

Barry and I finished our quick run to a nearby corner store, grabbing several bags of salt. The store was in pretty rough shape, with dozens of broken shelves and over ninety percent of its stock gone. Seeing the window shattered and the store a ransacked mess made me glad I had stayed in my apartment when everything first started going to shit. It also made me keenly aware that the vast majority of this and other stores' contents were most likely spread around the town, sitting in unoccupied homes and apartments with nothing but piles of human dust around them.

We still managed to grab some food, mainly because making the effort to ride our bikes down there, only returning with just a few large containers of salt, would be stupid. Most of the salt went right into storage, and the food went into the kitchen and the pantry. I wasn't particularly enthused about the idea of pickled eggs, but food was food, and now three jars of them would live in our pantry until we were desperate enough to crack them open.

The next morning, we woke up early. I was the first one down into the kitchen, quickly followed by everyone but George and Jason. Eventually, they did join us, looking substantially better with a full night of restful sleep. Once we had eaten and shared some coffee, I brought up that Sally had locked on to our next target.

"One sounds pretty rough, not something we are capable of yet," I explained. "Something about World War III and a zombie apocalypse wrapped together. The other option is Die Hard."

"Best Christmas movie ever," George said, Barry pumping his fist next to him at his correct prediction. "I'm still struggling to wrap my head around the concept of jumping between realities, but at least the options are good."

"What's the mission?" Alissa asked, sitting back a bit as she brushed her daughter's hair.

"So we have to get Joe Takagi and escort him out of the building before the hostage situation is resolved," I explained. "Without spooking Hans and his men into abandoning the heist."

"Wait, why?" George asked, looking confused. "Why not just ambush Hans and take them all out? It would protect Takagi and maybe even save some extra lives, too. I mean, it's been a while since I've seen it, but I can think of at least to places we could set up a decent ambush."

"Because the events at Nakatomi Plaza have had a profound effect on John McClane. He goes on to stop several large issues through out his life," Sally explained, bobbing around the table. "In order to maximize the positive effect of this mission, John McClane still needs to be responsible for stopping Hans' plot."

"Positive effect?" George asked, looking confused. "I thought this was all just about changing the separate reality so you could absorb some sort of energy? Jesus, I can't believe I just said that with a straight face."

The older retired cop put his head in his hands, rubbing his face as Barry patted his back in commiseration. As he recovered, I answered his question.

"It is, but these worlds we are jumping to are real, filled with people as real as you or me," I explained. "If we need to go the extra mile to make sure we leave somewhere better off than it was when we arrived, its worth the risk. I also refuse to take the easy way out and leave the worlds we visit *worse* than when we found them."

George took in what I said and nodded, seeming to understand my mentality. He looked pensive, rubbing the stubble on his cheek as he leaned back in his chair.

"Alright then, that makes sense as far as I can tell. Well... in the movie, Tagaki is one of, I think, thirty hostages," George finally said. "What happens when he isn't there? Will Hans start killing hostages to draw him out?"

"He holds off threatening hostages until McClane starts fucking around with stuff, right?" I asked, looking to George for confirmation, the older man shrugging in response.

"Maybe, but that's only after he killed Tagaki," He pointed out.

"Who he did pretty casually," Alissa countered. "That scene always stuck with me; he just shrugs like it doesn't matter."

"Makes me think he might not care at all. He planned around Takagi refusing to tell him the code, right?" I pointed out. "Well, if Joe is just gone, then he might just accept that and continue as he planned."

"Sally, just how much information do you know about the effects of the missions?" Barry asked, a curious look on his face.

"It can be pretty spotty, unfortunately. I extrapolate some bits of information from what I know. Other bits of info come from when I scan the reality for compatibility," The blue construct explained. "For example, I know very little of why it's important for Tagaki to survive, other than just saving a life. But I know that John McClane's marriage will go considerably smoother without the guilt of his death on John's shoulders. I'll know more once the mission is over, and I can scan the reality's new path."

"Okay, let's focus on the mission, guys. We need to come up with a plan. George, do you have any ideas?" I asked, leaning forward to lean on the wooden table.

"Well... where do we appear?" he asked, looking at Sally.

"Your arrival point would either be on floor thirty-four, the one under construction, the roof, or the parking garage," She explained. "Those are the only locations I can reach. And no, I can't explain to you why those locations specifically. I don't want to melt your brain with all the redacted math involved."

"Uh... okay? Well... that's an easy choice, at least," George said. "Floor thirty-four is just two floors up from the party. Nice and close to our target."

"I think there is an issue that nobody is seeing," Jessica said, prompting everyone to look at her. "In the movie, Joe stands up to keep his employees from being harassed, refuses to tell Hans the code... and McClane's wife, whatever her name is, seems genuinely concerned about him, right?"

"Yeah, she tries to keep him from turning himself in," George said with a nod. "So?"

"So, what makes you think we can convince him to leave?" Jessica pointed out. "He didn't seem like the kind of person who would abandon his employees to a bunch of terrorists, which is what he thinks Hans and his group are."

"...Fuck, you're right," I agreed, shaking my head. "At a minimum, he will want to warn everyone, but more likely than not, he will simply refuse to leave. I mean, I don't blame him. I would be applauding him in any other circumstance, but we are going to have to drag him out of there, kicking and screaming."

We sat there, around the table, contemplating how that would go. I was trying to think of the best way to tie the man up or knock him out, so we could carry him down the stairs when Alissa let out a long breath.

"What if we knocked him out first?" She asked. "When you guys raided the Urgent Care, you grabbed midazolam."

"And that is...?" I asked expectantly.

"It's what Doctors use to sedate patients," She explained. "Fast acting, relatively safe... just one syringe is enough to sedate him for a few hours."

"What are the risks?"

"He could be allergic. It's not very likely, allergies to it are rare, but it's possible," She admitted with a shrug. "But I can identify that and give him epinephrine and keep him alive."

"That seems like the- Wait, how would you identify it?"

"Because I'm going with you," She stated, her tone brokering no alternatives.

"Alissa, you're still injured and-" I pointed out, but she held up her hand to cut me off.

"Aiden, I absolutely, one hundred percent refuse to let you do this without me there to administer and observe his reaction," She said, shaking her head. "I feel bad enough actually offering to do it in the first place, I will not put his health at risk. Besides, I can limp around pretty well now."

"But we will be going down thirty flights of stairs," George said, shaking his head. "I don't really know how bad your wound is, but that's a lot of stairs to limp through."

"Then I will stay at the party floor," She responded, holding up her hand again, this time to keep Barry from saying anything. "I won't be in any real danger, even if Hans puts a bullet in my head, remember? I'll just wake back up here. I could even help keep the other hostages safe. Hell, I can even tell Hans that Takagi already ran away."

"I could always bring you back early!" Sally volunteered. "Aiden is the anchor for this jump, so he requires effort to return, but everyone else is simple to disconnect."

"Alright, that's acceptable. You come with us and stay long enough to help, then we send you back," I agreed with a nod. "Barry, Jessica, George, you coming too?"

"If you think I'd miss a chance to meet one of my heroes, you're crazy," George said while Jessica and Barry both just nodded. "Of course I'm coming."

"Good, the more the merrier," I said with a nod. "Let's talk strategies for now. Then, once everything is ready, we can make the jump."

We sat around the table, discussing our options and what our best plans would be for a variety of scenarios. Unfortunately, while the primary plan was still simple and lacked any complicated steps, it also lacked any flexibility. Essentially, we would descend from the thirty-fourth floor and try to snag Joe Takagi before Hans arrived and took hostages. Then we would make our way down the stairs, hopefully without running into any of Hans' men. With any luck, we could get out of the building before Hans even started looking for Takagi.

If an opportunity didn't immediately present itself, I was going to have to draw him out. Dressed in the same suit I had worn to stop Valentine in the Kingsman world, I would find him and try to subtly pull him to the side. If I had to knock some people out to do that, we were hoping that Hans' arrival would cover for us. If we got spotted before or during our descent, the most likely scenario was a shoot-out.

When we were finally done going over several scenarios, we split up to get ready. I went up to my room, quickly putting on my blue suit, making sure to get the cufflinks and tie right. As before, I needed to be able to appear unarmed since I was the backup plan for getting Takagi alone. When I was satisfied with my pistol hidden away, I hooked my pocketknife in one of my pockets. I did a quick spin in front of my mirror before leaving my room behind. As I stepped out of my room, I spotted Alissa and Jessica leaving the latter's room.

"Just checking in on Amelia," Alissa answered my unasked question. "Since we will be gone for a bit."

"Probably not very long," Sally said, popping into existence beside me. "Considering how little time you will be spending in the jump location."

"Yeah, well, not taking any chances," Alissa responded. "She is doing well, by the way. I'm hoping she wakes up in the next day or so."

"That's good news."

We headed down to the first floor, all of us gathering in the living and eating area. Everyone besides me was dressed in casual clothes, their bulletproof vests under those. I was also the only one not visibly armed. George had the AR-15, as well as one of the 1911s on his hip. He was wearing a police belt, with spare magazines for both his weapons tucked in. Jessica had her usual shotgun as well as the second 1911, also in a holster at her hip. Barry had his Glock in his holster and was also carrying the new shotgun from Crazy Abe's. Even Alissa, who had a small pack over her shoulder, had her revolver on her hip.

Altogether, they looked like a dangerous bunch, which I hoped would help us if we ran into anything unfortunate.

"Alright. Roger, you are in charge. Don't worry, we shouldn't be gone long," I assured him. "If something goes wrong, head up to the roof. Sally can seal everything up and buy you plenty of time. Sally, if someone crashes the bastion, I give you permission to scare them as much as possible."

"I will do my best!" Sally said, sounding happy at the prospect.

"Great, well... I think that's it..."

"Molly, behave yourself," Alissa said, Molly nodding several times rapid fire in response.

George just nodded to Jason, who nodded back. I hadn't heard the boy mutter a word all day.

"Alright Sally... Beam us up!"

"Good luck!" The blue construct said. "Commencing Avatar Reality Projection!"

The now familiar sensation of my avatar being sent across realities to the jump location spread through my body. Surprisingly, even as I felt like I was in two locations at once, I could still see my team around me. It was still a weird, bilocation feeling that settled once I was settled into the jump reality, the strangeness fading almost immediately.

"Alright, everyone, we are on a short schedule now. Let's get going," I said, looking around for a moment before finally spotting the stairs, clearly labeled even if the rest of the floor wasn't even close to being finished.

I led the group of five down the stairs, going down two flights before finally stopping at the thirty-second floor. Immediately, as we peeked through the door window, we realized the problem.

"We have no way to look out for Takagi," Jessica said, standing right behind me as I tried to peer through the window into the finished floor, barely seeing anything.

"I think most of the office space is around the corner," I admitted, shaking my head. "Alright, I'm going to head in. We don't have much time, so head down a few floors and stay quiet. John is going to come through here when the shooting starts, and he can't see you. Spotting me is one thing. Spotting all of us would shift everything around."

Jessica and George, the closest two, nodded in understanding before I opened the door completely and stepped inside, letting out a deep breath and putting on a confident smile. With any luck, the generous amount of alcohol people seemed to be imbibing would be enough to smooth over anything suspiciousness.

As the door closed behind me, I stepped forward, following the sound of music and people talking. I was trying to move fast without looking like I was in a rush, settling on a quick walk. Thankfully, the hall led directly to the space where the party was being held. Unfortunately, it looked like a speech was going on. A woman, who I was pretty sure was John's wife, was talking to the crowd, with our target standing right beside her.

In front of everyone.

With the time before Hans and his people showed up quickly running down.

No pressure.