

We waited silently for a response, George gripping the mic tightly. Finally, after a few seconds, the radio crackles to life again.

“George! You old fucker, how are you still alive? Are you at the police station? What happened? Over.”

As George talked, I waved to Jason, who had been sitting nearby. I whispered for him to go downstairs and get Jessica and Roger while Alissa sat down beside me. Soon, almost all of us were sitting around, listening to the radio.

“No, I’m not. As far as I know, the station is empty,” George responded, looking over at Alissa, who had told him her story when George had first arrived. “They packed up and left for the National Guard outpost. Over.”

“What? Those bastards left without telling us? Goddamit! Where are you then?” The man, Charles, asked.

“A safe place we’ve been calling the bastion,” He said with a wince, glancing over at Sally, who was bobbing in the air above my shoulder.

“Where? No, that’s not important. We have survivors here, George, but we have monsters all around us.”

At the mention of monsters, I moved closer, standing beside George, who held out the mic, clicked it active, and gave me a nod.

“Charles, this is Aiden Corlan, and I’m here with George. Could you describe the monsters to us?” I asked, wondering what could keep such a large group of people down.

“Two of the large canines, with six legs. I swear they are bigger than cars, bigger than a truck!” He responded. “They got spines down their back and a couple on the end of their tails. They picked off two of my guys on a hunting trip and followed the third home, though he had no idea. They’ve been waiting for us to come out since then.”

“And they haven’t tried to break in?” I asked. “I’ve seen them tear holes in houses before.”

“They’ve gotten into the garage bays, but save for the trucks, they’re empty,” the fire chief explained. “We got most people down in the bomb shelter where it’s safe, but if we can’t go out and hunt or gather stuff, the food stored down here isn’t going to last very long.”

“Charles, how long have they been waiting?” George asked, pulling the mic back to his mouth.

“Seven days now,” he answered, a hint of defeat in his voice. “They disappeared on the fourth day, so on the fifth, we sent out some people to scavenge, and they barely made it back. Wouldn’t have if one of them wasn’t being paranoid.”

“Dammit... Charles, I hate to ask you this, but how much longer could you survive? How long will your food last?” I asked.

“Four days, longer if we start to ration, but at that point, we won’t be much help,” He explained, his tone colder now, frustration easily coming through. “Why, you got somewhere to be?”

“One of our hunters is currently sick. Giving us two days or so to let them recover and let us plan could make all the difference,” I explained, understanding his frustration. “The more time we have to prepare, the more likely our help will work.”

The room was quiet, with no response from Charles for nearly a full minute. When the radio finally cracked to life, the fire chief sounded resigned.

“Alright. I’ll tell the folks that you’ll be coming in two days. Is that enough time?” He asked.

“Yes, that will work,” I responded. “We will do regular check-ins to make sure nothing is happening.”

“It will put a strain on our solar generator, but yes, that sounds like a good idea,” Charles agreed. “I need to go deliver the news, so I’m signing off.”

“Good luck, Charles,” George said. “Over and out.”

George hooked the mic on the side of the radio before dropping down into the seat. We were silent for a moment before Jessica looked over at me.

“These canine monsters, are they really that big?” She asked. “We never encountered them.”

“If they are hunting by the fire station, I’m not surprised,” I responded. “That’s on the other side of town. I don’t think we’ve even gotten close to it. But yes, they are big, though they are smaller than the dragon. One nearly rolled a car on top of me before I linked up with Sally.”

“How do you intend to kill two of something that large?” Alissa asked, only to stop when George coughed.

“Sorry, I just don’t think we should get two attached to that number,” he explained. “If they are smart enough to ambush, lure, and wait for prey... well then they are probably smart enough to have one, or even two, waiting in the wings.”

“...Okay, so we prepare for three then,” I agreed with a nod. “Between the guns we have, our spells, and our superior numbers, this is absolutely possible. As long as we come up with a plan, we can do this.”

“I’m coming with you,” Alissa said. “I’m not nearly as crucial as I was before with the healing spell, and you need everyone we can muster.”

“Ummm... I’ve been thinking... If I can use the rifle with the scope, from far enough away, I might be able to help,” Roger volunteered, shrinking a little when George winced.

“Kid, the sniper needs to be the most calm out of everyone because he is the one shooting from behind everyone,” Geroge explained. “Everyone else can stay in a loose firing line so stray shots don’t hit friendlies, but the overwatch has to shoot around people. Can you handle that?”

“I see, I understand,” He responded, pulling a bit further into himself.

“Not everyone needs to fight,” I reminded him. “Besides, you’ll be holding down the fort.”

“Right,” He responded, sounding a bit better but not entirely convinced.

“Before we start talking strategy, Jessica, want to see if Barry is up to coming down?” I asked. “I’m really hoping he feels better by then. Like Alissa said, we are going to need every fighter we can get.”

Jessica nods and stands from the table, heading up the stairs. While she is gone, Alissa looks at George.

“How do you know Charles?” She asked, looking curious.

“I was a lieutenant when they first joined the Fire Department,” He explained. “We’ve bumped elbows at events and parties before.”

“What kind of person is he?” I asked.

“He’s a decent enough man. Never heard of any major issues. He’s been Chief of the department for... three years now?”

Before I could ask any more questions, Jessica returned with Barry, the young adult leaning against her, though not nearly as heavily as he had been when we first returned from

our jump. Not only that, but his face had more color and didn't seem to be suffering nearly as much.

"Hey guys," He said, sitting next to Jessica. "Heard we got a distress call?"

"There are about thirteen people stuck at the first station," I explained. "Some big, truck-sized canine things."

"... that explains the giant dog pawprints I saw last time I headed in that direction," he said, pulling the blanket he had carried with him around himself.

"Wait, you knew something else was out there and didn't say anything?" Jessica asked, looking like she wanted to slap his shoulder, only just stopping herself.

"It kind of slipped my mind," He admitted, rubbing his face. "The attack happened, and then we moved here... Sorry."

"Either way, we need to come up with a strategy to take down three of them at once," I said, pulling everyone back to the topic at hand. "Barry, they are giving us a few days for you to recover, think you'll be ready by then?"

"Yeah, I'll be ready," He answered easily. "Even if it just added fire support, I'll be ready."

"Good. We still need some sort of plan... does everyone remember what the fire station and the space around it looks like?"

Everyone except Alissa nodded, so I did my best to describe it for her sake. I ended up using stuff around the kitchen, like cutlery, plates, and cups, to recreate the general area on the table. Thankfully, the area was relatively easy to describe.

Basically, the building sat on the end of a strip of small shops, separated by a street. A large parking lot wrapped around the back and right side of the building when looking at the front. To the left was a good-sized public area, with trees and benches and a large grassy area. Between the parking lot, grassy park, and the road in front, the station was separated from the rest of the buildings by quite a bit. This was good because it meant the Dino-Dogs, which was what Barry was calling them within minutes of me describing them, wouldn't be able to tuck themselves into an alleyway or something.

"Our spells will give us an advantage, but I don't want to rely on them. The fire will definitely make them flinch, and even with how big they are, the zap spell will lock them up for at least a second. But that's not enough. I want to stack the deck."

"Could always pull a Barry special again," Barry pointed out with a weak smirk. "Grab a couple of trucks and slam it into them."

"... won't pretend that isn't an option," I admitted. "If it's stupid and it works, it's not stupid. But we would have to use cars near the station, and the streets around it might not be clear. Not to mention that they may be in the park, smashed into a shop, in the parking lot. It's an idea, one that we may end up using again, but I don't know if it's what we need here."

"We have the firepower to take them down, right?" Alissa asked. "Why not just ambush them?"

"We do have a lot of guns, but I'm worried about unnatural resistance," I explained. "My shots pancaked on the dragon. Granted, it was my pistol, but I don't want to show up to a fight assuming the AR-15 is going to take everything down, only for it to do nothing, or at least not enough."

"...What about pipe bombs?" Roger asked, having been sitting quietly for a while. "You guys brought back a ton of smokeless powder from the bunker. It was supposed to be used for making more ammo... but we could turn them into pipe bombs."

"... The pipes would be easy, but we would need fuzes," I pointed out. "I-"

"I can make the fuzes. Just need strips of cloth, glue, and some of that powder," George answered. "Not that difficult."

"...Okay, so we can make pipe bombs," I said, nodding my head. "That's a good start. What else can we do to tip this in our favor?"

We talked as a group for a few more hours before eventually breaking for dinner. We had a new task and people depending on us, which gave everyone in the bastion a new sense of determination.

The following morning, Jessica, George, and I left to run to the hardware store. We grabbed all of the materials we would need for our latest dangerous DIY project. On the way home, we ran into a pair of raptors, but between our guns and magic, they were quickly dispatched. Jessica seemed upset that the things that killed so many of her friends were now a speed bump, but I pointed out that she enjoy it while it lasted.

Sally had been very clear that while, for now, the creatures that threatened us would stay in the same general area, eventually, they would start to migrate without the system to keep them in place. Eventually, we would need to be able to take down a dragon without requiring someone to plow into it with a hastily modified truck. The days of easily killable monsters that we recognized were numbered.

This was our early prep time. When it was gone, we would never get it back.

Once we were home, we spent the rest of the day making pipe bombs. The first part was easy. Use PVC glue to attach the cap to a short pipe, dump a bunch of smokeless powder in, and then seal the other end with a cap that had a hole drilled into it. Stuff a homemade fuse inside and that was it.

The second step was a bit more time-consuming, as we used painter's tape to attach dozens and dozens of nuts, ball bearings, nails, and screws to the outside of the pipebomb. When we were done, we were left with eight of the absolutely brutal explosive devices. We still had plenty of smokeless powder and materials, but eight was enough for now.

"When we set these off, everyone needs to be behind something solid," George said. "These are going to eviscerate anything that they are close to."

"Do... you think we should practice?" Jessica asked. "I feel like leaving that to chance is a bad idea. They are pretty heavy."

"... let's make a fake one and fill it with gravel or dirt," I said, hefting one of the explosives and realizing she was absolutely correct. "Cover it with the same stuff, but make sure it's obviously fake. We can go outside and practice throwing with that."

Everyone going, even Barry, spent about an hour outside practice throwing the fake bomb. We would have teased Barry for having his abysmal throwing skills if we weren't preparing to throw horrifically dangerous explosives. He blamed his ongoing recovery and agreed to try again before we left.

Two more days passed, and we continued to prepare, though at this point, we were mostly waiting for Barry to feel better. We did a few more scaving runs, but this time, focusing almost completely on food and camping gear like tents and cots. As much as we were not ready to have this many people come to the bastion all at once, I wanted to invite them anyway. The fact of the matter was that even if they were sleeping outside on the parapets, they would still be worlds safer than they would be if they stayed at the fire station.

I was well aware that this was our first step into the big leagues. We would be blowing past our status of just another small pocket of survivors. Our concerns about food were about to shift drastically, as were normal everyday resources like clothes. Hell, I was already trying to think of a solution to not having an easy way to wash clothes in bulk.

Through all of this, we stayed in regular contact with the Fire Chief and the people staying at the station. The Dino-dogs stayed close, frequently walking around the station, even entering the garage a few more times to push around the trucks, looking for the people they knew were in the building. It made me wonder if they were somehow sensing that people were nearby but couldn't locate them precisely.

On the day we finally panned to attack, Barry seemed like he had recovered almost completely. We warned Charles that we would be on our way soon, warning him that people should stay hunkered down, protected from our newly made explosives. He confirmed that everyone was still down in the bunker and that both of the monsters were still around before we signed out.