

Together, the group silently descended the stairs, the tension rising with every floor we passed. Eventually, after what seemed like ages, we had made it down another ten floors. It was slow going, between me carrying Takagi and the overall need to stay as silent as possible. By then, my legs were sore, and my back ached from carrying a full-grown man down twenty-five flights of stairs. I could feel sweat dripping down my face and back. But we were almost there.

"Keep your eyes open, people. Last five floors," I said softly, everyone nodding in determination. "We-"

Before I could finish, the last door we had passed, only just up the stairs from Jessica, suddenly burst open. One of the Hans' goons stepped through, his weapon up and ready. Jessica swung around, aiming her shotgun at the German, but the surprise gave him the advantage. A burst of submachine gun fire spattered the wall around her, three of the dozen or so shots slapping into her, two in her stomach and one higher on her chest. Somehow, she still had the control to fire her shotgun, blowing a softball-sized hole in the man's torso, spraying blood everywhere as the bastard collapsed back through the door.

"Jessica!" Barry shouted, rushing past me to catch his friend, almost knocking me and my passenger over.

Jessica, leaning heavily against the wall now, held out her hand to stop him. She was gasping for air, struggling to breathe but eventually managing to catch enough of her breath to say a few words.

"Vest... caught them..." She managed to say with a wheeze. "Gentle... ribs!"

"Barry, help her stand, but be careful in case those shots break anything dangerous," I ordered, breaking Barry from his stunned, wide-eyed look. "They know we are here now, so we need to move!"

We abandoned stealth completely and quickly descended, Barry supporting Jessica as we moved. Eventually, we reached the second floor. George immediately opened the door out of the stairwell, holding it open so I could carry Takagi into the office space beyond. Jessica, who was mostly recovered from being punched in the chest by a couple of 9mm rounds, racked her shotgun to expel the empty shell.

"Barry, Jessica, cover the door and elevator," I said, Takagi still on my back. "George, help me find a place we can drop out of."

I gently lay Takagi down again, making sure to get him in a good position to lift him up so I could do it in a hurry if necessary. Together, George and I started looking through windows, kicking open offices and conference rooms to look down at the Nakatomi Plaza grounds below. After a tense minute of searching, we found a decent spot, a tall structure built into the side of the building that was an eight or nine-foot drop from the second floor and another seven or eight

from the ground. It was still plenty high enough to get hurt, but much better than just jumping to the ground in one leap. I pulled out my pistol and fired through the window several times before picking up a chair and smashing the glass free. Once the window was clear, I leaned out and looked down.

"Okay. I'm gonna drop through, then you drop Takagi through to me," I said, George nodding in agreement. "Then you guys can follow."

After checking to make sure that the window was clear of glass, I slowly lowered myself to the other side, hanging for a moment before dropping. I landed cleanly, spinning around to find George already there with the unconscious man. Carefully, the muscular older man lowered Takagi as low as he could, hanging him down by his arms before finally dropping him. I caught him, falling backward onto my ass in the process. Cursing and wincing I pushed the older man off of me.

"Okay, Go get Barry and-"

The sound of nearby gunfire cut me off, and George whipped around, his rifle raised. He cursed and looked back at me.

"Go get him somewhere safe, we will cover you," He said, waving me away. "Sally can send us home when you're in the clear!"

"What? I...Fine! But try not to die, it apparently really sucks!" I called back, quickly grabbing Takagi as George returned to support Jessica and Barry.

I quickly carried the unconscious escort quest target to the side of the concrete structure above a large bush. Originally, I wanted someone to lower him to me, but now I was on my own. So I cursed, made sure he was still firmly on my back, and jumped, aiming for the bush.

Both of us hit the ground hard, the bush thankfully burning off some of our momentum, my legs taking the rest. I could feel something snap or crack in my leg, pain lancing up to my calf and knee. Cursing up a storm, the gunfire still loud and clear through the smashed window, I bit my lip and pulled Takagi and myself out of the bush. I could feel my leg grinding and pulling, but that didn't matter. I needed to get clear of the building so that the rest of my team could get home.

With a strangled scream of pain I managed to throw Takagi back over my shoulder, slowly limping through the grounds of the large building complex. It took about three minutes of limping, stumbling, and barely stumbling forward until I managed to drag the both of us to a nearby building. It was dark, probably shut down for Christmas, but I didn't care. All that mattered was that I could collapse around the corner in a dark, secluded alley, Takagi laid out roughly on the ground.

As I caught my breath, I listened closely for any distant gunfire, my fingers crossed, desperately hoping that the general silence meant my team had been safely pulled back rather than sent home after being killed.

After I finally recovered from the hobbled sprint clear, I leaned over Mr. Takagi, checking his vitals to make sure nothing had happened while we were throwing him around. Luckily, he seemed alright, save a bruise along his side and a scrape on his cheek. I spent a minute adjusting him to a more comfortable position. When I was sure he was good, I crawled to lean against the wall, shifting so I had a better position to see the tower.

It looked so normal from this angle, though that wasn't surprising since very little had happened to it at this point.

As time went on, my leg began to throb in constant pain, and what little I knew about first aid told me that I had really screwed it up and that adrenaline had probably been the only reason I had made it out this far. I ignored it as best as I could, leaning my head back against the alleyway wall.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I heard was the sound of what seemed like hundreds of police and SWAT cars, pouring in from every angle, surrounding the Nakatomi plaza. For a moment, I struggled to stand, but by now, my leg was completely useless, so swollen that it was tight against the previously loose fabric of my pants. I tried to shout and get people's attention, but after a few attempts, all I had to show for it was a sore throat. Finally I just cursed and pulled out my pistol, aiming it down the alley at an overflowing dumpster. I fired a half dozen times, the gunshots echoing through the alley. Soon, I could hear people shouting and getting closer, the light from a dozen flashlights flickering around the corner. Before anyone got close, however, the familiar feeling of being pulled back spread through my body. I hung around just long enough to see their shadows before I was back in the bastion, sitting on the ground by the dining room table.

I immediately jumped up and groaned, stretching and shaking out my limbs. I could see everyone was sitting around the nearest table, including Roger, Jason, and Molly, the latter holding on tightly to her mother.

"Welcome back!" Sally said, bobbing around for a moment. "Congratulations on another successful jump! Three for three is an impressive record!"

"Thanks Sally," I said, stepping past her to sit at the table with the others. "How did everyone- Holy hell Barry, are you okay?"

As I sat down I finally got a good look at everyone, including Barry. The young adult was pale, shivering slightly, with dark bags under his eyes. It seemed like he would pass out at any second.

"I died, no big deal," He said with a shrug, wincing from the movement. "It... feels like a really, really... *really* bad flu."

"The blockhead died taking a bullet for me," Jessica said, giving the slightly younger guy a look that was difficult to decipher. "A couple of the thugs blindsided us, not exactly sure how. He dove to pull me into cover, took a dozen rounds in the back and one to the skull."

"You're a better fighter than me, George needed you to help hold them off," He said with a shrug, still shivering. "You'd have done the same."

I spotted a conflicted look in Jessica's eyes as if she wasn't sure he was right.

"Why don't you head upstairs and get some rest, assuming Alissa's already taken a look at you?" I suggested, looking over at our resident nurse, who shrugged and shook her head.

"I wouldn't even know where to start," She admitted. "Not like I have a lot of experience in metaphysical trauma."

"I'm fine, just give me a day or two," Barry assured us, slowly standing, only wobbling a little bit as he did. "Wake me up if anything big happens, okay?"

After I nodded, the clearly struggling young adult turned to the stairs, Jessica standing and moving to help. He reluctantly accepted, and together, they slowly made it to and then up the stairs. Once they were gone, I looked at everyone else.

"Twenty bucks says they end up together by the end of next week," I said with a smirk.

"Money is useless," Roger pointed out, shaking his head. "... I say two weeks, and for bragging rights."

"Please, Jessica is way too serious of a woman to fall that fast," Alissa said. "She has high-powered lawyer energy. A month, at least."

We all shared a chuckle, both Molly and Jason looking confused. Once we had stopped teasing the young pair, I stood up from the table and got glasses and water for everyone. When I was done, I repeated my earlier question.

"How did your side go?"

"We held them off alright," George responded. "Until they blindsided us. We ran when Barry died, luckily Jessica had the presence of mind to grab his body so it didn't disappear in front of them. We hid in a random conference room and got pulled back before they could find us. What about you?"

"I cracked my leg jumping down, but adrenaline helped me work through it," I explained with a grimace. "Carried him to a alleyway until the cops showed up. Fired my gun a couple times to get their attention, which was when Sally brought me back."

We were silent for a moment as we mentally worked through what we had just experienced. Eventually, Sally broke through the silence with a reminder.

"Should we go over the rewards?" She asked, bouncing over my shoulder and across the table, starting to circle around us as she often did.

"Yeah, Sally, go ahead," I responded with a nod. "Gonna have to wait for Jessica to come down at least to make a decision, though."

"Perhaps not, I have a feeling this one will not be difficult," She responded. "The first reward is specifically for you, Aiden. Any weapons you hold in your hands break down twenty percent slower."

I furrow my brow as I work over her statement in my brain, before eventually shaking my head.

"Is that it?" I asked. "I mean it would be nice... Is this another attempt to access the framework of the system?"

"No, the second one is. While it sounds useless, consider what would happen if you picked that and got something similar again..."

"Yeah, but what are the actual chances of that happening?" Alissa asked. "And even if it did come up again sometime soon, what would be the actual benefit? Fully indestructible weapons?"

"If you managed to get the number over one hundred percent, any weapon in your hands would slowly repair itself," Sally answered.

"That... is better, but I would still have to hold it," I pointed out. "Besides, that would take a minimum of like five rewards, rewards I might never actually roll again. It's not worth the investment. What's the second option?"

"Right, the second option. This... well, it's potent, Aiden. This is why I've been so adamant about investigating the system infrastructure," Sally explained. "This reward allows everyone who lives at the bastion to have access to one of several low-level spells."

We sat around the table, looking up at the slowly bobbing and glowing crystal in silence. Eventually, Roger caught up with her statement.

"Did you just say... spells?"

"I did! Magic would have been a big part of the system, and is already a big part of the world now," She explained, continuing when our skeptical looks remained. "You are being biased because the word magic is considered to be something from a fantasy. It is a form of energy manipulation, which the system would have aided in. By working it through my own energy I was able to allow people connected to the bastion to utilize it. I... also may have figured out what happened to the dusters."

"Jesus, Sally, one mind-breaking revelation at a time, please. What does magic have to do with the dusters?" I asked, rolling my eyes at her non-sequitur.

"I believe that the magic that was spreading through the planet was naturally connecting with people," She explained. "But without the system in place to control it... The magic overwhelmed and consumed them. The difference in color between certain people was caused by different magical affinities, and the magnitude of the reaction how connected to magic a person was."

"...So what does that make us?"

"Well... it stands to reason that if some people were particularly talented with magic..." Sally began, slowly trailing off.

"Other people would be particularly bad at it," Jessica finished, walking back from the stairs and sitting back down in her seat. "Are you telling me that the only reason we didn't turn to dust was because we would have sucked at magic?"

"It is only a theory... but I believe so."

Again, silence reigned over the table. I could see everyone wrestle with memories, clearly recalling what they had gone through on the night of the dusters. I stayed quiet for a while out of respect. Eventually, I coughed, everyone pulling back out of their thoughts.

"Do we have to worry about anything happening now? Or with the new reward?" I asked.

"No, the magic from the reward will be filtered through the bastion," Sally answered. "As for the 'normal' magic? I don't believe so. Your connection would have to increase drastically for that to happen, and without the system to improve your connection... It's not likely."

"Great. Well... If anyone feels like they are... overcharged with magic, say something," I said, trailing off weakly at the end. I couldn't really pretend there was anything we could do.

After a few seconds of quietly thinking about our rather bleak circumstances, I finally shook my head.

"Right, never mind that. Sally, tell us more about the spells we could get."