

"Gazelle! Goddammit, what the fuck is wrong with you?" Valentine shouted, seemingly stuck between concern for his bodyguard and rising nausea at the violence. "You shot her!"

I glanced over at the assassin bodyguard, who had stumbled back against the wall and shrugged.

"So? Do you expect me to have empathy for you two?" I asked, genuinely baffled. "You were ready to doom millions, women, children, the whole shebang, to brutal violent deaths, but god forbid Nubs, the psychopathic ballerina, gets hurt?"

"It was necessary! Earth-"

I pistol-whipped him, smacking him in the face and cracking his nose. He shouted and clutched at his face as he fell back into his chair more, groaning and moaning. I struggled to hold back a wince as the movement pulled at the slice along my stomach.

"Earth is a non-sentient ball of rock. It's not alive, and it's not sick," I countered, shaking my head. "Global warming and all that shit is fucked, sure, but the solution isn't fucking genocide! You know what? Why am I arguing with you? Arguing is for people trying to understand each other, and the second we understand each other, I would indeed chew a bullet because I've been infected by your dumb fucking bullshit."

I shook my head and resisted the urge to hit the already bleeding man again with herculean effort. Instead, I looked to Eggsy, who seemed stuck between clearly agreeing with me and wondering if I had gone off the deep end.

"Listen, we need to make sure that there are no records of how this rage wave works. And as much as I'd like to pound out my frustration on this dumb fuckers face, we need someone who knows what they are doing," I said, shaking my head. "Unless they trained you in enhanced interrogation?"

"...I know the basics, but Merlin, he can come to help," Eggsy explained, clearly not thrilled with the idea of torture. "Are you sure...."

"Don't worry. I doubt he will have much to do. Valentine here isn't exactly a hardened agent or ideological zealot."

It took about ten or fifteen minutes for Merlin to make his way to the office, which he only did after going through the entire base's system to make sure there weren't any surprises. During that time, Eggsy and I were not idle, starting with Eggsy wrapping my wound with a bandage from a first aid kit Valentine had stashed nearby. I tried to convince him it was fine, but when I took a look at it, it did look a little gnarly.

When that was done, we forced the bodyguard, Gazelle, to remove her prosthetics before dragging her into a chair. Valentine complained about the unethical treatment of the handicapped, but I laughed and told him if she didn't want to lose her prosthetics, she shouldn't have made them weapons. We quickly bound them both to the chairs with handcuffs and belts that we pulled off the headless guards outside. Gazelle got a bonus strap around her head and into her mouth to keep her quiet.

We were just finishing up bandaging Gazelle's leg when Merlin walked in, holding a clipboard of all things. He nodded when he saw what we had set up, first at Eggsy and then at me. I stepped closer and extended my hand.

"Aiden Corlan. It's good to meet you, sir," I said as he reached out to shake my hand.

"And you as well. I should thank you. Your intervention helped this operation go significantly smoother than it would have otherwise."

"Happy to help."

"Indeed," He said with a nod before turning to focus on Valentine. "Now, Valentine. I've already deleted the database here, at this facility. I'm sure we will find more data at your primary facilities as well. What I want to know, and what you're going to tell me, is where you have stored your backups."

Merlins took two deliberate steps toward Valentine, leaning over slightly to better look the billionaire megalomaniac in the eye. Despite the intimidating position, Valentine shook his head.

"Why- why would I tell you that?" He asked, trying to maintain a tough facade. "I'm not going to-"

Merlin wordlessly reached out and grabbed one of Valentine's fingers and yanked on it. The digit pulled free of its socket with a rather disturbing pop, and Valentine screamed. I couldn't help but wince and shake my hand. I knew from personal experience that it was not a fun injury, especially not with how Merlin continued to move the dislocated digit around. With another quick movement, Merlin jammed in the finger, this time putting it back into place.

"Valentine, all you need to do is start talking. When you start saying things I'm interested in, I'll stop doing this," The older British man explained, grabbing another finger and repeating the process. "Until then, you've got a lot of joints to work with."

Immediately, Valentine started talking, nearly babbling about everything Merlin wanted to hear. I gave Eggsy a look, and barely spotted Gazelle rolling her eyes before her head drooped.

Valentine continued to talk, revealing several locations in which he had stored his data, including his home, a secondary bunker, and a half dozen other places. After a few reminders of

the consequences of not answering Merlin's questions, he also assured Merlin that everyone who knew anything about the project besides himself and Gazelle had been chipped and was now surely dead.

Seemingly satisfied, Merlin stepped away from the phone mogul, still carrying his clipboard, and made his way to us, standing by the door out of the office.

"You think that was everything?" I asked.

"I think that is all I'm going to get out of him," He responded. "Once he admitted he wet the bed until he was seventeen, I believe we reached the end of his useful information."

"Good, then it's time we put this to bed," I said, reaching down to my pistol. Eggsy saw me and reached out, preventing me from drawing my gun.

"Woah, you're just going to kill him?" He asked. "I mean yeah, I get that before killing was an option, right. But he is done now, an unarmed prisoner. We can't just kill em."

"Look, there is no way in hell I'm going to risk an Operation: Paperclip situation here," I said, shaking my head. "You guys can take care of his notes and make sure all of that is destroyed, but as long as he is alive, the information can spread. Besides, the man is fucking insane and so rich it beggars belief. You let either of them walk out of here alive, and they *will* come back to bite you in the ass."

"He's right, Eggsy," Merlin agreed. "I know it's a tough pill to swallow, but sometimes secrets need to die, and the only way to do that is to kill the people who know them."

After a moment of thought, Eggsy nodded, and slowly pulled his hand down, letting me pull my pistol. I walked across the room, standing in front of Valentine. I flicked the safety off and looked at him.

"Is- is this the part where you say some cheesy one-liner before killing me?" Valentine asked, his face dripping sweat from Merlin's interrogation.

I looked at him blankly, my mind going back to his final lines in the movie. I couldn't remember exactly what Eggsy had said as the final bits of life left that Valentine, but I did recall it mentioned Harry, Eggsy's deceased mentor. Part of me wanted to pay homage to that, but I quickly realized, after all that this bastard did, how many people he was ready to murder...

He didn't deserve to get what he wanted.

"No," I said cleanly, raising my pistol to his forehead. "Though you should know. Mcdonald's sucks."

"Wh-what? What does-"

The gunshot cut off his confused question, his baffled expression as I ruined his last moments alive now stuck on his face forever. I turned to the right and put a bullet through Gazelle's head as well, her face stuck in a defiant smirk. I held my gun out for a long moment before letting out a long breath. With a click, I set the safety on and placed the pistol on the now broken desk, trying to ignore my shaking hands.

"I've always been partial to Wendys," The older Kingsman said when I looked at him, maintaining his perfectly serious face.

"Nando's beats all bruv," Eggsy added with a smirk. "Not even close."

I laughed, holding my side as the two Kingsman agents broke the harsh tension in the room. It was a bit grim to be laughing after what I had done, but gallows humor had its own healing power.

"Right. Well, I think with that, it's about time I head out," I said before letting out another long breath. "It's been real interesting, but my task is complete."

"About that," Merlin said, idly looking down at his clipboard. "I have an awful lot of questions about who and what you are. Your name doesn't match any ID I could find, so I assume it's a taken name?"

"No, it's the name my mother gave me," I assured him. "Don't worry about it. We most likely won't meet again, at least for a long while. Probably best to leave me out of any reports as well."

Merlin frowned at the last statement, probably picking up on how utterly confident I was. I could feel the transition happening as he opened his mouth to ask another question, only for his jaw to drop and his eyes to go wide.

"What the-"

My double presence solidified back at home, standing in the bottom floor of the bastion. I shivered and shook my extremities, the pins and needles intensifying for a moment as I slowly acclimatized to being back in my reality.

"Damn, coming back is *much* weirder than going to," I admitted, stretching slowly as I tried to work out the kinks.

I looked around the kitchen, noting that Molly and Alissa were both absent. I reached down and patted where the slice had cut along my stomach, letting out a small sigh of relief when my hand came back clean of any blood, and I felt no pain.

"I told you, injuries do not carry over," Sally said, appearing in front of me. "Congrats on completing your second mission! How do you feel you did?"

"About as well as I could have hoped for," I responded. "How long was I gone?"

"Twenty minutes," The floating hologram construct responded. "Alissa and Molly are just upstairs. Do you want me to get them?"

"Yeah, but don't scare them!" I said the last bit to the empty room as she immediately vanished. Not long after she left, I heard a muffled pair of screams from upstairs. After a few minutes, all three of them made their way down the stairs.

"Did you tell her to do that?" Alissa asked, her hair and skin damp from a recent shower.

I quickly rushed up the stairs to lend her an arm to lean on, helping her to the bottom floor and into one of the dining room chairs.

"No, I tried to tell her *not* to do it, and considering I know she can hear me anywhere in the entire bastion..."

"I apologize. I'll try not to startle you in the future!" Sally said, but at this point, I was almost certain she was doing it on purpose.

Alissa snorted and shook her head, settling into her seat with a wince as she absently ran her hand along her leg wound. Molly sat beside her, as quiet as ever.

"So, how did you do?" Alissa asked.

"Alright. Managed to only get sliced up once," I said, absently patting where I had been cut. "Completed the mission, though."

"Congrats," Alissa said with a supportive smile. "From the way Sally was describing it, you saved a lot of people. Even with all of this... That's something you should be proud of, Aiden."

"Yeah... well, we have a lot of work to do, so we can't be resting on our laurels," I pointed, getting a seemingly reluctant nod from the experienced nurse. "Now I need to pick the reward before I head out to help the school kids. Sally?"

The blue glowing construct bobbed and floated over the table, having been waiting behind me.

"Your first option was an attempt to push the reward to the failed system's existing framework," She explained. "It is a power strike, an ability to enhance any melee attack with your own energy. At max, it's only about a fifty percent increase, but it also includes a slight penetration effect that would let you better damage creatures with thick hides."

"That... is exactly along the lines of what I need," I admitted, leaning forward. "If I'm going to be going on missions and leaving the comfort of the bastion, I need a better way to defend myself. With a spear or even my machete... that would be pretty potent."

"Well, remember, the energy comes directly from you. If you use it more than a few times in a row, you will most likely pass out. Using the full fifty percent twice in a row would be enough for you to struggle to stand," Sally warned. "I'm also... if I'm honest, I think this option is weaker than what it should have been. I attempted to push it into the framework, hoping it would fit into something pre-existing and therefore become more powerful, but... I think the framework it found is actually weaker than what I could have done."

"Sally, if that's the case, should you be working with the framework at all?" I asked, concerned about what effect it could have on future rewards.

"Absolutely!" She said confidently, her avatar bobbing and spinning. "From what I can parse out, it nearly *doubled* the effectiveness of the healing reward. Healing and regeneration are difficult concepts to instill in a location simply because of how complicated and flexible they are. Having a twenty percent increase in healing rate for a single reward is incredible, Aiden."

"Alright, alright, I get it. Just be careful, please," I said, raising my hands up in surrender. "What's the other reward?"

"This is a fully Sally special! The ability to charge and run any portable electronic device while within the limits of the bastion. Laptops, phones, power drills, you name it, it runs and charges, no cables required!"

"Okay, I can see how that would be useful. What is portable defined as?"

"Anything with just about a cubic foot of mass in total. Meaning empty air inside of the item doesn't count," Sally explained. "If you crushed it down until there were no gaps, and it was a cubic foot or less, then it will work inside the bastion."

"Alright, that... just having walkie-talkies and radio equipment would be amazing..." I said, shaking my head. "But I desperately need an offensive upgrade. Alissa, what do you think?"

"I think that there is a lot of smushed medical equipment that fits in a cubic foot," She said. "Heart monitors, blood sugar testers, defibrillators, ultrasound machines, oxygen concentrators, internal camera pills. Hell, I'm pretty sure we could use a portable dental x-ray to

see bones, and that's all just off the top of my head. We might heal fast, but we need to stay alive long enough for that to help."

"Well... shit," I said, slumping back into my seat. "I thought this would be an easy choice when I heard the power strike. Sally, what are the chances we see the charging reward again any time soon?"

"The exact same reward? Zero percent. It's like a fingerprint, you will never find an exact copy. Something similar might come up eventually. We might even get lucky and get something extremely similar, but that could be years from now," She explained. "Or it could be tomorrow. There is no way to know."

"What about repeats?" I asked, suddenly curious. "Do repeats happen?"

"Not really? It's complicated, but essentially creating the reality shift changes how the energy we gather reacts once it's here," She responded. "If there is a batch of energy that is inclined to something similar, it will shift in alignment with the reality that exists. Basically, when I shift reality, it becomes the new normal, which means new rewards are reacting to the new normal, meaning it's only going to be making changes to what we already have, rather than what existed first."

It took me a second to wrap my brain around her explanation, but after a moment, I finally nodded.

"Alright, I understand. Is there anything you want to say about the rewards before I make my choice?"

"I... I think I can do better than the first reward," She sheepishly admitted. "It would work fine, but... I think I can do better."

"Alright, I guess that's all I need to hear. Let's go with the second reward."

"Are you sure?" Sally asked.

"About as sure as I can be," I said. "I will just have to keep struggling for now. Go ahead."

"Very well! Commencing Reality Adjustment!"

A pulse of blue power radiated from every surface of the bastion, seeming to flood the room. It was just below blinding and was gone in a split second. When the light faded, I blinked rapidly and looked around.

"Well... alright, I guess that's that," I said. "I need to get ready to help the school kids. Are you ready to hold down the fort?"

"I'll do my best," Alissa responded, Molly giving a cute little nod from beside her, eager to help.