**Chapter Thirty**

**N**aturally, upon hearing the threat, Phil’s first reaction was to strangle Royce right there and then, but luckily Lenny pumped some sense into him before he could actually do that.

“Get a hold of yourself, man!” Lenny urged. “Killing him doesn’t change the equation. I know it sounds depressing, but if what he said was true, by taking him out, you’re basically signing your own wife’s death warrant.”

Making sure that Phil wasn’t going to try anything rash, Lenny turned to Royce. “How do I know that you’re not lying?”

“There are agents posted inside the room where they’re being held.” Royce spat. “If they see you walk out of this room before me, they’ll shoot them straightaway, no questions asked.”

“Not if we get to them first.” Phil countered.

Royce smiled thinly. “Well, if you think you can travel faster than a bullet, then go ahead; be my guest. Kill me.”

*Shit.* This guy had every possibility covered. No wonder he’d kept both Tanya and Layla alive instead of killing them; they were his bargaining chip. His trump card to get out of here, scot-free.

*Bastard*.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked. Me? I was out of ideas.

Nobody said anything for a long while. All I heard was the ragged breaths coming out of my mouth. Royce had already stopped struggling altogether; he knew he’d won this time. Honestly, I believe we knew that too. There was no way we could arrest or kill him without inflicting harm to Tanya and Layla. His hostage strategy had worked out perfectly.

And that sucked, big time.

Finally, Lenny broke the awful silence. “And how do I know you’ll keep your word once I give you what you want?”

Royce didn’t even hesitate. “That’s the thing. You don’t.” He admitted.

“You seriously gonna let him go?” Phil demanded, his voice pained. “Didn’t this guy like, murder hundreds of innocent people in cold blood or something?”

I could tell that Lenny wasn’t very happy with this idea either. “What other choice do we have?”

“I don’t know…drag him to the room where Tanya’s being held and threaten him to release them at gunpoint.”

“I think we both know how risky that is.” Lenny disagreed. “There are countless possibilities that could happen, and in most of those possibilities, death is an unavoidable factor.”

“So you’re telling me that we should give him what he wants?” The words sounded like acid in my mouth; the taste of defeat was definitely not good.

“Yeah,” Lenny muttered. “At least for the meantime. We’ll see how things work out and improvise if possible.”

“Well, I’m not the one who’s gonna be divulging information that might potentially lead to the destruction of the world.” Phil shrugged.

Lenny ignored Phil’s remark, but it was evident that he was getting antsy about the decision he was about to make. Then, although it was clear that he knew exactly what information Royce wanted, he asked, “What do you wanna know?”

“The optogenetics Kristoff used to restrain Jarod and allow Phil to have full and unrestricted control over his body.” Royce stated. As he was still facing away from me, he sounded like he was just making a casual statement, but I knew that wasn’t the case at all.

Lenny inhaled sharply. Oh, man. Sudden, sharp intakes of breath spell trouble.

“It’s actually a sub-phase of Phase Two.” He began. “The main concept is to utilize the functioning mechanism of the light-sensitive protein in algae called Halorhodopsin to silence specific neurons in the subject’s brain.”

Sensing Lenny’s hesitation, Royce got impatient. “What, that’s it? You’re telling me the entire procedure can be summarized into a freaking sentence?”

“This theory should never have been revealed,” Lenny said bitterly. “If I hadn’t told that blasted Kristoff about it―”

“I would’ve extracted the answer out of you nevertheless.” Royce interrupted. “So stop stalling and get the hell on with it.”

Then, like a breaking dam, Lenny let it all out.

“Halorhodopsin is a light-sensitive protein present in algae that gives it its phototrophic abilities. After extracting the gene that encodes the Halorhodopsin protein from the algae, you need to add it to another piece of DNA called the promoter before adding this combination into a virus.

“Here’s where things get a little complicated. First, you’ll have to identify and isolate the exact location of the neurons that you want the virus to infect. Those neurons are specifically targeted because they are the sole link between the host consciousness and its body, hence by silencing those neurons, you would’ve managed to severe the connection between the host and his or her body.

“Once the virus has done its job of infecting the targeted neurons, a subset of those neurons will have the correct machinery to activate the promoter, and in those cells, the Halorhodopsin protein will be expressed in the cell membrane.

“Now, to activate the inhibiting protein, light is a crucial prerequisite. To achieve this, an artificial light source must be created by inserting a nanochip into the subject’s brain. This nanochip must be equipped with the ability to shine yellow light on the genetically-modified neurons constantly. The shining of the yellow light will trigger the Halorhodopsin, which will in turn release a flood of negative ions that inhibits those aforementioned neurons. This immobilizes the host consciousness until the light is switched off or removed.”

“You know,” I gave Lenny a mental nudge when he’d finished the opto-whatsit theory. “What you just said makes absolutely no sense to me.”

“I know.”

Royce, on the other hand, was nodding slowly (as much as he could, being in a firm and solid arm lock). “Interesting. Now I suppose you know where you kept the experiment reports and methodology?”

No doubt grudgingly, Lenny revealed everything he knew. “It’s hidden inside one of the tiles in the Athena Lab. Thirty feet from the left and forty feet from the top. You’ll probably need a jackhammer to get through the porcelain.”

“I believe you are fully aware of the consequences if I find out that you’ve been lying to me,” Royce warned ominously.

Lenny didn’t reply. Thankfully, Royce took that for a ‘yes’. “Very well. Now let me go and I’ll promise you that your wife gets a safe trip out of here.”

Phil shifted uneasily. As much as he wanted his wife to be safe, he wasn’t very comfortable with the idea of watching the person who started all this getting away unscathed. Well, neither was I, but at the end, this stalemate had to end. After all, it’s impossible for this situation―Royce and I entangled in an awkward bromance hug while Tanya and Layla get prodded around by gun-wielding assholes―to go on forever, right?

So that’s why, five seconds later, I ripped back control from Phil and loosened my hand around Royce’s neck. Phil stared at me in shock, but said nothing.

“You’re free to go.” I told Royce. As he stood up clumsily, dazed by the prolonged pressure around his neck, I couldn’t help but cast him a look of absolute disgust.

“You’ve made a very noble choice, Jarod.” Royce nodded approvingly as he smoothened his ruffled lab coat. “The world is going to be such a better place because of you.”

“What do you mean ‘a better place’?” I narrowed my eyes.

“Oh, boy, I don’t wanna spoil it for you,” Royce smirked and started walking towards the door. “You’ll see for yourself.”

Then, before I could even decide whether I should be angry at him for calling me a boy or not telling me anything about his plan to end the world, Royce stopped just when he was about to open the door. As he turned around, I saw the evil grin on his face, and I knew, right at that moment, that I was fucked.

“On second thought, no, you won’t get to see it.” Royce shook his head sadly. Then, whipping out a walkie-talkie from his pocket, he shouted the words that flipped my world upside down once again.

“Kill them both. Do it now.”

As I stared at him disbelievingly, Royce gave me an apologetic wink and produced a gun from his oh-so-innocuous-looking lab coat.

“Hasta la vista, baby.”

**F**or the gazillionth time, I would like to credit Phil for saving my sorry ass. Seriously, that guy did all the hard work so that I could still be alive and kicking right now. If it was not for Phil’s legendary reflexes, I would be lying in a pool of my own blood, with my eyes staring lifelessly into the white concrete ceiling above me.

Here’s a detailed account of what happened earlier:

Royce, being an experienced cold-blooded murderer, didn’t utter a long I’m-going-to-kill-you-now speech before shooting me. So, when the bullet came screaming toward me following the wake of the gunshot, I was taken completely by surprise. Fortunately, for both our sakes, Phil wasn’t.

The *unfortunate* thing was, the evasive measures Phil had in mind happened to be doing a split. Mind you, this was the kind of split done by professional dancers/gymnasts, which required their…nether regions to come in contact with the ground. Me? I could barely do a proper toe-touch, let alone a freaking split.

Hence, the split almost killed me right there and then. I swear I heard my pelvic bones creak like the door at Boo Radley’s place, and I had a feeling that I was going to be able to pee standing for a month. *Jesus.*

“What the fuck, man!” I cried out to Phil. “What are you doing?”

“Saving your dumb ass!” Phil shouted back as the bullet pinged noisily into the metal tray behind me. If I’d moved a split second later, the bullet would now be embedded inside my skull. *Lovely.*

Without waiting for Royce to fire a second shot, Phil grabbed the scalpel, the same one that I’d left on the bed just now after using it to slit the zip ties around my ankles. With a deft flick of his wrist, he sent the sharp blade flying through the air toward Royce.

The poor guy never saw that coming. Or he was probably too blinded by the rage to kill me that he didn’t expect any retaliation. Either way though, Royce barely had time to dodge when the blade stabbed dead-on into his left eye with a dull ‘thunk’.

“Ugh!” I winced.

“Oof!” Lenny winced.

“Bullseye.” Phil gloated.

Royce, on the other hand, wasn’t doing very well with a scalpel poking out from his eyeball. His reflex action upon getting stabbed in the eye was to drop the gun and clutch at his eyes wildly with one hand, while the other tried to dislodge the scalpel with several frantic claws and scrabbles.

After a few F-bombs later, Royce managed to remove the scalpel-projectile, but the result was more or less like that last scene from *The Fly* where the guy’s jaw is torn away by the chick. In other words? Gross.

Pissed as hell, Royce started staggering towards me with murder in his eyes―no, *eye*―but he obviously thought better of it and halted in his tracks. Then, the *coward* turned tail and ran.

“Don’t let him get away!” Phil shouted. I needed no extra prompting. Like a flash of lightning, I dashed after Royce and shot through the door just before he slammed it in my face.

Emerging from the room, I caught the sight of Royce hobbling hastily down the far end of the corridor. I was about to make a dash for him but a thought struck me, freezing me in my tracks.

“What are you waiting for?” Phil barked impatiently. “He’s getting―”

I shook my head sadly. “We should go get the ladies first.” *Provided they’re still alive by now.*

“But where are they being held?” Lenny wondered.

My mind raced as I tried to recall Royce’s words. Like those ominous sounding voices in horror shows, they started floating back to me…*don’t worry, she’s fine*…*she’s just…in the next room.*

The next room!

As I darted towards the room on my left, I heard Lenny’s voice in my head. “Don’t you think it’s a bit strange for a criminal mastermind like The Duke to reveal the positions of his hostages to you just like that?”

“Well, criminal masterminds make mistakes sometimes.” I pointed out. “Plus, I don’t think we have much of a choice right now.”

I pushed the door open. To my delight, I found both Tanya and Layla inside, seemingly unharmed if you could ignore the duct tape on their mouths and the rope around their hands. I breathed a sigh of relief and was about to rush over to their sides when the unthinkable happened.

At first, I didn’t know what exactly happened. All I knew was there was this loud, resonating ‘BANG’, and I saw Tanya’s head snap forward with an excruciating cracking noise that reminded me of the splintering of a wooden armchair. A split second later, blood spurted out of her head and splattered all over the ground.

The brief moment of absolute silence after the gunshot was broken very quickly.

“NO!” Phil shrieked, his voice the one of a tortured man. I felt myself being taken over by the sheer force of Phil’s distress as I leaped across the room in slow motion. Phil, now in control of my body, took a few steps towards Tanya, before the soldier in him registered the threat at hand and changed course…towards the man who’d shot his wife.

Now, don’t get me wrong; I’m not a coward. But the man Phil was charging at turned out to be a 6’5 humongous ogre in a suit and tie. Not to mention that he had a smoking gun in his hand. I certainly wouldn’t have done that, even if I knew I had a martial arts sensei in my head with all the kickass moves ready. I shouted at Phil, begging for him to stop, but apparently the sudden wave of agony had made him shut out everything around him except for his only target―his wife’s killer.

Well, I guess love really does make people do crazy stuff after all.

Of course, Phil wasn’t an absolute idiot. As he careened his way over to Fatso, he grabbed a metal tray and no, he didn’t use it as a shield. Instead, he hurled the tray across like a professional Frisbee player.

The tray smacked the ogre in the face with a loud ‘thwack’, forcing him to drop the gun in reflex. Instantly, before the guy could even curse, Phil was in his face, hurling punches and kicks in such quick succession that I felt the dizziness creep into my head. The sudden exertion of force was just too much to bear.

After God knows how long, I finally found my voice. “Stop it, Phil!” I begged. “He’s dead!”

*Punch. Kick. Elbow.*

“Stop!” I yelled, more urgently now.

Phil hesitated. I could tell that through the fog of madness that had us both momentarily blinded, Phil was beginning to comprehend what had actually happened.

“It’s over, Phil.” Lenny cried out, his voice hoarse. From the corner of my eye, I spotted Tanya’s limp, unmoving form slumped in the chair that she was still strapped tightly to.

Phil raised his shaking hands to deliver another punch, but they froze in mid-air as he hesitated. An unearthly garbled noise escaped his lips. With an anguished cry, he turned over to his wife.

Phil staggered over to Tanya’s side. With a tentative hand, he reached over to her wrist and fumbled to take her pulse. There wasn’t any.

“No…” Phil whispered. Coiling an arm around her bloody neck, he wrapped Tanya into a trembling hug. Then, his chest started heaving uncontrollably as sobs racked their way through his (and my) body.

I didn’t know what to say except to repeat the words “I’m sorry” countless of times. Although I barely know Tanya (we’d just met 24 hours ago), sadness engulfed me like a wave. She seemed like a sweet woman, and her sweetness was merely marred by her unfortunate depression. Not just that, but Phil had just lost his beloved wife in front of his very eyes. If it sucks to watch a person lose a loved one on TV, try watching a person who’s been living in your head for two days do so. The moroseness is simply overwhelming.

I had no idea what happened next, neither did I know how much time had passed, but I do remember something before my vision turned black. And it wasn’t a very comforting image either.

It was Tanya’s cold, pale face, stained by the line of blood that slid down from the ghastly gaping hole in her forehead, with her eyes wide open, staring blankly into nothingness…