

Despite the fact that the kitchen was basically fully stocked, I resisted the urge to make anything crazy for breakfast. Having all this food on hand was a massive advantage, but it was one that would eventually end. Stretching it out for as long as possible while also preparing for that day would let us build up a hopefully substantial amount of shelf-stable food. Still, Molly had been through a lot over the last few days. Having a nice breakfast would probably go a long way in making her feel safe.

My own craving for pancakes and bacon had nothing to do with my decision.

When I finished making a small batch of pancake batter and the bacon was cooking steadily, I climbed the stairs to the second floor. Alissa was already waiting for me, the door to their room open. Both of them were sitting on the edge of Alissa's bed, and when I entered their room Alissa held her arm out.

Carefully, I helped the mother down the stairs and onto one of the stools by the kitchen island, managing to avoid falling or tripping along the way. Molly followed behind us, immediately perking up when she saw what I was making.

"Pancakes?" She asked, as if I would deny it if she acted too excited. "Really?"

"Sure, we have everything, and it has to get eaten at some point," I said with a shrug, walking back to the stove to check the bacon.

"In the meantime, why don't you set the table," Alissa suggested, Molly nodding in response and rushing around the kitchen, trying to find everything.

By the time I was done cooking, everything was set up, even the butter and maple syrup. I placed the plates of pancakes and bacon down before sitting down on the opposite side of the table from the mother and daughter. Molly eagerly grabbed some pancakes and started to pour maple syrup when Alissa stopped her.

"Hun, I need you to be careful. We talked about how food is important now... remember?"

The smile on Molly's face dimmed slightly, and she nodded, focusing on her food and gingerly pouring a small amount of maple syrup onto her pancakes. For a moment, I debated pointing out that maple syrup would probably be shelf-stable for years and the artificial stuff for a lot longer than that, but I figured the lesson was important enough not to comment.

For a while, we ate in mostly silence, enjoying the food together. Years living alone had made me a halfway decent cook, out of necessity if nothing else, so the pancakes were fluffy and the bacon was crispy. Eventually, Alissa looked up at me, putting her fork down as she leaned on the table.

"So... what's the plan?" She asked.

"The plan? Like for today or..."

"Both, I guess," She answered with a shrug. "If we are going to be staying here, I want to know what your plans are."

"Well... The first thing I want to do today is go out and get that duffel bag," I said. "No sense leaving it there when it's full of useful things."

Molly looked down at her food and mumbled out an apology. Alissa opened her mouth but I cut her off.

"Right now, a duffel bag full of supplies is important," I said, the young girl looking up at me. "But not nearly as important as you and your mom. With the world how it is, every person we save is a crucial achievement. I would have gladly left everything we found in exchange for us making it back safe. The only reason I didn't drop my backpack was that your mom would have had to get off my back to do it."

She nodded and took another bite of her bacon, seemingly thinking through what I said.

"Alright, what about after that? What are your goals?" Alissa asked, pushing for a more concrete answer to her wider question.

"Short term, spend the time between jumps as effectively as possible," I explained. "We need weapons, materials, food, and more people."

"And long term?"

"That... kinda depends on what kind of rewards we get," I admitted, scratching my cheek as I thought. "The basics are probably going to be relevant no matter what, but trying to plan long-term might be a bit on the pointless side if tomorrow I learn how to fly or the bastion gets a tank or something."

"That's... actually kind of fair," She admitted with a frown. "What would you *like* to do?"

"I would *like* to do what the bastion was intended for, to save as many people as possible and eventually get humanity back on its feet in some way."

"Tall order."

"I mean, I'm not crazy enough to think that's happening any time soon," I assured her. "I'm hoping that there are pockets of people setting up safe havens, which we can bring here once we have more to offer than a bit faster healing."

"I think you're underestimating how amazing that is, but I can't fault your logic," Alissa admitted. "I-"

"Hello!" Sally said suddenly, her projection appearing and scaring the hell out of all three of us.

"Goddammit Sally, please don't do that!" I said, leaning back on the chair, clutching my chest. "You're going to give someone a heart attack!"

"Sorry!" She responded, not an ounce of remorse in her voice. "But I assumed you would want to know when I found the next jump locations!"

"... Yes, I would like to know that," I admitted, reluctant to encourage the surprisingly perky construct. "Just try not to scare us to death when you do it."

"I'll do my best!"

We sat there, the three of us, waiting for Sally to say something. After a good thirty seconds of silence, I finally cracked.

"Are... you going to tell us or....?"

"Oh! Of course! I believe your first choice is from the Marvel Cinematic Universe," She explained. "The mission is to ensure that Ho Yinsen survives Tony Stark's escape from the Ten Rings."

"Ho Yinsen... He is the guy that helps Tony in the cave... Isn't his death like the last step of Tony's true change of heart or something?" I asked with a frown. "As horrible as it is to say, wouldn't saving him make the reality worse off?"

"Not if he hangs around and continues to help Tony mature and develop," Alissa pointed out, before getting defensive when I raised my eyebrow at her. "What? I'm not allowed to watch movies now?"

"Of course you are," I said, holding both hands up, before looking at Sally. "What's the second option?"

"Its... Oh my..."

"What?"

"I would greatly appreciate it if you took this one Aiden," She said solemnly. "This is one of those moments where the movies really don't show just how devastating something is. The

mission is in the Kingsman universe, specifically the first movie. Your mission is to ensure that Valentine never activates his neurological wave."

I thought hard, trying to do my best to recall the specific movie. Luckily, I did remember seeing it, even enjoying it, so the memories came forward pretty easily. Still, it had been a while.

"Doesn't he do that anyway?" I asked, a bit confused. "Eggsy manages to stop it in the end."

"But not before it affects almost the entire population for several minutes. *Millions* of people were killed," Sally explained. "All of them, unable to control themselves, filled with nothing but rage and hatred, but... Aiden... How many mothers were carrying their babies in their arms? How many people had access to firearms in a public place? How many people were driving cars around crowds?"

Suddenly, I felt sick, and I could see Alissa reach out to put her hand on Molly's shoulder. She whispered into her ear, and the child nodded, turning around and heading back upstairs, taking more pancakes and bacon as she did.

"By the end of the following year, suicides related to people's actions during the neurological wave took more than a third as many people again," The projection continued, her voice solemn. "Crime skyrocketed, and countries destabilized because so many of their leaders were dead, some of which actually deserved it for going along with Valentine's plan. The events of the Golden Circle might not even have happened if so many people didn't turn to drugs to dull the pain of having killed people, frequently their own families."

"...Alright, you convinced me," I said, nodding as I leaned back in my chair. "When and where are you dropping me?"

"Guests start arriving at his mountain lair twelve hours before Valentine planned to set off the sim cards," Sally explained. "The closest point of entry I can give you is two hours before Eggsy arrives."

"So I either do it myself and have a two-hour buffer or cut it really close and wait for backup," I said, shaking my head. "Damn... Do you have any idea where exactly you'll be dropping me?"

"Only place in the base, not under surveillance," She answered. "Inside one of the guest bathrooms."

"... that's not gonna work," I said, shaking my head. "Every one of the guests is a member of the elite. Security might miss an extra person coming out of the bathroom, but if I'm wearing blood-stained jeans and an old leather jacket they will clock me before I can make it

down the hall. Even worse... If I get caught, it might trigger Valentine to start the attack even earlier. Dammit..."

"What?" Alissa asked, clearly only half understanding what was going on. "I *think* I saw this movie, but I barely remember it."

"When I went to keep Harry from the Dursleys, I knew a lot of background information. This is a movie. One of three in the universe, and one of those was a World War I prequel. There *isn't* any background information. I... think there might have been a comic or something, but I've never read it."

"So you're saying you can't do it?" Alissa asked.

"I'm saying... That I need to think about this carefully, or I'll end up making the situation worse," I responded. "I could hide behind my out-of-context knowledge of Harry Potter. Here? There's nowhere to hide. Sally, is there a time limit for when I have to leave?"

"No, I can maintain my connection to these realities for a while, so take your time!"

After cleaning up from breakfast, I left the kitchen and dining hall area, stepping out into the parapet around the bastion. Deep in thought, I walked around, pacing along the stonework, pausing occasionally to look out across the empty, grassy field and the building beyond. I wracked my mind, desperately trying to remember every detail I could about a movie I hadn't seen in around ten years.

Eventually, I stepped back inside the bastion, Alissa looking up at me as the heavy doors shut behind me.

"Any luck?" Alissa asked.

"I think so. But I'm going to have to go out into the town again," I said. "I need to be wearing better clothes if I'm going to blend in at all. There is a men's tailor shop near the high school. I'll load up the duffel bag with clothes and come back."

"Yeah... we need normal clothes as well," Alissa pointed out. "Only so many times we can wash our clothes in the shower without having more stuff to wear."

"We can put it on the list for when I get back," I said.

It only took a few minutes for me to get ready, a quick run up the stairs to put on my jacket, my gun and my Kevlar vest. When I got back downstairs, Molly had reappeared, presumably from her room. I handed Alissa the spare pistol and one spare magazine, all tucked into a waist holster and belt.

"I assume since you knew how to shoot that revolver, you know how to shoot this?" I asked as she took the weapon and magazine. "It was out of ammo, right?"

"Yeah... I'll be honest, I didn't think you would trust us with this so fast," She responded.

"I'm not about to leave you unprotected," I commented. "Especially not when you have Molly here."

"Well... thank you. How long do you think you will be gone?"

"With any luck, twenty minutes," I said, getting a weird look in return. "I need to get the duffel bag first, then I can head back out. I have a spare bag from the station, but I want what I had in that bag."

"Alright... Well, good luck."

I nodded and headed out of the bastion, walking down the two sets of stairs and out into the open field. Eventually, I reached the edge, where I knew the protections ended. I spent about five minutes looking around and listening closely, making very sure there wasn't anything waiting for me on the other side.

Once I was confident I was alone, I headed out, stepping onto the asphalt road and making my way to the end of the street. As usual, it was slow going, and I had to work to keep from fantasizing about what it would be like when I actually got some real rewards from the jumps.

It would be nice to be able to fight the monsters and creatures that had taken over the town, rather than cowering in fear, sneaking around with our tails between our legs.

It didn't take long for me to find the duffel bag, which was miraculously intact and undisturbed. I quickly grabbed it and made my way back, straddling the line between stealth and speed the whole way. When I got back, I climbed the stairs into the bastion two steps at a time, the main entrance door unlocking as I reached out to open it.

Alissa was still sitting there, this time without Molly, jumping a bit as I entered. I could see her hand moving downward, only to stop when she saw it was me. I gave her a nod and quickly started unloading everything, more or less just getting it out onto the table. When I was done, I grabbed my empty backpack, slung it over my shoulder, and gave Alissa a small wave.

"Uh, good luck... again?" She said and I chuckled.

"Thanks. Just in case she didn't mention it, Sally can lock and unlock pretty much anything that opens and shuts from what I understand," I explained. "So feel free to lock yourselves upstairs or something if it makes you feel better."

"I would rather watch the door myself," She responded with a shrug. "Good to know, though."

It took a second to orient myself to my destination once I was on the grassy field, but once I was, I made my way to the edge, once again scanning the area for anything dangerous. When I was once again sure I wouldn't get pounced on just stepping off the grass, I started the journey. It was a fifteen-minute walk away under normal circumstances, so I had a decent length trip ahead of me.

All for some fancy clothes.

Still, every excursion I made was also an opportunity to find more survivors, as well as keeping an eye on where more resources would be. Plus, Alissa's question of whether or not any world changes were happening alongside the advent of these creatures still stuck in my head. While I still felt like I needed to focus on the task at hand, even if there wasn't a time limit, I would definitely make note of any strange landmarks I saw.

A spring of healing water or a tree that dropped magical fruits would definitely be something we needed to know about.