

Suddenly, I gasped, my eyes going wide as I studied my surroundings. My head... felt fine, actually. My arm, too. I looked down at where I knew I was supposed to have a broken arm, only to find a normal, completely uninjured limb. I reached down to touch it, wincing when I wrapped my hand around my bicep, expecting pain, only for there to be none. I shook my head, not knowing how to deal with what I saw. Had I died?

I looked around, taking in my new surroundings. I was in a room, one smaller than the office I had taken shelter in and infinitely cleaner. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all pure white, inset with blue carvings in a logographic language I didn't understand. They pulsed slowly with faint blue light, starting from the ceiling and feeding down into the center of the floor, where a beam of light connected it with the ceiling. A solid blue gem, like a massive sapphire, floated in the center of the beam, halfway between the floor and the ceiling, slowly bobbing up and down like it was floating on the surface of calm waters. The gem was easily twice the size of my head and cut into a double pyramid shape with six sides on top and six more on the bottom.

"What..."

Words failed to come to my mind, my brain lagging behind, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Everything was so out of place, so different from where I just was. My brain couldn't comprehend what was happening. I turned to run my fingers over the smooth walls, tracing out one of the carved symbols along the walls.

"Welcome! My name is Sapphire, but you can call me Sally!"

I whirled around, scanning the room, eyes darting back and forth. The sudden greeting absolutely *didn't* make me scream out loud like a girl a third of my age, though my heart was pounding.

"Who said that?" I demanded, looking around at the still-empty room, taking a step closer to the central crystal. "Hello?"

"Hello!" A woman's voice said, soft and gentle but excited to greet me.

The crystal pulsed, lighting up in a way that made it pretty clear where the voice had come from. I stared at the massive blue gem for a long, silent moment, wondering what the hell was going on.

"What... Where am I?" I asked, looking around again. "Can you let me out? I... I'm not sure what's going on, but..."

"You are currently inside my sentient matrix, the forge which allows me to manipulate reality," The voice coming from the crystal explained. "You can consider it my heart!"

"I... What?" I asked, my brain sticking on her nonsense statement. "Look I... I guess you must have fixed me? Thank you for that, but-"

"Oh, you mean your arm? It is fixed, but technically, it was a side effect of bonding to me. An anchor should be in perfect health before they can be used to lock a bastion unit in place to a single reality."

This time, I had nothing to say, not even any sounds. Silence stretched out for a long moment before the woman finally spoke up again.

"Perhaps I could start from the beginning?" She asked, continuing before I could even think of responding. "I am a bastion unit, an artificially intelligent construct, designed to assist and uplift the survivors of dead-end realities, planets, planes, and other bodies, both material and immaterial, capable of supporting sentient life."

"...I think I can guess, but what exactly do you mean by dead-end world?"

"Good question!" She responded, the crystal bobbing in a way that felt... perky. "In all of existence, there exist infinite realities. Generally speaking, these infinite realities are all 'shades' of different 'prime' realities, which, of course, are also infinite. Unfortunately, sometimes these 'shades' don't work out quite the way the inhabitants, either of specific locations or of the reality as a whole, would wish they did. Perhaps we could use your world as an example?"

"Sure," I said after a long pause, not really prepared to deny the floating crystal anything at this point.

"Great! Versions of your reality that are closer in results and proximity to the 'prime' gain a rather popular inter-reality concept called a 'system.' It would have allowed the initial survivors to grow stronger, gain skills, use magic, and even purchase things from a universe-spanning marketplace, all through a video game-style interface," The woman explained, thankfully pausing to let me parse what she had just dropped into my lap. "Unfortunately, your reality is quite far away from your 'prime'. Not only did the 'system' not engage here, but it never engaged anywhere in your entire universe."

"I'm familiar with system apocalypse type stories." I said without really meaning to, my mouth on autopilot. "What's the difference?"

"Well, in versions closer to the 'prime' but still far too different, the surrounding intelligent life, all of whom went through successful system conversions themselves, arrive shortly to the planet in a humanitarian effort, uplifting and aiding humans in regrowing," She explained. "While still not pleasant, humans are able to survive and eventually prosper. They do not count as a dead-end world, or more accurately, a dead-end universe."

I chewed on her words for a long minute or three, going over the fantastical claims she was making. It all sounded insane, but then again, with what was going on... could I really deny the fantastical? I mean, I almost died when some sort of six-legged mutant canine chasing some dude on a motorbike smashed into a car and almost crushed me. If half the things I saw online before power went out were true, then this...

"So... what does that mean for us? For humans? For everyone?" I asked. "Are we just fucked then?"

"Of course not! That is where I come in!" She happily explained, the crystal pulsing and bobbing more than ever, seeming excited and eager. "Bastion units were designed and created by a powerful artificer from a distant reality, who learned of these dead-end worlds and wished to help. We are specifically made to pass through the walls of reality, searching for dead-end planets, planes, systems, etc. When we find one, we bind to a local individual who shows the signs of being capable. This locks us into a singular reality. Once we do that, we can assist in the survival and uplifting of the local populace!"

"How?"

"Well, in the reality I was created in, the underlying laws were rather... loose. You could think of it in terms of a soft reality versus a hard reality. In a soft reality, things can be shifted and moved around almost willy-nilly, with only basic energy costs," She explained. "In a hard reality, the laws are immutable, with no amount of internal power or exchange capable of messing with it. Luckily, this universe is somewhere in between, not too hard or soft."

"Why is that a good thing?" I asked. "And how does it help?"

"It's a good thing because soft worlds can... get a little intense," She explained. "My creator frequently had to intervene to keep his reality from unraveling, or from being rewritten a dozen times before he was two hundred! Can you imagine having to keep up with that? So exhausting!"

"Right... yeah, soft reality sounds intense."

"Exactly! Now, this reality being a more or less middle ground means that with the right extra reality energy, I can bend the rules, shift things around, and even perform the odd miracle! And because it's not too soft, you don't have to worry nearly as much about some distant simpleton accidentally changing gravity or inverting the speed of light."

Again, whoever I was talking to was kind enough to stay silent, letting me work through everything they had "explained." Eventually, when I had everything set, I looked around again before focusing on the crystal.

"So... you're not talking to me through the crystal, then?" I asked. "You... are the crystal?"

"That's correct!"

"Right. And you're specifically designed to help worlds or whatever recover from events that would normally kill everyone?"

"Correct again! It seems like I chose my Anchor well!"

"Or after everything I've been seeing online, this is just par for the course," I muttered to myself before speaking up louder. "How do you help? Like, what can you do?"

"Right! As I was saying, this universe is a middle ground of mutability, which means modifying and shifting the world can be done, but it requires a specific type of energy that does not normally exist in the universe," She explained, light pulsing in time with her words. "In layman's terms, if you want me to do magic stuff, I need magic energy. Luckily, I come equipped with a way you can gather that energy!"

Suddenly, a light flickered in front of the gem, startling me enough to take a step back. Thankfully, the flicker turned into a projection, showing a dozen tubes running in parallel. Each of the tubes was a different color, with one color, blue, slowly going up and down in intensity.

"Imagine, for a moment, that these tubes are separate realities and that the blue one is this reality," The crystal, Sally, said, a red line coming off of it and connecting to the green tube. "I am capable of sending an avatar of you to different realities. Once there, you will have a specific task to complete. If you are successful, I will be on standby to absorb the energy that changing that reality will give off."

"And then you use the energy to change this reality?" I guessed, watching as the green reality changed to a purple past the point where our red line intersected with it.

"Indeed! There is only so far that that reality will change, and there is only so much I will be able to do with that energy, but I think you will be happy with the results!" She assured me. "At a minimum, I will give you two options: a reward that will affect the bastion or a reward that will affect you. If I manage to absorb more energy than expected, I may occasionally be able to provide you with more. Sometimes these choices will be easy, sometimes they will be more difficult, but whatever your choice is, once you select it, I will use the energy I gathered to make it a reality!"

"I... That's insane," I finally managed to get out. "Fucking crazy, there-"

"Perhaps a demonstration?" She suggested, cutting my rant off.

"I... Sure, why not."

"Fantastic!" She said excitedly. "Generating rewards now!"

For a moment, nothing happened before a deep, melodious sound resounded through the small chamber, like a thick wooden xylophone bar being struck. The glowing runes also pulsed once before two floating projections appeared on either side of Sally's blue stone. On the right was a simplified sketch of the Vesuvian Man. The other was a picture of a castle with a singular blue flag mounted in the center.

"Option one will turn your current location into a proper, hardened refuge while also enchanting the ground with a mild repulsing effect. It will keep medium-powered beasts from wandering across us and even dissuade lower-level monsters from following you should you need to make a hasty retreat."

As she talked, the floating translucent card pulsed as if emphasizing what she was saying before returning to normal. The second one pulsed next as she began describing it.

"The second is... sort of a biological tune-up. I will return your body to a pristine state, as if you grew up and trained in a setting perfect for human growth. The result will increase most of your physical and mental capabilities. Be aware, though, this will not make you superhuman."

Immediately, my brain started to weigh the two choices, as if being offered something had bypassed all of my skepticism and disbelief. I quickly arrived at the conclusion that while I desperately wished I could take the tune-up, the fact that the bastion enhancement would prevent low and medium-strength bullshit from following me made it a no-brainer.

"What would the canine things that almost killed me count as?"

"Medium strength," The crystal, Bastion, answered immediately. "They are also the dominant creature for several miles in all directions, for now at least. Without the system to force beasts to stay in their zones, there may be some migration."

I desperately tried to ignore the fact that the creatures that could shove SUV's to the side were considered only a medium-level threat. Instead, I focused on confirming my choice. Before I could say anything, Bastion continued to speak.

"Before you spend too much time thinking about your options, I have good news! Arriving at this location and bonding with you has released enough energy for me to complete a full charge. As all bastion units are made with a single charge already stored, I can offer you both rewards simultaneously! Which one would you like first?"

"Well, I still think this might be a hallucination brought on by a concussion, blood loss, or maybe even a fever from infection," I admitted. "So let's go with improving our location."

"Good choice!"

Suddenly, instantly, with no shift or change in position, we were floating high in the air. For a moment, I panicked, screaming out and flailing... until I realized I wasn't falling. Instead, we were just floating, looking down at the fire station and the buildings around us. Sally, solid blue sapphire that she was, floated right next to me.

"Commencing Reality Adjustment!"

A ripple spread through the large, concrete fire station, traveling down its walls and outward. It passed through the parking lot and grounds surrounding the building, before covering buildings, cars, and a handful of trees, covering a shocking amount of ground. When it stopped, potentially only because it was too far away for me to see, I focused back on the station.

It was subtle at first, enough that I didn't catch it until it began to speed up. Starting from the tops of the buildings and slowly making its way down, the surrounding structures began to dissolve. Wood, steel, concrete, and everything in between fluttered away into the air, the particles disappearing like dispersing smoke. The effect went faster and faster until finally, it reached the ground... and kept going, disintegrating grass, dirt, rocks, concrete, and asphalt.

When the disintegration finally stopped, it almost immediately reversed. Now dirt, rock, and stone was being created, refilling the hole. After a minute the entire space, what looked like around two hundred meters in all directions, so four hundred meters wide, was a flat grassy field. In the center was a gravel patch, a circle maybe twenty to thirty meters in diameter. In the center of that grew a solid stone structure, a fucking castle that grew and grew until it looked over the buildings around the outskirts of the fields.

The structure was built on a four or so meter tall stone base, made of what looked like solid black granite. It seemed to be a single solid chunk of stone, with a set of stairs carved directly into it along one side. The first level was a platform, one that went all the way around the central structure like a parapet around a wall, save for half the side that had the stairs. A second set of stairs led a bit further up to a second level. At the top of those stairs was the entrance into the central building, which was built out of a more gray stone, probably also granite. When the multi-story structure was done, the ripple returned from the distance as if marking the end of the change.

"Reality Adjustment Complete!"