

We made our way back into town at a much slower pace than we had left it. We were loaded down with all sorts of useful, and hopefully useful, stuff, our carts practically overflowing. It was clear that this was the first of many trips we would make to Abe's house. Surprisingly, though, our overloaded cargo was not what was really slowing us down. Instead, it was George.

The golf cart obviously easily kept up with the bikes, but George continually slowed down at every bush, blind corner, and car wreck before he would pull through. I couldn't blame him for being nervous. The man clearly needed some time to recover from being stuck under a dragon's nest for days. I respected the cautious outlook, but it didn't take long to get frustrating.

Luckily, despite the rising tension, we made it back to the bastion without any issues. We did hear distant howling and yapping, which immediately made me think that those six-legged canines were around, but thankfully, we never ran into them.

When we got back into the bastion, I made sure to get ahead of the group, passing into the boundaries first. I quickly called out to Sally.

"Sally, you better stay away for now! So help me god, if you make these people's trauma any worse by scaring them, I will ban you from appearing in front of anyone but me!"

When my glowing partner did not appear, I nodded, turning to watch as the others caught up. When they pulled onto the large grassy field, I couldn't help but chuckle at how stunned George and Jason were.

"What... where did this come from?" The older man asked as he looked up at the bastion. "I don't... where is the old station and the apartment buildings? What happened?"

"Why don't we get inside? Then we can talk without worrying about unwanted attention," I suggested. "The less time we spend outside, the better."

It took a bit of cajoling, but we managed to get him and Jason up to the bastion, leading them inside. We stepped into the building to find Roger, Alissa, and Molly sitting at tables on the first floor. Molly opened her mouth to greet us before her eyes went wide as she spotted our guests. She immediately shimmied closer to her mother, looking around her arm nervously.

"Hey, everyone," I said with a smile. "It took a bit longer than we thought, but it went pretty well, all things considered. This is-"

"George?" Alissa said. "That's your name, right? It's good to see you're still alive."

The older man squinted for a moment before his eyes widened in realization.

"Ms. Casina! Hello!" He responded, surprise clear on his face. "I suppose you were still in town when..."

"Yeah, we were planning on leaving soon, but... yeah, then all this happened," Alissa responded. "Can't say I'm not grateful we were still around. Molly and I wouldn't have ended up here if we were on our way back to Maryland."

"You two know each other?" I ask, both of them nodding.

"He was helping with my brother's funeral," Alissa explained with a rough look on her face. "You're a retired cop, right?"

"Couple of years now, yeah. I still help out when I can, mostly organize events and do fundraisers," He explained, shaking his head. "Keeps me from getting bored. So... could you tell me what exactly is going on here?"

He gestured around the first floor, eyes trailing over the kitchen and back to the stairs behind Alissa and Molly before settling on me, his eyebrow raised. I could see he was keeping Jason close as well, ready to grab him and run, though I wasn't sure what he planned on past that.

"It's a bit of a long story," I said. "Why don't you and Jason have a seat, and I can start from the beginning."

For a moment, I thought he was actually going to say no, but then he walked further into the room and dropped into one of the surprisingly comfortable wooden chairs. I sat down across from him while Barry grabbed some drinks. He put a beer down in front of George and me while Alissa waved him off. That seemed to click something in my mind, and I pointed at the younger man.

"Alissa, Barry was in a thirty-mile-an-hour car accident. Can you look him over while I talk?"

Her eyes went wide while Barry looked at me and mouthed the word "traitor." Soon, the nurse had dragged him down into a chair next to the older woman, who was examining his burns and bruises. Meanwhile, George slowly nursed his beer while Jason enjoyed a cold soda that Jessica had given him since Barry was busy being looked over.

I started my story at the very beginning, explaining how I had hidden in my room before eventually making a decision that I had to try something. George chuckled when I called the old fire station an ugly bunker and looked sad when I went over what had happened at the police station. He took it all in rather stoically, waiting for me to finish before finally speaking up.

"Do you have any proof of this?" He asked. "Healing quicker sounds nice and all, but I can't exactly see that up close."

"I can. Sally? You can come out now."

The glowing blue projection of my partner appeared over my shoulder. She was either taking my earlier warning seriously, or she had already learned her lesson from what happened with Jessica because rather than just snapping suddenly in existence, she slowly faded in until her floating blue crystal was bobbing over my shoulder.

"Hello! My name is Sally! I hope we can work well together," She said eagerly, all while George stared at her open mouth, his eyes wide in surprise.

"You look like a blue Sims crystal," Jason said before slapping his hands over his mouth.

"Holy crap, your right, she does," Barry said from behind us, where Alissa was applying burn cream on his chest. "How did I not see that?"

We all had a chuckle at Sally's expense, the blue floating construct taking it in good humor. For the next hour or so, we answered as many of Georges and Jason's questions as we could, even the ones we weren't sure about, though we did warn him there was a fair amount of guesswork for those. Eventually, their curiosity sated, George leaned back in his chair, shaking his head.

"I really can't believe it," He said, his eyes showing a semblance of something beyond broken despair for the first time since we met him. "... I had all but lost hope. Between everyone turning to dust, the monsters all over the place, and being stuck in Crazy Abe's shelter... To not just survive but have a chance to prosper? It... it hardly feels real."

"It is," I assured him. "If we work together and give it our all, we can do this. Someday, this bastion is going to be a safe haven for humanity, and it all starts with us."

"... I wouldn't have believed you... If I hadn't seen the dragon's corpse myself," He admitted. "Even with the truck... Just the fact that you killed it... It means there's a chance."

We were silent for a long moment, feeling hope and determination fill all of us. After it had passed, however, Alissa spoke up.

"What was that about you guys killing a dragon?" She asked, giving me a hard look. "What happened to playing it safe and not taking any risks?"

"Barry made a really inspirational speech," I explained with a shrug. "It's all his fault."

The nurse gave me a look that clearly said she didn't appreciate my attempt at humor, before returning her attention to Barry. Rather than sit around and watch, I used the chance to show George and Jason up to the barrack-style portion of the bastion, up on the top floor. Barry and Roger had already started turning one set of the bunkbeds into their own space, putting

clothes in their locker, and moving in some of their other stuff, which we had collected from the high school, in and around the bunk.

"It's not much, but it's the safest place in the town with the barrier in place," I said, watching Jason walk to a random bed and sit on the side. "Now that we have tools, basic food, and other stuff, the next few days of looting will probably be gathering less necessary but still important things like extra clothes and luxury stuff. If you have anything in mind, let us know, and we can add it to the list. For now... Feel free to head to bed early. I imagine you guys could use a restful night after what you've been through."

Jason nodded, but George, who had been looking around the room, turned and held out his hand. I grabbed and shook it, looking the older man in the eye.

"Thank you for giving us this chance," He said, a severe look in his eyes. "And for giving Jason a chance to actually grow up and live."

"Hey, I'm just doing what I can to make sure we have a future. Take it easy friend, we can talk more tomorrow."

He nodded and made his way to the bed next to the one Jason had sat on, sitting on it and facing his young ward. I let them have their privacy, making my way back down to the first floor. Alissa had given Barry a clean bill of healing as well as an Advil, which meant he could help as we slowly unloaded everything we had brought home.

Rather than lug everything separately, we actually slowly pumped the carts up the stairs, being careful not to spill anything. We had to stack a few things back up, but it still worked remarkably well. We emptied each cart and left them outside the storage room, going through the tools and equipment and putting them away on or in the limited storage we had gathered so far. Once everything we got from Crazy Abe's was stored away, we started looking over everything we had taken from the dragon.

"So... do either of you guys know how to turn dragon hide into leather?" I asked as Jessica, Barry, and I all looked at the pile of dragon parts.

"I know how the basic process works for deer," Jessica said, both Barry and I looking at her. "What? My dad liked to hunt, and I don't have any brothers. I'm just not sure we can really do it."

"Why not?"

"Cause you need specific chemicals and some tools. It's a multi-step process," She responded. "And that's only if doing dragon leather is the same as deer leather. I can clean it, then salt it. That should preserve it for a while until we figure out what we want to do with it, but who knows if salting is good for lizard leather."

"Damn... well, I guess let's clean and salt it," I said with a nod. "Would suck to just throw it away and then find out it's super useful."

While Jessica got started with her new project, which for now amounted to trimming the meat and gross stuff off the hide we took, Barry and I started getting everything off the dragon parts cart. After a bit of debate, we stacked up everything on the last set of shelves. As we cleared the cart, we did our best to clean up the parts as well, not wanting to have anything attached to the claws and teeth rotting. By the time we were done, we had contributed a not insignificant amount to the growing pile of meat and viscera that Jessica was making.

With the cart now cleared, I went to the shelf and pulled off one of the mid-sized teeth, a dangerous-looking chomper about seven or eight inches long. Without doing anything to it, it already looked like a pretty serious weapon.

"Tomorrow, I want to go to the hardware store," I said to Barry. "I want to mount a couple of these teeth on spears for all of us to use. Maybe see if we can turn the claws into large daggers, too."

"Is that before or after we go back to Abe's?" Barry asked, causing me to wince. "You said yourself we have at least two trips back there."

"Fair... we could split up?" I suggested, mostly just spitballing ideas.

"That would increase the number of trips."

"Unless.... We sent the cart back with the small trailer." I suggested. "We probably wouldn't be able to load it up fully, but it should be able to handle more than the bikes."

"Maybe, but-"

"Aiden!" Sally said, suddenly appearing in the large storage room, popping up by the door, and zooming over to Barry and me excitedly. "I connected to your next jumps!"

Her sudden arrival caught me off guard, but the fact that she appeared on the other side of the room meant I wasn't quite jumping around in surprise. Hopefully, that was a sign of progress. Still, I very carefully put the dangerous tooth back on the shelf before turning back to Sally.

"What are the options?" I asked, watching the bobbing construct stop right beside me.

"Well, the first is actually a jump I don't believe is connected to any story in this reality," She admitted. "The setting is sort of like... well, it's a mix of World War Three and a zombie apocalypse. But the zombies run, and the war is spread pretty much everywhere. Your task

would be to keep a specific soldier alive in one of the worst mechanized battles of the whole war."

"... that sounds a bit beyond me at the moment," I said with a frown. "What is my other choice? Is it bad?"

"It's... okay. You would be in the first Die Hard movie," Sally answered. "Your mission would be to escort Joe Takagi out of the building before the hostage situation is resolved."

"Joe Takagi... He's the one who refuses to give Hans the code, right?" I asked, scratching my head and trying to recall a movie I hadn't seen in a very long time. "Doesn't he die like... minutes into the takeover of the tower? When would we arrive?"

"Unfortunately, the insertion for this jump is very late. It's just about ten seconds before the first guard is killed," Sally explained.

"Dammit... okay... Die Hard is still the obvious choice, even if I don't remember the movie very well," I said, turning to look at Barry. "You wouldn't happen to secretly be a huge Die Hard fan, would you?"

"No, I've never seen it," He admitted with a shrug. "I only know it from the 'It's a Christmas movie' meme."

"Dammit... Well... what do you think the chances are that we could find a copy of it in the next day or so?"

"Uh... considering the last movie rental place in Danten closed down when I was ten, not very good," Barry said, shaking his head. "Maybe George knows the movie?"

"That's... That's actually an excellent thought," I said, mentally crossing my fingers. "Okay, in that case, hold on to them, Sally. We can talk to George tomorrow morning. Jessica, you can hang out here and keep that up. Barry and I are going to go get your salt for the leather. Then we can call it a day. We can talk about the jump tomorrow morning."