

On our first trip from the station to the bastion, we prioritized women and children. Sarah stayed behind, but with two young kids in the kid carrier and one in one of the bike carts, plus two adults in the golf cart trailer and one riding passenger, we managed to fit all of the kids and women in one trip. The second bike cart was filled with some of what they had used to set up camp. While Sally had brought up a potential solution, I wasn't about to leave good resources sitting behind, especially because we weren't certain of the solution or the timetable we were looking at.

The trip was quick and uneventful, arriving at the bastion about thirty minutes after we left. It was fun to hear the gasps of surprise and excitement coming from the kids when the bastion first came into view, but the adults' baffled, slack-jawed look was what got a real laugh from me. Once they were settled and Sally was giving them the guided tour of the building, George, Jessica, and I headed back to the station. On the second trip, only the golf cart was carrying people, again with two in the trailer and one in the passenger seat, while the bikes were charged with hauling more of the supplies.

After dropping off our third batch, our constant activity finally attracted the attention of a pod of raptors, four of them attempting to ambush us as we passed through a moderately congested intersection. Luckily, they failed to get their jaws or claws on anyone, but Jessica was sporting some miserable-looking road rash along the side of her left leg and her arm.

Still, between our more powerful guns and our magic, we managed to fight them off pretty easily. The only issue beyond Jessica's painful but ultimately light wound was that one of them had slashed at my chest, nearly ruining my Kevlar vest. We had more, but it was a limited resource, so it still sucked.

"Let's hope we can figure out how to make armor from those dragon scales soon," Barry said, tugging at his own vest. "This stuff is only going to last so long."

He wasn't wrong. While the damage to my vest was obviously a death knell for this particular one, there were already a few spots of wear and tear on them. We had been working them pretty hard, and eventually, they would start to fall apart. I would have to either recommend that Roger tackle armor next or maybe find one of the civilians willing to take a crack at it.

When we finished transferring everyone back to the bastion, we ran our only supplies only run. It was much quieter, with everything but one of the bike carts filled with food, clothes, and other toiletries that a large group of people had gathered. The last cart was filled with bits and pieces of the three canines that Jessica and Barry had harvested. They had cut their sharpest and largest teeth out, as well as the spines on their tail mace and along their spine. The spines looked more like rose thorns than the thinner spines of the dragon, making me think they would make decent axe-like weapons. They weren't nearly as sharp as the dragon teeth and claws, but they were definitely beyond what they should have been, enhanced by magic or something.

The rest of the supplies contained a decent amount of food, and cut with monster meat would hopefully last for a long time. Unfortunately, that also meant that a significant amount of the canned and shelf-stable food we were gathering would be eaten immediately, making me worried about what we would do when winter arrived.

We needed to find a source of fresh food we could use instead of the canned vegetables and soup we were currently surviving on. We also needed a way to preserve our own food for when we had drained the surrounding area dry of shelf-stable food. Winter was going to suck, and we needed to prepare for it, or it would also be lethal.

By the time we had finished, the civilians had started setting up a temporary camp along the furthest corner of the parapet, the corner that looked down on the stairs. Already, there were two decent-sized fire pits, both of them roasting two of the raptors we had killed and brought back with us. We quickly unloaded everything with the help of a few civilians before heading inside. The dining and living area was full of people sitting down at the tables. All of them were focused on Sarah, Charles, and Alissa, who were discussing sleeping arrangements.

"If there is space for them, then the children should have the beds," Sarah said vehemently. "It's the safest place for them."

The people most of the people sitting around were making noises or motions of agreement, so I held my hand up to stop Alissa from responding, mostly because she looked like she was already done with everyone's shit. She gave me a thankful look, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed.

"The children can sleep upstairs in the barracks," I said, surprising Alissa, the look changing to understanding as I continued. "But they will need to go through the process of getting spells, specifically the healing spell. Having a permanent, actual bed is part of the process for receiving some of the benefits of the bastion, and we cannot waste beds on people who aren't going to contribute."

"Are you crazy?" One of the adults asked. "You want to give the kids the ability to throw around the fire?"

"You can't change spells without touching something downstairs in the storage room," I explained. "And Sally can easily keep them out of that area. Once they choose the healing spell, they won't be able to switch. They can contribute by helping keep everyone healed and healthy. The only problem is that the process... is painful. Very painful. Like being branded around your arm."

A few of the civilians looked concerned, and one or two looked outright angry at the idea, but before they could say anything, I continued.

"As much as I wish it wasn't necessary, a few seconds of pain is worth it to have access to a healing spell," I said. "It will save lives, and it will let us keep everyone healthy. It sucks, but the world sucks right now. At least this particular piece of bullshit has a benefit on the other side."

There were a lot of shared looks, and people started to calm down, most of them looking at least temporarily mollified, though still not particularly happy. Sarah looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Does that mean your regeneration is useless?" She asked, seemingly curious. "If we can heal each other?"

"No, the healing spell will only heal specific negative issues, like wounds or poisoning," Sally explained, bobbing around my head. "The regeneration field will slowly heal more long-term issues like cancer or the damage smoking does to your lungs. It is always gently helping you return to your healthiest state. It even slows down aging to a small degree."

I looked at Sally with shocked surprise. Prior to her saying that, I had assumed the healing spell had more or less made the healing and regen field pointless like Sarah had. Sally seemed to notice my stunned look.

"Didn't I mention that?" She asked, her tone shifting to worry.

"No, you did not," I said, shaking my shock away. "I had assumed it was more or less pointless now."

"Oh... sorry!"

I let out a long sigh, shaking my head before focusing back on the rest of the people listening. By now, I had sat down in an empty chair, getting down to everyone's level.

"Getting back to the sleeping arrangements," I said, returning the conversation to the original topic. "The kids claiming three of the top floor beds is fine. But the remaining three spots need to go to people who are going out hunting or coming with me when I jump."

That got a few complaints as most people expected the other three spots to go to the women, though, for some reason, they seemed to exclude Sarah. Thankfully, I quickly managed to get control of the conversation back, gesturing for everyone to calm down.

"If we have any hope to keep up with the increasing population, then we need more hunters going out, gathering supplies, and bringing home meat. The ability to use even the simple spells we have could mean the difference between life and death, and I refuse to deprive the people who are putting themselves of that. Yes, it might make the living arrangements a bit more awkward for now, but with any luck, we will have a solution within the next few days."

"And if it doesn't work?" Sarah asked, having been here when Sally had explained the possibility that the POI might have what we need to grow the bastion.

"Then we still have other solutions. They might take a bit more time, but we have several options. There is plenty of safe space around the main building, room to build and expand," I pointed out. "It won't be easy, but there *are* solutions."

"Aiden... I'll give up my bed as well," Roger volunteered. "I'm not going out, so there's no real reason for me to have access to the spells. If there's someone who wants to go out and scavenge or hunt, they can take my bed."

"Thank you, Roger," I said, touched by his decision.

With the young man's sacrifice, the rest of the crowd's energy seemed to fade as their common sense seemed to win out. All three of the firefighters, as well as Charles, moved upstairs, as did the three kids. We enjoyed a hearty meal of raptor meat, which my group had never eaten before. It wasn't bad, almost like a slightly gamey chicken, which we ate with a sort of vegetable soup made from several different canned vegetables. At this point, the fresh ingredients that Sally had managed to make for the bastion were all but completely gone, leaving us with an increasing food problem that needed to be solved.

However, we had more immediate issues to deal with. After the kids, including Molly and Jason, had gone to bed, most of my crew, including Amelia, who was doing much better, as well as quite a few of the newcomers, gathered down at the living and dining area.

"At this point, it's too late for us to head off to our next jump," Barry pointed out, getting a few nods of agreement. "I'm not up for dealing with zombie hordes right now."

"Do you think... A few of us could accompany you?" Sarah asked. "It... well, I don't want to say it sounds impossible, not after everything that happened and that we've seen..."

"You could come with us, but we would have to send you right back," I explained. "For one, this is an escort mission, which means we already have too many people who can't fight to keep an eye on. We don't need any more. I also want to keep the group relatively small. The best defense in a zombie apocalypse is staying quiet, which we can't reliably do with ten people and a pair of VIPs."

"That's fine. It will be easier to assure people that you're telling the truth if a few of us have experienced it with our own eyes."

"What about the Pool Cave?" Barry asked, seeming excited about it. "I've been dying to find out what was inside since we found it."

"We can do that tomorrow as well," I assured him. "The jump will probably take a few hours, seeing we will most likely be in the setting for a full day, maybe closer to two. When we return, we can put together a group to explore the cave. I've never seen it... but do you think we will need special equipment, like climbing gear, to explore it?"

"Honestly, we didn't get close enough to tell," Barry admitted. "We were worried the area around the hole was unstable, so we stayed away. Caleb... Caleb even blocked the doors off with a few stacks of lockers and heavy desks."

"That was smart," Sally said. "It is likely that there are monsters of some sort in the cave."

"Is there a chance we run into something really dangerous?" I asked, looking over at the floating projection. "Something we can't handle?"

"Since this general area is on the lower end of power, most likely not," Sally admitted. "But there's no way to really know without exploring it."

"Are we going to get stuck inside once we stick our heads in?" Barry asked. "Or can we retreat?"

"Points of interest are more fluid than dungeons, meaning that anything could have happened. You may arrive to find that the feline monsters might have taken over what was once a den of large snakes," She explained. "Or you may find that the barrier blocking the door has collapsed, and whatever is inside has spread around the school. There is no system shenanigans to keep things precise and uniform, which is why they seem to be functioning when almost everything else had failed."

"For now, let's focus on the jump," I said, calling back everyone's attention. "I know everyone wants to know what's in the cave; it's been bugging me, too, but let's keep it to one step at a time."

"Right. Well... Roger, have you got any more spears done?" I asked, focusing on the young adult, who nodded at my question.

"I finished one earlier today and started on a second, but I was stopping frequently to help everyone settle in..." He explained, trailing off before nodding to himself. "If I pull an all-nighter, I could make two more, maybe three."

"... I won't say no since the spears would be *incredibly* useful for this jump, but are you sure?"

"Yes, this is the kind of thing I can do to contribute," He responded, his conviction solidifying as he talked. "I'll crash when I'm done, but I can do it."

"I can give you a hand," One of the civilians, a man probably not much older than me, volunteered. "I've done my fair share of DIY work, and I know my way around most power tools."

"Thank you, both of you. Having an improved, powerful melee option will make this jump much more approachable," I said. "Now, let's talk about what kind of things we might have to deal with."

We spent a few hours going over the kinds of threats we might face, some of the major players of the Resident Evil world, as well as what everyone should keep their eyes out for. The fact that we were sitting around a table seriously going over what was basically zombie survival 101 was surreal and insane. After about twenty minutes, Roger and his new helping hand excused themselves to get to work.

When we were done going over everything, including some basic strategies, everyone went their separate ways, heading off to bed. I made sure to check up on Roger and his friend, bringing a cup of coffee for each of them and making sure they were all set. They both thanked me, and after a minute or so of watching them work, I made my way to my room.

I sat on the edge of my bed for a long moment, my eyes closed as I took a series of deep breaths. Sitting down in the living space, surrounded by so many people, knowing that I had to win them over, knowing I had to be in control, be in charge... It made me look forward to jumping into a world of zombies, where everything would be a lot more simple.

After spending a few minutes clearing my head, I finally stripped and crawled into bed. I needed to get some sleep, and sitting there, letting my mind wander to what-if situations and worst-case scenarios, was not helping.

Thankfully, sleep still took me quickly, despite my still active mind.