

(Author's Note: I generally don't do 'content warnings,' but I feel like in this one particular case, I need to make an exception. The following chapter is meant to be highly reminiscent of the events of 9/11/01, and as such, may provide a challenge for some readers. I've written this chapter specifically so that it can be skipped if needed, although obviously I feel its inclusion in the story is important, otherwise I wouldn't have written it. That said, for anyone who was gathered around a television on that cruel morning of 9/11, this will have strong echoes of that, and if you feel you don't want to read the chapter because of it, I absolutely want to respect that decision. What happens in this chapter will be referred to again later, but never shown again in quite such graphic detail. -Dev)

Chapter Fourteen

December 18th, 2020

The book signing in Denver the day before had gone off without a hitch. They'd flown into Denver airport and headed straight towards The Tattered Cover, where Andy's fans were eagerly awaiting his arrival, albeit in smaller numbers than originally anticipated. The cold weather had discouraged people from protesting too heavily, although there had been a few hardened, determined people who had insisted on parading around with their signs, although the media coverage was still lingering around, the story of the shooting a few days ago still lingering over the general reporting around his book tour.

The fans had been incredibly gracious and welcoming, and when he'd read an excerpt from the book under development, he'd gotten a standing ovation for almost five minutes. The security was also a little bit stronger this time around, but it didn't feel constrictive, and if an attendee wasn't observant, they might not have even noticed there were additional guards stationed around The Tattered Cover bookstore the event had been held at, one of the largest bookstores in America.

Overall, it had let Andy relax a little bit yesterday, since he had been nervous of a repeat of the experience back in his home state of Ohio. The time spent with Niko's mom had certainly soothed his nerves some, as well as how welcoming to their family she'd been. (The fact that she'd just found out she was going to be a grandmother probably helped also.) And since the signing had been without issue, Andy's guard had been slightly lowered when they got back to the hotel on the night of the 17th.

The hotel itself had been set up incredibly well, with one massive bed, plus a couple of additional beds so that security could sleep somewhere during their down time. It felt like it was nice and safe, and they'd slept well, all huddled together in one big pile like they preferred to, given the option. It was a good time at rest.

That should've been what set warning flags up inside his brain, but he was hoping that maybe, just maybe, he'd earned a bit of a respite.

Instead, he woke up on the morning of the 18th to Niko shaking his shoulder.

"Andy, I think you'd better come take a look at this."

He was going to remember this exact morning for the rest of his life.

Andy got out of bed, extracting himself from the sea of still slumbering bodies with a casual adeptness he'd gotten better at over the last few months, and moved out of the bedroom into the foyer, where Alexis and Melody were already awake, watching the television, a sort of almost exhausted shock having settled in on their faces, and the look had Andy concerned, more concerned than he'd thought he'd ever been.

The clock read 9:52 a.m CST.

“We bring you continuing coverage of the crisis in New Zealand, I’m Shannon Mason for CNN. For those of you just joining us, allow us to recap the events of the last few days,” the woman on television said to them from her studio somewhere in Atlanta. She was the sort of blonde talking head that seemed to be a staple on the news networks, but she looked like she was exhausted, the toll of what she’d been talking about clearly weighing on her. He wondered how long she’d been on the air. “In February of this year, the small country of New Zealand shut its borders down just as the twin pandemics of DuoHalo and Covid began, and as such, had circumvented the heavy casualties that had affected the rest of planet. Since February, they had reported zero cases of either disease. Up until three days ago, when people in New Zealand began dying off in large numbers. The government of New Zealand initially attempted to keep it quiet, at first, to try and prevent a panic, while reaching out to the US government for emergency support but word broke internationally late last night.”

“Oh god,” Andy said, moving over to sit down on the couch as Niko sat down next to him, snuggling in hard against him, her lip quivering a bit nervously. He felt that nervous pit in his stomach that he’d only had once, half a lifetime ago, early in the morning on September 11th, 2001. He’d been nineteen, just starting his second year of college, when he’d been walking to class in the morning, seeing that people were huddled around televisions. He’d sat down in the lobby of one of the buildings with several dozen other students watching on a television that had been playing the same thing every other television across America was playing. He imagined that might be happening again right now, endless masses glued to the television in fear and shock.

“The United States *had* been in negotiations to start delivering the serum to New Zealand starting in January, because the small country had been confident that they had the disease under control,” the reporter said. “As such, they were not prepared to discover that the disease known as DuoHalo had somehow invaded their shores, unbeknownst to its citizenry. This problem was compounded by the fact that because New Zealand was so confident in how secure their borders were that they had given their citizens free access to travel *within* during that entire time. Because of this, the...” The reporter stopped, looking down at her hands nervously before looking back up and into the camera again, a tiny tremble visible in the woman’s hands atop the news desk. “Because of this, we are currently operating on the assumption that the entire population of New Zealand is currently carrying the DuoHalo virus. As such, the United States is making an emergency shipment of the Quaranteam serum to the country that should be touching down shortly. We have with us via remote satellite Doctor Charlotte Varma, who is part of the United States’s team dedicated to combating the DuoHalo epidemic, and one of the researchers who worked on the Quaranteam serum almost since its inception. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us this morning, Doctor Varma.”

“I only wish it could be under better circumstances, Ms. Mason,” Charlotte’s familiar face said, split screen on the television, with the reporter on the right and the doctor on the left.

“I think we all feel that way, Doctor,” the reporter said, clearly shaken. “Can you tell us what the current state of the population of New Zealand is right at this moment in time?”

“Yes, ah. Yes.” Andy had seen Charlotte during dark times before, when he’d helped pull her and her daughter from the clutches of Arthur Covington the Fourth, but her face looked like she was desperately struggling to keep it together, something which made the whole moment even more uncomfortable for Andy to watch. “So, two days ago, the city of Christchurch reported its first casualty from DuoHalo, something which wasn’t supposed to be possible. Because the country had closed its borders off, many initial reports which were presenting as DuoHalo were ignored by local authorities, until things turned severe in rapid succession.”

“Why did local medical authorities discard diagnoses of DuoHalo in such large numbers, Dr. Varma, and did that disregard complicate things?”

“It certainly did not help them any, Shannon, although even if they had correctly diagnosed DuoHalo upon first presentation, it would’ve really only bought them an additional twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and while that may sound like a lot of time, many of the consequences of their actions were already, at that point, unavoidable.”

“At this point, I feel the need to warn our viewers that we will be showing some fairly graphic footage over the next few hours, and that they may wish to look away from their televisions,” the reporter said, her hands balling up into fists. “How bad is it looking for the country, Doctor?”

“New Zealand has... *had* a population of around five million people, Shannon, according to the most recent estimates, with about fifteen percent of that being in the immediate, incurable age range from 11 to 18. Almost all those young people are already dead, and those that have not yet expired will do so shortly. There is nothing that can be done about that.”

The word ‘expired’ hung uncomfortably in Andy’s head for a moment, making the deaths of approaching a million young people sound like a show on a streaming service being cancelled, rather than the mind shattering number of dead people that it was.

“The graphic footage which we are about to rebroadcast comes from local New Zealand television media, taken yesterday afternoon local New Zealand time. Doctor, can you explain to us what we’re seeing here?”

The screen cut away from the two women to show a distant shot of what looked like hospital staff tossing bodies into a large open pit in the earth. The shot was taken from enough distance so that the faces of anyone involved could not be made out, but even from the distance, it was clear the pit already held hundreds, maybe even thousands of bodies, many of them teenagers.

“Yes, ah, the death toll is so high in New Zealand right now, Shannon, that individual graves are impossible and even mass cremation is basically unscalable at the rate of which new casualties are arriving at the hospitals,” Charlotte said, her face shown in a corner of the screen that couldn’t cut away from the horror, all the color having drained from her face as she was watching it along with everyone else. “Considering the infection rate, the incubation period and the lateness with which we are arriving with the serum to try and help these people, we are expecting the best-case scenario for New Zealand is to have somewhere between twenty and thirty percent of its population alive this time next week, although I have to admit more realistic projections are putting it significantly lower, within the ten to twenty percentage range.”

“Is there a reason none of the hospital workers are wearing personal protective equipment, Doctor?” the reporter asked.

“Because, at this point, Shannon, it would be completely wasted,” Charlotte sighed. “Everyone you see in these videos, the corpses, the hospital workers, even the very camera crew filming all of this, each and every one of them is already nearly guaranteed to be infected with DuoHalo. That’s one of the reasons we’re projecting such high casualty rates. There is no one to tend to the cases that might have been less severe in terms of women’s cases, meaning that basically every person in the country that we cannot get the Quaranteam serum into within the next three to four days is going to die, both men and women alike.”

The video cut to a closer shot, showing one of the hospital workers taking a photo of one of the dead bodies with that person’s identification on their chest. The man looked like he was in his early thirties, and Andy wondered how many more just like that had already been catalogued.

“In such catastrophic conditions, all hospital workers can do is quickly catalog the dead before disposing of the bodies in the safest way possible, so as to not contaminate the soil or the ground water,” Charlotte said. “All of this information is being cataloged, but at the same time, many of the hospitals have abandoned the practice, simply choosing to focus their time on doing what they can to try and keep those cases who might be borderline salvageable alive long enough to try and get some of the Quaranteam serum into them. In the words of their Prime Minister, it is looking increasingly likely that it will be easier to take a census of those that survived than to catalog those who have died.”

The video feed cut to a shot from what looked like a block away from a major hospital, the entire building surrounded by people clogging nearly every way in or out.

“We’re getting reports that many of the hospitals are simply turning people away at this point, unable to provide them any help or support, at least until the Quaranteam serum arrives,” the reporter’s voice said. “You can see here that in some cases, the hospitals have simply been abandoned by the medical staff for the time being, as doctors and nurses have either gone home to be with their loved ones, or to try and get into line to get the Quaranteam serum as quickly as possible. Do you know anything at all about the Air Force’s plans on how they plan to deploy the serum, Doctor?”

“The Air Force will be landing two or three planes each in each of the five major cities of New Zealand – Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton and Tauranga. As you know, you have reporters embedded with a couple of those units. I expect they should be contacting you soon, as they will be able to give you much more up to date information than I can, although I’m here to help speak to the medical concerns.”

The video cut to shots of a local store apparently being swarmed with looters and rioters, the windows completely shattered, people simply walking out with armfuls of things, although the health of the rioters looked suspect, many of them coughing, staggering in their walk, their eyes heavily bloodshot, their noses dripping with mucus.

The reporter’s voice spoke again, overlaying the footage of looting. “Law enforcement has, at this point, almost mostly abandoned their efforts to keep the populace in check and are also either with their loved ones or attempting to get in line at locations that it has been reported the serum will be delivered to shortly. In some cases, they have tried to establish some crowd control at locations suspected to be serum drop points, but for the most part, they are simply completely overwhelmed on all fronts. Doctor, how fast will they be able to distribute the serum?”

“It’s not a complicated process, Shannon, but the—”

“Sorry to cut you off, Doctor, but I’m just getting word that we’ve made contact with one of our embedded reporters with the Air Force salvation team. One of our southern Pacific correspondents, Jenny Sheppard, joins us now. Jenny, can you hear me?”

The feed cut in with a shot of a brunette woman with a giant airplane in the background. She was dressed in what looked like a typical reporter’s attire but had a decidedly non-standard flak jacket on over it. Her hair was done up in a bun, and she looked like she’d only recently been woken up from a bad night’s rest, which Andy suspected she’d had on the plane on display behind her.

“I can hear you, Shannon. I’m here with the 102nd, who arrived just about ten minutes ago in Auckland, as they are preparing to head over to Eden Park, a sports venue here with a capacity of 50,000. They are planning on using this as a staging ground for the first wave of patients in Auckland, and we are expecting to roll out within just a few minutes, a little past 3

a.m. local time. It will be the first stop of nearly half a dozen this team will make over the next twenty-four hours. Between the two planes landing in each of the five major cities, there are over two and a half million doses of the Quaranteam serum that have just arrived within the last couple of hours. I asked the commander of the task force before we deployed if this would be enough and was told that this was all the supply they had available, and that they would provide as much of it as they could to people in need.”

“Jenny, how many—”

“I’m sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I’m being told we need to move right now to relocate with our hosts, so we should be able to get back to you in twenty or thirty minutes,” the reporter said, clearly being hurried by her Air Force handlers, the trucks starting to drive off as the feed froze on a still of the last image.

“Stay safe over there, Jenny, and we’ll talk to you again a little later.” The shot cut away from the field and back to the split screen of the main reporter and Charlotte. “That was Jenny Sheppard, southern Pacific correspondent, and she’ll be joining us again later. Doctor Varma, what kind of recovery can we expect from those New Zealanders who are able to get access to the serum in time?”

“The results will vary significantly, depending on what happens to them *after* they get the serum, but many of them stand a good chance of recovery,” Charlotte said. “Assuming they are able to find and partner themselves.”

“I want to get more into that, but we need to take a quick commercial break. Don’t go anywhere, our coverage of Crisis In New Zealand will be back in just a few minutes.”

The screen faded and then turned into a commercial about some older man and his need for finding a comfortable catheter, which gave Andy a moment to look away from the screen for a moment, suddenly aware that a couple more of his partners had woken up during the time he was watching and had moved to snuggle in as much as they could. He realized at some point, Emily had taken his hand and wrapped it around her own.

“This is horrifying, Andrew,” she whispered to him, her eyes filled with tears.

“I know, Em. I know.”

Melody went to go wake the rest of his partners, as Andy recognized they might not be leaving the hotel room for a while, unable to turn away from the tragedy that was unfolding on the other side of the planet but was still only as far away as their television set. By the time the rest of his partners were moving to sit on or in front of the couch, the reporter had returned to the screen. Other than some very brief filling in of what was happening to the partners who’d awoken last, nobody much felt like talking.

When the reporter came back from commercial, it was in a three-panel split screen, with Charlotte on the right-hand side and the same reporter from before, Jenny Sheppard, who was now standing inside what looked like some sort of large sports arena, where it looked like pallets of serum had just been yanked off the trucks and stacked down in large sections. Many tall plastic dividers had been laid out on the field, funneling the open area down into twenty stations, each staffed by two people, one nurse and one armed soldier, before just opening out to the back.

“We’re back with Jenny Sheppard in Eden Park within the city of Auckland in New Zealand, and Jenny, it looks like behind you, they’ve set up stations where people can get injected with the serum quickly, although I don’t see any area set up for post-injection observation.”

“Shannon, the situation here is currently so dire that the commanding officer, General Natalie Scrimshaw, told me just a few moments ago that they simply do not have *time* for any

observation or post-injection care, as the situation here is so dire,” Jenny said, her voice starting to crack just a little bit. “They do not have time for Oracle screenings or even to ensure that people are getting paired up appropriately. As soon as someone is injected, they are given a pamphlet explaining how the serum works, which instructs them to go and find a male partner as soon as they are able to, and sent onward. Any men who try to show up in this area are being redirected from entering the lines and being sent to stand around the back, so that any women coming out of the area can collectively grab a partner or form ad hoc Teams before leaving the site, if they do not have someone already in mind who they know and is both available and alive.”

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that, Jenny? Are you saying the Oracle system isn’t being used *at all* over there?” Shannon asked.

“That’s right, Shannon,” Jenny confirmed. “The decision was made en route here that New Zealand was in a complete triage situation, and that the maximum amount of the serum would have to be distributed and that the New Zealand citizenry would simply need to be trusted to fend for themselves once they were given their dose. The General told me the situation is far from optimal, but the choices were this or essentially treating all New Zealand as hospice care, so the decision was made to save as many living people as possible.”

“What kind of preparations were made in advance of your arrival there, Jenny?”

“All of the syringes are preloaded, so staffers can simply remove the cap, stick it in the shoulder of a woman, press the plunger, pull it out, toss it into a bin, hand the person a pamphlet and send them on their way. The entire process should take no more than twenty seconds, meaning they’re hoping to get thirty-six hundred women done every hour at this location alone, or close to ninety thousand women within the next twenty-four hours,” Jenny told them. “Each city has two Air Force teams in it, one stationed and one mobile. Each stationary unit will remain at its location for three days, or until their supply of the serum is exhausted. The mobile units will be changing location every two hours within the major city they’re stationed in, offering those who are too ill to travel larger distances the chance to possibly get an injection of the serum. The chyron below will list those locations for our viewers in New Zealand, although we will *not* be broadcasting their locations outside of New Zealand, for fear of someone attempting to hijack Quaranteam serum.”

“Jenny, have you had a chance to read the pamphlet they’ll be handing out?”

“I have, Shannon, and it’s a straightforward and almost brutal explanation of how the serum works, as well as the side effects associated with it. The pamphlet gives instructions to find a partner, what the imprinting process is like and what to expect moving forward. The Prime Minister of New Zealand is also going to be recording a message that’s showing on taped loop on most of the local television and radio stations, repeating the instructions from the pamphlet, as well as listing both static and mobile locations the teams will be coming to.”

“Did you get a chance to see if there were people gathered up outside of the Arena, Jenny?”

“We did drive past the crowd that had gathered in the Eden Park Outer Oval,” Jenny said as the screen cut away to show footage of tens of thousands of people all gathered up, trying to remain calm, although as with any crowd that big, it looked like there were some disputes going on, with some people struggling to try and push their way forward. “A few members of the Air Force have gone towards the gates with megaphones, telling any men who are gathered there to go the other side of the stadium, and to try and find someone to partner up with, although they are reminding those men that they should not leave with just one partner, but only once they have

found *several*. They..." The reporter choked up for a moment before continuing on reading off of some of her notes. "They are also telling anyone between the ages of eleven and seventeen to get out of line, to go home immediately, as there is nothing that they can do for them, which is a horrible thing for these women have to tell the children of New Zealand."

"I'm sorry, Jenny, didn't you mean to say women *and* men? I would have assumed the Air Force would have sent mostly female staff members, but also some of those staff members' imprinting partners, in case they were needed to stay longer."

"That's an understandable assumption to make, Shannon, albeit a wrong one," Jenny said, as generators were being turned on and heavy flood lights were filling the entire area with illumination, as the camera operator struggled to adjust to the new lighting conditions. "The general told me on the flight over that there was a concern that if there had been any men as part of this relief effort, they might have been tempted to offer themselves up to partner with some of the women here, not out of any personal gain, but simply out a sense of empathy for what these people have already endured and are continuing to endure. We were not permitted to bring our male partners with us for those same reasons, as the number of women here in need is almost beyond the mind's ability to comprehend. This rule also ensures there is a time limit to the amount of effort the Air Force can put in here in New Zealand, and helps serve as a reminder that if any of the women here, be it Air Force or press, is starting to feel the need to be reinforced, then it is likely too late for anyone in New Zealand who has not already been injected with the serum, and that we should return home to our partners."

"So, the Air Force deployment will be there for how long, Jenny?"

"Best guess at this point is five to six days, although if the casualty count continues to escalate as quickly as it has over the past day, the general tells me staying past three or four days is likely a waste of time and resources." There was something terrifying and stark about how she said that Andy thought to himself, like after four days the only people on the island nation would either have the Quaranteam serum flowing through their veins or they would be dead.

"How does the Air Force feel—"

"Sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I've just gotten word that they're about to start letting people into the arena, so we want to turn the camera over to that and let you know that it's happening."

The shot cut away from the reporter to point across stadium, with waist high steel railings erected before the plastic dividers, an effort to funnel people into orderly lines to get the serum injected, but within moments, it was clear that wasn't going to happen. Women started rushing towards the railings as fast as they could, shoving other people out of the way, clearly panicked that those few moments were the difference between life and death.

"It looks like the people are charging towards the line, Jenny," Shannon said, concern in her voice. "Are you going to be safe?"

Suddenly, there was a spray of machine gun fire into the air, which made people suddenly stop in their tracks. An Air Force officer with a microphone hooked up to a large set of speakers shouted out like the Voice of God. "Citizens of New Zealand! Walk, do not run, towards the lines! If we see people pushing, shoving or forcing their way forwards, they will be detained and maybe even shot with rubber bullets or bean bag rounds. They still hurt like a motherfucker, ladies, so you do not want to make us do it, believe me!"

The stampede shorted itself out, although whether it was the officer's voice or the half a dozen Air Force officers with their rifles pointed into the crowd, no one could be sure. Many of the women in the crowd weren't yet showing signs of infection, but there were others who were

clearly battling with early or mid-stage DuoHalo onset. As some of the zombie-like horde began to approach the rows, members of the Air Force security team had to direct a few men out of the line, as well as some women who had brought their teenage children with them.

“If you are between the ages of 11 and 17, this serum is a guaranteed death sentence,” the officer said over the speakers. “If you are male, taking the serum directly will only result in your immediate and incredibly painful death. Please proceed to the other side of the stadium and attempt to find yourself several women to partner up with, as that is your *only* chance for survival.”

“It’s...” the on-location reporter started before stopping then starting again. “It’s incredibly difficult to watch this, Shannon, knowing that the people we are seeing here represent some of the few survivors this once great island nation will have in just a few short days.”

“Jenny, we’re going to leave you for a few minutes and go over to Kayley Post, who is set up at Hagley Oval in Christchurch. Kayley, how are things going where you are?”

The screen cut to an open park area, which looked like it was filled to the brim with people being funneled through lines similar to the ones they’d seen at the sporting arena. It panned over to a bottle blonde in her late twenties, standing next to an airwoman in Air Force garb, a Latina who looked like she wanted to just go and lay down.

“Shannon, the Air Force has been up and running here for a little over an hour now, and medics are being rotated in an hour-on, hour-off shift rotation so that nobody feels too overwhelmed or hopeless regarding the situation. I’ve grabbed one of the medics just to talk with us for a few minutes about how the process has been going so far. Staff Sergeant Alice Mayer joins us briefly. Sergeant, how has it been?”

“Uh, it’s been brutal, ma’am. We’re doing our best to get as many shots into as many arms as possible, but because of the overwhelming number of infected, we can’t do any of the post-care that’s important in making sure this solution works long term that we’re accustomed to doing. We’ve been giving pamphlets and brief explanations of how it all works, but we don’t have time to answer questions. We don’t even know if they’re reading the damn things, but we’ve told them they have to take the information in the pamphlet to heart, or they could die. Most of them seem so happy just to be getting the serum, even though we’ve explained to them that’s just the first step, and that it won’t mean much if they don’t follow the rest of the steps.”

“Have there been any problems?”

The staff sergeant sighed, nodding slightly. “We’ve had a couple of people try and grab handfuls of syringes and run off with them, but we’ve been told not to waste precious time chasing them down. We’ve also had some people ask for additional syringes that they say they’re going to bring to those too invalid to make their way here.”

“Is that what you think they’re being used for?”

“Some of them, sure,” the medic said. “We suspect that some those people, however, are either attempting to give them to those in the 0% survival zone, i.e. kids and teenagers, or are disregarding our instructions and attempting to give them directly to men, which will be completely fatal. We’ve done as much as we can to warn people about those consequences, with both the pamphlets and the announcements being given every ten minutes over the loudspeakers, but there’s only so much we can do at this point. We’re attempting to triage as best we can, but the situation’s a full-blown disaster.”

The Rook family had been watching the horror show for more than a couple of hours before any of them could bear to look away, many of his partners crying or shivering, clinging onto him, his hands, his arms, any part of him they could get in contact with, as if the sights of it

all were terrifying them, and that staying in contact with him was helping them get through it.

For Andy, it was like watching 9/11 all over again, only in slow motion, with the cameras able to capture the faces of the dying, except the scale was magnified to proportions that were almost unfathomable. On that fateful September morning, the death count had been only 3000 or so people. The suspected total dead, at that moment in that location, was approaching 1 million people within the last day or so, just in New Zealand alone.

The pandemic's isolation strategy of quarantining had detached them from the reality of it all a bit, all the information having been leaked out in bits and pieces, but this was like being smacked in the face with it all at once, up close and personal, unable to turn away or hide from what was happening.

It was a microcosm of the entire mass culling of the male population of planet Earth.

Live and on television.

By the middle of the day, they were all so numb from it that they made it to the airport without anyone saying much of anything, pulling away from the television long enough to leave Denver and head up towards Seattle. Nobody joined the Mile High Club that evening. Everyone was still too in shock, praying for the people halfway across the world to hold on just a little longer, to find their way to an Air Force team, to get the serum, to live.

Just...

...live.