

Chapter Twenty-Seven

May 3rd, 2021 – 9:47 p.m.

“You can’t mean to tell me our best option is to just sit here,” Andy said, pacing uncomfortably around the room. “I understand it’s a panic room, and that we’re in an underground bunker in a hidden part of the mansion, but I feel like stationary makes us a target.”

“A *hard* target, boss,” Lexi said to him, watching the screens intently, trying to figure out what the hell the two different teams were doing. “Any word from Linda, Niko?”

Niko shook her head. “Last I’d heard from her, there were about a dozen infiltration teams hitting locations up and down the coast. A trio up in the Pacific Northwest, one over at Valhalla Shores, a couple down in LA, and three or four teams here in New Eden, but she wasn’t entirely certain about that count, and didn’t know how reliable her information was. She just wanted us to be aware in case any of the teams showed up here, and to send her a message if they did, so I’ve texted her with no response yet. I’m going to assume she’s a little busy right now.”

“Yeah, if she’s got intruders at the gates, she’ll have her hands full and we’re a bit on our own,” Melody said, shaking her head. “This many strikes, all at once? They’ve got to be insanely desperate, hoping that just one of these attacks succeeds. It’s a tactical fucking nightmare, instigating this many strikes all at once. How desperate are they?”

“Based on what Phil told me earlier,” Andy said, “horrifyingly desperate. They’re worried about total extinction. The CCP’s trying to get its act together, but they’re dying off en masse, and they haven’t shown any signs of being willing to negotiate to get the serum, so the virus just keeps ravaging their people. They’ve been helped by the fact that some of the more remote villages haven’t been exposed yet, but sooner or later, if they don’t get assistance, they’re fucked.”

“That’s why this,” Ash said, waddling over towards the console they were all looking at. “They know it’s down to their last chance and they’re grasping at straws.”

“Aisling, baby, please sit down at the very least,” Andy said, moving over to help Aisling slide onto a bench seat. “The last thing I want is you going into labor in here, when we don’t have an actual doctor nearby. I know both Lauren and Taylor have sports medicine education, but neither’s what I would call a trained midwife.”

“I’ll hold ’em in as long as I damn well have to, Andy,” Ash smirked. “And if you think I’m not paying close attention when we’ve got fucking intruders in our house, you’re out of your damn mind. I’ll go all Aeryn Sun on them while giving birth if I have to. Are they in the building yet?”

“They’re at the back lower floor entrance, by the pool,” Lexi said. “Nicolette locked all the external doors, but you and I both know those doors are mostly decorative, boss. They’re going to be through them in no time. I suspect the only reason they’re trying to pick them is they’re hoping they haven’t tripped any alarms on their way in.”

“They’re *probably* wondering why we don’t have attack dogs on the property,” Melody grumbled. “I keep telling you we should get attack dogs.”

“Maya’s little dogs are all the dogs this household can handle,” Andy joked.

“They’re inside the building,” Lexi said, drawing Andy’s attention back to the monitors, and sure enough, the first three-person team had unlocked the pool doors and opened the house up without tripping any alarms. Of course, the alarms had already gone off minutes ago, and they were in silent mode. “The first team, anyway. I’m still not sure what the hell the second team is doing.”

Andy couldn’t help but hope the cavalry was on its way in, but he knew that was rather

unlikely.

They would be mobilizing the bulk of their forces to protect Team Marcos and Team McKenna, so that the researchers behind the serum couldn't be taken. Andy's face might win the Chinese some points, and it was true, he did have access to all the files on the Quaranteam serum, that access would be immediately terminated before an extraction team could even get him out of the area, much less the country. His value to a strike force would be more as a hostage than as an actual asset, he expected, which meant his *security* as a hostage wouldn't be guaranteed.

Despite the fact that a number of his partners were weapons trained, most of them had resisted the urge to go and get a firearm from the armory, preferring to let the trained professionals handle it. Lexi, Melody and Niko all had weapons, but other than them, it was just Andy, Ash and Piper out of the rest who were also armed. Andy had expected Sarah and Emily to arm up, but at least for the time being, they had chosen not to.

"They're keeping very close together," Lexi noted, as the first group moved into the house and began sweeping each area room by room, no one rushing ahead or getting beyond themselves, opening doors quietly, searching the entirety of the room before moving on to the next.

"This'll give us a good amount of time," Melody said. "There's a lot of rooms in the building, and they're being thorough. Even just limiting time to a minute in a room, they're still going to take quite a while to sweep through just the available house."

"What about the other team?" Andy asked. "What the hell is going on with them?"

"They're still at the pool house," Niko said, curiously, as if she was still trying to discern motives herself and had been unable to do so. "I think they're trying to not get spotted by the other team, not that that makes *any* sense..."

"What the hell *is* this?" Andy asked. "Is this second team a bunch of Russians?"

"I don't think so," Melody said. "That's similar gear and attire as the first team. Maybe they're a rear guard, meant to secure an exit route?"

"Then why aren't they in contact?" Lexi asked. "And why are they trying to stay out of eyeline of the first team? No, I think Niko's right. I mean, I can't be sure, but I don't think the first team even knows the second team is there."

"And I think the second team is trying to keep it that way," Niko added. "Maybe they're a backup team of some kind, or an evaluation team?"

"None of it makes any sense," Andy grumbled.

One of the members of the first team lifted a radio up to their mouths, and said something quick into it, then started moving through the rooms faster. They couldn't hear what was said too clearly, but Melody nodded. "Yeah, that's Mandarin," she said. "Beijing, by the accent."

"I didn't know you spoke Mandarin," Andy said to her.

"I was trained for southeast Asian operations, so I speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Indonesian, and I've got a passing grasp on Māori," she said proudly. "I'm not a native speaker of any of those except Korean, but I can follow basic instructions, and I know enough to generally get the gist of things."

"What were they saying?"

"I couldn't pick up all of it, but it sounded like they were saying 'target in concealment,' so I guess they're sure we haven't left the compound," Melody replied. "Maybe they have someone stationed down by the gate?"

"They went by the garage," Andy replied. "They would've seen all the cars are in, and that might be enough."

“Either way, it doesn’t matter,” Lexi said, jumping back in. “They know we’re here, which means they won’t assume we just up and bailed, so they aren’t going to go anywhere.”

“Looks like they’ve finished the sweep of the ground floor,” Niko said, “and they’re moving up to the 1st floor.”

“Can you send another message to Linda, letting her know we’d like some fucking *backup* over here? I don’t even give a shit if it’s Podunk sheriffs and peashooters,” Andy grumbled. “I do not like having foreign military personnel rummaging through my fucking *home* attempting to *abduct* me.”

“I’ve been sending messages to our Discord channel, trying to get others to keep updates flowing in, Andy, but so far, to no avail,” Niko replied, glancing down at her iPhone. “I’m betting everyone’s a little caught up in their own shit right now.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Andy said, starting to pace around a little bit until he felt Sarah’s arm wrapping around his waist, pulling him over to her to hold him steady.

She leaned her head down and whispered into his ear. “Stop fucking *doing* that, baby,” she said quietly. “Everyone’s looking to you for their fucking cues, so if you keep stomping up and down like a fucking caged lion, you’re going to make everyone fucking *nervous* along with you, and that’s no goddamn good right now, okay? You need to be the fucking boss right now, okay? You’re my fucking king. Fucking *act* like it, huh?” She kissed him hard, holding her body against his for a long moment before she offered him her most comforting smile and pulled away from him.

He knew she was right before he even glanced around the room, but he let his eyes take in the looks on all the members of his Team. They were all eyes on him to set the tone of how they should be feeling about this, and if he was on edge, they were going to be on edge, so he needed to be as calm, cool and collected as he could. So he pulled his feelings in, layered his armor up and tried to look as much the man of steel as he could.

Andy pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and sent Phil a text message. “Stay safe, brother.”

He didn’t get a response back immediately, so he put the phone back into his pocket and moved over to the door, inspecting it, not nervously, just sort of examining the heavy steel construction, noticing for the first time how much the inside of the door looked like a bank vault. They’d be perfectly fine inside of the safe room, so he didn’t spend long looking at it, making his way back over to Jade, who was holding little Matty. Andy stopped to give his sleeping son a little smile. Whoever these people were, whatever they wanted, they were not going to separate Andy from his son.

Matty looked up at him with innocent eyes and a gurgling smile, and Andy couldn’t help but grin back at his son. “Don’t you worry, kid,” Andy told him quietly. “Your moms got this shit on lock.”

“They’re moving up to the second floor,” Lexi said to Andy, drawing his attention back to the screens again. “They’re starting to look a little frustrated.”

“How can you tell?”

“The sweep patterns are getting sloppier,” Melody said. “They expected to find *somebody* by now, and the fact that they haven’t has them worried that maybe they missed something, some secret tunnel that would’ve let us all get off the grounds and over to a safe harbor somewhere else.”

“They’re also worried about reinforcements arriving, so they’re picking up the pace,” Lexi said. “They’re hauling ass through the upper floor.”

“What’re they going to do when it turns out there’s nobody in the upper floors?” Andy asked.

“Not sure,” Lexi replied. “I can’t imagine them just packing it in and heading home empty-handed.”

“Ah, hell,” Melody said, as on the screen, one of the trio reached into the bag and pulled out a small handheld scanner of some kind, something like a laser rangefinder. “That’s a thermal scanner.”

“So?”

“So... they’re going to recognize some of the walls are false walls,” Melody said. “They might even be able to see the path we walked to the elevator.” She tapped at the monitor. “Yep, they can see the path we walked, because our footprints still warmed the floor where we walked.”

Andy looked at the room, noting that most of his partners were actually just sort of caught up in their own business, talking amongst themselves, reading, writing or working on other computers. They were remarkably relaxed, and Andy hoped his being calm had spread throughout the safe space. He almost felt silly for being the nervous one.

It was difficult to watch as the strike team moved to the space next to the hidden elevator entrance on the upper floor and began searching the walls carefully. Andy frowned as he saw one of the women open her bag and pull out a small hatchet. Within seconds, she was hacking away at the smooth white wall that concealed the entrance to the elevator, chopping through a poster for one of his book releases from several years back.

Once they’d ripped into the wall of Rook Manor, Andy could feel his anger starting to flare up, like he wanted to go out and shoot them himself for destroying his home, but he kept it in check, and he knew the last thing he should be doing is putting himself in harm’s way over something as silly as a house. But there was something *personal* about his home being attacked. It hadn’t even been a year yet, but they’d put down roots and had decorated the place to make it their own. The poster wasn’t irreplaceable, and the wall itself was just wood and drywall, but it was still a violation of his home, and he could feel his fist clenching up before slowly relaxing.

“Searching for the latch too fucking hard for them?” Andy growled.

“We can fix it up easy enough, Andy,” Tala said, rubbing his back. “As soon as we’ve driven them off, we’ll have it back and fixed, good as new.”

“These fuckers come into my house, tear up my walls and you expect me to keep cool?” he said, seething with a rage he didn’t even know he had in him.

“Your time will come, Andy,” Melody said, placing her hand on his shoulder, as if it that should drain the rage from him.

On the cameras, they watched the three-person team pry open the elevator door and slowly move to climb down the ladder on the inside of the elevator shaft. Andy could tell that Lexi was considering the same thing he was – it would be so easy to run out there and spray machine gun fire up through the elevator shaft, taking the people out while they were sitting ducks, but it would also be just as easy for one of the strike team to drop a grenade down onto them, so Lexi remained where she was, looking on as the team emerged from the elevator on the basement floor and began sweeping the hallway, putting them much closer to Andy and the rest of Team Rook than he was comfortable with.

“There’s no way they can get through that door,” Lexi said. “I’ve inspected it a bunch, and the damn thing is probably bomb proof. I think when that dude commissioned this built, he told them it had better be able to withstand a nuclear blast.”

“I’m sure it’s not *that* strong,” Andy said with a dry chuckle.

“It’s strong enough to keep them at bay for as long as we need to,” Lexi said.

“Hello, Mr. Rook?” a voice said over the intercom. “Are you in there? You can come out. We do not wish to harm you or your family. We are only here to obtain the formula for the Quaranteam serum from you. That is all. Provide it, and I assure you, we will leave peacefully.”

Lexi pointed to the monitor and showed that one of the three members of the team had picked up one of the various phones from around the house and activated the intercom option, letting them talk throughout the whole house. The voice was heavily accented, clearly Chinese, and somewhat older, but still calm and yet, vaguely threatening.

Andy moved over to the old school landline near the monitors and picked up the handset, talking into it, immediately connecting him with the intruder and turning off the intercom. “This isn’t exactly a way to endear yourself to me, you know,” he said. “Breaking into my house, weapons drawn. It looks more like you’re going to abduct me.”

“Not unless absolutely necessary, Mr. Rook,” the woman said. “If it comes to it, however, I will take your unconscious body, bound and gagged, with two or three of your women to keep you alive, and leave the rest dead on the floor of that bunker you’re in. I assure you, young man, you do not want to fuck with me. We were sent knowing full well that this was likely to be a one-way trip. In fact, all of us are carrying the DuoHalo virus running through our veins, and so I assure you, we can and will end the lives of everyone in that bunker of yours if we have to. We have nothing left to live for, unless we come back with a cure, one which we can mass produce.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Andy said, trying to keep his voice as cold as ice. “The United States does not negotiate with hostage takers. We’re not going to give you an inch. I’m sure you understand why, but in case you don’t, it’s because once you cave the first time, it encourages more people to use the same tactic. So, no, I won’t be opening the door and letting you and your crew march in here. Besides, we’ve got more guns than you anyway, so why don’t you just piss off and get out of my fucking house already?”

“I can’t do that, Mr. Rook,” the woman said calmly. “You and the rest of your imperialist countrymen have prevented my country from obtaining access to this serum and as such, the people in my country are dying by the million. I refuse to let China be wiped from the face of the Earth, so we are not going to fail in our mission. Just give us the formula and we’ll be on our way, not much as a hair out of place for you or any member of your family, especially your newborn son.”

Andy’s hand gripped the phone a bit more roughly at that, threatening to crush it in his firm grip. “Subtle, veiled threats don’t help your condition,” he told her. “If anything, all it makes me want to do is come out there and put a bullet in your skull.”

“You should do that, Mr. Rook,” she said eagerly. “And then my colleagues will subdue you and kill the rest of your family, and you will have lost everything for no reason.” Her voice was tranquil, as if she was discussing the weather, like his death was simply the price of doing business, another entry in a ledger, nothing more than a simple business transaction. “Or you could be reasonable and give me what I want, without bloodshed, and this can be over in a matter of minutes. Simple. Easy. Painless.”

“I’m giving you the same offer,” Andy said, as he decided to turn the conversation around. “Turn around, get out of here, get lost, and I’ll forget about the damage to the house. Won’t even turn over the tapes of you idiots breaking into my house to the government. I mean, you’ve got, what, three, four minutes tops before the Air Force will be knocking down that door guns blazing, eager to put you down for good, and they’re not going to be gentle about it, you

know?”

“Mister Rook, I’d taken for you a man much smarter than you apparently are,” she said to him. “Because you and I both know the Air Force is stretched far too thin to be sending anyone over here at this particular moment. They’ve got more important people to protect. Dr. Marcos. Dr. McKenna. General Bonner. All of those people? Those people, yes, perhaps they do indeed have the cavalry coming. You, on the other hand, Mister Rook, you do not have that luxury, and will not be rescued. You do *not* have people coming, as you say, *guns blazing*, nor does the rest of your family in there. We are all that remains for you.”

Lexi gestured for him to mute the phone before she spoke. “What the hell are they doing out there? They’re inspecting the door.”

“Now that you’ve told us you have cameras outside in these hallways, Mister Rook,” the woman said to him, “we are sure you can see what we are doing, which is laying plastic explosive charges around the framework of your door. You might be confident that your bunker will hold. I assure you that it will not. The explosives will probably destroy the eardrums of your son, at the very least. It will deafen him for life. We will get in regardless. We will not be stopped. We cannot be. We will eliminate your family, we will get what we want and then we will eliminate you. all before a single shot is fired by your beloved Air Force.” She sighed, calmly, confidently, as if all of this was already a done deal. “Do not throw your lives away, Mister Rook. Is it truly worth not only your life, but the lives of those you care for?”

Andy scowled. She was right. They didn’t have reinforcements coming. The cavalry was *not* on its way. They did not have back up right around the corner. They were making their last stand, and this was the Alamo, and Andy wasn’t certain what was on the other side of it.

He’d always loved ‘Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid.’

So maybe this was Bolivia.

It had been a great life, and the last year had been as good as it could ever get.

“I open that door, and we’re all as good as dead anyway, so I guess our hands are dealt and there’s nothing left but to play out the game. You’re checking, I’m raising,” Andy said to her, as much resolution in his voice as he could put there. “Either fold now and get the fuck out of my house, or we see what’s stronger, your bombs or my fucking door.”

He hung up the phone, ending the conversation, before looking over to Lexi.

“Get everything prepped,” he told her. “We’re about to have everything pop off.”

“There’s no way—”

Andy gestured to the screen, and sure enough, on the camera, they could see that the three people had set down the bag and were pulling out bricks of C4, starting to affix them to the bunker door in even spacing, an attempt to blow the door off the hinges. Even as heavy duty as the door was, Andy wasn’t entirely certain that it could withstand several blocks of C4 attempting to pound through it, so they needed to get ready.

Members of his team began flipping over furniture, so they could form makeshift barricades and impact shields, while Ash, Niko, Jade and Matty all headed into the bathroom, to get the child and pregnant women as far away from the combat zone as possible, Aisling giving Andy a firm kiss before she let Niko draw her into the bathroom, which would be the point of last resistance. Andy knew that as much as he wanted to be on the front lines, defending his Team, there was no way in hell Lexi or Melody were going to let him be in the main room once those bombs were affixed to the door. No, his place was also going to be in the bathroom, the final point of resistance, so that as long as he lived, any women who survived were still provided for and able to receive their doses. He turned to look back towards the bathroom, preparing to

make his way into the deepest recesses of the bunker.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Andy had been watching one of the women start to put detonators into the bricks when a shot rang out in the hallway, and the woman with the detonator's head exploded as a supersonic bullet ripped through her skull and out the front before she slumped forward, dead, the detonators not affixed to the bricks, as the other two women panicked and tried to take cover.

A shot rang out from the other side, and before he knew it, he saw a second member of the strike team fall flat dead in his basement hallway, a bullet having ripped clean through her neck. Lexi tapped the control panel to scroll the cameras and they were able to identify the shooters.

It was the other strike team.

One member of the second team yelled out something in Mandarin, and Andy looked over to Melody for translation. "She said something like, 'it's over, Sister, give up,'" Melody said to Andy. "Boss, what the fuck is going on?"

"Not sure," Andy said, as he watched the woman who'd been taunting him on the phone earlier suddenly make a run across the hallway towards the detonators, only to be ripped apart by half a dozen gunshots, her body collapsing several feet away from the bombs, although it might as well have been a million miles.

The second team sprinted into the space, two women checking the dead bodies while the third moved immediately over to the C4, and began removing the bricks from the wall, tossing them back into the bag, but not until it had been thoroughly checked to make sure no detonator had been stuck into it. They removed the weapons from the dead bodies and set them down in a pile just off to the side of the door, as one of the three women removed her balaclava, revealing a beautiful Chinese woman in her mid-thirties if Andy had to guess, although westerners trying to gauge the age of Asian women was often a futile endeavor. She looked up at the camera, then back to her colleagues, saying something very quickly in Mandarin, as the other two women removed their masks as well, tossing them into the stack. There was something meticulous and specific about the movements that Andy found curious. He looked over at Melody for a translation, but she simply shook her head, apparently not having heard the woman clear enough to understand her.

Unsure of what was happening, Andy and his Team watched as the three members of the second team pulled the bodies away from the door and laid them out one at a time, face down, far away from their weapons. Then the three women put their *own* weapons in the pile of firearms and brought the bag of explosives over to it.

The woman who'd first removed her mask seemed like the team leader, and she issued both women another order in Mandarin. The two other women began to strip down to just their underwear, setting their clothing aside on top of the pile of weapons. Then they got down on their knees, and the team leader took out some zip cuffs, held them up to the camera, then moved to handcuff her two partners, pulling the cuffs tight on their wrists, sliding a second pair onto each of their ankles. The two bound and restrained women rolled forward and then turned on their side, presenting themselves in the most vulnerable of positions.

When she was the only one mobile, she started undressing down to a utilitarian set of bra and panties, then moved over to pick up the phone and waited.

"What the fuck is happening, Andy?" Lexi asked him.

"I intend to find out," Andy said, as he picked up the phone. "Yes?"

"Mister Rook?" the woman said, her voice accented but not overly so. "My name is Dr.

Ming-Yue Chen, and I'm here on behalf of the Empty Wives of China. We had nothing to do with this group of CCP loyalists, and wanted to do everything we could to ensure your safety, and the safety of as many other members of your community as possible. Unfortunately, our military trained numbers are much smaller than those in the CCP, so while there were forty women striking here in the United States, we were only able to bring a dozen, and so we deployed nine of us here, and three more to the place you call Valhalla Shores. We are out of radio contact, but hopefully you will be able to contact your friend Dr. Marcos and he will tell you that some of the members of my team have helped subdue his attackers as well. We're here to surrender to you, and to beg you to help save the Chinese people from DuoHalo. I want you to feel as safe as possible, so I'm going to hang up the phone, then handcuff myself in front of your camera for you to see, and I hope in doing so, we will have earned enough of your trust for you to come out and have this conversation with us face-to-face. We are completely unarmed and unable to defend ourselves, so if your security team wanted to come out and execute each of us, we would be unable to stop them, but I am placing my trust in you, Mr. Rook, that you will do the right thing, and at least listen to our story. I hope to continue this conversation momentarily."

Dr. Chen hung up the phone then grabbed another pair of zip cuffs, sliding them around her ankles as she moved to get down on her knees. She pulled the cuffs tight, binding her feet together, then grabbed one last pair, sliding them around her wrists, pulling them to tighten with her teeth. Then she lowered her head, closed her eyes and seemed to begin to pray.

"What do you think, Lexi?" Andy said. "You're in charge of security, but if you tell me not to open that door, I'm not going near it."

"Mel, cycle through all the other cameras," Lexi said.

They took two minutes and checked every single camera they had on the property, and nobody was moving anywhere, not a soul visible on any other screen. Finally, Lexi sighed. "Okay Mel, one of us has to—"

"I'll go."

"We should flip a coin or—"

"I said I'll go," Melody said, picking up her rifle. "I know I'm new girl on the totem pole, and I promised Andy when I signed up for this gig that I would always be first one through the fucking door, so all I need is you to watch my back, Lexi, and make sure nobody's coming down the hallway. Cameras will tell you everything you need to know."

Andy stepped over to Melody, frowning a little. "You don't have to—"

"Andy," Melody said with a wry grin. "Pardon my impertinence, but shut the fuck up already, okay? You're the principal. I'm the bodyguard. Let me guard your fucking body, okay?" Then she grabbed him and kissed him hard before pulling back. "Besides, my danger sense right now tells me there's nothing outside that door but a whole bunch of tied up women and some corpses. Don't worry about it. I'll be right back."

Lexi made Andy stand in the back of the room but let him also keep watch on the monitors as Melody moved to open the door and step out into the hallway. She moved with trained military precision, stepping over to the cuffed women first, inspecting their cuffs, then over to the corpses, checking them one at a time, before finally moving over to the stack of weapons, counting them all and making sure the explosives were all as safe as they could be. Then, when she apparently felt safe and confident, she offered a little shrug to the camera and then gestured for them to come out.

"Andy, you probably should wait in here anyway," Lexi said to him.

"Fuck that," he told her. "If Melody says it's safe, I'm going to go out and talk to these

women so I can find out what the fuck is going on.”

Lexi chuckled. “I’d hit you if the confidence wasn’t so damn sexy. Alright, c’mon, but don’t move more than a couple of feet away from the doorway, in case I have to throw you back inside, okay?”

“It’s your firezone,” he told her as he moved out into the warzone that was his downstairs basement hallway. It wasn’t his first time seeing a dead body, but it was his first time seeing multiples of them at once, especially so recently after they’d died. “Dr. Chen,” Andy said as he walked over to the only woman still on her knees, looking down at her. “What the hell is going on here?”

“We’re here to surrender, to seek asylum, and to beg for America’s help in saving China from itself, Mr. Rook,” she said, offering a very nervous smile. “I don’t know how much less threatening we can make ourselves for you and your family, save getting totally naked. But that’s still on the table, if it’s needed.” The nervous smile seemed to fade and it was replaced with a look Andy had seen a lot over the past year or so.

“Lexi, see if you can get Phil on the phone. I have a feeling we have some interesting stories to exchange...”