

I had only just closed my eyes when I felt someone sit beside me. I looked over to find that Dr. Salinado had moved, slowly rubbing her dozing daughter as she gave me a look.

"So... what sort of group is the Bastion Corps?" She asked softly. "I've never heard of you, but that isn't exactly a surprise after seeing... whatever the he-heck happened to your friends."

"They went back home, and yes, I know it's disturbing to watch. I recommended you cover her eyes for a reason," I responded, nodding to the young girl in her arms. "As for what we are... It's complicated."

Sometime after the Die Hard jump, during a moment of reflection, I realized that our interaction with John had been much more important than I had realized at the time. Learning that there were people out there doing impossible things and intervening in dark circumstances to prevent specific things from happening was information that could affect someone greatly.

Potentially even worse, if someone important, someone critical to important events for a specific reality, started spouting off about teleporting saviors, it could seriously damage their reputation. I could only imagine what would happen to John if he started going on about us, insisting that we were real. He was a stubborn man who would no doubt deny anything but the truth, even staring down threats like the loony bin.

On top of that, how different would people treat dangerous scenarios if, in the back of their minds, they thought we would show up to save the day if it started going really bad? Answering Dr. Salinado's question could have rippling effects that lasted for a long time. My only saving grace was that Sally insisted that while fate was flexible and could be changed, it still guided things to settle into a common stream. Our changes would hold, but I didn't have to worry about every little butterfly.

"The Bastion Corps is a small group that bounces around between important events, ones that stretch beyond what you know. We help where we can, shifting the events slightly to improve their outcome or stop catastrophes," I explained. "There are several very strict factors that dictate where and when we can show up, which means the likelihood of you seeing us again is small. Not nonexistent, but very small."

"I see," She responded, looking across the alley at the graffiti spray painted on the brickwork. "Well, I suppose that is about as much information as I will get from you."

I wince and nod, opening my mouth to apologize, only to get waved off by the mother. She ran her fingers through her hair, which, considering the hack job I performed earlier, rightly earns its own wince. She mumbles something about shaving it down clean before focusing back on me.

"After seeing your two friends... "return home" as you said, I am more than happy to accept that you've told me all you can," She admitted. "'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than dreamt of in your philosophy'..."

"Pretty much," I confirmed, recognizing most of her quote. "And, while I understand the desire to discuss us..."

"I would surely be seen as insane, broken by whatever happened here," She finished, gesturing at the city in general. "I understand, Aiden. Your secret is safe with me."

"Oh, I'm not verly concerned about us being a secret," I assured her. "Just the repercussions for you talking about us, or the repercussion if someone somehow managed to prove that we were here. My crew and I are completely safe, as I a mentioned before, there is no real risk for us. Just what we do."

For a moment, she seemed curious, but after a few seconds of thought, she shook her head, letting out a sigh of her own.

"I do not know what I expected when I sat down here, but I know I had hoped for fewer new questions and more answers," she confessed before shaking her head slightly. "Well, either way, no matter how little risk you and your people are taking, thank you for coming to save my daughter and myself. I... am ashamed to admit a large part of me was in denial."

"It's not your fault. Nothing like this has ever happened before," I pointed out. "How could you ever anticipate something like this? Sure, pandemics have happened, but an entire city choking to death on a singular virus... and then getting back up? You can't have predicted that."

"I suppose so. But me lying to myself goes back further than just this event," she explained, looking up at the cold, dark grey sky above us. "I have been running away from... well, a lot, using my daughter as an excuse to work as a glorified nurse. I was once one of the premier scientist on gene splicing and genetic reconstruction... I wrote papers that altered the base understanding of the field!"

Her daughter stirred, and for a long moment, the brilliant doctor was silent as she rubbed her daughter's back. When the young girl settled again, she continued, albeit more calmly.

"I won't bore you with the details, but I left the cutting edge behind two years after Amanda was born," she continued, her tone full of regret. "Something happened, and I ran, pretending that it was to prioritize my daughter. Well... I can see I was lying to myself. Don't get me wrong, she is still the most important thing in the world to me... but there was a middle ground, and I ignored it."

I reached out and patted her shoulder, which she seemed to appreciate. For a long while, we sat in silence before, eventually, it was time to leave again, our break time over. Once again, we stepped out into the streets, oriented north, and started to move.

While our progress did step up now that we had some natural light, it wasn't near anything that I would consider fast. It was, however, significantly safer. The extra light meant there were no dark corners for things to hide in, and we could see clearly into every alley and under every vehicle. Even just hitting the damn zombies was easier now that we no longer had to depend on car fires and flickering street lamps to see by.

We passed our second and third mile with relatively little issue, save a few larger than average groups of infected and a few close calls skirting around them through alleys and less traveled roads. We did almost get ambushed by four zombies from inside a storefront, bursting through the display glass to get to us, but luckily, George spotted them. He managed to point them out just before they broke through, giving us enough time to react and not get completely caught off guard. It made me wonder just how many of these zombies we must be bypassing in each building we walked by. By all accounts, a significant portion of the city was infected, meaning each building could have dozens on their bottom floors alone. Our group kill count was somewhere in the hundreds by the time we finally stopped to take a second break, this time as the sun slowly began to set.

"Should we stop for the night?" Barry suggested as we leaned by the front entrance of a small alcove between two buildings. "Find a small, sturdy building, clear it out, and get some sleep?"

For a long few seconds, I considered his proposal. I knew we could all feel the need to sleep. Even I was starting to really feel fatigued, and I had my reward-enhanced body.

"Yeah, let's do that," I agreed. "We are only taking six hours, though, just enough to recover a bit.."

"Not a lot of time..."

"I know, but I don't even want to be near this city on the third day," I explained. "I'm not cutting it down to the wire with a fucking massive bomb, not one that could wipe out a city. Not to mention that this entire city is under observation, a testing bed for Umbrella. They might step up their timetable or decide to throw some new challenges at us if we give them any extra time to work with."

"Dammit, I didn't think of that," Barry admitted, eventually nodding in agreement.

I explained to the rest of the group what we were doing, and they agreed getting some rest was a good idea. When we finished our break, we started to move, this time on the lookout for a place to stay for a portion of the night. Eventually, after a few more turns and a whole

bunch of zombie-killing later, we found a bar. It was a solid brick building with surprisingly few windows and only two entrances, a front and back. Jessica and Barry stayed outside with Dr. Salinado and her daughter while the rest of the crew worked their way through every nook and cranny, clearing everything out.

Once we had killed the several zombies that had made the place their home, we dragged their corpses out of the back door. We also spent some time clearing out the alley it opened up into, just to be safe. By then, the sun was starting to get really low, and shadows were starting to get hard to see through, so we quickly finished our business before making our way inside. Danny and I blocked the back door up completely with appliances.

The restaurant turned out to be a great call, because Barry was able to quickly wip up some food for everyone, before passing out bottles of water and chips. Considering the situation, it was a feast fit for kings, and everyone but George, who was first on watch, quickly fell asleep on beds made from booth cushions and tablecloths.

I woke up to the sound of shattering glass and shouting, jumping up out of my bed before my brain could even catch up. I whirled around, only to see George get taken down to the ground, trying to fight off four infected dogs at once. They tore and bit at him voraciously, and it was only my more recent experiences that kept me from being sick at the gory display. I immediately charged at the dogs, shouting for Danny and Kate, who were climbing out of their bed, to protect the doctor and her daughter.

Grabbing a chair as I ran, I slammed it as hard as I could on the nearest dog, the heavy wooden frame of the chair shattering but still imparting enough force to lift the dog off its feet. It didn't yelp like a normal dog would, but it did flail about until it was back on its feet, its bloody sores and half-rotted flesh making a gruesome streak on the ground. It growled and snarled at me, its friend pulling back from George, who was still alive but clearly in pain. He coughed, trying to sit up, only to collapse back onto the ground, the red patches on his clothes growing at an alarming rate.

"Aiden, Catch!" Barry called out, tossing me my spear.

As much as I wanted to kneel down and help George, I needed to focus on the zombie dogs in front of me, who suddenly charged all at once. With a shout, I held out my hand and conjured a patch of bramble directly under their feet. The three further back canines tripped and stumbled, almost immediately attacking the suddenly appearing patch of thorny branches and vines.

The fourth dog, however, continued its charge, jumping up to bite at me. I managed to somewhat clumsily get my spear in between us, the feral zombie cracking its own teeth as it chewed on the durable metal shaft. I pulled my knife from my belt and jammed it into the dog's head, the blade punching through its skull directly into its brain. The blade clearly didn't do enough damage, though, because even with three inches of steel embedded in its skull, the

infected doberman simply released the spear shaft and attempted to bite me again, this time leaping at my legs.

With a grunt, I punted its skull, my steel-toe boots knocking its jaw clean off. It was stunned just enough for me to raise my foot and follow the kick with a full-body stomp, crushing its head into a third of its previous thickness. I spun around to focus on the other three dogs caught in my bramble just in time to watch Barry slam his spearpoint into the last one's skull, the long tooth punching clean through it.

For a moment, I thought we were clear, only for three more dogs to come leaping through the shattered front window, charging straight for Jessica and Barry. I charged as, blazing past them and slamming my spear into one of the dogs, brutally crushing its head, while Jessica turned and jabbed at the next one, slashing at its leg. The Doberman monster stumbled, its head cracking on the floor, stunning it long enough for her to pounce, jamming her spear through its head. The final dog seemed determined to take down Barry, leaping clean over the corner patch of my bramble to get to him. Luckily, he saw it coming and dove backward, simultaneously firing off a spark, the thin bolt of electricity catching the infected canine in the chest.

I could only imagine such a jolt would have absolutely eviscerated a normal dog's heart, especially when blasted directly into its chest, but this canine was enhanced with the T-virus, so it simply jolted, tensing and convulsed enough that it hit the ground and slid before it could recover. It looked like Barry was about to fire off another spark when Jessica swung her spear around in a wide area, slicing the dog's back legs off completely. It shifted and wildly twisted, trying to get up onto its feet, half of which it was missing, which gave Barry enough time to stand and slam his heel down on its skull.

For a long moment, the restaurant was silent, saved for our heavy breathing and the soft crackling of settling broken glass. When no more dogs charged in to attack us, I turned to where George had been lying, only to find that he had disappeared. I looked around to see if he had crawled somewhere, only to catch Barry's eyes.

"He got called back," He explained. "He was already bleeding pretty heavily..."

"Dammit... Okay, we need to move. Kate? Danny? Dr. Salinado?" I called out, waiting a few seconds for all of them to step out from the staff area. "We need to go, pack up quickly. We head out in two minutes."

"George...?" Dr. Salinado asked, trailing off when she couldn't see the older man anywhere.

"He is back home, safe and sound. Probably feeling a bit sick, but that's about it," I assured her. "The best thing we can do is move on and keep from wasting his efforts."

After a long moment of staring at where George had collapsed, which was now clean of his blood, almost like he had never been there, she eventually nodded. Together, we packed up quickly, my pack getting a refill of water and food. We quickly strapped our gear back on before heading out of the restaurant in record time.