Gold

Emma McMullen
A drop of sweat slipped down Keenan’s forehead. He brushed back a strand of red hair as Fergus tinkered away in the middle of the room at an industrial-sized safe. He held a stethoscope up to the side and listened as if he could hear the earth’s sediments compressing. His slight, knobby fingers brushed the combination lock, caressing it with each small turn. Brayden stood at the door crossing his burly arms.

“Who’s this guy again?” Keenan shuffled in the corner, nervously peering out the tenth story window to the busy street below.

Brayden glanced at him. His grey eyes shined like polished nickel.

“Logan Caulson. Big bad billionaire, treats his employees like rubbish. In the hospital for a couple days. Which is why we’re here.”

A smile grew on Fergus’s weathered face, and with a barely audible click, the safe’s door swung open.

Keenan stepped forward to examine the contents of the safe. The heap of gold coins glittered with warmth against the stark, fluorescent lights. He kneeled down, setting his briefcase down and undid the latches. He snapped on a pair of gloves and picked up one of the coins. Carefully, he took out a ceramic plate and gently scraped the coin against it. He nodded. “It’s the real deal.” He tilted the plate in the light to see the gold line the coin left behind.

“Brilliant. Let’s get the booty and go.” Brayden held open a bag for Keenan.

Keenan scooped the coins into the bag, making sure to get them all. He took off his gloves and put away the ceramic.

“Got it? Let’s go. Nora is freaking out down there,” Fergus said, motioning for them to hurry.

Brayden put the strap over his shoulders, and with Keenan’s briefcase in his hand, they slipped out to the fire escape.

However, as usual, Keenan caught the tip of his shoe on one of the steel grates seconds later, rushing to get down.

“Yow!”

“Shhh!” Fergus and Brayden returned, their response well-practiced. He jumped up and down on one foot.

“Shhhhh!” They repeated. They left just the way they came: seamlessly. Except for Keenan.

Once at the street level, a sports car with slightly tinted windows pulled up. The window down, Nora stuck her muscular tattooed arm out giving Fergus the go-ahead. They slipped into the car, and Nora hit the gas.

Smoke hung between the rafters in the exclusive back lounge of a dimly lit pub.

“A round of drinks!” Nora called, sliding small glasses down a deep mahogany bar. Now that they were back at the pub which Nora owned as a cover for their organized crime operation, Keenan took this opportunity to examine the coins more closely. He squished down into a leather desk chair, pulling himself into his oak desk, which had dozens of small, labelled drawers that kept tools and samples of metals and rocks. His reflection blinked back at him from his array of magnifying glasses which fanned out around his workspace, distorting his thick face and flat freckled nose. He chose his strongest magnifying lens and leaned in close. Each coin appeared to be brand new and genuine American Gold Eagles.

He got into a rhythm of inspecting, setting into a coin board, grabbing another. He reached into the bag blindly, and what he set down on this station was not like the others.

“Hmm.” Keenan moved to look at the coin without magnification. The coin was had no patina or film, but appeared to be heavily weathered. He flipped it over to see the outlines of an emblem.

“Hey.”

“Brayden! You spooked me.”

“Well, what do you have there? I thought you were inspecting the loot.” Brayden whispered to Keenan from over his shoulder.

“I don’t know…” Keenan leaned in with my magnifying glass, and turned the light to look more closely at it. He lifted and tilted the coin in the light, careful to avoid scratching the intricate and faded design.

With some time, Keenan determined that the emblem displayed a panther, teeth bared, her spine arched in defense of what appeared to be a cub behind her.

“I think it’s a panther——” As he leaned in for a closer look through the magnifying glass, Brayden’s thick hairy fingers reached in to grab the coin.

“Brayden, I——”

“Think it could be gold?” he joked. Brayden brought the coin up
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“Think it could be gold?” he joked. Brayden brought the coin up
to his mouth and bit down, testing the metal’s softness. “Guess so!” he chortled. “Nearly bent the—.” His face blanched and his throat hissed. A white froth slipped from the corner of his lips, then poured out over his chin as he fell to the ground, twitching wildly. Keenan was frozen. Fergus threw back the curtains to the study. But it was too late. Fergus kneeled down and whispered a prayer. His hand moved in the shape of a cross. They watched the energy escape Brayden’s all-seeing grey eyes as his body went limp.

Keenan let out a sob. “I’m s-sorry, I don’t know wha—“

Fergus surveyed Brayden’s body. He sniffed the disintegrating white froth, opened and closed Brayden’s jaw, scratched at his teeth with a toothpick. Extracting a small piece of gold from between two molars, Fergus turned to Keenan and saw the broken coin on the ground.

Keenan looked down and wiped his eyes.

Fergus held his head in his hands for a moment. Then, he stood and walked out. “Nora, tell me you still have those connections in Southeast Asia.”

Keenan reached over to the coin. Only a thin glove protected him from the white powder which filled the coin. Like a chocolate coin, the golden outside was just a wrapping for the fatal treat it disguised.

Keenan fell to the ground, and he shed silent tears for Brayden.

They left him like that for some time, until Nora was fed up. “Keenan, quit blubbering and get out here.”

Keenan sighed and headed out the mumbling of Fergus and Nora. Nora took a long drink.

Fergus was fumbling through some files. “What did they say?”

“Nothing really. That they would look into it.” She shook her head. “How would they not know about a poisonous coin?” She turned to Fergus. “What are you doing now?”

Fergus stared blankly at his dark drink. “This group doesn’t need a reason.”

“You’ve seen this before, then?” Keenan asked.

“Once. During a time I do not wish to relive. We have work to do, Keenan.”

Keenan cleared his throat. “It’s an old coin, and it wasn’t made in a traditional mint. It was made by hand.” Nora made herself another drink. Fergus continued his search.

“`You’ve seen this before, then?’” Keenan asked.

“Once. During a time I do not wish to relive. We have work to do, Keenan.”

Keenan waited. Tapping his fingers on the table and spinning the ice in his drink.

Fergus had found something and Nora made another call. Nora’s “uh huh’s” and “hmms” into the phone did nothing to break the silence. She hung up. “We caught them just in time. My girl says they plan to target St. Patrick’s hospital at midnight,” Nora repeated to us from the phone.

“On 32nd street?” Keenan asked.

“The same,” Nora replied gravely.

“Who is targeting the hospital? What are they doing there?”

Fergus stared blankly at his dark drink. “This group doesn’t need a reason.”

“The information is right. It’ll be there,” Nora said decisively as she set down the phone.

“We have no choice but to take them on,” Fergus stated.

“For Brayden,” Keenan said, pulling his chair up closer to the table and turning to Fergus and Nora to discuss logistics.

Nora rolled up through an alley behind the hospital. Fergus turned to Keenan. “Remember, we’ll be in your ear the whole time.”

Keenan nodded.

“Okay, we know how this hospital operates. We have allies on this inside. This should be a smooth, seamless experience.” Nora and Fergus glanced at Keenan. “Nora, you are in the safest position from on top of the unused helicopter pad. You need to let Keenan know if anything goes wrong. I’ll be monitoring the security camera footage. If anyone enters through the main lobby, we’ll know.”

They got out to grab their materials. Nora was dressed as a custodian; Fergus, a security guard. Nora grabbed her rifle, which was disassembled to fit into a plumber’s tool bag. Fergus had a taser on his belt, a pistol on his ankle. Keenan was dressed as a nurse.

“Okay. Nora, move out first.”

Keenan took a deep breath. “Fergus, I…”

“Keenan, I’ll be walking you through every step. There’s nothing to worry about. Go ahead.” He nudged Keenan forward.

Keenan turned around and grabbed Fergus’s arm. “No, I wanted to ask. Should I maybe… have a gun?”

“Keenan, you shouldn’t need one. Our plan is to catch them before they get inside. You just need to get to Dr. O’Connor so that she can alert her people.”

Keenan nodded. “Fergus, is there anything we could be missing? Something feels wrong.”
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“No.” Fergus shook his head. “Don’t worry about anything other
than your part of the plan. With a man down, we need to rely on everyone
doing their part.”
Keenan hung his head. “I understand.”
Fergus sighed. “How about this: since you’re in the safest position,
you hold onto the coin, okay?” He handed Keenan the plastic bag
protecting the coin.
Keenan nodded.
“Go on, now. Stick with the plan.”
“Just like we planned… just like we planned,” Keenan repeated to
himself. He stepped out onto the cracked concrete. The light purple
scrubs scratched him with every step. He tried to look as casual as possible,
walking confidently. Upon approaching the huge granite arches and tall
glass sliding doors, he paused. He closed his eyes in a grimace and walked
forward, bracing himself for whatever calamity would surely come next.
Due to his eyes being closed, he walked right into the glass front
door. His already flushed face turned garnet red as the hospital employees
shot sideways glances. He gave them a small wave. “Just like we planned,”
He muttered again.
Inside, his footsteps seemed to echo more than anyone else’s as he
crossed the hospital’s marble floor to the elevator. For once, he didn’t trip
when he quickened his pace. He let out a sigh of relief when the elevator
opened and revealed itself to be empty. He slid inside and illuminated the
button for the third floor. Keenan slouched against the wall, exhaling the
breath he was holding and told himself that if he kept quiet, there was
nothing he could do wrong.
Finally, the bell dinged for the third floor. A flushed woman entered
before he could get out. “They’re sending me all over the place. Don’t
they know it’s the middle of the night?”
Keenan shrugged as he stepped out of the elevator quickly, crossing
the threshold. These marble stairs did not shine the same way those on
the main floor did.
A bad feeling twisted in Keenan’s stomach. “Fergus, do you copy?”
he asked into the microphone wired to his wrist.
“Uh Fergus is a little busy,” Nora responded.
He paused. “Roger that.” Keenan walked slowly toward the nurses’
desk. He couldn’t shake the feeling. They must have put a hit on someone
in particular. He approached the nurses’ desk. “Hey, do you know where
Dr. O’Connor is at?”
“She’s not in today.” Keenan nodded. Figuring he would look anyway, he passed the
blood lab, where he only caught two words: “Logan Caulson.” Keenan
backpedaled.
“Yeah, didn’t you hear? A billionaire in room 311.” He could hear
her roll her eyes.
“That can’t be a coincidence, he whispered. “Since he got here he’s
been making demands to have a higher security presence. Mix entitled
with drugs and you get demanding paranoia I guess. Didn’t learn that
one in pharmacy classes.”
Keenan took a look at the room numbers, and, with newfound
confidence, sped toward 311. Grabbing a clipboard, he entered the room.
There, a man stood over a middle-aged man in a hospital bed, a knife
to his neck. On the shoulder of his leather jacket, the same emblem as the
one embossed onto the poisonous coin was embroidered. Keenan looked
down at his cracking leather shoes, realizing he had forgotten to put on
those canvas sneakers nurses always wear.
“Where is our treasure?” The man whispered in broken English.
“I don’t know. It was stolen from me. They told me yesterday. I don’t
know.”
The man sliced off Logan’s ear lobe. He yelped. They both looked to
the door to see if anyone had heard.
Keenan managed to go unnoticed until now.
The man pulled out a gun and pointed it at him. Before he could say
anything, Keenan felt a muzzle on his lower back.
“Go in.” It was Nora’s voice behind him.
Keenan raised his arms in defeat, and Nora shut the door behind her.
Logan spoke. “Look, you know I have money. How much do you
The man laughed. “Money is not what I seek.”
The item? the man asked, looking to Nora.
“No, he didn’t have it on him.” She paused. “Must have left it back
at the pub.”
The man shook his head. “That’s too bad for you.” He threw his knife
and it pieced Nora’s forehead. She collapsed to the ground.
“Nora!” Keenan fell to help her, shook her. He noticed her gun there
on the floor. This can go one of two ways. My gross motor skills might take
over, in which case I’m dead. Or, my fine motor skills work, and I have some
leverage. His sleight-of-hand abilities swiftly grabbed the knife and hid it
behind his clipboard.
“Leave her.” The man pulled out two new knives, one pointed at
“No.” Fergus shook his head. “Don’t worry about anything other than your part of the plan. With a man down, we need to rely on everyone doing their part.”

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“She’s not in today.”
Keenan, one on Logan's neck.

Keenan's voice shook. “Okay, it's not money that you want. What is it?” The coin in his pocket suddenly felt heavy.

“I could kill you. But I think I tell you what this man took from me. My culture's history. Our dignity. Our humanity. Our ancestry.” The man relaxed his knives and looked up. “My legacy. Passed from father to son for generations. This is a time we fight for something of a different value.” He shook his head. “The ones who bit the coin for our cause.”

Keenan lowered one of his hands slowly to my scrub pants pocket. “A coin.”

“How do you —” The man saw that Keenan had lowered his hand. He raised his knife, but Keenan had already made his move. He held his fist out, holding a small plastic bag. In the other hand, Nora's pistol.

“Is this what you're looking for?” Illuminated by fluorescent lights, he opened his hand to reveal the coin for only a second. The man sliced Logan's neck and charged toward Keenan, but he put the coin in front of the muzzle. His hands were steady.

“Bit the coin? Why all of this for one coin?”

The men were in a stand-off, facing each other.

“During the war. An oath. We will not be taken alive.”

Keenan lowered the coin, watching it glitter through the plastic. “If I give you this, we both walk away.”

The man raised his knife.

Keenan spoke quickly. “My bullet will get there quicker than your knife. But I don't want that. I want you to have it. It belongs to you.”

They inched toward each other, weapons steady.

Keenan's pulse consumed his head as his hand, still clenched, and the man's open palm aligned. He opened his hand and what tumbled out was not the sparkle of gold, but the power of sacrifice, returned.

The door slammed open. “Keenan!”

“Fergus, stop!” Keenan tried to yell, telling him it was over, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of a helicopter.

In that split second, a ladder fell from the helicopter and the man jumped to grab it. As he caught the lowest rung, he turned and mouthed “Thank you.”