

The three velociraptor-like monsters stalked us for a few minutes, following behind us like they were making sure we were leaving. It was disturbing to watch, the large reptile-like creatures silently following behind us, keeping pace with us perfectly. They never looked away, eyes locked on us as we moved. The temptation to panic, to break and run increased with every second, which was probably the intention.

“What the hell are they doing?” Roger said, sitting up slightly to look back at the trio of monsters. “Fuckers already got most of us, what-”

“Easy Roger,” I said. “We got this.”

As if trying to prove me wrong, all three of the monsters charged at us at once, their long, powerful legs crossing the remaining distance in a near blur.

“Here they come!” Jessica called out, her shotgun already up.

The sound of her firing her weapon actually seemed to startle the overgrown lizards, especially when it was followed by a chunk of pebbly hide being blown off the closest one. She immediately racked another round and shot again, actually managing to tag one of them in the head, dropping it to the ground.

And then the remaining two were on us.

The first to reach us came directly at me since I had stepped forward to meet them. He jumped, horrifyingly lethal-looking claws held out to grab me. Thankfully, I was prepared, and with a wide sweep of my borrowed spear, I slapped it to the side, knocking it off course. I stepped left, letting the large creature stumble on the ground, whirling around and jabbing at its side, managing to punch through its thick skin with the spearhead. As I turned to stab at it again, I saw that Jessica had just barely managed to hold off the lizard that had attacked her, holding her shotgun across her body with two hands, her attacker's mouth wrapped around the frame.

Knowing eventually it would overpower her and that she couldn't fight back with the creature that closer, I reached down to my belt and pulled out my pistol. I fired three rounds into the creature's side, managing to get a decent grouping where its leg met its torso. The beast stumbled, giving Jessica some breathing room.

Before she could use it, I was forced to focus on my target, as my attempt to help Jessica had given it enough time to recover. The velociraptor-like monster jumped up to its feet and lunged its neck at me, snapping its lethal jaws as it tried to grab hold of my arm. I was forced to drop my pistol and grab my spear in both hands, just managing to drive it off. Seemingly enraged, the pony-sized lizard tried to jump and claw at me again, but with its injured side, it stumbled, giving me a chance to spin my weapon around and clock its jaw with the blunt end of the spear. The impact was jarring, reverberating painfully in my hands as I heard a distinct crack come from the creature's jaw, the metal spear bending slightly under the impact.

The blow knocked the lizard for a loop, collapsing onto its side, unable to stand. It still struggled, though, its tail whipping around and its legs scrabbling as it tried to figure out which way was up. I spun my spear around and jammed it into its side once, twice, three times before it finally went limp.

Immediately, I whirled around to see if Jessica needed more help, only to find her hacking at the completely still and heavily mutilated lizard corpse with Rogers's axe. She was crying, but still slamming the axe into the bloody mess. I stepped closer, but Barry waved me off, and I nodded, turning back to the first lizard Jessica managed to drop. To be safe, I slammed my spear into its side a few times, confirming it was dead. I also looked around and found my pistol, double-checking it was still functional before sliding it into my holster.

I took my time getting back to the cart, but when I finally did, Jessica was wiping her face, her eyes a little red but seemingly recovered from her partial breakdown. According to her, these abominations were responsible for killing the people she had been living with. Her slight breakdown was understandable. She quickly pumped her shotgun, the empty round flying out of the chamber before she grabbed a handful of shells from her pocket, methodically reloading her weapon.

"You good?" I asked softly.

"Yeah, I'm good," She responded, looking determined. "We should move."

"Yeah... that was..." I stopped, not wanting to voice how easy that was compared to what it could have been.

"I think they thought we would scatter," She said, shaking her head. "Or as much as they can think. We killed six of them when they attacked the school. That might have been the last three."

"Maybe... either way you're right, we need to move. Barry, I'm taking over," I said, handing the high schooler his now slightly bent spear. "Sorry about the bend."

"Jesus, how hard did you hit that fucker?" He asked, looking down at his weapon.

"Just about as hard as I could."

I quickly took the reins of the trailer, wrapped them around myself, and pulled. I set a much faster pace than before, my legs soon burning as I did. The new pace ate up the remaining distance, especially when I stopped slowing down as much when we were forced to cut through yards and such. It was a bit rougher on the cart and its occupants, but now we were racing against anyone or anything that might have heard the gunshots.

By the time we reached the clearing around the bastion, my legs were shaking, and sweat was dripping from my body. I nearly collapsed to my knees once we were a safe distance inside the protected zone, Barry catching me at the last second. Together, we pulled the cart the remaining distance. Surprisingly, as we neared the stairs, Alissa was making her way down the last flight, leaning heavily on the side.

“You hurt Aiden?” She asked as we stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“No, just tired,” I answered, pulling off the chains and sitting down on the stone stairs.

I watched as Alissa directed Jessica and Barry to get Amelia inside, carrying her carefully up the stairs and into the bastion. After a few minutes, I had recovered enough, so I stood and helped Roger climb the stairs, sitting him down in the dining area.

“So, what do you think?” I asked as I sat down at the same table.

“I think I’m starting to believe what Barry said about this place,” He responded. “You really have a floating crystal thing?”

“Yeah, kinda surprised she hasn’t popped up yet,” I admitted. “Sally?”

“Hello, Aiden. I’m glad to see you return safely,” The artificial construct said, her projection appearing over the table. “Greetings, newcomer.”

“Sally, Roger. Roger, Sally.”

“It’s good to meet you, Roger. Welcome to the bastion,” Sally said, bobbing happily in place. “How was the trip here?”

“Eventful,” Roger responded. “But we survived. Somehow.”

I opened my mouth to comment but stopped when Alissa hobbled her way down the stairs, followed by Jessica and Barry. I could only guess that Molly was hiding in her room, understandably nervous about meeting new people.

“I’m sorry to do this, Aiden, but I need you guys to go out again,” Alissa said. “Jessica says there is an Urgent Care not far from here. I need you guys to go there.”

“Yeah, I’m familiar. I’m assuming this can’t wait?” I asked, Alissa, shaking her head no with a frown.

“I need IV fluids, strong anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, a few other drugs and tools for stitches,” She responded. “I’m pretty sure the raptors have some sort of venom, and that’s why

she hasn't woken up. Sally seems pretty sure that the increased healing will help her pull through that, but she needs to survive long enough for that to happen."

"Okay, that's fine," I said with a nod. "Put a list of what we need, be as descriptive as possible, and we can go out and grab it."

Alissa spent ten minutes putting together a comprehensive list of everything she wanted, needed, and would be good to have in the future. While she was doing that, I grabbed all of the bags and backpacks I had found so far and distributed them to Jessica and Barry. I also gave them both Kevlar vests, which they both eagerly put on.

When Alissa was done, all three of us immediately headed out, quickly cutting through the town and heading directly for the Urgent Care building. It only took us about ten minutes to arrive, mostly because Jessica led the way at a jog. Thankfully, both Barry and I could keep up with her.

When we first arrived, we were unsurprised to find that the front door of the building had been smashed in, broken glass scattered around the building's front lobby. All three of us pushed through the lobby and into the rooms in the back. It took a bit of exploring, but once we found the small pharmacy, the sinking feeling that spread through us since we saw the smashed door fell away. While it was clear that someone had torn through, only the recreationally interesting painkillers, along with a few other drugs, were taken. Everything else was intact.

"Okay, let's grab what Alissa needed for treating Amelia," I said, looking through the storage. "Once we have everything, one of us can run it back home. Who feels comfortable on their own?"

"I can handle it," Barry volunteered with a nod. "As long as it's light, I can more or less run home. I was in cross country."

Jessica looked like she wanted to complain, but the mention of being able to run the entire way back seemed to stop her. We quickly grabbed everything Alissa needed for Amelia and put it in Barry's backpack. We had to explore the building some more to find the IV bags and stitching equipment, but once we did, Barry left at a run, his pack about half full.

"Well.... That's that," I said with a nod. "Let's spend an hour or so getting everything that's on Alissa's list, then we can head back too."

"Thank you," Jessica said after a moment. "Thank you for helping us and for offering us a place to stay. The school might have worked, but... the bastion does really feel safer."

"You're welcome," I said, patting her shoulder and doing my best to give her a reassuring smile. "We need to stick together and support each other if we want to make it through all this."

"I... I was so close to giving up," She admitted, looking away at a nearby wall. "After everything had happened. The fact that Ames wasn't waking up... I already lost Mom and Dad. I don't know if I could lose my sister too."

"It's a lot to go through at once," I agreed, filing the fact that Amelia was her sister away for later. "No one would blame you for struggling."

"Barry's entire family dusted in front of him," She said, shaking her head. "Look at him. He's keeping it together."

"He nearly cracked when the raptor came again," I pointed out. "You kept it together long enough to kill them. Sure, you broke down after, but you still made it through when it was important."

She nodded reluctantly before turning towards the storage room, the one where we found the stitching kit.

"Let's finish this up, and then we can crash when we get home," I said. "I don't know about you, but I might just take tomorrow off."

She chuckled, sounding a bit watery, but nodded. Together, we stripped the place down, filling two backpacks and four duffel bags full of equipment, drugs, materials, and everything in between. When we were finally done, the duffel bags were jammed full and nearly bursting at the seams, heavily laden with everything Alissa asked for and some. We also spent half an hour moving some of the stuff we couldn't fit into the storage room, covering them with several layers of plastic to keep them safe from moisture and water should something start to leak.

Once the pile was done, tucked up into the corner of a random room, we spent some time dumping boxes of paperwork, books, and other junk on top, as well as a bag of mothballs Jessica found in the janitor's closet. With any luck, anyone coming through the area would see a pile of trash and keep moving. I freely admitted it was unlikely, but it was better than nothing.

With our bags heavy and the extras a bit better protected, Jessica and I headed out. The sun was really starting to get low by then, which was unsurprising considering just what I had been up to today. Even worse, I felt like I had been up for multiple days since time had gone much quicker while I was jumped to the Kingsman reality.

I quickly led the way home, cutting through the same yards and alleyways. The return trip was much slower paced, both because we were both tired and because we were laden with two duffels and a backpack each, which I could imagine was just on the cusp of being too much for Jessica.

Thankfully, we managed to avoid any trouble, making it back to the clearing after an hour of walking. We quickly made our way to the bastion, climbing the steps and entering the first

floor. We were greeted by Roger and Barry, the latter of whom was in the kitchen, cooking something at the stove. He turned when we arrived and nodded.

"Welcome back," He said. "Everything go alright after I left?"

"Yeah, it was fine," I responded, gently putting down my bags on one of the tables.

"How is Amelia?" Jessica asked.

"Alissa is up there working on her. She said we got everything she needed," He said with a small smile. "Kicked me out once she started working on her stitches."

Jessica nodded and put her bags next to mine, including her backpack, before quickly walking up the stairs, taking them two at a time. When she disappeared from view, I made my way to the nearest chair and dropped down into it. I leaned heavily on the table, closing my eyes and rubbing my face. After a moment, I heard a light thunk on the table, and I opened my eyes to see that Barry had put a beer down in front of me.

"I hope you don't mind, but I started making some dinner," He said, scratching the side of his head with a finger. "I like to cook."

"No, it's fine," I said, taking the beer and cracking it open, taking a long sip. "This place is your home now. The kitchen is for everyone. And thank you."

He nodded and returned to the stove while I took another sip of my beer. I could feel the tension of the day, from making it through the Kingsman jumps to the fighting of the raptors, slowly fading, leaving behind soreness and fatigue.