

Quaranteam

Chapter 31

by Corrupting Power (<http://www.patreon.com/CorruptingPower>)

Before they even took the blindfold off, Andy knew exactly who was pressed against his left and right sides, even if he hadn't seen either of them in person in over a decade. Emily pulled the blindfold off him and he looked to his right, seeing Fiona's smiling face resting against his shoulder.

She was older, certainly, but the years had been far kinder to her than they had any right to be, and if DC had put her through any sort of hell, she certainly didn't wear it on her face. Mostly, she looked just like she had on their final night together, right before he'd moved west to California, and while that warmed his heart, he also felt a bit nervous about it. He'd put on some weight over the years, and the skin around his eyes was definitely showing initial wrinkles. The years hadn't been nearly as kind to him as they had to her.

Then it occurred to him that she'd had several minutes to watch him, blindfolded and splayed out, time in which she could have changed her mind, and didn't, so it meant that she knew what she wanted, and, for all his flaws and mistakes, he was it.

So then he decided to look to his left, and the face there certainly had aged, but mostly because she'd barely been more than a girl last time he'd seen her, then eighteen and full of life, now thirty-three and much more wizened.

Moira.

She bore a tiny nose stud now, a diamond he thought, which was new, but the explosion of her crimson curls was as gloriously unruly as ever. She had some tattoos now, although he couldn't see them too clearly this close up. Also, he could feel her small breasts were capped with pierced nipples, and that was also definitely a change.

So much had changed about Moira over a decade and a half, and yet, that mischievous little smile of hers was exactly as he'd remembered it. It wasn't the only thing, though. She was still slender and lithe, willowy in frame but also short in stature. Many differences and yet, somehow, still fundamentally the same Moira he'd met a decade and a half ago.

But how the hell had she come to be here? His mind was filled with endless questions, and he found himself slightly annoyed that he wasn't going to get real answers until tomorrow.

CLICK! went the sound of a cell phone camera as the tiny LED flash bulb lit him up, and he looked to see Niko holding a phone there, taking a handful of pictures as Emily moved to remove the restraints from his left arm, Sarah getting his right, Lauren getting his left leg and Hannah getting his right leg, all four of them moving quickly to make sure he wasn't imprisoned any longer.

"Remember what I said," Ash said, as she helped him slide out from between the two slumbering bodies. "Say thank you when you're given a gift."

He grinned, rolling his eyes in amusement. "Yes, well, I'll have to wait until they're both conscious before I can tell them thank you, now won't I?" He slipped back onto the bed so he could pull the covers over the two of them, making sure they were settled well into the bed. He made sure to put not only the sheet on them but also the comforter, so that they would awake warm and toasty in the bed. Of course, he realized, considering how early it was the morning, the rest of them were likely to be back in this bed before either of them woke up from the imprinting process. After getting them tucked in, he slid back to sit on the edge of the bed, seeing the girls were standing around him, all eager for a story, to explain how they'd come to this.

"I asked Fiona if she was sure you'd be okay with Moira, and asked Moira if she was sure she wanted this, and Moira told me she was very excited to see you again, so clearly you two have some kind of history," Niko said, stepping close to rub her hand along Andy's shoulder. "Fi said you'd be anxious for about five minutes and then exuberant after that."

Andy chuckled. "I think the five minutes has passed, and now I'm mostly just full of questions

about what happened between then and now. We don't have to worry about waking them, but maybe we should go sit in one of the living rooms so everyone has a place to sit.”

While Andy grabbed a pair of boxers and a t-shirt, the girls all did the same, pillaging his t-shirt collection so that each of them was wearing one of his shirts as well as panties or boxers. Once all of them had some clothing on, they moved out of the bedroom and down the hall to the second story living room, filled with couches and chairs.

He hopped onto a couch, as Sarah and Aisling immediately closed in on either side of him, as the rest of the girls gathered around, finding seats where they could all watch Andy, eager for him to spill the details they'd been unable to get from Fiona or Moira.

“So I'm guessing you got to spend the most time with them, Niko,” he said with a sly smile. “What did they tell you at the base? How much do you already know?”

“Almost nothing!” she huffed in mock indignation, although the smile on her face made it clear it was simply a ploy. “Fiona's a troublemaker, and I kinda love her already. She said you'd slept with Moira before, and you hadn't complained when it happened, so that you would be okay with it happening again on a more regular basis.”

“That's it?”

“Well, I asked Moira to tell me something she knew about you sexually to prove that she'd really slept with you before,” Niko giggled, “and she said you loved that she had a foul mouth, so I knew she really had.”

Andy's eyebrows hopped in amusement as he nodded. “Yes. Well. I suppose I have to tell the story now, don't I?”

“I mean, you don't,” Sarah said, leaning in firmly against his right side, “but I think if you don't, you should be worried about all of us fucking dogpiling on you and tickling you until you can't breathe, and we all know how much you hate being tickled, so...”

“Absolutely!” Emily giggled, tenting her fingertips like she was getting ready to tickle him. “Tea! Spill it!”

“I can't tell if this story's going to be better or worse than you expected, but okay, here goes,” he said, feeling Ash's fingertips stroking along the back of his head, trying to keep him at ease. “So in the fall of 2005, during Fi and my's last year of college, her older brother, Julian, got married to a Scottish girl named Alana. Naturally, Fi and I were invited to the wedding – we were pretty established into our coupledness back then – so even though the wedding was *in* Scotland, I knew it was important enough for her that we went. The two of us took a week off of classes to fly out to Aberdeen, as the wedding was in a little villa called Newburgh, just to the north of it.”

“Scottish weather in the fall is no great picnic, especially that far north,” Emily said. “I'm surprised they didn't wait until the spring or summer.”

“The plan had been to hold the wedding the following year, actually, but Alana's mother had been diagnosed with stage four breast cancer, and they didn't think she had that long, so the timetable was pushed up. Thankfully, Newburgh isn't a particularly large village, so making the accommodations wasn't tricky. It just meant that we had to move the timetable of our trip up by a lot.”

“Always tricky,” Piper said.

“Any massive problems?” Hannah asked.

“Well, we were a little worried that my passport wasn't going to arrive in time, but you girls know me, I prepare for everything a billion years in advance, so it showed up about two weeks before we were scheduled to leave. I'd never been out of the country before, whereas Fiona's passport had more stamps in it than library book.”

“They stamp library books?” Asha asked.

Andy decided to let that slide. “I'd also never been someone's date to a wedding before either, so I didn't realize quite how much conversation there was going to be from her family about our future, whether we should get married, if either of us wanted children, the whole nine yards. And remember,

we spent basically a full day just getting there, and another full day just getting back, so a lot of that conversation was had between the two of us before we'd gotten there. We were close and serious, but I hadn't realized that the possibility of marriage was on Fi's mind until we were on an airplane somewhere over the Atlantic and I didn't have anywhere to run."

He chuckled a little, as the girls all shot him some degree of dirty looks.

"I wasn't opposed to the idea, but I just didn't think she'd felt that attached to me, really. We'd already started having some of the conversations about how I wanted to go west and she wanted to go to DC, and I knew that was going to be a loggerhead we were going to come to at some point."

"You're getting off topic, love," Emily chided. "You were getting to Moira."

"Are you going to tell me how to tell a story, Em?" he countered, which made her snicker.

"Anyway, marriage wasn't the only thing we talked about on the way up. We had a short taxi ride from Aberdeen to Newburgh where Fi thanked me for coming along, because she knew I'm not a big party person. I told her that of course I was going to come, since she was a bridesmaid and we'd been together as a couple for a few years at that point. Her whole family was going to be there, and it would've looked terrible if her boyfriend hadn't come along to her brother's wedding, no matter how he felt about it."

"You've never seemed anti-party at any of our parties," Ash said.

"Well, no," he admitted, "but that's because I know everyone at *our* parties. I don't do quite as well in large social situations where there's a hundred people introducing themselves and you're expected to keep a dozen different conversations spinning in your head for hours on end. Those things I don't do as well with."

"Just imagine how much fucking fun you're going to have meeting all our families and friends," Sarah teased. "Shit, our wedding's gonna be a small city."

"Yes yes," Andy laughed, "we'll rent out the Fox Theatre in Oakland. It fits 2,800 people and if that isn't enough for you ladies, then the wedding's off." He tossed his hand into the air at the end for comic effect.

All the girls giggled a little bit at that.

"So how was Fiona's brother's wedding?" Sheridan asked.

"Relatively small and intimate, to my shock. Fi's family isn't that big, and it seemed like Alana's wasn't either, although both sides had a smattering of friends who had flown or driven in. Alana's side was certainly more full, as Newburgh was her home town. Julian had gotten into international finance and was working out of London, helping manage some hedge fund, which is where he'd met Alana. So for all of her friends, it was just a couple of hours. For his family and most of his older friends, it was a transatlantic voyage. But we came anyway, and I think there were about fifty people at the wedding, so it wasn't as overwhelming as I expected, and Fiona looked amazing in the bridesmaid's dress."

"Keep going," Piper prompted.

"Well, Moira was one of the other bridesmaids, a childhood friend of Alana's, well, someone Alana had babysat growing up, actually. I was 23, Fiona was 22, Julian was 27, Alana was 25 and Moira was 18, but only just. Alana and Moira were still tight friends even all the years later, and so when she'd decided to get married, she'd asked her two sisters, Julian's sister, her best friend and Moira to be in her wedding party."

"Here's where the plot thickens, I reckon," Lauren said.

"Wait," Sarah said. "The threesome you were telling Jade about?"

"Can I tell my story, or do you girls want to continue jumping to any conclusion you can get your hands on?" he said, trying to put as much 'disappointed parent' as he could into his tone, placing his hands on his hips in exasperation.

"Sorry baby," Sarah replied, kissing his cheek. "Carry on."

"Thank you," he sighed, although he wasn't genuinely annoyed. It was simply fun keeping the girls in the dark a little longer, since they'd enjoyed having him blindfolded so much. "So the wedding

itself was nice, mostly a low-key affair. One thing I'd told Fiona was that the heavy Scottish accents were crazy hard to understand, especially as we were all starting to have more than a few drinks at the reception. I dunno if any of you ladies have been drinking with Scots before..." Emily cleared her throat and he shot her a wink. "...but for those of you who haven't, heavens, you can't tell if *you're* way more drunk than you thought, or if *their* language has just devolved into raw sounds."

"Usually a bit of both," Emily said as she nodded. "It's true – I've grown up hearing Scottish voices now and again, and even I have trouble making out what they're saying after they've a few pints in them."

"So, picture that, me at a wedding reception, a little tipsy, unable to hold a conversation with at least half of the people in the building, and Fi pulls me out onto the dance floor, where I am *just* drunk enough that I don't give a shit of how badly I'm dancing."

"You aren't that awkward, love," Ash teased.

"You're fibbing, love, but I'll let it slide. Anyway, Fi and I are out there dancing on the floor, and the DJ puts on a slower song, some Robbie Williams number I think, but basically all that sort of stuff blends together for me. And while we're there slow dancing, Fi whispers into my ear and asks me if I've ever considered a threesome."

"I fucking knew it!" Sarah said, shoving her fist into the air, before realizing everyone was staring at her, and she giggled furiously, burying her face in Andy's neck for a second. "Sorry, sorry, carry on. Just super fucking proud of myself for figuring it out."

"I told Fi that she was all the woman I needed, and the idea of sharing her with another man was enough to make me soft. She giggled, said she didn't want another man, and that she didn't want us to have Miss Forever, but that we *were* at a wedding, so there wasn't any shame in having fun with Miss Right Now."

"That little minx," Niko mumbled.

"She even had someone in mind, and pointed out Moira, who was dancing by herself in the center of the room, slow dancing alone like nobody was watching, having shrugged off a couple of Julian's friends from London. She didn't have the nose stud back then, but she certainly had the long curly dark red hair. It had been up for the ceremony, but as soon as she'd gotten to the reception, she'd let her hair down, both figuratively and literally."

"You certainly do have a fucking type, Andy," Sarah teased, poking him in the ribs.

Andy blushed a little bit, looking down at his lap for a moment before looking back up again. "Moira was actually my first redhead, and I didn't have another in my life until I met Ash. Most of the time, before and after Fi, I dated blondes, actually. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that Moira certainly went a long way into shaping my sexual tastes."

"How so?"

"She was so confident, so playful, so open and free. She loved to swear, and I know that Fi picked up on that, because she swore *way* more when we got back from Scotland than before we'd left. Moira was only 18 at the time but she felt like this dynamo of energy, and she wore her sexuality so blatantly on her sleeve. She seemed worldly, far more experienced than either Fi or I were, and while we were nervous when the whole thing started, to Moira, it seemed like just another in a long list of adventures, one that she was going to dive into without reservation. The Scottish accent was hot too, I'm not gonna lie, but you girls know how I have a love of accents."

At that, Emily began to giggle frantically, a frenzied laugh that made all the other girls and even Andy as well turn to look at her, her face turning red, waving her arms in the air for everyone to fall silent for a moment, and eventually the laughing fit faded and she was finally able to speak. "I know that you said the family was full after this, Andrew, but Niko absolutely, positively, unequivocally has to remain vigilant for a Welsh girl to bring into the house, so you can complete the set." Andy cocked his head to one side, so she explained. "English," she said, pointing at herself. "Irish," she said, pointing at Aisling. "Scottish," she said, pointing back at the bedroom. "You can't leave the set

unfinished like that. We've got to get you a taff to round out the set.”

“Taff?” Niko asked.

“The river that runs through the Welsh capital of Cardiff is the river Taff, so a lot of people call the Welsh taffs or taffys,” Emily said. “Anyway, you will make an exception if we find the right Welsh girl to complete the house. I've decided for you.”

“I don't get a say in the matter?” he asked, realizing it was futile trying to argue with her.

“Oh, of course you do, Andrew, and your say is 'whatever you think is best, my darling Emily.’”

He grinned, chastised. “Whatever you think is best, my darling Emily.”

“There's a good boy.”

“Did you keep in touch with Moira after your tryst?”

“I didn't, and I thought Fi hadn't either. It was only one day, well, I guess it was technically two nights and one day. But it felt very much like a fling, a very intense series of sexual experiences that were wonderful, but definitely fleeting. I mean, I told Moira that if she ever wanted to come to the states, we'd be happy to show her around, and I gave her my email address, but I never heard from her after that. Shit, I don't even know her last name!”

“It's MacLeod,” Niko said.

“What, like the Highlander?” Sarah asked.

“It's one of the most common surnames in Scotland, Sares, so hush,” Emily said to her.

“I wonder if there's such a thing as *too* Scottish,” Andy muttered to himself.

“I went and got them from the base earlier this morning at their request,” Niko said. “Myself, Ash and Emily chatted with them a little bit before we brought them into the bedroom. They're both genuinely very eager to join the family.”

“Moira was a little starstruck by me at first,” Em confessed, “but I told her she was going to have to get over that and she agreed.”

“We didn't have a lot of time to talk to them this morning, but we did vet them a little bit,” Aisling said to him. “Fiona seemed exactly like you described her as, and Moira seemed proper class.”

“You *did* agree to whatever Fiona's condition was, Andy,” Niko said to him. “Moira was that condition. I'm sure she'll be happy to tell you why when they're both awake.”

“We wouldn't have let them in if we didn't think they wanted to be with you for any reasons other than the right ones, Andrew,” Emily said. “And we vetted them as a team, so each of us could make certain there weren't any red flags lying about, and be certain that the others hadn't overlooked any possible dealbreakers.”

“I'm surprised you didn't join them in grilling them over, Sarah,” Andy said to her.

She laughed a little and shrugged. “I'm klutzy and I'd have only screwed it up or said something awkward. Besides, I had to make sure you stayed pinned in bed until they got back, although Piper helped with that too.”

Piper smirked. “Sheridan tied the knots, though.”

“Ever need a hand with rope,” Sheridan giggled, “I'm your girl.”

“Besides, I trust in the trio,” Sarah said. “Em knows what things I'd think to ask, and Ash and Niko only ever have your best interests at heart, so I knew they'd do fine without me getting in the way or slowing things down.”

“Anyway,” Andy continued, “after Fi and I flew back from Scotland, I never heard from Moira again. I didn't want to ask Fi if she had, because I didn't want her ever thinking she wasn't enough for me. Fi could be a little emotionally insecure back in those days, and I felt like if I went around asking about Moira, I might be accidentally picking a fight I didn't intend to, so I just played it safe. Do you know how they reconnected, Niko?”

“It's not my place to tell their story, Andy,” Niko said. “I know bits and pieces, but when they're awake, I'm sure they're going to tell you all about what they've both been up to for the last fifteen years. They both seemed like wonderful people, and if I had seen anything to give me pause while they were

at the base, I would've voiced concerns well before they even set foot in the door.”

“Can you at least tell me what Moira does for a living? That much surely can't be a spoiler.”

“It's not and don't call me Shirley,” Niko replied, sticking her tongue out. “She's a doctor, actually, and apparently a damn good one. Dr. Moira MacLeod. So the Rook family got itself a doctor in the end after all.”

“That's wild,” he said. “I would've never pegged for her becoming a doctor. Can you be more specific?”

“I could, but then we're bordering into spoiler territory, so I won't. But I'll tell you what I will do. Wait here a minute,” Niko said, hopping up from her chair, heading back towards the bedroom.

“Any idea what this is about?” Andy asked Emily, since she seemed to be the most in the know at the moment.

“Not in the least,” she answered, just as Niko was coming back into the room with her arms behind her back.

“So Fiona did have one thing she wanted me to give you, once they were imprinting, and you knew she was going to be part of your life again, and this time forever.” From behind her back, she pulled out a weird stuffed monkey, a rather cheap looking plushy that had clearly been carted around for a long time, the color of the fur slightly faded from age. She held it out to him with a kind smile.

He took it from her, and immediately started to tear up a little, a shocked little laugh escaping from his lips. “Oh. My. God. I don't fucking believe it. There is no fucking way.”

Niko smiled, not moving away, standing in front of him. “She said you'd recognize it.”

“Of course I fucking recognize it,” he said, aware there were tears running down his cheeks.

“On my and Fi's first date, we went to this traveling carnival that had stopped on campus, and I spent thirty bucks at the ring toss game to win her this silly goddamn monkey, because she said it was the cutest thing, and I refused to give up. Eventually I won it and gave it to her, and she used to keep it on her desk at home, but I didn't think she'd kept it all these years,” He was crying openly now, but still smiling, the waves of joy almost unbearable. “God I'm a mess, girls, I'm sorry.”

Suddenly all the girls rushed him, each of them doing their best to wrap their arms around him, all of them hugging him together, a couple of them having teared up a little, in sympathy or maybe caught up in the story he'd been telling, he wasn't quite sure.

They stayed like that a few minutes, until Andy had regained him composure, Sarah wiping the tears from his face as each of the girls took a turn giving him a soft kiss.

“I promise you, girls, you're all going to love Fi, and if Fi thought it was important to bring Moira, then you're all going to love Moira as well. Fi always had the better judgment of the two of us,” he said as the girls peeled away one at a time and returned to their seats.

“I got to spend a few hours yesterday with them,” Niko said, “and they're both awesome, so nobody panic.”

“Well, maybe we should panic a little, my dears,” Emily teased, tapping her Apple Watch, “because I'd like to remind everyone that 60 Minutes will be arriving in just under three hours, and the last thing we want to do is appear on national television in our jammies like we're hosting a slumber party. And as big as the master bathroom's shower is, we don't want to all be running the hot water at once in several different bathrooms either. So why don't half of you go and get your outfits picked out, ready and set aside, and the other half of us will hop through our showers. Make sure that you can still eat, though, and you can put on lipstick after lunch as a finishing touch.”

“Yes, Emily,” all the other girls said together in unison, like a bunch of reluctant schoolchildren, which only made Emily giggle all over again, trying on her best schoolmarm look.

“As for you, Andrew,” she said, helping to pull him to his feet. “You definitely need to get shaved, hop through your shower and then get dressed, because I know you're going to want to make sure the house is in proper order for their arrival.”

It turned out that a dozen women all getting ready for television appearances was, in fact, a

major operation. The master bathroom was large enough that four of the girls could use the mirror at the same time, but beyond that, they had to party up with “prep buddies,” each making sure they were getting themselves ready as well as their prep buddy.

Andy was, of course, ready long before anyone else was, even with Emily, Sarah, Ash and Niko sharing him in the shower. He left the four of them in there, although they emerged not long after, each running a hair dryer while they applied their make up and got into their outfits.

He was glad to escape the bathroom as early as he did. The girls were in go mode now, and the last thing he wanted to do was get in anyone's way, so he took the time to prep the house. The house had a large empty room that seemed like it was meant to be used as a ballroom. They'd used it as their poker room on and off, but it was also just a nice place where lots of people could stand around and talk. It also had French windows opening into the garden, so the lighting of the room was excellent. Andy figured it would be the best place for the group interviews to take place.

Katie and Nicolette helped him get enough chairs for everyone into the room, while Jenny was prepping a large lunch for all of them, a massive batch of jambalaya, so they would have a bit of leftovers in case the 60 Minutes crew arrived hungry. They were scheduled to arrive at one in the afternoon, and had asked them not to make plans into the evening, so clearly the interviews would take as long as they took.

Nicolette had been doing cleaning a bit at a time for the last two weeks, so the only thing that really needed to get a major touch up was Andy's writing room, which the 60 Minutes people had asked to use for their one-on-one interviews, something he'd agreed to, although he was going to lock his laptop away before they arrived. He didn't imagine they'd want to steal his writing, but he was notoriously paranoid when it came to that sort of thing.

The cats seemed extremely confused by all the hustle and bustle, but also seemed content to just rub up against the leg of whoever was closest, and follow people around when it seemed like they were going from one place to another.

Andy also took time to check in with both Tala and Jade, making sure they doing okay and still on board with talking to 60 Minutes, something he was glad he did.

Tala, as expected, was starting to feel the mental itch from having been primed the day before but not yet imprinted, though she was handling it far better than Sheridan had, even if she wasn't as far along with it. She said she'd never felt quite so sexually frustrated before, but that it was a great feeling to have, and that she enjoyed her body acting with wills and wants of its own.

Jade had news for him as well. “I want you to imprint me as soon as you're done imprinting Tala, Andy,” the bubbly blonde said to him. “And I want you to record it. Not for 60 Minutes, though, but for my father. He has tried to control me my entire life, and I'm just friggin' sick of it, so I want him to see that his dang control is broken, and that I'm giving that control to another man, a better man. So you can use my phone to make the video of it, and I don't care what it shows and what it doesn't, as long as he sees my face when I'm taking that orgasm, when I'm starting that imprinting process, so he knows that he can't push me around any more.” She'd been talking with a sort of intensity that he'd never seen from her before, and he let her finish. When she stopped talking, it was almost as though it dawned on her how forcefully she'd been lecturing him on what to do. “That's... that's okay, right?”

“You're sure about this, Jade?” he said, taking her hand in his own. “I'm sure he's done some rough things over the years, but he's still your father, and you want to be careful not to do anything you'll come to regret.”

“The only thing I regret is being that asshole's daughter,” she said, wrath in her voice. “I know it's a lot to ask, especially since I'll be sucking you off, which means that it'll be hard not to get your cock at least a little in the shot, but it's important to me, okay? I'm... I'm *reclaiming* a part of myself that bastard's taken from me. So you asked me earlier what I wanted, and that's what I want. And I want him to see it while I'm imprinting, so there's no way he can talk to me about it.”

He nodded. “Alright then. You can change your mind at any time between now and then, but if

you don't, then that's what we'll do, just for your father, just at your request. Although, you probably also want to record a message for him to go along with it before hand, so he's not just randomly getting that video without any context.”

She bristled in mirth, nodding quickly. “Good point. I'll record that on my phone after lunch.”

“Or during the time they're doing one-on-one interviews with anyone else. I know they're planning on doing smaller interviews, one with Emily and Sarah and one with just me, but I don't know who else they're going to want to talk to.”

“If they want to talk to me, they can, and if the 49ers organization has a problem with it, well, the heck with them, I don't have to continue being a cheerleader for them anymore.”

“Give it some thought. You've still got time.”

By lunchtime, everyone was ready except for the staff, who'd gone to get themselves ready once lunch had been served. Nobody was sure if the 60 Minutes crew would want to talk to them, but Andy felt it best to make sure that anyone who was willing to have a conversation with Katie Couric was in a state where they could. Nicolette had said she didn't care one way or another, and while Katie wasn't thrilled about the idea of being interviewed, she agreed that if Katie Couric wanted to talk to the two of them, she and Jenny would make themselves available for it.

Over the course of lunch, it was clear the girls were doing everything they could to keep Andy's mind off the interview, as the family got to know both Tala and Jade better, while Whitney was still in Nicolette's chambers, in the middle of the imprinting process, and Fiona and Moira were in the early stages of it in the master bedroom.

Tala had decided that her first project, once she got her workshop set up in the poolhouse, was going to be to make Andy a puzzle desk of his very own, and once that idea had been voiced, all the girls had thoughts and ideas on things to incorporate, with Sarah filling in suggestions based on his books, and Aisling filling in suggestions based on his life. Niko thought it should also incorporate all the girls' names, so that he might have a better time remembering everyone, which made everybody laugh, simply because the family had indeed grown so large.

They were just finishing cleaning up after lunch when the doorbell rang, and Andy's heart felt like it stopped just a little. Ash poked him with a smile. “It's just the media, babes,” she teased. “You'll do fine. Go say hi.”

He headed up from the dining room and down to the front door, where Nicolette was standing in the doorway, greeting the visitors. Standing in the doorway was Katie Couric, one of the best known journalists in America, with a couple of crew members behind her. “Hey, Ms. Couric,” he said to her as he approached. “Welcome to my home.” He held out his hand and she seemed thankful for the normalcy of shaking hands.

“Please, Mr. Rook, call me Katie,” she said, “and thank you for inviting us for the interview. I know the President's office had something to do with it, but you could have said no if you didn't want to. Having a couple of famous faces like Miss Stevens and Miss Washington selling the new normal will help the general population of the nation make more sense out of this tragic new normal.”

“Well, I'll call you Katie if you'll call me Andy,” he said. “How's your tour of New Eden been so far? Niko mentioned you did a short interview with her at the base, although you mostly just talked with Dr. Varma and my boy Phil.”

“You're friends with Mr. Marcos?” she said. “Is that how you got in here?”

“Well, there's a story behind that. I can tell you now, but I suspect you'd rather get it down on camera. It's not all that long a story, nor is it really that interesting. I suspect Phil's story was a lot more engaging than mine will be.”

“Did you get your writing room all set up for our interview?”

“I did,” he said, “and we also set up our ballroom with chairs, so you can talk to all of us together first. I know Em and Sarah are willing to talk to you either in their little studio, or you can use my writing study instead. It's up to you.”

“I’ll have my team take a look at both locations while we’re getting set up in the ballroom. Is everyone in the house willing to take part in the interviews?”

“Two of my partners have chosen not to take part, simply because they aren’t sure how their employers would react to it, but everyone else in the house is willing to chat,” he said, as he felt a hand sliding onto his shoulder. He turned around to see Lauren standing behind him.

“Actually, Andy, Sheridan and I have decided we’re going to do it anyway, and if the Niners or the people at Cirque have a problem with it, fuck’em, we’ll sue their asses into the ground,” the tall blonde Aussie told him. “If this is gonna be the new normal, pretendin’ like it’s not is just as bad as sayin’ it ain’t, so we’ll be there.”

“You’re sure, Lauren?” he asked her, smoothing his hand over her hip, knowing it usually soothed her nervous when she was wound up.

She placed her hand over his and gave it a soft squeeze, smiling at him. “Yeh, ‘sides I dunno how much of management’s gone at this point already. You gambled with us, so let us have a turn at the plow fer a change.”

He leaned up and kissed her softly. “Well, I’ve known you long enough, hon, to know if your mind’s made up, there’s no point in trying to talk you out of it.” Andy glanced back at Katie Couric, shrugging. “Guess you get your pick of the litter then.”

Behind her, the crew had started ferrying in lights, tripods and camera equipment. While Andy had thought he’d only seen two additional people at first, it turned out Katie Couric traveled with a crew of nine, and there had been a second and third SUV behind the van that he hadn’t seen. It felt a little like his house was being invaded, but he did his best to not get in anyone’s way, as Nicolette started to lead a producer away, to show her where both Andy’s writing room and the actresses’ little studio were located.

“C’mon, I’ll take you down to the ballroom, and we can get settled there,” he said, starting to lead Katie and her two companions down the hallway. One of them, Geraldine Amato, was the unit’s head producer, and the other, Poppy Delgato, was the lead camera woman. “Was your crew mostly women before the plague hit?”

“Mostly,” she said, “although I’ve got a couple of men in here as well, and thankfully, they’ve been given the treatment via their wives. My husband has been getting it through myself as well, for about a month now.”

“I’m a little surprised they let your whole crew into New Eden,” he said, as they headed down the stairs to the lower level. “They’ve been fairly paranoid about letting people in, I’ve been told, so I imagine you had to quarantine for a little bit after you got here.”

“We did,” she said, stopping to look at one of the promotional posters on the wall, this one in particular for “The Trouble With Werebears.” She glanced over at him with that winning smile she loved flashing on the news regularly. “In fact, Geraldine here’s now sharing my husband with me, because she didn’t have anyone before hand, and needed someone she could count on to be around while doing her job.” She reached up and tapped at the words ‘New York Times Bestselling Author’ on the poster. “It says here you’re a bestselling author, but I have to admit that before preparing for this interview, I’d never heard of you.”

He shrugged with a little smile. “There’s leagues of difference between a Bestselling Fiction author and a Bestselling *Genre* Fiction author, I’m afraid. When you’re talking non-genre, you’re talking hundreds of thousands of copies, but for genre, well, drop a zero off there, so if you’re not into urban fantasy, I won’t take it as a slight. Jim Butcher, who’s probably the most popular of us working in the field, only sold a couple hundred thousand copies for his most recent Dresden Files book, and that series has a huge following, far bigger than my little corner. Hell, I think the reason a publisher finally took a gamble on me was that I was playing in a similar wheelhouse and they were hoping to piggyback off his success.”

“E. F. Winston is a genre writer, but her books have sold in the hundreds of millions,” Katie

countered. "So clearly there are breakout stars."

"Ah, but those are young adult books, and the teen fiction genre has a handful of crossover success that never seemed to roll over into other things in our genres," he sighed. "The Dagger Academy books were definitely science fiction, but you didn't see a spike in sales for people like John Scalzi or William Gibson when those books, did you? The same for those Harry Potter books. Sold by the truckload, and yet, did many of those kids go and read works from Roger Zelazny, Fred Saberhagen, Emma Bull, Terry Pratchett, Steven Brust, Simon R. Green or any of the other massively prolific fantasy masterminds we've had working for decades? No, we're not all that different than any other form of entertainment – everyone's just hoping that they get one big bite from the apple at some point during their career."

"But I heard they're making a movie based on your books?"

"Well, when two high profile actresses are willing to sign onto a project, that goes a long way into pushing it out of Movie Hell," he laughed. "The option had been signed years before that, but once Sarah and Emily expressed interest in playing supporting roles, well, that got the whole thing into turnaround quite quickly. It's like the screenwriter William Goldman always said, 'Nobody in Hollywood knows anything.'" Andy shrugged a little bit as they entered the ballroom. "Besides, I figured you'd want to get all this out during the on-camera interview."

"Oh, we'll go over it again then, but it doesn't hurt to do a little pre-camera screening, just so I know what kinds of things you're likely to say, so I can facilitate the conversation in moving in the right directions," she said. "You've been interviewed several times before. Hasn't anyone ever done that?"

"Nope," he said, moving to sit in one of the chairs in the front row. "But then again, I've never been interviewed for television before." They'd originally set up the 17 chairs as one chair facing two rows of eight, but Geraldine started moving the two rows of eight into four staggered rows of four.

"We'll bring in some risers, so we can get everyone into one big shot," Geraldine told Katie.

Poppy nodded. "We'll need to set up four cameras in here," she said, as she started to help Geraldine block out the room. "One for the group shot, one for Katie, one for Andy and one to rove to whoever's answering questions in the group setting. We can use fixed cameras for the first three, and I'll manage the fourth. We'll have them all rolling all the time and you can just pick and choose what you want in the editing room."

"How do you want to order them, Katie?" Geraldine asked her.

"Well, Andy here in the front corner, then Niko, the woman we interviewed yesterday next to him. That'll be our link between the segments. Then Sarah and Emily next to her, because star power up front. Beyond that, we can figure it out."

"I'd like to insist Aisling, my first partner, be up front with me," he said, just as Ash was walking into the room, along with Emily.

"The balance might be a little weird," Poppy frowned.

"No no," Geraldine, "we can make that work. We'll just do five in front and three in the top row, so we frame Andy in the center, with Niko and Aisling on one side, Emily and Sarah on the other."

"Good," Katie said, "that reinforces the whole 'large family' front and forward as our first visual cue, so that the viewer has to confront it right away. Does that work for you?" she said, asking Andy his opinion for the first time.

"That'll work," he replied. "You can even put the three staff at the back, since they're willing to be here for this, but aren't likely to volunteer much in the way of answers."

"Jenny and Katie, er, Kate might not, Master," Nicolette said, entering the room with the rest of Katie Couric's crew in tow, "but I'm certainly planning on speaking my mind given a chance, because I don't want people to be given the wrong idea."

"What's the wrong idea?" Katie asked, tilting her head just a little bit.

"That we're here involuntarily, or that this isn't what we wanted, or, hell, even that Master Rook here wouldn't let us change if we wanted," the French maid teased. "You know if I had a nickel for

every time he's sort of reminded me I don't have to call him Master, and I've had to remind him that I *like* calling him Master, well, I could enjoy a nice two week stay in the Bahamas, once it's opened up again. In fact, little secret, every time he reminds me of it lately, I've just gone out of my way to say it even more, so I can watch him blush.”

“Katie Couric,” Andy said, “this is my first partner, Ash Blake, and I'm sure you've probably already met Emily Stevens.”

Katie made it a point to shake Ash's hand first. “A pleasure, Miss Blake.” She then turned to Emily, taking the tiny blonde's hand and shaking it as well. “I've actually interviewed you before, Miss Stevens, although I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't remember. You seemed quite busy on that press junket, and I know they were just wheeling journalists in and out for you.”

“I keep a diary of anyone who's interviewing me, Ms. Couric,” Em said, a wry grin on her face, “so I assure you, I remember the interview quite well. Any surprises we should be wary of?”

“Oh, I've always got a few things planned to lighten up an interview,” the journalist said, somewhat evasively. “It's not like I'm interviewing Vladimir Putin or anything. You're not going to have me murdered for a question you don't like.”

“Well,” the Brit said, “I still wouldn't anger Sarah too much. She's... excitable, and prone to fits of exaggeration.”

“I'm fairly certain she's never poisoned anyone to win a role, Em,” Andy said to her.

Emily clicked her tongue in amusement. “Let's not be too hasty with that judgment, Andy. Anyway, shall I round everyone up and we can get started?”

“Yes, I think my team will be ready to start in about twenty minutes, so if you can get everyone together, that would be excellent.”

By the time all the girls were in the ballroom, risers had been placed under the seats, the lights and sound were set up, a boom microphone used to cover the majority of the girls, although clip on mics were used for Katie and Andy. They also had a handheld microphone that the girls could pass around if anyone wanted to give a detailed answer.

They were structured as had been discussed, with Niko and Aisling to Andy's left in the front row, and Emily and Sarah to his right. Behind them, Lauren, Taylor, Sheridan and Piper sat. The third row had Asha, Hannah, Tala and Jade. In the back row sat the staff, Kate (his Katie), Jenny and Nicolette. All of the fiancées were up front, and everyone else was sat in order of arrival, with the exception of the staff, who were at the back, at their own request. It felt right that Ash was on one side of him and Emily was on the other, as if the two of them wanted to be close in case he needed support.

It wasn't until Andy saw it framed up in the monitor as they were showing Katie that it dawned on him just how big his household was growing, and even still, he knew there were already three more in the house not in this shot.

He was always aware of how big his family was, but seeing everyone together in one single framing shot, it really drove the size of it home, and it felt *huge*.

“Okay, Andy, let's start with how you telling us a little bit about yourself and how you got here.”

For the next few minutes, Andy gave the shortest possible version of his bio, how he'd moved to California a decade and a half ago, his writing for the Silicon Valley companies, as well as his novels, which transitioned nicely into him talking about how he got his vaunted level 5 status, regaling 60 Minutes with the story of how the guy who'd come to test them, Dave, had been a big fan and given he and his then-roommate Eric level 5 status as a return gift for Andy having given him an advanced copy of his next novel.

“I hope I'm not getting Dave in any trouble by telling that story,” he finished.

“No no, each member of the initial Bay Area team was given five level 5 statuses to give away as they saw fit,” Katie Couric told him. “Most of them just gave them to friends or family, but Dr. David Straussman hadn't used any of his until he met you, and there were no rules on who he could or couldn't give them to, so that's fine.”

“Straussman,” Andy repeated. “Huh. You know, I didn't even know his last name until right now. I hope he's doing okay.”

“He's doing quite well,” Niko said. “I see him every so often wandering around the base.”

“So Andy,” Katie said, bringing them back on task, “how did you fill out the form you were given with the testing process?”

“Well,” Andy said, “Dave stressed to us when he gave us the link that we should be honest, and to answer the questions knowing we wouldn't be judged for our responses. I don't actually remember a lot of it, because it was a *very* long questionnaire, like, ridiculously thorough. But I suppose what you're getting at is what key things *do* I remember answering.”

“Yes, that's what I'm asking.”

“There were definitely questions about my sexual preferences, like, a *lot* of those, but there were also basic demographic questions about what range of people I felt comfortable dating, was I into women, men or both, and how did I feel about polyamory.”

“Did that surprise you?” she asked him.

“Sure, but not as much as I expect it probably shocked people back in the Midwest. It's not what I would call common place around here, but you see it mentioned often enough in people's online dating profiles that most people have at least some awareness of it here in the Bay.”

“And how did you answer the polyamory question?”

“I actually put 'no preference,' but you have to remember, to some extent when this started, we thought this was all some temporary thing, and we certainly didn't know that the casualties to men in America were going to be as high as they were,” Andy said, sighing a little bit, Ash taking his hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

“Do you remember what ages you put that you would be comfortable with?”

“The low end was set to 18, and I didn't adjust it, and I set the high end to 35. I suspected no one younger than their mid twenties would be interested in me, so the low end didn't really matter.”

“You can start to see how his mind works,” Hannah teased, “and how he just misses things sometimes.” That let the girls have a soft laugh, releasing a little bit of the tension.

“Were there any things that you said were absolute dealbreakers?” Katie asked.

“Just two,” Andy admitted. “Must not be allergic to cats, and must not smoke, although we ended up with someone who vapes.”

“And who is that?”

“That'd be me,” Sheridan said, “but I'm working on quitting, so... it's a stopgap on the way to that. And it's been much easier stepping down from that than it was stepping to that from smoking.”

“Who showed up first?”

“Aisling showed up I think it was actually the very next day,” Andy said. “I was a little surprised how quickly everything moved. Usually anything the government's managing is a total clusterfuck, but I think since we were basically right by the site where the treatment was developed, they were rushing it out in order to keep as many people safe as they could.”

“Aisling, let me ask you Aisling, was Andy the sort of man you dreamed about ending up with when you entered into the process?”

“At first, my head was a little clouded, because the process when it started wasn't as refined as it is now, so when I met Andy, my mind was a little fogged up with lust, but he ticked all the boxes of what I wanted out of a man. He didn't look exactly like I expected him to, but yeah, within a couple of days, I knew I loved him pretty hard. Still do.”

“Would he have been the kind of person you would've gravitated to in a bar?” Katie asked her.

“I would've thought he was cute, but I was horrible at dating, and only had a couple'a boyfriends before him, so I'm a bad judge of character for that sort of question.”

“How many of you would've approached Andy in a bar?” Katie asked the group of them.

Andy chuckled, rolling his eyes. “Be honest.”

Sarah put her hand up immediately, and Tala raised her hand as well, as the rest of the group giggled a little bit.

“As progressive as we all like to *think* we are, Katie,” Niko said, “women still generally don't approach men in bars, so maybe that's more on us than saying anything about our tastes.”

“Sarah, I saw you put your hand up,” Katie asked. “You're an Oscar nominated actress who's know worldwide. What about Andy would've made you approach him?”

Over the next couple of minutes, Sarah and Emily related the story of how they'd attended one of Andy's Q&As at ComicCon in costume, so that nobody would recognize them, and talked about how she'd had a crush on him because of his writing for a long time, which Katie laughed about, and Andy was certain would make for good television.

“So how many of you would say you're in love with Andy now?” she asked the group after Sarah finished her story.

About half of women raised their hands, although several of the others looked like they were considering raising their hands. The front row all raised their hands, as expected, but Lauren and Piper also raised their hands, which surprised Andy a little.

“So those of you who wouldn't say you're in love with him, how would you describe your relationship with him?”

“Deep respect and affection, but not at the love stage, not yet anyway,” Sheridan said.

Most of the other girls seemed to nod and agree with that.

“Why do you say 'not yet,' Sheridan?”

“You have to keep in mind, Katie, a lot of us have only known Andy a few weeks right now,” she said, leaning forward just a little bit. “We had to make probably the biggest choice of our lives, and we had to do it basically on a hunch. Our choices were to defer treatment and go on being afraid we were going to die, or take the treatment and get paired up with a man for the indefinite future. That's a hell of a gamble to ask of anyone.”

“Who's unhappy with the decision they made, raise your hand,” Katie said, only to get no hands raised in response. “Everyone's happy being paired with Andy, maybe for the rest of your lives?”

“Look, Ms. Couric,” Hannah said. “You're going to find every one of us girls has a different story, a unique story, and each one of us came to where we are now on an entirely different path, m'kay? But we'll all tell you the same thing – Andy's treated us with an immense amount of respect and affection, and he's made sure that nobody's doing anything they aren't comfortable with. Shit, he's even done stuff *he's* been a little uncomfortable with because it's made *us* feel *more* comfortable, and how many women can say that about their partner? So while a bunch of us aren't in love with him, yet, we all admire and respect how much he's gone out of his way to make sure we feel like we're part of a goddamn family, a good goddamn family.”

“Do you want to continue to grow the family, Andy?”

“If you ask him,” Em said, jumping in before he could respond, “he wanted to stop growing it a while ago.” All the girls laughed at that. “But at this point, I think we're all doing what we can to stick together, and a lot of us girls wanted to protect our friends, to keep them safe, so we took turns presenting them all to Andy, trying to convince him to bring them into our home and into our family.”

“Everyone had someone they wanted to pitch?” Katie said, smiling at Andy. “That must have been overwhelming.”

“Not everyone wanted to pitch someone, but *almost* everyone,” he said with a laugh. “And it was a lot of names and faces that were presented all at once. I said upfront, though, that I wasn't going to bring everyone on, and that there was only so much of me to go around. In the end, I think we mostly made it work to everyone's satisfaction.”

“So how many more people are coming?”

“Well, we have three people who are in the imprinting process right now, and two more people arriving tomorrow, and if I have any say in the matter, that will absolutely, positively, *definitively* be the

limit of women I can handle in my life,” he chuckled.

“And how much say do you actually have in that matter, Andy?”

“*Very little!*” Emily joked, and all the girls laughed, as did Katie.

“It would take a super compelling case for us to add, like, anyone else to the family past that,” Sarah said, “but I think it's totally for the best that we never say never. Sometimes exceptions have to be made.”

“Like I told you yesterday, Katie,” Niko said, “I think if Andy had total control of the matter, he would've probably put a hard limit in after myself, Ash and Lauren were in his life. He told me multiple times early on that he barely felt like he deserved one amazing woman, and at that point, he already had three, so it's been a growth process.”

“But this is the new normal now,” Katie said. “Or at least it's going to be. Families with one man and several women, because so many men in the US have died. Raise your hand if you know a man who's lost their life to the plague here in the US.”

All the women raised their hands, and of course Andy had his raised as well.

“How does that feel?”

“I think we're all suffering from some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder,” Piper said. “The losses, they're too big for any of us to process, so we're sort of clinging to one another, holding on to the only family that we know for certain that we can protect.”

“Piper, you were actually supposed to have competed in the Olympics by now. How does that feel, knowing that when it starts up again next year, the US basically doesn't have almost any of their male athletes to compete?”

“At this point, it's impossible for it to even make sense in my head any more, Katie,” she sighed. “Most of the people I trained with have died over the last several months. A lot of my trainers died. I've lost colleagues, friends and family members. I don't even know where to start mourning, because there's so damn *many* people to mourn. I consider myself lucky that my sister's husband took everything seriously, and completely refused to leave the house this year since the word of the plague got out.”

“It's something we've talked about in here a bunch,” Andy said. “And we sort of keep coming back to that famous Stalin quote. 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic.' It's so many dead men that the mind can't even make sense of it. It's like 9/11, but if each of the Twin Towers was holding exclusively almost every man each of us knew and loved. My own brother died a few weeks back, and he was one of the kindest and most careful souls I know, but he ran out to help someone get their storm shutters up before a particular bad thunderstorm rolled through, and a few weeks later, he was just gone, almost overnight. It happened so fast, I didn't even hear about it until after he was already gone.”

“It's actually unproven that's a real Stalin quote,” Tala said. “I read an article that said it was attributed to a French humorist.”

“Sure, but even if Stalin didn't say it,” Andy said, “it's still pretty relevant here. It doesn't really matter who said it, it's the sentiment that's important. We're talking about a matter of *scale*, and the human mind's capacity to comprehend that scale. At the end of the day, that's a hell of a lot for anyone to handle. So we're all just doing our best.”

“Normally,” Emily said, “when a friend or loved one dies, there is typically a funeral or a wake, a gathering of all that person's surviving circle coming together, to celebrate their passing and remember them, but we have been denied that, and it has made all their passings that much harder to process, somehow transformed them all into seeming less real, because our normal emotional milestones haven't happened along the way. We are adrift in our emotional morass.”

“That's true,” Katie said. “We, as Americans, haven't had to confront all the deaths simply because we aren't allowed to go out and do so, and that somehow makes it feel less concrete.”

“It hits you every day,” Jade said, “little by little. Lauren described it to me a few weeks ago as

a slow motion car crash that we're all stuck in, and nobody can get out of.”

“So, Jade, I understand you're one of the newest arrivals here,” Katie said. “Have you gone through the imprinting process yet?”

“Not yet,” she said. “Tala and I arrived yesterday, but we wanted to wait a little bit, to spend some time with Andy and his family, to make sure that we would be happy getting melted into their pot. I'm happy to say we're both going to do it, but it's the kind of commitment you gotta be certain of, you know?”

“Have you seen what the imprinting process is like?”

“Um, yes?” she said, trying not to blush a little. “When we arrived yesterday, we had a third person with us, another woman who was joining the staff and faculty of the house, but not the family itself, a young woman named Whitney.”

“So, Andy, explain to me the difference between family and staff, and how you decide that.”

He immediately put his hands up, almost like he was at gunpoint. “First and foremost, *I* do not decide that,” he laughed, and all the girls laughed with him. “When the military came and relocated us from our little condo and brought us here to New Eden, the house also came with three members of staff attached with it, all of whom I was told had been selected to mesh with me, and whose boxes I would tick as well.”

“That was the three of you in the back, Nicolette, Jenny and Kate, yes?” Katie asked.

“We had all been told a bit about Andy before he arrived,” Nicolette said, “and his answers to the questionnaire implied that he would eventually be willing to play into our tastes.”

“Eventually?” Katie asked.

“Well, sure,” Nicolette giggled. “I know the first few times I called him Master, it rattled his cage a little bit, but he eventually realized I *liked* saying it, and nobody was making me do it. One of the things that we girls all figured out early on was that just because Andy was okay with something didn't mean he had any real *experience* with it, so we would need to hand hold him a bit through it. So while Andy said he was okay with bondage and discipline stuff in his questionnaire, he didn't have any real practical experience in it. So we've found ways to teach him about that kind of thing without it ever feeling like we were lecturing to him. He sort of set that expectation up front when he told us communication was everything, and he couldn't have been more right.”

“And Kate? I hear that you and Jenny had a different experience,” Katie asked.

“Damn, uh? Andy?” Kate (his Katie) asked. “How real you want us to get here?”

“We're not hiding anything,” he chuckled, “so fire away.”

“So, uh, Katie,” Kate coughed. “I'm actually a lesbian. Not a bisexual who mostly identifies as a lesbian, I mean straight up, hardcore, one hundred percent, unrepentant fully committed *lesbian*. And Jenny here is my wife, but she's bisexual.”

“Hi!” Jenny cheerily said with a wave.

“When we signed up for this, we, ah, we were planning on hiding that from Andy, and I was simply going to fake it, and go along with the ruse, so that we could stay together, and we could still get the treatment, which, as you already know, takes both a female and a male component to work,” she sighed. “So I, er, *we* lied, and claimed we were both bisexual. Since we were married, wherever we went, we were going to go together, and we figured we could just keep up that lie as long as we needed and make it work.”

“And what happened?” Katie asked.

“Day two, I folded, before we'd even been imprinted,” Jenny said with a shrug. “When we met him, Andy wasn't at all what any of us were expecting him to be, but I mean that in a really good way. It didn't feel right lying to him. We'd had a few days together before he showed up, the three of us, us two and Nicolette. We'd talked about it, and Nicolette volunteered to go first, so that if it didn't go well, my Katie and I could request to be moved elsewhere, since we were a little more particular than she was about how we got paired up.”

“What do you mean, you folded?”

“I started talking to Andy, and... and it all just came tumbling out, how we were a little unsure, how my Katie wasn't really into men, and, I just felt like I had to tell him everything before we were committed to anything.”

“How did you react to that, Andy?”

“I could tell they were afraid that I was going to be angry,” Andy said, his tone as breezy and relaxed as he could keep it, “but I wasn't. Why would I be? I simply wanted to talk with them about how they wanted to handle it, because at that point, I knew a bit more about the physiological affects of the treatment than they did, so I wanted to prepare them for it, if they wanted to move forward.”

“Do you still consider yourself a lesbian, Kate?” Katie asked her.

“Absolutely. I don't feel any sexual attraction to Andy what so ever,” she said. “Now, with that said, I can also admit that I have received biochemically induced orgasms from him regularly as part of the treatment process, and I don't think that affects my sexual identity in any way. But Andy and I haven't ever had direct sex. He's offered, but he's also never pressured. I might take him up on it some day, to see if the chemical and neurological changes the treatment have made to me might compensate for my lack of sexual attraction to him, but then again, I may not. That's my decision, well, *our* decision, to make,” she said, taking Jenny's hand in hers. “And nobody's going to tell me who and what I am. I get to decide that, and fuck anyone who says otherwise.”

“So if you haven't had direct sex with him, how are you getting what you need from him to keep your treatment managed? Go ahead and be as direct as you want, and we can bleep parts of it out if we need to, but I think they're just going to air it as we send it.”

“Well, to be frank about it, I don't ever actually fuck Andy, but that doesn't mean I don't swallow his semen. I do that around once a week, either directly from him, or second hand from my wife. I consider sucking his cock just to be another task around the house that needs doing now and again. No offense, Andy.”

He laughed, waving a hand in his air. “None taken, but you already know that.”

“And that's enough?” Katie asked. “Just swallowing semen, either directly or second hand?”

Kate nodded. “It's fine. I haven't had any adverse side effects, and it's easy enough right before he's about to pop for him to point it elsewhere, or for Jenny and I to split it after he does pop. I'm never going to have an encounter with Andy without Jenny present, and she's always my focus, not him, because she's my wife, and he's just... my boss.”

“And everyone in the house is okay with that?”

“This is the world we live in now,” Lauren said. “Lotsa fellas used to get all hung up onna things that they did and didn't like, but who's got time for that anymore? Life's too short to hold onta old grudges, so if we can, we're all gonna take it on the chin and just keep movin' on together.”

“Now Lauren, I understand you're also a lesbian.”

“Nah Katie,” the tall blonde Aussie corrected. “I'm definitely bisexual, but I just lean a lot more towards the ladies than I do the fellas. I very much enjoy my sexual encounters with Andy, but I'm not one of his primary partners, despite showing up so early. I'm in love with him, like he is with me, but he's not my Big Love, if you folla. I've got me own primary partner here, in Taylor. We'd split before New Eden, and when she came back, I was right pissed off, but we've worked it out, and now she and I are back to being a couple again.”

“Does that put you on the outs with Andy?”

“Nah,” she laughed, “it just means the master bed doesn't need triple reinforcement. I love Andy and all he's done for me, for alla us, but I ain't interested in being one of his wives. I wanna marry Taylor at some point, but that doesn't mean I don' wanna stay part of this family. That works for us, so, y'know, fair play.”

“How many people do sleep in bed with you on any given night, Andy?”

“There's always at least five of us in the bed,” he answered. “Myself, Ash, Niko, Emily and

Sarah. But sometimes more people want to cram in, and we never say no.”

“What’s the most the bed’s ever held for a night?”

“Oh, uh, everyone who isn’t staff, I think, but last week, so before some people had arrived,” he said, trying to remember, “so, what, 11?”

“Yes, that was the maximum. On the day when we found out Andy’s brother died,” Emily said, “we all crawled into bed with him and just wrapped our arms around him, as we all shared a good cry, then fell asleep holding one another, but that’s extremely uncommon.”

“Five or six would definitely be the average,” Ash said.

“So the four of you would say you’re closer to Andy than the rest of the women in the house?”

“Well, we’re all his fiancées, so we’d better be, Katie!” Sarah laughed. “He asked Ash first, and then Niko asked him before he could even get the words out to her, so once he freakin’ told us, me and Em, we both demanded he propose to us as well immediately, because we come as a package deal.”

“What do you mean by that, Sarah?”

“Okay, well, here’s the thing. Emily and I have been a couple for almost two years now, but we’re both, well, we’re both totally into dudes and chicks. So while we super love each other, we also knew we were going to need a regular *dick* in the equation. When we found out that the writer of my favorite freaking book series of all time was in play, we decided we had to freaking have him.” Andy was a little amazed Sarah could do so much to self censor, but realized she’d probably been doing it for interviews forever.

“So you put in a request for the two of you to be paired up with Andy, and the government made that happen?”

There was a long pause, as everyone was trying to decide what to say and how to say it, but eventually Emily broke the silence.

“Something like that, yes,” she lied.

“We’ll put a pin in that and come back to it later,” Katie said, and Andy’s guard was immediately up. He’d been wondering what sort of problems this interview was going to throw up, and now he felt like he knew what one of them was. “Have you had to send anyone back, Andy? Had any partners show up that you didn’t think would be compatible?”

“Just one,” he admitted. “My ex-girlfriend was sent to me, because she hadn’t disclosed that we’d been together about a decade ago. She was eager to rekindle the relationship, but I was not. It ended on terms that made me unwilling to revisit it again, so we helped her make other arrangements. We hadn’t been compatible back then, and I didn’t feel comfortable gambling that she’d grown enough that I would’ve been compatible with her now.”

“You didn’t send her back to the government?”

“New Eden isn’t that large of a community, so sometimes we just see if we can make things work among ourselves first, and we found a solution that everyone seemed happy with, including my ex. In fact, the people that my partners here pitched to me that I didn’t think would be good matches for our family, we worked to pair them up with other people here in New Eden instead, so they were still local and safe. It’s a small town, so we have to look out for one another. Problems here are rare and generally manageable.”

“Not always, though, we’ve heard,” Katie said. “I take it you’ve heard about the fatality that New Eden had last week?”

Everyone nodded. “It was horrible, hearing about someone dying from something so easily preventable,” Hannah said. “Like, they totes warned us about that ish before we left the base, so why the hell would someone chance it?”

“They did warn you?”

“*VERY* thoroughly,” Emily insisted, horror in her voice. “They told us multiple times, again and again and again, that if we took in semen from any man other than the one we were paired up with, it would be toxic, if not fatal. They even showed us a recording of a woman who’d already been

imprinted getting semen from a man she wasn't paired up with on her skin, and the large, violent rash that immediately broke out. I am told they show that footage to everyone, to drive the point home. Seeing that sort of instantaneous reaction should've been enough to discourage anyone from testing those boundaries.”

“They're talking on base about showing some of the autopsy photos from the fatality to the people who are getting the treatment now,” Niko said, “to make sure everyone understands how serious it is not to dally outside your family.”

“Have any of you ever been tempted?”

“I think we all value our lives too much for that,” Sarah joked.

“And love Andy far too much for that,” Ash said.

“Definitely,” Emily agreed. “Why would anyone take such a pointless risk?”

“Did any of you know the woman who died, or the man she partook from that killed her?” Katie asked them.

“I met her briefly,” Andy said, “but I wouldn't say I knew her. And none of us ever even met the man accused of doing it to her.”

“Major Peters told us yesterday he's currently imprisoned at the base, pending local law enforcement being able to take custody of him. They're going to charge him with murder, they were telling us.”

“They should,” Sarah said. “They told everyone when they brought them here to New Eden what would happen if people engaged in any form of sexual activity with anyone they're not paired with, and they fucking did it anyway!”

“The problem,” Andy sighed, “is that the man, whoever he is, already has multiple women paired up with him, which means that whatever they do to him is going to affect those women as well, even if it's just that they have to come to a prison for their weekly intake. Those women are already tied to him. I'm sure they're looking into some way to remove the binding and reimprint a woman onto a new person, but there's only so many problems they can solve at once.”

“Does it bother any of you that your health is tied to Andy's?” Katie asked the group.

“*Bother* is the wrong word,” Sheridan said, annoyance in her tone of voice. “*Concern* is the right word. We're very protective of Andy, because he knows our lives are all fully dependent on his for the time being, and that if he dies, we all probably die with him. So, sure, we're concerned, but I think all of us feel comfortable in knowing that Andy's got our best interests at heart, and is keeping that all in mind.”

“One of the two people arriving tomorrow is going to be his bodyguard,” Jenny said. “A friend of mine from college, who's going to guard his life with her own.”

“Who's the other?”

“A director friend of mine,” Emily said, “whom I thought would be an excellent addition to the house. She was one of the AD's on some of the latter Dagger Academy movies.”

Katie Couric clapped her hands together. “Okay, why don't we take a break, then do some of the one-on-ones, and then we can circle back and do another group interview to close out the day. Our team can leave you one of our cameras here tonight, so you can get that video of someone being imprinted, and we'll come by and pick it up tomorrow before we leave down. We appreciate you trusting us with that, as I know it can't have been an easy decision to make, but I think that footage will go a long way to convincing people this treatment is in their best interest. As for today, we'll go ahead and finish getting set up in Andy's office, and when you're ready Andy, we can sit down and do our one-on-one and drill down on some things I've got further questions on.”

“Sure,” he said, as all the girls were standing up and stretching. “Let me go grab a quick drink, and I'll meet you in my office in about ten minutes, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

Katie and her crew were escorted by Nicolette down to Andy's office, while the girls stood up

and started chatting among themselves, while Emily and Ash closed it around Andy.

“That went about as well as can be expected,” Emily said to them.

“I feel like we've got some kind of curveball coming,” Ash said, taking Andy's hand in her left and Emily's hand in her right. “After you're done, Andy, we'll talk a bit again. I'm sure you'll get surprises before any of us do.”

He took his time, grabbed a bottle of Vanilla Coke, drank it then headed down to his office, which today felt a little like going into a lion's den. With all the girls in the ballroom, the large group session had allowed the attention to bounce around a great deal, and he felt like he could catch his breath, but here, it was just going to be the two of them, and he didn't have anyone to run interference for him from time to time.

Andy headed into his office and saw that even his cats weren't in there, likely having been moved by the production crew, as Andy moved to sit down in his writing chair, Katie Couric sitting across from him.

“Are you ready?” she said to him.

“Yep,” he answered. “Let's do it.”

After the mics were checked, the cameras were tested and the lights were adjusting, Andy's one on one began with a softball question. “So how'd you fall into writing urban fantasy, Andy?”

“The best advice I ever got was 'if the stories you want to read don't exist in the world, it's your job to put them there,' so I've stuck with that,” he said. “I knew what kind of stories I wanted to read, and nobody was really writing those, a sort of fantasy-western/samurai hybrid. I mean, you had Butcher's Dresden books, but those were more of fantasy-noir hybrids, and I wanted to get into the sort of stories that people like Akira Kurosawa and Sergio Leone used to tell, where you could kill off characters, where actions had consequences and where you never really knew when the next gunfight was coming, because it felt like they could happen at any time. Joe Abercrombie does it in high fantasy, but I wanted something that was happening in our time, in our world.”

“Do you think your books' protagonist, the Druid Gunslinger, is a hero?”

“I think it's very dangerous to reduce people or characters to simple heroes and villains, Katie,” he said, starting to feel a little comfortable, more in his element. “Reductive story telling focuses on obvious rights and wrongs. One of the reason I love things like 'The Seven Samurai' or 'The Good, The Bad and the Ugly' is that often times, bad people are doing good things, and sometimes without any real reason given at all. Life is such a complicated journey, and when I see storytellers trying to boil it down to simple things like 'heroes' and 'villains,' I think it becomes too easy to demonize the people who have viewpoints opposed from our own. So I've tried to make characters in the Druid Gunslinger books less of simple heroes or villains and more of a fully fleshed out people. Sometimes the protagonist has done very noble things. Other times, he's taken less noble paths. In a couple of the books, he's done some *very* bad things for what he thought were the right reasons. I leave it to my readers to decide if things like killing a wounded and temporarily incapacitated adversary are bad things or not. He's always trying to do what he thinks is right, but sometimes that means crossing into some very sketchy moral territory.”

Then she clocked him in the face with her right hook, one sentence that cut though the November air like a cannonball.

“So tell me a bit about the poker game where you won the lives of Emily Stevens, Sarah Washington and three others.”