

Quaranteam: North West

Chapter 16 (Beta)

By BreaktheBar

The following story is based on the fantastic [Quaranteam](#) series by CorruptingPower over on Literotica. You can continue to expect general themes of light Mind Control, bonding and Harems from the original, but with a slightly edgy and alternative cast. In this chapter you can expect some group/voyeur, and a trip to find a missing person.

“Can you guys take a break for a second?” Vanessa asked.

“Just une seconde,” Ivy gasped from above me. My little Quebecoise lover was slowly grinding her hips as I drove my tongue into her pussy. I was on my back on the bed and she was holding onto the sill of the back window, her eyes closed as she twitched and stifled her groans of pleasure. Her clit hood kept nudging across my nose and she’d been leaking her juices for a while now as I teased her mercilessly.

Erica sat down fully on my cock with a groan of her own and sighed out a wordless hum.

“Vanessa, babe, this better be good. We’ve been edging Ivy for like forty-five minutes.”

“Damn, Ives,” Vanessa said. “Um, well, I- This can’t really wait. It’s about the house.”

“One minute,” I mumbled from between Ivy’s lips. I wrapped my arm around Ivy’s thigh and got my thumb on her mound, pulling her clit hood back so that my juice-covered nose and the moustache of my upper lip brushed against her clit directly. My other hand ran up her body from her thigh to her breast, holding it firmly. “Come for me, ma dulcinée,” I told her.

“Ooooooh, tabarnac! Mon ammoooooooooooouuurr,” Ivy collapsed forward against the headboard and wall of the RV, her cheek pressed to it as her entire body hunched in and she came hard. Her girlcum splattered into my mouth and I had to hold my breath and let it just run down my chin and neck. We were going to need to wash the bedsheets and pillow covers again.

“That’s it, you pretty bitch,” Erica said, and I felt her give Ivy a spank on her cute little butt cheek. “Get it.”

Ivy was shaking when she finished her orgasm, and I manhandled her off of my face and down so that I could cradle her against me as she curled into a fetal position and tried to catch her breath.

“Fuck, that was hot,” Vanessa said. Now that I could actually see her, I could see that she was still dressed in her jeans, long-sleeved shirt and high-visibility vest. She’d gone back to work the day after our first workout at Valkyrie Falls, and I was almost surprised that she’d taken the time to kick off her steel-toe boots and take off her white hard hat before coming back to the bedroom. She’d literally fallen asleep with her boots hanging off the end of the bed one night and we’d had to take them off for her, she was working such long hours. The other thing that was currently ‘off,’ at least professionally, about her at the moment was that she’d undone her belt and had a hand down the front of her jeans as she watched us.

“Babe, you want some cock?” Erica offered. My fiancée was wearing one of my t-shirts, her heavy breasts braless underneath and her nipples making delightful bumps in the fabric.

“I shouldn’t,” Vanessa hesitated.

“Go fuck her,” Ivy whispered to me with a playful little smile as she nuzzled her face into my neck.

“You think?” I asked her.

She nodded and let go of me, so I sat up and surprised Erica by rolling us over so I was on top of her and I kissed her once and honked her boobs through her shirt before I pulled out of her. I stood and turned to Vanessa.

“Harri, I don’t have ti-” Vanessa started, but I had already scooped her up in my arms and I laid her down on the end of the bed and yanked her jeans and panties down to her thighs and moved her bundled legs to the side so she was laying on her hip.

Erica grinned and rolled over onto her stomach, putting her face over Vanessa’s and looking down at her. “Really?” she asked.

“Fine,” Vanessa gasped as I ran my cock along her pussy lips, teasing her. “Just... quickly.”

I pushed into her, feeling that delightful warmth and squeeze as I entered her and her body accepted me. Erica kissed her as Vanessa let out an exhalation of pleasure. I was quickly buried in her and started to slow-stroke. “I missed you,” I told her.

“It’s only been like... four days,” Vanessa said.

“How many days did you go without his cock in at least one of your holes since you imprinted?” Erica asked.

“I know the answer,” Ivy said, rolling over and then down the bed so that she was lying next to Vanessa and kissed her cheek. “Zero.”

“Fine,” Vanessa said. “I admit it, I missed your cock too, Harri.”

“And his hands,” Erica prompted her, reaching up and taking my hand and sliding it under Vanessa’s shirt where I palmed her small titty through her work bra.

“And his hands,” Vanessa admitted.

“And his lips,” Ivy said, summoning me down with a wiggle of two fingers. I leaned down and kissed Vanessa.

“Mmmf,” Vanessa grunted into our kiss as I went particularly deep. “I haven’t not kissed him, so I haven’t missed his lips.”

“When you said you wanted a quick family meeting, I didn’t think I’d walk in on this,” Kyla said from the doorway behind me.

“Oh, sorry hon,” I said, starting to pull out. “I didn’t realize-”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Kyla assured me, rubbing my bare shoulder as she stepped up and kissed my cheek, then squeezed around the side of the bed to sit on her usual side up at the head of the bed. I generally tried to keep the sexual acts with the others to a minimum when Kyla was in the same close-in space - at least keeping it across the RV from her to give a modicum of detachment. “Vanessa needs a good fuck.”

“Thanks,” Vanessa gasped, reaching out to Kyla who just smiled softly and took Vanessa’s hand for a moment and winked at her.

“So what did you need to tell us about the house?” I asked as I started thrusting a little faster, but keeping the motion smooth.

“Uuuuhmm,” Vanessa groaned. “Right, the house. Uh- Fuck that’s hitting the spot- OK. The house. So the refab work on the dorms is going super fast and we’ll probably have crews start moving in within the next couple of days. The day workers are already taking new supplies and equipment deliveries, and the road crews started work again this morning with the new surveyor plans for the bigger lots. I think we’re going to lose any privacy up at the spring within the next three days, so if any of you want to go have time up there before the construction crews are around, do it now.”

“I do,” all three of Erica, Ivy and Kyla said at once, and then we all chuckled a little.

“We’ll find the time,” I promised them. I was going to miss having the spring all to ourselves, but we’d get it back. Vanessa had already shown me the plans for our lot in the development and had made sure that the spring was well within our border, and that the brush and clearing

immediately around it would remain intact until after the construction when we could decide if we wanted to cultivate it a bit more or leave it wild.

“OK, so I’ve been squeezing in calls with the architects on the plans for the house,” Vanessa said, blinking to try and keep her focus as I sped up just a little bit more. “Every time I ask for something I basically get approved, so I don’t know what sort of limitations I actually have. I’ve already got the solarium and the studio and the home gym with the utility area. I need to know if there’s anything else you guys want. Just... fuck, Harri, that’s it, like that- I mean like ‘dream house’ kind of stuff, because I don’t know if anyone will say no.”

“A big salon room,” Erica said. “Like a hair salon, not an old-timey salon for ladies to entertain visitors. For us to doll ourselves up, but also I can set up my tattoo stuff there.”

“OK,” Vanessa nodded. “Um...” She fished with a hand down to her pants and pulled a small notepad out of her pocket and handed it to Ivy. “Could you?”

Ivy took it with a smile and grabbed a pen from one of the wall cubbies where a lot of our random stuff had accumulated (along with several sex toys and bottles of lube). She flipped to a blank page and scribbled down the idea.

“What about a stripper pole?” Kyla asked. “Then Ivy and Dani can teach me moves, and it’s supposed to be great exercise.”

“Mmm, I like that idea,” Erica grinned.

Ivy was dutifully scribbling down the ideas.

“A shooting range,” I suggested.

“A big one, or just like for your pistols?” Vanessa gasped as she reached up and put a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me closer and herself up a little as she used her hips to fuck back at me. I still had one hand on her chest, now directly on her tit as I’d wormed it under her bra.

“Well, I was thinking just pistols but if you can figure out a way to do a full-sized range then that would be cool too,” I said.

“Two playrooms,” Erica said. “They can be pretty much bare for now, just set aside the space. We’ll use one as a daytime nursery and for little kids, and another one for older kids.”

All three of the others cooed their assent at that idea, which surprised me a little. Erica and I were of an age that even if she got pregnant quickly here and then we went right back at making another as soon as possible, we were still in questionable territory. We only had a few years before she was thirty-five and would be considered a ‘geriatric pregnancy.’ Kyla, I knew, wanted

a mess of kids. It was Ivy, who was kind of terrified of pregnancy, and Vanessa with her hysterectomy that were the surprises. But then, both of them had been great with Mary's kids when they'd visited and met them.

"I was thinking a mini ballroom," Vanessa groaned. "For like hosting parties and stuff. Not massive or anything, but big enough that the kids could ride scooters in it on rainy days and stuff like that. Us not being able to have a basement made me think of my own childhood growing up with my brothers playing stick hockey in our unfinished basement."

"You mean like a rec room slash ballroom then," Erica smiled. She swept a hand through Vanessa's hair, pulling it from the younger woman's face.

"Yeah, like that," she nodded. "I'll see if we can get some extra-durable windows, and maybe it can overlook the pool and outdoor hosting area."

"Pizza oven!" Ivy blurted out, then blushed a little and clarified. "An outdoor pizza oven."

We spent another few minutes coming up with random things and discarding a few that seemed almost too outrageous. Secret rooms? Just too silly.

"Vee, how long have you been holding back your orgasm?" I asked finally. She'd gone quiet for a long minute and had her eyes closed.

"Not too long," she groaned.

"You thought Ivy getting edged was hot, didn't you?" Erica grinned.

"Well, I had two small ones while we were talking," Vanessa admitted.

"You think I didn't notice?" I laughed. "Babe, when you come your pussy clamps down on me like crazy and does this rippling thing like it's trying to suck me in and milk me."

"Well, I can't help that, can I?" Vanessa laughed.

"Ask Harri permission to come, babe," Erica said, again stroking Vanessa's hair.

My tough little construction working lover, still wearing her high-vis vest, opened her eyes and looked at me. "Harri, can I come? Can you fill up my cunt with a giant fucking load of sperm, and send my brain to the fucking moon? I need to go back to work, so I'm just going to pull up my panties and feel it leaking out of me for the rest of the day, and I'll be thinking about you constantly, and that's the best day I can think of."

"You can come when I come, beautiful," I said, leaning down and planting a hard kiss on her. She pulled an Erica and kissed me ferociously back to the point of biting my lip. I grunted and

she didn't let go, and I took that as a challenge and started really pumping into her hard until her teeth loosened on me as she moaned loudly from her throat. I pulled away and pushed her down onto the bed hard by the chest and I thrust into her in three brutal strokes, her ass smacking on my thighs as I carved in and out of her with my cock, before I unloaded.

"Aaaaaugggghh, gaaaawwwffddughuh," Vanessa moaned at the top of her voice, throwing her head back as she matched my orgasm with her own. Her orgasm released in a wash of girlcum sloshing out of her and soaking the bottom of the bed. Her moan lowered into her mumbling gibberish for a long moment before she shook her head hard and blinked. "Holy fuck I needed that," she gasped as she tried to catch her breath.

"Ungh," I groaned as I slowly pulled out her, my cock a mess of our mixed juices. Erica jumped on the opportunity first, leaning in and getting her lips tenderly on the head and starting to clean me off with a soft blowjob.

"So, no work today, or...?" Kyla asked me with a smirk from the head of the bed as Vanessa wiggled her hips so that she could pull her panties up and catch my cum as it started to leak out of her.

I barked a laugh at almost the same time I winced at the tenderness of my dick. "That depends," I said. "Are you going to want some alone time soon, or wait until tonight?"

Kyla looked down at Erica sucking my cock and bit her lip.

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It had been a week and a half, based on the timing Miriam had given me, since the Vaccine had started going public down in California but we still weren't seeing any word of it on the news. Leo was the most invested in trying to spot the Government manoeuvres in that regard - he was fascinated at having gotten a peek behind the curtain, and I would have worried he might become a crackpot if not for the fact that Dani and Aria would keep him grounded. India maybe not so much, she was the child of hippy communists (real ones who walked the walk on an actual commune) so she had a tendency to offhandedly distrust just about anything that espoused authority.

Thankfully that distrust hadn't transferred to me in my new job.

The only thing that seemed to have slipped through the new embargos nationally was a social media thing that went viral about trucks full of bodies in New York City. I likely would have been sceptical if I hadn't known what I knew - they were picking up bodies in trucks out here in the sticks of Oregon, too. Not big transport trucks, but little refrigerated box trucks driven and manned by the National Guard. I could only guess at the death toll in a place like NYC where so many people were stacked on top of each other. I'd been there once for a trip in high school and the fact that it dwarfed Portland in almost every way had boggled my young mind at the time.

Now I'd seen Paris, Berlin, and Istanbul, not to mention a bunch of the cities across the Middle East, through my time in the military and while New York was still the *biggest* I'd seen, I had realized Portland wasn't as big a city as my teen mind had thought.

Even still, transport trucks full of bodies disappearing in the night? It was chilling.

It had also led to some hard questions over at Valkyrie Falls. Erica had come along and met everyone up there on the first supply run I did for them; mainly because she needed to sit down and talk with Sara and Abigail about facilitating things for them and what other supplies they would need. But also because she wanted to get eyes on both Josie and Spencer, who Vanessa, Kyla and Dani had spread the word about back home. Both Josie and Spencer had been a little quieter than I'd known them to be when meeting my fiancée, and it had been kind of funny to see two such physically powerful women intimidated by Erica.

Ivy had come up on the second supply run with me, and things had been a lot more playful. In between supply runs, Kyla, Dani and I had gone up twice more for workouts - Vanessa had needed to back out due to the construction work starting up again - and things had stabilized a bit as Abi trained me and Spencer trained both Dani and Kyla. Both of the girls pointed out that Josie was never far away when I was around and ribbed me about it, and both Josie and Abi had continued to shower with us after our workouts.

It was on the third supply run, which was the second one with a big load of groceries that took eight people to unload from the truck in one trip, that I had to field the questions about the viral video and explain that it was likely true, and what I knew of how we were handling things here in the region. That had been a sobering conversation for a lot of us, myself included. Every time I'd gone to Valkyrie Falls before then, even that first time doing the Welfare Check, it had been an upbeat place full of women who took charge of their lives and were constantly seeking to better themselves.

Knowing something is real, and seeing it play out, are two different things.

Dani had done the trip with me this time and we were heading back out to the truck when Melina came jogging out to the parking lot. "Sheriff! Hold on a second." I hadn't exactly spent much time with Melina, only meeting her in passing just like most of the clients at the Falls. She was the blonde bodybuilder who was stunningly gorgeous and was obviously highly focused on her appearance. Her face was almost too perfect and symmetrical and I guessed she'd either had a bit of work done or was a former beauty queen, and she sported a full, round bosom that she were just on the edge of looking like they were bolted on.

"Hey, Melina," I said as she jogged over and stopped. She had a worried look on her face, not that I hadn't left several of those after the conversation we'd had in the kitchen, and she sucked her lips in between her teeth for a moment as she put her hands on her hips. "What can I do for you?"

"I- Well, I don't know if you can help with this," she said.

"If he can, Harri will try," Dani said, coming back around the truck and giving the woman a caring smile. "Just ask."

Melina took a breath and then nodded. "After the first time you came here, I tried calling home and to the local police and I haven't been able to get ahold of anyone. I haven't been able to get ahold of my boyfriend for almost three weeks now. I know that we're not supposed to travel or anything, and if I leave here I can't come back, but I'm starting to get really worried. I was wondering if you've got any way to maybe help me track him down?"

"Well, that might depend on a few things," I said. "You haven't been able to get ahold of anyone back home?"

"My parents died years ago, and I don't have any siblings," Melina said. "I have some aunts and uncles and stuff, but they all live out on the East Coast. I haven't been able to track down a few of my friends either, but I'm trying to prioritize my worry here."

"Mmm," I nodded, thinking to myself that this wasn't panning out to sound very good. "Where are you and your boyfriend from? I can try giving a call to the local PD with my rank to see if that gets any answer."

"Just down in Eugene," Melina said.

"Oh," I said, a little surprised. I would have pegged her for a Californian for sure with her look. "That's only like three hours away."

"Four with traffic," Melina nodded. "Not that there is much, from what I understand. I'd go myself, but Abi says she really can't let me come back and if I go down there and find out he's just ghosting me or something... well, being without the ability to hit a gym would really hamper my ability to cope with shit."

"I totally understand," I said. "Look, I don't know if calling will do anything, but I could maybe take a drive down and see what's up."

"Really?" Melina asked, her eyes getting big as she put a fist to her mouth like she was trying to hold back the hope she was feeling. "You can do that?"

"I can stop by your place, and check in with the local cops if I can't find him," I said. "Shouldn't be too hard." It also wouldn't put me at any large amount of risk compared to Melina going down herself. All I'd need to do afterwards is have a bunch of sex with my partners. *Oh no, poor me.*

Melina thanked me, pulling me into a powerful hug actually cracked my lower back a little, and Dani shot me a look asking me to wait as she walked the other woman back to the building with

an arm around her shoulders. When Dani came back she stepped up into the truck passenger seat and shut the door.

“You sure you want to help with this, Harri?” she asked. “It’s very sweet of you, but-”

“I might as well, Dani,” I said. “There aren’t as many welfare checks for Kyla and I to handle anymore, and if I can help her find a little peace of mind just so she knows if something is wrong or not... Well, I think it’s worth it.”

Dani smiled softly. “You’re a good man, Harri,” she said. “Just don’t burn yourself out trying to help everyone, all the time.”

“I won’t,” I said as I started the truck.

“Not bad, by the way,” Dani said with a smirk.

“Not bad, what?” I asked.

“Oh, adding another Muscle Mommy to the list of hotties that want to bang you,” Dani chuckled.

“There isn’t a list, and she’s got a boyfriend,” I said.

“Says you, there’s no list,” Dani shot back. “And I’m not ashamed to say I’d be at the top of that list if it weren’t for Leo. Remember how I almost imprinted on you instead of him?”

“‘Almost’ is a little strong,” I said. “But thanks.”

“No problem, buddy,” she grinned and patted my arm. “But there’s definitely a list.”

“Oh my God,” I sighed as I pulled the truck off of the forest path and onto the highway, heading for home. “There is no list!”

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I left early the next day. I’d thought about leaving the truck for Kyla to use if she needed it and borrowing either Erica or Leo’s car for the road trip down but was easily talked out of it by the girls. Erica walked me out to the truck that morning.

“Love you,” she said with a little kiss. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Wait, how many things are on that list?” I asked. “Like, five?”

“Seven, now,” she smirked. “No more sex with guys who aren’t named Harrison Black. And no more daydreaming about hooking up with a guy named Harrison Black. That last one became redundant.”

I snorted and kissed her. “Hold down the fort,” I said. “I’ll be back by dinner.”

“And I’ll be waiting with bells on,” she said. “But do me a favour?”

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Don’t bring home any strays,” Erica said.

“What, like a dog?” I asked.

“No, babe. Like some lady who needs shelter or something,” Erica said. “Because it would be just like you to find some beautiful young thing, down on her luck and in a desperate situation. And probably injected with the Vaccine but not imprinted yet. That’s the kind of luck you have.”

“OK, so say I really do find that beautiful woman, down on her luck and destitute, and in dire need of imprinting. What am I supposed to do with her?”

Eric rolled her eyes. “Fine, you can bring her home. But we don’t have any room in the bed. And the point of this was to say it out loud so that it wouldn’t happen.”

“Noted,” I laughed.

The drive down was downright pleasant. It was another overcast summer day, which meant I got the occasional peek at the sky but otherwise it was just pleasantly warm and I didn’t even need to wear sunglasses. Coasting down the highway and skirting through the southeast of Portland, I hit the I5 in record time and was headed due south. Traffic was almost non-existent until I hit Portland, and even then it was only a few cars on either side of the highway. I’d never liked driving so much as I did during the pandemic.

Passing through the small towns south of Portland was the same as on my way from Jewell. Salem was a slightly different story, but not by much. It wasn’t nearly the size of Portland but was the State Capital so I’d been there plenty of times as a kid and teen on school trips to different government and historical sites. The city itself looked about the same as I remembered, just sort of cleaner - with no tourism and no cars around it looked like the city had decided it was a great time to refurbish their outdoor spaces. It was downright pretty, even for a city, in my eyes.

The first two hours and fifty minutes of my trip down were a breeze. Then, right at the end, I hit the roadblock about ten minutes outside of Eugene.

“What the fuck?” I muttered to myself. There were four big, green army trucks parked across both lanes of the highway and a big tent off to one side that was some sort of a waystation or command centre. I slowed down my truck as I approached - there was one car stopped at the roadblock, and another one was being directed to turn around onto the opposite lane and sent off. A national guard soldier with a big handheld stop sign waved frantically at me as I came in behind the car ahead of me and I slowed to a crawl and then a stop. The driver of the car was being interrogated by a National Guardsman while another two were doing a security check on the vehicle, checking under it for what I could only assume would be explosives and peering inside the windows.

Another Guardsman came around that group to me but hesitated when he took in the bold white stripe and ‘Sheriff’ printed along the side. I rolled down my window as he approached and put on my best ‘I’m not someone to argue with’ glare from my MP days.

“Uh, the highway is closed,” the Guardsman said as he approached. He was dressed in his regular fatigues but had a hazmat hood over top, along with gloves. I found the medical mask *inside* the hazmat hood to be a little silly and just served to muffle the guy. “What’s your purpose of travel, Sheriff?”

“Is the highway closed, or are you interrogating travellers, soldier?” I asked. “Because the first one is understandable, but the second one breaks at least two constitutional rights that I can think of off the top of my head.”

“Both?” the soldier hedged, and then firmed up. “I mean, both. The highway is closed, and we’ve got orders to ask for the reason for travel.”

“On whose command?” I asked. “Where are your orders coming from?”

“Oh, uh, my regimental command,” he said.

I sighed and rubbed under one of my eyes, levelling my glare at him. “Why is the highway closed, private?”

“That’s classified,” he said.

“A major interstate highway is closed and it’s classified?” I questioned him. “What, did aliens crash land in the middle of Eugene or something?”

“That’s all I can say, sir,” the soldier said. “You’re going to need to turn around.”

I snorted and shook my head. “Hold on,” I said. I pulled out my phone and dialled Miriam, keeping it off of the truck speakers.

“Please don’t tell me you’re in another shootout,” Miriam answered her phone.

“Nope,” I said with a little smirk. “And hello to you too, Colonel. I’m currently on the I5 outside of Eugene, travelling on official business, and I’ve got a National Guardsman telling me it’s closed for classified reasons.”

There was a long silence on the other end and then a short sigh. “What are you doing heading that far south, Harri?”

“Investigating a disappearance,” I said.

“There’s a lot of those going on down there right now,” Miriam said.

“So this is a real thing, then,” I said.

I could practically hear Miriam quickly thinking through what options she had for how much she could, or wanted, to tell me. “Eugene is under martial law,” she finally said. “Do you really need to go in there?”

“Well, if I’m going to try and find the person I’m looking for, yeah,” I said.

“Alright. I’m going to make a couple of quick calls and you’ll be let through. Just- and I know I don’t need to tell you this, but no photos or video, Harri. No leaks.”

“OK,” I said. “Talk to you soon.”

“You too. Stay safe.”

I hung up and looked at the Guardsman. “You’re going to get a call.”

Another car pulled up behind me, and the one in front of me was turned around and sent back the way we had come, by the time the Corporal in charge of the roadblock crew got called over to the command tent at the side of the road to pick up a sat phone. I watched as several men had a quick back and forth before the Sergeant in the tent and the Corporal waved over the Private who had stayed at my door the whole time. After another quick chat, the Guardsman jogged back over.

“I’m, uh, sorry for delaying you, Sheriff,” he stammered. “We didn’t know you had clearance.”

“Well, my clearance levels seem to fluctuate by the day,” I said. “No worries, soldier. Stay safe out here.”

“Our Sergeant says you’re expected down at the HQ. We’re set up in the main Eugene Police station,” he said. “Do you need directions?”

"I'll figure it out," I said and gave him a nod.

They had to move one of the big green trucks for me, the engine in the thing making my bowels shake as it turned over heavily. All it did was remind me of days I thought had been long behind me. I could just barely hear the guy in the car waiting at my rear shouting at the Guardsmen when they didn't let him follow me.

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Parking at the Eugene PD was... limited. Not because there weren't many spots, but because the place was packed. More army trucks, along with some humvees and jeeps, took up a good portion of the lots on either side of the station and into the commercial office space around it. Several staging tents had been deployed outside the front door in the little courtyard-like area and the grass of the front lawn was torn up from trucks and lots of travel over a short amount of time. The entire area looked like a mix between an army depot and the remains after a big music festival.

Except that, other than a couple of National Guard posted up at the front door, there wasn't anyone around.

I pulled into the visitor parking area right at the front, my pickup flanked on either side by military jeeps. As I approached the front door both of the National Guardsmen glanced at each other and looked ready to stop me, but I stopped short and pulled my new badge out of my back pocket. It was in a little leather frame that I had attached to a chain and I looped that over my head so it hung on my chest.

"Boys," I said in my MP voice and gave them a respectful nod. Between the badge, my confidence and the voice they let me through without issue. Inside there was a lot more activity going on - there was a buzz of conversations as National Guard, and several members of other military branches, along with local PD and other emergency services and civilians that I assumed were running admin roles were all working in a quiet frenzy. Despite the energy through the room, there was also exhaustion - big maps of the city were posted on walls with neighbourhoods and areas coloured in quickly, or with stats written across them.

When no one immediately approached me, or even really noticed me, I went up to the front desk where I assumed a secretary or officer would have usually been stationed. Still nothing, so I tapped the service bell firmly. The ring cut through the noise and almost thirty people looked over at me just in that front office area.

"Who are you?" someone in the crowd asked. They were all covered in medical masks and gloves and it was hard to tell who had actually spoken.

"Sheriff of Black County," I said. "I'm-"

“Here to see me,” Captain Bloomberg said, coming out of a side corridor and pointing at me with two fingers and then giving me a ‘follow me’ beckon. That seemed enough for the various officers, both military and emergency services, and they went back to work as I skirted around the front desk and caught up to the Captain as she was headed back down the corridor.

“Captain,” I said. “Nice to see you again.”

“What happened to staying out of trouble?” Laura asked.

“I’m pretty sure that was a suggestion,” I pointed out. “And this barely constitutes as trouble.”

The Captain scoffed and shook her head. “Harrison, you just drove into a city on the edge of collapse.”

“I... really? It didn’t look that bad on my drive in,” I said.

Laura led me to an office she seemed to have temporarily appropriated and shut the door behind us, gesturing for me to sit. “You can take off the mask, I know you’re safe,” she said as she peeled off her own. “And I disinfected this whole fucking room.”

I took my mask off and took the seat she offered as the Captain sat behind the desk and sorted a few papers and then turned to me. “Yes, Harrison,” she said. “It really is that bad. Just over two weeks ago there was a run on a bank downtown when it couldn’t fulfil cash withdrawals - they weren’t out of money, their delivery was hijacked. Insurance and the treasury would have covered it. But one bank ‘failing’ cascaded into issues for all the banks, and that turned into a full-on riot. There was a full day of chaos across the city before the National Guard rolled in - looting, vigilante justice, protests, the works. The locals and the National Guard did what they could to mitigate the fallout, but best guess is there are two distinct waves of Duo Halo outbreaks that swept through, not to mention the COVID outbreaks that are shitty enough to deal with. Now I’m down here seeing if there’s anything that can be done to save folks with the Vaccine, but after the debacle with your construction site we’re low on vaccine supplies and California can’t make it fast enough for their own rollout right now. You’re literally catching me on my way out.”

“Well... fuck,” I said. Eugene was a city of around 175,000 people, give or take. Based on how Duo Halo had hit the construction site, that meant... “Fuuuuuck.”

“Yeah,” Captain Bloomberg said. “Official death toll is over 50,000 right now, and that’s just confirmed deaths. We’re expecting it to be much higher.”

The weight of it hit me like a brick in the gut. Five hundred construction workers had been the estimated death toll at the site, and that was with emergency vaccine deployment. It had seemed like a massive number. Now we were adding two zeros onto that number, *and growing*.

"I- well, shit," I said. "And this is all being kept quiet?"

"Think about it, Harrison," Laura said. "One bank has one delay, and the powder keg of this city got set off. The fact that we were able to keep it locked down is practically a miracle. The entire western seaboard could be on fire right now if people saw anything about what happened here right now. The whole city is cut off - no news, no cell service, no internet, no landlines. Every road out is blocked, and the algorithms are constantly searching for any mention of what's going on to strip it from social media."

"And if it was handled so well here," I guessed. "Eugene probably isn't the only place this has happened."

"Probably not," the Captain nodded. "But I'm not privy to that information. It's the only city in Oregon, at least. Well, other than a couple of smaller towns that are looking more like ghost towns now."

I wiped my face and sat back, sucking in and breathing out a long stream of air. "OK," I said. "So... shit."

"The Colonel said you were vague on the phone about why you came down here," the Captain said. "How about we start there."

"I'm looking for someone," I said. "I've got a name and an address."

"Why, though?" Laura asked. "And I mean this with exactly the tiny amount of respect your office holds considering I'm the one that made it legal to begin with - what the fuck are you doing down here?"

"A glorified welfare check," I admitted. "There's a woman I-"

"You're doing this for a woman?" Laura asked, levelling her gaze at me.

"Not like that," I said, holding up a hand. "She's part of a quarantine group that I've been helping out, and it's her boyfriend. She hasn't been able to reach anyone down here, for obvious reasons now, and asked me to look into it. I figured it would be less hassle for you or Miriam if I just came down here to find him myself instead of bothering you with it."

"And yet, here you are," Laura smirked. "Bothering me with it. But roll it back, Black. What's this 'quarantine group?'"

I told the Captain about Valkyrie Falls, and that just made her more incredulous that I'd stumbled across an Amazonian heaven in the middle of the forest and had somehow not only met them but befriended them and was now their go-to person for interacting with the outside world. She asked for pictures as proof and I told her I didn't have any. Then she asked for names and took

out her phone, but we quickly remembered that there wasn't any service so she couldn't look them up anyways.

"You realize that you are the luckiest fucking person this side of the Rocky Mountains, right?" she said.

"It's not a big deal," I said. "Really. They're just friendly people who needed some help."

"Miriam is not going to believe this one," Laura sighed and shook her head. "Alright, here's the deal. The records are kind of loose right now, so what I can do is hook you up with a local guide. I'm hitching a chopper ride out of here in about an hour back up to Portland, so if you get into any shit I'm not going to be around to pull you out of it again. Think you can handle that?"

"I'd argue, but I think we both know you'd win that one," I said.

"Good, you're learning," Laura smirked.

She led me out of her temporary office, after we both masked up again, and down to the main area and flagged down an admin person and spoke to her quickly. That woman took her directions and then went looking for someone else.

"She'll bring you your guide," Laura said. "And seriously, don't get into trouble."

"I won't. Thanks, Captain," I said.

She nodded and left me waiting in the front lobby area, and I had a moment to process what she'd told me. The city was fucked.

Fifty thousand dead.

I had to step over to a wall and put my hand on it to keep myself up as I tried to imagine that number in my head.

"You OK, sir?" someone asked me, and I realized my legs had buckled a bit as I'd had my eyes closed.

"Um, yeah. Yeah," I said, getting myself up and standing straight, blinking rapidly to try and clear my thoughts. The woman was dressed in a firefighter's uniform, which was to say a button-down short sleeve navy shirt with the Eugene Fire Department crest on the sleeve. She was brunette, with a sort of severe angle to her face, and while she wasn't tall she still had a somewhat powerful and active build that made me think of the women back at Valkyrie Falls. "Sorry, I just got filled in on... what's been going on."

“Mm,” she hummed with a single nod. There was a sort of hollowness to her expression that told me she’d probably been going through waves of what I’d just been feeling. “My name is Kristine. I’ve been ordered to help you get around town?”

“Yeah, yes,” I nodded, offering her my hand. “Sheriff Black.”

“Sheriff of where?” she asked, shaking it and then immediately turning to a wall-mounted sanitiser bottle and squirting her gloved hand with it and scrubbing thoroughly. I did the same, following her lead.

“Black County,” I said. “It’s small and up north.”

“You’re Sheriff Black, of Black County?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. It was the first bit of real emotion I’d seen from her.

“Long story,” I said.

“Alright, well, if you’ve got a vehicle then we might as well take yours,” she said. “What exactly are we doing?”

“I’m trying to locate someone,” I told her as we headed for the door.

“That might be tough,” Kristine told me.

“Well, I’ve got one day down here to try and get it done,” I said. “Might as well make the best of it.”

I led her out to my truck, which got my second flash of emotion from her as she raised both eyebrows this time and whistled behind her mask. “Brand new?” she asked.

“Yep,” I nodded. “I got her a couple of weeks ago now.”

We piled into the front. “So who are we looking for, and where?”

“His name’s Victor Fenton, goes by Vic,” I said and fished the slip of paper I’d written Melina’s directions on. “Lives in a condo block at 3614 Goodpasture Loop.”

“Alright, I know Goodpasture,” Kristine said. “Let’s see if it’s still standing.”

“What?” I asked.

“There’s been more than a few fires over the last couple weeks. Some residential, some commercial. The riots were the worst for it, but every day there’s one or two. Our crews, those of us that are left, have dealt with more in the past two weeks than in the past five years.”

“Fuck,” I said and shook my head as I pulled out of the visitor parking.

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Kristine frowned. She gave me directions through town and pointed out where some of the fires had been, and we took a quick detour through a commercial neighbourhood where one of the big riot sites had happened. The buildings looked like they’d been burned out and gutted.

“You ever serve?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Took a straight shot to becoming an EMT out of high school, then transferred to firefighting after that.”

“Well, you’ve been serving in your own way,” I said. “But this - this reminds me of over there more than it does back here.”

“I can imagine,” she sighed.

We pulled onto Goodpasture and had to do a bit of driving to reach 3614, but as we got close it quickly became apparent that this wasn’t going to be easy.

“Well, I guess I jinxed it,” Kristine said as we looked out the window at the blackened pile of rubble. The place hadn’t just lit on fire, it had burned to the ground. “We’ve been prioritizing which fires we fight hard, and which we think we can let burn themselves out. We don’t have the manpower to save everything.”

“So what now?” I asked. “Is there somewhere that the displaced people from the fires are going, or are they in the wind?”

“There are a few sites,” Kristine said, picking up her phone.

“I thought there wasn’t cell service?” I asked.

“There isn’t,” Kristine said. “But I loaded the ‘Refugee Doc’ onto my phone this morning when I got in. If there are survivors from these condos, I should be able to figure out where they are in the city.”

“Do you have names?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Too many people moving. We’re just keeping them in groups. Alright, looks like the survivors from this building got moved to the Rink Exchange. If your Victor guy wasn’t dead from the virus or died in the fire, we should be able to find him there.”

“Shit, alright,” I said. “Where to?”

Again Kristine had to give me directions by memory, backtracking us to a main street before working us around through the city. We passed by a few different gathering points throughout the neighbourhoods. Several were supply depots where the National Guard were handing out provisions to people since all the stores were closed. A few were checkpoints we had to pass through, but between my truck and badge and Kristine's outfit we got through with little more than a cursory glance. One of the active places we passed was the hospital, which looked like it had been through its own warzone. All of the lower-story windows were boarded over, and several of the entrances were blocked as well. The ER entrance was manned by National Guard soldiers.

"The riots hit the hospital twice," Kristine explained when she saw I was slowing down a looking. "It was one of the first places the National Guard secured, and they are processing wounds but stopped all other treatments."

I grimaced, thinking of all the people who were missing out on important healthcare they relied on. Duo Halo was killing tens of thousands, but how many would end up dead at the end because they just didn't get what they needed?

The Rink Exchange was another National Guard-manned building, the complex parking lots stuffed to the gills with both civilian cars and army transports. I ended up needing to park a ways down the street and we walked our asses over. At the front, we got cursory inspections and then were allowed in. It looked like several of the ice rinks, all of which had been cleared and turned into barracks areas, were housing many of the National Guard but one of the rinks was housing displaced folks. Kristine led me over there, and we checked in with an admin person who huffed at us interrupting whatever she was doing. She struck me immediately as someone who had created her own little fiefdom of power and seeing someone outside her little world step in with some real authority got her back up.

It took almost an hour for us to get the answer that Victor Fenton *had* been at the Rink Exchange, but he'd 'moved out.' It took another half hour for the lady to confirm that she was allowed to release the forwarding address to us, and it ended up being another condo block in the south end of the city.

We sanitized heavily coming out of the complex and got back in the truck, again heading back to a main street so that Kristine could get us to the right place. By the time we pulled up in front of the condos, it was going on the middle of the afternoon and I hadn't had a lunch and could feel my stomach wanting to revolt against me. Ever since that first time with Erica, I'd found I was eating more, and the more sex I had the more I found myself wanting to eat for energy. Four partners had me eating three full, hearty meals a day usually. Add in the new workouts and I was usually snacking in between meals as well. All of that added up to me starting to get a little impatient, and trying to figure out where the hell I was going to get a meal. Everything in Eugene was shut down, so I'd need to drive north out of the city, past the roadblock and back to one of the other towns on the way to find an open fast food place with a drive-through.

Katrina and I parked in the condo parking lot and headed into the building. The front glass doors had been broken and boarded over, but other than that the place seemed in general good maintenance. The lady at the rinks had told us he had moved into Apartment 122, so Katrina and I made our way through the lobby and followed the signs into the corridors of the building down to the right door.

I knocked lightly at first, and we could hear the muted sound of some sort of small dog barking behind the door but there was no answer. I knocked louder. "Police. We're just looking to contact Mr Fenton," I called with authority. A door down the corridor opened as someone poked their head out, but quickly pulled back inside their own place.

The barking continued, but still no answer.

"We're on the first floor," I said to Katrina. "I'm going to go check and see if I can get a look in through an outside window. You mind staying here?"

"Sure," she nodded, and I left her.

Outside it took a bit of work to figure out the right window to peek into. As best I could tell, Apartment 122 had two windows. The first one was mostly covered and seemed to lead into a living room of some sort. The place was a mess, but a lived-in mess and not a ransacked one. There were also, oddly, several piles of what I thought was dog poop.

I figured out why when I went to the second window.

Back inside the building I met Katrina. "What did you see?" she asked.

"They're in the bedroom," I said. "Dead. We need to get in."

"That's not protocol," she said with wide eyes.

"Exigent circumstances," I side. "I don't need a warrant if there's a dead body in plain view."

"That's not what I mean," Katrina said. "It's dangerous. We're supposed to report it, and the National Guard come and handle it."

"Not good enough," I said. "I'm going in. You don't need to come in with me."

"I'm going to be in the same car as you," she said. "If you catch something in there, I'll just get it from you then."

"I'm not going to touch the bodies," I said. "And I'll sanitize. Fuck, I'll take a full bath with a hose outside if you need me to."

“...fine,” she said with a sigh. “But if I catch something from you and die, I’m haunting you every night.”

I suppressed the urge to snort - Katrina’s ghost would find my nights were a little jam-packed with women already.

It only took me two solid kicks to bust the lock on the apartment door, and a shoulder slam to push it in fully. Inside I caught the strong waft of Death, along with dog shit. Katrina started coughing and gagging in the hallway, and I tried not to let my eyes water and took shallow breaths behind my mask as I moved through the apartment. It was clearly a woman’s place, but not one who took a lot of pride in keeping it clean. There were also several unopened boxes of electronics and a big stand kitchen mixer sitting in the living space - likely looted goods from a box store. At the door to the bedroom I knelt down before opening the door a crack, the thicker stench of the corpses inside making me gag now, but I opened it a bit more and the little bundle of fur came flying out at me and I caught it.

He, and he was definitely a he with the oversized pair of fuzzy nuts hanging off him, wasn’t exactly full of energy. He was more desperate than anything as I manhandled him around in my hands so that I was holding him under his gaunt belly and he yapped and snapped.

“You’re nothing more than a puppy,” I said to the little guy. He had shit on him - likely from being cooped up in that room for days - and he stilled quickly as he ran out of what limited energy he had from going hungry for so long. I bundled him up under my arm despite the dog shit on his coat and I kicked open the door to the bedroom more fully. Inside, Victor Fenton was laying in bed next to a woman - the only reason I could tell was that he had that dumb mutton-chops moustache that was in the picture Melina had sent me of her boyfriend. The covers were thrown off and they were both naked, though not in a sexual way; it was clear that they’d both gone through an uncomfortable stretch at the end of their lives as the Duo Halo took them.

“OK, little guy,” I said, almost gagging on my words. “Let’s get you water and food.” I headed for the kitchen and scrounged in the cupboards until I found a couple of Tupperware containers, then filled one with water and set the little guy down with it so he could get some hydration while I looked around for his dog food. I found it and filled the second container with food and water to let the kibble soak and get soft to be easy on his stomach, then scooped him up away from the water bowl before he sucked back too much of it and got sick. I carried him, the container with the food, and the bag of food, out and met Katrina in the hall.

She gave me a look as I came out with a shit-covered dog in my arms. “What the fuck?”

“Well I wasn’t going to leave him in there,” I said, a little affronted. “He’s just a puppy and he was starving.”

“The shelters are shut down,” Katrina said bluntly. “It wasn’t safe to run them, if the people running them are even still alive. They put down all the animals.”

That turned my stomach in an entirely new way to the 50,000 dead number, or the smell from the apartment. “Then I guess I’ll need to find him a new home myself,” I said.

Katrina just shook her head and sighed. “Did you find your man?”

“Pretty sure,” I said. “Looks like he shacked up with his mistress or something. There was some looted goods in there, so one or the other of them probably caught it during the riots.”

“Fucking assholes,” Katrina grunted, shaking her head again, but then glanced at me sharply. “Sorry, if you knew him...”

“Nah, he seems like he was a real prick,” I said. “Come on, let’s go find a hose so we can get this little guy cleaned up.” It took some work not to feel a bit of revulsion at Katrina’s lack of empathy, but I’d seen it before. She was living through a trauma that I could recognize - the trauma of seeing things that most people weren’t equipped to handle, over and over. Of being exposed to horrible things at an increasingly speedy rate. I’d seen it in soldiers overseas, and had experienced it a bit during the worst of my MP investigations.

I had to forgive her for her callousness because she was still living through it.

Outside we found a hose on the back of the building, and after the little guy had a chance to scarf down a bit of food I gave him a quick wash and rub down, then cleaned myself off as well. I wasn’t completely sure since he was still a puppy, but I was pretty certain he was a full-blooded dachshund.

“Well, when he isn’t covered in shit, I’ll admit it,” Katrina said. “He’s cute.”

I was making sure his ears were cleaned as he gobbled down another few mouthfuls of the soaked kibble and he didn’t mind being touched one bit as he was eating. “Well behaved too,” I noted. “Not scared or aggressive.”

“Well, I can’t take him,” Katrina said.

I sighed and smiled behind my mask, then couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“What?” Katrina asked.

“Just something my fiancée said before I left this morning.”

We headed to the truck and I stripped off my wet shirt and wrung it out before stowing it in the bed and grabbing a t-shirt from my gym bag that I’d stashed there, along with a towel that I

wrapped the little guy up in. Katrina held him in the passenger seat, her eyes slowly softening as she gave me directions back to the Police Station and she played with the puppy.

I pulled up out front and looked over at her. “Last chance,” I told her. “He likes you.”

She shook her head again. “Get him out of this hell,” she told me, handing him over to me.

“Katrina,” I said as she started to get out of the truck, stopping her as she turned to look at me. “Don’t blame yourself for this.”

She frowned at me with her eyes over the mask.

“Survivor’s guilt,” I explained. “None of this is your fault. You’re doing what you can.”

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” she said.

“I served, remember?” I said. “This place, the way you all are running on fumes and there’s still more and more bad shit raining down on you... Don’t let it break you.” I pulled out a pen from the centre console and scribbled my number on the paper I’d originally had Victor’s address on and handed it to her. “If you need to talk, and somehow get access to a phone that works, you can call me. Just to talk or whatever, or if you need anything brought down here. I owe you one for today, OK? So don’t be afraid to collect.”

Katrina took a breath and nodded, accepting my number. “Get out of here while you can,” she told me. Then she reached over and ruffled the head of the puppy and her eyes softened again as she did it. Then, before she could change her mind about anything, she hopped out of the truck and closed the door.

“Fuck,” I sighed as I watched her head back into the police station. Then I looked down at the puppy in my arms, laying belly up and cocking his head to the side as his big eyes fixed on me. I pulled off my mask and gave the little guy a scratch behind the ears. “You are going to cause me a lot of grief, aren’t you?”

I let him eat a bit more, sitting on the passenger seat of the truck, then took him out onto the torn-up grass on the front lawn and he pee’d a little, which was a good sign.

* * * * *

“Melina, I’m sorry but it looks like your boyfriend passed when his condo unit burned down,” I said.

Melina deflated a little, tears springing to her eyes. “He... literally died in a fire?”

I pressed my lips together and nodded, lying my ass off. "I couldn't get too much info, but Eugene isn't a very safe place right now and fires aren't uncommon. It's possible he was sick when it happened, which would explain not evacuating the building when the alarms went off."

She broke down, and Abi and Sara both held her. The two of them had come out to meet me with Melina when I called from the gate that I was on my way in with news. I consoled her a bit and didn't have much more information I could give her. She hugged me tightly, squeezing hard enough to make my ribs ache a bit, and thanked me for trying.

Sara led her back to the compound where a few of the other women were waiting and immediately surrounded her and started loving on her. Abi stayed back with me.

"You're lying," she said bluntly but quietly.

I swallowed and nodded.

"Worse?" she asked.

I glanced at her and then looked away.

She hugged me, not quite as desperately as Melina had but still firmly. "If dying in a fire is the easy version, thank you for not hurting her more," she said.

I hugged Abi back.

* * * * *

"So, remember what you said about not bringing home strays?" I asked as I walked into our little RV compound with the puppy bundled up in my arms.

Erica laughed when she saw what I meant, and all of the women were immediately taken with the little guy. I had to tell them not to spoil him with snacks since his stomach was still adjusting to food again. Ivy took charge of the little guy, parading him around our home and talking about what sort of toys and other stuff would be needed.

"You really know how to turn my words back on me," Erica said as she hugged me from the side. "Where'd you get him?"

I gave her a sad smile, and she frowned. Kyla, after a brief snuggle of the puppy, had come back over to me as well and hugged me from my other side. "Something's wrong," she said, looking up at me.

They took me into the RV, and I told them about all of it. About the death, and destruction. About finding the boyfriend of a scared woman dead, in bed with someone else. About finding a

starving puppy, and a woman who was balancing on a knife edge of holding it together, and leaving a plagued city.

And they held me softly and listened to it all, and cried with me at how the world seemed to be on a downward spiral into hell.