

Once people had finished exploring and claiming rooms, we started to actually move people in. Most of it was simply grabbing stuff from the temporary setup along the parapet and moving it into the space, but we also went out and around the bastion borders. Previously, while my jump team was recovering from our trip to Resident Evil, the civilians, with some light help from me and a few others, had explored two of the closest apartment buildings. We cleared out every room of anything useful, from sheets and mattresses to cans of food and utensils.

Unlike the original building, which people were already calling "the tower," the new building wasn't stocked or filled with toiletries. Sally had been cutting any corner she could to give me as much material to work with as possible, and we just barely had enough to do things like the bedframes and chests in each room, as well as adding the storage enhancement twist. As a result, the bedframes had no mattresses, and the kitchen cabinets didn't have any plates, cups, or bowls. The place was technically functional but mostly empty. Thankfully, we had plenty of places to borrow some mattresses and had already gathered most of everything else.

Since the food stasis tweak that Sally made for the tower extended to the new storage area, and that area was empty, we designated it the primary food pantry for the two buildings. The tower would still have some food stored in closets and the like, but most of it would be kept in the new space.

To help with that, we explored the apartments again, this time with a specific target. Having asked around to the civilians, we knew several of the apartments had mini-fridges and even a couple of small freezers. The bigger ones were useless to us, but some of them, if you squashed them down, would be less than a foot of space. So, we dragged them back with us to the new space, stacking them up along one wall. According to Sally, the built-in climate control could more than handle two or three dozen of them, so I made it an open order for anyone who found a mini fridge or freezer to either drag it back or let people who could know about it.

Between them and the stasis, food would have a much longer life, reducing wastage and helping us stock up for winter. It might only be late Spring, but we already needed to start saving up for it.

We got halfway through moving the fridges when we called it a day. It was starting to get late, and everyone was tired, so we moved back to the new building to break in the new kitchen. Some of the civilians put together a meal around a bunch of raptor meat, which had been hunted by Danny, the third firefighter, and a civilian hunter while we were spelunking. I could have questioned why they went out without talking about it, but they had been smart about it. They hadn't gone too far from the bastion and had used the high-powered rifle to deal the killing blow before retreating back to the barrier with their kill. All three of them were experienced hunters, even the civilian, so telling them they had fucked up because they didn't ask permission first felt juvenile, especially when they had been right. We did need the food, especially when we had already been dipping too hard into our shelf-stable reserves. Plus, I left for the school pretty early, so they couldn't even ask me if they wanted to.

Unfortunately, I still needed to do something about it. I couldn't have the place devolve into anarchy every time I left. So, after grabbing a plate of food, I headed over to Charles, who was sitting beside Sarah, Danny, Kate, and George, who still looked warmed over from death but was at least smiling and eating.

"Hey guys, how's it going?" I asked, sitting down with a smile. "Charles, you mind talking shop over dinner?"

"...No, that's fine," He said, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "What is it?"

"So... I left this morning to go explore the POI, as we discussed," I said, picking at my food, my look shifting over to Danny. "And we had a team go out hunting."

Danny winced, but the older man, the man who had been his boss for a long time, opened his mouth to defend him. Before he could, I held up my hand, gently forstalling his words.

"I'm not complaining about them. They did fine, got results, and did it safely. I can't condemn them for that, but as the Chief, I'm sure you can understand that people just doing what they want whenever I leave is not going to go well for very long."

Charles was silent for a long moment before nodding stiffly in agreement, though he stayed silent.

"That's why I want you to be my second in command," I explained. "You have experience leading groups, seem to understand leadership, and can handle people. I want us to work together, and when I'm on a jump, out hunting, or anything else, I need you here keeping everything kosher and orderly."

"... Why not ask George?" He eventually asked, looking over at the older man. "He has more experience."

"Just time-wise, maybe, but I was never a leader on the force," George answered, taking a long sip of what I was pretty sure was tea. "You got experience I don't, and I vouched for you."

I did, in fact, talk to George before starting this conversation. The man didn't have the stomach or drive to lead anyone, and he freely admitted that himself. He was content to go on jumps and hunts, and in a few years, he would retire. He was pushing seventy at this point, but according to him, the healing field was having a big effect on him, and he felt younger than he had in ten, maybe fifteen years. Sally said that sounded about right with how effective the healing field was, maybe a little under. Either way, he was happy to help but didn't feel up to leading.

"Well... I don't have a problem with helping. I'm just surprised you asked me," He admitted. "I would imagine you would pick someone from your group."

"That's part of the problem. We joined with two comparable groups, and unless we do something to bridge that, that won't change," I explained. "If we are divided and we find another group of people, we are going to run into some serious factioning issues. We are already going to run into some problems with groups forming between the different roles, like hunters, jumpers, and farmers. That's bad enough, but with any more groupings layered in, we are going to start having issues of people forming rivalries, competing for resources, bullshit like that."

"I agree," Charles said, rubbing his lips. "I was going to come forward at some point, talk about what we were going to do... I'm glad you realized it's a problem as well. It means you're at least paying attention."

Sarah rolled her eyes at his bluntness but ultimately stayed silent. Everyone else was clearly used to it, though Danny shook his head. When Charles opened his mouth again to continue, I cut him off.

"Before you respond, you should understand that this is not an attempt to partition off my control. The bastion is mine, and it will always be that way. We need a singular, strong leader, someone who can make quick, unilateral choices," I explained, leaning forward in my seat. "I am not creating a council or creating ministries to divide up my position and power. We also need to present a united front. We can discuss things, even argue behind closed doors, but we can't be working against each other."

My statement seemed to surprise the slightly older man, who now looked less certain than before. After a long moment, he nodded.

"As long as you don't expect me to help you be a dictator-"

"Charles, that's exactly what he is," George said, shaking his head. "It's what he needs to be too. Yes, it sucks, yes, it might even be unfair, but he is in the position where if he says jump, people need to ask how high."

"It's not quite to that level, but he isn't completely wrong, either," I added with a frown. "There is no voting, and there is no majority win here, Charles. If I start committing crimes against humanity, then sure, that's different. But when I kick someone out because they are causing issues, I need you to back me up. When I'm forced to have Sally listen in and follow people around while invisible and silent because I'm worried someone is starting to stir some shit, I need to know you're not going to start ranting and raving about people's right to privacy. The world is too fucked up right now to worry about stuff like that."

Sarah, whom I was trusting to understand how serious this conversation was, seemed to understand I was including her in a secret, especially as I leaned forward and started to whisper about Sally.

Charles was silent for a lot longer this time, which I was fine with. The table silently sat and continued to eat, the people around us oblivious to what we were talking about. Kate stood to get seconds, returning a minute later with another plate of food, though significantly smaller.

"Fine. I understand, and I agree," Charles finally said. "I don't necessarily like it, but you're right. This is not the time to get lost in pre-dust logic and ideals. Survival is more important, and if that hinges on someone being in control... Fine."

"Fantastic. We can make the announcement tomorrow, which, by the way, I want to spend grabbing whatever we need to test the vine fruits and the mushrooms," I explained. "I plan on sending two teams, one back to the urgent care and another to the hardware store."

"What other plans do you have?" Charles asked. "For future reference?"

"We can talk more about it later, but a big one is heading out to the library. I want to make sure it's in good condition first and see if we can't borrow some stuff for food preservation. If we can find some ways to extend the shelf life of our food, the stasis effect would magnify it significantly." I explained, getting a few understanding nods. "I also want information on tanning hides. With any luck, we will find a way to treat the hides, and if our luck continues, they might end up being decent armor. I also want stuff on blacksmithing and other old-fashioned crafting like that."

"Why? What good will blacksmithing do us?" Kate asked.

"Well, for one, the time it will take for the supplies around us to be useless is surprisingly short. In seven or eight years, when knife chips or a bowl breaks, we won't be able to run out to the nearest building and empty a cabinet," I explained. "But that's long term. In the short term, I'm betting on special metals showing up. Already, we are seeing that parts harvested from monsters and used in weapons are necessary when fighting some of the tougher monsters. Jessica could barely do any damage to the kobolds we ran into today."

"So... you think system metals are going to show up?" Danny asked. "Like what and how?"

"Probably the POIs," I guessed. "Call it a hunch, but I get the sense that they are going to be a very important part of us surviving and thriving. I mean, I have no idea what's going to actually come out of them, but blacksmithing seems like a solid thing to bet on."

We talked for a while longer, going over my plans to go out to the farm that Danny mentioned, Mabels. It was a semi-famous small town farm with a few animals, mostly for

petting, and a small orchard and gardens. It was more of a tourist and school trip destination than anything, but there was probably plenty worth hauling back here, especially farming equipment, maybe even seeds.

I didn't know much of anything when it came to farming, but more likely than not, we would end up needing to start a few farms, probably next year. With any luck, there was something we could plant in late Spring and still see food by fall.

Or maybe we should build some greenhouses for winter variety.

When dinner was over, the impromptu celebration petered out, and I went back to the tower. I fell asleep pretty quickly, exhausted from our trip to the pool cave.

The following day, we spent most of the morning getting what we needed to test the fruit and mushroom. I headed the team to go to the hardware store, coming back with a whole heap of supplies, as well as a couple of testing kits, most of them used to identify things in water. We actually made three trips to the hardware store, bringing back a lot of materials and stacking them around the wall. It was mostly pipes, wood stock, and other building materials, which, as long as they were covered and off the ground, were perfectly safe to keep outside.

Once both teams returned from their trips, we quickly began the testing process. Separately, we put both the mushroom and the vine fruit into a blender, added some water, and pureed them before pouring them out and using the testing kits. As far as the kits could tell, there weren't any heavy metals, acids, or anything else dangerous. It wasn't a perfect test, but after Sally once again confirmed that the heal spell would cure poisoning and that, yes, this would count as poison, it was enough for someone to try them. Once again, I tried to volunteer, only for that to get shot down. Four civilians volunteered to help, two women and two men. They would try them, one by one, waiting for a few days before trying the next. Alissa would watch over them closely, with plenty of people on standby to heal.

The first one up was the root fruit, since most everyone was actually excited to see what it tasted like. One of the female volunteers went first, eating three of the root fruits since they were about the size of a plum each, though they lacked a pit. She claimed they tasted like a combination of sweet beets and grapes and, overall, were delicious. The combination certainly sounded interesting, and I was eager to eventually try them.

The last part of the day was spent planning the next day, which would start with me and a team of people heading off to inspect Mabel's Farm. When we got back, a different group would set off to the library. That way, the bastion would still have plenty of people to defend it, and we still got two major things done in one day, without pushing people too hard.