

We spent the rest of the day messing around and doing light work. I ended up testing the flame burst spell for myself after grabbing my spear and changing my spell. Charles hadn't been kidding when he said the spear turned the spell into an actually focused blast. In fact, if anything, he was understating the change. Casting the spell through the weapon resulted in a stream of flame, harsh and powerful enough to have a noticeable kickback as I held it. It was almost like a flame thrower, save the blast of fire didn't sink or splash down to the ground, instead fading as it reached the maximum range.

"That needs to be tested on a real target ASAP," I said, resisting the urge to use my last spell to try it again. "That seemed like it was going to do some serious damage. But we need to be careful; we don't burn the town to the ground, either."

"It's certainly nerve-wracking," Charles said, shaking his head. "I think it's a miracle that hasn't happened already."

Once we were done messing around with magic, I spent some time casually clearing buildings around the bastion-cleared area, double-checking ahead of civilians so that they could go from floor to floor, grabbing anything useful. It was pretty relaxing, seeing as these buildings had already been cleared, and I was only really worried about running into the horned cats. Technically, raptors could have fit inside, too, but I couldn't see them working their way up the stairs or settling in such small spaces.

Rather than bring it all back to the bastion, since space was already becoming an issue, most of the stuff we found was brought down to the lower floors and marked for later retrieval. By the time we called it a day, collectively, we had filled two apartment lobbies with shelf after shelf of useful things. Everything from kitchen supplies and canned goods to toiletries and grooming supplies. With any luck, some of it would get brought into the bastion when we started working on the room issue, while most of it would remain here, ready to use when needed.

At the end of the day, a few of the civilians put together a heart stew for everyone, serving it over massive piles of rice. It was all made with jerkied meat and canned vegetables, but it was still pretty damn good, like a post-apocalypse curry.

That night, I managed to get some actual sleep, my exhaustion eventually outweighing any nightmares lurking in my mind. After a fitful but marginally effective night's rest, the four of us who had planned on delving into the Pool Cave met downstairs. We would have gathered more people, but with our destination being a cave, I didn't want to bring too many people and then run into the issue of getting in each other's way. The group consisted of Jessica, Barry, and Kate because she was the first to volunteer, and myself, obviously. I knew at some point I needed to learn how to delegate these sorts of things, but for now, I was just happy to leave some people behind to defend the bastion.

When we all gathered together, it was slightly later in the morning than it had been when we left for our last jump, but still relatively early. We sat down and had a light meal of leftovers before splitting up to prepare for our trip, meeting back at the base of the parapet stairs.

Our outfits were remarkably similar to what we had worn on our last jump, with the caveat that all of us were wearing vests under our jackets. Kate was wearing a Kevlar vest, as was I, while Jessica and Barry wore the much lighter stab-proof vests. Both of our younger party members had been leaning towards lighter, more mobile fighting styles, while Kate and I favored a heavier, more stationary one. That and I had made a habit of putting myself in harm's way, so wearing better protection only made sense.

While our outfits were mostly the same, our armaments were certainly not. Gone were most of your guns, save for our backup pistols on our hips. Jessica's primary weapon was still her shotgun, which I let her keep because she had gotten so good at it, and having a heavy-ranged option wasn't a bad idea. She also had a machete strapped to her opposite hip since she still needed a melee weapon. Barry and I were sticking with our spears while Kate used Roger's latest creation.

We had harvested a bunch of parts from the Dino-dogs that we killed during our recent rescue. While Roger confirmed that the teeth, claws, and spikes weren't as sharp as what we harvested from the dragon, their tail spikes were actually pretty close. Their unique shape, almost like a rose thorn, invoked an entirely different sort of weapon than the dragon's teeth, one I was quick to point out to Roger when we returned with the parts.

He had happily gotten to work, resulting in a weapon that looked like a cross between a normal axe and one designed to spike through the ice. It was attached to a normal axe handle, fused with metal plates, bolts, and thick cabling, all connected with bolts and very neat welds. It was a dangerous-looking weapon, and I could tell Kate was excited to try it out.

Once we were set, we said goodbye and left the bastion behind. We left on bikes, two with wagons, one with the kiddie carrier, and a fourth one that someone had found in an apartment the previous day. The bikes were nice to have because it would cut our time down by a lot, but I really just wanted the ability to haul stuff back in case we found something interesting. At some point very soon, I wanted to send some people out to grab everything worthwhile in the town's bike shop, but we had time for that later. For now, I wanted to focus on clearing this POI.

We also left with a pair of walkie-talkies. It had taken a while to get them properly set up since the sets we found at Crazy Abe's bunker were some pretty advanced models. They had more in common with the radios used by police officers and firefighters than the civilian modes we were used to. Now that they were ready, we could finally stay in contact and update the people staying behind at the bastion about what was going on. The ability to call for help alone was well worth the effort; being able to keep the bastion up to date was just a bonus.

Fortunately, the high-end radios also came in silent and vibrating modes. This meant we didn't have to worry about an inopportune call giving our position away if we were sneaking around. Well, as long as people actually remembered to put them on silent.

When we arrived at the school for the first time in quite a while, we pulled our bikes into the main entrance, leaving them there for safekeeping. We could have entered at an entrance much closer to the pool, but we had no idea what we were heading into, so a slower, more wary approach was better for now. The possibility that whatever was in the cave had spread throughout the school after it was at the forefront of all our minds.

We made our way slowly through the school, with Barry and I in front with Kate and Jessica covering our backs. As far as I could tell, the interior of the building looked fine, save a few unfortunate piles of dust and some bloodstains that Jessica and Barry had a hard time even looking at.

When we finally reached the pool, we were happy to find that the barricades their group had placed were still intact. It took us a couple of minutes to pull away the heavy desks, the lockers, and the few bits of other furniture, but when we did, I called for everyone to pause before Barry could throw the doors open and look inside.

"I know we are all eager to see what's inside the cave, but we need to remember that this is not a jump," I pointed out. "We have had an easier time around here lately, now that we have been armed properly and we have some experience fighting raptors and cat monsters. Unfortunately, the truth is that there is a lot of dangerous shit for us to still find. We have been swimming in the shallow end of a small pond, and this may or may not be a step in the deep end."

"Was that pool reference on purpose or...?"

Barry joked, but Jessica rolled her eyes and slapped the back of his head.

I gave the young man a look as he rubbed the back of his head, pausing for a moment to continue.

"Since we have no idea what might be in here, we take it slow, get ready for anything," I said eventually. "Me and Kate are gonna be front line, Barry and Jessica you cover our rear. Once we find whatever bad thing is waiting for us, depending on what it is, we may retreat and reconsider our approach. Everyone clear?"

When everyone nodded in confirmation, I nodded back and opened the doors, with Kate immediately stepping inside with me. We both had our weapons ready as we did, stopping just inside the door as we both prepared for contact. Seconds passed slowly, and after a while, we slowly released our tight grips. Since nothing immediately attacked us, we both looked around,

trying to take in every detail. This was the first time either of us had seen the pool, so all of it was new to me.

The large room looked relatively normal, with bleachers on one side and benches along the other. The room smelled faintly of chlorine, which I had to imagine was probably lower than it had been when it was being regularly cleaned. The pool itself was standard Olympic size, though there was no water in it at this point. Instead, merging into the tiled floor and walls was the entrance to a cave. It was utterly nonsensical; the rock formation looked like it belonged on a cliff wall or at least among boulders and chunks of stone. Instead, it looked like someone had dragged a select tool, cut out a large cave mouth, and dropped it into the pool with Photoshop.

“That is... bizarre,” I said, standing up straight and slowly walking around the pool, wanting to see the strange phenomena from every angle.

“Yeah... I kinda forgot how weird it looked,” Barry said, everyone following me as we walked around the pool. “I mean, it's not super weird, just kind of weird. At this point, it's maybe a four out of ten on the weird shit-o-meter. One is the last Monday before this happened, and ten is what it looks like when we jump.”

I stopped and turned to look at Barry, who was focused down at the seam where the cave met the tile. After a moment, he looked up and winced.

“Right, sorry,” He said, standing back up and adjusting his grip on his spear. “It's serious time, my bad.”

I let out a long breath before finishing the full circle of the POI, or at least the entrance to the point of interest. When nothing important jumped out at us, I nodded toward a ladder built into the side of the pool.

One by one, we descended the short ladder to the tiled floor before we moved closer to the entrance. The stone around the wide mouth of the cave was wet, which was surprising considering where it was, but the dampness smelt earthy and fresh rather than the deep chemical smell that usually came from pool water.

“Alright, guys, lights on.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a beefy flashlight, one designed to be clipped to the front of a firefighter jacket. They were strong but not blinding and should last for several hours. We had snagged them from the fire station during the transfer of surplus, along with several other useful things. As we all clipped them to our jackets and vests, I stepped closer to the mouth, ducking down slightly to walk in. The flashlight did a pretty decent job of lighting the place up, and with all four of us inside, we could see pretty well.

“Bit cramped,” Jessica said. “Gonna be hard to use a spear...”

“... Let's hope it gets bigger when we go deeper,” I responded with a frown before looking over at her and then at Kate. “Do you think you guys can pull up the slack if it doesn't?”

“Unless it's something impossible, sure,” Kate responded with a shrug.

“If it's too much, we can pull back,” I assured them. “We can investigate the farm instead.”

Jessica and Kate moved to take the lead, an awkward process with how cramped the cave was, their melee weapons out and ready as we made our way deeper. The stone corridor went down quickly, and we followed it until we were well under the school. The ceiling stayed low for the first hundred feet, and the walls stayed pretty close, too, though we always had enough room to move. Suddenly, without warning, the small, tight cave opened into a much larger space.

The massive cave was shockingly full of color. Along one side was a thick stream, water pouring from the wall, falling down the stones and rocks before filling a small pond, one that ran off down further, disappearing beside what looked like another corridor almost forty feet away. The cave walls were covered in yellow glowing mushrooms, half disks that grew bigger than my head. From the ceiling hung thick, tough-looking vines, or more accurately, roots. They hung down anywhere from a few feet to all the way down to the floor. Each branch that the roots had, of which there were three or four per foot, had plum-sized, green fruits growing under them.

“This is incredible,” Barry said, stepping past Jessica and Kate to touch one of the closest vines. “Do you think they are edible?”

Jessica reached out and slapped away his hands before he could start tugging one of the green fruits off the root.

“We can bring some back with us. I'm sure there is some way to test if it has anything dangerous,” I suggested. “We-”

A screech echoed through the cavern, cutting me off abruptly. All four of us whirled towards the sound, now looking at the opposite side of the cavern, where the next path was. There, standing in said entrance, was a waist-high, scaled, clawed, and bipedal lizard man thing. It was pointing at us with a crude spear, growling and snapping at us, showing off its teeth and claws.

“No fucking way,” Barry said as we all stood there, staring at the tiny but lethal-looking humanoid. “It's a fucking kobold!”

Before anyone could respond, three more of them came running in from the same large hole in the rock, all armed with spears. They growled and spat at us before charging at the nearest person, Barry, with their weapons raised.