, into the ocean and on to the rest of the world. Within a week, strange aggressive dogs were being put down in the streets of China, after attacking a couple on a late night walk.

The mutations were fickle, passing over just over seventy percent of living biomass, turning the other twenty five into twisted, dangerous creatures. A month after the impact the first super virus hit Los Angeles, turning it into a dead city in just three days. After that, London went dark, then Hong Kong, and then Tokyo. Billions of people died, entire cities rioting themselves to death as they tried to escape terrifying viruses.

As the world's cities and large towns choked on diseases and viruses more virulent than anything previously imaginable, the smaller towns struggled with an onslaught of mutated creatures. Farmers waking up to find their herds of cattle ravaged by mutated bulls, while families woke up to find that the family dog is covered in bone plating. The mutations seem random, with more unique examples popping up every day, with the only connecting factor being that almost all of them grew engaged and violent at the simple sight of a human. When a normal animal would run away in self preservation, a mutant would charge, sacrificing its life in the vague hope it could take a single human with it.

Humans were not wholly immune to the mutating influence either. Only about fifty percent of the population was immune to the contaminants effects, while the other fifty was just as susceptible as any other living creature. However, human mutation due to high amounts of

exposure was almost immediately fatal. We were puzzled by this, as there wasn't really any reason why the contaminant, which we will discuss shortly, would cause that sort of issue. Eventually the conclusion was reached that the human mind could not handle the stress of being mutated at such a basic level. Maintenance

When humanity civilization finally broke, they ceased recording any meaningful information on what was happening to the planet. We can draw conclusions by comparing what we learned with the current state of Alpha-14B4631, but that would be almost entirely postulation.

Perhaps the most important investigation we performed was into the exact nature of the mutations that spread across the globe. The final culprit was a harmless microbe, one that reproduces at an unbelievable pace. While this fast spawning microbe was harmless, what it produced as a waste product is most certainly not. A previously unknown material that has a massively negative effect on cellular division, causing it to spiral out of control. This material, however dangerous it may be, is easily purged from the systems, and its effects on human tissue are completely erased by several high end cancer preventative treatments. We recommend a full decontamination of all returning personnel, as well as treatments for all personnel in contact with the actor prior to decontamination.

The prevailing theory remains that the microbe was either inside the comet, and therefore extra terrestrial in nature, or that the impact of the comet somehow freed this microbe, perhaps from some sort of subterranean cave or sealed deep in a Louisiana swamp.

Our final recommendation is that Alpha-14B4631, and more specifically the outline deployment space is a satisfactory location to deploy your actor, as long as they receive proper cancer treatment. We do your primary landing position be outside the city limits, as teh city you currently have picked out is what many would call a "death trap."

Chapter 1

I tightened my grip on my axe, the same axe I had been using for the last month and a half. By now every inch of its polymer handle was as familiar to me as my own hand. I waited silently outside the building, counting down the seconds in my head. Tessa had another two minutes and thirty seconds before I came in after her, despite.

Before I could get down to a single minute, the brown haired woman came bolting out of the building, easily jumping through the broken front window. She ran past me and slid to a stop, pulling out her bow and knocking an arrow.

"It's just one of them," She said, preparing to pull the arrow back. "Any second now..."

With a low burbling screech a giant amphibian, a mutated cross between a frog and a newt, which also happened to be the size of a large dog, leapt out of the dark interior. Its skin was a deep, dark purple, its eyes spinning wildly as if taking every inch of its surroundings at once. Its mouth was open wide, showing off several rows of serrated, dagger like teeth. Its jaw opened even larger, almost as if it was going to attempt to eat me whole.

I heard the familiar twang of an arrow being fired from behind me as Tessa let an arrow fly, the sturdy rod synthetic material and lethally sharp tip whipping by me with a whistle. It embedded five or six inches of itself in the mutated creature's throat, causing it to thrash even as it flew through the air.

Before the large mutant could crash into me, I shifted forward and jabbed out with my axe, slamming the heavy metal end into the monstrous amphibian's face. I could hear the crack of several things breaking, as I just managed to stop the creature's forward momentum, my feet sliding back a foot or so as my enhanced frame absorbed the impact.

The creature fell to the ground, the burbling, angry screech now turning into one of pain and confusion. It was just managing to recover from the heavy strike to the face when I slammed my ax down between its bulging, darting eyes. Its whole body squirmed and flailed at my swing cracked its skull, its tail curling and slapping against the ground with heavy thumps. Instead of pulling my axe out and losing any connection I had to the mutant, a mistake I had made before, I used my axe to pin it to the ground. After a few seconds, when I was sure it wouldn't suddenly break free, I gestured to Tessa with a nod.

"I've got it, finish it off?" I asked, staying focused on the creature.

My partner made a noise of agreement, and I heard the sound of her machete being pulled from its sheath. With a grunt of force she slammed her sharpened weapon down into its neck, cutting deep enough to sever its spinal cord. She slashed it again and its squirming and flailing turned into death twitches. I waited a moment longer before putting my boot on its head, yanking my axe free.

"That... went better than I expected," I admitted, tapping the gore off of my axe. "The first one was much more difficult."

"It was also a lot bigger," Tessa pointed out, flipping the dead and bleeding creature out to yank her arrow free. "Just glad we ambushed it, would have sucked having to deal with both."

I nodded and looked around, an ingrained habit at this point, scanning the area for any new threats. Eventually my eyes settled on Tessa, musing on how much we had both changed in the last few months, both looks and equipment wise.

Neither of us were wearing any normal clothes at this point, trading them out for a variety of white crate clothes that offered a bit of protection and were much easier to maintain. She was wearing a dark green jacket, similar to mine except hers also muffled her sounds for thirty seconds, twice a day and could also change color on command. We found that in a blue crate a week after Tessa had accepted Illbrey's offer. She was also wearing a white undershirt and black pants, the same gloves and her jump boots, which she had already used up completely today. She also had the same holsters and belts as before, her pistol on one hip and her machete on the other.

I was wearing my shield projecting under armor, the shiny black finish just barely back lit with red glowing highlights. My white undershirt was long gone at this point, and with my chest armor being both breathable and comfortable, I didn't see any reason for replacing it. I was also wearing my white crate jacket, my flash bang gloves, and new dark blue pants that we found in a green crate. They didn't do anything actively, but would self repair every two days, and were actually properly armored, instead of the vaguely protective qualities of the white crate clothing, like my boots and jacket. I also had a new holster on my hip, which held a pistol, one that worked with a magazine rather than a cylinder like Tessa's. We had traded John for the pistol and a spare magazine, matching the box of ammo I had found. I now had a total of fourteen shots between two magazines.

Of course, not all of our changes were externally obvious, both of us having taken several serums in the last few weeks. Realizing that we had already started leaning toward the roles of tank and ranger through our tactics and the gear we had managed to find in crates, we decided to lean into it. So far, Tessa had taken a speed enhancing serum, which was actually incompatible with the strength enhancing serum that I had taken. She had also taken a reflex serum, which had taken her already impressive bowmanship to an incredible level. It also played very well with her speed enhancement, making her damn hard to keep up with over any terrain.

I had taken a single durability serum, which had been a very interesting experience. My bones were now, supposedly, about half again as tough as before, and my skin was noticeably harder to damage. We quickly learned it wasn't knife or bite proof, however, and Tessa had been teasingly calling me "abrasion proof." On top of those both of us now had an endurance and metabolism serum, the latter of which we found together in a blue crate.

All in all we had managed to put together an effective array of upgrades and equipment, slowly working our way through all of the crates around our armored home. At this point we had stopped going after white crates, instead focusing on green and blue. Tessa was *still* hesitant to go after another purple, though after the ordeal we went through for my shield armor, I couldn't exactly blame her.

"Did you see the crate while you were playing rabbit?" I asked, stepping closer to the window and peering inside.

“No, spotted this fucker the second I reached the bottom of the stairs,” She explained. “FYI... I’m gonna go ahead and veto trying to eat this guy.”

“What?” I asked, looking over my shoulder in surprise. “Why would we eat that, it smells as bad as it looks.”

“And the tuskers didn’t?” She said with a raised eyebrow. “Are you going in or what?”

“Yeah, I’m going,” I said, stepping through the window space and up onto the raised display platform.

What had once been some sort of clothing store had become the den of the two semi-aquatic mutants we had just finished killing. The ground floor was the standard wrecked, looted and wrecked again mess most buildings we investigated were, with the far right corner of the building sinking worryingly low. Thankfully the left back corner, the corner with the stairs to the basement, was mostly intact.

I reached down to my belt and unclipped the double-clasped, foot-wide disk that had been secured to my left hip. It was my lighting drone, encased in a home-stitched cloth binding. With a few simple commands I activated the drone and instructed it to follow behind me and keep everything lit up. Immediately the room was almost perfectly lit, with the only dark spots cast by shadow. With the room lit, I slowly made my way to the stairs, my eyes and ears peeled for any sign of more newt mutants.

With my axe held at the ready, I put my foot on the stairs, testing it carefully with my weight before slowly making my way down. The basement was a dark, swampy mess, made up of mud, rotted food and whatever the hell else had been down here. It stank, of course, but after the physically painful level of stench in the tusker den and the actually dangerous smell of the screamer nest, this was nothing. As I got to the bottom of the stairs I made a quick scan of the now bright room, which revealed that the foundation on one side collapsed inward, and dirt had been excavated to form a small cave that sloped down and away. I let out a sigh before lifting up my arm and rolled up my jacket sleeve.

With a tap on my arm, a holoprojected screen sprung up in front of my eyes, displaying a map that was as zoomed into this building as possible, showing it and four other buildings. Still, it was detailed enough to confirm that the crate we were looking for was most likely in the dug-out den.

I groaned and made my way to the small cave, my feet squelching at the mucky, nasty layer of mud and decomposition that covered most of the floor. When I got to the cave I whistled my light drone over, the small floating disk making its way to me and lighting up the den. Sure enough, in the far back of the den I could see the glint of green metal, half-buried under a pile of dirt.

Using my axe as a makeshift shovel, I managed to dig out the crate and hook it out, dragging it closer until I could reach out and grab it. I scraped off as much of the mud and filth as I could before heading back up the stairs. I quickly climbed out of the window to find Tessa waiting for me, sitting on the partially crumpled front end of a rusted out car. I handed her the case, which she gingerly took and held out. I swiped my implant, the same implant that projected the map, before using my axe to tap out the muck from my boots.

“Huh... what the hell is this?” She asked, prompting me to look up at what she had pulled out of the small, briefcase sized reward crate. “Looks kinda like a...”

As I looked I saw she was holding a small metal rectangle, about two inches tall and an inch across. A single seam traveled around the entire side, and with a flick Tessa opened it up, exposing the lighter's top.

“Jesus, it is, an old light,” She said, flicking it again before activating it.

Instead of a flame coming out from the nub, which is what I assumed Tessa expected, a small loop of blue and purple plasma, just over a quarter of an inch tall popped up. It did not make the usual screaming sound of tortured air that I had come to expect, staying almost completely silent, which meant that this was not the cheap lighters I was used to dealing with.

“What the hell kind of lighter was that?”

“An electric one,” I responded, holding out my hand. “They last longer and are more durable. But this one is pretty high quality, they usually make a really annoying high pitched sound...”

She put the lighter in my hand and I examined it for a minute before bringing it closer to my implant, opening the short description I got with every reward. Unsurprisingly it was in fact a lighter, with a silence feature built in.

“That loop of plasma will light just about anything if you get it close enough,” I explained. “It will also burn through stuff too, so that can be useful as well. The description says it has five minutes of ‘burn time’ a day before it needs to recharge, which is bullshit. Lighter like these can go weeks without needing a recharge.”

“Doesn't really matter. If it works as well as you say, five minutes is more than you could ever need in a day,” She pointed out, before flicking the lighter closed and putting it back into her pocket. “You ready to head back?”

“Yeah, I need a shower.”

“You're telling me, you're not the one who has to smell you,” She said, smirking as she started walking away.

We only made it a dozen feet or so before having to step over the larger corpse of the first newt mutant. It was laying in a pool of black blood, with its chest and back punctured three times by arrows and its side hacked open with my axe. Once we had gotten past that, Tessa reached into a seemingly random car to pull out my backpack, and the two extra duffle bags I was responsible for, before pulling out her backpack. Once we had everything on and strapped tight we headed off again. It would likely take the rest of the day to get home, so we needed to hurry to make it back before the screamers came out.

Chapter 2

We arrived back home just as the screamers were starting to fly above the trees, just managing to climb into the broken down armored personnel carrier before we could get spotted. Tessa was fine, her enhanced speed and endurance meaning the last hour she spent jogging with nearly sixty pounds of loot was barely even a work out. Unfortunately for me, I was carrying closer to a hundred and fifty because of my strength enhancements, so the trip was just on the curtails of possible, and pushed me to my limit.

“So.... much.... for taking... a... shower,” I panted out, having dropped my packs next to Tessa’s bed, before collapsing back in the center aisle of the makeshift home.

“Was wondering when you would realize that,” Tessa said, barely even sweating. “Now turn on your drone so I can take care of this stuff.”

I flipped her off as I slowly recovered, reaching down and pulling off the lighting drone, activating it before closing my eyes. My breathing eventually returned to normal over the next few minutes, my muscles now feeling the burn. When I had recovered enough I sat back up, watching Tessa as she went through our loot.

This was the first time we had even bothered to loot for food, supplies, or other goodies to trade with. Between the fact that Tessa no longer needed to worry about stocking for winter, our ability to safely eat the meat of mutated animals and that we had one metabolism serum each, our food situation was looking pretty much solved. Our biggest concern now was getting as much portable food as possible, but even that was a low priority behind gathering as many enhancements and rewards as possible.

“So, where to next?” I asked, pulling off my jacket and activating my map. “You said we had, what, a bit over a week before we should leave?”

“Maybe two weeks,” She corrected with a shrug, dragging over another pack to unload. “We could stretch for more time, but I would rather get there a few days early than a few days too late.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” I agreed, scrolling through the map, looking for potential targets.

At this point we had really started to scrape the bottom of the barrel in terms of nearby reward crates. There were no more green crates in easy travel distance, at least none that I could see. I once again cursed the fact that a significant portion of the blues and greens were hidden until we got close to them.

“We are running out of nearby stuff.” I said with a frown, zooming out the map. “I think its time to consider a new plan.”

“We are *not* going into the city,” Tessa said, stopping what she was doing to give me a glare. “Going into the city is way more dangerous than it's worth. Anyone who scavs there has a literal death wish.”

“But-”

“I... I had a death wish, Leon,” She added, cutting me off. “I didn't care any more. But now there is a chance of getting the fuck out of this hell hole. We are not going into the city. It's a miracle either of us made it out alive. The hivers must have been distracted or something.”

My partner turned back to what she was doing, stacking a can of beans before moving onto the next duffel. When she opened it she nodded and slid the whole bag under the small table we ate at.

“That water is for our trip,” She explained. “I know we could survive drinking tainted water at this point, but I would rather not waste the calories we would spend doing so. This should be enough for the first quarter of the trip.”

I nodded and looked back on the map, moving around its focus and frowning as I noticed something. I spent a minute considering it before getting Tessa's attention.

“Hey... come look at this and tell me what you see...”

It took a minute for her to realize what I was looking at. The most direct route to the golden dot, the target for our final challenge and where we would find our ticket off of this world, was multiple times further than our longest trip to date. Tessa was pretty familiar with the first sixth of the trip, and was vaguely familiar with the following sixth. But once we were past that point we would be in completely new territory.

At somewhere around the first third of the trip, well into the only vaguely familiar territory for Tessa, we passed within what looked like a day's travel of the only purple in which we knew what to expect, a visper nest. It was the gauge in which, prior to finding out that another purple reward crate was guarded by a pair of ursa, we had judged just how difficult purple crates would be. The fact that an ursa was a massive bear mutant and vispers were forty foot long snakes, I don't think I would ever feel confident going after a purple cache with an unknown challenge.

What was interesting though was two greens and a blue reward that we could hit on the way to the visper nest.

"Wait, are you suggesting we do something like this?" Tessa asked, trailing her finger along the path I envisioned. "That's nearly a day and a half travel to the first green, another day and a half to the blue, a day to the next green and, oh yeah, it ends with the fucking visper nest! Are you fucking insane?"

"Tessa. Ilbryen clearly said that getting to the golden marker would be more difficult than anything we had done before," I pointed out, shaking my head. "Not only do we need every single advantage we can get, but if we can't handle killing a couple of giant snakes, then what chance do we have of getting to the gold marker?"

She was quiet for a long moment, leaning next to me just looking at the map. After a while she sat down heavily at the end of her bed.

"This is insane, you know that right?" She asked, focusing on me. "Even if we get insanely lucky with the greens and blue, attacking a visper nest... There's going to be at least four of them, most likely more."

"We need to get stronger Tessa," I said with a shrug. "We need to push ourselves to get better gear."

"It will add an extra week of travel," She pointed out next, trying to convince me this was a bad idea. "We would have to leave within the next few days."

"I know. We have plenty of supplies and we can always hunt mutants," I pointed out. "If we make good time we can also find somewhere to hunker down for a few days, maybe find some moving water to clean off in."

She quietly chewed her lip, looking down at for a moment before groaning and flopping back down on her bed.

"Fine! We can try and clear out a visper nest," She said, frustration in her voice. "I think it's going to end up getting us killed, but alright, let's do it."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me, before making my way to the back of the APC, where the slanted back door offered reclined support for me to lean back on. I couldn't bring myself to celebrate the fact that I had convinced her to agree to my plan, as she wasn't entirely wrong.

It could definitely end up getting us killed.

Eventually, after about ten minutes sitting in silence I started pulling off my armor and equipment, the larger and more substantial things too big to sleep with. Tessa was also pulling off her jump boots, having already pulled off her muffle jacket. I quickly used a rag to dry up whatever sweat remained, cleaning myself off as well as I could with a damp cloth, before laying out the repurposed couch cushions that made up my bed. A few shared words later and we were both asleep in the dark, my drone resting on the nearby table.

The following day was quiet, the coolness of the night and early morning quickly replaced by the warmer daytime temperatures. Tessa got up first, quickly using the makeshift shower system outside, before switching with me. When I was done I quickly washed my pants and rinsed off my shield armor.

"So, what do we need to get done before we leave?" I asked when I was once again dressed, sitting on the top of the APC as Tessa did her own laundry.

"Well... honestly there isn't much," She admitted, hanging up her last bit of laundry. "We have to leave within the next three or four days, which might not be enough time to get in contact with John."

"What? Why do you want to contact him?"

"Well carrying cans of food around is going to suck," She pointed out. "Having some dried, smoked or salted meat might come in handy. Also... I want to send a message back with him. For my dad."

I looked down, mentally kicking myself for forgetting about her father. After a few seconds I looked back up to catch her looking out into the woods with a conflicted face.

"Why don't we go see him?" I said, the brown haired survivor whipping her head around to look at me. "We bring a bunch of stuff to trade, take it to the outskirts and I'll walk it in, trade for it and then escort him to see you. You can say your goodbyes and I'll bring him back."

"Wha... But... I..." She struggled for a minute before dropping down to sit on the edge of one of the APC's busted tires. "What would I even say to him?"

"You could try the truth?" I suggested, getting a harsh "oh really?" look in return. "Well what about most of the truth? I'm a traveler from a village far away from here, who came here

looking for something. Now that I found it I'm heading home and I invited you to come with me. He knows about what the fucker did right? Spreading out those lies?"

"Yeah... took a while for me to convince him not to kill him," She admitted. "... I don't know if I want to cause a scene. Because you showing up will, by the way, especially if John feels like being a prick. Which he will."

"It's up to you Tessa, as much as having some lighter food supplies might be good, I don't think it's essential," I pointed out. "On the other hand, this is pretty much the definition of a one way trip. I'm not sure how you could convince anyone to let you come back here once we are gone."

"They wouldn't let me come visit for the holidays?" She asked with a smirk.

"I mean, I know nobles... other nobles I guess, they use the interreality stuff to go on adventures," I admitted, frowning as I thought. "But from what I understand it's incredibly expensive. I'm banking on my siblings taking the money I'm earning through these trips and using it to make more money, securing the future of our noble status, but my brother is only eleven, and my sister is probably still catching up after being sick."

"I was joking," She responded, shaking her head. "I don't think I would ever come back here, even if I had a choice. This place is a hellhole, and once I'm out I can't imagine ever coming back. Can you imagine coming to visit, like it was a vacation spot? Or coming to visit and getting stranded somehow."

"I'd rather not imagine either of those things," I said, Tessa snorting and shaking her head.

"Alright, we can go to them," She said after a few moments of thinking. "Not like we will need any of this crap, we will either be dead or in your world. Try not to get completely swindled when you're bartering, please."

"Hey, I might not know much about skelly-wolves, displacers, or tuskers, but bartering is alive and well for lowies everywhere," I said, defending myself. "I'll be fine."

We chatted for a while as the sun moved across the sky, both of us wordlessly agreeing that we would be taking today easy, recovering and planning for the long challenge ahead. At one point, Tessaddgaadsdfasdfasqdfasdfasdfa

"You mentioned a while back that stuff from here might sell well when we got back... Should we try and bring stuff back with us?" Tessa asked. "Do the boxes have a weight limit?"

"I... have no idea." I admitted, scratching my head. "Depending on how popular the live show is, it might be cool to bring some stuff home... but honestly I don't know if they have a

weight limit... or if they are calibrated or something. I mean they would have to be able to calibrate for weight change since they haven't weighed you."

"...Could you ask?" Tessa asked, sitting up and looking over at me. "They answered your question about the healing serums, right?"

"Cause I pointed out that watching us heal for a week straight if one of us got injured," I responded, eventually looking around. "Any chance we could get an answer?"

We sat there for a few minutes, waiting in silence. After a while Tessa rolled her eyes and groaned, laying back down. I chuckled, doing the same. About an hour later, while I was drifting off, a ping echoed through the small clearing that surrounded the APC. I sat up quickly, as did Tessa, both of us reaching for our weapons. My fingers were touching my axe, while Tessa had her pistol out already when I realized the sound had come from my implant. I quickly activated it to find that the map had been replaced by a message.

"Ten pounds each, bring me back something for my desk," I read out loud, before looking up at Tessa.

For a long moment we just stared at each other, before I lost my poker face and started laughing, my partner quickly joining in.

Chapter 3

The day ended without us getting much done, which as far as I was concerned was fine. We had been working pretty much non-stop since Ilbryen made Tessa his offer, we had more than earned a break. Add that to the fact that we had just set a dangerously high bar for ourselves?

I didn't want to rush into anything.

Despite that, however, we still needed to get things done. So, after waking up the next morning we quickly got to work getting everything set for our trip. The first step was some gear maintenance. I sharpened all of our knives and my axe, while Tessa fixed any holes or tears in our clothes, which at this point was almost all stuff from reward crates.

When our gear was all set, we both began packing up, both for trading and for our long journey to getting out of this reality. All told the trip would likely take at least two weeks, at minimum. It would take much longer if we got lucky and stumbled upon more green and purple reward caches, which I sincerely hoped we would. We were just at the cusp of one month

remaining for us to reach the golden point on the map, which meant we had two weeks extra to play around with.

We also weren't entirely sure how this new challenge would work, which made Tessa and I very nervous. We knew we had a time limit because sometime after Tessa accepted the offer a small timer appeared in the corner of the map, counting down the days and hours until our time was up. We knew that Ilbryen and his company would be throwing additional threats to make the journey even harder. But beyond being more difficult than a purple rated cache, we had no idea how many there would be, and just how much more difficult they would be.

When we were done packing everything worth trading and everything we wanted to bring back with us, we sat back and examined our work. We had four duffel bags stuffed to the brim with stuff to trade, including useful stuff that would ordinarily be worth keeping, but would just sit in the APC and rot now that we were leaving for good. While the duffel bags were in danger of bursting seams if we dropped them, our backpacks were just around half empty. A few cans of food, some basic tools and supplies, as well five bottles of water each. We were hoping to fill the empty space with more dried food, which we would stretch as long as possible by hunting and gathering as we traveled.

By the time everything was all set we both agreed that it was way too late to be heading out into the wilds, even if Tessa was extremely familiar with the area between the APC and her old village. It wasn't worth the risk, and we had time to spare. We both spent the rest of the day mentally preparing, as well as eating a lot of the food we would have been leaving behind.

When the next day finally rolled around we set out customarily early. Unsurprisingly we both had trouble sleeping, so when the sun started to rise and Tessa was sure it would be safe to travel, we were both more than eager to get moving.

Progress was slower than we were used to, as Tessa was carrying two duffel bags, and without strength enhancements she was understandably taking it slowly. Still, the settlement was relatively close, and we managed to avoid any issues along the way.

As we traveled Tessa was coaching me on what to do and what not to say.

"Don't mention me or my dad until after you've made the trade," She said. "I don't think it would stop most people from taking anything, especially considering all of the food is in cans or sealed up."

"How do I... what's your dad's name?" I asked as I followed behind Tessa.

"Howard," She answered, "Howard Morse."

"Huh... You know I don't think you ever told me your last name..." I pointed out.

“And you never told me yours,” She fired back, looking over her shoulder with a smirk.

“Draver,” I answered easily. “Leon Draver.”

After about four hours of walking Tessa eventually stopped by a car wreck by the side of the road. It had been stripped of anything even remotely useful, and plenty that probably wasn't. Between several well beaten paths, obviously looted building and even the occasional campsite, It was pretty clear that we were close to an active settlement.

“Alright, this is about as far as I can go,” She said, frowning as she put her bags down. “Any closer and we risk running into a patrol or something. Just follow this road and you'll see it in about twenty minutes.”

“Would a patrol really recognize you?” I asked, putting down my own bags to rest for a moment. “It's been a few years right?”

“Leon, I may have been unfairly treated in some ways, but I still killed the mayor's son,” She said, running her finger through her hair. “I wouldn't be surprised if my face was still plastered on a board somewhere, with instructions to kill on sight for a big reward.”

“Fucking hell... Well, stay safe,” I said, pulling off my pack and carefully handing it to Tessa, as my axe was clipped to one side. “I'll be back soon.”

It took a few minutes for me to get a good grip on all four bags at once, but after a few tries and Tessa's help, I was off. I took it slow, both to save my energy in case something happened, and because I didn't want to cause any panic if I bumped into someone. About ten minutes after I left Tessa by herself I could smell just the faintest hint of smoke. A few minutes after that I finally saw the village.

This wasn't the first time I had seen it of course, but it was the first time I had seen it up close. The walls were more impressive now that I was standing in front of them, built out of old cars half crushed and stacked like bricks. Telephone poles, no doubt cut down from around the area, helped to reinforce the protective structure. The wall encircled a large space, and connected to two larger buildings, the structures part of the defensive walls.

The closest of the large buildings, while nowhere near as severe or twisted, showed similar modifications to what the savages did to their building. A few spots had walls that were knocked out, and a small structure had been built on top of it. All of the windows facing the outside of the perimeter wall were heavily reinforced with car parts and wood.

As I got closer I slowed down even more. Eventually someone spotted me, an older man of maybe forty caught me out of the corner of his eye. He did a double take before turning to get the attention of another person close by. Before I had made it another thirty feet the entire town was buzzing with activity. Most people rushed inside the rusted scrap walls for protection, while

a few, most of them armed in some way, stayed behind. A few people popped up around the wall as well, most of them wearing armor of some kind, all of them holding some sort of makeshift weapon, probably muskets.

“Hello!” I called out, slowing down to a stop, still a fair distance away from those who stayed behind. “My name is Leon, I have got some stuff to trade, I was wondering if anyone was interested?”

One of the largest men to stay outside turned to whisper something to the man next to him. After a moment he responded.

“Alright, but you’ll have to stay outside the walls,” He explained, gesturing to come closer.

Keenly aware that I was out numbered and under the watchful gaze of an armed militia, I slowly made my way to the small group, stopping when I was a few feet away.

“Thank you. I have a long trip ahead of me and I was hoping to trade all of this for some lighter travel food,” As I explained I put the duffle bags down and kneeled, opening one of them to show it was full of cans of food. “There’s some clothes and other stuff I scavenged as well, but I figure people will mostly be interested in the food.”

“Can we take a look at it?” He asked, looking down at the now opened bag. “I’m not causing a stir for cans of bad food.”

“Yeah, be my guest,” I said, standing back up and taking a step back, not wanting to loom over anyone.

The big man nodded to one of his friends, who crossed the distance warily. He quickly went through some of the cans in one bag, before looking up at me and gesturing to the others. When I nodded he started going through the others, which was when the big guy spoke up again.

“What brings you around here?” He asked. “You don’t strike me as a local.”

“I’m a traveler of sorts,” I explained. “Exploring old towns, scavenging and looting. I keep the good stuff and sell the rest before moving on.”

Before he could respond the smaller guy going through the duffle bags stood up and nodded back to who I could only assume was his boss or superior. I was pretty sure he wasn’t the mayor, he didn’t look anything like what Tessa had described.

“Well, Andy seems to think your stuff is worth trading food. You said you’re looking for travel food? Anything in particular?”

“Anything that will last in a backpack for a couple of weeks,” I explained with a shrug. “Hard to guess what you’ve got.”

The man nodded in understanding, before sending another person inside the walls, presumably to get people to trade with. He looked back at me, eyes trailing over my armor, which I internally kicked myself for still wearing. The obvious high tech armor stood out like a sore thumb.

“Where are you headed?” He asked after a moment. “Any particular destination in mind?”

“No destination, but I plan on going west,” I answered, which was most definitely not the direction we would be going in.

We made small talk for about fifteen minutes before people started to leave the walled area of the village. Some of them were just getting back to whatever they were doing, but some people were carrying things to trade. Our conversation was soon put on hold as I bartered with a dozen or so people, though in all honesty, I wasn’t really working that hard to get crazy deals. I had brought a ridiculous amount of stuff, and if I got a good deal I would be leaving with way more than we could carry comfortably for the long trip.

After about an hour of haggling with people, I had one empty duffle bag and one full of relatively stable food, including something called fruit leather made from berries, dried and smoked meat, some pemmican, which Barry, the large man who seemed to be in charge assured me would last for *years* if I kept it stored properly. When I had traded, and occasionally given away everything I had brought I pushed the spare duffel into the one full fo food and zipped it shut before standing upright.

“Right, this should be more than enough,” I said with a smile, before scratching the back of my head. “Now, could you do me a favor? I’d like to talk to Howard Morse, do you think someone could fetch him?”

“...What do you want with old man Morse?” He asked, an underlying tension suddenly coming to the surface.

“Well... when I was passing through, I stumbled on his daughter, Tessa,” I explained honestly. “She very kindly put me up in her home and showed me the dangers of the area. But now I’m moving on, so I suggested she come with me.”

“And she agreed?” He asked, sounding skeptical.

“Wouldn’t you?” I asked. “Exiled from her home, and banned from every village within a reasonable walking distance, all for defending herself?”

I shook my head, before taking a minute to gather myself. I needed these people to get Tessa's dad for me, preferably without me doing anything serious.

"Defending herself? Is that what she told you?" One of the people behind Barry said, sneering at me. "She's a killer, dangerous! She led poor Adam along and-"

"That's enough," Barry said, cutting the other man off. "Go get old man Morse."

"Wh- Why? Fuck that bitch, she-"

"Go get him, now," He repeated, turning to give the smaller man a harsh glare. "Tessa Morse may be exiled but her father is free to come and go as he pleases, as is he."

He finished by pointing at me. After a moment of glaring, the short man looked away and nodded, quickly turning and heading back inside, hopefully off to do as he was told. After he had disappeared behind the walls, Barry looked back to me.

"Three years later, she remains a tense subject," He explained, shaking his head. "Mayor Wallace likes to remind us frequently of what she did. But some of us still remember what his son was like."

For a moment I considered what I would say, part of me wanting to call him out for not helping her in the first place. Eventually I just shrugged, not really caring what about him or anyone here beyond this moment. After a few minutes of awkward silence an older man stepped out of the gate, leaning heavily on a cane. He looked around before spotting us, quickly hobbling to us as fast as he could.

"So, I hear you're traveling with my daughter?" He asked when he got to us.

"That's right," I responded simply. "She shouldn't be out here alone, and I could use the company as well."

He gave me a long look, still leaning on his cane. I could feel his eyes stopping on my armor, widening just a hair at the glowing highlights. After a long pause he nodded and walked closer, and then right past me, heading out the way I came.

"Well, let's go then," He said impatiently, as if I was holding him back. "That coward Sam was running right to the mayors house last I saw him, I'd rather not be here when that fucker comes running."

I turned to look at the old man, then back to Barry, who was laughing to himself. I shook my head and lifted the duffle full of food before chasing after him.

Chapter 4

I easily caught up with the older man, who was actually setting a halfway decent pace, even with his limping. For a while we were silent, which gave me the chance to really take a look at him. He had brown hair, like his daughter, but with streaks of gray mixed in. He was taller than me by a few inches, but more wiry, built for speed rather than power. Even though he hadn't been out hunting or anything, according to Tessa, he still looked to be in good shape.

"Sam said you were 'taking my daughter away.'" He said suddenly, without looking in my direction. "I assume that was him being an idiot and her leaving was her choice?"

"Uh, yeah, I wouldn't force her," I assured him before chuckling. "Not sure I could to be honest, pretty sure she would kick my ass."

The older man simply nodded, clearly agreeing with my statement. He kept walking, looking around with trained precision, like he had made this journey hundreds of times before, which, considering what Tessa had told me about him, was probably true. Despite the reasonable pace for someone with a pronounced limp, we were still going slow compared to the pace I had set for the village. As a result it took just about fifteen extra minutes to get back to the spot where I left Tessa. I only realized it a second before Tessa stepped out of the woods, carrying both our packs.

"Good to see you Dad," She said with a smile as she made her way to us, putting the bags down by the burnt out wreck we had stopped at originally.

"It's good to see you too buttercup," The older man said, both of them meeting in a tight hug. "You are looking better, better than before winter."

Tessa rolled her eyes, I assumed at the nick name, giving me a harsh look that promised grievous payback if I ever repeated it. I couldn't help but smirk and shrug.

"I've been doing better," Tessa responds, the two family members pulling back slightly. "The last few months have been... interesting. Challenging for sure, but... much better than before."

"Good. I was worried when I left you before winter," He admitted, stepping back to lean on the wrecked car. "You had that look in your eye. I was worried you wouldn't make it through."

"I... managed to survive winter without going crazy," She said with a deceptively calm shrug. "I gathered all the books and magazines I could, like you suggested. It helped. But it was

a close thing when spring came... Honestly, I was getting reckless, but Leon saved me from doing even more stupid shit.”

The older man looked over at me when his daughter pointed me out, his searching look harsh and steely. When he focused back on Tessa he gave her an understanding smile, patting her shoulder.

“I’m sure you would have been fine, but I’m glad you’re doing better.”

“Why don’t we find somewhere to sit?” I suggested, before they could continue talking. “Maybe somewhere out of sight?”

Both of them looked at me, Howard with a frown and Tessa with a smile and nod.

“Good idea, there’s an old house this way,” My partner said. “It’s been completely cleared but it looked relatively intact.”

“Fine, though there isn’t much to be worried about,” Howard agreed with a shrug. “They do more patrols than ever these days.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“I think that’s the problem.”

Tessa and I said at the same time, both of us sharing a look before leaning over and grabbed my backpack, Tessa doing the same. We spent about ten minutes walking down an overgrown but still identifiable street before finally getting to a row of houses. Tessa confidently walked up to the front door and stepped inside, her father following after her. I gave another quick look around before stepping in as well, shutting the door behind us.

Tessa and I looked around for a minute or two, just to make sure there weren’t any surprises waiting for us, before we met again in the living room. Howard was already sitting down on the ratty old couch, Tessa quickly joining him, leaving me to sit in a single seat that at one point probably matched the rest of the room, but was now stained black with water damage and rot.

“You’re leaving?” Howard asked bluntly, leaving no chance for Tessa to breach the subject slowly.

“I am,” she responded, just as bluntly. “Being alone out here is driving me insane dad. When Leon offered to go with him... I couldn’t say no.”

“I understand that, and I don’t blame you for wanting to leave,” Howard admitted. “I... Should have told you to go, to try and find somewhere that the bastard’s lies hadn’t reached. I guess I was just being selfish.”

“I wasn’t ever going to leave without someone pushing me,” Tessa explained, turning to look at me. “Part of me had already given up, I would have never left the APC by myself.”

“And where exactly is your destination?” He asked, following his daughter’s gaze to me. “The coward Sam said you were a ‘Traveler.’ What exactly does that mean?”

“That was just crap, to keep them from following us or whatever,” I explained. “I had no reason to tell anyone in that town the truth except you.”

“We are going to Leon’s home,” Tessa explained, putting her hand on her dad’s leg. “He... lives very far away, fast enough that the trip is essentially one way.”

“I’m glad that you have an actual destination,” He responded with a nod. “traveling anywhere far is dangerous these days, being a ‘traveler’ sounds like a death sentence. What’s your home like?”

“It’s... well it’s a hell of a lot less dangerous than this place, at least in the day to day,” I explained.

“And both of us would be in high regard once we made it,” Tessa explained. “Leon was sent with a specific task, and if we make it back we will be a lot better off than even the Mayor ever was.”

“Good lord Tessa, will you stop beating around the bush?” Howard demanded, frustration starting to leak into his demeanor. “I understand why you want to go, and I am happy that you will live better there, but I can tell you are hiding something, in no small part because he is wearing a chestplate that looks like it came out of an old comic book.”

Tessa let out a sigh, shaking her head and taking a deep breath.

“Leon’s home is years ahead of us, further than we were before the Cataclysm,” She explained. “He was sent here as a test of sorts, to survive and to gather bits of advanced technology to bring back. The people that gave him the test agreed that if I can join him on his journey home and we both survive, they would give me the same status they are giving him.”

Howard looked at her for a moment before turning to look back at me. His eyes trailed down to my armor, then to my armored gloves. He frowned and turned back to Tessa, who seemed to anticipate his disbelief, had already pulled out her safety knife. She activated it and swung at a nearby lamp, slicing it in half easily, rivulets of red hot metal spattering on the damp carpet. She then moved to dragged it across her cheek, which, of course, would do nothing. Howard, not knowing that the knife wouldn’t cut her at all, lunged forward to grab the knife, managing to wrap his hand around the blade and pull it away from her face. He winced as if expecting pain, only for his expression to shift to surprise when the knife did nothing to him.

"It's a safety knife," I explained. "Cuts more or less anything that's not alive. And this is our map."

I rolled up my sleeve and tapped my arm, activating the holo projected map that both Tessa and I had come to rely so much on. When Howard turned to say something he spotted the glowing projection, his eyes going wide.

"What the hell?"

The older man stood as quickly as his bum leg would let him, taking a step closer and waving his hand through the projection, which shifted and broke up as his hand interrupted the projected light. After a minute of messing with the projection he turned to look at his daughter.

"That interesting, sure, but-"

"Whack him with your cane," She suggested. "Just don't break it, you need it to get home."

With very little hesitation the older man choked up on his cane and slapped it across my arm. For a split second a red bubble of energy popped into existence around my arm, completely opaque where his cane smacked against me, fading out to translucent and then completely transparent the further away it got. His cane rebound from the impact, making the older man stumble back onto the couch. He stared at both of us for a long moment before eventually recovering enough to talk.

"Well... alright then. Advanced, huh?" He asked, Tessa nodding in confirmation. "Well... Alright. And you trust him?"

"We've been working together for almost two months," She said. "He shared everything he could and we have both gotten pretty strong because of it. Yeah, I trust him."

"Good, that's good Tessa. I'm glad you are getting the chance to find some place where you can be happy, and that you'll be safe. You will be safe, right?"

"I'll do my best to stay safe dad, but you know as well as I do that there are no guarantees."

"Yeah, you get that from me. The idea of playing it safe just sounds boring to the Morse family. Your grandma and grandpa were the same way."

The two of them spent an hour or so talking, seeming to stay away from difficult subjects on some unspoken agreement. Eventually I started sorting through the new bag of food I brought back with me, splitting it up into our backpacks. I made sure I was carrying the heaviest

stuff since being the heavy was my job at this point. When I was done I handed both of them some jerky, already chipping on my own piece.

“Isn't this for your trip?” He asked, watching as Tessa and I took another big bit.

“It is, but we already have enough,” Tessa accused him. “It's one way don't forget, and we will be scavving while we travel... probably. Speaking of which, are you familiar with this area?”

Tessa stood up from her spot, picked up my hand and started controlling the map until it was displaying the area. Once she was set she gestured for her dad to get closer.

“Well it's one heck of a hike,,:” He said, eyes following along the general path between the golden point and where we currently were. “You would get there eventually but be careful, We know there is at least one savager camp in the are.”

“We know, we already ran into them,” I explained without thinking, Tessa wincing as I did. “Only about three of them survived, we think.”

Howard once again stood up out of his seat, this time looking angry, turning to his daughter with a harsh look., Tessa groaned before starting the process of explaining what had happened while I added my own detail here or there. By the end of it Howard was upset but sitting down again.

“That could have very easily gone wrong for you two, you realize that?” He asked, shaking his head. “You're both lucky to be alive. If they had decided to chase you down any more you would be carrion food.”

“We know dad,” Tessa assured him. “But Leon was right, it needed to be done. Every piece of tech we have is going to make this journey easier.”

The conversation eventually spun around to how Howard was doing, and while the older man wasn't quite comfortable talking about himself, mostly because he was clearly annoyed with how little he could contribute in his older age and persistent injury. He did seem to understand that this would be the last conversation they would have, so he pushed through his dislike and talked as much as he could. Eventually, after two or three hours he stood up from the couch.

“I think it's time I get back,” He said, a frown on his face., “Frankly its a miracle that they haven't started hunting us down. I can't imagine what kind of shitstorm getting back is going to be like.”

Tessa nodded and stood as well, both of them sharing another tight hug, this one even longer than their first. They whispered a few things to each other and I pretended to be very

interested in what was going on outside, not wanting it to seem like I was listening in. After a ten minute goodbye, in which both of them pretended not to be crying, Howard and I started making the trip back to the village.

The trip was completely silent, following along the same path as before, a beat up road with a wide beaten path through it. When we were about five minutes away from the village Howard stopped and turned to me.

“I think this is far enough. I wasn’t joking about there being a shit show waiting for us when we got back,” He said, facing away from me. “I can make the last few minutes by myself, and it will keep you from getting sucked into anything.”

I opened my mouth to tell him it was fine, but he turned and focused on me completely, his eyes holding a seriousness that made me instinctively step back.

“This world is terrible. It chews people up and spits them out, broken and twisted. If you can offer my baby girl something better, then all the power to you,” He said, his grip on his cane audibly tightening. “I know survival is never guaranteed. But if my baby girl dies you had better be a cooling corpse already, because in this world or the next I will make you regret otherwise.”

Without another word the grizzled old man turned and hobbled away, leaving me alone on the beaten path, too shocked to do anything but watch him go.

Chapter 5

When I eventually recovered from Howards threatening exit, I quickly made my way back to Tessa. It had been weird talking to someone other than her after almost two months of basically no other contact, and surprisingly it left me missing my family even more than I usually did. I couldn’t wait to get home, to see what my siblings had been up to and hear how they had been enjoying their new status. My brother would have definitely started his new lessons, and my sister would be walking around on her own by now, fully recovered from exotic energy poisoning that she had been suffering from for years now.

When I finally stepped into the house, Tessa was waiting for me. I had barely made it past the doorway when she quickly wrapped me in a hug.

“Thank you,” She said, her head on my shoulder. “For helping with that. For pushing me to do it. Just sending him a message... that would have been terrible.”

“Yeah, of course Tessa, I’m just glad you agreed,” I responded, rubbing her back.

After a moment she pulled away, focusing on me with a searching look. Whatever she was looking for she must have found, because she squeezed my arm and looked concerned.

“What's wrong?” She asked. “They didn't give you any trouble, did they?”

“No, no its fine. I... seeing you and your dad just made me think of my family,” I explained, rubbing the back of my neck. “I miss them.”

“You're going to see them again, I promise,” She responded, giving me a reassuring smile. “Just a few more weeks and you can see them.”

“Yeah, Yeah I know,” I agreed, nodding my head before smirking at her. “I'm looking forward to introducing you to them.”

“Introducing... really?” She asked, suddenly nervous. “But.. I mean alright...”

“Yeah, our new place has plenty of room for you, and it will be better for you to stay close until you get used to all of the new stuff,” I pointed out. “I can already imagine how badly my mom wants to meet the person who kept me alive long enough to come back.”

She chuckled nervously, before quickly grabbing my backpack and passing it to me.

“Come on, we have the rest of the day to travel and we should really get going.”

I couldn't help but chuckle nodding along to her sudden desire to rush, following her out of the house as she fiddled with her own backpack. A quick check of the map later and we were off, heading south east, away from the village and very much not west like I had told Barry. We quickly settled into our usual routine for traveling, with Tessa focused on where we were going, stopping occasionally to check things out with her binocular glasses, while I focused on what was around us, making sure we weren't ambushed by anything. It was a strategy we had adopted soon after securing the first purple crate, and let us focus on different tasks rather than forcing Tessa to do both as I followed along like an idiot.

The half hour of travel was boring, mostly because we were still in the heavily patrolled area around the village and inside the quiet perimeter around the hiver city. With little to worry about and nothing worthwhile to loot, we made pretty good time, only slowing down to a more cautious speed when Tessa pointed out a tree that was marked. A green circle with a brown rectangular shape was painted around the tree in several places, with dripping drops of paint along some of it.

“This was spray painted here by the village,” She explained, hand tracing the old, partially worn marking. “I used to help redo them every once in a while around the patrolled perimeter. Its kind of like the village flag, marking out where was safe and when you were getting close to a village.”

“What's it supposed to be?” I asked, tilting my head as I tried to interpret the symbol.

“It was supposed to be a loaf of bread in a green circle,” She explained, shaking her head and chuckling. “But that was too hard for most of the hunters and scavvers, so it sort of devolved from there.”

She stared at the symbol for a few moments longer, her fingers tracing it before she pulled away and stepped back. Then she turned and gestured with her head back to the vague path we had been following.

“Come one, let's get going,” She said, focusing on the path ahead. “We have to start really paying attention now. We are at the very outskirts of the quiet area around the city, and this marks the end of the cleared out area around the village”,

“We are on our own then,” I said while looking around, the dense trees around us suddenly feeling a lot more foreboding.

“Yup, nothing we can't handle though,” Tessa pointed out, nudging me a bit before walking ahead. “C'mon, we need to start moving. Keep your eyes out for a good place to stay for the night.”

I nodded and quickly caught up to here, keeping my head on a swivel as we walked. The path slowly faded until we were walking through waist high grass and weeds, all of them growing through the thousands of cracks in the asphalt below us. It wasn't anything we were not used to at this point, but it was still annoying. Thankfully I spotted that the sidewalks of the road we were traveling on were a bit better condition, so we moved over to the side of the road, allowing us to speed up.

Eventually we passed through whatever mutated plant had been growing *through* the asphalt, and we could resume our normal pace, making good progress until the sun started to set worryingly low, prompting us to pick a house with a nice, solid basement and quickly setting up a secure place to sleep for the night. After pushing around some furniture to block most of the doors and locking the one we left clear up, we settled down for a simple meal of dried meats and fruit leather, which I had never had before but was actually really good. It lacked the sharp sweetness of artificial sugar I was used to, both from home and from the canned fruit we occasionally ate, but was still really good.

“What is this anyway?” I asked, tearing off a chunk and chewing it.

“Fruit leather? It's basically a finely ground mash of fruits and some veggies that you dehydrate,” She explained, grabbing a bit for herself. “Usually they use whatever berries they can find or that are left over. I think this is raspberry and... strawberry maybe? Definitely some sort of veggie too. Either way it's nice and lasts for a while.”

“How did you dehydrate it?” I asked skeptically, swallowing my last chunk, resealing the tightly wrapped package before I was tempted to have more.

“You can make one using a fire, or one that uses warmed rocks,” She assured me. “Just takes a long time.”

When we were finished eating we both moved closer together and I pulled up my map to see what kind of progress we had made despite spending most of the day walking in the wrong direction, towards the village.

“Alright, I think we just managed to make enough progress that we can get to the first green crate in two days,” She said, pointing out the vague path to our first target. “We might have to save it for early on the third day though, if we stumble on another cache or something.”

“We have plenty of time, I would rather just put it on the third day so we dont burn ourselves out.”

Tessa gestured with her hands as if she was weighing the options before finally shrugging.

“On one hand we have a deadline we *need* to hit, which makes me think that just taking our time is not a good idea,” She said, chewing on her lip. “On the other hand...”

“Rushing is how we end up dead,” I finished, the brunette survivor nodding in agreement. “I think rushing it in at night is a bad idea, if we get stuck or it takes too long we are screwed. Lets just plan on doing it early on the third day, but also stay aware of the fact that wasting time isn’t going to do us any favors.”

Tessa considered my words for a moment before finally nodding in agreement.

“Yeah, alright,” She said. “You're right, there isn't much difference, especially when we are likely a week ahead of schedule despite the detour we are taking.”

We discussed our plans past the first green cache, but quickly realized that there wasn't much point trying to puzzle out how much time each leg of the trip would take, and exactly how much time each crate would be if we couldn't even figure out what our time schedule would be for the first one. We eventually just gave up, planning the trip in only the broadest of terms, which at this point was more of a review than planning.

“Should we even bother scavenging for anything until our packs get lighter?” I asked after we had finished our “planning” session. “We have plenty of food for now, right?”

“Well what about the ten pounds we can bring to your world?” She asked, looking over her shoulder and setting up a makeshift bed from some relatively enact couch cushions.

“Damn, forgot about that...” I admitted, looking up at the finished basement ceiling as I thought. “What do you think?”

“Well... it depends on what you want to bring back,” She pointed out. “For something like jewelry, all we need is to look out for big, fancy houses. But for something like books or random stuff? We would kinda just have to loot houses until we find something we like.”

“A pile of jewelry isn’t going to weigh much... right?” I asked, looking over at her. “Maybe we both bring like a pound or two of jewelry and then keep our eyes open?”

“Solid, but we should definitely wait until we are closer to start,” She suggested, laying down on her bed. “We will hopefully have a better idea of how much time we have left and how much we can spend fucking around, scaving for knick nacks.”

As Tessa got some sleep, I got first watch. I ended up spending most of the time reading with the help of my drone, which I kept at near minimum levels to stretch out its charge. It was better than nothing, but there was only so much reading magazines I could do before I started to get antsy. I made a mental note to grab a book that was actually interesting next time we were looting. I passed out almost instantly when Tessa and I traded places.

I woke up the next morning, just five hours later, to Tessa preparing breakfast, which at this point just meant unwrapping some tightly sealed bags of salted meat. We also had some soda that Tessa had snagged from the kitchen up stairs, which was great because it contained no small amount of caffeine.

By the time we were packed up and ready to go the sun was just rising and the morning safe period was just starting. A quick check of the map and we were on our way, two days of solid travel ahead of us. I was hoping we would stumble on a green or blue cache on the way to the first stopping point, but there was no way to know if we would.

We managed to avoid any issues for the entire first day, making significant progress towards our destination, even spending an hour or so searching a large, fancy looking house that we stumbled upon early in the afternoon. We grabbed a few expensive looking pieces of jewelry from two of the rooms, and shared a good laugh when we realized that neither of us had any idea of what expensive jewelry actually looked like.

“I think... I think you can test if a diamond isn't actually glass by trying to scratch it with a piece of metal,” I said, squinting as I tried to remember an off handed comment that my once business partner Steve told me. “A diamond won't get scratched unless you have another diamond? Maybe?”

“I have no fucking idea Leon, do i look like I wear jewelry?” She asked, throwing a gold ring at me, the small piece bouncing off my chest. “These could all be glass for all I know.”

“Well... lets just grab a bunch from a few different places I guess, and hope its worth something when we get back.”

We quickly grabbed a bunch and stored it in our backpacks, wrapping it in a towel to keep them safe. When we were done we headed off again, barely slowing down to check the kitchen for anything easy, finding nothing that wasn't long since rotten and turned to dust.