

Quaranteam: Book Two

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Chapter One

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Whatever Andy expected his first visit to the military base at the heart of New Eden was going to be like, being brought in with his hands cuffed together wasn't it. To some extent, he understood the reasoning behind it, but he still felt like the entire thing was an overreaction.

"You okay, hon?" Niko asked him, having not left his side the entire time. Lexi hadn't been allowed on the base, but as a member of the Air Force, they couldn't justify denying Niko the rights to escort her fiancée onto the base for what they were calling his 'executive review.'

"It's fine," he told her, as they were shuffled down a hall, two women Security Forces officers in front of them, one on either side of them, and three of them in the back, none of them part of Linda's Girls, which didn't make Andy feel any better.

"It's *ridiculous* is what it is," Niko growled. "They're treating you like you're Hannibal Lecter or something..."

"Cannibalism's not really my taste," Andy joked, trying to keep his spirits up. He couldn't really get much of a look at the base itself, what with the sea of bodies all swamped around them. "But yes, the handcuffs do seem a bit much."

"You're getting the same level of scrutiny as every other man involved in this mess," the woman in charge, a gruff Captain with the last name of Nash. "We're being thorough and we're not letting any of you fuck it up. This whole thing has been fubar in spectacular fashion, and while this didn't use to be my circus or my monkey, but I've been put in charge of security for the complex until Captain Hayes has either been permanently removed or exonerated and reinstated to the position."

"She'll be cleared and put back in charge," Andy said confidently. "Say what you like about Linda, her loyalties have never been in question."

"It's not a question of *if* she's loyal," one of the guards said, "but who she's more loyal *to*, this country or her soon-to-be husband."

"Stow it, Reynolds," Nash said to her. "Ours is not to question why and all that..."

It had been over half a year since the start of the plague, and just three weeks since the Covington household had taken their patriarch, Arthur Covington the 4th, hostage. Andy had expected the situation to be solved quickly, but instead it had been a tense three weeks, with supplies being delivered, demands being negotiated and solutions being worked out. Andy had thought it impossible that Covington himself wouldn't be released by now, but apparently the situation was far more complex than anyone had anticipated, and had only been complicated by the additional scrutiny Andy had brought down onto the base.

When he'd been interviewed by Katie Couric for 60 Minutes, she'd thought she'd captured him in a gotcha moment when it came to talking about the infamous poker games that Covington had been holding, one of which Andy had attended, purely as part of a rescue effort for some of Niko's friends. When Andy had been completely candid about the game, his role in it and how there were some people at the base who'd manipulated the pairing system, a top-to-bottom investigation of the entire base was put into place by the female senators who'd heard all about it, instead of Ms. Couric airing Andy's allegations publicly.

Considering how slowly the government moved involving most things, he'd been incredibly surprised by how fast they'd moved regarding this one particular thing. He supposed that the hostage situation with Covington had figured into it, as had Covington's sizable fortune, and that both Congress and the President wanted to get everything under control quickly and quietly, especially before any of it leaked to the press, something it seemed like the women who'd taken Covington hostage were more

than happy to acquiesce to, as long as they felt like progress was being made.

The investigation of the base itself had just started a few days ago, but Andy's good friend Phil had gone mostly dark since then, with Linda assuring them it was part of the whole process and that things would work themselves out in the end. Many of the women in Andy's house had been interviewed by members of the investigating team, generally at Rook Manor, which had put Andy somewhat at ease.

All of that had been before someone had come to Rook Manor to drag Andy away in handcuffs, naturally.

He hadn't even had warnings that it was coming – just a large military transport truck driving up and onto his property with several women armed to the teeth came to take him away. They hadn't even phoned ahead and had opened the gate to his estate without anyone in Team Rook opening it, which made Andy wonder if the Air Force had some sort of override access to all the gate systems within New Eden. He wasn't entirely certain of the legality of that, but as of late, legality had been a pretty flexible concept in the walled colony.

The squad of female soldiers brought him into an elevator, several floors downward, then back out again, taking him down a singular hallway before bringing him into a large room he felt fitting for the sort of tribunal he was expecting. He was actually dressed up for the occasion, having been getting ready for a date when the soldiers had taken him away.

At one end of the room behind an elevated desk were three women, one in military attire behind a plaque which read “Maj. General Bonner” in the center,” and then one in a business suit behind a plaque which read “Engle” to the General's left, and one in much more casual attire behind a plaque which read “Giancola” on the General's right. All three looked to be in their early to mid 50s, and each of them looked incredibly tired.

“Remember baby,” Niko whispered to him. “Just be honest and you, and this should all be fine.”

“Lieutenant Redwolf,” the General said, a scolding tone to her voice. “We have allowed you to be here to ensure the safety of your household's male figure, but do not think that give you the option to address this court.”

“Ma'am,” Niko responded, moving to sit in a chair behind where Andy was sat at.

He was placed at one of two tables, an empty chair to the left of him, glancing over to the right, where a pair of women in business suits were dressed, briefcases in front of them. The soldiers did, however, remove the handcuffs from him, although they were only stationed a few feet away and they were very much still armed.

“Don't I get an attorney?” Andy asked.

“This isn't a trial, Mr. Rook,” the General said. “It's a military tribunal, and we're currently holding it to determine who is and is not an enemy combatant. To determine if you are functioning as a rogue operator working to establish interests counter to those of the United States of America or not. We're going to review your actions of the last six months and see if you've engaged in behavior that violates the law of war. Assuming you are who you say you are, and that you only did the things you have previously said that you did, no further escalation should be necessary. But if it comes out that you were engaged in manipulation or disruption of the system, or the laws of the land, then we will determine if you are going to be considered an enemy combatant, or just a civilian in violation of unlawful behavior. Should we determine the latter, you will be detained by local law enforcement until such time as you are able to be given legal counsel and then tried before a jury of your peers.”

“I know this all seems rather frightening, Mr. Rook,” the woman named Giancola said to him. “But I assure you, it's all on the up and up, and we're just as eager as you are to be past all of this.”

“Assuming you *are* who you say you are, Mr. Rook,” the other woman, Engle, said to him. “I'm not entirely convinced you aren't somehow tied to a foreign interest that is attempting to manipulate our response to the DuoHalo Virus.”

“And you are?” Andy asked.

“Representative Madeline Engle, from the great state of Montana,” she replied proudly.

“Well then, Representative Engle,” Andy chuckled, shaking his head a little. “Let me be the first to say that I’m not entirely convinced of *your* intentions either, and we can move on from there.”

From the moment they’d relocated Andy from the tiny little condo owned by his friend to the new mansion he’d been given in New Eden, Andy had entirely been prepared for some kind of reckoning and accountability. It felt like maybe that moment had come.

After the other woman introduced herself – she was Senator Caroline Giancola from Kansas – they moved into having Andy relate his version of the last six months or so to the tribunal. It was a long and winding story, but Andy did his best to relay all the information he had now, even at points in the story before he might have had it, starting with his friend Phil Marcos getting a few strings pulled to get Andy high in the priority list, as well as redirecting him to live within the walls of New Eden.

Andy knew Phil hadn’t *technically* done anything wrong, but that the tribunal might have found concerns with the *spirit* of Phil’s actions. Andy did, however, make a point to call out how as far as he knew, Phil had never stepped outside of the things he was *allowed* to do at any point, and that in many ways, Phil was acting similarly to thousands of others in the system – trying to take care of his family and friends. Was it abusing his position and privilege? Perhaps, but he hadn’t set down *any* of the rules he’d used to keep Andy and his family safe.

Surprisingly, he encountered very little push back from the tribunal regarding Phil’s actions, or how he’d been paired with his first few partners – Aisling, Laurel and Niko – and the tribunal kept things moving along quickly, even glossing over his relocation from the condo in San Jose to the mansion up in New Eden, although there were a number of repeated questions about how much he knew about the DuoHalo virus, when he knew it and who had told him, focusing on what both Phil (who was one the lead medical personnel responding to the DuoHalo epidemic) and his former flatmate Eric (who was a contractor working for a research and development arm of the CIA) had told him.

Andy knew that both Phil and Eric were trusting him with information that maybe he wasn’t cleared to know, so Andy stuck to his guns and presented a fairly blank picture of how much information he’d picked up along the way. He relayed that while his understanding of how big the epidemic was grew a little faster and bit more in-depth than others, he’d trusted in Phil and Eric not to tell him anything he wasn’t cleared to know, or, more accurately, to only tell him things that weren’t prohibited from knowing, since the amount of information was changing so fast, that it was nearly impossible to keep up with what was going on in all fronts.

There were a few times over the course of the first few hours that he felt like maybe Phil had told Andy more than he should’ve, but each time he’d seen the tribunal’s faces scrunch up in annoyance, Andy had asked if what Phil had told him was classified, and each time he was told that it wasn’t, although that they’d been urging more discretion when it came to dissemination of such information. Each time Andy had responded that he hadn’t told anyone outside of his Team (the term being used to describe the new family unit that had resulted from the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum used to counter it) and that he did not believe Phil was being careless with the knowledge. Eventually, he figured out *that* was why they were getting annoyed with him – there was nothing illegal about what Phil had done, nor what Andy had done; it just wasn’t how they *wanted* it done.

Once Andy’s story moved past talking about his arrival in the new manor, as soon as Covington entered his story, a whole new tension filled the air, with each of the three suddenly paying much more attention to their notes, asking far more questions than they had been previously.

Despite their constant barrage of interruptions, Andy did his best to relay the tale of how Niko had informed him that some women were being assigned to men in a method that did not fall in accordance with the protocols they were supposed to be. Basically, Covington and some of his friends had gone out of their way to buy the ability to circumvent the systems designed to pair up women with men they would find acceptable, putting the man’s demand up as ‘nonnegotiable,’ and just giving a woman to a man who requested them, something Niko had told him she found reprehensible,

something which he'd agreed with.

At that point in the story, Niko had offered to fill in some gaps, only to be scolded by the General, being told that she would get a chance to tell her version of the story privately, and for the time being she should remain quiet. Niko had fallen silent in response.

Andy then detailed how Niko had worked to get Andy an invitation to the private poker game that Arthur Covington had been holding for a month or two, where men were urged to put up women assigned to them that had *not* been imprinted yet as stakes for the game, with the winner being able to choose whatever women he wanted from the stakes and then allowing the rest to be chosen by those further down in order of elimination from the poker game.

“Didn't you feel any *shame* at all, Mr. Rook,” Rep. Engle asked him, “in using these women like they were *property* instead of *people*?”

“Absolutely, Representative Engle. In fact, if you interview the women who were already my partners at that time, you will find that they will all detail for you how much guilt I had about my actions, how uncomfortable I was with them, but that I made a decision to do what I needed to for the greater good, and to protect the friends of my partner, 2nd Lieutenant Redwolf,” Andy sighed. “I had seen first hand what kind of a cruel man Covington was to his partners, going so far as to refuse to let them even *speak* to other people in public. And even then, I didn't *truly* understand how deep the man's depravity went. It wasn't until after the game itself I would learn how dark that hole is.”

“And the women you had to enter as stakes, Mr. Rook?” the General asked him.

“One of them, Sheridan Smith, I didn't know at the time, and I made a point to choose to bring her back into the house, especially since she'd selected me during the process legitimately.”

“And the other?”

Andy shook his head with a dark little chuckle. “The other I would've sent back to the base to be paired with someone else had I not entered the game. Her name is Erin Donegal, and she and I had a relationship about a decade ago that ended... badly. I was not interested in rekindling the relationship in any way, shape or form, and to do so would've actively been detrimental to not only my mental health, but the mental health of everyone in my Team.”

“And where did Miss Donegal end up?”

“She was chosen by Mister Watkins, which I will admit relieved me somewhat.”

“Why is that?” Senator Giancola asked.

“Of the other people who were at the poker game, I found Mister Watkins to be the most reasonable and scrupulous, although I suppose I should append that by stating that the most reasonable of pit vipers remains a snake,” he chuckled. “Nathaniel seemed like the best worst option, although I have come to find that he was engaged in the poker game for similar reasons to my own.”

“And that was?”

“He was mostly trying to keep tabs on what Covington was up to, although I don't know that that fully excuses his behavior. Mister Watkins has repeatedly informed me that he would have preferred to have less partners than he did, but that the government insisted he get up to a number that would reasonably guarantee his immunity to DuoHalo, a situation I could empathize with.”

“Based on others we've interviewed before you, you did quite well for yourself at that poker game, Mister Rook,” the General said.

Andy shrugged a little. “What can I say? Despite their astute powers of business, it turns out they're all pretty shitty poker players. And I suspect Covington kept holding the game at his home because he was using an unscrupulous dealer, guaranteeing he would generally end up on top.”

“And that would be the late Veronica DeLaCruz?” Representative Engle asked.

“Yes.” Andy paused, as did the others, and since no one else wanted to voice the speculation, he decided to give it air. “There's been some talk that Covington had her killed because of how poorly the game night went for him, but I can't speak to that personally. I'm certain I know less on that front than you do. That is what the New Daughters of the Revolution are claiming, however.”

“Please list the women that you added to your Team as a result of that night's poker game.”

“I went in to rescue Dr. Charlotte Varma and her daughter Asha, both of whom left the Covington mansion with me, but I agreed with Charlotte that no person should be forced to share a sexual partner with their parent. Charlotte said that she would have chosen Dr. Marcos, given the opportunity, and Phil was open to the option, so she was paired with him, and Asha remained with me. I was also paired with Piper Brown before leaving Covington Manor, something I was extremely apprehensive about, considering her mental state at that particular moment, but it has seemed to work out well enough for us in the long run.”

“How would you describe her mental state when you first encountered Miss Brown?”

Andy frowned, his fingers curling uncomfortably at the memory of it. “Feral? Out of her mind? Covington had kept her in the in-between state of getting the Quaranteam serum and being imprinted for nearly a week, and Piper had regressed to something bestial and primitive. When she finally came to her senses a few days after being imprinted, I told her that if she wanted to leave, as soon as we could find a medical way for her to do that, I would aid her in taking that path. She has, since then, insisted she very much wants to remain a part of the family, and we are engaged to be married.”

“Is that a bit of Stockholm Syndrome there I detect, Mister Rook?” Rep. Engle asked.

“I don't think so, but you're more than welcome to interview Piper, so that you can ascertain her motives for yourselves. I'm certainly not a medical professional capable of making that sort of judgment call.”

“Who else joined your family as a result of that poker game, Mister Rook?”

“Sarah Washington, Emily Stevens and Hannah Nakamura.”

“And how would you describe their opinions on joining your family?” the General asked him.

“Enthusiastic? Eager? Sarah had a bit of a crush on me before the pandemic. I think that's relatively easily verified. Also, Emily and Sarah were in a relationship prior to all of this, so joining the family made Sarah happy, which made Emily happy. Hannah just wanted safety but wasn't particularly enthusiastic about whom she'd been assigned to initially, as it had been under false pretenses.”

“Oh?” Senator Giancola asked. “Elaborate, please.”

“She'd been invited to join the Watkins family, but had assumed that the invitation had come from Nathaniel, which it had, but it turned out that the invitation was on behalf of Nathaniel's 18-year-old son Benjamin. Hannah would not have accepted had she known that, and when presented with the option of being paired with Benny Watkins or myself, she chose to be paired with me instead.”

“I like this Mister Watkins less and less the more I hear about him,” Representative Engle snorted. “And this was all of the women you'd acquired in the poker game?”

“Well, and the right to retain Miss Smith, as stated earlier.”

“How did Miss Smith react to being put up as stakes in a poker game?”

Andy frowned. “I didn't exactly tell her that before hand, and when I came clean about it, there was a bit of a rift, but one which I think we've worked past. Sheridan understands that I was in a rather untenable situation at the time, and back then, I didn't know anything about her. In fact, I wasn't entirely certain she'd had any interest in me at all.”

“Why do you say that, Mister Rook?”

“Because how women were being presented to men in the early days... we had the impression that the survey we'd taken was shaping those decisions, but we certainly didn't have any real insight into how they were being selected, or how they were being redirected to us,” Andy said. “We were told the conditions were favorable to us, but beyond that, we were basically told nothing about how or why women were paired with us men. Everything that I learned about the selection process was basically passed on as second hand information from the women who joined the Team. We were never formally *told* any of this, beyond the survey we took at the onset.”

“And I understand your household has grown quite sizable since then.”

“I think most of us feel that way,” Andy said with a weary smile.

“How did you come across the additional members of your Team?”

“Recommendations from other members of the Team, generally.”

“Generally?” Rep. Engle asked.

“I sent out one request of my own, and that person accepted, but also wanted to bring someone else along with her.”

“That would be...” Sen. Giancola said, searching through her papers. “...Miss Fiona Smith and Miss Moira MacLeod?”

“That's correct.”

“And you and this Fiona had a prior relationship?”

“We were college sweethearts,” Andy replied.

“But you had not been in contact since college?”

“Her career took her one way and mine took me another.”

“And you and Miss MacLeod were familiar with each other?”

“We been briefly intimate when we were in college. The three of us.”

“And I assume that both Miss Smith and Miss MacLeod were interested in resuming the prior relationship?”

Andy nodded. “They both came willingly and have seemed quite happy and content since their arrival, so I think that's a same assumption.”

“Who else has joined your family since your arrival in New Eden?”

“Well, there's the staff – Katie is our groundskeeper, Jenny is our cook, Nicolette is our housekeeper, Whitney is our informational security and support, Lexi is my personal bodyguard and Mali, who should be arriving tomorrow, will our financial manager.”

“Do any of them have any relationships outside of the one with you?” the General asked.

“Katie and Jenny are married, and I think Nicolette and Whitney might be developing a relationship, although I haven't pried.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged with a smile. “It's not really any of my business? They're both adults.”

“That's staff,” the Senator continued. “You have additional partners who aren't staff?”

“Sure,” Andy answered. “There's Lauren's no-longer ex-girlfriend, Taylor Morrison; Tala Jordan, Sheridan's friend; Jade Dillon, Lauren's friend and former co-worker; and Maya Steele, Emily's director friend.”

“How many women does that put you in sexual relations with in total, Mister Rook?” the General asked.

“Once Mali is here? Twenty-one women in total. In excess of the twelve to fifteen that is currently being recommended by the government.”

The Senator laughed, shaking her head a little. “That sounds like quite the mental and physical load, Mister Rook. My own household is only at thirteen other women, and I'm barely able to remember everyone's *names*. How do you keep track of it all?”

Andy offered her a sympathetic smile. “Well, we spend a lot of time with each other, so that helps, but Whitney also developed an app for my phone so I can easily keep track of when everyone was last dosed, to ensure everyone's needs are being addressed in a timely and prompt fashion.”

“Ever had days where you simply didn't *want* to have sex, Mister Rook?” the General asked him rather bluntly. “No one would blame you.”

“Of course, but all of these women, their very health *relies* on me having sex with them, so I do my best to never let them see me feeling like that. And besides, they are such a widely varying group of women that I find myself drifting from one style of encounter to another very regularly. My time spent sexually with Emily is dramatically different than my time spent sexually with, say, Tala.”

“Would you like to elaborate on that, Mister Rook?” the Representative asked him.

“I would not,” he replied curtly, “nor do I feel it is any business of this tribunal's how I and my

partners enjoy each other's company.”

“Would you consider the women in your household happy where they are, Mister Rook?”

He folded his hands on top of the desk, his eyes drifting between the three women. “Let me exceptionally clear on this point, ladies. When it was discovered there was a way to reassign women to another man without the man being dead, I made sure to offer that option to each and everyone woman in my household. The last thing I would *ever* want is any woman feeling she's trapped by being with me. Each and every one of them declined to engage in reassignment. I'm sure you knew that already, though, considering you've been interviewing most of the members of my house individually for the past week.”

“Not 'most,' Mister Roo,” the Senator said. “All. And I have to admit, either you have somehow convinced nearly two dozen people to tell minor variations of the same story, or your story, as implausible as it seems, is mostly true.”

Andy spread his hands. “I have nothing to hide. I'm not especially pleased with my own behavior regarding the poker game, but I was also the one who insisted that Katie Couric reach out to the government to fix the problem rather than telling her to just run what she had gathered and letting the chips fall where they may.”

“Mmm,” the Senator said, reaching into her pocket to grab a tube of lip balm, applying some to her lips. “Quite the hornet's nest you kicked up with that one conversation.”

“Yeah, well, I think Covington was trying to throw the blame onto me to cover his own shitstorm, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen,” Andy said, annoyance plain in his voice. “He made his own fucking mess, so he can stew in it. How's that going, by the way?”

“We'll talk about that in a little bit, Mister Rook,” the General said. “Are you willing to bet your freedom and your life on the fact that every woman who is part of your Team is there of her own free will and volition?”

“I am,” he replied confidently. “And if any of them would like to leave, I will be the first in line to help them make that happen. After all the shit I've witnessed with Covington, the *last* thing I want is to be anything at all like that shitheel. I'm guessing because you're in charge, General, that the previous head of the base has been relieved?”

“Major General Fielder is currently in the brig, and will be facing a tribunal of his own in the immediate future, and he's not the only one. A total of seven different men here on the base are either in our brig or have been arrested by federal authorities for their part in circumventing the legitimate and lawful pairing system that we have in place. We've also helped federal authorities arrest a number of people in the local government in and around New Eden, including the former Mayor of New Eden, Mister James Haunton.”

“Hopefully his wife, Major Peters, is being taken care of,” Andy said. “She was the one who welcomed us to New Eden when we first got here, and she seemed very nice.”

“For the time being, Mister Rook, Major Peters will be assuming the role of Mayor of New Eden, and stepping down from her military posting,” the General replied. “She is also considering whether or not she and the other members of Team Haunton want to be reassigned, or simply keep Mister Haunton here in a local jail for their needs to be tended to.”

“Considering what your day has been like, Mister Rook,” the Senator said, an amused tone to her voice as she leaned back in her chair a little. “I'm a little surprised to see you giving any kind of a damn about any member of the Air Force.”

“They're mostly good people doing a hard job,” Andy countered. “Even these people who stormed my house with machine guns at the ready have got families to go home to at night, and they're just following *your* orders anyway. If they're not a bad egg, I'm not going to hold a grudge. They've got enough shit on their plate without me adding on to it. While you folks may have come in a little bit hotter than I think you needed to, a certain amount of paranoid involving everything that's going on in New Eden isn't entirely unwarranted, you know?”

“That's the difference between me and Andy,” Niko added. “He's very good at keeping a clear head no matter the circumstances. Me, I tend to put the health and safety of the primary before everyone and everything else, because that's my job.”

“And your diligence is appreciated Miss Redwolf,” the Representative said. “Thank you for your service.”

“I'm more concerned about my friend, Dr. Marcos, and his Team,” Andy said.

The three women of the tribunal turned off their microphones and discussed among themselves for a moment, leaving Andy to turn and look at Niko with a shrug. Andy turned back to look at the them as they started to turn their microphones on once more. “While it isn't entirely finalized yet, we have been unable to find any flagrant violations in Dr. Marcos's actions, and considering the number of human lives that he has saved, a small amount of leniency is probably warranted,” the Senator said. “Some of his actions, such as his intervention in the reassignment of Jenny Carnero to Mister Yang's house, are, shall we say, rather unorthodox, but they've also resulted in improvements in the Oracle system itself, so we're going to cut him some leeway.”

“Nothing would be gained by punishing Dr. Marcos for being human, Mister Rook,” the General said. “And quite a great deal would be lost if we *did* impose retributive measures upon him. In the early days of this disaster, people were playing fairly loose with the rules and regulations, but we're past that phase now, and I think Dr. Marcos understands that. The research that Dr. Merriweather brought with her from Russia when she was fleeing her ex-husband, Dr. McCallister, has been incalculably valuable, but there are only a handful of people who even understand what we're looking at, so we can't afford to lose him from his research. With all that on record, however, I can also stress that we're going to be putting a lot more guardrails to prevent anyone from going completely cowboy on us anymore. The last thing any of us want is Dr. Marcos accidentally fucking things up by trying to do the right thing at the wrong time.”

“Phil's a good guy,” Andy insisted. “And whatever rules he bent or broke, I'm fairly certain he had his reasons for doing so. Based on what's happening with the New Daughters of the Revolution, there were much bigger systemic problems going on here at the base.”

“Yes, well, now we come to the real reason we've brought you here, Mister Rook,” the General said with a heavy sigh. “Now, it should be noted that it's taken us almost a month to get to this point, and I wish it hadn't come down to this, but it has, as the NDR are entirely inflexible upon these terms. One of their demands involves you specifically, and as loathe as I am to ask this of you, they will be not be budged off this point. That's why we had to have all of this scrutiny. We needed to vet you as thoroughly as we could and ensure this wasn't some sort of trick or deception on the behalf of the NDR, and I expect your reaction to the demand will only confirm what I already believe to be true.”

“We gonna dance all night with your hand on my ass, General, or are you going to make your move?” Andy said. “What the hell *are* you talking about? What demands?”

“We have reached a settlement which will result in the NDR surrendering Mister Covington, Jacobson and Vikovic to law enforcement,” the Senator said. “It's not perfect, but we didn't expect that it would be going into it, yes? There's a handful of things that're... less than ideal, but it's what we gotta do to get things back into a more manageable fashion. And as the General said, one of the demands involves you, and we anticipated... well, frankly if I were you, Mister Rook, I'd tell me to go stuff it. But it's our job to implore you *not* to do that, and to find some sort of counterbalancing agent that will make their demand more palatable to you.”

“Okay, look,” Andy snapped. “Quit fucking dancing around the topic and tell me what the fuck is going on, so we can stop wasting each others' time.”

The three members of the tribunal looked at one another, trying to silently decide who was going to tell Andy, before the General spoke again, seemingly having decided to fall on the grenade herself. “As part of the New Daughters of the Revolution surrendering Covington and the others to us, they're all going to be reassigned and not face any retaliatory actions for what they did, although we are

mandating that Dr. Rachel DeMarco engage in mandatory psychiatric counseling for a period no less than one year, because of her... demonstration of physical violence in regards to Mister Covington. But that's not the hard part. They have a few demands about their reassignments that are... particular.”

“Oh no,” Andy heard Niko say behind him.

“Miss Lisa Davis is insisting she be reassigned to someone on the East Coast. She wants to be as far away from California as she can get.”

“I can understand that,” Andy said. “After the kind of thing I imagine Covington put her through, she's right to want to put it all behind her and never think about it again.”

“Dr. DeMarco is insisting she be reassigned to Dr. Marcos, so that she can continue to aid in the research on the project, although she has agreed to do so under constant supervision, and with no real authority in any way, shape or form.”

“I can't imagine Phil or Linda is particularly happy about that,” Andy muttered, mostly to himself but loud enough that the tribunal could've heard him. He expected Linda would be even more angry about it than Phil would, although he certainly didn't expect Phil to be all that thrilled with it.

“They will have extremely limited contact with one another until Captain Hayes has assessed that Dr. DeMarco is no longer a threat to anyone. She will remain on the base under supervision at all times until Captain Hayes deems otherwise. There are a handful of other demands about specific people wanting to go to other places, but there's one in particular that the NDR are adamant on, and they will not be budged from it. They want you to select one of their members to join *your* Team specifically, here in New Eden.”

Andy wasn't sure how long the silent moment was between them telling him that and him speaking again, but it might as well have been a thousand years for as heavy as the time felt.

“You *cannot* be serious,” were the first words he could summon to his lips, and they were just a hair's breadth away from him following it up with 'go fuck yourselves,' but he decided not to vocalize that last bit, at least not yet.

“Deadly serious, I'm afraid,” the Senator told him. “They're aware of your history with House Covington, and some of the disagreements their members have had with members of your household...”

“They basically *tortured* my fiancé, Piper Brown, and you want me to bring one of them *into* my home with her? You're insane. *This* is insane. It's not inviting a wolf into the hen house; it's laying out a fucking three-course dinner for her!”

“They're willing to let you choose from any of the members of House Covington, House Vikovic or House Jacobson, but obviously they would prefer you take someone from House Covington. In fact, I've been asked to convey to you that Melody Park would like to volunteer for your Team, but that she also understands if her time with Miss Brown would be a dealbreaker. She has voiced in particular a desire to make amends for her inability to protect Miss Brown. The NDR feel like you've done wonders in fighting against the abuses of the system, and they believe that having someone from their organization embedded in your Team will let them all sleep a little better, since they'll know what work you're doing to keep the system from having any other abuses, and they can communicate that work out to the others in the NDR.”

“I'm just a fantasy writer who got lucky along the way. I don't work on the Quaranteam serum. I don't know a thing about how the DuoHalo virus works. I'm not in the Air Force. I'm not what anyone would call an insider.”

“I disagree,” the Representative said, a fiery anger in her tone. “When you agreed to step forward and place your liberal West Coast values forth as the new model for the American family, you took a place in the spotlight and became the sort of public figure that's going to have a firm hand in shaping the direction of this country for the next twenty years, you and your Hollywood elite women, one of whom ain't even from this country.”

He could hear Niko's hands balling into fists behind him, but the taunt from the Representative from Montana just made him smirk a little bit. “I see. So it *is* retaliatory, just not for *them*. You don't

like the fact that the President asked us to step forward and talk to '60 Minutes' because you didn't get a chance to put your stake down in the culture wars. I wasn't asking anyone else to live their lives how I live *mine*, just telling people how we decided to survive with each other in the new world.”

“I think you and the rest of your godless heathen sluts shouldn't get to decide anything about how our nation does anything,” she sneered back at him. “You've always treated the middle of this country as 'flyover states,' people you turn your back on and ignore until you need something, and then suddenly it's nothing but handout handout handout. We in Montana don't have sales tax, because we don't believe in big government.”

“Great,” Andy shot back. “Then you won't mind us not sending you any aid or paying for any of your federal services? Californians pay a higher tax rate than anybody else in the United States, and maybe we should start making sure we're getting what we pay for with those taxes. You've got quite a lot of our money coming into Malmstrom Air Force Base up there in Montana, when all those resources could be allocated elsewhere.”

“Typical liberal talking points,” she said, rolling her eyes. “We need our military now more than ever, Mr. Rook, what with all casualties we've suffered as a nation.”

“Maybe you haven't heard but we aren't the only country who lost people, Representative. Hell, you should know far better than I do what's going on internationally.”

“And I do, Mister Rook, and it's not fucking pretty. But we're going to make sure it's America First no matter what happens to the rest of the world. So you're going to take one of these fucking NDR women and add her to your household because it's what keeps this shit from getting out of hand. Because if you don't, they're going to make sure all of Covington's abuses are going to be broadcast far and wide, and I think we both know how that's going to end up, don't you? With me and mine on top, where we belong, but by God, the amount of bloodshed it'll take to get us there is unconscionable, so we're telling you to do this so there's not rioting in the streets. But you will not push me and mine into a corner, Mister Rook. We're going to keep our Second Amendment strong and we're going to protect our people from immigrants and those who'd want to sully this great land of ours. So the last fucking thing we need is you and your woke socialist family setting the tone for the rest of the country. Traditional. American. Values. That's what this country needs and what it's going to get.”

Andy couldn't help but tilt his head to one side. “If you think you have a snowball's chance in hell in keeping this country 'traditional' when it's lost over 70% of its men, best of fucking luck to you.”

“Okay, settle down, you two,” the General sighed. “And you can save the speeches for the stump, Maddy. There aren't any fucking cameras in here.”

“The little peasant needs to know who he's fucking with,” the Representative shot back.

“Careful, Maddy,” the Senator cautioned. “You may not know who *you're* fucking with. Mister Rook may not look like much, but he's still alive, which is more than I can say about your first husband. A little less religion and a little more science and you wouldn't have to be shacking up with a member of your security detail for your survival.”

“Oh fuck you too, Caroline. Uptight bitch.”

“I know this is a lot to spring on you, Mister Rook,” the General said, interrupting the two bickering politicians, “but how difficult a sell do you think this is going to be to your family?”

“I would say the decision will be entirely in the hands of Piper,” Andy admitted. “If she's okay with it, then the rest of us can make it work. And I suspect if she's deadset against us taking anyone from House Covington, we can probably work to find someone in House Vikovic or Jacobson that'll be a decent enough fit for the family to satisfy the demands of the NDR. Melody Park might be a bridge too far, but maybe not... There's probably somebody in that mix I can make work if it's that important to this whole thing,” he sighed. “I know Lisa and Ash were at least familiar with each other, so I would've said that would've been fine, but I can understand Lisa wanting to get as far away from here as possible.”

“Can we consider that a 'yes,' Mister Rook?” the Senator asked him.

“Get me a short profile on everyone in each of the three houses and I'll have an answer—”

“You mean 'a selection,' don't you?” the Representative corrected.

He frowned, dropping his eyebrows as he scowled at her. “Yes, I'll have a selection within 24 hours of you dropping off profiles on all those I need to consider. That will give me time to run it by everyone in my family, and ensure I don't get any conflicts or personality mismatches. I'm not adding anyone to my Team without clearing it with the rest of the Team.”

“What kind of sissy man are you?” the Representative sneered.

“The kind who gives a shit what people are partnered to him think,” he said. “I don't know why you'd be the kind of woman who just blindly accepts what her partner is doing without knowing about it, but that's between you and him, and I'll thank you to keep your antiquated bullshit out of my life. Are we done here?”

“Just a few final things, Mister Rook,” the General said. “We've got some paperwork we need you to sign – an NDA regarding everything we've talked about today and another one to extend your Top Secret clearance regarding any and all things involving the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum.” One of the soldiers brought over a couple of small stacks of paper, laying them down in front of him. “You've been operating under it long enough that we figured we might as well make it official, and we've done a full background investigation into your last 10 years, so you'll be able to come and go around the base at will moving forward. With that, however, comes an actual title – officer of civilian oversight for the Quaranteam project. The president has mandated that a handful of civilians will be given carte blanche access to the entire process, so that we can ensure that all questionable decisions have at least been reviewed by qualified members of the public. You'll be working in conjunction with the Air Force and the CDC, but there will be a number of people like yourself distributed into all aspects of this system, to make sure we aren't engaging in any unethical or questionable behavior, like Major General Fielder was. It isn't just going to be a pro forma gig, either. You'll need to go to Washington once every three months to file a report, both with the manager of civilian oversight and with the President herself.”

He felt the movie line leaping to his lips and just couldn't help himself. “Not to be the materialistic weasel of the group, but do you think we'll get hazard pay out of this?”

“You'll do the job and you'll like it, egghead, or we'll ship you off to Guantanamo and disappear your ass,” the Representative said to him.

“Do the people of Montana know they have someone representing them who can't even *spell* the name of their state, or are they just grading on a *really* wide curve?” he countered.

“Stow it!” the General said, slamming her fist down on top of the desk. “You two don't have to like each other, but you're damn well going to have to learn how to work with one another, and if you're constantly acting like the cast of *Mean Girls*, you're never going to get shit done, and you're also never going to be able to remove my boots from your asses. Clear?”

“The Commie started it,” the Representative said, and Andy chose to let it lie.

“Anything else,” Andy asked, as he signed the two documents in front of him in several places, all of which were helpfully marked with stick on tabs. “Or are we done here?”

“One more thing, Mister Rook,” the General said, while the Representative and the Senator turned their attention to their tablets in front of them. “You haven't been informed of this yet, but early next year, sometime in the early spring, *60 Minutes* is going to come by to do a follow-up story on you, see how you and your family are getting along months later. We've told them not to report on the NDR, but they're probably going to ask you all about it anyway. So we need you to talk to them about that *off the record*, let them know that we've addressed the issue, if not to your satisfaction, at least to your tolerance. For what it's worth, I happen to agree with all of the NDR's grievances, but airing all that dirty laundry out in public is just going to be throwing even more fuel onto an already difficult to control fire that we're dealing with day to day. At this point, we've all just got to get on with getting on with it.”

“How is it looking across the country, General?”

“We've still got plenty of holdouts insisting the Quaranteam process is a sin against God or a Democratic plot to inject them with microscopic tracking devices. There's some debate about whether or not we simply inject these people for their own good or not, but that's way above my paygrade. There's lots of international developments, but all of those are currently being kept between the President's team and the countries involved. I expect we'll start hearing all about them in the next few months, though. I understand you're going to be doing your mass wedding in January?”

He nodded. “End of January, yeah. The ceremony'll be on the 30th, but we're basically making a whole week out of it, what with all the people we need to get to know. It's been tricky organizing all the families to come out for it, but now that pretty much all of them are either imprinted or next in line to be imprinted, we're setting down a day for the ceremony and a weekend for everyone to come and visit. We're already looking into booking out most of the hotels down in Pleasanton and Dublin, and we're already worried that spillover might have to go to Oakland, but we'll make it work as best we can. And it will be a great chance for everyone to get to know everyone else's families.”

“How many of your partners are you going to be marrying at the ceremony?”

“Seven. Aisling, Niko, Sarah, Emily, Fiona, Moira and Piper, so just their family and friends are going to be quite the collection of people, not to mention all of Sarah and Em's Hollywood friends on top of that,” he laughed. “And, of course, most of my other partners are inviting out some of their friends and families as well, so the whole thing is going to be basically be our own little private convention. I genuinely considered renting out something like Moscone or the San Jose Convention Center, but none of us wanted to constantly be driving there and back.”

“I imagine the budget for nametags alone is already quite sizable,” the General chuckled.

“Absolutely,” Andy agreed. “And I'm already a nightmare with names. So we're basically printing the nametags ourselves, with a bunch of information on them. Name, who they're partnered with, who they're *related* to and where they currently live. No one's going to remember all of that, so we're just doing the best we can to manage it.”

The General got up and walked down from the elevated section, rubbing the back of her neck with a weary hand. “Okay, Mister Rook. I think we're done with you. Again, I apologize for all the theatrics, but we had to make sure you *are* who everyone seemed to *think* you are, especially with the demands from the NDR being so strangely *specific* in regards to you. Apparently, you're the only man they're convinced has no malice in his heart.”

“Mmm. They should've seen me when your truck rolled up to pull me here four hours ago. I have a rather important dinner date tonight,” he frowned before glancing at his watch. “But if we're done here, maybe I can still make it home in time to salvage that without too much fuss.”

“I won't keep you any longer then. We'll have the profiles emailed to you within the next few hours, and we'll expect a response from you tomorrow night on whom you're willing to add to your family. Once that's done, they're going to let us come in and take the hostages out, and you'll have about five or six days before you need to have the person reassigned to you. We'll do that here at the base. Part of the terms of their surrender is that they all get reassigned quickly, so if you can do it sooner than that, even, that would be better.”

“Let me figure out *who* it's going to be before we figure out the *when*,” Andy chuckled. “I know that at this point, you're thinking what's one more to add to the man's tally, but it's still a bit of a logistics problem to be taken care of.”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out, Mister Rook.” The General paused and then offered her hand out for him to shake. “I wasn't sure I'd be saying this, but it's been nice talking with someone else who's kept relatively grounded during all of this madness. I hope you'll stay that way moving forward.”

He reached out and shook the General's hand with his own. “Let's hope that makes two of us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a date to get to.”

Andy and Niko walked out of the room, and for the first time, Andy realized he could go

anywhere and see any part of the base, something his innate sense of curiosity couldn't wait to delve into, but for the time being, he needed to get home. He glanced at his watch, frowning, as one of the six soldiers who had brought him here moved over, offering a sad smile. "Sorry about all that hassle, sir, but we had our orders. Can I give you a lift back to your house?"

"Thank you, Sgt. Curiel, that would be kind of you."

Neither Andy nor Niko talked much on the way back to the house, mostly just considering all the information that had been dropped on them, and when they got back to the Manor, Andy had to use his phone to open the gate remotely, so whatever access the Air Force had to his property, they weren't going to wantonly abuse it. Curiel drove the Jeep up to the front door and let them out before driving off, as Andy found Aisling and Fiona waiting for him.

"Rough day at work, luv?" Ash asked him with a giggle.

"Christ, you'd think I'd invented DuoHalo myself the way they were treating me. How is she? Not too upset?"

"She was worried you wouldn't be back in time, but when the gate opened, she lit up like a Christmas tree," Fiona replied. "How'd the interrogation go?"

"Let's just say we're going to have quite a *lot* to talk about over breakfast tomorrow morning."

"Are you sure it'll keep, Andy?" Niko said. "The sooner we—"

"It's all things that'll wait until morning," Andy said, putting his hands on Niko's shoulders. "The Air Force has to send all the paperwork over, and we can talk about it at breakfast. Tonight's Jade's night, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let any drama get in the way of that, okay?"

"Yeah, okay, I guess that's fair," Niko said, leaning up to kiss him softly for just a moment as Aisling and Fiona moved to straighten out his suit and slacks a little bit. "Now you should get off to your dinner."

He started to head into the house and behind him, Fiona couldn't help herself and yelled "And don't forget to enjoy your cherry dessert!"

Tonight, he was going to treat Jade Dillon to an excellent one-on-one dinner and then after that, he was, at her request, going to finally take her virginity.

He genuinely wasn't sure who was more nervous, Jade or him.