

I sat backward as the transition between realities settled, taking a long minute to shake off the feeling of being in two places at once. It seemed, at least so far, that being sent somewhere didn't affect me nearly as dramatically as returning, since there was no sense of pins and needles or any discomfort to speak of past the strange bi-locative sensation. I cracked my neck and stood, looking around the small bathroom stall.

Well, it was small in the sense that it was recognizably a bathroom stall, because beyond that it was pretty large for what it was. I quickly unlatched the door and stepped into the bathroom proper, walking to the sinks and washing my hands. I glanced around, double-checking to make sure that no one else was in the bathroom before letting out a long sigh and leaning heavily on the sink, trying to get my body to unclench.

"You've only been here for a few seconds, and you're already freaking out," I mumbled to myself. "Get it the fuck together."

I took another long breath, letting it out slowly before pushing off the sink and standing up straight. I quickly dried my hands and gave myself one last look over in the mirror, making sure everything was in place. After a minute of making sure I was ready, I left the bathroom and stepped out into a long hallway tunnel. It was immediately obvious that we were deep inside a bunker of some sort. I could practically feel the weight of the stone around me.

The hallway itself was hewn directly from solid stone, with pipes, door frames, and other fixtures built directly into the rough rock. Down in one direction, I could see a pair of armed guards in white winter uniforms stationed at a thick, seemingly armored door. Down the other, I could see signs of a well-furnished room with people ambling around. I could see staff waiting on people as well as fancily dressed people, the sound of polite, hushed conversation just barely reaching me.

With one last look at the guards, I made my way to the party room, trying my best to seem calm and confident, stopping at the entrance to look around. It was a large, open room, still carved from the continuous slab of mountain rock but now with high arching ceilings and much more space. On one side were two floors of private booths carved into the stone, with a small catwalk and railing on the second level. On the other side, raised on a concrete foundation, was a glassed-in observation-style office room. I could even see Valentine lounging behind what I knew was a high-tech-looking desk he used to control his crazy mind fuck tech. There were three fortified but open doors beyond the one I was standing in, and the whole floor was filled with tables, chairs, a bar, lounge space, and more.

Letting out a long breath, I stepped in, doing my best not to stare at any of the sick fuckers who were willingly siding with a mass, global genocide. On a whim, I reached out and snagged a flute of champagne as a server walked past, raising it in a toast when they looked at me. As they nodded and walked away, I scanned the room, taking a small sip from my glass as I spotted what I was looking for, an empty seat along the far wall of the room, where I would get a decent view of the entire space without seeming suspicious.

As I sat down on the comfortable seat, I put my glass down and leaned back, my eyes trailing over the room. I had spent a lot of the last few hours, as I made my way to and from the tailor, trying to figure out the best way to approach this task. I know I had about two hours before Eggsy arrived, which made me feel like I should do *something* in the meantime, but as I tried my best to piece together everything I could remember about the movies, I realized that it wasn't worth the risk.

In the movie, Valentine was all too ready to speed up the countdown when shit went bad. Originally, the female co-star, who I was pretty sure was named Rose or Roxy or something, blew up a satellite, which bought them some time after Eggsy was caught, but unfortunately it wasn't enough. If I wanted to complete this task successfully and save the millions of people who had died as a result of Valentine's fucked up plan, we needed to stop the Bond villain wannabe in one go. Anything else risked premature activation, which had the chance of making the situation *worse*.

At some point, I was hoping to have the abilities and the personal power to be able to handle a mission like this without relying on in-universe people or my often imperfect knowledge of a setting. Unfortunately, for now, I was barely above average, so I needed all the help I could get. That, unfortunately, meant patiently waiting for Eggsy to arrive so I could use my meta knowledge to give him the edge he needed to get this done properly.

I leaned forward and grabbed one of the finger foods from the small table in front of me, carefully putting it in my mouth. I hardly tasted it at first, really only eating it to give me something to do. When I realized it was literally just a tiny Big Mac, sauce and all, I almost spit it out in surprise. I vaguely remembered Valentine serving McDonalds to rich people in the movie, but going as far as to slice up and serve it as fancy finger food?

Certainly explained why I didn't see anyone else eating. These were clearly people who were used to much better quality food. Hell, even I knew McDonalds was disgusting once it cooled down, no matter how you tried to reheat it.

I shook my head and leaned back in my seat, taking another sip from my champagne, washing the taste from my mouth.

Over the next hour or so, I kept to myself. Luckily, the mood was fairly grim, meaning that nobody really called me out for being anti-social. In fact, most everyone else seemed to have a similar outlook, with people rarely talking to anyone else, even the people they were with. Any conversations that were happening were in hushed tones. My eyes looked up at the countdown, plastered on the large flatscreens attached to either side of the large room, the timer slowly ticking down, showing just under an hour left. I knew Valentine made a speech at some point about the party being grim and quiet but-

"Hey-oh!"

Right on time.

I watched and listened as a man who was a dead ringer for Samuel L. Jackson pretending to have a lisp gave a rather horrifying, megalomaniac speech about culling the planet, made only more disturbing by the fact that everyone laughed at his joke and cheered for his long, drawn out declaration to celebrate. The mood of the room lifted considerably by the time he was done, and I could barely hold down my stomach.

As I listened to nearly two hundred people cheer and laugh, celebrating the violent and gory end of millions and millions of people, I could only hope that this level of sociopathic behavior was some sort of quirk specific to this reality and not present in any other. I knew that hope wasn't worth the time it took me to think about it, but I had to anyway. Otherwise, what was the point?

I took a large swallow of my champagne, surprised to see that I had already finished it. I had barely put it on the table before it was taken and replaced with a full flute, a handsome waiter smiling at me as he stepped away to continue his job. I nodded and smiled back, but didn't touch the new drink.

I needed a clear head, even if I wanted to drink until I forgot everything about this experience.

Once Valentine finished his speech, I knew that time was finally starting to get down to the wire. It wouldn't be long until Eggsy arrived, and it would finally be time for me to act. I only hoped that my plan, which was nowhere near as surefire as I wanted, didn't blow up in my face and make everything worse. I'm not sure I could live with myself knowing I had an opportunity to save millions of people and fucked it up.

I silently sipped my way through my second glass of champagne, doing my best to keep to myself, not wanting to perk anyone's interest, lest people start asking questions I really couldn't answer. Thankfully, even with everyone's moods lifted, people seemed happy to leave me alone, save for a few awkward greetings.

The timer lowered past half an hour, and I spotted the first target, the man who I was pretty sure was supposed to be the Swedish President or Prime Minister. He was carrying a laptop, and after grabbing a flute of champagne from one of the serving tables, he started to climb the metal stairs to the second level of private booths against the far wall. I watched as he sat down in one of the empty booths and took a sip of his drink before opening his laptop.

Now that he was here, I knew where Eggsy would go, since he needed a connection to the network in order for Merlin to hack into Valentine's whole system. Now, technically, I already knew that wouldn't work in terms of stopping the rage signal, but there was plenty of other handy stuff he could do.

After a few minutes of idly sitting, I stood and made my way to the stairs leading to the second level, leaving my drink behind. I walked as casually as possible, moving past the first few alcoves, slowing as I approached the politician. As carefully as I could, I reached down along my pants to pull out my pocket knife, sliding it into my right hand and gripping it tightly, still closed.

When I was finally next to my target, I turned sharply, rocketing my fist out in one quick motion, slamming it cleanly into his temple. Between my target being at the perfect height, my peak body enhancement, and the heavy weapon in my hand, the strike knocked the older man out completely, like a puppet with its strings cut. He jerked slightly, tensing as his brain completely shut down, before finally going limp with a quiet groan.

He started to fall, but I grabbed the neck of his suit, sliding into the booth beside him and using my hips to push him further in. Then, with a bit of finagling, I guided him down to the floor, kicking his legs to the side to keep him as close to the wall as possible, still keeping his head up with my grip on his jacket.

As quickly and as subtly as I could, I pulled the handkerchief out of my breast pocket and forced it into the older man's mouth before pushing it even deeper with my pen. When I was sure he was adequately silenced, I gripped his throat and squeezed as hard as I could.

As I slowly choked the life from him, I looked around the room, trying to slow my thundering heart. If anyone had spotted me, if anyone had seen what I had just done, then this whole fucking thing was a bust, and millions of people might have just been doomed to die...

I had to fight to keep from sagging in relief. As far as I could see, everyone was still partying, chatting, and drinking their champagne. Even Valentine, on the far side of the hall, was oblivious, still leaning back casually in his office chair. I slowly let out a long, choppy breath, my hand still tightly choking the man. I must have really fucked up his head when I punched him because my hand stayed clamped on his throat for a full five or six minutes, and he never woke up.

When I was well and truly certain he wouldn't be waking back up, I let the corpse fall under the table, pushing it as far back as possible and then under the seat, trusting the fact that we were above the rest of the crowd and that the lights in the entire room were dim enough to keep anyone from spotting the body. Again, I looked around a bit, pretending to take a sip of the champagne that the Prime Minister had gotten, all while trying to seem as calm and collected as possible.

Now... All I had to do was wait.

The countdown seemed to slow down to molasses as I did my best to seem busy and unassuming. Eventually, though, the next step in my plan arrived. I spotted him as he

approached the booth, looking suave in his fully bespoke suit. He looked very much like the actor who played him, though I was pretty sure he was a bit taller, at least as far as I could remember. He stopped by my booth, eyes focused on me with a cocky smirk, one I knew was part of his act. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, however, I nodded to him.

"Chester! Good to see you," I said with a friendly smile, gesturing to the space across from me. "Please, take a seat."

His cocky look dropped in an instant, and he tensed, preparing for violence. The fact that I pretended to recognize him and still used the name he was working under had obviously sent some loud warning bells in his mind.

"Please, we don't have much time," I said, turning the laptop towards him, offering him the connection he had come to me looking for.

For a long moment, he didn't move, perhaps listening to Merlin on the other side of whatever communication device he was using. I quickly turned my head, showing that I did not have a scar along my right ear, turning again to show him the other.

"Seriously, not enough time, Eggsy," I said a bit softer. "Trust me or don't, but please link up to the network first."

He seemed to understand what I was showing him, that I wasn't one of the maniac sheep that Valentine had convinced to go along with his plans. He nodded and slid into the booth, quickly pulling out the shiny brass device that would connect Merlin to the network, and sliding it into the USB slot.

As he typed away, looking up at me every few seconds, I couldn't help but think that if I needed proof that he was the protagonist, the ability to insert a USB stick on the first try was undoubtedly it. After about thirty seconds of work, he looked up at me, slowly shutting the laptop.

"Who are you?" He asked, using what I knew was a fake posh accent.

"Names Aiden. I work for... a concerned party," I explained vaguely, not entirely lying. "I'm here to do the same thing you are, to stop Valentine."