

Chapter Twenty-Nine

May 5th, 2021

“You think this is a good idea?” Nathaniel asked Andy as they both tried to sit and wait patiently, glancing at their phones checking yet again for a message that still hadn’t yet arrived.

“I think at this point there’s enough rot that having two sets of eyes on the situation is probably for the best, don’t you?” Andy shot back, checking to make sure the Glock he’d been given was secure in its holster.

“This is more than two pairs of eyes,” Nathaniel said, gesturing to the group of security personnel gathered around them in the parking lot of the beach, ready to hop into their vehicles as soon as the message came. They were dressed in full combat gear, weapons at the ready, and there were a couple of members of the Air Force Security Forces from New Eden base as well, although most of the Air Force personnel were stationed on the other side of the target, where General Bonner was waiting with them. Even Andy and Nathaniel had on body armor. “I’ve got nearly my whole team here, except for the couple of people I left back at Watkins Manor to make sure it wasn’t completely with its pants down.”

“You call it that too?”

“What, referring to the house as Watkins Manor?”

“Yeah, I just started referring to my place as Rook Manor one day, and it stuck and I’ve been doing it ever since,” Andy admitted.

“Sounds less pretentious than calling it a mansion, even if it is,” Nathaniel said with a slight chuckle. “You’re like me – you don’t want to rub anyone’s face in your wealth. That’s one of the many reasons why we get along so well, I think.”

“I didn’t *have* any wealth until you came along, Nathaniel, so thank you again for that.”

“It’s only money,” Nathaniel said with a laugh. “What can it really buy you?”

“Your security team for one.”

“I suppose that’s fair, but that feels more like a price of having money than a benefit,” Nathaniel sighed almost a touch remorsefully.

“I’m a little surprised the head of your security team’s a man, to be honest.”

“Well, there’s only so many slots in my personal life I can dedicate to bodyguards, so I ended up hiring Elliott and his team to provide a higher level of security,” Nathaniel said. “It’s kind of an elegant design – he basically knew security forces were going to be at a premium when the plague hit and so he insisted everyone on his team be an operator, so they could just become a new company, and, wham, bam, thank you ma’am, Bob’s your uncle, here they are. Elliott’s got ten women soldiers in his company, and his original wife is handling logistics and planning now, so that makes them officially Watkins’ Dirty Dozen.”

“Let’s hope it ends better for yours than it did for the movie’s.”

“I still don’t like you being here, sir,” Octavia, Nathaniel’s lead bodyguard said to him. “There’s absolutely no reason we need to be putting ourselves at risk like this.”

“Oh, relax,” Lexi said with a chuckle. “I doubt anyone’s even going to put up a fight. They aren’t going to see it coming and we’re going to roll in like we’re carpet bombing them back into the stone age. The risk is very minimal.”

“Minimal isn’t zero,” Octavia said, narrowing her Persian eyes at Andy’s bodyguard. “I prefer keeping our risk at zero as much as possible, simply because knowing the principal goes down means not only does my paycheck dry up, there’s a decent chance my life goes with it.”

“Aren’t you carrying a disaster kit?”

“Disaster kit?” Andy asked Lexi, arching an eyebrow.

Lexi blanched for a second, frowning slightly, as if she wished she hadn't said something. "Sorry boss, this is probably a lot more morbid than you'd want to know about, but I guess you do have the right to know that I'm carrying it." She reached into her satchel bag and pulled out a small brown pouch about the size of a large cellphone. "Disaster kit." She unzipped it and showed it to him. Inside there was a large, capped steel syringe and four empty vials, and immediately Andy understood what it was and what it was for.

In the event of his death, Lexi would go into partner salvation mode. She would extract as much necrotized semen from his dead testicles as she could and take it with her to make sure every one of his partners could be reassigned as quickly and safely as possible. It made sense, and he certainly didn't want anything to happen to his Team in the event of his death, but it certainly was gruesome thinking about how emergency contingency plans had been made in case the absolute worst happened to him, so having the plan in place made perfect sense.

Octavia nodded to Lexi. "I carry something like that, yes, but I hope to never have to use it."

"Me neither, but there's only so much control I have over this world, so it's better to be prepared and not need it than to need it and not have it," Lexi sighed, zipping the pouch up, tucking it back into her bag. "Were you annoyed when he decided to bring on a whole outside team to help you in your job? I imagine I might've been if Andy'd done it."

The Persian woman shook her head. Andy had wondered how her voice had gotten the Spanish tinge to her accent but didn't want to be impolite ask. "It makes my job easier, even if I dislike knowing they aren't quite as invested in my principal as I am."

Lexi laughed in agreement at that. "If he dies, they don't have to worry about finding somebody new to fuck. Yeah, I find that's incentive for me to keep Andy as safe as I can."

"I do not think your principal is quite as careless as mine is," Octavia said with a slight smirk.

"Oh, I'd happily put Andy up against Nathaniel any day."

"Hey!" Nathaniel laughed. "We're *right here*."

"And?" Octavia said, her smirk not having shrunk one bit.

"The things we put up with," Nathaniel said to Andy with a laugh of his own.

"Speak for yourself," Andy chuckled, glancing back out at the Pacific Ocean. "I'm happy to do whatever Lexi tells me in times of crisis."

"And when it's not times of crisis?" Lexi asked, arching one of her slender black eyebrows at him. "Why not then, hm?"

"Hey, the book tour went fine and you advised me not to do that at first."

"Fine, you mean, except for the shooting."

"That wasn't at or *about* me."

"It was still *near* you."

"So was the shootout at the house," Andy laughed, "and I listened perfectly well then." He turned to glance over at Elliott, pressing his hands together in gratitude. "Thanks again for coming to our rescue there," he told the older man. "I know it might've looked like we had it under control, but I was nervous as all hell, especially considering we had C4 on the vault door."

"It didn't have detonators in it, Andy, I told you!" Lexi protested, still grinning while she did, as if she found his nervousness charming.

"Not a problem, sir," Elliott told him, his voice deep and gravelly, like a thousand cowboys on a million dusty roads. "We were happy to help, and no, sir, you did not look much like you had it under control. You looked like a handful of kindergarteners who'd managed to

accidentally get a grizzly bear into a bear trap. I think you were still more scared of them than they were of you, and you lot had them in handcuffs and naked after they'd rescued you from their countrywomen." Elliott's face hinted at a smile he wasn't allowing himself to show. "The Air Force must've very much had their hands full to have such a shitty response time."

"Their people took swings at General Bonner, my friend Phil Macros, his co-worker Bill McKenna, and a few others, but I guess they thought getting the public face of the American response to DuoHalo would be a feather in their cap, so they sent their meanest crew after me. Thankfully, the Empty Wives team was there to handle them, otherwise shit would've definitely gone sideways pretty damn quickly."

"Hell of a few weeks you've had, Andy," Nathaniel said with a smile.

"And I'm still not out of the soup yet," Andy said, glancing back at his phone once more, cursing how long the other team was taking to get in place. The last thing he wanted was for them to get spotted and people to have a chance to prepare for their arrival. "I don't know why, but I've got a pretty bad feeling that LP's deep in the weeds and needs our help a great deal."

"I thought you said the visit was hard to get a read on," Nathaniel said.

"That's true, but the fact that we weren't allowed to speak to LP alone at any time while we were there?" Andy shook his head with a sigh. "Something was very much not right with him, and even going through their tour felt... off."

"Did they get hit by a CCP strike team as well?" Lexi asked Andy.

"They did, but according to the information they sent up the food chain, they 'handled it,' although details beyond that are a little sketchy," Andy said.

"Details for anything about that place are *super* sketchy," she grumbled.

"I agree with you, Lexi, and that's why we're where we are."

Andy's secure line message terminal chirped and he glanced down eagerly to read the message.

-We go in 2 min, at 4pm exactly.-

"Okay folks, 2-minute warning," Andy said to the gathered group, seeing the Security Services members were already getting ready, so he suspected the pair had gotten the same alert message he had. "We're about to roll in, but remember, we're trying to do this peacefully, and under no circumstances should this turn into a bloodbath. We're not even the primary on this, but the secondary is almost as important, because it means we're ensuring nobody sneaks out the back way. Remember, we think they may have done something to the serum, so people may act strangely. Do your level best to keep your cool, but we aren't letting *anyone* leave the premises, no matter what their reasons. Everybody got that?"

"Heard, sir!" came back the response from a dozen or so women holding machine guns, which Andy couldn't help but admit felt kinda cool.

"Alright, folks, let's go save our people."

Everyone began piling into Humvees, Tesla Model Ys and Escalades, as they lined up and started heading towards the giant wall fences of Valhalla Shores. There were only two entrances to the campus, and they needed to hit both at once, otherwise there was a good chance word might leak and runners might make a break for it. Andy's Model Y was right up front with the Security Services Humvee right behind him.

Lexi brought the Model Y up to the gate and one of the two airmen on guard duty moved out of the box and over towards the driver's side window, gesturing for Lexi to roll it down. Just then, the two Security Services members hopped out of their Humvee and moved quickly and efficiently towards the guards, their weapons drawn and pointing with intent.

“Weapons down, ladies,” the lead Security Services officer, Captain Shepherd, said to the two guards. “This base is being given a full inspection under suspicions of unauthorized and perhaps unnatural research, but all you two need to do right now is sit down and shut the fuck up.” The two guards looked like they were deer caught in the headlights, the one still inside the booth glancing at an alarm button on the wall, but Shepherd shook her head. “Don’t do it, airman. Any move towards that button will be considered an act of treason and I will be forced to shoot you.”

It seemed like that was enough for the two women guards, as both stepped forward and out of the booth, letting the other Security Services officer put twisticuffs on them and seat them on the ground.

“What now, Captain?” Andy asked her.

“Now, sir, we stay here, lock down the exit so no rats scurry out, and you, well, you go find your man, see if he can give up the ghost about what the *fuck* is going on in here,” Shepherd said to him.

Messages were being relayed back and forth on a secure data line, and the message came down the pipeline that the main front gate had been taken without anyone being tipped off, so the vehicles were rolling in and fast, almost like it was a rolling strike. They were cutting off communications lines for the people of Valhalla Shores as they moved in because they didn’t want a chain reaction, they didn’t want everything to go south and collapse. The minute the warning hit, they knew all the reprobates and guilty parties were going to scatter like cockroaches in the sunlight. And that moment was going to hit before they got throughout the entire base, but they needed to push it out as long as possible, because nothing was going to put that problem back in the box.

Andy felt like he was on the frontlines as their Tesla headed straight for the lion’s den, as they pulled up on the main buildings, and Lexi and was out the door before he felt like the vehicle had even come to a complete stop, holding a rifle she’d been loaned by the Air Force for the raid. They moved over to Structure C and Andy gave Lexi the nod. Melody had been left to guard the manor and the family, so Lexi was accompanied by a woman named Acuna from Elliott’s team as backup.

They burst through the front door and the woman at the front desk was about to reach for either her phone or her gun when Lexi drew down on her, Acuna making sure to give the lobby a quick sweep. “Hands way, way, *way* up, sister,” Lexi cautioned. “I’m hoping you’re just a gate jockey doing her job, but if I see you so much as twitch funny, I gotta put you down, and we both know it, m’kay?” She looked over at Andy, giving him a nod. “Cuff her.”

While they’d been waiting, the tac team had taught Andy how to apply zipcuffs quickly and correctly, so that was going to be his job as they moved up to find Lesser Phil. He pulled the woman’s arms behind her back and zipcuffed them tightly together.

The airman looked up at Andy, and there was a bit of desperation in her eyes. “Knock me out. Please. Or cover my ears.”

“What?” Andy said.

“I don’t have time to explain, sir, so please... please just knock me out...”

Acuna stepped over and slammed the shoulder brace of her rifle into the woman’s face, knocking her unconscious. “The hell was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Andy said, “but I sure as hell don’t like it. C’mon, let’s go.”

“One sec,” Lexi said, stepping to the desk. She couldn’t disable the alarm from the lobby, but she could at least see where the guards and their checkpoints were, and thankfully it looked

like Structure C wasn't one of the buildings with the massive amounts of guards everywhere. She picked up the phone to turn on the PA system, but then just set it next to a desk speaker as she pulled up a web browser and set it to Lofi Hip Hop Radio, letting that play over the airwaves, so people couldn't use the PA system to communicate in the building. It would be clear something was slightly wrong, but they wouldn't be able to let the whole building know at once.

They snagged the keycard from the guard and headed over to the elevator, pushing the third-floor button as the elevator began to move. When the doors opened on the third floor, people were looking around, confused by the music that was playing through the air.

"LP!" Andy shouted, and Lesser Phil's head popped up from one of the cubicles before ducking back down, popping up again with noise-canceling headphones strapped onto his ears, a big smile on his face as he started running over towards them, holding an iPad with him. Andy gestured to the headphones, and LP grabbed his tablet and typed into it.

-I'll tell you shortly, but don't let anyone from Valhalla Shores SAY ANYTHING.-

They headed back to the elevator, as Andy sent a message across the secure channel. *'Homer One to Zulu Actual, do not let anyone outside of our team speak inside target area. Have been warned by recovered asset.'*

'Zulu Three, can confirm. Personnel seem boobytrapped.'

'Actual here: Boobytrapped how?'

'Three reporting: Saw one woman say something and then half a dozen women just blanked out and fell to the ground.'

'Actual here: Switch to rubber bullets, gas masks and tear grenades. Use flashbangs liberally. No way to tell friendlies from foes.'

The music from LP's headphones was leaking out of the edges, which meant it must have been absolutely deafening for LP. Nine Inch Nails, and it sounded like the Broken EP, angry and aggressive and full of heavy crunchy sounds. Andy saw LP gesturing wildly at his tablet, so he glanced down and saw what LP had typed. *-Only women can issue commands and even then, only verbally. Men incapable of issuing orders.-*

He nodded and then sent another message across the channel *'Homer One: Asset reports men cannot trigger boobytraps.'*

'Actual here: Level of confidence in that intel, Homer One?'

'99%, Actual. No reason to doubt, every reason to believe.'

'Copy that. Knock out everyone, but women are higher priority. Actual on the move. Location, Homer One?'

'Structure C but heading over to General Ibanez's office now.'

'Meet you there, Homer One.'

When he'd asked for a callsign, General Bonner had said he could be called Homer. He'd hoped it was after the poet, and not the Simpsons character, but the General wasn't saying either way. It probably didn't even matter. They hopped back into the elevator and Andy typed into LP's tablet – *What the hell is happening here?*

Tell you when we can speak, but long story short, they found a way to make people obey commands, whether they want to or not.

What the FUCK, LP?

That wasn't my division! There were several factions here when it started. Now there's only Ibanez.

The elevator dinged and they were back on the ground floor as they headed over towards the main building, finding Bonner and five members of her team in the lobby waiting for them,

the guards already handcuffed and gagged.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on here, Rook?” General Bonner asked him as they approached.

Andy gestured to LP to take his headphones off, something he did nervously. “LP, what the hell’s happening here?”

“They’ve found a way to induce a kind of ‘spike’ into an existing or even a new Team, by giving an altered version of the serum to a woman before she’s paired up. She then becomes a sort of Override for anyone in her Team, man or woman alike, and anything she says must be obeyed if the command words are given, and there’s nothing—”

“Apollo echo! Stop breathing!”

General Ibanez was standing by the elevator, holding a cellphone in her hands that had just played the sound clip they’d just heard played at maximum volume.

Phil suddenly looked panicked, gesturing *wildly* at his throat, while all the guns trained on General Ibanez.

“Easy there, folks... you’re going to let me walk away, or your friend there is going to suffocate to death,” Ibanez said as she started making her way over towards Andy, inching her way towards the doorway, cellphone still held in one hand. “Ever watched a man suffocate, especially when it’s just his own inability to breathe that’s killing him? Nasty way to die.” She got to the point where she was almost right beside Andy, but clearly she hadn’t seen the holstered weapon on his hip because when she was nearly on top of him, Andy drew the gun, turned and shot her in the left thigh with one quick, fluid motion, like it was as natural as breathing for him, and *no one* in the room had seen it coming.

“Make him start breathing right now, otherwise I’m going to introduce you to so much pain, you’ll only wish you were dead,” Andy said, pointing the gun at her slumped form, even as he felt all the military personnel tensing up, some of them considering drawing on him.

“You would’n—”

BLAM!

The pistol in his hand belched another round of lead and fire, this time into the General Ibanez’s other thigh, as General Bonner’s women lifted their guns to point at Andy very nervously before Bonner gestured for them to lower them. “I’ve missed the femoral artery both times. Shit, I’ve gotten good enough at my aim that they’re mostly just flesh wounds. The next one’s taking off a fucking kneecap, you bitch,” Andy said, his voice like burning steel. “After that, I’m going to start targeting places with even more nerves. I write fantasy horror for a living, General Ibanez, and you are threatening one of the very few remaining male friends I have left on this planet. So, if you’re wondering if I know how to hurt you, I’ve got ideas that would curdle your morning milk, and I fucking damn well have the will to use them. I’m not going to count to ten. Shit, I’m not even going to fucking *count*. Make him breath, now, or you will struggle with your last thousand breaths, you’ll be in so much pain.”

Ibanez looked at Andy for a second, as if trying to size him up, and a half a second later, he was certain he saw genuine fear in her eyes, because it was now terrifyingly clear to her that if Andy’s friend died here, she too would die here as well, but nowhere near as fast, Andy would make certain of that even if it killed him.

The General glanced at the phone, and then pushed a button, as another sound clip cut loudly through the air so quiet you could hear a flea cry. “Apollo Echo! Continue breathing!” the voice from the phone said and suddenly Lesser Phil wheezed in a desperate gasp of air, panting to recover his stability, as Andy took the phone from Ibanez.

Andy took one more look at General Ibanez's face, and then cracked her in the forehead with the bottom of the pistol grip, knocking her out.

"Jesus, Rook," General Bonner said, stepping over towards him. "Were you really gon—"

"Yes," Andy said, as calmly as if he'd been discussing the weather. "I would've just killed her to start with if I wasn't worried about not being able to unlock the phone if I did that."

"It's not an easy thing to live with, Rook, taking a life."

"Any worse than watching your friend suffocate to death because you don't have the willpower to help them?" Andy said, turning that stone-eyed gaze up to stare down the General. "Thought not." He turned to glance at Lesser Phil. "What the *fuck* happened here?"

"Fucked up shit," LP said, still struggling to recover his composure as he stood up, but found his feet wobbly. "Why do you think I tried to get your help?"

"You didn't really reach out to me about it."

"Couldn't."

"Explain."

"In early January, a covert ops team was able to get a small crate containing doses of the Gabon version of the Quaranteam serum, which they were safely able to bring back here to Valhalla Shores," LP said, moving to sit down on one of the benches in the lobby. "You know about the pacification part of that one, yeah?"

"Yeah, only just," Andy said. "I learned about that yesterday."

"Well, in January of this year, we got a whole crate of it, and one of the doctors here began tearing it apart, seeing if they could figure out what made it different," Lesser Phil grumbled. "I'm not supposed to *know* any of this, mind you, but that's why I was trying to get your attention, not coming to the bachelor's party or even the wedding, because I would have to have had my handler with me, and if she got a whiff I was trying to signal you, she could've made me jump off a ledge or something, and bye-bye to me."

"Your handler?"

LP nodded. "Every Team here in Valhalla Shores has one, someone who's part of Ibanez's little cabal. They have a sort of mental key into anyone they're bound to. They say a two-word phrase then issue an order, and then whoever's on that Team that can hear the order has to do it, no matter what it is. And they've ordered some wild and heinous shit."

"Shit," General Bonner said. "One of the women said 'Zeus Neptune – Forget 2021,' to a room full of people, and suddenly I was staring into a sea of blank faces. You're telling me they just lost all their memories of this year?"

"Every single one of them – totally gone," LP said.

"Fuck!" the General shouted, stamping her foot.

"How does it work, LP?"

"I just told you."

"No, how does getting a handler work?"

"Oh," he said. "I sort of know the broad strokes, but not all the specifics. They give a woman a spiked version of the Quaranteam serum – it's some combination of our serum, the Gabon serum and the Sergei Swerve; they call it the Rover Variant – and when she imprints on a man, that man's guaranteed to go into a regeneration state, but as he does, much like women don't know they say 'imprinting,' the man'll say 'awaiting override.' The next two words he hears are that woman's override phrase, and as the man has sex with the rest of the members of his Team later after he's woken up again, it'll spread the override phrase to all of them, one by

one until they all have it installed in their brains, like a fucking Trojan horse brainworm.”

“Jesus, LP,” Andy said. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you call for help?”

“They control the communications lines here, and the only reason I know what I know is because I’ve been snooping around and haven’t gotten *caught* yet,” LP said, exhaustion plain on his face. “We were all given a command that we couldn’t talk about our experiences with the serum outside of the walls of Valhalla Shores, so if I’d gotten permission to come to your wedding, I couldn’t think of any way to let you know we were in trouble. I can tell you *here*, because the way they said it, I’m free to talk about it within the walls, which is how I got the rest of my Team prepared when this day came. I tried to tell you, man. I desperately wanted to get you alone for even two minutes when you were here recently, but I couldn’t get the damn guards to leave us alone for even a minute. Speaking of which, what took you so fucking long to come back here?”

“Niko gave birth to our son last week, literally right after I left here.”

LP chuckled, shaking his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “My *fucking* luck, am I right? Congrats, man. I sent a text message to Brandy as soon as I saw you, and she knocked out Chelsea, our handler in the Team, got her tied up and gagged so she can’t say or do anything, but I guess after your visit her last week, Chelsea prerecorded some voice clips for the General to use in case of emergency, to use me as leverage against you.” LP looked down and then looked back up at Andy’s face. “You were really going to—”

“You’re fucking right I was,” Andy said calmly, still looking at General Ibanez’s unconscious bleeding body. “Shit, I still half want to, but we’re going to need her alive to unpack what sort of clusterfuck they’ve gotten us into. Tell me this brainrape version of the serum is contained entirely in Valhalla Shores.” When LP didn’t answer, Andy turned back to look at his friend with terror in his eyes. It wasn’t just bad; it was fucking next level bad. When it rained, it always fucking poured like he was Noah, and God had a woodshop project for him. “Jesus, Phil, how much?”

“About fifty thousand doses went out last week,” Lesser Phil said, the weight of it like a ton of bricks on his shoulders. “It was the third consecutive week of shipments about that size. All said and done, since they started, I’d say close to a quarter of a million doses of this shit are loose and in the wild right now. I have no idea where the fuck Ibanez sent them. They could be here in the states, or she may have sold them off to the highest bidder. I couldn’t find any paper trail on where they’re going once they leave the base. I’m sorry, man.”

Andy glanced down at Ibanez’s unconscious body and kicked her once in the gut as he shouted, “FUCK!”