

Quaranteam: North West

Chapter 20 (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.

Returning Dramatis Personae

House Black

- Harrison '**Harri**' Black - Sheriff of Black County, 'Jason Momoa-looking motherfucker' mountain man (mixed heritage), former Army MP
- **Vanessa** Peters - Construction Forewoman, Daughter of Brent Peters the head of the construction project, Brunette
- **Erica** LaCosta - Fiancee of Harri, Leo's sister, Italian Tattoo Artist, Dark Brunette
- **Ivy** Gauthier - Quebecoise stripper, half-tattooed, Dirty Blonde anal queen
- **Kyla** Bautista - Trained dancer, Phillipino Spy, Harri's Deputy Sheriff, Raven hair

Other

- **Kara** Swiftwater - Harrison's high school sweetheart that ended poorly, community leader of the local Native band, Raven hair
- Lt Col **Miriam** Abarbanel - Military friend of Harri's, Air Force Lt Col, Jewish heritage, Commanding Officer for Valhalla Hills construction and the Oregon Quaranteam research project

Referenced Characters

- Lt Col **Miriam** Abarbanel - Military friend of Harri's, Air Force Lt Col, Jewish heritage, Commanding Officer for Valhalla Hills construction and the Oregon Quaranteam research project
- **Brent** Peters - Vanessa's father, the Project Manager for the Valhalla Hills construction project, very overweight
- Gertrude '**Gerty**' Swiftwater - Kara's second cousin, Tribal police on the Rez, Voluptuous Native, Raven haired
- **Barry** O'Callahan - Went to high school behind Harri, is a Sovereign Citizen from the Golden Beaver group
- Agent **Greerson** - Senior 'OGA' that negotiated Harri's land deal and dropped Kyla into Harri's life

I loved Vanessa, but God *damn* I hated her 5:30 AM alarm. Most mornings we usually rotated who would get up with her to see her off for the day - that meant that even though the rest of our sleep got disrupted, we still got at least a little bit longer snuggled up in bed.

Being the only person in the RV with her had been a novel experience; I'd never spent the night with just one of my partners in that bed. I'd missed Erica, Kyla and Ivy for sure, but it was nice to have a break from being so completely smothered in warm, sleeping women and just have Vanessa's naked body cuddled with mine. Now, however, as I blearily blinked to myself while she got dressed and I worked the little kitchenette to get her a decent breakfast... well, I kept my grumbling to myself. My military experience had drilled an expectation of comfort out of me, but years *out* of the service had gotten me used to it again.

"How's your leg, baby?" Vanessa asked as she came out of the bedroom, dressed in her jeans and long-sleeved shirt. She already had her high-vis vest on and was just missing her boots and hard hat since they were both sitting by the door.

"Aches," I said. "Not horrible, but I'm definitely feeling it."

Vanessa frowned and came to me, wrapping her arms around my waist lightly and kissing my cheek. "Are you going up to the Falls this morning?"

"I wasn't planning on it," I said. "Why? We just dropped everyone off yesterday afternoon."

Vanessa smirked a little. "Because you're used to popping off at least twice in the morning after I'm out of here," she said. "And you know the girls and I would give you shit if you jerked off instead of giving one of us that cum of yours."

I sighed and shook my head, snorting softly. "Vee, I think you drained every last ounce out of me last night," I said.

"I doubt that," she chuckled, then closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of the bacon and eggs as I shifted and slid them off of the griddle pan I'd been using. She took the plate and sat at the Murphy table. "Thank you, baby."

"Gotta keep my gal energised for the day," I said, dropping into the seat across from her.

"M'seriously though," she said through her first mouthful. "Be careful today. And don't *not* go to the Falls. If you have any risk of getting exposed to the viruses, you better fucking find one of us to fuck, baby."

"I *fucking* promise," I said, smiling as I watched her shovel down her breakfast.

"Good," she said. "Do you have a plan?"

“A bit of one,” I said. “That pickup truck out on the access road is my first big clue, or might be holding one. Miriam was running the plates for me.”

“Anything else?”

“No one on-site would have recognized the raiders,” I said. “I could try and interview everyone who saw one, but I think your father might have a fit if I pulled that many guys from work. Do you think I could just put an all-call on the radio, see if anyone remembers distinctive markings like tattoos, scars or that sort of thing? I could go meet them where they are at to get the notes.”

“That I can definitely make happen,” Vanessa nodded. “Do you think maybe you would recognize some descriptions of people from around town?”

“It’s possible,” I sighed. “But honestly? I doubt it. They’ll help me identify people while I’m on the hunt though.”

“What happens if you don’t find anything with the truck?”

“Then I really have to knuckle down and start working my old MP skills,” I said. “It feels bigger because it happened to us, but everything that happened was a crime. Someone did it with motive, means and opportunity. If I can start narrowing those down, I have a path to follow.”

Vanessa polished off her food quickly and chugged down the half-glass of milk she always finished with, then went and rinsed her dishes in the sink. “If I make you promise to be careful, what are the chances you do that?” she asked.

“I’m always careful,” I said. “It’s the world that does risky shit.”

She snorted and set her dishes on the drying rack before coming and sitting on my lap, looping her arms around my shoulders as she looked at me. For just a moment, I got a flash of what life might have been like if I had met Vanessa some other way. Living in the old Black house, her running some construction company as I kept working in concept art for games and film. She’d likely be the one bringing home the serious bacon, while I’d keep the home, but I wouldn’t have minded so much. No kids of our own, but we could have adopted. A quiet life, loving each other.

But we never would have met. That life could never have been, except for the pandemic. She’d been working states away and never would have had a reason to come to the back woods of Oregon, and I would never have had a reason to go to one of the industrial construction sites she worked on.

Duo Halo brought her to me.

“I love you, you know,” I told her.

"I know," she said with a sad little smile. "And I love you too. Promise me anyways?"

"I promise I'll be careful," I said sincerely. "Now you."

"Now I what?" she asked.

"Promise you'll be careful," I said. "That you won't get squashed by a bulldozer, or have a building collapse on you, or that you'll get abducted by aliens."

"I promise I won't get caught in any big machinery or have a building fall on me," Vanessa said, then gave me a peck on the lips. "No promises on the aliens though. Depends on how hot they are."

"Wow!" I laughed, and she giggled and leaned in to kiss my neck.

"I need to go," she said.

"I know," I sighed.

We separated and I watched her put on her boots and pick up her hard hat and hook it to the carabiner on her belt. Then I kissed her properly at the door and she was gone, trudging into the pre-dawn gloom.

I had a lot to do. An entire investigation to get underway. My own breakfast to make. I needed to phone in and check with Miriam, and over to the Falls to check to make sure everything was OK there.

But no one was going to be awake and 5:45 AM.

I stumbled back to bed, collapsing down onto it heavily and wincing at the pain in my leg and the sting on my scalp. I'd almost forgotten about the scalp injuries. As my eyes were starting to drift closed I noticed that my phone was blinking - I had a message waiting.

Rolling onto my back, I picked up the phone and checked it.

'*Good morning, babe,*' Erica had sent. Along with a picture of her and Ivy kissing. Neither of them were wearing makeup, and Ivy looked mostly asleep. The next picture was the two of them snuggling naked in bed.

I groaned and sent them a heart emoji in return and dismissed the message, just to find I had another one waiting.

'Good morning, dear,' Kyla had sent along with a picture of her naked butt as she lay in bed. Her warm, golden brown skin was illuminated by the flash of her phone camera and there was just a glimpse of her pussy between her legs.

I groaned again and sent her a heart emoji as well and dropped the phone.

Part of me felt like I should respond with something more. They must have set alarms specifically to take and send those pictures to me, which took effort that they didn't need to spend. *I should really send something back.* I wasn't exactly a 'dick pic' person though.

Then I grinned and laughed to myself, and rolled back up out of bed. I could spend a few minutes to tease them a little.

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My phone rang, and I wasn't sure if I'd even gotten fifteen minutes of sleep since I'd snapped the photo and sent it off to Erica, Ivy and Kyla. I was pretty sure I'd sent it to Vanessa as well, just to try and make her smile and roll her eyes. Then I'd pushed the sex doll off the side of the bed because I didn't actually want to cuddle with it as I snagged a couple more hours of sleep.

There was a part of me, no matter how much I loved the girls, that wanted to just hang up the phone and wait until later to laugh about it with them. But, as I listened to the generic ringtone and realized I should probably put some custom ones in so I could discern who was calling me without looking, I realized that it could have been Miriam calling about something important. Or Vanessa calling because the raiders were back. Hell, it could have been Mary calling me. We hadn't heard from her in almost three weeks now other than a text to Erica that had said she'd gotten to 'the commune' safe and sound with the kids.

When I rolled over and picked up my phone, blearily opening one eye to check who it was as I fumbled to answer it, one name I *wasn't* expecting was on the call display.

"Kara?" I asked groggily as I answered.

"Harrison?" she said.

I was immediately thrown back into my own memories. Back before the pandemic, and the military. Back to high school. Talking on the house phone with Kara for hours on end, clogging up the one line we had until my sister or my mother came to claim the wireless phone from me. It had been the time just before cell phones - I could only imagine what trouble we would have gotten in back then if we'd had those. It had been years since I'd heard her voice over the phone and it just did something to me that I couldn't explain. Her voice put this warm but uneasy, nostalgic and sad tingle through me because nothing else that had happened between us was in the forefront of my sleepy mind.

“Harrison, I’m sorry I’m calling so early,” Kara said. “But you said to call if…”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“It’s here, Harri,” she said. “The sickness. It’s on the Rez. It’s bad.”

“Are you OK? Are you isolating and quarantining?”

“Not at first, but we are now,” she said. “I wore a mask the whole time though, and started wearing gloves. We spent some time trying to help people. The ambulances won’t come up here, and the clinic is closed, and…” Her voice broke. “You have connections. Can you help? Please?”

My mind immediately went to what might be possible. The Rez wasn’t huge, in size of population or land, at least compared to some other reserves. It housed maybe fifteen hundred people at any given time, plus the Tribe’s community members who didn’t live on the Rez but used its services probably tripled that number. They were spread an hour’s drive in every direction though. In an emergency would they have tried to congregate, or would they have stayed home?

It was a bigger population than the Site had been when we had the outbreak, but it was way smaller than a place like Eugene. Captain Bloomberg had said they didn’t have the vaccine supplies to do anything useful down there, but they might have enough to save lives on the Rez.

“Harri? I know I’ve been an absolute bitch,” Kara said quietly. Pleading. “In general, and personally. You never deserved… I shouldn’t have let…” she sobbed. “I’m sorry.” I realized that my moment of quiet, as I’d processed things, had sounded a lot like hesitation over the phone.

“Kara, baby, I’ll do everything I can,” I promised her. “The rest doesn’t matter. Are you alone?”

“I’m quarantining with Gerty, my second cousin, and my neighbour Tanaya,” she said. “We’re all at my place.”

“OK. None of you leave that building,” I said. “Lock the doors and windows, pull the shades. Hell, barricade the doors if you can. It’s going to hurt a lot, Kara, but if you keep trying to help people you’re going to die for sure and we’re not going to be able to actually hug it out and maybe figure out how to be friends or something.”

“I-” she started, but couldn’t put into words what I knew she was feeling.

“I know,” I said. “I know, baby. You’ve always been the person who helps. But it will literally kill you. You *have* to follow the help-yourself-first rule. Block the doors. Make it look like no one is home as much as you can. People will be desperate, and that’s when they’re the most dangerous. Do you have any weapons, anything to protect yourselves with?”

“Gerty has a handgun. I have my hunting bow.” There were voices in the background for a moment. “Tanaya says she can run back across to her place. She has a couple of hunting shotguns her ex left behind last year.”

“She should do that as soon as possible,” I said. “Just make sure no one is outside and nearby when she goes. This virus is insidious, Kara. I-” I felt my own breath hitch for a moment. “It’s entirely possible all three of you are already infected. I just need to try and get you help as soon as possible to reverse it. OK?”

“I’m so sorry, Harri,” she whispered again, and I could tell by the tone of her voice that she had her eyes closed and was hating on herself. Even after all this time, I could read the variations in her voice. “I should have listened to you more.”

“You couldn’t change anything,” I tried to assure her. “It was going to happen no matter what. It’s... It’s kind of amazing it hadn’t happened already. Just stay safe, Kara, and when I can give you a concrete answer of some sort I’ll call you, OK?”

She gulped softly on the other end of the line. “Thank you, Harri. I’m- Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

The guilt was eating her, and I knew it wasn’t just the guilt around the virus. It was everything between us. Layers of guilt. She was facing her own mortality and all the other stuff was falling away.

It was funny how a virus, or a gunshot wound, could really put someone in a clear frame of mind.

“I forgive you,” I said, meaning it for everything just like she was apologizing for everything. “You hear me, Kara? I do. Now I’m going to hang up so I can start making calls, and you’re going to do what I said, OK?”

“OK,” she said. “OK.”

I hung up and had to suck in a long, calming breath through my nose and let it out through my mouth. That didn’t help, so I did it a few more times. Once I was sure I wasn’t going to crack, I made a call.

“Harrison,” Miriam said as she picked up. “Getting started early, or is something wrong?”

“Both,” I said. “Miriam, I need a favour.”

Her sigh was heavy and long. “This isn’t about the investigation, is it?”

"It's not," I admitted. "It's vaccine-related. When I was down in Eugene, Captain Bloomberg mentioned that you guys were low on stock for the vaccine because of the California rollout. Is that still true?"

"She probably shouldn't have said that," Miriam said, and I got the distinct impression she was glaring across their shared office at the blonde lawyer. "But it's the truth."

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"That's a complicated question," she said. "Look, if your sister needs it, I can squeeze out a dose or get one to her from California."

"It's not- well, actually, yes that would be amazing, but that's not what I'm calling for," I said. "A local community is having an outbreak here."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation.

"It's on the reservation, isn't it?" Miriam asked. I could hear the frustration in her voice. Frustration at people not taking the government messaging seriously. Frustration that her messaging in the state was getting muddled by messaging at the Federal level, and messaging from different political factions in the state, and opposed by grassroots groups. But it was also frustration at me.

"It is," I said. "They need help. They don't have any emergency services."

Another frustrated sigh came across from Miriam, this one shorter and more sad than mad. "Harri, the rollout down south has already eaten up most of our stockpile," she said. "The rest is going to different missions. Operation Homestead, Operation Breadbasket, Operation Bugzapper- Fuck, you might as well just call the whole thing 'Operation Keep The Lights On.' Our rounds of backup testing are done here, we're onto deployment for operations until we get new shipments in a week or so. I've got a handful of doses earmarked for discretionary use, but it's nowhere near enough for what you're asking."

A handful of doses would cover Kara and the two women with her. I almost, *almost*, asked for that but I knew Kara would hate me if I did. For all that she was finally thinking in survival mode, she would never agree to a plan that would effectively be her putting herself above everyone else in her tribe. She'd end up demanding it went to someone else worse off.

"Is there *any* chance that you could make a case to get enough doses?" I asked. "Call it a cultural emergency or something. Make it a racial thing if you have to and show you can't doom a bunch of natives to death."

"I can try," she said. "But... Harri, I'll try. I can't promise anything though. You need to expect nothing, not something. This virus is a genocide machine and I don't have the details, but this rez wouldn't be the first to go dark."

That made me suck in another breath and let it out slowly.

"Is this a 'no' without wanting to say no?" I asked.

Another long, awkward silence.

"I'm so sorry, Harri," Miriam said sadly.

"It's OK," I said quietly. "I don't blame you, or the Captain, or anyone. The world is just a real hellhole right now."

"If there's anything else that *isn't* the vaccine that they need, I can try to get something organized," she said.

"I don't know if it would be much good, or accepted," I said. "I'll find out though. Um... did you get anything back on that truck license plate?"

Miriam was quiet for a short moment as she switched gears. "Yes and no," she said after I heard some paper rustling in the background. "We got the registration, but the truck is likely looted or stolen. The owner is logged as deceased as of two months ago."

"OK," I said. "Not unsurprising. I'll do a sweep through it for any useful clues. Any IDs on the three dead raiders?"

"One was an Army washout," Miriam said. "Charles 'Chuck' Poole. No known current residence, and dishonourable discharge during boot camp. The one with his head smashed in was Chuck's brother and had a criminal record, went by Larry Poole. Looks like he was off the grid for the last couple of years though. The third one we don't have anything on."

"I don't recognize the name Poole, but that might not mean anything," I sighed. "But they sound like prime candidates for an idiot's array of backwoods redneck militia. Any chance of a forensic team checking the truck for other fingerprints?"

"Not for four months at least," Miriam said flatly.

"Alright. I'll see what I can do," I sighed.

"Harri... I've said it before, but I need to say it with some more emphasis. *Be careful*. And I mean that for you, but also not *just* for you. Yesterday was too close a call and the other day when you got hit... If you die, Harri, the best-case scenario is messy. With a short enough

timespan, we can do a very invasive process to re-partner your girls, but that will only ever work once. And those girls that love you will remember you, but that love will get—" she paused and took a breath. "The lab coats aren't exactly testing for this, and I'm reading it between the lines in the reports and talking to the couple of people it's happened to here in the state already so it's just me guessing at things. They'll remember loving you, but the re-partnering will rip the active feeling out of them. The vaccine doesn't make a woman love a man deeply, but it manipulates positive feelings to be stronger and I think part of that will deaden their memories of you. They wouldn't forget you, but they wouldn't feel that same love in those memories. And that's the *best-case* scenario, because if you die and we can't get your body back here fast enough, we might not even be able to do the re-partnering and then the girls will be the first test subjects to find out what happens at the end of the line when there's no re-partnering available. We don't *know* what will happen yet, but it would be bad."

As I listened to Miriam my head lowered and I stared at my feet on the floor, absorbing what she was saying. Dead was dead, and I obviously would prefer to stay alive. But that other part... the idea of any of the girls *forgetting* how they felt about me as I got replaced... If I were in a normal relationship with Erica and the world wasn't in the shitshow it was, and I died, I would want Erica to find someone else to make her happy but that didn't mean I would want her to forget me. To forget how we felt about each other. And if Miriam was reading between the lines, it could be even worse than that.

"OK," I said, a little hoarse. "I get it."

"Just be careful, and be decisive," Miriam said. "Don't take risks you don't need to, Harri."

I had to breathe in and out a couple of times to keep myself centred and let all of it brew inside my mind. "Thanks, Miriam," I finally said.

There was a moment where I could tell she wanted to say something else, though I couldn't be sure what. It could have been serious or a joke to try and cut the tension, and about any number of the crazy things going on. But she swallowed whatever it was. "Be safe," she repeated.

"You too," I said and we hung up.

"Fuck," I growled to the empty RV bedroom and let myself fall back onto the mattress.

Outbreak on the Rez. Hunting the raiders. Protecting myself and my girls. Security for the site.

I had a lot of plates spinning, and I was running out of hands to keep them steady. And each of them was important, and could mean life or death. I had to prioritize, but *how* did I prioritize this?

The outbreak was the most pressing issue, but what could I do about it? I didn't have the vaccine to hand out. I could try and recreate the thing with Vanessa, but we still weren't sure

what exactly had done that - it could have been something to do with Vanessa and nothing to do with Erica, Ivy and I.

And could I offer that to Kara? *'Hey, I can maybe save your life but you need to be bonded to me, and to try to accomplish it we'll need to have an orgy and you need to drink mouthfuls of my other girlfriend's squirt.'* And that still wouldn't fix the issue of offering Kara an out, or even her and her cousin and her neighbour, without helping the rest of the community.

I could offer it to her, if it was between that embarrassing offer or her dying. And I would if I had to. If she started to show symptoms, I would offer it - well, I would try to get a dose from Miriam first, but still.

There wasn't anything else I could do for them though. And as I sat there on the bed I knew I wasn't going to get any more sleep.

I had to take all of this one step at a time. Tackle the things I could deal with. The girls were safe for now. The site had some airmen deployed at the entrances, and a few more in the main camp when they weren't on duty. I couldn't do anything else for the Rez at the moment. That left my investigation and the raiders.

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The truck had been sitting exactly where we'd left it. Instead of hiking out to the spot, I'd driven my police truck around to the freshly cut utility road the crew had been working on, and as I pulled up at the scene I had to take a moment to myself in the quiet of the cab. There was blood splatter on the vehicles - a little bit here or there, and a larger trail across the raider's truck since it had been sort of close to the fight.

With the bodies having been carted away, for the most part, the scavenger animals in the woods had done a little digging around where the blood had pooled on the ground, likely hoping to find some scraps, but not so much that I couldn't see where the action had happened.

It wasn't actually my own close call, or my part in killing the raiders, that bothered me. Part of me still regretted that Kyla had been forced into killing again, but that wasn't even it. What made me pause was the vision of the four construction crew members pummeling the raider to death. It had been a hard death, and now I knew that one of the others had been his brother, and he'd died knowing they were *both* getting killed.

Sliding out of my truck, I took a moment to try and just absorb the sounds and smells of the forest. Out here, without the cut crew for the utility road working, I was as far from any workers as I was likely to get on my old family land. I could almost pretend to feel normal. Shaking my head, I opened my eyes and went to the raider truck.

It was an old piece of shit, but it was a Toyota so it was the kind of old piece of shit that could run for ages and go through a ton of abuse. I'd seen plenty of worse-off-looking Toyota trucks being put to use overseas by civilians, terrorist cells and everyone in between. Hell, I'd seen plenty of them with heavy machine guns mounted to the bed of them to make 'technicals' that could somehow still drive over rocky desert terrain. The license plate hadn't gotten anything for Miriam, so I needed to look for anything else that might be of use.

I started in the back bed of the truck - the raiders had grabbed a bunch of the cutting crew's tools, which I was able to quickly sort out and put over near the excavator for them to reclaim. The back of the truck was otherwise empty other than some old filth and dead leaves that tended to pile up in corners if someone wasn't diligent about being clean - one of the many little things about living in a heavily forested region and entirely unremarkable.

Leaves and filth weren't going to tell me anything, so I went to check the cab. The back seat had a layer of garbage on the floor, stomped down by boots, and I quickly pulled it out hoping to find something interesting. Generic coffee cups, fast food wrappers from the most popular chains and the packaging from a brick of plastic water bottles weren't going to tell me anything. And not a single receipt that might have told me where these guys frequented. Even a McDonald's receipt could have told me where they had been on a specific day at a specific time.

The front driver's side didn't give me much more of anything. The door had a couple of badly scratched-up CDs in the pocket. One was a bootleg mix of popular country rock songs, and another was the first Taylor Swift album. The centre console revealed some more CDs in better condition, some pocket change, several empty packs of cigarettes and a couple of cheap BIC lighters. The passenger side had more trash, similar to the back, but this was where I found the receipts I'd been looking for. Not every receipt was the same, but I was able to quickly start putting together a mental image of their haunts - not that it actually told me much right away. A few of the oldest receipts were from before the previous owner was supposed to have died, but the more recent ones were scattered all over the region and crossing county lines. Mishawaka, Banks, Vemonia, even all the way up north to Clatskanie closer to the Washington border. Whoever was using this truck had been travelling in the last couple of months and tracking those movements was going to take a whole fucking murder board of work and significant time. I bundled all the receipts that I could find and set them aside.

I struck paydirt with the glovebox, pulling out a revolver in a leather holster. It was a basic Ruger of some sort, worn and old but it had all the serial numbers still on it. A quick check showed me it was loaded. It really wasn't that strange a thing to find for a backwoods truck - it wasn't about to stop a bear in its tracks, but it could be used in most wildlife-related situations to at least hurt and scare something off, and was a decent little self-defence piece. Sure, folks in Portland and some of the other cities would have scoffed or been shocked at the need for such a casual carry in the truck, or they would have before the pandemic, but in the backwoods you never knew when you might need to even just make a loud bang to spook an angry deer, a bobcat or a wolf.

With luck, and some work calling around, it might be possible to track who owned the firearm. It was old but not *that* old, and firearm sales still needed to be tracked at individual gun stores. I could start with the nearby vendors and circle out from there.

Well, if the owners of the stores were still alive and willing to go to the effort.

Under the revolver was the old, tattered owner's manual for the truck. No insurance documents that I could find, though I doubted the raiders were insurance kind of people on a regular day. A couple of empty and crumpled water bottles in the passenger side door rounded out my search.

I took a picture of the revolver with the serial numbers clear and sent it to Miriam, then got back in my truck, rolled down the windows and turned it off again. I pulled out the little notebook I'd brought with me and made notes about my search, then flipped to a new page, opened up the maps app on my phone and started searching for firearms shops and dealers, scribbling down their locations and phone numbers.

I had some phone calls to make once the rest of the world was more likely to be awake, but I could get as much other work done as I could.

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I got a few bites on the call-out to the work crews and spent a couple of hours jumping from crew to crew gathering descriptions of tattoos, facial hair, scars and particularly identifying items of clothing. Nothing stood out as someone I could recognize from around town, but I bundled it all up into a report and shot it off to the State Troopers and Miriam just in case they could run the descriptions through the criminal databases.

Not that I was going to hold my breath on that - the States were still stretched way thin, and Miriam couldn't detail too many people to help with this. She had an entire operation to run.

Where I *could* get some help was right there on the site though. When I checked in with Vanessa - who had punched me in the arm for sending her the photo with the sex doll while she was just about to start work - she'd immediately been able to grab a few of her new, untrained labourer women to start making calls for me. I left them with the serial number, make and model for the revolver and the list of shops I'd started putting together. The first dozen or so shops they managed to reach had been dead ends, but about half the calls weren't even being picked up. I left them to it with a script that should at least get the owners to check their records unofficially.

Unless, of course, the owners were part of the same militia group the raiders were from. That possibility had darkened my mind, too.

Not having any good updates for Kara, I had texted her that I was still working on things to try and keep her spirits up, and got a brief update that they were locked up tight.

That drilled out the leads I had immediately from the raid. Other than running down the receipt locations and dates, that is, but that wasn't going to get me anywhere fast. There was one more outside thread that I could pull on first.

"You're going to be careful," Erica ordered me.

I was driving and had her on speaker, though it was only from my phone. "Of course I am," I said. "I've got my bulletproof vest on under my shirt, and I borrowed an unmarked truck from the pool on the site."

"Oh, great," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "The redneck assholes won't *immediately* know that you're a cop."

"That's Sheriff to you, missy," I said.

"And that's Wifey to you, Sheriff," she retorted.

"I'm going to be careful," I said.

"Good," Erica agreed. "And when you're done there, you're coming here. You need to make sure your immunity is up."

"I'll head home first to change and shower," I said. "If I do pick anything up there I don't want to bring it with me."

"OK, babe," Erica sighed. "Call me when you're done though, yeah? I need to know you're safe."

"I will," I promised.

She made a kiss sound into the phone and then hung up.

I checked the map on my phone and sighed. Here was as good as anywhere. I pulled off the side of the highway and put the truck in park. If I was going to be careful, I needed to scout the location before I just drove up, and if I parked too close to the driveway someone might take notice.

I was in for a hike.

Soon the truck was locked and I was climbing up through the brush, my hunting rifle slung over my shoulder and a camo hunting jacket giving me a bit of cover as I started my trek. The start of my hike was actually pretty peaceful as I didn't have much to worry about, but after a mile I started checking my GPS a bit more often and another mile in I slowed my pace as I started to really focus.

The soft crunch of my boots on the forest floor, and the sounds of nearby birds, were my only company until I hit the first tripwire.

It wasn't exactly a professional job, but the bent branch with the sharpened stakes would still have fucked me up.

"Someone's been reading some really stupid website," I grunted to myself. I grabbed a stick and, standing away from the danger zone, I triggered the tripwire. The branch swung around and actually broke under its own weight.

From then on I slowed down even more. I spotted three more tripwires made with the same trick, plus some basic snares sized for small game and a couple of bigger ones that must have been intended for larger game like deer, or people. I bypassed the most obvious ones and tripped a few more of the basic ones while noting the surroundings so I could remember a safe way out, before pressing on.

I almost fucked up when I spotted the trail cam. It was a basic one, camo patterned and tied to a tree. In the dark, I would have probably walked right by it without noticing. As it was, the cam had definitely got me on video. The good news was that, after I took it down and pried it open, I found it was only recording and not broadcasting. I took out the memory card and batteries, erased the internal memory, and put it right back where it had been.

The next camera wasn't so easy to deal with, but I spotted it early because I reached the treeline. It, and several more like it, was mounted to a pole and had wires running back towards the main building of the little compound ahead of me.

The Golden Beaver bar looked like it had been a decent-sized hunting cabin at some point back in the 1980s. It had one main building, two stories, and was made of thick logs. The windows were shuttered and someone had reinforced them with sheet metal on the first floor. There were also a couple of outbuildings around the back, one of them an old doublewide trailer and another a small barn. Tarps had been erected and tied down between the buildings now, and someone had started farming chickens in the space as the birds pecked away at the ground, protected by a couple layers of a chickenwire fence. The front of the building was packed with almost a dozen cars and trucks, and someone had erected what looked like an attempt at a log palisade gate at the throat of the driveway but had given up halfway through.

I quietly skulked around the edges of the property, staying back from the treeline to keep out of the view of the security cameras. I scoped out the buildings and parking lot with my rifle. The place wasn't exactly a hopping busy bar, but there were definitely people inside and at one point a guy with a beard reaching halfway down his gut stumbled out the front, strutted to the side of the porch and unzipped, taking a piss off the end.

I circled back around the property, scanning the other side. They didn't have any guards posted, including in the upper windows of the building, but I did spot a cache of big red fuel containers and propane tanks set back from the main house, so they weren't complete idiots.

Part of me regretted the time wasted even bothering with scouting - there wasn't any sign of the raw materials stolen from the site, and none of the trucks in the parking lot had been shot up so whoever Kyla and I had hit wasn't here. That being said, the truck could have been dumped and the perpetrators were here after all.

Hell, the guys from the shootout at Mary's could be here, even if the raiders weren't.

It wasn't a complete waste. I knew that even if they were halfhearted, the men who were congregating here *were* doing shady shit. The traps in the woods were an important clue as to which way they were leaning.

I backtracked my way back out the way I had come. Whoever came out to eventually check their traps would be suspicious about several of them being triggered, but that wasn't likely to happen until at least tomorrow and gave me time to follow through with the second half of my plan. The hike out, once I was away from the Golden Beaver 'danger zone' was pleasant again and I popped out of the woods about a third of a mile from my truck and trudged my way back up to it. A year ago I would have been passed by cars and trucks on that little stretch of highway - now I didn't see a solitary car.

After a quick text to Erica to let her know I was checking in and safe, I stowed my jacket and rifle and got back in the truck. The drive up to the Golden Beaver was a lot faster than the hike.

At the mouth of the driveway up to the bar, I found that their little club had erected a second sign next to the one that was stencilled with the same symbol as from the matchbook Barry had given me before. The new sign was a laminated printout nailed onto a wooden backing, and I pulled over to read it before heading up.

"Jesus Christ," I grunted under my breath. It was a declaration of independence from the 'sham governance of thieves, conmen and cheaters.' There was a bunch of mumbo jumbo bullshit under it that I didn't bother reading because it was all the same drivel that the Sovereign Citizens always spouted off.

The driveway was a winding mess of gravel and dirt filled with potholes, and I could just guess at the reasoning the lazy assholes had for not fixing it. Up at the top, I got a fresh look at the unfinished palisade gate and drove right through and into the parking lot, pulling up at the end of the rough 'row' of vehicles and making sure to back in so that I could manage a quick getaway if needed. I parked, got out, and walked up to the main doors of the bar without a single person stopping me.

That's where I stopped, taking in a breath and swallowing. I could smell the cheap beer and sour sweat smell from outside. Or maybe that was the piss from the guy earlier along with whatever else was staining the old wooden porch. It wasn't what stopped me though. What stopped me, for a moment, was the risk I was taking.

I walked into the bar without a mask.

The interior of the main floor was mostly one large room, or had been converted into that at some point. There was a bar splitting off a third of the room with a small kitchen area behind it. The rest of the space was mostly seating, though there was a small stage along the back wall with a stripper pole mounted in the middle - unless the good ol' boys had been hiring proper strippers to come out here back before the pandemic I had a feeling I didn't want to know the women who made use of it.

The walls of the building were crowded with taxidermied trophies, old posters that would make a mechanic's break room blush, and various maps and printouts that seemed to be all about the sovereign citizen movement. A 'Don't Tread On Me' flag was slung over the bar right beside a Confederate flag. How either of those belonged in Oregon, I couldn't say. There were also boxes and palettes stacked with supplies jammed into the corners of the room, and under the rickety set of stairs that led up to the second floor. Most of it seemed to be food or beer, though I also noted what looked like a crate of what might have been looted valuables.

The bar also happened to be populated by about thirty men, women and several children, all of whom turned and looked at me as I walked in and the door swung shut behind me.

"Who are you?" one lady, a redhead who looked like she'd probably lost a fight with an oxy addiction, asked me.

"Is Barry here?" I asked the room.

A couple of guys stood up from a table near the middle of the room, the clatter of their chairs was only covered by the scratchy audio from the boombox behind the bar that was playing *Born in the USA*, which I found highly ironic.

The pair stalked towards me, both glowering heavily with a hand on the pistols holstered at their hips. The taller one was bald and had a longer, coppery-coloured beard while the shorter one had a slicked-back head of hair and an old scar that split his lips. The scar and the beard didn't stand out from my notes from earlier.

"Barry ain't here," the bigger one said, his voice rumbling a bit in his chest. "What do you want him for?"

Fuck, I thought. "Oh," I said. "Well, he invited me to come out here. We went to high school together."

The short guy sneered a little but I couldn't tell what the big one was thinking - he had the sort of face that barely moved and showed very little beyond gradations of disgruntlement.

"Barry ain't been here for a week or so," the shorter guy said. It wasn't really fair to think of him as 'short' per se, considering he was about average height, but the big guy made him seem smaller than he really was. "You know anything about that?"

"Not a clue," I said. "He gave me the invite a month ago or so - he'd invited me before too, but I've been busy."

"He might be a Federal," the red-headed junkie spat.

I snorted derisively, but that didn't seem to impress anyone.

"We ain't used to folks just walkin' on up here," the shorter man said. "And Barry knows he can't just hand out invites when the Government is makin' people disappear and the social fabric of our community is fallin' apart. You some kind of a pinko Commie? Or are you a fascist, tax-paying pig?"

There was *so much* to unlock from that, but I couldn't correct him.

"He's got a gun!" shouted a man down the room, pointing at me.

Immediately both men had their pistols out and pointed at me, and I raised my hands. "I thought this was the kind of crowd who believed in the right to bear arms," I said slowly, trying my best not to show my nerves. I could feel a drip of sweat slowly crawling down my spine.

"It is, for true sovereign citizens fighting the oppressive, illegal DC dictatorship," the shorter man grunted. "Now don't fuckin' move, y' Commie Fascist."

I didn't move, and the big guy closed the distance with me and pulled my pistol from the holster I had strapped to my belt in the centre of my back. "Sit," he ordered, gesturing for me to take a seat at the nearest table. It looked like the chairs had been liberated from someone's kitchen table.

Things were quickly sliding out of control - I'd been hoping Barry would be here to vouch for me like he had at the grocery store months ago, but now I needed to try and prove myself somehow to these assholes if I was going to get out of here.

"Look, fellas," I said, letting my wording slip a bit into the slightly slurred, lazy way the rednecks spoke. "I'll admit, I ain't exactly an old hand at the Sovereign movement, but I'm here 'cause I want to learn my real, God-given rights. I used to own some land over on the other end of Jewell, did what I thought was right and supported the government with my taxes and shit. But

now, after all those years of shellin' out my hard-earned cash, they go and fuckin' steal my land right out from under me. My family has been livin' there for generations, and now they've gone and hoovered it up with their legalese crap."

There were some murmurs and mutters in the crowd as different people commiserated with my story. The shorter guy, who still had his pistol trained on my kneecap, eyed me carefully. "They hit you with that imminent domicile shit?"

"Yeah, that," I agreed readily even as I cringed internally at the butchering of 'eminent domain.' "They didn't even give me a choice. Just up and took it from me."

The taller man grunted and spit on the floor in disgust, and the shorter one sighed and then holstered his weapon. "Alright," he said. "That all might be true, and there's always space to learn the *truth* here at the Golden Beaver. But we ain't in the business of just inviting any old Joe up into our community. What's your name?"

There was a big part of me that wanted to lie my ass off and tell them something like 'Gary Blake,' but if I was going to use these assholes as a source or for clues I couldn't burn myself with them. Barry would eventually need to vouch for me all over again once he came back around here - unless he was dead, of course.

"Harrison Black," I admitted. There weren't any immediate flashes of recognition among the people I could see, but I did notice the shorter guy glance and nod over to someone else, who started typing on his phone.

"Well, Harrison Black, if that's your real name," the shorter guy said. "You're going to need to prove to us you aren't a commie, a fascist or a cop."

"Just tell me what to do," I said agreeably. "I need to figure this shit out."

The two men put their heads together and muttered back and forth before both nodding. The big one stood straight and looked down at me as I sat in the chair. Then he pulled a combat knife from the sheathe on his belt and stabbed it into the table. "Put your hand flat." I followed his direction, but tensed, ready to pull away. "Now take the knife."

I took the knife in my hand, and then he leaned in close and wrapped his bigger hand around mine, prying the knife from the table and lifting it up. He started moving it, digging the tip into the wood in between each of my fingers, one gap after the other, and then back again. It was the 'knife game' or whatever people called it. I could feel his breath on my face and had to stop myself from gagging - not because of the smell, which was bad because the guy clearly used dip, but just from knowing the asshole went around all day without a mask. He could have been breathing Duo Halo all over me.

“Keep going,” he grunted, and let go of my hand. After a small falter, I kept going with the knife game at the same speed he had set.

The shorter guy pulled out the chair opposite from me and sat. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Harrison Black,” I said, and quickly realized what they were doing. I had to concentrate on the knife or risk stabbing or nicking myself, which would make it harder for me to lie. Any hesitation would be suspect.

“How do you know Barry?”

“We went to high school together,” I said.

Thunk-thunk-thunk, went the knife.

“When was the last time you saw Barry?”

“Last month, at the grocery store,” I said.

There was a grumble from someone behind me.

Thunk-thunk-thunk.

“How long ago did the Government take your land?”

“They first showed up a few months ago, offering me money. I tried to say no,” I said, watching the knife as I dug the tip into the tabletop over and over. “Now the house my grandfather and father built is gone.”

More grumbles behind me. *Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m an artist,” I said, and it was my immediate response. I wasn’t technically being paid to be a Sheriff. “Before that, I was in the military.”

That got more reactions.

“What branch?” the big guy asked from over my shoulder. I had a feeling he was holding his pistol pointed at my back.

“Army,” I said. “Two tours as an infantryman.”

“Where did you deploy?”

"Iraq," I said. "Spent some time in Afghanistan, too. Plus some stops in Europe."

"Did you kill anyone over there?"

"I did."

"Saw a lot of your friends get killed?"

I nodded, trying not to lose focus on the knife by thinking of the friends I'd lost.

"To stupid orders made by political assholes?"

"Obviously," I grunted.

"You ever take some revenge on one of them?"

That made me smirk a little, thinking of the standoff with the Air Force Colonel after I caught him assaulting Miriam.

"I'll take that as a yes," the shorter guy said. "You looking for some more revenge on the Pols?"

I grit my teeth and looked away from the knife and up into his eyes, my hand keeping the knife moving in its path. *Thunk-thunk-thunk*. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

"You can stop," the shorter redneck said.

I dug the tip of the knife into the wood beside my hand and pulled back from it.

"My name is Rodrik Nell," the shorter man said. "My friend with the beard is Big Paulson." Then he turned to the rest of the bar. "Someone get Harrison a drink!"

The music got turned up, and the chatter started as people stopped watching the spectacle, though there were a lot of glances my way. Big Paulson sat down heavily in another chair at the table, while Rodrik got up to go get us all a beer. I noticed that the guy who had been checking on his phone went and whispered with him at the bar briefly - I had to assume he'd been Googling me and he probably had some info. I was trusting that Miriam's communication teams had been keeping the site quiet on the internet so there was nothing easily accessible to tie me to it at the moment.

Rodrik came back over and handed me and Paulson our beers, and then sat down and started in on a diatribe that lasted a full half hour. He only stopped talking to take a swig of his beer or to suck in a breath. The man was all over the map - he hated liberals and what they'd done to the cities, but he also hated conservatives because the bad ones were fascist religious freaks and

the 'better' ones were too weak-kneed to stand up for what they wanted. He hated immigrants for stealing jobs, natives for being lazy, and capitalism for turning people into wage labourers. He despised every level of government from federal down to local, and he respected the military but wanted to see it dismantled because it was unconstitutional and could be turned against the people.

He was a man caught in a web of his own distrust, with a ready finger to accuse anyone other than himself for the problems around him.

Paulson spoke little, and once Rodrik ran himself out of his monologue I endeavoured to keep him speaking. I asked questions, leaning into the idea that my land had been taken by eminent domain. What could I do? What recourses did I have? Who should I blame?

Rodrik was happy to give his thoughts on the matter - completely unfounded as they were. I stayed away from asking about their group and looking like I was digging into their 'operation,' if it could be called that. I focused on *his* thoughts on *my* situation; I empowered him and made him feel important.

It wasn't my usual interrogation technique or one that I had used outside of theoretical classes from my MP days. I wasn't a spy, and I hadn't been an MP investigator long enough to have gone undercover. But I had the basics, and Rodrik and Big Paulson weren't sophisticated enough to really identify that I was easing them along the conversation.

"But what can I *do*?" I asked again.

"Well, short of tracking down and laying a beating on whichever politicians signed off on the land grab, you're stuck while the Federals have the whole country on lockdown," Rodrik said. "Not that the false courts would listen to you anyway. But unless you're willing to really stand up for what you believe, it's better to go off-grid as much as you can."

I leaned in, frowning. "What if I *am* willing to stand up?" I asked quietly. "I heard there was a thing that happened a couple of days ago over on that big construction site. That's why I came looking for Barry; I wanted to know if he knew anything about it 'cause that's the kind of thing on *my* mind."

Rodrik and Big Paulson glanced at each other briefly and then turned back to me. "It was yesterday," Rodrik said. "And we heard about it, too. Someone... organized, I guess you could say, took a shot at raiding that big construction site. Sounds like it worked, too."

"Do you think that's something... interesting?" I asked, trying to clearly hint that I wanted it to be while trying not to make it obvious. It was a weird verbal dance.

Another glance between the two. "Not for this group," Rodrik said. "We've got plenty of folks who would defend this place, but they aren't hungry enough for something like that yet."

“Not every Sovereign Citizen is the same though,” Big Paulson said. “We’ve had visits. A couple of guys looking for help on certain things.”

“Really?” I asked, leaning back and trying to smile in a way that said I wanted to talk to those people.

“We don’t have any contact info for them,” Rodrik said. “And they don’t tell us when they’re coming. But your background is definitely something they would be interested in. If you hang around more, come by every once in a while, I can hand off your information to them. You got a burner phone?”

I shook my head.

“We’ll get you one and give them the number,” Rodrik said. “Whether they call you, or take you in, is up to them though. If you’re serious, wait to do anything. They hate it when someone does something that might disrupt their own plans.”

“Who are these guys?” I asked. “They aren’t neo-nazis, are they?”

“No,” Big Paulson shook his head firmly. “Just Americans. Real ones. A lot of them are ex-military, we guess, and pissed off. You’d fit in.”

I grunted and nodded, then stood. “More beers?” I offered. They nodded, and I headed to the bar. When I got back my pistol was on the table, and I re-holstered it without a word. I wasn’t one of them, I didn’t have their full trust, but I had enough.

* * * * *

“I’ll let the FBI know,” Miriam said over the phone. I was driving back to the site, having left the Golden Beaver and the very talkative sovereign citizens in the late afternoon. After a quick text to Erica to assure her I was OK, I had pulled over a couple of miles away from the bar and checked over the truck for GPS tags or recording devices. I’d been in the bar for a few hours, which would have given them plenty of time to plant something. Thankfully I hadn’t found anything though, even crawling under the truck to check the undercarriage, so I felt safe heading home.

“Hopefully they’ll have some sort of a lead,” I said. “The best I could figure it, this group is like a feeder cell for the more militant one. Recruitment and basic necessities. They don’t know much of anything about the militant cell, which makes me think it’s gotta be some militia group.”

“If I can get someone on the phone, they’ll get me what they have,” Miriam said. “The main problem is going to be getting them on the phone at all.”

“Please tell me I don’t need to go ransack their offices or something,” I sighed.

She snorted. “No, it’s not that bad. It just might be some phone tag before I can get someone who can actually release the information to me.”

“The real problem is they might not even have anything useful,” I said. “From the receipts I found, they are moving all over the region. The raid might have even been more than one cell in a network. Narrowing these guys down to a specific location is going to be a problem.”

“Time for some out-of-the-box thinking,” Miriam said. “Where are you headed now?”

“I need to decontaminate. I was just in a room with over thirty people who opposed the most basic of government safety guidelines. They probably ignore ‘Careful, Hot’ warnings just to be contrarian. Then I’ll head over to Erica and the girls.”

There was a beat of silence from the other end of the call. “Alright,” Miriam said. “Just stay safe, and get healthy. I’m going to need you for more than your sneaking and stealthing, soldier.”

“Got it,” I said. “Everything OK on your end, Miriam?”

“Just a lot of pressure coming down from the top,” she said. “And not enough time or resources to handle everything at once. And, Harri, I haven’t forgotten about your ask earlier. I haven’t been able to shake loose any more vaccine yet, but I’m looking.”

“Thank you,” I sighed. “Keep me updated if anything does come out of it. I’ll take ‘fell off the back of a truck’ if I need to.”

“I will,” she promised. “Stay safe.”

“You too,” I said, and we hung up.

Back on the construction site I stayed masked as I signed back in with the airmen at the gates, then drove the truck around the main office site down to our RV compound. I sent Vanessa a message that I was done with the truck and it would need a thorough decontamination scrub down, then headed in and stripped off my clothes. I hesitated, considering throwing my clothes directly into the fire pit, but ended up bringing them into the RV and shoving them into the little washing machine that was built into the expensive vehicle. It was a good thing Greerson had sprung for some of the highest-end units on the market because if we’d needed to do our laundry at a laundromat one of us would have been down there every day.

After a quick but thorough and rough scrubbing in the shower, I got dressed, hopped into my own truck and headed out.

Pulling into the Valkyrie Falls driveway, I felt a sort of tension release from between my shoulders as the trees on either side of the driveway loomed over me. There really wasn't all that much of a difference between the driveway to the Golden Beaver and the one to the Falls, other than the lack of potholes here, but as I smelled the air through my open windows I found myself calming down and feeling more centred.

I pulled through the gate, hitting the remote to close it behind me, and as I hit the parking lot I had to grin. As soon as I could I hopped out of the truck and Ivy was leaping into my arms, kissing me as she wrapped her arms behind my neck and hugged herself to me.

"Mon amour," she laughed breathlessly, still planting little kisses across my cheeks.

"Mon Cheri," I grinned back, holding her tightly.

"Fuck me," she demanded, pulling back a little so she could look into my eyes. "I spent a whole night without you, and now most of a day. I miss you. I miss your taste, and your smell, and your laugh. I need you."

"I need you too," I groaned. "Am I carrying you all the way to your room?"

She laughed and brought one of her hands back to show what she was holding. A small bottle of lube. "Outside," she said. "Up at the waterfall. Then Erica will meet you in our room later."

I kissed her again then pressed my lips to her neck, smelling her soft, clean skin. Soon she, and the others, would make me feel clean again, too.