

Quaranteam: Book Two

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Chapter One

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Whatever Andy expected his first visit to the military base at the heart of New Eden was going to be like, being brought in with his hands cuffed together wasn't it. To some extent, he understood the reasoning behind it, but he still felt like the entire thing was an overreaction.

"You okay, hon?" Niko asked him, having not left his side the entire time. Lexi hadn't been allowed on the base, but as a member of the Air Force, they couldn't justify denying Niko the rights to escort her fiancée onto the base for what they were calling his 'executive review.'

"It's fine," he told her, as they were shuffled down a hall, two women Security Forces officers in front of them, one on either side of them, and three of them in the back, none of them part of Linda's Girls, which didn't make Andy feel any better.

"It's *ridiculous* is what it is," Niko growled. "They're treating you like you're Hannibal Lecter or something..."

"Cannibalism's not really my taste," Andy joked, trying to keep his spirits up. He couldn't really get much of a look at the base itself, what with the sea of bodies all swamped around them. "But yes, the handcuffs do seem a bit much."

"You're getting the same level of scrutiny as every other man involved in this mess," the woman in charge, a gruff Captain with the last name of Nash. "We're being thorough and we're not letting any of you fuck it up. This whole thing has been fubar in spectacular fashion, and while this didn't use to be my circus or my monkey, but I've been put in charge of security for the complex until Captain Hayes has either been permanently removed or exonerated and reinstated to the position."

"She'll be cleared and put back in charge," Andy said confidently. "Say what you like about Linda, her loyalties have never been in question."

"It's not a question of *if* she's loyal," one of the guards said, "but who she's more loyal *to*, this country or her soon-to-be husband."

"Stow it, Reynolds," Nash said to her. "Ours is not to question why and all that..."

It had been over half a year since the start of the plague, and just three weeks since the Covington household had taken their patriarch, Arthur Covington the 4th, hostage. Andy had expected the situation to be solved quickly, but instead it had been a tense three weeks, with supplies being delivered, demands being negotiated and solutions being worked out. Andy had thought it impossible that Covington himself wouldn't be released by now, but apparently the situation was far more complex than anyone had anticipated, and had only been complicated by the additional scrutiny Andy had brought down onto the base.

When he'd been interviewed by Katie Couric for 60 Minutes, she'd thought she'd captured him in a gotcha moment when it came to talking about the infamous poker games that Covington had been holding, one of which Andy had attended, purely as part of a rescue effort for some of Niko's friends. When Andy had been completely candid about the game, his role in it and how there were some people at the base who'd manipulated the pairing system, a top-to-bottom investigation of the entire base was put into place by the female senators who'd heard all about it, instead of Ms. Couric airing Andy's allegations publicly.

Considering how slowly the government moved involving most things, he'd been incredibly surprised by how fast they'd moved regarding this one particular thing. He supposed that the hostage situation with Covington had figured into it, as had Covington's sizable fortune, and that both Congress and the President wanted to get everything under control quickly and quietly, especially before any of it

leaked to the press, something it seemed like the women who'd taken Covington hostage were more than happy to acquiesce to, as long as they felt like progress was being made.

The investigation of the base itself had just started a few days ago, but Andy's good friend Phil had gone mostly dark since then, with Linda assuring them it was part of the whole process and that things would work themselves out in the end. Many of the women in Andy's house had been interviewed by members of the investigating team, generally at Rook Manor, which had put Andy somewhat at ease.

All of that had been before someone had come to Rook Manor to drag Andy away in handcuffs, naturally.

He hadn't even had warnings that it was coming – just a large military transport truck driving up and onto his property with several women armed to the teeth came to take him away. They hadn't even phoned ahead and had opened the gate to his estate without anyone in Team Rook opening it, which made Andy wonder if the Air Force had some sort of override access to all the gate systems within New Eden. He wasn't entirely certain of the legality of that, but as of late, legality had been a pretty flexible concept in the walled colony.

The squad of female soldiers brought him into an elevator, several floors downward, then back out again, taking him down a singular hallway before bringing him into a large room he felt fitting for the sort of tribunal he was expecting. He was actually dressed up for the occasion, having been getting ready for a date when the soldiers had taken him away.

At one end of the room behind an elevated desk were three women, one in military attire behind a plaque which read “3-star Lt. General Bonner” in the center,” and then one in a business suit behind a plaque which read “Engle” to the General's left, and one in much more casual attire behind a plaque which read “Giancola” on the General's right. All three looked to be in their early to mid 50s, and each of them looked incredibly tired.

“Remember baby,” Niko whispered to him. “Just be honest and you, and this should all be fine.”

“Lieutenant Redwolf,” the General said, a scolding tone to her voice. “We have allowed you to be here to ensure the safety of your household's male figure, but do not think that give you the option to address this council.”

“Ma'am,” Niko responded, moving to sit in a chair behind where Andy was sat at.

He was placed at one of two tables, an empty chair to the left of him, glancing over to the right, where a pair of women in business suits were dressed, briefcases in front of them. The soldiers did, however, remove the handcuffs from him, although they were only stationed a few feet away and they were very much still armed.

“Don't I get an attorney?” Andy asked.

“This isn't a trial, Mr. Rook,” the General said. “It's a military review of sorts, and we're currently holding it to determine who is and is not an enemy combatant. To determine if you are functioning as a rogue operator working to establish interests counter to those of the United States of America or not. We're going to review your actions of the last six months and see if you've engaged in behavior that violates the law of war. Assuming you are who you say you are, and that you only did the things you have previously said that you did, no further escalation should be necessary. But if it comes out that you were engaged in manipulation or disruption of the system, or the laws of the land, then we will determine if you are going to be considered an enemy combatant, or just a civilian in violation of unlawful behavior. Should we determine the latter, you will be detained by local law enforcement until such time as you are able to be given legal counsel and then tried before a jury of your peers.”

“General, I know you wanted me to remain silent, but is this being conducted under Article 31 and should Mr. Rook have the proceeding explained to him?” Niko asked.

“It's an informal process, Lieutenant, and if we get to anything that has immediate repercussions, we will, of course, assign Mr. Rook counsel, be that a civilian attorney or someone from trial defense services,” the General responded.

“I know this all seems rather frightening, Mr. Rook,” the woman named Giancola said to him. “But I assure you, it's all on the up and up, and we're just as eager as you are to be past all of this.”

“Assuming you *are* who you say you are, Mr. Rook,” the other woman, Engle, said to him. “I'm not entirely convinced you aren't somehow tied to a foreign interest that is attempting to manipulate our response to the DuoHalo Virus.”

“Jesus, Maddy, don't start in with this again...”

“And you are?” Andy asked.

“Representative Madeline Engle, from the great state of Idaho,” she replied proudly.

“Well then, Representative Engle,” Andy chuckled, shaking his head a little. “Let me be the first to say that I'm not entirely convinced of *your* intentions either, and we can move on from there.”

From the moment they'd relocated Andy from the tiny little condo owned by his friend to the new mansion he'd been given in New Eden, Andy had entirely been prepared for some kind of reckoning and accountability. It felt like maybe that moment had come.

After the other woman introduced herself – she was Senator Caroline Giancola from Kansas – they moved into having Andy relate his version of the last six months or so to the tribunal. It was a long and winding story, but Andy did his best to relay all the information he had now, even at points in the story before he might have had it, starting with his friend Phil Marcos getting a few strings pulled to get Andy high in the priority list, as well as redirecting him to live within the walls of New Eden.

Andy knew Phil hadn't *technically* done anything wrong, but that the tribunal might have found concerns with the *spirit* of Phil's actions. Andy did, however, make a point to call out how as far as he knew, Phil had never stepped outside of the things he was *allowed* to do at any point, and that in many ways, Phil was acting similarly to thousands of others in the system – trying to take care of his family and friends. Was it abusing his position and privilege? Perhaps, but he hadn't set down *any* of the rules he'd used to keep Andy and his family safe.

Surprisingly, he encountered very little push back from the tribunal regarding Phil's actions, or how he'd been paired with his first few partners – Aisling, Lauren and Niko – and the tribunal kept things moving along quickly, even glossing over his relocation from the condo in San Jose to the mansion up in New Eden, although there were a number of repeated questions about how much he knew about the DuoHalo virus, when he knew it and who had told him, focusing on what both Phil (who was one the lead medical personnel responding to the DuoHalo epidemic) and his former flatmate Eric (who was a contractor working for a research and development arm of the CIA) had told him.

Andy knew that both Phil and Eric were trusting him with information that maybe he wasn't cleared to know, so Andy stuck to his guns and presented a fairly blank picture of how much information he'd picked up along the way. He relayed that while his understanding of how big the epidemic was grew a little faster and bit more in-depth than others, he'd trusted in Phil and Eric not to tell him anything he wasn't cleared to know, or, more accurately, to only tell him things that weren't prohibited from knowing, since the amount of information was changing so fast, that it was nearly impossible to keep up with what was going on in all fronts.

There were a few times over the course of the first few hours that he felt like maybe Phil had told Andy more than he should've, but each time he'd seen the tribunal's faces scrunch up in annoyance, Andy had asked if what Phil had told him was classified, and each time he was told that it wasn't, although that they'd been urging more discretion when it came to dissemination of such information. Each time Andy had responded that he hadn't told anyone outside of his Team (the term being used to describe the new family unit that had resulted from the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum used to counter it) and that he did not believe Phil was being careless with the knowledge. Eventually, he figured out *that* was why they were getting annoyed with him – there was nothing illegal about what Phil had done, nor what Andy had done; it just wasn't how they *wanted* it done.

Once Andy's story moved past talking about his arrival in the new manor, as soon as Covington entered his story, a whole new tension filled the air, with each of the three suddenly paying much more

attention to their notes, asking far more questions than they had been previously.

Despite their constant barrage of interruptions, Andy did his best to relay the tale of how Niko had informed him that some women were being assigned to men in a method that did not fall in accordance with the protocols they were supposed to be. Basically, Covington and some of his friends had gone out of their way to buy the ability to circumvent the systems designed to pair up women with men they would find acceptable, putting the man's demand up as 'nonnegotiable,' and just giving a woman to a man who requested them, something Niko had told him she found reprehensible, something which he'd agreed with.

At that point in the story, Niko had offered to fill in some gaps, only to be scolded by the General, being told that she would get a chance to tell her version of the story privately, and for the time being she should remain quiet. Niko had fallen silent in response.

Andy then detailed how Niko had worked to get Andy an invitation to the private poker game that Arthur Covington had been holding for a month or two, where men were urged to put up women assigned to them that had *not* been imprinted yet as stakes for the game, with the winner being able to choose whatever women he wanted from the stakes and then allowing the rest to be chosen by those further down in order of elimination from the poker game.

"Didn't you feel any *shame* at all, Mr. Rook," Rep. Engle asked him, "in using these women like they were *property* instead of *people*?"

"Absolutely, Representative Engle. In fact, if you interview the women who were already my partners at that time, you will find that they will all detail for you how much guilt I had about my actions, how uncomfortable I was with them, but that I made a decision to do what I needed to for the greater good, and to protect the friends of my partner, 2nd Lieutenant Redwolf," Andy sighed. "I had seen first hand what kind of a cruel man Covington was to his partners, going so far as to refuse to let them even *speak* to other people in public. And even then, I didn't *truly* understand how deep the man's depravity went. It wasn't until after the game itself I would learn how dark that hole is."

"And the women you had to enter as stakes, Mr. Rook?" the General asked him.

"One of them, Sheridan Smith, I didn't know at the time, and I made a point to choose to bring her back into the house, especially since she'd selected me during the process legitimately."

"And the other?"

Andy shook his head with a dark little chuckle. "The other I would've sent back to the base to be paired with someone else had I not entered the game. Her name is Erin Donegal, and she and I had a relationship about a decade ago that ended... badly. I was not interested in rekindling the relationship in any way, shape or form, and to do so would've actively been detrimental to not only my mental health, but the mental health of everyone in my Team."

"And where did Miss Donegal end up?"

"She was chosen by Mister Watkins, which I will admit relieved me somewhat."

"Why is that?" Senator Giancola asked.

"Of the other people who were at the poker game, I found Mister Watkins to be the most reasonable and scrupulous, although I suppose I should append that by stating that the most reasonable of pit vipers remains a snake," he chuckled. "Nathaniel seemed like the best worst option, although I have come to find that he was engaged in the poker game for similar reasons to my own."

"And that was?"

"He was mostly trying to keep tabs on what Covington was up to, although I don't know that that fully excuses his behavior. Mister Watkins has repeatedly informed me that he would have preferred to have less partners than he did, but that the government insisted he get up to a number that would reasonably guarantee his immunity to DuoHalo, a situation I could empathize with."

"Based on others we've interviewed before you, you did quite well for yourself at that poker game, Mister Rook," the General said.

Andy shrugged a little. "What can I say? Despite their astute powers of business, it turns out

they're all pretty shitty poker players. And I suspect Covington kept holding the game at his home because he was using an unscrupulous dealer, guaranteeing he would generally end up on top."

"And that would be the late Veronica DeLaCruz?" Representative Engle asked.

"Yes." Andy paused, as did the others, and since no one else wanted to voice the speculation, he decided to give it air. "There's been some talk that Covington had her killed because of how poorly the game night went for him, but I can't speak to that personally. I'm certain I know less on that front than you do. That is what the New Daughters of the Revolution are claiming, however."

"Please list the women that you added to your Team as a result of that night's poker game."

"I went in to rescue Dr. Charlotte Varma and her daughter Asha, both of whom left the Covington mansion with me, but I agreed with Charlotte that no person should be forced to share a sexual partner with their parent. Charlotte said that she would have chosen Dr. Marcos, given the opportunity, and Phil was open to the option, so she was paired with him, and Asha remained with me. I was also paired with Piper Brown before leaving Covington Manor, something I was extremely apprehensive about, considering her mental state at that particular moment, but it has seemed to work out well enough for us in the long run."

"How would you describe her mental state when you first encountered Miss Brown?"

Andy frowned, his fingers curling uncomfortably at the memory of it. "Feral? Out of her mind? Covington had kept her in the in-between state of getting the Quaranteam serum and being imprinted for nearly a week, and Piper had regressed to something bestial and primitive. When she finally came to her senses a few days after being imprinted, I told her that if she wanted to leave, as soon as we could find a medical way for her to do that, I would aid her in taking that path. She has, since then, insisted she very much wants to remain a part of the family, and we are engaged to be married."

"Is that a bit of Stockholm Syndrome there I detect, Mister Rook?" Rep. Engle asked.

"I don't think so, but you're more than welcome to interview Piper, so that you can ascertain her motives for yourselves. I'm certainly not a medical professional capable of making that sort of judgment call."

"Who else joined your family as a result of that poker game, Mister Rook?"

"Sarah Washington, Emily Stevens and Hannah Nakamura."

"And how would you describe their opinions on joining your family?" the General asked him.

"Enthusiastic? Eager? Sarah had a bit of a crush on me before the pandemic. I think that's relatively easily verified. Also, Emily and Sarah were in a relationship prior to all of this, so joining the family made Sarah happy, which made Emily happy. Hannah just wanted safety but wasn't particularly enthusiastic about whom she'd been assigned to initially, as it had been under false pretenses."

"Oh?" Senator Giancola asked. "Elaborate, please."

"She'd been invited to join the Watkins family, but had assumed that the invitation had come from Nathaniel, which it had, but it turned out that the invitation was on behalf of Nathaniel's 18-year-old son Benjamin. Hannah would not have accepted had she known that, and when presented with the option of being paired with Benny Watkins or myself, she chose to be paired with me instead."

"I like this Mister Watkins less and less the more I hear about him," Representative Engle snorted. "And this was all of the women you'd acquired in the poker game?"

"Well, and the right to retain Miss Smith, as stated earlier."

"How did Miss Smith react to being put up as stakes in a poker game?"

Andy frowned. "I didn't exactly tell her that before hand, and when I came clean about it, there was a bit of a rift, but one which I think we've worked past. Sheridan understands that I was in a rather untenable situation at the time, and back then, I didn't know anything about her. In fact, I wasn't entirely certain she'd had any interest in me at all."

"Why do you say that, Mister Rook?"

"Because of how women were being presented to men in the early days... we had the impression that the survey we'd taken was shaping those decisions, but we certainly didn't have any real insight

into how they were being selected, or how they were being redirected to us,” Andy said. “We were told the conditions were favorable to us, but beyond that, we were basically told nothing about how or why women were paired with us men. Everything that I learned about the selection process was basically passed on as second-hand information from the women who joined the Team. We were never formally *told* any of this, beyond the survey we took at the onset.”

“And I understand your household has grown quite sizable since then.”

“I think most of us feel that way,” Andy said with a weary smile.

“How did you come across the additional members of your Team?”

“Recommendations from other members of the Team, generally.”

“Generally?” Rep. Engle asked.

“I sent out one request of my own, and that person accepted, but also wanted to bring someone else along with her.”

“That would be...” Sen. Giancola said, searching through her papers. “...Miss Fiona Smith and Miss Moira MacLeod?”

“That's correct.”

“And you and this Fiona had a prior relationship?”

“We were college sweethearts,” Andy replied.

“But you had not been in contact since college?”

“Her career took her one way and mine took me another.”

“And you and Miss MacLeod were familiar with each other?”

“We had been briefly intimate when we were in college. The three of us.”

“And I assume that both Miss Smith and Miss MacLeod were interested in resuming the prior relationship?”

Andy nodded. “They both came willingly and have seemed quite happy and content since their arrival, so I think that's a safe assumption.”

“Who else has joined your family since your arrival in New Eden?”

“Well, there's the staff – Katie is our groundskeeper, Jenny is our cook, Nicolette is our housekeeper, Whitney is our informational security and support, Lexi is my personal bodyguard and Mali, who should be arriving tomorrow, will be our financial manager.”

“Do any of them have any relationships outside of the one with you?” the General asked.

“Katie and Jenny are married, and I think Nicolette and Whitney might be developing a relationship, although I haven't pried.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged with a smile. “It's not really any of my business? They're both adults.”

“That's staff,” the Senator continued. “You have additional partners who aren't staff?”

“Sure,” Andy answered. “There's Lauren's no-longer ex-girlfriend, Taylor Morrison; Tala Jordan, Sheridan's friend; Jade Dillon, Lauren's friend and former co-worker; and Maya Steele, Emily's director friend.”

“How many women does that put you in sexual relations with in total, Mister Rook?” the General asked.

“Once Mali is here? Twenty-one women in total. In excess of the twelve to fifteen that is currently being recommended by the government.”

The Senator laughed, shaking her head a little. “That sounds like quite the mental and physical load, Mister Rook. My own household is only at thirteen other women, and I'm barely able to remember everyone's *names*. How do you keep track of it all?”

Andy offered her a sympathetic smile. “Well, we spend a lot of time with each other, so that helps, but Whitney also developed an app for my phone so I can easily keep track of when everyone was last dosed, to ensure everyone's needs are being addressed in a timely and prompt fashion.”

“Ever had days where you simply didn't *want* to have sex, Mister Rook?” the General asked him

rather bluntly. "No one would blame you."

"Of course, but all of these women, their very health *relies* on me having sex with them, so I do my best to never let them see me feeling like that. And besides, they are such a widely varying group of women that I find myself drifting from one style of encounter to another very regularly. My time spent sexually with Emily is dramatically different than my time spent sexually with, say, Tala."

"Would you like to elaborate on that, Mister Rook?" the Representative asked him.

"I would not," he replied curtly, "nor do I feel it is any business of this tribunal's how I and my partners enjoy each other's company."

"Would you consider the women in your household happy where they are, Mister Rook?"

He folded his hands on top of the desk, his eyes drifting between the three women. "Let me be exceptionally clear on this point, ladies. When it was discovered there was a way to reassign women to another man without the man being dead, I made sure to offer that option to each and every woman in my household. The last thing I would *ever* want is any woman feeling she's trapped by being with me. Each and every one of them declined to engage in reassignment. I'm sure you knew that already, though, considering you've been interviewing most of the members of my house individually for the past week."

"Not 'most,' Mister Rook," the Senator said. "All. And I have to admit, either you have somehow convinced nearly two dozen people to tell minor variations of the same story, or your story, as implausible as it seems, is mostly true."

Andy spread his hands. "I have nothing to hide. I'm not especially pleased with my own behavior regarding the poker game, but I was also the one who insisted that Katie Couric reach out to the government to fix the problem rather than telling her to just run what she had gathered and letting the chips fall where they may."

"Mmm," the Senator said, reaching into her pocket to grab a tube of lip balm, applying some to her lips. "Quite the hornet's nest you kicked up with that one conversation."

"Yeah, well, I think Covington was trying to throw the blame onto me to cover his own shitstorm, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen," Andy said, annoyance plain in his voice. "He made his own fucking mess, so he can stew in it. How's that going, by the way?"

"We'll talk about that in a little bit, Mister Rook," the General said. "Are you willing to bet your freedom and your life on the fact that every woman who is part of your Team is there of her own free will and volition?"

"I am," he replied confidently. "And if any of them would like to leave, I will be the first in line to help them make that happen. After all the shit I've witnessed with Covington, the *last* thing I want is to be anything at all like that shitheel. I'm guessing because you're in charge, General, that the previous head of the base has been relieved?"

"Major General Fielder is currently in the brig, and will be facing a tribunal of his own in the immediate future, and he's not the only one. A total of seven different men here on the base are either in our brig or have been arrested by federal authorities for their part in circumventing the legitimate and lawful pairing system that we have in place. We've also helped federal authorities arrest a number of people in the local government in and around New Eden, including the former Mayor of New Eden, Mister James Haunton."

"Hopefully his wife, Major Peters, is being taken care of," Andy said. "She was the one who welcomed us to New Eden when we first got here, and she seemed very nice."

"For the time being, Mister Rook, Major Peters will be assuming the role of Mayor of New Eden, and stepping down from her military posting," the General replied. "She is also considering whether or not she and the other members of Team Haunton want to be reassigned, or simply keep Mister Haunton here in a local jail for their needs to be tended to."

"Considering what your day has been like, Mister Rook," the Senator said, an amused tone to her voice as she leaned back in her chair a little. "I'm a little surprised to see you giving any kind of a

damn about any member of the Air Force.”

“They're mostly good people doing a hard job,” Andy countered. “Even these people who stormed my house with machine guns at the ready have got families to go home to at night, and they're just following *your* orders anyway. If they're not a bad egg, I'm not going to hold a grudge. They've got enough shit on their plate without me adding on to it. While you folks may have come in a little bit hotter than I think you needed to, a certain amount of paranoia involving everything that's going on in New Eden isn't entirely unwarranted, you know?”

“That's the difference between me and Andy,” Niko added. “He's very good at keeping a clear head no matter the circumstances. Me, I tend to put the health and safety of the primary before everyone and everything else, because that's my job.”

“And your diligence is appreciated Miss Redwolf,” the Representative said. “Thank you for your service.”

“I'm more concerned about my friend, Dr. Marcos, and his Team,” Andy said.

The three women of the tribunal turned off their microphones and discussed among themselves for a moment, leaving Andy to turn and look at Niko with a shrug. Andy turned back to look at the them as they started to turn their microphones on once more. “While it isn't entirely finalized yet, we have been unable to find any flagrant violations in Dr. Marcos's actions, and considering the number of human lives that he has saved, a small amount of leniency is probably warranted,” the Senator said. “Some of his actions, such as his intervention in the reassignment of Jenny Carnero to Mister Yang's house, are, shall we say, rather unorthodox, but they've also resulted in improvements in the Oracle system itself, so we're going to cut him some leeway.”

“Nothing would be gained by punishing Dr. Marcos for being human, Mister Rook,” the General said. “And quite a great deal would be lost if we *did* impose retributive measures upon him. In the early days of this disaster, people were playing fairly loose with the rules and regulations, but we're past that phase now, and I think Dr. Marcos understands that. The research that Dr. Merriweather brought with her from Russia when she was fleeing her ex-husband, Dr. McCallister, has been incalculably valuable, but there are only a handful of people who even understand what we're looking at, so we can't afford to lose him from his research. With all that on record, however, I can also stress that we're going to be putting a lot more guardrails to prevent anyone from going completely cowboy on us anymore. The last thing any of us want is Dr. Marcos accidentally fucking things up by trying to do the right thing at the wrong time.”

“Phil's a good guy,” Andy insisted. “And whatever rules he bent or broke, I'm fairly certain he had his reasons for doing so. Based on what's happening with the New Daughters of the Revolution, there were much bigger systemic problems going on here at the base.”

“Yes, well, now we come to the real reason we've brought you here, Mister Rook,” the General said with a heavy sigh. “Now, it should be noted that it's taken us almost a month to get to this point, and I wish it hadn't come down to this, but it has, as the NDR are entirely inflexible upon these terms. One of their demands involves you specifically, and as loathe as I am to ask this of you, they will be not be budged off this point. That's why we had to have all of this scrutiny. We needed to vet you as thoroughly as we could and ensure this wasn't some sort of trick or deception on the behalf of the NDR, and I expect your reaction to the demand will only confirm what I already believe to be true.”

“We gonna dance all night with your hand on my ass, General, or are you going to make your move?” Andy said. “What the hell *are* you talking about? What demands?”

“We have reached a settlement which will result in the NDR surrendering Misters Covington, Jacobson and Vikovic to law enforcement,” the Senator said. “It's not perfect, but we didn't expect that it would be going into it, yes? There's a handful of things that're... less than ideal, but it's what we gotta do to get things back into a more manageable fashion. And as the General said, one of the demands involves you, and we anticipated... well, frankly if I were you, Mister Rook, I'd tell me to go stuff it. But it's our job to implore you *not* to do that, and to find some sort of counterbalancing agent that will

make their demand more palatable to you.”

“Okay, look,” Andy snapped. “Quit fucking dancing around the topic and tell me what the fuck is going on, so we can stop wasting each others' time.”

The three members of the tribunal looked at one another, trying to silently decide who was going to tell Andy, before the General spoke again, seemingly having decided to fall on the grenade herself. “As part of the New Daughters of the Revolution surrendering Covington and the others to us, they're all going to be reassigned and not face any retaliatory actions for what they did, although we are mandating that Dr. Rachel DeMarco engage in mandatory psychiatric counseling for a period no less than one year, because of her... demonstration of physical violence in regards to Mister Covington. But that's not the hard part. They have a few demands about their reassignments that are... particular.”

“Oh no,” Andy heard Niko say behind him.

“Miss Lisa Davis is insisting she be reassigned to someone on the East Coast. She wants to be as far away from California as she can get.”

“I can understand that,” Andy said. “After the kind of thing I imagine Covington put her through, she's right to want to put it all behind her and never think about it again.”

“Dr. DeMarco is insisting she be reassigned to Dr. Marcos, so that she can continue to aid in the research on the project, although she has agreed to do so under constant supervision, and with no real authority in any way, shape or form.”

“I can't imagine Phil or Linda is particularly happy about that,” Andy muttered, mostly to himself but loud enough that the tribunal could've heard him. He expected Linda would be even more angry about it than Phil would, although he certainly didn't expect Phil to be all that thrilled with it.

“They will have extremely limited contact with one another until Captain Hayes has assessed that Dr. DeMarco is no longer a threat to anyone. She will remain on the base under supervision at all times until Captain Hayes deems otherwise. There are a handful of other demands about specific people wanting to go to other places, but there's one in particular that the NDR are adamant on, and they will not be budged from it. They want you to select one of their members to join *your* Team specifically, here in New Eden.”

Andy wasn't sure how long the silent moment was between them telling him that and him speaking again, but it might as well have been a thousand years for as heavy as the time felt.

“You *cannot* be serious,” were the first words he could summon to his lips, and they were just a hair's breadth away from him following it up with 'go fuck yourselves,' but he decided not to vocalize that last bit, at least not yet.

“Deadly serious, I'm afraid,” the Senator told him. “They're aware of your history with House Covington, and some of the disagreements their members have had with members of your household...”

“They basically *tortured* my fiancée, Piper Brown, and you want me to bring one of them *into* my home with her? You're insane. *This* is insane. It's not inviting a wolf into the hen house; it's laying out a fucking three-course dinner for her!”

“They're willing to let you choose from any of the members of House Covington, House Vikovic or House Jacobson, but obviously they would prefer you take someone from House Covington. In fact, I've been asked to convey to you that Melody Park would like to volunteer for your Team, but that she also understands if her time with Miss Brown would be a dealbreaker. She has voiced in particular a desire to make amends for her inability to protect Miss Brown. The NDR feel like you've done wonders in fighting against the abuses of the system, and they believe that having someone from their organization embedded in your Team will let them all sleep a little better, since they'll know what work you're doing to keep the system from having any other abuses, and they can communicate that work out to the others in the NDR.”

“I'm just a fantasy writer who got lucky along the way. I don't work on the Quaranteam serum. I don't know a thing about how the DuoHalo virus works. I'm not in the Air Force. I'm not what anyone would call an insider.”

"I disagree," the Representative said, a fiery anger in her tone. "When you agreed to step forward and place your liberal West Coast values forth as the new model for the American family, you took a place in the spotlight and became the sort of public figure that's going to have a firm hand in shaping the direction of this country for the next twenty years, you and your Hollywood elite women, one of whom ain't even from this country."

He could hear Niko's hands balling into fists behind him, but the taunt from the Representative from Idaho just made him smirk a little bit. "I see. So it *is* retaliatory, just not for *them*. You don't like the fact that the President asked us to step forward and talk to '60 Minutes' because you didn't get a chance to put your stake down in the culture wars. I wasn't asking anyone else to live their lives how I live *mine*, just telling people how we decided to survive with each other in the new world."

"I think you and the rest of your godless heathen sluts shouldn't get to decide anything about how our nation does anything," she sneered back at him. "You've always treated the middle of this country as 'flyover states,' people you turn your back on and ignore until you need something, and then suddenly it's nothing but handout handout handout. We in Idaho have one of the lowest sales tax rates nationwide, because we don't believe in big government."

"Great," Andy shot back. "Then you won't mind us not sending you any aid or paying for any of your federal services? Californians pay a higher tax rate than anybody else in the United States, and maybe we should start making sure we're getting what we pay for with those taxes. You've got quite a lot of our money coming into Mountain Home Air Force Base up there in Idaho, when all those resources could be allocated elsewhere."

"Typical liberal talking points," she said, rolling her eyes. "We need our military now more than ever, Mr. Rook, what with all casualties we've suffered as a nation."

"Maybe you haven't heard but we aren't the only country who lost people, Representative. Hell, you should know far better than I do what's going on internationally."

"And I do, Mister Rook, and it's not fucking pretty. But we're going to make sure it's America First no matter what happens to the rest of the world. So, you're going to take one of these fucking NDR women and add her to your household because it's what keeps this shit from getting out of hand. Because if you don't, they're going to make sure all of Covington's abuses are going to be broadcast far and wide, and I think we both know how that's going to end up, don't you? With me and mine on top, where we belong, but by God, the amount of bloodshed it'll take to get us there is unconscionable even to me, so we're telling you to do this so there's not gonna be rioting in the streets. But you will not push me and mine into a corner, Mister Rook. We're going to keep our Second Amendment strong and we're going to protect our people from immigrants and those who'd want to sully this great land of ours. The last fucking thing we need is you and your woke socialist family setting the tone for the rest of the country. Traditional. American. Values. That's what this country needs and what it's going to get."

Andy couldn't help but tilt his head to one side. "If you think you have a snowball's chance in hell in keeping this country 'traditional' when it's lost over 70% of its men, best of fucking luck to you."

"Okay, settle down, you two," the General sighed. "And you can save the speeches for the stump, Maddy. There aren't any fucking cameras in here."

"The little peasant needs to know who he's fucking with," the Representative shot back.

"Careful, Maddy," the Senator cautioned. "You may not know who *you're* fucking with. Mister Rook may not look like much, but he's still alive, which is more than I can say about your first husband. A little less religion and a little more science and you wouldn't have to be shacking up with a member of your security detail for your survival. Maybe this one'll believe in vaccines, huh?"

"Oh fuck you too, Caroline. Uptight bitch."

"I know this is a lot to spring on you, Mister Rook," the General said, interrupting the two bickering politicians, "but how difficult a sell do you think this is going to be to your family?"

"I would say the decision will be entirely in the hands of Piper," Andy admitted. "If she's okay with it, then the rest of us can make it work. And I suspect if she's deadset against us taking anyone

from House Covington, we can probably work to find someone in House Vikovic or Jacobson that'll be a decent enough fit for the family to satisfy the demands of the NDR. Melody Park might be a bridge too far, but maybe not... There's probably somebody in that mix I can make work if it's that important to this whole thing," he sighed. "I know Lisa and Ash were at least familiar with each other, so I would've said that would've been fine, but I can understand Lisa wanting to get as far away from here as possible."

"Can we consider that a 'yes,' Mister Rook?" the Senator asked him.

"Get me a short profile on everyone in each of the three houses and I'll have an answer—"

"You mean 'a selection,' don't you?" the Representative corrected.

He frowned, dropping his eyebrows as he scowled at her. "Yes, I'll have a selection within 24 hours of you dropping off profiles on all those I need to consider. That will give me time to run it by everyone in my family and ensure I don't get any conflicts or personality mismatches. I'm not adding anyone to my Team without clearing it with the rest of the Team."

"What kind of sissy man are you?" the Representative sneered.

"The kind who gives a shit what people are partnered to him think," he said. "I don't know why you'd be the kind of woman who just blindly accepts what her partner is doing without knowing about it, but that's between you and him, and I'll thank you to keep your antiquated bullshit out of my life. Are we done here?"

"Just a few final things, Mister Rook," the General said. "We've got some paperwork we need you to sign – an NDA regarding everything we've talked about today and another one to extend your Top Secret clearance regarding any and all things involving the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum." One of the soldiers brought over a couple of small stacks of paper, laying them down in front of him. "You've been operating under it long enough that we figured we might as well make it official, and we've done a full background investigation into your last 10 years, so you'll be able to come and go around the base at will moving forward. With that, however, comes an actual title – officer of civilian oversight for the Quaranteam project. The president has mandated that a handful of civilians will be given carte blanche access to the entire process, so that we can ensure that all questionable decisions have at least been reviewed by qualified members of the public. You'll be working in conjunction with the Air Force and the CDC, but there will be a number of people like yourself distributed into all aspects of this system, to make sure we aren't engaging in any unethical or questionable behavior, like Major General Fielder was. It isn't just going to be a pro forma gig, either. You'll need to go to Washington once every three months to file a report, both with the manager of civilian oversight and with the President herself."

He felt the movie line leaping to his lips and just couldn't help himself. "Not to be the materialistic weasel of the group, but do you think we'll get hazard pay out of this?"

"You'll do the job and you'll like it, egghead, or we'll ship you off to Guantanamo and disappear your ass," the Representative said to him, which felt to Andy like an empty threat at best, a gross overreach more likely.

"Do the people of Idaho know they have someone representing them who can't even *spell* the name of their state, or are they just grading on a *really* wide curve?" he countered.

"Stow it!" the General said, slamming her fist down on top of the desk. "You two don't have to like each other, but you're damn well going to have to learn how to work with one another, and if you're constantly acting like the cast of *Mean Girls*, you're never going to get shit done, and you're also never going to be able to remove my boots from your asses. Clear?"

"The Commie started it," the Representative said, and Andy chose to let it lie.

"Anything else," Andy asked, as he signed the two documents in front of him in several places, all of which were helpfully marked with stick on tabs. "Or are we done here?"

"One more thing, Mister Rook," the General said, while the Representative and the Senator turned their attention to their tablets in front of them. "You haven't been informed of this yet, but early

next year, sometime in the early spring, *60 Minutes* is going to come by to do a follow-up story on you, see how you and your family are getting along months later. We've told them not to report on the NDR, but they're probably going to ask you all about it anyway. So, we need you to talk to them about that *off the record*, let them know that we've addressed the issue, if not to your satisfaction, at least to your tolerance. For what it's worth, I happen to agree with all of the NDR's grievances but airing all that dirty laundry out in public is just going to be throwing even more fuel onto an already difficult-to-control fire that we're dealing with day to day. At this point, we've all just got to get on with getting on with it."

"How is it looking across the country, General?"

"We've still got plenty of holdouts insisting the Quaranteam process is a sin against God or a Democratic plot to inject them with microscopic tracking devices. There's some debate about whether or not we simply inject these people for their own good or not, but that's way above my paygrade. There's lots of international developments, but all of those are currently being kept between the President's team and the countries involved. I expect we'll start hearing all about them in the next few months, though. I understand you're going to be doing your mass wedding in January?"

He nodded. "End of January, yeah. The ceremony'll be on the 30th, but we're basically making a whole week out of it, what with all the people we need to get to know. It's been tricky organizing all the families to come out for it, but now that pretty much all of them are either imprinted or next in line to be imprinted, we're setting down a day for the ceremony and a weekend for everyone to come and visit. We're already looking into booking out most of the hotels down in Pleasanton and Dublin, and we're already worried that spillover might have to go to Oakland, but we'll make it work as best we can. And it will be a great chance for everyone to get to know everyone else's families."

"How many of your partners are you going to be marrying at the ceremony?"

"Seven. Aisling, Niko, Sarah, Emily, Fiona, Moira and Piper, so just their family and friends are going to be quite the collection of people, not to mention all of Sarah and Em's Hollywood friends on top of that," he laughed. "And, of course, most of my other partners are inviting out some of their friends and families as well, so the whole thing is going to basically be our own little private convention. I genuinely considered renting out something like Moscone or the San Jose Convention Center, but none of us wanted to constantly be driving there and back."

"I imagine the budget for nametags alone is already quite sizable," the General chuckled.

"Absolutely," Andy agreed. "And I'm already a nightmare with names. We're basically printing the nametags ourselves, with a bunch of information on them. Name, who they're partnered with, who they're *related* to and where they currently live. No one's going to remember all of that, so we're just doing the best we can to manage it."

The General got up and walked down from the elevated section, rubbing the back of her neck with a weary hand. "Okay, Mister Rook. I think we're done with you. Again, I apologize for all the theatrics, but we had to make sure you *are* who everyone seemed to *think* you are, especially with the demands from the NDR being so strangely *specific* in regards to you. Apparently, you're the only man they're convinced has no malice in his heart."

"Mmm. They should've seen me when your truck rolled up to pull me here four hours ago. I have a rather important dinner date tonight," he frowned before glancing at his watch. "But if we're done here, maybe I can still make it home in time to salvage that without too much fuss."

"I won't keep you any longer then. We'll have the profiles emailed to you within the next few hours, and we'll expect a response from you tomorrow night on whom you're willing to add to your family. Once that's done, they're going to let us come in and take the hostages out, and you'll have about five or six days before you need to have the person reassigned to you. We'll do that here at the base. Part of the terms of their surrender is that they all get reassigned quickly, so if you can do it sooner than that, even, that would be better."

"Let me figure out *who* it's going to be before we figure out the *when*," Andy chuckled. "I know

that at this point, you're thinking what's one more to add to the man's tally, but it's still a bit of a logistics problem to be taken care of.”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out, Mister Rook.” The General paused and then offered her hand out for him to shake. “I wasn't sure I'd be saying this, but it's been nice talking with someone else who's kept relatively grounded during all of this madness. I hope you'll stay that way moving forward.”

He reached out and shook the General's hand with his own. “Let's hope that makes two of us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a date to get to.”

Andy and Niko walked out of the room, and for the first time, Andy realized he could go anywhere and see any part of the base, something his innate sense of curiosity couldn't wait to delve into, but for the time being he needed to get home. He glanced at his watch, frowning, as one of the six soldiers who had brought him here moved over, offering a sad smile. “Sorry about all that hassle, sir, but we had our orders. Can I give you a lift back to your house?”

“Thank you, Sgt. Curiel, that would be kind of you.”

Neither Andy nor Niko talked much on the way back to the house, mostly just considering all the information that had been dropped on them, and when they got back to the Manor, Andy had to use his phone to open the gate remotely, so whatever access the Air Force had to his property, they weren't going to wantonly abuse it. Curiel drove the Jeep up to the front door and let them out before driving off, as Andy found Aisling and Fiona waiting for him.

“Rough day at work, luv?” Ash asked him with a giggle.

“Christ, you'd think I'd invented DuoHalo myself the way they were treating me. How is she? Not too upset?”

“She was worried you wouldn't be back in time, but when the gate opened, she lit up like a Christmas tree,” Fiona replied. “How'd the interrogation go?”

“Let's just say we're going to have quite a *lot* to talk about over breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“Are you sure it'll keep, Andy?” Niko said. “The sooner we—”

“It's all things that'll wait until morning,” Andy said, putting his hands on Niko's shoulders. “The Air Force has to send all the paperwork over, and we can talk about it at breakfast. Tonight's Jade's night, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let any drama get in the way of that, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess that's fair,” Niko said, leaning up to kiss him softly for just a moment as Aisling and Fiona moved to straighten out his suit and slacks a little bit. “Now you should get off to your dinner.”

He started to head into the house and behind him, Fiona couldn't help herself and yelled “And don't forget to enjoy your cherry dessert!”

Tonight, he was going to treat Jade Dillon to an excellent one-on-one dinner and then after that, he was, at her request, going to finally take her virginity.

He genuinely wasn't sure who was more nervous, Jade or him.

Chapter Two

December 10th, 2020

There was a certain level of expectation that had been building up around tonight for the past several weeks. While he and Jade had been sexually intimate several times now, they'd both sort of been dancing around the subject of her virginity, until last week she'd come to him with a proposal. They could have a nice dinner date, and then they could fuck and get her past the hurdle of her virginity without anyone else present, without any real pressure, with the chance for her to have the experience exactly how she wanted. It was more than anyone could ask for, and he had hoped it would've alleviated some of the tension for both him and her.

It had seemed to work for her, as Jade had been happy as a clam all week, but Andy had found himself more than a little nervous about it, hoping that he wouldn't let her down or disappoint her. The girls, particularly the fiancées, had had *plenty* of advice, but most of it all boiled down to the same thing – just fucking *relax* already.

The person with the best advice had been, unsurprisingly, from Ash, who'd stressed that every girl's first time was important, but that as long as a good time was had by all, that was all that mattered, and considering Andy was giving Jade an entire evening of his attention all to herself, it would focus their time on each other in a way that would let Jade have center stage. They were even having a nice formal dinner beforehand, so it could feel like a private date, although Jenny had insisted on bringing the food to them.

They'd planned to have dinner out on the patio, but the weather had been uncooperative. While winters in California were certainly not as cold as most other places in the United States, they were still brisk enough that they had decided to have dinner indoors, the two of them using one of the smaller ballrooms as their dining room for the evening.

On his way over to the dining room, he stopped in one of the bathrooms to make sure his attire didn't look too off. He'd been trying on outfits for the dinner when the Air Force had rolled up and carted him away, so while he hadn't been entirely settled on this particular look before, he didn't really have time to swing by the bedroom and choose different things to try on. He made sure it wasn't askew or hanging out, tucking in one little bit of shirt that had gotten loose back into his waistline, then sighed, splashing some water on his face.

He was fairly certain the more he thought about it that *he* was more nervous about this whole thing than Jade was, at this point.

Andy walked out of the bathroom and headed down the hall, marveling at how quiet the house mostly was. All the girls had agreed to mostly stay out of the way, although he imagined a bunch of them were also grilling Niko for any information they could get from her about why the Air Force had hauled him up and onto the base with no warning and no courtesy whatsoever.

On the car ride home, Andy had stressed to Niko that he get a chance to talk to Piper first before *any* discussion of his time at the base happened. He expected Niko to hold strong, although he knew that the girls would be nonstop peppering her until bedtime. But Piper absolutely deserved to know about what was coming before anyone else, and he wanted to gauge her reaction privately, so that she didn't feel any pressure from the rest of the house, or even from him. Andy had stressed that they'd talk about it all over breakfast in the morning, but he planned on getting up early and pulling Piper aside so they could have a private chat first.

The door to the ballroom was closed, but he could hear music being played on the other side, Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers singing “Learning To Fly,” which only made him grin. He stepped up to the door, took one final check on his attire, adjusted his glasses then opened the door and headed in.

The ballroom had been set up with a small table in the center of it, lots of candles everywhere although the candle light wasn't the only illumination for the room, the lights simply turned down to half power. The table had only two chairs at it, something that was basically alien in the house at this point, with every other place having multiple seats scattered around it. There was a single centerpiece

of flowers that had been adjusted so it was slightly off to one side, a pair of plates, a bottle of wine on one side of the table, a mixed mojito on the other, as Andy wasn't much of a wine drinker.

He found himself gasping a little as he caught sight of Jade, and immediately felt significantly underdressed. She was wearing a red dress that hung down to her knees with long black leather boots that ran up underneath it. The top was low cut, but not so much that it felt scandalous, offering a generous amount of view of Jade's plump breasts, pushing them up into the best shelf she could get them to be with some push-up bra beneath the dress. Her blonde hair mostly hung down her back, although part of it had been braided up into a crown around the top of her head, keeping any of it from falling into her eyes. Her makeup had been done tastefully, although there was a heavy amount of smoke around her eyes to make those emerald orbs really stand out even more than they normally did.

The look was nothing short of breathtaking.

"It's too much, isn't it?" Jade immediately said as she started moving across the room towards him. "I kinda like how my hair turned out, but I knew the make up was too over the top. Sarah promised me you'd like it, but you kinda hate it, don't you?"

"Jade," Andy said with a wide smile. "You're *magnificent*. I feel like I should be turning and running so whoever your real date is don't see me slinking around near his girl."

Jade giggled suddenly at that, clutching her hand to her face. "You really think so?"

"Honestly, Jade, you're stunning. Are you sure what I'm wearing is okay?"

"Andy, you could be dressed in a leopard print thong and flipflops, and you'd still be handsome to me," she said, batting her long thick eyelashes at him. "Shall we sit and eat? I can tell you how the first woman's NFL team's training is going and you can fill me in on why the military took you out of your own home without so much as a polite warning."

"I want to hear your story much more than I want you to hear mine," he laughed, leaning in to kiss her lips tenderly as she pressed her body against his. "New dress?"

"New boots," she countered. "The dress was just in a collection of things that I needed to be in the right mood to put on."

"They *are* good boots," he said, moving over to pull her chair out for her. "I'm betting that mojito's got quite the kick to it, doesn't it?"

"It's date night," Jade said, sitting down, letting him slide the chair in to meet her. "If it isn't, I'll be bitching at Jenny in the morning."

He moved over to pour a glass of wine for her before going to his own seat across the table from her. "I'm sure it'll be fine. So they're really going to go for a completely female NFL?"

"They *have* to, which means the state of the game's going to change a whole hell of a lot," Jade said with a smile. "They're doing their best to get fully staffed women's teams, but they're also just having a lot of pitch in to help with training. Cheerleaders, trainers... hell, you'd be amazed at the throwing arm Lauren's got on her. I think the team's going to be trying to convince her to play any day now, not that I think she'd want to take them up on it."

"She tell you she doesn't have any interest in it?" Andy said, picking up his mojito, bringing it to his lips, finding it was indeed loaded with rum.

"Quite the opposite, actually," Jade said, picking up her wine, swirling the glass in her hand. "But she wants to have a kid first before she gets into that kind of thing. You knew that already, though. I'm sure she told you she's off her pills."

"She did," Andy laughed. "God help us all next summer. It's going to be baby central up in this house, and I don't think any of us are ready for it."

"No parent ever is," Jade said, smiling shyly. "But I figured maybe I could be the house nanny. We're going to need one, and after three or four years, I can go back to teaching, once things have stabilized down a little bit."

"Is that what you want or what you think the house needs?"

"Equal parts of each," she said, looking up as Nicolette was bringing in a bowl of French Onion

soup for each of them, setting it down on the table without saying anything to either of them.

“Thanks Nicolette,” they both said in unison, laughing a little as they caught themselves.

“Jinx, you owe me a Coke,” Andy said first.

“Nicolette, be a dear and bring me a Coke that I can pour over Andy's head, would you?” Jade smirked at the blonde in her French maid's outfit.

“Yes, ma'am,” Nicolette grinned back before heading to the door, slipping out of the ballroom.

“Two to one she's actually going to bring you a glass bottle of Mexican Coke,” Andy said, shaking his head in amusement.

“No bet. I've been around her long enough to know it's just going to mysteriously appear on the table at some point when we aren't expecting it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her. So, back on topic, you think you're going to be okay tending to that many newborns?”

“Well, I'm hoping one of them will be yours and mine, and the rest will still be yours, which means they might as well be mine, so someone's gotta be on baby duty,” Jade said, stirring the soup just a little bit. “There will probably need to be two of us, one on daytime duty and one on nighttime duty, but one of them should definitely be me. I like babies, and I won't mind taking some time away from teaching to get the house up and running on the right foot.”

“As long as you're happy with the decision, I'm not one to tell you no for anything,” Andy said before taking a sip from his own soup, although something struck him before he could take a second. “Yours and mine, hm?”

“I'm not getting any younger, Andy, and I have a feeling that once I've got this chain out from around my neck, I'm...” She paused for a second, a strange smile crossing her lips. When they'd first met, Jade had had the habit of using fake cuss words instead of real profanity, a trait that absolutely driven Andy up the wall, and one that Jade had been working very hard to break herself of when she was around him. “I know I'm gonna like fucking, because *you* like fucking, and all the girls in the *house* like fucking, so once I *start* fucking, I don't think I'm gonna want to *stop* fucking any time soon. I haven't been on birth control before, so why start now? I'm not like Fiona, where my window is rapidly dwindling, but I've always been unlucky when it came to relationships, so I feel like my odds of getting pregnant aren't going to be any better. That means you're gonna have to fuck me a whole lot to knock me up. Hope that won't be too much of an imposition on you,” she teased.

“Looks like Sarah's swearing lessons have been helping some,” he laughed. “No, I can't say I'll be all that bothered if you want actual sex out of our encounters moving forward. I imagine you're a little tired of giving blowjobs all the time anyway.”

“Well,” she blushed a little bit, looking down at her soup before looking up at him again. “It's fun watching you sort of spasm out when you're cumming, but the minute your spunk hits my throat, I'm so caught up in the moment of my own orgasm that I can't really enjoy the sight of it for too long. And I don't want to wait to feel you inside of me any longer. I've been a virgin too fucking long,” she grumbled before digging back into her soup.

“You had your reasons,” Andy told her. “For better or worse. And those reasons don't apply any more, so we'll get you over that hump tonight, and you never have to worry about it ever again. I mean, you only lose your virginity once.”

“Well, I don't intend to give up *all* my virginities tonight,” she giggled. “I don't care how big of an advocate of it most of your brides-to-be are, I'm definitely going to want to fool around on my own with a few toys before I even *think* about having your cock lodged up my ass.”

“You don't *ever* have to have my cock in your back door if you don't want it, Jade,” he chuckled, rolling his eyes. “All of you ladies have very different tastes and nobody should be expected to share anybody else's.”

“Enough talk about that for now,” she said, finishing off her soup. “How was your trip to the Air Force base? They let you go, so I imagine it couldn't have been too bad.”

“It was both better and far worse than I'd imagined, but I probably shouldn't talk too much about it yet, otherwise all the other girls are going to be mad you got to know some of it first.”

“How am I going to tell any of them?” Jade said, rolling her eyes at him with a dopey laugh. “After you've fucked me properly, you and I are falling asleep in my bed and not moving until morning. That was the thing I made all the girls agree to. Nobody's barging into our bedroom until daybreak, and even then, if we're still sleeping, we're gonna keep on sleeping until we get up. Tonight's my night, and everybody is going to respect that.”

“Well...” he considered. “I suppose I can talk about parts of it. They ended up giving me top secret clearance when it comes to things related to the DuoHalo pandemic and the Quaranteam serum, because I've been made a member of the civilian oversight team for the New Eden base.”

“That's... good, right?” she asked, tentatively.

“Probably? It means I've got a direct line to register concerns, in case we find out things like Covington's little diversion project end up happening again, but it also means I'm on the hook for wandering around that base every now and again, just to make *sure* nobody's trying to sneak something by the rest of them. So, a bit good, a bit bad. The new General running the base seems like she's got her head on straight, but you never can tell with people these days, so we'll just keep an eye on her like we do everybody else.”

“Makes sense,” Jade said as the door opened again, Nicolette bringing in a serving tray with a couple of steaks on them, mashed potatoes and gravy on the side, placing one in front of Jade which looked slightly pinker than his own.

Andy wondered how the hell Jenny had learned he preferred his steak medium-well instead of medium-rare. He couldn't remember them ever talking about it. Hell, he couldn't remember talking steak with anyone in the house, although at this point, he supposed it was possible he'd mentioned it in passing to someone somewhere along the way. He'd long ago since decided that keeping track of who knew what when in the Rook Household was going to be an impossibility, and that people would just disseminate information at will.

“There's some other stuff as well, but we'll talk about that tomorrow, with the whole house around, although I might have a couple of private chats first.”

“Things the Brides Club needs to know before the rest of us?”

“Not even that,” he sighed. “It'll make sense tomorrow, so I just need you to trust me on this one.”

“Of course, Andy. We all trust you with our lives. If you think I should wait until tomorrow to hear about it, I'm sure you've got your reasons.”

The two ate quietly for a little bit, although Jade spent a bit of time asking Andy if he'd considered where he wanted the main nursery to go, and how he planned on divvying up kids rooms eventually, which made him laugh, simply because it was *so* far in the future to be thinking about, and was a welcome change from talking about next month's upcoming wedding, which felt like it was going to be practically a convention, and which Fiona, as the oldest, had sort of taken point on, doing planning and scheduling with nearly all of her free time.

When it came to dessert time, Nicolette brought in two slices of decadent chocolate lava cake, one for each of them, and Andy was a little worried that the amount of sweetness might put him into sugar shock, sending him spiraling into some kind of a food coma but Jade's relentless enthusiasm certainly didn't seem to let him wind down.

During the pitch process the month before, where all the girls had suggested their friends who they wanted to be brought in to safety, Lauren (who had pitched Jade) had described Jade as the human equivalent of a golden retriever – always full of boundless energy and enthusiasm and nearly impossible to put in a bad mood. Andy had thought it was a bit of hyperbole when he'd first heard it, but true to Lauren's word, Jade had never been anything less than unwaveringly positive about anything and everything, even when she was nervous.

“Just one thing I'd thought I should ask about an update on, regarding your father, Jade,” Andy said as they were finishing dessert. “You said you didn't want to ever hear from him again, and that any messages he sent over we should completely ignore and reject. That still true?”

Jade sighed, her face darkening for only a moment before the storm passed as she nodded. “That's no longer my problem, so unless he's actually dead, I don't want to hear a word about it. If he's sick or dying, he can do so without my knowledge.”

Andy nodded silently, making a mental note that they were likely to revisit this conversation within a few days, then, as reports were that Cormack Dillon was indeed on his deathbed, and that he wasn't expected to last much longer, although it wasn't DuoHalo was that catching up to him, but good old fashioned lung cancer – Cormack had never been able to shake his habit of pipe smoking and it seemed like it was finally going to be the death of him.

“Besides,” she continued. “I'd rather focus on the fun we're going to have in just a little bit. I know we both agreed to wait until I was ready, but I'm starting to think maybe I should've been ready far sooner than I actually was. That's on me, though.”

“You wanted to be sure you were ready,” Andy said. “I respected that.”

“Sure, but in waiting so long, I just kept letting the pressure build and build inside of my head until finally nothing was ever going to live up to that. Spending time with Sarah's helped out for that, some, because she pointed out to me if I just relaxed and enjoyed our time together, the fact that it was my *first* time would stop mattering so much. So I'm just going to make sure we have a good time and that you give me a good and proper fucking, you know?” she giggled. “So maybe we should move this to the bedroom?”

“In your own time, obviously.”

“Oh, my time is now so get your ass up out of that chair,” she laughed, standing up, pulling him to his feet, pressing her lips against his, both of her long arms folding behind his neck, keeping her lean athletic body pressed firmly against his. When she broke from the kiss, she was grinning from ear-to-ear. “Or are you just gonna take me here in the ballroom like some sort of savage brute?”

He reached both of his hands down and grabbed her ass, hoisting her up so that her legs wrapped around his waist as he started turning and walking towards the doorway while Jade was cackling with laughter, tears starting to run down her cheeks she was laughing so hard at Andy's absurd caveman like walk, taking her out of the ballroom, down three doors before stepping into the only bedroom that was open, which, thankfully, was Jade's, carting her in before tossing her onto her bed with a loud clatter, her face still beaming with joy as he turned to close the door shut behind them.

Andy hadn't spent much time in Jade's room, but was pleased to see she'd gone all out in decorating the room to her own tastes, having even repainted the walls inside to a nice warm orange/yellow hue, like an approaching sunset. Framed artwork lined the walls, and he knew that some of them must have been gifts from her father, because they were originals and not prints, and some were quite valuable. But in addition to the modern and classical artwork, there was something that Andy had to work *insanely* hard not to laugh at, framed with as much love and care as the Matisse next to it, was a vintage black and white poster of a tiny Siamese kitten clinging to a bamboo branch with the words 'Hang in there, baby,' written on it. The poster probably wasn't even worth a tenth of the money spent on framing it, but the sheer contrast of it was so undeniably Jade, he couldn't help but being caught up in smiling over it.

She also had a surprising amount of furniture in the room, with only a twin bed, so it was going to be a good snuggle for them tonight. There was a desk, a dresser, a chair and a bookshelf, which Andy was surprised to see had a couple of his books on it. While many of his partners had just decided that they could still love Andy without reading any of his work, a few of them had taken to picking and choosing a few of his books, in an effort to learn what he did for a living without getting hung up on the big Druid Gunslinger series. Jade had clearly decided she wanted to read some of his work, though, as he could see a copy of “The Demon Dies At Midnight” had a bookmark in it most of the way

through it. There were also several books of poetry, though it seemed like they were all in French and not in English. Andy hadn't even known Jade spoke French before that moment, and he hoped the detail would stick in his head.

Jade moved to pull one of her boots off, then the other, exposing her tanned dancer's legs to his eyes as she rubbed one of her feet along her other calf invitingly. "Maybe you should give me a little striptease? Just to set the mood?" she suggested.

"We'd need music for—"

Before he had finished the sentence, she'd tapped on her phone and a little speakerbox on top of the desk starting to play Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On," as she giggled, bouncing her blonde eyebrows in his direction suggestively.

Andy'd never done a striptease before, but figured why not, and decided to be game for it, sliding out of the jacket, tossing it on top of the dresser. He kicked off his shoes and plucked off his socks one at a time, throwing them anywhere. He wasn't used to this, but decided to keep the pace up a best as he could, unbuttoning his shirt while turning his back to her, slipping one arm out then the other before taking the shirt and whirling it over his head.

"You're adorable," Jade giggled. "But you look ridiculous. C'mere."

He moved over to sit down next to her on the bed and she pulled him in for a fierce kiss, his hands sliding along her back as she slowly climbed into his lap, sliding her knee on the other side of him, her body moving to be atop of his. His hand reached up and unfastened the top of her dress before slowly drawing down on the zipper at the back of her neckline, beneath the waterfall of blonde locks that drizzled down her back. One of the girls must've helped her into the dress, he realized, as he slid the zipper down down down until it was at her waist.

Once it was that loose, she slipped off his lap and stood up so she could let the dress drop to the floor, crouching down to pick it up and set it on the dresser next to his jacket and shirt. She was wearing a deep purple push-up bra and matching panties. "I almost want to put the boots back on," she said with a mischievous smile. "But I'm pretty sure they'd chafe, so we'll leave them off." She moved to slip off the bra, exhaling a breath, the lines on her skin where the fabric had been clinging and pushing still visible. "God, I know it made my tits look fantastic, but I'm so glad to be out of that fucking thing. I don't understand how some women can wear them all fucking day."

"Your tits look fantastic anyway," he said, unbuttoning his slacks before she reached over and slapped his fingertips.

"Let me do that," she said as her hands grabbed at his waistline and pulled both his pants and his boxers down and off, leaving him naked sitting on the edge of her bed. He lifted his hips so he could pull out the sheets from beneath him, tugging them to one side so that they could pull them over their bodies when they finished as she put the remainder of his clothes on the dresser before she pulled off her panties, leaving her standing there in all her naked glory before him.

Jade wasn't the tallest or the shortest of his partners, neither the bustiest or the least endowed. But somehow she felt the most All American of his partners, the mess of blonde hair giving her the sort of look of the gorgeous girl next door that every red-blooded American man had dreamed of knowing, a sort of wholesome wanton sexuality cut with just the perfect amount of coquettish nervousness to make it all seem as genuine as possible. Her breasts were that perfect spot between firm and large, with rose-pink areola and small little nipples that already stood proudly stiff. She'd taken Andy to heart when he'd said he wasn't bothered by pubic hair as long as it was neatly trimmed and maintained, and so she had a wedge shaped block of brown just above her pussy, the lips themselves neatly shaven. Other than that, her skin was free of adornment, no tattoos, birthmarks or even moles to speak of across her well-tanned flesh, all of which Andy knew, having seen her naked many times before.

The second time they'd been sexually intimate, Andy had made it a point to go down on her until her whole body was constantly shaking with ecstasy and she had been afraid he was going to forget to dose her, so she'd made it a point to suck him off immediately afterwards even though it was very

clear she'd had trouble focusing, and kept giggling distractedly in the middle of it, the aftershocks of her orgasm still tingling through her body. She'd even teased Andy that he was being too giving of the wrong things for that moment, considering she was craving his cum something fierce.

“At some point, being naked in front of you's gonna get easier, isn't it?” she said shyly, folding her hands behind her back so that she didn't instinctively cover herself up. “You got used to being naked in front of lots of women *very* quickly.”

He chuckled a bit, reaching forward to slide his hand onto her hip, pulling her over towards the bed. “Not *easily*, though. I've still got a belly, even if we are slowly working it off. I shave my head because I've got a huge bald spot otherwise. And before Ash and Niko started waxing my back, I practically had a sweater on there. So I'm still *very* self conscious about my body. But all of you seem okay with it, so that's all that matters. And you're fucking *gorgeous*, Jade, with or without clothes. Men have been chasing after you your entire life. Hell, men were constantly lusting after you when you were shaking your ass on the sidelines of 49ers games all the time. What the hell have you got to be nervous about?”

She grinned a little bit, miming kicking her toe against the carpet of the room. “When you put it like that, it does seem silly. But you've got so many other beautiful partners, it's hard not to compare myself against all of them.”

He pulled Jade down to sit in his lap, his hand stroking against her face. “Let me tell you something I told Niko, right after Em and Sarah showed up, and she was having similar doubts. Just because someone likes listening to The Beatles doesn't mean they can't also like listening to The Rolling Stones or The Velvet Underground or Led Zeppelin or, shit, even the Backstreet Boys or Public Enemy! I hate ranking lists of musicians, because nobody's better or worse than anybody else – they're all just different. Don't compare yourself. To anybody. Ever. Okay?”

She bit her bottom lip in a shy smile and leaned in and kissed him with a sort of kind thankfulness he wasn't anticipating. “That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, Andy. I needed to hear that. You may need to remind me of it again every so often, if that's okay.”

“Whatever you need, Jade.”

“*Well*,” she said, her smile turning devilish. “What I *need* right now is to finally get my brains fucked out. I need you to take my virginity and make me a real goddamn woman. I need you to fuck the shit out of me so hard that when I get up in the morning to go to yoga, all the girls tease me about how I'm walking funny. But I need you to love me and not be *too* rough either. I just wanna feel sore in a good way for the next few days, because you made this night count. That's what I need *now*.”

“As you wish, m'lady.” He slowly moved to turn them both, lowering her down onto her back on the bed, settling her head perfectly on the pillow. “You know I'm so tempted to give you another tongue lashing first, though, right?”

She giggled, shaking her head vehemently. “Not tonight. I'm already so fucking wet, you probably felt my cunt dripping onto your lap.”

“I didn't want to say anything but...”

She playfully slapped his shoulder. “But it turned you on and you really liked it,” she said, moving to slide her legs on either side of him, letting him get settled between them.

“Of course I liked it,” he countered. “It's nice to feel attractive, even for us guys.”

“You've got the strongest feature of all, Andy. You've got a fierce mind and a powerful heart, and you won't back down from anyone or anything, no matter how great the adversity in your way,” she said, a genuine kindness behind her eyes. “That's the most important thing.” She licked her lips a little bit as she started to grind her hips a little bit, rubbing the length of his cock across her slit. “Although you've got a very nice cock, too...”

“Let me introduce you to it proper,” he said, leaning in to match his lips to hers again as he felt her reaching down to get him lined up. His hips dipped up and in as his shaft pushed inside of her, he could hear her breath catch and felt her walls squeeze down on him as her body tensed up. “Welcome

to th—”

Whatever he'd been going to say next was lost inside of Jade's mouth as their tongues got tangled up within each others' mouths. He could feel her bare heels digging into his back, pushing his body more firmly into hers, as if she wanted them to just melt together.

He drew his hips back, to start to give her a bit of friction, but her hands and feet pulled him back down, not wanting him to be even a few inches away from her. That meant fast and shallow thrusts, his body rolling against hers in a quick tempo. Normally he would be taking longer, slower thrusts, but Jade was making her preferences clear, and he wanted to make it perfect for her.

Eventually she let her legs slide a bit more open to allow him to push deeper, to prolong the moment, even as he felt her squeal and clench down again, her body giving a heavy shiver before she opened her eyes, pulling back her lips from his for just a quiet “oh *fuck*.”

He eased up a bit, but as soon as he felt the shivers stop, he started drilling down harder and faster once more, pumping his cock in and out of her slippery snatch, tears rolling from her eyes, although the beaming smile on her lips told him they were of joy, as she could tell his breathing was stepping up a notch, as she started nodding frantically.

“Please, Andy, pleasepleaseplease, give it to me, gimme your love, gimme your cum... make me your woman... Love me, Andy, fucking love me...”

Andy wanted to prolong it as much as he could, but Jade was egging him on, and he couldn't deny her a thing, so his hips pushed his dick as deep inside of her as he could and let go, that pent up release pouring into her like a rushing river. He'd gone two days without giving anyone a dose of his cum because he wanted Jade to feel like he was pouring an endless amount inside of her, and his balls had been sitting heavy all day. He unloaded gusher after gusher of blast up her snatch, sending her into yet another wild collection of spasms before they both collapsed together, his body weighing on hers but she only purred in contented delight at the feeling of it.

“How was—”

“It was fucking *fabulous*,” she burst out laughing. “God, why the fuck did I *wait*?!” She tilted her head and kissed his cheek. “Can you stay all night?”

“Of course, Jade,” he said with a smile. “I'm going to probably be up early, though, if that's okay? I need to pull someone specific aside and have a chat about something impossible tomorrow before breakfast.”

“Ash?”

He exhaled, shaking his head. “Piper.”

She nodded. “Then I'll take every moment I can get, but when you need to get up, go ahead and take care of her. This was hella good, and I can't wait for us to have more of these for forever.”

“Whenever and wherever you want.”

Andy reached up and flipped the switch to turn the light on the nightstand off, letting the room full into darkness. He was halfway asleep before he heard Jade's voice giggle again to break the silence. “Andy?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if I bring in one of the other girls next time?” she asked, laughing through all the words in a delirious whisper. “If this is what it feels like when you cum inside of me, I'm gonna hella need a helper to dilute that shit. I feel like you dumped a fucking gallon into my belly.”

That made him laugh too.

Chapter Three

December 11th, 2020

It was incredibly uncommon for Andy to get up before dawn, but this particular morning his body just would not let him sleep, and he knew exactly why. He was going to have to have one of the more difficult conversations he'd ever had to have in his life. Skipping it, however, would've been endlessly worse.

The morning sun was just threatening to peek over the hills and nobody was awake inside of the house, not even the normal early morning risers like Lauren and Piper. He'd extricated himself from Jade's bed without rousing her, and nobody so far had been woken by his wandering the halls, not even the cats, who would normally come and investigate anytime someone was awake when they shouldn't be, especially Andy.

He was tempted to go and have a think up on the balcony, but he'd been relying on that spot too much lately. He decided to walk out into the back yard and wander the big expanse of green. He stopped to crouch down and examine the lawn itself, wondering if there were sprinklers or if it would turn into a large field of withered tan when there's no rain. There was something so strange about having a giant lawn when he'd spent over the last decade in a tiny little condo without any grass to his name. It had been raining lately, thankfully, but if the drought sprung up again, he might have to talk to Katie about transitioning to something less water intensive.

When Andy stood up, he glanced around the backyard slowly and chuckled as he spotted Lauren on a yoga mat over by the edge of the pool, doing slow stretches, the kind he'd seen Sheridan teaching her, although it didn't seem like any of the other girls were anywhere to be seen. It looked like she'd *just* gotten there, so maybe she'd walked out and just not seen him, not like he was ever up this early ever anyway.

Since the decision had been made that next year there would be an all-female NFL season and Lauren had been convinced to join the new female 49ers team playing fullback, she'd been taking her own workout almost religiously. Lauren had told the family she wasn't sure she wanted to commit to playing for years and years, but taking a turn for at least a year was an opportunity she simply couldn't pass up.

"The hell, Andy?" Lauren said as she spotted him, a broad smile on her face. "What the bugger are you doing up this early?"

"Shit on my mind, Lauren," he sighed, strolling over towards her, each footstep a little heavier than the one before it. "Shit. On. My. Mind."

The tall blonde Aussie nodded as she walked over and wrapped her arms around him to give him a firm hug, her hand on his back as she leaned down and gave him a tender kiss. "Whatever it is, Niko's got that same weight about her. Is it going to be with us for a long while?"

"Nah," he said with a cheeky grin. "By the end of the day, I'll at least have clarity on it, and once we're there, then at least I'll know what I'm dealing with. It's the not knowing that's getting me wound up. How's training going?"

"We're talking about you, boyo."

"Mmmm," Andy said. "I'm deflecting. I'm good at that. I'd rather talk about you."

"It's a bit daft, having a bunch of sheilas in pads and helmets trying to play football, considering they're teaching us the rules of the game as much as they are how to play it. But I suppose we'll make it work in the end, one way or another. To me, it feels like everyone's just clutching for some feeling of normality in this new and crazy world."

"That they are, Laur, that they are." He pulled away from the hug and let out another sigh. "You good? You need a top off or anything?"

"Strewth, Andy, you *are* having a tough time with whatever it is you're thinking about, aren'tcha? You, me and Taylor had a go 'round just a couple of days ago. I thought it was pretty memorable, I did, so I'm a little worried if you've forgotten it already."

“Right. Sorry, sorry. Let’s just say I have an incredibly big ask for one of the fiancées and I’m worried how she’s going to take it,” he said, folding his fingertips together before stretching his arms above his head.

“Is the ask for Niko or Piper?” Lauren asked him.

“Yeah, why?”

“They’re both walking this way now.”

Andy glanced over his shoulder to see the two women making their way over towards him. Instantly from Niko’s expression, he could tell she’d been true to her word and hadn’t told Piper anything, and that it was clearly eating her up inside. “Morning ladies,” Andy said to them with his best optimistic smile. “How are you both this fine morning?”

Piper and Niko were both dressed in workout gear, thick leggings and baggy t-shirts, each of them with their hair put up, the tall white brunette from Florida a sharp contrast to the short mixed race girl from the reservation in South Dakota. “Morning babe,” Piper said to him, as Niko shot him a sympathetic look. “Neeks says we need to have a chat?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly one way of putting it,” he agreed. “You mind skipping your morning workout so you and I can have a private chat?”

Piper’s face looked a little crestfallen as she immediately braced for bad news. “Did my dad die or something?” With the number of men that had been killed in the past year by DuoHalo, it was an entirely reasonable assumption that someone had died, even if it felt like the world at large was starting to get a handle on the pandemic.

“Nothing that bad,” he said with a smile. “Nobody’s dead, but by the end of the conversation, I might find myself wishing that *I* was. C’mon, let’s walk and talk so we can figure this out.”

As soon as Piper was standing next to him, she kissed his forehead, something he regularly did to her when she was worked up or stressed out. “Chin up, Andy. Whatever it is, we’ll get through it.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just going to suck when you hear what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Don’t forget, you’ve got to go meet Mali this afternoon as well,” Niko said.

“Right. Right. The woman who doesn’t want to talk to me until she’s imprinted on me. How could I forget?”

“It’ll be fine, Andy, relax,” Piper said. “Now what’s up and why do you need to talk to me about it first before the whole family?”

The two of them walked into the house and headed into Andy’s upstairs office. With the discovery of the hidden basement, Andy now had two separate offices he could work in, but the upstairs one was a little homier and easier for them to sit and chat. Andy moved to sit down on one end of the couch against the side of the room and Piper sat on the other end.

“So we’ve been mandated that we have to add another member to the house,” he said, reaching over to take one of Piper’s hands, holding it within his own. “And it has to be a member of the New Daughters of the Revolution.”

“Under no circumstances is Hope coming into this fucking house, Andy,” Piper snarled. “Nor that bitch Rachel.”

“No no, we’ve talked about your time over at Covington’s enough that I wouldn’t dare suggest that kind of thing. We can pick any one of the people from the three houses, but we have had one person express personal interest in joining the house.”

Piper’s eyes narrowed a little. “Who?”

“Melody Park, Covington’s former bodyguard.”

Andy braced himself for a shout that never came, because instead Piper simply offered a nonjudgmental, “Huh.”

He looked at her face, trying to find that expression of rage or anger that he thought he’d find there and instead saw a rather quizzical look instead. That left him a little off-balance. “Huh? That’s it? You’re not going to scream and shout about her asking to join us?”

Piper offered him a tender smile, squeezing his fingertips in her own. “You were worried about me flipping out, weren’t you?”

“Well, not as much as I would’ve been if I had to pitch Hope or Rachel to you.”

The athlete nodded. “God help whoever gets stuck with one of the two of them.”

Andy’s eyebrows bounced in amusement. “Phil’s getting stuck with Rachel, actually, so I’ll tell him you send them your prayers.”

Piper blanched with an embarrassed sort of derpy smile. “Better him than us, I guess.”

“So tell me about your experience with Melody Park,” Andy said to her.

“Well, she was there during my time over at Covington’s house, but she sort of really wasn’t *there* if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually,” Andy told her. “Give me a good picture of who this woman is and what you thought of her during your time over there.”

“So the thing about Melody is that she wasn’t really much of an active hand in what they did to me under Covington’s watch, but she was around for a lot of it. I mean, she caught me and hauled me back to the room the one time I tried to escape, but even as rough as she was with me that whole time, she was also working to make sure she didn’t do any real damage. I didn’t feel like Covington had ordered her to do that and it was just something she’d chosen to do. And there was once where we had a conversation and she told me that Covington was going to win out in the end, and if I’d just go along with it, I wouldn’t be suffering as much as I was. And it wasn’t a spiteful tone, more... sad. I think that before me, she genuinely thought it wasn’t possible to resist Covington and what he’d done to all of them. She... she looked at me like I was someone getting mad at the weather. Or the seasons.”

“Knowing what she did about DuoHalo and the Quaranteam serum, she might have believed in that so badly that seeing you resist felt like you were only making things worse for yourself,” he said. “I know a lot of the NDR felt like they simply didn’t have any recourse other than the one they eventually took. They were pushed into a corner where they couldn’t take being with their assigned partner anymore but didn’t want to murder anyone to get out from under it.”

“Did she send a message?”

“She did. It’s a video file, but I haven’t watched it yet, simply because if you wanted to shut it down entirely sight unseen, I didn’t want you to feel bad about it.”

“Alright, let’s take a look at it.”

Andy turned on the television in his office and connected to it from his phone before pulling up the video message from Melody that the General had sent over. It was filmed, hilariously enough, in the same room in Covington’s house where he’d played poker a little more than a month ago. Melody was sat in the dealer’s seat at the very poker table that had turned everything in his life upside down. The look on the woman’s face could only be described as some combination of exhaustion and shame. She was dressed in a loose-fitting black silk blouse which she had the top few buttons undone of. Andy imagined several of the women of the NDR had recorded similar videos, pitches to convince those households they felt most comfortable with that they wouldn’t be harmful to those people already in them. He’d have to ask Phil to show him the one that Rachel had sent them. Andy lifted his phone up and clicked on the play button as the video file sprung to life.

“So, this message is for Piper Brown and her fiancé Andy Rook. I’m sure I’m not a face you expected to see again, Piper, but I wanted to reach out to you because, well, this revolution wouldn’t have happened without you, and I... I wanted to find some way to make up for my transgressions.”

Piper reached over and touched the button to pause the message on Andy’s phone. “This... this isn’t at all what I expected it to be.”

“Let’s watch the whole thing first,” Andy suggested, “and then we can watch it again multiple times if we need clarification.”

“Okay,” Piper said, tapping the play button once more.

“Before you came to Covington’s house, we’d... we’d all forgotten what it was like to resist. I’d

tried, like you did, to not get sucked into Covington's gravity, to not bend to his will, but in the end, I'm afraid I just wasn't as strong as you were. I made it to day eight and then I cracked, beaten down by the pain and suffering and betrayal of my own body. I gave in. To my great and almighty shame, I gave in. I fucking hated myself for it, but I didn't see any other option. And I somehow convinced myself if I couldn't do it, it couldn't be done. And on day eight, *your* day eight, I stood behind Covington as he came to you, and I was ready to watch you fail, to prove that I hadn't been weak, and instead, you reached out and slapped him."

On the screen, Melody looked down at her hands for a long moment, wringing them together atop the table, before looking back up at the camera, almost willing herself to carry on talking.

"I don't know if that means you were stronger or I was weaker or maybe I just didn't have the degree of self-faith that you did. But regardless of how, you got out. And at that point, I think all of us, the women Covington had forced to be subjugated to his will, we just wanted that. We wanted *out*. We were prepared to go the hard route, too. By any means necessary. With all of us, to a woman, willing to end Covington's life if it meant we could get free of him. Rachel knew the science behind the only possible way to get reassigned, or, at least we *thought* she did. She told us the only way we were going to be free of Arthur was to kill him, at which point we could be bonded to someone else. We were getting close to doing that thing that but then a rumor started circulating around the base, that there might be some other way to reassign people. One that didn't involve killing anyone. It was just plausible enough to give us pause."

Melody inhaled a deep breath and then let it out. She seemed like she was uncomfortable talking this much all at once, but that she realized this was her one shot to make a case for herself.

"Now I'm the kind of person who's gotten blood on her hands more than a few times over the years. I was a Ranger. There were times where the jobs that needed doing weren't the kind of jobs anyone liked having done, where you had to blur the line between civilian and enemy combatant, between right and wrong, until all that remained was a narrow path, a tightrope you found yourself laser focused on because to glance to your left or right would spell out immediate death or damnation."

Andy could see the woman was tired, and wondered how far in to their last stand the video had been recorded. He'd wager that the video was less than 24 hours old, and had probably been filmed yesterday morning. The Air Force had sent in food and water during the negotiations, but they'd still been tense as hell, and Andy had heard multiple times from Phil that even the simple exchange of basic resources had nearly resulted in gunfights, as the Air Force was eager to have the whole matter wrapped up quietly and neatly, and the New Daughters of the Revolution refused to relent on nearly any of their demands.

"With a path out that didn't involve bloodshed, I wanted to take that if at all possible. Not just for me, but for all of us. I'm not close with any of the other women here in Covington's house, but I don't want anyone to have unnecessary blood on their hands, friend or no. So, we decided to give the Air Force a chance to make things right. All that said, none of us women fully trust the Air Force to do the right thing. That's why you're getting involved, Mr. Rook – because you've sort of been mixed up in this whole mess since the beginning, and for the most part, you've seemed to stumble into doing generally right and noble things. I'd... I'd like to be a part of that. And I'd like the chance to spend part of my life learning from Piper, learning how to be better and believe in myself more."

It was odd, Andy thought, but as much as Melody spent her time looking at the camera, when it came to talking about Piper, she would often avert her gaze a bit, as if she still bore some shame with her about her inability to stop Covington.

"I'm sure you will have terms and conditions to which you'll allow me within your house, and just know as long as they won't harm anyone else, I'll agree to them. Want me to wear a ball gag for the first month? You got it. Want me to revise that tattoo on my back to have Andy's name on it? I'll do it. I don't care what it takes. I'm not going to fail again, so whatever obstacles you put in my way, I assure you, I will overcome them and will triumph in the face of adversity. When we saw that piece on

you all on 60 Minutes, you all looked... *fuck* you looked so fucking *happy*. Katie Couric gave you every chance to call out Andy for misbehaving, and instead you just made it clear that things were going fantastically. Like, I know what a fake fucking smile looks like, and you were genuine, Piper. All I'm asking is for a chance to get in on that. I feel like I've got a lot to offer the Rook family – I'm an excellent soldier and bodyguard, and if it comes down to my life or Andy's, well, I'm going to put myself in the line of fire each and every time."

A single tear formed beneath one of Melody's eyes, and she reached up to swipe it away, as if being caught in a moment of weakness physically hurt her.

"Look, I haven't got shit left in my life, okay? My mom died of cancer about six years ago, and my father and my two brothers were early casualties to DuoHalo, so I've got survivor's guilt, complicated even more by the fact that I was one of the goddamn *bad guys* for a while, oppressing my fellow women when I should've been helping them to stand strong. We didn't form a bond with each other here. We were all too angry and scared to relate to each other as human beings. I gotta get past that, and I'm hoping you two will teach me how to do that. If you tell me 'no,' I'll understand, and I'll probably just let myself die off once we turn Covington in. They tell me they haven't really tested to see what happens if a woman goes without getting semen from their man for too long, because no woman's been able to keep it together. I mean, I'm fucking *feeling* it bad right now already, and it's only been a week. We jacked him off last week and split the dose among all of us, but I swore to myself that would be the last time I'd ever take *shit* from that asshole, and I just don't know who to trust any more... But Piper, *I trust you*. And if you trust Andy, I guess that means I trust him too. So I suppose it's up to you whether or not I deserve to live or die, and whatever you two decide, I'll respect that decision. I'd like to think that I'd let you in if the situations were reversed, but I don't know, considering our history, that I could get past that mess. But fuck do I want to try. And you've seemed to always be better than me at anything, Piper, so I'm hoping you're better than me at giving second chances. I want to spend the rest of my life learning to be better, following your example, Piper. I want us to stop being enemies and learn to be friends. Anyway, I should probably end the message here. Either I've convinced you, and I'll see you soon, or I haven't, and you won't have to worry about ever seeing me again. Nobody will. I think I'm at peace with either of those options right now, so you should just follow your heart and do whatever you think is right. Thanks for at least listening and hearing me out." Melody looked like she was about to say one final thing, pausing for a long moment before just reaching forward and turning off the recording, that last thing going unspoken.

Andy and Piper sat in silence, looking at that freeze frame still of Melody turning off the recording, neither of them quite sure where to start the conversation. Andy knew how he felt about it, but had decided that he wasn't going to say anything until Piper had voiced her opinion without possible contamination of his.

"What a fucking thing to lay on us," Pipe finally said to break the calm. "I've heard about people having to make life and death decisions, but usually that's in a split second, not something where you can stop and fucking *think* about it for a while." She sat up straight and leaned back, shaking her head. "What do you think, Andy?"

"I think I want to hear what *you're* thinking before I say *anything*, Piper."

She offered him a bitter grin, rolling her eyes a little bit. "That's diplomatic of you."

"Whatever you want to do, Piper, I'm going to back you on," Andy said. "I've got some thoughts and feelings of my own on the matter, but I didn't go through what you went through over at Covington's house, and no matter how much detail you relay the story to me with, that's not going to change. I can *understand* what you went through without really *getting* it, you know?"

"Right. Right right. I hear what you're saying, Andy, and if this were Hope, this would be an easy decision, but what I told you earlier was completely true – Melody mostly just enabled through inaction rather than doing anything directly harmful to me. And yeah, that fucking *sucks* and I'm fucking mad as hell about it, but mad enough to condemn someone to *death*? I mean, fuck *me*."

“She might be bluffing,” Andy suggested, even though he very much didn’t feel like that was the case.

“Look at her face, Andy,” Piper said, gesturing to the frozen image of Melody on the television across the room. “That’s not a woman who’s bluffing. That’s the face of a woman who’s nearly given up and is looking for someone to throw her a lifeline, who needs someone to give her a hand and pull her out of the mess that she’s found herself in. That’s not a bluff, that’s a... that’s a... that’s a fucking *cry for help* if ever I’ve seen one.”

“It doesn’t have to be you that helps her, though, Piper.”

She turned to look at him with a kind smile. “Did you back down when Niko asked you to save Charlotte and Asha? No. You rolled up your sleeves and got the job done, and saved me, Emily and Sarah in the process. Oh! And Hannah! Indirectly. That’s six lives you helped with one crazy action!”

“And if I’d lost, I could’ve committed Sheridan to a life of horror, Piper,” Andy said. “Let’s not forget about that, okay?”

“Sometimes risks have to be taken, Andy. That’s all I’m saying. There’s a reason you came to me on this first, isn’t there? You wanted to see if I was going to just straight out say no, because you want to help her, don’t you?”

Andy sighed, looking away from Piper and down at his hands. “I want to help everybody. It’s one of my major failings, I know.”

She reached over and nudged her fingertip along the underside of his chin, nestled somewhere in his goatee, lifting his face up to make him look at her. “It’s not a failing, Andy. It’s one of the things we all love about you. One of the things we love *most* actually. You’re more optimistic than anyone any of us have ever met. You’re our own personal Don Quixote, jousting at windmills and sometimes, just sometimes, taking the windmills down.”

“Damn things had it coming,” he chuckled with a laugh as she leaned in and kissed him affectionately, her other hand sliding across his smooth head.

“Damn straight they did. Anyway, I want to live up to that expectation. I want to follow your example and to look for the best in people, even if I don’t entirely trust her.” She glanced back at the screen and chuckled. “Besides, she’s pretty hot, don’t you think?”

“I think I have hot women all fucking *over* me, Piper,” Andy laughed. “But you’re right, if it was just up to me, I’d give her a second chance, because that’s who I am. But it’s not up to me. Not this one. No, this is your personal call to make.”

“You think I can’t handle having her around?”

“I think you’re going to have to find a way past seeing her as Covington’s bodyguard, and that’s going to be a hell of a challenge after what she helped put you through.”

“*Helped* put me through. ‘Helped’ doing all the heavy lifting in that sentence. You saw her video. She’s willing to do *anything* to get her second chance.”

Andy laughed softly, raising a hand. “Okay, here’s where I lay down at least a *little* bit of the law, in saying I won’t have you marching her around naked like Lauren did with Taylor for the better part of a month. If you want to punish her, sure, I get that, but we’re going to have to find a way to do that which doesn’t involve hiding somebody every time we have friends over at the house.”

Piper giggled mischievously. “Oh, I can get *way* more creative than that. But I mostly just want to make sure she’s going to be dedicated to the house, not just to me or to you, but to the whole family. Especially if we’re going to eventually be trusting her with a bodyguard role in your life.”

“So, what are you thinking?”

“I’m going to have to think about it, but I think we should do it if you do,” she told him.

“I said right at the start I was going to bow to whatever decision you made.”

Piper shook her head, taking his hands in hers. “Nuh uh. This is a decision we make together, Andy. I appreciate you wanting to put me first in all this, what with my history with Melody and everything, but you can’t just bow out of a decision this big. It’s got to be something we’re in

alignment on.”

“Then yes Piper, I agree and think we should give her a second chance. If you and the rest of the girls want to haze her a bit, I get that, but it’s also going to be important that you all make her feel like part of the family. That’s going to be a lot on me as well, making sure it’s clear from the very moment she arrives that we’re nothing like that fucker.”

“Well, not the *very* moment,” Piper chuckled. “She’ll be unconscious for like most of the first day, getting reprinted. Speaking of which, how soon do they want you to do this?”

“The sooner the better,” he told her. “I got the distinct impression that if I told them we were okay with it this afternoon, they’d have her in front of me either tonight or tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve got to meet with Mali this afternoon. I think the plane’s scheduled to be landing around one or so, and she was *very* specific about how she wanted her first time to go, and how quickly she wanted it to be. If you can agree to those kinds of strange circumstances, then I don’t know how getting Melody taken care of soon would be any weirder.”

“I’m going to want to get the signoff of all the fiancées first before we agree to it.”

“If *I’m* okay with it and *you’re* okay with it, baby, then *they’re* going to be okay with it. Sure, there’ll be some griping and bitching and moaning, but the fact that I’m willing to go along with it should be enough to get everybody else to relax about the whole thing.”

“Lexi’s not going to trust her with a gun for a while, I’d bet.”

“I mean, that’s *fair*. We want to make sure this chick understands it’s family first before we arm her up, even if harming you would be the stupidest possible thing she could do.” Piper pointed at the screen. “But look at her. That’s not the face of a woman who wants to harm you *or* me. That’s a woman looking for someone to throw her a lifeline. She wants *help*, Andy. We gotta help her.”

“How does it feel to know you’re basically responsible for the NDR?” he asked Piper as she rolled her eyes a little bit.

“On one hand, I’m glad to have encouraged them to stand up for themselves and not get walked over by that asshole, but on the other, chopping Covington’s hand off?”

“A bridge too far?”

“No, I just kind of wish I’d have been the one who got to *do* it,” Piper said, and based on her tone, Andy couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “You going to be okay *reimprinting* someone to you? I know you said you’re okay with it, but are you *okay* with it?”

“Hell, if anyone’s prepared for the experience, it’s pretty much me,” he laughed. “When you were first imprinted, you were basically in a similar state to what Dr. Merriweather was when we saw the demonstration of the reprogramming process.”

“Who else knows about Melody’s request?”

“Here at the house? Just you, me and Niko. They told us at the base yesterday.”

“Were they pushing Melody, or just that we take on *somebody*?”

“Just that we take on somebody. They told us about Melody’s request, but they didn’t seem to give a shit if it was her or if it was somebody else instead, just that we got it done and got it done quickly and quietly.”

“Instead of adding one more to the house before closing it off, it’s just going to be two, and we’ll manage. It’s not like we don’t have room for them here at the house.”

“Not that I’m going to be *imprinting* either of them at the house,” he said with a touch of amused annoyance.

“Let’s go over it with everyone at breakfast, just to make sure nobody’s going to throw too much of a shitfit, but after that, call the General and tell them you’ll take Melody this evening, but that they need to let me be there at the reprogramming.”

“She won’t be thinking too clearly, Piper, so if you don’t want to be there, you don’t have to.”

“Oh, I *want* to be there. I want to look into Melody’s eyes and make sure she understands this is her *last* chance, and that if she fucks up, it’s game over. And that she better not once disrespect my

man, otherwise we'll beat her with soap bars wrapped in towels while she's sleeping."

"Maybe lead with the kindness and not with the threats."

"One hand open and extended in welcome, the other balled up in a fist in case I gotta beat some ass."

Andy rolled his eyes, pulling Piper over to slide into his lap. "She's an ex-Army Ranger. You know that, right? She can probably kill you with your volleyball without too much effort."

"Just gotta make sure she knows who she's fucking with," Piper purred as she started to lock lips with Andy. "Thanks for coming to me first. I'm glad you trusted me with it."

"I'm *marrying* you next month, Piper," he chuckled. "I trust you with my everything."

"Think anyone else is up yet?"

"You aren't suggesting..."

"I think just about all my fellow wives-to-be have had a go at you in this office, so now it's my turn," she said, reaching her arm over Andy's shoulder to shove the door closed quietly. "Get to it."

"Yes ma'am."

Chapter Four

December 11th, 2020

Brunch had been about as tense as Andy had anticipated it would be, with many of his partners voicing concerns about bringing Melody Park into the family, but in the end, Piper laid them all quickly to rest by pointing out that if *she* could give the woman a second chance, then all the rest of them should be able to as well. That had pretty much settled the argument, although he could see that some of his partners were certainly going to be less trusting than others.

It certainly changed the energy around the house, which was already tempered with nervous anticipation, as towards the end of brunch a text message had come in to let them know that the plane had landed at Livermore Municipal Airport. The Air Force were there doing their initial screening, but relayed that Andy should be able to come by and both meet Mali and see his airplane by around 2.

After brunch, Andy headed up to the hidden room on the upper floor and stepped out onto the balcony to make a call. He held the phone to his ear as the General's voice leapt from the other end of the line. "So, Mister Rook, what's it going to be?"

"After talking with my entire Team, we'll accept Melody Park into our home, although we're going to have some conditions for her and we're certainly going to keep a close eye on her at first."

"We would expect no less from you, Mister Rook," she said curtly. "To be frank, I'm a little surprised you're willing to even entertain the notion, considering what you told me about her history with your fiancée, Miss Brown. Piper got a real bad beat before she ended up with you, and if she were to say she held a grudge a mile wide, well, I don't think just about anyone could blame her."

"I let Piper make the final call, but she's big on second chances and so am I. We're going to be cautious about this, naturally, but I guess somebody's gotta take some risks, and if my buddy Phil's taking Dr. DeMarco, I guess I'd never be able to live it down with him if I didn't do something equally as stupid."

"We can have Ms. Park here on base and ready for reassignment as early as this afternoon."

"We won't be ready until this evening," Andy said. "I've got to go down to Livermore and pick up my new money manager and get her imprinted to me. It's about half an hour each way, and I understand we can't go get her until your people have cleared my plane."

"It's not so much the plane, Mister Rook, as it is all the people your finance manager brought with her," the General sighed, as if the entire thing was one giant pain in her ass that she would've much rather foisted off onto someone else. "You're probably aware, but she's carrying with her one of the wildest collections of spies, soldiers, diplomats, scientists and politicians than have ever shared a single privately owned aircraft before. And she struck you quite a great deal on acquiring the plane for you permanently, if I'm meant to believe what she charged for transporting all these people to the United States."

It was true, although Andy hadn't expected the General to be fully aware of how they'd gone about it. Mali had bought him a Bombardier Global 5000, which could hold 16 passengers in addition to the pilot and co-pilot. And then, in order to aid in her immigration to the United States, a deal had been struck with the United States government. The plane had been temporarily enlisted as sort of international one-way taxi service. That meant the plane, which had been purchased used from the estate of a Saudi businessman, had made nearly a dozen stops before finally arriving in California. It had picked up, in addition to Mali, passengers from Egypt, Israel, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, India and Japan, with each person (or the nation representing them) paying a million dollars for the private relay service. All of that had basically paid for the plane itself.

The pilot for the flight was a military exchange from Saudi Arabia who was being paired up with a man in Valhalla Shores and the co-pilot was from the UK who was bound for Sacramento. Neither would likely ever set foot on Andy's plane again. Both Alexis and Niko were qualified to fly the jetliner, and several other girls in the house had been taking virtual flying classes. Team Rook had decided if it wasn't a skill they had in-house, they were going to get a handful of people within the

Team to learn it, although Andy himself wasn't ever going to be allowed to fly the plane.

"Your people had a long list of folks they wanted brought to the US on the hush-hush, and with me having two internationally renowned actresses in my family, I knew I was going to need to be able to get around regularly and probably without having to constantly book flights. Seemed like getting my own plane was a win-win for everybody."

"You still charged them a pretty hefty ticket price, Mister Rook."

"I had to *buy* the fucking plane, General," Andy laughed. "That ain't cheap. Regardless of how much money you might *think* I have, let me assure you that a 16-person private jet is not what I could call 'pocket money.' It was a very sizable investment, so I appreciated Mali coming up with a plan to defray the costs."

"But your little United Nations of Spies flight still needs to be scrutinized by every security expert we have on site and a handful of others we brought in just for this occasion. That includes searching your plane practically down to the studs. You don't *know* any of these people that you've helped bring into this country, Mister Rook, and neither do we. Not as well as we'd like to, anyway. They'll have spent hours, maybe even days on that plane of yours as it travelled around, picking these merry pranksters up. So, we're going to take our time and make sure everyone on the plane is exactly who they say they are, and then and only then, we will turn it and Miss Merrick over to you."

"And once you do, and once she's imprinted onto me, then we'll bring her back to the house and then come onto the base and we can see about reimplanting Melody over to us."

The General paused for a second, as if an idea had just occurred to her. "Would you rather we bring Miss Merrick back to the base and you can save yourself a trip, imprint them both here?"

"We paid several million dollars for that plane, General. I'd kind of like to see it, you know?"

"I'm just saying, if you allow us to have a full day searching and examining it, it'll be better for all parties involved," the General replied. "And it'll let us give Miss Merrick a once over by people you know that you trust, like Dr. Marcos and Dr. Varma. I'm honestly trying to help you here, Mister Rook. Trying to help make both our lives a little bit easier."

"I might feel a little strange going straight from imprinting Mali to imprinting Melody."

He could hear the General laughing on the other side of the line. "I think Melody might have it coming, but you could also take a shower in between sessions here on the base. We have the facilities for it, and you're guaranteed to have medical staff if something goes wrong, which you'd have been half an hour away from if you did it at the airport."

"Why would something go wrong?" Andy asked.

"So far, you've been pretty lucky, Mister Rook. Nearly all of your imprints have gone off without much in the way of hitches or complications."

"I think Piper and Sheridan would very much disagree with you, but okay."

"You seen a cocoon yet?"

Andy chuckled. "Yeah, Alexis had that when she showed up. Healed off all her scars, and she couldn't decide if she was angry, delighted or both."

"I can imagine. Some of us treasure our scars and don't want to see them gone. But I suspect she's missing them less and less every day," the General said. "If I'd gotten my gunshot scar through my shoulder healed up when I'd gotten imprinted, I'd probably miss it at first, but I'd be damn thankful eventually that I was back up to full strength."

"It's only been a month and change. We'll see how she feels about it this time next year. I suspect she may be nothing but thankful by then."

"Well, as fun as it is to chat with you, Mister Rook, I should probably get back to work. You want me to have Miss Merrick brought here to the base? I think it'll be much easier if you just give us a day or two to fully examine the plane. You're not in any immediate need, are you?"

"Not *immediate* need, no, but I suspect I'm going to need it before the end of the month. Not only do Emily and Sarah have some meetings they want to take down in Los Angeles, I think Maya

needs to head there as well for some final sign off stuff to get her deal finalized. The plan was to have her working on a soundstage in Oakland, but it sounds like the location isn't quite ready yet, so their backup soundstage is going to be up in Sacramento. It'll be a bit of a drive every morning and evening, but she wants to get back to work, and I don't blame her. The studio is also pushing hard to get stuff into production, so the fact that Maya has a script everybody likes already means they don't want to waste *any* time they don't have to."

"Is Hollywood really in that much trouble, Mister Rook?"

Andy sighed, knowing the General couldn't see him shrugging. "It's not for me to say, but I know Emily seems to think they don't like to keep material waiting around too long, and we've been in a vacuum for basically a year now, where nobody could make new things. For theatrical films, that's not such a big issue, but for things like television? The networks are *freaking the fuck out*. So I suspect Em and Sarah will probably pick up a handful of television projects that'll start filming almost immediately before we get back to feature films again next year. Aren't you jonesing for new television?"

"I will admit that after my third rewatch, 'The Americans' has lost a little bit of the luster. I feel like a lot of us feel like we've finished Netflix."

"Well, you'll be delighted to know that Hollywood's spinning up again and so sooner or later, there will be loads of new things clogging our airwaves again. They're working very hard to get whatever they can finished as fast as possible. They're even looking to adapt a couple of my lesser works, just because I'm relatively easy to work with when it comes to the non-Druid Gunslinger stuff. Fine, we can come into the base and pick them both up there, and if you need a few more days to inspect the plane more thoroughly, I guess it won't hurt to let you have it for a few days."

"Great," the General said. "Come by in the early afternoon and we'll have both women prepped and ready and waiting for you. Say, around two or so?"

"Sure, I can do that. We'll be by around then."

"Thanks, Rook. See you then."

He headed back down the stairs and opened the secret book case, almost jumping out of his own skin as he found Alexis standing outside of it waiting for him. "So what's the plan for the day, Andy?" she asked him. "The General throw a spanner into the works like I expected her to?"

"She wants to take more time to search the plane, so we're going to pick up Mali from the base, and we can pick up Melody right after that."

"You *know* I'm not thrilled about her joining the house, right?" Alexis said. "I mean, I get that Piper's the make-or-break decision, and she's like you in that she believes in second chances."

"You make it sound like that's a bad thing. Lex."

"If it were up to me, I'd throw the bitch in a hole and take my sweet ass time filling in the dirt on top of her," Alexis grumbled. "But if Piper can suck it up and allow her in, who the hell am I to tell that girl she's in the wrong, you know? I guess I'll just be the paranoid bitch in the house, and maybe I'll get lucky and you'll show me that second chances don't always bite people in the ass."

"Let's hope, because the last thing I want is to have bodyguards squaring off," he said, sliding an arm around Alexis's neck, pulling her in for a hug even as she laughed and shoved him back moments later.

"So, you and me and who's the third going to the base?"

"We're going to take two cars, so that means you driving one and Niko driving the other. Emily wants to be there for Mali, considering she's the person Mali's spoken to the most, and there's no way we're going to take on Melody without Piper getting a chance to set down the terms beforehand," Andy said as the two of them headed down to the ground floor. "I know Melody said she'll go along with whatever Piper's going to put in front of her, but I think we want to be sure. The last thing I want is Melody being massively unhappy here."

"You're worried about *her* being unhappy," Alexis laughed, shaking her head as they headed out

towards the back yard. “What time are we supposed to be at the base?”

“Two-ish.”

“Okay, then I’ll relay the plan to Niko and we’ll get everything ready.”

Andy had the luxury of an hour or so to himself before they gathered up to head to the base and he did something he hadn’t done enough as of late – he spent it playing with his two cats. The two of them had gotten ahold of a tennis ball and were whipping it down the hallways, chasing after one another with reckless abandon. Neither cat had gotten a firm grasp on how to move on wood floors, so the two had a tendency to slide into one another when running around corners. Andy was tormenting the two of them with a laser pointer when he saw Emily come around the corner, smiling as she tapped the watch on her wrist.

The drive over to the base was perfectly normal, what with New Eden still being on relatively high alert. Until the New Daughters of the Revolution were entirely a solved problem, there was going to be more tension and less peace on the streets. They were let onto the base and allowed to put their cars close to the building that housed the large structure where women were being given the serum before being sent out to get paired up with people.

Everything had seemed very slapdash when they’d first seen it, but now it was being done with complete precision, and trucks were arriving and leaving every hour on the hour. Emily had seemed a little bit nervous on the car ride over, and just as they were pulling into the parking lot, she told Andy why, her voice tentative and cautious, something rather unlike her.

“Andrew, there’s something I need to tell you, but I don’t want you to be cross with me, even though you might have rights to be,” she said as they were getting out of the car.

“Good lord, Em,” Andy chuckled. “What level of upset should I expect to be here?”

“Nothing too severe, I hope, my love,” she said with a smile that revealed just exactly how nervous she was at that moment. “You remember how Mali said she didn’t want to speak to you until she’d been imprinted?”

“I do recall that, Emily, and I said that while I thought it was odd, I would respect it, since she was still rather in her cups in grief.”

“That’s specifically what I needed to talk to you about before we go in there, Andrew,” Emily said, holding onto his right hand with both of hers. “So, there’s a theory going around right now that if the dose of the serum is... what’s the word Mali used... overclocked? If they overdo the dosage somewhat of the serum, it has a good chance to activate the regeneration and restoration process, so she’s going to ask them to give her a double dose of the serum.”

“That sounds... a little risky.”

“It will be, but not for you, or any of us, just for her. So as part of this, she would like you, and the rest of the family, never to talk to her about her previous partner who died earlier this year.”

Andy squinted a little with a frown on his face. “Never talk to her about it? That seems like a very stiff cocktail for grief to sit in and take very rough hold within her mind and soul.”

“That’s just it, Andrew,” Emily said, looking up at him with those soft blue eyes that were so kindly imploring. “*If* it actually works, it stands a chance of removing all memories of him from her brain, and it will be as if he never existed. She will have healed away that very dark trauma.”

“Whoa there,” Andy said, putting his hands up. “Didn’t you ever see ‘Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind’? That certainly doesn’t sound *at all* healthy to me, simply losing such a large chunk of her memories. You said that they were childhood sweethearts, didn’t you?”

“She’s the one taking the risk, Andrew. All she’s asking you is to respect her choice in the matter, and if she never brings up her late fiancé, none of us will either. I know how much you prefer to run guns blazing into any trouble you come across, but this is something that must be handled with delicacy and should not be taken lightly.” Emily had such an earnest expression on her face that Andy knew he wasn’t going to be able to say no in the end, but he wanted to be sure she understood the risks.

“Alright, Em. Alright. Since this is what *she* wants, I won’t stand in the way of that, but if we

start to see any signs of things going sideways, you must promise me that we'll get her back safely here to the base as quickly as possible so that they can try and get her to work through whatever the serum will have done to her. I think that's a fair compromise, don't you?"

"That is absolutely fair, Andrew, and thank you for not being cross with me about holding back on this for up to the last possible moment," Emily said, giving him a hug that sort of drained the nervousness out of her. "I was trying to be all British and stoic and not let it get to me, but it's been an immense amount of pressure on my conscience. I wanted her to be welcomed here with open arms, and she had been through such an unbelievable amount of tragedy. She *chose* this and she *chose* you, and I knew that you were what she *wanted* and I just, I suppose I feared that such a *brave* choice might frighten you. You're a very brave man when it comes to your own decisions, but you're still..." She looked as if she was very carefully selecting her words. "You have a tendency to still want to protect all of us, Andrew, and I know you do that with the best intentions, and I try to look at it as a noble thing, your instinct to want to protect not only the women in your life but your friends also. But this is one time where I was worried that your sense of chivalry might get the best of you, and you might confuse doing the *right* thing with doing the *correct* thing."

"The minute you're telling a woman what she can and can't do, Em, you've stopped being chivalrous and started being an asshole," Andy chuckled. "I mostly just wanted to make sure she understood the risks she was taking, and how that if it starts to crumble, it won't be something we can put back in the box again."

"Trying is all anyone can ask of you, Andrew." They headed to one of the side doors of the building rather than going through the main gate where the trucks were pulling in and out of. "Hello, love, we're here to pick up two lovely ladies, Miss Mali Merrick and Miss Melody Park," Emily said to the airwoman in fatigues behind the counter who looked practically giddy.

"Of course, Miss Stevens, we should be ready for you in just a few moments, but is it alright if I were to ask you for a selfie and an autograph? I was such a *huge* fan of Dahlia Hairtrigger, and she meant the *world* to me growing up," the airwoman whose name tag read 'Washington' asked.

"Not a problem of any sort, dear. In fact, Andrew can even take the picture for us, can't he?" Emily said as she took the phone from the airwoman's hands and handed it to Andy, who immediately started to get it lined up. Andy took a handful of pictures and then handed them back to the airwoman for her to review while Emily had taken a card from her pocket and was fishing a pen out of her purse. "What's your first name, my love?"

"Andrea, ma'am." Andrea glanced over to Niko, technically a superior officer even if she was out of uniform, with a bit of embarrassment. "Sorry ma'am, they should be ready for you shortly. Miss Merrick arrived just a few minutes ago, and Miss Park will be here within the hour."

"It's okay, airman," Niko chuckled. "You don't see me busting your balls over this, do you?"

"No, ma'am," Washington replied. "Thank you, ma'am."

Emily finished signing the card for the desk officer and then slid it over to her. "Thank you for being a fan. I'm certain you'll go on to do great things and make Dahlia proud."

A moment or so later, a familiar face came through the doors to greet them. "Hey Charlotte," Andy said to her.

"Good to see you again, Doc," Piper added.

"Bonjour, mes amis," Dr. Charlotte Varma said to them with a soft smile. "This way, please? Mali should be ready for you in about five minutes or so."

As they stepped out of the waiting room and started walking down a long hallway, Alexis moved up next to Emily, whispering low enough that Andy could just barely hear them. "Am I going to have to get used to that all the time? People asking for autographs and photos?"

"Quite often, I'm afraid," Emily whispered back. "It's been nice not having to worry about that while we've been here in New Eden, but now that the world is getting back to normal, I expect at least some of that element of my life will return."

"I'll try not to bitch about it *too* much in front of you," Alexis joked.

"Both I and my therapist will thank you for that."

"Having Doctor Merriweather here has been a godsend for us, Andrew," Charlotte told him as they moved into a small antechamber with a bed in the corner. "She's made so much headway in getting the Quaranteam serum to work for gays and trans people, in addition to helping us make the reassignment solution a little more palatable. I understand you had a hand in getting all that worked out, so thank you for that."

"I just connected a handful of people to one another, Charlotte. That's all. I didn't know we'd be running into you, otherwise I'm sure Asha would've said to give you her best," he said with a smile. "She may like to pretend like she doesn't like having you around, but I think she's secretly very happy you swing by once every couple of weeks just to check up on her."

"Yes, well, mothers can't be too overprotective of their daughters," she said, taking her buzzing phone out of her pocket. "One moment, please." She lifted her glasses up off her eyes so she could read off her phone clearly before tucking it away. "Miss Stevens? Miss Merrick is just next door, and she wanted to speak to you for a minute or two before she came in for imprinting, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Just through there?" Emily asked, as she pointed to a door on the far side of the room.

"Yes. It's unlocked. Just go through and you can come back in and get down to brass tacks whenever she's ready. I will leave you alone in here, and we will come back to get you in an hour or two for Miss Park once she's done with processing."

"Won't be a skosh." Emily moved to step through the door into the next room, closing it behind her.

"What kind of processing is Miss Park going through?" Niko asked. "I haven't been working around the reassignment area much, so I don't know the standard protocol for what we're doing with the NDR's that are being reassigned. I imagine you'd know pretty well, considering you're sharing your fella with one."

"Mmmm. Dr. DeMarco is something of a special case, simply because of her rather violent actions, so she's not being allowed off base until Linda feels safe with her, and I imagine that will be at least a few months," Charlotte said, tapping her fingertips against her phone's screen, sending a message to someone. "It's mostly a basic health and wellness check, as well as a thorough screening for weapons. So far, all the members of the NDR have been entirely peaceful and happy in getting reassigned, but that isn't to say that some won't be. Excuse me, I have to go tend to a patient. As soon as Miss Merrick comes in, Andy, you're welcome to get her imprinted and once that's done, if some of you want to take her home early before you move on to Miss Park, that would also be fine."

"Yeah, I think me and Em will take Mali home and leave you, Piper and Lexi here to handle Melody," Niko said to Andy, as Charlotte exited the room through the door they'd come in through. "I figure that's a fair enough split, don't you think?"

"I'm good with it if you all are," he told the amazing group of women he had around him.

"I want to make sure Melody's not going to try anything," Alexis said. "And I know Piper wants to have a few words with her before you pull the trigger."

Piper grinned, rolling her eyes a little. "I just want to make sure she knows what she's getting into with us, and doesn't think we're going to go easy on her, even as we are letting her in."

The door opened again and Emily peeked her head out. "Andrew? I think we're just about ready if you are. Remember, please don't say a word, and don't expect her to *say* a word until after she's woken up tomorrow, alright?"

Andy nodded and moved to sit down on the edge of the bed. They hadn't really settled how they were going to go about getting Mali paired, but he assumed she and Emily had talked about it during their conversation as Emily moved over to sit next to him, reaching down to unbutton his jeans as Mali entered the room and he got his first look of her in person.

Mali Merrick was a truly gorgeous woman from Wales, with a very rounded, almost cherubic face with rosy cheeks. She was in her early thirties, although she looked as though she could easily be half a decade in either direction. Her dark brown hair hung down to her collarbone and was parted almost in the middle of her head. She was busty, probably D cup, although it fit her frame perfectly. She was dressed in a simple one-piece dress made from a very busy pattern and a strappy thin leather belt around her waist. Her lips were a delicate shade of pink and her brown eyes looked like they were doing their best to remain stoic and unflinching. She offered Andy a shy little smile before starting to walk over towards them.

Andy knew the next few minutes were going to be some of the hardest he'd ever endured, because he strongly wanted to talk to Mali, make sure this was what she wanted, but the smile seemed to widen a little bit as she leaned in and kissed him softly for a moment. It was a trepidatious first kiss, but he could feel Mali take in a deep breath and then try again, kissing him a bit more openly now, selling herself as well as him on her dedication to this. However he might have felt about the kiss, Mali seemed focused on her plan as she moved down to kneel before him, pushing his legs apart.

"I know this will be trying, Andrew," Emily whispered into his ear, "but tomorrow, you and she will be able to start fresh. So just let her get imprinted as easily as you can."

Mali's face still seemed a little nervous, but the smile on her face had grown a little playful now, as if maybe she was trying to convince herself this was some sort of game. She reached into his pants and pulled out his cock, bringing her right hand to tap her fingers to her mouth, miming surprise at the size of his shaft, which made him chuckle a little.

Piper moved to sit down on the other side of him as Alexis and Niko moved to sit down on the ground behind Mali, just to be prepared for what was coming next.

She started to press her lips to the tip of his shaft and he could tell when the droplet of precum emerged from his tip and hit her tongue because it was the first time she'd made a noise since entering the room, a throaty moan of orgasm blowing across his cock as Lexi and Niko pressed a hand each to keep her from falling backwards, as the imprinting process was getting started. There were two orgasms a person got when they were being imprinted, one at the first taste of sexual fluid and the other with the first release.

A moment or two later, Mali turned her brown eyes up to look at him imploringly, an expression that could easily be misread as fear but one that Andy had seen enough to know was awe. Over the past year, he'd talked to all of his partners about their sexual histories before him, and all of them confessed that whatever else the Quaranteam serum had done, it had certainly ensured that the orgasms they had together were on a level of intensity they hadn't even considered beforehand. So, when Mali's mouth descended down hard over his cock, he knew why.

She was chasing the rush.

Andy wasn't sure what to do with his hands, so he was glad when he felt Emily taking hold of one and Piper taking hold of the other, both reassuring him wordlessly that he was doing the right thing, as Mali dove down until her lips were nearly at the base of his dick, her cheeks puffing out a little bit.

He'd gotten more blowjobs over the last few months than he had probably over the rest of his entire life beforehand, but Mali's tempo was unlike anyone else in the house, and she was taking her time keeping his cock inside of her mouth, her tongue basting his shaft relentlessly.

Andy didn't want to put off a poor first showing, but Mali grabbed the tops of his thighs with each hand and started thrusting her face down faster and faster. Her breath was hot on his flesh, and she was moaning each time she pulled her face back. She wasn't giving him much time to recover in between facial dives and before he knew it, he was nearing his release.

It had taken him a while to break himself of the tendency to let his partners know he was about to cum in their mouths, because frankly that was the point, and with the tip of his cock nearly pressed against the back of her throat, Andy released a heavy load into her mouth, setting off another

overwhelming orgasm in Mali's body as the imprinting process took full hold of her body.

Mali was still shaking and trembling in the orgasm as Lexi and Niko moved to lay her on her back. She was mumbling "imprinting" over and over again, but it was much faster than it normally was, and every third or fourth time the word was stuttered and a little slurred.

"Well," Andy sighed. "It looks like the double dose is having *some* kind of effect. Let's hope it doesn't go south on us."

"You should probably take a quick shower," Niko said. "So while you're doing that, I'll borrow Lexi to help me and Em get Mali to the car."

"Yeah, if he's not safe here, he's not safe anywhere. And besides, Piper can watch him while he showers."

"I'm entirely capable of taking a shower all by myself, ladies." The way the girls laughed at him made him give them back a snarky frown. "Oh, I'll remember that," he teased, rolling his eyes, as Piper helped him back to his feet while he pulled his pants back up. "Take good care of her, Em. Tomorrow she and I can have our first real conversation."

"C'mon, loverboy," Piper said, sliding her arm around his waist. "Let's get you washed off before we go see danger girl..."

Chapter Five

December 11th, 2020

Even though he was perfectly capable of washing himself, Piper stripped down with him and entered the shower alongside him, mainly because she could tell something was on his mind. “You okay, Andy?” she said as she spread soap along his back.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It wouldn’t be to most people, babe, but I’m not most people,” Piper said, her fingertips smoothing softly along his skin.

“That’s fair. I’m unhappy that Emily is making a habit of keeping things from me right up until the moment of decision, so I can’t have time to consider things properly,” he sighed. “I understand why she’s done it, but we can’t have her keeping things from the rest of the family. I have some very genuine concerns about someone joining the family with a large chunk of her memory missing, regardless of it being for a good cause. I would’ve liked to have a bit of time to consider the further ramifications of that decision, and to talk it over with all the rest of you ladies, the fiancées at the very least, if not the whole household. This isn’t a minor thing, you know? Someone could ask her a simple question and she could have some kind of mental meltdown.”

Piper sighed, wrapping her arms around Andy’s waist, pressing her tits against the backs of his shoulders, her chin nestled against his temple. “Yeah, we need to sit that girl down and have a talk with her about keeping secrets from the family. She may think she’s doing us all a favor, trying to shoulder the big decisions on her own, but all she’s really done is strip us of our agency in these kinds of things. I know she just wants to do right by everybody, but I’m with you on this one. I don’t feel entirely comfortable having a potential mental timebomb in our household that we need to worry about either.”

“You say this as we’re getting ready to go bring another potential timebomb in,” Andy laughed as Piper rubbed her hand along his crotch, spreading the soap all over it slowly. “But that one’s okay because *you* gave her a pass.”

“No, *I* gave her a pass, but I also gave *everyone* else in the house a chance to say no, and nobody chose to take me up on it,” Piper said. “That’s the difference. Anybody could’ve shot this whole thing down. Everything the rest of you know about Melody Park is based on what I’ve told you, so that’ll be enough for the family. Everyone still had a chance to say no, they didn’t want her around, once they had all the facts. Em sort of sprung that thing with Mali’s memory on you, and *only* you, and that isn’t fair of her, especially since she waited until Mali was just a few feet away. We’ll need to have a long talk with her tonight, not just the three of us, but all the fiancées, so everyone can voice their concerns to Emily. I’m more bothered by the idea that she didn’t even tell Sarah. Those two are thick as thieves and the fact that Em was keeping it from Sarah makes me wonder how much Mali must have stressed that nobody talk about it.”

“Are *you* worried about seeing Melody again? I know you two don’t exactly have the smoothest of histories,” he said as he dipped his head underneath the water, letting it run over his freshly shaven scalp, trickling down through his goatee.

“I’ll manage, Andy,” she said softly to him, kissing his cheek. “But it’s sweet that you’re more worried about me than you are worried about you.”

“Eh, I’m convinced that whatever’s gonna get me will be something I didn’t see coming, so I’m not going to worry about it,” he said as he turned off the water. They’d hosed him down pretty good, but Piper had avoided getting her hair wet, so she wouldn’t have to dry it afterwards. “The one promise I made to myself when all of this started was that I wasn’t going to be scared all the time, no matter how dark and moody it got.”

“You think you’re going to be able to handle Melody? Covington certainly snapped the whip and kept all the girls of his house in line, but that’s *so* not *you*, baby.”

“I think you girls are going to be paranoid enough on my behalf that it’s going to be my role to show kindness, mercy and forgiveness. She rejected Covington remember, and I have to prove to her

that there's another way for us few remaining men to be."

"But not so much that she thinks she can walk all over you..."

"No, certainly not that much. But she's seen me stand my ground against her old boss before, so I think she knows that I'm not entirely a pushover."

The two of them toweled down and got dressed again, just in time for a knock at the door to the bathroom before Niko poked her head in. "They're just about ready for you, Andy. If you two are good?"

"I thought you were driving Em and Mali back and Lexi was going to stay here."

"We decided to swap, in case Piper needed emotional support from another fiancée. Anyway, you ready?"

"Yeah, I think we're good. Piper?"

"Yep, let's go induct my wicked stepsister," the athletic woman joked.

The three of them headed down the hallway and reached a door marked 'Reassignment Induction Suite #3,' with Niko opening the door to lead them inside. "You ready, Charlotte?" she said.

Inside of the room was a sort of modified gynecologist's chair, designed to elevate and spread legs, but there were also restraints on the ankle mounts, and on the base for the wrists, something Andy knew all too well why they were needed. The one time he'd seen a woman reassigned in person, it had taken several people to hold the woman from breaking loose and just grabbing the first man that she saw. The whole thing had been more than a little terrifying, considering the woman straining at the others was Doctor Merriweather, who wasn't exactly young and muscular. Andy could only imagine what a woman twenty years her younger and in peak physical condition could do unrestrained. There was also a small wooden table and a couple of soft chairs, mainly for observers or security, Andy guessed, as this kind of thing still wasn't second-nature around the base.

"Just going over the final confirmations with Miss Park here, stressing that this reassignment is a one-time only thing, and that should she go through with it, she will be inextricably tied to you until one of the two you die, so it's not a decision to be made lightly."

There were only two women in the room before they entered – Dr. Charlotte Varma and Melody Park. Melody was dressed in a white crop top and a pair of cotton white panties that weren't meant to be flattering in any way, although Andy had to admit she still looked damn fine in them. Her hair was pulled back into a neat, low ponytail, as if it was mostly to keep her hair out of her face than in any effort to try and make herself visually appealing, not that Andy minded.

"I keep telling her," Melody said, "that anyone else is gonna be way better than Covington was, so she can stop asking. Hey Piper. I know I've said it before, but I'll keep saying it – sorry about how we treated you when you were under Covington's watch."

"You weren't as bad as Hope was," Piper said with a sigh, clearly trying not to think about her time spent at the House of Covington. "But you better know we're going to keep you on a super tight leash at first, so we can ensure that you don't have any harm planned for us or our man."

"He's going to be *my* man, too, Piper," Melody said, her voice calm and a little resigned, like she was prepared to have to prove herself. "But I respect your caution and skepticism. It's good to be careful and not to just trust in unproven actors, even if that is Andy's established brand. Whatever it takes to buy my place in your house, I'll do it. Covington was... well, I didn't feel much like myself while I was there, I guess because I didn't do my homework before getting imprinted on him. I'd been given the impression that it was only a temporary thing, only to find out that it wasn't *after* it was too late to change my mind. That... that put me in a dark place for a long while, and I turned nihilistic and defeatist. It... it wasn't like me at all, but I'd lost so many people in such a short period of time. Both brothers, my father, my brother-in-law, almost all the men of my former unit... It was like anybody I knew with a dick died within the span of just a couple of weeks, and I couldn't even go to anyone's funeral. How do you handle that sort of mass grief and loss? I went from having a support network to being alone in the fucking world. When this lifeline from Covington came, I... I should've looked

before I leaped. And that was foolish of me. By contrast, I've done my fair share of homework into you, Mister Rook, and all the women of your family. Well, soon-to-be *my* family, I suppose. I'd better get used to saying it that way. Anyway, there's a surprising amount of information about you on the internet if you know how to look."

"What should I be worried about?" Andy asked. He'd certainly been a lot more public over the last month than he'd ever anticipated, and it seemed like every other day, someone wanted to do a short phone interview, or video interview, and Andy tried to agree to as many of them as he could without them utterly consuming his life. He knew that in some ways, they were being looked at as the public face of how people would get through this, so he felt expected to play the part.

"That's the thing, Mister Rook," Melody said with a little laugh, looking down at a tablet that Dr. Varma was holding out to her, skimming through the paperwork on it. "I don't see *any* of it as something to be worried about. It's kind of endearing, actually, how open and transparent you are about your life, your trials and tribulations, what sort of challenges you've been through. With the exception of the infamous poker game – which I've seen nary a whiff of *anywhere*, so bravo for that – you've been remarkably willing to talk to anyone about pretty much anything. I suspected the 60 Minutes would be a one-and-done for you, but you've done quite a few email and phone interviews since then. And you've been astonishingly willing to be frank and honest about your feelings, your fears, the loss of your brother... it's been refreshing seeing someone be so open, and if you *do* have any secrets to hide, which I assume you do because who doesn't, then you've done a phenomenal job of keeping them from even being hinted at. But you've got a very eclectic family. Whether intentionally or accidentally, you've got a wide collection of different kinds of women, from those in the upper echelons of society to people who, before they met up with you, struggled each month just to scrape together enough money to pay their rent off. Your partners range in age from 18 to 38, in height from 5'1" to 6'6"... you've got blondes, brunettes, redheads... you run the gamut. In fact, the only real surprise to me right now is that you don't have Miss Blake with you."

"Ash and I had a long conversation about both of the women we're adding today, but she didn't think she needed to be here for the actual process," Andy responded. "Whereas Emily and Piper both had stakes in these matters."

"And I'm here to make sure he's safe," Niko added.

"Ah yes, 2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf," Melody said, signing her name on the tablet with a single fingertip. "You know, you might think Andy's the person Covington hates most of all in the world, but you'd be wrong." She pointed at Niko with an almost admiring smile. "He hates *you* more than *anyone else*, Miss Redwolf. More than me, more than Rachel, more than Andy. He hates you with a level of rage I cannot even begin to describe to you."

"Me?" Niko asked in surprise, seeming to take delight in her most hated status. "How the hell did I make his number one slot?"

"You maneuvered Andy into *playing* in the poker game, which is what really caused all of his eventual downfall. Andy would've turned down the game if you hadn't been there pressuring him to come in."

Niko chortled at that assertion. "Well, if he hadn't been manipulating the system to override people's personal preferences so that he could get whoever he wanted, he wouldn't have had that problem. I mean, he was trying to get both Dr. Varma here *and* her daughter, so you can imagine *why* he wanted that. Creepy old fuck."

"Is *that* why you entered the poker game, Andy?" Melody said with a dark chuckle. "And here I'd been figuring it was to try and go after Miss Washington or Miss Stevens."

"I didn't even know they were there, Melody," Andy said with a laugh of his own. He'd forgotten that everyone inside of House Covington wouldn't have known the reasons he'd gone there in the first place. "Niko had made friends with Charlotte here on the base, and refused to let Covington get his claws into both her and her daughter, Asha, whom you'll meet soon enough. I didn't know

anything about who else was going to be there until I got there.”

“For what it’s worth, Doc,” Melody said, touching her hand to Charlotte’s shoulder, “I’m glad you didn’t end up in our nightmare.”

“You’re not the only one, but thank you,” Dr. Varma responded, offering a tight-lipped smile as she looked up from her tablet, nestling the handheld computer under her arm. “So the pill is on the table, but you’re going to want to have her restrained first. Other than that, I think you all know everything you need to know, and don’t really need me here for this, yes?”

“Thank you again, Doc,” Melody said, offering her hand for Dr. Varma to shake, which she did. “See you again in a month for my checkup.”

“Checkup?” Andy asked.

“We’re going to revisit all reassignees after a month, make sure there haven’t been any additional complications we didn’t anticipate,” the Doctor replied. “It’s happening with everyone who’s getting reassigned, so don’t think it’s anything specifically regarding you.”

“We’ll make a note of it on the calendar, Doc,” Niko said to her.

“Got it, Doc,” Melody said. “I think you can leave us to it.”

Dr. Varma nodded, although she looked back at Niko one final time from the doorway. “Do *not* give her the pill until she’s fully strapped in. If you do, you are entirely responsible for the consequences of your actions, and I *will* request disciplinary action.”

“Copy that, Charlotte. You know me – I always listen when you speak.”

“Yes, well... this one bears repeating. Good day.” Charlotte moved outside of the door and closed it behind her, flipping a latch so it would be clear the room was in use for the time being.

“Shall we get to it?” Melody asked, looking over at the three of them with an almost nervous smile. “I could tell you more about me, but I think you probably know far more about me than I could tell you over just a few minutes. I told the General to give you as much information about me as they had, whatever you wanted. Military record, discharge papers, the files that the FBI and/or CIA I assume have on me... I told them you could have it all.”

“We watched your video a couple of times,” Piper said. “You seemed like you were basically at the end of your rope. You still feel that way?”

Melody looked down, a single tear falling from one of her eyes before she wiped it away, steeling back up again. “Yeah, well, I fucked up and instead of turning it around, I kept fucking up even *further* until we finally got Covington under control. And you’d think that going through that crisis would’ve made all of us ex-Covington girls form some kind of bond, but instead, we kept pushing each other further apart. Nobody in that viper’s nest trusts anybody, not even Rachel and Hope, and those two share a father. It was everybody looking out for number 1, and that’s no way to build a family. But you’re here now, both you and Andy, so maybe that means I’m getting a bit more slack in the rope again; maybe I’m going to actually get that second chance I keep hearing so much about.”

“Why’d you stop taking your dose from Covington?” Andy asked. “You mentioned that in the video, and I have to admit, that gave me a little bit of pause.”

Melody’s face turned into a stoic frown before she nodded. “It might not have been smart, but I had to do it. Most of the ladies were willing to keep milking Covington right up until the day they left to go and get reassigned, but there was something... so fucking *smug* about the prick any time we did it, y’know? Like he wouldn’t let any of us forget that we still *needed* him, that we were still *dependent* on him to remain alive. We didn’t let him talk but he could judge you just with his fucking eyes. But when we were close to getting surrender terms worked out with the Air Force, I decided I was just going to be done with him, so it’s been, uh, about ten days since I had any of his cum, and it’s *really* hard to think straight right now. But it was important to me that I try and endure something similar to what Piper went through. I know it isn’t anywhere near as bad, because I can still talk, but it’s taking everything I have to do remain calm right now, knowing that the reassignment pill is right there. And knowing that you’re right here, Andy, right now. And if I do it in the wrong order, I’m basically dead.

But the longer it takes for us to get there, the harder it is for me to keep the *right* order clear in my head. In fact..."

Melody pulled the crop top off, tossing it aside, revealing a modest pair of breasts with no adornments or piercings on her dark brown nipples, then shimmied down out of her panties, revealing a stripe of black hair above her pussy. She'd turned sideways when she did, so Andy could see the tattoo on Melody's back, wincing a little at the size of it, a large square plaque that read "Property of Arthur Covington the 4th, Bitch #4, MELODY" in very thick ink. It was the only tattoo on the woman's body.

"I can't believe that bastard made you get those," Piper said.

"Yeah, well, once I'm settled with you fine folks, I can get it removed or blacked over or whatever you like," Melody said as she hopped up into the chair. "It's just skin. Besides, where he put it? I didn't ever really have to see it that much. He'd talked about making them neck tattoos, apparently, but Rachel convinced him it would be showing off too much to other people." She shifted to place one ankle up into each of the stirrups. "We can keep talking, but I'd really rather you strap me in now, just in case my will slips a little." Niko and Piper moved to each strap one of Melody's ankles down. The leather straps were heavily padded, as it was clear attention to the care of the patient was of the utmost importance. They then went to strap Melody's wrists down as well, and the Korean American woman let out a soft sigh of relief. "Thanks. I didn't want to do anything I might regret, and the need's starting to really push on my skull."

Niko patted one of Melody's shoulders. "Andy's big on second chances, and Piper decided after your video to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I want to stress right here and now that if you've got malice in your heart, if you ever lift a threatening finger towards my man, I will end you. I will slit your throat and stand over you watching your body until the life drains from it and I can guarantee you won't ever draw another breath. If there's any part of you that isn't sure about this, now's your last chance to back away."

"Hey, I know I haven't earned any faith from you yet, Niko, but believe me, I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to live up to the examples that you and the rest of House Rook set for us," Melody said. "It might take that long, too, but I'm not going anywhere, okay? At the end of this, I want you to think of me as a sister-in-arms as much as you do anyone else in the household, and if that means I have to jump in front of a bullet to earn that trust, believe me, I'll do it, no hesitation. He's not just *your* man; he's *our* man, and I do not take his generosity in the face of adversity lightly. Anything else, or can we get this rodeo started? You can all probably *see* I'm soaked with anticipation."

"We probably *should* just get on with it," Niko said. "At this point, I think you've asked everything you need to ask, haven't you, Andy?"

Andy frowned a moment. "I always feel like I'm just half a step behind the rhythm, like I'm supposed to be a little further ahead in the dance than I actually am. There's probably something I should ask here, but I can't think of it. You're right. Anything else we want to talk about can wait until after we're on the other side of this." He lifted his shirt up and set it down on the chair next to where Melody was tied up. "Anything in particular you like or don't that I should know about, Melody?"

She barked a tiny bit of laughter, shaking her head. "Shouldn't I be the one asking *you* that, Mister Rook?"

"At this point, you'd better get used to just calling me Andy."

"Well then, Andy, the only rule I have is no drawing blood. Anything else, have at thee."

"But what do you *like*, Melody?"

"Just..." She trailed off for a second, looking away before she turned to look back at him. "Just treat me like an honest-to-God person, okay?"

He stopped undressing, moved over, bent down to stroke her face, and then leaned in to connect his lips to hers in a tender kiss, nothing overly passionate or affectionate, but a welcoming gesture, one that made her smile when he eventually pulled back.

"That was nice," she said, another tear escaping one of her eyes. "You didn't have to do it, but it

was nice. I'm just hired help."

"Hey now," Andy scolded. "Knock that shit off right now. Whatever the hell Covington did to you, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to care about what you do and don't like, what turns you off and what turns you on. I'm gonna do everything I can to make all our time together something you look forward to and not regret. But you gotta work with me on this one. Fight to reclaim whatever humanity you lost when you were in his service, and while we can help you out with that, it's a battle that'll be won or lost in your own heart."

"Ride or die, Andy," Melody chuckled. "Either I'll get this right, or I absolutely deserve the bullet Niko's going to put in my skull if I don't. But thank you for letting me feel like I matter as a person. It's the first time I've felt that way in months. Now gimme the goddamn pill already."

Piper picked up the pill, a tiny little gel capsule and then put it into Melody's mouth before pulling her fingers away. "Remember to bite down on it."

Melody shot Piper a sarcastic smile, but then closed her lips and bit down on the capsule with her back teeth, exposing her tongue to the reassignment sperm that was contained within. Her body went through a very sudden hard shudder then began to thrash against the restraints, her nostrils flaring in wild, almost primordial breaths, her eyes widened and highly dilated all of a sudden. Despite the fact that her wrists and ankles were bound down, she still managed to thrust her hips upwards towards Andy, her vulva swollen and ready for him.

"You are going to start every day thanking him for giving you a second chance, Melody," Piper said, her hands grabbing onto the woman's shoulders, unsure her words were even getting through the blind lust/rage cocktail that was flowing through Melody's system as she waited to be reimprinted.

"And you are gonna talk dirty to him every time he's fucking you," Niko added as Andy removed his pants. "Because he likes that, and you want him to like you."

Then the oddest thing happened.

Melody started to *talk*.

"C'mon Andy, shove that dick into me," Melody moaned, her voice dripping with a carnal wanton sultriness that somehow knew exactly where Andy's soft spots were. "I wanna feel you shoving a real man's cock inside of my dripping little pussy... Fuck me... fuck me just how *you* like it... I wanna be whatever fucking kind of woman you want... a virgin, a whore, an innocent, a slut, or maybe all of the above... but you need to pound me, to rail that snatch... to fucking tear my shit up..."

It was odd, because when they'd seen Eve getting reimprinted, she hadn't said a single word. And, in fact, Andy had heard stories from Phil that all women during the reimprinting were silent beyond some howls and whines, like they were completely incapable of speech. And yet, here was Melody, running her mouth off like she was being paid by the word.

Andy pushed his cock inside of Melody's twat and she immediately convulsed with an orgasm that made her entire body light up like a newly plugged in Christmas tree, feeling her walls envelope him like she was trying to suffocate his cock inside of her.

"FFffffuck that's a big fucking dick you've got there, Andy," Melody purred. "So much bigger than that little dick Covington... bigger and *longer* and *way thicker* and just so much more fucking *satisfying*... and that was you just putting the fucking thing in... I never came that hard with that worthless fossil... c'mon, you beautiful bald bastard... I know you know how to use that weapon so lemme have it..."

Along with being more cognizant than Eve had been during her reimprinting, Melody was also more adept at using what little mobility she did have to try and get him to push even deeper inside of her, squeezing at his hips with her thighs, even if it only was an inch or so on each side.

"Mmmpphhh... I'm glad I'm positioned this way... Covington never liked to look anyone in the eyes when he was fucking them, but you're a *real man* aren't you, Andy? You like to know your women are *enjoying* feeling you *plow* their tight little pussies... I certainly fucking am... I'm loving it and I'm *your* woman now... but I want my load, baby... I wanna feel you fucking explode inside my

cunt... I wanna feel you creaming my brains out... I wanna feel your hot sticky love... gimme that load, Andy... gimme that creampie... paint my guts with your love... love me, baby... let me be worthy of your fucking love... show me I'm a good little slut who deserves to be loved... show me I can be better than what that tiny dick Covington called me when he was kicking me in the stomach... show me I can be loved... love my cunt, Andy... love me, Andy... please... I beg of you... I can't stop cumming until you blast me full... empty those fat fucking balls and unload inside me... make me your woman... Oh fuck I can feel you twitching... you're gonna do it, so do it do it do it cum in me cum in me cum cum cum ohfuckwe'recumming!"

She was clearly in the middle of yet another orgasm when he finally felt his body's resistance collapse, and he began to toss volleys of his hot semen up inside of Melody's trembling cunt, her muscles constricting and contracting around him, clenching him tightly as if trying to pull as much of his seed from him as possible before she slumped down onto the examination chair, her body completely limp.

And the first word she said was not what was expected.

Her lips opened and a word none of them had ever heard before escaped her lips. "кодировка" said only the once, only to be followed immediately by the one they'd expected to hear, "imprinting," repeated strongly. There was a wide smile on Melody's face even as her lips went through the motions a few times, repeating only the imprinted word a few dozen times before falling silent, her body completely immobile except for the slightest rising and falling of her chest while she breathed.

Andy's cock had slipped out of her and softened, but as he looked over to the table where he'd put his shirt, he noticed the room was starting to spin, and a soft warm tingle had begun to roll over his body. "W-w-what?" he muttered. "What's happening?"

"Oh hey!" Niko said cheerfully, a reassuring smile on her face. "About time this happened. Piper, quick, help me lay him down. Andy, don't panic, baby. There's nothing to fear. Just relax and drift off to sleep, okay?"

"Sleep?" Andy asked groggily. "But I... you sure?"

"Yes, baby, I'm sure, it's *fine*," Niko said. She and Piper sat him down in chair and started to put his boxers and pants on him, but before they even had his shirt on him, Andy was unconscious.

Intermission One – Topher

December 11th, 2020 – Minneapolis

The buildings loomed large in his vision, even though several of them weren't lit up at all, capped with snow on top, the streets decently plowed but it was still cold as balls outside, and there wasn't anything Topher wanted so much as to go home. But that wasn't on the cards for him tonight. The military was slowly sweeping its way across downtown Minneapolis, and he wasn't sure how long it would be before they got to this building. And if the military beat him to the building, the task simply wouldn't get done, and he wasn't sure he could live with it if it didn't.

Most of the office buildings were locked up well, but they'd been sitting idle long enough now that it felt like they'd either been managed or they were itching to be broken into. It wasn't like Topher had set out to fall into a life of crime, but his new lifestyle wasn't easy to live with, especially since he hadn't hit the lottery like it seemed many of the other surviving men had. At least not yet anyway. He wasn't entirely sure what his life would look like in a month's time, but that was Future Topher's problem, and Today's Topher had more pressing concerns.

There should've been a guard in the lobby, but the last few months, lots of things that "should" have been happening had fallen by the wayside as the male population of the planet had dwindled rapidly. The elevators for the building were off, which meant he'd be trudging up the stairs, at least until after he figured out how to turn the elevators on.

Raiding office buildings was far different than raiding residential buildings. Topher had done his fair share of looting from the apartment highrises downtown, at least before the military had come by to

do sweep-and-clears. Apartment highrises were actually trickier, because he had to gauge if they'd only done one sweep or two. The first sweeps were easy enough to spot – there were standard search & rescue markings in spray paint on the walls outside of each units, marking if there had been survivors or if there had been dead bodies to collect. Some of the tall buildings even had people still living in them, but for the most part, they'd been temporarily moved out so the insides could be adapted into the new living structures and then moved back in. Topher knew all about that. He was scheduled to be moved into one of the buildings in early January, which would be a nice change of pace than the shitty brokedown borderline livable house he and his nine partners were currently holed up in, practically tripping over one another any time they wanted to move from one room to another.

Topher still couldn't believe the odd arc of the last year of his life. This time last year, he'd been planning on how to best drop from college, not enrolling in the spring semester because he just didn't have the money to pay for classes. His plan was that he'd take a year off, work his ass off nonstop during that year, then come back again for the spring semester in 2021, switching back to part-time work so he could continue his education. He'd picked up two part-time jobs to pair with his full-time job, and by the time the lockdown had happened in March, he'd actually been a little thankful, because it meant he could sleep. After a week's worth of sleep, he'd started to get nervous, though. His money wasn't going to hold out forever, and when a week turned into a month, the panic began.

He wasn't living so desperately paycheck-to-paycheck that he didn't have some savings to tap into, but it wasn't as though he could just go in and pick up extra shifts at Burger King, when the management over at Burger King was simply like "no, we're closed. Nobody come in."

It was early May when he realized things were completely going to hell in a handbasket. He and his roommate had scraped together the month's rent, but Mister Davies, their landlord, hadn't come by to pick up the check on the 1st. Or the 2nd. Or the 3rd. By the time the 10th had rolled around, Topher had asked Joe, his roommate, whether they were just living there rent free from now on. It wouldn't be until September that they would learn definitively that Mister Davies had died in April, but by that point, they were already pretty sure that was what had happened. When the President and the Vice President both collapsed in early July, it was obvious that the world was going to hell in a handbasket, no matter how much the government was trying to keep it under wraps. The problem was clearly bad, but it would be another month and change before Topher started to understand just *how* bad.

Mid-September, there had been a knock on the door, and both Topher and Joe were tested and then immediately relocated, each given their own house to stay in, along with well-stocked fridges. The house wasn't anything fancy – a three-bedroom two-story a decent drive from downtown and still quite a bit of distance away from the University. It was over near the Mississippi River, in a district called Cooper, but not right along the river itself.

When they'd started bringing women for him to get paired up with, Topher had been a little taken aback, but couldn't find himself complaining too much – after all, the women he was being paired up with were massively out of his league. Shit, the first one they'd brought was a goddamn *model* and while she hadn't been all that interesting to talk to (on the first day, anyway), she was gorgeous, and the second delivery three days later had contained three more women, at least two of which were exactly the kind of personalities he'd been looking for his entire life. The third had been a little shy at first, but eventually opened up. What had surprised him the most, however, was that the second batch had also brought with them a check from the government, marked 'survival funds,' for a cool twenty-five thousand dollars. That had put him more at ease, at least for a little while.

By November, though, he was starting to get nervous again, even if he was having a remarkable amount of regular sex with women far outside of his league. His ninth partner, Abby, had shown up along with a letter from the government that in the first week of January, he and his new family unit – Team Moline – were going to be relocated again. The house was just too small for him, and they wanted to be sure they all had space to grow, especially as the government wanted to encourage him to have kids. Topher had only turned legal to drink in January, and now the government was suggesting to

him that he start fathering kids. While most of the women in his Team had decent jobs and steady incomes, he still felt like he was a bit of dead weight for all of them, something they were struggling to keep him from thinking.

When the *new* President had gotten on the television in late November to inform the country just how dire straits the entire world was in, that was enough to make Topher want to crawl up into a ball and just disappear. He'd been noticing how many of his friends and former coworkers had just stopped answering their phones, and when the death toll was announced by President Pelosi, the reality had hit him in the face all at once. His friends were dead. His family was dead. And for some stupid fucking reason, *he* was still alive.

Him.

Who the fuck was *he*?

He wasn't going to cure cancer. He wasn't going to be the first person on Mars. He wasn't going to solve climate change. He'd just wanted to get through college and maybe eventually work his way up towards being the producer of a local nightly news show or something. He wasn't going to change the world with his life, and yet, somehow he'd survived where millions of other men hadn't.

When the relocation happened in January, he was being moved into the 4 Marq building at 400 Marquette Avenue South. It was a 20+ story skyscraper that was full of luxury apartments, which had immediately made Topher worry about it, because by the first of December, he was at nine partners, and the ten of them were bursting at the seams in the house they'd been assigned. But when he'd told the government rep who'd called him that the ten of them wouldn't be okay in some three bedroom apartment, the rep had told him that no, he and his family were getting an entire floor. That meant they would have a dozen or more bedrooms and several living rooms and bathrooms for them as a family. They were converting the building by knocking down some of the walls and opening the floor to be one interconnected unit, while still offering plenty of space so that people wouldn't feel so cramped in. When he asked how he was expected to pay for it, the rep had told him that it would be "handled."

Maybe that was why Topher had gotten so nervous after the phone call. It was the use of the word "handled" which had set off alarm bells inside of his head, because that meant "we don't know yet, but we don't want to *tell* you we don't know yet, so don't worry about it, even though maybe you *should* be worried about it."

So on the first of December, he'd decided to go wandering through the buildings of downtown Minneapolis, just to see which ones he could get into. They'd told him that he was very strongly resistant to DuoHalo, having been part of the pairings in September, so he didn't have any qualms about just strolling into any building he could, to see what was going on, what was locked up and what people had just *forgotten* about.

It turned out they'd forgotten about quite a lot.

The 365 Nicollet building had been the first thing he'd gone through, only to find it had already been both looted and scheduled for renovation and conversion, clearly being transformed into the Team Per Floor model that he'd heard about. So he'd headed over to the Soo Line Building, and while the renovations hadn't started yet, they were clearly getting ready to, and all the bodies and property had been taken away from the site.

That was when he decided to start moving into checking office buildings.

Now generally the buildings were all locked, but often times that was more of a general discouragement than an actual prevention of entry. Either a loading dock would be unlocked, or there'd be a side door that didn't latch properly, or even a window already smashed in around the corner, and pretty soon, most of Topher's days were getting spent looting office buildings.

Oh, he definitely set limits for himself, because he still had to carry stuff to his car then drive the car back to the house, and the last thing he wanted was someone from either the police or military to look over and see him with a carful of ill-gained plunder from some office building. But, as he learned on the first day, as long as he wasn't doing anything ridiculous, nobody seemed to give him

much mind.

The other thing that boggled his mind was that once he was in one building, he basically had access to all of downtown. Because of the brutal cold winters in Minnesota, most of the buildings in downtown Minneapolis were connected, either by skyways or by underground tunnels, and for whatever reason, when everything had shut down in the spring, they'd left all the skyways and tunnels unlocked.

(He'd find out later that they *had* been locked up at first, but that search-and-rescue had simply unlocked them all and left them that way.)

It wasn't like Topher was looking to get rich – he just didn't know what to *do* with his days, and scouring through the businesses of downtown Minneapolis looking for plunder seemed as good as anything. He was still setting his sights small, though. He'd gotten a new laptop for everybody in the house, as well as picking up a couple of extra televisions.

Once he was inside of the building, he'd wandered from floor to floor, looking in at the endless rows of cubicles that lay silent and vacant, an entire world abandoned when its occupants had gone and died off. He'd been careful not to set off any alarms, but if there was ever a night when he was going to trip one, this would be it.

Tonight, he was in the U.S. Bank's local office in downtown Minneapolis.

The door from the stairwell to the floor their offices were located on was locked, so Topher took his time and went through the process of slowly picking it. When the pandemic had started, he'd needed to take up hobbies, so he'd decided he'd always wanted to learn how to pick a lock, and taught himself. Now he was using that skill very regularly.

He let himself out of the stairwell and into the fifth story offices, far above the vaults or safety deposit boxes. Mostly it was just a collection of cubicles, desks and computers, like so many other office towers he'd broken into. But today he was just after one thing and one thing in particular.

Topher moved down the hallway and started checking offices until he found one unlocked. After that, he turned on the computer and started sweeping around the desk, looking for little post-it notes or the like. It didn't take long before he found one, giving him the login and password to the computer, so he sat down and started to get to work.

He wasn't here to do any real harm, or even to get rich. No, he had much simpler goals than that. He just wanted to make his Visa bill disappear.

One of the things he hadn't realized when he'd been younger was that credit cards were, basically, predatory practices that had just been decriminalized. The idea was that you were encouraged to be spending money you didn't have, paying interest into some faceless company that couldn't give a shit about your well-being, specifically so they could make you give them more money than something was worth. When he'd looked into how much money he'd been paying into credit cards to pay off "interest" as opposed to things he'd actually paid for, he realized the company was literally just using him as a revenue stream.

So he figured, if there was going to be anything good out of this pandemic, the risk of getting this albatross out from around his neck would be more than worth it.

The desktop computer fired up easily enough, and with the login and password he'd found on the post-it note, he was inside the bank's system very easily. It took him far longer to figure out how to void out his account than it did anything else, and he was just wrapping up when a flashlight flicked on, pointing directly at his face.

"Hands up," a man's voice barked at him. "You're not supposed to be in here."

Topher put his hands up with a shrug. "I'm not supposed to be *alive* either, but that isn't stopping the fucking bank from charging me eighteen percent interest when I can't be making money," he sighed. "I'm not here robbing anybody. I'm not hurting anybody. I'm just trying to get this fucking yoke off of my neck. Lemme put my hands down and nobody'll even know I was here."

"You can't just make debt vanish," the guard said, walking over towards Topher, not lowering

the flashlight but his tone softening a little.

“Yeah, I know,” Topher said. “It took me a bit to figure that out. But you know what I *can* do from here? I can *move* the debt over to somebody else. Somebody who’s dead. And then it’s not in my name and it’s not my problem anymore and I’m not paying this stupid fucking interest when I can’t work for a living.”

The guard turned off the flashlight, and Topher could get a look at him now, seeing the guy wasn’t that much older than he was. “Aren’t they gonna track it to you?”

Topher laughed, rolling his eyes, lowering his hands. “Why would they even think to *look*? I mean, c’mon man. The government’s moved me around once already, and they’re moving me again in January. Maybe they’re going to do this for us anyway, and they just haven’t gotten around to it yet. All I know is that I managed to rack up about twenty grand in credit card debt, mostly for food and gas, and I’ve probably paid like thirty five grand just to keep that initial twenty grand from getting out of hand. Not paying it off, just keeping it from spiraling out of control. I’m not murdering anybody. I’m not stealing from somebody else’s pocket. I’m just making sure this nameless, faceless demon gets off my back and I can start living for myself again.”

The guard’s face scrunched up for a long moment before he spoke again. “Can you fix mine too?”

Half an hour later, two Visa charge accounts fully paid off, Topher was making his way back out of the building again. During the time when he’d been fixing their credit, Topher had gotten to know Brian, the guard, a little bit, and it had been nice having another guy to talk to about the crazy shit they’d both been enduring as survivors.

Brian’s house was only four women so far, and they’d just started arriving two weeks ago. While Topher had had months to come to grips with the weird changes, Brian had been completely in the dark until the President’s speech. He’d still been coming to work, patrolling the building although mostly sticking to the main bank area, not bothering with any of the upstairs offices. The only reason he’d even noticed was that Topher had forgotten to pull the stairwell door shut, and Brian had been trudging up to the roof to go and have a smoke in the little nestled area near the doorway.

He’d told Topher that it was like living in a ghost town for eight hours a day, and that he’d actually been excited to have something different going on. Most of the time, he simply hung out in the bank lobby and watched Netflix on his phone. The conversation continued as Brian walked Topher back through the skyway over towards the building he’d come in through, and by the end of it, they’d exchanged phone numbers and Topher felt like he’d made a new friend.

“You mean they’re *all* unlocked?” Brian asked him about the skyways. “Like, I could just walk ten or fifteen blocks without going outside?”

“Well, some of the buildings are starting to get people in them again,” Topher said. “So they probably won’t stay that way for long. Most of the time it’s just people coming into their office to pick up shit and take it home – photos from their desks, paperwork they didn’t think they would need to have access to at home or even just throw out shit they’ve left in the company fridge back in March. Cleaners have generally already handled those, but sometimes you can’t be too sure.”

“So, I’m guessing you’re going to go back to school in the fall then?” Brian asked him.

“I dunno,” Topher admitted. “Maybe? I’m still not entirely sure I can afford it.”

“You didn’t watch the special after the President’s speech, did you?”

“Some of it,” Topher said. “I wasn’t listening when it was focused on that dude in his mansion, but when they were talking about the high rise conversions, I paid a lot of attention, since apparently that’s gonna be me next month.”

“Oh yeah? Which one are they moving you into?”

“4 Marq,” he said. “I think we’re supposed to be Floor 11 or 12. Something like that.”

“Hey, cool, we can be neighbors,” Brian said. “I’m getting moved into Floor 5 of that building, although it sounds like it’s way too much space for just the five of us.”

“They’ve got more women coming for you, man,” Topher said. “Just like they’ve got more coming for me. I told them nine was *plenty*, but they assured me I’m going to get brought up to a dozen once I get moved into the new place, so I can’t imagine they’re just stopping at four for you, especially if they’re putting you in a high rise and giving you a whole floor. You’re, what, about thirty or so?”

“Yeah, and been married for three years now. Kit and I were happy, just the two of us, but the government seemed convinced that we needed more women to keep me alive, and as angry as Kit was about it at first, when she came home with Katya, our first *new* partner, man the two of them couldn’t *wait* to team up on me. I felt like the luckiest man on Earth.”

“I gotta wonder if all of this is being done to help keep our spirits up, considering how many people have died.”

Brian nodded. “It’s too much to think about,” he exhaled with a deep sigh. “If I stop and think about it, I want to break down crying, so I try to push it to the back of my brain. We came through something, and those people we were, back before this, back on the other side? They aren’t who we are now. We only know the people we know *now*, and we can’t go back, can’t think back, can’t remember back, otherwise that void’s gonna eat us up from the inside, you know?”

“I hear ya,” Topher said, wrapping his arms around Brian to give his newfound friend a big hug. “You take care of yourself, man, and I’ll see you again in January when we’re both moved into the building. You and your Team can come up and visit me and mine, assuming we don’t all go crazy before then.”

“You’ll make it, man,” Brian said to him, patting him on the shoulder. “You and me, we’re survivors, man. We made it through, we’ve dodged the plague and we’re ready to see what the new world holds for us.”

“It holds loads and loads and *loads of fucking*,” Topher said with a laugh before exiting the building, heading over to his car, wiping snow off the top of it. Thankfully it wasn’t so cold that the Mazda 3 wouldn’t start, the engine protesting a couple of times before turning over as Topher sat inside it, letting it warm up a bit.

The drive back to the house was still eerily quiet. In the before times, even being close to North Loop, there would be loads of cars on the road, people heading out to dinner or to the club or to a party or something, but it seemed like people still didn’t feel ready to venture out of their homes and to try and interact with one another on the regular yet.

He pulled the car into the driveway of the house he’d been put up in near 43rd and East Lake Street, driving along and back into the little garage behind the house. He was almost a little nervous to head into the house, but one thing he’d noticed was that despite the wild collection of personalities in his new Team, fights were especially rare. If people weren’t getting along, they simply stayed out of one another’s way.

Topher headed into the building and inhaled that smell of home cooking that he was still astonished by every meal. Tonight smelled like it was Mediterranean, Greek or Italian maybe. Tiffany, his fourth partner, had been the head chef for The Butcher’s Tale, a high end surf & turf restaurant and bar near downtown, and since she couldn’t be cooking at work, she’d taken to learning what the family liked and didn’t, catering to her new family.

Angelica, his first partner, the model, met him at the door, offering him a wry smile. She was a tall, leggy brunette with a wickedly dark sense of humor. It had taken a little bit for him and Angelica to see eye-to-eye at first, mostly because they’d both been putting on false fronts for each other, him trying to come across as cooler than he was and her doing much the same. By the time she’d woken up in his arms the next morning, however, they’d both dropped the pretenses, and were swapping stories about their first few skateboarding injuries. “How’d it go?”

“Guard found me, but it turned out, he didn’t really give a shit.”

“I’m telling you, baby,” Angelica said, sliding her hand against his back. “The government probably would’ve just taken care of it. Shit, you probably should’ve just not paid it, or have let me pay

it off.”

Topher shook his head in annoyance. “Look, I understand you have money, Ang, and that this wouldn’t be a big thing for you, but for me, I would’ve always felt like I was living in your shadow, hiding behind your money, unable to prove I could do things for myself. Anyway, it’s done now and I don’t ever have to worry about it.”

“There’s some paperwork that came for you via mail,” she said. “I didn’t open most of it, but one of the envelopes was marked 4 Marq, so I figured you wouldn’t be too mad if I took a look inside.”

“I’m furious,” he deadpanned. “I hate you and I never want to see you again. Go and never darken my towels again.” He paused for a moment, seeing who could hold it longer, but they both started giggling around the same time. “That’s fine. Just blueprints I take it?”

“And asking if we had any special requests. I was thinking about having them convert one of the old apartments into a skate park for us, but then I realized the ceilings were too low.”

“Oh well,” he laughed. “We’ll just have to avail ourselves with boarding downtown during mosquito season. Everybody been getting along okay while I was gone?”

“Diane and Julia were arguing about who got to sleep pressed up against you tonight, and I swear they were going to pull each other’s hair out until I volunteered to take a night off and let one of them have my space up against you.”

“Awwww. Ang. You didn’t have to do that.”

Angelica rolled her light green eyes in amusement. “Somebody’s gotta keep the peace around here. And it’s been two months since they both joined our family, so I think they wanted to do something special to celebrate the night.”

“Dare I even ask?”

“Well, I think they’re ready to put their differences aside and spend a night actually *sharing* you, and maybe even playing with each *other* too.”

“I thought both of them were adamant they didn’t want to anything with girls.”

Angelica shrugged with a wry grin. “I think they were talking a big game, but now that the reality of us all being together forever is starting to sink in, they may be reconsidering.”

“I’m going to end up paddling one or both of them tonight, aren’t I?”

“You know they’ll only enjoy it. But it’ll wait until after dinner. Before that, though...”

Angelica wrapped her willowy arms around him, leaning her head down to kiss him with a scorching intensity that took him off-guard, his cock twitching in his pants as her body seemed to envelope his, the kiss cutting right down to his very soul.

“What was *that* for?”

“I just don’t want you getting it that thick skull of yours that those two are the only women in this house who love you, you dummy.”

“You know you’re too good for me, right?”

She leaned in so she could whisper into his ear. “I know it was just the two of us here when my ex-boyfriend came by the day after I was imprinted to you, demanding I go with him, but seeing you swing that crowbar to knock the knife out of his hand will forever be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. So we’re too good for each other. Now shut up and let’s eat.”

Chapter Six

December 12th, 2020

Andy woke up at home in his own bed, and the first thing he did was glance at his watch, which told him he'd slept about 16 hours. It was just about noon the day after he'd gone to get Mali and Melody, and he felt more refreshed than he'd felt in a long while. His body felt strange, though, not quite the way it should.

"Oh hey! You're up!" Sarah's voice said and Andy glanced over to see her sitting in the big armchair that was off to the side of the master bed. She had her iPad in her lap, probably reading some screenplay. "We weren't entirely sure when you were going to be awake, so we wanted to be sure and totally have somebody here when you did. Lucky me, I won!" The tall redhead hopped up and moved over to lean down to press her lips against his, her tender fingers holding his face for a moment. "Just wait here, I'll be right back."

Andy found that the girls had brought him home, undressed him and put him to bed, his phone on its charger on the nightstand, along with his glasses. As Sarah darted out of the room, he reached over and grabbed his glasses, sliding them onto his face.

Then he began to worry.

Everything was blurry and distorted and his head hurt a little bit.

"Take those off, Andy," he heard Niko's voice from the door. "Then look up here and tell me who you see."

Andy slid the glasses off his face and then looked up to the doorway all the way across the room, finding with utter shock that he could see perfectly four of his partners with their backs against the wall, Sarah then Aisling then Moira and Niko there on the end. Each of them had on a different one of his t-shirts, with yoga pants on beneath them.

"Did you give me lasik when you had me knocked out?" Andy chuckled. "I see Sarah, Ash, Moira and you're there on the end, Niko. And I don't remember anyone telling you that my Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine t-shirt was fair game to borrow, Moira."

Moira grinned, giving him a cheeky wink. "Every one of your shirts is fair game to borrow, sweetness," she replied. "But you kin see it's a Carter shirt from there?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "My eyesight hasn't been this good since I was like ten. What happened?"

"What happened," Niko said, "is that you finally got a full regeneration, or as close to one as you're going to get." The four women moved over across the room, hopping up on the bed, slowly surrounding him, getting close. "That scar on your leg is completely gone, you're probably a bit more flexible than you used to be, your eyesight's back to at least 20/20 and there may have been a number of other fixes."

Andy was a little agape then held a fingertip up, keeping everyone quiet as he took a deep breath in, held it and then let it out, listening... to nothing. "Holy shit, my tinnitus is fucking *gone*. I knew, I just *knew* something was off when I woke up, and it was that I wasn't hearing that goddamn high-pitched humming that's plagued me for the last ten years. I'm so used to having it in the background that without it there, something felt off."

"You're probably going to be noticing lots of those things for the next week or two, because after your body goes through regen, you'll find lots of portions of your anatomy will have been tweaked and you won't even have realized it," Niko said to him. "It's almost like waking up in a brand-new body I'm told. Maybe I should get Alexis in here, since she's been through it."

"I guess I was just expecting that maybe I wasn't going to go through regeneration," Andy said. "Shouldn't it have happened by now?"

Niko giggled. "Mathematically and statistically? *Long* before this. Everyone during an imprinting has about a ten percent chance of triggering a regeneration, both men and women. Considering how many partners you've got, dear, it's a little mindboggling that you didn't hit a regeneration cycle before now."

Andy rubbed his eyes and felt that a few little bumps of skin he'd had on the outside of his eyelids were no longer there. It was odd, feeling portions of your body that didn't feel like you remembered them feeling, he thought to himself. "Any idea what's changed? Beyond the eyesight and the tinnitus?"

"Like I said, the scar on your leg healed up, and there were a handful of moles on your skin that you shed off in your sleep," Niko told him. "But considering most of the stuff is internal, you'll probably never know how much or little you actually changed."

He laughed a little bit, stretching his arms over his head. "I certainly feel more rested than I ever have before, like I've been sleeping for a thousand years."

"Just as long as a normal imprinter, so you probably didn't have anything severe the regeneration had to do," Niko told him. "It's not like it was regrowing you a limb or something."

"Can..." Andy frowned for a second. "Can it *do* that?"

"In some cases, yes, but they tend to be a little rare," Niko replied. "I sort of assumed you'd gone through a regeneration with Ash or Lauren before I entered your life, and you just didn't notice because your life was so damn busy."

"I think I'd have noticed suddenly not needing to wear glasses," he joked.

"That wasn't a given," Ash told him. "But you certainly would've noticed *something*."

"How many of the girls went through regeneration?"

"Well, you *knew* Alexis did, but so did Piper, Sheridan and Fiona," Moira told him, her Scottish brogue a bit more tempered now than it had been when she'd first arrived at the house. "An' me, too. I was a bit annoyed that ye never got to see my bullet scar, but maybe it's fer the best that it was gone."

Moira and Fiona had both been imprinted on him before he'd seen them in person, something that he'd had to explain to his friends several times was fine. Phil had been up in arms, saying that what the girls had subjected him to was borderline rape, but Andy had shut down that argument quickly, pointing out that he'd known Fiona was coming, and he'd agreed to whatever Fiona's condition was, sight unseen. Never once was a decision made without his knowledge, and Andy hadn't been at all bothered by it, but he could understand why Phil had made the mistake to jump to anger. Phil dealt with questionable people all the time, although thankfully didn't have any in his Team.

"I don't know," he said, leaning over to kiss Moira's cheek. "I think a bullet scar might've been kinda sexy."

"It hurt like shite when it got too cold, so I'm happy it's gone."

Andy laughed a little bit, moving to get up and out of bed. "Shit, I had some calls I was supposed to make last night. Did someone-?"

"I handled it, love," Ash told him as she slid off the bed next to him. "You had the call with the other publisher about the McTaggart manuscript you found, but that's pretty much just a formality. You know that and they know that. They're already ecstatic to find out that he left them one last mystery novel that they can cash in on, but to find out that he also left behind an autobiography? They're going to make an incredibly generous offer, and I figure we should honor the man's wishes and just let them print them books without any real input from us."

Andy started making his way towards the bathroom and his partners followed him into the large open space. "Well, minimal input," Andy said. "I don't want to change a word, but I want to make sure they're sticking to the cover aesthetic the guy had for all the other books, and that includes for his manuscript. Maybe I can write an epilogue for the autobiography, just explain how I came to get tangled up in all of this."

"Makes sense," Ash told him.

There was a knock at the door, which made everyone sort of look over in surprise before Niko moved to it, pulling it open, letting in Melody, who was dressed in flannel pajama pants and a big baggy t-shirt. She moved over across the room, approaching Andy before wrapping her arms around him in a big hug. "Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy," she said to him before meshing

her lips against his for a long moment before pulling back, an almost shy smile on her face. “Just making sure I fulfill my duties. Heard you were awake. Anyway, Piper’s gonna give me a tour of the place, so I’ll see you later.” She pulled back from him and slipped away before he could even think to bring words to his lips, disappearing out through the bedroom doors as quickly she’d entered.

“She seems nicer than I might’ve expected,” Sarah said to him with a laugh. “She and Piper going to be okay just the two of them, or should I dispatch Em to play peacekeeper?”

“I bet Em’s probably gauging how Mali came through the process,” Andy sighed. “Can I just say I’m not at all keen about having to avoid talking about her past for fear of stirring up repressed memories? I get that it’s what she wants, but it just doesn’t strike me as particularly healthy.”

“We all deal with grief in our own ways,” Moira told him. “Believe me, I’ve seen folk try every possible avenue to find a way to get through those dark passageways, but it’s not up to us to tell her what’s what. We respect her wishes and do the best we can.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Andy said, putting toothpaste onto his toothbrush. “Well, unless you ladies need something, I should probably finish getting ready for the day, unless there’s something else you all had in mind.”

Niko grinned, giggling a bit as she headed to the door. “I’ll meet you all down for lunch after you’re through with fun time.” She stepped out of the bathroom, into the main bedroom, then headed out, closing the master bedroom’s door behind her.

“Fun time?” Andy asked.

“Mmm,” Ash agreed. “Reds only.”

“Oh *ho*,” he chuckled. “Is *that* what this is?”

“Don’t worry, Andy,” Moira teased. “We’ll make sure y’kin still walk when we’re through with you.”

What should have been a quick five-minute shower devolved into a frenzy inside of the bathroom, with each of his three redheaded fiancées taking a turn getting a load from him, and it was at least twenty minutes before the trio was satiated. He was particularly surprised how much Moira was determined to play not only with him, but with Sarah and Aisling as well, and without Fiona present.

When Fiona and Moira had joined Team Rook, Andy had sort of suspected that the two of them might be more akin Lauren and Taylor in that they would be more insular as a pair and simply delve out with the rest of the Team from time to time, but Fiona had made it clear that she wanted to be on equal footing with Ash, Niko, Em, Sarah and Piper. Andy wondered if that had left Moira feeling a little bit out on her own, and she’d been working to solidify her new relationship with Andy a bit more each and every day.

Seeing Aisling and Moira kissing each other around the head of his dick while Sarah talked dirty into his ear and ran her fingers along his chest as she pressed her sizable tits into his back, it was rather overwhelming, not the least of which because Ash and Moira were very much getting into it with each other as much as they were with him.

He encouraged all the members of his family to be open and adventurous with each other, but Moira seemed like she wanted to prove she had a place with the family outside of her pairing with Fiona, to not rely on her old connection with Andy as a kind of crutch.

With all three of them satisfied, they toweled off and got dressed.

Andy’s days had gotten a lot less easy to predict since he’d gotten all the money from Nathaniel Watkins. He left his job over at Netflix and was focusing on writing full time, but over the last month, much of his time had gone to doing follow up interviews with various media sources, including several international. His interview with the BBC had gone a little viral since a number of the girls had wandered in and out of it during his talking with the presenter. He’d also spent more time than he’d liked to in contract negotiations, doing script revisions and offering notes on pitches and proposals for adaptation of his works for television and movies. It was the *last* thing he figured anyone should be focusing on, but the people at the studios were insistent that the more people were entertained, the less

time they would have to dwell on their misery.

Andy came downstairs for lunch, finding lunch waiting for him. The girls were mostly hanging out, seeing what the plan for the day was, and wanting to check in on him after his regeneration. “So I figured I’d take Ash and Fiona with me into the city, although we’ve got room for one more, considering either Niko or Lexi’s going to be on guard detail,” he said.

There was a brief but frenzied set of Rock/Paper/Scissors games but in the end, Sarah came out on top and decided to take Andy up on the option of going into the city. As much as Niko wanted to go with them, she needed to head to the base so couldn’t head out with them, although Andy assured her there would be plenty of further opportunities in the future.

It was the first time Andy had been in the city since March, when he’d gone to see Soul Asylum at one of the very last concerts Slim’s would hold before closing during the quarantine. Apparently the venue’s closure had been planned in advance, but they hadn’t told anybody because they’d planned to have a grand farewell party in the fall, but instead, everyone had gotten locked in their homes, and the club had closed not with a bang, but a whimper.

They loaded up into one of the big Tesla SUVs and started driving south. Andy hadn’t realized it before they left, but he hadn’t been off the grounds of New Eden since their arrival in September, and he was eager to get into San Francisco and see what the city was like, now that the Air Force had come and gone through most of the buildings, pulling all the bodies from the high end apartments and homes that hadn’t been willing to respect the quarantine.

Driving across the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, it felt like the end of one era and the beginning of another. It was the middle of the day, and yet there still weren’t any other cars on the highway. Andy had driven across the bridge hundreds of times since he moved out from the Midwest, but never once in all that time had he been on the bridge with no other cars. Of course, the new Bay Bridge wasn’t all that old – well, part of it, anyway. The eastern span past Treasure Island had opened in 2013.

As they moved downtown, heading down from the overpass, Andy was shocked at exactly how empty everything was, how quiet the city was. No matter which direction he looked, no matter which way he listened, San Francisco was like a tomb. It was eerie and unnatural. No cars parked along the streets, nobody walking along the sidewalks, no food trucks, not even a car horn.

One of the things he’d always gotten used to was that going into San Francisco during the daytime was radically different than going into it at night, but now, it was almost like being in the city at 4 a.m. except that it was two in the afternoon. He fully expected that if they wanted to head back across the Bay Bridge during rush hour, they wouldn’t even need to slow down.

That was *unheard of*.

Before, it had all sort of taken on a level of unreality, the numbers too big and hard to comprehend, the losses so unimaginable that it sort of cloaked itself in a sheen of imperceptibility. But driving through the once thriving downtown of San Francisco only to feel like the entire city was devoid of people, it all hit home just how monumental the loss to life had been.

They headed up Fremont Street before crossing Market to head over to Montgomery Street, passing by the Transamerica Pyramid Building before turning onto Columbus Avenue. Despite the fact that they were heading up to City Lights Booksellers & Publishers, they crossed the infamous corner of Columbus and Broadway, which was sort of ground zero for the majority of the strip clubs in San Francisco. The Condor Club was right on the corner, and it had been featured in an Eddie Murphy movie. Hell, it was the first topless club in America, opening as such in the 1960s. He hoped that it reopened at some point, but it was hard to say, especially since the clientele had to have dropped to almost zero. Maybe it could rebrand more as a bar and keep the topless part simply as a legacy part. The other nearby strip clubs – Centerfolds, Big Al’s, the Hustler Club, Vanity and all the rest – they weren’t quite the historical mainstay that the Condor Club was, and he wondered how this particular street corner was going to look in just a few years’ time.

Andy hadn't brought his partners to see The Condor Club today. No, today they were stopping at City Lights and then one other place before heading back home. As he headed into City Lights, a broad smile spread across his face as he spotted a familiar person behind the counter. "Hey Brittany," Andy said with a laugh. "Wasn't sure you'd still be here on the other side of all of the mess."

Brittany was something of a staple at City Lights – she'd been working there for almost twenty years now apparently, and her look hadn't much changed in all that time. She looked exactly how people *expected* San Francisco to look – her brown hair was in thick dreadlocks, her nose had three separate piercings, her ears had spreaders that had opened the lobes enough to slide a Coke bottle through, and what wasn't covered by the giant baggy clothes she wore stood a decent chance to be covered in tattoos. He was never quite sure how old she was – she could've been a hard-lived thirty or a well-kept sixty, and neither would've surprised him. Still, she was an utter sweetheart and she ran over to give Andy a big hug. "I saw you on the television last month, so I knew you'd made it, but I have to admit, you seemed like you're doing a lot better than you were last year," she said.

"I saw Lawrence didn't make it," he sighed.

Brittany laughed, rolling her eyes at him. "Andy, darling, Lawrence was *one hundred*. He'd lived a grand old life. I think he was ready to go long before the plague came to decimate society, although I'd wager he'd have had something wicked to say about it. That said, our rent has fallen to basically nothing for the time being, just as a way to keep San Francisco, you know, San Francisco. Ginsberg, Kerouac, Lawrence himself... we can't just let all that history disappear into the ether."

"I know, that's why I wanted to come by, see if maybe you wanted to do a charity signing for the latest Druid Gunslinger novel," he said. "I know I'm not a Beat poet or even maybe as radical a lefty as you like to normally house but—"

"We'd be delighted, Andrew," she said to him, patting him on the back. "It wouldn't hurt to remind people that we're still here, still kicking. Didn't you lose a lot of your fanbase with all the deaths, though?"

"I've done pretty well in cultivating a fifty-fifty gender split in my audience, so we'll see how the turnout would be. You and everyone else here were so nice to me when I got started, I feel like I have to give something back. You remember that first signing? I think we had three or four people show up total to get an autograph, and I'll bet half of them didn't even really know who I was. They were just buying a copy to be polite."

"Nancy always told us that we never knew whose work would catch on, or where people find their inspiration from. She was a big advocate for us including Tolkien and the like in their own section, saying we shouldn't devalue fantasy or science-fiction just because it wasn't always appealing to the mainstream," Brittany told him. "I'll see about setting aside the first Saturday in January for the event, so we'll have a little time to publicize it and we'll see what kind of turnout we get, but any publicity is good publicity."

"Where are my manners?" Andy laughed. "Brittany Vozsesnesky, these are my fiancées Aisling, Sarah and Fiona, and my partner and bodyguard, Alexis."

Brittany grinned over at Sarah and gave her a polite little nod. "I recognized Miss Washington as soon as she came in but figured it impolite to geek out at her. But I have to ask... Is this Fiona the same one mentioned in the thank yous in one of your early works?"

Fiona giggled, giving a little mock bow. "Guilty as charged," she said. "I read a lot of the early pieces that would become the first Druid Gunslinger novel and encouraged him to keep writing at it. We were lovers in college before we both developed a case of the stupids, which, thankfully, we've outgrown as we've gotten older."

"It's amazing how much of the world we reevaluated once we realized it might've been ending," Andy sighed.

"Larry would've been proud of you, dear," Brittany told him with a soft smile. "He always liked your books. Said you never got bogged down by telling your readers about things they didn't care

about, and kept everything moving along nicely. He admired your economical use of language. Said it was uncharacteristic for your field.”

They sat and chatted for a couple of hours, each of the women getting a chance to talk over things with Brittany while Andy sort of wandered through the stacks, looking through what books the store currently had on offer. Brittany didn't know Andy all that well, but she'd known him for decades now, and his partners were always keen to find information they didn't have previously about him. Brittany even took the time to show the women a photo that had been taken of Andy at his first signing at City Lights, and true to his word, the store looked especially empty in comparison to the rest of the photos around it in the photo album.

During his time strolling around, he would occasionally catch Fiona taking pictures of him out of the corner of his eye, never stopping to pose, but somehow knowing that Fiona would only catch him at his best. He wondered if she was taking them just for herself or if she was working on some kind of book that had him tangentially involved.

After heading out from City Lights, it was time for Andy to check on one of the people who he cared the most amount that he didn't really know personally. Just up the street a little from City Lights was a place that Andy considered to be one of the great institutions of San Francisco, a tiny little corner restaurant called Buster's Cheesesteaks.

Buster's wasn't going to be a historical site any time soon, but to Andy, it was perhaps the greatest cheesesteak he'd ever had. Buster's had been a longstanding tradition between him and his friends, the place they'd always stop after a concert to get food before driving back down to the South Bay after the show. Buster's was always open late at night, and hilariously enough because of its locale, the person working the register was inevitably a stripper who couldn't get a shift that night. There was a vaguely Eastern European blonde girl in a half-zipped up track suit behind the counter right now. But the stripper cashiers weren't the reason Andy kept coming.

Standing at the grill was the tiny smiling Latino man that Andy's heart swelled to see alive. “Oh thank god Carlos,” Andy laughed, a sort of heavy nervous tension inside of him breaking for a moment. “I was worried like hell you hadn't made it.”

Carlos was lucky if he was five foot tall, but he was built like a fire hydrant, squat and muscular. He was a Latino man somewhere in his late fifties if Andy had to guess, and his English wasn't amazing, but he'd been with Buster's for as long as Andy had been going there, maybe longer, and he was a good part of the reason Andy suspected the food was as amazing as it was. Initially Andy had suspected that Carlos might even *be* Buster, but he'd asked and Carlos had laughed, pointing out that just because he was around all the time didn't make him the place's owner.

“No worries, Mr. Rook,” Carlos said to him. “I took good care of myself when lockdown was called, and as soon as the government come calling, I do what they tell me, and they pair me up with eight lovely chicas, including Gretchen here.” He slapped the tall blonde on the ass and she giggled, rolling her eyes in his direction as she reached over to ruffle his short black hair in her fingertips. “They all love me.”

“Well, I love your cooking, amigo. So how about we get some cheesesteaks cooking?”

While normally Carlos was massively focused on his cooking and didn't talk to people seated at the counter, today he was happy to be chatty and get caught up with Andy, even if they didn't really know each other that well. Carlos lived in the city, and had been moved from his old tiny apartment into one of the tall condo towers over on Van Ness, where he'd been given his own floor, in addition to being paired up with a number of gorgeous women. And while he hadn't originally *been* the owner of Buster's he was *now* and asked Andy if he should change the name of the place to Carlos's. Andy said as fun as it might be, people might get worried that things were different if the name changed, something Carlos said he could understand.

It had also turned out that Carlos was a *huge* fan of the Ballerina Badass movies, and insisted that he be allowed to get a picture with him and Sarah together, stepping out from behind the counter

for perhaps the only time Andy had ever seen it happen. Sarah was more than happy to oblige, though, even giving Carlos a shot where she was kissing him on the cheek, which made the short order cook's tanned flesh take on a blushing highlight of deep red.

As they ate, Andy spotted Fiona snapping pictures again, not just of him but of Ash, Sarah and Lexi, as well as the girl behind the counter, who was mostly engrossed in some paperback novel she'd brought with her, when she wasn't packaging up food. Fiona also snapped pictures of the empty streets, stepping out into the street to show just how empty the city was, taking a couple of photographs standing in the middle of Columbus Ave. Lexi, for the most part, kept watch by the door. She'd gotten her order to go, planning on having it later, once they'd gotten back to New Eden, despite Andy's repeated insistence that she eat it there. Being 'on watch' meant she couldn't afford to be distracted, she'd told him, and in the end, he'd relented, because he'd promised that whenever Lexi insisted something was for security reasons, he would defer to her.

It was taking more getting used to than he'd expected it to.

Andy was surprised to see that even though Carlos was making time for them to talk, there were still plenty of orders coming in. After a few minutes, Andy began to understand why. Food delivery services had flourished under the pandemic, but the method in which everyone was functioning was entirely different. The area next to the register had become a large staging area, and women were constantly coming in and out to pick up orders and take them on their way. Fiona took pictures of those people too, and Andy started to suspect she'd begun work on some kind of book about the DuoHalo epidemic.

"I think to myself when all this start, 'who will want my food' but it turn out, comfort is something people willing to pay quite a lot for, and my food, it brings comfort," Carlos said with a big, toothy grin. "So, I find silver lining to massive cloud, and I cling onto that for *my* comfort."

Andy nodded in understanding. That was all any of them could do, cling onto what light they had against the overwhelming darkness and see the way to the other side.

Sure enough, when they were heading back across the Bay Bridge to the East Bay during what would've been rush hour, Andy still didn't see another car anywhere on the roads. Even the people who were safe to travel were still deathly afraid of moving around, for fear of catching DuoHalo, for fear of spreading it, for fear of something, anything unforeseen going wrong. Despite the president promising 'a return to normality,' the reality didn't quite reflect that optimism so far.

He wondered, looking out the window while Ash held his left hand and Fiona held his right, Sarah sitting up front, chatting away with Lexi, what more he could possibly be doing to remind people that they were still alive, still going.

The trip to SF had been meant to make him feel better; instead, he felt only more worried than he had been before they'd left. He needed to be doing more, but what exactly that meant, he wasn't sure. Not yet, anyway.

Chapter Seven

December 13th, 2020

By morning, Andy had begun to form a handful of ideas. That meant he was up and out of bed uncharacteristically early for a Sunday. He was particularly proud of how he was able to extricate himself from the pile of bodies without so much as a stir. In fact, while all the girls were basically still asleep, Andy snuck out of the bedroom and headed down to his office to make a handful of phone calls.

The first was to his agent, Trish Geovani, who was out in New York, although not in NYC proper. She wouldn't be in her office on a Sunday, but thankfully, since Andy's recent bump in prominence, she'd given him her home phone number, so any time he needed to reach her for business reasons, he could do so.

"Trish, how the hell are you this morning?" he said, sitting down at his desk, dressed in sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt from some fantasy convention he'd been a guest at a couple of years ago. He had her on FaceTime, and she looked like she was at home in her study, wearing a giant t-shirt that had as many holes in it as one of his first drafts. She leaned back in her chair, like she expected this to be some kind of gripe session, or news of other problems he was having that had suddenly sprung up without warning. Calling unscheduled on a Sunday was very much unlike him.

"Okay Andy, who died?" Trish sighed.

"Lots of people. Maybe you've seen the news? But that's not why I'm calling," he said. "If I wanted to put together a quick little book signing tour, say, six days, how hard would it be to get that together?"

He could see Trish sitting up on the other end of the line, realizing that he was being serious and wasn't just calling to chit chat. "Theoretically? Not very? I mean, you've got your security concerns to worry about..."

"Let us handle those," he countered. "If I picked six cities, how fast could you line up a bookstore for me in each one to do a signing, and get a bit of promotion going around it?"

"I basically phone up any bookstore in America and ask them if they want to do a book signing with you, right now, they're going to leap to say yes. Sales for your stuff doubled after the *60 Minutes* interview, you know that, and bookstores are always eager for anything that gets people in through the door. Assuming you wanted me to start on this today, I could probably have your first signing tomorrow, assuming you can get there."

"I've got a private jet now, Trish, so getting there and back isn't the problem. Personal security we can also handle just fine, but logistics at these kinds of places might need law enforcement or military helping out if there's giant turnouts. I can probably reach out to the Air Force here, but if you've got contacts on the ground..."

"It shouldn't be too hard one way or another. You have a city list in mind?"

"New York City, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA."

"Quite the road trip."

"Air trip," he corrected, "but yeah."

"You need me to handle hotels, ground transportation and the like?"

"We'll cover all that ourselves," he said, waving his hand. "If I wanted to, could we start in NYC tomorrow evening?"

"I mean, I might have to call in a few favors, but I can probably make that happen," she admitted. "I don't know what turnout's going to be like, though. People are still pretty gunshy about leaving their own houses."

"That's the whole *point*, Trish," he sighed, leaning back in the incredibly expensive leather chair the house's original tenant had left behind. "As long as you're paired and vaccinated, there's nothing *wrong* with leaving the goddamn house. We keep telling people that, but apparently folks in the government aren't *seeing* anyone else do it, so I gotta put my money where my mouth is. I'll go and do signings and readings, make a big show of the thing. We'll do a photo blog of the whole trip, although

maybe we'll leave out the airplane parts. Other than that, though, we'll show people, like *really* show people that it's time to stop hiding indoors. I want to have a little travel diary so that everyone who's protected knows they can go out and be part of the world again, encourage them to do so."

"We can get events thrown together fast, sure Andy, but I don't know if there's going to be enough turnout to make it worth your while," Trish said. "You can always show up and sign books, but that doesn't guarantee anyone's going to come or that you'll sell more books from the effort."

"I don't *care* about making money off it, Trish. I just want to do my part to help the country wake up from the slumber of staying in their homes, once they're vaccinated," Andy told her. "I'm also going to make a point of seeing some family members for a handful of people. We're probably going to do a stopover in Chicago, and the LA portion coincides with some meetings that Sarah and Emily need to take down there, so I figured, getting out of the house for a bit isn't the worst idea. My security team will probably chew me out for a while, but I think it's important we set precedent that we can see people, hang out with people, be around people. *Anyone* who's got the vaccine can. If I'm getting out there and being seen, that'll be progress enough. It'll be *a start*. And I want to take my fiancées around to a handful of places. We're going to stop and see Piper's parents, Fiona's parents, Niko's mom and, most importantly, introduce everyone to my nephew Connor. I know he's still in shock with his dad dying, but I need the kid to know I'm there for him, whatever he needs, however he needs it. It's safe for me to travel. It's safe for me to go *see* him, so I'm gonna do that. And I think it'll help the people of America if they don't just hear someone telling them it's safe, but actually *acting* like it. In a way where they can see it." He realized he'd been talking for quite a bit without her saying anything. "So what do you think?"

"I think... it'll be a good thing," she finally responded, shifting in her chair, having scribbled a dozen or so things onto a yellow legal pad while they were talking. "But I think you'd better clear it all with your security team first, and you'd better listen to every damn thing they'll tell you along the way. This is uncharted waters we're heading into right now, so be overly cautious rather than lax. No shaking hands, no taking pictures with people. Ask people who to make it out to, sign the book, hand them the book and then move on to the next person. Don't linger and for fuck sake, Andy, don't engage in political discussions, no matter how much I know you're going to want to. As long as you can do that, then I can have your list of bookstores ready for you by the time you're wheels up tomorrow morning. New York City's easy, so hell, I'll have that ready and booked before lunch."

"Okay, get it done and I'll start things rolling on this end," he said. "Thanks Trish. I know I can be a pain in the ass, but I'm trying to do the right thing."

"I know you are, Andy," Trish sighed. "That's when you're typically the *biggest* pain in the ass. Just take care of yourself while you're out there, okay? You went from being my favorite client for artistic reasons to my favorite client for financial reasons and I don't think I'd do well if you up and died on me, okay?"

"I'm certainly not *planning* on dying anytime soon, Trish."

"Nobody ever is, Andy. Nobody ever is." She reached forward and tapped the end call button as Andy saw the screen fall dark. One call down, a couple more to go.

His next phone call was to General Bonner over at the base, and he wasn't at all surprised when she picked up on the second ring, although this time it was strictly voice and not a video call. "Mister Rook. To what do I owe the honor of this call?" she said to him, a light undercurrent of snark in her voice.

"My plane, General. Have your people finished their inspection?"

"They did last night, and you should be thankful we did it. We found a couple of listening devices and a tracker on the plane, as well as a compartment that could've been used for smuggling. But other than that, you should be ready to go. Why the sudden need to check in on the plane? I thought you told me you didn't really have any need for it until next week."

"Change of plans," he said. "I'm going to do a sort of quick impromptu book signing tour, as a

sort of effort to show the American people that once they're vaccinated, they can get out of the house. I was in downtown San Francisco yesterday and it was utterly dead. So, we're going to do a six-day book signing tour, I'm going to blog about the whole thing. We'll take photos all over and everyone's free to link to it from wherever or share photos from the trip. It'll be good PR for me, but even better PR for everyone to see that it's safe to go out there and live again. Just telling people it's fine out there for vaccinated people wasn't enough – we need to *show* them, otherwise they're going to think it's all smoke and mirrors.”

“I can respect that,” the General said. “You want some ground support at the locations?”

“My immediate reflex is to say no, which means I should probably say yes,” Andy admitted. “I haven't told my security team yet, and I'm pretty certain they're going to throw a shitfit, but it's important that we keep making progress in showing the world that we're not going to all die out because of this plague. So, yeah, anything you can do to offer a little bit of added security on location would be helpful.”

“You got a city list?”

“New York City, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA,” he told her.

“Quite the little tour you've got going on,” she replied. “I can have bodies on the ground in most of those locations, although you might be on your own in Jacksonville.”

“That's Piper's hometown, so I think I should be good. I mean, if you can get me a handful of people there for site security, I won't say no, but I don't think we'll freak out if you can't, either.”

“I can probably get a couple of people out there, but don't expect like a whole team. But if I sent you out there on tour naked, Lieutenant Colonel Hayes would probably be up my ass with a giant ass floodlight, determining if I'd engaged in conduct unbecoming,” the General chuckled.

“Linda's getting promoted?”

“Number of promotions coming down the pipe, including one of your partners. We'll do the whole razzledazzle next week, but 2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf is about to become Captain Redwolf,” the General said. “It's needed to happen for a while now, but what with everything being what it is, you can understand why we're a little bit behind. You want to tell her, or should I?”

“You definitely should and *not* me,” he stressed. For the next ten minutes or so, they worked out some of the logistics of it. The Air Force would provide between two to six people on site at each of the bookstores, offering some basic security, and Andy's crew would worry about transportation to and from the sites, and at the hotels they were staying in. He would have the list of the bookstores for the Air Force as soon as they had them in their own hands, and the General thanked him for his willingness to set a good example for everyone.

He was just finishing up with the General when Niko poked her head into his office and let out a big sigh. She immediately pulled out her phone and sent a text message, which Andy suspected was to Lexi. “You can't *do* that, Andy!” Niko said to him, a cross look on her face. “We need to know where you are! At all times! I woke up and you weren't in bed, and you weren't with Lexi or even Melody, for fuck sake! It's my job to keep you safe, and I can't do that if I don't know where the fuck you *are*!”

“I didn't leave the house, Niko!” Andy sighed, realizing she was probably right but clearly being uncomfortable with the notion of being unable to even move about his own *home* freely. “I know better than to head off the property without an escort, but there's going to be times where I'm going to walk around my goddamn house by myself, okay?”

She headed over and wrapped her arms around him in a big hug, moving to slide her ass up into his lap. “Yeah, okay, I suppose that's fair, but I would've gotten up with you if I knew you were getting up so early. It's unlike you to be up at the buttcrack of dawn.”

“I know you would've gotten up if I asked you to, hon, but then you would've tried to talk me out of things *before* I set them in motion, and I'm not going to be talked out of this,” he said, rubbing his hand against the back of her neck comfortingly. “I assume Lexi's on her way down here?”

“She *can* be. Do you need her?”

“Her and Melody. The whole Team Rook Security Detail.”

Niko scowled at him, although the anger was mostly superficial and would quickly dissolve. He hoped. “I’m going to be angry about this, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a little, but then I think you’ll be okay with letting it slide,” Andy told her, as she typed on her cell phone’s tiny little screen, sending messages to the other two, letting them know where to come and meet them.

Alexis came in a couple minutes later, followed by Melody, who immediately came over, kissed Andy on the cheek and said, “Thanks for giving me a second chance, Andy.”

“You know, you don’t have to say that *every* morning,” he joked. “Anyway, I wanted to get the three of you gathered here because we’re going to do a field trip for the next week or so. We’ll take the plane and we’re going to do six different bookstore signings, starting tomorrow.”

“Jesus, Andy,” Lexi sighed. “This is the sort of thing we should have a week or two to *plan*. In advance. Like sane people. But I suspect your mind is already made up and we’re doing this, regardless of how much we’d like you to reconsider. I guess we’ll just have to have the advantage that our enemies won’t really have time to prep either. Not local?”

“Cross the country. We’ll take the plane. Stay in hotels that we’ll book on the day, so nobody knows where we’re staying in advance. A few nights we won’t even be staying in the city where the book signing is.”

“And if the hotel we want is full?” Niko asked before everyone stopped and turned to look at her. “Right. Right. Stupid.” She laughed at the notion itself. “What hotel in the world is even going to have *guests* right now? Where are we going?”

“Couple of places on the east coast, couple in the middle and a couple here on the west coast. Last stop’ll be L.A. so we can take Em and Sarah’s meetings in Hollywood next Monday.”

“You’ve got some plans for additional stops?” Niko asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to swing by Piper’s parents, stop in and check on my nephew, your mom and a few others.”

“She’s going to be out for the wedding next month, Andy.”

“I know, but you haven’t been back to the rez in a couple of years, baby. You said so yourself. And you probably need to see the state of the land with your own eyes,” he said to her. “And I know Piper says she’s okay, but I think getting her to see her folks sooner rather than later is probably the best for her mental health, anyway. And you seeing the Rez is best for you and yours.”

“Who’s going to go with us?”

“I figure we’ll take the full Team Rook Fiancée Club, and we can stop by the house in a week’s time to take care of anyone here who’s close to their time lock before we make our way down to LA. I can also take care of a handful of people while people are packing, assuming the whole RFC is going to come along. I mean, if anyone doesn’t *want* to go...”

“Are you *kidding*, Andy?” Niko laughed. “Everyone’s been so cooped up that they’re going to be tripping over themselves to get out of the *house*, much less out of the state. I mean, everyone’s been so busy planning for the wedding that a week’s break is probably something everyone desperately needs. When do we leave?”

“Just after lunch. It’s about five and a half hours from here to NYC, and that’ll let you all figure out hotels, coordinate with the Air Force and get everything prepped and ready. It’ll be our first chance to take the new plane out for its first flight. First signing will be in NYC tomorrow evening.”

“Not to be inconsiderate, sir,” Melody said, “but are you sure you feel comfortable including me as part of your security detail so soon? I wouldn’t blame you at all if you were paranoid or wanted more time to—”

“No time like the present if you ask me,” Andy said, waving his hand. “But that’s not my decision to make. Ladies?”

Lexi and Niko looked at each other, considering their situation for the moment. “I’d much rather have an extra set of hands on the security detail, Niko, if we can get them,” Alexis said, “but I’m not marrying the big lug. Final call is definitely yours to make.”

Niko glanced over at Melody for a moment then looked at Andy. “Then I’m with the big lug. We’re giving her a second chance, so that means we have to *give* her that second chance. She’s just as on the hook for his safety, if not *more so* than the rest of us. She can’t take the reassignment again, remember? The only way she’s getting away from Andy is if he’s dead, and whatever our differences, she doesn’t have that in her. So yeah, I agree with your assessment. She can help with security details, just not take point. We need all the help we can get.”

Alexis nodded, her dark curly hair hanging around her shoulders. “Okay then, I’ll start making accommodations for us in NYC, and for getting us transportation from the airfield to the hotel, as well as to and from the bookstore. Do we know what store yet?”

“I should have that before we’re landing in NYC. My agent’s on it right now. And I will defer all hotel decisions to you three. I know how last minute this is, so I want you all to feel as much inside your comfort zones as you can get.”

“The girls are going to throw a hissy fit that you’re giving them so little time to prep, babe,” Niko giggled at him. “Especially considering all the different weathers we’re going to see. Snow in NYC and Cincinnati, shorts weather in Florida... Although, now that I think about it, it’s probably *best* that you don’t give them long to pack. They can’t lose the whole day making decisions.”

Alexis smirked. “I guess that’s one advantage of being on the security detail. We get to know in advance that we need to get up and go. I’m already packed in my head, but then again, I usually am by force of habit. Any rules or guidelines for the hotels I can consider?”

Andy shrugged. “Just get us the biggest suite we can find, I suppose. If anything, this’ll also be a lesson to all the hotels that we visit that they’re going to have to change the way their business works from now on, especially if it’s going to be several people to one room on the regular. Two beds in one room isn’t going to necessarily be a great business model anymore.”

“Ten people, two cars, two security people on Andy at all times,” Niko said. “You’re not shaking hands with people come from signings.”

“No, I hadn’t planned on it.”

“It wasn’t a question, baby,” Niko told him. “It was a statement. And if people want to do selfies, they can do it with a table in between you and them. I know you think we’re being silly, but it’s our job to keep you safe and sound, okay, so that means—”

“That means I listen to everything you tell me without hesitation or reservation. I got it, Niko,” Andy sighed. “I know I can seem like a bit of a scatterbrain here and there, but I’m going to do my part for all of this. Your job is to keep me safe, and I’m not going to tell you how to do your job. You know it a thousand times better than I do. And the bookstores will all be smaller, independent bookstores. I don’t need to go into Barnes & Nobles; they’re doing just fine on their own.”

A few hours later when Andy brought the trip casually up at lunch, you’d have thought he’d flashed the Queen for the kerfuffle it threatened to cause. Many of the girls said it was impossible for them to be ready to be gone for a week in just a few hours and needed more time to prepare...

...at least they said that *until* Andy threatened to let someone else have their spot on the trip, and then very quickly it was ‘we’ll make it work.’

He gave the RFC three hours to pack and get ready, with the plan to be at the airport at four and landing in New York around ten at night. During the time they were packing, he made a point to dose both Sheridan and Tala, who were the furthest out from their last doses. He wanted to make it slow and passionate with them, but Sheridan and Tala had gotten it into their heads that he was *also* on the clock, and so they made a game out of who could get him to pop faster, and absolutely *rushed* him through their encounters. He dosed both of them in less than twenty minutes, with Sheridan proud she’d beaten Tala’s time by almost a full minute.

And then he'd banged Nicolette in a coat closet, just because she thought it would be a fun lark.

"Master Rook," the maid told him, backing him into the closet. "I am going to need you to tend to my needs before you leave." The closet wasn't a particularly big space on the ground floor, more than enough room for the two of them to maneuver around. Nicolette had, as she often did, decided to forgo panties for the day, so she'd simply leaned forward against the wall, reached behind her and hiked up her skirt.

Nicolette preferred him rough and raw, so he didn't even bother removing his pants, simply unzipped them, fished out his cock, lined himself up and then thrust deep and hard inside of her, a sultry moan escaping her lips until he clamped his hand down over her mouth, something that made her cunt squeeze down excitedly around his shaft.

For the next few minutes, he thrust his hips against her perky ass, pushing his dick in and out of her dripping hole, as she did her best to shove back into his grinding pushes. One hand stayed clamped over her mouth, the other pressed against the wall to keep his leverage, but halfway through, he realized she'd found an angle that let her snap her body into his. She was ridiculously flexible and spirited, and she'd been working out as part of Sheridan's morning exercises to improve that even more, which he suspected played into how she was rolling her hips.

All of his partners seemed to enjoy setting the tempo for him, and Nicolette wanted this one to go quick, because she was moaning heavily into his hand, knowing that Andy's was an aurally driven person, so when he felt her core crush around him, they both locked up in an intense orgasm, his natural, hers improved by chemistry and biology.

There was something fundamentally weird about his life, Andy realized, but not in a bad way.

He packed his suitcase within about fifteen minutes, hopped through a shower to wipe off the sex funk smell of three different women, and then tried to stay out of the ladies' way. He also went downstairs and grabbed a box of advance reader copies that he was going to give to the first bookstore to sell. All the other stores would have a box worth of books shipped to them for him to sign, not just the newest book, but also a selection of some of his other works as well. NYC might get some as well, but it didn't hurt to be extra prepared.

Andy also pulled Fi aside for a few minutes during the packing, explaining that he was going to rely on her to take loads of pictures during the tour, stuff they could use to show that they were living and thriving in the new world. While the new world was still all a bit scary, it wasn't the kind of thing that should keep anyone locked in their houses. She assured him she'd do everything needed to make sure they had a great photo package to push the right message across to the public.

As they were getting ready to head to the Livermore Municipal Airport where Andy's plane was being stored, Trish called with the list of bookstores they would be visiting, their signing times, the locations and confirmation that she'd dispatched books overnight to all of the locations, even in the NYC one, so that if turnout was better than expected, they wouldn't be caught empty handed. Even still, Trish advised that signings be limited to a hundred people per location, at least inside the location at the time, something she'd conveyed to the stores themselves and to the people Andy had connected her with in the military. If they wanted to have people lined around the block waiting for a chance to come in, that was fine by her. It would make for good publicity. She *also* stressed that Andy would be doing radio interviews each morning with a station in the city they'd be having a book signing later that day, just to get the word out. It would be via phone calls, unless he could actually get to the radio stations in question.

Nobody really knew exactly what to expect in terms of turnout, so they were getting prepared for both ends of the spectrum. If they held a party and nobody came, they'd still make it look like Andy and the rest of Team Rook was out in the world, setting the right example. If they got swarmed with people, well, a bit more caution would be needed, but they could make it work, and that would be even better publicity, both for getting the world back on its feet and Andy's writing career.

He was pleased to see the cars weren't insanely packed, and that each of his partners had

managed to restrain themselves to just one suitcase each. Piper and Moira sat on either side of him, with Melody driving and Niko sitting in the front, while Alexis, Aisling, Sarah, Emily and Fiona took the other car. It was only about twenty minutes from New Eden down to the Livermore Municipal Airport, where the plane was waiting for them.

It felt super strange to have his own private hangar at an airport, but it was a place where they could leave the cars, and it was all locked up behind them. They loaded up the plane while Lexi filed a flight plan for their flight over to New York City.

Andy walked through inside of his Bombardier Global 5000, the interior of the plane done in dark greys and blues, but he did find it a little surprising that there wasn't a dividing curtain or mid-section split. He'd been told it was very easy to add one, but for the time being, he didn't have one installed, meaning the interior was basically one big open space with a number of chairs, some around a table, some more like a couch. He'd brought his laptop with him, and was considering sitting down at the table, but decided to just settle in one of the single seats on his own, letting the ladies move to get settled as Lexi and Niko moved into the cockpit, although they hadn't closed the door yet.

He glanced over and saw Aisling had a deck of cards and was letting each woman draw a single card from the deck before heading towards the cockpit.

"Should I be worried?" Andy asked Piper, having leaned over to whisper to her.

Piper giggled, patting him on the arm. "Nah. We're just settling the order we're all joining the mile high club. Didn't feel right to do it any other way. I'm probably reasonably close to the front of the line. Jack of Diamonds!" She waved her card in his direction.

Andy didn't have any idea how to respond to that, so he did the only thing he could think of, and had a good laugh. He knew they weren't kidding.

Chapter Eight

December 13th, 2020

They were wheels up a little after five, just around sunset, so they got a gorgeous view of the city sprawling out beneath them, Oakland and the Bay itself just behind them as they started their 2500+ mile flight. Andy had never flown in something so small before, and it felt even stranger to think of it as *his* plane, even if it was. He was starting to wonder if he should have Rook painted on the side of it, or maybe just a chesspiece of a rook. That might be a bit too supervillain-y, though, he decided. He'd voice the idea to his partners and was sure they'd have a consensus almost immediately about if it was a good idea or not.

But it was his first flight on *his* plane.

The flight path would take them across twelve states and three time zones, and they wouldn't be landing until the early hours of the next day, the trip five and half hours, plus the three-hour time differential meaning they would be arriving close to two in the morning local time. Niko and Lexi had been a little worried about that at first, but the first book signing wasn't until 4 pm, so they'd have plenty of time to sleep and recuperate, so they'd agree they'd find a way to make it work.

The first signing was going to be at one of the landmarks of New York City, the famous Strand Book Store in Greenwich Village. The store had been having some rough times with the pandemic keeping them closed, but they'd made a point to open as soon as their staff was vaccinated, and when Andy's agent had called to see if they could handle a last-minute book signing, they couldn't trip over themselves fast enough to say yes.

He was glad they'd gotten the Strand to agree. It was one of the first places he'd gone to visit when he'd made his first trip to New York City oh so many years ago, with their signs that said "Shop Local! Buy Early! Think Indie!" and Andy's personal favorite, "18 Miles Of Books!" There were plenty of other places he could've gone and signed, but the Strand held personal affection for him. He'd never signed there before, but it had been on his bucket list of places he wanted to sign, and the fact that they weren't just accepting of his presence but eager made it all the better. They'd immediately started calling the radio and television stations, publicizing the event, and they were hoping for a good turnout.

The plane was somewhere over the Nevada desert when Fiona and Piper came over to stand next to him. He'd brought his laptop along for the trip and had been trying to get some writing done, but some thirty minutes into the air, it seemed like a portion of the RFC had plans for him. "Hey Andy, whatcha doin'?" Fiona said in a playful singsong voice that made him suspiciously look up at them.

Most of the girls had dressed very casually for travel, with both Fi and Piper in yoga pants and a big baggy T-shirt they'd stolen from his closet. The ladies of the RFC had figured out extremely early on that Andy loved seeing them in his shirts, and so they were always stealing from his seemingly endless collection of band t-shirts. The only condition was that they needed to be able to name a song from any band whose shirt they stole, which was a great excuse to expand the girls' musical repertoire as well. Piper had on his only Jesus Jones t-shirt, while Fi was dressed in one of his many Fury In The Slaughterhouse t-shirts. Fi had her hair swept back and tucked behind her ears with a barrette, and Piper had a lazy ponytail that was off to one side like she was an 80s aerobics fitness instructor.

"Trying to get started on the next Gunslinger book," he said, a smirk on his lips. He could already sense where this was heading based on the look on Fiona's face. "Drew the high card, did you, love?"

"I did," Fi said with her trademark charm. "But we were all talking back in the back half of the plane about how we wanted to do this, and we've decided it's going to be a trio experience each time, with one of us joining the Mile High Club and another assisting, essentially 'who's got next,' so we all get a little bit more comfortable playing together as a team."

Andy's face tried to go as blank as it could. "You're suggesting turning the Mile High Club into, what, a team building exercise? Like trust falls and shit?"

“Exactly! We all need to get used to splitting our time, not only with you but also with each other, and that means we all need to get out of our comfort zones a bit. We’re gonna work you over in pairs, and we drew cards to determine the order,” Fi said with a smirk as she held up her card. “Queen of Hearts, if you can believe it. I swear, Ash would’ve accused me of stacking the deck if I’d been holding it, but I drew from the deck blind like everyone else.”

“So you’re second on deck then, Piper? Jack of Diamonds turned out to be strong enough to get you on deck? No aces?”

“Nary an ace to be seen,” Piper giggled. “Fi’s first, then me, then Niko with a Jack of Clubs, Ash with a Seven of Hearts, Sarah with a Five of Hearts, Moira with a Four of Diamonds and Em’s last in line with Two of Diamonds. But it means everyone’s mixing it up, getting a little fun and freaky with someone they haven’t really spent all that much time with.”

“Fun and freaky?”

“We need to all be willing to adapt to each other, and that means being comfortable with each other in any state, especially naked and intimate,” Fiona said.

“I thought you said you weren’t sure about dabbling with other women, Piper,” Andy said to her. “You don’t have to do an—”

Piper reached over and slipped her hand on the back of Fiona’s neck, pulling her lips to her own, a surprised blip of noise from Fiona before she sort of melted into the kiss, the two tangling tongues for a long moment. Fiona seemed caught off guard but was clearly getting into the groove of it, sliding her own hand up and into Piper’s hair before the two finally broke from their kiss, as Piper looked at Andy like the cat that had eaten the canary. “I think we need to tell Phil there’s pretty solid evidence that their serum will open women’s minds wide to the idea of bisexuality, because I can’t even begin to tell you how fucking hot that just made me,” Piper purred. “I can’t wait to devour her from head to toe, to feel her squirming under my touch.”

Fiona feigned waving her hand in front of her face to fan her. “Oh, now *that* had a *lot* more spice on it than it did in rehearsal,” she said with an almost youthful giggle. “Anyway, all the ladies of the RFC want to play doubles with you, so we decided this would be a great way to start.”

“Mmmm. Well, Niko and Ash are more than a little familiar with getting intimate with each other, but I think the rest of the pairings’ll be pretty new,” Andy admitted. “And you’re comfortable with getting frisky with Niko as well, Piper?”

The tall athlete blushed a little bit and nodded shyly. “She’s like a little fireplug of sexuality, Andy, with an ass that just. Will. Not. Quit. I can’t wait to just go buck wild and embrace this new side of me. I need to crack me off a piece of all the other girls I’m gonna be sharing my life with.”

“Hey, I’m not one to tell any of you ladies no when it comes to stuff like this. How do you want me?”

“The three of us are going to go to the back of the plane while everyone else comes to the front, so we can have a bit of privacy,” Fiona told him. “We really should look into having a divider set up, just so that if some of us want to sleep on a flight, we’ve got the room and space to do it without forcing the rest of the plane into dead silent mode.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Andy chuckled. “I didn’t really much think about it, but I guess since it’s our plane, we can do what we want to with it.”

“Well, what we want to do with it *now* is have some fucking *fun*, Andy,” Piper giggled, pulling him up out of his chair.

Andy put his laptop snugly into its case and set the case on the table before Piper kept tugging him towards the back of the plane, Fiona behind him pushing one hand against his shoulders. Once they got to the rear section, the women who were sitting there – Em, Sarah and Ash – got up and let Piper tug Andy to sit down on the center of the couch.

“You got this Piper?” Ash said with a sly smile. “Thought I heard Fi whimper a little upfr—”

Piper suddenly reached over and pulled Ash’s face to hers, locking lips with the diminutive

redhead who gasped a moment at first before dripping into the kiss, her hands sliding along the tall athlete's waist. They broke the kiss a moment or so later as Piper grinned almost challengingly to Ash. "I decided I'm all in, so I'm gonna *be* all in, Ash." Piper reached down and goosed the Irish woman's ass, which only made Aisling giggle, rolling her eyes a little.

"Great, just bloody great," Aisling teased. "She's gone from shy wallflower to full charge fun-time slut."

Piper leaned down and nibbled on Aisling's ear while whispering loud enough for everyone in the back of the plane to hear, "You know you fucking love it, don't you?"

Andy was surprised to see Aisling blush as much as she did when she was pulling from Piper's grasp, but he still caught her nodding with a wry smile that he suspected only he and Piper saw. "Okay, ladies," Ash said, wrangling the rest of them. "Everyone not involved in the funtime, up to the front of the plane."

"I don't suppose I could linger a smidge and watch?" Emily asked.

Piper reached over and swatted Em on the ass with a solid spank, as the tiny actress giggled furtively and scurried forward toward the fore section, followed by Ash and Sarah, although Sarah lingered just long enough to say, "Don't do anything I wouldn't fucking do, although I don't really know what that would be, because I'll—" She was still talking when Em and Ash both reached back to grab a wrist apiece and pull her away from the back.

"You just sit there and let us work," Fiona said. Andy hadn't gotten especially dressed up either. Even when he was doing book signings, he didn't get too decked out, dressed in his usual jeans and a t-shirt. Fi and Piper weren't going to take too much time with foreplay this time, tugging his cock out as they flanked him on either side of the couch, leaning their heads down to press their lips on either side of his shaft, kissing each other around his prick while they let their tongues smother his flesh.

As much as they clearly enjoyed making him squirm while they were blowing him, Fiona didn't want to wait too much, and stood up before tugging her yoga pants only down far enough to her mid thighs before scooting back and just sliding herself up and onto his dick, her head leaning back as she let out a soft moan. "God, Andy, you always feel like... home..."

Andy could understand why there was a bit of thrill in this, being high in the sky, as Fiona shimmed up and down on his cock, her ass bouncing in his lap, as Piper leaned in and kissed him, her fingertips dragging firmly against the back of his neck. One of his hands held on to Fiona's hip as Piper took his other hand and pushed it down the front of her yoga pants, sliding two of his fingers up inside of her pussy.

He wanted to savor the experience for as long as he could, but with Piper's lips locked onto his own and Fiona's weight bucking against him, he felt his release filling up Fiona's cunt much faster than he would've liked, but thankfully, his orgasm set off her own, as it always did, and she leaned back against him, nestling her face against his neck as Piper's lips finally broke from the kiss. "Remember, I got next," Piper said to him.

"And Niko's gonna make you squirm when you do," Fiona purred.

There wasn't a shower on the plane, but the three of them took turns using the sink to wipe down a little bit before making their way back into the main compartment of the plane, where Moira immediately high-fived Fiona, who had a sly grin on her face. "How was it, love?" Moira asked her.

"I don't know if it's the fact that we're so high up or if it the feeling that we're basically doing it in public, but it is a *rush*," Fiona giggled, slumping down in a chair.

Things got quiet for a bit after that, with most of them watching movies on their various laptops. It was when they were somewhere over Nebraska that Andy's phone rang, routed through the plane's Wi-Fi. He chuckled a little bit, stood up and walked into the back of the plane as he took his first airborne phone call.

"Hey Trish, what's up?" he said, having seen it was his agent on the caller ID.

"How set is your schedule tomorrow?"

“Well, the signing is set for 6, and I think it’s going to run about three hours, why?”

“If I needed you to do it from two to five instead, could you?”

Andy laughed, because he could sense there was a nervous excitement on the other end of the phone. “Trish, if there’s something you want me to do inst—”

“The Late Show With Stephen Colbert wants you to come by and do an interview. You and any of your partners who want to stop in. But they’d need you to be at their studio by 6:30-7 at the latest.”

“Are you kidding?” Andy said in amazement. “They want me?”

“Well, they want Em and Sarah, I think, but they *also* want you. It would be a nice easy conversation, unlike the long form interview with 60 Minutes, or the ones you’ve done since then,” Trish told him. “I think it’d be a good move, even if it’s just you. They don’t really have much turnout in terms of in-studio audience, so it’s in line with what you’re wanting to do in terms of giving good promotion, and they’ve got plenty of security, so it should be safe.”

“And if none of the girls wanted to do it? If it was just me, would they balk?”

“Nope, Stephen seems to think you’d be a great interview to have, even if it’s just you, and it would certainly get more people to turn out for your little signing tour. Can I tell them yes?” Trish’s voice was so heavily layered with eagerness, he didn’t want to tell her no. “I don’t ask for a lot from you, but this is one opportunity I think I’d have to strangle you if you didn’t want to take. Besides, I know you *love* Colbert. You were always asking what it would take to get him to invite you on. Now you know. So please, let me tell them yes.”

“Trish, you know I’m a fan of the guy. Of course, I’m going to let you say yes. We’ll get a little less sleep than originally intended, but sometimes you must move things around and make them work because the opportunity’s too good to pass up. I’ll get it set up on our end so we’re in and out of the hotel and the signing to make it to the Ed Sullivan Theater on time to get through make up and hop into the interview. You think you can do the prep work for them, so they have a baseline of whatever they want to know?”

“You know Stephen,” Trish told him. “He’s going to be eager to talk to you about a whole bunch of things. They want you and the rest of your Team to be the only guests for an entire show. They’ll have a very long interview with you and anyone else on your Team who wants to be part of it, so let the ladies know if they want to talk a bit, they just need to show up.”

“I’ll run it past them but tell Colbert’s people to expect at least a handful of the ladies are going to want to show up with me,” Andy said. “Anything else I should know about the tour dates?”

“Everything’s set up, and I sent Lexi the full list, as well as sending it over to that new General friend of yours,” she said, clearly trying to get him off the phone so she could call the television people. “Call me after the taping so I can hear how it went! Knock ’em dead!”

Andy shook his head with a smile. He’d long ago learned not to take it personally when Trish hung up on him before they were actually done talking; she’d always been the first one to get out of any conversation if she felt like she had other things that needed doing. He walked up back towards the front of the plane and had a wry smirk on his face. “Anyone want to do The Late Show?” he said with a chuckle as he moved to take the one open seat, Sarah immediately climbing into his lap, kissing him.

“I’m fucking in! He’s always been super fucking nice to me.”

“I’ll go along as well, Andrew,” Emily said, sitting in the chair across from him. “It won’t hurt for us to reinforce the image of the family.”

“No way in hell you’re keepin’ me off the telly,” Aisling said with a playful grin. “Niko’s flyin’ right now, but I’m sure she’ll say the same.”

“We’ll all go do it, yeah?” Piper asked, only for the rest of the women to nod in agreement.

For the next few hours, people retreated to their devices, although Aisling and Andy moved back to the couch in the back to continue their slow watch of “Farscape,” with Sarah jumping in on the other side of him, nestling his body between the two redheads.

They were about an hour outside of New York City when Lexi wandered back to talk to them.

“So we’ve got two suites at the Walker Hotel in Greenwich Village, each of which can fit five. They hadn’t really thought this new world through all too well yet, so we’ll just have to make do with what we can get our hands on. We’ll split into two rooms for the night, but you have to have at least Niko with you in the room at all times, because I’m not having you sleep without *someone* from security forces on you.”

Andy nodded. “I told you, whatever you ladies want me to do to keep myself safe, I’m going to listen to you.”

“Good. We’re going to touch down reasonably soon, and then we’ve got a trio of SUVs picking us up and transporting us to the hotel. I understand we’re shifting to do the signing earlier so we can stop off and do the Late Show,” she said with an amused look on her face. “You want to head back to the hotel afterwards or to the airport to fly down to Florida?”

“How long’s the flight down the coast?”

Lexi waved her hand in the air a bit. “Two and a half, maybe three hours, give or take. We can do it fine after the recording, as long as Piper’s family understands once we get there, we’re going straight to the hotel to crash, and we can see them in the morning. No late-night dinners or Cuban coffees, no matter how much they want to see her as soon as she get there.”

“That should work, unless you’d rather we do two nights at the Walker.”

Lexi shook her head. “Negatory. The more on the move we can stay, the easier my job’ll be. I like the idea of us being constantly in flux, staying ahead of anybody looking to pin us down.”

“Then away we’ll go,” Andy agreed. “And thanks again for going along with me on all this, Lexi. I know you’re still probably annoyed at how last minute it all is, but I think it’s important.”

Lexi smiled and shrugged a little bit. “Andy, stop apologizing. You’re the principal, I’m the bodyguard. Whatever the principal says needs to happen, it’s my job as the bodyguard to *make* it happen, so we’ll each stick to our roles and call it good, okay?”

“Couldn’t ask for a fairer deal.”

“Great. Now let me go see if I remember how to land an aircraft,” she said as she started heading back towards the cockpit.

“She’s kidding, isn’t she?” Sarah asked just a touch suspiciously.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Andy said. “Like, eighty to ninety percent sure.”

She punched him in the arm for that, and he probably deserved it.

Landing at the private airport outside of New York City was definitely a new experience, because Andy had to admit, not being forced to walk through metal detectors or stow things into overhead bins was a luxury he’d never imagined he’d have in his life.

The private airport wasn’t all that busy, but there were three SUVs waiting for them, each with their own driver, and Niko and Melody checked each of them, and then the vehicles, while Alexis parked the jet in the private storage hanger they were renting for the day. “Don’t lose our plane!” he teased Alexis as she headed back into it to park it. He could see her playfully flipping him off through the windshield.

Andy hadn’t even thought about things like temporary jet parking when he’d bought the plane, but it wasn’t like he could just fold it up and put it in his back pocket when he wasn’t using it, so they would rent storage places wherever they were staying over.

The drive into New York City wasn’t anywhere near as quiet as Andy had expected it to be, as his particular driver, Imani, had loads of questions. Andy, Niko, Sarah and Fiona had taken one car, and Imani had recognized both Sarah from her movies and Andy from his 60 Minutes interview.

“You mind me asking you a question Mister Rook?” she said to him a few minutes in.

“Andy, please. And go ahead.”

“What’re your thoughts about this whole MPA that Congress is talking about?”

Andy cocked his head to one side. “We’ve been in the air most of the day, Imani, so I’m not entirely sure what you’re talking about.”

“The Male Protection Act that Congress is starting to kick around,” she said. “They started talking about it this afternoon, and y’know, I agree we need to keep all y’all men safe, but some of it sounds, I dunno, like maybe dudes would take offense being told how to live their lives.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“Like, what they’re saying is that stuff that’s hazardous to men’s health would be forbidden from them. Like, y’all would have to stay in a certain degree of shape, couldn’t engage in dangerous activities, couldn’t do things designated unhealthy or perilous. Like, smoking would be right out and drinking alcohol would be regulated.”

“I don’t smoke, but I don’t know if I like the idea of the government telling me that I no longer have the right to,” Andy scowled. “And telling us we can only drink as much as they say sounds pretty suspicious to me.”

“You should look into it,” Imani said. “I mean, on one hand, I feel like it’s about time that all y’all dudes get your bodies legislated like y’all been trying to do to us women for centuries, what with all the abortion laws and shit, but on the other hand, if us women is dictating what men can do with *their* bodies, how’s that make us any better than the dudes we been complaining about all this time?”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely have to do some reading about all of this.”

As the cars made their way through the quiet late-night streets of New York City, Andy was looking up the news on his iPad, scrolling through to pick up as many of the highlights as he could. As Imani had suggested, Congress was starting to debate something called the Male Protection Act, which sounded like it would trample over a whole hell of a lot of men’s personal freedoms in order to keep them “safe” or protected. Exactly what was going to be in the MPA when it was presented was still being debated, but it ranged from limited caloric intake to essentially lo-jacking every male in America like they were prisoners under house arrest. Some of the earliest suggestions had already been struck down as “too prohibitive,” one of which would’ve forbidden men from leaving the country for any reason for the next ten years, but others, like men having to obtain specific permission to travel internationally were certainly being talked about like they were already a done deal. The whole thing made his stomach uneasy, even if he could see the root cause the women were trying to deal with.

With the survival of men and women so tangled up with one another, and so many men having died in the epidemic, the government was going through typical overreach paranoia and wanting to regulate as much “safety” as they could, in many cases going too far.

It was a little like speed limits, Andy felt. In principle, he understood them well enough, respected them and was in support of them generally. But like any other law forbidding people from doing things, they’d often been turned into a funding tool for the police in how they were enforced. Some basic measures to ensure men weren’t needlessly risking their lives, that was something he could certainly get behind, but if they were going to tell him he had to cut meat entirely out of his diet, well, they could pry his bacon cheeseburger from his cold dead hands.

Click! went the camera shutter as Fiona took a picture of him from the front seat, looking at his tablet in the back seat of the SUV with a slightly worried expression on his face. He looked up and offered the best smile he could as she snapped another one. Making a good impression on the nation was important, and if he was moping or scowling in all the photos, it wasn’t going to be good for anyone, much less selling the impression that America was open for business again.

“Jesus Christ, this is fucking ridiculous,” Andy muttered. “Mandatory therapy for all men? No high stress jobs? Requisite eight hours of sleep each and every day? Government run doctors check ups every six months? Intrusive much?”

“Remember, though, babe,” Niko told him. “You’ve got close to two dozen women whose lives depend on you staying safe. I think asking for a bit of common-sense protections isn’t too much, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I think we gotta be very careful how far down this line of conversation we go, before it starts becoming government mandated safety blankets,” Andy grumbled. “How’d you like it if the

government started telling you what you could and couldn't eat?"

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to speak your mind about all of it at some point, Andy," Fiona said. "What was that thing you said back in college? 'Nobody's an activist until it's their butt on the line?' I remember thinking how cynical it sounded back then."

"A cynic's just a realist who hasn't had enough time to be proven right yet, Fi," Andy snorted.

They reached the hotel not too much longer afterwards, and the plan was for the SUVs to come back and ferry them from the hotel to the bookstore, from the bookstore to the Ed Sullivan theater, and then back to the airport. Everyone was keeping their larger luggage on the plane, and just taking smaller bags so there wasn't an avalanche of luggage everywhere they went, but it still felt like moving an army platoon.

At the hotel, Andy asked the front desk for an 11 am wake up call, explaining they were all going to be pretty jetlagged, and that they were going to do their best to adjust to the timezone shift, but also if they could have the wake-up call be room service bringing them all breakfast, it would be very much appreciated. All of them quickly placed an order for the morning, with Andy even thinking to order some pineapple juice so none of the girls would yell at him too much for having soda in the morning, even though many of them were putting in coffee orders.

When they got up to the suites, all the women took turns giving Andy goodnight hugs and kisses before they split for their separate rooms, with Ash, Niko, Em and Sarah taking the room with Andy, and Lexi, Melody, Fiona, Moira and Piper taking the other. Nobody was happy about sleeping apart from each other, but until the hotel rooms were equipped with larger beds, it was all they would be able to do.

Andy took care of brushing his teeth and washing his face first, and as soon as he was out, he was about to climb into bed when Emily sat down next to him, already in her pajamas, taking his hand nervously in her own.

"You're still cross with me, aren't you, Andrew? About the specifics regarding Mali? I want you to know that I had only the best of intentions."

He sighed, nodding. "I am still cross, yes Em, simply because you waited until the last possible minute to tell me. And you did that *intentionally*. Meaning you knew it was going to cause friction, but you waited until I was right there at the site so I couldn't even stop to think about the ramifications of what you were asking of me. I don't like being ambushed, Em, especially by someone who's supposed to be on my side."

She sighed, starting to cry a little bit. "I know, Andrew. It was very wrong of me, but I was so desperately afraid you might tell me that we would need to pair her with someone else, and her story made me so sad, and she has been so kind to me in the face of adversity that we needed to help her."

Andy gritted his teeth for a moment, then resolved to try and let the anger go. "And I would've come to that conclusion on my own as well, Emily, but it should've been something we decided as a family, not something that you just decided *for* us. The only way this is all going to work is if we all trust each other with our lives, and you didn't even trust me to come to the same conclusion on this as you did."

She threw her arms around him, the tears flowing a little stronger now as she clung to him tightly. "I cannot go back and fix the mistake this time, Andrew, but I can promise you that I shan't do it again, that I will remember we're all a family now, and that I need to act in a way that shows I'm putting the family's needs ahead of my own petty fears." She pulled back so that her puffy eyes could look into his own. "Can you forgive me, Andy?"

The fact that she was using the shortened version of his name meant she understood the weight of her mistake, and the fragility on her face made it impossible for him to hold onto his anger, not that he'd intended to. "Of course I can, Em, but let's stop making a habit of deciding things for the whole house without talking it out, okay?"

She smiled a little bit and leaned up to kiss him as he wiped away the tears from her cherubic

cheeks. “Thank you... I’m so used to having to think of just myself, or more recently, just myself and Sarah. But you are most assuredly correct – this *should’ve* been a House decision and I put myself above the House in making it for you all. I can’t promise I won’t ever do it again, but I’ll work very hard not to.”

“That’s all anyone can ask of you, Em,” he said just as the others were making their way over to the bed, everyone giving both him and Em a big bear hug, happy to see them having put their differences aside. “Now let’s get to sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

They all climbed into bed, Andy with his arms around Emily so she’d know he meant it when he said he forgave her, Sarah in Em’s arms, Niko holding onto his back and Ash holding onto Niko’s. Just as he was about to fall asleep, he felt Niko’s lips right over his ear, whispering into it, “You try and leave this hotel room without me, mister, and I’ll break both your legs.”

He knew she meant it affectionately.

Chapter Nine

December 14th, 2020

When he woke up in the morning, he was surprised to find that nearly everybody but him had been up for at least an hour with one exception, as dear Emily had wrapped her arms around him in the middle of the night and snuggled in against him as hard as she could, not letting go, so her face was up against his collarbone, and she had drooled all over him in her sleep. The others, however, had quietly gotten up, showered, and dressed, and as much as they would've loved to let Andy sleep in, he needed to get up and get his shit in gear, so Sarah woke up Emily and Niko woke up Andy.

He made Emily shower by herself as he reviewed the morning news on his iPad. They'd continued with the debate about what should be in the Male Protection Act, and he couldn't bear to turn on C-SPAN to watch the discussion live, because he knew he'd only end up yelling. As soon as Em was out of the shower and drying her hair, Andy put the iPad down and headed into the shower.

By the time he was coming out of the shower, the ladies of the other room had brought all their things over to Andy's room, each of them ready to check out, with the exception of Emily, who was finishing putting on her makeup.

"Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy," Melody said first thing when she saw him.

"You really don't have to keep saying it every morning, Melody," he laughed as Niko walked over towards him.

"You've got an interview with the New York Times in about an hour, but we can go downstairs and enjoy lunch while you're doing that," Niko told him like she had his entire schedule for the day mapped out. "They would've loved to talk to you yesterday, but they understand you were in transit, and apparently the bookstore's done pretty well in terms of letting people know they're going to have a book signing."

"I can't imagine anyone's lined up or anything."

"Oh, there's people lined up," Niko said with amusement.

"And a handful of protestors too, so we'll need to exercise some caution," Alexis added.

That sentence hit Andy in the face like a bucket of cold water. "Excuse me, what now? Protestors? What the hell are they protesting?"

"Your preferential treatment, your survival when so many other men died, plus the standard 'don't inject me with your microchips' nutcases, although the store's been advising them to steer clear of being in public, for their own health."

Andy rolled his eyes. "Okay, look, I get them being angry that I lived and lots of other men didn't, but I'm *with* them on that. And what's protesting going to get them? Protesting *me* especially! I can't change any of it."

"What's that King Missile song you used to love, dear?" Fiona asked him. "Where the man goes 'what ever happened to protesting nothing in particular, just protesting, because it's Saturday, and there's nothing else to do?' It was on the album with that 'Detachable Penis' song that was everywhere for its 15 minutes of fame."

"Yeah, well, I somehow doubt any of these people will remember that song, love," Andy chuckled. "Anyway, let's get downstairs. I'll bet the Times reporter's already here."

By the time they hit the lobby, Andy was ready to have his game face on for the interview. The last month or so, he'd done plenty of interviews either by Zoom or by phone, but this was the first in-person interview he'd had since the 60 Minutes interview that had certainly changed his life.

The woman doing the interview, Claire Russell, was in her early thirties, and more than a couple of times, Andy almost felt like she might have been flirting with him, or maybe that was just because Sarah and Fiona had gotten a little overprotective a couple of times and interrupted before Andy could answer a question. The interview hadn't felt combative, but twice Claire had asked Andy to speak *for* the women in his life, and each time, either Piper or Ash had been like, "we're *right here*, you can ask *us*, and we'll speak for *ourselves*." The rest of time, the interviewer had been smart and focused on *why*

he was on tour, what he hoped to accomplish and whether or not this was the right time to encourage people to get out of the house.

“Look, anyone who’s paired up and has taken the Quaranteam serum one way or another, it’s safe for them to travel,” Andy said, in exasperation. “We need to start getting used to the new normal, and it isn’t living at home, never going outside again. That was the old normal. *This* normal, people can go wherever, as long as they’re paired. But people aren’t going to believe that until someone’s showing it to them. So that’s what I’m doing.”

They headed from the hotel straight to the bookstore. The drivers they’d had yesterday came back to pick them up again today and would be with them until they were dropped off back at the airport in the evening.

Even in the middle of the day, New York City still felt somewhat abandoned, something he’d never seen before. Yes, there were cars on the road, but it wasn’t wall-to-wall traffic. Hell, it was barely even traffic. The only time the car stopped was for red lights, and even then, they were almost always the first in line at it. He was used to NYC being a constant barrage of car horns and people yelling “fuck you!” at nobody in particular. Instead, the city had an almost peaceful, serene vibe to it. He knew it wouldn’t last.

Andy caught Fiona taking photographs of the empty streets every so often, documenting how strange the current fear of going outside was. There was snow on the ground, and the NYC streets weren’t completely cleared. The wind had come in since the morning, and he sort of hoped it would discourage protestors from hanging around his book signing, but as they pulled up to the bookstore, he could see it hadn’t pushed much of anyone away. There weren’t a *lot* of protestors, but there were still half a dozen people outside holding picket signs. The first one he saw said, “Choose God over ‘Science!’” Another said, “You are NOT special!” One with particularly bad handwriting said, “Jesus hates you!” The last one he saw said, “Let me die how I lived – FREE!”

‘You will,’ Andy thought to himself, ‘and that right soon.’

Inside, nearly a hundred people had shown up to get copies of Andy’s books autographed, and a big cheer erupted when he entered the store. As he expected, there were also a handful of people in line who’d brought things for Emily and Sarah to sign, if they were doing signings, but both women insisted to the bookstore that they were just here to support Andy and didn’t want to deflect focus or slow things down. One of women near the front of the line pointed out that both Em and Sarah were going to be appearing in the upcoming movie adaptation of the first *Druid Gunslinger* book, and wanted to know if they could sign that for them. Because of that, and because the crowd seemed quite insistent, Sarah and Emily agreed they would sit with Andy and would sign *Druid Gunslinger* books if requested, but, like Andy, weren’t going to shake hands or take selfies.

Before the signing, Andy did a quick reading from the upcoming *Druid Gunslinger* book, “The Fatal Solstice,” which he’d finished a little more than a month ago, something he figured would be a good test of who was here for the celebrity of it and who was an actual fan of his books, and found the audience was enraptured with the section of the story he’d chosen to read, from an early section of the book that hinted at some of the bigger plot he was pushing forward with the series. The audience clapped much louder than he’d expected.

Andy moved to settle behind the signing desk they’d set up for him, Sarah to his right and Emily to hers, with Niko standing behind them as Alexis patrolled the line, sizing people up. Melody was wandering around, trying to do her best to not look like part of Andy’s entourage, so she could spot trouble if it sprung up. The Air Force had provided two people to help in terms of security, one on the door, the other also wandering through the line, just making sure people were okay. There had been a metal detector that everyone had been required to pass through to come in for the signing, but Alexis had insisted she be given the space to patrol freely. She, Niko and Melody were, of course, all armed, and they’d insisted Andy wear a bullet proof vest on beneath his t-shirt, something he’d thought was ridiculous, but he’d agreed to do whatever it was that the two women in charge of his safety instructed

him to, so he'd dutifully put it on. They'd made him wear one of his baggiest T-shirts, so the fact that he had the vest on wouldn't be obvious.

The signing went off without much of a hitch, although a handful of people had been a little hurt that Andy wouldn't shake hands or take selfies. One guy had had the balls to ask Andy if Emily was a great fuck right in front of her. Emily had, thankfully, been more than ready, and instead of blushing or shying away from it, she took glee in staring the man down, and detailing how much she delighted in ensuring that Andy's balls were never left even a little bit full. The man, completely taken aback by how direct and unflinching she was, had stuttered and stumbled away, being mocked by pretty much everyone else in line, as Emily was grinning from ear to ear.

Andy signed over 300 books over the course of two hours, with loads of people trying to edge in questions about what he was writing next, when "The Fatal Solstice" would be on store shelves, when filming was going to start on "Neon Stonehenge," if any of his other works were going to be adapted, and a couple of questions about what his relocation experience was like and if he was going to write a book about it.

They'd cut off the number of people in line at 315, but Andy agreed to hang around a little longer to sign a few things for the staff themselves, all of whom had been incredibly helpful for the afternoon, one of whom had even brought a copy of "Fatal Alliances," asking if the rumors were true about someone considering making a movie of it. He tried to keep his answers honest but still a little vague, so that no one would be run around saying he'd violated NDAs or put false hope into the air.

It was true that Maya was in the process of getting "Fatal Alliances" adapted, but she'd actually started to change her mind about how she wanted to do it over the last few weeks, with the thought of adapting it as a television series instead of a movie, something Andy had whole heartedly endorsed, as he'd been unsure that the complexities of the book could be successfully compressed down into just a couple of hours. He'd spent a couple hours a week for the last few weeks helping her break the book down into various acts and divvying things up, as well as offering her points where she could expand upon the book, add additional subplots or buff up the narrative with more time. She'd felt like she'd just about gotten it all together right before he'd left for his trip, and she had planned to start pitching to networks soon.

Once they left the bookstore, they were on their way to the Ed Sullivan Theater, and Andy couldn't have been giddier. Ever since Stephen Colbert had taken over for David Letterman, Andy had seen the man as the heir to both Jon Stewart and Johnny Carson and had always made it a point to watch at least the Late Show's monologue, either on first broadcast that night or on YouTube as soon as it went up later. But Andy had always considered himself just a silly little fantasy writer, and never thought he was going to be the kind of person well known enough to be invited onto the show.

When Andy got there, he was pleased to find that the staff was ready for not just him but the whole Team, and that they had brought in additional people to help get everyone ready in terms of makeup and asking prep questions, discussing what was okay to talk about and what wasn't. And, to Andy's delight, nobody seemed to be assuming that just because Andy was okay talking about something that all his partners would *also* be.

And, to Andy's great excitement, Stephen came in himself to sit and chat a little bit with him, talking about how weird the whole world had gotten, and if he had any tips for how to keep multiple partners getting along. Stephen's wife Evie hadn't been especially thrilled with sharing her husband with other women at first, but seemed like she was starting to come around, he'd told Andy, who'd nodded and told him that the number one question people had been asking him was, "all these women are *getting along* most of the time – is that *normal* now?" And while Andy certainly couldn't speak to anyone else's experience, he could say from his own that he'd found friction between people on the same Team to be relatively minimal, and that he too had wondered if that was simply how things were going to be from now on.

There was some talk about how much he wanted to pitch his book tour, and Andy had stressed

that while he wanted to mention it, that it certainly didn't have to be the focus of the interview, considering he knew that Stephen might've wanted to follow up on the 60 Minutes interview, or talk to any of his partners about their experiences. Stephen told Andy that they were the only guests for the evening, meaning they would do about an hour's worth of interview and then edit it down to just the stuff they could use, but would throw the whole thing up on the YouTube channel.

The last thing they asked Andy was if he had any music he wanted to come in on, any songs that the band could cover for his entrance music, and on a split second lark, he asked if they could cover The Charlatans UK's song "Weirdo," and Stephen said that he loved that song, and would be happy to see if the house band could cover a bit of it for him.

About thirty minutes before they were set to go on stage, Andy ran to the toilet and threw up, something that made all his partners laugh. Everyone knew he wasn't sick; it was just stage fright. He had his makeup retouched and then had a good laugh about it himself, shaking his head. He hadn't gotten nervous at anything else, not even the 60 Minutes interview, but somehow the thought of going out and talking to one of his favorite comedians made him so ridiculously on edge that he could barely contain himself.

All of that disintegrated as soon as he heard the Late Show band covering "Weirdo" to play him and his family on. Normally there was just room for two or three guests on the stage, but they'd set it up so they had two couches stage right of Stephen's desk and one behind those two up on risers, so that they could fit nine of them on stage if they wanted, but both Alexis and Melody had agreed they didn't want to be on stage, each preferring if they could stay off stage and do their job in terms of security.

For the better part of an hour, Stephen and Team Rook held a delightful conversation. The focus started with Andy but had drifted across nearly every one of his fiancées before the interview was done, all of them getting at least a couple of minutes chatting with the genial host, who genuinely seemed like he was fascinated by their life stories and how their experience in joining such a strange new family unit had gone for them.

As expected, Colbert did spend a good ten minutes talking to Emily and Sarah, dwelling on what they'd seen in terms of change, and when they were going to start working again. Sarah took the opportunity to mention that they were going to start in on filming of Andy's first Druid Gunslinger book, "Neon Stonehenge," next summer with the hope of getting it out for Christmas, 2022.

The charming late-night host also spent several minutes talking with Piper about what she knew about when the Olympics might start up again, but of course, she knew about as much as anyone else did, which was to say nearly nothing. But whenever they were going to go up, she would be ready and she would be there representing America.

Andy himself, naturally, got the lion's share of the conversation, and to put him at ease, Stephen even had drinks brought out for the whole Team, as well as one for himself. During the screening while they were in makeup, someone had asked Ash if she knew what everyone in the family preferred for drinks, and so the show had had drinks prepped for everyone – a Guinness for Ash, a Cosmopolitan for Niko, a Whiskey Neat for Sarah, a Mojito for Em, a Midori Sour for Piper, a Grasshopper for Fiona, an Appletini for Moira, and for Andy himself, a Piña Colada. Andy had nearly laughed himself silly when a production assistant had rolled out the drinks cart on stage and began handing them out. Colbert had bourbon on ice.

During Andy's time talking with Colbert, the host asked him about how some of the early days had been for him during the pandemic, how difficult it had been losing his brother and how things had changed for him since the 60 Minutes interview had aired less than a month ago.

They'd been talking over an hour before the host pivoted over to talk about Andy's little impromptu book signing tour.

"Why do this, Andy – can I call you Andy? – Why do this sudden, quick book signing tour of America?"

"I need people to know it's safe to go out there again, Stephen," Andy said, trying to give the

host his most reassuring smile. “As long as you’re imprinted and vaccinated, there’s no reason not to be out in the world again. We’ve all been living in terror for so long now, and with the death tolls so high, it’s no wonder people are scared. Hell, *I’m* scared, but the only way I know out of this is through, so I’m just going to go around the country, sign some books, talk to some people and show people that the world hasn’t stopped just because they’ve been afraid, and rightfully so, to leave the house. If you’ve been treated and imprinted, get out there.”

“I understand you’ve been taking pictures of the whole thing, Fiona?” Stephen asked her. “And you said it was okay for us to show some of them?”

“Absolutely Stephen,” Fiona replied, as some of the photographs she’d taken over the last day started to fill the screen for the audience both in the studio and at home. “When we were driving from the hotel to the bookstore earlier today, I was just gobstruck at how empty and desolate New York City seemed. It was what I imagined it must have been like a day or two after 9/11, everyone in this state of shock and silence. But the people who came out to the book signing today, they weren’t going to be scared into submission. Look at those smiles. They weren’t going to be sleepwalking through their own lives, and you could see the light on their faces that they were out of their houses, and that someone had told them it was okay to *live again*. We need to be safe, but we can’t give up and surrender.”

“How many more cities are you going to, Team Rook?”

Andy answered, having just glanced at their schedule before he’d walked out. “Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA, and then one final stop back near home in San Francisco a week or so later. Our tour sort of coincides with a lot of us going and introducing old family members to new partners, letting the families sort of blend and mingle a little bit before everything becomes official.”

“Is there a big marriage ceremony coming soon?”

“Early next year,” Ash said, jumping right in. “We talked about doing a justice of the peace kind of thing for legal reasons, but none of us wanted it to seem like any of us was more or less important than the other. That’s important to us.”

“Well, best of luck to you all, and I hope that this won’t be the last time we see each other,” Colbert said to them.

“Hey, you invite us back, we’ll be here, Stephen,” Andy laughed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Team Rook! You can catch them at bookstores across the country for the next week, and the newest Druid Gunslinger book from Blake Conrad a.k.a. Andy Rook entitled ‘The Fatal Solstice’ will be hitting bookstores on February 15th, next year. Preorder it today!”

Once they went to a commercial, Andy looked at Stephen in shock. “I hope like hell the publisher gave you permission to announce that date!” he laughed. “I haven’t told *anyone* that date yet! They only settled on it last week.”

Stephen grinned at him and nodded. “They suggested we use the large audience to announce it for you, and your agent thought it would be funnier if you didn’t know it was coming.”

“I swear to God, if Trish wasn’t such a fucking *great* agent, I’d have killed her already,” he chuckled. “But she’s right. The look on my face will probably be great for your promos tonight. Hey, thanks again for doing this. I’ve been a fan of yours for a long time.”

“Tell you what,” Stephen said. “We can call it even if you’ll do me one last favor.” The man reached beneath his desk and pulled out a *very* well-read copy of ‘Neon Stonehenge,’ the very first Druid Gunslinger book, and slid it across the desk. “I didn’t really have time to get down to the bookstore today so—”

Mid-sentence, Andy reached across the desk and grabbed the book, flipping open the cover to the title page, and immediately began writing. “To Stephen, your shows from home during the pandemic helped keep me from losing my mind. I hope this book brought you even half that much joy. From one fan to another, Blake Conrad / Andy Rook.”

As soon as he slid the book back across to Stephen, the host picked up the book and clutched it to his chest with a thankful smile. At that moment, Andy heard a click from behind them, as Fiona

captured the moment on her camera. They took a handful of pictures, Andy and Stephen, Stephen with Em and Sarah, Stephen with all the ladies of Team Rook, and finally, one of Andy, Stephen and the members of Stephen's Team who were at the studio, which was a total of nine, although Stephen told Andy that his complete Team was currently fourteen women, and he'd not realized how much the Quaranteam serum had stoked his libido until he'd had to take stock of how many women he'd been paired with and just how much sex he'd been having.

Once all the pictures were done, Team Rook had washed their faces to remove the makeup they'd put on and headed for the cars, which were waiting at the back entrance for them, and headed straight off to the airport.

"How's security felt so far, Lexi?" Andy asked her. He'd agreed to do whatever Alexis wanted him to during this tour, but he also wanted to be checking in with her regularly, making sure she was comfortable with how things had been going.

"Good," she said. "I was worried that it was going to be a shitshow, what with the talk of protestors, but so far, that's basically just been a handful of whackjobs shaking their fists at clouds. That's no reason to relax our vigilance, naturally, but it makes me a little less concerned that we're going to have to worry about shit like sniper eye lines and whatnot."

"I don't know if we should be *more* nervous about Florida or *less*," Niko joked. "On one hand, it's Florida. On the other hand, *it's Florida*. They've got plenty of lunatics and just about as many guns as gators, and they're all on meth."

"Who's all on meth?" Fiona joked. "The lunatics, the gators or the guns?"

"We'll be fine," Andy said. "We've got the signing tomorrow at Books-A Million, and where are we staying, Niko?"

"The Hampton Inn & Suites downtown, where they've set us up with connected rooms and they've taken two queen sized beds and shoved them together in each of the rooms, plus there's an additional queen sized bed in each of the connecting rooms, so I think we're good with the exception of bathroom space, but the hotel's given us room keys for a couple of other rooms on the floor on either side of us, so if we need to, we can have lots of showers going at once."

"That's nice of them," Andy said with a smile. "And while the connected rooms instead of one big room isn't ideal, it'll have to do for now."

"They actually want to know if we can spend fifteen minutes in the morning talking to them about what we think an ideal hotel room would look like, what with teams being what they are, and I told them you'd probably have loads of ideas, Andy."

"Sure, yeah, happy to help, as long as it's over a complimentary breakfast. It delays us from meeting Piper's family a little bit longer," he joked as Piper slugged him in the arm.

"They can't wait to meet you in person, you jackass, so you be *nice* to them when you meet them," Piper said, although she knew he was just kidding.

When they hit the airport, they were all ready to ditch the cold New York weather for something warmer, the weather report promising mid-sixties in Florida. The sun had set on the drive there, and so they were taking off under cover of darkness. The flight was only going to be three hours long, so everyone got settled in relatively quickly, although Andy had nearly completely forgotten about the plan for all his fiancées to join the mile high club until Piper and Niko came and picked up from his seat when they were somewhere over North Carolina, cunning grins on their faces. Most of the girls hadn't changed out of their outfits from the appearance on the show, but Piper and Niko had, and were just wearing oversized t-shirts. "Think it's about time for you to expand the club, don't you?" Niko said with a slight giggle.

"You sure you're up for it?" Andy asked Niko, as they pushed him back towards the back of the plane.

"Why are you asking me and not her?" Niko said with a strange look, gesturing to Piper. "She's the skittish one."

“*Was*. She *was* the skittish one,” Andy corrected. “You should’ve seen her with Fiona. *Or* with Ash before.”

“Oh yeah?” Niko said, licking her lips. “Then gimme a ki—”

Piper’s hand was on the back of Niko’s neck pulling her lips to meld with her own, and Niko pipped in surprise but then moaned into the kiss, sliding her hand onto Piper’s ass while the athlete began pinching one of Niko’s nipples through the shirt. The smaller Asian woman was grinding her hips against Piper’s, and Andy couldn’t help but admit, it might’ve been one of the hottest things he’d ever seen with his own two eyes.

The taller woman broke from the kiss before looking over at Andy, a wild smile on her lips. “You,” she said, staring directly at him. “Sit. Cock out.”

Andy moved to sit down on one of the couches and unbuttoned his jeans. He pulled out his cock as Piper drew the shirt up and over her head, revealing her gloriously fit naked body to his eyes, his and Niko’s. Within moments, Piper had straddled Andy’s hips in reverse position, her ass moving to settle against his pelvis as she slowly pushed her cunt down onto his thick cock.

“That’s so fucking *gooooood*,” Piper purred. “You feel so fucking perfect, you lovely bastard. I fucking love how your cock fills my tight little pussy up.” She wriggled her hips back and forth and began to pivot on top of him, as Niko grinned drawing her own shirt up and off, tossing it to the floor of the plane. “What’re you up you, you sneaky little sluuuu—”

The last word got dragged out as Niko dropped to her knees and began to flick her tongue against Piper’s clit, edging against the line where her flesh met Andy’s. Piper’s body wasn’t even sure how to move, but it did its best, continuing to try and buck up and down in his lap, her moans loud and frantic, Niko’s tongue sending her into convulsions of pleasure so fast and hard, she could barely contain herself, and by the time Andy was emptying his load into Piper’s cunt, he was fairly certain she’d gone through a couple of orgasms at least.

Niko made a point to lick up as much as of his cum as she could before all three of them got dressed again.

It was nearly midnight when the plane landed, and Andy barely remembered the trip to the hotel, falling asleep between Piper and Niko as soon as they were safely in bed.

Chapter Ten

December 15th, 2020

“Andy, we need you to get up,” Niko’s voice said to him, pulling him from his slumber. “We may have a problem.”

He never liked to hear that, especially as he was waking up, but he knew trying to go back to sleep and ignore the problem would probably only make things worse, so he moved to sit up, looking at how all his partners were awake, everyone staring at Melody, whose face was scrunched up a bit. Nothing seemed direly out of place to start, but the fact that everyone was watching Melody made him wonder what the hell was going on.

“Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy,” Melody said, before a second sentence was already leaping from her lips, one much shorter and even more frustrated. “Fuck! I tried so hard not to say it, but it was like I was fucking compelled to do it until it was starting to hurt! I wanted to pull other words to my mouth, *any* other words, but that was all I could bring myself to say! ‘Good morning, Andy!’ ‘Can we fuck, Andy?’ ‘Get your lazy ass out of bed, Andy!’ It was like I suddenly lost every word I knew until I said that phrase!” She looked a little nervous, staring down at her hands. “Something’s fucking wrong with me.”

“Huh,” Andy said, which suddenly made everyone turn and look at him. They were all incredibly nervous and jumpy, but Andy seemed to be taking it in remarkable stride, and that made most of them even more uncomfortable, unfortunately. He’d learned that getting too worked up in advance only upsets everyone and never gained anything, so he was doing his best to remain calm and look at everything logically. He’d gotten better at tracking through logical progressions, no matter how flimsy the data or the theory. Living in a post-apocalyptic world had a lot of effects, but one of them was that Andy’s mind was always waiting, watching, wandering. And from one single data point, he’d built a quick hypothesis. Maybe he was right, maybe he wasn’t, but it wouldn’t be hard to do a fairly conclusive test. “I’ve got a theory. We could test it pretty quick, I suppose, although it might make us a little bit late for breakfast.”

“We’ve got an hour before that, Andy,” Lexi said. “Is that enough time?”

He nodded. “Should be fine. Five to ten minutes for the sex, ten minutes for the shower to follow. We’re just going to have ourselves a little dosing for Melody, but during the whole time, Mel, I want you to try and be as quiet as you can. In fact, I want you to not say a single word during all of it. If I’m right, and I have a worrying feeling that I might be, you won’t be able to, and I don’t want you to feel bad about it, okay?”

“Am... am I going to be okay, Andy?” the Asian woman said to him, her eyes tearing up a little with concern.

Andy smiled, taking her hands into his, giving her his most confident look. “If I’m right? 100%. There’ll be a few hiccups here and there, but nothing you can’t handle. If I’m wrong? Well, we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it. Anyway, let’s see if I’m right. I think that I am.” He reached his hand up and smoothed along her arm. “How fast do you want to—”

“I want you to fuck me stupid right now,” Melody said, pulling her shirt up and over her head. “Nothing gentle.” The bra was next. “Nothing tender.” Her pants and panties were off her ankles in moments. “Flip me. Fill me. Pound me. Hammer that thick dick of yours into my tight little snatch until I feel like you’re ripping me open from the fucking inside.” She crawled up onto the bed on her hands and knees then turned around, lowering her shoulders down to the top of the mattress as one hand reached back between her legs to smooth two fingertips across her pussy, which was already damp and slick, even to his eyes.

“I thought he told her to be quiet,” he heard Sarah mumble.

“Shhh!” Emily said to her, as all the women moved to form most of a circle, wrapping around the bed, as Fiona cautiously snapped some pictures on her camera, like she wasn’t sure if either of them minded, although Melody didn’t seem to mind if Andy didn’t.

“You can have anything you want, Andy,” Melody whimpered at him. “You want to have my ass? It’s a tight fucking fit, but it’s yours, *I’m* yours, your hot little slut ready to be used.” She was teasing the pucker of her asshole with one digit, whining in impatience. “I don’t even fucking care where you stick it, but I need that fucking dick and I need it fucking now…” Her fingertips moved down and she pushed two long digits inside of her cunt before sliding them back out, glistening as she curled them in Andy’s direction. “Please, baby, daddy, Master, whatever the fuck your hot little slut’s supposed to call you, Andy… can you please just fuck me already?”

The one downside of the position was that the tattoo Covington had put on Melody was staring him in the face, but he moved and put his left hand on her hip and his right hand over the tattoo, covering as much of it as he could as he shifted his torso to press his cock against her slit, sliding up inside of her as her head leaned back and she let out an utterly pornographic moan. Like many of his partners, Melody seemed to orgasm as soon as he was inside of her, although it wouldn’t be the only orgasm she’d have this session.

“Fuck yes, you glorious motherfucker, drill that cunt! Fuck me like you own me! Fuck me like you hate me! Fuck me so hard I feel it for fucking days!”

Andy’s hands tried to hold her in place, but Melody was thrusting back into him with each push of his body towards hers, and whatever tempo he was planning on setting, her body was only going to push the tempo even faster than that.

“Do it! Fuck me! Fuck me Andy! Fuck your whore! Fuck her to fucking death!”

He did his best to batter his cock in and out of her, but it was remarkable how tight Melody’s pussy was, and somewhere around her third orgasm, his own started to overload him, and he spewed a searing load of cum inside of her, and the two of them shared the intense moment together before they both rolled onto their sides, her body nestling in against his, his cock starting to soften inside of her, but mostly staying enveloped by her cunt.

She’d been talking the entire time.

“I’m *so* sorry, Andy,” Melody said, breathless and sorrowful. “I tried—”

“Hey,” Andy said, stroking Melody’s hair tenderly. “Relax. I don’t think you *could’ve* been quiet if you tried. It fits in with my theory. So, I’ve got good news and bad news, but we’re going to *have* to call Phil.” He chuckled a little bit, noticing that literally all the other women were standing around staring. He turned Melody’s head, so she was looking at him and then leaned in to give her a very soft and tender kiss. “So do you want the good news first or the bad news?”

“The good news first, please,” Melody said. “I don’t think I can take any more bad news.”

“The bad news isn’t all that bad,” Andy said. “So the good news is that what’s happened to you, I don’t think it can ever happen again, so nobody can *fix* it, but nobody can make it *worse* either. The bad news is that every morning, you’re *always* going to say thank you, and every time we fuck, you’re *never* going to be able to be quiet. But that’s it. That’s the total extent of everything that’s happened to you, and you don’t need to worry about additional changes.”

“Oh *shit*,” Piper said, moving to slide up onto the bed, sitting next to Andy and Melody, her hand sliding over Melody’s hip. “*I* did this. *I did* do this, didn’t I Andy?”

Andy sighed, reaching over to put his hand on top of Piper’s. “You didn’t do it intentionally, Piper. You didn’t know this would happen. And consider how much worse this *could have* gone if you’d said something else.”

“Andy, love,” Ash said, sitting down on the bed, putting her arm around Piper’s shoulder, not sure why she needed comforting, but instinctively just moving straight to it. “What are the rest of us missing?”

Andy gave Melody a hug, folding his arms around her as she flipped herself in his arms, her chest to his. “When we went to reimprint Melody, between the time Melody took the reassignment pill and her first contact with my semen, Piper talked to her a little.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” Melody said quietly. “Why don’t I remember that?”

“You were, uh, a little out of it,” Piper said. “I said... what did I say? I told you that you would start every morning thanking Andy for giving you a second chance, and that whenever you and him were having sex, you’d talk dirty to him, because he likes that. I’m pretty sure that’s all I said.”

“And right before she said ‘imprinting,’ I swear I thought I heard her say something in Russian,” Andy said. “But in all the chaos of my regeneration, I’d forgotten all about it.”

“I think we all did,” Niko said. “I was there at the time, but, no offense Melody, you weren’t my biggest concern at that point. And that’s my fault. I should’ve been better, more observant. Andy trusts me to keep the family safe, and...” She sighed, rubbing her eyes for a second before looking up. “And I need to get used to the idea of you being part of the family now. I can’t be so laser focused on just Andy all the time. I’m a protector of the whole family, and I’m going to have to wrap my head around that pretty fucking quickly. I think... I think you’re right, Andy; it was Russian. But the whole thing was on tape, and I’m sure Phil can get the tape without too much hassle.”

“You remember what it was?” Andy asked.

“I think... I think it was... кодировка... My Russian isn’t great but, I think that’s... is it similar to imprinting?”

“Similar, but not the exact same,” Lexi said. “It’s more... it’s like... encoding?”

“Why wouldn’t anyone notice this sooner?” Sarah asked.

“When women are reassigned, they’re... practically feral,” Niko said. “They’re not thinking clearly and above all else, they’re impatient. As soon as they get that hit from the reset, they’ll do anything to get reprinted. So it’s extremely unlikely that there would be *time* for most women to be given instructions. And it certainly wouldn’t be a common thing. We aren’t doing reassignments on a large scale. Not yet. And we need to make sure nobody else gets this done to them.”

“Shouldn’t it be tested or some such?” Emily said.

“I bet Phil can find someone who needs to be reassigned who wants to cure herself of some bad habit – smoking, nervous eating, something minor that they can give a final test over, to make sure it works like we think it does,” Niko said with a soft laugh. “You going to be okay, Melody?”

Melody sighed, looking up at Piper. “*Every morning?*” But there was a hint of a smile there that showed she understood how much worse it could’ve been. “I don’t mind talking dirty – I kinda like it that way myself – but what happens if I *can’t* start a morning that way? Do I have to write him a note or something?”

“Guess we’ll see sooner or later,” Andy said.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Piper laughed, as if coming to accept the weight of what she done, and realizing exactly how much worse she could’ve accidentally done. It wasn’t good, being ‘encoded,’ but the potential for greater damage was so much larger than what had actually been done. “Being part of Team Rook involves a little bit of chaos for everyone involved.”

Andy grinned as he kissed Melody’s cheek. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay,” Melody grumbled. “I just don’t like the idea of there being some kind of standing instruction in my head that I’m not allowed to disobey.”

“Consider it part of the penance you’re doing for your time under Covington,” he said, slowly pulling away from her to get out of bed. “Why don’t you go hop through a shower while I call Phil and tell him what’s going on?”

“Don’t take too long, Andy,” Piper said, handing him his phone. “We’re doing lunch with my family before the signing and then having dinner again with them afterwards before flying out.”

“How long’s the flight?” he asked Alexis.

“To Cincinatti? Couple hours, tops,” she said. “Nothing to worry about. We’re already on top of getting everything prepped for our arrival, with the hotel already picked out and prepped. The Embassy Suites RiverCenter already has a suite set up for us where we can all share one bed again.”

Niko giggled, shaking her head slightly. “Thank god they did, too, otherwise we were going to be staying at a hotel called the Covington, and I just don’t think we could bring ourselves to do that.”

As Melody headed into the bathroom for her shower, Andy tapped the first name on his contacts list – his old friend Phil Marcos, as he walked over towards the covered windows. For the next several minutes, Andy detailed to Phil what they'd learned about what happened to Melody during her reassignment, and Phil's reactions had run the gamut, thinking Andy was kidding at first before growing intensely concerned to immediately planning how to manage the issue for the time being. As always, Phil moved towards the practical as quickly as possible, and was already taking notes on what he needed to test for and new protocols they were going to need to implement during the reassignment process. Leaving people alone during the time was, at least for the foreseeable future, clearly out. By the time Melody was coming out of the shower, they were wrapping up their phone call, with Phil having a plan of attack on what he needed to do next, and Andy feeling like he'd helped some. And then he headed straight into the shower himself.

By the time he was out of the shower, everyone else was ready and they were fully packed up. Andy had to admire the almost military-like precision with which the family had taken the process of setting up and tearing down camp, although his part in the matter was pretty small. He only had one roller suitcase and his laptop bag, and that was basically it. Even his charger gear – phone, tablet, watch – all fit into his laptop bag.

Breakfast went by quickly, as Andy let the women of his family do most of the talking about how the hotel business needed to adapt to what the new family unit looked like – bigger bedroom sections, bigger bathrooms, more electrical outlets – and what the cheapest possible solution to the problem would be. Fiona, who had been taking photographs during the meeting, suggesting simply combining rooms together, two or three single rooms being connected by removing the dividing wall, letting a big room have two bathrooms and a center space with room for a bed that could hold large families in their new configuration. It *was* however Andy who pointed out that not *all* rooms should be retrofitted that way, as it wouldn't be uncommon for women to be travelling solo, which meant they would really only need a double or a queen-sized bed and a single bathroom. The hotel management thanked Team Rook for giving them their time and thoughts about how to reconsider their business moving forward.

Andy hadn't realized how tired he must've been the night before when they'd got in, because it didn't dawn on him until they were walking out to the parking lot that Lexi had rented two SUVs *for* the family to use here, instead of hiring a driving service. They loaded up the vehicles with stuff then people, and before he knew it, they were on their way driving southwest to Gainesville to meet Piper's family at their home.

The whole family had talked a little bit to Piper's family over the phone during the last month, but nobody had expected the whole Brown clan to come out in force to meet all of Team Rook when they'd decided to show up last minute to say hello. Andy had hoped that the short warning time would've kept things to a small family get together, but it seemed like Piper's parents had invited not only any of the family that happened to be nearby but the neighborhood as well. Both Lexi and Niko seemed a little annoyed at first, but Melody had teased both of them about the odds of one of Piper's parents' elderly neighbors being a secret member of the Taliban, and both women had immediately lightened up a little and laughed.

Andy had expected the hardest grilling to come from Piper's parents, but both of them had been remarkably warm and friendly right off the bat. No, the person who'd been the most intense around him had been Piper's older sister June's husband Declan, and his Team. It wasn't that Declan was mean; he was just *intense*. They definitely didn't run in the same political circles, of that much Andy was certain. Declan had seen the interview and had talked to Piper a couple of times since then when she and June had been talking over the phone. Dec had a lot of questions, but since he and Andy were close to the same age, they at least shared a sort of cultural common understanding, even if they were miles apart politically.

"I just want to make sure my wife's baby sister isn't going to be marrying a jackass," Declan

said to him while he was sipping his scotch. “You didn’t *seem* awful on television, but it’s not that hard for people to look good on tv when they’re, in fact, horrible.”

“Go easy on him, Dec,” June said. “Andy seems like a great guy.” June looked a lot like Piper, just older and not anywhere near as tall, although she wore her hair incredibly short, and the two couldn’t be any further apart in terms of dress sense, as Piper was always about sportswear casual, and June looked like she’d pulled out her Sunday’s best dress for this. But both were brunettes, both in good physical shape and both certainly easy on the eyes.

“I’m a normal guy, June, just like anyone,” Andy laughed, sipping from a rum’n’coke that Lexi had brought him. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a 911 operator down in Tampa,” June said. “Which, I have to say, has been pretty fucking weird for the last year. Once lockdown started, it was totally quiet almost all the time, for the first few months, although we started getting a lot of calls to pick up dead bodies after that.”

“Jesus, June, that sounds fucking brutal,” Andy said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. How is it these days?”

“Mostly back to quiet again,” June said, her smile almost completely devoid of joy, as if she was dealing with exhaustion on a cellular level. “But that’ll pass soon enough, I’m sure, and I’ll look back at this as the time I got a paid vacation and was told to just sit around all day waiting for something to happen. Which is better than Dec, who’s had to go and actually collect the dead bodies constantly.”

“Being a paramedic’s been brutal during this time, but we’ve learned to adapt,” Declan said, rolling his glass in his hand. Andy had suspected the man was law enforcement of some kind, as he had that sort of look about him – crew cut hair, perfectly pressed trousers, dress shoes polished within an inch of their lives – but he could see paramedic now that it had been pointed out to him. “And the disease has been weeding out those that can’t take their health seriously.”

“A couple of our other partners are floating around here as well, but most of them didn’t want to do the drive up here considering they might be at the wedding soon enough,” June said. “Don’t suppose you’ll be lending out that plane of yours to ferry people to and from the wedding?”

“Ha, no, afraid even if I could afford to do that, which I really can’t, my security team would bust my balls for even *thinking* about letting other people fly around in our jet,” Andy laughed. “But we’re making sure that the accommodations nearby will be excellent, no matter how big or small your Team is, and that nobody feels overly burdened to come if they don’t want to. If you just want to come as the two of you, I promise you, nobody will mind. The size of this wedding is already more than a little terrifying.”

“What’s your headcount at for guests?”

“Basically the same as an outdoor festival?” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “I think we’ve capped attendance at two thousand people, although we still aren’t entirely sure if we’re being crazy optimistic or if everyone’s just going to pass if they can’t bring their *entire* Team with them. We’re allowing a handful of people to bring their full Teams, but we’ve suggested to most people only showing up with a few of them, more for their own sanity than for our convenience.”

“We’d *love* for everyone to come, sis,” Piper said as she stepped over to join in on the conversation, sliding her arm around Andy’s shoulders almost protectively. “But we get not everyone’s feeling comfortable traveling yet, and learning to move this many people at once? It’s a challenge.” Piper turned Andy’s head up so she could lean her head down and kiss him. “My sister’s not giving you too much shit, is she?”

“Just the right amount,” Andy said with a chuckle, thinking to himself that June had been lovely, but her husband had been borderline antagonistic.

“Hey Dec. Good to see you again.”

“Pipes,” Declan responded quietly.

“So I take it you two are a pre-DuoHalo match?” Andy asked. He really hadn’t had much time

to talk to Piper's sister over the preceding month, and he now had *so* many partners with *so* many details that nobody expected him to remember much of anything. He and June had gotten along fantastically the one conversation he remembered, though, and he wasn't sure how June and her husband could be so very different.

"Married ten years last April."

"Kids?"

"Two daughters, Natalie and Abigail, 8 and 5," June said with a smile. "They're both running around here somewhere. I think our partner Esparanza's keeping tabs on them."

"She is," Piper confirmed. "They wanted to play 'Cling To Auntie Piper's Legs' for a while, so I obliged them."

Andy smiled back a bit more comfortably at that, as both girls were safely within the pre-DuoHalo zone, and clearly still alive. He remembered Piper telling him that June had been married before DuoHalo, and that she was sort of acting as queen bee of their household while new women were added to the mix. "Glad to hear they're keeping old traditions alive."

"It's best that way, don't you think?" Declan said. "Sticking to old traditions, the way things used to be?"

Andy's head turned a little bit, his eyes narrowing. "I'm more of a forward-thinking guy myself. Traditions usually hold people back from evolving."

"Moving too far forward too fast is what gets people into trouble," Declan said. "All this focus on identity politics, it's all walking away from family values, good Christian family values."

"Well, I'm not a Christian," Andy said with a devilish smirk. "I'm an atheist. But knowing right from wrong isn't based on any religion – that's simply treating others as you want them to treat you. And you know who complains about identity politics? People whose identities haven't ever been threatened. It's easy to claim people should stop talking about how they're oppressed when they've never been oppressed."

"Is this the point of the conversation where you call me racist?" Declan said.

"I dunno," Andy shot back. "*Are* you a racist?"

"The facts are the *facts*, Andy," Declan said, his temper starting to flare a little. "If there's a crime committed in America, it's far more likely to have been committed by a person of color."

"No, if there's someone *arrested* in America, they're more likely to be a person of color," Andy corrected. "That's not even close to the same thing. And considering how much more damage white collar crimes do to society, it's surprising how few white-collar criminals get arrested or do hard time. And funny how all the white-collar criminals are white skinned too."

"We have a legal system in this country for a *reason*, Andy," Declan said, his voice starting to get raised a bit. Now Andy knew exactly where the tension had been coming from.

"Sure, for the wealthy to abuse as they see fit, and to ensure they don't ever see the inside of a jail cell," Andy countered. "If you want to convince me you believe in equal justice, I want to see you demanding the death penalty for the bankers who've repeatedly and illegally crashed the economy."

"How soon before you're thinking about having kids, sis?" June asked, trying to pull the conversation away from politics. "I know the government's leaning pretty hard on this 'Repopulate the country' plan of theirs, and the tax breaks they're offering are a little crazy, but I know you want to go and do the Olympics again."

Piper nodded, nudging Andy in the ribs, as if trying to get him to back down a little. "We're going to go and lock in a second gold medal, but after that, I'm probably going to start trying. Well, *we're* going to start trying," she said with a soft giggle. "There are days where I can tell Andy is completely *over* all these gorgeous women having sex with him."

"Can you blame him?" Ash said as she moved to slide in against Andy's other side. "It's basically two to three a day, at his level. Most people have smaller scales than Andy, but Andy's a giver and he's always putting other people over himself. Some people think it's a flaw, but we think it's what

makes him the most special man we've ever met. Anyway, I need to borrow him for a bit to help me rescue Em and Sarah from your father, Piper. I think he's been talking to her about Dahlia Hairtrigger since we got here, and Em's doing her absolute best to stay polite, but she's really *really* tired of talking about it. Think you can lend me a hand, babe?"

"No problem, love," Andy said. "Excuse me."

Andy and Ash pulled away and slowly made their way across the room. It was a busy party, but he could see Niko, Lexi and Melody were stationed in a triangular pattern, so that each of them was covering the entrances and exits, and he knew they wouldn't let anything happen to him. But that didn't include protecting Emily from overly enthusiastic fans. But as they approached, Andy was a little surprised, as both Emily and Sarah were laughing, with wide smiles on their faces.

"I thought you said we needed to rescue Emily," Andy whispered to Ash.

"No no, we just needed an excuse to make Piper, her sister and her sister's husband spend some time alone chatting, so that we know they're okay," Ash said. "So, we wanted to pull you away from them. June's beau has been a little short-tempered with Piper about you. Declan's not convinced that Piper isn't stuck in Stockholm Syndrome, and the two of them have been fighting about it. June and Dec keep bickering, and so Piper wanted to help. We wanted you to have a little bit of time talking to Dec first so he could see you truly do love Piper. Dec's just having a hard time wrapping his head around this, around all of this, no matter what June thinks. We're going to let 'em hash it out."

"I shouldn't—?"

Ash shook her head. "Let 'em talk through it. Piper'll make him come around, or at least back down. Family knows family best. And once Piper's had enough time to smack some sense into her sister's husband, she'll be back over again. Even if Dec doesn't like you, he needs to learn to respect you, and that you're not going anywhere, no matter how much of a fuss he puts up."

"Andrew!" Em said, a laugh rolling from her lips. "I was just telling Piper's father here about the time we turned half a dozen cats loose on the set of the third Dagger Academy film. We got in *so* much trouble, but it was so, so, *so* worth it, to see all of those old, stodgy actors scrambling to catch felines who were starting to demolish the carefully constructed sets."

"You were a hellraiser as a child, weren't you, Em?" Andy said, joining in the laughter.

"Still am, thank you very much!"

"We're not going to let you have *any* animals on the Neon Stonehenge set, Ems, otherwise the director's going to throw a shitfit," Sarah said with a giggle.

"I've not read any of your books, Andrew," Piper's father, "but if Em here's going to be in it, I'm going to have to start in on them, I guess. I do hear they're... a bit more adult, though?"

Andy laughed, shrugging a little bit. "I leave the sex on the page, Mr. Brown, and figure that my audience is grown up enough to handle it. But I never let it get in the way of a good story."

As the conversation carried on, Andy noticed something he'd not had a chance to really see before – his partners were being *territorial*, almost *possessive* of him. During the entire party, at least one fiancée had been pressed against his side all the time, and they'd been making sure it was clear he was with them, as if they didn't want anyone to entertain the idea they might be able to draw Andy's eye away, something he thought was patently ridiculous, but then it occurred to him that the girls might not have even known they were doing it. They'd been having conversations and always making sure to establish their place with Andy first and foremost, and almost immediately dropping in the fact that they were a closed Team right afterwards.

He didn't *mind*.

By the time they were leaving the party, it seemed like Piper and June had smoothed things over, or at least established what was and wasn't fair game for conversations, and how he and Declan could navigate not killing one another.

Declan wasn't really *that* bad; he was just misguided. Andy'd known a lot of people just like him growing up. It was hard getting people to look past what they'd been taught and get them to

understand systemic fundamental underpinnings that could lead them to bad conclusions. They'd been taught to follow the basic logic – cops arrest criminals, and if most criminals cops arrested weren't white, then most criminals must be not-white. But usually they didn't stop to see the bigger picture, how large scale criminals often weren't punished because they used their wealth to protect them from consequences, which let them continue to commit crimes.

His entire life, underpinning anything he'd ever written, Andy was always writing about systems, how easy it was for a pattern to become a system and for a system to just blend into the background until people didn't even notice they were doing it. Malice was rarely intended, but confronting systems was hard, because people often felt like they were being judged, and Andy was just as guilty of coming across overly harsh as anyone. He and Declan were never going to see eye-to-eye, but they didn't have to be at each other's throats about it the whole time either.

The signing back up in Jacksonville was much smaller than the one in New York had been, but the fans were no less enthusiastic, and the reading portion of the event had gone over especially well. Piper's parents had come up from Gainesville for a short dinner after the signing, and before Andy knew it, he was back at the airport already, climbing back into his private jet.

While his encounters on the jet so far had been slightly on the wilder side, Niko and Ash had wanted to keep it as soft and tender as they could, almost like a reminder of how the early days had been (excepting, of course, Lauren's absence), and while Niko certainly got off with Andy, the cuddling they did afterwards was far more important.

On the drive from the airport to the hotel, Andy made it a point to check in with Melody, to be sure that she was taking her new situation okay, and it seemed like she'd mostly made peace with it. She'd thought about it and realized that as long as she either said thank you or texted him thank you first thing, she'd probably be okay in managing the compulsion, and thinking about how much worse it could've been had made the whole thing much easier to swallow.

When they made it to the hotel, Andy was already starting to get nervous about tomorrow. It would be the first time he'd seen his nephew since his brother's passing, and out of all the things that scared Andy, that scared him the most. The ladies were trying to be optimistic, trying to keep Andy's spirits up, but everyone sort of understood the weight he was carrying around with him.

His partners were also nervous, but for entirely different reasons. Tomorrow they were also going to meet Andy's mom (and the Team she'd been saddled up with), and other than Fiona, none of them were entirely sure what to expect. She'd been hospitalized for months, but had been released a few weeks ago, and hadn't really been in a state to talk to any of them, even over the phone. But she'd insisted that she get a chance to meet all of Andy's soon-to-be wives in advance of the wedding. Apparently after getting imprinted a week ago, her health had completely rebounded and she felt like she was in the best shape of her life. Andy knew they'd all do fine, though.

With all that weighing on them, they were glad to have one giant bed they could all crawl into and pile on top of one another in a sea of arms and legs, Ash snuggled in against his left, Piper tucked in on his right.

Right before he was about to fall asleep, Ash whispered quietly into his ear, "Wonder if any of your old flames are going to be at the signing tomorrow. Won't that be fun to show off for them." That certainly woke him up for a little bit longer, but eventually he drifted off to sleep, realizing that if he could make it through tomorrow, everything else would seem easy by comparison.

Intermission Two – Billy

December 16th, 2020 – Athens, Georgia

William “Billy” Monteiro was on the verge of losing his goddamn mind. In the spring of 2020, most of the students of the University of Georgia had been sent home, and the college temporarily shuttered to try and ride out the epidemic, but for some students, like Billy, whose parents had already rented out his former room in their house, leaving wasn’t really an option. A small handful of students had been forced to remain on campus and done their best to band together, and some of the faculty had stayed to make sure the campus wasn’t completely in the hands of the students.

That had been mid-March.

By April, it had been relatively evident that the semester had just been totally cancelled, but again, the students who were trapped on the UGA campus still couldn’t leave. The administration had done everything possible to make sure that the students weren’t simply abandoned, but that they were taking care of one another and that the staff who made their homes on campus were still working while keeping safe. Hot meals were delivered to students in their dorm rooms twice a day, the bathrooms were still getting cleaned and above all else, the internet access never, *ever* went down.

When summer rolled around, Billy had asked his parents if there was any chance of him moving back home while the campus was running on autopilot, but his dad had insisted that everyone had been told to shelter in place now and that even the woman who was renting his old bedroom had started working from home full time, so none of them were leaving the house if they could help it, and they certainly couldn’t displace their renter because Billy didn’t want to stay on campus or get his own place off-campus.

They’d argued for a bit, but at the end of the day, Billy agreed that he *had* told his parents they *could* rent out his old room when he’d moved out, but he hadn’t expected them to take him up on it quite so *quickly*. So going back to his parents’ place was out of the question.

That meant he had chosen to remain on campus along with the handful of other students and faculty who didn’t have anywhere else to go. But then the rules changed, and fast. May was a whirlwind of whispers, rumors, and gossip that everyone was going to die. There were reports drifting through the Internet that the death tolls were clocking much higher than anyone was putting up on the news, so the students had decided to take matters into their own hands.

Within the first week of June, the students built their own operating protocols – how people could move across campus, how they could pass things between each other while still avoiding contact, and how they could keep from going insane with isolation sickness. Rules were being bent, sure, maybe even broken, but they weren’t dying. In fact, the mini community that had sprung up at UGA hadn’t had a casualty yet, something the students were taking as a mark of pride. There were only about 400 students on the entire University of Georgia campus, and half that in terms of faculty living on campus, but they’d formed their own small village to make sure nobody took any unneeded risks, that nobody got into trouble or stepped outside of their safe zones.

They’d even divvied up the risks for supply runs, by making sure whoever went (usually one of the few paired of people already sharing a room, either student or faculty) was picking up supplies for a few dozen people and then delivering it to doorsteps. They’d commandeered a couple of the handtrucks and rolling pallets so they could get things in bulk, and CostCo was doing what it could to help everyone stay safe. People would Venmo their share of what they owed and then things would be delivered to their doorstep.

By September it was clear they weren’t going to have a fall semester either, but by that point, the campus was getting more comfortable with their new processes and procedures. The community – they were calling themselves the R.E.M. Runners, after the famous band – had a working set of guidelines that were helping everyone manage, but even though they were physically fine, they were still fighting a losing battle against the depression that was settling in.

In October, Billy heard from one of the staff members on campus that there was going to be

some kind of a solution coming, but that it was going to take a while. Stay put, they were being told, and hold fast. It was starting to eat away at him, not really being able to see or talk to anyone. He'd built friendships with a couple of other students on campus – they'd started 'hanging out,' if being hundreds of feet apart yelling across a courtyard could be called that fairly. Mostly guys – Dwayne, Eric, Cal – but a couple of girls too, like Ella and Molly. More often than not, they were spending nights on their Discord server, in one of the dozen voice channels, sometimes playing party games like JackBox or Among Us, other times just playing Call of Duty. It wasn't much, but it was a band-aid situation designed to keep them from getting too antsy. Voices in the head were giving a little solace, but not anywhere near as much as a simple hug would've put him at ease.

When November rolled around, the weather cooled but it hadn't snowed, and so while the outside meetups were still happening, people were in much heavier clothing, and the fatigue was starting to show. The lack of physical contact was eating away at everyone something fierce. More than a couple of times, some of the other students had broken down crying, saying they didn't care if they died anymore, if they could just hold another person's hand again, even for a few minutes, it would be worth it. Collectively, they were doing everything they could to keep anyone from going off the reservation, but the last thing most people wanted was to succumb and die when they'd been so dedicated and careful thus far.

Billy was doing his best to keep a level head about it, but it was clear how close to breaking everyone on campus was. They weren't going to be able to hold up their quarantine all that much longer, no matter much they tried to adapt. There were limits to what the human soul could be expected to endure. People had broken down crying too much lately, and a couple of people had broken protocol and gone rogue in early November. They'd left campus, headed for who knows where. Somehow, deep down, Billy knew they were dead the minute they'd headed off campus, but he couldn't let himself take the time to grieve them, because those who still going were pretty sure the casualty rates were off the charts.

Hell, at this point, they were starting to expect they'd be fighting off hordes of flesh-eating zombies before 2021.

At least spending a few weeks planning how to handle a zombie apocalypse had kept them busy for a while. It made a lot of people laugh, and everyone ping-ponged between treating it deadly seriously and cackling their damn heads off, which was good. Some of the blueprints people were doing for "zombie defenses" were truly the kind of thing that made everyone laugh, even the people having the hardest time. Idle hands were the devil's work, and the idea of zombie planning kept everyone busy for most of the month.

Then, towards the end of November, all the shoes dropped at once.

An entire fucking closet of them.

The President's speech had clarified a lot of what was going on – not just one plague, but *two*. Covid and DuoHalo. The worst fucking double-act in human history. The details weren't expected, because the casualty rates were brutal, but they weren't even. That was the biggest shock. Men were dying in such large volumes that they were now being considered precious resources. Everyone on campus had been so isolated, they hadn't really been aware how the deaths had been split. But with the information about how many men had died, suddenly all the unanswered phone calls were making sense, not because people didn't want to get back to them, but because there wasn't anyone alive on the other end of those lines.

He'd watched the 60 Minutes story with rapt attention, figuring this was going to be the blueprint about how his life was going to go moving forward. He needed as much information as he could get, and even if the story was at least somewhat propaganda bullshit, it would still be the general plan he'd be following for the next few months.

They were pairing men up *hard*, and the plan was to make sure men were safe, sexually active and producing offspring. The new family unit was going to be something like one man and a dozen or

so women, all bringing new children into the world. Whatever he had been planning on doing with his life, those plans were going to have to go through a complete rework. He'd been thinking about getting into cybersecurity, since it seemed to be a field that was always growing, but now, he didn't have a fucking clue what he should be doing with his life.

By the end of that singular episode of 60 Minutes, it dawned on him – maybe people had just forgotten they were even out here, what with most of the universities closed during the pandemic. People were concentrating on areas they knew where people were, but what if someone somewhere along the way had just assumed the campus was empty and marked it off on some map as 'deserted land?' So he did the only reasonable thing he could think of to do...

...he made a phone call.

On November 22nd, at 10:25 am, he contacted the Air Force and informed them that approximately 150 men were safe and secure on at the University of Georgia campus, but that it had been getting harder and hard to keep people on campus and prevent them from getting out of line or running off. There were also about 200 women on campus, as well as about fifty faculty, of which he thought the male-to-female split was maybe three-to-one. That meant he had close to two hundred men, all alive and safe, who were wondering when they could get this treatment they'd just seen on television. The woman who'd answered, a civilian named Sherry Spender, had been so astonished she'd nearly dropped the phone, but insisted that he stay on the line while they gathered as much information as they could from him.

They didn't let him off the line until the afternoon, with him having to plug his phone into the charger and talk to them on speaker as he detailed how the students were keeping safe, what protocols they had in place to keep them all separated but safe, the teachers and faculty who were still on campus, and how tense it was all getting, what with the news of just how many men had died.

Billy hadn't really felt like he was much of a leader, but as he talked with Sherry, he felt like maybe he'd been underestimating how much he'd been doing with keeping the campus safe, having coordinated food deliveries, plate takeaways and cleaning regimes, so much that the other buildings around campus had taken their cues from the systems Billy had helped design. All he'd really wanted to do was keep those who were trapped on campus like he was safe, from themselves and each other.

By the end of the day, the Air Force had a plan for someone to come by and test them in the immediate future, telling Billy to rally the wagons and keep everyone strong, that before the end of the year, he would be able to share a bed with not just one, but several people, and that every single one of the people he'd been talking to at distances for the better part of a year would be able to sit down and shake his hand to say thank you for keeping them alive.

Word traveled around campus fast after that, and within a day, all slack had been picked up, and everyone was back to taking everything intensely seriously again, knowing that they were so close to the finish line, a sense of renewed energy and reinforced potential, that there was a finish line in sight.

(It certainly didn't hurt that they were being promised overly eager sexual partners as well, considering most of the people who'd stayed on campus had been single beforehand, and, in the words of one of the guys, "I've seen *all* the porn there *is to see*." If they hadn't seen the special, with the slightly frumpy looking author and his bevy of unbelievably gorgeous women, the whole thing might've been a bridge too far. But everyone was watching it, and thinking the same thing – if *that* guy can pull *those* women, what the hell is waiting for *me*?)

Billy heard back from his dad that he'd been contacted by the Air Force the very next day. He had, of course, paired up with Billy's mom, but also that the woman who'd been renting out Billy's old room had been added in almost immediately, as well as a couple of other women, including one who was barely older than Billy, which felt fucking *strange*. Thankfully, they were hours away, and he had problems of his own to keep him busy.

On December 7th through the 9th, the Air Force came and tested all the men and women on the University of Georgia campus to ensure nobody had DuoHalo or Covid, and to get everyone to take

their Oracle questionnaire. It had almost felt like an invasion, with a dozen troop trucks rolling onto campus and each building getting a complete sweep for dead bodies, of which they apparently found a couple. While everyone on campus would've loved for things to move along quicker, they were told they were being considered a precious resource at this point, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was to get them sick just before the finish line.

The hurry up and wait was, still, more than a little brutal, as some of the students were then moved from one hall to another, being put into places so that a couple of the buildings – Rutherford Hall and Rooker Hall – were getting adjusted to be able to house the sort of new family units that were to be expected on campus moving forward. Rooker Hall was already known for its apartment-like dormitory space, but apparently even more modifications were needed to get everything up to spec for how they would be expected to live while attending college there. The Corps of Engineers came in and did quickhack alterations to the buildings, but what exactly those alterations were hadn't been detailed to the students or faculty, who were just as much in the dark as everyone else, but it had all been done incredibly quickly, as the renovations took only a few days, and most people were too busy discussing how they'd responded to the Oracle test.

The Oracle questionnaire was everything Billy had expected it to be and much, much, much, *much* more. To his surprise, a large portion of the questionnaire was under the heading 'Dealbreakers,' and gave each student a chance to lay down the things that they positively, absolutely would not endure under any circumstances. At first, he'd been surprised that there was no mention of infidelity, but then he remembered the portion of the 60 Minutes special where they'd been talking about 'negative exposure of unpaired partners,' as well as the rather gruesome photos they'd shown, just to drive the point home. He'd kept his dealbreakers relatively simple – nobody allergic to dogs, no vegetarians and nobody who was into the far extreme of filth-based sexuality. (It boggled Billy that there were people who found piss and shit to be *turn-ons* rather than *turn-offs* but he supposed to each their own.)

He was supposed to be in the middle of his sophomore year and instead, his freshman year had never really ended, and he was on month 12 of that second semester. And the Oracle questionnaire, it was a nice little distraction to take his mind off the fact that he felt like he was in a total holding pattern, just waiting for the world to wake up again, and to prevent him from thinking about just how many people he knew were now dead. Hell, if he'd been even a single year younger, he would've been a fatality instead of a survivor. (He'd actually heard from a member of the Air Force that the two dead bodies they'd found had probably died very early on in the pandemic, and they were both under the age of eighteen, having started college early.) He could start to dream what kind of women they were going to be pairing him up with, what his life would be like on the other side of it.

During the time they'd had to wait, he'd watched the recording of the President's speech a bunch, as well as the 60 Minutes story, the entirety of which was up on YouTube. He wasn't particularly thrilled at the idea of being a father so young in his life, but the news of the last few weeks had made it *abundantly clear*, he was expected to be fathering kids as quickly as possible. And it did mean he was going to be the center of attention for a bunch of beautiful women who would be somewhat hand-picked to share his interests.

Billy was starting to wrap his head around all of it, now that that news embargoes had been dropped, that the number of fatalities across the world were epic and awesome and terrifying, all in the truest senses of the words. In hunkering down on campus, Billy and the others had probably evaded the deadliest plague in human history.

Through dumb *fucking* luck.

But just after he'd finished his morning exercises, there had been a knock on his 4th floor Church Hall dorm room door. Billy had damn near jumped through the roof. With the exception of the time the troops had come knocking on his door on Dec. 7th, nobody had knocked on that door since March. Even when food or supplies were dropped off, the people bringing things never knocked – they would leave things on the doorstep, head back to their own room, and once in their own room, they'd

call to say that things had been dropped off. It was all to make sure nobody was breathing quite the same air as anybody else, and while it certainly wasn't a guarantee, it was a measure, and all the measures they'd taken had been enough to keep them all alive.

"Who is it?" Billy said.

"Colonel Alice Hickman," a female voice said. "United States Air Force. Can I come in?"

"Is it safe?"

"I assure you, Mister Monteiro, I couldn't be any safer if I tried."

Billy moved over and opened the door, seeing a single woman in grey and blues of urban camouflage waiting for him, a kind smile on her lips. She looked like she was in her mid to late twenties, but she was ridiculously fit, a sort of Nordic beauty the likes of which he'd spent much of his high school years dreaming of, her blonde hair up in a bun, her blue eyes staring right at him. "Well, I guess you should come in, then," Billy said, stepping back into his 10' by 10' prison dorm room. "Close the door, though. We're still observing all our protocols until it's safe for us to be moving around the place again, and I certainly don't have this Quaranteam vaccine the President was talking about, so I'm still what you would call high risk."

Colonel Hickman moved into the room and closed the door behind her, as Billy moved to sit in his desk chair and she moved to sit down on the couch, looking over at him. "So you're the Bulldogs' Bodyguard, huh? I thought, I don't know, I thought you'd be *older*. You don't look like you're even old enough to share a beer with me."

He'd heard the nickname every so often for the last few months, based on how he'd just sort of told people how to do things. He wasn't trying to be an ass about it, but whenever it felt like people didn't have an idea on how to handle things, he'd just told them what to do and how to do it, and they had, because maybe they'd been too caught up in their own shock, or maybe fear and indecision had taken hold. The UGA mascot was the English Bulldog, specifically named Uga, and a couple of the students in May had jokingly referred to him as the Bulldogs' Bodyguard, since he was shepherding them through the crisis. In late September, after he'd talked a couple of students who were having a particularly hard time with isolation into staying put instead of running off, one of them had made a special order, found out Billy's hat size, and a black bowler hat had been left with his next food delivery. Billy had laughed about it, but had kind of liked how the hat looked on him.

"I'm not, but you make it sound like I'm some kind of fucking superhero," Billy said, his hand pushing back his unruly black mane of hair out of his face. "I've just been trying to keep everyone here safe, not let anyone get too distraught or depressed and make sure we're all taking care of each other." Billy grumbled and moved over to his desk, opening the drawer to take out a rubber band, tying his long black hair into a ratty ponytail at the back of his head. "Sorry, I very badly need a fucking haircut, but that isn't exactly the kind of thing we can do a lot of on our own. I thought about shaving it off, but in the winter that can be too fucking cold." He laughed a little bit. "I'm rambling. Sorry. I haven't really had an in-person conversation with another human being in seasons."

"I thought you and the other students were doing outside conversations."

"Shouting from one rooftop to another isn't 'an in-person conversation' no matter how you want to spin it. Yeah, I've seen people, but not so close I could reach out and touch them if I wanted to. I assume you're here to tell me about what's going to go on with what's happening to all the people here on campus."

"I am," she said, crossing one leg over the other. "We're going to keep you in place, but we're converting the campus into a small village for the time being. Consider it like temporary housing, some place for us to keep you all safe and together and allow you to go through college before you move off and away. That'll give us time to establish real housing off campus for you in a slightly more leisurely pace, and you'll all continue to get your further education on whatever it is you want to do going forward, other than fathering the next generation, that is."

She had a very straightforward and direct approach to conversation that Billy had to admit he

admired. She knew that *he* knew exactly how many fucking people had died, so there was no reason to dwell on that – they could just move forward and focus on actions instead.

“So, wait, we’re going to stay trapped on campus?”

She laughed, and to Billy’s ears, it felt like music. “Not in the least,” she said. “Over the next nine days, we’re going to get everyone on campus paired up with as many matching partners as we can, and at the end of that, anyone who wants to take their new family to meet their existing family on Christmas Day is welcome to do so. While we were taking a slower roll approach for pairing up women with men, the enclave you’ve set up here demands rapid response, so we’re having to take a, ah, slightly more aggressive approach here. That means we’re sort of dumping several women on each man all at once. Now, we haven’t started that yet, mostly because I wanted to get your read on whether that would be a good idea. It might be a bit of whiplash with the sudden—”

“The sooner the better,” Billy said. “The people here, they are literally starving for physical contact of any kind. Most places, people who were told to shelter in place were in households with a handful of other people, who formed a pod. That meant while they weren’t seeing a *bunch* of other people, they were seeing *some* people. Most of the people here, they’ve been going completely solo since March. You probably already know this, but we had a couple of the girls who just started relationships with the nearest boy they could get their hands on after a few months, so they could have a shelter buddy. Most of them came clean about it, but I know there’s a couple of others who are still trying to be on the sly about that. As long as they’re just seeing that one other person, though, I’ve told them we’re looking the other way. Most of the time, it’s just someone to wrap your arms around and cry yourself to sleep at night. I assume that probably got figured into your pairings?”

“It did, although I have to admit, I’m impressed that you knew there were couples on campus.”

Billy clicked his tongue. “By my count, we had about dozen couples when lockdown started, and that maybe doubled over the course of the quarantine, but once people paired up, they stayed paired up, and they stayed safe and on campus, so I figured better that than running off into the world.”

“See? You’re smart,” she said, admiration in her voice. “I told them you were smart. One of the other soldiers bet me that you didn’t know some of the guys and girls had paired up, but you were even pretty close to the number of them.”

“Let me guess – I was off by one pair, one way or the other.”

“Twenty-five couples, not twenty-four,” she grinned.

He snapped his finger with a chuckle. “Missed it by *that* much. But yeah, I think if you’ve got five to ten women ready for each guy here on campus, you should bring them all on immediately. Yes, there’s going to be some initial awkwardness, but if you pace them, you’re letting them establish a pecking order, whether you know it or not. I get that normally you can’t normally control that, but what it sounds like to me is that you can here, and if that’s true, I think it’s probably the better plan. And, y’know, keep in mind, everyone who’s here and isn’t staff? We range from 19 to 22, and we know what we’re up against now. We’ve all watched the President’s speech a bunch, and that 60 Minutes special. All that grieving you’re worried about? We started that months ago, and while we’re certainly not done with it yet, neither is anybody else on this fucking planet.” Billy sighed, reaching to open his minifridge, grabbing a 7-Up. He looked at her and she nodded, so he tossed it to her, then pulled out another for himself, cracking it open. “The longer you wait, the harder it’s going to be on all of us. At the end of the day, we’re barely more than fucking kids, ma’am. But we’ve been doing what you’ve been telling us to. We’ve been hanging on, holding out, waiting for someone to come in and fix this. You’ve got that. Don’t go slow – go as fast as you fucking can.”

She nodded. “That’s about what I expected you’d say, but I wanted to be sure you felt that way before we moved you.”

He took a swig from his soda. “Moved me? Where am I going?”

“Over to Rutherford Hall,” she said. “You can come back and get all your stuff tomorrow or the day after. Today, I think we just need you yourself.”

“Nice,” Billy said. “I’m getting one of those swanky double units on the fourth floor? You think that’s going to be big enough, Colonel Hickman?”

“We’ve been retrofitting the whole building, Billy,” she said to him. “We took the 29 units up on the 4th floor of Rutherford and converted them into 7 units. There’ll be an excessive number of bathrooms, but we had to do what we had to do to make it all work. You’ll be getting the largest unit, the center space, which used to be 6 units, all sort of merged into one. Yours is the only floor where we had to cut out the passthrough space between the left side and the right side, but we figure people will get used to going downstairs and up again if they want to see people on the other side.”

“How many people am I getting paired up with?” he said, grabbing his laptop and his phone charger, tossing them into his laptop bag as he looked at her.

“Right now? We’ve got ten other women lined up for you, all waiting in the new space. They’ve spent the last twenty-four hours getting to know each other while they’ve been under observation, making sure the injections didn’t have any side effects, so once you get over there, you’re going to be pretty busy for the first few days. After all, you’ve got nearly a dozen women to get imprinted onto you, so we’re sure you’ve completely protected from DuoHalo.”

“Wait, *other* women?” he said with a raised eyebrow as they were making their way to the door, Billy so eager to get away from this room he could barely wait.

“Sure,” Alice replied. “You’re basically the Mayor of Bulldog Bourg, and men are a precious resource, so we’re doing our best to try and assign someone from either the armed forces or protective services to each man in America, and I thought to myself, ‘he looks cute enough,’ so I had them run my Oracle test against yours, and we actually came up at an 87% match. Unless you think I’m not *pretty* enough to be part of your family,” she said, undoing the top button of her uniform.

“Did not mean to imply that *at all*, Coronel.”

“Call me Alice, Billy. Call me Alice.” As they walked out of the room, Alice took a cellphone out of her pocket, making a quick call while they waited for the elevator to rise to their floor. “Captain? We are go for Full Force Integration. As soon as I’ve reached Rutherford, start sending in our girls in groups of five every ten minutes, and we should have all the men relocated before dinner. Copy that.” She chuckled a little bit. “Oh, I intend to, Captain. I intend to.”

“What happened to all the women on campus?” Billy said as the elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. This wasn’t new territory; he’d done this once a day for the entire pandemic, but he could still feel the pressure of the changes already starting to weigh on him.

“We gave all of them the Oracle questionnaire like we did the men, but we also gave women the option of requesting their results be run against men here on campus if they wanted. We also respected all the existing couples, so those people got paired up last night and we’ll move them into their new rooms this afternoon, once they’ve recovered from their first imprinting.” She glanced over at him with a smile as the elevator opened on the ground floor. “You were quite the popular request, you know? I think a number of the girls on campus came to think of you as their personal savior. It was a good thing we had your questionnaire to go on to figure out how to whittle them down, otherwise you might’ve been overwhelmed with thirty or forty women jockeying for your attention.”

They stepped out and walked out of the building, Billy taking a deep breath of fresh air. They’d walked a couple of minutes before he finally spoke again. “Any of them match up with me in the end?”

“Any you were particularly hoping for?”

Billy chuckled, rolling his eyes. “I feel like that’s a trick question, because if I say yes and they *aren’t* there, the ones who *are* going to be there will feel devalued and the ones who *aren’t* will have trouble looking at me again later.”

“C’mon, Billy. We’re gonna be fucking at least once a week until one of us is dead. At least tell me *one* person you were kind of hoping might be over there,” she teased as they walked farther than Billy had travelled in several months, down S Lumpkin Street and over the UGA Myers Quad, the area not well kept, but at least kept in check by the cool weather. “Just *one*.”

“Well...” Billy chuckled, looking up at Rutherford Hall. It wasn’t even half a mile away from where he’d been, but it might as well have been Mars at that point. “It’s probably a pipe dream, but there’s been one girl I’ve been talking to on Discord like every other day for the last few months, and I figured once we were out of the quarantine, I was thinking about asking her out.”

“Oh yeah? What’s her name?”

“Molly,” Billy said. “Molly Warner. The nose ring’s kind of a turnoff, but she’s so amazingly optimistic and chipper... whenever *my* energy was running low, I’d talk to Molly for a pick me up, and I’d store it to give it back to her when she needed it.”

“Molly Warner,” Alice said, as if struggling to remember the name. “Molly Warner. If I said I didn’t remember her name being on our list, would you be disappointed? I mean, I could try and requisition her for you if—”

“No no,” he said as they stepped into the elevator at Rutherford Hall, pressing the 4 button. “If she doesn’t want me, I don’t want to force it.”

As they stepped off the elevator, Billy could immediately see how the changes had been made, with a number of rooms having been combined into larger units, sections of the building combined together to make larger apartments. They moved out of the elevator and towards the section that had a newly constructed wall and door where a hallway had originally gone through. On the door was the number 404, which made Billy chortle a little.

“What’s so funny?” Alice asked.

“404 is the old web page error for page not found.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, unlocking the door. “Oh, Billy? I remember Molly now...”

He wasn’t even halfway through the door before the nearly naked form of Molly Warner had wrapped her arms and legs around him, clinging to him in just a bra and panties before she kissed him as hard as she could, her tongue practically demanding entrance to his lips, as they moved into the room, where several other beautiful women were waiting for him.

As she closed the door with her inside of the room, Alice said to him, “Little Molly here matched you at 97.4% and she claimed dibs on first go around.” She started stripping as well, as most of the women were already wearing as little as possible, hoping to get an early position in line, as Molly directed Billy further into the room and towards the nearest couch. “Go Bulldogs.”

Chapter Eleven

December 16th, 2020

Andy hadn't had the heart to tell any of the girls when they'd crashed the night before that they weren't *technically* sleeping in his home state of Ohio. In her effort to avoid them staying at a place with Covington in the name, Niko had missed that the Embassy Suites RiverCenter by Hilton Cincinnati wasn't actually *in* Cincinnati. *Or* Ohio. Oh, sure, it was in the greater Cincinnati area, but it was across the Ohio River. In Kentucky. In a town called, sadly, Covington. Thankfully, his partners had all sort of laughed it off in the morning while they were getting ready.

Melody had tried sending Andy a text when she first woke up, thanking him for taking her in, and when he opened his eyes, generally the last one to get out of bed, he saw her grinning, standing over him. "You're a big-dicked bastard, you know that?" she said, and then turned to high five Piper. "Fuck yeah, that worked!" Andy hadn't *seen* the text when she said that, so he was momentarily confused until Piper showed him his phone.

"Melody sent you a text message as soon as she got up, babe, but we had your phone in silent mode so it wouldn't wake you," Piper told him. "So, as long as she sends you a message while you're asleep, it's pretty easy sailing for everyone in dealing with that. We just wanted to test it without causing too much of a fuss."

"Hey, anything that makes your lives easier, you know I'm all for," Andy said, as Lexi and Niko wheeled in a few carts from the hallway that contained plenty of breakfast options for them to all have, Andy delighted to see an entire decanter full of pineapple juice. Sometimes the girls made special requests, and Andy's *only* request was that he always wanted to have either pineapple juice or orange juice for breakfast, never *ever* grapefruit juice, or, as he described it, squint in a glass.

As breakfast was starting to wind down, Andy asked Piper to phone up her sister, so that he could talk to Declan. He hadn't liked how they'd left things the day before. "Dec? Hey, it's Andy. Look man, I feel like we sort of got off on the wrong foot yesterday, and I'm afraid I probably came across looking like a bit of an asshole, which was never my intention."

"Yeah, well, me too, Andy," Dec sighed on the other end of the line. "You know how it is. Politics flare up and tempers kick up and suddenly we're at each other's throats for no real reason. I did a bit of reading while you were gone, and you're right, we aren't tackling white collar crime as much as we probably oughta be. I voted for Trump 'cause he promised to drain the swamp, but you know, it's swampier in DC now than its ever been. Nothing got done the whole time he was there and that fucker *still* raised my taxes and spit in my eye. Fool me once and all that. Wouldn't have voted for him a second time, even if he'd lived. Wouldn't have voted for Biden neither, but I mean, Trump fucking stared into an eclipse and decided he knew more about hurricanes than the weather people, so he just changed a map with a sharpie and thought nobody would notice. Fuck *that* guy. I'm glad he's dead. He's not one of us. He was fucking *rich*. That's the problem. I sort of realized, we gotta be looking at rich and poor before *anything* else. I'm tryin' not to think about it in terms of race, but in terms of economic status, and, hoo boy, does that turn a bunch'a shit on its head."

"And I'm sorry I bit at the racist comment," Andy sighed. "I should've known better, because I really *don't* think you're racist – I just think systemic problems get ignored a lot by people who *think* they're looking at one set of data and think they have the whole picture. It tends to make people *look* racist when they just occasionally *act* racist, and most of the time, they don't even realize they're doing it, otherwise they'd stop and think about it some. We question each other and suddenly we're both shouting like a bunch of drunken idiots." He laughed a little. "We *gotta* find some better way to get past these entrenched habits of ours to get our hackles up the minute we're questioned, y'know?"

"You find a way to do it," Declan laughed in response, "you let me know and I'm pretty sure we can make a fortune off of teaching it to people. Anyway, you're not a vegetarian, and you weren't bitching about my Garth Brooks t-shirt, so I'm certain we can find somewhere in the middle to make it work, even if we don't see eye-to-eye on a bunch of stuff."

Andy grinned. “They can have my cheesesteak when they pry it from my cold dead hands, Declan. Glad we were able to talk through it and not end on a bad note. You decide if you’re coming up for the wedding yet?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll just be me and June coming up for it while the kids and the rest of the partners stay home. We’re filling out the RSVP card right now and we’ll have it off to you in the mail, so maybe it’ll even be waiting for you by the time you get back home.”

“Sounds great, Dec. We’ll look forward to seeing you in January then.”

“Cover your ass out there, Andy,” Declan said. “We got unreasonable folks on both sides of the aisle, your camp *and* mine. Never take your eye off the ball.”

“You got it, man.” Andy ended the call, handing the phone back to Piper. He looked over at Alexis, who was basically playing schedule keeper for the whole trip, which was good, because Andy was pretty sure he’d have gotten lost down the rabbit hole for logistical planning. “What’s our schedule for the next few days look like?”

“We’re going to meet up with your mom and your nephew early in the afternoon at the house you grew up in, the book signing in the afternoon, then we’re flying up to Chicago to meet Fiona’s family. Crash the night there, then the next day we fly up to Pierre, South Dakota, driving down to the Rosebud Reservation to meet Niko’s mom for lunch, then driving back up to Pierre, and flying from Pierre to Denver, where we’re crashing for the night,” Alexis told him. “Going to be a very busy few days for us, but tomorrow’s got lots of travel time you can write during, and the day after’s pretty lax as well with just the book signing and then the flight up to Seattle, but that’s a three-hour flight, whereas everything we’ve got today is just a couple hours here and there. Plus you can sleep in again.”

“How far from the Rosebud Reservation is Pierre?” Andy asked, gathering up his things, making sure all his various little electronics were tucked into his satchel bag.

“A couple of hours each way.”

“Can’t we fly straight there?”

Alexis sighed. “Yeah, we can, I suppose. Rosebud does have its own airport – Rosebud Sioux Tribal Airport – but it’s not exactly what I would call a security-rich environment.”

“How big is Rosebud as a city?” Andy asked, a smile on his face.

“Like, barely a thousand people?”

“Think we can afford to be a *little* laxer and just fly straight there instead?” he laughed. “We didn’t tell anyone we were going there, it’s not on the public schedule and it’s remote enough that you should be able to see any threats coming a mile away. Besides, Niko’ll be on her home turf.”

Alexis chuckled, nodding. “Yeah, okay. I’ll get the flight plan updated, but either me or Melody stays with the plane the whole time.”

“Why not both of us?” Melody asked.

“Because Niko’s going to be home again, so she won’t be as critically sharp as she normally is, and that means either you or me’s gonna be on full security detail,” Alexis said. “No offense, Neeks.”

“None taken,” Niko replied, doing one final sweep of the hotel room, making sure nobody had left anything behind. “It’s totally fair to say I won’t be on my A game back on the rez. Place is going to bring up a lot of old memories, even as tiny as it is. But anything out of the ordinary there will stand out like a sore thumb.”

“You mean us,” Moira joked.

“I do, indeed, mean us.”

“Any reason we’re not doing a bookstore signing tomorrow in Chicago?” Ash asked Andy.

He sighed, having been hoping to dodge this particular bit of conversation. “You’re gonna make me get into it, aren’t you?”

Suddenly, all the women turned to look at Andy. “Oooooo! There’s gossip!” Sarah cackled. “Andy’s got an unkind word to say about somebody!”

He shook his head, rolling his eyes a little bit. “I did a book signing at Myopic Books a couple

of years ago, but they've got a hard-and-fast total no-cell-phone policy for the whole store, and I had my cell on me there and it rang during the Q&A, which got me a *major* talking down to by the manager of the store, despite the fact that it was actually important and time-sensitive business information I needed at that moment in time. They told me they were going to put me on their blacklist and I would be persona non grata from the store, now and forever more," he scoffed. "The whole thing just put me off the idea of doing a signing in Chicago, even if we'd gone somewhere else like the Sandmeyer's or Open Books instead. And I figured I know the Smiths are going to want to have some serious time grilling me again, so I suspected having a couple of days off to meet family and travel in the middle would give everyone time to decompress a little bit. I don't want Fi's parents or Niko's mom to feel rushed. I was a little worried that we hadn't allotted enough time for Piper's family, but—"

"But I insisted we not give them more than a couple of hours otherwise I figured Andy and Declan might be at each other's throats," Piper said with a laugh. "I'm not deluding myself about who my sister married. Dec's a good guy, but he's also definitely a bit of a Florida redneck."

"We've mostly got it worked out, him and me," Andy said. "Although it did take a couple of tries to get there. But yeah, Piper told me to keep it quick to a nice in and out visit with only a few hours there."

"You probably could've done the same with me and mom," Niko said. "The reservation's so damn tiny, you'll have seen the whole thing by the time we land the plane."

"It can't be *that* small, Niko," Andy said, sliding his arm around her waist. "Your mom's a teacher there, so they've got a school, and that means they've g—"

"Like a thousand people *tops* Andy," Niko shot back. "It's going to feel like the tiniest little town you've ever been in in your entire life. It's utterly boring, I promise you. I'm glad you want to see where I grew up, but don't set those expectations high, because you will be disappointed no matter how low they are. If after an hour or so chatting with my mom, you all want us to take off and head to Denver, I'm with you all the way."

"It's where *you* grew up, Niko, so that makes it important to *me*," he said, kissing her cheek, feeling her blush under the sudden focus and attention. "Besides, you're all getting to see where *I* grew up today, and I dunno how comfortable about that *I* am."

"Well, *part* of where you grew up," Fiona corrected. "Unless we're swinging by and seeing both houses?"

Andy shook his head. "Nah, just the one where I was from ages eight to eighteen. The house my folks lived in before that I don't even remember. That was more of where Matty grew up than where I did." He winced a little, mentioning his late brother, but did his best to hold it together. So much had happened over the last few months, it was almost easier trying *not* to think about all the people they'd lost, but the death of Andy's brother in early November still stung hard. "Sorry, it's going to be hard today not crying."

"Nothing's wrong with crying, Andrew," Emily said, moving close to join in a group hug around Andy, all of them closing around him. "Come. Let's get going and see your house."

It wasn't too much of a drive, back across the river then just on the east side of Hyde Park, not too far from Mt. Lookout, and when they drove up to the house in their SUVs, it felt to Andy almost like nothing had changed. It was a two-story house that had to have been built sometime around 1930 or so, with a white stucco exterior and stacked stone accents, a couple of chairs on the porch, with his mom, Virginia, sitting in one and his sister-in-law, Samantha, sitting in the other. Conner, Andy's nephew, was sitting on the stairs playing with his Nintendo Switch.

"Conner! Your uncle's here!" Samantha said as they all started to get out of the vehicles. Sam was in her early forties, but was still quite the attractive woman, with long, blonde hair that she typically kept up in a bun. Andy had almost expected to see her in a suit, but she was in casual attire today, clearly not showing any houses to anyone.

Conner pushed pause on his game, set the Switch down, then took off like a bolt towards Andy,

rushing straight at him before giving him a massive hug. He looked so much like a younger version of Andy's late brother Matt, it was hard for Andy not to cry seeing him. The boy was only about four feet tall, with a massive flop of blonde curly hair that hung down past his shoulders. He still had Matty's eyes, though. Conner wore a giant Billibong t-shirt that Andy was absolutely sure was from Matty's collection, considering it hung down nearly to Conner's knees. He'd just eeked in under the fatal range for DuoHalo and had caught the disease off the back of his father, but now that he'd recovered from it, he was essentially immune to the virus. Even though he could still be a carrier of the virus, he would never suffer the same fate of collapsing lungs that DuoHalo normally killed people with, the way an entire generation had gone. Andy didn't even want to think about how many of Conner's friends had probably suddenly died over the summer.

"It's good to see you're okay, Uncle Andy," Conner said, clinging tightly, not even looking up at him yet. "Dad hasn't been gone that long and already Mom's got a new boyfriend. I hate it."

"I know, Conner, and it sucks, but you know your Dad would've wanted your mom and you to be safe, and your mom having a new boyfriend's part of that," Andy said as Conner pulled back so he could look up at him. "That's a weird part about how they're treating this disease, but it is how they're doing it. I heard you were hospitalized with DuoHalo for a few weeks. I'm glad you came out okay."

Conner looked to his left and to his right at all the women surrounding Andy before the boy's eyes turned back to him, his gaze a little wider. "Is this *all* your girlfriends, Uncle Andy?"

Ash laughed a little bit and moved over to get a bit closer to Conner. "No, your uncle's quite the important man, so they made sure he has a *lot* of girlfriends to help keep him safe. Most of us are his fiancées though, which means we're all getting married soon, although Alexis and Melody over there are just dedicated bodyguards, although they're his girlfriends too. They're specifically here to keep him safe. Hi! I'm Aisling, but you can call me Ash if you like."

"Like the boy from Pokémon?"

"Pronounced the same, but spelled different," she said with a smile.

Conner's innate shyness came to the forefront a little, and he smiled nervously. "You talk funny."

"I'm originally from Ireland, all the way on the other side of the planet."

"How come you want to marry Uncle Andy?" Conner said, almost trying to hide himself behind Andy for safety. He kept looking over to one side, but Andy couldn't figure out which of his partners Conner seemed to be repeatedly glancing at before returning his gaze back to Ash.

"Because I think he's the neatest guy I've ever met," she said with a big smile. "He's my *favorite* person in the *whole world*. We met back in June and since then, I haven't let him be away from me for more than a *day*. I like him *that much!* But you know what's *crazy*? I like him enough that I think he's *so* special that he needs *lots* of us girls to marry him, and I'm gonna share him with all the girls here. Can I introduce you to them? Would that be okay?"

"Okay," Conner said shyly, starting to come out from behind Andy.

"So this is Niko, Piper, Sarah, Emily, Fiona and Moira," Ash said.

Fiona laughed, taking her phone out of her pocket, as she moved in close to Conner. "Can I show you something, Conner? Take a look at this..." She leaned down and showed Conner a picture of her and Andy together, back in college, with Xander, back when they were all roommates. "Your uncle and I used to be special friends before you were born, but after we finished school, we went different directions, so I didn't get a chance to see you when you came into this world. But now I'm back together with him, and it's a pleasure to meet you."

Before they did anything else, Virginia moved forward to take Andy's phone from him and get a picture of him and Conner sitting on the steps, surrounded by all of Andy's partners, and Conner seemed to be grinning like he'd won the lottery at that. "Can you send me that picture, Uncle Andy?" Conner said. "I want to show it to some of my friends."

"Course I can, Conner."

They all started walking up towards the house, a soft smile on Andy's face, as he moved to give his mom a big hug. "Hey Mom, hey Sam," he said. "Should we all go inside? I know Lexi and Melody would feel much safer indoors."

"Sure," Virginia said, leading them all into the house.

Andy's mom was in her late sixties, and there was still a tiny hint of a Brooklyn accent to her voice. She was about five and a half feet with curly brown hair. She had on a loose shirt and a pair of classic mom jeans. She looked tired, more than anything, but was clearly trying to put on a brave face. She brought them all into the living room, where the wall behind her couch was covered with pictures of the family, many of whom were now dead. Andy's father, who'd died several years ago, Matty, who'd died last month, both of Virginia's brothers (Andy's uncles), neither of whom had survived DuoHalo, but also included pictures with Samantha, Conner, and even a printed version of the photo Fiona had shown Matty earlier.

"I don't feel like I've got time enough to learn everything about all these wonderful women you're going to marry, Andy," Virginia said to them. "So if you don't mind, Fi, I'm going to go kind of quick and gloss over you a bit, since I feel like out of all you ladies, I at least know you the best already, although we definitely have to catch up at some point about what you were up to while you were out of my son's life."

Fiona chuckled a bit and nodded. "I get that, Virginia, and I don't mind."

"You've barely aged a day since you were in college, my dear; I'm so jealous. Three different famous women, hm?" Virginia asked, putting on her glasses, as she smiled, looking over at Piper, Em and Sarah. "Two actresses and an athlete. Quite a lot of celebrity for one household. There aren't jealousy problems between the three of you, are there?"

Sarah giggled, taking Emily's hand in her own. "Well, Em and I sort of came as a prepacked deal, so there's never any fucking jealousy between the two of us, well, no *serious* jealousy," the tall redhead laughed. "And we've all bonded with Piper super fucking well."

"You're not bothered by my son being a bit out of shape, Piper?" Virginia asked the volleyball player, who had opted not to sit down, but was looking at all the pictures of Andy when he was younger on the wall. "You're *very* fit and he's, well, he's my son and he's always preferred writing to exercise."

"Not at all, ma'am," Piper said. "I couldn't really talk about it during the television interview, but Andy pulled me out of the toughest situation of my life, and the first thing he did afterwards was *apologize for not being able to do more*." She was starting to tear up a little bit, thinking about it. "I still have the letter he wrote me, and I'm going to carry that with me every day for the rest of my days. I don't say this lightly, Mrs. Rook, but I'd *kill* someone to keep your son safe. He saved me. *SAVED ME*. Maybe I'll try and get him to lose a few pounds around the mid-section, but even if he doesn't, I am going to love him with all my heart until the last breath leaves either my dying lungs or his." She placed her hand on Andy's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze, so he reached up to hold her hand for a moment. "I'm sort of hoping we'll go together."

Virginia smiled softly, nodding. "That certainly *sounds* like my son. Well, let's get to know one another then as best we can in our short time together, shall we?"

For the next few hours, Andy's mom grilled all the girls, sometimes one at a time, sometimes in pairs or even as a whole, and while they tried to get to ask some questions about Andy growing up, or about Virginia herself, Andy's mom, much like her son, had an uncanny ability to deflect questions around herself and back towards the people asking.

There was even a point in the conversation where Virginia asked about if Ash had felt bad, considering she'd shown up first and yet Andy seemed insistent on keeping all his fiancées on even ground, to which Ash said she'd always thought Andy seemed larger than life, and having extra sets of hands around to keep him from getting idle was for the best. But Ash also pointed out that even in the house, she was sort of First Among Equals, although she rarely went out of her way to use that power. And the fact that *all* the other women laughed implied tacit agreement on their parts.

Andy excused himself from the conversation for a while to check in on Conner and Samantha. It was true, Sam had been assigned a new partner, a man named Steve who had politely asked not to intrude on the family moment, something Andy found himself a little thankful for, as it let Conner sort of come out of his shell more.

It turned out part of the reason Conner had been so shy was because he'd recognized Emily from the Dagger Academy movies, and while he knew she was an actress *playing* that part, he also knew that meeting her was a little bit special, and he'd been at a loss for words. Andy hadn't realized that Conner was a fan of the books, otherwise he might have seen that coming, especially since he found out that Matty had read Conner the books before bedtime for the last few years, which meant his brother's ghost was all over the boy's feelings.

Andy did his best to try and keep Conner's spirits up, and told him that any time he wanted to, he could always reach out to Andy, and that Andy would do his best to help Conner feel connected to his late father. "I miss him too, buddy," Andy said, giving Conner a hug as the boy cried for a little bit. "Each and every single day."

When Andy, Conner and Samantha came back to the living room, he found that his mother had, as he expected, busted out the photo album, and was showing off pictures of Andy as a child, usually in the most embarrassing attire or poses she could. They'd already taken a quick tour of the house, but the room that had been Andy's growing up had been converted into a guest bedroom and there were very few signs of him from his youth, which was why she'd reverted to the photo album.

Because he knew it would make his day, Andy situated Conner in a photo with Emily, Sarah and Piper, the three women surrounding him, each of them with an arm around him, as Conner had the biggest smile possible on his face when Andy snapped the picture. Conner shyly asked if he could get one of just him and Emily together, and Em had happily obliged, all of which brightened Conner's mood considerably. Andy was sure that his nephew would be showing that photo to all of his friends for months to come, telling them how his uncle was marrying Dahlia Hairtrigger (or the actress who'd played her, anyway).

"We've got to get going, Mom, but I hope you'll come out to California a few days early for the wedding," Andy told her. "If you can't, I understand, but it would be nice to give you a bit of uninterrupted time seeing the new place and getting to know all my partners as much as you wanted to. Like I said, if you can."

Virginia nodded, a bittersweet smile on her lips. "I'll make the time, honey. Niko, I hope you, Lexi and Melody will do whatever you can to keep him alive, okay? Losing Matty... it nearly broke me. I don't know what I'd do if I lost Andrew as well."

Niko smiled a little bit sadly herself, moving to give Virginia a big hug. "Well, we're going to do everything we can to keep him safe, especially since he's going to be a *father* next year." His mom gasped a little at that, as Andy smiled. He was fine with them telling his mother whenever they wanted to, and while they were still in the early days where risk was high, they'd clearly wanted to reinforce her spirits a bit. "It's still early and we're not really telling anyone yet, but both Ash and I are pregnant, so you're going to be Grandma to a lot more kids in the next few years, so you hang on as well, okay? We think we're due sometime early June, but we'll know more for sure next year."

Andy's mom started to tear up, motioning for Ash and Andy to join her, as the four of them had a big hug, Virginia moving to kiss Andy's cheek. "You're going to be a good father, Andy," she told him. "I've always said that. I'm glad you'll have a chance to prove me right. Your late father, God bless his soul, thought so, too, and he'd have been proud of all you've done this year."

Everyone was a little teary-eyed as they climbed back into the SUVs and headed back towards downtown, driving the seven or so miles to get to the Ohio Book Store. A four-story building that had been in use since 1961, the Ohio Book Store was something of a Cincinnati institution, one that Andy had spent countless hours in his youth walking the various stacks, in search for the next great story that would lead him down a rabbit hole in the way only truly fantastic fiction could.

What nobody in Andy's crew had expected was the sizable number of protesters outside of the building, somewhere between forty and eighty people. The protesters were divided into two camps, one who seemed to be "anti-new government" and one side that seemed to be just generally "anti-men." The signs each side carried made it pretty clear who was on which side.

'Why did you live and my husband die?'

'The patriarchy oppresses us!'

'Not my government!'

'DuoHalo is hoax!'

And on the other side...

'Men deserved to die!'

'God hates men!'

'Burn in hell, sinner!'

'Men, stay at home and let women handle things!'

It was enough to make Andy more than a little bit nervous, especially since the two sides, which had been yelling at *each other* long before Andy showed up, turned all their attention to *him* when he did, as if both sides hated the other, but they hated Andy *more*.

Lexi had been in contact with the members of the local police who'd been stationed outside to keep the peace, and so she knew what they were rolling into. There were a few officers stationed inside the bookstore as well. They made it a point to bring Andy in through a back entrance, but once he was inside and they started letting people who'd shown up for the signing (and had passed through a metal detector/quick search) into the building, and that was when tempers flared up out front.

Andy did his best to get through the reading portion of the signing even while there was conflicting chanting outside. He was aided by the fact that the bookstore had set up a microphone and speaker to amplify his voice a bit indoors. And he was pleased to see that the fans he had who'd come out for his book were all eager to hear a bit from the next one.

After that, he'd agreed to do a short bit of Q&A, against the advice of Lexi and Niko, because it had been tradition. He'd made it through four questions before the audience had asked anything about something other than what was in his books. The fifth question was from a young man in his early thirties who looked exactly like Andy envisioned a lot of his readers looked like – a bit overweight, a bit shy but well-educated if a touch socially stunted. "Mr. Conrad," the young man said, "what are your thoughts about the Male Protection Act it sounds like Congress is trying to push through into law?"

Andy sighed, closing his iPad cover over the tablet. "I don't want to get into a deep dive about politics, especially on such a complex issue, but I also feel like you've asked a genuine question and it deserves a genuine answer. In principle, I understand the desire and design to try and keep men safe, especially since there are so few of us left in the world right now, but I also think it's *very* dangerous for anyone to start dictating how people are allowed to live their lives. Maybe there are some things we men are used to that we *should* put on hold for a while – smoking, extreme sports, extraplanetary travel – but I also don't want them to think they can tell me I need to never leave my house again until I've fathered a few dozen children, because I've still got to *live my life*, you know? Human nature is often to overreact when course correcting, but we've still got plenty of time to make sure we can achieve their stated goal of protecting men without telling those men they aren't allowed to enjoy a whiskey sour and a good bacon cheeseburger every now and then."

The answer seemed to go over better than Andy had expected it to, with strong applause from both the few men and the many women in attendance for the signing. After that question, though, Andy was pretty sure it was going to devolve into more things along that way, so he told the audience it was time to get signing, as he cut the Q&A portion off.

The autograph line was long, and Andy did his best to keep it moving along, although, as expected, a number of people Andy had gone to grade school and/or high school had shown up, and many of them wanted to chat for at least a minute or two, which slowed the line down considerably.

Andy could've brushed them along, but never wanted to come across as rude, and so did his best to straddle the line between friendly and professional and was willing to give everyone a few minutes of time before pointing out the line behind them.

Two thirds of the way through the line, though, came a rather drastic surprise, as a woman about Andy's age strolled up with a copy of his first book, a giant smile on her face, her top featuring as daringly plunging a neckline as she could get away with without being booked for indecent exposure. "Hey there stranger," she said as she walked up for her turn at signing.

"Marie?" Andy laughed. "Holy shit, I haven't seen you since college. How've you been?"

Marie Anderson had been the girl Andy had been dating right before Fiona, and it was him and Marie's breakup that had led to Andy and Fi exploring their feelings for each other in college. She looked good for her age, certainly very busty, and dressed like she was auditioning for a Bon Jovi video in the 1980s, with leather pants, her blonde hair hairsprayed up into a lion's mane. "Hey Andy," she purred at him. "How've you been? Miss me?"

Andy felt Fiona's hand squeezing his left leg beneath the table and he smiled a little bit, knowing this wasn't going to go at all how Marie had envisioned it to. "Haven't really thought about you much, Marie," Andy told her. "Not with how we left it at the time."

"Oh, come on, Andy," Marie said, trying to give him a gaze down her top. "We were just kids back then, and neither of us really knew what we were doing. But you've grown up into a hell of a man, one *hell* of a man, and it just so happens my husband died in August. I'm not paired up with anyone, so I was think—"

Fiona took that as her cue to jump in, cutting the woman off suddenly. "You were thinking you could go back to the guy you dated in college until you two split up because you were constantly making fun of his lack of sexual experience?" Fi said, not raising her voice at all. Fi was a professional at being cutting without being loud, a highly refined skill from her journalist days. "Why on *earth* would you think *that*, Marie? Because you saw him on television, saw he'd made a little money and you're still playing receptionist at your daddy's feed business?"

"I think Andy's capable of deciding these things for himself, don't you, Fiona?" Marie practically growled.

"He is," Andy said, shaking his head. "And his family is more than completely full, Marie. And even if it wasn't full up, when we split up, or, to be more accurate, when you *dumped* me, you made it clear that you didn't ever look back with regrets, so I couldn't *bear* it if I was the one responsible for you breaking your oath to yourself." He signed the book 'Good luck with the new direction, Blake Conrad,' then slid it back across the table to her. "I'm sure you'll find someone else sooner or later."

Marie picked up the copy of the book with a deeply offended look on her face before stomping away, moving to head out of the front door of the bookstore, as Andy felt Ash's hand on the back of his shoulder, reassuringly, as Fi merely quietly laughed. "I am *so* much better than that girl could ever *dream* of being," Fi said. "Aren't I?"

"Was the engagement ring not enough, Fi?" Andy teased.

"A girl likes to be reminded every now and then."

"Yes, Fi, I was *always* happier with you than I was with Marie. Then *and* now. With her, back when she and I were dating in college, it felt like I was trapped in the same argument for a decision I made years and years ago that never got let go of, and no matter how many times she claimed to forgive me, it always came back to 'You went to Todd and Jenny's party without me, even though I told you to go, because I wanted you to decide not to go without me on your own' since she was explicitly not invited to the party. Her and Todd had been arguing about something, and somehow, I got caught in the middle of it. No matter what I said, whenever I disagreed with her on something, it always came back to that, or back to her usual defense mechanism of complaining that I'm always telling her she's wrong. Seriously, there's only so much drama a guy needs in his daily life."

"And we comprise the entirety of that, Sarah and I," Em said, reaching over to rub her smooth

fingertips against the back of his neck. “But I think we offer equal recompense.”

“Oh, you most certainly do,” Andy chuckled.

That was the moment when everything changed in Andy’s life.

The moment he heard a gunshot outside of the building, and everything went mad.

Niko pulled him down to the ground as Alexis and Melody closed ranks around him, forming a triangular human shield around him, pinning him in a small ball before they started to pull Andy to his feet and evac him out the back way that they’d come in, Lexi taking point, Melody watching the rear and Niko practically glued to Andy. The rest of Andy’s team were pulled in close, somewhere between Lexi and Niko or Melody and Niko, but it was clear everyone was basically bundled around Andy as the primary point of protection as they all began moving quickly and efficiently towards the back door.

Within moments, all ten of them were inside of the two SUVs, Lexi, Niko, Andy, Ash and Em in the front car with Melody, Sarah, Piper, Fiona and Moira in the rear car. The two vehicles pulled out hard and fast from behind the bookstore just in time to see tear gas cannisters being launched into the protesters out front. Niko was on her phone immediately, trying to get answers. “What the hell happened out there?” she said, talking to someone with the local police or someone in the Air Force reserves who’d also been covertly keeping tabs on the gathered crowd outside. “Right. Okay. Just the one then? Any idea what started it? It related to us or just people being stupid? Sure, I get that. Alright, keep me posted. No, I don’t care how unreliable the early information you’re getting is – I want it as soon as you fucking *have it*. Am I making myself clear, or do I need to head down there and put a boot up your ass personally? Sorry. No, I get you’re just trying to do your job. You’re right, it was uncalled for. I’m still just amped up in combat mode with the adrenaline spike. I apologize. I just... let me know when you know more, yeah? Thanks.”

“The *fuck* happened out there?” Lexi asked.

Ash was practically shivering, clinging to him, and Emily had reached back one of her hands, which Andy was holding, and he could feel her trembling a bit as well. While everyone else felt on edge and wound up, Andy felt the complete opposite, almost cold and dead inside, and he started to wonder if maybe he was in shock at what had just happened.

“Someone in the crowd shot someone *else* in the crowd,” Niko said. “They were only screening for weapons for people going into the building, not standing outside. I told them they should’ve had the two factions further apart, but Cincinnati PD assured us they had everything under control.”

“That was very much *not* under fucking control!” Lexi shouted before catching herself. “Sorry. Sorry, Niko. You know I’m not mad at you. You handled this like a pro.”

“Hell of a fucking test run to see if the three of us can handle something like this, huh?” Niko said, trying to force a laugh that everyone inside the SUV could tell was unnatural.

“You holding it together, Andy?” Lexi asked.

“I’m kind of numb, Lexi, if I’m honest.”

“You checked him for wounds when we got him into the SUV, right, Niko?”

“Complete sweep. Not a scratch on him,” Niko said. “Always secure and verify the health of the asset first thing.”

“You’re probably just a bit shellshocked for the moment, Andy,” Lexi said. “It’s not uncommon for someone to be that way their first time in a firefight. We’re going to double back to the hotel for a bit, you all are going to hang out in the lobby while I go and do a quick security sweep of the jet before you all join us, and then we can get the hell out of this town.”

“I’m going to call Mama Rook and let her know that we’re all fine,” Ash said. “It okay if she meets us at the hotel?”

“That’s a good idea, Ash. Have her head over, and you all can spend a bit more time talking with her while I’m doing a sweep of the airport,” Lexi said. “It’ll give you all a chance to cool down, take a moment, clear your heads a bit and start to feel normal.”

“I don’t know that I’m ever going to feel normal *again*,” Andy said.

Chapter Twelve

December 16th, 2020

A few hours with Mama Rook had put everyone a little more back at ease, although Ash had immediately commented on how Andy had gone straight for getting a drink, when he was known to dabble with drinking alcohol only occasionally. He'd asked for a Coke with a heavy splash of rum and had even needed a refill. During the time at the hotel, he'd been twitchy, jumpy and almost inconsolably nervous.

His mother had reminded him that it hadn't been his fault, and within the first hour of their waiting, news had come in that they hadn't even been shooting at *him*. The shooting had happened between the two groups of protesters, and a woman had died, and another woman had been arrested. He hadn't recognized the name of either woman involved in the matter but was at least a little relieved not to see Marie's name there in either case, nor anyone else he might've known. They did call out that it was outside of his book signing, though. Andy was certain his name was going to be mentioned again in the news stories about the matter tonight, but he hoped it was more of just in a foot note capacity, so that the news could focus on the real conflict between the two sides and just how heightened that tension truly was. It wasn't something he wanted the news to blink and look away from.

All was *not* well across the country.

When Lexi came back to the hotel, Andy had calmed down a little bit, but not entirely. His hands had stopped shaking at least, but he was still more than a little hyperaware of his surroundings, all his senses cranked up to 150% against his own will. He felt like he could hear things halfway across the hotel, and the sound of a suitcase tumbling over made him jump much more openly than he'd have liked. It wasn't a gunshot, but it sure as fuck *felt* like one in his ears. He spent much longer than he wanted reminding himself it wasn't.

Once Lexi had given them the all-clear, they'd all loaded back up into the SUVs and headed straight to the airport, Ash on one side of him, Sarah on the other, Niko in the front passenger seat, Lexi behind the wheel. He was wagging his leg impatiently until he felt Sarah put her hand on his knee, smiling over at him, understanding his nervousness.

"Sorry," he said, looking outside of the window, unable to focus on much of anything for very long. "I keep hearing the gunshot replaying over and over in my mind. It felt like it was right in front of me. In front of me, or, or behind me or..."

"Andy," Sarah said, taking his hand in hers, holding it firmly. "You heard the report. It wasn't you they were shooting at."

"I don't think that really matters, Sarah," Andy said quietly. His voice had a defeated tone to it that even *he* didn't care for, but he couldn't find a way to shake himself loose from the sense of impending doom that was crowding in on his soul. "It could've been. All the guns, all the talk about how dangerous it is... Niko's told me. Lexi's told me. Melody's told me. Fucking *Phil* has been telling me non-fucking-stop. The danger is fucking real, it's all around me, and I need to stop wearing fucking *blind*ers. How could I be so fucking stupid?"

"You're not fucking stupid, Andy," Sarah said, putting one of her arms around him, trying to provide some comfort. "You're human. There's nothing wrong with being human. It's a good thing, having faith that the world around you isn't all doom and gloom. There's enough of that in the world. *You* can do better. You usually do, and we love you for that. You've always been trying to see the best in everyone and everything. The best in people, the best in the world, the best in those around you." She tensed up a little bit. "Please don't lose that. Please? We're all relying on you, Andy."

Ash was holding onto his other hand, interlacing her fingers with his. "You know what people are capable of, love. You know the human condition better than anyone I've ever met. You've written stories about the good and the bad, about the heroes and the villains and how that line isn't always as clearcut as we as people would like it to be. Because in the end, nobody sees themselves as a villain, and anyone who sees themselves as a hero is a goddamn narcissist. There's... at the end of the day,

there's just people. People, for better or worse, don't always do what's best for them, or think about what's going to happen more than thirty seconds in the future. It's a different world out there now, but it's not *that* different. People are still just *people*. They're still running in fear, struggling against the darkness, trying to make sense out of the madness that's everywhere we look. I know this whole thing is going to change you, baby," she said, placing her head on his shoulder, trying to be close enough to practically climb inside his heart and help bolster up the defenses. "You'd be a fool for it *not* to. But you can't let it *define* you. You can't be that person who got shot at once and spent the rest of his life wondering why he didn't get killed. Especially when they weren't even shooting *at* you," she teased. "We're fine. We're together. It's okay to *not* be okay about this, but I refuse to let you throw the hat in and abandon who you are fundamentally just because some idiot decided to shoot some other idiot while you just happened to be around, okay?"

Andy had to laugh a little bit at that, drawing a bit of strength into himself from the beautiful women on either side of him who were clearly terrified of him falling apart. And they were right – he'd been teetering dangerously to wallowing in misery, and that was something he didn't want to find himself ever doing. Regroup, pull yourself together and push forward, he told himself. You don't take shit off nobody. "Right. Right. I'll shake it off. It's... it's just gonna be a hot minute."

"Absolutely, baby," Ash told him, snuggling hard against one side of him while Sarah did the other, basically smothering him in soft, pliant, lovely smelling girlflesh. "We just want you to be okay, to remain *you*."

"I'll get there. Just gonna take time."

They were almost deathly quiet when they were getting loaded up on the plane, nobody talking to anyone else, everything being done with utter precision and in total silence. Ash and Sarah basically hauled Andy straight back to the couch in the back of the plane and kept snuggling him, hoping to soak up some of the despair and replace it with their hope.

Once they were airborne, Ash pulled out her little Bluetooth speaker and set it down next to the couch, turning it on as she set her phone to shuffle on The Afghan Whigs catalog, that slinky little intro of "John The Baptist" kicking in as she and Sarah moved onto the couch on either side of him, wicked little smiles on each of their faces. "You didn't think you were getting out of starting the Red Run just because of some stupid gunshot, did you?" Ash said, purring at him. "You know how this song goes... 'Take me, taste me, erase me, I'm yours, let's get it on'..."

Normally Andy had gotten a bit adept at being able to resist the girls when they were trying to turn up the charm, but the look in Ash and Sarah's eyes was *intense*, like they were going to eat him alive, or, more accurately, they were going to remind him what it was like to *feel alive*.

The two of them were naked so fast, he'd barely had time to process it happening, as Sarah slid up alongside of him, her hand smoothing along his chest, tugging up on his t-shirt. He vehemently loved the fact that both Ash and Sarah kept small patches of red pubic hair, taking pride in their ginger nature. The music was turned up loud enough that he couldn't hear the conversations on the other part of the plane, and that added a bit of intimacy for the moment, as Sarah's tongue lashed along the shell of his ear, while Ash turned and started to sway her ass before him, bringing it down to rub against his crotch like he was getting his own private lapdance, her hands reaching up along the back of her neck to pull up those red curls of hers, looking back over her shoulder at him with such intense lust, Andy had to wonder if maybe she'd gone a bit longer between doses than she should've.

"I got the devil in me," Ash growled at him with such wanton seduction that no matter what foul or foreboding mood Andy had been in before, it was quickly abandoned and replaced with heady lust, his cock throbbing beneath his jeans.

"Not yet you don't," Sarah teased, "but you will fucking soon. Go on, Ash. Show me why you're the boss bitch around here."

Andy shivered a little bit when Ash let her hair fall down along her back before spinning around, reaching forward to grab Andy's jeans, yanking them down only as far as mid-thigh, letting her

fish out his cock, before slowly climbing onto the bench seat, moving to straddle him, reaching down to get his shaft perfectly lined up and then sinking right down on it at the exact moment she locked lips with him, so her moan was gifted to him, her breath mixing with his as he felt her enveloping him, their bodies locking together, her pussy clenching hard onto his dick like she couldn't bear to let him go.

The two of them remained like that, for a good moment or so, listening to the horn section of the song slowly faded down before "I Keep Coming Back" started to slink its way into their ears, the kiss breaking as Ash giggled a little bit. "Am I laying it on too thick?"

"Ash, you always know exactly what I need and when I need it," he chuckled.

"Hey," Sarah joked. "I'm here too." Ash turned her head and slid her hand against the back of Sarah's neck, pulling her in close as the two women began to kiss directly in front of him, his cock giving an excited pulse throb for a moment before Ash turned them, making room as she maneuvered them into bringing Andy into the kiss, a slow and sloppy tangle of lips and tongues, Sarah whimpering excitedly. "That's more fucking like it."

"You get your turn on the ride next, Sarah," Ash said to her, "so I need you to be cranking that shit this whole time. I need you to help me respark Andy, to reignite that fire inside of him. You need to bring your best, but I want you to keep it *very* quiet, just for the three of us. You think you can do that?"

Sarah nodded licking her lips. "Gonna be quite the contrast between the start of the Red Run and the *end* of the Red Run," she giggled mischievously.

"Why's that?" Ash asked.

"Moirra seems like she's a quiet, delicate little sunflower, you know?"

Ash smirked, shaking her head a little. "I think she's gonna surprise the *fuck* out of you, Sares. You two haven't spent too much time together yet, so it'll be good for you. You can dial your tongue up to fifty and I bet you Mo will want it even higher. But this is my moment, so get your game face on."

Sarah lifted her right hand up to her temple and offered a mock salute as Ash turned back to lock lips with Andy once more as the cymbal crashes marked the opening of the song "I'm A Soldier." The taller redhead leaned in and purred into Andy's ear. "You know she fucking loves it when you're willing to be a little more rough'n'tumble with her, right? Go on, slap her ass and feel how much the little slut'll moan for you."

Andy thought this was going to be the perfect time to see if the two reds were on the same wavelength or out of synch with each other, so he lifted his right hand from Ash's back and brought it down to spank Ash's buttock, feeling her indeed clench down on his shaft and burble a throaty moan into his mouth. He could swear he also felt Ash's nipples get even stiffer than they already were, like two firm points pressed against his chest.

One of Sarah's hands reached in between them and moved to play with one of Ash's nipples, which induced a sudden squeak followed by another hungry whorish sound into his mouth, as Ash started trying to rock her hips along his lap, doing her best to lift up and off him before pushing back down to swallow him entirely within.

"You feel that?" Sarah said quietly to him. "She *loves* when you fuck her hard, just as much as she does when you're soft and tender. You're her *everything*, dude, just like you're *mine*. Give her the ol' giddyup. I'm so fucking jealous right now. I wanna get fucked too..." She had that tone of an impatient child being told to wait their turn before opening a present on Christmas.

Andy's hand slapped down on Ash's ass again, but this time he dragged his fingernails along the reddening flesh, feeling her trying to squirm herself down even further into his lap. Ash's hand pulled on the back of his neck, keeping his face attached to hers, as the heat started to burn even hotter between the two of them.

"I fucking love you, Andy," Ash said, parting the kiss just long enough to gaze lovingly into his eyes, holding that eye contact for as long as she could. "And I love you that you trust me enough to share me with all these other amazing fucking women. And I will love you until the fucking day I die, but whenever you go, I'm going with you, you lovable bastard. That means you and I are lifebound,

you fucking hear me?"

Andy smiled softly, leaning his forehead against hers, feeling her snapping her hips back and forth, lifting up and dropping down. "Yes, my love," Andy said to her. "Butch and Sundance, to the very last."

"Good boy," she giggled. "Now are you gonna fuck your fiancé for real or you just gonna pretend and make her do all the work?"

He laughed a bit with her, as he felt Sarah nibbling on his ear. The two women were hitting all his soft spots, Sarah talking dirty to him while Ash plied on his nerves. The tempo increased and built upwards, and before he felt that familiar telltale squeeze of Ash's pussy around the base of his dick, and as soon as she was in the throes of her orgasm, he matched her and released a load inside of her, which set Sarah off giggling ferociously in his ear.

"She's always easier to deal with when she's gotten her fucking rocks off," the taller redhead said to him, giving Ash's clit a little spank before pulling back and away.

"You're just annoyed you have to wait until tomorrow for your turn," Ash joked.

"You're fucking right I am," Sarah said, sliding her legs around Andy's waist, pulling him to lean back into her, wrapping her arms around him, one of her hands reaching forward to stroke Ash's face. "But it's okay. I'll keep. I'm like fine fucking wine, meant to be savored."

"Then you'll go well with Scotch," Ash said before both girls devolved in a fierce bout of giggles, kissing each other and Andy, holding together.

Half an hour later, they were landing in Chicago. Despite the fact that they were on a relatively tight schedule, Andy insisted they swing by the hotel first, dropping off all their stuff and hopping through a quick shower before they went to go meet the Smiths. Andy was preparing for quite the grilling, and he didn't intend to do it reeking of fresh sex, especially since it wasn't with their daughter.

The Smiths had always liked Andy, at least he *thought* they had, but the new world was throwing everyone off, and Andy hadn't had a chance to sit down and talk with them since the 60 Minutes story had aired, so he wanted to make a great first (re)impression. After the shower, Lexi even took the time to give him a fresh shave with a razor herself. He still tended to use the electric when he was in a hurry, but on important days (or days when he could afford the extra time), Niko and Lexi had traded off shaving him with a straight razor, almost like he was some sort of old school Mafioso.

He had to admit – it was *way* fucking better, even if it was time consuming.

All things worth doing, though, were worth doing right.

They were staying at the Cambria Hotel in the theatre district, and while it was a bit of a tight fit, the room had been configured to have the two queen beds pushed together to form one mega bed, although there was also a sofa sleeper, and an attached secondary suite with a queen-sized bed, mostly to provide a second bathroom. The hotels were doing their best to adapt to the new world, and everyone was doing their best to make it work.

As much as Andy wanted to take time to decompress and chill, he knew the Smiths were going to be eagerly awaiting their arrival for dinner. Andy had offered to bring the family to their house, but Seamus, Fiona's dad, had insisted they, as a group, were all going to meet up at a restaurant and have a nice meal prepared for them. He'd placed a reservation for one entire section at a place called Mastro's Steakhouse, with a reservation for 25, a number that made both Lexi and Melody a little nervous, although Niko seemed much more nervous about meeting Fi's parents.

The drive down felt strange – it had been quite some time since Andy had been in Chicago, but he'd never seen the streets quite so empty, only a couple of cars sharing the roads with them. It felt unearthly, unnatural, although Andy was starting to think nearly every major metropolitan city might be a little like this.

The entire drive, Fi was snapping pictures out the window, documenting all of it.

"You okay with this, love?" Andy asked her, his hand squeezing her thigh.

She turned to smile back at him, placing her hand over his. "I'm just more worried about how

Dad and my brothers are getting on. I imagine Dad's head has got to be incredibly spinning."

"I'm sure we'll manage them just fine."

After parking and enjoying a short walk to the restaurant, Andy wasn't entirely surprised to find that the restaurant had just given them the second floor all to themselves. There were a lot more people than Andy had been expecting, although when he thought about it, it did make sense. Fiona's parents, Seamus and Ellen, were both there, but Seamus also had six new women partners to introduce to both Andy and Fiona herself, which helped set an easier tone than Andy had expected. Also in attendance were two of Fiona's three brothers, Julian and Paul. Rob wasn't present, something Andy immediately thought to make a mental note to ask after in case something had happened to him. Julian had his wife, Alana, with him, as well as seven other women whose names just flew in one of Andy's ears and out the other without even pausing to linger. But Andy had been at Julian and Alana's wedding so he knew them well enough. The rest of his partners, though, Andy retained basically nothing. The same was true for the nine women accompanying Paul. It was just too many names flying past for Andy to pick them up, so he decided to do the only reasonable thing he could think of – focus on Fi's parents, and let his partners divide and conquer the rest of the women.

Lexi and Melody were on full alert now, although they also made a point to get orders in for food, each of them sitting in carefully chosen strategic places, something Andy expected to get a little bit of guff about before the night was through. Melody was technically sitting at one end of the table, with Lexi at the other, although they were there mostly for placement.

"It's good to see you again, Andrew," Seamus said, shaking his hand. The end of the table had Andy, Fi, Moira, Seamus and Ellen at it, although Ash and Piper were both next in line at the long table, so they could interject if they needed to. "It's been some time since we saw you last. Obviously, we saw your time on 60 Minutes, which brought with it a few, ahem, surprises." He was looking directly over at Moira when he said it, but he didn't seem cross about it.

"Ach, well, we didnae know how to tell ye, Mr. Smith," Moira said. "Fi and I have been in a relationship for years now, but Fi wasn't sure how ye'd take it."

"When the Pope sent out the papal decree not only permitting homosexuality but going so far as to endorse it," Ellen, Fiona's mom said. "Well, we had to reevaluate a lot of things. And all the additional women sleeping with your father now has obviously changed things as well, but that's all very new. We'd seen the story with you on television, Fi, and naturally we recognized Moira, but in that moment, it became rather clear that our daughter had been hiding things from us." The proclamation felt dangerously close to condemnation.

"To be honest, Ma," Fiona said, "I wasn't entirely sure how you'd react to finding out that I was in a relationship with a woman. But it wasn't like this was the first time I'd sort of been hiding something you from and Dad."

Ellen scowled, looking directly across the table at her daughter. "What does that mean? Fiona Abigail Smith, what have you been up to behind our backs?"

"Mother, you *had* to know that back when Andy and I were dating the first time, back in college, we were sharing a bed, and he *didn't* have his own bedroom. Not *really*. I figured you weren't comfortable with Andy and I sleeping together, so we sold you a fantasy. I always thought you'd probably known the truth, but maybe you were that much in denial. I also knew when I started getting involved with Moira that you'd have very complicated feelings about that, me in a long-term relationship with another woman."

"It's... very untraditional, Fiona."

Fiona threw her hands up in frustration, scowling at her mother. "Look around you, mom! Nothing's traditional anymore! And it never will be again! Do you know how much it angers me that you're paranoid of all the people I've ever fallen in love with?"

Ellen's face deepened even more, a complex conflicting set of emotions dueling inside of her. Some mix of shame, embarrassment, anger and frustration, directly not only at Fiona but herself as

well. “I only ever wanted what’s best for you, Fiona.”

“I know, Mom! I get it! But back in college, I was in love with Andy, and all you could ever talk about how unfortunate it was that I couldn’t find a good Catholic boy to settle down with! And then when I was in Washington, you were always trying to convince me to marry a cop or a politician. So I couldn’t tell you about Moira when we moved in, because Heaven forbid that Ellen Smith’s only daughter turn out to be as queer as a three-dollar bill! But we were in love, Mom! We still are! I love her and I love Andy and I love all these other women here! You know what? Fuck it. Let’s just spill *all* the tea. Moira met Andy and I at Julian and Alana’s wedding in Scotland, Mom! We all slept in the same bed that night! Well, I *say* sleep, but we didn’t do much of that—”

“That is enough, Fiona!”

“It’s enough when you back *off*, Mom! When you finally just say ‘we’re happy for all of you’ and let *us* deal with everything else. I am as my Creator made me, mother, and if that means He condemned me to Hell for being as He intended, well, there’s very little I can do about that, now, is there? But I still believe in God, mom. I do! I just believe God wants me to be who and what I am, and to value love when and where I find it. The flaws are in the teachings and the scripture, because sometimes when people are writing down the Word Of God, the message can get a bit jumbled in translation! So, either you can accept us, accept all of us, as a family, or we can all just get up and leave you to it, Mom!”

Ellen’s frustration was evident on her face, but it wasn’t until she spoke again that Andy realized it was directed inward. “I’m... I’m sorry if I ever made you feel anything but loved Fiona. You’re right; it’s not fair of me to judge you, or them, and if you’re happy, that should be enough for me. No, that isn’t good enough. It *is* enough for me. I’m... I’m very glad you’re happy, and that you reconnected with both Andy and Moira, since it seems like they hold the keys to your heart. I do hope they’ll be as careful with your spirit as we tried to be.”

Finally, Fiona seemed to smile again, shaking her head. “Well, I’m *marrying* them, Mom, so I sure as hell *hope* so!”

The next few hours, it was like he was getting to meet Fiona’s parents all over again. The same with her brothers, although Rob not being present was strange, at least at first. Then Andy found out that Rob had moved to Spain with his girlfriend a few years ago, and they were still sheltering in place, not having gotten access to the serum yet.

Seamus, Fi’s dad, had always liked Andy, and the two men found an easy peace between them almost immediately. “I knew, of course,” Seamus told him quietly so only the two of them could hear. “Back then. That the spare bed was just that, and not your actual bedroom. I didn’t mind, and I didn’t want to cause too much of a fuss, so I went on letting Ellen believe what she wanted to believe and let Fiona convince herself that we didn’t know. It seemed better than kicking up too much dust.”

“I know that feeling,” Andy said with a soft laugh. “Sometimes I feel like the best thing we can do as men is to keep our head down and stay out of the way of the women who know better.”

“Now now, my boy. Don’t go sounding like those damn Male Protection Act people, Andy,” Seamus said. “We few men, we’re all that’s left, so we have to take care of each other, and look out for each other, make sure nobody’s trying to put us out to pasture.”

“Yeah, well, I understand their concerns about keeping us all safe, but I’m certainly not going to live the rest of my life in a padded room with no sharp edges or corners because someone tells me I can’t live my life the way I choose to,” Andy chuckled. “They can try if they want to, but I can make a *hell* of a stink, and they’ve given me a bit of a platform to do it, too. I’m going to look out for my family, and that includes looking out for myself, for better or worse, no matter what the government thinks of me.”

“I saw the news of the shooting,” Seamus said to him. “That sort of thing can do a real number on a fella’s psyche, but it sounds like it wasn’t aimed at you.”

“*Aimed*,” Andy scoffed, shaking his head in anger and annoyance. “They were two people

fighting about whose idea of the end of the world was the *right* one. It was ridiculous. Nobody gets to decide how the world ends, or what the state of it is after people start picking up the pieces. And yet, one of them decided to shoot the other. I was freaking out about this a few hours ago, but now? Now I just feel sorry for *all* of them. They're raging against the dying of the light, but it's the *wrong light*."

For the next hour or so, Andy, Fi and Moira entertained all the questions that Fiona's parents had, although they had a certain amount of information about Moira already. It was just a matter of reincorporating what they'd already learned about Moira when they lived together. Fi's mom had come around, at least mostly, and was now getting excited about the idea of the wedding, although she was a little annoyed that it wasn't going to be a Catholic wedding, despite the fact that Fiona, Moira *and* Aisling were all Catholic. But, as Andy pointed out, Emily belonged to the Church of England, Piper was Methodist and both Sarah and Niko were atheists. Andy was as well, which apparently was the most scandalous thing he said all night. But with such religious diversity in the family, it was going to be a non-denominational ceremony, but there would be hints of the big G here and there, to help soothe everyone over. The vows would all be custom tailored, though, and each person would speak entirely for themselves.

The fact that it wouldn't be an entirely God-less ceremony seemed to calm down Ellen a bit and let her focus on the parts of the wedding she was most excited about – the music, the dresses and what Fiona was thinking about saying.

By the time dinner was being served, almost all the tension had entirely dissipated, and everyone at the table was laughing again, and it felt like just a normal (if abnormally large) family get together. Seamus was even calling Andy "son" which Andy knew would probably *always* feel weird. The meal was excellent, and the dessert was even better.

Andy felt nearly halfway normal again by the time everyone was saying their goodbyes and heading towards the hotel again. Most importantly, Fiona was smiling, radiant and exuberant, joyous and wondrous, she and Moira were joking and laughing like they didn't have a care in the world.

It was a great moment.

He hoped it would last.

Chapter Thirteen

December 17th, 2020

The next morning, he was up earlier than most of the women were, something that caught him off-guard, but he found that Melody and Lexi were both up, although none of his fiancées were. He hopped through a quick shower then moved from the bedroom into the little foyer where Melody and Lexi were enjoying coffee, both having showered and gotten dressed before he'd risen.

"You're not usually up this early," Lexi said to him. "Everything okay?"

"Still a little rattled, maybe, from the whole shooting thing, but I'm alright."

"Thanks for giving me a second chance, Andy," Melody said before giving a tiny bitter laugh, looking down at her hands. "Dammit. Forgot to send the text. Thought you wouldn't be up for a bit. This is going to take some getting used to."

He moved over to stand behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it. If you think *that's* going to take some getting used to, I hate to tell you this..." He leaned down and made a big production of his mock whisper. "In *addition* to me, you *might* have to fuck other women."

Melody burst out giggling, trying to put on her most caught off guard face. "No! Who would expect such a thing?"

Andy waggled his eyebrows. "I hear the head of the household's a real asshole when women let him be, but maybe that's just talk." He leaned down to kiss Melody on the cheek, but she suddenly turned her head and pressed her lips against his, her hand rubbing against the back of his neck with more affection than he might've expected.

"Even without the compulsion, I am *very* lucky that you and Piper gave me a second chance, Andy, and I'm very, *very* glad that you did," Melody whispered to him when the kiss broke. "You may not see it, but you're a hell of a catch, and if the day ever comes, I will *gladly* take a bullet for you."

He smiled, feeling his face turn a little red as he blushed. "Well, thanks, I guess. I genuinely hope you don't ever have to, but it's good to see you're making up for your time spent causing trouble with Covington."

She shuddered, closing her eyes. "You know, I did black bag shit with the military, and I'm *still* not sure if I'm more grossed out by what I did as a Ranger or by what I did for *that* asshole. At least the shit I did as a Ranger, I was doing that in the service of our country."

"Well, I highly doubt I'm likely to ask you to kill anybody on my behalf, Mel," Andy joked.

"If you do, you best mean it, boss, because I'm gonna do it, no questions asked."

She was grinning like she might've been joking, but the tone in her voice told him she very much was not. It was a little strange, knowing he had that kind of power in his life, and he wasn't entirely sure that he cared for it.

"How you want to handle security today, Lexi?" he asked her. "I mean, the reservation is so goddamn tiny, I think whoever's waiting by the plane is going to be bored out of their damn mind, the place is so damn tiny. I was looking at it on a map, and I'm not entirely sure how we're going to get around, unless it's mostly just walking."

"Niko's mom is coming to pick people up from the airport and drive you all around. Might be a little crowded, but it won't be for all that long. And you're right, I can't imagine we have all that much to worry about in terms of security. Anything feels out of place, we're going to see it miles and miles away. But I'll hang with the plane, and we'll let Melody have a test run in the point position, making sure your safety is priority number one in the literal most lax environment we have."

"You sure, Lex?" Melody asked. "I don't want to jump the queue or do anything before you think I'm ready."

"This should be easy rider, so we'll just let you run the table," Lexi replied. "Don't worry about it, other than worrying about the standard thing, which is keeping Andy safe."

"Obviously."

Niko was the next to be up and it might've been the first morning since he'd met her that he

remembered seeing her truly trepidatious. He smiled and patted his lap, so she came over and slid down to sit on top of him on the couch, leaning in so he could give her a tender kiss. “You’re nervous about me meeting your mom,” Andy said. “It’s all over your face. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“That’s *one* of us, then,” she sighed. “No, I’m sure you’re right, it’ll be fine. I just... after seeing where you grew up, it’s a little weird knowing you’re going to see the sort of poor squalor I grew up in. They don’t call it the Badlands for nothing, and it really is the middle of absolute nowhere. Hell, the casino where most of the folks work is still half an hour drive away from the center of Rosebud, if you can call it that. It’s right on the border, to give all the Nebraskans who want to gamble another option than going across the river into Council Bluffs, Iowa.”

“Hey, as much as you’re worrying about it, we’re going there to meet your mom in person. If you don’t want us to hang around long, or not to wander around the reservation too much, we won’t. Whenever you want us to get back on the plane and fly away, we will.”

She smiled shyly at him. “You have *no* idea how much it means to my mom that you’re coming out to see *her*. She already liked you, but the fact that you’re making a point to stop and show her respect by coming to her home?” Niko shook her head. “Major brownie points, Mister Rook.”

“You only get one chance to make a first impression,” he laughed. “Besides, I want to see where someone as remarkable as you *came from*.”

Niko rolled her eyes, but she was also still blushing a little at the compliment. “Oh, no nookie on the plane ride there, though, okay? My mom’s sense of smell is *uncanny*, so if you, Sarah and Moira could wait until we’re flying into Denver, I’d much appreciate it.”

“I’ll tell them, and I think it shouldn’t be too big of a deal.”

“Well, even if it is, put your goddamn foot down. Tell them, ‘Woman! I’m the man around these parts and I say when we is and isn’t gonna fuck!’ And if they won’t listen, spank their asses!” Niko said, giggling feverishly the entire time she said it.

“Yeah, that *totally* sounds like the kind of thing I’d say.”

“I’m just saying that maybe once in a while, you should try and put on the stomping boots and see if you can’t kick some ass among the fiancées.”

“And that totally sounds like the kind of thing I’d *do*. Oh no. Wait. Strike that. Reverse it.”

“Spoilsport,” Niko said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Should we start getting everyone up?”

“Probably,” he said. “It’s only an hour and change to fly there, so as long as we’re around to meet your mom for lunch, we should be good to go.”

Niko leaned in and kissed him once more. “Thanks again for making me stop and see home again, even if I spend the rest of the day bitching about it. It means a lot to me, even if it is a whole lot of nothing to look at. It’s still where I came from.”

“Hey, you didn’t give me shit about Ohio,” he teased.

“You *came* from *Ohio*. No more shit need be *given*, babe. That’s punishment enough.” She giggled as she headed from the foyer back into the bedroom and started clapping her hands in the air loudly. “Up! Up! C’mon you dopey bitches, everybody UP! Your man snuck out of your bed and none of you even noticed! What kind of good-for-nothing whores are you? It’s time to get up already!”

There was a collective grumbling as all the women started to roll out of bed, eager enough to wake up that they were using the shower in pairs, willing to split the hot water if they could get under it and get washed down quickly. Andy did notice, to his amusement, that he saw Moira tossing one of the bland white hotel towels into her bag before they left, but he didn’t say anything, nor did Sarah, the only one of the girls who saw her do it.

Within an hour or so, they were checking out of the hotel and heading to the airport. Andy had to admit, having his own jet was extremely nice – no long security lines, no waiting to drop off or pick up bags – but he also wondered just how utterly abandoned the inside of the airport must be right now. Sure, there were flights coming and going, but it still felt almost desolate for how few people they saw.

As soon as the flight took off, Sarah and Moira started to approach Andy, but Niko threatened

them playfully with a glass of water and the two redheads had giggled and backed down, instead just sitting next to him on the bench while he was typing away at the next Druid Gunslinger novel, which was still in just the very earliest stages, having only finished up “The Fatal Solstice” six weeks or so ago, but the publisher was leaning on him to up his output if at all possible, so he was leaning into writing nearly every spare moment he had. Sarah had also turned into a remarkably good sounding board for him to bounce ideas off, and to even offer suggestions for possible twists and turns he could send Dale down for his next adventure. He was in his rough outlining section and had put down plenty of narrative guideposts and road signs so that when he started working towards fleshing out his skeleton, he knew where things were going to go, and he could plow through them much faster. It was a helpful tool, and he’d probably spend the next two or three weeks just sort of laying down the foundations before he got to actual writing.

Of course, just when he’d gotten into the groove of things, Lexi’s voice came over the intercom that they were nearing in on Rosebud airport. Andy leaned over and looked out the window, pointing down at a small town below. “That it?”

“Nope,” Niko said. “That’s Mission. It’s bigger than Rosebud itself. Hell, Rosebud’s not even a real incorporated town. I spent a lot of time hanging out either in Mission or Saint Francis once I got old enough to drive, just because there’s fuck all to do in Rosebud proper.”

“There truly isn’t a whole lot out here, is there?” Fiona said, looking out another window.

“Nope,” Niko agreed. “Nothing times nothing, carry the nothing, to the power of nothing is still a whole lot of nothing. Mom’s going to meet us at the airport. She said we’re the first non-local flight they’ve had other than the Air Force vaccination brigade in two years.”

It turned out that while the term “airport” was *technically* correct, it was certainly being generous. There was no tower, no hangars to store planes in, just a single runway with the equivalent of a tiny airplane parking lot off to one side and a building marked Guardian Flight – Rosebud Base off to another. Andy had to look up the company, but it turned out they specialized in delivering emergency medical services to remote and rural locations, and their building *did* have a hangar with their own plane stored inside of it, as well as a helicopter on top.

Once they landed, Lexi taxied the plane over to the little concrete plane parking area and moved into a spot cordoned off with pavement markings, a large faded 1 written in the center of it. And then she powered down the plane, moving out of the cockpit and back into the cabin. “Well, we’re here, although I don’t see anyone here to meet us here.”

“Give her a couple of minutes,” Niko said. “We weren’t sure when we were going to get in, so I told Mom just to head over to the airport when she heard the plane coming in. She’ll be here in a couple of minutes.”

They started to get off the plane and onto the tarmac of the parking lot, looking around them. “So, this is what the center of America looks like,” Emily said. “I’ve always known there were rural parts of the country like this, but I’d simply never seen them.”

“Yeah, when I moved out to California, I drove through lots of areas like this. It’s a great big country, but there’s tons of empty land where nobody lives and nobody’s really doing anything with it,” Andy said. “I mean, I’m sure somebody owns the land, but it’s all just sitting there.”

“There’s plenty of this kind of vacant land east of here too,” Fiona said. “I thought it would only be the Midwest, but there’s lots of rural spots on the East Coast also, so don’t think you’re so special, Mister Rook, for having driven through loads of nowhere.”

“Here comes Mom,” Niko said, pointing over towards a dust cloud traveling down an unpaved road towards the airport. “We probably should’ve paved concrete out here, but the airport’s so rarely used, I guess nobody much saw the point in it.”

When the dust started to clear, Andy couldn’t help but laugh, seeing a giant yellow school bus pulling up alongside the plane parking lot. Along the side of it was written “Rosebud Reservation Elementary” and Andy remembered that Niko had told him his mother was a teacher. Since schools

hadn't started back up yet, he supposed the school bus was probably the best option for transportation they had available.

After bringing the bus to a stop, Niko's mom hopped off the bus and made her way over to the group of them, a warm smile on her face. She looked a lot like her daughter, short and slender, barely five foot tall if she was lucky. She was half-Lakota and half-Japanese (Niko's father had been half-Lakota and half-Mexican), dressed in a brown leather jacket with fringe on it, a t-shirt that read "Teachers Make The Best Lovers," and a pair of well-worn and faded blue jeans, as well as black leather boots that nearly came up to her knees. Her black hair was hanging long and loose down her back, and she wore a pair of giant reflective aviator style sunglasses. "Hínhañni láchčij, little one," Niko's mother said to her, opening her arms as her daughter ran to give her a massive hug.

"Háu, mama," Niko said, clinging to her tightly. "Lemme introduce you—"

"Háu Andy," Niko's mom said to him as she pulled away from her daughter. "I'm Spotted Wing Redwolf. Welcome to Rosebud." She reached over to offer him a handshake, but instead he moved over and gave her a hug, which she laughed and leaned into. "You're taller than I expected."

"You're *exactly* as I expected," he said with a broad grin. "I love the school bus."

"Ay ya, you've got such a large entourage, I couldn't think of any other way to haul all you and your collection of owned ass around," she said with a smirk. Her sense of humor was immediately reminiscent of her daughters. "C'mon, let's get on the bus, and we can do all the introductions once we get to the house."

It wasn't a long drive, as they took a small off-road past a Dialysis Clinic followed by a large Health Care Facility. It gave the impression that maybe the area wasn't quite as thin on the ground as it could've been, but once they hit Highway 1, they were back in the middle of nowhere, buildings looking like they were at least half a mile apart, most of them much, much further. Eventually, they turned onto West White Street and eventually pulled in front of a small house, parking the school bus on the street against the curb.

Andy was about to get off the bus first, but Melody leaped in front of him, pushing him back, as she stepped off the bus first and looked around for a moment before she gestured for him to come out. "Are we worried about a tree throwing an acorn at me?" he said in a slightly annoyed tone.

"Don't be silly," Melody said as they all walked over towards the house, ignoring his annoyance. "These trees don't *have* acorns."

The house wasn't even half as large as Andy's mom's house, but it wasn't because they didn't have the room, as the neighbors were still at least a few minutes' walk away. The house wasn't run down, but certainly didn't look new, with a sort of heavy weathered look to it, the exterior paint cracked and flaked away in large swaths.

Inside of the house, the furniture was sparse and simple, a picture of the man Andy assumed was Niko's late father up on the wall, as well as plenty of pictures of Niko throughout the years, from her as a child all the way to pictures of her in uniform.

"You haven't moved in with Chatan yet, mama?" Niko said.

She waved a hand through the air. "I know what I need to do to keep the serum going, Niko, so he and I have a weekly date, and that is enough. I did pay attention to all the information that you sent me, so I understand how serious it is, but I brought you into this world in this house, and I will not be pulled from it by some silly disease."

"I just want you to be safe, mama. That's all."

Spotted Wing tilted her chin up and towards Andy. "You. Manchild. You're keeping an eye on my daughter, yes? I see you've got a lot of ass around, so you best be making sure not to neglect my little girl."

"Wouldn't dare dream of it, Mrs. Redwolf," Andy said. He was starting to feel at home with all the grilling from parents he was getting. "Your daughter proposed to *me*, and that's an honor I'm never going to forget as long as I live."

Spotted Wing nodded approvingly. “That sounds like my Niko, always making sure she established her stake in whatever she was a part of. I’m a little surprised she’s not already with child.”

Niko grinned awkwardly. “Funny you should mention that, mama...”

Spotting Wing gasped and then burst into a big smile, rushing over to hug her daughter. “It *must* be early. You’re not even showing.”

“Somewhere between two and three months along, mama, which is why we haven’t really told anyone yet,” Niko said pulling back a little. “But I figured you should know since we’re here. Not just me, but me and Ash as well.”

Spotted Wing moved over to give a hug to Ash, kissing the woman on the cheek. “You’ll both be fine mothers. You’ve been a good partner in crime to my daughter, firewoman. When she first came to stay with you and Andy, she was worried that you might not accept her for who she is, but since then she’s told me you’ve become her best friend.” She looked over at Andy. “And you her true love. So I am happy for all of you. You didn’t bring the blonde giantess with you?”

Ash chuckled, shaking her head. “Lauren’s part of the family, but doesn’t want to be married to Andy, so we’ve chosen to respect that decision. This trip’s only for fiancées and bodyguards.”

“That makes sense,” Spotted Wing said. “Besides, if you have too many children showing up all at once, how will you ever manage? One Niko was more than enough for me, and I had a whole reservation to help with raising her, after her father died.”

“And you did a great job, Mom.”

“It sounds like I may have to try and give you a sibling soon, if possible, my little one.”

“I know, Mom. And I get it.”

Spotted Wing frowned a bit, as if she was still mulling over the notion of it. She couldn’t be older than her mid-forties at the oldest, clearly having had Niko when she was young. “I can’t say I’m fond of the idea at my age, but I guess it’s something I must endure for the good of the nation. But I’m old enough that it’ll be a challenge.”

“Mom, I understand,” Niko said, reaching over to take her mother’s hand. “And if it happens, it happens, and if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.”

“They’re talking about quite the financial incentives to help people bear the burden of having to refill several lost generations. Have you settled on how many children you’re going to have as a family? I imagine with so many wives, it’s going to be up there.”

“At least enough to front our own soccer team, I think, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we get two or three times that,” Piper said. “Some of us are taking our time before starting the race to become mothers. I want to do one more Olympics, and I know both Sarah and Em are probably going to start filming movies next spring, but that’s just a delay for all of us.”

Spotted Wing smiled over at Emily. “I remember when I had students with your picture on their tablets’ lock screen, from those movies. You were quite the hero to a lot of those little girls.”

Emily offered a polite bow. “Thank you, but I was just an actress trying her best to play her part in a remarkable story.”

Suddenly, Niko’s mom took in a big inhalation of breath, closed her eyes, and then very slowly let it out again. “Sorry, it’s just difficult thinking about how many people I’ve taught over the last several years who are all dead. I’m an elementary school teacher, so it’s not that hard to just think of entire years of students as gone.”

Niko moved over and wrapped her arms around her mother, and both women shared a good cry for a couple of minutes, Andy and the rest moving to join the giant hug, each of them hoping to leech off a little bit of the sadness and darkness, to carry the weight in Niko’s mother’s place.

Before they left the house, Andy insisted on seeing Niko’s room. Spotted Wing was happy to show them, but she’d mostly converted the room back to a neutral state, all the furniture there, but none of the embarrassing posters Andy was certain had to have lined the walls only half a decade or so ago.

After that, Spotted Wing gathered them all back up and onto the bus to give them a driving tour

of the reservation, which truly was as sparse and unpopulated as it had seemed from the air. In fact, she drove them down to Saint Francis, which only had a population of a couple hundred, and then back again. She offered to drive them up to Mission, South Dakota, only fifteen minutes away, which she assured them had almost twice the number of people, but admitted that it really wasn't worth the trip, even if she did have to drive up there regularly.

"Everything on the reservation's so scattered out," she said, driving them back to the airport. "That's why we have the buses, to bring everyone in from all the little, tiny farms and homesteads that are out there, miles away from everyone. It's not much to show, but it's home."

"If you ever wanted to move out to California, mom, and bring Chatan and his other partners, we certainly wouldn't mind the help in raising all the kids."

Spotted Wing smiled. "I'll think about it, Niko, but to be that far from our sacred lands? Ay ya, I don't know how happy I'd be."

"Give it some thought when you're out for the wedding and we'll talk about it again then, okay? Love you."

"Love you too." They all gave their goodbyes and were starting to walk over towards the plane when Spotted Wing gestured at Andy. "White boy. A moment, before you go?" Andy started to move back towards her, and Niko was about to go with him, but Melody put her hand on Niko's shoulder and then went to join Andy. Spotted Wing looked over at Melody, arching an eyebrow. "When you said this one wasn't a fiancée but a bodyguard, I must confess I thought you were joking."

"If I die, there's a good chance that all of those women over there do as well, Mrs. Redwolf," Andy said quietly. "Respectfully, I owe it to them to take my safety deadly seriously, not just for my own sake, but more importantly, for theirs."

"You say it like that, it makes sense," she said, nodding quietly. "The Lakota didn't really have a marriage ceremony before encountering Christianity, but they also weren't opposed to a man having multiple wives, if entire families got along. But I'd like to have some of our heritage represented at the wedding if you don't mind, and I would rather you not tell Niko about this in advance. Now, for the important question – what size shoe are you?"

"11, why?"

"I will make you a pair of moccasins to wear on your wedding day, so while you should pretend to get dress shoes, you will not wear those, but will instead wear the moccasins I will bring you when I come out for the wedding, yes?"

"Of course, Mrs. Redwolf."

"You can call me Uncisi, which is Lakota for mother-in-law, but I won't hold you to the old traditions of not being allowed to talk to me or speak directly to me," she said gruffly. "Some traditions can stay in the past for all I care. And I will call you Wicaha, which is son-in-law, but only every now and again, to keep you on your toes."

"Thank you, Uncisi," he said smiling.

"You strike me as a noble heart, Wicaha, although perhaps you may need to look a moment longer before you constantly go leaping into fires to prove your bravery."

"I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone, Uncisi," he sighed. "I'm just trying to be a good man with a relatively uncomplicated moral compass."

"Mmm. That you are and that you have, but if you die young on my daughter, I will never forgive you, and will set the spirits of my ancestors to the task of haunting your spirit for the rest of eternity. You hear me?"

"Yes, Uncisi."

"Good. Now give your Uncisi a kiss and off with you. I'll see you next month for the wedding."

Andy gave Spotted Wing a hug, kissed her cheek and smiled at her one more time, mouthing the words 'thank you' before turning back, walking towards the plane where most of the ladies had boarded, but Niko was still waiting at the bottom of the steps.

“What did mom want?”

“Just the usual ‘break my daughter’s heart and I’ll obliterate your soul’ kind of thing,” he chuckled. “Nothing to worry about. C’mon, let’s go.”

They loaded up into the plane, taxied down to the end of the runway, turned around and then took off into the skies. As they passed the midsection, Andy could see Spotted Wing standing atop the center of the school bus, waving farewell to them, which he made sure Niko saw.

About twenty minutes into the flight, he saw Sarah and Moira peering over at him before they bum rushed him and pushed him back towards the rear section of the plane. He’d known this was coming, but he was a little surprised by how giddy the two of them looked as they approached him, both of them having already stripped down to nothing, as Sarah grinned at him. “You ready to get rough and randy, Andy?”

“You were talking rather a big game earlier, Mo,” Andy said with a chuckle. “You think you can hold up to it?”

“Oh, Andy, believe me, we intend to give you a *good time*,” Moira said, licking her lips. She grabbed Sarah and pushed the much taller woman up onto the couch on her knees. “Sarah’s always talking a big game, about how she always wants to be yer dirtiest slut, but we both know she’s got a long way to go for that, doesn’t she?”

Sarah looked back over her shoulder with a wry smirk. “I’ve certainly got the dirtiest fucking mouth of the house.”

“Do ye though?” Moira asked. She lifted her hand up and then brought it down in a hard spank on Sarah’s upturned ass. “I think it’s time we put ye to the test.”

“That actually fucking stung a little bit,” Sarah giggled. “I think I liked it.”

“We’re gonnae put that to the test, ‘cause I think you’ll look prettiest getting railed on your hands and knees like Andy’s good little bitch,” Moira said, her fingertips moving down to rub two fingers across Sarah’s exposed snatch, the taller redhead whimpering and leaning back a bit into the smaller one’s touch.

Andy closed up his laptop and then rose up to his feet, unbuttoning his jeans. There was something about Moira’s attitude that made him want to keep as much of his clothing on as possible, and Moira had a sly little look in her eye as she pushed Sarah’s head down against the top of the couch seat, and Sarah’s thighs open a little wider. “Fuck, I need you to fuck me so fucking hard, Andy, that I want you to fucking break me, so that people at the fucking book signing ask if I hurt my leg or some shit like that.”

Moira brought one of her fingers up to her lips, making a little shushing motion towards Andy, as she moved over and grabbed her purse from beside the bench where she’d left it when she’d gotten on the plane. From it, she pulled out a tube of clear lubricant, and began to drizzle it on Andy’s cock, wrapping her fingers around it, making sure to get it good and slick. Andy arched an eyebrow, but Moira leaned up and kissed him tenderly before whispering in his ear. “You watch how this is gonnae make her cum...”

“Don’t make me fucking *wait*, Andy,” Sarah whined. “Your good little slut needs you to *fuck her*. So fucking badly.” She was even waggling her hips back and forth, trying to lure him in, and he could see that her pussy was dripping, glistening with so much clear excitement as to be starting to dribble down the inside of her thighs, threatening to fall off onto the couch.

“Towel,” Andy said to Moira, who immediately grinned, reaching back into her bag, pulling out the towel he’d seen her stash away earlier, moving to lay it beneath Sarah, lifting one of Sarah’s knees to wedge it in, putting it back down, and then repeating on the other side. “You sure you want me to make you walk funny, Sarah?”

“*Yeessssssss Andy*,” the taller redhead purred. “Whatever you want to fucking do to me, I fucking want it too. I want to fucking feel how much you own my fucking body, own my fucking soul. I wanna feel you complete my fucking life.” Andy shrugged with a smile to Moira, who then moved to

smear some of the lubricant on her own fingers before taking her fingers to Sarah's exposed asshole, smearing the cool gel there. "Oh. *OH!* Oh, fuck *yeah*. Nobody else's done this here in the skies, so you better fucking *believe* I am one hundred fucking percent *that bitch*. C'mon, Andy, have at my fucking ass. You know it's fucking yours. You fucking *know* I fucking *adore* it. Do it. Fuck my ass. I can't fucking wait any longer." She even reached a hand back to pull those asscheeks apart a little wider invitingly, her hips wiggling.

"Look at what you've wrought, Andy," Moira whispered into his ear. "She's the most gorgeous filthy slut I've ever laid eyes on. And while you're fuckin' her in the ass, I'm gonna be making out with her the whole fucking time. Now make good on your end. Fucking ruin her day. Make it clear who owns that delicious ass of hers. I'm gonna go keep the other end busy." The tiny Scottish woman moved over to sit down on the couch next to Sarah and then did her best to slide underneath her, bringing her lips to lock with Sarah's, one of Sarah's hands moving to hold the back of the couch, the other playing with the silver barbell through Moira's nipple.

Andy knew his part to play and moved over to hotdog his cock between Sarah's butt cheeks, smearing even more of that lubricant over her pink pucker before he lined the head of his shaft up and slowly thrust forward, planning on taking it slow, but instead, Sarah just shoved her ass back onto his cock like she wanted to engulf the whole fucking thing on the first pass, a complicated moan erupting until Andy realized it was both Sarah *and* Moira moaning together, and he saw that Sarah's hand had moved from Moira's tits down to between her thighs, rubbing against the Scottish woman's slit.

Early on in their relationship, he'd learned that Sarah and Emily often had a rivalry about being the first to do things, and that had extended to their relationship with Andy, with Emily taking great pride about being the first of the two of them to try anal with Andy (or, in fact, at all). And now Sarah was countering by joining the Mile High Club by going through the back door.

He was doing his best to keep his pace in check and not to rush, but there was no mistaking that for as much as Sarah *loved* anal now, she was still *very* tight, and the constricting snugness wasn't going to let him last all that long. So, when duration was going to be a problem, he'd learned to compensate by countering with intensity. Because of that, he grabbed onto Sarah's hip with one hand and reached forward to slide his fingers around her neck, giving it a little squeeze, which he felt surge as a shiver down her spine.

Andy kept plowing his hips forward, using her hips and her throat to keep her in motion, but he also felt Moira's fingertips moving to smooth over his hand on Sarah's hip, as if connecting the three of them, and just as he started to cum, he thrust down hard, which was when Sarah truly surprised him. Her thighs slide wide to each side, practically doing the splits against the towel and the couch, as her body tensed up and she let out the most intense, fierce monster of an orgasm into Moira's mouth, her ass swallowing his jism, the two of them locked in a feedback loop that seemed to never end until finally, seconds or minutes later, Andy's surge stopped, his hand slipped from her throat and he grabbed the back of the couch himself, his own legs feeling a little unsteady.

"That's why I stole the towel from the hotel room," Moira whispered to Sarah, who began to giggle hysterically in the aftermath of her overwhelming orgasm.

Chapter Fourteen

December 18th, 2020

The book signing in Denver the day before had gone off without a hitch. They'd flown into Denver airport and headed straight towards The Tattered Cover, where Andy's fans were eagerly awaiting his arrival, albeit in smaller numbers than originally anticipated. The cold weather had discouraged people from protesting too heavily, although there had been a few hardened, determined people who had insisted on parading around with their signs, although the media coverage was still lingering around, the story of the shooting a few days ago still lingering over the general reporting around his book tour.

The fans had been incredibly gracious and welcoming, and when he'd read an excerpt from the book under development, he'd gotten a standing ovation for almost five minutes. The security was also a little bit stronger this time around, but it didn't feel constrictive, and if an attendee wasn't observant, they might not have even noticed there were additional guards stationed around The Tattered Cover bookstore the event had been held at, one of the largest bookstores in America.

Overall, it had let Andy relax a little bit yesterday, since he had been nervous of a repeat of the experience back in his home state of Ohio. The time spent with Niko's mom had certainly soothed his nerves some, as well as how welcoming to their family she'd been. (The fact that she'd just found out she was going to be a grandmother probably helped also.) And since the signing had been without issue, Andy's guard had been slightly lowered when they got back to the hotel on the night of the 17th.

The hotel itself had been set up incredibly well, with one massive bed, plus a couple of additional beds so that security could sleep somewhere during their down time. It felt like it was nice and safe, and they'd slept well, all huddled together in one big pile like they preferred to, given the option. It was a good time at rest.

That should've been what set warning flags up inside his brain, but he was hoping that maybe, just maybe, he'd earned a bit of a respite.

Instead, he woke up on the morning of the 18th to Niko shaking his shoulder.

"Andy, I think you'd better come take a look at this."

He was going to remember this exact morning for the rest of his life.

Andy got out of bed, extracting himself from the sea of still slumbering bodies with a casual adeptness he'd gotten better at over the last few months, and moved out of the bedroom into the foyer, where Alexis and Melody were already awake, watching the television, a sort of almost exhausted shock having settled in on their faces, and the look had Andy concerned, more concerned than he'd thought he'd ever been.

The clock read 9:52 a.m. MST.

"We bring you continuing coverage of the crisis in New Zealand, I'm Shannon Mason for CNN. For those of you just joining us, allow us to recap the events of the last few days," the woman on television said to them from her studio somewhere in Atlanta. She was the sort of blonde talking head that seemed to be a staple on the news networks, but she looked like she was exhausted, the toll of what she'd been talking about clearly weighing on her. He wondered how long she'd been on the air. "In February of this year, the small country of New Zealand shut its borders down just as the twin pandemics of DuoHalo and Covid began, and as such, had circumvented the heavy casualties that had affected the rest of planet. Since February, they had reported zero cases of either disease. Up until three days ago, when people in New Zealand began dying off in large numbers. The government of New Zealand initially attempted to keep it quiet, at first, to try and prevent a panic, while reaching out to the US government for emergency support but word broke internationally late last night."

"Oh god," Andy said, moving over to sit down on the couch as Niko sat down next to him, snuggling in hard against him, her lip quivering a bit nervously. He felt that nervous pit in his stomach that he'd only had once, half a lifetime ago, early in the morning on September 11th, 2001. He'd been nineteen, just starting his second year of college, when he'd been walking to class in the morning,

seeing that people were huddled around televisions. He'd sat down in the lobby of one of the buildings with several dozen other students watching on a television that had been playing the same thing every other television across America was playing. He imagined that might be happening again right now, endless masses glued to the television in fear and shock.

"The United States *had* been in negotiations to start delivering the serum to New Zealand starting in January, because the small country had been confident that they had the disease under control," the reporter said. "As such, they were not prepared to discover that the disease known as DuoHalo had somehow invaded their shores, unbeknownst to its citizenry. This problem was compounded by the fact that because New Zealand was so confident in how secure their borders were that they had given their citizens free access to travel *within* during that entire time. Because of this, the..." The reporter stopped, looking down at her hands nervously before looking back up and into the camera again, a tiny tremble visible in the woman's hands atop the news desk. "Because of this, we are currently operating on the assumption that the entire population of New Zealand is currently carrying the DuoHalo virus. As such, the United States is making an emergency shipment of the Quaranteam serum to the country that should be touching down shortly. We have with us via remote satellite Doctor Charlotte Varma, who is part of the United States's team dedicated to combating the DuoHalo epidemic, and one of the researchers who worked on the Quaranteam serum almost since its inception. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us this morning, Doctor Varma."

"I only wish it could be under better circumstances, Ms. Mason," Charlotte's familiar face said, split screen on the television, with the reporter on the right and the doctor on the left.

"I think we all feel that way, Doctor," the reporter said, clearly shaken. "Can you tell us what the current state of the population of New Zealand is right at this moment in time?"

"Yes, ah. Yes." Andy had seen Charlotte during dark times before, when he'd helped pull her and her daughter from the clutches of Arthur Covington the Fourth, but her face looked like she was desperately struggling to keep it together, something which made the whole moment even more uncomfortable for Andy to watch. "So, two days ago, the city of Christchurch reported its first casualty from DuoHalo, something which wasn't supposed to be possible. Because the country had closed its borders off, many initial reports which were presenting as DuoHalo were ignored by local authorities, until things turned severe in rapid succession."

"Why did local medical authorities discard diagnoses of DuoHalo in such large numbers, Dr. Varma, and did that disregard complicate things?"

"It certainly did not help them any, Shannon, although even if they had correctly diagnosed DuoHalo upon first presentation, it would've really only bought them an additional twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and while that may sound like a lot of time, many of the consequences of their actions were already, at that point, unavoidable."

"At this point, I feel the need to warn our viewers that we will be showing some fairly graphic footage over the next few hours, and that they may wish to look away from their televisions," the reporter said, her hands balling up into fists. "How bad is it looking for the country, Doctor?"

"New Zealand has... *had* a population of around five million people, Shannon, according to the most recent estimates, with about fifteen percent of that being in the immediate, incurable age range from 11 to 18. Almost all those young people are already dead, and those that have not yet expired will do so shortly. There is nothing that can be done about that."

The word 'expired' hung uncomfortably in Andy's head for a moment, making the deaths of approaching a million young people sound like a show on a streaming service being cancelled, rather than the mind shattering number of dead people that it was.

"The graphic footage which we are about to rebroadcast comes from local New Zealand television media, taken yesterday afternoon local New Zealand time. Doctor, can you explain to us what we're seeing here?"

The screen cut away from the two women to show a distant shot of what looked like hospital

staff tossing bodies into a large open pit in the earth. The shot was taken from enough distance so that the faces of anyone involved could not be made out, but even from the distance, it was clear the pit already held hundreds, maybe even thousands of bodies, many of them teenagers.

“Yes, ah, the death toll is so high in New Zealand right now, Shannon, that individual graves are impossible and even mass cremation is basically unscalable at the rate of which new casualties are arriving at the hospitals,” Charlotte said, her face shown in a corner of the screen that couldn’t cut away from the horror, all the color having drained from her face as she was watching it along with everyone else. “Considering the infection rate, the incubation period and the lateness with which we are arriving with the serum to try and help these people, we are expecting the best-case scenario for New Zealand is to have somewhere between twenty and thirty percent of its population alive this time next week, although I have to admit more realistic projections are putting it significantly lower, within the ten to twenty percentage range.”

“Is there a reason none of the hospital workers are wearing personal protective equipment, Doctor?” the reporter asked.

“Because, at this point, Shannon, it would be completely wasted,” Charlotte sighed. “Everyone you see in these videos, the corpses, the hospital workers, even the very camera crew filming all of this, each and every one of them is already nearly guaranteed to be infected with DuoHalo. That’s one of the reasons we’re projecting such high casualty rates. There is no one to tend to the cases that might have been less severe in terms of women’s cases, meaning that basically every person in the country that we cannot get the Quaranteam serum into within the next three to four days is going to die, both men and women alike.”

The video cut to a closer shot, showing one of the hospital workers taking a photo of one of the dead bodies with that person’s identification on their chest. The man looked like he was in his early thirties, and Andy wondered how many more just like that had already been catalogued.

“In such catastrophic conditions, all hospital workers can do is quickly catalog the dead before disposing of the bodies in the safest way possible, so as to not contaminate the soil or the ground water,” Charlotte said. “All of this information is being cataloged, but at the same time, many of the hospitals have abandoned the practice, simply choosing to focus their time on doing what they can to try and keep those cases who might be borderline salvageable alive long enough to try and get some of the Quaranteam serum into them. In the words of their Prime Minister, it is looking increasingly likely that it will be easier to take a census of those that survived than to catalog those who have died.”

The video feed cut to a shot from what looked like a block away from a major hospital, the entire building surrounded by people clogging nearly every way in or out.

“We’re getting reports that many of the hospitals are simply turning people away at this point, unable to provide them any help or support, at least until the Quaranteam serum arrives,” the reporter’s voice said. “You can see here that in some cases, the hospitals have simply been abandoned by the medical staff for the time being, as doctors and nurses have either gone home to be with their loved ones, or to try and get into line to get the Quaranteam serum as quickly as possible. Do you know anything at all about the Air Force’s plans on how they plan to deploy the serum, Doctor?”

“The Air Force will be landing two or three planes each in each of the five major cities of New Zealand – Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton and Tauranga. As you know, you have reporters embedded with a couple of those units. I expect they should be contacting you soon, as they will be able to give you much more up to date information than I can, although I’m here to help speak to the medical concerns.”

The video cut to shots of a local store apparently being swarmed with looters and rioters, the windows completely shattered, people simply walking out with armfuls of things, although the health of the rioters looked suspect, many of them coughing, staggering in their walk, their eyes heavily bloodshot, their noses dripping with mucus.

The reporter’s voice spoke again, overlaying the footage of looting. “Law enforcement has, at

this point, almost mostly abandoned their efforts to keep the populace in check and are also either with their loved ones or attempting to get in line at locations that it has been reported the serum will be delivered to shortly. In some cases, they have tried to establish some crowd control at locations suspected to be serum drop points, but for the most part, they are simply completely overwhelmed on all fronts. Doctor, how fast will they be able to distribute the serum?”

“It’s not a complicated process, Shannon, but the—”

“Sorry to cut you off, Doctor, but I’m just getting word that we’ve made contact with one of our embedded reporters with the Air Force salvation team. One of our southern Pacific correspondents, Jenny Sheppard, joins us now. Jenny, can you hear me?”

The feed cut in with a shot of a brunette woman with a giant airplane in the background. She was dressed in what looked like a typical reporter’s attire but had a decidedly non-standard flak jacket on over it. Her hair was done up in a bun, and she looked like she’d only recently been woken up from a bad night’s rest, which Andy suspected she’d had on the plane on display behind her.

“I can hear you, Shannon. I’m here with the 102nd, who arrived just about ten minutes ago in Auckland, as they are preparing to head over to Eden Park, a sports venue here with a capacity of 50,000. They are planning on using this as a staging ground for the first wave of patients in Auckland, and we are expecting to roll out within just a few minutes, a little past 3 a.m. local time. It will be the first stop of nearly half a dozen this team will make over the next twenty-four hours. Between the two planes landing in each of the five major cities, there are over two and a half million doses of the Quaranteam serum that have just arrived within the last couple of hours. I asked the commander of the task force before we deployed if this would be enough and was told that this was all the supply they had available, and that they would provide as much of it as they could to people in need.”

“Jenny, how many—”

“I’m sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I’m being told we need to move right now to relocate with our hosts, so we should be able to get back to you in twenty or thirty minutes,” the reporter said, clearly being hurried by her Air Force handlers, the trucks starting to drive off as the feed froze on a still of the last image.

“Stay safe over there, Jenny, and we’ll talk to you again a little later.” The shot cut away from the field and back to the split screen of the main reporter and Charlotte. “That was Jenny Sheppard, southern Pacific correspondent, and she’ll be joining us again later. Doctor Varma, what kind of recovery can we expect from those New Zealanders who are able to get access to the serum in time?”

“The results will vary significantly, depending on what happens to them *after* they get the serum, but many of them stand a good chance of recovery,” Charlotte said. “Assuming they are able to find and partner themselves.”

“I want to get more into that, but we need to take a quick commercial break. Don’t go anywhere, our coverage of Crisis In New Zealand will be back in just a few minutes.”

The screen faded and then turned into a commercial about some older man and his need for finding a comfortable catheter, which gave Andy a moment to look away from the screen for a moment, suddenly aware that a couple more of his partners had woken up during the time he was watching and had moved to snuggle in as much as they could. He realized at some point, Emily had taken his hand and wrapped it around her own.

“This is horrifying, Andrew,” she whispered to him, her eyes filled with tears.

“I know, Em. I know.”

Melody went to go wake the rest of his partners, as Andy recognized they might not be leaving the hotel room for a while, unable to turn away from the tragedy that was unfolding on the other side of the planet but was still only as far away as their television set. By the time the rest of his partners were moving to sit on or in front of the couch, the reporter had returned to the screen. Other than some very brief filling in of what was happening to the partners who’d awoken last, nobody much felt like talking.

When the reporter came back from commercial, it was in a three-panel split screen, with

Charlotte on the right-hand side and the same reporter from before, Jenny Sheppard, who was now standing inside what looked like some sort of large sports arena, where it looked like pallets of serum had just been yanked off the trucks and stacked down in large sections. Many tall plastic dividers had been laid out on the field, funneling the open area down into twenty stations, each staffed by two people, one nurse and one armed soldier, before just opening out to the back.

“We’re back with Jenny Sheppard in Eden Park within the city of Auckland in New Zealand, and Jenny, it looks like behind you, they’ve set up stations where people can get injected with the serum quickly, although I don’t see any area set up for post-injection observation.”

“Shannon, the situation here is currently so dire that the commanding officer, General Natalie Scrimshaw, told me just a few moments ago that they simply do not have *time* for any observation or post-injection care, as the situation here is so dire,” Jenny said, her voice starting to crack just a little bit. “They do not have time for Oracle screenings or even to ensure that people are getting paired up appropriately. As soon as someone is injected, they are given a pamphlet explaining how the serum works, which instructs them to go and find a male partner as soon as they are able to, and sent onward. Any men who try to show up in this area are being redirected from entering the lines and being sent to stand around the back, so that any women coming out of the area can collectively grab a partner or form ad hoc Teams before leaving the site, if they do not have someone already in mind who they know and is both available and alive.”

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that, Jenny? Are you saying the Oracle system isn’t being used *at all* over there?” Shannon asked.

“That’s right, Shannon,” Jenny confirmed. “The decision was made en route here that New Zealand was in a complete triage situation, and that the maximum amount of the serum would have to be distributed and that the New Zealand citizenry would simply need to be trusted to fend for themselves once they were given their dose. The General told me the situation is far from optimal, but the choices were this or essentially treating all New Zealand as hospice care, so the decision was made to save as many living people as possible.”

“What kind of preparations were made in advance of your arrival there, Jenny?”

“All of the syringes are preloaded, so staffers can simply remove the cap, stick it in the shoulder of a woman, press the plunger, pull it out, toss it into a bin, hand the person a pamphlet and send them on their way. The entire process should take no more than twenty seconds, meaning they’re hoping to get thirty-six hundred women done every hour at this location alone, or close to ninety thousand women within the next twenty-four hours,” Jenny told them. “Each city has two Air Force teams in it, one stationed and one mobile. Each stationary unit will remain at its location for three days, or until their supply of the serum is exhausted. The mobile units will be changing location every two hours within the major city they’re stationed in, offering those who are too ill to travel larger distances the chance to possibly get an injection of the serum. The chyron below will list those locations for our viewers in New Zealand, although we will *not* be broadcasting their locations outside of New Zealand, for fear of someone attempting to hijack Quaranteam serum.”

“Jenny, have you had a chance to read the pamphlet they’ll be handing out?”

“I have, Shannon, and it’s a straightforward and almost brutal explanation of how the serum works, as well as the side effects associated with it. The pamphlet gives instructions to find a partner, what the imprinting process is like and what to expect moving forward. The Prime Minister of New Zealand is also going to be recording a message that’s showing on taped loop on most of the local television and radio stations, repeating the instructions from the pamphlet, as well as listing both static and mobile locations the teams will be coming to.”

“Did you get a chance to see if there were people gathered up outside of the Arena, Jenny?”

“We did drive past the crowd that had gathered in the Eden Park Outer Oval,” Jenny said as the screen cut away to show footage of tens of thousands of people all gathered up, trying to remain calm, although as with any crowd that big, it looked like there were some disputes going on, with some

people struggling to try and push their way forward. “A few members of the Air Force have gone towards the gates with megaphones, telling any men who are gathered there to go the other side of the stadium, and to try and find someone to partner up with, although they are reminding those men that they should not leave with just one partner, but only once they have found *several*. They...” The reporter choked up for a moment before continuing on reading off of some of her notes. “They are also telling anyone between the ages of eleven and seventeen to get out of line, to go home immediately, as there is nothing that they can do for them, which is a horrible thing for these women to have to tell the children of New Zealand.”

“I’m sorry, Jenny, didn’t you mean to say women *and* men? I would have assumed the Air Force would have sent mostly female staff members, but also some of those staff members’ imprinting partners, in case they were needed to stay longer.”

“That’s an understandable assumption to make, Shannon, albeit a wrong one,” Jenny said, as generators were being turned on and heavy flood lights were filling the entire area with illumination, as the camera operator struggled to adjust to the new lighting conditions. “The general told me on the flight over that there was a concern that if there had been any men as part of this relief effort, they might have been tempted to offer themselves up to partner with some of the women here, not out of any personal gain, but simply out a sense of empathy for what these people have already endured and are continuing to endure. We were not permitted to bring our male partners with us for those same reasons, as the number of women here in need is almost beyond the mind’s ability to comprehend. This rule also ensures there is a time limit to the amount of effort the Air Force can put in here in New Zealand, and helps serve as a reminder that if any of the women here, be it Air Force or press, is starting to feel the need to be reinforced, then it is likely too late for anyone in New Zealand who has not already been injected with the serum, and that we should return home to our partners.”

“So, the Air Force deployment will be there for how long, Jenny?”

“Best guess at this point is five to six days, although if the casualty count continues to escalate as quickly as it has over the past day, the general tells me staying past three or four days is likely a waste of time and resources.” There was something terrifying and stark about how she said that Andy thought to himself, like after four days the only people on the island nation would either have the Quaranteam serum flowing through their veins, or they would be dead.

“How does the Air Force feel—”

“Sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I’ve just gotten word that they’re about to start letting people into the arena, so we want to turn the camera over to that and let you know that it’s happening.”

The shot cut away from the reporter to point across stadium, with waist high steel railings erected before the plastic dividers, an effort to funnel people into orderly lines to get the serum injected, but within moments, it was clear that wasn’t going to happen. Women started rushing towards the railings as fast as they could, shoving other people out of the way, clearly panicked that those few moments were the difference between life and death.

“It looks like the people are charging towards the line, Jenny,” Shannon said, concern in her voice. “Are you going to be safe?”

Suddenly, there was a spray of machine gun fire into the air, which made people suddenly stop in their tracks. An Air Force officer with a microphone hooked up to a large set of speakers shouted out like the Voice of God. “Citizens of New Zealand! Walk, do not run, towards the lines! If we see people pushing, shoving or forcing their way forwards, they will be detained and maybe even shot with rubber bullets or bean bag rounds. They still hurt like a motherfucker, ladies, so you do not want to make us do it, believe me!”

The stampede shorted itself out, although whether it was the officer’s voice or the half a dozen Air Force officers with their rifles pointed into the crowd, no one could be sure. Many of the women in the crowd weren’t yet showing signs of infection, but there were others who were clearly battling with early or mid-stage DuoHalo onset. As some of the zombie-like horde began to approach the rows,

members of the Air Force security team had to direct a few men out of the line, as well as some women who had brought their teenage children with them.

“If you are between the ages of 11 and 17, this serum is a guaranteed death sentence,” the officer said over the speakers. “If you are male, taking the serum directly will only result in your immediate and incredibly painful death. Please proceed to the other side of the stadium and attempt to find yourself several women to partner up with, as that is your *only* chance for survival.”

“It’s...” the on-location reporter started before stopping then starting again. “It’s incredibly difficult to watch this, Shannon, knowing that the people we are seeing here represent some of the few survivors this once great island nation will have in just a few short days.”

“Jenny, we’re going to leave you for a few minutes and go over to Kayley Post, who is set up at Hagley Oval in Christchurch. Kayley, how are things going where you are?”

The screen cut to an open park area, which looked like it was filled to the brim with people being funneled through lines similar to the ones they’d seen at the sporting arena. It panned over to a bottle blonde in her late twenties, standing next to an airwoman in Air Force garb, a Latina who looked like she wanted to just go and lay down.

“Shannon, the Air Force has been up and running here for a little over an hour now, and medics are being rotated in an hour-on, hour-off shift rotation so that nobody feels too overwhelmed or hopeless regarding the situation. I’ve grabbed one of the medics just to talk with us for a few minutes about how the process has been going so far. Staff Sergeant Alice Mayer joins us briefly. Sergeant, how has it been?”

“Uh, it’s been brutal, ma’am. We’re doing our best to get as many shots into as many arms as possible, but because of the overwhelming number of infected, we can’t do any of the post-care that’s important in making sure this solution works long term that we’re accustomed to doing. We’ve been giving pamphlets and brief explanations of how it all works, but we don’t have time to answer questions. We don’t even know if they’re reading the damn things, but we’ve told them they have to take the information in the pamphlet to heart, or they could die. Most of them seem so happy just to be getting the serum, even though we’ve explained to them that’s just the first step, and that it won’t mean much if they don’t follow the rest of the steps.”

“Have there been any problems?”

The staff sergeant sighed, nodding slightly. “We’ve had a couple of people try and grab handfuls of syringes and run off with them, but we’ve been told not to waste precious time chasing them down. We’ve also had some people ask for additional syringes that they say they’re going to bring to those too invalid to make their way here.”

“Is that what you think they’re being used for?”

“Some of them, sure,” the medic said. “We suspect that some those people, however, are either attempting to give them to those in the 0% survival zone, i.e. kids and teenagers, or are disregarding our instructions and attempting to give them directly to men, which will be completely fatal. We’ve done as much as we can to warn people about those consequences, with both the pamphlets and the announcements being given every ten minutes over the loudspeakers, but there’s only so much we can do at this point. We’re attempting to triage as best we can, but the situation’s a full-blown disaster.”

The Rook family had been watching the horror show for more than a couple of hours before any of them could bear to look away, many of his partners crying or shivering, clinging onto him, his hands, his arms, any part of him they could get in contact with, as if the sights of it all were terrifying them, and that staying in contact with him was helping them get through it.

For Andy, it was like watching 9/11 all over again, only in slow motion, with the cameras able to capture the faces of the dying, except the scale was magnified to proportions that were almost unfathomable. On that fateful September morning, the death count had been only 3000 or so people. The suspected total dead, at that moment in that location, was approaching 1 million people within the last day or so, just in New Zealand alone.

The pandemic's isolation strategy of quarantining had detached them from the reality of it all a bit, all the information having been leaked out in bits and pieces, but this was like being smacked in the face with it all at once, up close and personal, unable to turn away or hide from what was happening.

It was a microcosm of the entire mass culling of the male population of planet Earth.

Live and on television.

By the middle of the day, they were all so numb from it that they made it to the airport without anyone saying much of anything, pulling away from the television long enough to leave Denver and head up towards Seattle. Nobody joined the Mile High Club that evening. Everyone was still too in shock, praying for the people halfway across the world to hold on just a little longer, to find their way to an Air Force team, to get the serum, to live.

Just...

...live.

Chapter Fifteen

December 19th, 2020

Sleeping had been difficult, but before they'd crashed for the night, things had looked like they were stabilizing in New Zealand, even as disastrous as it was. Current estimations were that the New Zealand population would end up somewhere between 15-20% of what it had been two weeks ago, and that was an improvement upon how terrifying it had looked just twelve hours earlier.

Even while they'd been traveling, Team Rook had done everything they could to keep track of what was going on overseas, someone on their phone or laptop, hooked into the plane's Wi-Fi, streaming CNN, MSNBC or the BBC, unable to look away from the latest news coming from halfway across the world. It wasn't like the death tolls were massively higher than the rest of the world – especially now that the Air Force was pushing the serum into every female arm of age it could find – but because New Zealand had gone from zero to sixty within a couple of weeks, it was an easier visual display of what the whole world had been dealing with for months and months. And the sudden severity of it meant that they hadn't time to adapt like most of the rest of the world had.

As individuals had died off across the globe in key logistics or support positions earlier during the pandemic, the deaths had been spread out enough that new people had been brought on, trained up and, as soon as it was available, vaccinated with the serum. And if the keystones in terms of utilities and services were being upheld, it was easier to overlook the massive number of casualties. In most cases, it had been men dying and women being trained up and/or promoted to fill in the slack.

There had been some shortages, naturally, as certain things dwindled in the supply, but by working to keep ahead of the problem, the Air Force had done a remarkable job in keeping all the major industries needed to keep the country functional running, although many of them were operating only at a fraction of what they once were. That was okay, though, as the demand had also dropped, for obvious if depressing reasons.

Less people meant less demand for power, water, food, toiletries, etc.

The ridiculous thing to Andy was that it was all basically just a bunch of dials, and the decreased production for, say, meat, hadn't resulted in anywhere near the sort of panicked shortages people would've expected was because the *demand* had dropped accordingly.

The bigger challenge had been distribution and transportation, but the Air Force had thought of that too, which was why the watchword of surviving the pandemic was *consolidation*.

As it turned out, the people who'd most noticed the pandemic happening in America were those who'd been in smaller to mid-size cities in the United States. It was something Andy had been doing a bunch of reading on. The top 300 largest cities in the US all had populations over 100k (or at least they had before the start of the epidemics), but there were loads and loads and loads of cities across the country with populations between 10k and 100k, and those were the ones that were getting hit the hardest. As such, much of the population of those smaller towns were being consolidated upwards into larger cities.

Consolidation was something people had been advocating for in the United States for literal decades, long before the virus. High density housing hadn't been happening across the country because rich people had pushed for single-home land development to be the only kind of thing that was being allowed to be built, which led to the suburbs.

(There were lots of reasons, but the common denominator was, of course, racism.)

As the sprawl expanded, the problem worsened.

The suburbs made up only 25% of the population of the country, but they accounted for more than half of the greenhouse gases being released in the US. Too many people were just taking up too much space and using too much energy to do it. Public transportation also had a harder time making inroads to usage there. Single family houses were infinitely more expensive to heat and cool than centralized towers or even midsize complexes. The United States had needed to consolidate down into more efficiently designed and constructed cities, so with the dramatic reshaping they already needed to

do because of the pandemic, the government agencies in charge of relocation and social pairing started pushing toward more efficient clustering.

All of the zoning laws had been completely gutted and thrown into the trash.

A completely new United States was rising from the ashes, and it was generally going to look a lot more European, a lot more centralized and a lot more focused. Mixed use structures were going to become *way* more prevalent, with stores and shops on the ground floor, and residences on the several floors above that. The sprawl was going to stop going outwards and start going upwards. That meant changes would be hitting every level across the board.

To keep supply lines from running too thin, many men and women in those smaller towns that were dying out had been offered free relocation to larger cities, chances to move into more centralized locations. Often these were existing metropolitan areas, but in some cases, it was taking key smaller sized cities and scaling them upward, essential crossroads points in the supply chain getting reinforced by being built out as quickly as possible. Anything which was determined to be a keystone in a logistics chain was immediately marked for reinforcement and development.

Andy'd been reading about some of the so-called 'culture clashes' that had been happening in some of the bigger cities. People who used to live in towns of ten or twenty thousand were now living in modified downtown highrise apartments and condo buildings, surrounded by a bunch of people who had been living in the city for decades. That had been by design, too, apparently. If people were going to be forced into new villages, the old tribal political lines had to be broken, and the tribes had to be intermingled, left wingers and right wingers sharing a building, sometimes even a floor.

Farming, agriculture, and livestock were still incredibly important, but again, in newly adjusted proportions. There were plenty of farms that had simply been abandoned because their owners had died, and they weren't needed to keep the supply line within scale. Those who hadn't chosen to move into central city hubs had also been offered a chance to take some of these farms over. The existing farms had been redirected to drop off to new, more centralized redistribution centers. It seemed like a lot of farms had nominated one or two women from their Team to be designated 'drivers,' delivering their goods to the bigger centers before being sent upstream even further.

So, while states like Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, Oklahoma and the like had previously had several smaller towns that would feed up to bigger depots, now the middleman was being cut out and farm deliveries had further to travel to reach larger centralized hubs. It was a bit inconvenient, but a little inconvenient was better than everything suddenly shutting down, or farmers having to give up their land. In some cases, they'd actually *expanded* to take over the land from neighbors who had died, as much as they could manage.

That was how the United States was adapting.

But because everything in New Zealand had collapsed all in the span of two weeks, there hadn't been time to employ any of those lessons to help manage the fallout. All the systems had basically shut down at the same time, and instead of being able to shift resources around to manage the problems until the demand for resources decreased accordingly, the dam had just given way, and everything was spiraling out of control.

One thing Andy did have to admit that gave him hope was that injected women were being allowed to leave New Zealand in search for partners abroad, if they wanted. Obviously, the New Zealand government was encouraging people to stay and find partners locally, but they also understood the need to get paired with people they trusted, which meant some women were leaving on boats or even planes, trying to get to Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan or even Honolulu, although none of those were guaranteed to make it, or even to be allowed to land if they did.

The media was reporting that only between ten and twenty percent of New Zealand women were attempting to leave in search for partners in other countries. When they *were* trying to depart the country, the women the reporters talked to said they simply couldn't bear to be in New Zealand anymore, as everywhere they looked, they were reminded of exactly how many people had died in such

a short period of time. They needed to start over, start fresh, start something totally new. Not that anyone could blame them.

One of the moments of levity Team Rook got, somewhere over Idaho, was when one of the reporters had been talking to a New Zealand man who'd chosen to just wait at the far end of the stadium, so that all the women who'd just been injected would walk past him. When the reporter had interviewed him, he had six women, all of whom seemed wildly out of his league, waiting for him to pick two more before taking them all back to his place. Men were being asked to pair up with as many women as possible, so they'd asked any man to wait until he had at least eight partners before leaving. The man being interviewed said he'd just been talking to any woman he thought looked attractive as they exited, and while loads had turned him down, many were thrilled to have found a partner so soon that they leaped on their first opportunity. He'd even been holding up a sign that read "available cock" and it had brought a smile to many of the women's faces as they trundled out of the arena. And while the man admitted that they didn't have access to the Oracle system, the standing and waiting allowed them all to get to know each other first. A couple of women had left after standing with him for a while, only to be replaced by others who seemed better fits, so he considered the whole thing a success, even if it wasn't optimal. The women had all collectively agreed that while the man, whose name was Zed, wouldn't have been their first choice, he was friendly and he was intelligent and he had a sense of humor, and they were hoping that would be enough to last.

It was hard to turn off or look away from the news for too long, as if they were looking at a window into what had happened worldwide over the last few months under the cover of darkness. So much of the catastrophe had happened while people weren't looking.

Andy had wanted to cancel the signing in Seattle, expecting no one would want to show up, but had been informed by the store that there were people lined up outside, waiting for his arrival. Loads of people were either not watching the news or were looking for something to escape from it with. As such, Andy agreed to donate all the proceeds from his appearance to New Zealand support.

They'd chosen to have the signing at The Elliott Bay Book Company, which had been around since the 70s, and was always a welcome home to visiting authors, and the event itself felt like it went relatively well, although someone from Andy's Team was always on their phone, keeping tabs on the news, trying to stay up to date with how things were going in New Zealand. The gathered crowd was a lot more subdued than the previous events had been, though, so Andy knew that many of them were also still keeping tabs on the situation abroad just as much as they were. But they wanted Andy to distract them from all of that, and so he did his best to keep them smiling and laughing.

One of the things Andy had decided what felt like lifetimes ago but really had only been earlier that year was that he was always going to be moving forward, thinking about how to improve things as he lived his life. That meant learning how to detach himself from tragedy and not letting himself be consumed by loss.

He'd done that by reminding himself of the sense of scale. Death, in such large numbers, had mostly become a statistic, and while he could put names and faces to dozens, if not hundreds of people he'd known who'd died between February and December of 2020, they had all basically blended together, and through consolidation, he'd found detachment.

Consolidation wasn't *always* a good thing, but its use as a survival tool was undeniable.

So if he didn't focus on any one person, face or memory, he could keep his mental sanity drifting a little bit above the sea of melancholy and depression that he was sure had infected every living survivor on the planet.

The problem was that the section of the upcoming book he'd chosen to read today was inspired by his late brother, and Andy had to work to hold it together so that he wasn't thinking about Matty the entire time he was reading it. It took effort, but he got through it.

It was when things got to the Q&A portion when things got a little bit crazy. Andy was used to having to dodge questions about politics, his appearance on 60 Minutes, his partners and everything

else that had sprung up, but several people wanted his opinion on the situation in New Zealand, something Andy hadn't prepared for at all.

He found that after a few questions, though, the crowd was willing to back off, simply because Andy wasn't sure what he could really add to the conversation, other than to hope for the best for the people of New Zealand. He didn't know any more than what was on the television, even though he had a partner from nearby Australia. Someone asked if he would consider expanding his family further if it meant saving the life of a New Zealand woman fleeing the country, and he said while he'd happily do his part, he was certain there were closer eligible men who would hopefully take care of those women in need.

Sarah joked to the crowd that "no" was Andy's least favorite word, which brokered a few more empathetic laughs.

After the questions about New Zealand, things had suddenly gotten politically sticky, but Andy had already used up most of his tricks in getting out of the New Zealand questions.

"Mr. Conrad, what do you think about the continued push for the Men's Protection Act? Are you in favor of taking severe actions to limit the rights of men in order to provide for women's safety, to ensure a Team's increased survival odds?"

"It's a complicated issue," Andy sighed, feeling like he was cornered and was going to have to provide a real answer. "I fully understand women's desires to want to feel safe and secure, but I also think we have to be *very* careful not to go around stomping on men's civil rights in order to do so. It's the classic 'society' versus 'individual' concerns, and yes, I think we as men are going to lose a little bit of the freedoms we've been accustomed to over the years, but that's part of the price we're going to have to pay for being so integral in the new society moving forwards. I'm not against some of the ideas behind it, but I also want to caution anyone from taking it too far. So, minor actions, maybe, but severe actions, probably not. Let's just say if my government wants to tell me I can't go skydiving or mountain climbing, I'm fine with that. But if someone tries to get in the way of me having my weekly cheesesteak, well, let's just say I don't envy that person. That'll wrap it up, so let's get to signing. Remember, if you want a selfie, you have to stay on the other side of the table, and I'm only signing stuff that I wrote. Since a couple of people have asked, yes, both Sarah and Emily have volunteered to sign copies of 'Neon Stonehenge' since they'll be appearing in the film, but only if you're making a donation to the New Zealand Survival Fund. There'll be someone walking the line, taking donations and giving tickets to those who do. Anyone without a ticket can't get a signature from the ladies. Okay? Let's get signing!"

The signing portion went off without a hitch, and Em's idea to take donations for New Zealand for hers and Sarah's signature had raised nearly a thousand dollars. Also, several women had wanted to get selfies of themselves with Em or Sarah, and as long as they'd made a donation, they'd been cool about it, although Melody was keeping a watchful eye on both women for security purposes.

The staff of the bookstore was thankful he'd come out, everyone desperately in need of some distraction from the madness of the news, even if it sounded like New Zealand was starting to stabilize. Early reports were starting to come in, and it looked like *most* of the people who'd gotten the serum had gone on to build semi-stable teams, at least that was how it had looked on first glance. The initial impression had been the worst possible starting point, but the diligent work of the Air Force doctors had been getting jabs into arms as quickly as possible, and the hope was that, by the end of the second or third day, they might have gotten somewhere between half a million and a million people in New Zealand with the Quaranteam serum running through their veins, directly or indirectly, although those numbers were still targets, not confirmed finishing points. It would be weeks, if not months, before they had concrete information about the survivor count, as well as how many people had relocated to other countries.

They closed off the line around 9 p.m. and Andy was finishing up the last couple of signings for the staff, when one of the people running the event said there was a small group of people claiming to

be friends of his waiting outside for him afterwards, if he could spare them some time.

“They’re cleared,” Lexi said to the store manager. “You can go ahead and let them in.”

“I wasn’t aware we were expecting guests,” Andy said to Lexi, a smile creeping on his face. “Hell, I don’t really *know* many people in Seattle.”

“Yeah, well, when you decided you wanted to spring this little surprise trip on us, we built a few surprises of our own into it, and this is one of them,” Sarah said, waving at the group of people coming in, heading towards them quickly, as Sarah moved to hug a short, round woman somewhere in the center of the pack of them. “You came!”

“You told me you were only going to be three hours by train away and you thought we wouldn’t make the trip up to see you fuckers?” a boisterous familiar voice said, cutting through the air, as Andy began to laugh. “Rook! Get your bony ass over here!”

“Ris, what the *fuck* are you doing in Seattle?” Andy said, signing the last of the books before standing up from the table, heading over towards the group. As Sarah moved to the side, he could see the familiar face of his friend and fellow author Larissa Cotton, someone he’d extended an invitation to join his family a month or so ago, only to be rebuked because she already had a husband, the massive chunk of meat and muscle standing a few steps behind her, Will. ‘Ris and Will had gotten married in late 2018, some six months after he’d seen her last, but they’d sort of kept it quiet. Will had even taken her surname.

Larissa wasn’t even 5’ tall, portly, with the silver septum ring still staunchly in place. She was, as she’d told him, Mestizo, the daughter of a Mexican mother and a second-generation Cajun father. Her hair was dyed a shade of bright green that could only be described as ‘atomic lime.’ And despite how Andy had thought of her as “covered in tattoos” when he last saw her, they’d only proliferated, having grown to run up along her neck all the way to the underside of her chin and behind her ears, as well as all over the backs of her hands. Her goth Lolita look had been dialed up even further, with bright orange and green striped leggings that would’ve made Jhonen Vasquez proud. They were beneath an overly frilly black poofy dress that only complimented the black leather bustier that was holding on for dear life against Larissa’s more than ridiculous bosom, the material propping her boobs up into the kind of shelf an entire drinks platter could safely rest on.

Will, by contrast, looked like he was some sort of hipster chic lumberjack, with a truly magnificent beard that threatened to cover the top third of his chest. He was dressed in red and black flannel and the skinniest set of skinny jeans he’d ever seen spray painted onto muscular man legs before. Andy almost wanted to grab a knife, though, because Will’s brown hair was done up in a ridiculous man bun that Andy *hated* on sight, but it was Larissa’s husband, not some random guy off the street, so he exercised restraint. Maybe she found that sort of look attractive. Last time Andy had seen Will, he’d only been Larissa’s boyfriend, so Andy wasn’t surprised to see a heavy gauge titanium and gold wedding ring on the man’s left hand now.

When Sarah had suggested Andy invite Larissa into Team Rook, Andy had been *relatively* certain that Larissa had already gotten married, but he hadn’t been *entirely* certain, so the invitation had been extended. Larissa and Will were not only already married at that point, she’d gotten in on one of the first rounds of people to get the serum in Portland, since she and Will were already in a throuple with another woman. They’d actually gotten the vaccine around the same time Andy and Aisling had. He hadn’t been at all bothered by the rejection – if anything, he’d been relieved because it meant at least someone he knew was safe.

“It’s only like 3 hours by train, and nobody’s going fucking *anywhere* these days, so we decided if you can make it that far, we could meet you the rest of the fucking way,” ‘Ris said to them with a laugh, still hugging Sarah. “He half as good a fuck as I always thought he’d be?”

Sarah giggled and blushed but nodded immediately. “All that and so much fucking more,” she said, a note he hadn’t heard in months in Sarah’s voice, that of nervousness. “I’m still mad that you didn’t get me his fucking phone number though, ‘Ris. You knew how fucking hard I was crushing on

him back then!”

“Well, I hadn’t fucking *seen* him to *ask* if it was okay, Sarah!” Larissa laughed. “I don’t just go around giving fucking personal information because somebody fucking asks me for it. And I didn’t just want to call him up out of the blue with no other reason than to ask him if it was okay to give out his phone number to a complete fucking stranger, no matter how fucking hot she was. Can you believe he’d never mentioned *his* fucking crush on you to me?”

“I don’t exactly go around telling coworkers who I’d like to sleep with, ‘Ris!” Andy cackled. “That seems like *incredibly* bad form.”

“One, we’re not fucking ‘coworkers,’ Andy, we’re colleagues, cohorts, friends at best, B, I always told you I’d be happy to wingwoman your scrawny ass if that was what it would take to get you laid, and Charlie, that story about Sarah and Emily asking you that question at OmegaCon was, like, pinnacle fucking meet-cute of all fucking time. I mean that was the GOAT’s GOAT right there. How could I ever have deprived the two of you of that?”

“One, B and Charlie?” Emily asked quietly.

“I’m terrible at organizational structure in arguments,” Larissa said, “so hush.”

“Speaking of OmegaCon,” Andy said, “how come *you* weren’t there last year? Something about your health? I got super worried, and you were ridiculously cryptic any time I asked about it. You wouldn’t even take my calls, just texted me.”

Larissa frowned and nodded. “Ovarian cancer. I had to have one of my ovaries removed, and I was on chemotherapy, making sure the cancer hadn’t spread anywhere else. I was advised not to travel for a while. The chemo fucked my voice up for a good while.”

“Jesus, Ris, I’m so sorry,” Andy said.

The heavyset woman smiled and shrugged. “It turned out not to be such a big deal, because apparently when I got imprinted onto Will, my missing ovary grew back. Like, they’d told us that any lingering health concerns we had might be affected by the serum, but when I went in for my sixty-day checkup after I’d gotten imprinted, they wanted to do a full body scan, and as it turns out, I had a whole new collection of eggs that just *appeared*.” She tossed her free hand up into the air. “Whole new ovary had grown in me overnight to replace the one they’d cut out of me. Shit’s fuckin’ wild, innit? How big your count end up?”

“Twenty-two women,” Andy chuckled, shaking his head. “Which is, what, twenty-six or twenty-seven more than I probably deserve?”

Fiona reached over and smacked Andy across the back of his head with her palm, loud enough to sound like a crack. “Sorry, we sometimes have to discourage him from disparaging himself,” Fiona said with a grin. “Andy likes to make sure nobody else can take potshots at him by *insisting* he fire first. I’m Fiona, Andy’s old college girlfriend and soon-to-be wife,” she said, extending a hand for Larissa to shake, but the plump woman pulled her in for a quick bear hug instead.

“The old romantic soul herself!” Larissa said, patting Fiona on the back. “I’d been wondering if you were going to take him up on it. It made sense he extended you an offer, considering he’d still been pining over you for decades.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Niko asked with a broad grin on her face.

“In the list of dedications for ‘Neon Stonehenge,’ there’s like, five or six people and then the last person was ‘the old romantic soul,’ which I’d thought Andy had just put in there to fuck with people, but when we were out drinking years back, he told me that was something he used to call his first true love Fiona back when they were dating, and that if she’d ever seen it in the book, she’d have known it was for her.”

It was Fiona’s turn to blush for a little bit now, as she nodded. “I *did* know it was about me. I was a little nervous about it, but I figured it was maybe because I’d encouraged him to start writing a book, long long ago, telling him there was a lot of potential in his writing. I didn’t take it as him still holding a flame for me.”

“You probably should’ve, luv,” Moira teased, poking her partner in the ribs. “I told you he wouldn’t have lost the faith.”

“Yes yes, dear,” Fiona said. “You’re right, I’m wrong and you’re *much* smarter than me for it. We’re all past it now, so no reason to beleaguer the point.”

Over the next few minutes, Andy introduced Larissa to everyone in his Team who was present, and Larissa did the same with her own, although Andy was fairly certain nobody was going to hold all the names in their head properly.

The group of them walked down the street to a place called Linda’s Tavern, that advertised itself as “the official tavern of the N.W.” The place was mostly quiet, as it seemed like nearly any restaurant that Andy and his Team set foot in. That was the thing Andy was most worried about in America, even still – how many restaurants, diners, eateries, bakeries, sandwich shops, ramen joints, sushi bars and other places to grab a bite to eat weren’t yet able to recover, because those people who’d already received the serum wouldn’t leave their houses?

And yet, when he looked at the news in New Zealand, it was insanely easy to see why they were still afraid of going out *anywhere*.

Between Andy’s ten and Larissa’s eight, they needed to have some tables pushed together, but the place was ecstatic to have a large crowd show up, the hostess looking upon them like they were a godsend, especially as Fiona made a point to take several photos, including one of the name of the place out front.

The food and the drinks started flowing, and once it did, so did the stories, everyone having a great time, plenty of laughing and general merriment. And after Larissa had told a rather embarrassing story about how she had tripped and fallen walking up to accept her Nebula award, Niko had made a crack that nobody had embarrassing stories about Andy, which immediately made Fiona start giggling like a fiend as Andy glared at her.

“Don’t you dare,” he cautioned playfully.

“It’s a *funny* story,” she said in between fits of giggles.

“It makes me look like an *idiot*,” he sighed.

“No, it makes *us* look like idiots, which is why it’s *funny*, Andy!” Fiona said, leaning in to put her head on his shoulder. “C’mon. I haven’t heard you tell this story in years, and it always makes me laugh so hard I’m nearly peeing in my panties. It’s time.”

Aisling, who’d been sitting on the other side of him, leaned in against him with a wicked smile. “We’re going to get this story out of you one way or another, Mister Rook, so we can do it the easy way, or we can do it the hard way.”

“What’s the hard way?” he asked.

“It involves me waking you up in the middle of the night with blowjob while my mouth’s full of ice cubes,” she grinned.

Andy shuddered in fear. “Alright. Alright! I’ll tell the fucking story already, okay?” A cheer erupted from the crowd. “But nobody better interrupt me until I’m finished otherwise I’m going to stop telling it, you hear me?”

Niko suddenly raised her hands and shot an intense look at the gathered group of people, an almost deranged grin on her face. “So you know, I’m gonna shoot anyone who interrupts this story, you lot here me? I’ve been trying to get this out of him for almost two months now! And I’ve got a gun on me, I promise you!”

The group tittered with a little bit of laughter, but fell quiet as Andy sighed and smiled wearily, realizing there was no getting out of it. “Fine. Fine, so most of my time in college, I was doing some opinion writing for the newspaper that Fi also worked at. In fact, she was dating my boss when I first met her, which is much better and less embarrassing story to tell than this one, but you put your quarter in the jukebox, so you’re gonna hear the whole song now. In the spring of my junior year, a column I wrote called ‘The Next Great Disaster’ went what I guess you’d now call viral. Pieces we wrote for our

local paper could get picked up and printed in other college newspapers when somebody found something interesting or they had column inches they needed to fill. As it turned out, my op-ed column, which had been a mostly satirical piece about how we were always hopping from one ‘the world is ending’ narrative to another, and how we never stopped to really look at any of them, because deep down, we knew they were all bullshit.”

“Quit talking about the column and get on with the story,” Fi said. “Otherwise I’ll tell it and I don’t tell it as well as you do.”

Andy shot her a dirty look and then turned back to the enraptured crowd. “I’m only telling you this because it’s important to understand that it got a *lot* more notice than anything else I would do for years, in that it was reprinted in, like, thirty different college newspapers across the country. That was in the spring of my junior year. In the fall of my senior year, I was told that it had won a nationwide award, which came with a two-thousand-dollar cash prize, and that I would be officially given the award at the student newspaper’s fall party.”

Fiona was struggling not to giggle, but it was clearly taxing on her.

“Since the newspaper’s party was going to be on October 26th, it was going to be a Halloween party, and we were supposed to come in costume, and told there was going to be a prize for the most elaborate costume, the prize for which would be five hundred dollars. It’s at this point that I need to tell you that my fiancée Fiona Smith is one of the most ridiculously competitive people it’s ever been my privilege to meet. I tell her all of this, and she *insists* we’re going to win that costume contest. We’d been told the party started at 8 p.m. and given the address.”

“Oh *no*,” Ash said, trying not to start giggling.

“As it turned out, the party actually started at 7 p.m. Also, and perhaps *more* importantly, it was *not*, in fact, a Halloween party, but a formal dress attire party, and the governor of Ohio, Bob Taft, had come to give me the award personally, in recognition for my excellent in communication, and that the award was to be given to me at 8 p.m. So, Fiona and I showed up to the party at five minutes to eight and realized that the editor-in-chief, my dear friend Gabby Cunningham, has set me up for the punchline of a lifetime, because Fi and I are dressed... as clowns. And I don’t mean we made some sort of half-assed attempt at it. Oh, no no no, Fiona was not to be outdone when it came to this sort of thing, so we had full production costumes with accompanying wigs and face paint and giant floppy shoes.”

The crowd of his partners, guardians and friends were all trying desperately not to break down laughing, but everyone had the image of Andy as a clown in their head, and it seemed like it was impossible for anyone to shake it loose, all of them wanting to burst into giggles.

“Knowing full well there was no time to change or even try and take *some* of that ridiculous get up off, I did the only possible thing I could do in those circumstances, and I leaned into it. We’d walked in through the door just two minutes or so before the presentation was supposed to start, so Fiona and I walked over to our reserved places at the table right in front and sat down and waited for the whole presentation to start. When the presenter got up on stage, they began extolling my virtues, how my writing had transcended beyond being just a short satirical piece and had crossed over into something of a statement upon the mindset of humanity, how easily we can be distracted by bad news and how we needed to focus on the lighter side of life, how to take comfort in the things that made us smile and laugh and sing and dance. And now, the presenter said, the governor was going to come, say a few words, and present me with my award.”

Andy had practiced telling this story, because it was one of those things he would occasionally break out when people would tell him he was being too serious, and he looked around, seeing everyone on pins and needles, waiting for him to continue, so he did.

“The Governor got up and gave a brief speech about how the youth were important, and how we were so often dismissed because of our age, accused of being unable to tackle serious subjects, and how my article had been a reminder that we should never judge a book by its cover, never judge a writer by their age, to always give anyone a fair chance. And so he wanted to present the award to

Andrew Rook, and invited me to come up on stage and say a few words.”

Fiona was still quiet, but was in tears, she was laughing silently so hard it must’ve hurt, as the rest of the people started to laugh even more.

“I stood up and at that point, I realized the governor hadn’t seen me because of the bright lights being shone in his face, nor had he been told about the practical joke my EIC was playing on me, because I kid you not, I watched the whites of his eyes grow three sizes that day. I made my way up onto stage as if I was dressed perfectly normally, with the exception of when I made my way up the stairs, which I had to sidestep up, because of the length of my ridiculous shoes. I walked across the stage and shook the governor’s hand, seeing the utterly aghast look on his face as we both turned to face the front so the cameras gathered there could capture the image for posterity’s sake. As soon as he could, the governor made his way offstage, trying to get as far away from me as he could, out of embarrassment, perhaps? Or maybe he was just worried what kind of image a photo of him giving an award to a clown would send. But I turned to the microphone, I cleared my throat, and I began to speak. It was important and momentous occasion for me, so I wanted to have as much gravitas as I possibly could, which, I’m sure you can imagine, was quite difficult dressed as a clown in face paint, to say nothing of my bright orange wig.”

The group was nearing that bursting point that Andy knew how to cultivate oh so well, so he continued.

“I said to the gathered audience, ‘Thank you all for this award, and the recognition of my column about how farcical the doomsayers of the world often are. As you can imagine, for someone with my condition, gelotophobia, there’s always a moment when you put something creative into the world that you’re terrified it’s going to be the subject of ridicule and mockery. But I wanted to put this article out there, so you know that even those of us who are just crying on the inside types have the capacity to reach beyond our station, to elevate our work through dedication, hard work and perseverance, and that the work, our work, can move beyond us, live beyond us. I just want to thank my loving girlfriend Peaches, and my parents, who in addition to naming me Andrew, also bestowed upon me a culturally significant name, one relevant to my heritage. So on behalf of all those of you whom also bear the name ‘Chuckles’ in observance of our ancestors, thank you all.’ And then I picked up the award and the check, and walked off stage and back down to Fiona, who had been laughing then, much as she is now, so hard that her makeup was running, as she threw her arms around me, and the entire newspaper staff cheered. And when that died down, I said, ‘And fuck *all* of you for this, I’ll have you know.’”

Much as it had back then, it set the entire room to laughing so hard people were struggling to breathe.

A few minutes later, when people had finally regathered their composure, a process that had been interrupted by Fiona showing the picture of Andy, in full clown regalia, standing behind a lectern, accepting his award, followed by one of him shaking hands with the former governor of Ohio, the food arrived, and the rest of the evening felt informed by that story, everyone trying to find their little bit of light in a dark day.

A handful of people had wandered in sometime during Andy’s story, and it felt like maybe the fact that their presence had given the place some life for a Saturday night had drawn some other people out to have a good time.

The next day was a Sunday, one Andy’s Team was going to spend traveling down to Los Angeles, and Andy offered to transport Larissa and her team back down to Portland on his private jet, but Larissa insisted they’d enjoyed taking the train up too much, so they were just going to do that tomorrow morning. But that meant they could all stay drinking and telling stories until the tavern closed at 2 a.m.

Andy picked up the bill at the end of the night, and left a tip equal to 100% of the bill, refusing to let Larissa pay for even a tiny amount of the tab. He hugged Larissa hard. “Thanks for this,” he said.

“After the news out of New Zealand, I was starting to feel a little numb, to everything and everyone.”

“Hey, I’m just giving you back your own lesson, amigo,” Larissa said to him. “You don’t remember?”

He cocked his head to one side. “No?”

“Back when we first met, you remember how I was up for a World Fantasy Award, and I didn’t get it? I was super fucking bummed that night, but you cheered me up. You remember what you said?”

“I honestly don’t, ‘Ris,” he laughed.

“You said ‘As long as you’re alive, you’ve got another chance, and a chance is all it takes.’” She blushed a little bit. “I’ve never told you this, but I have that tattooed on my thigh. I got it tattooed as soon as I got back to Portland, and while I’ve got loads of other stuff around it now, I refuse to let anyone cover up any of it, because it’s the best advice anyone’s ever given me. So take your own fucking advice, Rook. As long as you’re alive, you’ve got another chance, and a chance is all it takes.”

“We’ll see you again next month for the wedding, yeah, ‘Ris?”

“We RSVPd for just me and Will, as much as I think everyone else would love to come.”

Andy looked left, looked right, then shrugged. “Bring’em all.”

“Isn’t that going to wreak havoc on cakes, seating placements, dinners, chairs, all that?”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Thanks Andy,” she said, kissing his cheek. “See you then.”

Intermission Three – Kai

December 20th, 2020 – Hamburg, Germany

The snow was lightly drifting down from the sky, and Kai Schumann stepped out from the Emilienstraße station heading north, heading towards Weihnachtsmarkt Osterstraße, a broad smile on his face, three lovely women in tow, his first partner Anny, his second partner Claudia and his newest partner Ilse. All eleven of his partners had wanted to come out with him, but he'd wanted to check everything out for himself mostly first, but of course Anny and Claudia wouldn't let him leave the house without them, and Ilse wanted to tag along see a little bit more of the big city she'd barely had any time to spend in.

If everything went well, they'd come back again in a few days as a full Team. As recently as three or four months ago, Kai hadn't been entirely sure there would even *be* Christmas markets this year, but Germany had made quite a remarkable turnaround over the last six months.

When he'd been approached in August, he'd been on permanent medical discharge. A former army medic, he'd been motorcycling during a weekend pass in 2018, and a drunk driver had whipped out and clipped him, sending him sailing off his bike, throwing him into a metal signpost, breaking his back, both legs and several ribs, leaving loads of metal shrapnel in nearly impossible places to reach in his body. It had taken him the better part of the next year and change to learn how to walk again in even the most rudimentary fashion. Then, in March of 2020, just as he'd felt like he was in a place where maybe he could move around enough so that he could start to get out of his small town of Jork, not far from Hamburg, the lockdowns had begun.

Originally, the story had been that a disease called Covid was catching fire, and that to combat the spread of it, people were being asked to stay at home, to self-isolate, which, for the most part, was fine with Kai. It gave him time to continue rebuilding his house and working on his motorcycles. In fact, he'd found out that he could travel around the Germany countryside on his motorcycles as much as he wanted, as long as he kept distant from other people, and after a few years of only being able to look at his bikes, he knew it was time to start enjoying riding them once more.

By May, the information about the world at large was getting crazier and crazier, and certainly far less reliable. What had started as just one plague had turned into two, and Covid had turned out to be the less deadly sister to dance with at the party. Covid's big sister, DuoHalo, was a bigger, meaner bitch in every sense of the word. At that point, Kai's ability to travel among the German countryside had been limited all over again, but this time it was because he'd started to get information from friends on the inside, as people inside the Bundeswehr had been doing their best to keep him in the loop.

"Don't get sick, Kai," his friend Klaus had said to him. "We'll have need of you soon enough."

That had sounded ridiculously ominous, so Kai had begun doing as much homework as he could with what access he still had. And despite all the coverups that were in play, a *lot* of the information had slipped through. There were simply too many leaks to plug everything up. Nobody had that many fingers.

By July, he was sure that DuoHalo was in every possible sense going to be a new version of the Black Plague, with the casualties going to be in the millions, maybe even the billions. Most information about the severity of it was being suppressed, but it wasn't that difficult to read between the lines, or to add together the intense amount of "people suddenly too sick to communicate" with the information about the disease in order to make the inevitable conclusion that millions of people were *already* dead, and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

In mid-August, he'd gotten the call to report back into the local base, to return to active duty. Even with the advance warning from his friend Klaus, he was more than a little surprised. Kai had gone into the base, still limping a little bit, the wounds from the accident years ago still pestering him daily. Once he'd gotten there, they'd briefed him in on everything, giving him full access and total clearance to read about everything regarding the plague that had been living in the back of his mind for the last few months.

DuoHalo, the American ‘Quaranteam serum,’ the imprinting process, the abduction of one of the serum’s cocreators by the Russians, a rumored attempt for some Australian Special Forces trying to get the *other* creator of the serum, reports that DuoHalo was man-made and had possibly escaped from a lab in Australia, Indonesia or New Zealand in some sort of transport accident – every detail that they had regarding the whole sordid mess.

“What do you need me for?” he’d asked his superior officer.

As it turned out, they wanted him to be part of the distribution team that was going to get a shot into every German arm before the year’s end, and to help with the research needed to spin that team up. Part of the agreement with the Americans had been that they needed to keep things quiet until middle-to-end of November, to keep people from panicking, because the last thing anyone wanted was a global rush on the supply markets, people collapsing into hoarding mode when there was no need for it, when in fact hoarding would only complicate things further.

The Army had relocated him into Hamburg proper, giving him a series of apartments above a café not far from the red-light district, so that their work wouldn’t attract unwanted attention. Modifications were going to be made to convert the several smaller apartments into one large home that he could permanently call his own, and he wouldn’t need to so much as lift a finger.

As much as he didn’t want to leave his home in Jork behind, his country needed him close at hand, and the work to be done was too important for them to risk being caught. The lab had been set up in a warehouse a few blocks away that had been abandoned for nearly a decade. It wasn’t a particularly large team, but the best and brightest of Germany’s medical minds were there, and Kai was mostly just playing lab assistant to all of them.

Like all the other people working on Project: Frauenweg, he’d gotten paired up as soon as he’d arrived, Anny being a statuesque blonde twenty-two-year-old from Flensburg they’d brought down as they thought she would be the best possible match for him and would be understanding about the new way of the world without too much pushback. They’d gotten on exceptionally well right from the start, although Anny had been a bit taken aback by the size of Hamburg, having spent her entire life in smaller towns, Flensburg clocking in at less than 90k before DuoHalo had ravaged it, and Hamburg approaching 2 million.

Much as they usually were, their American friends were playing things close to their vest, but also as they usually were, they were expecting the rest of the world to be behind the curve. Germany had no desire to let American expectations set the tempo for the rest of the world. They had decided that as much as possible, they preferred to have their fate in their own hands.

The initial batch of doses the Americans had sent over to Germany in early August had been meant to stabilize the government and the military. The size of that shipment had been reasonable – about thirty thousand doses. But instead of immediately handing out all thirty-thousand doses, the German government and military had set aside five hundred doses for research and development.

The Americans had promised to share the formula and all the associated technologies with it by mid-October, but nobody in the Bundesregierung wanted to wait that long, so they’d decided they’d just crack it on their own, using what the Americans had provided as a roadmap of where to focus their research. Even the American’s supposed “Oracle” system, a combination computer program and questionnaire designed to use algorithms to pair up compatible individuals they’d just used for initial calibration, studying how it worked as best they could before coming up with their own version, Heiratsvermittlerin, quite literally, “Matchmaker,” which would let them do their own pairings without relying on the Americans, and, more importantly, without giving the Americans a complete database of every man and woman still alive in Germany.

Of course, The Americans had offered assurances that all the data would not be used for anything other than pairings and matching, but just because the wolf gives you his word that he’s vegetarian is no cause to put him amongst your chickens.

In early September, the German team had been able to replicate the Quaranteam formula exactly

but hadn't been able to modify it to remove any of the strange side effects that seemed to come part and parcel with it. In fact, the longer they worked on it, the more they were starting to feel like the serum couldn't be altered at all, not even in the most minor of ways. Some of the side effects they'd wanted to avoid removing, but the fact that the serum couldn't be given to men directly had been something that was still plaguing German scientists as well. Still, sometimes what worked had to be good enough. And in many cases, the side effects had proven extremely beneficial, as Kai himself could attest to.

Kai's fifth partner, Tanja, had been the first person to use the German version of the serum, on September 5th, 2020, and she'd integrated into his family perfectly. And, even more importantly, she'd triggered Kai's regeneration. They'd both gone to sleep after he'd begun her imprinting, and when he'd awoken, in the bed beneath him had been sloughed off layers of skin, all wrapped around bits and shards of metal fragments, left over shrapnel that his body had been holding onto since the motorcycle accident years ago, all in places too dangerous to consider removing, but the serum had simply instructed his body to slowly work the fragments out and repair the damaged nerves, muscles and tissue. When he'd awoken the day after Tanja's arrival, he felt twenty years younger, with no pains or aches in his body, no stiffness, no limp, even the heavy scarring that had covered much of his back and bottom had been entirely healed up. Tanja had still said "imprinting" in English, however, so it was clear their derivative was just adhering to whatever protocols the original had.

Still, they had a formula they could mass produce, and on September 7th, 2020, Germany became either the second or the third country to begin large scale production of a version of the Quaranteam serum. (Reports were still unclear as to whether the Russians were mass producing the serum or not – it had *sounded* like they were producing loads of it, but their death toll continued to rise catastrophically in the face of that information, which didn't make *any* sense.) A week later, reports would start coming in that the Brits had begun spinning up their *own* version of the serum as well, having gotten a leg up from the Americans, who'd gone out of their way to be extremely helpful in getting the Brits set up. It wasn't enough for their Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, to take it seriously, of course, because the man died on Oct. 1st, somehow having convinced himself that the serum was worse than the disease, if reports were to be believed.

In the first week of October, the German Army had begun its process of travelling from north to south across their great nation, vaccinating every woman they could find. There were some people being transported from one region to another, but the idea was to try and cause as little disruption as possible, and whenever possible, people were left where they were. There was definitely some condensation, however, as major cities like Hamburg, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Nuremberg and Munich were given influxes in population from small villages in the countryside to counteract the amount of people they'd lost.

Compared to many other countries, however, Germany had *excelled* in keeping its citizenry alive. Germany's population had been around 83 million at the beginning of 2020, and by the end of it, they were expecting the survivors to be a little over 30 million – they'd lost the 6 million or so people in the DuoHalo killzone (11-17), and the older population (65+) had been hit especially hard, losing about 15 of the 18 million people in that range, but they'd kept the male survival rate in the Green Zone (18-39) at a surprisingly high 30%, something the government had attributed to the lower-than-norm birth rates in Germany over the last decades, and the intense scrutiny they'd placed on caution since the pandemics had begun.

By the end of October, they'd started a second wave of teams starting in the south, with the plan to meet up in the middle a few weeks before Christmas. But a few weeks earlier was when things started to get a little weird.

On October 15th, 2020, a man named Manfred Ullman had seemed to reject his first pairing. Because of the nature of toxicity in mismatched pairings, the woman in question had been given a new partner and Manfred had been brought in for further study.

The results had shocked *everyone* in the lab. Not only was Manfred immune to DuoHalo, but

his body had also taken the brief amount of Quaranteam serum that he'd gotten from the failed first pairing and had gone into overdrive generating its own variation, completely unlike any other subject they had heard of.

Within two days, they'd learned a lot. Manfred was bisexual but strongly preferred men, his sperm could be used to 'reset' any previously paired woman *exactly* once, and a woman who'd been reset could be paired onto *anybody*, either a man or a woman. Women paired onto women obviously had less protection than several women paired onto the same man – about 60-70% resistance versus the 98% all people in a Team of 12 or higher would gain – but it would allow those women who were ardent lesbians to get some level of base protection.

It offered a huge amount of relief to the German teams, who had been more than a little nervous about permanent pairings. Of course, the Americans had told them about the "necrotized reset," which involved combining necrotized sperm of the dead old male with another dose of the serum then injecting it into the woman, resetting her to take another host. That, at least, could be done multiple times without risk of serious repercussions, but one of the reasons German engineering had been so successful over the years was its tendency to incorporate automatic failover systems, interlocking redundancies to avoid single points of failure anywhere in the greater mechanism. They were calling the resetting sperm "Manfred Mix," and it was being distributed to most of the teams in case of accidents or overly enthusiastic pairings, as well as those in military jobs, as a "break glass in emergency" thing they could carry with them.

As such, Germany was now entering negotiations with loads of other countries, to provide some of *their* version of the QT serum in exchange for resources, land or even key members of their populace. The Americans had been trading their serum away for scientists, soldiers and spies, so why not Germany?

Unsurprisingly, loads of other countries in the European Union were happy to look to Germany's solution if it could be delivered faster than the Americans could deliver theirs. As such, much of the European bloc was engaged very heavily with Germany in order to get their serum, although most were also still negotiating with the Yanks or the Brits, trying to keep all their options open. Still, it felt like Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Austria, Monaco, Italy, Greece and maybe even France were starting to consider the Germans a better option than the Americans, although Germany was being incredibly careful not to overplay its hand. Also, a handful of the other more eastern European countries such as Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary were more than a little nervous about Germany becoming such a centralized power structure again. When the Americans had asked, Germany's official response was that "they're coming to us, we're not going to them."

All of this was infinitely complicated by the complete lack of coordination coming out of Russia. In fact, communication lines between Germany and Russia had broken down so much that no one was really sure who was in *charge* over in Russia, much less how they were reacting to DuoHalo.

Which had led to Operation: Zuckerbecher.

In early October, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (or, more commonly, the BND, which was Germany's only overseas intelligence service) had reports that one of the co-creators of the Quaranteam serum, a Doctor Adam McCallister, who had been abducted by the Russians several months ago, had turned up in western Russia, and that there was a chance that, because of the actual shitshow that was Russian security for the time being, they might be able to extract him and bring him back to Germany.

A team of operatives, led by Lovisa Wagner, stalked him like wild prey. His wife escaped first, and it had been tempting for the BND team to grab her, to do so would've exposed their position, so they chose instead to wait, and they didn't have to wait all that long. Less than a month later, Adam McCallister's position inside of the Russian government had gotten so tenuous that he no longer felt safe, so he and a few of his partners had broken out of the lab and fled, only for the BND team to strike almost immediately after. (Reports were that Dr. Eve McCallister, Adam's wife, had made her way after

her escape back to America.)

By the time the Americans were announcing DuoHalo's existence to the world in late November, 80% of the surviving population of Germany already had the German version of the serum running through their veins, with the remaining 20% to be completed before year's end, and Dr. Adam McCallister was on his way back to Germany. The feeling was the Americans would be too caught up in wanting to *punish* Dr. McCallister and that they wouldn't be able to use his sizable knowledge to help make additional changes to the serum, to try and scale back some of its more difficult to manage traits. Early reports from Lovisa while in transit were that those potential changes might still just be a pipe dream, and that McCallister was only going to help them refine the serum better, claiming that removing the effects from the serum was beyond even his knowledge.

When the man arrived in the Hamburg lab in the beginning of December, Kai immediately took a disliking to the pompous git. McCallister's knowledge was obviously deep when it came to the serum, its development, its applications and usages and how the formula might be able to be tweaked, but he almost seemed astonished that they had discovered and developed "Manfred Mix" on their own, and that many of the things that McCallister supposedly brought to the table had just been things that the German team had already picked up on their own with basic research and study off those samples of the original QT formula they'd gotten from the Americans months ago. Anything related to the regenerative properties of the formula, it seemed, had mostly come from the other leader on the project, Dr. Phil Marcos, whom the Americans kept under strict lock and key.

McCallister had not been worth as much as advertised.

Of course, he wasn't completely useless.

His brain held some useful knowledge about how the "Manfred Mix" worked, as they had a similar situation appear in Russia with a gay man named Sergei, but his wife Evie had made off with most of that research and all the samples, so he was mostly just another set of well-educated eyes when it came to studying that particular offshoot.

As soon as the Americans made their announcement, Chancellor Angela Merkel had gotten on television just a few hours later and announced that Germany was nearing completion for its Quaranteam serum distribution and pairing, and that barring a section in the middle of the country around Leipzig, nearly all Germans were already ahead of the curve when it came to the new Quaranteam protocols, and as such, could travel freely, not only within their own borders but internationally. The remaining portion of Germany would be vaccinated within the next week,

It was also at that point that Germany announced they would also be providing aide to other nations in need of the Quaranteam serum, having developed their own version based on what had been provided to them by the Americans. It was unclear how the Americans had reacted, but the reports Kai had seen had given a wide spectrum of responses – some reports said the American scientists were fine and glad for the help, but that the military had been displeased to lose its advantage in negotiating. Other reports said that across the board the Americans were just happy to be saving more lives, and cared little about whatever geopolitical gains they might have gained from it.

Germany had been forced to go through some major changes in a very short period, but Kai was also pleased to see that his people had listened, and that they had been able to weather the storm of having to isolate away from each other for long periods of time. The recent news about New Zealand had everyone concerned, and Germany had offered to fly additional doses to the country, who said that by the time they would arrive, everyone would already be dosed or dead anyway. That had German politicians reminding everyone that if there was a need for more of the serum, they could reach out to any of the countries to offer help who had serum to spare – and that included Germany.

Many countries were taking them up on the offer, although in some cases, they were also reaching out for other things, in some cases, the most valuable resource of all – men. Japan, for example, was offering an exchange rate of fifteen women for one healthy and fit man of good breeding age. At first, the whole idea seemed rather ludicrous, but then some offers were extended to men from

the countryside who were paired up with smaller numbers, and within a week or two, Operation: Liebesgeschenk was put into play. Men with two or three partners were being sent to Japan in exchange for ten to fifteen women. This project wasn't going to be operating in large numbers – only a hundred German men or so would immigrate to Japan, but it would be enough to help stabilize Japan's fertility problems, which had already been in trouble before DuoHalo. The Operation was a big enough success, however, that similar offers were being extended to most of the other countries in the European Union, and that several of them were thinking long and hard about taking them up on the offer. In fact, the most recent partner for him before Ilse was a Japanese woman named Akari, who'd arrived as part of the Operation. Akari didn't speak German, nor did Kai speak Japanese, but both of them spoke at least passable English, and were using the language as a stopgap while they grew to know each other better. Kai had been told to expect an Italian girl and a Greek girl within the next week. They'd decided that as part of the German serum team, he was to have at least fifteen partners, and so they were going to keep throwing more diversity into the mix, to keep him constantly busy.

It was both exhausting and exhilarating, like an endless day at a confectionary shoppe.

"I remember back in July," Anny said to him, "when it looked like we wouldn't have Christmas markets this year." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "I know we're not supposed to talk about it much, but I know you've helped us all get through this, so thank you. All the rest of Team Schumann are going to make sure this is your best Christmas ever."

"You've already given me gifts aplenty," Kai told her. "You've been incredibly understanding with the sort of odd, mismatched family Team we've had to build here. So many different languages being spoken in the house, sometimes making it so difficult to understand each other. Thankfully almost all of you speak *some* English, so we have a starting point."

Claudia, the petite brunette of his Team, giggled. "So many copies of Rosetta Stone running in one household, all at the same time. But we will get through it, beloved, because we must. Besides, there's something rather fun about not knowing what some of our Teammates are saying during the throes of passion, knowing we'll have to have it translated later."

"I'm surprised you can remember such things," Kai said as he reached into his pocket to pull out a stick of gum. He'd taken up chewing gum to try and help him quit smoking. The national ban on cigarettes had come down months ago, and it was, so far, the *least* successful initiative the German government had put out, with black market cigarettes being traded around madly as people were trying to wean themselves off tobacco.

"Sometimes if it's particularly exciting," Ilse said with an impish smirk, "we will record it, so we can listen back later, and run it through Google Translate. I think I know terms for my pussy in six different languages already, but I intend to keep going."

Kai narrowed his eyes at her but had a playful smile of his own upon his face. "Where is that innocent, wide-eyed small-town girl that was sent to me just a few weeks ago?"

"I do believe you've fucked her into a filthy slut like the rest of us, beloved," Anny teased. "Do not worry. It's all for the best."

They were starting to walk over towards the central mulled wine stand when Kai chuckled, not quite sure he could believe his eyes. "Dr. McCallister? Is that you? And without so much as an escort?"

Dr. Adam McCallister actually looked far better than he had in the time since his arrival, as if being allowed to go out in public had rejuvenated and revitalized the man some from his deflated and defeated appearance when Lovisa had brought him to their team. "Ah, Dr. Schumann, good to see you again," McCallister said in somewhat broken German.

"It's just Mister Schumann, Dr. McCallister," Kai replied in spot on English. "I'm just an Army medic who got assigned to the research project and has been doing his best to help out as much as he can along the way."

"Then I must commend you on how quickly you've picked everything up, Herr Schumann," McCallister replied. "You're twice as bright as many of the actual doctors I've worked with over my

career. And yes, I am mostly without escort. You know Jäger Hüh, who is both my partner and my sentinel? She and her superiors have decided that keeping me cooped up in the lab all the time is detrimental to my productivity, so today is my first expedition out onto the streets of Hamburg, for this tradition called a Christmas market, which I don't really understand."

"Food, drink, seasonal items, plus entertainment," Kai told him, as he glanced over at Jäger Carolina Hüh, a very capable blonde German soldier with sharp features that gave her beauty a sort of danger to them. She was standing off to one side of him, still in uniform, weapon close at hand. "It's a very German tradition, which you'll come to love each and every year you're here. Look, there's one of Germany's best-known bands, Fury In The Slaughterhouse, all six male members *and* their male touring pedal steel guitarist, alive and well, having survived the plague. They take the stage now, to perform Christmas songs for everyone in the market." Anny snuggled up along one side of him, Ilse on the other, Claudia having gone to fetch them some potato pancakes called Kartoffelpuffer. "Merry Christmas, Dr. McCallister, and may all your sins be washed away by the coming new year."

McCallister's tight-lipped smile made it clear how he felt about that. "You seem quite the fellow in the know, Herr Schumann," he said, almost like he was trying to implore Kai for some sympathy. "Did you hear confirmation of my wife's death? Evie and I hadn't really been close for years, but still the idea of not *knowing* what happened to her... it still bedevils me from time to time."

Kai wasn't sure he should be volunteering such information, but Dr. McCallister was under their careful watch and key, and it did seem unnecessarily cruel to keep such readily available information from him. It would cost him nothing, or so he hoped. "Your wife successfully made it to the Americans, back to your old stomping grounds of northern California. And she has re-paired with someone local there, although I'm not privy to who. They have been attempting to keep the matter rather hush-hush, but now that they've learned we have our own reassignment sperm, there is talk about perhaps our two nations collaborating together to find a solution that works more than once. We will, of course, keep your presence in our fine country hidden from their knowledge, even though the BND is starting to suspect that they may have deduced we have you in our possession."

"I don't know that I care for your tone, speaking of me as a possession, Herr Schumann."

"Considering what you were attempting to do to men and women across the globe, Doctor McCallister, I would say my degree of giving a damn about what you do and don't care for would be somewhere near the bottom of any instrument that could register such a minute amount," Kai replied coldly. "You should consider yourself lucky I answered your question at all."

The two men didn't speak again for a minute or two, and just about the time that Claudia was returning with the Kartoffelpuffer, McCallister broke the silence. "I'm sorry, Herr Schumann. You are correct – it was impolite of me to take objection to your tone. I am afraid I am still learning how to be a better and more pliant captive. Thank you for telling me of my wife's status. I hope that she is happy with her new partner, and that she continues to excel at whatever she's putting her mind to."

Kai found the new, more docile side of McCallister suspicious, but decided to let the man attempt to course correct. "Information is sparse, but the one photo I have seen of her, she did look happy, smiling and holding a wine glass up. It looked as though it was taken at a Christmas party, but I couldn't be sure."

"Do you have a spy inside of the American Quaranteam efforts?"

"We have spies everywhere, Doctor McCallister," Kai said with amusement. "I think it's safe to say you can assume that we do."

"Then allow me to repay the kindness and tell you about something I think we have been missing, which is to say there is yet another variant of DuoHalo that is starting to get loose across the globe, one I've only recently identified."

"And why didn't you call attention to this to the other researchers in the team, Doctor?"

"I wasn't entirely certain where it came from, or, quite frankly, that it wasn't German in design."

“We haven’t *developed* any DuoHalo variants, Doctor. That would be in violation of so many treaties, I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Mmmm,” McCallister said. “So you told me when I arrived, but I reserve the right to develop my own opinions on the matter. Regardless, I now believe it’s a development of Middle Eastern design, although I can’t say where from specifically. I’m calling it the Garden variant, and I suspect it’s going to be particularly nasty for a while.”

“What’s so difficult about this variant in particular?”

“The Quaranteam serum doesn’t seem to fully destroy it in women except when the specific conditions are met.”

“Have you been able to determine what conditions those are yet, Doctor?”

McCallister frowned and then nodded. “It requires the woman to be pregnant for the variant to be killed off by the serum.”

On the stage at the end of the market, Fury In The Slaughterhouse had moved from traditional Christmas songs to singing one of their biggest hits, a song that had somehow taken on an entirely new meaning over the last six months – “Every Generation Got Its Own Disease.”

Kai sighed then nodded. “We’ll make it our top priority tomorrow when we get in.”

“Shouldn’t we head in now?” McCallister asked.

Kai shook his head. “Tonight, let us just enjoy Christmas Market. Tomorrow, we can get back to emptying our flooding boat with tea cups...”

Chapter Sixteen

December 21st, 2020

Los Angeles around Christmastime was an odd place to be. Normally, everyone went home for the holidays, and it left Los Angeles a mostly empty area, because the old adage was that *nobody* was *originally* from Los Angeles – everyone had come from somewhere else before they'd settled there. This time, however, people didn't feel comfortable traveling yet, nor did they feel safe leaving their homes. That meant the streets were empty, as they normally would be, but for all different reasons.

Andy and the rest of Team Rook hadn't been particularly looking forward to visiting Tinsel Town, but there were a lot of meetings that needed to be had, from the studio that was going to be adapting the first of the Druid Gunslinger books to a handful of people who wanted 'general meetings.' It was the latter Andy was least looking forward to, which was why they were later in the day.

The first stop of the day was over at Working Title Films, who would've much rather seen Andy and company in their London headquarters but had been willing to settle for a meeting in their Hollywood offices. They had a final shooting script candidate they wanted him to quickly read, and once that had passed his approval, they needed to set up the shooting schedule. The current plan was for 25 days of shooting in London at Pinewood Studios and then 14 nights of shooting on location in San Francisco. They really only needed Andy on set for the last week of the London shooting, when most of the scenes with Emily and Sarah, who were only in maybe 10-20% of the movie, were needed. With him showing up for the last week of London shooting, if they needed to do reshoots on any of the London sets, they could do so with him there. All of that seemed fine to not only him, but the whole family. Shooting would start in mid-March, with the first date they'd be needed in London, well after the time of their honeymoon wrapping up.

After Working Title, they needed to divide and conquer, with Sarah, Niko, Moira, Fiona and Aisling going to one set of meetings, and he, Alexis, Melody, Piper and Emily heading to a different set. Andy himself wasn't actually needed for either set of meetings, but Emily was still doing her best to make it clear how bad a fuckup her moves with Mali had been, and so she'd asked Andy to tag along with her as she met with her agents to discuss potential new projects that were being floated her way.

He'd seen Creative Artists Agency before, but he'd never set foot inside of the building before now, and he was a little taken aback how obsequious everyone was. He thought he'd seen ass kissers before, but this was an entirely new *level* of rear view puckery. They had a dozen projects they wanted to run by her while she was in town, with the intent of getting her into at least two or three of them before the end of next year.

This was also a chance for Andy to see a side of Em he'd never really gotten a glimpse into before now – the shrewd businesswoman. After Dagger Academy, Em had made it a point to look at the points she was being offered on the back end as much as she was the project itself. As soon as they got into the room, they were already trying to get Emily back to work yesterday, but the miniature blond Brit stood her ground, refusing to start work on anything until she was back from her honeymoon after the wedding in January. The earliest she was willing to start shooting was late-April/early-May, so it didn't conflict with her obligations with the Neon Stonehenge shoot, which was already set and on the books.

Emily listened to each of the pitches in turn, sometimes offering notes, sometimes shooting things down immediately and sometimes saying she'd like to circle back to it when more had been solidified, such as director or other cast members. A few times she was asked if she still wanted to hold to her 'no nudity' clause, and she reiterated that even though many of the fans of Dagger Academy had died, to those that hadn't, she'd always be Dahlia Hairtrigger, and she had no desire to let those fans down unless it was somehow essential to the part or the story being told.

It was perhaps the only time when the agents seemed to even acknowledge Andy's presence, shooting him a look as if to say, 'Can you talk some sense into her?' Andy had stood by his fiancée, stressing that Emily hadn't said she'd never do nudity – only that none of the projects were compelling

enough for her to feel comfortable pulling that trigger. If they really thought it was important for her to do something like that, they needed to find a project that had a justifiable reason to include it, and they hadn't, so it would have to wait. He knew Sarah felt the same way and had given the same reasons to her agents.

Emily finished the meeting with the expectation that she would start filming in a fantasy series for Netflix in May, based on a series of spies in the British government who also happened to be telepaths. The series was called "Looky Loos" and was based off a comic that had run in 2000 AD, a very popular anthology comic that had been running in the UK for ages. The scripts weren't quite there yet, but Em felt like with another round or two of revisions they could definitely get there, and her agreeing to star in the series was contingent on her getting scripts she liked. But it was enough that they could get it on the books and start moving forward towards getting new content developed. The plan was that she would be in London for three weeks of filming over six weeks, with one week on, one week off, allowing her time to come back (or for Andy to come out) and keep her from encountering withdrawal from his presence.

That, as it turned out, was always going to be the biggest challenge – scheduling. Back in the before times of last year, Andy had found out that Lesser Phil was polyamorous, and had, in fact, three partners, all of whom were now paired with him. But back then, in the wild and woolly time of 2019, polyamory had still been a lot less common, and Andy had been baffled by the fact that Lesser Phil had been dating multiple women at once, and that they all knew about each other. They hadn't fought; they weren't upset that Lesser Phil was splitting their time, as long as everyone knew about everyone else. It had been the longest one-on-one dinner conversation he'd ever had with someone. They'd started talking at around 7 pm and had closed down the Applebee's they'd been at, getting kicked out at 2 am.

Lesser Phil had lots of wisdom to offer, both good and bad, about what it was like to have multiple partners and the two key pillars of surviving the experience were communication and scheduling – communicating about when changes were coming down the line, how people were feeling, what they were thinking and what they wanted; and scheduling, a roadmap of where people planned to spend their time, and the ability to respect that schedule, by hell or by highwater.

Lesser Phil and the other five members of his pod had a shared Google Calendar with everyone's schedules in it, and each person got a bar, so they could make sure people were all getting ample time with their partners and that nobody was getting unfairly cut out. Feelings were easy to argue with; math was harder.

At the time, Andy had thought the whole thing had sounded endlessly complicated, but since the formation of Team Rook, he'd been adapting all that learning into things he could actively use, and a centralized calendar had been one of the first things he'd had Whitney put together for them. They could've used a Google Calendar, but it didn't really support the sort of number of users they wanted, and the subgroups that they needed, or if they did, Andy hadn't seen it. His location needed to be prioritized, and everyone else's schedule had to be managed accordingly, set up so that he would be around to take care of any partner who was away from home at least once a week. It wasn't that he thought of himself as more or less important than any of his partners – it was just that *he* needed to be accessible to everyone and couldn't be away from his partners for too long.

After they left CAA, they headed over to the Andaz, where they had the Penthouse Suite on reservation, although they were going to be taking a few more meetings, but for these, it was people coming to them, rather than them going to people.

The sort of lounge area of the penthouse suite included a balcony that overlooked all of Los Angeles, and Andy felt like he was so far out of his element that someone would show up any minute now, ask him to finish cleaning and then get out of the way. He *so* didn't belong here, he felt, although he was doing his best to tamp that down, because he needed to get used to the idea that he *did* belong here, because it was going to be more and more common place.

"Who's our first meeting with?" Andy asked Niko, who had sort of been doubling as his

secretary for the trip.

“Next Level Teleproductions Entertainment,” she said. “They want to pitch something to you, well, to all of us.”

Andy scowled, as Fiona moved over to hand him a drink – it looked like she’d mixed Coke, orange Fanta and some rum together – but he could only shrug. “Well, Whitney scheduled the meeting, so clearly these people have enough clout that they’re worth a bit of our time. Thanks, Fi.”

“I mixed it a little bit stronger than you normally do it, so if you refill the glass, go easy on the rum.”

“You think I need a stiff drink?”

“I looked up what else these people have done, and yes, you’re going to need it,” she said with a smirk, just as a knock sounded at the main door to the suite. Lexi and Melody went over, giving everyone a sort of cursory once over, just making sure nobody was carrying weapons. Andy couldn’t imagine why they would be but had been told that Hollyweird was a strange place where anything was possible, and whatever strangest story he’d heard about the place was probably only a tenth as weird as what had actually happened.

“Mister Rook!” a voice said from the doorway. “Alan Garabon, Next Level Teleproductions Entertainment! Thanks for agreeing to meet with us today. We don’t want to take up too much of your time, but we wanted to just give you a little pitch we’ve been thinking about since your appearance on 60 Minutes last month. We’ve brought a handful of things we want to show you, a mockup and maybe a quick little pre-viz concept trailer.”

Alan looked exactly like Andy had expected a Hollywood producer to look like – he was a pasty white man in his fifties wearing three different designer pieces of clothing and *none* of them matched. He clearly had a toupee of some kind on top of his head (either that or a wild Shar Pei had perched there instead) and his teeth were so blindingly white that Andy wished he was wearing his sunglasses. Accompanying him was a 20-something musclebound man in a button-up pink shirt that the top half of which was unbuttoned, and jean shorts that might’ve revealed if the man was circumcised or not. They were also accompanied by a rather buttoned up dark-haired woman in much more business-like attire. “This is my assistant and partner, Albert, and our producer, Jean.”

“I won’t do introductions for everyone here,” Andy said, “simply because we have a lot of these meetings, and so I’d rather you get to pitching, if that’s okay?”

“That’s absolutely fine,” the woman, Jean, said, placing her laptop down before pulling out a small projector, connecting it up. “What we want to do is tap into your bump in the collective consciousness and piggyback that into a reality show, where we have cameras following you around all the time, recording what you’re doing, what you’re saying. We’re really going to dial into the struggle that you have to get through your daily life, having to set the patterns of behavior for so many women, keeping all their demands in check while still placing your own above theirs as the head of the household should do.”

Andy sort of glanced around to his partners seated around him, watching them all trying very hard to not start giggling at any moment, as the presentation continued.

“We’re thinking sort of a ‘Keeping Up With The Kardashians’ sort of vibe, although maybe like an undercurrent of dealing with the demands of two Hollywood A-listers who are very outspoken, and how despite the fact that you fight all the time, you’re still able to work through it and remain a family. Here, let’s just play the trailer for you.”

The projector threw an image onto a wall, and the placeholder opening credits of this supposed show idea rolled before their eyes. The logo popped up first, “CASTLE ROOK,” but because there weren’t any I’s in the logo where they could swap out a chess piece, they’d over exaggerated the shape of it and replaced the A with rook chess piece with a much wider base than a top, which made the whole thing look a little strange. Then the logo disappeared and it cut to footage of Andy that seemed to be a combination of stuff from the 60 Minutes interview interspliced with him doing panels at a various

genre conventions, as well as the moment he went up to accept his Hugo. Then it cut to a split screen, with Emily on the left and Sarah on the right, the two clearly getting equal billing, using footage of them from press junkets, television interviews and even a little bit from the 60 Minutes segment. Next came another split screen, this time Aisling on the left and Niko on the right, all the footage taken from 60 Minutes. That was followed by yet another split showing off Fiona on the left and Moira on the right, but in this case the footage of Fiona looked to be cribbed from various news stories and on-air reporting she'd done over the last few years before moving in with Andy, and almost of all of Moira's footage seemed like it came from the singular story that Fiona had done, which had been pushed out as a segment on CNN years back. Then it cut to a wide screen shot, with a graphic that read, "And introducing Piper Rook..." as it played footage of Piper in training, at the previous Olympics and doing interviews after she'd won. Then as it faded to black, some sort of slogan popped up in the black. "Big Love Takes Even Bigger Patience."

They left that projected on the wall for a moment, and Andy could slowly feel every set of his partners' eyes turning to look at him, as if they expected him to be the one to speak first, to set the tone of how the rest of this meeting was going to go. He inhaled a deep breath, seeing the sort of eagerness that was on the faces of the people who'd come to meet them, and knew this meeting wasn't going to go at *all* how they'd expected.

"Great, right?" Jean said. "Just think of how famous you'll be overnight! You'll be bigger than the Kardashians were! It'll increase your book sales by so much, and between Emily, Sarah and Piper, one of them is practically guaranteed to be the next Taylor Swift! You can set the tone for the conversation everywhere you go! You could affect national discourse! You can influence the government's way of thinking when it comes to the decisions they're making regarding the Quaranteam program! You could be the face of the survivors when it comes to this horrible tragedy!"

There was something about the way that Jean ended every sentence by going up rather than down, like a normal sentence would, that just irked Andy to no end.

"Pardon my lack of tact here, folks, but what the *hell* are you all thinking?" Andy finally said. "Let's start with your basic premise – that we fight all the time. *We don't*. Have we had some disagreements? Sure, but certainly not the sort of ridiculous bullshit that people peddle as 'reality television,' where producers are pushing and pulling whatever they need to, in order to get their spike and their promo and their scenes. But you don't strike me as the kind of people interested in doing a deep discussion discourse on the challenges of integrating several different personality types into one cohesive family unit, and I for one don't have any interest in being constantly pushed, poked and prodded by some producer into artificial conflict just to make 'good' television," he said, doing the air quotes to make it clear exactly how sarcastic he was being with them. "You're asking us to open up our lives just to enable you to make a few dollars, and rather than approach us, talking to us about how you might be doing this differently than existing reality television, you seem to think we're just going to leap at the chance to be on television, like we're the Real-Life Housewives of Silicon Valley or something. I don't want to speak for my partners, but speaking purely for myself, I don't see anything in your pitch that makes me think you understand a single thing about who I or my partners are. I mean, you're talking about having an influence on the way the government treats the whole Quaranteam project, but if you'd done even a *little* bit of homework with that team, you'd know that I've been made a civilian liaison for that project in an oversight capacity, meaning I'm going to influence that conversation a lot more than most people would ever get the chance to. I know that's public information, because people were asking about it during the Q&A portion of my signing event in Seattle. I like telling stories, and writing fiction is one thing, but living it? That's something entirely different. The idea of having you people following us around every moment of our daily lives? I don't know what benefit you think you'd be bringing to us, but I just don't see it. Ladies? Thoughts?"

"I have, like, less than zero fucking interest in being Kim Fucking Kardashian," Sarah said. "I don't need a make-up company. I don't want my fucking ass to break the fucking internet or whatever."

I want to live my life; I want to fucking *enjoy* my life and I don't need you shoving a fucking camera in my face every morning to try and make me a household name. I'm super fucking happy with my life how it is, and the last fucking thing I want is your shit messing with *my* shit, just so you can make a fucking buck off my back."

"This isn't an opportunity I think any of us have any interest in pursuing any further," Emily said. "Your presentation displayed an extraordinary lack of understanding on who makes up this family and what kind of people they are like. I am uncertain if you even watched the 60 Minutes story, or simply saw some famous people that you thought you could exploit for personal gain, but I must inform you, we are *not* those people. We are not the sorts of souls who live to be adored by the masses. We are entertainers, but we do not live our entire lives on the stage. We are not meant to be in people's homes all the time. And I personally am against you exploiting our lives for your amusement. No, madam, I am not interested in such an 'opportunity,' no matter how beneficial to my career you may think it would be."

Piper chimed in as well. "Yeah, I think that just about wraps it up. Nearly everything I would've wanted to say was said best by these three already, but I just have to ask, what was it that made you think we would be approachable to the idea of letting cameras into our lives twenty-four seven, or that we were somehow this dysfunctional bunch of misfits who'd be happy to throw shit at one another once you turned the cameras on us, as if we thought it would make us more famous than most of us already are. I mean, Fi? Ash? Mo? Neeks? Any further thoughts?"

"Yeah, fuck that," Aisling said.

"Well," Jean said, turning off the projector. "Sorry to have troubled you then. We just wanted to expose you to an opportunity that we had available for you, but we'll simply go and find another family to turn into billionaires."

The three of them left the suite, and everyone had the common decency not to laugh until they were well out of ear shot, but as soon as the elevator started descending, the whole lot of them fell about the place in fits of giggles and snorts. "Who the hell pushed that meeting onto us?" Fiona asked the group.

"That would be my agents," Sarah sighed. "I had them call Whitney and set it up. They wanted to find some possible ideas for me and Em to do shit together, and I told them 'No idea is a bad idea,' and, well..." She gestured towards the elevator, and everyone started laughing again. "Sometimes, when I'm fucking wrong, I'm *really* fucking wrong."

Nobody was particularly mad; they were just a little caught off-guard by how utterly mistaken some Hollywood people were about who they were and what they were like. The next meeting was far more positive, although a couple of times Emily had to stop the meeting to stress to the producer how the script seemed a little dehumanizing to the male characters, treating them more as eye candy and props than actual characters with feelings and depth, something Andy couldn't help but be amused by, especially since he wasn't particularly paying attention to the meeting conversation.

It was something Sarah had said to him earlier as well, that it was almost like Hollywood had inverted itself overnight, and where it used to be hard to find parts for women and, if they were available, they were often underwritten. Now that women held most of the positions of power, they wanted to see more stories featuring women, which was probably for the best anyway, because many of the male actors had died during the past year. Still, the insane speed for the total about face was unmistakable. And now finding parts with men in them were significantly less common.

Part of it, Andy found through some digging, was on suggestion from the White House, trying to show people that the new norm, with men being far rarer than they used to be, as 'the way things are,' and helping people adapt to it by showing it on television, in movies and in music. It was something he could understand and accept, but he also wondered if they were going to do stories dealing with the collective tragedy and trauma they'd all experienced, and yet, everyone seemed to be dancing around dealing with the deaths head on, especially in lieu of all the news coming out of New

Zealand. In a few years, maybe, after some time had passed, maybe then people would be ready to deal with that sort of situation head on. Andy found himself wondering if he was going to have to start writing fiction to reflect the world post-disaster, or whether he could just carry on pretending like it never happened, a therapeutic security blanket for survivors, a reminder of how the world used to be. But hiding from problems had never been Andy's strong suit. He decided he was going to have to adjust what he'd written in the start of the next *Druid Gunslinger* book to reflect the world as he saw it now, rather than how it had been before the plague had decimated the male population.

There were a few more meetings about this, that and the other thing, but nothing really needed Andy's attention, because they were all for Emily or Sarah, although Piper also had a meeting with someone from Nike about an endorsement deal during someone else's meeting. Andy found himself mostly bored and had pulled out his laptop over in the corner, settling down to get a little bit of work done, and before he knew it, there was just one final meeting for the day, although nobody seemed eager to tell him what it was about.

"Andy, we need you to come pay attention to this last meeting," Ash said with a grin on her face, "and after that, we'll head down to Skylight Books for the signing tonight."

"I'm actually *needed* for this meeting?" Andy chuckled, saving the file before closing up his laptop. "Why the hell am I needed?"

"Because we need you to sign off on some casting decisions, Andy," a familiar voice said as she entered the suite.

"Maya!" Andy laughed, seeing his partner walk in with a couple of studio execs in her wake. She'd clearly flown down to LA on her own to take a handful of meetings, but just hadn't told Andy about it. "Couldn't this have waited until I got back home?"

"It could, but I had to come down to meet with the folks over at Legendary Entertainment, to go through what I wanted, to settle the budget and the shooting schedule. We're going to do 90% of it at StageOne Creative Space down in San Jose starting in June, so I'll have a bit of a commute here and there, but I'll still be local for almost the whole shoot," his green-haired partner said to him. Maya had been the first person that Emily had recommended to Andy, and last month she'd asked his permission to adapt "*Fatal Alliances*," one of his non-Gunslinger projects that, while it hadn't sold bucketloads, had a loyal and faithful audience, something he'd gladly granted for her to make her directorial debut, having been an assistant director or a fight coordinator on several pictures. "We'll need to go to Berlin to get a handful of external shots, but that's like a week's worth of shooting tops. And we wanted to bring by the two people who we wanted to cast for the leads over to see you, see if they're okay for you." The elevator dinged off in the distance.

"I'm sure they'll be fine, Maya," Andy started. "You know, we talked about it for a while but it's still a shame we couldn't HOLY FUCKING SHIT you're Ewan McGregor! And you're Mary Elizabeth Winstead!" He suddenly glanced over at Maya, as the two movie stars began laughing. "They want to star in your movie of *my* fucking book?"

"Hello there!" Ewan said, giving his best Obi-Wan Kenobi voice as he offered his hand for Andy to shake. "I'm a big fan of your work. Little cross I wasn't considered for Dale Sexton, honestly."

"We shouldn't be able to *afford* you," Andy laughed, shaking the man's hand immediately. "I'm guessing you two got paired up?"

Mary nodded. "We'd been dating for years, so when they asked Ewan if he had anyone that he wanted to get paired with first, I was the only name on his lips," she said with a smug smile. "I had to practically twist his arm to get him to bring on some others."

"Anybody famous I'd know?" Andy couldn't help but ask.

Ewan waved his hand. "A gentleman really shouldn't kiss and tell, but I'm sure word will come out eventually. So, back to the task at hand, you think you'd be okay if my love and I took on the leads in this film?"

"Okay?" Andy laughed. "I'd think I was far luckier than I had rights to be. Of course, you're

probably going to ask me to change the ending...”

“Fuck no!” Mary said. “That’s the best part of the book! The tragic ending, the two of them dying in each other’s arms, having taken down their respective bosses, having done the right thing for the wrong reasons, but being unable to stick around and clean up their own messes. Especially how you described that last shot, the two of them just slumping lifeless, arms wrapped around each other, covered in blood, the quiet of the snow drifting down onto their corpses... That was what sold me on it, and I told Summer, sorry, Maya, that I was only going to do it if she *wasn't* going to tamper with the ending, because it was the perfect close for the story.” Maya professionally went by the name ‘Summer Steele’, so Andy had gotten used to people making that slip all the time.

“Maya love?” Andy said, glancing over at her.

“Yes, Andy?” Maya said, grinning at him, so proud how she’d been able to keep all this quiet until this very moment.

“Can you please get us all the paperwork, so we can sign this and get the deal locked in?”

“Somewhere you need to be?” Maya teased.

“Well, I’ve got a book signing in about an hour, and I figured since you were here...”

“Oh. Oh!” Maya said, laughing a touch awkwardly, as she opened her satchel bag to get the paperwork out.

“You’ve seen us on ‘Fargo’ then?” Ewan asked him as he moved to sign the paperwork.

“Oh, I’ve been a fan of yours since ‘Trainspotting,’ and yours since ‘Scott Pilgrim vs. the World,’ so I go way back,” Andy replied.

“Well, I hope we’ll see you on the set, in case we need to tweak lines,” Mary said to him.

“Absolutely!” Andy said. They all chatted for a little bit longer before Ewan and Mary excused themselves, along with the executives, leaving Maya with the rest of her family, Andy still chuckling at how odd his luck was.

“Just so you know,” Maya said, “if he’d have asked me to join them before you did, I’d have fucking done *both* of them in a heartbeat.”

“Who could blame you?” Ash said with a giggle.

Maya tapped Andy on his shoulder, a gesture he found odd, considering he was standing right next to her, but she had a wicked smile on her face.

“Yes?” Andy asked.

In her most playful voice ever, she asked him, “Nice shoes; wanna fuck?”

They were.

They did.

Chapter Seventeen

December 23rd, 2020

Andy Rook was happy to be home. Los Angeles had turned from a one-day stop to a two-day stop because it seemed like the meetings kept piling up before anyone could stop them and a number of people needed to take meetings with Sarah, Emily, himself or, occasionally, Piper and/or Fiona. Getting an additional day at the hotel hadn't proven any real challenge, so it enabled them to get more work done before heading back to the private airstrip midday on the 23rd. He'd even sent a message home, making sure everyone was in control of their faculties, and Whitney assured him that as long as he was back on the 23rd, everything should be fine.

The flight between Los Angeles and Livermore was only an hour and a half, and after the fifteen minutes to stow and secure the plane, they loaded back up into the SUVs and headed back to New Eden. He'd been on signing tours before, but never on his own private plane, and he'd certainly never had a mansion full of beautiful women waiting for his return. The cats were probably still impatient for his return, though.

As they drove back from Livermore to New Eden, Andy was pleased to see more cars on the highways, people actually out and about during the day, hopefully traveling out to see friends, neighbors or even just getting out of their houses for a while. There was even a car pulled over by a CHP for speeding, by the look of it.

'Cops writing tickets again,' Andy thought to himself in amusement. 'Nature is healing.'

The cars pulled up to the gate of New Eden, and Niko checked the lot of them in. The security checkpoint for people coming and going from the walled garden that was New Eden hadn't relaxed in his absence, not that he was at all surprised by that. The mirrors checking the undersides of the vehicle were new, though. It was supposed to make him feel safer, he suspected, but it didn't.

When they got back to the house, Andy was a little surprised there wasn't a welcoming party waiting out in the driveway for them, but they made it into the long garage without anyone meeting them, and it wasn't until they were rolling suitcases into the main house that nearly everyone came out to welcome them home, Andy suddenly swarmed by nearly a dozen women all at once, each of them surrounding him like ravenous piranha, forming a giant seal around him as they clung to him in one colossal monster hug.

"Hello ladies," Andy chuckled, his arms raised, but mostly already woven between bodies all surrounding him. "I take it I was missed?"

"There's an appointment schedule waiting for you, Master Rook," Whitney said to him, standing just off to one side, not part of the hug brigade. "You're going to be rather booked up for the next few days getting caught up with partners who are in need of their fix, so I hope you didn't have anything else scheduled between here and Christmas."

"No no," Andy laughed. "Other than a brief check in at the base, I'm at the tender mercy of all you ladies and your wanton desires."

"We tried to pace your appointments so you wouldn't be too overwhelmed, Master Rook," Whitney said with a slight giggle, "but I'm certain you'll find that some of us are a great deal more... voracious than others. But we made certain that we scheduled you with enough recovery time in between that you'd still be able to get things done before Christmas Eve. As per your request, there will be no sex on Christmas Day."

"I take it Amazon's been here a bunch while I've been gone?" Andy laughed, still unable to wriggle free of the buxom pile of flesh smothering him.

"Indeed, sir," Whitney said. "And I haven't opened any of the packages, as per your request, although I did recall you saying you'd bought almost all of them wrapped by Amazon."

He nodded. "Like, all but one are wrapped in either paper or bags by Amazon, with cards attached, but there was one thing that I had to special order and they couldn't wrap it, and it's *for* you, Whitney, so I couldn't risk you accidentally opening it."

“We’ve placed almost everyone else’s gifts under the tree, Master,” Nicolette said to him with a smile from her position on the edge of the squeeze squad. “Although we’re going to have to start opening as soon as people are awake on Christmas morning and be opening nearly all day if we’re going to get through them all. It’s quite the collection of loot.”

Andy had done the math, and even with everyone in the family just getting one present for each other member, they were looking at over 500 presents, all said and done, and that didn’t include things that had been sent from people outside of the immediate family. One thing they’d all agreed upon was no thank you notes to people inside of the family, lest they go out of their mind handwriting them all.

“Can I get at least a few minutes before I start filling appointments, Whitney, or am I completely swamped for the day?”

“You’ve got about an hour before you need to start fucking, sir,” she said with a wry smile. “You’re welcome to spend that however you like, although Mistress Mali has asked that she have ten or fifteen minutes to talk to you as soon as possible.”

Andy glanced around and saw that Mali was in the outer ring of the hug spiral and nodded to her. “Well then, I need to check in on the cats and put my laptop down in the office, Mali, so can we walk and talk for the first bit?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Rook,” Mali, one of his newest additions, said as the cluster of women around him started to break off, each of them kissing his cheek or his lips before moving to peel away, heading back into the house. A few of them gave his ass or crotch a squeeze, but Jade, to his surprise, practically took half a minute of stroking his cock through his jeans, a devious smile upon her lips, her other hand holding a fingertip over his lips to keep him quiet before she pulled away, saying nary a word.

Andy and Mali hadn’t had a chance to speak since he’d imprinted her, and the conditions under which she’d been imprinted had left Andy a little bit uneasy, simply because the imprinting wasn’t exactly done in line with all the others.

“Do you mind if Emily joins us, Mr. Rook?”

“Only if you stop calling me ‘Mr. Rook,’ Mali, immediately and forever more,” Andy teased.

Mali smiled shyly, nodding a little. “Yes, Andy. Thank you.”

Emily scurried over and gave Mali a hug, and the Welsh woman returned it with a touch of shyness still, but Mali clung to her for a moment longer than it seemed like Emily had anticipated. After the two broke from their hug, they moved to follow Andy, who refused to let anyone wheel in his suitcase. Niko had apparently decided to take on security details for the moment, so she followed along a handful of steps behind, even knowing how much it irked Andy that she did so. He wasn’t going to argue with her, though, because he’d agreed never to tell any of his protectors how to do their jobs. Melody had taken Niko’s bag and Sarah had taken Emily’s, which left him as the only one pulling a bag along as they headed into the house.

The hard part of this conversation, Andy thought to himself, was going to be talking around the elephant in the room without making any mention of it. The effort to erase Mali’s memory of her deceased high school sweetheart had caused quite a rift between Emily and the rest of the family, simply because Emily had kept it secret until right before he’d imprinted Mali.

Mali was quite a gorgeous young woman, a round face with thick brown eyebrows and a mysterious, almost Mona Lisa smile, but there was something still slightly sad and tragic about her, and she still moved with a slight lack of energy and enthusiasm.

“I’m hoping you’ve settled in okay while I was gone, Mali,” Andy said to her. “I probably shouldn’t have left you just after you’d been imprinted, but, ah, you asked for—”

“I didn’t forget anything, Andy,” Mali said to him, looking like she was going to break into tears. “Not a god damned thing.”

“Oh Mali,” Andy sighed, setting his bag down before turning to wrap his arms around her as she practically collapsed into him, sobbing softly. “I’m so, so sorry. I knew it was something of a longshot when Emily told me about it, but I understand what it’s like to have a memory that you just want to rip

out of your brain. But the grief that we carry with us is a reminder of those who are gone, and so they aren't entirely lost to us. A part of his light still carries on in you."

"I don't mean to be disrespectful to you, Andy, but I miss him so fucking much," she moaned, pressing her face against his chest, unable to look up at him. Emily stood behind her, one hand stroking the Welsh woman's dark brown hair. "I know you've done such a generous thing by bringing me into your family, in taking me in and keeping me safe from DuoHalo, and here I am, bawling up a storm because I can't forget a man I spent half my life with."

"Hey hey hey," Andy said quietly. "There'll be none of that. I'd offer you the chance to pair with someone else, but I think you're just going to have the same issue there that you would with me, so we'll do what we can to get through it, take each other one day at a time. We can be sexual without being intimate if that's what you'd prefer."

"I'd like to spend some serious time getting to know you, Andy," Mali said, trying to staunch her crying as she looked up at him. "Emily hadn't even really known you for a month when she recommended you to me, and I was astonished at how eloquently she spoke of her love for you, and how strongly it had bloomed in such a short time."

"I think that may have been more of Sarah's love than Emily's you were picking up on," Andy said with a soft smile.

Emily shook her head. "When we first met, Andrew, you were already willing to put your own desires aside to help us find someone else to be paired with, and I cannot tell you how astonishing that is, or how much we have talked about that, all of your fiancées, how you have been willing to do anything and everything to make things easier for us, even at the cost of your own comfort or happiness. That's the mark of a very good man."

"You're much better than you've ever given yourself credit for, Andy," Niko added.

"It's one of the many reasons we all love you so much," Emily said.

"I'm just trying to do the right thing with all the power I've sort of fallen into, Em," Andy sighed. "But of course, you can spend plenty of time with me, Mali. And don't think of it as replacing your lost beau, but simply introducing another one into your heart. I'm never going to be him. I don't want to be him. I don't want you to forget him. Keep him with you always."

Mali looked up at him and smiled softly. "Thank you for that, Andrew. I have a feeling we're going to have to slowly build into this, but I think between you and I, we can find some true feelings for one another. You'll have to forgive me if I'm... a little distant for our first few sexual encounters..."

Andy laughed a little bit. "Whatever it takes for you to get through this, Mali. We can have date night before your encounters if that'll make things easier."

She nodded with a smile, wiping tears from her cheeks. "I'd like that, Andrew," she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "I was worried that you might try and send me away when you found out the memory of Michael hadn't left me. I know we're all dealing with grief in our own ways, but mine feels so vibrant, so intense."

"Would you like to tell me about him?"

"Would that be alright?"

Andy smiled down at her. "Of course it would. C'mon, I've got to make sure the cats haven't demolished my office while I've been gone, and in a bit, I've got to start tending to the needs of some of the women of the house, but I'd love it if you told me all about not only him but yourself. There's only so much I can learn by reading."

"Might I come with you, Andrew?" Emily asked.

"Fine with me if it's fine with you Mali."

"Of course it's fine. You're the one who got me into this mess, Emily, so it's only natural you get caught up in my story." She slid her arm around his waist as they walked down to his office, and for the next twenty minutes while he checked on the cats and his office, she told him and Emily about her journey growing up in Wales, how she'd met and lost her fiancé Michael, how she'd been assigned to

manage Emily's finances, and how much she and Emily had talked over the weeks running up to her agreeing to join the family. Andy was a little flattered with how highly Em had spoken of him, and even more surprised when he found out how explicit Em had been in telling Mali about his sex life, although the more he thought about it, the more he realized that the stigma around talking about sex had rapidly faded from the public consciousness now that it was basically mandatory that everyone was having it all the time. Consciously, he was fine with it, but there was still a part of him a little caught off guard when it came up and he wasn't expecting it.

Mali wasn't in such dire straits that she couldn't wait a few more days, and after Andy had gotten his office back into order, she and Emily excused themselves, letting Andy get a couple of moments in with the cats, who had made it abundantly clear at first how annoyed they were before settling on his lap and purring so loud he thought the chair had gained a massager function while he'd been away.

"I see how it is," Niko scoffed at them, but neither Huginn or Muninn would be discouraged from sprawling across Andy's lap.

"They had years to love me first," Andy joked.

Fifteen minutes after the cats had settled and nearly fallen asleep, his phone buzzed on his desk. He glanced at it, seeing it was from Whitney, which meant he had some appointments with ladies stacking up that he had to tend to. They'd been gone close to ten days, which meant the needs of his partners were stacking up, and a lot of them were close to climbing the walls. He'd been a little worried about taking the extra day in Los Angeles, but Whitney (who had grown from being his IT person to also being his Executive Secretary) had insisted that all the girls in the house were looking to push the challenge as much as they could.

-We as a Team decided it was best to learn everyone's limits on how far they could stand to go in-between doses, Master Rook, so your schedule today is filled with the women who are insistent they could not wait a day longer, which means you have six appointments today, the first few of which will be... rather intense.- Whitney texted like most people sent formal missives. -Your first appointment is with Hannah and Asha. We suspect that age may be a factor in enduring the need, as the older members of your Team seem less affected by the time between doses as your younger members do. You may wish to bring one of the upcoming missuses with you, just to help keep the two of them in check. They're still in control of their senses, but I suspect if you'd arrived in the evening, they might have been bordering on feral. I threatened to handcuff and whip them if they left their room until you came and met them. Good luck, Master! ;) ww-

That was certainly something interesting to note. He'd dosed Hannah and Asha *right* before he'd left on the 13th, literally minutes before getting into the cars to head for the airport, and the fact that they were the *most* squirrely certainly supported Whitney's theory that age was a factor. If that was true, Tala, Sheridan, Katie and Jenny would be last in the queue, and sure enough, when he looked at the scheduler app, the four of them were down below all the other women who'd remained at the house (except Maya, who'd cheated her way into an early dosing by flying down to LA on her own for it). Phil probably knew about it already, but Andy made a note of it in his list of things to talk about his friend with.

His schedule for the next twenty-four hours was quite sizably packed – Hannah and Asha, to be tended to immediately; Whitney, Nicolette and Jade this evening; Tala and Sheridan tomorrow morning; Katie and Jenny for brunch; Lauren and Taylor for lunch tomorrow (with a note that Taylor's endurance was struggling, so she might need to be rotated into an earlier time slot); and Mali would be tomorrow evening after a dinner date.

It was a whole *lot* of fucking he had to get up to.

Andy slowly scooped up the cats, who stretched in lazy protest, before laying them back down in his chair without him, letting them enjoy the warmth his ass had left in the seat. He needed to head upstairs to Hannah and Asha's room, but he was a little worried about the state he'd find them in. This

was the longest either of them had gone between doses, and he wondered just how intense this was going to be. “You going to be enough to protect me, Niko, or you want me to get backup?”

“Two untrained teenagers against a member of the Air Force’s highly decorated Security Forces?” Niko scoffed. “I’ll be fine.”

“They’ve been without their dose for ten days, Niko. You’ve seen what that can do to even the strongest of women,” he said.

“If I can’t handle those two on my own,” Niko said, “I don’t deserve to be on your security detail. They’ll be a little worked up. I’ll be fine. You’re the one who should be worried. By the end of tomorrow, your balls are going to be like whiffle balls – completely empty and full of holes.” She giggled as they climbed the stairs up to the second floor.

“Nice, really nice,” Andy said, shaking his head with a smirk. They reached the door to Asha and Hannah’s room, and there was a Post-It Note on the outside that said “COME IN!” on it in friendly letters, although Andy almost wondered if this was the start of some horror film, and the two teenagers of his Team would be like wild animals behind the door, their long hair in their faces like some Japanese horror flick.

He opened the door quietly and stepped into the room. The girls’ makeshift dorm room was still mostly the same disaster area it had been before he’d left on the trip, although the path from the door to the bunk beds had been cleared some. Both Hannah and Asha were there, dressed in red plaid skirts and white Oxford buttonup tops that they’d mostly left unbuttoned, allowing Andy to see neither of them had on a bra beneath them. They were kneeling, their asses rested on their heels, their arms laid out across the tops of their thighs, palms up, fingers curled. Their breathing was rhythmic, controlled. Were they meditating or just trying not to think about how long it had been since they’d been with Andy? Neither had been there to greet the caravan when it had returned home, and he suspected the two of them may have been right here, trying to keep their heads clear. Their eyes were closed, and he wondered for a moment if they hadn’t heard the door opening.

As soon as he stepped another foot or so into the room, both girls opened their eyes so suddenly, Andy felt like he was in a slasher film and that he was the prey about to be eviscerated. Before he could so much as blink, they were up off their knees and charging him, wrapping their arms around him hard, clinging to him like a lifeline, both squealing “Daddy!” at the top of their lungs. He’d politely asked them not to call him that, but it had only seemed to have the reverse effect, instead ingraining it more into their habits instead of striking it.

Both of Asha’s hands were grabbing onto his hips and her grip was steady and like two metal clamps, while Hannah had one of her hands down the front of Andy’s jeans almost immediately, reaching in so that she could get her fingertips around his cock. “Daddy,” Hannah whined, kissing at his neck as he heard Niko step into the room and close the door behind her. “We’ve been such bad little bitches while you’ve been gone. We’ve been playing with each other’s pussies, cuddling up in bed together, licking at each other’s clits... but nothing even comes close to Daddy’s dick...” She groaned, her slender fingertips clenching around it. “The thought about you pounding our perfect little teenage pussies, just stretching open your bad little girls... we can’t even think straight, Daddy... it aches and my body fucking needs you hammering the shit out of it... We don’t even care how, do we, Asha?”

The half-Indian, half-French girl bound up in the trio shook her head, her voice dripping with even more of her London accent than normal. “Bend us over. Pull us on top. Skullfuck our faces until we’re drooling like fucking morons. Christ, you can even take us both in the arse if you want. Whatever you fucking want, Daddy, your depraved little giggly teenage fuckholes will only beg you for more, more, more. Just don’t make us fucking wait, Daddy. We need Daddy Drink. We need to get our loads of cum.” He’d seen Hannah impatient before, but Asha was just as bad, if not worse, kissing at his neck and flicking her tongue along the shell of his ear, making him shiver and twitch just a tiny bit. He idly wondered if the girls had been swapping tales about what did and didn’t affect him while he’d been away, and the news that he had very sensitive ears had gotten around.

“Hard as you fucking can, Daddy,” Hannah moaned. “I wanna really feel it. I wanna fall asleep with a tingling, fuzzy feeling my belly, knowing I’m loaded up with Daddy’s creamy yummy cum... like I’ve been ridden hard and put away sopping fucking wet, my brain all clouded from how hard Daddy’s fucked it stupid... It’s been so fucking long I’m out of my fucking *mind*, Daddy... I need you to rail the ever-loving shit out of me... Out of *us*. Your greedy, needy teenage fuckbait bitches blind with cum hunger... Please Daddy? Why are you still waiting?”

“Jesus,” Niko giggled. “Imagine if they were all this bad. You’d have never made it out of the fucking garage.”

Andy was afraid they were going to scale and topple him if he didn’t do something, so he pushed the lot of them over towards the couch off to one side, spinning Asha around so her ass was grinding against his before pushing her knees onto the couch seat. Asha practically lunged behind her to hike her skirt up, putting her shoulders against the top of the couch back. Her pussy was sloppy with how worked up she was, the insides of both of her thighs down to her knees glistening with slickness, as she moved to get her knees as far as wide apart as possible. “Do it, Daddy!” Asha shouted back at him. “Dick me down like you fucking own this cunt!”

He’d fished his cock out and was about to step forward when he realized that Hannah had dropped to her knees and shoved her face down onto his shaft, burying the tip of his dick in her throat for a long moment, both hands latched onto his hips like she was going to suffocate herself on his shaft, but incredibly, no matter how long she held her face down there, she wasn’t coughing or choking, although he could see her eyes watering up just a little bit. There was something challenging and defiant on her face, her gaze matching his, before she pulled her head back and slid off his cock, turning him suddenly to line him up with Asha’s trembling twat, her palm flat on his ass shoving him forward, as Asha howled while his cock forced its way inside of her trembling walls, the guttural, almost savage, moan of strained pleasure bleating from her throat.

“Fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me Daddy harder harder fuck me harder!” Asha shouted as Andy began to corkscrew his hips forward and down, pressing into her, as Hannah pulled her shirt open wider to unveil those massive tits of hers as she moved to lean her head sideways on top of Asha’s ass, looking up at Andy with brown, loving, wanton eyes, licking her lips.

“C’mon Daddy,” Hannah cheered. “You can rail her harder than that. Smack those hips. Drill that pretty little cunt. Is she tight, Daddy? I bet she is. I’ve felt her clamp down on my fingertips while you were gone, when all we had to keep ourselves busy was each other.”

“Oh fuck Han, he’s so fucking good I’m seeing fucking spots!”

“That’s it, Daddy,” Hannah said licking her lips, pinching one of her own large brown nipples, giving it a firm twist. “Nut her up. Blow a hot load in her tiny gash and blast her back out. I bet it makes her cum so hard she just blacks out... Do it, daddy... breed your dirty little British bitch... fill her up... do it!”

“Do it, Daddy! Do it do it fuck me fuck me fuck FUCK FUCK!”

As Asha seized up like a gas engine with sugar in the tank, he felt her cunt practically vicegrip his cock and his body knew it could only take so much, so he began to pour what felt like buckets of his sizzling cum inside of her while her face buried itself against the back of the couch before her body simply slumped forward and keeled over to one side, twitching and shaking in the aftershocks of it, his cock sliding out of her snatch with a wet splorching sound.

His cock wasn’t exposed long, however, because Hannah immediately pushed her face back down onto it, sliding his dick into her throat as her tongue lashed all over it, trying to drink in as much of his cum and Asha’s fluids that still remained on his shaft, her eyes looking up at him like she was trying to prove a point.

Andy wasn’t sure who was going at it with more enthusiasm, him or Hannah, but she was facefucking her mouth down onto his cock like she thought he’d been trash talking her technique or something and had something to prove, and he was mostly just holding onto her head to keep her from

overdoing it.

After a minute or two he pulled her head back from his cock, and she almost fought him to try and get it back in her mouth, her tongue flicking out at it like a kitten at a saucer of milk before Andy moved to sit down on the couch next to Asha's completely limp form, one hand reaching over to stroke her hair a little bit, although Asha didn't so much as move.

"She's fine, Daddy," Hannah said as she slid one knee up on one side of him, then the other on the other, moving to straddle him as she reached down to rub the tip of his shaft against her slit. Once she had it lined up, she lifted and stretched her thighs, spreading them wider, like she was trying to do the splits on him, posting herself down onto his cock, her eyes widening a little bit as she finally pushed all the way down onto it, as if she was surprised herself with how tight she felt around his shaft. "Fuck, Daddy, did you get bigger, or did I get tighter?" She lifted both of her hands up to run through her black mane of hair, the blonde stripes swirling like cream in dark coffee, before letting the strands drop down over her face in the messiest way possible. "That feels so fucking good, Daddy, that big fucking dick stretching my tiny teenage fuckhole open, making me sore and achy."

Andy reached over and placed a hand on Asha's chest, just making sure she was breathing, before Hannah grabbed both of his wrists, pulling his hands to latch onto her hips, helping her piston whip them up and then back down and forward, until he could feel her throbbing around him.

"Feel that, Daddy? Feel that fertile young womb that wants your spunk dripping out of it? Feel how tight and hungry it is for your love? Fuck me, Daddy. Fuck me until I'm spent and lifeless like my best friend, the two of us just satisfied husks, full of your love."

Each time Hannah posted on his lap, her massive tits lifted up and then dropped down again, as she leaned forward to press those overwhelming spheres of soft flesh into his face, like she wanted to smother him with them. Her tempo was frantic and fast, and sweat coated her young body as she continued to thrust her ass down into his lap again and again.

"C'mon Daddy. Fill me up. Flood that tiny twat that fucking belongs to you. Fill it up like a fucking éclair. Pump me so full of spunk that I'm still leaking it when I wake up later. Fuck you feel so fucking good, Daddy. Such great fucking Daddy dick. Harder. Harder motherfucker! Beat that pussy up! Fucking own it! Knock it up! Brand it! Paint it! Tame it! Show it who it fucking belongs to! Oh fuck fuck I'm gonna cum, Daddy, cum in me, cum in me, cum cum cum cum you big dicked motherfucker CUM IN ME!"

She wrapped her arms around the back of his head and pulled his face to get lost between those giant tits of hers, nearly buried in an avalanche of smooth caramel flesh, as her hips began to twitch and shiver while the muscles inside of her slit milked at him while her orgasm shattered her consciousness, and even if he'd wanted to resist, the intense heat and pressure were more than enough to get another load from him, blasting as much as his balls had to give inside of her before he leaned back against the couch and Hannah just slumped atop of him, splayed out like she'd gone all ragdoll.

A moment or so later, he felt Niko starting to pull on Hannah's completely limp form, rolling her off the top of him and onto her ass and back on the couch, her head lolled back like a puppet whose strings had all been cut. Niko couldn't help but giggle, looking down at Asha then Hannah before looking over to Andy, reaching down to wipe sweat from his forehead with the palm of her left hand, leaning down to kiss him.

"Rough life, huh, 'Daddy?'" Niko teased.

"Don't *you* start, or I *will* bend you over my knee and paddle your ass senseless."

"How dare you threaten me with a good time, baby?" Niko laughed before helping Andy up to his feet. "Well, you clearly can't go meet anyone else like this, so I think it's straight off to the showers for us."

"Us?"

"I think I've got some of Hannah's sweat and drool on me," Niko said, sliding her arm around his waist, looking down at the two unconscious teenagers in heaps upon the couch in their room.

“They’re kinda cute when they’re passed out like this. They hardly look like trouble at all. You’re gonna be a good—”

“I’m warning you, I have absolutely no qualms about leaving you hanging for a week or so, leave you wanting and waiting until the New Year.”

“You’re no fun.”

Andy flicked his chin at the two bodies sprawled out before him. “I think they’d disagree.”

He and Niko moved to shift them, laying them down one next to the other, Hannah’s arms wrapped around Asha, chest to back, and then laid a blanket down over top of them. He wasn’t entirely sure how long they were going to be unconscious, but it seemed like the two had very much needed those orgasms like their lives depended on it.

“Two down, ten more to go.”

Andy sighed before he sung quietly beneath his breath, “All I want for Christmas is a good night’s sleep...”

Chapter Eighteen

January 1st, 2021

Most of the ladies had gone much harder at New Year's Eve than he had, and as such, he woke up relatively early at eight. He suspected a lot of them would wake up rather hungover and annoyed at themselves, considering several had claimed they weren't going to overdo it when it came to booze, and the majority had failed pretty heavily in that regard, with a few of them getting so rip roaringly drunk that they had threatened to scale the chandelier.

Christmas, just the week before, had been a relatively quiet affair, and presents were kept to small things, nobody putting together a list, with lots of books, CDs and vinyl changing hands as everyone was encouraged to introduce their partners to things they thought they might like. Presents were opened simultaneously and absolutely no one was expected to write thank you letters to anyone inside of the Team, although brief phone calls were encouraged to families.

Part of getting everyone's families familiar with a team was to focus on the Soon To Be Wives club first, with all the additional partners for later dates. Accordingly, Andy wasn't expected to remember *anybody's* name, but was doing his best to pick them up as he could, and he'd certainly found he got along with some of them better than others. Ash's brother Dermot had connected with Andy even beyond the Irishman's love of his books, and the two of them were often the ones who had to be corralled off the phone call towards the end, they got along so well.

But when it came to New Year's Eve, the women of Team Rook had been so glad to see the back of it that they threw the kind of rager meant shake the very top of the heavens, with the exception of Ash and Niko, who'd stayed dead sober, and Andy, who'd gone light, despite the *constant* prodding from various women around the house trying to get him to drink. (They'd also decided to let Asha and Hannah get drunk as well, but only since they were staying in the house.)

In the morning, when he'd woken up, he'd found everyone was still asleep and in bed, so he'd left a note saying he'd be down in his office if anyone needed him, so that nobody would panic when they woke up and found he wasn't in bed with them, like they had early in December.

Down in his office, the things he wanted to look at awaited him on his desk.

The day before, the last day of December, both Ash and Niko had been in to see the doctor, to get check-ups on the babies, and Andy had been more than a little taken aback by some of the news they'd gotten.

First, the doctors had revised the due dates for the two women. Niko's target date was May 5th, while Ash's was May 21st. It came as a surprise to everyone involved that Niko had gotten pregnant first, and that meant she was expected to be delivering first, even if it was just by a few weeks. Niko had been a little worried that Ash was going to take it as a slight, but instead Aisling had just laughed it off, saying she was fine with it, and it let her learn by watching Niko. Ash said it was fine if she wasn't first in everything.

The second surprise was the *number* of children the two women were to be having. While Niko had only the one, it turned out Aisling was carrying *twins*, which she immediately began to joke about how she was doing double the work and how Niko might've been first, but that she was still getting off light, compared to the labor Ash was going to have ahead of her. Niko said it was *fine* for her to stick with only one child making her world more complicated. It was too early to tell if they were fraternal or identical twins.

The last and final surprise was getting to know the genders – Niko was having a boy, while each of the children Ash was carrying was a girl. Ash had immediately scrapped all the names she and Andy had been talking about, and decided to go back to the drawing board now that she was having twins.

Niko had been absolutely adamant that since she was having a boy, he would be named Matthew, after Andy's late brother, something that made Andy smile from ear to ear even while his eyes watered up. Andy insisted they have some tilt towards her heritage, and she'd suggested they use the name of her reservation as the child's middle name, but neither was entirely certain that Matthew

Rosebud Rook worked, so they'd revisit the middle name closer to the child's birth. But the fact that she was completely unwavering on insisting that their son would bear his late brother's name made him tear up a little each time he thought about it.

He'd put the two sonograms up on wall of his office, so he could see them whenever he wanted to look up and consider how quickly the future was running towards him. They'd told all the members of the house, obviously, and Andy had called Phil, which had resulted in a bit of information that had come as rather a surprise to him.

Boys, it seemed, were making up a smaller than normal percentage of reported pregnancies in those that had been vaccinated with the Quaranteam serum. The sample size wasn't enough to know anything conclusively thus far, but early reports had the male/female split in upcoming children to be something akin to 1:10. That wasn't normal, and that wasn't good for long term sustainability, but the science was what it was. It was yet another thing they would have to simply find a way to work with on the other side.

Another thing that was already starting to be visible about the fetuses being carried by women with Quaranteam serum running through their veins were that they were in *incredibly* good condition, free of health problems. It was almost like the Quaranteam serum was doing what it could to improve the health of anyone it encountered. All the pregnancies had, so far, been remarkably problem free, with chances of problematic or inherited weaknesses or deficiencies at apparently 0%. Many of the things that neonatal screenings were invented for had simply not shown up in any of the pregnancies that had happened in the post Quaranteam environment.

The future only knew what other generational surprises lay ahead for their children, but Andy and Phil agreed they'd do the best they could to take them one day at a time.

After spending a few minutes looking at the ultrasound images, still trying to wrap his head around how he would be a father of not one but *three* children before the end of summer, he started futzing around with the collection of ideas he had pattering around with in the background while starting up the next Druid Gunslinger novel. Most of them would likely just litter around on his hard drive as he pecked at them in between working on actual projects. They were usually under just concept headings like "A Colorado Collegiate Werewolf" and "Merlin's Mayhem" and "The Unlying Bracelet" and "Born of Dragons," but every so often he'd dust one off and see if he could pull anything interesting from it. He was considering whether or not a story he'd started a while ago called "Family Is Hell" was worth picking up again but had decided to put it back where it was for the time being.

If he was working on anything *other* than the next Druid Gunslinger, he suspected his agent and his publicist would try and string him up, especially with the movie going into production in just a few short months. They wanted to have yet another book ready to go, in case the sales bump from the movie was putting things through the roof. He'd tried reassuring them that even if the movie's filming went spectacularly, with the amount of effects that would be needed, the film itself couldn't possibly be out before Christmas of 2022, and more likely summer of 2023. But the folks at the top always wanted it now, now, and once they had it, the creative folks could wait, wait, wait.

He was still in the middle of a great debate about whether or not the Druid Gunslinger books should acknowledge the apocalypse that had happened because of DuoHalo, and still hadn't come down on either side of the fence yet, although he was starting to lean a lot more towards just having the six-to-twelve months of the pandemic happen off-stage in between books, and starting a Gunslinger book down the way with something like "Over half the world died in less than six months. But I don't wanna talk about that. I wanna talk about what the world looked like a year later." It would be a nice, simple, effective way to acknowledge that the world, both real and fictional, had changed, and still not linger in the pain and misery too long.

Sometimes putting your head down and hiding in fiction was easier than trying to make sense of the real world all around you. At least, it felt like that helped him keep a handle on things.

And then there was the upcoming wedding, in less than a month's time.

In that regard, he felt like he'd basically done everything that he could, which was mostly just to stay out of the way of everything and everyone. All his partners had their opinions on what things "had" to be in the wedding and where all the conflicts lay, so he was basically happy to let them hash all of that out without him. He would show up where they told him to, say what they told him to (and probably add some of his own words along the way), respect whatever traditions he was supposed to and invite whomever they thought was necessary.

Fiona, Moira and Aisling would have liked for there to be a Catholic priest present, and for the ceremony to contain at least most of a Catholic marriage ceremony, but Piper, Emily, Sarah and Niko had differing opinions, and so the compromise that had been reached was that it would be a non-denominational Christian wedding with a local priest from a Unitarian church handling the service, which would touch on elements of both Catholicism and Protestantism. Andy's one insistence was that it not be "a three-hour epic" and that they keep the ceremony under an hour, even with the unique challenges their wedding was going to present.

The biggest problem was going to be attendance. It wasn't the first time nor would it be the last time that he thanked Nathaniel Watkins for giving him so much money, because the invites alone would've broken anyone else. The decision had made that every person *involved* in the wedding could invite 50 people each, with Sarah and Emily being given exceptions and being allowed to invite twice that, for professional reasons. People were expected to bring only small numbers of their own Team to the wedding, so each person who was invited could bring up to 3 members of their Team with them. It didn't sound like a lot of people when you were talking about it, but if everyone invited had RSVP'd with 3 addons, it would've been 1,500 people.

One of the things they'd learned from the invites, though, was who was alive and who'd died, and that was chilling on its own. Many of the invites had bounced back as "recipient deceased." They had hired a service to send the invites and to process the replies, and once a week since they'd sent out the invites, the service would send back a list of who'd accepted, how many they were bringing and who had passed away.

There were still a few more weeks left for reservations to come rolling in, but based on the estimates and how people had been responding, it was looking like they'd have close to 750 people in attendance when the ceremony happened at the end of the month. And there was no way in hell they were assigning seats at the reception for that many people, so other than the tables marked off for Team Rook and the one table assigned off to the side to Team Marcos, people could sit where they wanted, and they could get the food from the buffet.

All the fiancées had decided as a group they all wanted to take Andy's last name. There had been a little bit of talk at the start about them all maybe hyphenating their original last names, but Fiona pointed out how much more complicated and messier it would make their house look, and they'd agreed simple was better.

Andy had also made it clear that the whole staff of the house was expected to be in attendance of the wedding, and as guests, and that if he caught them doing a lick of work, he would make them regret it, which Nicolette had begrudgingly agreed to. And to make sure that both Alexis and Niko felt comfortable, Linda had assigned a couple of her girls to guard the house while everyone would be out of it.

For the honeymoon, the decision had been made to go down to Jamaica, a place that (almost) none of them had ever been to before (with the exception of Sarah, who'd been down for filming at one point), and they would enjoy a week away from home. They'd talked about doing a trip around the world, but the world didn't feel stable enough for them to be comfortable with that yet.

Basically, at his request, most of the decisions were handled for him, but he'd made one exception to that rule – the DJ for the reception. Andy had always joked around that if he had an endless amount of money, he'd throw whatever it took to have DJ Shadow (a Bay Area legend) come and DJ his wedding. As it turned out, DJ Shadow hadn't asked for an unreasonable amount at all.

(Also, Andy had decided what his entrance music would be, but was doing his absolute best to keep that secret from *everyone* involved, having resisted the overwhelming lure to walk into “Stayin’ Alive,” because it would’ve been in incredibly poor taste.)

Those family members who were flying in from overseas were being given a few days before the wedding to get a chance to meet everyone, learn names, see the house and just generally get the lay of the land, which meant his Bachelor Party was actually scheduled for a week before the wedding. The last thing he wanted to do was to try and keep up with Aisling’s family when it came to drinking.

All of that really meant that he had about three weeks of time during which he could get writing done, but past that, it was going to be time spent getting to know Aisling and Em’s big families, as well as Sarah’s and Moira’s smaller ones, all of whom were incredibly eager to spend some time getting to know Andy in person.

Which meant he was a little taken aback when there was a knock at the door to his writing room, but he’d insisted that he keep an open door policy in the house, so he simply sighed and then said in his loudest voice, “Come on in.”

Who entered, however, surprised him. Two members of his staff, Jenny, his cook, and Katie, his groundskeeper, moved in one after the other, Katie looking a little nervous, Jenny looking almost giddy.

Jenny was a slightly stocky Midwestern brunette with the warmest face ever, an absolute kind-hearted soul who had originally hid the fact that she and Katie were married from Andy. She’d been adamant that the staff remain staff, that they preferred to keep the relationship professional, and the rest of the staff had been in firm agreement with her.

Katie, Jenny’s wife, was Hispanic, originally from Los Angeles, with short black hair in a bob cut, hard and muscular in the places where her wife was soft. She, also unlike her wife, was a staunch lesbian, whereas Jenny identified as bisexual.

Both women were dressed in their off-duty clothes, jeans and t-shirts, as Andy had told them they could have New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day off, to which his entire staff had insisted on just working ‘half days,’ as if they were uncertain if Team Rook could function with them gone, even temporarily.

They were probably right.

“Can we have a bit of your time, Master Rook?” Jenny said, a nervous smile on his lips.

“Of course ladies, come in, take a seat, talk to me,” he said, pulling his laptop closed, eager to take his thoughts away from the Gunslinger for a little while. “What’s on your mind? Wanted to get your next dosing in while no one else is awake?”

“No, but yes, Master Rook,” Jenny sighed. “This is... well, it’s a little complicated. Katie?”

Katie frowned as the two of them sat down on the couch across the room from him, looking down at her hands. “I need... I need to say something, Master Rook, and I need you just to listen for a bit while I try and explain myself.”

“Of course, Katie. Take as much time as you need and just tell me when it’s my turn to talk again,” Andy said.

Katie kept her eyes fixated down at her hands as she started to talk. “I knew I was a lesbian very early on in life, even though I knew it wasn’t something my family would approve of. By the time I was ten, I knew that boys really didn’t do anything for me. When I was in high school, I had to keep it quiet, but I started dating girls, fooling around with them and it just... it just felt *right*. In college, because I decided I wanted to make sure I wasn’t the kind of girl who could go both ways, I hooked up with a guy from my economics class, someone I knew wouldn’t go talking about the experience, and by the end of it, well, let’s just say he had a good night and I’d been bored off my tits. And in that morning, I knew that guys... just didn’t do it for me. So I moved up to the Bay Area, basically distanced myself from my family, found Jenny, fell in love and got married. I knew Jenny liked both boys and girls, so we established an agreement that she could have a little dick on the side as long as it wasn’t serious, and everyone involved understood it was just a physical fling. And that’s served us

pretty good, for quite a while... until we got here.”

Jenny put her hand on top of Katie's. “If you're not ready—”

“I'm never going to *be* ready, baby, but I think I just gotta *do* this,” Katie said. “When we got here, we were initially going to lie to you, and we'd both planned to take care of your needs. I'd fooled Tanner back in college, so I figured I could fool you too. It would be just another part of the job, I told myself. And then we met you, and you... well, you weren't at all what we expected you to be, Master Rook, no offense. You weren't pompous or assuming. You didn't think you were always right and you didn't seem all that comfortable telling people what to do. You were, *dios mio*, you were the least arrogant rich prick I'd ever met.”

“We also didn't realize you *weren't* rich until you actually *were* rich,” Jenny giggled, “when Mister Watkins gave you all that money.”

Andy chuckled with her but had to admit he could see it.

“And even when you *became* rich, you sort of refused to *act like it*,” Katie sighed. “The only reason we found out you'd *become* rich was because you were taking over our salaries from the Air Force, and you were *increasing* them, because you didn't want us to be underpaid, despite the fact that you're providing room, board and taking care of our Quaranteam needs. It's madness, you know that, don't you?”

“I'm just trying to do the best I can to make sure anyone who's life is tied to mine is doing okay.”

“That's why we're here today, Andy,” Katie said. “We need to talk to you about us getting dosed from you, because, well, we'd like to request some changes.”

Andy hadn't overlooked the fact that Katie had referred to him by his first name, but certainly wasn't going to be a prick and point it out, especially since she looked so concerned by the conversation they were having. “Sure, go on.”

Katie bit her bottom lip, looked up at Jenny, who nodded at her wife resolutely. Then Katie turned her eyes up to Andy with an expression he'd never seen on her face before. “I'm a lesbian. I *know* I'm a lesbian. I've tried looking at every picture any of the women of the house can think of when they think of 'hot guys.' Chris Evans. Idris Elba. Paul Rudd. Brad Pitt. Michael B. Jordan. Ryan Gosling. George Clooney. Matt Damon. All of them. None of them give me even the slightest flutter of excitement in my belly. But... I look at you, and I get the same queasy feeling I get when I look at Ruby Rose, or Cara Delevingne.”

“Katie, I—”

“I'm not finished, Andy,” she said, interrupting him. “I've tried watching straight porn, and looking at cocks – big cocks, little cocks, it doesn't matter, they're all just a bit of flesh I'm not really interested in... unless it's yours. And yours makes my knees go weak, watching you shove it into Jenny, and seeing her eyes light up like a pinball machine on tilt when you cum inside of her pussy... and I think...” She swallowed a deep breath of air before her eyes fixated on Andy's. “I think I *want* you to *fuck me*.”

He'd wondered if this was coming for the last few months, as every time he'd serviced both Jenny and Katie, Katie had been getting more and more sexually aggressive, taking more of an active hand in their trysts. In fact, after they gotten back from the book tour, Katie had given him the most forceful blowjob he'd ever gotten, trying to deep throat him the entire time, her eyes having locked on his like she wanted him to know how much she was enjoying doing it. And when he'd come down her throat, he knew the orgasm she'd experienced in kind was chemically enhanced, but the intensity of it had taken both him and Jenny aback a little.

“You're okay with this, Jenny?” Andy asked her. “I want to make sure you're both on board with this and that I'm not coming in between anyone.”

“What kind of hypocrite would I be if I didn't let her do everything I've done with you, Master Rook? Yes, I'm fine with it, whatever the two of you want to do, as long as she's back in our bed at the

end of the night, and the two of you don't ever do anything in *that* bed. That's just for her and I."

"Of course, Jenny. Whatever rules you two put out, I'll absolutely follow."

Katie stood up and started peeling her clothes off. "Good. Great. Can we get to the fucking right now, before I lose my patience?" He'd seen Katie naked before, but this was the first time like it felt she was putting on a show for him, like she wanted him to be looking at her body, to be drinking in the sight of her slender but muscular form. Once she pulled her top off, she took particular time to press her two smaller tits together, smiling at him. "You can have the full go of me, Master Rook. I know I've been... a bit jumpy some of the time, but that time has passed." Her hands reached down and pushed her pants and panties down off her legs, revealing she'd kept that small patch of black curls above her snatch. She moved to sit back down on the couch, one of her hands reaching over to fold her fingers to intertwine with Jenny's. "You gonna get over here, or you gonna make me beg for it? I figured since I'm still nervous you wouldn't make me *beg* but if I *have* to..." she teased with an almost playful look in her eyes as she lifted one of her legs up, putting the sole of her foot on the edge of the couch, her hand reaching between her legs to slowly brush her fingertips across her slit. "It's not virginal, but it's never been touched by anyone other than the one-timer before now. I know you had a virgin with Miss Dillon, but can I tempt you for a second round?"

Andy had to have a brief chuckle about the absurdity of his life before he stood up from his desk and unbuttoned his jeans, unzipping them to fish his cock out as he moved across the room. He'd thought, at one point, about a 'no sex in the writing room' rule, but Aisling had pointed out what an idiotic idea it would've been, and as such, the only rooms where there was no sex was in his partner's private rooms, and that was only true if the partners didn't ask him in. Some, like Lexi, wanted to have sex almost exclusively in their own rooms, while others, like all the rest of the staff, preferred to have their rooms as their little sanctuary where they could be alone if they wanted.

When Andy got close, he started to bend his knees to kneel down in front of the couch, and while he was doing so, Katie reached up and pulled him down to press her lips up against his, her tongue invading his mouth and seeking to get tangled up with his, a move that made Jenny say "Oh!" in an amused giggle. Before he knew what was happening, Katie's legs were slowly wrapping around his sides, and then she laughed a bit into mouth when she felt the tip of his cock pushing against the wrong parts of her.

"It doesn't naturally line up, does it?" Katie said in amusement.

"Not always, no," Andy replied.

"Lend a girl a hand?"

He reached down and moved to adjust his cock until he could feel the tip of his dick pressing right against her fleshy folds, and then felt her heels on the small of his back trying to pull him in closer, forcing his shaft to slowly penetrate inside of her, the only flesh'n'blood cock that would ever slide into her cunt again.

The shudder and look of shock and awe upon her face was astonishing, like she had been deaf and was hearing sound for the first time in her life, a sensation so alien and unbeknownst to her that she didn't have a frame of reference for the delights that were coursing through her body. Andy was about to ask if he should slow down or stop, but her arms and legs closed on his flesh to draw him in even more, making his cock penetrate parts of her that had mostly been touched by hands, rubber or silicon, and the expression she wore was that of being overwhelmed with bliss.

"Oh fuck," she whispered so quietly he could barely hear her. Her pupils had dilated, almost like she was on drugs, her breathing a bit shallower and faster paced, but any time Andy made any efforts to reduce his pace, to ease off, to give her some space, she would pull and paw at him, trying to get him to go faster, harder, deeper.

Andy wanted the experience to be as enjoyable for her as he could, so he tried to read as many subtle signals as he could involving speed, tempo, force and pressure, but for the most part, it seemed like Katie simply wanted more, more, more.

His hips thrust his cock in and out of her at a steady rhythm, and he saw Jenny lean in to kiss Katie's lips, whispering to her, "You okay, baby?"

"Jesus fucking Christo, Jen," Katie whimpered. "I can't... I can't think... I can't fucking *see* straight... My mind's a fucking *jumble*..."

"That's okay, baby," Jenny purred to her. "Just ride the wave."

"I can't... I can't stop *cumming*, Jenny..."

"I know, baby, I know, it's okay... enjoy it... take it all in..."

Katie's body kept crashing against his time and time again, and Jenny nodded at him, as if to encourage him to let go, which wasn't difficult, because she was crushingly tight around him. Once his body let loose, it sent Katie into such overwhelming spasms that he worried something had gone wrong until they eased off and he saw that look of inescapable contentment spread into the widest, almost delirious smile he'd ever seen on her face, somewhere between a trance and overloaded ecstasy.

He pulled his hips back as he felt Katie's legs go limp, and before he was even more than a few inches away from her body, Jenny's mouth was Hoovering his cock clean, sucking every bit of his cum and her wife's juices from his shaft. He let her lick his body spotless before she moved to suckle a bit out of Katie's pussy, as the Latina began to stir a little bit.

"I think I'm gonna want to do that from now on, Jenny, if that's okay," Katie giggled, arching her back as if she was still tingly all over from the experience.

"Of course it is, baby," Jenny said. "As long as I'm with you."

"Congrats, Master Rook," Katie said, opening one lazy eye to look at him. "I don't find any other man on the planet hot, but you get to be the exception that proves the rule. You're fucking gorgeous and you can fuck me *any time*."

Chapter Nineteen

January 23rd, 2021

The bachelor party began like most of them typically did – with Congressional hearings.

They were at Rook Manor, although the plan was to be out of the house within a few hours, once everyone had arrived. Until they had, they were doing something none of them had really planned on – they were watching C-SPAN.

“Mr. Rook, do you have experience seeing what an imprinted woman looks like when she’s gone too long in between appointments?” Senator Giancola (R, KS) asked him on the television.

“I do,” Andy watched himself say in response on the television, recorded yesterday. “Through no fault of my own. I’d like to stress that I am doing everything in my power to make sure none of the women I’m partnered with are unhappy.”

“We have heard indirectly from your partners about how satisfied they are with your performance and have entered it into the record, Mr. Rook,” another Senator, Senator May Collins (D, CO). “This is not a condemnation of your personal behavior. But you have a great deal of experience in dealing with those who’ve had complications resulting from the serum, which is one of the many reasons you’re here for these hearings. We’re not accusing you of anything. But could you perhaps describe for us the state of mind a woman who has gone too long between encounters with her partner?”

Andy remembered how weirdly hostile it had all felt at the time when this had been recorded, twenty-four hours earlier, but in watching it back now, he could see that maybe he was just jumpy by the whole gravitas of the whole thing.

“Unfocused would be generous,” Andy saw himself say. “Imprinted women who have gone nine or ten days without a tryst with their partner will be unable to think clearly and will be so focused on getting that encounter that basically anything else will become secondary to that goal, and that includes the physical well-being of herself and or anyone else around her.”

“How often would you recommend an imprinted woman have a tryst with her partner, Mr. Rook?” a third Senator, Senator Evelyn Yang (D, NY), asked him.

“I’m not a medical professional, so I’m not the person who should be answering this, Senator.”

“I’m asking strictly from your own personal experience.”

“Once a week to be safe, although sometimes needs can push that out for a few days, if there are other women in the Team there to look out for her.”

“What’s the longest anyone in your Team has gone in between trysts, Mr. Rook?” Giancola asked him.

“Thirteen days.”

“Was that healthy?”

“The partner in question wanted to determine the extent to which she could hold out if needed. She could’ve tapped out at any time, and I was on hand to make sure she was okay, ready to give her what she needed whenever she felt she had to yield.”

“Would you expect the average woman to be able to hold out that long, Mr. Rook?”

“I would stress again that I am not a medical practitioner, but that long? No. The need would turn into pain much sooner than that for most women, particularly younger women, but again, that’s purely based on personal experience and not professional medical opinions.”

“Would it surprise you, Mr. Rook,” Senator Yang picked up, “to know that we have spoken to medical professionals about this, and they are very much in agreement with your opinion?”

“Considering I’m close friends with one of the people who is working on the serum, Senator, no it would not.”

“Do you have any experience with what happens when a woman goes beyond the two-week period, Mr. Rook?”

“Personal experience? No Senator, I do not.”

“According to all the professional medical minds we have approached about this, they have all described matters the same way – the serum that is keeping these women alive goes into overdrive and begins to consume their bodies for fuel, and within a day or two, they suffer irreparable organ failure and die an extremely gruesome death,” Senator Yang said. “Are you aware of that?”

“I am, Senator,” the television version of him said. “As part of the Civilian Oversight Group assigned to keep tabs on the Quaranteam serum and its development, I have read all the literature, research and data I can get my hands on.”

“And yet, you are still of the mind that this proposed piece of legislature,” she said, lifting up a black three ring binder with two-hundred and eighty-five pages of paper in it, “the Men’s Protection Act, is too aggressive in the efforts that it takes to keep women from being left at the whim of a man’s foolish decision to put himself into harm’s way?”

The televised version of Andy sighed. “Yes, Senator, I am. I’ve read the entire bill, and there are several things in it that are *quite* concerning to me.”

“Such as?”

“Caloric intake restrictions? Shall we start there?” Andy said. “I fully agree that men need to take care of themselves, in order to be able to remain alive to provide for their partners for as long as possible, but you know as well as I do, Senator, that if a man dies of a heart attack, there are solutions to get any women assigned to that man reassigned, even if they are gruesome and unpleasant.”

“Should we be forced to do that, Mr. Rook?”

Andy chuckled throatily. “Have you ever just not been in the mood, Senator?”

“Excuse me?”

Andy grinned a little bit, both on the television yesterday and today sitting in his living room. “I love all my partners, and I’m happy to be paired with all of them, but I have to tell you, there are some days where I just do *not* want to have sex. This won’t be a surprise to any of my partners – I’m sure they’ve been able to tell on one day or another where I’m just going through the motions and doing what’s expected of me. Because my partners have needs, and I am willing to set aside my personal mood at that moment to make sure those needs are being met. But I’m asking you right now, Senator, if you try and tell me that on a particularly miserable day, if I happen to have a second bacon double cheeseburger for lunch, that I’m going to be arrested and my partners are going to have to come to a prison to get their trysts, how much more harm do you think you’re doing than good?”

“Don’t you agree that your health is important, Mr. Rook, and that diet is a part of that?” Senator Giancola asked. It hadn’t been obvious at the time, but now, a day later, he could see she was teeing him up for a perfect answer, and that she had been doing so intentionally.

“I do, Senator, but let me ask you this – did you ask any of those doctors who’ve you consulted with about how long a woman can go in between trysts about what kinds of other changes the Quaranteam serum has done to men’s bodies? Because this legislature demonstrates that you absolutely have *not*. I know that, because my caloric intake now compared to what it was before I was introduced to the Quaranteam serum by my first pairing partner are in *no* way comparable.”

“How many partners do you have, Mr. Rook?”

“Keep in mind, Senator, I am by no means indicative of what the average male looks like in terms of pairing.”

“We’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Rook. Now please answer the question.”

“Twenty-two.”

“And how much would you say it’s affected your caloric intake?”

“I consulted with both my cook and my personal trainer before I settled on this number.” Andy winced at that now, realizing it kind of made him look like an entitled asshole, but there was nothing he could do about it a day later.

“We understand that Mr. Rook. If the average person should consume around 2000 calories a day, how much would you say you are consuming daily?”

The version of him on the television glanced down at his notes and then looked up to answer the question. “Somewhere between 8000-9000.”

“And if you were to be restricted to 2000 calories a day?”

“According to my trainer, you would be sentencing me to death,” Andy said confidently. “And this is in the research with which you’ve all been provided. A man’s appetite, physically, is tangential to the number of partners he has. For every five or so partners a man has, his needed caloric intake adds another 2000 calories needed per day. A man with five partners would *need* to eat 4000 calories a day, just to keep up with them. And yet, you have a very strict 2000 calorie a day *mandated limit* here in this legislation, which tells me either you aren’t reading the data very well, or you think you know better about this serum than the data, neither of which, I must confess, makes me at all comfortable with the bill in question.”

“So you’re saying we should strip that provision from the Act?” Senator Giancola asked him.

“Unless your plans are to arrest every man in America on day one, yes. And if those are your plans, then obviously, I object to that also.”

“What else in here is untenable, Mr. Rook?” Senator Yang asked.

“How about the unlawful detention clause?” Andy said.

“I don’t believe we have anything like that in this bill, Mr. Rook,” Senator Collins said to him in a way that sounded more condescending than he imagined she intended it to.

“Sure you do,” Andy said. “It’s called the Restricted International Travel Guidelines.”

“They’re simply *guidelines*, Mr. Rook,” Senator Collins said.

“Anything that can be punished for violating it by jail time isn’t a *guideline*, Senator; it’s a damn law, so please, don’t try and argue the definition of words with a goddamn writer,” he growled.

“You don’t think we need better protection for our men travelling abroad, Mr. Rook?” Senator Yang asked him.

“I think required itineraries that have to be filed a month in advance would be considered unlawful detainment, and in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution.”

“If you are traveling abroad, Mr. Rook, you represent a danger to your partners in that a foreign nation might attempt to capture you as an asset for their own use,” Senator Collins said.

“Then you need to close the borders to those countries and not let any Americans in. But between that and the RITS system you’re suggesting in this document, you do realize you are making many of the men in this country *less* safe instead of more, I hope.”

“How do you figure that, Mr. Rook?” Senator Yang asked.

“The head of my personal security spent time working for the CIA, and she said that if we were filing itineraries any time we traveled abroad, all it would take is one bad actor to gain access to that itinerary and they could pick us off with relative ease, even set up ambushes in advance for us. The RITS system is even worse. A foreign agency would just need to gain access to how that system operated, and they could track every individual male in the country. I know you want to protect men, Senator, but lo-jacking us like we’re all under house arrest isn’t the answer.”

“Some versions of this bill have suggested that every man in America *be* under house arrest, Mr. Rook,” a new voice, Senator Ruth Hadaway (R, IA), said. “I’m still not entirely sure why we’ve moved away from those.”

“Because, Senator, it *also* violates the Fourth Amendment,” Andy said. “Most men are carrying cellphones anyway, so I’m not entirely certain what actual benefit you need beyond that. If you wanted to establish a precedent where the government could use a man’s cellphone to gather his location at any moment, I would be entirely comfortable with that.”

“The military is of the mind that we aren’t doing enough to protect men in this country, and that they should now be considered a resource of the state,” Senator Yang said.

“I’m almost certain you either didn’t consult with the majority of military’s commanding officers before drafting this bill, Senator, or you disregarded their advice, and in either case, I think that

was a drastic error,” Andy said with a soft laugh. “In fact, the head of my personal security said that if this law passes as written, we’d personally be breaking several parts of it within the first twenty-four hours, at her insistence, in order to keep me *safer*.”

“So what you’re saying, Mr. Rook,” Senator Giancola said, “is that the entire bill is a total waste of time and we should just scrap it.”

It was much easier to recognize her teeing him up in retrospect.

“No Senator, that *isn’t* what I’m suggesting at all. Some parts of this, I can completely understand and agree with, although I suspect some of those parts you’ll have problems getting *other* men to agree with.”

“Well, what parts of the bill do you *not* have objections to, Mr. Rook? Let’s start there.”

“Sure. There’re plenty of parts I have no objections to. Banning smoking. Fine, no problems there, although I imagine smokers may be angry. Maybe establishing maximum daily alcohol consumption would be okay, although I’m sure much of America will be up in arms about that. I don’t drink that much, but at least you’re not banning alcohol from men outright. Mandatory doctor visits every month don’t seem too unreasonable. A little overbearing for my liking, but I get it, and I can understand the overabundance of caution. Maybe once every three months? Just to not overwhelm our already overworked medical staff.”

“Just those?”

“Not at all. I’m *personally* okay with all law enforcement and military personnel in active combat duty being restricted to women only, but I suspect you’ll get some severe pushback from the Armed Forces about that, and I have no real horse in that race. And you’d still have to have men as part of frontline teams, just to take care of their female partners.”

“We’re going to hear from several commanding officers over the next week or two of testimony before we make adjustments and bring some version of this bill to a vote.”

“During those revisions, then, Senators, I ask that you keep your mind towards making this a *workable* bill and not to repeat the mistakes of something like Prohibition,” Andy said. “Make this a bill that *protects* men, not one that smothers them.”

“This committee would like to thank the gentleman from California for taking his time to offer his wisdom and insight into the current draft of the Male Protection Act, and hopes he know that we will take his criticism under careful advisement.”

“Senators,” the version of him on television said as he stood up, a young man of about college age moving in, clearly the next in line to be speaking at the hearings. He remembered how odd he found it that the seven-person committee didn’t have a single one of the nine remaining male senators on it, but also didn’t know how appropriate it would’ve been to point that out during his testimony.

“We will take a ten-minute recess and then will bring William Monteiro from Georgia to express his opinions regarding the current draft of the Men’s Protection Act that is currently under consideration and public scrutiny.”

They’d gathered at Andy’s house in the early evening, and because of the amount of different people coming from different places, they’d agreed to wait until they were all there before they headed into San Francisco for the night.

Each man had one woman from his security detail with him, but as per the terms of the party, they had to not be anyone’s fiancée. That meant Phil, who was one of the people they were still waiting on, would arrive with Violet on guard and not Linda. Andy was the only exception, and both Lexi and Melody would be providing the group with additional security tonight, with Lexi tasked with Andy’s personal security and Melody overwatch for the whole group.

“Oh hey,” Xander said as he poked Andy. “You met the UGA Bulldog, Billy. I was just reading about that guy’s story in the New York Times. Seemed like a super down-to-earth kid.”

“Yeah,” Andy said. “He’d been through a rough patch, since basically they’d just been forgotten about on campus, and had been doing everything to keep themselves from catching DuoHalo or Covid.”

They'd done an amazing job, and Phil said they were looking into the guidelines the kid had developed to pass on to areas that still hadn't gotten access to the vaccine yet, as a 'best practices' document that everyone could use."

"He agree with you about everything in the MPA that's fucked up?" Eric asked him.

"Like, 80% of what I objected to, he objected to," Andy said.

"What did he object to that you didn't?"

Andy grinned. "Well, I didn't have a problem with men not being allowed to carry or own guns, but Billy went pretty hardcore Second Amendment fundamentalist on that when it came up during the hearing. Real 'pry it from my cold dead hands.' He was also, as expected, heavily against the booze restrictions. And he told me he didn't even *know* about the changes to appetite a man has as the number of his partners goes up, so I think we've still got a long way to go in terms of education on what the Quaranteam serum can and can't do. Hopefully they'll take all my notes seriously."

"Anything you objected to that he didn't?" Eric said, turning off the television.

"Weirdly enough, he didn't give a shit about international travel, and said he thought it was fine if we as a nation wanted to restrict men from traveling outside of the United States borders. Ever. 'Safer at home' were his exact words."

Xander winced, shaking his head. "Not good."

"I'm expecting that one to get stripped out, personally," Andy said. "There's just too much existing law that they'd have to overturn to enforce that kind of overreach. It would essentially be making every man prisoner in his own country, and that's probably enough to get public sentiment against it. In fact, if I had to put money on how this bill's going to turn out, I bet they strip out everything that both Billy and I criticized, and maybe do some adjustments to active combatant positions in law enforcement and military, and then just try and run the bill up with the rest of it as is."

"As someone who's trying to quit smoking," Nathaniel Watkins said as he entered the room, his head of security, Octavia, just a few steps behind him, "fuck you for making it sound like I'm going to get fined if I don't but thank you for making sure I've got incentive to just finally getting it done." He laughed a little bit as Andy stood up and shook his hand.

"Thanks for coming, Nathaniel."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world, Andrew," Nathaniel said. "It's a chance to get out of the house and hang out with a bunch of men, something I haven't really had since the poker game was shut down and Covington was arrested."

"You won't hear me apologizing for that."

"Nor should you, dear boy. Nor should you. Who are we still waiting on?"

"Just Phil at this point," Andy said. He'd kept his bachelor party group relatively small – himself, Xander, Eric, Nathaniel, Ari and Phil (just Greater Phil, as Lesser Phil seemed to be having trouble with getting permission to leave Valhalla Shores over in Pacifica) – so that they could be agile and not traced to any one location easily.

"Of course," Nathaniel said with a soft laugh. "The one organizing the event is always the last to show up."

"Do you even know what he's got planned, Andy?" Xander asked him.

"You meant what *you two* have got planned?" Andy smirked. "I know the two of you worked together on it, but that's pretty much all I know."

"I helped also!" Nathaniel said.

"That's true," Xander said. "We all chipped in a bit, but Nathaniel had all the money to make a couple of things happen."

"It wasn't really all that much," Nathaniel said, sheepishly. "And what's money if it's not being used to make life better? And Phil was the one with most of the ideas, although I did add one of my own to the mix."

"You tell Phil about that?" Eric asked him.

"I did, and he said it was a doozy of a closer, so we'll end on that."

"The last time you had a gift for me, you turned me into a millionaire, Nathaniel," Andy laughed, "so I hope it's nowhere near that."

"Nowhere near that at all."

"Good."

"You have any idea how ridiculous it is organizing a bachelor party where strippers are the *last* thing on anybody's mind?" Xander asked, as everyone laughed.

"And if we drink too much, we're going to become federal outlaws!" Eric laughed.

"I can't think of a better gang of hooligans to have by my side," Andy chuckled.

"Then you aren't trying at all," Phil said as he strolled into the room. "You looked good on television, though. Senators didn't give you too much trouble once the cameras were off you, I hope?"

"Most of them seemed nice enough, although I did get a few 'liberal hippy' comments from one or two of them."

"Your tax dollars at work," Phil said. "You'd think they'd ask for my fucking opinion on these things, but no no, they have the reports, and that's good enough for them to think they know how I'm going to answer every one of these fucking questions."

"I thought they said they were asking Bill McKenna to do it because he was more—"

"White?" Phil said, annoyance in his voice.

"Restrained with his profanity, I was going to say."

"It's okay, Andy," Phil sighed. "You don't have to apologize for *their* subconscious racism. You'd think I'd be used to it at this point, but whatever. Bill'll be fine anyway."

"I think that was my other line of thinking," Andy said with a smirk. "That you wouldn't be dragged dead or alive to Washington D.C."

"I suppose that's fair." Phil looked over at Lexi. "We ready to go? I'm set on my end, but I know better than to dictate security maneuvering to our protectors."

Lexi looked over the gang of men and offered a tiny smile and little shrug. "Yeah, fuck it."

"And this is your head of security, Andy?" Phil teased.

"Yeah, fuck it," Andy laughed, as they all started heading towards the cars. They were two men and two security personnel to a car, and Andy watched as their small convoy of three cars made its way out of New Eden and started heading south on 680 before turning west on 580, heading towards Oakland and San Francisco, which didn't surprise Andy at all. Him and Phil had shared a car, as he'd expected them to, because he knew Phil would want to grill him on what had happened *off* screen when he'd been in D.C. yesterday to testify.

"They treat you okay? I know you said they did earlier, but that was when everyone was around, so I figured I'd check when it was just our Teams in earshot," Phil said.

"They're just scared, Phil. Just like you and me and anybody else."

"Sure, but they also have the power to tell me I can't have chocolate any more, and I think if I find them trying that shit out on me, I'm not going to want to do any more research for them," Phil laughed. "I heard they hadn't even *seen* the part of my reports discussing increased caloric intake. You think they've read about the Sergei solution?"

"I'm *certain* they have, because they asked me not to mention it before the cameras were turned on," Andy said. "Something about not wanting a rush on it before you were ready to roll it out. Speaking of which, you check in on that thing with Melody that I told you about?"

"Sure did, and let me tell you, that is some fucking terrifying potential in there."

"How strong is it?"

"The one person we tested it on for verification we told her to never smoke again, and now even the smell of cigarettes makes her nauseous to the point where she won't let anyone *else* smoke around her. We're trying to do more testing without actually *using* the encoding, but it's starting to look like we might have to, so we're considering offering it as an option to some of our first wave reassignments to

make up for the Oracle hacks that Covington and his people did.”

“They actually hacked into the Oracle system?” Andy asked him.

“Yep. Assigned it to override the results of any pairing they wanted to make and pumped out a fake 98.7% compatibility result to the parties involved. That lack of deviation made it pretty easy for us to track them down, although there were a few actual results of 98.7%’s that we came across and just double-checked with unaltered code to be sure.”

“You think this encoding thing was put there by the Russians before Sergei left?”

“Nah, we’re pretty sure it wasn’t done intentionally. Hell, at this point, operating theory is that it’s just a natural mutation in Sergei’s DNA that’s causing it, which would square away reports that we have about the Germans having something similar. I’d wager that if you gave one of the reassigned Germans an order during that period of time, they’d say encoding in German, not in Russian, because I bet they got their reassignment sperm from a gay German man. The current line of thought is that with the reset comes a chance to actually encode something *additional* into the nanobots programming, which makes us a *lot* less likely to want to roll this stuff out for mass use, although it may turn out that the need is just too fucking great for us to ignore it.”

“Jesus, I got fucking lucky,” Melody muttered under her breath.

“You’ve got good people looking out for you,” Phil told her. “You’d have come out okay no matter what they accidentally said.”

“If so, there’s going to be a shitload of precautions for the stuff when you roll it out to a wider audience, right?” Andy asked.

“Oh fuck yeah, way more than there are with the base QT serum these days,” Phil said.

“Probably have it done under armed guard, and maybe stuff earplugs into the woman’s ears before she takes the Sergei Swerve.”

Andy laughed hard at that. “You aren’t *really* calling it that, are you?”

“Informal nickname around the base, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it stuck. Shit, I didn’t come up with the name Quaranteam serum either, so sometimes these names just happen organically.”

“No other side effects than that, though? The Senators were leaning on me pretty hard to tell them a reassignment solution was imminent, especially one that let the gays get in on the action as soon as possible.”

“You didn’t promise dates, did you?”

Andy scoffed, rolling his eyes at his friend. “Regardless of what you may think sometimes, Phil, I’m not a goddamn idiot. I told them that I didn’t know, and even if I *did* know, the answer would be I didn’t know until told otherwise by the goddamn Air Force.”

“Good. Great. Fine.” Phil rubbed his eyes a little bit. “It’s starting to sound like mid-February we’re going to begin rolling it out in waves, with the completely unvaccinated getting first crack at it, followed by priority cases needing reassignment.”

“Like the women assigned to Brian Morrison?”

“Heard about that, did you?” Phil scratched his head. “Yeah, that trial’s going to start up around the same time, but it sounds like Morrison’s going to plead guilty by reason of duress, arguing that yes, he did do it, but that one of Covington’s people held a gun to his head to *make* him do it.”

“None of *us ladies* did that shit,” Melody said.

“No,” Phil said, “one of Covington’s few male guards. He had a couple, up until they were disarmed and contained by the NDR.”

Melody smirked, looking out the window. “I hope you’re not asking me to apologize for *that* shit, either, because that we did and do *not* regret.”

“We are not,” Phil said with a smile.

“Good,” she replied. “Because they were a bunch of pansies who weren’t worth shit unless they got the drop on you.”

“Anyway, if Morrison *is* found guilty, then the five women who are partnered with him are

going to be given an option on if they want to stick with him or be reassigned. Nobody's entirely sure how the whole case is going to come down. Some people want the guy put to death, other people think he was mostly not at fault since he was at gunpoint, or so he claims."

"And you?" Andy asked.

"Me?" Phil exhaled, shaking his head. "I think I'd rather have had my own brains blown out than do what that man did to that poor woman."

"Right answer," Phil's bodyguard Violet said from the seat next to him.

"We'll see how that case pans out. We're going to see a lot of new laws springing up very quickly, as the government does everything it can to criminalize all the possible new paths of abuse men now have to women, and vice versa."

"Vice versa?"

Phil frowned, looked around the car then looked Andy dead in the eyes. "I need everyone in the car to agree to absolute secrecy about what I'm about to tell you. Not you, Vi, you already know, but Andy, Lexi and Melody, otherwise I'm gonna have to sit on this."

"If you don't think you can trust me at this point, Phil—"

"Fuck it," Phil grumbled. "So, if a group of women wanted to, they could actually get the benefits of the serum from their man without giving him the benefits back for long enough for him to catch and die from DuoHalo. We *think*."

"What?" Andy said. "How?"

"So, when men and women are dosing each other, they're exchanging nanobots, but if a team of women wanted to, they could just jerk a man off and consume the sperm only after it wasn't in contact with the male host anymore. They get refueled, he gets weaker. They could do this until the guy died, and at that point, they have the necro option open to them. All they basically need to do is make sure they aren't really getting any of their bodily fluids onto their male partner. It's actually stupid simple if you think about it."

"Fuuuuuck," Andy said. "Yeah, okay, that lines up with what I've read in your reports about how the serum works. The women in question would have to be pretty ruthless to do that sort of thing, though."

"You know how people are, Andy. You think there aren't people like that out there?"

"Yeah, you're right. So that's just something you're going to sit on until the laws are getting put together by Congress, the ones beyond the MPA?"

"Members of the Department of Health and Human Services are working day and night to get drafts of laws they can put in front of Congress, so hopefully that'll be early next month as well. It's a billion and one things, all of which we needed ten fucking weeks ago."

The Tesla Model Y passed under the bridge toll system as the FasTrak box beeped cheerfully, marking their bridge toll as paid, before the car started driving up onto the Bay Bridge and towards San Francisco proper.

"Have you got any *good* news, Phil?"

"A couple of things that I imagine will be on the news within the next week or two," he said, leaning back against the faux leather seat. "We're going to move from 50 to 55 states, assuming the vote passes."

"Who are we adding?"

"Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, Taiwan and Baja, the part of Mexico that looks like it's dangling off California anyway," Phil said. "That's what I've *heard* through scuttlebutt, although confirming anything of *that* magnitude is basically impossible right now."

"What about that rumor that we were taking the Vancouver metro area from Canada?"

"Supposedly the Canadians are putting up more fuss than the U.S. government thinks its worth, but who knows – that could just be a hard nose bargaining tactic. That said, the Germans are offering out their offshoot of the serum with pretty low expectations, so it may be the time of international land

acquisition is mostly behind us, although I'm betting that's not true."

"Why not?"

"Because South America's in so much trouble right now, and they *know* it. A bunch of the countries said they didn't want and or need the serum, and that they'd just 'endure' DuoHalo," Phil said, shaking his head. "Which means men's casualties are way higher than expected in places like Columbia, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru and most of the rest, and the women are begging us to send men in, to stabilize the countries, even if it means subsuming them. The South American situation is taking up a *whole lotta time* for discussion from a bunch of people *way way way* over my pay grade. Even if *we* don't gobble up some of that land, some of those countries are going to have to consolidate, just to fucking survive."

"What about the drug cartels?"

"They're almost all completely wiped out, Andy," Phil chuckled. "They thought basic facemasks were going to be enough to prevent DuoHalo from spreading, so before they knew it, they were dying off like New Zealand was, and nobody down there really had access to our serum."

"So what you're telling me—"

"What I'm telling you is that by this time next year, it might be as high as 65 states. The next six months are going to be crucial."

"How about Africa?"

Phil threw his hands up. "I don't have all the intel, but reports are starting to circulate that one of the northern African countries has gotten enough of our serum that they could develop their own and are spinning up production. If that's true, shit, that one country could end up taking a good portion of the continent, assuming their serum doesn't get taken from them in some attack or something. We're working on negotiations with several African countries, though, and it's not impossible that one or two of them want into America's nestled bosom. Of course, South Africa's a wild card, considering they got access to the serum very early as well, both from us *and* the Germans, so who the hell knows where they're going to land."

"Europe?"

"It's tough to say, but it looks like the Germans are sort of spear-heading a new European Union, with them at the forefront. I think the Brits are still kicking themselves a bit for the whole Brexit disaster, and not feeling like they're a part of the EU as the Germans help turn it into a powerhouse pulling through the pandemic. Austria's already made motions that they want to become part of Germany, and it looks like both Czechia and Poland are considering the cost/benefit ratios as well, so I wouldn't put it past either of them."

"Asia?"

"China's still a big unknown, but we're pretty sure they're on the higher end of the death count. We've been amping up to annex Taiwan, and they haven't rattled sabers, made angry phone calls or threatened us in anyway, so they may be in *real* trouble. Japan was having fertility problems long before they started having men dropping like mayflies, and North Korea's probably at zero male survivors, not that anyone's bothered by all of that, although I know South Korea's a little nervous about trying to move in and put flags down."

"What a clusterfuck."

"Right? Like Eddie Izzard said, 'Hey England, what's behind your back?' 'Oh, it's India and a number of other countries...' Welcome to the age of New Empires..."

Andy looked out the window, seeing they'd descended into San Francisco proper and were heading towards the northside. "Are we heading into Chinatown? You know how much research I've had to do about this area for the Gunslinger books?" He chuckled, tapping Melody, pointing over Phil's shoulder. "That building over there's where the protagonist's office is supposed to be."

"Sorry boss, I still haven't read your books," Melody said, frowning a little like she expected to be scolded for her lack of knowledge.

“Nah, that’s fine,” he said, leaning back. “They’re not for everybody.”

“I like them,” Violet offered.

“You haven’t read *any* of them,” Phil said, rolling his eyes, but Violet was quick to respond.

“Fuck you, boss!” Violet giggled. “I thought ‘The Wraith’s Lexicon’ was the best one of the bunch, personally. You ever thought about doing an entire book from the Hunt Mistress’s perspective? I think his sister has deserved to be the protagonist a couple of times already, considering how important she’s been in some of the books, so you should think about it.”

“If I started telling stories from the perspective of every character I’d ever mentioned, I suspect the books would take a lot longer than they already do,” Andy joked.

“Then consider it for just one,” Violet said. “It’d be a smart move.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Enough chatter, we’re here,” Phil said as the car moved to stop right in front of one of the places Andy had spent the most time in within San Francisco’s city limits – The Fillmore. It was one of the most legendary concert halls on the West Coast. The inside walls of the building were lined with posters of all the legendary acts that had played sold out shows featuring everyone from Tom Petty to the Grateful Dead to the Wu-Tang Clan to local heroes like Green Day and Metallica. Any time a show sold out, everyone in attendance got a free poster from the event, and Andy had over a dozen posters from people he’d seen here, including Weezer, DJ Shadow, Something Corporate, They Might Be Giants and more.

“I didn’t know the Fillmore had reopened for shows yet,” Andy said, looking over at Phil.

“It hasn’t. Not yet. But private events? They were more than happy to welcome us.”

There were even places for them to leave their cars on the streets, something basically unheard of on the San Francisco streets. And even if they hadn’t had bulletproof glass in all the windows, Andy wondered if they still weren’t a thousand times safer on these streets than they would’ve been in the exact same location pre-pandemic. There wasn’t a tour bus or anything in front of the building like there usually was for concerts, so Andy wasn’t entirely sure what to expect. “Are we just stopping in or is there a reason we’re going inside?”

“Private concert all for you, my friend,” Phil said as they moved out of the vehicles and up the stairs inside the venue. “Now, keep in mind, our options were a bit limited, because, well, a ton of the bands you listen to are either dead, outside of the US or both, so we went through your Spotify history and found someone who was both alive and within the US, and we think we got someone’ll who make this night pretty memorable.”

As they entered into the main room of the Fillmore, Andy could see there was only a single instrument on stage – an upright piano. And sitting right next to the piano was a familiar face, someone Andy had seen live a number of times – Andrew McMahon, frontman for both Something Corporate and Jack’s Mannequin before he basically decided to go solo, although Something Corporate had played some reunion shows over the last few years. He was a skinny blonde guy in his late thirties who looked like he’d just been letting his hair grow for the entire lockdown.

“Thanks for getting me out of my house for a while, gentlemen,” Andrew said to them. “Not being on stage for like a year has felt super weird. Anyway, I understand it’s a bachelor party for a guy with a pretty cool first name, so let’s rock out!”

Over the next couple of hours, McMahon played a set of greatest hits culled from all his various projects, even taking time to play the ten-minute epic “Konstantine,” one of the earliest Something Corporate songs, and one that would often get requested by crowds, but rarely played on tour, because of the song length.

After the set, and an encore, McMahon came to join the party at Andy’s invitation. They headed out of The Fillmore and over to another place Andy spent a lot of time, an all-hours hole-in-the-wall deli called Bite, where they ordered a mess of sandwiches and drinks to take with them. Then they got back into the cars and drove south of Market St., to the area where the nice new high-rise towers had

gone up.

They moved to the underground parking garage where they apparently had three spots reserved for them, so they parked and headed over to the elevator, taking it up to the penthouse as Nathaniel swiped a keycard in front of the magnetic stripe reader.

“Your place?” Andy asked him.

“Not anymore.”

When they reached the penthouse, Andy was shocked to see that the two-story penthouse had been converted into a combination office/getaway pad with traces of his literary career all over the place, including book posters, standees of the Gunslinger and plenty of nooks and crannies for Andy to sit and write.

“I figured you were going to need a sort of landing pad inside San Francisco proper, so, I give you, Andy, your very own townie penthouse,” Nathaniel said. “Now, as per Phil’s instructions, let’s go watch ‘Seven Samurai’ in your ridiculously impressive home theater.”

Andy had to chuckle. His friends did indeed know him all too well. And it helped keep his mind off the massive wedding that was only a week away and was likely to be the biggest event he would ever be involved in.

“No pressure,” he thought to himself.

Chapter Twenty

January 30th, 2021

“This is the dumbest idea I’ve ever had in my life,” Andy muttered to himself, looking in the mirror as he tried to make the tux look at least semi-respectable. “Marrying seven women at once. What the *fuck* am I thinking? I’ve never had a relationship last more than a couple of years.”

“One of the women you’re marrying *was* that relationship, though,” Phil said, helping Andy adjust the tuxedo. Phil had been Andy’s choice for best man, although it had been a difficult decision, and he’d relegated both Xander and Eric to groomsmen. “You should be fine. It’s not a big deal.”

The tuxedo didn’t have a tie – Andy’s one solitary demand regarding his attire, but was otherwise mostly a classic black wedding tux, with a crimson vest beneath it. He was fine getting married, but wearing a goddamn tie was a bridge too far. “Don’t most people wait until they’ve been dating a couple of years before they get married?”

“Sure,” Phil said, dusting Andy’s shoulders off. “In the before times. Back when the world wasn’t on fire running at a thousand miles an hour like it is these days. And, y’know, if it bothered you, you didn’t have to marry all seven at once. You could’ve spaced them out a bit.”

Andy sighed, shaking his head. “Then I’d have been establishing a priority amongst them, which isn’t a fair thing to do. None of them should feel like they’re more or less important than any of the others. It’s probably an impossible feat, but I’m going to spend as much of my life trying to do it as much as I can. So, when they said they all wanted one collective wedding day, I sort of breathed a sigh of relief, even if it meant I was running into marriage a little bit faster than I would’ve liked.”

“You know there’s *already* a kind of pecking order in your brides anyway, right?” Phil asked him, as if he found it odd that Andy had missed that.

Andy scowled at his friend, squinting a little. “How do you figure?”

“Ash physically got here first, and she’s one of the first having a child, so she’s basically right at the top. Niko’s next, and she’s also with child, but you and Fi had a long-standing relationship before she left and reentered your life, so they’re vying for second and third,” Phil told him. “Mo’s just happy to be here, so she doesn’t care where she fits, as long as Fiona’s happy. Piper’s competitive, so she’s pushing for higher placement. And Sarah just wants to be part of the conversation and Em wants to be part of Sarah’s conversation.”

“Christ, I hope they don’t think that’s *me* deciding placement *for* them.”

Phil chuckled. “I mean, I could be wrong. I’m *not*, but I suppose I *could* be. I have to entertain that option, as unpleasant as it may be.” He stopped and looked around the room in mock fright. “God, what an awful thought, me being wrong about something.”

“You’re right. That’s the worst possible thing that could happen here. Phil Marcos could be wrong.”

Phil grinned at him and tipped an imaginary hat. “Now you’re getting it. I’m glad you’ve learned how to properly rate my importance.”

Andy let out a defeated sigh. “Fuck, Phil, I’m just trying to keep everyone happy. Am I going about this all wrong?”

“I’d say Ash and Fi are the two titans on either side of you, with Niko as Ash’s right-hand woman and Moira as Fiona’s,” Phil told him. “Sarah and Em are a package deal, which means I think Piper’s more deeply attached to you than almost any of the others, because she doesn’t really have a team-up buddy. Which is probably fine, considering what she went through before getting here. It’s okay for her to be a little less sharing of her time with you. Although maybe you should take an eighth wife, just to have an even number, two on each side of you. How’d they settle on the order for the ceremony?”

“In order of arrival to the house, so, Ash, Niko, Piper, Sarah, Em, Fiona then Moira.”

“Is that how they do everything?”

Andy snorted. “That’s like the *only* thing they did that way. Most things they settle with a deck

of cards, which is how they're settling the first dance order, who gets bedded as a married woman, and, perhaps most importantly, who's smashing cake into whose face."

"They're not all just smashing cake into your face?"

"And, what, leave me trying to smash seven pieces into seven brides?" Andy scoffed. "Fuck off, Phil. Even I'm not that crazy. I'd be running around all night long." He scowled in amusement. "And most of them can probably run a lot faster than me."

"You know, I think me and the other groomsmen wouldn't mind helping there," his friend said with a smirk. "We'd be great cake smashers."

"I have no doubts, Phil, but believe me, they're looking forward into smashing cake into each other's faces as much as they are mine." Andy looked down at his feet then looked back up, as if reminding himself of the one thing left to do. "How are we looking in terms of attendance?"

"Good lord, dude," Eric said to him from his place over at the doorway to the hallway. "You'd think you were the fucking pope being laid to rest, or a head of state. I think less people turned out for Ronald Reagan's funeral than are here for your wedding."

"So you're telling me it's really the full fifteen hundred people?"

"I'm telling you, it's definitely *more* than that," Eric laughed. "And it was smart that the reception area was basically decked out to handle two thousand, because I think you've probably *got* that, although I suspect a lot of them are just excess Team members. Good thing a bunch of them aren't going to partake of the catering, because there is no way we're gonna be able to feed all of them."

"Is it just people brought along a few extra members of their team along each, or—"

"Yeah, I think some of Sarah and Em's coworkers didn't think the 3-partner-max rule applied to them," Phil smirked. "Plus we forgot to take into account how many of the men were going to have security details. This place probably has its own private army around here right now. And in some cases, more members of the families turned up than expected. I think all of Aisling's living family is here, and that's a small invading force in its own right."

"I thought it would be bad form to run in here yelling 'The Irish are invading!' but if you want, I can go back out and come in again," Eric said with a smile. "Besides, the amount of celebrities here is far more entertaining."

Andy grinned, tilting his head to glance over at Eric. "I'm not going to want to stop partway on my walk down the aisle to get an autograph am I?"

"There's a few folks from 'Ocean's 11' here and I know you're a huge fan of that flick, so maybe, but you'll see them at the reception, so stopping for an autograph when you're walking in would be bad form," Eric said.

"Which ones?"

"Clooney. Pitt. Cheadle. I think a lot of the others were DuoHalo victims, or maybe they just didn't work with Sarah or Em. Damon's alive, but I don't think you sent him an invite, since I don't think Em or Sarah ever worked with him. Not sure though."

"Great. Just great. If it turns out my wedding day is remembered for the day I accidentally snubbed Matt Damon, I'm never going to hear the fucking end of it," Andy said, shaking his head. "Can someone grab me a Coke?"

"Ice water for you," Phil said, grabbing a thermos full of it, holding it out to him. "The last thing you fucking need is more caffeine running through your veins right now."

Andy nodded, taking the bottle, flipping the top of it open so he could suck on the straw end of it. "Tala's on her way, yeah? Once that's here and in my hand, I think at least some of the nerves will pass. Hopefully anyway."

"Nobody's seen her," Eric said from the doorway over his shoulder. "They've been searching for like an hour now."

"What?!"

Lexi turned and peeked her head in with an eyeroll and a smirk. She was already classed up in a

gorgeous dress, though she also had a pistol in a shoulder holster resting over the top of it. “He’s *fucking with you*, boss. Relax.” She lifted a walkie talkie up to her mouth. “Yojimbo to crew, who’s got eyes on Tala?”

“Niner Girl here,” Lauren’s voice said from the radio. “She’s on her way to you now. Should be there in just a minute or two.” Lauren had taken on the role of wedding planner, something she’d fallen into quite naturally, taking care of making sure all the parts and pieces were running the way they were supposed to. Someone had to quarterback the wedding on the day, and all the participants were far too nervous for that, so Lauren had stepped in and taken control, and nobody had felt confident enough to tell her no. She’d done an amazing job, much to everyone’s relief, and the day had, so far, gone without any major hiccups.

Sure enough, just a few moments later, Andy’s partner Tala Jordan came sprinting into the room. She was rocking a matching a dress very similar to Lexi’s but obvious a few sizes bigger to accommodate Tala’s more significant curves. In her hand, she had a blue box that couldn’t have been bigger than six inches on any side. “They’re here! They’re here! I had to do a couple of last-minute adjustments to Niko and Ash’s rings because their fingers have swollen a little bit due to the pregnancy. But you shouldn’t have any trouble with them now. We can resize them later if need be. They go from left to right, starting with Ash on the left, so just work your way down the line. Now I need to get back out there.” She handed Phil the box, gave Andy a kiss and headed back out of the room to rejoin the area.

“Don’t lose that,” Andy said to his friend, who laughed.

“Oh, I *know* better,” Phil said. “Linda’s standing right outside that door too, you know, and if I lost *your* rings, you think she wouldn’t be expecting retaliation come June when you’re best man for *our* wedding?”

“I’m not like that, no matter what Linda might think of me.”

“It’s less what she thinks of you and more what she thinks of me.”

“I’m still shocked Linda wanted to wait until summer for your wedding.”

“She’s much more patient than Ash and Niko are,” Phil told him, doing his last set of adjustments on his own tux. “And we wanted to watch yours, so we could see you get all the kinks out of the process before we did it. You’re like our test bed. A prototype wedding.” Phil laughed, patting Andy on the shoulder. “Of course, all of those in my house with buns in the oven aren’t Catholic. The rest wanted to wait a year or so after we’d gotten together, just to let things shake out, but you just couldn’t be bothered with that kind of thing, could you?”

Andy chuckled, scratching the side of his head. “I was told I had a low sperm count when I was younger, so I wasn’t expecting to really ever be a father,” he admitted. “You know, I think Fiona’s the only one I ever told about that. *Ever*. So when both Ash *and* Niko turned out to be pregnant, I was more than a little surprised, because I hadn’t gone through a regeneration at that point.”

“Well, that you *know* of,” Phil told him, having moved over to give Andy a final once over. “The serum’s *always* repairing reproductive systems if it can help it. I mean, not *always* always, but like 90-95% of the time, and that’s not even a regeneration thing – that’s just the serum working as designed, like fighting off DuoHalo. You were probably back to a fully regular sperm count after your first time with Aisling, and you just didn’t even know it.”

“Jesus, Phil, you think that maybe that’s something you should, I dunno, *tell* people?”

Phil shrugged a little bit. “It was in the notes I gave to the President, and I even told Katie Couric when she interviewed me for the story, but they didn’t include it for air, so whoever decided to bury that personal factoid, it was somebody above my paygrade. Probably the President herself. A’ight, you’re good to go. I just want to tell you... good luck. And we’re all counting on you.” Phil patted Andy on the cheek, grinned and then turned to walk out the door before Andy could think of a snappy comeback or witty retort. In the end, Airplane! won out as the last word.

Andy stepped over towards the doorway, tapping Lexi on the shoulder. “The President didn’t

come, did she? I mean, we sent her an invitation out of obligation, but if it turns out the Secret Service is here—”

“She’s not here, Andy.”

“Thank god.”

“She sent a pretty amazing wedding present, though.”

“Oh yeah? Dare I even ask?”

“She commissioned a one-of-a-kind Banksy portrait of you for you.”

“Now you’re fucking with me,” Andy laughed.

Lexi smirked, shaking her head. “I wish. Secret Service dropped it off personally this morning. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Fucking hell...” Andy said, stepping back into the room where he was basically alone. “Well, I guess at least we know Banksy’s still alive now.”

It was almost time to head over to the venue, so now that he was nearly by himself (except, of course, for Lexi, who wasn’t going to leave his side all day), he took out the box that he’d been gifted just a few hours earlier. He sat down on the bench and pulled off his dress shoes, setting them aside before opening the box, revealing the traditional moccasins contained within. He slipped one on then the other, before putting his dress shoes in the box, closing them inside. He’d promised Niko’s mother that he wouldn’t say anything about it in advance to anyone, and he intended to keep that promise.

Andy glanced at his phone, checking the time, seeing it was five minutes to 1 p.m., the designated start time for the wedding. After a few more minutes, he got the word he was supposed to head to the back of the venue, in preparation of his entrance. And then he heard the opening notes that marked the start of his entrance music, a guitar strum followed by a serious patch of guitar notes. The song was The Afghan Whigs’ “66.”

He walked down the pathway that felt so damn long, he thought it must’ve been a mile or so, although he knew it really wasn’t. It simply felt that way because the gathered crowd for the wedding was enormous. They’d had to take over the Alameda County Fairgrounds just south of Pleasanton to have a place large enough for them to accommodate the number of guests they had showing up. One building had been turned into the groom’s staging area, and a much larger nearby building had been turned into the brides’ staging area.

He did his absolute best not to look at anyone when he walked down the aisle, but when he was almost there, he saw that one of the people seated on the aisles was George Clooney and his wife Amal, as well as four more gorgeous women who must have been other members of Team Clooney, smiling at Andy like he was just some other guy and this was any other of a dozen weddings he’d attended this year, and that couldn’t help but make Andy smile a little more openly, putting him a little at ease.

‘Thanks George. And thank God the weather turned out nice,’ he thought to himself. ‘Otherwise we were well and truly fucked.’

People had flown in from all around the world, most commercial through Oakland or San Jose, but all the private hangars over at Livermore Municipal Airport were also fully booked (as well as the ones over at Oakland airport), mostly with friends of Sarah or Emily, who had taken their own planes in for the event.

As he moved past hundreds of people, he tried to keep his pace quick and his strides wide, simply because the added number of people involved in the wedding meant that everything was going to take longer, and the last thing any of Team Rook wanted was a ceremony that ran several hours.

The soundtrack for each girl’s entrance had taken longer for them to figure out than anything else involved in the wedding. They marched in the order they’d joined the family, so it was Aisling (The Pogues’ “The Sunny Side of the Street”), Niko (Redbone’s “Come And Get Your Love”), Piper (Better Than Ezra’s “In The Blood”), Sarah (Mumford & Sons’ “I Will Wait”), Emily (Coldplay’s “Clocks”), Fiona (Patti Smith’s “Because The Night”) and Moira (Primal Scream’s “Country Girl”).

Each of his brides had walked down with one of the other members of Team Rook acting as her

escort whenever the Father of the bride hadn't been alive, which was more often than anyone liked to admit. Ash, Piper and Fiona were escorted by their fathers, Niko by Hannah, Sarah by Jade, Emily by Maya and Moira by Asha.

Just getting everyone to the stage alone took close to half an hour, but Andy kept his nervous smile the entire time, and each bride was grinning from ear to ear. They'd all decided to forgo the veils, because when they'd mimed the process of him unveiling seven brides at their first rehearsal, one after another, it had looked so silly that nobody had been able to keep a straight face.

All the brides had chosen to wear white, but the styles of dresses were all over the map, from the more conservative (Fiona, Moira & Piper) to the more modern (Ash, Emily & Sarah) to a combination of both tribal and modern (Niko, whose dress had been made with the help of her mother). And, of course, both Ash and Niko's dresses had been made to accommodate their pregnancies, which were getting impossible to hide.

Niko had immediately started crying with a smile when she saw Andy wearing the traditional Lakota wedding moccasins, Ash having to help her dry her eyes a bit, as did Piper when she arrived, as Niko whispered to the others the significance of his change.

Andy hadn't been thrilled about the idea of there being a Catholic priest performing the ceremony, but had agreed to go along with it, mostly to smooth things over with Fiona's parents. The priest, Father O'Sullivan, was under strict instruction to keep the religious aspects as light as possible. He hadn't entirely adhered to that, but it had been kept in check enough to not set anyone off.

The priest's opening speech took about five minutes, dwelling on how God worked in mysterious ways, and pointing out that there was nothing against polygamy in the Bible, pointing out that many of the prominent figures in the Old Testament had more than one wife. Then he transitioned to talking about how important the new family unit was to be moving forward, and how vital it was to find moments of joy when surrounded by so much death and loss. He talked about the importance of establishing permanence and how the new family unit may be different at first glance, but the same core tenets still held up even the new families – love, respect, trust and honor.

Father O'Sullivan also took a minute or two to talk about how he'd spent a bit of time with Andy and his brides and had found them almost like a group of people who had been living together for decades, not months. He said that he felt like they were all an incredible series of matches, and that when he left the venue, he was going to hope the next Team he would marry would be even half as attached to one another as Team Rook was.

After rambling on a bit more about God's love for humanity, the priest finally moved on to the main ceremony at hand, much to everyone's relief. They'd all chosen to write their own vows, but the rule was that every one of them (except Andy) had one minute for their vows. Andy would have up to seven, so he could have one minute for each of his partners. He said it was only fair that he be able to tell each of them how he loved them individually instead of collectively, but Andy had been smart enough to keep each individual one to 45 seconds, allowing him to have a minute or so at the beginning to address all seven of them as a group, and then another half a minute at the end, closing talking about them as a group again.

"We're in this together, and I wouldn't have it any other way," had been his closing line.

He felt like he'd done a good job with the speech, because basically all his brides were bawling when he was done, but they were holding each other's hands proudly and smiling from ear to ear.

Then came the presentations of the rings. Phil held the box for Andy, and Lauren held the box for all of Andy's brides. Andy went down the line, one at a time, taking a ring from the box, placing on his bride's finger, and saying, "With this ring, I do thee wed." Then he would take the matching ring from his partner, place it back in the box and continue down the line.

Once he got to the end of the line, seven rings given and seven rings received, Andy took all seven rings out of the box and swapped them for the linked rings beneath the box's pillow, dropping the seven rings there before covering them up.

It was a little bit of stage magic, but the illusion was important for the crowd, even if all his brides knew about it, to sell the sense of ritual. The seven rings he'd been handed one at a time were mostly for the ceremony and would be fused together correctly afterwards to function as a backup ring for him. The idea of a puzzle ring required all the bands to be interlinked, which was what Andy had wanted in the first place, but that meant he couldn't be handed the bands one at a time, which the girls had all wanted. Tala had told him she could make duplicates that weren't linked, so each woman could give him one during the ceremony. His brides all knew about the switch and had signed off on the idea.

He prayed like hell he'd practiced this enough to do it right on the first attempt as he held the interlocked rings in his hands. He slowly started to put them together, stacking and twisting them slightly, the tiniest of adjustments here and there, before all seven rings essentially snapped together to form one solid ring made up from the seven smaller ones. There had been several puzzle ring designs online, but Tala had insisted on making her own for the family, because it needed to be one that could be upgraded to include additional bands, just in case more members of the Team decided they wanted to move up to bride status. Tala's design would accommodate up to a total of 12 bands, which would mean up to 5 more brides, although Andy thought that unlikely. And, more importantly, each individual band in Andy's ring was completely unique and tailored to the partner it represented, not just an identical ring in a slightly different shape. It made Andy's wedding ring something unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.

Andy had asked each of his brides if they wanted matching puzzle rings, but each of them decided they wanted unique rings for themselves, and so each of them had a wildly different design from each other. But as such, each had made sure that Tala had added as much of their own personality to their band of Andy's puzzle ring, so he never forgot which ring belonged to which wife. Of course, she'd also engraved each bride's name on the inside of each ring.

He relaxed and muscle memory took over, and he was able to get the rings to all interlock into one solid ring, which he slid onto his left hand.

"By the power vested in me by both God and the State of California, I now pronounce you man and wives. You may kiss your brides."

Starting with Moira working up, he kissed each of his wives one at a time, some of them wanting to keep it quick to keep him moving along, a few of them wanting to take their sweet time and show off to the audience, Ash as the final one making it abundantly clear to the audience that she was grabbing his ass through the tux.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I be the first to present to you The Rooks!"

They'd spent the better part of an hour discussing that line and what it should be. The first thought was it should be "Team Rook," but then that discounted everyone who was in the Team who *wasn't* marrying Andy, which he couldn't abide by. The plural of "Mrs." turned out to be "Mesdames" but absolutely *nobody* had known that on their own. Even Andy, with his mammoth knowledge of the English language, had been forced to look that one up, and the word sounded weird rolling off his tongue. The end compromise was just to have everyone announced by the family name, since all of his brides had agreed they were going to take it in lieu of their own.

They marched out to the sounds of INXS' "Never Tear Us Apart" lost somewhere beneath the cheers of thousands of people.

It wasn't a long walk from the wedding area to the reception area – only a quick stroll to the other side of the fairgrounds, and the area where the party was set up had about a hundred tables set up, as nearly a hundred people had said they would attend the wedding but wouldn't be able to stay for the reception, so they had simply headed back to their cars and left. But a reception for close to two thousand people was no small event.

They made a stop along the way, however, where the wedding photographer stopped them to get a seemingly endless permutation of families for group photographs. The photographer wasn't trying to separate Andy from any of his partners, but each of his partners' family wanted to get a picture of them

plus The Rooks, as well as one with the majority of Team Rook. (Lexi and Melody made it a point not to be in photos, just because they needed to keep security up.)

It felt like it took an hour, even if it was just half an hour or so to go through all the mixes, but Ash's family, Niko's mother, Piper's family, Sarah's family, Emily's mother, Fiona's family and Moira's sister each got a pair of photographs, one with The Rooks and one with Team Rook that *did* include Lexi and Melody, despite their grouching. He didn't even get a chance to say more than a few words to each grouping, as the photographer was trying to get all the group photos taken and then get The Rooks off to their wedding reception.

Rather than preplanned meals, the reception had a seemingly endless buffet, where a person could go, grab appetizers, have drinks, dance, and party. It was a very strange cross section of people from across the globe, but Andy was glad to see that people had taken getting Teamed Up seriously. And it was a nice chance to get a few minutes to say hello to people he hadn't seen in quite a while, as well as a chance to be introduced to *everybody*.

He'd already briefly met all the families of the women he'd married, but he also got to meet the families of the women he was simply paired up with as well. A handful of them asked if he intended to marry those partners later, which would usually be deflected by the partner in question. Hannah's mother, for example, seemed extremely intent on making it clear that he should consider marrying her daughter sooner rather than later, something that seemed to embarrass Hannah plenty, although Hannah didn't object to the sentiment in any way, which Andy made a mental note of. Tala's mother was much the same way. Jade seemed especially pleased that her father, whom had yet to die despite her hopes, did not attempt to show up to the event. He hadn't been invited anyway.

Beyond that, he got to talk a bit in depth with members of the families who had flown in for the wedding, including all of Aisling's family, none of whom had been taken by DuoHalo, to Andy's amazement, until Ash pointed out to him that she had been given enough early warning about the severity of the virus to convince her family to take it deadly seriously and she had done so harshly enough that they'd all listened to her.

For most of the rest of the families, though, it felt like he was meeting *survivors*, each family only remnants of what it had been only a year or so earlier. Moira's parents were both dead, her mother long ago and her father right at the beginning of the epidemic. Em had lost both her father *and* her brother in the last year, back-to-back victims of DuoHalo in April. Sarah's brother had *almost* been a casualty to DuoHalo but had gotten partners only a few days before the disease would have killed him, and now he was back to his normal spry self, only the first of his seven partners in tow with him.

Andy heard the phrase "he would've *loved* you" so many times over the course of the next few hours, it nearly made him break down, but he knew that crying in grief at his own wedding would be a bad look, and so he stayed strong, although it grew harder and harder with each reminder of how many people had died over the last year, and how much his partners had lost before meeting up with him.

And when it felt like he was nearing his breaking point, that was when Sarah and Emily decided to cheer him up by giving him a whirlwind tour of celebrity, introducing him to a nearly endless cavalcade of famous people, although he definitely noticed that the group of them skewed more towards women than it did men, which was its own kind of weird reminder of the people they had lost over the last year.

Still, getting to meet George Clooney, Margot Robbie, Brad Pitt, Emma Stone, Scarlett Johansson, Ana De Armas, Jennifer Lopez, Ben Affleck, Kate Beckinsale, Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock, Cate Blanchett, Anne Hathaway, Kate Winslet, Angelina Jolie, Charlize Theron, Jennifer Lawrence, Bree Larson, Emily Blunt, Ryan Reynolds, Blake Lively, Halle Berry *and* Helen Mirren within the span of half an hour made Andy feel like he was *way* more famous than he deserved to be.

Ewan McGregor and his wife Mary Elizabeth Winstead had also attended, but Andy was a little less shellshocked the second time around with them, especially since he'd had several Zoom calls with them since their first meeting, where they were asking very smart questions about the adaptation of his

book that was going to start filming in only a few more months.

And, of course, Clooney had tried to prank Andy by starting their conversation by saying, “So what made you decide to not invite Matt Damon? He’s *pissed* you know.”

In between all of that, Andy had to do first dances with all his wives, individually before they decided to gang up on him, one final dance with the seven of them encircling him and him in the center, trying to retain some amount of dignity. (“In Love With A Clown” by Fury In The Slaughterhouse for Piper, “The Sun Smells Too Loud” by Mogwai for Moira, “(Nothing But) Flowers” by Talking Heads for Fiona, “American Girls” by Counting Crows for Sarah, “Ghost” by Halsey for Niko, “You Belong To Me” by Taylor Swift for Emily and “All I Want Is You” by U2 for Aisling, with the group song being “All My Friends” by LCD Soundsystem.) He was certain the photographer got loads of pictures of that final dance, where he was surrounded by brides like piranhas as he tried to dance with seven women, each of whom kept playfully spinning him to focus on them. He hoped at least the photos would be funny because he was dizzy as fuck by the end of it.

After the dancing had died down a little bit, the wedded Rooks gathered everyone up for a toast, letting Phil stand up to make the traditional Best Man’s Speech, and Andy almost dreaded to see what kind of torrid stories he was going to drag up from Andy’s past, but was delighted by what he got.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I know it’s a bit of a tradition for the Best Man to drag the groom through the muck for the crowd’s entertainment, but honest to god, Andy’s one of the most noble sons of a bitch that I know,” Phil said with a smirk. “Maybe *that’s* his flaw – he always sees the best in people, always thinks the best of people, and always tries to *do* the best for as many people as he can. Our own personal Don Quixote. I’ve tried to help him a little bit here and there, especially while we’ve all been trying to survive during this weird pandemic, but all I’ve ever really done is open doors for him, and he’s the one who’s done everything that involved actually walking through said doors. So let me offer a bit of advice to his new brides – be open, be honest, be direct and, most of all, be *patient*. He’s always going to be following his heart before he thinks, and if something’s going wrong, *tell him*. Maybe his other flaw is his inability to see three or four steps ahead when it comes to complex and complicated people, so take care of him, and he’ll do everything he can to take care of you. I know that Niko and Lexi and Melody will do everything to make sure he’s not putting himself in harm’s way to keep one of his partners safe, because I *guarantee* you, that’s going to be his first instinct, and he’s going to have to get used to it like the rest of us, because Linda will tell you, I had to be horsewhipped into making my own self-preservation a number one priority.”

“Sit down and stop making a target of yourself, baby!” Linda shouted at him playfully. That got a good laugh before Phil continued.

“No, but, honestly, I can’t tell who’s luckier, Andy or all of the amazing women he’s had the good sense to marry, but I think Team Rook isn’t just one of the better Teams, I think they may well be the best of us. To Team Rook!”

“TO TEAM ROOK!”

Before he realized what was happening, Andy was ambushed and seven small slices of cake descended upon him like a strike of hornets. All the plans they had set about who was going to smash cake into whose faces seemed to have been abandoned as each of his giggling brides rubbed cake into some part of his bald head. It was one of the few times in his life that he was glad he shaved the thinning hair from his head, because it meant that the only hair he would have to wash cake from was his goatee and eyebrows.

And the entire room was laughing as Andy stood up, dusting cake off his face, shaking his head, smirking wryly. “Ladies and gentlemen,” Andy said, “my beloved brides. But you see here’s the thing—” As he was talking, suddenly each of his brides got a piece of cake smashed into their face (or in a few cases, two or three), as *all his other partners* had been warned that if he was attacked with cake smashes out of the blue, it should be their duty to defend his honor, and so almost every other member of Team Rook had had their cake slices at the ready, and absolutely *none* of the brides had

seen it coming. “—I came prepared!” he laughed. “I will not go caked quietly into the night!” He was pretty sure he saw Nicolette making sure each of his brides had been smashed with cake at *least* twice, because he thought he saw her a couple of times going after a different one of his brides each time.

The joy and laughter of several hundred people washed over him, and there was something kind and healing about that intensity. Each of his wives came by to kiss him, as they smooched their cake-smearing faces together one at a time, Ash grinning at her as she kissed him last. “You didn’t *trust* us, Mister Rook,” she whispered teasingly at him.

“Of course I trusted you, *Mrs. Rook*,” he said to her. “I trusted you to make sure everyone at the wedding was having a good time, and so I played my part accordingly.” He chuckled a little bit, pausing to run his fingertip along the shell of her ear, scooping out a bit of frosting. “Lauren took great delight in smashing the cake into you, didn’t she?”

“Never even saw her and Taylor sneaking up on me,” Ash smirked. “And when I was wiping that cake off my face, Nicolette gave me one final smash. So well played, my beloved husband.”

He felt a spark of delight run up his spine. “I’m never going to get tired of hearing that, am I?”

She leaned in close, whispering right into his ear. “If we weren’t in front of all these people, I’d take that hand of yours and show *you* how wet I got when you just called me *Mrs. Rook*.” She nipped at his earlobe for just a second, licking a bit of frosting off of it, to finish her tease before pulling away. “It’s good cake at least!” Ash shouted to the laughing crowd.

People were starting to take pieces of cake away from the seven-tiered wedding cake that had been prepared for the event, something Andy had thought was ridiculously too big, but turned out to be just about the right amount of wedding cake for their insanely large guest list.

When it came time for the brides to throw their bouquets, a few hundred women still gathered out in the center, most of whom were partnered but not married, as if to offer a subtle reminder to their own Team that marriage was on their minds, and when the seven bouquets went flying, the struggle to get ahold of them was serious.

As soon as that was done, however, Fiona pulled a chair over and made Andy sit down on it, as his brides each lifted one leg and placed it on his thighs, exposing a leg each, so that he could roll down the garter each one had prepared for him. He also realized that a couple of his brides had done it specifically so they could rub their foot against his crotch, or to make his hands slowly smooth along their stockinged legs.

It was also a moment when Andy realized why all his brides had been constantly wearing high socks for the last week. Somewhere along the way, they’d all snuck off and gotten a tattoo of a rook chess piece on their ankles, simple, black and elegant.

After they let Andy get off the chair, he tossed the garters in a ball over his back into the crowd of men, and to his amusement, Phil had stood with both arms in the air like a football referee calling a touchdown, and gotten one on each hand, which had Audrey giggling something fierce, although Andy also realized he could hear the sound of Lily laughing so hard she was struggling to breathe, and as a few of the men moved away, Andy could see that Ash’s kelly green garter (they’d each worn one of a different color) was resting atop of Eric’s head like an askew crown.

It was *fucking hilarious*.

A few minutes later, Andy was talking with Eric and Xander when he felt a hand slide across his shoulder and down onto his chest as Piper moved to stand behind him, her tits resting against the back of his shoulders. “You know, *Mister Rook*, that you are insanely lucky that my parents are here, otherwise I would’ve had you bend me over a table and plow my pussy until my knees gave out, howling like a slut in heat, right here in front of all our guests, and I’m still not sure quite why I’m so horny right now that it’s fucking hard to think,” she whispered into his ear. “And it’s not just me. All the others are feeling the same way. You’d better keep your energy up, because you’re gonna have a long haul tonight, you best believe it.”

“Don’t worry, *Mrs. Rook*,” he told her, “I’ll do everything I can to keep up with all of you for as

long as possible tonight.”

She whimpered a little bit into his ear. “You know, I think I damn near came when you called me that. Say it again.”

“Say *what* again?” he teased.

“Aaaaaannnddddddyyyy...” she whined.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist, *Mrs. Rook*; it’s only a few more hours before we’re heading out of here.”

“Oh, I can’t, Andy,” she giggled, turning his head to press her lips against his for a moment.

“I’m not wearing any. Didn’t see the point.”

As Piper sashayed away from him, Andy could only grin. He hoped that she was kidding, but there was something about the way she’d said it that made him convinced she probably wasn’t. He noticed that Phil was coming over to him, an almost apologetic smile on his face. “The longer this goes on, the more I’m convinced I probably should’ve warned you not to do seven marriages all at once, but I don’t think you’d have listened to me if I had.”

“I don’t want any of them feeling more or less important than the other, Phil,” Andy told him.

“You know that. I told you that earlier. Several times.”

“I do, but I also know of a handful of things that generally happen on wedding days for people like us,” Phil said with a smirk.

“What do you mean ‘people like us’?”

“People with large teams. There’s certain things that just... sort of... happen.”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*,” he said, gesturing over to the fact that Andy’s seven brides were basically in one long grind line on the dance floor, each with their ass in another bride’s crotch. “They’re all pretty worked up, aren’t they? Frisky, one might say?”

“Why do I have the feeling that you *know* they are already, Phil?”

“Because I *do* know they are already,” Phil laughed. “Look. Andy. I’m not going to spoil your wedding night for you but there are a handful of... ahem... oddities... that spring up as a result of the Quaranteam serum when people are at their emotional apexes. Wedding days, just after the birth of their first child, that sort of thing. Nothing permanent, nothing you really need to be worried about. Just a handful of surprises that may take you off guard.”

Andy scowled, wondering what sort of madness his friend had chosen to overlook in the pursuit of entertainment. “You could’ve warned me about all of this ahead of time, Phil.”

“Oh, sure, I *could’ve*,” Phil said, shaking his shoulders as he attempted to dance a little bit, “but where’s the fun in that?”

Andy rolled his eyes a little. “Nothing permanent, you say? That’s all I’m really concerned about. I don’t need to make another mistake like we did with Melody.”

“You did us a big favor with that, by the way,” Phil said, his tone moving out of joking mode for a moment. “Although we’ve got reports that the Russians actually know about that encoding effect, and that they have incorporated it into their current version of the serum, so they can make people more loyal.”

“Jesus, tell me you’re fucking kidding, Phil.”

“Wish I was. It’ll be in the report I’ll provide to Oversight after you get back from your honeymoon.”

“This thing with me and the wives... it isn’t *that* bad is it?” Andy asked him. “It’s nothing permanent or seriously debilitating?”

“You’ll be fine in a few days’ time,” Phil said. “All of you. It’s mostly just... quirky. And it’s good to make sure there aren’t any hidden secrets left between you and your brides.”

“Secrets?” Andy asked him.

“It’ll all make sense in time, Andy.” Phil chuckles softly. “Have you figured out the whole

pecking order your wives have yet?”

“I told you, Phil, I’m going to do everything I can to treat them equally.”

“How *you* treat them, sure, but how they treat each *other*...” Phil lifted his glass of bourbon to his lips, drinking deep from it. “We don’t really talk about this in any of our paperwork, but Teams are sort of like beehives in a way, if you think about it.”

“And I’m the Queen?”

Phil scoffed with a smile. “You *wish*. You’re the actual hive, bitch. But depending on how big a Team is, a few women within it will sort of self-identify as Queens, and they work together, rather than against each other. It’s about one in every five to seven partners, so you should probably have three or four.”

Andy nodded a bit. “Well, I can see two, maybe three of them.”

“Ash and Fi?” Phil asked.

“Yeah. Maybe Niko. Maybe Piper.”

“Oh yeah?” Phil said. “Piper’s growing a bit more controlling, a bit more aggressive?”

“Yeah, something like that. Much more of an active hand with the group than when she first arrived to the family, although I expect she spent a while dealing with the shock of it all.”

“Four Queens then,” Phil said with a nod. “Makes sense. You’re one of the bigger Teams we have on file, you know.”

“Not the biggest, I hope.”

Phil waved his hand with a laugh. “Nah, the biggest team clocks in just under thirty.”

Andy let out a slight whistle. “I think I’d go fucking crazy at that point. That’s too many women. *Way* too many women.”

“I think Team Goshier would agree with you,” Phil said, “but Isaac just couldn’t bring himself to say no to any woman who wanted to join his Team, so he let them all in. Plus he makes a nice clear upper limit cap to what we’ve learned a man can handle, because if we added anyone else in there, I think he’d probably break. He’s starting to consider asking us to reassign a few of them, but it’s super hard once they’re imprinted on you, y’know?”

“Why’s that?” Andy asked. “They could be reimprinted without too much of a challenge, right? You’ve got the Sergei Swerve, so what’s the problem?”

“That’s the thing, Andy. Think of it like gravity. The gravity pull of a Team is intense, so for a woman to have the want to *leave* that Team, the problems have got to be *massive*, to generate even more gravity, pulling them away from that Team. It’s like I told you before – small problems don’t mean anything and they’ll get glossed over. And Isaac Goshier’s a great guy and all the women chose him, so I don’t think any of them really *want* to leave his Team, so he’ll just have to manage with being exhausted all the time. Last time he came in for his checkup, he said he was feeling less like a man and more like a milking machine. You’re the same way, friend. Not the milking bit. Just the slightly overextended bit. All your partners are with you voluntarily. You had access to the reassignment serum before almost anyone else and you offered everyone in your Team the chance to get out if they wanted to. Multiple times. I know. Niko told Linda that she had to tell you to stop asking them if they wanted out of the Team, because after three times, it was starting to feel like maybe *you* wanted them out, not that you did. I know, I get it, you’re looking out for their best interests.”

“I don’t want to be any woman’s Covington, Phil. Or their McCallister.”

“And that’s why you’re a good man at heart, Andy. And why all your partners love you so truly, madly, deeply.”

“And yet, you still think they’re keeping secrets from me. Or that I’m keeping secrets from them. I’m not sure which.”

“Both,” Phil said, patting Andy on the back. “But you’ll get through it and get past it. And it’s good to have total transparency with your family. Don’t worry about it. It’s probably secrets you didn’t even know you were keeping.”

“Jesus, like what?”

“Relax, Andy. Seriously. You’re getting panicked over nothing.”

“I’ve got seven brides who look like they’re all looking to pin me to the bed and drain my balls dry, and you’re telling me I’m getting panicked over nothing.”

“After your fourth or fifth orgasm, they’ll probably let you sleep. Maybe you’ll even get off with just three.”

Andy groaned. “You’re killing me here, Phil.”

“Don’t worry,” his friend assured him. “They know better than to harm you. I’m just saying it’ll get a little wild, and that’s okay. Just be cool and you’ll be fine.” Andy wanted to keep prying, but he knew that the look on Phil’s face meant he wasn’t going to give up anything else.

Xander glanced over and wandered close as Phil and Andy’s conversation had wrapped up, giving Andy a big hug. “I always knew you and Fiona were going to get married, my guy.”

“Yeah, well, that big gap in the middle sort of disagrees with you,” Andy said to him.

“The world works in mysterious ways, buddy.” Xander reached up and ran his fingertips behind Andy’s ear, gathering up some remaining cake crumbs. “You’ve still got cake all over you, my dude,” he laughed.

“I swear, I think there’s still cake in my eardrums,” Andy said with a grin.

“You’re still glad you did it though, aren’t you?” the gentle giant asked him.

“Of course I am. But someone should make sure *they* are,” Andy said gesturing to his seven wives, most of whom seemed to be paired up and chatting with a cultural exchange between families.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Andy smiled softly. “Probably.”

“Those women love you, Andy. I mean *love* love you. I made them promise not to break your heart, so I should probably make you do the same.”

Andy grinned, shrugging a little. “I’d die before I’d do that.”

“Well, ya can’t do that either,” Xander laughed. “You need to take care of these women as much as they need to take care of you.”

“That’s the plan.”

Xander looked around the reception, as did Andy, and they both noted that the crowd had wilted slowly over the last few hours. “Maybe we should try and sneak you guys out of here, now that things are starting to die down a bit?”

“Let’s ask El Capitan,” Andy said with a chuckle, as he tried to make the most subtle gesture towards Lauren as he could without people noticing. “Boss lady, think it’s time we should make our escape? I’ve noticed there’s been a good amount of people making their goodbyes, and it’s bad form for the wedding party to hang around and have to clean up…”

Lauren looked at him as though he’d just handed her a gift. “YES,” she said, perhaps a little *too* emphatically for him. “Take your randy wives and get them the fuck out of here before they finally just tear you apart in front of all your guests.”

Andy’s eyebrow shot up. “They can’t be tha—”

“Andy,” Lauren said to him, taking both of his hands in hers. “ANDY. When I was congratulating all of them, Moira grabbed my ass and almost started dry humping me. And Niko was talking to me about they intended to make sure you couldn’t fucking walk tomorrow.”

“Well, I mean, we’re newlyweds an—”

“In front. Of her *mother*.”

“Oh. *Oh*,” Andy said. “That bad?”

“I think you’re about thirty minutes away from being the center of a reverse gangbang in the most expensive location shoot ever,” she giggled, but there was an edge to her tone that made it clear she wasn’t joking, and that she truly wanted them to evacuate as soon as possible. “Please. PLEASE. Take them and get the *fuck* out of here before they lose what little patience they have left.”

He nodded. If Lauren was worried, they were probably just a few minutes shy of a disaster. “Tell Melody to bring the limo over, and let’s start gathering them up.”

“They’re mostly together over talking with Clooney and his wife, who seem to be humoring them, as far as I can tell,” Xander said. “Although it looks like Piper and Emily are over talking with Em’s mother.”

“Alright,” Andy said. “I’ll grab those two, then circle over for the rest, then make a straight beeline for the limo, if Melody can be in place that quick.”

“I told her to doubletime it, so she gets it,” Lauren said.

Andy smiled, leaning in to give Lauren a huge kiss and hug. “Thanks again for organizing this. You’ve literally kept us all sane today. We can’t say thank you enough.”

Lauren’s eyes watered up, but she hugged Andy as tight as she could before pushing him away, shoving him over towards Em and Piper. “Love you too, ya idjit, now git!”

Lexi moved in to lean against his side protectively as they started to head across the field. “How much trouble am I in for, Lex?”

“You’ll get through it fine, chief.”

“Oh thank *fuck* he’s here,” Emily said almost at the top of her lungs as she immediately moved over to press her small body against Andy’s before Piper moved to lean against his other side, making him look like the middle option of a sizing chart. Andy was more than a little surprised Em was swearing in front of her mother, but the look on her mother’s face was almost aghast already, so Andy supposed this was just another nail in that coffin. “I was just telling mother here how worked up I am and how I was thinking about pulling you into a bathroom for a quick rutting.” She laughed nervously then leaned her head in close, whispering into Andy’s ear. “I can’t stop *talking*, Andrew,” she whimpered. “We need to get *out* of here.”

“Alexis was just telling me that we needed to get going so that we wouldn’t get swamped in the traffic too much,” Andy said, feeling Piper’s fingertips interlace with his as she squeezed his hand firmly, almost thankfully. “I think everyone’s starting to get a little tired anyway, so we’re all going to head out, but it was lovely to meet you, Mrs. Stevens, and your new partner. I hope you won’t be a stranger and will come out to see us whenever you can.”

Em’s mom, a sort of mousy British housemarm, gave him a sympathetic smile before moving to give him a hug. It had been no surprise to Andy that Emily’s mother was a schoolteacher of kids in Year Two, although he could see how much of a toll it had taken on the woman, who had lost both her husband and son, plus most of the children she’d taught over the last decade, all within the span of a year, and she was doing everything she could to see her daughter’s happiness as a beacon of light to show her the way out of that valley of sadness. “You have been simply lovely, Andrew, and thank you for taking such good care of my daughter. I will certainly be over to meet my grandchild, whenever that ends up happening, although from the way my daughter has been speaking tonight, I might think that might end up being rather soon,” Em’s mom said to her, an almost playful smile on her lips, which made Emily’s face turn as red as Sarah’s hair. “Love you darling.”

“Goodbye mother!” Em said, giving her mom one final huge hug, both women in tears before Em moved back to press against Andy once more like she was trying to hide beneath the protection of his arm. “I’m so mortified... I feel like I’m unable to stop talking...”

Piper nodded, her face mirroring Em’s a little. “Me too!”

“Almost home free,” Andy said, as they moved over to the rest of his brides, who were holding court with a number of the more well-known actors, who it seemed like George Clooney was entertaining with a tale.

“And I’d really just taken my shirt off because it was blazing hot at this party, and Sandra’s asking me if I’m actually just going to go for a swim at this dinner party that we’re at, so I told her yes, I’m going to just jump in.”

“Oh god, you’re actually telling this!” Sandra laughed.

“And she says to me, ‘I’ll jump in if you and my friend jump in too, because it’s too damn hot in this dress!’”

“I was *burning up!*”

“So the three of us hold hands and count 1, 2, 3!”

“And then I’m the only one who jumps!”

The whole crowd starts to laugh, as George Clooney holds his hands up in surrender. “It might be the only time I ever felt a little bit bad about a prank because I looked down at the pool, and poor Sandy’s dress is starting to literally disintegrate in the water. What were you, dressed in spun sugar that night?” he teased.

“Yes, George, I was wearing an entire dress made of cotton candy,” Sandra said, rolling her eyes. “No, you idiot.”

“Not to spoil the moment,” Andy said, finally sort of making his presence known, “but I’m afraid we really have to be heading out.” When Andy’s eyes met Sarah’s, he saw her mouth the words ‘*thank you*’ to him quite openly although no one else was looking at her to see. “But it has been a wonderful pleasure meeting all of you.”

As Andy moved to gather them all up, George Clooney shook his hand one final time and said quietly, “Make sure Sarah tells you about my offer. Good to meet you, Andy.”

When they started to walk away from the crowd and headed towards the limo which was waiting not too far away, Andy said to Sarah. “His offer?”

“He wants to play Dale Sexton’s dad in all the flashback stuff for the movie.”

“That’s not up to *me*,” Andy said, “but I can’t imagine the producers possibly saying no if he’s asking for a reasonable fee. I’ll pass it up to them when I get a chance. Are *you* okay?”

“Yes, but no, but yes, if that makes any fucking sense, which I know it fucking doesn’t,” Sarah sighed, shaking her head, laughing a bit nervously. “I feel like any time anyone’s asked me a question for like, the last fucking hour, I’ve basically just told them the fucking unvarnished truth! I’m an actress, Andy! I can’t live with that level of total brutal fucking honesty!”

“Just relax, Sares,” Andy laughed. “Phil was telling me earlier that the serum has a few weird side effects that spring up during moments of high emotional velocity, and they’re all temporary. It’s starting to seem like temporarily losing the ability to lie might be one of those things.”

They were getting into the car one at a time when Sarah looked at him with pained frustration. “What if one of you asks me a question you don’t really want the answer to and I fucking say it anyway? I’m scared about fucking everything up!”

“Sarah,” Andy said to her, grabbing her by the shoulders. “There is absolutely nothing you can say that will make me stop loving you. Okay? What’s the one thing you’re most scared to tell me?”

“I thought ‘The Trouble With Werebears’ had such a lame ending, I wouldn’t have read the next one if I hadn’t already bought it,” she said before slapping her hand over her mouth, looking like she was about to cry as Andy couldn’t help but start to laugh.

“It was a bad book!” Andy said, laughing so hard it almost hurt. “Jesus, does everyone think I’m that fucking thin-skinned about it? I had to write it on an unreasonable deadline and everyone kept fucking hounding me and I half-assed the ending because I couldn’t think of a better way to get out of it, okay? I, Andy Rook, wrote a bad thing! I’m over it, Sarah! I don’t care! I still love you!”

She was crying a little, but the smile that spread over her lips as she kissed him turned into a feverish giggle as she got caught up in the high emotions that were running through them now before she pushed him into the back of the limo. “God, that makes me feel better,” she said, sliding in after him, pulling the door shut, all the wives loaded in the back, Melody and Lexi up front. Linda had agreed to keep a couple of her girls stationed at Rook Manor for security while all of Andy’s security detail stayed with him. “Now I want to ask all sorts of embarrassing questions of all of us,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “Can you lie Andy?”

Andy scratched his chin and tried to tell a little lie he’d made early on last year, and instead he

said, “The first time Aisling made me scrambled eggs in the morning, she burned them so bad I thought they were hashbrowns, but I had to lie and pretend they were great because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.”

That made Ash start to giggle as she pointed a finger in Andy’s direction. “*I knew it! I knew I’d* arsed those up so bad they were inedible!” She suddenly looked around the car and pointed at Piper. “Piper! How good is your superpower, really?”

It was Piper’s turn to blush, but she finally looked at Ash and said, “Strong enough that I can tell you the most recent woman Andy fucked just from his scent alone, and that’s after he’s had three showers and put on a shitload of cologne.”

Fiona scoffed with a smile. “We *all* know it was Nicolette yesterday morning. It’s in the app.”

That made Andy raise his hand to cover his mouth. “Oh shit, I forgot to log it.”

“Andy!” Fi said in mock annoyance. “We all agreed you weren’t going to fuck anyone between lunch yesterday and the wedding today.”

“I didn’t!” Andy laughed. “It was right before lunch and I got ambushed! I forgot to put it in!”

“Who was it, Pipes?” Niko asked.

“Who do you think?” Piper giggled. “Hannah’s scent is still all over him.”

Sarah rolled her eyes but smiled. “The only thing bigger than that girl’s tits is her appetite for causing trouble.”

Niko glanced over, narrowed her eyes at Andy. “Who’s the best fuck in the Team, Andy?”

“There isn’t one,” he said before he could cover his own mouth, but when he heard the words escaping his mouth, he let himself keep talking. “Or you all are. On different days, I want different things when I’m in different moods. Sometimes I just want things soft and quiet. Sometimes I want them loud and dirty. So I’m lucky that all of my partners and wives all like different things, so I can honestly say nobody’s the best.”

The limo had left the Pleasanton area and was heading west, bound for a house they’d rented in Bodega Bay, up north of San Francisco, where they were going to stay for two days before flying out to Hawaii for six days for their proper honeymoon. It was about an hour and a half drive, so they had a bit of time in the car.

Piper smirked a little bit, glancing over at Andy. “Can’t lie, huh? None of us?”

“Probably not until tomorrow, I’m guessing,” he said.

“What were you *really* thinking when I came at you that night in Covington’s?”

Andy laughed, looking down, but he knew he wasn’t going to get out of answering the question. “I was hoping I was doing the right thing and that you’d be okay with it, but I was also terrified I wasn’t going to be able to get hard because you *reeked of shit*, and that was very distracting. And then when you didn’t go into imprinting mode after my first orgasm, I panicked and thought I’d done something wrong, and was *definitely* worried I couldn’t get hard *again*.”

That made Piper double over with laughter, as Niko tried to help the situation but somehow only ended up making it worse. “I mean, both he and I could see you were beautiful, Piper, but you smelled *so* bad I was afraid I was going to throw up, and I was worried you were going to get violent, because that would mean I would have to *touch* you.”

“Stop!” Piper shrieked in between giggles. “*Fuck* I wish I could remember that moment, just to see the look of shock on your fucking face, Andy.”

Fiona shifted and leaned her body against Andy’s a bit more. “I wish *I* could’ve seen the look on his face when he realized it was me and Mo who’d gotten in on that game that morning,” she cackled. “I bet he had eyes like dinner plates.”

“I slipped up a’ th’ end and talked a bit,” Moira admitted with a smirk, “so I reckon he figured it out then.”

“I did,” Andy admitted, “but I was no less shocked by it.”

“Are you going to want to marry anyone else in the Team, Andrew?” Emily asked him.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's more of if anyone else in the Team wants to marry *me*. I don't want to spread myself too thin, but I also don't want to disrespect the feelings of any woman who wants to have that kind of connection."

"Hannah's going to want to," Ash said. "And you probably should marry her but maybe make her wait until she's graduated from college."

"I bet Jade's going to want to as well," Fiona said. "I know you can be blind to it sometimes, Andy, but you should see the way she looks at you when your attention is elsewhere. That girl's in love with you, whether she's admitted to herself or not yet."

"Well, the ring design that Tala made for me can accommodate five more rings in it, so I'm thinking that serves as a nice cap for the number of eventual brides I'll ever take," Andy said. "So that seems like it'll make sense. And I don't have to rush."

Ash leaned in to whisper into his ear, "You may also need to keep Melody in mind, too. It seems like she's fallen pretty hard for you."

Andy turned to glance at her in genuine surprise. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"You never do, love," Ash teased. "You never do."

When they were driving through Novato, Sarah pointed out the window. "Isn't that over there where Sexton Manor is supposed to be?"

Andy nodded. "Yeah, I sort of picked a random location out, but that's about where I think it should be, over in those hills."

"I'll have to remember that when the director's showing us possible locations for the shoot, since I'm an executive producer on the film now too."

"Are you certain we can't have sex in the car, Andy?" Niko asked. "I know we all agreed on it, but it's *really* hard to fucking focus right now, and all I can think about is ripping your clothes off. I know the others feel the same way."

"We're only about half an hour out," Andy told them all, despite seeing them licking their lips and moving in a little bit closer. "Any other secrets I should know?"

"Yes," Em said suddenly, before all the other girls turned to smile at her.

"Go on, Em," Ash said kindly. "He's not going to be mad. I promise you."

Emily nodded a touch shyly before turning to look at Andy. "I've stopped taking my birth control, Andrew, because I want to have a baby. I want to have *your* baby. I've... I've been acting out the last few months because... well, because I've been jealous of Ash and Niko. Because I've always wanted to be a mother."

"Why didn't you say something, Em?"

"Because Andrew!" she said with a slightly frustrated laugh. "Because good little British girls aren't supposed to be the ones shouting 'Breed me, Daddy!' at the tops of their lungs! And I worried that Sarah would think I just wanted to do it so that I could do it before her, when I just... I truly want you and I to have a child together, Andrew, because I want to be a mother, but I also wanted to show you just how much I genuinely love you, and I cannot think of any way better to do that." She bit her bottom lip. "And if it's a boy, I want to name him after my late brother, if that's alright."

"Of course it's fine, Emily," Andy said to her, holding her as she started to cry again. "Whatever you want from me, you only ever have to ask. If you want us to start trying, then we can start trying."

"We'd all decided you were going to have Em first tonight, Andy," Ash said to him, "when she finally confessed that to us this morning. She was afraid we were all going to be mad, but we're all just happy for her."

The car finally moved up to drive to the oceanside manor they were going to be staying in for a few days, and as soon as the vehicle had stopped, the doors to the limo flung up and all Andy's brides started rushing into the house, leaving Andy behind alone in the car.

He got out of the car to see Melody making her way into the house as Lexi stood next to the car, waiting for him to go in with a big grin on her face.

"I'm not ready for this, am I?" he asked her.

"Probably not," Lexi admitted, patting him on the ass like a coach giving him an attaboy. "But you're gonna have a hell of a time with it anyway."

Andy moved to walk up towards the house, as Lexi started to bring the luggage up and into the house. He found the living room completely empty so he kept moving through the house before he reached the bedroom and came across the loveliest sight in his life.

All of his brides had stripped down out of their wedding dresses but left only their white stockings and garter belts on, and hands interlocked, all staring at him with adoring eyes, each of them licking their lips, as if holding each other's hands was all that was keeping them from swarming over him in unison.

"Time for you to get to work, Mr. Rook," Emily said to him from her place in the center of the group, looking up at him expectantly.

"As long as *you're* ready, *Mrs. Rook.*"

The strangest thing happened when he said that out loud. He watched Emily's body start to shiver, and then that shiver started to expand outward, each of the girls in turns, as the sensation seemed to infect all the others.

"You'd better get fucking, Andy," Sarah said, as they pulled Emily back to lay her down on the center of the bed, each of them having a hand on Emily's naked body as they pulled her legs slowly apart, as Ash blew him a kiss.

Andy stripped out of his tux quickly, as they drew him onto the bed, practically yanking him onto the bed when he got close enough to touch, Piper on one end and Sarah on the other, the two biggest of his brides making sure he was nearly on top of Emily before either of them knew it.

He leaned down and gave Emily a soft tender kiss as the other girls all went "Awww" in unison before he pulled his lips back, looking down at her kind face. "Last chance to back out, Em," he told her with a sly grin.

"I believe I told you earlier that I would shout 'Breed me, Daddy!' if I thought that would be required to get you to cover the inside of my cunt with enough cum to get me pregnant with our child," she said at him with a sly grin, giggling when her words make his cock twitch and throb just a little bit more. "Now are you going to fuck me, Andrew, or am I going to have to pin *you* on your back and make you lie back and think of England while I'm fucking your ridiculous brain into pea soup?"

There was something so smug and joyous about his bride's grin that there was no chance he was going to be able to deny her what she wanted, so he lined the tip of his cock up and pushed it deep inside of her on that first thrust, something that made them both moan, and then the moans were almost echoed in a chorus around them.

"W-w-what's happening?" Niko asked a little breathily, her eyes a little glassy.

"I dunno," Ash purred, "but I *like* it. Get fucking, baby."

It was almost a Greek chorus or a parade of dirty whispers as Andy began to thrust his hips down and into Em's eager cunt in a slow rhythm that he began to slowly quicken almost immediately. He'd been given the luxury of nearly thirty-six hours without an orgasm, and it felt like his body was ready to unleash a volcano into his blushing bride's belly, but he refused to be hurried through his paces. His other brides weren't making it easy for him, though, as Sarah was whispering directly into one of his ears, Ash into the other, as Niko was fondling Emily's nipples as Fiona and Moira were taking turns churning his balls in their sack with their fingers.

The assault on nearly every one of his senses was overwhelming and despite his best efforts, he knew the impending tidal wave of an orgasm was inescapable, and no matter what he was trying to do to slow it, his brides were working twice as hard to make sure it hastened.

It was Em herself who finally pushed him over the top, though, as she leaned up and kissed him, her eyes holding his in a longing gaze, while she whispered to him. "Please, Andrew, breed me... cum so hard in my pussy that I cannot *help* but get pregnant... I love you so fucking much... just cum inside

me... I'm begging you... I fucking love you... I need that cum... it's going to make me cum so hard... I cannot wait, Andy... cum for me!"

His loss of control was, at that point, inevitable.

When he felt the orgasm hit him, it was nearly like a bolt of lightning, like all the releases he *should* have had during those thirty-six hours had been saved up and concentrated into one, and he was almost certain that the load of cum he unleashed into Emily's pussy was enough to overflow from her small body pinned beneath his.

But it was the reaction he got *back* that caught him by surprise.

Not only did Emily's body tense up in a deadlock as the orgasm hit her, *so did the bodies of all his other brides.*

It was as though his singular orgasm had set off a chain of ecstasy, and Emily's orgasm had linked to all his other brides, and they had shared that pinnacle of lust, as each of the seven of them fell onto their backs around Andy like some perverse flower of flesh, Andy atop of Emily's gasping body in the very center of it.

"Okay," he heard Sarah's voice say, "who just came about as hard as they did during their imprinting orgasm?"

Seven hands shot up around him, followed by an almost dazed collection of frantic giggles.

"Oh good," Ash said. "I'm glad that wasn't just me."

"Me too," Niko said.

"Let's do it again!" Fiona laughed.

"There's no way I have seven of those in me," Andy pleaded before he felt his face being turned, Ash's lips moving in to kiss his.

"Don't worry," she giggled. "After three or four of those, you'll have doled out somewhere between twenty to thirty orgasms, and I think that'll be enough for our wedding night."

A few minutes later, he felt like he'd recovered enough to get to the next in line, who was Piper. She'd pulled him up into a sitting position next to her so they could talk for a few minutes first, as she crossed her legs beneath her. "Can I tell you one last hidden secret Andy?"

"You can always tell me anything, Piper," Andy whispered to her, his hand stroking through her dark hair as they stared into each other's eyes, all the other brides still having gathered around them.

"I know you've been being kind and gentle and soft with me because of how you found me, but I'm healed now. I've recovered, and now that we're married, you need to know... you *should* be a lot *rougher* with me," she said with a wry smile. "I like seeing the strong side of you, so when you feel the urge to slap my ass, to pull my hair, even give me a little choke here and there... I'm not going to be mad in the slightest."

"Oh no?" Andy asked with a grin.

"No, husband of mine, I'll probably just tell you to come at me even harder," she said with a mischievous smirk. "We both know I could easily beat the shit out of you in a fight, so when I tell you to be *rough*, believe me, I don't think you'll ever go too far for me to be unhappy."

"Well then... Never let it be said I don't listen to feedback," he said. His hand lifted up and pushed her down onto her back with such speed, she clearly hadn't seen it coming, because she felt back into the waiting arms of Fiona and Moira,

"Oh my," Fi said with a Cheshire grin. "You've woken up The Beast. God help you, love."

Andy moved from his seated position up onto his knees before he grabbed Piper's hips and flipped her over onto her belly, as Fiona and Moira started to caress the athlete's shoulders a bit. When Piper moved up onto her hands and knees, Andy leaned forward, placed the base of his palm between her shoulder blades and shoved down hard. Piper could've easily stayed up if she wanted, but again, the quickness of Andy's movements had caught her off guard, and her arms slid outward as her face flopped down onto the bed once more.

"I'd say it's Piper's turn to be the bitch in heat," Sarah laughed, "except that I think just about

all of us are sitting in estrogen puddles right now.”

Andy knee walked over to get in behind Piper before his hands reached down and pulled her knees wider apart, lowering her waistline down so that his cock was angled properly as he basically mounted her like they were in some jungle mating ritual, and slammed his dick right into his bride’s cunt, where upon she let out a feral roar, and all the other brides trembled a little bit.

Since Piper had told him to go at her hard, he did just that, both hands on her hips as he held her in place and tried to piston punch his cock in and out of her pussy like he was drilling through deep rock on the hunt for oil. Whereas Emily’s cunt was always tight, like a perfectly fitting velvet glove, Piper had enough vaginal control to make her walls contract and release around his shaft, timing her clenches with each time he tried to draw back, like her body was refusing to let his go.

His thrusts started fast and only got faster, started hard and only got harder, Fi and Mo each keeping a hand on one of Piper’s shoulders, not letting her even make the effort to lift her chest off the mattress. She was far more athletic than he was, so he could tell she was trying to push back into him without giving up the sensation of being completely under his control.

Andy knew he wasn’t going to last long at that sort of intensity, and so he decided to go for broke, as he reached forward and grabbed a fistful of Piper’s dark hair that she’d probably spent hours on earlier that day and yanked it back as his cock burrowed inside of her, his second orgasm of the night not as productive as the first in terms of volume, but the sheer firepower of it almost scared him, feeling like his whole body was on fire for just a moment.

The reactions from his brides were even stronger.

It was almost as though he had hit some kind of multiplier, and the orgasm he’d given to Piper wasn’t just replicated in each of his other partners – it was amplified. Piper’s orgasm was nearly ear splitting, and her body had clamped on his cock hard enough to make his toes curl, but those reactions weren’t half as loud as the choir of orgasms from the six other women surrounding the two of them, intense enough for Melody and Lexi to come rushing into the room to make sure that everyone was okay. They’d changed from their dresses into pants and t-shirts, but still had their weapons in shoulder holsters, as they pretty much always did these days.

“Jesus, boss, what the *fuck* was that?” Melody asked him.

“I’m... I’m not entirely sure, but it’s almost like... you know how if you see someone yawn, you’re likely to yawn yourself?” Andy sputtered, still more than winded. “It seems like they’re all having sympathetic orgasms, and they’re getting stronger.”

“How *much* stronger?” Lexi said, cautiously.

“Stronger than the imprinting orgasm, I think,” Fiona grumbled. “I think I can take one more, then I say we don’t fuck around with it anymore until things have gone back to normal. Ladies?”

The rest of them agreed, and it was decided Fiona could have the last go, as they laid Andy on his back, the rest of his brides slowly crawling in to crowd around him, pressing against his sides any way they could fit, Em and Piper both pressed closest, as both of them were almost having trouble moving, they were still trembling so hard, although the smiles on their faces made it clear they weren’t bothered by that fact, but in fact, savoring it.

“I think if I’m on top, Andy, maybe I can keep us all from short circuiting,” she said, straddling his waist, grinning as she stroked his prick, licking her lips. “Because God knows we’ve got to tame this beast before any of us is getting any sleep tonight.”

Andy laughed, shaking his head. “I can sleep with a hardon, m’love.”

“Well, we can’t,” Niko giggled.

“Besides,” Ash said, playing with a strand of her hair, “I wanna see how big this next one gets... Go get ’em Fi.”

Fiona moved to get settled, not yet sliding his dick inside of her, simply rubbing against it as she smiled down at him. “I figure if I’m on top, I can control the tempo a bit more, try and keep it from getting too far out of hand.”

“I think it’s a bit late for that,” Andy teased.

“Oh Andy?” Fi said as she lifted her hips up. “I got off my birth control about a month ago too.” She grinned down at him as her hips pushed her snatch down onto his cock, feeling her folds envelop him, her body having a big shiver as she did, which rippled out from her across all the other women gathered around. Andy wasn’t sure, but he even thought he saw Lexi and Melody twitch a little bit. “We’re gonna make sure this family grows in leaps and fucking bounds.”

With Fi on top, she had total control of the tempo, or at least she should have, but it looked to Andy like she was quickly caught up in the moment, her eyes dropping closed like she was trying to focus hard on not fucking him too fast, but whatever resistance she was putting up, it seemed to snap quickly enough, because before he knew it, Fi was posting up and down on his cock like she was a jockey riding him in the Kentucky Derby, bouncing her ass into his lap again and again, a desperate garden of brides’ arms and hands trying to paw at her, trying futilely to get her to slow down.

It was an inevitable moment, really.

When the orgasm hit both Fiona and Andy at the same moment, they were ground zero of a blast of ecstasy that travelled out in shockwaves that made each other bride cling to the two bodies in the center, one giant singular supernova of sexual energy that encompassed all their senses in an inescapable whiteout.

Andy wasn’t sure how long it was before he came back into focus, but when he did, he noticed that all his brides were unconscious, their bodies slumped against his, each of them with a goofy, overly satiated grin on their faces, some of them even drooling onto his chest, arms and legs. Fi herself was practically splattered atop him, every inch of her feeling limp as Andy moved her just enough off to one side so that they weren’t compressing each other.

He looked over to see both Lexi and Melody helping each other to their feet, and in the front of each of their pants were large wet spots, like the two had been caught up in the blast radius of the final moment and had triggered their own sympathetic orgasms, just by sheer force of will.

Once the two had stood up, Melody started laughing, a giggling fit that seemed so intense she was crying, before Lexi finally said something. “Yeah, I don’t know what happened to us either,” she muttered. “But madre de Dios, that was fucking strong...”

Melody grinned, reaching up to wipe sweat from her brow. “How the fuck is Andy going to report all of *this* back to Phil?”

Lexi started laughing, shaking her head. “It’ll just be an SOS message. ‘Linked orgasms disabled wives. Stop. Trapped beneath mountain of flesh. Stop. Send help.’ You okay in there boss?”

Andy tried to speak but found he couldn’t get a word out, so he lifted his left arm just enough to be able to give them the thumbs up signal.

“Got it,” Lexi said, still giggling. “Night boss!”

They turned out the lights and within less than a minute, Andy passed out along with the rest of his brides.

His thumbs up hand dropped a few seconds after he did.

Intermission Four – Milagros / Jake

Operation: Funnel Cake – Case Files IB2323 & OB646

IB2323 – Feb. 1st, 2021 – 1st Contact – San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina

Milagros Herrera arrived at the tented outdoor temporary building with a certain level of trepidation, but there had been enough talk about how people were being offered a new life and being guaranteed safety from the virus that had been ravaging the country, leaving them almost entirely without men.

The sign on the side had both an Argentinian flag and a United States flag on it, and she had gotten a notice at work that she needed to report to this tent today, so here she was. Milagros was in her early 30s and had mostly been highly focused on her career at INVAP as an electrical engineer specializing in large scale mechanics and robotics, but the fact that she was a woman had been holding her back, and she had grown sick and tired of being passed over because she was good looking and single. She wasn't model beautiful, but she was prettier than she felt was good for her career. Long black hair that she usually kept up in a bun, a decent figure, a good bust and excellent cheek bones had meant that people were constantly talking about how she should get married and leave the heavy work to the men.

All of them could jump into the ocean for all she cared.

Milagros wandered into the tent and found there was a line of women there all of whom were being talked to one at a time by two people at the end of the line. The two people at the end were both military women, one from the Argentinian army and one from a United States military group called the Air Force, and both women had a laptop in front of them.

When she stepped into line, she was handed a pamphlet that seemed almost like science fiction, detailing how a vaccine had been discovered for this dreaded DuoHalo virus, but that it could only be given to women, and that women could pass on that resistance to their sexual partners. She'd seen clips from the *60 Minutes* story on YouTube, but she'd thought it sounded so silly that it had to be a prank. Now, looking at the pamphlet, she had to wonder what else she might have been wrong about.

"Name?" the Air Force woman, who had a nametag on that said 'Collins' said to her when she reached the front of the line.

"Herrera. Milagros Herrera," she said proudly. "What's this all about?"

"Survival of the country," the Argentinian, whose nametag read Gomez, said to her. She clicks a few things on her laptop and then uses her mouse to flick a file from one laptop to the other. "Here's her file."

Collins looks at the file and nods. "Potential candidate."

Gomez sighed. "Of course she is. Fine, make your case."

Collins looked up at Milagros and offered her a smile. The American woman was a small blonde with her hair cut short, but there was something warm and friendly about her. "Miss Herrera, I'm with the United States of America, and we're here to offer you an opportunity, if you're interested."

"What kind of opportunity?"

"You're smart, you're well-educated, you're attractive and I think you'd make a fine US citizen. We're offering you a chance to be a part of a program called Operation: Funnel Cake, where we are trading some of our male citizens to other countries, in exchange for some of their under-utilized female citizens," Collins said casually. "Let me guess – you've been passed over for promotion several times here at work because you're a woman and you don't have a husband."

"I mean, yes, a little," Milagros said.

"So, your choice, Miss Herrera, is this – you can stay here and be partnered up with someone here at INVAP, or you can immigrate to the United States immediately and partner up with someone in my country. Now, keep in mind, in the United States, you'll still be expected to work, but it will be in the field which you've already proven quite resourceful in, and I imagine you'll find the climb up the

ladder to be significantly less fraught with problems. There's also significantly less people here for you to choose from, so I imagine that if you consider moving to the United States, you'll be much happier. As part of the Operation, we're offering free relocation and a significantly wider selection of partners to choose from."

"How does it work?" Milagros asked Collins.

"Well ma'am, we give you what we call the Oracle questionnaire, and then we run it against the database back in the States," Collins said. "It's going to be targeting a specific area of the country where we're focusing people with your particular skillset. If you agree, we'll begin relocating you to that area, and once you're there, you'll be presented with a list of men who are of high compatibility with you for you to choose from."

"Why not present that list to me here?" she asked.

Collins frowned. "Because we don't know who'll still be alive and who'll be dead by the time we finish relocating you. This virus is serious fucking business, ma'am."

Milagros had to spend a long moment considering things before she asked her next question.

"Don't you expect those of us who move to get lonely in your country without friends or family?"

Collins smiled now, and Milagros wondered if she'd tipped her interest away too much. "Not at all, ma'am! See, that's the beauty about how Funnel Cake works. If you decide you want to be traded to my country, you can bring a number of your friends and family with you. Now, we don't recommend you have family members as a part of your Team, but we do keep everyone in a Cake cluster within sixty miles of each other, at a bare minimum. You can even request your friend be part of your new Team. They'll relocate with you, sharing your cabin and transportation so you'll be with them the whole time from the moment you leave here to the moment you depart to meet your new partner."

"They're..." Milagros started and then stopped, sighing. She needed to be honest, she decided.

"They aren't as educated as me. My best friend, she's a chef in a local restaurant. My sister, she is a stock clerk at the local grocery store."

Collins nodded, waving her hand. "That's absolutely okay, Miss Herrera. You see, you're what we would call 'the get' in this case, and whatever it would take to ensure you'd be happy in your new home, we're going to do. Your best friend and your sister would get jobs where they'd be happy, and they'd be close by, so you could see them all the time. They don't have boyfriends or husbands?"

Milagros sniffed a little bit. "My best friend, Sofia, she had a boyfriend but he died of the disease in the summer."

"That's okay, that's totally fine. A lot of people have very similar stories," Collins said. "And I don't want to put any pressure on you, but we're only going to be here until tomorrow afternoon, so if you want to go, you'll need to show up before then, because I need to be moving on with the rest of my team, as we continue to look for candidates."

"This Oracle questionnaire," Milagros asked. "Have you used it?"

Collins grinned and nodded. "I have indeed, ma'am."

"And are you happy?"

Collins giggled a little bit and then nodded slowly. "Honestly, I met the love of my life through it, and the sex, well, they told me the sex was going to be mind blowingly good, but I thought they were full of shit until I met up with George. Fuck, just thinking about him is giving me the chills. So yes, ma'am, I can enthusiastically recommend the program without any form of reservation or hesitation, and assure you, you will not go two weeks without being sexually satisfied for the rest of your life if you decide to take part."

Milagros considered herself an excellent judge of character, and the woman, Collins, didn't show any of the telltale signs of being a liar. In fact, the sort of distant, glassy-eyed look the Air Force woman had gotten for a second when thinking about her man had only sort of reaffirmed everything she'd been reading about this Quaranteam serum in the pamphlet while she'd been waiting, and all of that lined up with what she'd see in the *60 Minutes* story last month. While it all seemed a bit too good

to be true, Milagros found herself hoping that maybe, just maybe, it would turn out to be a good thing.

“If I change my mind when you’re transporting me to the United States?” she asked them.

“You have right up until the moment of imprinting to change your mind, Miss Herrera,” Collins said. “Now, keep in mind, if you’re injected and change your mind then, you may be somewhat pressed for time in deciding on a new partner, but that’ll be explained to you before you’re injected with anything, and you have the right to change your mind anywhere along the way between here and there. Does that mean you’re considering—”

“I’ll be back here tomorrow morning with my sister, my best friend and our bags,” Milagros said as she turned around. “Be ready to send us on our way to your country.”

OB646 – Feb. 1st, 2021 – 1st Contact – Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Jake McCready absolutely hated his fucking life. When the pandemic had hit, he’d done his best to keep from getting sick, but he couldn’t afford not to work, so he’d just done the best he could with masks and avoiding people, and so far, it had left him alive, although he almost wished he’d just fucking died instead.

During the evening, Jake was a pizza delivery driver for Dominoes, dropping pizzas off on people’s doorsteps before backing away. People were a lot stingier with fucking tips when they didn’t have to take the pizza directly from you, but at least some people were pre-tipping before the pizza even arrived, so the money wasn’t awful. It wasn’t *good* by any stretch of the imagination, but it wasn’t awful either.

That wasn’t Jake’s only gig, either. He also worked the midnight shift at the local 7-11, starting at 11 at night and working until 9 in the morning, although people very rarely came into the place. He almost thought his boss was just going to call one day to tell him not to bother coming in, but that call never seemed to come.

What pissed Jake off the most, however, was that his dealer had died early on in the pandemic, and now Jake didn’t know who to score weed or meth from anymore. He didn’t need the stuff to function day-to-day, but the weed certainly made the dull times easier to take and the meth made the long hours fly by faster. He’d resorted to buying skunk weed from Little Nikki Grover, the town’s only hooker who had decided to start a second business selling pot when she couldn’t give handies out to drunks behind the Denny’s.

He wasn’t a good-looking guy; he was used to that. He’d been described as slimy, skeezy, slippery, weasel-looking, rat-faced, snide, and thuggish. He kept his hair in a mullet, so it didn’t get in his eyes, but didn’t let anyone think he was a fucking pushover. He had a short black pencil mustache because he thought it made him look tough. He had a tattoo running down the length of his left arm from shoulder to wrist that said in stacked single letters: W-I-N-E-R. Occasionally people would laugh when they saw it, but nobody ever told him why.

Jake had been busted for minor possession charges a couple of times, but the first time had just been a fine and the second time had been community service that Jake had begrudgingly put up with just to fucking get through it.

At least Jake knew there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Yesterday, a guy from the Air Force had come into the 7-11 and given Jake his personalized link to take the Oracle test. Like everyone else in the country, Jake had seen the news stories, and heard all the talk about it, and knew that once he took it, they were going to be delivering women for him to fuck not long after. He just hoped they didn’t send him anyone too mouthy or bitchy, because Jake already had an ass full trying to deal with customers, so he didn’t need to take that shit when he got home.

Most of the test Jake had just checked no because he wasn’t interested in most of that freaky shit, although he did mark that he liked telling people what to do, and he liked being taken care of. If he was lucky, he thought maybe one of his partners might be one of the girls from one of the strip clubs up

in Jackson, but knowing the sort of shit luck he usually had, he felt like he'd probably be given a bunch of women who he would have trouble even looking at.

He was torn between being optimistic and daydreaming about beautiful women being sent his way and being realistic and thinking that his two counts of drug possession and his lack of a high school diploma were going to be what kept him from getting any of the good pussy, but fuck it, he thought to himself, I'm alive and I've got a dick that works, and that's more than most of the men in this fucking country.

Jake was putting new steak and cheese rolls on the griller when he saw the Air Force HumVee pull up in front of the 7-11, his excitement completely quashed when he saw only one woman get out of the vehicle, and she was in uniform, as she walked into the store. "Mr. McCready?" she asked. "Are you in here?"

"Yeah yeah," Jake said, sliding another pizza into the oven, so there would be hot and ready slices waiting in the glass case if anyone came in and wanted them. "Something wrong with my application? I notice you don't have any trim for me with you."

"Yes, Mr. McCready, that's why I'm here," the woman whose nameplate said "Gabriel" read. "Your government has a proposition for you, one which we think is in both your interest and ours."

"Dunno if I believe some assholes in Washington give a shit about me, lady, but go ahead. Tell me what the scam is."

"No scam, Mr. McCready. Just a choice. You've got two options in front of you. Your first is that you decline what I'm offering, and I go back to the base and bring three women to be paired with you for as soon as you're off shift."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"That's the thing, Mr. McCready – your profile has proven significantly difficult to match people up with, and so we're resorting to extremely long reaches in terms of compatibility scores with the Oracle system to even get vaguely sustainable matches."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Most good Teams have 80-90% compatibility scores, Mr. McCready. Those higher than that are exceptionally lucky, and when that score gets below, say, 60%, we begin to grow very concerned."

"So what's the highest match score I got?"

"34.6%."

"That sounds pretty fucking dire, lady," Jake sighed.

"That's the thing, Mr. McCready," Gabriel told him. "We have another option, one which we think will be much more to your liking. It's part of a program we're calling Operation: Funnel Cake. You see, there are a number of other countries around the world that, quite frankly, just need men for breeding stock. We are giving you the chance to volunteer to enroll in the program to become one of those. You would move to a foreign country, and you would no longer be expected, or in fact even *allowed*, to have a job."

"You're fucking kidding, right?" Jake asked, restocking the cigarette stand.

"No, Mr. McCready, I am not," Gabriel said. "You would be taken care of for life. You're likely to get much more attractive partners over there, and we expect the compatibility would be significantly higher, simply because the countries you might be sent to have experienced serious losses of their male population. Your entire role in life would be to breed with your partners, impregnating them in order to help raise a new generation."

"I don't speak no foreign languages," Jake said. "Shit, I ain't even speak English so good."

"No worries, Mr. McCready, at least one member of your Team overseas will speak English and will serve as your interpreter for the rest of your Teammates," Gabriel said. "And it's a chance for you to be regularly hooking up with the sort of women who wouldn't normally even give you the time of day, Mr. McCready."

"And they gotta fuck me, if I do this?"

“They do, Mr. McCready, and you’ll have to fuck them as well,” Gabriel said. “The world needs children, and you would be helping to father a new generation.”

“What sorts of places y’all sending folks like me to?”

“Europe, South America, Africa, southeast Asia... lots of people are looking to get their hands on American studs.”

“And I can come back here any time I want?” Jake asked.

“No, Mr. McCready, I’m afraid that if you join the program, you will become a citizen of whatever country you move to, and in doing so, will renounce your American citizenship.”

“Fuck that,” Jake said. “Can’t be worth that.”

“Well, Mr. McCready, that is your decision to make, and if you don’t want to relocate, I can go back to base and get the first of your partners, who I imagine will be indicative of who you’ll be paired with. Her name’s Virginia Rhodes.”

At the very name, Jake’s dick tried to crawl up inside of his gut and take refuge. Virginia ‘Ginny The Virgin’ Rhodes was certainly the least attractive woman Jake had ever laid eyes on, and she was certainly even more of a mess than he was. Blane, Jake’s old drug dealer, had stopped selling Ginny meth when all of her teeth had fallen out and she couldn’t give even halfway decent head no more. She was ugly, she was foul-tempered and worst of all, she was strong like a fucking ox. Jake immediately wanted to lock himself in the 7-11’s freezer and never come out.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Jake said. “Do I get any say in where I’m going?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. McCready, but I can tell you that the last five men I’ve sent overseas as part of this program have thanked me once they were settled in their new homes.”

Jake knew that he was probably being sold a load of horseshit, but if it was that versus the rest of his life being stuck with Ginny Rhodes, he would take dumpsters of manure all day long. “Fine, what do I need to do?”

“Pack a suitcase and stand outside your apartment tomorrow morning, when someone’ll come pick you up and take you to the relocation center. Remember, you aren’t coming back, so take anything with you that you want.”

“Great. Swell. See you tomorrow morning.”

IB2323 – Feb. 2nd, 2021 – Departure – San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina

At six in the morning, Milagros, her sister Martina and her best friend Sofia arrived at the relocation center, each with a single suitcase in tow, as per instructions. Martina had been a harder sell than Sofia had, as her sister spoke poor English and had never even considered moving away from where they’d grown up, but with Milagros being completely convinced she was leaving, her sister had come around eventually, and the three had spent the night packing all their things. Milagros had told her sister they were going to have new lives, better lives, free from worrying about drug lords threatening to rape them or sell them into slavery.

There were about a dozen other women beyond them, and in each cluster of them, Milagros recognized many of her most talented and brightest coworkers from INVAP, giving them smiles and polite waves. She only knew them in passing, not well enough to consider them friends, but still, it was a welcome sight. Seeing people that she knew and respected making the same decision only helped reinforce that she was doing the right thing.

The long lines of yesterday were gone, and it seemed like the tent was packing up, but just past eight, the woman from the Air Force, Collins, came to bring everyone into the tent and into a small briefing area, with a large screen projector.

“Hello and welcome!” she said, as her words were being translated live into Spanish on the screen behind her. “My name is Major Collins, and I am the Unit Commander for this division of the Operation: Funnel Cake Discovery and Relocation Force. You are here because you have been invited, directly or through one of your friends or family, to join the United States as citizens and to be paired

up with men there. Let me give you a brief rundown of what we're doing here today."

Major Collins gestured to a table on her right which had a dozen or so silver laptops on it, each with a Post-It Note on top of them. "Each person who received a *direct* invitation from *me* to join us will be handed one of these laptops. On top of them is a note with what it called a bundling number. Each member of your party, starting with you, will take the Oracle test, but at the beginning, you will be asked for your bundle number. This is where you type in the number on that note. You will have to enter it twice, to ensure there's no mistake, because that number is vital. It guarantees that you and the rest of the people you personally brought with you will be relocated to a place no further than 120 miles from each other, at the maximum. There are currently three major locations being considered for your relocation, but by using the bundling system provided, we ensure that you will stay accessible to your friends and family that you have brought with you here today. Moving you as a network isn't just in your best interests, it's also in ours, because studies have shown that having local connections will help stabilize you, and allow you to integrate better into your new home.

"Also on that Post-It Note are your user ID numbers, four per note, as per my discussion with each of you yesterday. You should take note of your ID number, because you can also use it to enter into the 'shared' options, which the test will ask of you. If you put another user's ID down in your 'possible shared options,' this means you are telling our system that you would not mind sharing a male partner with that other person. We typically do not recommend doing this for family members, but sometimes you have a girl friend who you wouldn't mind also being a girlfriend, if you know what I'm saying," she laughed, and a few seconds later after the translation popped up, much of the room laughed with her. "Keep in mind, this is entirely optional, even the bundling number. If you're simply bringing along a friend or family member, and she finds the idea of having a better match more important than being close to the rest of you, she doesn't have to enter the bundling number – she can simply choose to leave it blank. It isn't recommended, but we aren't deciding anything for you."

Collins began to pick up the laptops and hand them out one at a time. "The Oracle test is full of a lot of terms you may not know, so you will find opened in a second browsing tab a detailed explanation of each of the terms, allowing you to decide whether those things are turn ons, turn offs or have absolutely no impact on you. Remember, this test is confidential, and no one is judging you for your kinks, ladies, so I cannot stress to you enough that it is in your best interests for you to be as honest as you can about what you do and do not like, emotionally, mentally and sexually. Whether you want a soft-spoken man who isn't afraid to spank you in the bedroom or a loud boisterous man who's going to follow you every instruction when the bedroom doors are closed, there's somebody out there who will be a good match for you. As long as you are honest. We aren't mind readers here, so if you lie to the questionnaire, that lie just became your reality for the rest of your life. Don't lie. You are only hurting yourself and your partners."

The women had been looking on as Collins talked, but when the Air Force officer stopped, they would gossip among themselves a bit. "Now the test usually takes between 30-45 minutes per person but with the language barrier, we'll call it an even four hours to get all of you through the tests. During that time, I'll be wandering around, answering any questions you might have, about the program, about the Serum, about what the process is like... anything you want to know, I am here to answer. But all of that can be done while you're taking the tests. So, let's begin!"

Milagros found that the opening portion of the test was about what she'd expected it to be – a basic quiz regarding her age, height, weight, physical statistics before getting to the bundle question, where she entered the large number on the scrap of paper twice. They had decided Sofia would take the test second and Martina would take the test last, and the idea of having Sofia around all the time brightened Milagros' outlook on life, so she put Sofia's ID number down under possible shared partners before moving on to the meat and potatoes of the questionnaire.

As expected, the test drilled down into subsections of human sexuality she'd never even *heard about* much less considered, and despite the fact that she considered herself a very well-educated

woman, she found herself having to resort to looking at the detailed explanations more often than she'd expected to, usually to just say 'turned off by' on the slider. It also opened her eyes to understanding why the instructor had been so adamant in drilling home the point that this was only of concern between them and their future partner, because she felt like this was an intense amount of information to have about any one person.

Collins had been stopping and answering questions, often through translation, but Milagros' group waited until she was done taking the test, and Sofia had started. "Major Collins?" Milagros said, waving her hand up in the air.

The Air Force administrator came over with a soft smile. "Yes, Miss Herrera, what can I do for you?"

Milagros was impressed that the woman remembered her name from yesterday, considering the half a dozen or so others she must have had to remember. "The *60 Minutes* story that aired in your country... how much of that was accurate and how much of it was propaganda designed to keep your populace from losing hope?"

"We didn't include anything in that story that wasn't true," Collins told her. "There were a few things that were left out, simply because they were too complicated to get into within that hour, but they're all gone over in the pamphlet you were handed yesterday."

"But all the things about the improved orgasms? None of that was propaganda?"

Collins laughed a little bit and fished her cellphone out of her pocket. "I haven't had a chance to show anybody this yet, but I was told if I was asked about the program, having it at the ready might be useful. Watch and see for yourself."

On the Major's cellphone was a video of her filmed from the neck up only, clearly enjoying some sexual experience, before the Major was hit with what looked like the most intense orgasm that Milagros had ever seen. Then the Major seemed to pass out and started muttering "imprinting" over and over again, and Milagros could only smile and nod. "And since then?"

"Not *quite* as strong as that, but pretty damn close, and that's still miles better than what I used to be getting," the Major said with a sly grin as she took her phone back. "Plus, the fella I'm shacked up with? I don't know that I'd have ever found him if I hadn't been part of Oracle."

"Why's that?"

"He and I didn't really run in the same social circles. I'm career military; he's my little nerdling, a database administrator for a company on the east coast, but he can work remote, so he's here with me. We like a lot of the same things, but we're from two completely different worlds. We'd never have *found* each other. So yeah, it might sound weird, but I fucking love this program, I fucking love my man and while I can't guarantee you'll be happy with whomever you pick, I think it's going to bring a lot of joy into your life."

"And even if we go with you, we can still change our minds?"

"Right up until the very last moment, the point of no return, the moment you're imprinted."

"Then we're still with you."

OB646 – Feb. 2nd, 2021 – Departure – Jackson, Mississippi

The Air Force truck had picked Jake up a couple of hours ago, him and his one suitcase, and driven them several miles to the city of Jackson, the largest nearby metropolitan area. There were five of them on the truck, but Jake hadn't liked the look of any of the other guys, so he didn't try and start conversations with any of them.

The relocation center was on an airstrip, and Jake could see they had several of the big fucker planes resting down the runway a little bit. The truck drove past them and came to a small building that looked like it might be a converted small plane hangar.

When they get off the truck, each of them is slapped in the chest with a sticker, not even having their name on it, just some kind of identifier. Jake's read "OB646." Nothing else. Not even date of birth

or blood type.

As he's being ushered into the main room, Jake grabs one of the guards to ask her a question. "So, what are they going to do about my truck, my apartment, all of my shit?"

"You were told to bring anything with you that you thought was vital," the guard told him.

"Everything else is going to be sold off at auction. You aren't coming back for it."

"It's still *my* shit, man," Jake sighs. "Look, am I going to be allowed to come back and visit or—"

"All questions will be answered during the video, so go take a seat, linen jockey."

Jake knew that was probably an insult, but wasn't entirely sure quite why, so he didn't push the matter any, and just moved to take a seat. In addition to the four other guys who'd been with him on the truck, another half a dozen or so arrived within the next half hour and were given name tags and told to sit their asses down. This process repeated once more. With fifteen guys in chairs, the room went dark and a screen at the front started to come to life.

Jake didn't like the feel of the whole thing. It reminded him of the night he'd spent at county lockup, like the whole place was one bad comment away from everything spiraling completely out of control and could erupt into violence at a moment's notice. But nobody wanted to break the quiet, and once the film started, Jake hoped it would be enough to keep everyone in check.

The opening credits said "Operation: Funnel Cake & You" and disappeared as the camera faded in on what looked like one of the shittiest looking dive bars in what had to be one of the shittiest looking areas of America that Jake had ever seen. A caption popped up saying "Hoboken, New Jersey" before the camera turned to focus on a somewhat scummy looking bruiser with greased black hair, his arms crossed over his chest, and at least half a dozen gold chains hanging around his neck.

"Hey, yo! My name's Frank Marscipone, and I'm here to walk you through what your next couple'a weeks are gonna be like as youse guys work your way through the Funnel Cake program. Youse guys was probably just like me – shitty life, shitty job, no real prospects and yet, when it came time for the government to come hook me up with hot chicks to keep me alive, they toldja they was runnin' low on the lookers. So they gave youse guys two options, like they done given me. Your first is stay in your shit life and take whatever dicey broads they got laying around, or go work abroad as a breeding stud."

Frank looked like the kind of guy who was in between stints at the county jail or maybe the sort of bad luck schmuck who couldn't get the moxie together to try something major so he kept getting thrown back for not being worth the trouble.

"When da pandemic started, I was working here, at Rat Fink Freddie's, as a bartender and sometimes cook. We got robbed 9 times in 2019. You'd have thought we got nothing left to rob, but when we didn't got money, they'd rob the guy selling meth around back, or the girls hooking for twenty bucks for ten minutes of joy time. Da owner made me start delivering food from the bar in my own car once we couldn't let customers into the bar, just so he ain't go broke, but he didn't give me gas money or hazard pay or nothing. If you're thinkin', 'Frankie boy! That sounds like it fuckin' sucked!' You are fuckin' A right my friend. It did suck. Then along comes this Air Force chick who tells me it's time for me to get my government issued girlfriends, and I'm thinkin', hey, at least my day's starting to look up a little bit! But wouldn't ya know it, dey's gonna fuck me too! After I took their Oracle test, they tell me I ain't got great prospects here in the states, so they're gonna trade me to another country. I tell them, fuggedaboutit, I'm a fuckin' American! Then they tell me how much better my life's gonna be... So I agree to trade this..." he says, gesturing back to the outside walls of the bar covered in more graffiti than not, "...to this!"

The screen suddenly shifts and suddenly Frank is in a Tuscan villa of some kind, surrounded by fourteen beautiful Italian women, all of them smiling brightly, their ages ranging from what looked to be eighteen to forty, and three or four of them already showing signs of pregnancy. It was impossible to miss how a couple of the girls were pressed hard up against Frank in seeming adoration.

“I live in Italy now! My first partner, Bella, her family has owned this vineyard for almost two hundred years, but when her father, brothers and husband died, she was left with almost no reason to go on. Until I came into her life.” The camera followed Frank in a tracking shot that showed him walking along a pathway in front of a giant Tuscan estate, with row after endless row of grapevines in the background. “Now I know what you’re thinkin’ – Frank! It sounds like you’re just working a new shit job instead of the old one, but I ain’t allowed to work, you hear? Sure, I can walk the grounds, inspect shit, learn about how we’re making wine here, maybe even offer some thoughts and opinions, but I’m not allowed to do anything dangerous or even strenuous. I’m not allowed near heavy machinery; I’m not allowed to work in the vineyards or even drive the truck around the estate. None of that shit’s my job no more. All that’s expected of me is knockin’ up alla these hot broads.”

There was a jump cut, but when it came back, Frank was sitting inside a bedroom that looked like a very expensive estate, sitting on a couch, a Playstation 5 controller in his hand. “My daily schedule looks a little like this – sex, gym time, sex, television time, sex, meal time, sex, playing Call of Duty while streaming on Twitch, sex, another meal and then a last round of sex before I crash for the day and get a good night’s sleep. How the fuck could it get any better than this?”

Suddenly there’s some small print white text that scrolls by at a speed too fast for Jake to read it all, but he caught the word ‘atypical’ amidst the fine print, but Jake decides it’s probably of no concern, because if it had been serious or important, they would’ve made it much bigger than just some tiny words at the bottom of a screen.

“Chiara over there is one of my two bodyguards, and everywhere I go, they make sure I’m safe. Chiara! Show ‘em your gun, it’s badass!” The Italian woman laughs a little, and waves dismissively at the camera. “So what are you waiting for! Sign your paperwork and get yourself a new home today!”

Jake flags down the recruiter, who crouches down alongside him. “So, I won’t be able to own a gun overseas?”

The recruiter shook her head. “No, son, but you wouldn’t be allowed to here much longer anyway, if the MPA passes, and it looks like it’s going to. Men have to be protected and kept safe, and letting them own firearms is just too dangerous.”

He sighed and shook his head. “It doesn’t even feel like America anymore. Get me outta here. I’ll sign whatever you want.”

IB2323 – Feb. 10th, 2021 – Arrival – Indianapolis, Indiana

While the trip took over a week, it mostly seemed to fly by in an instant to Milagros, as having her best friend and her sister with her made the whole trip feel relatively short. The group had made several other stops across Argentina before heading back to the United States, bringing the total number of women in their group up to close to a hundred. They had arrived to a redistribution center in Indianapolis, a town which headquartered Bastian Solutions, one of the largest manufacturers of heavy industrial machinery in the world.

As soon as they’d arrived, they’d been shown a very long video that detailed all the things to expect and know about the Quaranteam serum and its side effects, and Milagros was impressed that not only was the video very thorough, but it was also subtitled in Spanish, for Sofia and Martina, neither of whom spoke particularly good English.

Major Collins had been their shepherd through the whole process and as soon as the video ended, Milagros flagged her over. “Hey Mila, what’s up?” the Major asked.

“So in the video, they talked about a possible regeneration. I’ve always had something of a bad leg, as I get muscle spasms of intense pain now and again. What are the odds I’ll regenerate from that?”

The Major frowned a little and sighed. “I’m not going to lie to you, Mila. Not great. The odds of regeneration are around one in ten, although maybe that’s a minor enough thing that the serum will just fix it on its own anyway. We don’t have a lot of control over the regeneration process. I know we’re trying to figure out how to improve that, but we’re not there yet.”

“I respect your honesty, Major.”

“Now, I came by to show you your ten options,” Major Collins said, holding out an iPad tablet for Milagros to look at. “You’ve got access to all their information, so you can see what your Oracle match was, and key things where you match up and any possible points of concern, although all of these men fall between 90% and 97% in terms of matching up with your tastes. Why don’t you start looking through them, see if anybody catches your eye?”

Milagros took the tablet from the Major, fully expecting to find a sea of faces she couldn’t stand but was instead greeted with nearly a dozen good but not great looking men. They were all reasonably handsome in their own right, but they skewed a little bit older than she might have liked, and maybe a little less adventurous, in looking at their profiles, but then she realized, of course, that most of the adventurous men had probably died during the pandemic. Still, they were good looking enough, and she felt like since they were compatible, they might eventually come to love one another.

Eventually, she’d settled on two possible options, but noticed that one of them has a blue dot next to his name, so she turned the tablet to show the Major. “Major Collins, what does this blue dot mean?”

“Ah, that’s the advantage of going last, Miss Herrera,” the Major said with a chuckle. She reached over and tapped the blue dot and a tiny picture of her best friend Sofia popped up. “Your friend Sofia chose this man, so you have that knowledge to aid in your decision, if you want to go with her, or if you wanted to avoid picking someone who is already paired with someone you know.”

Milagros looked at the man’s profile for a while – Nick Fisher, 43, African-American, PhD in Engineering & Robotics from MIT. Prefers his sexual encounters to be slow and tender. Widower, with an eight-year-old son. Lost his wife, a police officer, to DuoHalo in August of last year.

“This one,” she said tapping Fisher’s picture. “This one will do nicely.”

“You’re sure, Miss Herrera? This is your last chance to back out.”

Milagros smiled up at the Major almost a touch patronizingly. “I’d like my shot now, Major.”

OB646 – Feb. 18th, 2021 – Arrival – Cairo, Egypt

The trip from the United States to Cairo had been miserable, having to travel by ocean liner, and even then, they had been restricted to quarters basically the entire time, for their own safety, or so they’d been told over and over again.

Once they’d arrived in Cairo, Jake was greeted by a few female members of the Egyptian military, women dressed in tan shirts and pants with red berets atop their heads. His contact point was going to be Captain Hafez, a no-nonsense woman who led him quickly into the building, along with the other four Americans that had been sent to Egypt.

He felt a little like he was being rushed, with several things being explained to him all at once, but within the next twenty-four hours, he would be taken to a luxury apartment that would belong to him and would be his home for the foreseeable future. He would be required to always remain within that apartment unless escorted by two members of his personal security team, and even then, he needed to restrict his departures from the apartment to no more than one per week.

Jake thought the whole thing sounds pretty overblown but was told that his security is paramount and that there have been numerous reports of male abductions across the region, men stolen from one country to be traded to others like hostages.

He wasn’t thrilled by all of this, but at this point, Jake figured he was too far along to try and call it off, so he simply accepted what they told him and started focusing on what was next, and at least with that, there were nice things on the horizon.

They told him they had run his Oracle profile against their local database and had come up with a pool of fifty candidates that he can choose from, and they will be sent to his apartment for him to partner up with. His apartment, he was told, was more of a floor of a luxury apartment building and will house up to twenty partners for him.

He was handed a tablet and told to start picking women, with a handful of caveats. He had to pick at least one woman from the first page, as all five of them speak English. He found two of them to be smoking hot, so he selects both of them and moves on. From the second page, he had to pick at least two, as they're security trained. That was a little harder – the women aren't ugly, but they aren't what Jake would consider easy on the eyes either. Eventually he noticed that one of them speaks English, so he picked her and then almost picked the second one at random. The rest of the pool he was given free choice of.

He flipped through page after page of pictures and biographies of women, although he barely stopped to read any of the text, mostly just focusing on the images. He considered the pool to be full of 6's and 7's, with a couple of 8's and 9's scattered in. There were also a few outliers – a Ukrainian blonde who'd been living in Egypt for the last six years, a South African brunette with eyes that practically skullfuck the camera with smoldering intensity, both of whom he picked immediately – but after a while, many of the women almost seem to blend together into a sort of homogenous lump of faces.

After he'd gone through the list, he'd made eight selections, and attempted to hit 'submit,' but nothing happened. After several attempts at poking the button to no avail, he flagged over one of the administrators from the Egyptian Army, who was overseeing the process.

"I can't seem to get it to go."

The woman tapped a bit of Arabic script above the submit button. "You haven't picked enough yet. You must pick at least fourteen."

"Fourteen?" Jake moaned. "I can't handle all that many women being dumped on me at once..."

"They will be paced, but you must pick more. You cannot leave until you pick more."

Over the next twenty minutes, Jake read up on each profile a little more, trying to see if he could find key things that would excite him, and eventually he had bumped his partner count up to fourteen, and when he hit 'submit' the button changed to a green bar that read 'submitted!' along with a yellow happy face that did not accurately portray how Jake was feeling.

He was also given a document to sign which renounced his American citizenship and declared himself a citizen of Egypt, subject to all her laws.

After that, the rest of the day was a bit of a blur, as the Egyptian Army women moved him from the relocation center to a magnificent apartment building that did indeed live up to the hype. He was told that his first batch would arrive tomorrow, and would include Wafaa, his English-speaking partner, and his two bodyguards.

As the Army left him in the comfort of his new apartment, he wondered at what point the Air Force handlers had disappeared and why he hadn't noticed them leaving.

IB2323 – Apr. 15th, 2021 – One-month checkup – Indianapolis, Indiana

"I have to say, Miss Herrera," Major Collins said, "you're looking great."

"Please, call me Mila," she said with a smile and a laugh. "And you have no idea how right you are. When I showed up to my first day at Bastian, I was expecting to be some fledgling tester or scrap engineer, but instead they made me Senior Engineering Manager in R&D! The people there have been so excited to work with me, and it isn't at all like my old job, where people would just ignore me because I'm a woman. Here, my coworkers are more interested in my ideas than my tits."

"How's things going with you and Nick?"

Mila's smile widened even more. "Oh, dios mio, I couldn't be happier. He is a remarkable man – well-educated, reasonable, caring, dedicated and oh so handsome. And you were right, the orgasms are truly beyond even what I could imagine," she added with a giggle.

"I need to swing by your house and check on your friend Sofia, but I hope you two sharing a partner hasn't caused too much of a rift?"

Mila shook her head happily. “Not at all. In fact, it seems like both Sofia and I had been harboring a bit of latent curiosity we’d never explored before we paired up with Nick, and now that we have, we’re closer than ever. It also helps that my sister is just on the other side of town, so if I ever need to talk to someone about the old country or how things used to be, I have either my best friend or my sister a stone’s throw away.”

“That’s all great to hear,” Major Collins said, reaching into her satchel to pull out a manila folder. “Just one last formality then, for you to sign these two sheets of paper, one renouncing your Argentinian citizenship and the other to accept your US citizenship. If you could just sign tho—”

Mila was done signing before Major Collins was done talking.

OB646 – Apr. 18th, 2021 – One-month(ish) checkup – Cairo, Egypt

“Hey Jake, I’m Major Gabriel. Maybe you remember me for your recruitment? I’m just here to do a final check up on you to see how you’re doing,” the Major said to him.

Jake sighed, gesturing for her to come in, although his two bodyguards gave the Major a pat down first, checking for weapons before letting her in. “I mean, I guess I can’t complain too much. C’m on in.”

They moved to sit down in a living room that looked like an overgrown mancave with a television that took up nearly an entire wall, a collection of game consoles below it. “So, Jake, how’ve you been?” the major asked as she sat down in one of the chairs, opening her iPad up to take notes.

“Up and down,” Jake said. “I mean, the apartment is the tits, and I’m banging beautiful women left and right, so that’s great. Most of them don’t speak English, so I have to rely on Wafaa to translate for me quite a bit of the time, and we’ve had some mistakes happen because of translation errors, but we’ve made it all work out okay in the end.”

“Seen much of the city?”

“Nah,” Jake grumbled. “I’m not let out much, although once a week we do go somewhere, just so I can see a little bit more of Cairo. I don’t really have any male friends here, but Wafaa’s been talking about trying to coordinate with other Teams to find some local US ex-pats that I can shoot the shit with. Just hasn’t happened yet.

“So how would you rate your happiness here on a scale of one to ten?”

“Eight on a good day, six on a bad. I mean, I guess I shouldn’t complain, but I do miss how shit used to be, back when I could just get in my pickup and drive. It’s a nice cage, but it’s still a cage, you know what I’m sayin’?”

“Well, that’s all I was really here for, Jake, so it’s been good seeing you...” Major Gabriel rose to her feet and started moving back towards the door, as Jake moved over, trying to see if he could get her to stay a little longer.

“You don’t have to go already, do you, Major?”

“I’ve got plenty of other cases I have to check in on, Mr. McCready, so while I appreciate your enthusiasm, I’m afraid this is where we part ways.”

“Oh. Okay. Well. You can come back anytime, okay?”

“Sure, Mr. McCready.”

The two hugged and Jake winced a little. “You okay, Mr. McCready?”

“I’m fine – the girls convinced me to get a new tattoo, and it stings a bit,” he said, taking off his shirt to show two words written in Arabic on his back, along with OB646 down in the bottom right-hand corner of his back. “It says ‘Heart of Fire’ and I think it looks bad ass.”

Major Gabriel smiled and nodded. “Thanks for seeing me, Mr. McCready. I’ll be back for the six-month eval later,” she said as she made her way out the door and into the elevator. Once the elevator doors opened, she opened his file and made a note about Jake and his new tattoo, which read “Property of Egypt.”

Chapter Twenty-One

April 19th, 2021

He hadn't expected to be waking up just a short hop, skip and a jump away from Pinewood Studios, but sometimes the machinery that surrounded his life was just that much bigger and meaner than he was, and he had no choice but to acquiesce to its demands.

Hollywood being what it was, the amount of shooting time needed in London had been expanded, and the key members of Team Rook had shown up a week or two later than originally planned, but Andy didn't mind, as the news of the delay in shooting had come in during the middle of their honeymoon, which had involved a week in Hawaii, a week in Mexico, a week in Jamaica and a week in Cuba, with regular stops back at the manor in between.

He felt Melody's hand on his shoulder, a smile on her lips, which meant she'd already sent her text message a while ago. "You need to get up, boss," she said to him. "They need you on set in case they need any revisions done on the fly."

"What time is it?"

"Just a little after ten. Em and Sarah have been on set since five, but neither of them wanted to wake you, since they got to sleep earlier than you did last night. Em also has that interview with that UK journalist today, Farah Hassan, so she wanted to have a little bit of extra time to give her while she was in costume and make up. Em felt it was good to give the home press a bone, and liked what she'd seen of Hassan when she'd been back home visiting. The two took Ash, Piper and Niko with them, and Mo and Fi are in New York having their meeting with Fi's publisher. They're probably still asleep, since I don't even think it's daybreak over there yet, so I wouldn't call them for a bit. You were really out of it, so everyone thought it best if you get caught up on sleep."

"Yeah, well, I had to have that video call with the Senator, and so I needed to function on D.C. time, not London time, for at least a few hours," Andy sighed as he sat up. He curled a finger at Melody and she leaned down. He tilted his head up and gave her a soft kiss, partially because he wanted to but mostly because it made the tough-as-nails woman blush each and every time, and he enjoyed that.

"Thanks for letting me sleep in, Mel."

"I think you'd have ignored me if I'd tried to get you up any earlier, boss," Melody chuckled. "But if you want to say thanks to your girl, maybe she could suck you off during the morning shower? I feel a little self-conscious shouting about how I love you fucking me when we're in such a high-end hotel on the movie studio's dime."

"This kind of hotel?" Andy laughed. "I'm sure they've heard much much worse, but sure, I don't mind."

Maybe they took a little bit longer in the shower than he needed, but Melody looked extremely satisfied when they were both drying off, licking the remaining jism from her lips, her skin a little tingly in the post-glow of the serum-induced orgasm. "I'm sure you already probably know this, Andy, but it really is much better with you than it was with Covington. Not just the way you treat me, but the sex itself. He made me feel more like an object than a person, but you go out of your way to make sure I'm having a good time, even when you know you don't have to. I'm just an employee and yet, you're still taking time to cuddle me post orgasm, like that long hug you gave me in the shower. I want you to know that means a lot to me."

"You're not just an employee, Melody," Andy said to her. "I get that you *think* you are, but every employee is still family on one level or another. And you made a mistake throwing in your lot with Covington. You can't let that color the rest of your life. What's that quote from the movie? 'Life's simple. You make choices and you don't look back.' You were given a second chance, and you're making the most of it. Anyone who doesn't respect that is out of their mind."

"I think Piper might still be a little overly cautious around me."

"Well, that's to be expected," Andy chuckled. It still felt strange not having to put on his glasses after he got up or got out of the shower. Twenty years of constantly putting them on meant he felt like

he was forgetting something every time he didn't, but the regeneration had left him with better eyesight than he'd had even when he was younger. "She still wishes Covington would've gotten something more retribution oriented instead of just life in prison, but they need men alive, one way or another, so they weren't going to kill him off. Shit, they aren't even killing off Brian Morrison and he killed someone directly."

"Well, he did do that on Covington's orders."

"So he claimed," Andy sighed, "but it's his word against Covington's, and the jury didn't know who to believe, no matter what any of us said in testimony. Either way, both him and Covington get to spend the rest of their lives in jail, working as human sperm banks. That's just the way it is. The death penalty's a thing of the past, at least for the time being, at least for men. We can't afford any more lives to be lost."

"Can I ask what you and the Senator were talking about last night?" Melody asked him, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. She'd found out that Andy preferred longer hair on women not long after she'd joined the family and had started growing it out without so much as a suggestion from him, according to what Niko had told him a few days ago.

"Sure," Andy said, grinning as he waited for the joke to sink in.

A few seconds later, Melody rolled her eyes and flashed him her most embarrassed grin. "What were you and the Senator talking about last night, oh keeper of the dad jokes?"

"Some last-minute tweaks they're trying to jam into the Male Protection Act," Andy grumbled. "The Senators sort of like to use me as a testing ground, to see just how much of a shitstorm I'll throw up if they try and chip away at our freedoms just a little bit more."

"How bad is it?"

He tossed his hands up. "I think it might just be the most damned piece of legislation since the original Prohibition, but that's also just me speaking from my point of view, and men aren't exactly the largest of voting blocs anymore."

"What are they trying to add?"

"A clause that will let them regulate a man's diet if he weighs too much during any checkup," he sighed. "I told them trying anything diet related would cause the whole thing to be unconstitutional no matter how they try and portray it, and that they'd just end up having to jail most men, which isn't the intended point."

"I can't understand why they're worried about it anyway," Melody told him. "Most of the men I've seen, what with all the sex you're having to have, all of you are probably in the best shape of your lives. Not getting fit wasn't really an option. You're all doing the equivalent of a two-mile jog each day in the equivalent calories burned fucking. Maybe more."

"They seem to feel like there may be some exceptions down at the lower end of the scale, those with a small number of partners," Andy said. "But I keep pointing out that those men are getting saddled with more and more partners as the desire to start ramping up human production increases."

"You have a weird way of saying 'making babies,' boss."

Andy chuckled, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah, that's fair. After looking at numbers and spreadsheets for so long, you start thinking of them *just* as numbers and forget they're people. The folks in Congress are doing everything they can to get America pregnant, even if that includes women who weren't American just a few months ago."

"How's the acceptance rate for Operation: Funnel Cake anyway?" Melody asked as she moved to strap her weapon's holster back into place, pulling on her jacket over it to keep it concealed. Andy had gotten quite appreciative of how well she, Niko and Alexis kept their weapons out of sight, so that he knew they were there, but he wasn't constantly thinking about them.

"I haven't been able to get acceptance and satisfaction rates for outbound, but inbound, it seems like we've made a lot of women very happy at least in the short term," Andy said with relief, pulling on his clothes. He grabbed a Buckethead t-shirt from his suitcase, tugging it on last. "It's the Friends &

Family benefit that's really helped, I think, because everyone brings a slice of home with them, and nobody's run aground in a new country without some of their support system with them. It's definitely going to change the makeup of this country, though, let me tell you. The melting pot just turned into a blender set to puree. I understand why they're making all the new women wait a year before giving them voting rights, though, just so that the fall election isn't affected by them too much."

"How soon is Congress going to vote on the MPA?"

"Within the next day or two, I think," Andy grumbled. "There's still a whole bunch in there that I think is going to go over like a lead balloon, but hey, why would anyone listen to me, right? I'm just one of the men who'd be affected by the whole damn thing, and there aren't a whole lot of those left in Congress anymore."

"What part of it do you think is going to go over the worst?" she asked him as they headed out of their hotel room towards the elevator. Lexi was downstairs, waiting for them outside of the car with the driver the studio had hired for them. It felt a little odd, moving around with so few people with him, but there was something refreshing about it, like he wasn't quite as constricted as he normally was.

"The phasing out of all men from combat/line-of-fire positions in the military across the board. They're still wrestling with whether they can apply that to law enforcement, but I kept telling them if they did it for all police, the bill would be *completely* DOA, because I can't imagine all the cops agreeing to follow it. You'd have thousands of men refusing to turn in their badges and their weapons. Shit, I think trying to do it for the military alone is going to be hard enough, but you can understand where they're coming from there," Andy said, stopping to give Lexi a kiss on the cheek as she scowled at him before quietly laughing. "Even if it's just military and doesn't include cops, I think that's going to be the biggest bone of contention in the bill." Andy climbed in the back of the car and Melody scooted in next to him as Lexi moved to sit in the front passenger seat, next to the driver, whose name was Tulip.

"You think most of the bill is fine?"

"I think most of it is common *sense* at this point," Andy said as the driver started up the e-tron car and drove out from the underground parking area. "Not letting men smoke? Not letting them be firefighters or engage in high-end, risky behavior? That's all just sensible from a practical point of view. But there's limits to what you can dictate that people can and can't do. They struck the 'no foreign travel' clause, thank God, because otherwise we'd be the most isolationist country ever, with women being unable to go abroad for longer than a week or so. I'm not real keen on the 'required kids' clause, but that number seems to keep changing, and if it settles at just 1-2 kids a year, then *maybe* I can understand that, but at one point they were talking 3-5 kids a year per Team, regardless of size, and that's just insane. Nobody's ready for that kind of sudden pressure in their lives yet. Nor do we as a species need that much to recover."

"The system needs shaking up, boss," Lexi said from the front seat. "We're going to need to repopulate the planet, and right now, with the small enough percentage of men we have, we're still far closer to extinction than anybody would like."

Andy scoffed a little bit. "I know the casualties are hard for any of us to wrap our minds around, but let's do it in cold hard numbers. According to our estimates, we lost about a billion people in the Kill Zone. That leaves around 7 billion people on the planet before we start clipping off casualties. About another billion of that are people aged ten and younger, who are immune to the effects of DuoHalo. That leaves us with a starting point of 6 billion. Half of that 6 billion, give or take, were men. The ballpark estimate is that 80% of the planet's men have been killed, give or take 7%. That means there are somewhere in the range of three to seven hundred million men left alive on the planet. Compared to the 2.4 to 2.8 billion women left alive. Yeah, it's a cataclysmic event, but life will carry on. It's not like there's only ten thousand men left in the world. If we were looking at those kinds of numbers, then yeah, I get it, every man is basically a semen bank you keep locked away. But the planet was looking at overpopulation before all of this, so there's some benefits to it all as well. Trying to lock

a generation of men in an ivory tower ain't the way to go about solving this problem, though."

"I'd sleep sounder knowing you weren't constantly in harm's way, boss," Lexi told him. "But I get that you don't want to be kept under glass either. I'm glad they took some of my feedback and incorporated that as well, otherwise we would've been intentionally in violation of a lot of those rules on day one. No way in hell I'm letting anyone lo-jack you."

"What's on my schedule today?" Andy asked. "Anyone know?"

"First few hours they're going to show you some of the footage shot spliced together. It's too early to call it a rough cut, but they want to make sure you think it's falling in line with how you see it translating from page to screen, and then you'll meet with the producer to give any of your notes," Melody told him. "After that, it's dinner with the director and the producer together, then a few hours on set, letting you have the chance to tweak any of the dialogue that actors are having trouble with. You'll ride back with Em and Sarah tonight after they're done shooting."

"Right, right," Andy nodded. "So, a week here, then everybody's back to the Bay so the movie can do its two weeks of on-location shooting for stuff they can't or won't fake with CG, although I imagine they won't need Sarah for much, if any of that, and even Em's stuff shouldn't be too long. And then the Oversight meeting in mid-May."

Melody laughed a little bit. "Plus, y'know, Niko probably giving birth first week of May, and Ash probably giving birth late May."

Andy chuckled, nodding. "Y'know, the little things." He looked out the window and muttered a single word beneath his breath. "T'oeel. Maybe that'll work."

"What's that, boss?" Melody asked him.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," he said as the car pulled up to the gate at Pinewood Studios. The guard checked their ID, did a quick sweep of the car and then passed them through, letting them head towards the buildings. "Where are they filming today?"

"Some second unit stuff is being done on the main stage, and the main shooting is over at the Underwater Stage, so you don't have to worry about onset dialogue fixing today."

"Good," Andy said. "It'll be nice to see what they've shot so far and get a handle on how the movie's coming together before I have to sit down and talk with anybody about it."

The film's choice of director had been something of a controversial one – the man's name was Alex Proyas, an Australian director with a very uneven track record. His most recent film, 2016's "Gods Of Egypt," had tanked at the box office, but Andy was a *big* fan of one of the director's earlier movies, a film called "Dark City," which he felt showed a good understanding of the sort of vibe and atmosphere the Druid Gunslinger books had always fallen under. Andy had been willing to accept Proyas as director on the movie, as long as there was an understanding that he would strongly stick to the script, and not try to add or remove too much from screenplay draft that Andy had okayed shortly after Christmas. The studio had insisted that Proyas had plenty of green screen experience, and that he could bring the production in under budget, even if he took a little bit of extra time shooting it.

For Andy, the quality of the thing was all that mattered.

The director's lead assistant brought them into the screening room and sat them down before turning on the footage, which was definitely still far too early to be called a 'rough cut' but was far enough along to let Andy see how the film was developing.

Andy had his laptop out to let him take notes, but for the most part, Proyas was on the right track. The pacing felt right, Chris Kane was *perfect* in his interpretation of Dale Sexton and the director had always chosen angles to heighten the mood of the shot, not to detract from it. In fact, he only really had three major notes they would need to talk about. It was the most relaxed Andy had felt in months, as if a giant weight had been lifted off his head.

From there, the producer's assistant brought the three of them out of the viewing room to meet in a private lounge, and this was the meeting Andy was most nervous about. "So, Andy, what do you think?" Dana Goldberg asked him as he came to sit down at the table with her for lunch.

Goldberg was the Chief Creative Officer of Skydance and had the sort of powerful track record of success that made him a little nervous, from giant mega-hits like the Mission: Impossible movies to highly successful TV like Altered Carbon or Condor. Skydance and Working Title Productions were the two production houses behind the movie.

“Well, all the key points are in place, so I think you’re most of the way there,” Andy said, shaking hands as he got comfortable. “In fact, I’ve really only got three major notes to talk about. Most of the rest of it is minor quibble stuff.”

“You’re the father of this whole story, so let me hear your concerns,” she said. “I had them prepare lunch for us in advance, so I hope a chicken cheesesteak’s okay.”

“I certainly won’t say no to that,” Andy laughed, as a waiter brought out a can of Mezzo Mix, setting it down for him. “Wow, you’ve really done your homework on me.”

“We didn’t want you to be disappointed. Now, concerns. You have them; I want to fix them.”

“Sure, the first one’s just sort of a tonal question – I noticed you haven’t done any of the sort of flashback stuff that’s peppered through the story. And I understand most of them, but I feel like if you don’t include the scene of young Dale and Charlotte being told who’s going to be the Gunslinger, it’s going to muddy up the relationship they have to the audience who isn’t familiar with the books,” Andy said. “And I realize, the more into the books you get, the more complicated that relationship gets, but the last thing you want to do is start them off on a semi-adversarial relationship. They antagonize each other, but that’s brothers and sisters for you.”

“You’re absolutely right, and I agree with you, it’s a scene we *will* be shooting – we just need to find the right cast for the younger version of the Sexton kids, and the right actor to play their father. Any thoughts? Who’d you see in the role?”

“He’s too big for this sort of thing, but Colin Farrell.”

“Are you kidding? This is the sort of thing Colin *loves* to do – come in for a small cameo that he can really sink his teeth into. And, even more importantly, he’s still alive. I’ll make some calls. What else? What’s next?”

“The second is that I notice you haven’t shot either of the scenes with Seymour in them, and they don’t seem to be on the shooting schedule for on location shooting.”

“Alex doesn’t seem to think we need them.”

Andy frowned a little bit, shaking his head. “Okay, this hill I’ll die on. Seymour’s only in two scenes in the first book, but those two scenes are pivotal, because the first one starts Dale down the path, and the second one leads into the resolution of the whole damn story! You can’t cut them out of the script, otherwise it’s going to feel like the audience is missing steps to make the mystery work.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, so we can talk those out with Alex over dinner,” Dana told him. “What’s the last one?”

Andy smirked a little bit. “Well, the last is that the ending of your movie implies you’re going to roll on into making ‘The Trouble With Werebears’ next.”

“What’s the problem there?”

“The problem’s threefold,” Andy chuckled. “First and foremost, it’s probably my worst book, and while it’s got some defenders, even I think it’s something of a mess structurally. I’m not sure what the hell I was doing with all the constant flashbacks to Dale’s childhood. Padding for content, probably.”

“It’ll give us a chance to bring back Colin for an even bigger part, and we can likely fix the book in the screenplay phase,” Dana said. “What’s the second part of the problem?”

“The second part of the problem is that while Trouble is the next book in the story chronologically, it was published much later, and the next book published was one of the better ones, even though it’s down a ways in Dale’s timeline.”

“We decided it’s best to adapt them in the order they appear as stories, although we might just skip ‘The Wraith’s Lexicon’ since it’s sort of all over the place in terms of the story’s timeline. Trust us,

we've got market research to back this up. What's the last thing bothering you?"

He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Well, the *biggest* problem is that you don't currently have the rights to anything other than the first book in the series," he smirked. "You folks never optioned anything past that."

"Does someone else hold the options?"

"No no," Andy said, "I still do."

"Good, because I've sent an offer letter to your agent, telling her we want to acquire the rights for all the books in the Druid Gunslinger series, including the prequel novella and the next few we know you're writing, in exchange for both the cash offer and the percentage on the back end for each of the movies. So if they do well, you do well. If they don't do so well, you still got paid some for each one we tried."

"That's... a rather large vote of confidence," Andy said.

"We think this is the beginning of a big franchise for us," she told him, "And it doesn't hurt that you've got more female characters in these books than you do male, which will make casting significantly easier. Take your time. Talk the contract over with your agent. I think it's in everyone's best interests, and you still retain creative control over the project, although not final cut. If you don't agree to the deal, it'll just be a nod to the fact that there's more books in the series, but c'mon... this is good business for everyone involved."

"Same director for the next one?"

"Well, that's the thing – we've had a screenwriter working on adapting the second book already, and so we're thinking we could move into production on the second one while the first is in post and f/x, just to get a head start on it."

"I guess if you've already got people for the young Dale and Charlotte, you could probably start in with all of that first, since I think Emily's booked up for a bit with the television show she's going to be working on in the summer and early fall."

Dana waved her hand. "We can make all the schedules work, don't worry about that. So it sounds like in principle we're agreed?"

"No closing handshake until I've heard from Trish, but yeah, in principle, I can get behind that."

"Great. We'll work out the particulars between agents and make sure everybody's happy in the long run."

A little while later, the director came in to join them, and Andy made his case for including the two scenes with Seymour the omnisexual unicorn, and the director argued that they were already worried about length, but Andy had a number of places where he was happy to suggest trimming his own material if that was the concern. At the end of the day, the two scenes would be filmed and included in the movie. Andy had even suggested they get Patton Oswalt to do the voice, although Dana suggested they contact Tilda Swinton.

After that was the part he was most looking forward to, as he walked onto a movie set for the first time, a little surprised how sort of small it felt in scale, despite the scene being depicted being rather huge. Much of the backdrop was a green screen that would be filled in later, simply because they hadn't been able to find a suitable location to double as Sexton Manor anywhere, so they were creating one out of whole cloth, parts of the foreground a set but the general structure itself living nowhere except inside the author's head and the audience's mind.

Still, he was here, and there was even a chair with his name on the back. "Blake Conrad, creator" it read, boldly.

He sat down in it and took a minute to marvel that he was there.

"Mr. Conrad?" a voice from behind him said. "Hey there. Just wanted to introduce myself while I had a second. I'm—"

"Christian Kane," Andy laughed. "I know exactly who you are, man. You were my first and pretty much *only* choice to play Dale Sexton, so I'm very glad you took care of yourself."

“Thank you kindly, sir. What do I call you? Mr. Conrad? Mr. Rook?”

“Jesus, Chris, call me Andy,” he said with a laugh. “I was a huge fan of you in *Leverage*, so I don’t know what we would’ve done if you hadn’t been interested in the part.”

“I’d heard talk that you were interested in me as an actor from a friend of mine who’d read all your books, and she sent me the series, as well as a video of you from that convention you were at where you said you could see me playing him,” Kane said to him. “I hope what we’ve done honors the very complicated character you’ve put onto the page, and that you enjoy my performance.”

“I watched a few hours of the footage earlier today, Chris, and now more than ever, I’m convinced we’ve got our *Gunslinger*.”

“I appreciate the hell out of that, Andy,” Kane laughed, patting him on the back. “If you and your Team have got time before you leave, I’d love to share a meal with you and pick your brain about what’s not on the page.”

“That sounds great, Chris,” Andy replied. “Not tonight bu—”

Andy was mid-sentence when the whole world slowed down suddenly, like everything was being put at 10% speed, and while Andy couldn’t move, still in the middle of saying that he couldn’t tonight when a metallic, disembodied voice flashed inside of his head, offering him a choice with no other relevant information.

query:blockorcharge?

‘What?’ Andy thought to himself. ‘I don’t understand.’

priorityquery:blockorcharge?

‘Uh, block, I guess.’

Andy’s right hand snapped up and into the air and his fingers curled around an *escrima* stick that was flying towards his head, catching it, even while he continued his sentence. “—t we should be able to make time sometime this week,” he finished, even as he wondered what the hell had just happened.

“I’m *so* sorry about that, Mr. Conrad,” a fight coordinator said, running over towards them. “We were sparring to get ready for the next scene and it just slid out of my hand!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Andy said, still not entirely sure what his body had just done, turning to glance at the *escrima* stick in his hand, just as surprised as everyone else was.

“How the hell did you do that, Andy?” Kane laughed. “I barely even saw it coming!”

“If I said ‘magic,’ would you believe me?” Andy said, his own voice filled with uncertainty.

“I just might, Andy! I just might!”

“Then let’s go with that for the time being...”

‘I *really* gotta call Phil,’ Andy thought to himself. ‘What the actual *fuck* was that?’

Sarah came bounding over towards him, dressed in the costume of the Barbarian Queen of the West Coast Elves, looking ridiculously gorgeous, even if he thought the hairstyle was a little overblown for what he’d imagined the Queen to have. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him off his chair a bit suddenly. “What the hell just happened, Andy?”

“Not entirely sure myself, Sarah,” Andy said. “I just felt my arm moving up on its own.” No need to mention the voice in his head, he figured. “Some kind of reflex defense system, maybe? Haven’t got a clue what the hell that was.”

“That would’ve really fucking hurt!” she whimpered. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too,” he said, pulling back only enough for him to tilt his head up and kiss the tallest of his brides. “How’s shooting been?”

She burst into giggles, shaking her head. “Only *you* could nearly be clubbed in the fucking head and then want to know how shooting was,” she teased. “It’s fine. It’s much fucking better now that you’re here, but it’s fine.”

Lexi and Melody sprinted over, shaking their heads. “That was a freak fucking accident,” Lexi said, “but I should’ve been—”

“What, standing on top of me?” Andy laughed. “I’m *fine*, Lex. Nobody panic.”

“Reflexes like that, you could be on the stunt team,” Kane laughed.

“I’m surprised they’re even letting you *do* your own stunts at this point,” Andy sighed.

“Although I guess there’s not a ton of hand-to-hand combat in the first book, and the spell slinging and gunfighting will all be CG.”

“Oh yeah,” Kane said. “The guns *themselves* are going to be CGI’d in later. They’re just solid green props the general *shape* of the guns, because we can’t bring anything that was at any point an operational gun onto the set. New safety regulations, otherwise, we couldn’t get insured. It’s going to be a weird wild world working on films from now. Television too.”

Emily came over to join them, a darker skinned woman in tow with a digital recorder in one hand, the interview clearly still going on. Emily was dressed in the Charlotte Sexton costume, and it was the first time he’d seen her in character, and he knew this new role of hers was going to break hearts of tons of men all across the world all over again, those who had finally gotten over their crush of Dahlia Hairtrigger, only to find she’d grown up into even more of a bad ass. He was glad to see they’d taken the note about her not wearing a skirt most days because her outfits typically focused on practical over appearance. “How do I look?” she said, giving him a twirl.

“Radiant as ever,” Andy said, moving over to give her a kiss, one he was a little surprised that Emily held onto as long as she did. “How’s Pinewood? Just how you remember it?”

“Honestly, Andrew, something has *changed* about the people here,” Emily said, her arms still around his neck, grinning that she’d gotten a bit of makeup on his face. “It’s almost as if this Gemivax version of Phil’s serum has removed a collective stick out of everyone’s ass.”

“Maybe they’re all like you, Em, and have had something else jammed up there instead,” Sarah teased. “You’ve certainly taken quite a liking to it.”

Emily glowered at Sarah for a second before glancing over at Farah. “Please do not include any of that in your story, please.”

“Are you sure? It makes you a lot more relatable, Mrs. Rook, trust me. The first time I...” Farah said with a grin before noticing Emily’s slightly agitated glare. “Sorry. I forget how easy it is now to overshare. If you insist.”

“Ignore her,” Andy said with a chuckle. “You write your story and include whatever you think makes her most relatable to your audience. And if you think that her enjoying a bit of back door action humanizes her—”

“Andrew!” Em giggled, blushing a deep shade of red. “It most certainly does not!”

“Let the journalist do her job, Em. She’s not out to do a hit piece on you.” Andy turned to look at Farah with a slight smirk. “And if she is, well, I’m sure she’ll rethink that lest she imagine your rabid fandom dismantling her bit by bit.”

“I’m just here to do a profile piece on Emily, and a bit of a preview about the movie,” Farah said. “And also talk a bit about how with filming starting back up at Pinewood how life is starting to get back to whatever the new normal is. I won’t put her in a bad light. The only thing she’s got to worry about is me maybe being a little too flirtatious...”

Andy had to trust his instinct, but he felt like Hassan was telling the truth, but he supposed all they could do was wait and see. Ash and Niko had been sitting off to the side, staring at an iPad, but they sighed and turned to look at him. “You’d better look at this, babe,” Ash said as she turned the tablet to show what they’d been looking at.

The headline was all he needed to see.

“Men’s Protection Act Passed Overwhelmingly In Congress.”

“Well, *shit*.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

April 28th, 2021

What a week it had been. Andy had spent most of it on set, helping polish and rework scenes so they played better, as he'd been trying not to think about the Men's Protection Act going into law. He and Phil had also been playing phone tag, so he'd been unable to get clarification about what was going on in terms of the weird little short-circuit his body had done to prevent him from being hit in the head with an escrima stick. Phil had been adamant that they only talk in person for a while, as if he no longer fully trusted the communications lines. That had certainly set off a few alarm bells in Andy's head, as had the extremely exhausted tone he'd heard in his friend's voice.

During the last few days, they'd stopped by Em's London apartment and spent the last few days camped there, although Andy learned how much he disliked the paparazzi hanging around all the time, trying to get pictures of him and the rest of The Rooks. At one point, one of them had tried holding a camera up and over a wall and Melody had shattered the lens with a well-thrown rock.

It was good to see some people were starting to be out and about, though, because it meant the whole world was starting to adapt to life under the new normal. He, Ash, Fi, Melody and Lexi had even stopped and had breakfast in a nice little corner pub one morning right before they left.

Andy was happy to back on U.S. soil, though, and it didn't feel like as many eyes were on him. As much as it had pained her, Niko had agreed it was finally time for her not to be part of his regular patrol and security, especially since her due date was a week away. It was probably for the best that she simply start getting ready to be a mother.

The house had gone through several changes, and one of the larger bedrooms had been converted into a nursery. Jade had decided to take on the role of house nanny for the foreseeable future, and she seemed genuinely excited about being up in the middle of the night, making sure the house was fully stocked, especially since Ash's twins were only going to be a few weeks behind Niko's baby. She'd set the nursery right up next to her room and had already started preparing to be up during the nights keeping tabs on the babies.

That was still, hopefully, a week or so away, though, and today, Andy, Fi and Ash were having lunch with Phil, Linda and Violet at a place called Cliff House on the western edge of San Francisco. Andy had been surprised that Phil had wanted them to meet outside of New Eden, but assumed Phil had his reasons. Violet was keeping watch, along with Melody and Alexis.

Cliff House had been operating on the edge of shutdown for years, and the closure due to the epidemics hadn't done them any favors. They had reopened, but the entire place was empty except for the group of them, and Andy wondered if that meant they were still going to have to shut down. They did have one of the best views anywhere around, but the menu certainly wasn't cheap, not that Andy worried about that kind of thing as much as he used to.

"So what are we doing here, Phil?" Andy asked as they sat down at the table. "What's so important that we can't just have lunch in New Eden?"

"I wanted to be out of the office, because things are getting strange the more research I do, and I want you to be an outside objective observer for me, to make sure I'm not jumping to any conclusions that I can't back up," Phil said with a sigh. He looked ragged around the edges. "You said a week ago you had something you wanted to talk to me about regarding the serum?"

"Yeah, I was on the set with Em and Sarah, and they were practicing some fight choreography off to one side to me and—"

"You heard a voice in your head?" Linda asked him, a wry smile on her lips. "Tell me you did. It'll make me feel *oh so vindicated*."

Andy looked at her in shock as next to her, Phil was simply shaking his head. "You didn't... did you, Andy?"

"I... I did," Andy admitted. "It was like I think the nanobots inside of my bloodstream were speaking directly to me."

"What did they say?" Phil asked him.

"It was strange... it was like... block or charge," Andy said. "Like that guy on Twitter always says. But it was very much a question, and it wanted a response."

"What did you choose?"

"Block," Andy said. "And as soon as I did, my arm shot up and caught the escrima stick out of the air, like it was nothing, like it was something I could do all the time."

Phil looked over at Linda. "That sound about right?"

She nodded. "Sounds like about what's happened to me. The question was phrased differently, but yeah, it seems like the same sort of thing I've gone through a couple of times."

"What the hell was it?" Andy asked them.

"We *think* it's exactly what you *think* it was... the nanobots making contact, offering you one of two options to help you deal with a matter of self-preservation," Phil said. "I suspect the other option would've been to treat the incoming stick as a threat rather than an accident, and to fling it back at whoever let it fly your way."

"Well, I'm certainly glad *that* didn't happen," Andy said. "Should I expect to be hearing more from our tiny robotic friends? I wasn't aware they could *do* that. There haven't been any reports of that sort of thing in the documentation you've been providing to Oversight."

"You can't just keep every discovery about this serum secret, Phil," Fiona said.

"Before Andy came forward, I mostly only had Linda's word for it, and while I believe her, it's also only happened a few times for her."

"What's 'a few?'" Andy asked.

"Three, each in moments where split second decision making was crucial," Linda said.

"Each time you or Phil were in danger?"

"Once I was, once Phil was and the last time... well, the last time I think things would've gotten dramatically out of hand if I hadn't acted the way that I did," Linda sighed, picking up her glass of water. "I've tried loads of times since then to try and have conversations with them, tried talking *at* them... all to no avail."

"If it's happened to you and it's happened to me, it's probably happened to loads of other people," Andy said.

"Other people, yes," Phil corrected. "*Loads*, no. There's a handful of things that we've figured out probably contributed towards this, and it's going to be a lot less likely than you think. First off, we're certain it *can* only happen in very large teams."

"Define 'very large.'"

"Twenty or more."

"What're you at these days, anyway, Phil?"

"Twenty-one," Phil said.

"Slacker," Andy teased.

"Don't think that one extra person puts you ahead, my friend," Phil shot back with a smirk. "As far as we can tell, Teams are factored in terms of 5s, so twenty-one and twenty-two partners are exactly the same, other than one other person's needs to look after."

"What, like tiers?"

"Exactly. Tier 1 Teams – 1-5 partners plus core. Tier 2 – 6-10, Tier 3 – 11-15, Tier 4 – 16-20, Tier 5 – 21-25, Tier 6 – 26+. You're not even top tier," Phil chuckled. "I'm not either, though, so don't worry about it. Besides, we're starting to think Tier 6s may have additional complications to them."

"...like what?"

"Don't worry about it for now, at least until I can get more empirical evidence," Phil said. "I don't have enough groups with data to feel comfortable drawing conclusions yet. I'm only mentioning

it to you because I know you don't frighten easily, and just in case you were thinking about possibly making your Team bigger..."

"I'm *not* thinking of making my Team *bigger*, Phil," Andy scoffed. "If anything, I wanted to make sure the Team I have is rock solid. That's why I asked you for the thing I did. Speaking of which, did you bring it?"

"I did, but we aren't finished talking about the other thing yet," Phil replied. "Anyone else in your team reported hearing robotic voices in their heads?"

"I'd have mentioned it to you if they did, Phil, and I'd have told you about it sooner except that you don't want me discussing sensitive shit over the phone for some reason."

"I've *got* my reasons, Andy, and they're *good* ones. There's some strange shit going on right now, and I'm pretty sure I'm being kept out of the loop of some of it."

"Not trusting the phone lines, though, Phil?" Aisling asked. "That's some Cold War, black bag super spy shit right there."

"That's what you do when people start keeping you out of the loop."

"What are you talking about, Phil? Why would anyone keep *you* out of the loop on this kind of thing?" Andy said annoyed. "You're one of the goddamn *inventors* of it. You should be in the know on everything involved with this damn serum."

"Yeah, that's how *I* feel about it too, Andy, but it seems like the government has other ideas," Phil grumbled. "I think they saw the regenerative applications of the serum and thought, 'Hey, what else can we make the thing do?' And decided I was 'too close' to the issue, or maybe that I was 'too important to be distracted' with whatever side gigs they wanted the serum to be applied to. So I'm pretty certain they've got a bunch of different teams working on different aspects of the serum, trying to get it to do things other than what it was originally intended for."

"Like what?"

Linda placed her hand on Phil's shoulder. "Well, not necessarily beyond what it was *originally* originally intended for, baby," she said to him. "We're fairly certain there's some focus on getting the regeneration aspects of the serum back towards the forefront of the serum's application, or maybe they're trying to make a breakaway offshoot of the Quaranteam serum that just focuses on that, but as far as we can tell, nobody's had any real luck in getting that one aspect out of the serum without it being entangled in everything else."

"The regeneration aspect," Phil said, toying with a silver spoon, as Phil constantly seemed to be fidgeting with something in his hands, "it's definitely got a scaling element to it. It's not universally consistent, but there's some definite correlation to Team size. Larger Teams get stronger regenerations, they have stronger protection, and now we've got this whole defensive blip contact."

"Anyone else?"

Phil paused for a moment before he chose his next words carefully. "Do you remember me mentioning the name Isaac Gosher?"

"Isn't he the record holder for largest Team here in the States?"

"Yeah, twenty-nine women all bonded to him, last we spoke. He's up to thirty-one now. Might be the record holder for largest Team in the world, but I doubt it. A couple of women in the security aspect of his Team have reported brief blips like you were telling me about, but they've got lots of odd reports all the time. Some truly weird oddities, but nothing earth shattering. Yet, anyway."

"Weird oddities like what?" Andy's frown intensified as Phil didn't answer him. "Don't you think that's the thing you want to *report* Phil?"

"Three reports are enough for me to start *studying* it, Andy, but the last thing I want to do is keep lobbing hand grenades about how many unexpected side effects our cure has at the President," Phil sighed. "The woman's already half a step away from a heart attack, and I just keep on exacerbating things for her every other week."

"There's other things we need to be worried about?" Andy asked.

Phil waved his hand. “Like I said, I’ve got a whole lot of little outlier issues that I’m investigating and I’m not going to burden anyone with any of them until I’ve got more conclusive proof than I do right now.”

“Phil, I’m not just the guy from Oversight, okay? We’ve been friends, what, ten, fifteen years?” Andy said. “You can’t carry all this weight on your own.”

“Can and will and you just watch me, Andy,” Phil said, rolling the spoon around a little more. “Don’t worry. When I’ve got something demonstrable, something provable, your name is the first one on my list of people to call. Some of this stuff seems too crazy even for me to believe, so I definitely have to be sure it’s really doing what I *think* it’s doing before I tell anyone else. Otherwise you and everyone else is just going to think I lost my mind somewhere along the way, and none of this shit is going to get studied like it needs to be.”

“Phil,” Fiona said. “We’re family. You can at least give us a clue as to what kinds of things you’re looking into.”

“That sort of intense linkup you felt on your wedding day? That ability for Piper to be able to pick up the scents not only of Andy but anyone in your Team? Sheridan and Tala’s extra sensitive tripwires?”

As soon as Ash and Fi raised their hands to their faces, Andy knew people had been keeping things from him again. “Sheridan and Tala’s whatnow?”

“We... we didn’t think you needed to know, Andy,” Fiona said with a little giggle. “Just because it doesn’t really affect anything.”

“I think *I* should get a say in that, don’t you, ladies?”

“Not *really*,” Ash said with a slight laugh. “We told Phil about it because it seemed like something he should know about, but it wasn’t going to really affect you, so we let the two of them keep it to themselves, although I guess they won’t be *too* mad now that it’s out.”

“What the *hell* are you two talking about?”

“Maybe as a result of them going so long between priming and imprinting, or maybe just because of their genetics, we’re not sure,” Phil said with a slight grin. “It’s *likely* it’s a side effect of the time span spent in between priming and imprinting, since they’re genetically pretty different, but I haven’t found anyone who *wants* to test this for themselves, considering we’re basically done imprinting people here in the States, barring a few holdouts. Sheridan and Tala are what we call ‘hyperorgasmic,’ meaning you can trigger an orgasm in either of their bodies with almost no effort at all, Andy. *Just* you.”

Andy was somewhere between amused and annoyed, the two emotions pushing and pulling on him in a sold struggle before amusement won out, realizing that Ash was right, and that it didn’t actually affect him all that much. “Is *that* why they both always looks so fucking exhausted after we have our sessions?” he finally said. “Or why they tend to come at me as a pair?” The look on his face had both of his partners lost in giggle fits. “How many—”

“Sheridan says she usually loses count around twenty or so, and Tala swears she’s been in excess of fifty more than once,” Ash said with a smirk. “Honestly, Andy, I think Tala’s losing weight because of it. They both practically go comatose after their encounters with you, and we figured you’d notice sooner or later, but then again, you’re so overwhelmed with women, it’s okay that you haven’t.”

“They’re okay with this?”

“Andy, baby,” Ash said, placing her hand on top of Andy’s. “If they weren’t, we would’ve said something. But that’s why Tala and Sheridan tend to come at you together, and why they’ll often try and rope in a third play partner, just to give them an intermission so they can catch their breath. That’s all it really means. Neither of them wants you to treat them any different or go easy on them because of it, though, so you best not suddenly adjust how you act around them.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Andy chuckled, rolling his eyes a little. “I thought we all agreed no more secrets in the house, though.”

“It was decided this wasn’t really a *secret* so much as a condition, and nobody wanted you getting self-conscious about it, especially since it involved Sheridan, and even though she’s told you it’s water under the bridge, you still have a little hangup about having put her place in the Team at risk,” Fiona said. “The last thing *she* wanted especially was another thing getting in your head when it came to spending time with her.”

“So you can’t let it affect you, Andy,” Ash said. “Otherwise I have to hurt you, and nobody wants that.”

“I’ll call Lexi and Melody to stop you,” he chuckled in response.

“Oh, they’ll back my play as long as I don’t break anything,” Ash giggled. “Just don’t overthink it, and you’ll be fine, baby.”

“I’ll just try and keep it in mind, in case I can tell they need a breather halfway through,” Andy said with a wry smile. “Yeah, okay, I suppose those kinds of things are fine to keep secret to surprise me with later.”

“So yes, if anyone else in you Team’s going to get brief bits of contact from the nanobots, it’s probably going to be those on your security team, so probably wise to let Niko, Lexi and Melody know about it, just so they can be aware if it’s happening that it’s in their best interests to go along with it rather than fight it,” Linda said to Andy. “How’s Niko doing anyway?”

“Eager as hell to get our son out of her belly,” Andy chuckled. “She’s got all the typical weird pregnancy craving combinations – peanut butter and marshmallow, pickles and cheese, onions and chocolate... you name it. Her back hurts on and off.”

“Not as much as mine does,” Ash grumbled. “But then again, she’s only hauling one around, while I’ve got a pair, so I’m looking forward to them showing just as much as Niko is.”

“Anything strange we should expect?”

“If anything, you’re at the optimal point to have a kid, Andy,” Phil said. “The children who’ve been born to Quaranteamed parents thusfar have all been *insanely* healthy. Like, beyond the pale, way outside of even statistical anomaly category of healthy. None of them have come prematurely. None of them required turning or C-sections. No birth defects, no birthmarks, nothing outside of the ordinary. Generally even the time spent in labor hasn’t been excessive, with most women reporting between 12 and 16 hours of labor if it’s their first child, or as short as 4 to 8 if it’s not. We’re recommending that women breastfeed for the first six months before starting to introduce outside foods.”

“Are they getting nanobots through the breast milk?” Andy asked.

“They *are* but of a different *variety*. They’re in much, *much* smaller numbers, but those that are sent in are designed to essentially ensure everything’s running smoothly for the child’s earliest phases. They don’t recycle into the mother – the dead nanobots simply pass out in the child’s stool. The craziest thing about Quaranteam babies is that they don’t tend to wake up as much during the nights. They sleep *incredibly* fast. They’re completely immune to both DuoHalo and Covid and... *shit and* a lot of other viruses and diseases. But they don’t have active nanobots running in their system beyond the handful they get from their mother’s milk that are usually flushed out of their system within a day or two of arrival.”

“Nothing we should be actually *worried* about, though?”

“Nothing that *we*’ve found, but keep in mind, that’s not the lead focus of my research these days,” Phil said. “I’m mostly focused on expanding the Sergei Swerve Solution.”

“How’s *that* coming?”

“Well, it’s being rolled out sparingly across the country, starting last week, under some *very* strict oversight,” Phil said. “We’ve included the rule that the person being reimprinted has to be wearing headphones blasting white noise the whole time. We aren’t explaining *why* to anyone, but it’s been made mandatory as part of the program, and there is always going to be an overseer in the room until the reassignment’s complete. We’re claiming that’s for ‘medical’ reasons, but the overseers know what to look for and watch out for, to make sure nobody’s trying to say anything to the person being

reassigned. It's a known risk, but part of agreeing to be reassigned, a woman signs away any liability if something goes wonky during the reassignment. Best we can do. And it's been working well enough so far. With Eve's help, I've been able to amp up the resistance it provides, so any two people have about a 65-70% resistance, just as a paired couple. And that's any singular couple. Two men. Two women. People who are trans. That's the best progress we've made in months. The resistance is strong enough that DuoHalo might debilitate them some, but it's basically non-fatal in anyone who's gotten any version of the Quaranteam serum. So I'm considering that a big win."

"Any luck in changing the rest of it?"

Phil shook his head. "You'd be amazed at how adaptive the nanobot's programming is at this point. They're iterating each time they go through another cycle. They're constantly changing and morphing on what I expect them to be doing, so there's not a whole lot I can do to them beforehand. I don't know that I'm ever going to be able to break the lock/key system that seems to be hard coded into them. I mean, maybe given a few decades, but at that point, I think people are already going to be so set into their ways that what's the point?"

"It's that ingrained?"

"It's beyond ingrained – it's integral. And worse, the system adapts to reinforce that bit of coding, meaning the further down you are into a Team's numbers, the harder it would be to break it down now. I mean, yes, if we'd had the Sergei Swerve at the start, we could've just used that, and gotten most people up to strong resistance in a single pairing, but that wouldn't have done a damn thing to make up for the huge death tolls we had to men across the board," Phil sighed. "On top of that, non-traditional pairings done with the Swerve have a whole list of complications we have to keep an eye out for, which makes it even more messy."

"Okay, so let me ask a hypothetical example, mostly because I'm pretty sure they wouldn't take this option even if it was given. If, say, my two staff members Katie and Jenny, wanted to be deassigned from me and reassigned to each other, what sorts of complications would they be looking at?" Andy asked.

Phil gently threw up his hands. "There's a bunch, the biggest of which is that when one of them died, the other would probably die almost immediately after. We don't know how to do a Dead Man's Switch with non-traditional pairings, because what if there aren't any testicles involved? What if there's two sets of testicles? How do we determine which one is the lock and which is the key? This is part of the research I'm still working on, trying to get answers for, but at least I bought some time, and we have passable solutions for gays and trans people. We got Jake, Linda's brother, paired up with his girlfriend, but even paired up as they are, Jake doesn't have functioning testicles, just implants, so at this point, we think the Skene's glands are taking on that duty, but again, without boatloads of research, we're not entirely certain. Jake and his girlfriend agreed to relocate to the Bay, so I can keep them under regular watch, follow the nanobots as best I can. Maybe I'll learn more about them by having a case I can keep under scrutiny, but as I told Jake, it's also possible I'm not going to learn a whole lot. But Linda's happy having him nearby."

Andy opened the folder and started looking through it before he let a soft sigh escape his lips. "Really? C'mon, Phil, don't bullshit a bullshitter."

"The only ones to be concerned about are in the back, and even then, I don't think it's a big deal, but hey, what do I know?" Phil said.

"What are you looking at, hon?" Ash asked him.

"With so many people on our Team having been added by request, I wanted to check everyone against the Oracle results, make sure we didn't have anyone who was a bad match for me," Andy said. "I sort of trusted Phil to tell me if anything was too out of whack, but I wanted to look at all the data for myself, make sure we didn't have any significant outliers. I literally just wanted to make sure everyone was paired in a way that would make them happy." He flipped through and looked at the last two pages and frowned. "Yeah, well, I suppose I guess I could've expected that."

“What’s that?” Fiona asked. “Nobody’s a horrible match, are they?”

“Well, Taylor’s only at 60%, and both Asha and Hannah clock in in the mid-50s, which definitely concerns me.”

“Look, Andy, I’ve explained this to you before, but let me go through it one more time for you – the younger someone is, the fuzzier their Oracle results are,” Phil said. “Miguel, the creator of the program, has even said that for people between the ages of 18-24, the results are fuzzy by at least five to ten percentage points, because people that age don’t *know* what they want for themselves, and that depending on how they grow, they could grow twenty to thirty points closer to a given man.”

Fiona reached over and closed the folder, putting her hand on top of it, looking at Andy with a stern look he knew didn’t bode well for him. “Andrew.” Oh shit, he thought; if she’s using my full name, I’m in deep trouble. “If you allow this to affect your relationship with those girls, that will be entirely on you, and will have *nothing* to do with them. They’re happy within our Team. They’ve told you as much repeatedly. They’ve told *both me and Ash* the same. Repeatedly. If they change their minds, they will come to one of us, if not you then myself or Ash, and we will deal with that matter then, but until then, you are not going to allow some computer to tell you something that goes against what you already know, and what those girls have promised.”

“I’m just trying to do right by them, Fiona,” Andy sighed.

“I know you are. Honestly, it’s *sweet* even as pig-headed as it is,” Fiona said with a tight-lipped smile. “But those girls are still figuring out what they want to do with their lives. Of course that means they’re not sure how they fully feel about you. But it’s going to be what it’s going to be.” Fiona pushed the folder back across the table towards Phil. “You can take that back, Phil. We won’t be needing it.”

“If you’re—”

“Phillip,” Fiona scolded. “Don’t make me say it again.”

“Yes ma’am,” Phil replied with a soft laugh. “Now, onto the real reason I brought you here.”

“All the rest of this wasn’t enough?” Andy chuckled in response.

“I need you to do me a favor, Andy, and use your access as part of Oversight to go and pay a visit to our friend LP over in Valhalla Shores,” Phil said. “They won’t let me or any of my people in, but you’re a part of Oversight, meaning they can’t officially say no to you without causing a *huge* fucking stink about it, and even then, it’s probably not worth it for them to cause too many issues for you to go in and inspect what’s going on there. LP hasn’t been able to leave, and they’ve actually turned off all telco services for the place for the time being, and that has me worried.”

Phil Pak, a.k.a. Lesser Phil or LP as he was often referred to for short, had been relocated to a place called Valhalla Shores last fall, and since then, had basically been in a bubble, with the last contact Andy had had with him in January, when he’d called to decline both the bachelor party and the wedding, and had sounded a little rattled, but Andy had had so much on his plate at the time that he hadn’t thought to follow up on it.

“Yeah, I started to get a little worried when he couldn’t come out to the wedding, but he said it had something to do with clearance and some of the projects they were working on over there,” Andy said with a frown. “Whatever they’re cooking up, you’re telling me you haven’t gotten any reports about it?”

“Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. Zero fucking information,” Phil said. “I’m livid, and I went up to the gates of Valhalla Shores a few days ago and demanded to be let in, demanded to see LP and they told me he wasn’t available even to talk, and he hasn’t gotten in contact with me since. I need you to summon up your inner Karen and demand to see that place’s fucking manager, Andy.” Phil patted Andy on the shoulder.

“What do you know about Valhalla Shores?”

“Not much more than you,” Phil said with a grumble. “It was originally a combination of NSA, CIA, FBI and DOD researchers getting rolled up with a handful of ‘disruptive future shock engineers’ and they were going to be conducting some pie-in-the-sky skunkworks research, *none* of which I like

the sound of. They might even try and tell you no, but I suspect since you've got a line to the President, they're at least going to feed you some kind of dog and pony show to make you *think* everything they're working on is on the up and up, but you need to dig deeper than that. Because I'm betting they have three or four separate tiger teams on deck over there that are working on things I haven't even *imagined* using our serum on, so I want you to go and push until they push back, find out what's going on even if they try and tell you no. I expect they're not going to let anyone but you and your security detail in, sorry you two, so if you want me to give them a lift back to New Eden, I can."

"Wait, you want me to go *now*?" Andy said. "Like, *now now*?"

"The longer this waits, Andy, the more time they're going to have to bury it, hide it, whatever the fuck it is they're doing there," Phil said. "I've given you a *lot* of help over the last year, man, and I try not to ask much in return, because you've always been a good friend and a solid rock to turn to when it comes to looking for moral advice, but this time, I'm coming to you hat in hand, asking you to go in and figure this out for me. And to make sure LP's okay. I don't like him going radio dark. I know he's done work for the alphabet agencies before, but him just not answering his phone... I have a very bad feeling about it all, Andy."

Andy sighed, giving a little shrug. "Ok, I'll go knock on some heads and kick down some doors."

"Don't get yourself *shot*, okay?"

"Is that likely?" Ash asked, concern on her face.

"I sure as fuck *hope not*," Phil sighed. "Otherwise we're *all fucked*."

Chapter Twenty-Three

April 28th, 2021

Valhalla Shores.

Even the *name* sounded pretentious as fuck, Andy thought to himself.

The location was on the south side of Pacifica, and the entire area had been walled off, and not in a discreet way, either. Highway 1, which had originally run down almost right against the coastline, had been diverted to run around the newly erected walled in city of Valhalla Shores, so it could run up to the waterfront.

It looked less like a modern city and more like a military base, with razor wire and gun towers atop the fencing.

“Jesus,” Andy muttered beneath his breath. “It’s Fortress California.”

“That’s some pretty intense external security they’ve got going on here, boss,” Melody said, trying to scope out the perimeter while Lexi was attempting to find the place to drive into. It was almost as if they’d gone out of their way to hide the entrance on the north side, and he had to expect the entrance on the south side would’ve been just as difficult. “This isn’t light local security. This is Fort Knox level shit here. I’ve been on forward operating bases with less intense borders.”

“How the hell you expect we’re going to get onto this base, boss?” Lexi asked him.

“I’m Civilian Oversight for everything Quaranteam related, Lexi,” Andy said with a grin. “That means I’m *supposed* to be showing up around this stuff and poking my nose into everything. I’ll bet you \$20 we’re on this base within twenty minutes.” He grabbed his iPad and flipped the leather case to open it, taking out the Pencil to make it look more like a clipboard.

“You’re on, boss,” Lexi said.

“I’ll take a piece of that action,” Melody said. “If you don’t have clearance, you don’t have clearance, so they’re just going to turn us away.”

“Watch me Karen, Mel,” Andy laughed, as the Model X finally found a gate to drive up towards, a couple of soldiers approaching the car, as Andy rolled down the window.

“You can’t be here, sir,” the woman whose nameplate read Martinez said. “This is a highly restricted area.”

“Of course it’s a highly restricted area,” Andy said, putting on his best indignant face, as he pulled out his wallet, hanging it to the woman. “They’re doing Quaranteam serum research in there, which is why I’m here. I’m Andy Rook, a member of the Civilian Oversight Group for all Quaranteam research, and I’m here to do a surprise inspection of your base and what you’re working on in regards to the serum.”

“We don’t have any notice to expect you, Mister Rook,” Airman Martinez said, looking a little nervous, looking at her partner, who offered a little shrug. “I’ll have to call the C.O.”

“You do that,” Andy said, swiping on his tablet over to a stopwatch app. “Meanwhile, I’m just going to start a timer here, so that I can put in my report how long I was delayed at the gate, if there’s an attempt to cover up whatever it is you’re working on in there from the people who are *supposed to goddamn know about it*.” He was actually relishing the opportunity to get into the role of a pompous asshole who assumed his presence was allowed anywhere. He swiped back from the stopwatch app to his notes app. “Let me get the names down. Martinez. Aaaaaand White. Got it.”

“You don’t need to write our names down, sir,” Airman White said, as Airman Martinez had gone into the booth to call to the base’s commanding officer. “We’re just doing our jobs.”

“Oh I’m sure you are, Airman,” Andy said, continuing to scrawl notes on his iPad. “But you’ll have to forgive me, I’m just doing *mine*. And when the President of the United States of America says she wants you to be part of the team keeping an eye on what’s being done in terms of Quaranteam serum research, you can imagine that made me take it all very deadly seriously.”

“Yes sir. Sorry, sir. I’m sure it won’t be long, sir.”

“What’s been made worse is the fact that I’m also afraid you’re keeping American citizens

hostage here, and not letting them out, nor even letting them make phone calls,” Andy said, not looking up, still focusing on his scribbling on the iPad. “My friend Phil Pak lives within these walls, and he didn’t show up at my wedding, nor has he returned any of my phone calls for months now, so I’m starting to think that I should contact the President and have an entire platoon of Air Force Security Services come down and pry this place apart down to the studs.”

“I’m certain that won’t be necessary, sir,” Airman White said nervously. “It’ll just be a few more minutes. I’m sure the General is just explaining where to take you first.”

“I hope for your sake that’s true, Airman, because the longer this takes, the more I’m going to suspect you’re all trying to conceal something from me, which I can’t imagine the President is going to react well to.”

“Sir, as far as I know, they don’t have anything to hide from people here, but we’re just gate guards, not scientists,” Airman White sighed. “Look, here comes Martinez now.”

“Alright, Mr. Rook,” Airman Martinez said. “The first thing I’m going to do is temporarily confiscate your cellphones. They’ll be returned to you when you leave the base. Then I’m going to hop into my Jeep and lead you over to the General’s Office and take you in to see her. After you’ve met with her, I’m going to be your escort and I’ll accompany you to any part of Valhalla Shores you want to see, including going to visit your friend Mister Pak. Is that acceptable to you?”

“It’s a start,” Andy sighed, as he, Melody and Lexi handed over their cellphones, which were put into a small bag by Airman Martinez that she handed over to Airman White for safe keeping. “Let’s get going.” He rolled up the window as Airman Martinez moved over to head to a Jeep parked next to the booth, as White started to open the gate for them to drive in. Once they were past the gate, Andy held out his hand, and Melody reached into her pocket, grabbing her wallet before pulling out a twenty, putting it in Andy’s hand.

“I’ll pay you when we’re back home, boss,” Lexi said. “Right now, I’m on high alert.”

The inside of Valhalla Falls was not at all what Andy expected to see. In almost every direction, there were very new condominium complexes, stackable buildings three or four stories tall, with rows of garages on the ground floor, or small businesses on the ground floor instead. None of the structures could’ve been from before the lockdown, and everything felt almost uncomfortably new. While the places could show signs of individuality here and there, there was a strange conformity to the structures, as if most of them were built off of the same template, with the same amount of room. There were some variations here and there, but for the most part, the uniformity felt off-putting.

“Talk about a McCity,” Andy muttered to himself. “Don’t get me wrong – I like the first floor commerce, upper floors real estate, but, c’mon... a little variety ain’t gonna kill ya.”

“Looks like it’s only part of the town, boss,” Lexi said. “If you look out that way, looks like a lot of unique homes, well, more like mansions, like a more open-air version of New Eden.”

“‘Cause *that’s* what we needed *more* of,” Andy grumbled.

The car continued in through the city, although Andy could see a number of soldiers in camo, either training or patrolling, he couldn’t be quite sure, as they approached the center of the city, where a series of five buildings eight or nine stories tall made a central spire, a helipad on top the tallest in the center. The five buildings were all sharp lines and no curves, wedge angles all over the place, with one-way mirrored glass on all the exterior surfaces, wedge like corners jutting out in the mid sections every other floor, like the building was some off-kilter rotation puzzle. The exteriors had been painted grey, or maybe had just been left as exposed concrete, but there were streaks of dark brown along them, the effects of the ocean air slowly attacking the building’s facades.

There was a sign in front that said “Opprimo Research – an Air Force, National Security Agency, Invincible Strategic Investments, Mandible Technologies & Ingsoc Communications partnership” with each of the five organizations’ logos beneath it.

“That’s not ostentatious at *all*,” Melody said.

“Designed to intimidate on sight,” Andy replied. “A modern form of brutalist architecture. Or

did you mean the list of the companies?”

“Well, you’ve got military, informational security, financial appropriations, a science-is-all thinktank and a media conglomerate with a very strange name,” Lexi said.

“It’s not strange at all if you know where it comes from,” Melody said. “It’s from Orwell’s *1984*, and Ingsoc was Oceania’s political system, one that venerated the ruler above all else. Cult of personality taken to the extreme, if you will.”

“Sound familiar?” Andy asked, as Lexi parked the vehicle next to where Airman Martinez had parked her Jeep, in an area marked Visitor Parking that looked like it had never seen a single vehicle parked in it before. “You best not be trying to keep me from anything, Airman Martinez,” Andy said as he got out of the car. “I’ve got to make a report about this mess to the President within a week, and so far, I’m starting to feel like I’m on rails.”

“Just a little bit longer, Mister Rook,” Airman Martinez said. “You need to meet with General Ibanez and she’ll clear us to go wherever you want within the base and see whatever it is or whoever it is you want to see while you’re here, so you can see we’ve got nothing to hide.”

“How many in your Team, Martinez?” Lexi asked, walking on one side of Andy while Melody walked on the other. They’d relaxed a little bit, seeing as they were on a secure base, but still wanted to make sure they were doing their duty as his protectors.

“Eleven, ma’am.”

“You happy?”

“As Larry, ma’am.”

“Who’s Larry?” Melody asked.

“Just an expression one of the other members of my Team taught us, ma’am,” Martinez said.

“She’s former UK military. I just liked how it sounded. Ma’am.”

“Carry on, Airman,” Andy said as they made their way into the building. They were stopped at the entrance to the building, and needed to check in, being issued RFID visitor passes that they were told to keep on them at all times, so the base could keep track of where they were going.

Andy wasn’t surprised that people were looking at them quite intently, but he *was* surprised at how little information about what this company was or what they were *doing* was visible *anywhere*. It was the most bland and nondescript building inside he’d ever seen. The walls, the floor, the lack of artwork – it was like looking at an empty movie set that hadn’t been dressed yet, far too immaculate to be used or lived in, and yet, the place had clearly seen foot traffic. The floors seemed a little less new, less shiny than the rest of it.

People were *walking* these halls.

They walked down the hallway and past a second security gate, still being escorted by Martinez who didn’t seem intent on leaving their sides the whole time, and up to an office that had no prestige, no pomp, no circumstance, nothing marking as a position of power, just a door that read “General Ibanez” on it.

Martinez knocked on the door before a voice inside said, “Come in.”

The Airman opened the door and gestured for Andy, Melody and Lexi to head inside.

The office was a welcome change of pace from everything they’d seen so far. It was a well-decorated room, an American flag on one side, a desk in the center, with a single computer on top of it and a telephone. There were a couple of thick red cables running from the computer and the phone into the wall. Behind the desk sat a woman in her early forties, dressed in military uniform. She looked up at Andy like he was just another person passing through, not judgmental, nervous, or angry. “Mr. Rook, I presume?”

“That’s me, General,” Andy said to her. “I would apologize about being unannounced—”

She laughed softly. “Don’t worry about it, Mr. Rook. If you told us in advance, it wouldn’t be a *surprise* inspection now, would it?” She stood up from her desk as she looked over his two bodyguards. “I’m guessing this is your security detail?”

“Alexis Coleman, formerly of the CIA, General,” Lexi said.

“Melody Park, former Army Ranger, ma’am,” Melody added.

“Couple of very capable people you got there, Mister Rook,” the General said. “How’d that happen?”

“One’s a recommendation from a member of my staff, the other’s a rescue,” Andy joked.

“Melody joined our family after wanting to leave her previous partner, who’d been one of the people that had been manipulating the Oracle system over at New Eden.”

“Which one?” the General asked.

“Covington, ma’am,” Melody answered.

“Ah,” she said, bouncing her eyebrows. “The *utter* asshole. I remember reading about what he’d done and I do not blame Dr. DeMarco’s taking off of his hand in retaliation for what he did to you ladies. We aren’t doing anything like that over here at Valhalla Shores, despite all the secrecy.”

“So let’s start there,” Andy said. “Why all the secrecy?”

“There have been elements of the kind of research we’re doing in some of the elements of what Dr. Marcos and Dr. McCallister invented, and we’re pushing the boundaries of things that the nanobots are capable of,” the General said. “But it’s mostly been theoretical because we haven’t had a lot of luck getting the sort of results we’d like. You want to sit and talk here, or you want to walk and talk through the research facility?”

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time, so let’s walk and talk,” Andy said.

The General stood up and started walking out of her office, expecting Andy and his team to keep up, Martinez following right behind, forming a little protective bubble around Andy reflexively. “You’re a part of Oversight, Mister Rook, and I know you have a fairly large Team,” the General said, “but how much reading have you been doing into what the nanobots are capable of?”

“I’ve been *experiencing* a lot of it,” Andy said. “From the sort of weird transmissible orgasms my wives had on our wedding day, to the fact that a couple of my partners can basically track me short range by smell, but all of that’s been in my reports to the Quaranteam research community, which I expect you’re a part of and have access to.”

“Have you experienced any sort of... I suppose you might call it empathic or telepathic communication between you and any of your partners, Mister Rook?” the General asked him as they made their way down a very non-descript hallway to an elevator.

“I... I can’t say that I have,” Andy said, as he watched the General insert her badge into a slot in front of an elevator door that opened for them. “Has that kind of thing happened?”

“Rarely, but we have enough reports into it that we’re researching the matter,” the General said with a smug smile. “You are, of course, familiar with what we’re calling Team DNA, for lack of a better term currently, yes?”

“The idea that each individual team has its own identifiable makeup of nanobot development that could function as an identifying characteristic for that team, like a group fingerprint? Yes, we’ve been aware of that for a few months now.”

“It goes a bit further than that, I’m afraid, Mister Rook, although we’re just beginning to scratch the surface of it,” Ibanez said, pushing a button that said 4, as the elevator began to slowly lift upwards into the building’s heart. “We know the nanobots that are part of a Team are swapping information all the time, working to improve and synthesize better group function solutions for the Team as a whole, but what we’ve only just *recently* discovered is that they aren’t *only* doing that when nanobots are being exchanged, but, in fact, when they’re in near proximity to each other. Think of it like having an RFID chip and reader inside of your body that’s constantly checking against nearby people, and then sending small databursts when it’s a recognized and trusted source.”

Andy looked at Melody, then Lexi, then back to the General. “You mean the nanobots in my system are talking to those in my two partners’ here... right now? Without me knowing it?”

“That is, in fact, the working theory, Mister Rook,” she said with a slight bristle of amusement.

“The range is *extremely* limited, we’re talking a matter of a couple of feet, tops, but it’s a way for the nanobots to be updating software and hardware without having to wait for a sexual intercourse exchange. Little buggers are far more active than we expected them to be.”

“What *kind* of information?”

“That’s *part* of what we’re still trying to determine here,” the General said with another soft laugh. “We’re still not entirely sure. We’re referring to a cluster of nanobots unique to a Team as a Swarm, and we think each Swarm does its best to look after every member in the Team, so it’s constantly relaying status updates. Have you noticed that some of your partners seemed to have unusual swings in their need cycles? Not so often that you get worried, but just often enough that you wonder why one of them needs to be fucked a little bit sooner than you’d had scheduled?”

“I’d been chalking it up to ‘shit happens,’ but you’re telling me that’s not the case?”

“It *might* be ‘shit happens,’ but it *also* might be that particular partner was fighting off an infection and needed an injection of additional resources with which to fight that battle. Or that they have highly important information that they need you to distribute to all the other members of the Swarm as quickly as possible, since you function as the Hive.

“What kind of information?”

“Pregnancy has usually been the biggest cause we’ve seen in terms of information transfer,” the General said as the elevator doors opened, revealing a large open-concept lab workspace with several workstations scattered around the floor. “But that’s partially what we’re researching – what *other* kinds of information could we get members of the same Swarm to communicate across short distances without saying a word? That’s the military use, obviously, but there’s also plenty of practical applications, especially if we can get the nanobots to be sending status reports, which we think we may be able to. That would mean a person could walk into their doctor’s office, put their hand on a scanner, and we could pick up a full internal and accurate report on what’s going on inside of that person in terms of problems or needs. We currently *think* that information is being kept by the nanobots, but we haven’t yet determined how to get it to *give* that information to *us*.”

“It’s more complicated than we originally thought,” a doctor in a labcoat said to Andy, offering her hand, “because as it turns out the nanobots communicate in their own actual language, and we haven’t figured out how to translate that into anything we can use yet. I’m Doctor Abernathy, I’m one of the Head Researchers in the nanobot relay research team here at Opprimo. Would you like a demonstration of one of the things we *have* been able to get the nanobots to communicate across?”

“As long as it’s not harmful,” Lexi said.

“Come over here, ma’am, and hold onto this signal booster,” Abernathy said as she led Lexi over toward a small metal box with a couple of handles on it. “Hold onto this.” Lexi did as instructed. “Now, I assume you’re both paired with her. Tell me what you feel.” The doctor reached up beneath the back of Lexi’s shirt, and Andy and Melody both shivered.

“Are... are you drawing an A on her back?” Andy asked.

“Very good, Mister Rook! It seems you and your Swarm are very much in synch with one another,” Abernathy replied. “That didn’t take much in the way of time at all!”

“You can imagine how we might find ways to communicate information across short distances in ways that can’t be intercepted useful,” the General said.

“Yeah, I can see that. But that can’t be the only thing you’re studying here,” Andy said. “There’s a whole lot of buildings here.”

“Of course not,” Abernathy replied. “Although nearly one of these whole buildings is dedicated towards breaking down how the nanobots language works. They’ve made basically no progress in that regard, however. But we’ve been studying to see if we could trigger a post-imprinting regeneration, something which we’re starting to see a little bit of results in. We haven’t been able to do it reliably, but we have, once, been able to trigger a regeneration in a person completely independent of the imprinting/pairing process.”

“Any idea how?”

“We’re trying to investigate every possibility, but we’d basically fallen back to Operation: Grasping At Straws when we got the result which helped an already paired woman trigger a regeneration, which regenerated a foot she’d lost in combat,” Abernathy said.

“That said, we proved it *can* be done,” Ibanez said. “Which is only encouraging our researchers to double down on their efforts. Can you imagine the kind of strategic advantage we would have if we could get our soldiers to just need a couple of days and a few very calorific meals before they could be deployed again, and that’s after losing multiple limbs.”

“Not to mention the number of illnesses we could defeat or at least delay,” Abernathy said. “We’ve seen the serum destroy or repair hundreds of various illnesses and ailments that modern medicine has *no idea* what to do with. We owe it to humanity to keep researching those solutions, now that we know this sort of thing is within our grasp.”

“We’ve got not just dozens but hundreds of various research projects going on here, Mr. Rook,” General Ibanez told him. “I certainly don’t have time to walk you through all of them, but I can have the progress reports for everything we’re working on sent over to your secure email account, and you’re welcome to go anywhere within the base you want, talk to anyone you want. We don’t have anything to hide. I just ask that Airman Martinez accompany you, so we can make sure you aren’t stumbling into a door with sensitive research that we may have forgotten to mark or something. It’s just as much for your safety as it ours, I assure you.”

“Alright, General, I can agree to that, as long as you aren’t attempting to separate my security detail from me.”

“Last thing I would want to do, Mister Rook,” the General said with a soft laugh that almost put Andy at ease. “I know how protective I am of my Team’s man, and I wouldn’t dare stand between a woman and her man. Your detail can accompany anyone you like. Any other questions before I take my leave of you?”

“Just one – my friend Phil Pak lives here, and he hasn’t been able to leave, nor has he been able to return phone calls for over a month now,” Andy said. “What the hell is going with that?”

“Well, because we’re constantly running tests on most of the residents of Valhalla Shores, we require them to remain within the borders, or at least we’ve been operating that way for the last few months. We’re hoping to be able to lift those restrictions within the next few months and allow our residents to come and go a great deal more freely.”

“That doesn’t explain why he hasn’t called me back.”

“Oh, that’s actually very easy, Mr. Rook,” Dr. Abernathy said. “It’s the same reason your cellular phones were confiscated at the gate. Because we’re working with communications frequencies, we don’t have any cellular towers near to the base, and we do not allow cell phones anywhere on the base. All of the five central buildings here are Faraday cages. Hell, we’re trying to avoid as many stray signals as we can anywhere near the city, so you’ll notice we’ve had to go out of our way to have everything wired,” she said, gesturing to a computer terminal, as Andy noticed it also had thick red wires running out of the back of it. “In fact, your visitor badges might be the only RFID tags we have within the base. We’ve been in the process of getting a series of landlines installed, but as it stands right now, we only have a few, which are specifically for the base’s use here. Your friend probably didn’t know your phone number by heart, and so he didn’t have a way to reach you from here. What’s your friend’s name?”

“Phil Pak.”

Abernathy typed into the computer, pulling up some kind of registry program. “Yep, says here he’s in the office today, so he’ll just be in the next building over. You should definitely stop by and see him, I’m sure he’ll be glad to see a friendly face,” the doctor said with a smile. “As important as our research is here, there’s no denying it’s been a bit lonely being isolated from everyone and everything. It’s been especially hard on the people who are used to having up-to-the-minute information on

everything, because we're sort of on a signal sanctuary out here. That means we're getting our entertainment and news in via landlines."

Andy thought it would also be a *great* way to control the flow of information in or out of a modern base or even a modern country. It sounded like the sort of thing he'd heard China had been doing to prevent 'cultural contamination via the Internet' back before the giant collapse. He wondered if they were ever going to get any information on what was going on inside of the Chinese borders, but at this point, it was starting to seem like that part of the world almost didn't exist. "I'll head over there next," Andy said. "Maybe he can give me the nickel tour of the rest of Valhalla Shores."

The General nodded but shrugged. "There's not a whole lot to see, truth be told, beyond the five research centers," she said. "Just residential places for those researchers to stay and commercial places for them to eat and relax. We've got a movie theater, but it seems like even though they're partnered up, they still don't trust large gatherings of people."

"Yeah, I've seen that for myself," Andy said. "I even did a little book tour to try and encourage people to come out of their homes some."

"How did it do?"

"Mostly went pretty well."

"Although shots were fired outside of one event between two different groups of protestors," Melody added.

"I think you and I have varying opinions on what 'pretty well' means, Mister Rook," the General said to him.

"Those sorts of protests are happening all over this country right now, General, although maybe you haven't heard as much about that in your little ivory coastal tower here," Andy said, realizing the words were a bit more heated than he'd intended seconds after they'd come out of his mouth. "Sorry about that. I was trying to do the right thing in encouraging people to start picking up the pieces of their lives, but yes, I wasn't thrilled about the shooting either. It seems that trying to do the right thing carries with it a certain level of risk in these modern times, I'm afraid to say."

"Understandable, Mister Rook," the General said. "Anyway, as you can see, we're not up to anything nefarious over here like Mister Covington or Dr. McCallister were. This is genuine, good, clean, beneficial research that benefits our civilians, benefits our military or benefits our species. No downsides. And with that, I'll leave you in the capable hands of Airman Martinez."

As the General made her way back down the hallway, Dr. Abernathy looked at Andy with a soft smile. "Any other questions about the sorts of research we're doing that I might be able to answer for you, Mister Rook?"

"Are you doing any research into the imprinting/pairing systems?"

"No, we're strictly focused on the communications systems between nanobots and trying to trigger regenerations without pairing," the Doctor told him. "Dr. Marcos has a giant head start in trying to understand the pairing systems, and he has Doctor Merriweather with him, so they're going to be ahead of everyone else in that line of research, so we're leaving it to them."

"Also, you don't see any way to exploit that system for financial or strategic gains," Lexi said.

"Not any more than we already are as a country, Ms. Coleman, no," Abernathy said with a smile. "But we focus where they tell us to."

Andy nodded to Airman Martinez. "Let's go see my friend Phil Pak now."

They headed back down the elevator and out of the building over to another one of the buildings, this one marked "Structure C" on the outside, although it didn't look remarkably different from any of the other four on the outside except for the sign at the front, and a red ring around the front doorway. There was a security guard at the front desk who looked like she'd been bored since the first time she'd sat down at it, and this was *far* from her first time at the desk. "Looking for Phil Pak," Martinez asked the desk guard.

"Third floor," the desk guard said.

As they walked down the hallway to the elevator, Andy decided to try and talk to Martinez a little bit. “What about you, Airman? You finding it lonely here in Valhalla Shores?” he asked her.

“It is what it is, Mister Rook,” she said flatly. “I’ve got my Team and I’ve got my pitbull, so that’s good enough for me to get by without complaint.”

“You’re not frustrated by not being able to make calls to family?”

“It’s temporary and it’s for the greater good,” she said as she pushed her access card into the slot to let the elevator open for them to step in. “Sometimes you gotta take one for the team, Mister Rook.”

“I think Andy knows a lot more about that than you do, Airman,” Lexi said, seeing slight intended where Andy had simply written it off as disrupted routine. “So maybe let’s lay off the judgment of people you’ve only just met, hm?”

“I saw the television special, ma’am,” Martinez said. “How come you two weren’t featured in it?”

“Neither of us had arrived in time, Airman,” Lexi said, keeping her tone even keeled. “Team Rook’s gotten to be quite the sizable team.”

“Define sizable.”

“Twenty-two, plus Andy,” Melody offered.

Martinez let out an appreciative whistle. “That is a *lot* of fucking.”

“That it is, Airman,” Andy agreed as the elevator doors opened. “That it is.”

Once the elevator doors opened, instead of laboratory equipment, they were confronted with something far more insidious and insipid – wall to wall *cubicles*.

It was just like a million other Silicon Valley startups he’d ever been in, with the same types of constructed felt walls erected to keep everyone segregated to their own little fiefdom, away from the prying eyes of their neighbors and coworkers.

To be honest, Andy had expected something significantly better from the National Security Agency, but he guessed they were expected to work semi collaboratively. They walked down three rows before stopping and peering in, where (Lesser) Phil Pak was looking at his screen intensely. “If that’s my sandwich, you can just leave it on the desk,” LP said, not looking up or even realizing Andy was there.

“Don’t make me have to explain to everyone why you’re called Lesser Phil,” Andy said with slight scolding to his tone, a subtle laugh cutting beneath it.

“Andy!” LP was quite the contrast to (Greater) Phil Marcos – LP was Korean-American, while GP was Filipino; GP was relatively thin, while LP was significantly more rotund; GP was Andy’s height, while LP would be lucky to be measured at 5’3”; GP had a lustrous head of magnificent long black hair, while LP had alopecia, or at least he’d *used* to have alopecia, as LP now sported a stylish short hair cut with actual hair care product in it, which Andy guessed was the result of a regeneration between now and the last time Andy had seen him, which would also explain the lack of Coke bottle bottom glasses LP had usually worn. “What the fuck are you doing here, man? How the fuck did you get in?”

“I’m part of the Civilian Oversight Group for all things relating to the Quaranteam serum now, so I decided I’d better find out what kept my friend from attending my wedding,” Andy said, giving LP a long hug. “How you been, man?”

“Great!” LP said. “Other than I can’t get outta here, really great. C’mon, I’ve got to take you to see Brandy, because if she finds out you were here and she didn’t get to see you, she’s going to shred my asshole into kimchi.” LP tapped a button on his phone to mark him as ‘out of office’ and then started leading Andy back towards the elevators. He glanced at the women surrounding him as they did. “Your security detail?”

“Jesus, where are my fucking manners?” Andy said with a chuckle. “Ladies, this is Phil Pak, a.k.a. Lesser Phil. LP, this is Alexis Coleman, the head of my security detail, and Melody Park, one of my bodyguards. Airman Martinez is one of yours, on loan from the front gate to make sure I don’t

stumble into whatever nuclear missiles you have hidden on base.”

“Ha ha,” LP said. “I wish we were half that cool. Can I ride with you?”

“You can ride with me, Mr. Pak,” Airman Martinez said.

“C’mon,” LP said. “Lemme have a few minutes with my friend alone.”

“No can do, Mr. Pak,” Airman Martinez said. “You know how important OpSec is here. I can’t leave anyone alone with the guests at any point during their visit.”

LP sighed, rolling his eyes. “Fine, I’m riding with you. Let’s head back to my house.” He moved to get in the front of the Jeep with Airman Martinez as Andy, Lexi and Melody got back into their Tesla.

During the drive across town, Andy tried to surveil the place as well as he could, but the uniformity made it hard to remember much of anything. As they drove by an open field, however, he saw several women out doing yoga in a field on mats, and there was something... odd about them. They seemed to be moving in perfect synchronicity, each of them in exact lockstep with all the others in their movements. Normally when looking at any exercise class, there were one or two people who were just a few steps behind everyone else, but not here. There was also an incredible similarity in the hairstyles and outfits that all the women had – ponytails and bangs, yoga pants and sports bras, even though the variety of sizes, hair colors and skin tones made it clear they were individuals.

When they got to what seemed to be LP’s house, Andy wasn’t all that surprised to find it a nice large structure with a certain sense of modern style to it. Brandy, LP’s wife (from before the pandemic), was waiting to meet them, and Andy was a little surprised to see she had her hair in a style matching those of the women he’d seen doing yoga on their way over, ponytail and bangs. She was also dressed similar to them – sports bra and yoga pants, all in soft pastel colors. “Andy Rook!” Brandy said. “God, it’s fucking good to see you! Come in, come in! I know you can’t stay long, but I need to introduce you to all of our new partners and hear how your wedding went!”

For the next couple of hours, LP and Brandy did their best to get caught up with Andy, and get to know both Lexi and Melody, as well as get some news about what had been happening on the outside, and for a little while it was almost like a perfectly normal visit between old friends. Towards the end of the visit, Airman Martinez insisted it was time for Andy to be leaving the base, and Andy moved to hug Brandy, then LP before they got back in the car, following Airman Martinez to the gate, turning in their IDs, getting their phones back and then starting to drive back up towards San Francisco.

They were all the way at the Bay Bridge when the three of them spoke. “You okay, boss? You’ve been completely quiet since we left Valhalla Shores.”

“Trying to figure out what to do next.”

“What do you mean, boss?” Lexi asked him from the driver’s seat. “It was odd, but I didn’t see anything that set off panic bells.”

“Mmmm.” Andy paused then spoke again. “Except when LP went to hug me goodbye, he tapped me nine times before he let me go – three short taps, three long taps and then three more short taps, all on the small of my back, where nobody could see.”

“S.O.S.?”

“Something’s not right over there, and I need to figure out what it is.” His pocket started to vibrate and he pulled the phone from his pocket to see Ash’s face on the caller ID picture, so he answered it. “Hey babe, we’re on our way back to New Eden now, just crossing the Bay Bridge.”

“Well, don’t come to the manor,” Aisling said to him. “Niko’s water just broke, so we’re on our way to the hospital. Meet us there.”

“Aren’t we like a week early?”

“Baby’s coming whether you like it or not, Mister Rook, so you best get your shit in gear.”

“Heard, we’ll be there doubletime.” He hung up the phone, still somewhere in shock between what had just happened with Lesser Phil and hearing that his son was going to arrive a whole hell of a lot sooner than planned. “Lexi, Niko’s water just broke. We’re heading the hospital.”

“Roger that, boss. Baby time, here we come!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

April 28th, 2021

“Can you *not* kill us on the way to the hospital?” Andy asked with a little bit of a nervous laugh. He trusted Alexis with his life, but she was putting that to the test. “I’d like to be *alive* to meet my son.”

Alexis was driving like if Andy wasn’t there in time to witness his son’s birth, the world would stop. She laughed, shaking her head with glee. “Are you fucking kidding me, boss? I’ve always wanted an excuse to drive like a bat out of hell on American streets, and now that we’ve got one, you’re gonna try and take that away from me? No fucking way. Come and get me mister lawman!”

“You ready for this, boss?” Melody asked him. “Ready to become a father?”

“Not in the fucking least,” Andy said, glancing out the window again. “But it’s not like that’s up to me anymore. The kid’s coming. I think it’s a little too late to put him back in the box. Besides, haven’t you heard? ‘America Needs Children!’” The slogan had been gaining traction across television, print and film, and Andy had grown a little sick of hearing it. In fact, the studio had asked if there was any way they could incorporate it into the “Neon Stonehenge” movie they were making, and Maya had told him the *other* studio had made a similar request about the “Fatal Alliances” script. “Shit... I should... I should call the house, I should call Phil, I should—”

“I’m *certain* the house already knows, boss,” Lexi said with a grin. “They probably had to figure out who could go with Niko to the hospital without her feeling like she was being smothered to death, and you know how everyone in the house is going to want to hold the first new addition.”

“Calling Phil’s not a bad idea though,” Melody said to him. “It’ll clear your head while we’re driving. You can’t do anything until we get to the hospital anyway.”

“Which hospital are we going to anyway?” Lexi asked.

“The text Ash sent says San Ramon Regional Medical Center,” Melody said, as she watched Lexi type it into the Tesla’s navigation system. “Looks like we’re about an hour out, and we’re going to come in from the north.”

“Just get us there, Lexi,” Andy said. “If I’m not there for his birth, Niko’s never going to stop giving me shit about it.”

Lexi grinned, rolling her eyes. “She’s gonna be in labor for at least a few hours, boss. You’re not missing anything except a lot of grunting and her growling ‘You did this to me!’ every now and again. Call Phil. Tell him what we saw over at Valhalla Shores.”

“You’re right, you’re right...” He pulled out his phone and tapped Phil’s number off his speed dial, hearing it ring only a couple of times before Linda answered the phone.

“Hey Andy, what’s up?” she asked him.

“I was calling to give you both a status report on the thing.”

“The thing we agreed not to talk about over the phone? That thing?” Her voice sounded at least a little bit amused.

“Oh. Shit. Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, I’m a bit scrambled at the moment. Well, I did get in to see LP at least, so I guess I’ll save the rest for the next time I see you guys.”

“You could probably come over now,” Linda told him. “Phil’s in the lab here at the house right now, but I bet he could carve out a chunk of time to talk to you.”

“Yeah, that’s a thing I *can’t* do,” Andy said with a chuckle. “Niko went into labor a few minutes ago and they’re taking her to the hospital, so we’re on our way there now.”

“Oh. Ha. Yeah, I imagine that’s not the kind of thing you’d want to wait on,” Linda said on the other end of the line. “Wait, *who* took her to the hospital?”

“Aisling and some of the others, I imagine,” Andy said, hearing a shift in tones in Linda’s voice. “Why, Linda, what’s up?”

“What hospital?”

“San Ramon Regional Medical Center,” Andy told her. “You’re closer than we are. I imagine you’re only fifteen or twenty minutes away from it, while we’re almost an hour out. Why, Linda?”

“Well, a couple of things, Andy, that Phil, uh, may have conveniently ‘forgotten’ to tell you, for his own amusement,” Linda said with a bit of a laugh. “So you can’t take Lexi and Melody with you into the hospital, not while Niko’s in labor. Do you know *which* others are with Niko right now?”

“I’m texting Ash to ask her as we speak, Linda,” Melody said.

“Good. Ash is fine to be there, but you need to tell all the other girls to get out, at least until after the kid’s born. None of your partners have ever given birth before, have they?”

“No,” Andy said, “I’m pretty sure that would’ve come up.”

“Damn. That would’ve really helped out some right now. Oh well. Alright, I’m going to send Violet over to be your bodyguard until your kid’s actually out of the oven, at which point Melody and Lexi can come into the building, but they need to stay a hundred feet from you until that happens once you’re at the hospital and approaching Niko.”

“Linda, what the hell is going on?”

“You’ve got a team over twenty, Andy, so Phil was *supposed* to tell you the extra rules about childbirth at lunch, but he got so concerned with... the other thing... that he forgot to go over them with you. I think he assumed Niko’s boy wouldn’t dare show up early.”

“Sounds like Piper, Fiona and Ash are the three who went in with Niko,” Melody said.

“Okay, you need to send a message suggesting that Piper and Fiona excuse themselves from Niko’s presence until the baby’s born.”

“Not Ash?” Andy asked.

“Ash’s already *plenty* pregnant, Andy,” Linda said with a giggle. “That’s not true for Piper or Fi, though, is it?”

“Not unless either of them just found out about it today,” Andy said. “Why, what difference does it make?”

“While you’ve got a member of your Team in labor, Andy, any other member within about a hundred feet of her is going to have the uncontrollable urge to make you get her pregnant,” Linda said with a soft laugh. “Phil’s going to be disappointed that I told you in advance, but it’s only right that you know about it going in. Again, if you had like an eight- or twelve-person team, this wouldn’t be a concern, because the intensity’s a lot less for smaller teams, but...”

“But we ended up with large families, and that brings its own collection of oddities,” Andy said. “So how strong an urge are we talking?”

“It depends on how strong the labor pains are,” Linda said. “But it could get quite intense. But if a woman’s given birth before or is already pregnant, then we guess the nanobots don’t take that as a signal they need to flare the woman up some. And knowing how extra you and your family are, I think it’s only fair that you at least warn the two of them.”

“I’m telling them right now,” Melody said, “via text. But it seems like they think you’re full of shit and fucking with us, Linda.”

All three of the people in the car could hear Linda snort in amusement over the speakerphone. “Right. Sure. Yes. Definitely. That’s absolutely the thing I’m doing here. There is no possible way this is going to come back and bite you in the ass. You have fun with that.”

“Assuming you *aren’t* lying, Linda, when does it pass?” Andy asked her.

“As soon as Niko’s given birth, the moment will have passed and the Heat Signal will have shut down, at least until Ash is in labor.”

“It won’t affect Violet?”

“BigTits’ll be fine,” Linda chuckled. “In fact, anybody who’s *not* imprinted onto you won’t notice a damn thing. But your partners are going to be unable to fight the siren’s call.”

“Melody, please tell Fi and Piper that I do *not* think Linda is fucking with them, and if they choose to ignore her advice, they do so at their own peril,” Andy laughed, rolling his eyes.

“I think it was Piper who typed it, but the message just came back – ‘Bring it on.’ So I guess we’ll find out for ourselves.”

“Just be quick about it and it won’t keep you busy for too long, Andy,” Linda said. “Once the nanobots detect recent sperm, it’ll cool off their brains. I know you’ve gotten quite adept at dishing out a dosing if you need to, so just make sure you’re quick about it, and you’ll be fine. Besides, if they suddenly stop, then you know the baby’s out and you need to get your ass into the room.”

“Oh, he’s got to be in the room when the kid gets here, or Niko is going to be busting his balls from now until all eternity,” Lexi said. “I was told to shoot anyone who gets in the way.”

“I’m sure she didn’t—”

“Anyone. In. The. Way.”

“Well, then we’ll let you keep the building secure from the outside,” Linda said. “It’s all generally over much faster than people expect anyway. It used to be the first birth’s labor was half a day to a day, and then down to eight to ten hours for later children, but it looks like the nanobots are helping with that too, and labor’s down to 8 hours tops, thank Christ for that.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” Andy said. “Anything else Phil forgot to tell me?”

“Nothing that you didn’t already know, I imagine, from reading up about the serum as part of Oversight,” Linda said. “Niko won’t need a dose of your cum for three weeks post birth, give or take, while her body is recovering, recalibrating and adapting to providing milk for your child. She’ll have a little bit of warning when the cravings are going to start up again, but when she feels those cravings start to set back in again, you tell her to take them seriously and not put it off, otherwise it’ll creep up on her like a motherfucker.”

“The serum going to have any long-lasting effects on her body post giving birth?”

“Oh yeah,” Linda replied. “She’s going to recover way faster than you expect, and she’s... well, no polite way of saying this... she’s gonna have a tighter pussy after giving birth, not looser. That’s going to throw you, even with me telling you about it in advance. And if (or, let’s be honest, when) she decides she’s ready for another kid, her body’s going to have total control of when that happens. It’s trippy, but she’ll be able to simply *decide* when she wants to get knocked up or not. No need for birth control. It’s wild, but we’ve been seeing it for a couple of months now. There may be some other nanobot tweaks that’ll be unique to her, but you’re not going to know what those are until you’re in the thick of it. Just don’t expect whatever happens with her to also happen with your other partners who give birth the exact same way. I’ve told you the commonalities, but the rest of it? It’s one massive fucking crap shoot, and you’re just going to have to play it where it lies. You’ve been following the advisory rules for the last few weeks?”

“Absolutely,” Andy said. “I thought it was a little weird being instructed for my partner to *only* blow me for the last month of pregnancy, but then I thought about it, and you’re right, the risk of contamination’s just too much to put the doctors in jeopardy. Keeping them safe needs to be the highest priority. Everything else is safe to touch?”

“Yep, although the doctors need to be more worried about that than you,” Linda said. “You’re familiar with all the other stuff in the document, right?”

“I was a little tripped out by the idea that my son’s semen isn’t toxic to my partner’s skin, but I suppose that makes sense,” Andy said. “The nanobots know and identify family.”

“And it’s *just* external skin, so still be careful and have partners wash their hands very carefully if they accidentally come in contact with it,” Linda said. “Not that that isn’t just good advice when dealing with newborns anyway. If it gets into someone’s eyes or internal flesh, that person’s going to get some severe damage, so caution is your friend. Boys don’t produce sperm until puberty, so we’re a good ten years away from knowing exactly how different your son’s going to be because of the nanobots, but we want you to use safety as your top watch word. Male children still seem incredibly rare, so I need you to be conscientious of what you’re doing and what your kid’s up to.”

“We’ll keep tabs on him, I promise you,” Andy said. “We’ll stay in the hospital for a few days after my son’s born, but I suspect we’ll be back again soon enough once Ash is ready to let go.”

“Ash has been ready to have those two girls out of her for months now, Andy,” Lexi joked.

“Oh, believe me, I know,” Andy chuckled. “I keep telling her she looks beautiful even while she’s pregnant, but she keeps telling *me* she looks like she’s a cartoon character that swallowed a bowling ball.”

“Well, she is eating for *three* Andy,” Linda said to him. “I think having Ash giving birth in a few weeks is going to be trickier than you think, because Niko will probably be the only person you can safely bring into the room with you.”

“Christ,” Andy grumbled, “okay. I’ll try and figure it out.”

“Don’t worry,” Linda said with a giggle. “It can’t be all that much harder than when our parents did it, can it?”

“You’re telling me I have to worry about partners losing their minds and yet, somehow, you don’t think that’s trickier than what my parents had to deal with?”

“Fair point,” Linda said. “Call if you need any more help.”

Then she hung up.

“You’re sure you can’t get them to go along with Linda’s suggestion, Melody?”

“Boss, you’ve known Fiona a lot longer than I have,” Melody said with a grin. “Do you really think she’s going to be told what to do?”

Andy sighed, leaning back, shaking his head. “Not a chance. But I’ll have to do what I have to, to keep her safe.” The rest of the drive to the hospital, Melody was checking in with the hospital, informing them about Andy’s impending arrival, and the nurses there said they had set aside the room next to the delivery room for Andy and his partners, which only seemed to reinforce the idea that a couple of his partners were expected to have trouble focusing.

He had to wonder how much adapting hospitals were doing with all of the new medical... quirks that were affecting people. He expected there had to be more than a handful of changes, but there were so many things going on that Andy couldn’t keep track of them all.

When they arrived at the hospital, Violet met them at the entrance, a big grin on her face. Master Sergeant Violet ‘BigTits’ McGuinness was part of Phil’s security detail and one of his partners, but she was a big-hearted softie who had a warm sense of humor. “This is as far as you go, ladies,” Violet said to them. “I’ll keep your boy safe from here on out until after Niko’s gotten her kid out.”

“You best, BT, or I’ll have your hide,” Lexi said to her with a smile, as Melody gave Andy a big hug. “Go get ‘em boss.”

“Yeah,” Melody said to him. “Don’t let ‘em dictate when they’re gonna get knocked up.”

“You think I want to argue with them?” Andy said, shaking his head with a wry grin. “I’m gonna go with the flow as best I can and hope nobody kills me before I see my son for the first time.”

Andy and Violet entered the hospital and Andy stopped to check in at reception, although his nostrils flared a bit as his head looked around the room. “That’s weird,” he muttered to himself.

“What’s that?” Violet asked him.

“I can *smell* Piper,” he said quietly. She had a certain kind of earthy scent to her, but one tinged by that coconut lavender body wash she always used, mixed with her favorite perfume. It was something he’d smelled on her every once in a while, but certainly not at such a distance. She was floors away from him right now, but he knew her exact location by scent alone. “That’s never happened before. We... we need to get to her soon.” He wondered for a moment if this was how Piper felt all the time, being able to track him by his individual odor. Then his voice took on a certain snarl he’d never heard in it before. “I have to knock my bitch up, so everyone knows she’s fucking mine...” Andy slapped his hand over his mouth, looking at Violet, who just giggled a little. “I... I don’t know why I said that, but we need to go.”

“It might be tied to that special bond you and Piper share because of how long she went between priming and imprinting,” Violet said as they moved over towards the elevator. She reached out and pushed the button. They needed to get to the 5th floor. “Do you smell any of your other partners?”

“No,” Andy said, scowling a bit, unable to sit still, pacing back and forth like a wolf ready to

pounce. “This is taking too fucking long.” He turned and stepped over towards the stairwell, as Violet quickly had to shift to stay behind him, as he started running up the stairs. As he was running up, he could smell Piper running down and they met on the third-floor landing, practically colliding into each other, Andy turning to shove Piper with a strength he didn’t know he had against the wall, as she whimpered, her hands clinging to him.

“Breed me, Andy,” Piper said in-between frenzied kisses, their lips pressing against each other’s every so often, but the two of them just as content to lick and sniff at each other. The Olympian volleyball player was far more fit than he was, and yet, he seemed to be able to push and shove her without resistance, his taller partner whimpering and moaning. “It’s like I’m back in Covington’s den, but I can *think* clearly enough to tell you this time about just how badly I need to be *fucked*, to be *filled*, to be *knocked up* and proudly swollen with your fucking child.” She was nuzzled against his body, her hands reaching down to try and rip his pants open. “I’m your wife, Andy, but right now I just feel like a fucking bitch in heat, *your* bitch in heat, *your* slut with an itchy pussy that’s confused why it isn’t full of *your* fucking cum right fucking now...”

He’d seen Piper like this before, not just the first time they met, but when she’d also decided she wanted to try and go as long as she could between dosing sessions, just to test her limits. But it wasn’t *her* demeanor he was concerned with – it was *his own*.

Andy didn’t feel much like himself – he felt carnal, primal, bestial. In his mind, he wanted to talk to Piper, to make sure she was okay with this moment, to try and talk her down or at least clarify what they were about to do, considering Piper had, at least up until recently, been talking about doing the next Olympics. But it seemed like baby fever had been infecting his entire household, and for the last month or two, the Olympics had seemed like less and less of a priority for her. So rational Andy wanted to stop and have a conversation about whether this was a thing she really wanted to do...

...but it seemed like Rational Andy was on lunch break.

Caveman Andy was in the driver’s seat for the time being.

He yanked her away from the wall and shoved her down onto the landing, watching her spill onto her ass before she started turning over even before his hands could reach her. They both clearly had the same thing in mind, he realized, as she moved onto her hands and knees, reaching behind her to yank her yoga pants and panties down to her knees before her fingertips spread her swollen pussylips wide for him, showing off just how wet she was as she started to whimper.

“Don’t make your bitch wait, Andy,” Piper whined. “She needs to be made whole. She needs to be *claimed*. She needs to be *fucking bred*, *you bastard*...”

The primitive half of Andy’s brain was making all the decisions, as he moved to get in behind her, fishing out his cock before he lined it up and sunk it right into Piper’s eager waiting snatch, hungry groans escaping from both in parallel.

Andy certainly enjoyed doggy style as much as the next man, but he could feel his body taking it to a whole new level at this moment, his hips whipping back and forth in quick, fevered thrusts, snapping his torso back and forth against hers more furiously than he’d thought himself capable of, as Violet leaned against the stairwell door to prevent anyone from opening it, as they both saw Fiona walking slowly down the stairs, a broad smile on her lips.

He felt like he couldn’t divide his concentration, so he kept on slamming harder and harder into Piper’s hips, feeling his balls already working to provide a load that would sate both the nanobots inside of her and her own need for sexual release, that orgasm just around the corner.

Fiona slinked down the stairs a little bit and reached down to pull Piper’s hands off the ground, lifting her up so that Andy could see it as the two women’s faces grew closer and closer. “C’mon, husband of ours, she’s made it abundantly clear what she wants. Your wife wants to be a mother. She wants to bear your child. She wants you to fucking *breed her*, Andy, so what the *fuck* are you waiting for?” With that, Fiona began to kiss Piper, knowing that seeing any of his two partners kissing was an immense turn on for him, and it was the final push Andy needed.

His hips thrust forward and sank his cock hilt deep inside of Piper's pussy as his balls drew up and let loose a mighty load, almost like his body was working overtime to produce an excess of what he normally did, and he felt like the orgasm that left his body dead was set on being as potent as possible.

A moment or two later, he could feel the fog clearing in his own mind, and he laughed. He *had* to laugh, because of the insanity of it all, as he felt like he could think a bit more clearly again, still feeling Piper's pussy clenching and spasming lightly around his cock deliciously. "You okay, Piper?"

"I think you came inside my fucking *skull*, Andy, you beautiful motherfucker" Piper laughed, just as winded and exhausted as he sounded. "*Fuck*, that felt so fucking *good*, though. I wasn't expecting you to go all 'Andy strong, smash woman!' on me, though... I definitely don't want that all the time, but it was... well, it was *hot*. Where the hell did *that* come from?"

"Yeah, uh, I wasn't expecting that either," Andy said with a nervous laugh. "Weirdly enough, while we were standing for the elevator, I, uh, I could *smell* you..."

"You *whatnow*?"

"You know how you can smell me from a distance? Well, for a minute or two, I, uh, I could smell you and smell that you were in heat..."

Fiona laughed a little, stroking Piper's face as Andy moved to pull up Piper's panties and pants before tucking his cock away. "Well, at least we know it doesn't affect all non-pregnant partners now," Fiona said.

"No no," Violet said with a shit-eating grin. "It does. It really does."

"Oh. *Oh*."

"Congratulations?"

"I mean... I knew I was a few days late, but I just thought it was the stress from Niko and Ash's due dates..." Fi said.

"Wait," Andy said. "I know I'm not the sharpest stick in the bundle but—"

Violet smiled at him like he was a small child asking a rather basic question. "But the only way Fi wouldn't be ready to pin you against a wall right now is either she was pregnant before and either gave birth or had a miscarriage—"

"Which you know I haven't—"

"Orrrr... if she already *has* a bundle in the oven right *now*," Violet said with a giggle.

Andy had to chuckle a bit at that, leaning over to kiss Fiona's lips tenderly. "You're going to be an *amazing* mother, Fi," he said to her.

"Don't you talk like you're going to be anywhere but right there beside me, Mister Rook," Fi said, her face blushing a little bit. "I'd stopped taking my pills late last year, but I didn't think it would happen quite so soon..."

Piper giggled a little bit, reaching up and grabbing Andy's neck to pull him down so she could kiss him hard, keeping his lips locked against hers for a long moment before they parted. "Well, I can't speak for *you*, Fi, but *I'm* pretty certain I'm getting pregnant from *that*... tell Caveman Andy he doesn't need to paint *every corner* of my cunt with his fucking cum..." She started giggling again. "Not that it wasn't hot as *fuck*. God, I'm still fucking shaking from it."

"C'mon, let's get up to Niko," Fiona said, helping Andy and Piper back up to their feet. "She wants you there for this."

"You know *no* man has ever wanted to be in the room when his wife is giving birth, right?" Andy asked with a laugh as they started to walk up the rest of the stairs. "She's just going to be mad at me the whole time."

"Nah," Fiona replied with a laugh. "But I'm sure she'll remind you that you did this to her at least a few times for good measure."

"Like you did to the rest of us, apparently," Piper giggled, seemingly a little fuck-drunk from a few moments ago. "God, I feel all squishy inside..."

When they got to the room, Andy couldn't help but chuckle, seeing the doctor and nurses giving him a wink when they entered, Ash rolling her eyes with a grin wide enough to wrap around the back of her head. "All done making sure everyone you're married to in the room is pregnant?" she asked him.

"Didn't take as long as you might have thought," Piper laughed, poking Fiona.

Ash tilted her head then narrowed her eyes to Fiona. "Why didn't you *tell* anyone, Fi?"

"I didn't *know*, Ash!" Fi laughed back. "It was news to me too!"

"Hey!" Niko said from her place in the center of the room, her legs up in stirrups, a blanket tarped over her while a doctor was keeping an eye on her dilation. "Woman in fucking labor here, okay? Get my fucking husband over here to hold my fucking hand."

"I'm here, Niko, I'm here," Andy said as he moved over to the empty chair that was next to the bed, offering her his hand, which she immediately grabbed and started to crush. "Sorry I was running late."

"No no," Niko laughed, sounding a little exhausted. "Sorry he's coming early. I think he just couldn't wait to fucking meet you."

"How bad's the pain?"

"I'm shitting a bowling ball," Niko bitterly laughed as she rolled her eyes. "How the fuck do you think it is?"

"Except she's on drugs to help manage the pain," Aisling added.

"Not enough, if you ask me. I've yet to say even one thing semi-ridiculous."

"She'll be *fine*," Ash grinned. "And you've got plenty of time. Doctors want to give her another hour or two to continue dilating before they're gonna make a go at getting the kid out."

"Can't they just take him out *now* Andy?" Niko whimpered. "I just... I want to hold him... I want to know he's real..."

"Just another hour or two Mrs. Rook," the lead doctor said. "And then you'll be ready."

"Fuuuuuuck," she groaned. "I'm gonna go out of my fucking mind..."

For the next half hour or so, they tried to keep Niko's mind off her body, especially as Fiona relayed the events of the stairwell to Ash and Niko, the others in the room only chuckling a little bit, as if this was a story they'd heard before, just with different players.

Half an hour later, there was a knock at the door, and Violet went to go open it, only to reveal Nicolette standing outside, dressed in sweatpants and a very baggy sweatshirt, a slightly pained look in her eyes, a large duffel bag in one hand. "M-M-M-Master?" Nicolette said, her words incredibly shaky. "I j-j-just came to bring some things, but..."

"Shit, how did you get past Melody and Alexis?" Violet said to her before looking over to Andy. "You need to get her into the next room and take care of her."

"She's a fucking ninja," Fiona giggled. "I'll bet she didn't even see they were standing guard and just breezed on past them. Nowhere in those sweatpants to hide a smoke bomb."

Niko smiled up at him, pulling him down, kissing his lips. "I'll be fine. Just don't take too long, babe. And it'll be fine."

"Nicolette, are you—"

"Get fucking over here, Master," Nicolette said, tossing the bag of clothes down in the room, her voice turning guttural and wanton.

Andy moved over as quick as he could and stepped out with Violet following quick behind him. The room next door had a single bed in it, and basically looked like it was made up to handle exactly this kind of thing, as Nicolette ignored the bed and shoved Andy into a chair off to the side of it that Andy suspected was for whoever was on guard duty. "Nicolette, are you—"

"Master, I've been trying to find a way to tell you for months now, but I can't fucking think anymore, so you've gonna fuck a child into me..." Nicolette said as she pulled out his cock, yanking down her sweatpants, revealing she wasn't wearing any panties, which was standard for the blonde.

Andy wasn't immediately hard, so she gave him a hard kiss and a few rough tugs, looking at him imploringly as her other hand smoothed all over his face nervously. "I don't wanna be your wife, Andy; I just wanna be your baby momma. I just wanna be a good little bred bitch for you... I'm so fucking scared you'll say no..."

"I won't say no," Andy told her, as he felt her pushing her cunt down onto his cock, straddling his lap. Nicolette was known for enjoying rough sex, wild and primal, with him yanking on her hair or slapping her ass, but in this moment, he could see the most vulnerable look in her eyes, her body taking the active hand, doing everything possible to keep her ass bouncing in his lap.

"Good. Good good fucking good give it to me please Master please please please give me your fucking baby!"

Andy didn't last long, because Nicolette kept whimpering into his ear, her breath hot on his skin, and when his body yielded, vacating his balls inside of her, she let loose the most erotic moan he'd ever heard from her, like she'd felt her soul being completed.

After they'd both cooled off a little, she giggled a little, nuzzling his cheek, stroking his hair. "I know you need to get back in and check on Mistress Niko, Master, but thank you... thank you for not telling me no..." Andy could see a single tear running down her cheek, so he wiped it away with his thumb. "I was so scared you were going to tell me I'm just the hired help..."

"Nic," Andy smiled. "I'm just glad that you *really* wanted this before you were a bit out of your mind. Although we're definitely going to have to revisit the conversation about you being 'just staff,' at some point soon. How long have you felt this way?"

"A few months now? Maybe more? Maybe even as far back as the wedding," Nicolette told him, her fingers intertwining with his for a moment. "I don't want to be your wife, Andy. I said that before and I meant it. But I do want to be a mother. And I do want it to be *your* child. And... and I was worried that telling you that..." She looked away for a moment before looking back at him. "Well, let's just say I was afraid you might tell me to pair with someone else, and I'd have to get very angry with you, because I'm not leaving this household by hell or highwater."

"I did tell you that you could come to me and tell me anything, Nicolette. You and everyone else on staff."

"We get that, Andy, but... some of us are still working out how *we* feel about everything. And when I heard that Mistress Niko was going into labor, well, I *knew* I had to talk to you... because I've... well, like a lot of young girls, I want to be a mother, so I hope you're okay with what we just did... because it certainly feels like it's definitely going to take."

"And you're okay with this?" Andy asked her. "You really wanted to bear a child from me before you walked into the hospital?"

"I did, I do, I still fucking do, Master," Nicolette told him, kissing him again and again. "So, thank you. Thank you thank you thank you. I'll bear you a good child, I promise. No, *us* a good child. Now, let's go see about your son."

They cleaned themselves up and headed back into the delivery room, where about twenty minutes later, the big show started. Niko was only in labor for about an hour past that before their son popped free and into the world.

After doing all the standard newborn things, the doctors handed him to Niko, and he looked absolutely perfect, all tiny and frail, eager to carve his place in the world nonetheless.

"Have you decided on a name?" the doctor asked them.

"Matthew T'ael Rook," Niko told her.

"I keep meaning to ask you, Neeks," Ash said with a grin. "What's 'T'ael' mean anyway?"

"It's an ancient Lakota word," Niko said, sticking out her tongue at Aisling. "It means 'first!'"

"You little bitch," Aisling giggled. "He's your son, not some bloody YouTube comment."

"It's still a fine, proud, upstanding name," Niko said. "And it's only his middle name. Hell, I can't even *remember* most of your middle names, so let my son have a bit of fun with his."

“Not *your* son,” Andy said, reaching down to brush a fingertip across his son’s forehead. “*Our* son. All of ours. We’re a family, and that means every one of you... Violet and doctors aside... is this boy’s mother now and is going to be part of his life forever.”

“Speaking of which,” Niko said. “Would you like to hold him, Andy?”

Andy took the small baby from his wife’s arms and cradled him in his own, and in that moment, Andrew Ian Rook’s entire world fundamentally shifted, like tectonic plates making way for a new volcano to spring forth into being.

He’d heard tales about how fathers could feel the universe pivot around them when they held their first newborn child in their arms, but Andy had always written it off as sentimental nonsense, and something that would never apply to him. And yet... here he stood now, a choir of vengeful angels with flaming swords at the ready behind him, his legion of wrathful forces to strike down with no mercy those who might oppose his son’s path in life.

This child was born of his own flesh and blood. This child carried part of Andy’s soul with him, and the boy would have an army of Valkyries seeing to his upbringing while Andy himself would do his best to keep his head above water and to set a good example. He would impart all the wisdom he’d gained, especially over the last few years, and try and raise his son to be a great man, worthy of the name of Andy’s late brother, who’d always been Andy’s hero.

Two years ago, Andy had been a semi-struggling fantasy author working a day job writing marketing copy for movies that nobody wanted to watch on Netflix while his brother Matty was running a successful business and raising his son with his beautiful wife. Andy had been convinced that Matty was going to carry on the family name and that Andy would just die alone and unwed eventually, a quiet little life without much legacy beyond his writing. He couldn’t have planned for this, for any of this, but he swore to himself in that moment that if he could keep this child safe and raise him to be even half the man his namesake was, then Andy’s survival would be justified and earned.

He felt Ash and Fi’s arms around either side of him as Piper reached down and wiped tears from his eyes that he hadn’t even realized he’d been crying, somewhere between being reminded of the loss of his brother and yet, somehow seeing a bit of the old Matty’s comforting smile in the eager innocent eyes of Andy’s newborn son.

Matt reached out and closed his tiny fingers around one of Andy’s thumbs, and in that singular moment, Andy knew he could’ve written a thousand pages trying to explain all the feelings searing through his veins, when it truly boiled down to one solitary word...

...joy.

Chapter Twenty-Five

May 3rd, 2021 – 10:23 am

The last several days had been something of a blur for Andy. Thankfully, Ash seemed to be holding to her expected delivery date, and so the twins hadn't yet arrived, although Aisling and Andy had picked out their names – Kayleigh and Riley – and Andy felt a little bit of relief that his son, his first son, Matt, got to experience being the center of attention for at least a little bit on his own.

It also turned out that whatever else the nanobots rushing through Piper's body were doing, they were at least respecting the fact that she was still taking birth control, and while her body may have wanted her to get pregnant, it hadn't affected the birth control she was on, and her intentions of doing one more Olympics before retiring were still going to be on. For now, at least, Piper remained unimpregnated.

Fiona *had* tested positive for pregnancy, and that had delighted her to *no* end, because she'd been expecting it to be something of an uphill battle. Both her and Andy had been considered semi-infertile when they were younger, and now that she was with child, she couldn't be happier.

They'd brought Matt back from the hospital just a couple of days after he'd been born, and the doctors said that he was just shy of 8 pounds. He'd been born with hair a shade of onyx like his mother, hazel eyes like his father, and a strong opinion about when to eat, like both of his parents.

The family had set up a room in the manor which would be the nursery, a place where the newborns and infants could be until they were old enough to get their own room, although Andy had done the math and was already worried that a handful of rooms might turn into dormitories with several children bunking in. But, as he was fond of saying, they'd burn that bridge when they crossed it.

Niko had been wiped out for a few days after getting back, but since then had sprung into being a new protective mother with all the gusto she attacked everything else with. Matt had been doing the rounds, and the entire family had already taken multiple turns holding him.

Also, as expected, Jade had decided to settle into her role as house nanny, and she sprang into that job like she was born for it. In fact, she'd taken to handling Matt when he woke up in the middle of the night so much that Niko had only gotten up once so far to help. Niko had felt a little bad, but Jade had insisted that she be allowed to do her job and tend to Matt when Niko was resting. It was an adjustment to the house rhythm, but it seemed a welcome one, with the Team coming together to show how group parenting was going to work.

But one person that Andy had had trouble cornering was Nicolette, however, as the almost ninja-like housekeeper had taken to avoiding talking to anyone for more than a few moments over the past week. Andy, however, had a plan. He grabbed his laptop and went to sit in the hallway outside of Nicolette's room, and he started to write.

One of the advantages of being a writer was that location didn't matter, and wherever he wanted to write from, he could. So, pulling up a chair and waiting outside of someone's room was definitely an option. An hour or so later, Hannah wandered by and cocked her head, and asked, "What're you doing, Andy?"

"Waiting for Nicolette," he told her, not looking up from his typing.

"I think she's scared of talking to you," Hannah said with a giggle.

"Well, that's ridiculous, so I'm going to wait here until we have a conversation," Andy told her, typing away on the keyboard. "If you see her, you can tell her that."

"Okay, Andy." And then Hannah continued along her way.

Another hour or so later, he heard the voice he wanted to hear from the end of the hallway near the stairs. "You're not going to let this go, are you?" Nicolette's voice asked.

"Nope," Andy said. "We're gonna talk about it."

Nicolette let out an overly dramatic sigh and then walked over towards him, dressed in one of her least slutty French maid outfits, dropping down onto her knees next to him in the chair. "Please don't make me give it up, Master," Nicolette said, a single tear running down her cheek.

That was the point where Andy turned and looked at her, a single tear running down his own cheek. “Is that the kind of monster you think I am, Nicolette?” he sighed. “That I would ask you to give up the child you so vehemently insisted you wanted? I’m not going to make you give it up, Nicolette; I swear to you on my son’s life.” She let out a very visible shudder and sigh of relief at that, as if the tension had just left her body. “Why would you think that I would?”

“I... I’m not sure, Master,” Nicolette said. “With Piper not getting preg—”

“Piper didn’t *want* to be pregnant, Nicolette, not yet.” Andy nodded his head, though, as if he could understand how the information out of context might have made her jump to erroneous conclusions. “That was a decision that *she* made, and I’m supporting her in. That doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“I was worried you might’ve just been telling me I could have a baby so you could get out of the hospital or something,” she sighed. “Whitney got accidentally pregnant with Bill’s baby in 2019, and he forced her to terminate it, which she did without open objection, even though it was fucking killing her. They had a ripped condom, which neither had noticed in the heat of the moment, and when Whitney missed her period, Bill... didn’t take it well.”

“Oh, shit...”

“He flew off the handle and while he didn’t hit her, he was threatening to abandon her, to get rid of her because he didn’t want a child that badly. He did the worst thing he could possibly do to a person who gets off on total submission – he refused to tell her to do anything else until she’d had the abortion. It... it was the worst I’d ever seen her, Master. She was crying all the time, almost nonverbal, and despite the fact that she was trying very hard to put on a brave face, that was the break in their relationship from which they never recovered from. Rationally, I know you wouldn’t ask me to do that, Andy, but the idea of losing this child... I was scared that maybe you’d agreed to it in a spur-of-the-moment thing, and that when you weren’t under the pressure of your first child about to be born, maybe you’d reconsider, because I’m not one of your wives. It sounds really fucking stupid when I say it out loud, I know. But just because it was important to *me* doesn’t mean it would have to be important to *you*, sir. I’m staff. I get th—”

“Okay, Nicolette, knock it off,” he chuckled. “The *staff* designation around here couldn’t mean any less if I *tried* to make it mean less, and Heavens know, I have tried. It’s a way for you women to say you don’t want to be married to me, you’re never *going* to want to be married to me and that I shouldn’t even *consider* trying to ask one of you to join the brides. I get it. I respect it. But I also need all of you to do me a favor.”

“Sir?”

“I need you to stop treating me like an idiot,” he said with a grin. “If you or any other woman in the house wants a child, I’m *going to say yes*. You just need to talk to me about it first, let me know that it’s something you’ve thought about, given weight to all the ramifications, and then let me know that you’re *trying* for it. I think the only reason I was even slightly annoyed at the hospital was because you were springing it on me out of nowhere. Because it was hard to tell if it was you or the nanites speaking. And then when you started ducking me at home—”

“To be fair, Master, it wasn’t just you. I was scared *anyone* would try and talk me out of it. Or that maybe one of the wives would get jealous. Fi can be a little scary and territorial when she wants to be, but you know that.”

“—I assumed it was because you *didn’t* want to keep it, now that you’d come to your senses, and didn’t know how to tell me. I’d been trying to find you to tell you that if you didn’t *want* the baby, you could terminate it, but if you wanted to keep it, that was fine, too. I’d support whatever decision you’d made. I’m never going to make you do anything you don’t want to.”

Nicolette threw her arms around his midsection and leaned her head against his chest. “Aren’t we a perfect pair of idiots? I’m avoiding you because I’m afraid you’ll make me give it up, and you’re hunting for me, because you want to tell me that whatever I want to do is okay,” she laughed in

between sobs. “You want to write an O. Henry story? I think we’ve got a free one for you.”

“God no,” Andy laughed. “Those stories were always depressing as fuck. Let me tell more entertaining stories about how a phoenix wants to bone a minotaur or something. Now, whether you like it or not, you’re sort of the de facto leader of everyone who considers themselves *staff*. I want you to go about conveying a message for me – anyone in the house on staff who wants to have a kid with me is allowed to, provided they talk to me in advance about it. No, not *allowed* to... that’s the wrong word. If someone wants to have a kid with me, I’m encouraging it. But we talk first, before that moment happens. I’m trying *really* hard here to be as supportive to everyone as I can, but every so often, one of you girls thinks the worst of me for whatever reason. No more springing it on me in the heat of the moment. I just need a few minutes to wrap my head around the idea, but I promise not to tell anyone no, okay?”

“Even if it’s Whitney?” she asked him.

“Even if it’s *Katie*, although that may be a slightly *longer* conversation,” he said with a slight chuckle. “Not that I would expect it to happen.”

“You should,” Nicolette said.

“I should what?”

“You should expect it to happen,” Nicolette said. “Katie and Jenny have been talking about it for the last couple of months, and one, if not both of them, are going to ask you for permission to get pregnant with your child, although they’ll want their children to keep their last name and not take yours, assuming you’re okay with that. I’d like the same thing, actually.”

“Of course that’s fine, Nicolette,” he told her. “Do I strike you as the kind of man who cares about putting his name on everything that came from him? Shit, I don’t even write *books* under my *own* name,” he said with a smirk. “You could give the kid the last name Conrad for all I care, so you can tell everyone they’re Blake Conrad’s kid instead of Andy Rook’s.”

“How about I give them the last name Sexton, after Dale and Charlotte?”

“Then you’re just asking for trouble, but that one’s not on me,” he smiled. “You’ve read some of the books; you know how cursed the Sexton family is.”

“And expect Whitney to be scared shitless when she comes to you to talk to you about this, because the fear of Bill’s still hanging in her mind like an unexploded German bomb in the streets of London post Blitz.” She tilted her head up and pressed her lips against Andy’s, both of her hands reaching to hold onto the back of his head, keeping him in the tender embrace for a long moment. “Thank you for being a good man, Andy. I didn’t really know how much I wanted to be a mother until I had the option in front of me and then... then I realized I would do anything to prevent someone from taking it away from me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her. “The child will still be welcome as family, but they’ll be your child, and you’ll be the driving force in their life.” He stood up and she stood up with him. “Don’t make me have to park a chair here again, young lady,” he teased. “You should know by now I’m not above following George Carlin’s advice.”

“Which advice was that?”

“When someone approaches me and says ‘Lead, follow or get out of the way... I *obstruct*,’ he said with a smirk. He gathered up his laptop and headed back downstairs to his office, finding Fiona working away at her laptop. “How’s the book coming along?”

“I’m starting to think I’m going to have to separate it into several series detailing all sorts of aspects of the whole DuoHalo crisis,” she said, sighing as she glanced over at the white board she kept in his office. Her, Ash and Andy had sort of split the major office in the concealed basement into thirds and each had a whiteboard they used for different things. Andy’s kept track of which projects were in which stages. Ash’s had been used to start figuring out how to begin her own graphic design consultancy firm. Fiona’s was now divided into ‘Rook family,’ ‘Marcos family,’ ‘history of New Eden,’ ‘history of DuoHalo,’ and ‘big picture connective tissue’ with file names listed beneath each of them,

parts that Andy suspected were either interview, transcripts or written observations. “Maybe do one book up front that’s focused on some individual aspect and then break it out after that? Jesus, the deadline for a first draft book out of me about all of this should’ve been like a month or so ago, but I need to get something out there soon, otherwise someone else is going to beat me to it.”

“You’re very smart, love,” Andy told her. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. I’d offer to help but I’ve still got to get final script notes and edits back to Maya before she starts filming next month.”

“It’s going to be way more useful to have you there whenever she needs you, you know?”

“Oh, I get it,” Andy laughed. “And I’m sure I’ll spend plenty of time on set, if for no other reason than to say, ‘I was there and got to watch as they made a movie from *my* story.’”

“It doesn’t hurt that you have a man crush on Ewan McGregor, now, does it?” she teased.

“Not in the slightest,” Andy laughed. “It’s just easier, though, to be able to offer thoughts and suggestions when you have a partner working from the top, rather than as one of the pieces on the inside. I love working with Sarah and Em, don’t get me wrong, but here, Maya’s the shotcaller, which means what she says, goes, and I’m going to try and stay out of her way as much as possible.”

“You’re not going to back seat direct her, are you?”

“*God no*,” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “She knows infinitely more about movie making than I’ll ever learn, but I also know the story she’s working from, so if I have a question about why something’s different from my story than it is as they’re filming it, I can get that answered without ruffling any feathers or pissing people off.”

“You *really* need to talk to Phil about what you saw over at Valhalla Shores, though,” Fiona told him as he moved to lean against her desk. “That was some seriously dicey shit going on over there, and the last thing you want to do is leave LP hanging.”

“I know, and I agree, but Phil’s been radio dark since before Niko gave birth, which means there must be some serious shit going down that needs his full attention,” he said. “That’s why I haven’t been bothering or pressuring him. I know that things are pretty wildly out of hand and he’s trying to stuff some genie back in the bottle, otherwise he would’ve loved to come over and see little Matty.” He felt his phone start buzzing in his pocket and pulled it out, seeing it had Whitney’s smiling face on it. “Hey Whit, what’s up?”

“Dr. Marcos is here to see you and says it’s urgent,” Whitney said to him.

“Speak the devil’s name, and he was already on your doorstep,” Fiona chuckled.

“I just buzzed them in through the gate, so they should be at the front door in just a minute or two. I’m on my way to greet them now. Would you like to meet them in one of the living rooms?”

“Sure, let’s meet up in Amber. I’m in the lair, so I’ll be up in just a minute or two.”

“Very good, sir. We’ll see you momentarily. Would you like me to let Niko know so she can bring Matthew for Phil to meet?”

“Good idea. Be there shortly.” Andy hung up the phone, leaning down to kiss Fiona on the cheek. “You want to come up and see Phil, or you want to stay here and keep working?”

Fiona waved her hand at him. “You boys go trade your spy stories. I’ve got plenty here to keep me occupied. I’ll come up later.”

“Fair enough, I’ll tell Phil you’re too good to waste your time on him,” he joked.

“I have a wealth of embarrassing stories on you from our college days, Mr. Rook, don’t you dare forget.”

“I will not, Mrs. Rook,” he grinned as he made his way to the door. “Of that you can be certain.” Because the living rooms needed some sort of differentiator, each of them had been named after places in fantasy or science-fiction. The main living room in the center of the lower floor of the house was nicknamed Amber, for Roger Zelazny’s realm which connected to all others. When he made his way there, he saw Niko had beaten him to it, and Phil was holding Andy’s son trepidatiously. “Don’t worry – at some point I’ll probably have another son and I can name *that one* Phil,” Andy said with a wry smile.

Phil looked *awful*, having clearly not shaved in a week, but because of his Filipino heritage, he didn't grow facial hair very well, and so it was a little spotty and ratty. There were bags under his eyes and after a few seconds, Andy realized that Phil was wearing the exact same clothes he'd been wearing when Andy had seen him last, on the 28th. "He's adorable, Andy," Phil said with a weary smile. "You did good, kid."

"You, on the other hand, look like *shit*, Phil," Andy said with a hint of concern as Phil moved to hand Matty over to Linda.

"That's what I keep telling him, but apparently he's been working on something vitally important, that he didn't want to talk about," Linda grumbled, annoyance writ large in her voice. "Whatever it is he's worried about, he only wants to talk to you about it, Rook, so..."

"That's only part of the reason we're here, Linda," Phil said, grabbing one of Andy's remotes, turning on the largest television in the room. Phil pulled his phone from his pocket and streamcast a video file. "Watch this."

A recorded bit of CNN news from what looked like maybe early this morning began to play. The anchor looked a little surprised. "This morning, we have word from southern Russia, from a town close to the Black Sea called Krasnodar, not far from the borders of Georgia and Ukraine. That town's vice-mayor has apparently declared independence from Russia, in a stunning speech given just a few hours ago. Here's video footage from that speech," the anchor said, before transitioning to footage that looked like it had been shot with a handheld camera trying to stand in for a professional shot, although the sort of down-to-earth look of the footage only seemed to enhance the credibility of it.

"For those who don't know me – I'm Danila Koval, vice-mayor of Krasnodar," the weary but defiant looking man said into the camera. "I did not prepare a fancy official speech for you today, so let me just tell you where we're at and what it has come to."

Andy looked over at Phil with surprise in his eyes. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Seems like. First domino in the Russian Empire looks like it just fell and we're only expecting more, keep watching."

The man on the television continued. "For months, we knew Moscow had abandoned us as people, but as empires go, it didn't want to let go of this land – *our* land. When we asked for the vaccine against DuoHalo, they told us no vaccine exists, but still demanded total loyalty of us. When we didn't bend the knee blindly and obediently, they sent assassins to remove your legitimately elected government. When that didn't work, they tried to smother us by stealing our salaries, pensions and welfare payments, but we were already prepared. Then they turned to the famous Moscow diplomacy. Yeah, that's right – *debily, blyat*, that one. We kicked them out."

For the next couple of minutes, the camera panned to show tank wreckage, as well as damaged buildings and cars strewn about the general area, before the man hopped down off the tank wreckage and moved to stand with his comrades in arms as he detailed how they had defeated the invaders sent to put down their uprising, and how those invaders would be tried for war crimes.

"Two weeks from now, on May 16th, Kuban will have an independence referendum." The footage moved to zoom in close on his face, framing tight for maximum effect. "I am now addressing all the enslaved peoples of the Russian Empire. Raise your voices. Break your chains. Join us. Become free."

The footage cut back to the anchor. "Extraordinary footage from southern Russia. Early reports are that several other regions of Russia are in the process of following suit and calling for independence referendums for their own districts. Obviously, we'll be keeping you up to date on this story as more breaks, but let's go to one of our Russian exper—"

Phil turned off the video. "Whole world's coming loose at the seams. We got a report about China that I need to give to you as well, although if it were any vaguer, it might as well have included a weather report for a specific day next year."

"Any news is more than what we have now, Phil, so spill."

“It sounds like everyone in China is in one of four conditions right now. There’s the very small splinter of members of the Communist Party that apparently were able to hijack a shipment of the German Quaranteam serum variant and get a small portion of their leadership covered. There’s a much larger faction of women survivors who are apparently attempting to overthrow the Communist Party. They’re called the Empty Wives, and they’ve been trying to liaison with us to get QT serum to help them bolster their numbers. There’s also the incredibly high number of casualties they’ve had, with men being decimated, and I wish I meant that in the literal sense of the word, but it’s the opposite, and they only have between five and ten percent of their men left alive. And then there’s the last group, which are the bigger problem. They’ve got something the Chinese are calling the sleeping plague – it’s a variant of DuoHalo except that during the latter stages, the brain is in a comatose state, but the body is still moving around, like it’s sleepwalking, infecting as many others as it can. The sleeping plague portion of the DuoHalo infection seems to affect them for about 3 days, and then dehydration cripples and immobilizes them before they just expire. We haven’t gotten a chance to see what QT’s effect is on one of the sleeping plague, but our current guesses are that either a sleeping plague person would make a full recovery, or they’d just drop down dead. The Air Force right now is prepping a recon mission to see if they can snag and pair someone with sleeping plague, and hopefully we’ll know more about that by this time next week.”

“Jesus, Phil,” Andy chuckled. “You’ve been fucking busy.”

“No no, this is all shit that doesn’t have anything to do with me,” Phil said. “This is just me getting the news.” Phil started looking around the room a bit. “Is there someplace the two of us can go and talk without being disturbed?”

“Phil, you know I don’t like this,” Linda said, edged eyes glaring his way. “We agreed, no more secrets unless they were absolutely, positively necessary.”

“Linda, within a couple of weeks, I’ll tell you everything and you’ll understand why I waited, because Andy’s going to wish I *hadn’t* told him any of this,” Phil said before turning back to Andy. “Maybe we can go up to that hidden room upstairs?”

“Yeah, okay,” Andy said, turning to Niko. “Phil and I are going to head up to the Birdcage. Can you make sure nobody comes in while we’re up there? I’ll lock the door, but you know as well as I do that somehow both Nicolette and Whitney know how to get into there anyway.”

“I’d like to go on record that I’m with Linda about the danger of keeping secrets, Andrew,” Niko told him, but the look in her eyes said she clearly empathized with whatever self-flagellation Phil had been going through over this. “But I’ll tell them.”

“C’mon,” Andy said to Phil. “Let’s go talk about what’s so damn important.”

As they started to walk up the stairs, Andy tried to get Phil to talk about whatever was troubling him, but his friend was so concerned that he shushed Andy several times until they were at the bookcase that doubled as a secret door to a third-floor study. As soon as the door opened, Phil practically sprinted past Andy and headed up the stairs. Andy stepped into the narrow stairwell, pulling the bookcase door shut and flipping the latch into place to lock the door behind them, then started walking up the stairs after his friend.

When Andy reached the top, he saw that Phil had already poured two glasses of scotch, much fuller than he normally would, and held one out to Andy. “You’re going to need to drink this,” Phil said, and for the first time, Andy noticed that Phil’s hands were shaking a little. “Trust me on this one.”

Andy took the glass from Phil, having a sip from it as he sat down in one of the chairs while Phil sat down on the couch, slumping like all the fight had just gone out of him. “Phil, talk to me, man. What the fuck is going on?”

“Andy, I…” Phil started then stopped. He looked down at his glass of scotch, took another long draw from it, swallowed it and then looked back up at Andy, steeling himself to get through it. “A couple of weeks ago, I started researching the impact that the higher Tiers were having on the individuals within Teams at those Tiers. And I came across…” Phil sighed. “Fuck it, I don’t even know

what to *do* with this information, Andy... and I can't sit on it too long, because I know somebody's going to figure out it sooner or later, probably much sooner than I want them to..."

"Phil! Spit it out, man."

"Right! Right. Right... okay, so let me give you a piece of information that *isn't* in any of the reports, because I didn't know what to do with it – higher Tier teams? Their nanobots exchange information via a radio antenna they've grafted onto bone of your right forearm. You can't really feel it, but it's there, trust me. Now, what they're exchanging, I'm still not entirely sure. I think it's mostly just best practices, but it might also be experimental self-modifications the nanobots have made that have been beneficial, so they can be incorporated into other Teams."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Yeah, but this remains between us."

"Of course, man," Andy assured him.

"Piper's ability to track you via scent? Linda developed that ability recently with regards to me. My theory is that the nanobots recognized it was a skillset that your Team had that we didn't, and so they moved to incorporate it into the person who most wanted it," Phil said. "How far that ability extends, I don't know, but it's tangential to the real thing I'm here to talk to you about. Because... because *fuck* if I don't tell *somebody* I'm going to go out of my fucking mind..."

"Phil, brother, just *say* it..."

Phil turned to look at him and then Andy could see that last bit of resistance collapse, as he began to tell Andy the most insane piece of information he would ever hear. "I told you the nanobots are always doing some level of regeneration on anyone they're implanted it, but lately, it's started to become a bit more obvious they're taking things a bit further than that." Andy was about to jump in with a question, but Phil raised his hand, asking him to remain quiet as he continued to talk. "The larger the Team, the higher Tier you're in; the higher Tier you're in, the stronger this low-level constant regeneration is. And it's affecting one thing that nobody's noticed yet, but eventually everyone will. Those in the higher Tiers are aging a lot slower than the rest of world. In a Tier 1 Team, for every two months an unserumed person ages, a person in a Tier 1 team ages only one month. At Tier 2, it's one month for every three months. At Tier 3, it's one month for every four months. And anyone in Tier 4 or higher? We're only aging a couple of months every year."

The information hung in the air for a very long moment before either of them spoke, Phil not sure what to say next and Andy unsure how to make sense of any of it. But eventually someone had to break the silence and Andy's voice cut through the air.

"So you're saying—"

"Yes."

"And it's just people inside of Teams?"

"*Yes.*"

"So, assuming I was going to live another 40 years or so before, I'm now going to—"

"Live approximately two hundred and forty years, yes."

"And so is everyone else in my Team."

"Barring death by non-natural causes, yes."

"That's—wait. It doesn't affect anyone *outside* of the Team?"

"No," Phil said, lifting his glass up towards his lips. "Now you're catching on."

"I'm—we're going to outlive our kids?" Andy said, completely aghast.

"And probably our kids' kids. And maybe even their kids' kids. I'm saying that on your son's 18th birthday, you're only going to look 3 years older than you do right now."

"Phil what the ever-loving *fuck?!?*"

"I know! How the fuck do I tell a mother that she's almost definitely going to outlive the child she just gave birth to?"

"Phil!"

“Andy, what the fuck are we going to do?”

“...I haven't got a fucking clue, Phil...”

Intermission Five – Sergei

May 3rd, 2021 – New Eden, California – 1:37 pm

“You look exhausted, Sergei,” Dr. McKenna said to Sergei Petrov as he entered the room, his partner Andrei having headed down to the canteen to grab them some lunch. “I know it’s not exactly thrilling having to come here and ejaculate as many times as you can into a jar, but we’re working to synthesize it as best as we can. Hopefully soon we’ll be able to let you just sit and rest at home without needing you in here every few days, but because you’ve been here, we’ve saved hundreds of thousands of lives that we wouldn’t have been able to help otherwise.”

“Da, I know, the work we do is important, but it still feels hollow, even with Andrei here,” Sergei sighed, handing another small jar of his jism to the doctor, who put it immediately into a storage container designed to keep it viable as long as possible. In an hour or so, it would get run through a separator, which would split it into tiny doses, that would then be sent out to hospitals all across the nation. His doses were viable for about a week, so the reassignment protocols were still being used relatively sparingly.

Supposedly the Germans had found a way to stabilize the reassignment vector into a pill form that remained viable for up to sixty days, but so far the Americans hadn’t been able to replicate that. Sergei had heard the Germans were offering to share research with the Americans and the Brits, but so far, that offer had been viewed with a bit of suspicion. Sergei hoped they acquiesced soon, simply because it would mean he wouldn’t have to come into the lab and masturbate into a jar several times a day. His protection and US citizenship was dependent on his cooperation.

“Think of how many non-heterosexual people you’ve kept alive, though, Sergei, if it ever gets tough,” Dr. Eve Merriweather said. As the ex-wife of the man who’d developed the lock and key part of the Quaranteam serum, she had found herself at odds with Dr. Adam McCallister’s work, even before he’d had them kidnapped to Russia. Now that she’d escaped (both from him and the Russians, although reports now claimed Adam was working for the Germans) and returned to California, she’d dedicated her life into cracking as much about the serum as she could and undoing some of the horrible work her husband had baked into humanity’s last gasp at survival. “I know how difficult all this can be, but that’s why we try and bring as many of those people in to meet you as we can, so that their faces will live on in your memory. To help you can keep in mind who these people are. So that you know actual people whose lives you saved, rather than them all being abstract numbers.”

“I get this, Doctor, but you know, it still seems unfair that I can have only one partner, compared to the many you both have,” Sergei chuckled before glancing at the door with a frown. “Do not tell Andrei I said that. He will consider me jealous man who wants more cock than he can handle. Are you any further into understanding why I’m different, Dr. Merriweather?”

“We’re still trying to understand how my ex-husband’s work ties into this,” Eve sighed. “I can’t say I’m especially thrilled about being paired up with a man for my survival, but it did keep us alive as a species.”

“How is your new man, Watkins?” Sergei asked her. “Better?”

“He’s... well, he’s quite a lot different than Adam was,” she said with a soft smile. “It’s... nice, being able to talk about... feelings with a partner. We’ve only been together for less than a year, but I already feel infinitely closer to him than I ever did with Adam. And Nathaniel’s existing partners are all good and charming women, so they have done their best about making me feel at home.”

“It is much better than we had it in Russia,” Sergei agreed. “There is no doubt about that. Better food. Better accommodation. Certainly, much better weather. But do I really need the security detail, protective forces around me at all times? I am no head of state, no super soldier.”

“Well, you do have magic running through your veins,” Eve told him. “There are probably only a handful of people like you in the world, whom the serum is reacting in a significantly different way.”

“Da,” Sergei said, “but is it true the Germans have someone like me?”

“It is,” Eve replied. “And there are reports of a few others in other places, but it’s still insanely

rare. We haven't found anyone in the United States reporting such a condition yet, and we've had doctors on the lookout all across the country, now that they know how someone like you would react to people pairing with him."

"I am happy to be of use, Doctor," Sergei said, sitting down on the chair, picking up the carton of orange juice that was provided for him. He ended up drinking a few gallons of orange juice or pineapple juice each day, just to keep himself both hydrated and to keep his body up and running. It sounded like it should be easy work, masturbating into a jar several times a day, but it actually depleted his energy reserves quite quickly. "I must ask, Doctor... why are we asking those who use my sperm to get reassigned to remain entirely quiet during their reassignments? I heard one of the other scientists, Dr. Varma, mentioning that to you, but I had not heard as to why."

"There are... issues that can happen when we allow people to talk during that narrow window, so for the time being, we're insisting that no communication happen," Eve told him.

"That is unfortunate," Sergei replied, scratching the back of his neck. "They always look so enthusiastic when they make contact with my sperm, so eager to learn."

"That's part of the problem," Eve grumbled beneath her breath.

"What was that?" Sergei asked her, as he started to change back into his day to day clothes, instead of the hospital scrubs they had him wear around the labs.

"Nothing," Dr. McKenna said. "My colleague is just tired and crabby, that's all."

He nodded sagely. "This feeling I too know," he said stoically. "That feeling that you are trapped in never ending loop, that each day only runs into the next, a cycle we cannot escape."

"It's not *that* bad," Bill laughed. "You're well fed, you've got your own small mansion, you've got personal security."

"Da, but this is not my *home*, Doctor," Sergei said sadly, shrugging some. The thing he missed most of all was smoking. He could get cigarettes here, although they were heavily frowned upon by the doctors, and they were soft, *American* cigarettes, nothing like the real thing. Too many chemicals, not enough raw tobacco. Sergei had decided it best to just give them up completely, but that did not mean he did not still miss them regularly. "It is my new *adopted* home, perhaps, but it is not the land I grew up in, not the language I grew up speaking. I can be with the man I love, yes, true, but I am not welcome to see the place of my birth ever again."

"That may not be entirely true," Bill told him. "You've seen the news. There're uprisings in Russia, people overthrowing the yoke of oppression and wanting to try something new. Who knows what the geopolitical landscape is going to look like over there in just a few years' time. Maybe you'll be allowed back after the dust settles."

"The dust never settles in Russia," Sergei sighed. "They simply add new layers of dust atop the existing dust. But I suppose it does not hurt to dream."

"Anything else we can do to make your life easier? I know K-Rod said she's been taking you and Andrei to the firing range every so often," Bill said. "Has that helped?"

"I spent much of my life as a soldier, Doc—Bill," Sergei said. Doctor McKenna had asked Sergei to call him Bill dozens of times, and as much as Sergei wanted to oblige him, the soldier's training him kept fighting it. He was getting better at it, however, catching himself this time. "Anything that lets me inhabit those familiar rhythms, familiar steps, it is a good step, something to help ween me off of my former life and ease me into this one. I should also say thank you for letting us go to visit the Tenderloin. Being a gay Russian soldier, San Francisco was a sort of pipe dream, a place we hoped to go to eventually, but I did not think we would ever see it. Do you think there will be another Folsom Street Fair in our lifetime?"

Bill couldn't help but laugh a little bit while Eve blushed slightly. The Folsom Street Fair was one of the largest outdoor events in California, on the last Sunday of September each year, dedicated to the BDSM and leather subculture, but had sort of become a larger event than that, as perhaps the largest regular organized public nudity allowed event in the country. "You've heard of that?"

"I wouldn't call myself a leather man," Sergei said with a slight smile, "but the photographs have made it past many a Russian censor who didn't know to filter the term. Still, it seems a wonderful event tied to gay pride, as well as the BDSM scene." He glanced over to Bill, cocking his head, a little surprise occurring to him for the moment. "You seem to know quite a bit about it."

The older man laughed, nodding his head. "Not intentionally! The whole thing started in the mid-eighties, but when I moved here in the late nineties, it was already a long-established tradition. Of course, I'd heard little rumors about it here and there, but I didn't expect I was going to accidentally stumble onto it one day when I wasn't paying enough attention. I'd gone into the city to do some shopping, turned a corner and then got quite an eyeful of public cock on display, a trio of naked men, collared and leashed, following behind a very burly man in a leather vest and leather pants. And this was back in the 90's when it wasn't anywhere near as big as it is now."

"How much has it grown?"

Bill rubbed his beard a little bit. "In the 90s, it was probably thirty or forty thousand people, but I think, 2019, the last year they held it, it was approaching four hundred thousand people," he said with a slight grin. "It's quite the scene. Now, with a lot of gay men having died to DuoHalo, the turnout will probably be quite a bit less than it used to be, although maybe it'll even out with a bunch of other people turning out for the BDSM aspect of it instead. Lots of people have found themselves sort of inadvertently part of the BDSM scene now that they have partners who are into that, even if they themselves weren't a part of it."

"Has that happened a lot?" Sergei asked, titling his head slightly, amusement on his face. As of late, he'd often been too exhausted to just hold some conversation with the doctors, but he felt like it was important to stay at least a little informed as to the world he could get access to via the staff of New Eden.

"Quite a bit," Bill said, leaning back in his chair some, crossing his hands over his chest. When Eve had first arrived here, this sort of conversation might have been taboo, but since then, she'd had to adapt to sexuality coming much more to the forefront of daily living. Lots of people had. "Lots of men who aren't *against* BDSM but don't have *experience* in it have found themselves with partners who are quite into that kind of thing, and they're learning to adapt, trying to make sure they do whatever it takes to keep their partners happy. You know Dr. Marcos? Phil? Well, a couple of his partners are *big* into being tied up and used that way, so Phil's had to spend a bunch of time picking up things like shibari and Japanese rope tying, but he said it's brought him and his partners closer together, because a few of them sort of had an interest in that but always felt too shy to talk about it. But now that everyone has to have sex daily, or even multiple times daily, people are talking about the ins and outs of it a lot more. What they like, what they don't. We have to, otherwise I think we'd all go crazy. Say goodbye to Puritan Repression and hello to Free Love part 2."

"How about you, Dr. McKenna?" Sergei asked with a wry smile. "I can envisage you with a leather cap, a vest and some hot rocker pants while you're wielding a whip over a couple of cute young ladies dressed in scraps of leather. It might be quite the becoming look on your."

Bill couldn't help but guffaw at that. "Well, I've got one partner who like a bit of D/S and I'm doing my best to get into it, to pick up the mannerisms, the lingo, the expected patterns of behavior... but I have to admit, Grace gets far more into it than I do," he said, turning a bit red. "I hadn't realized she liked ordering people around, especially since I won't let her do that with me, just like I won't order *her* around, but when she found out one of my partners was turned on by calling me Master and her Mistress, well, Grace is one of those people who doesn't do anything in half measures, so she went at it full force, and has been working to try and get better."

"How's that been?" Eve asked.

"It's been... a learning experience, no doubt about that," Bill said before sort of giving a shrug and a cryptic smile. It was clear to Sergei that the older man was still getting accustomed to having to be frank about all his sexual goings on, but that it was now generally public discourse, and that trying

to keep it private just deprived himself of shared experiences. “But at the end of the day, it’s not that hard to give people what they want, and if she wants me to be strong and domineering and it turns her on to be ordered to do shit, well, I should just take that as a sacred trust and not abuse it, right?”

“Just tell me it’s not your daughter’s friend, Bill,” Eve laughed.

“Kenna?” Bill said, almost startled at the thought. “*God* no,” he laughed. “Kenna’s the most active hand girl in the whole damn household, shy of Grace. If anything, she’s more dominant than most of the rest of my partners, even if she’s got a bit of a verbal degradation kink. She enjoys sort of surprising me, and being both very active and vocal about what she likes and doesn’t like. That was incredibly awkward, the first time when she was crawling all over me, telling me she’d been masturbating thinking about me for years. Apparently, Jen, my daughter, had known about it growing up, but thought it was just a phase she’d grow out of. In fact, both Jen *and* Grace knew about it, so that was more than a little strange. But, y’know, apparently that’s common, girls having crushes on their friends’ fathers and whatnot.” Bill tossed his hands up a bit. “News to me, but then again, most things usually are.”

“How’s it going, what with you having said no to Kenna originally?” Eve asked him.

“I think everybody understood my concerns, not just personally but how it all looked, considering the influence I have around here,” Bill said with a sigh. “I didn’t want anyone to think I was abusing my power, even if it seemed like nearly everyone and their mother was doing it. Since I was a fallback option for Kenna, I haven’t had to take too much shit around here about the age difference. It’ll start getting weird again if Kenna decides she wants to get pregnant, but Jen’s already got a head start, with a bun in her oven. She and her boyfriend wasted *no* time once the government said it needed people to start breeding like rabbits.”

“You don’t like her partner?” Sergei said.

“I just think she’s *young*, and know she had plans, wanting to go to college, get a higher education, and I’m worried if she becomes a mom so young, it’ll derail all that for her.”

“She’s not going to go to college in the fall when they reopen?” Eve asked.

“She has the option to,” Bill said. “Same’s true for Kenna. Both are still thinking it over, and they have a month or so left to decide. It would be weirdly timed for Jen, considering she’s due in January, but she might do it anyway, considering all the benefits they’re offering for new mothers and furthering education. They really are trying to have an entire nation of newborns within the next couple of years.”

“Your daughter, she should get education,” Andrei said in his broken English as he entered the room. Andrei hadn’t spoken much English at all when he arrived, but had been doing his best to learn the language as quickly as he could. Sergei’s was still much better, though. “Do you think government will let us... what is word... get burdened?”

After a brief exchange of Russian, Sergei smiled and translated for the doctors. “He means adopt. Do you think Andrei and I will be allowed to adopt children? We would very much like to be parents, and I know many young women will be pressured to have children they are not ready to keep.”

“There’s also a lot of orphaned boys and girls under the age of ten,” Bill said. “If you’re looking to adopt and don’t mind someone with a few years on them, I would be happy to get you contacted to the adoption agencies. Lots of desperate boys and girls looking for good homes. We could have you meeting kids as early as tomorrow.”

Andrei’s face lit up, and Sergei couldn’t help but smile. The two of them had talked quite a bit about how good it would be to have a handful of children running around the large empty house that the Air Force had provided for them. “Let us meet with your people tomorrow to discuss what we are looking for, then,” Sergei said. “I think we would not mind adopting three or four children, but we will want to meet them first, if that would be okay.”

Eve smiled over at them kindly. “It would only be natural for you to want to find a good group of children to call your own,” she told them, reaching over to put her hand on Sergei’s shoulder. “I

think that's incredibly noble of you two, and I want you to know that I'm very proud of you for agreeing to take on such responsibilities."

"We simply want to have family of our own," Andrei said with a slightly nervous look about him. Sergei knew his partner had not expected everything would move so fast, although Sergei knew that whatever he asked was likely to be done in an expedited fashion. The Americans truly did want to make his life as easy and as pleasurable as possible, lest he simply one day say that he didn't want to provide his sperm anymore. The deal was good for both parties, but that didn't mean he couldn't occasionally ask for additional things, and he and Andrei had long dreamed about having a family of their own. It would give them something to unite over, and something to keep their minds occupied.

"It's a very noble thing regardless," Bill said. "I'll start the paperwork today, and we'll have someone here from Child Services tomorrow to start building you a profile of what you're looking to put together."

"Could... Is possible we get Russian boy?" Andrei asked, and Sergei smiled, knowing his partner simply wanted a taste of home.

"It's possible," Bill said, "although it might take a little bit longer. But you know what my people are willing to do to make sure you're happy." Everyone chuckled a little bit. "We can start tomorrow the process and by this time next week, you should have children showing up at your home."

"There are many children without parents, yes?"

Eve nodded somberly. "Many of them died before they could be found, but yes, there are still many more in need of good homes."

"We will provide them with one, with stability, with order amidst the chaos."

Dr. McKenna nodded. "Well, we're done with you for the day, Sergei, so if you want to head home, you're welcome to do so, and I can make a few phone calls so that you'll have folks to talk to here tomorrow about adoption. They're very much expediting the process, but they'll want to make sure it's a good fit, not just for you, but for the kids also."

"Is good," Andrei said. "Is right."

"We thank you, Dr. McKenna," Sergei said. "I have to admit, I was anticipating some pushback, but I guess I truly can... what is your American expression? Write my own ticket?"

"Something like that," Bill agreed. "Nancy's here to drive you boys home."

2nd Lieutenant Nancy Meyers was part of Linda's team of women who had been tasked with special duties, and Nancy's was to keep tabs on Sergei and Andrei, and to provide them with a level of security necessary. New Eden was an especially secure area, but it didn't hurt to have security on the people who were extremely important, and while there wasn't any expectations that people would try and take a shot at Sergei and Andrei, Linda preferred to be safe instead of sorry. "You ready, kids?" she said, standing in the doorway. Nancy's best trait at being covert was that for all the world she looked like she would be the perfect yoga practicing trophy wife, a second-generation stepmom who was secretly a Karen lying in wait, when instead she was a crack shot with a rifle and a sidearm and was easily the best knife thrower in Linda's Girls. But the bright blonde bushy ponytail and suburban MILF attire were the perfect camouflage. It looked more like carpooling than a security detail.

"Yes, boss," Sergei said as he grabbed his satchel, slinging it over his shoulder. "Thank you again. I know I can seem to complain a lot, but honestly, it will be nice to have a few days off without my dick chafing." He chuckled a little bit, as did all the doctors. "I empathize with you men who have dozens of partners to satisfy every week. At some point, the spirit is willing, but the body can only give so much of itself."

"See you all again tomorrow!" Andrei added cheerfully, as they started to head out of the room. Once they were out of earshot of the doctors, he switched into Russian to ask his partner about the details of what had just transpired. "They will help us adopt children? Is that what I heard, Sergei?"

"You heard correctly, Andrei. Tomorrow they will send an expert to help us develop a computer model, one that will let us understand what kind of family we can build from those in need of adoption.

There are even a handful of Russian speaking boys and girls we can consider as options.”

“We will, of course, raise them to be bilingual,” Andrei said proudly. “Despite how much trouble I am having in picking up their language, I will work even harder on my English, so we can raise them properly here.”

“Your English is not so bad,” Sergei teased.

“I sound like a bad cab driver in awful movies we see on cable late at night,” Andrei said with a spit. “But it’s nice of you to be so kind while I am frustrated. This language makes no sense. The pronunciations are all over the place! Did you know ‘through’ and ‘blue’ actually *rhyme*? They do not end the same way *at all*. I will learn, though. I will learn and I will get this language down even if I am fighting to my last bootlace.”

“Just making the effort is probably enough, Andrei,” Sergei said with a smile, even as he was looking out the window, when something caught his eye, and he switched back to English.

“Lieutenant? You said if I saw something unusual, I should say something, yes?”

Nancy immediately brought the car to a halt. “Absolutely,” she said. “What did you see?”

“Can we back up to near the fence?”

The car shifted into reverse, driving on the secluded road backwards without much fear of encountering anyone. “Look there, near the base of the fence,” he said.

Nancy brought the car as close to the fence as she could, then hopped out, stepping close, but looking very carefully around her to investigate. “Shit,” she muttered just loud enough for Sergei to hear her. She hopped back into the car, slamming the door shut, turning the vehicle around.

“Was it—?”

“Yes,” she said, grabbing her phone, tapped Linda’s name at the top of her Favorites. “Boss, call a Code Yellow. Somebody’s breached the border of New Eden.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

May 3rd, 2021 – 7:23 p.m.

They hated to leave it at that, but Andy and Phil had agreed they both needed to take some time to think, and while Andy had promised he wouldn't go around talking about it with people outside of his house, he didn't say he wouldn't tell anyone in his family.

Because he absolutely knew he had to talk to someone about the whole thing, but the idea of telling Niko or Ash right now terrified him. He needed to not crush their excitement, and he couldn't imagine putting that kind of pressure on Ash just a few days before she gave birth to twins.

Andy had walked Phil to the door, where they met up with Linda and Niko, and Linda shot Andy the kind of look meant to get him to spill the beans, but Andy stood his ground and kept silent, offering her only an apologetic smile, as if he knew how frustrated she understandably was. But he knew exactly why Phil didn't want to tell her. Not yet.

As soon as they closed the door, Niko looked at him with questions in her eyes, and Andy could only sigh all over again. "I'll tell you soon enough, love, but right now, you need to focus on Matty, and we can't afford to have *both* of us distracted by this," he told her, kissing her cheek.

"Andy, we handle shit together in this household," she scolded him, putting her arm around him to hug him tightly, her face pressed against his chest, her other arm still holding Matty. "I'm not some delicate little flower you have to worry about because of her age."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "Niko, you are ten times the badass I'll *ever* be, age be damned. You're whip smart, you're a crack shot, and you've got combat situational skills I'm *never* going to be able to pick up. This couldn't have *less* to do with your age. I very rarely ask you to trust me, but I'm asking you here, like back when you asked me to trust you about your involvement with Phil and the base. Give me a little bit of time."

"Okay Andy," she said to him, standing on her tip toes to give him a little kiss. "I trust you with my life." She pulled back from him as little Matty started to gurgle. "With both our lives. Now, go find someone in this house who you *can* talk to, before that weight drags you under." She headed away from him over towards the stairs, clearly heading up to the nursery to put Matty down for the night.

Andy clearly knew he needed to talk to someone, but it needed to be one of the wives who was not yet with child, and in fact, the further away from being with child, the better. That meant Niko, Ash and Fiona were all out, as likely was Moira, who had gotten off birth control the day after the wedding. That left Sarah, Emily and Piper. As much as he valued both Sarah and Emily's opinions, both were still a little frazzled from having finished filming, and he needed someone clear headed, and he suspected Piper's encounter at the hospital might have helped give her some clarity on this kind of thing, so he made the decision to talk with her first and see what she had to say.

The weight of the knowledge felt like it was slowly killing him, and he'd only been carrying it for minutes, not even hours.

-*Where are you?*- Andy texted Piper, so he would know where to go and find her in the seemingly endless house.

-*Basement gym.*- she texted back. -*Y?*-

-*Need to talk. Down in a minute.*-

He headed over to the stairwell, and then down the hall to the theater, where he used the latch to open the secret door, leading him down a floor further, into the actual basement of the building, the well-concealed fortress that it was.

They'd been in the house for months before they discovered the entire secret basement floor, a sort of battle bunker constructed by the original tenant before he'd died, all the entrances and exits concealed around the manor. Once they had, Andy had been tempted to open it up and make it much less secret, but both Lexi and Niko had convinced him otherwise, saying having a secure basement added a layer of security to the place.

He closed the door behind him and headed down the hallway. There had originally been

something of a romper room with a ton of open space, a slightly larger than normal bedroom without an attached bathroom, and they had simply gone about converting it into a gym, with plenty of machines for people to work out on. They were even managing to make sure Andy put in an hour or so on either a treadmill or a stationary bike five days a week, simply by installing a good-sized television in front of them and letting him watch whatever while he exercised. Even with all the exercise gear, however, the room was only about half full, leaving space for the actresses to practice fight choreography and dance choreography when they didn't want to do it in the back yard.

Andy found Piper where he expected to, over at the pull-down bars, working out her arms and shoulders. She was far stronger than he was, and when he entered the room, she set the weights back into the resting position and stood up from the machine, grabbing a towel to wipe sweat from her glistening athletic body. "What's up, babe? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I..." Andy started and then stopped speaking. "I need to talk to someone, Piper, and I think you're going to be the best candidate for it, but I need you to keep it private for a little bit."

"From people outside of the Team?"

"From *everybody*," he said. "Including the rest of the Team."

She scowled for a second, then nodded, as if deciding that if it was important enough for him to ask for her silence, she should trust him enough to give it. "Okay, let me take a very quick shower and then we'll chat."

"Thanks, Piper," Andy said. "I know it's asking a lot."

"Andy," she said with a soft smile. "I'm your wife. One of them, anyway. If not me, then who?" They headed over to the master bedroom of the floor, a sort of massive bunker-like chamber, and she headed into the bathroom in the back, turning on the shower, as she started to talk to him anyway, even as she hopped beneath the warm water. "So Phil was here? That what I heard? Does that figure into what we need to talk about?"

"It does."

"Does Linda think there's reason to be concerned?"

"Phil hasn't told Linda."

Piper opened the shower door and poked her head out, eyes wide. "He didn't tell *Linda*? And he told *you*?"

"Yep."

"I can't imagine Phil not telling Linda *anything*. Jesus Christ, Andy, what's Phil gotten you into now?" she said as she stepped back into the shower, washing herself down a little more.

"Not just me, Piper," Andy sighed, washing his hands, not because they were dirty, but just out of a sense of giving himself something to do while he waited. "All of us."

She turned off the shower and grabbed a towel. "I'll wash my hair later," she told him as she stepped out and began to towel down. Despite the fact that he'd seen her naked hundreds of times now, he never got tired of the amazing view. "You want to have a go first to clear your head? You dosed me just a couple of days ago, but I'm always down to cram an extra fuck in," she teased with her jock-like goofy grin.

"Honestly, my brain's so scrambled right now, I don't think I could get it up."

Piper dropped the towel and moved over to Andy, wrapping her arms around him, holding him in a giant hug. He started to speak but she shushed him and let him just relax for a moment with her powerful arms wrapped around his body. He felt himself unwind just the smallest amount and after a minute or so she tilted her head towards his and their lips met, nothing intense or sexual, just an emotional moment, as if she could understand the sort of mental baggage he was lugging around. It made him feel... safe. "Whatever it is, Andy, we'll get through it. As a family. As a Team."

"That's the thing, Piper," Andy said with a chuckle as she finally unwrapped her arms from around him. "This isn't an *immediate* problem, but it's something that we're gonna be feeling for a long time to come." He watched her pull on some utilitarian panties, a sports bra, then some track pants and

one of his various band t-shirts that he'd collected from concerts over the years, that particular one for a British shoegaze band called Ride. His expansive band t-shirt collection had turned into the girls' favorite thing to raid, especially since they all claimed they could smell him on his shirts, since he'd worn them so much for so long. Some dated back twenty years. "You know, at some point if you girls keep wearing my shirts so much, they'll smell less like me and more like you."

"We're all trying to smell as much like you as we can anyway, Andy," she giggled. "Alright, where do you want to go and talk? Your office?"

"Up in the perch, if that's okay?"

"Oh, *very* serious business, then," she said with a tight smile that hinted at the deep concern running below the surface. "Sure, let's go."

They headed out of the gym and down to the elevator with a hidden access point out behind the main stairwell, taking it to the upper floor before slipping out and heading to the upstairs study with the hidden stairs behind the bookcase where Andy had just been talking to Phil earlier. As they headed up the stairs, Andy was a little surprised to see the two glasses were still out from earlier, Nicolette not having done her usual ninja routine to take them away to be washed. "If you want some of the Scotch, I wouldn't blame you," Andy said to her as he moved over towards the French windows that opened onto the nestled concealed patio up on the roof. He moved over to sit down on one end of the couch. "This is all going to feel pretty surreal."

"I'm not sure how much more surreal our lives can get, babe," she said with a slight roll of her eyes. She sat at the other end of the couch, but put her feet in Andy's lap, which he took as a sign that she wanted a foot massage, something she'd said repeatedly that she thought Andy was good at.

"I'm going to save you the windup that Phil gave me and just cut straight down to the nitty gritty, and then you and I can talk about it, so I can figure out both how to feel and what we should be doing about it."

"Good. I prefer 'No Bullshit' Andy to 'How Do I Put This Politely?' Andy. How bad is it?"

"Very bad. But not immediately," he said with a sigh. "Part of what Phil's been doing research into is the regeneration process, and it turns out, it doesn't just happen to us in spurts – it's happening all the time. Apparently the nanobots are constantly fixing our reproductive systems, which they'd sort of figured out early, but now they also think it's slowing our aging processes down."

"Oh, so we'll live longer?" Piper said, stretching her legs out a little, wiggling her feet in his lap, so he started rubbing them. "By how much?"

"Well, it depends on the size of the Team, but for people in a Team of our size? Phil says for about every year that passes, we're only aging a normal person's equivalent of two months."

She stopped wiggling her feet at that, and her eyes went wide. "You're shitting me, Andy."

"I am not."

"I'm going to live to see two hundred?"

"Easily, barring unnatural causes of death."

"So what's the problem?" she asked with a laugh. "That sounds awesome."

"It's not something we're passing on to children."

That laugh died in its tracks. "That *can't* be right."

"I only have Phil's word for it right now, but he says the data's pretty conclusive. The kids, *our* kids, they're aging normally."

"Well, maybe that's just because they're in the growth stages," Piper said. "You wouldn't want to have an infant for twenty years, now, would you?"

"Like I said, Phil doesn't seem to think it's just that, but maybe you're right. We'll definitely know within just a few months with Matty."

"This is why you didn't want to talk to Ash or Niko about it, isn't it?" she asked him, suddenly understanding the weight he was under.

He nodded somberly. "Niko just gave birth to Matty, and Ash is ready to pop any minute now."

They've got plenty on their minds already, and this... this isn't going away. It'll be here a week from now, a month from now... and they won't even start to notice for at least a few years. But I don't like keeping secrets from the women I love."

"Keep that in mind, baby," Piper said, scooting over a little more, resting her calves in his lap, to let him not have to continue rubbing her feet. "This is a problem we're going to be living with for *decades*. And quite a lot can change in decades. Tell me shit hasn't changed a ton over the last thirty years. What was the internet like thirty years ago?"

"Oh god!" Andy laughed. "You had to use the phone line to access it, and it made this horrible screeching noise when you connected. It took forever to get anything with pictures in it, if you could even get that. It was mostly just text, what they called electronic bulletin board systems. I wasn't really allowed on them, but I remember my brother Matt used to use them all the time. By the time I was in high school, we were playing Starcraft and the like on dialup still, but the idea of plugging the Internet directly to the house was starting to sound less and less like a silly idea."

"Telephones thirty years ago?"

"Hardlines into the wall, although 'cordless' phones were a new thing, if your family had a bit of money to pass around. Couldn't move more than ten, fifteen feet from where it was plugged into, unless you had one, but if you did, you could get maybe thirty or forty feet away from the base."

"Televisions thirty years ago?"

"Ha! They were massive boxes as big as a desk. You had to build a cabinet to set them on, they were so damn heavy."

"You see what I mean, Andy?" Piper sighed. "Things change *fast*, much faster than any of us see coming. It's good to know about this problem, but you can't let it consume your every moment. Not so far down the line. *We* can't let it do that to us. I'm concerned. Of course I'm concerned. But the problem, *this* problem? We have time. In fact, that sounds like the one thing we've got *lots* of."

"I'm scared of how Niko's going to take it, how Ash is going to take it, shit, how *Fi's* going to take it," Andy said.

"And you?" Piper asked, sliding her feet off his lap, moving over to put her arm around Andy's shoulders, pulling him in close. "How are *you* taking it?"

Andy smiled, a singular tear running down his cheek. "I'm... I'm fucking *scared*, Piper," he said, his words a little uneven. "More scared than I've been during any of this. And I know how silly that sounds, being scared of *living*? But life's *meant* to have an expiration date. It's *meant* to end. And I'm excited to see my son and my daughters have all their firsts. Take their first steps. Say their first words. But asking me to be around to see their final moments?" He shook his head. "I'm not ready for that. I don't think any father is."

"Hey, you've got a long, *long* time before any of that is even a remote possibility, okay?" she said, pressing her forehead to his. "We gotta get through *raising* the kids before you worry about them growing *old*, okay? And it's going to be scary. I get that. But that's life. This? This is just another curve ball that we're going to have to learn to live with, or eventually beat."

"What if—"

"Andy! This world is too fucking short for what ifs, what might bes and maybes, so you need to focus on the here and now," she said, holding him closely. "We take it one day at a time, okay? And if you need a rock right now, you've been mine long enough that it's my turn. I can be *your* rock. I can carry you as long as it takes."

He held onto her, her arms wrapped around him protectively, and she let him cry for a while. He hadn't realized it, but the pressure had been building up inside of him like a timebomb, and once the tears started flowing, he just couldn't stop them. The shock, the grief, the weight of it all, it just exploded within him.

He cried for a spell, much longer than he'd anticipated, but he'd been overwhelmed with all of it, running purely on emptiness and fumes for long, far too long to be healthy, his mind tasked with

issues too big, too overwhelming to even contemplate. He couldn't even imagine how Phil felt.

Andy was completely at a loss. He didn't know any magic words to make himself or anyone else feel better, or to make the pain that was shredding up his soul fade. He wanted, he *needed*, everything to fade. Not for good. Just for a moment. For a while. To clear his head.

He hadn't bawled like this since his brother had died last year, and as always, Andy was a very quiet crier, his tears running down heavy but his mouth not making much of a sound.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Piper started crying too, and the two of them just held onto each other until the sadness passed, at least for a little while.

What felt like an eternity later, the two of them started to pull themselves back together, and they took a few minutes to clean up. She was right, unsurprisingly. They had *time*. They had plenty of time, and waiting a few months to tell the women in his life who were just enjoying the new lives they'd brought into the world, well, that seemed like only fair. He didn't want to crush their moments of joy, but he also didn't want to prolong keeping secrets from his partners. He hoped they would understand why when the time finally came to cross that bridge.

After that, Piper did something she'd never really done before – she asked him how his writing was going. Not in depth, anyway. She'd ask about it in passing here and there, but it was never intended to be a deep conversation point between the two of them, not before now. He could tell this time it was meant to deflect away from the tension, but she also seemed genuinely interested in how the process was coming along, and now she'd even read some of the Druid Gunslinger books, so when he was talking through what he was considering for some of the characters, she actually had a frame of reference for who most of them were, even if she hadn't read the whole series.

From there, he asked about her training, and they spent fifteen minutes or so talking about how glad Piper was that her birth control held, because she wanted to participate in the first Olympics once they started up again. She'd begun pushing herself back into the hard part of training, and despite the fact that she felt like she healed faster now, she also felt like maybe she wasn't pushing as hard as she could or should be doing. She asked Andy if he wouldn't mind being her coach one or two days a week. Not for the full day, but an hour or two of motivation would be a great help, something he didn't mind doing.

It was everything they could do to avoid talking about the big ugly sword hanging over their heads.

But after they'd been talking a bit, Andy was surprised to feel his wrist vibrating, which meant his phone was ringing in silence just across the room. He hopped up and glanced at the name and picture on the screen – it was Lexi. They'd been talking long enough that it had fallen dark outside, and he suspected it was just Lexi checking in on why they'd missed dinner. He did see he'd missed a text message but didn't see what it was. He immediately answered the phone, because that's what he'd been trained to do. "What's up, Lex?"

"You're with Piper right now, sir?"

Andy felt his sphincter clench. It was a sort of unspoken code that when Lexi called him 'sir,' it meant he needed to snap to and pay attention. He'd asked her not to do it enough times that when she did, he knew it meant she needed him at his most focused. "I am."

"Is Muninn with you?"

Andy glanced over at the windowsill and saw that, indeed, one of his two cats had snuck in when he'd been coming or going, and was asleep there. "He is."

"Can you bring him and Piper downstairs please?"

"Is ev—"

"Now, if you could, sir?"

"Alright, to which room?"

"The bunker, sir."

"On our way." He hung up the phone and it immediately rung again with Lexi's face on it, so he

answered it again. “Yes?”

“Keep your phone on, sir, and put it on speakerphone, if you would?”

“...alright.” Andy tapped on the speakerphone button as he gestured for Piper to grab the cat.

“Can I ask wha—”

“As soon as you’re down here, sir, I’ll tell you.”

“Do we—”

“I’m just outside of the staircase, sir, and all the rest of the Team is headed down to the bunker. Sarah grabbed your laptop on her way down. Let’s go.”

“What’s going on?” Piper asked.

“Tell you shortly,” Lexi’s voice said via speakerphone.

Piper scooped up the indignant cat into her arms, but other than a grumbling meow, he made no further protests nor attempts to escape, mostly falling back asleep immediately, just in the athlete’s arms instead this time. Andy wedged his phone microphone end up into the left front pocket of his jeans. Then the two of them headed down the stairs and quietly opened the hidden bookcase door, seeing Lexi and Melody both outside, both holding HK33’s at the ready.

“Can I hang up my phone yet?” Andy asked Lexi.

“Negative,” Lexi answered, tucking her own phone into her back pocket. “Niko’s listening in on the call from the bunker. Once we’re down there, I’ll explain everything.” She’d turned off all the lights in the room, and had a flashlight attached to the end of her barrel. “Until then, please keep your right hand on my right shoulder, follow in behind me, and don’t make a sound.”

As they started to move through the mansion, Andy couldn’t help but notice for the first time since they’d moved into the house almost a year ago, everything was completely off, and the house was pitch black. He could feel Piper hooking one of her fingers in the back belt loop of his jeans, and the four of them were moving in a tight formation down the hall and over to the stairwell. Instead of going down the stairs, though, Lexi moved to open the secret door leading to the elevator to take them down to the basement. They stepped in, closing the door behind them, pushing the button, as the elevator quietly began to lower them down three floors. Andy was a little surprised at how quiet the elevator ran, barely even hearing the sound of it moving before the doors opened onto the hidden basement floor.

Once they’d opened, Lexi and Melody poked their heads out, each looking in an opposing direction down the hallway. The basement, at least, still had its lights on. Once they were satisfied it was clear, Lexi reached in and flicked the elevator into the ‘hold’ position, so the doors wouldn’t close and it wouldn’t leave the floor. Then they resumed moving, keeping Andy and Piper (and Muninn) in the center of the formation, until they reached the bunker door.

Lexi raised her left fist and banged on the heavy door twice, then once, then four times in quick succession, which apparently was the signal to open the door, everyone being ushered into the bunker room quickly, with the door being slammed shut and rebolted back into place.

The downstairs Master Bedroom was also affectionately referred to as the bunker, and they’d just been in it a few hours ago for Piper to take her shower. It was large enough to double as a panic room for the entire Team, with one massive bed, plus plenty of storage. There were also only three doors in and out of the place – one into the hallway, one into the giant attached bathroom and the other directly into the armory. And it looked like several of his Team had taken advantage of that connection, as he could see many of his partners were armed. The room that had been completely empty just three or four hours ago now held everyone in the Team, as well as his two cats, Maya’s two dogs and a basinet for the baby to sleep in.

Andy pulled his phone out of his pocket and terminated the call as Emily was the first to hug him and hug him hard. “Thank heavens you’re alright, Andrew,” she said to him, her tiny British body shaking with fear.

“Okay, someone please tell me what the hell is going on,” Andy said as he watched Piper set

Muninn down with Huginn, the two cats seemingly nonplussed by whatever was happening.

“Niko, can you pull it up on the screen?” Lexi said. She reached over to the shelf they’d laid out a dozen or so weapons on and grabbed the Colt .45 in the holster that was sitting there, handing it over to Andy. “Remember your training.”

Since the incident outside of the book signing last year, Andy had spent an hour a day, five days a week, whenever he was at home, down with Lexi or Melody in their firing range, learning how to shoot. He didn’t want anything complicated, nothing too powerful, but he also didn’t want to make an ass of himself if it came down to a firefight, and so, after some long discussions with Lexi, she had agreed to teach him how to use a gun, pistols only. The weapon felt comfortable in his hands, even if he’d never pointed it at a living thing before. He attached the holster to his belt, securing the weapon carefully, as he’d been trained to do, with respect.

Niko had a tablet in her hand and with a few taps, one of the walls of the room came to life, turning into a bevy of monitors, showing security cameras from all around the grounds, cycling through them before stopping on one, showing a portion of the metal barred fence that surrounded the perimeter, except that a couple of the bars had been removed and a path in had been made. “We’ve got intruders on the grounds,” she said. “I’ve already called it in to the base, and they have troops heading over here now, except that there’s about half a dozen other places in New Eden reporting infiltrations onto grounds, so they’re being forced to spread a little thin. They want us to hunker down where we are and just wait for the cavalry to show up.”

“Have you been able to spot anybody?”

“We lost a couple of cameras outside the pool house, but so far we hav—”

“Boss, look,” Lexi said, pointing to one of the monitors displayed on the wall. It was a camera displaying the pool, and there were three female figures dressed in all black scurrying across the deck, running towards the building. They were carrying military rifles, and each had a backpack strapped to them, one of them having a much bigger backpack than the other two. “We’ve got company.”

“Is this the Russians again?” Andy asked, trying to glean information from the cameras, when it was clear the team was doing everything they could to stay out of vision, but hadn’t picked up on all of the cameras, or, more likely, had realized they would pass in front of some cameras on approach, and had chosen the ones that would give the least level of detail.

“Doesn’t look like them. Not their preferred rifle, not their preferred movement tactic,” Lexi said, also scrutinizing the image. “The Pacific wasn’t really my theatre, but that feels like a Chinese squad to me.”

“What the fuck are the Chinese doing in New Eden?” Melody asked.

“What the fuck are the Chinese doing at *my* house?” Andy countered.

“And why are there *two* teams of them?” Niko asked, pointing to another screen, as a second team seemed to be rounding the pool house, weapons at the ready, moving to follow the same path as the first, albeit quite a bit slower, the two teams unable to see each other, no signs of radios or other communication between them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

May 3rd, 2021 – 9:47 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You just want to avoid another zombie rush, don’t you, Andy?” Fiona teased. “I thought we looked sexy swarming you.”

Taylor grinned, poking her head up from behind a couch. “Sorry, Master Rook, but I ain’t know nothin’ about birthin’ no babies!”

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

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

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

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

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

Andy couldn’t help but hope the cavalry was on its way in, but he knew that was rather unlikely. They would be mobilizing the bulk of their forces to protect Team Marcos and Team McKenna, so that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What were they saying?"

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

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

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

"Looks like they've finished the sweep of the public basement," Niko said, "and they're moving up to the ground floor."

"Can you send another message to Linda, letting her know we'd like some fucking *backup* over here? I don't even give a shit if it's Podunk sheriffs and peashooters," Andy grumbled. "I do not like

having foreign military personnel rummaging through my fucking *home* attempting to *abduct* me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How can you tell?”

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

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

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

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

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

“So?”

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

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

It was difficult to watch as the strike team moved to the space next to the hidden elevator

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sure it's not *that* strong," Andy said with a dry chuckle.

"It's strong enough to keep them at bay for as long as we need to," Lexi said.

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

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

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

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

"Haven't you heard?" Andy said, trying to keep his voice as cold as ice. "The United States

does not negotiate with hostage takers. We're not going to give you an inch. I'm sure you understand why, but in case you don't, it's because once you cave the first time, it encourages more people to use the same tactic. So, no, I won't be opening the door and letting you and your crew march in here. Besides, we've got more guns than you anyway, so why don't you just piss off and get out of my fucking house already?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He'd always loved 'Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid.'

So maybe this was Bolivia.

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

"I open that door, and we're all as good as dead anyway, so I guess our hands are dealt and there's nothing left but to play out the game. You're checking, I'm raising," Andy said to her, as much

resolution in his voice as he could put there. “Either fold now and get the fuck out of my house, or we see what’s stronger, your bombs or my fucking door.”

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

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

“There’s no way—”

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

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

That was when all hell broke loose.

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

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

It was the other strike team.

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

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

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

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

of explosives over to it.

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

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

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

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

"Mister Rook?" the woman said, her voice accented but not overly so. "My name is Dr. Ming-Yue Chen, and I'm here on behalf of the Empty Wives of China. We had nothing to do with this group of CCP loyalists, and wanted to do everything we could to ensure your safety, and the safety of as many other members of your community as possible. Unfortunately, our military trained numbers are much smaller than those in the CCP, so while there were forty women striking here in the United States, we were only able to bring a dozen, and so we deployed nine of us here, and three more to the place you call Valhalla Shores. We are out of radio contact, but hopefully you will be able to contact your friend Dr. Marcos and he will tell you that some of the members of my team have helped subdue his attackers as well. We're here to surrender to you, and to beg you to help save the Chinese people from DuoHalo. I want you to feel as safe as possible, so I'm going to hang up the phone, then handcuff myself in front of your camera for you to see, and I hope in doing so, we will have earned enough of your trust for you to come out and have this conversation with us face-to-face. We are completely unarmed and unable to defend ourselves, so if your security team wanted to come out and execute each of us, we would be unable to stop them, but I am placing my trust in you, Mr. Rook, that you will do the right thing, and at least listen to our story. I hope to continue this conversation momentarily."

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

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

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

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

"I'll go."

"We should flip a coin or—"

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

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

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

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

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

“Fuck that,” he told her. “If Melody says it’s safe, I’m going to go out and talk to these women so I can find out what the fuck is going on.”

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

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

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

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

Chapter Twenty-Eight

May 4th, 2021

“General Bonner, forgive my bluntness, but you’re fucking kidding me, right?” Andy asked the General as he stood in her office, with Lexi, Melody and Fiona waiting just outside for clearance reasons. “I understand there’s a high level of complexity to this issue, but your go-to move for these sorts of problems cannot be ‘hey, let’s add another member to Team Rook, that’ll make things easier.’”

“I understand your hesitation, Mr. Rook, but we’re in something of a pickle right now, and like it or not, when you agreed to do that *60 Minutes* interview, you became the public face of the Quaranteam project,” Lt. General Bonner said to him. “Besides, this is only the second time in six months that we’ve asked you to take on an additional member of your team. You make it sound like we’re throwing women at you left and right.”

‘Sure,’ Andy thought to himself, ‘but we’re already closer to becoming a Tier 6 Team than I’d like, and the last thing I want is to stumble into that blindly.’

“Tell me how everyone else is doing before we even get into that,” he said, sipping from a cup of coffee. The military had come by to pick up the bodies and the prisoners last night, and after the adrenaline had faded, the whole group of them had been ready to pass out, so they’d slept in a puddle in the bunker room, staff included. The Air Force hadn’t been the first to arrive, though. Nathaniel Watkins, one of New Eden’s billionaires who had taken a liking to Team Rook, had personally sent a portion of his security detail over to Andy’s house when Andy’s power had gone out, and his crew had been the first responders, getting there almost an hour before the Air Force had, something the General had seemed especially annoyed about. “I can’t say the Air Force’s response time thrilled me any.”

“It wasn’t our finest hour, Mr. Rook, by all admissions, but between your own defenses and that small private army your friend Mr. Watkins employs, it seems like you came through okay,” the General said to him. “Although I expect that was simply because he didn’t have his own Team to worry about at that moment, since no one was attacking his house, unlike the dozen or so locations we had to deal with along the western seaboard.”

“Everyone’s okay, though?” Andy asked. Sometimes getting a straight answer out of the General involved asking the same question a few times. It wasn’t as though she was being deliberately withholding from him; she was just a cautious person by nature.

“We’re still getting things settled in the Pacific Northwest and over at Valhalla Shores, but it seems like most of the invasion forces were defeated with only minor casualties on our end. We had some advance warning they were coming from your friends in the Empty Wives, because according to their leader, they did everything they could short of send up a signal flare to let us know they were invading. While the CCP were trying to move mostly fast and quiet, the Empty Wives were doing everything they could to get us aware of the snakes in our garden. In addition to that, these women, all these women, they’re infected with DuoHalo. I assume you had a booster encounter last night or this morning, as you were instructed to?”

“I’m not being keen on being lectured when and where I need to fuck,” Andy said with a smirk, cutting through the euphemistic language. “But yes, I had a couple of fucks to boost my resistance this morning, figuring we might’ve been exposed to DuoHalo. We were under the impression China seemed to be in very dire straits, so this seems to confirm that. Have we decided what we’re going to do about their situation?”

“Do?” the General asked him, a curious tone to her voice. “What makes you think we’re going to ‘do’ anything?” She noticed the expression on his face and then chuckled. “I’m fucking with you, Mr. Rook. Of *course* we’re going to do something about it, especially since they’re willing to acquiesce to a bunch of our demands. Of the old superpowers, it looks like most of them are falling by the wayside. In the last few days, it looks like both Russia and China are pretty well cooked.”

“With us, Germany and the UK coming back to the forefront,” Andy said. “That’s more like a return to older times, isn’t it?”

“That’s the thing, Mr. Rook,” the General said, carrying over a small stack of folders for him to look at. “New intel I want you to take a good look at right now, because it’s going to have some pretty major impact on us, I think moving forward.”

Andy frowned, looking at the outstretched folders before taking them from her hands and moving to sit down on the couch in her office. This was decidedly not the reason he’d come into her office, but new military intelligence regarding the Quaranteam serum and the DuoHalo virus was, as part of his duties on the civilian oversight committee, something he had to take deadly seriously.

In December of 2020, a shipment of the Quaranteam serum being delivered to Spain had been hijacked by thieves out on the open waters. A boat transporting several refrigerated shipping containers of the serum had somehow ‘lost’ one in transit, which contained close to 50,000 doses of the Quaranteam serum. How that container disappeared off the ship or where it had gone to had been of great speculation for the military for some time.

New intelligence suggested the container had been split into two, loaded off onto a second boat somewhere in transit, and 25k doses had been shipped to two different countries – Algeria and Gabon. What was even more surprising, both of the countries had apparently been able to reverse engineer a ‘working’ version of the Quaranteam serum, although the Gabon version had some serious side effects, not the least of which was a sort of pacification effect on the men exposed to it. The men weren’t any less intelligent or expressive, but they seemed to exist in a sort of a euphoric daze, incapable of aggression or violence.

For several of the nations of Africa, this hadn’t been considered a ‘side effect’ but a ‘benefit,’ and explained why the demand from African nations for the serum had declined so rapidly in the early months of the year. Many of the African nations had undergone military coups led by women, and the idea of using the serum to keep their men docile and compliant seemed to have appealed to a lot of the nations that had been ravaged by warlords and terrorists for too long. There were even reports that Egypt, Algeria, Gabon and South Africa were talking about trying to create some sort of African Union, like the European Union, but this one led mostly by strong female leaders, although Algeria had some men on their council who had taken *their* version of the Quaranteam serum, and remained much as they were beforehand. That particular rift had, in fact, been the biggest sticking point on why the African Union *hadn’t* formed yet, as the Algerians wanted to move all existing nations onto *their* version of the serum, and many of the nations were just trying to get the first one available they could.

The two versions of the serum didn’t play especially well with the other, and a single woman with the Algerian serum introduced a Team built entirely off the Gabon serum would see that Team restored to normal, the docility effect completely stripped from the man within a matter of hours. Because of that, some nations had chosen to *only* accept the Gabon version of the serum, and Egypt was trying to not to mix the two but had additionally stopped taking on any further shipments of the US serum, instead taking only local versions of the serum, focusing on the Gabon version.

Men, in Egypt, were being treated more as property than people, even if the cage was quite gilded.

It was a rather chaotic situation, varying greatly from nation to nation.

All of this had been happening remarkably quietly, off the world stage and behind closed doors, despite how Andy thought he and the rest of the world should’ve been seeing it on the nightly news. But, as he’d learned in the six months since he’d joined Oversight, much of the world’s massive restructuring was happening in the shadows, and people would only see the end results, when it was too late to change or adjust things that might’ve been controversial.

That was the *first* folder in the stack.

The second folder was a detailed debrief from the Empty Wives, explaining what had happened. The new CCP was *desperate*, and they were falling apart at the seams. However strong they’d felt their grip was on the military, as it turns out, the Empty Wives had been working to change that, and they had turned the CCP into the minority, with the CCP loyalists making up only 10-20% of the remaining

military forces. The Empty Wives were closer to 60-70% with the remaining undecided group trying to just find some kind of workable solution.

The two conflicting groups had presented such a problem that neither side had been willing to let the other take on negotiations with a country with the Quaranteam serum, and both sides had tried reaching out on the sly, only to have their delegates murdered by the other group. The CCP had reached out to Gabon, and the Empty Wives had tried reaching out to both the US and the Germans, with no success.

Andy had to make sure he was reading this carefully, because as far as he or anyone else at New Eden had known, no one from China had made contact of *any* kind, not even to *schedule* a meet. He checked it off in his mind as something that needed to be investigated, because if different groups within the US were going rogue on their own, that could be just as much of a problem.

As a last-ditch effort, the CCP had decided to send a strike force to the US. They'd gathered forty-two women, divided into teams of three, to form twelve strike teams and two teams dedicated to their exfiltration from the US. The Empty Wives had found out about the teams, and followed them when they flew into Mexico, and took a ship to sail up along the west coast, dropping the majority of the teams off in the Bay Area before sailing up another day or so to Oregon and Washington. The Empty Wives contingent had been much smaller than the CCP had sent, only four members to spare, and so they had followed them into New Eden, trying to draw as much attention to themselves along the way as possible. But because they hadn't anywhere near the forces to take on the CCP, they'd just decided to follow the most vicious of the Communist teams and when it looked like things were going to get completely out of hand, they'd decided they had to intervene.

That was when they had attacked and worked to prevent Andy's abduction. They had stripped down to next to nothing to prove their intentions not to harm him or his family, and they were willing to do whatever it took to broker a bargain with the United States to get the serum shipped to China.

The discussions between the Empty Wives and the President had gone on almost immediately from when they'd been taken into custody until Andy's arrival early this afternoon. That was what the last folder was all about.

Operation: Faint Dawn.

It would be the largest deployment of the Quaranteam virus done in the shortest period of time, using up nearly all of the remaining stored doses to inoculate as many people from China as they could as quickly as they could. It would also involve quite a large number of military forces, both US and Chinese, sweeping through the country from east to west, in an effort to save as many people as they could.

Deploying the Quaranteam serum into a woman with the sleeping plague would wake her up for about twenty minutes before she would fall unconscious again. Once paired with someone, however, the DuoHalo would be flushed out, and all other norms of pairings seemed to be holding.

All the things China would be giving up in exchange for this humanitarian rescue operation were listed on the page, and it was quite a sizable series of asks. Taiwan's independence had to be guaranteed and respected. North and South Korea would be reunited, under the South Korean leadership, with no official ties to China. China would need to hold democratic elections, and demolish the existing Communist government structure. And Operation Funnel Cake would apply as well, although only in more populated urban areas that had been doing their best to quarantine and survive.

As it turned out, the only thing China needed as much as the Quaranteam serum itself was men.

The United States was starting to run low on its pool of 'less desirables' and made that clear to China, and the Empty Wives had basically replied that they were out of options at this point, that they would take just about whatever they could get their hands on, shy of violent psychopaths and murderers. They were starting to consider even taking those, and just keeping them shackled and chained up, something the United States had no official stance on.

The last page of the second document made Andy sigh, shaking his head with a little laugh. It

was a note from the President herself.

“Mr. Rook – I know your country asks a lot of you, but I am hoping we can trouble you just a little further. As part of Operation: Faint Dawn, the Empty Wives faction of China would get one person to work there, in New Eden, contributing and aiding to the Quaranteam research. I understand you met her a few hours ago – her name is Dr. Ming-Yue Chen. She needs a Team to join, and I would like to ask you to consider adding her as part of yours.

I am aware your Team is already quite large, but you are, frankly, one of the only people I can think to ask this of, and I feel like she has already proven her intentions by saving your life. I don't want to make a habit of asking things of you, but since you've gone far already, I hoped this one last step wouldn't be too troubling. It is a noble calling we ask of you, one born of honor and duty. Your country won't ask you to take on any additional Team members beyond this, but we have done our homework on her, and her file should be accompanying my note.

We ran her through Oracle against your last on-file test results, and you came up as a surprisingly high match, much higher than anyone else on the base. She actually matches up higher than many of your current Teammates. You can see the results for yourself. Talk about it with a couple of your wives if you need to. If you refuse, we'll have to redirect her to a Senator whose compatibility isn't even half of yours, just for security reasons, something I'm loathe to do. But right now, it almost feels like making it to Nov. 2022 is going to take every last drop I have in me.

It's a strange world we live in, Mr. Rook.

But it's the only one we've got.

President Nancy Pelosi

“Goddamn it,” Andy grumbled beneath his breath. Then he looked at the file beneath the President's note. Dr. Ming-Yue Chen was 35, and a doctor specializing in nanobiology. She had spent much of her life in Shanghai but had spent close to a decade in London getting her education in medicine, which explained the complicated nature of her accent. She came from a small family that had been at odds with leadership in the Chinese Communist Party but had done her best to try and fight DuoHalo and Covid.

In many ways, she was everything a traditional Chinese woman was expected not to be. She was outspoken, bold, brash and loved to challenge authority. And yet, because of her brilliance, she had gone out of her way to excel in her field and lead research into nanotechnology. But the very first photo in the stack of pictures they had gathered of her was from her college days, and she was wearing a Nine Inch Nails t-shirt, black leather pants and stiletto leather boots. It was quite a daring look.

She liked her men thoughtful but decisive, contemplative but not so much that they were caught up in analysis paralysis.

Interestingly enough, she was a big fan of fantasy and science-fiction, but she had never heard of Blake Conrad (Andy's pen name) before seeing the *60 Minutes* story last fall, nor had she read any of the Druid Gunslinger books. Apparently the Mandarin translations were lackluster, and she had been hoping to get either the English originals or Cantonese translations.

The Oracle assessment had pegged her and Andy as being 94% compatible, the sort of number that was hard to ignore. She even listed her favorite movie as Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits*. How was he expected to argue against that?

“Looks solid on paper, right?” the General asked him, a slight smile on her often-inscrutable face. “I told you – the decision wasn't coming from me. It was coming from up on high.”

“When the hell did my life become a Gilbert & Sullivan musical?”

“Farcical?”

“No, that's incidental,” he replied. “I just meant the constant reminders about honor and duty.”

“Some of us are called to higher things.”

“Having a harem of what sounds like it's about to become 23 women isn't what most people

would describe as ‘higher things,’” he scoffed.

“And yet—”

“And yet here I am.”

“Called to higher things.”

“Oh stop,” Andy sighed. “You knew I was going to say yes even before you even sent for me, didn’t you?”

“You’re a good and noble soul, Mr. Rook,” the General said. “Yes, I expected you were going to do the right thing, no doubt in my mind.”

“That only makes me want to say no even more.”

“But you won’t, will you, Mr. Rook?”

“...no.”

“No?”

“No, I won’t say no,” he grumbled. “But the President’s right in her note. You can’t ask me to take on anyone else. I’m already far closer to being a Tier 6 team than I’d like.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Rook, I intend to honor the President’s deal with you – no more pairings without them being requested by you or the woman in question personally. Between the unusual circumstances regarding your pairings with Miss Brown, sorry, Missus Rook, and Miss Park, I’d say you already have more than your fair share of unusual aspects, don’t you?”

“Much more than I’d like.”

“How’s she doing by the way? Hell of a thing, discovering the impressions window like that,” the General told him. “I’m sure she’s got mornings where she doesn’t want to start the day with thanking you, but it not being up to her must drive her crazy.”

“She’s got a workaround for it that helps her manage.”

“Can I ask what that is?”

“She sends me a text message first thing every morning thanking me for allowing her into the family,” he said. “It just pops up as another message in our chat thread, so it satiates her need to thank me in the morning.”

“And the, ah, dirty talk?”

“Well,” Andy said with a wry smile. “I don’t mind that and neither does she, so we let her go as long as she keeps the volume in check, or we’re downstairs in a room that’s decently soundproofed.”

“And the Missus? Piper? How’s she taking to her... individualistic quirks?”

“She says you never fully get used to being able to *smell* another person, to be able to track them via scent, but it’s gotten to the point where she can at least *manage* it and it’s not driving her crazy or anything,” he told the General. “But she’s gotten more precise with it over last few months. “She can sort of determine what sort of mood I’m in by my smell, whether I’m calm or stressed. It’s almost like she’s got a sort of low-level empathy with me based on my scent. She says she feels like it gives her secret insight into how I’m doing. I know your people have been testing her blood and mine, seeing if you can find some way to replicate that ability. Any luck with that?”

“Nothing actionable,” the General sighed. “Which is a shame, because it would be a very nice tool to put into the toolkit of all security forces. How do you feel about the intel about the impending African Union?”

“I can’t say I’m especially thrilled about the Gabon variant of the serum, but I also can’t say I’m entirely surprised by it either,” Andy grumbled. “The minute that whole shipping container disappeared, we knew it was going to be trouble one way or the other. I just didn’t expect one of the countries was going to try and find a way to use it to pacify men like that.”

“Africa’s been so full of in-fighting for so long that it didn’t come as a big shock to me,” the General replied. “For decades now, warlords have gone driving from village to village, recruiting ‘soldiers,’ kids who weren’t even teenagers having a machine gun shoved into their heads and dragged off, never to be seen or heard from by their family again. I think the women of Africa have had just

about enough of that bullshit, and they decided to do something about it, so good on them for that. I'd have suggested we do that here, but it seems like we went the political route here and just legislated men out of causing too much trouble."

"You know," Andy said with a laugh, "everyone keeps this shit up and I'm going to consider actually running for office, despite my promise to my wives *not* to. The MPA was scary enough, but if you're going to start insisting men be stoned all the time, yeah, that's not something I can get behind."

"I believe 'contained' is the word I'd use," the General said. "Men are now a political, social and economic resource, and as such, need to be protected for their own good. If you ask me, the MPA doesn't go far *enough*. But that's a discussion for another day. Can I ask how your visit to Valhalla Shores went?"

Andy glanced over at the General with cautious eyes. "I wasn't aware that *you* were aware that I'd made a journey over there."

"I'm meant to be in the loop on all things Quaranteam, Mr. Rook," the General said with a tight-lipped smile. "Even the more 'off the books' things, like what the NSA is cooking up over at Valhalla Shores that they think the rest of us don't know about."

"You know what's going on there?"

"I have an inkling about what's going on over there, but certainly not the entire picture. That's why I was hoping you might be able to fill me in a little more." The General leaned against her desk, looking at him expectantly.

"There's definitely *something* odd going on over there, but exactly what it is, I'm not sure," Andy admitted. "My friend seemed nervous about something, and there was a sort of... strange conformity? Like most of the women there were moving and thinking and acting as packs, almost more like a flock of birds than people? I hope I'm just imagining things, but it was *uncanny* how in synch the women doing yoga in the park were. Like, there's coordinated movement and then there's precision coordination, and these women were at that level. I feel like we definitely need to go back there, and not just me and a couple of members of my Team, but a whole division of military police, ready to investigate whatever they're up to." He focused his eyes on her. "Unless you're in on whatever projects they're working on over there."

"I know you caught Fielder up to some truly heinous shit over here, Mr. Rook, but I assure you, that man and I could not be more different if we tried to be," the General laughed. "I'm on your side, in spite of what you may think."

"Asking you to prove it might be rather complicated. But I suppose your transparency about this is a good start," he said, patting the files. "Anything else I should know about?"

"A few things I want to key you in on, but I want to have a specialist come and brief you personally on it," the General said. "We're seeing a rather weird DuoHalo variation cutting through France and Spain right now, and it's... well, it's interacting with the Quaranteam serum in a rather odd fashion. I've got Dr. McKenna looking at it at the moment, but you're definitely going to want to be briefed on it within the next few days, assuming your wife Aisling doesn't go into labor early."

"Ash seems like she's going to take her sweet time about it, no matter how much she wants the twins out of her," Andy said, moving to stand up. "I'm trying to trust you, General, I really am, but some part of me still clings to the memory of all the shit General Fielder did. So we'll work past that. It's just going to take time." He moved over, handing her the files back before shaking her hand. "I'll take your doctor off your hands for you and bring her into my Team, assuming that's what she wants."

"It is," the General said as she released Andy's hand. "Your two security officers and your wife have been talking to her the whole time we've been here, screening her for you as one last cautionary measure. You can take it from them whether or not she passes final muster."

"You were that certain I'd say yes?" he chuckled with a suspicious grin.

"Gilbert & Sullivan, Mr. Rook," she said with a smile, as she moved to sit behind her desk once more, flicking her hand to shoo him away. "You are nothing if not a slave to your sense of honor and

duty. Go on. Fuck off. Show your newest partner what for and all that.”

“One final condition, before I go,” Andy said, standing at the doorway.

The General folded her hands atop the desk and shot him what he thought was her ‘I’m trying to be patient with you, but you’re annoying me’ smile. “Yes?”

“I want you to send a handful of workers over to repair the damages done to my house, courtesy of the Air Force,” he chuckled. “The least you can do is throw in the home repairs I need after a strike force broke into my home and threatened to C4 my basement unless I gave them the QT formula. It’s not that much – a handful of walls, a ripped-up section of fencing, nothing major. It’s not like the C4 went off or anything...”

The General smiled and shrugged. “Yeah, okay. I suppose that’s fair. I’ll have people over today to size up what needs to be done, and we’ll have the repairs finished within a week. Now go. It’s impolite to keep a lady waiting.”

When he stepped outside of the General’s office, a couple of airmen were there waiting for him, and they escorted him down the hall to where Lexi, Melody and Fi were all talking quite animatedly with Dr. Ming-Yue Chen, who had been given her clothes back.

Fiona stood up first and moved over to him, rolling her eyes with a smile. “You’re doing the right thing again, aren’t you Don Quixote?”

“That’s me, the Lord of La Mancha,” he sighed. “It *is* the right thing I’m doing here, isn’t it, Fi?”

“Seems like it from where I’m sitting,” his wife told him, stroking his bald head with a smile. “We need this alliance to work, and she actually seems like your type. She sort of reminds me of me, back when we were in college together. Confident, self-assured, straightforward if maybe a bit *too* directly so. But she’ll fit in fine, at least based on how she’s done with me, Lexi and Melody so far. And I hear she scored exceptionally high in the Oracle pairings with you?”

“I saw the test results, and yeah, it’s pretty comprehensive we like the same things in the same ways, which makes me feel better about going through with all of this,” he sighed. “I really didn’t want to grow the Team any bigger than it is already, but it’s hard as hell to deny a President anything.”

“You’re doing what needs to be done,” Fiona said, giving him an affectionate kiss for a moment before winking at him. “Besides, there’s only so much complaining a man’s allowed to do about having *another* beautiful woman to fuck, you know?”

“Oh, I get it,” Andy chortled. “That’s why I’m getting it out of my system now. I’m just tired and cranky.”

“Hey, you know what I hear is a good cure for that?” Fiona teased. “*Fucking*. C’mon, you’ll like Ming. She’s a hoot.”

They walked over and Andy moved to join them sitting on the couch, Fi standing as Andy took the spot where she’d been sitting next to Ming-Yue. “Hello again,” Andy said with a slight smile. “I understand that the Oracle system thinks that we’d be a pretty good match, and that you’ve already signed off on the idea?”

“I thought you were quite a good-looking man when I saw you on *60 Minutes*, and how you were treating your partners, well, it was quite different than how men in Shanghai like to act around women,” she said to him, taking his hand in her own, holding onto it firmly. “And in talking to your wife Fiona and two of your bodyguards, they both feel you are quite the remarkable man.”

Having read her file, her accent made more sense now. Mandarin was clearly her primary language, but having spent a decade in London, her English was tinged with a very British tone, posh and refined, although he could still clearly hear her rebellious spirit coming out in it. “Thank you, Dr.”

“Please, my friends call me Ming, and considering you’re going to be fucking me until my brains run out my ears, I think you’re going to be at least that,” she said with a wry smile, winking at Melody before turning her gaze back to him. “Assuming you’ve decided to accept me into Team Rook?”

“It seems like I’d be fucking up everyone’s lives by saying no, so as long as you’re willing to put up with this insanely large house, that’s fine.”

Ming let out a deep sigh of relief, exhaling a breath that Andy hadn’t realizing she’d been holding in, like him rejecting her had been a real possibility. “Excellent. If you don’t mind, then, I’d like to get back to the house as quickly as possible and get myself imprinted,” she said, her fingertips clenching Andy’s hand a little bit more firmly. “I’m starting to suspect that whatever variation of DuoHalo leads to the sleeping plague kicks the need to get imprinted up a few levels. According to what Melody was telling me, I shouldn’t feel like this unless it had been a couple of days since I was injected, but I’m fucking antsy...”

“Yeah, definitely be sure and make a note of that as something you’ll want to tell your colleagues when you show up to work later, but for now, let’s head back to the house,” Andy said.

The drive back across New Eden was relatively short, and Andy suspected Lexi might’ve even been lead footing it a bit at portions where she knew she could get away with it. Ming had only a small bag with her, saying she would have some things sent to her from Shanghai, but until then that she would borrow from other women in the house or just go shopping with them tomorrow for new things. One thing Andy did note, however, was that Ming did not let go of his hand the entire trip, nor did her leg stop bouncing impatiently.

When they pulled up to the gate, Melody giggled a little. “Your first time coming in through the front gate,” she said.

“Although I did go *out* this way earlier,” Ming added with a smile.

He found it interesting to note the sort of differences between Melody and Ming. Melody was Korean-American where as Ming was classical Chinese. Melody was definitely stronger, more muscular, a result of training more than genetics, although Ming’s build was slender and willowy. In fact, he realized that Ming was likely the thinnest girl on his Team. If it was unhealthily so, he was certain Lauren and Taylor would be all over her. Melody’s skin tone was also a darker shade of tan than Ming’s, whose was very light. The epicanthic folds on Melody’s eyes, however, were much less pronounced than those on Ming’s. Both women were staggering beautiful, but in very different ways.

As soon as the car pulled into the garage, Melody and Ming hopped out of the car together to run into the house. “We’ll come get you in like five, boss!” Melody said before pulling Ming into the house with a giggle.

“They were talking about how Ming could make her first time with you different from your first time with anyone else in the family,” Fiona said. “And Melody wanted to help her with that. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Just as long as nobody’s outside of their comfort zone,” he replied. “Oh, Lexi, starting tomorrow, we’re going to have Air Force work crews here for about a week to repair the damages the CCP strike force caused, so if you want to inventory everything they fucked up, we’ll get all the repairs done on the Air Force’s nickel.”

“Sounds good to me, boss,” she replied as they walked into the house.

Sarah walked up to him, shaking her head with a smile as she wrapped her arms around him, tilting her head down to kiss him hard, her hands against the bare back of his hand, giggling when she broke the kiss finally. “Is it true? Did you agree to take on yet *another* piece of pussy for this household?” She didn’t even wait for him to answer, smirking at him. “You’re an absolute fucking softy, you are, Mister Rook.”

“Well, the President asked me to do it...”

“And I suppose if the President also asked you jump off of a bridge,” Emily said, moving into the hallway to join them, stepping in before ducking under one of Sarah’s arms to get into the middle of the hug, “then you would do that as well?”

“Of course not,” Andy said with a grin. “I mean, first off, Lexi wouldn’t let me.”

“Damn straight,” Lexi snorted. “President or no, bitch best step off threatening my supply of

Vitamin D!”

Andy groaned, which made all the girls giggle, as they knew he hated being referred to as that, even if it was a fair assessment. “Second of all, no way in hell am I leaving my wives or partners to this mess without me. As long as I have any say in the matter, I’m not going anywhere.”

“And how much say in the matter do you usually get?” Ash said, waddling into the room, Nicolette helping her get around.

“Almost none, but I’m doing my best.” He pulled out of the hug and moved over to Aisling, sliding one hand across her belly, the other on her face. “How are we all doing?”

“Desperate as *fuck* to get your daughters out of my fucking body,” Aisling laughed. “This whole wonder and glow of pregnancy bullshit? Yeah, I’m over it. Done. You best like these two soon-to-be spawns of yours, ‘cause I don’t know if yer getting any more out of me.”

He laughed, giving her a tender kiss. “You’re still beautiful, you know that, right?”

“Aw Jaysis, fuck off will ya now?” she giggled. “You’ve got someone new to take care of.”

“You’re not mad, are you?”

She rolled her eyes again with that wonderfully understanding smile of hers. “It’d be like getting mad at the sun for shining on everyone,” she said to him. “Go on. But I’m telling you, if we hit 24, you and us wives are going to have a *very* long talk about what sort of emergency circumstances it would take for you take on a 25th, am I clear, Mister?”

“Crystal.”

“Good. Now go. Have a good time or whatever,” she said, slapping his ass.

Andy headed into the house proper and headed up the stairs. They were certainly dangerously close to running out of bedrooms, even with Ash, Fi, Piper, Niko, Sarah, Emily *and* Moira all choosing not to have a bedroom and always slept in the master bedroom. Emily and Sarah had turned one into a miniature studio; Moira and Fiona had turned another into a shared office for the two of them. But there were still a handful of open bedrooms, and clearly Melody had taken Ming to one of those.

He was wandering the hallway when a door opened and closed suddenly, Melody slipping out of it. “Give her two minutes, then go on in, okay?” Melody kissed his cheek and rubbed the back of his neck. “Have fun, boss!”

After a couple of minutes, he headed over to the door and knocked. “C’mon in, Andy,” Ming’s voice said to him from the other side. He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him before looking up to see her. She was dressed in grey thigh stockings and nothing else, sitting on the bed, legs crossed, hair done up in a bun with a pair of chopsticks through it to keep it locked in place. He’d seen her in just a bra and panties half a day ago, but the way she had positioned herself, and the stockings in particular, made it all feel a little bit more intimate. She had smaller breasts with tiny nipples, her areola not much bigger than quarters, the flesh a dark chocolate shade. “I wanted to really dial in on a kink you have that you may not have explored with other partners, so I asked Fi about which ones they’d explored a bunch with you and which ones you hadn’t done much with, and so... long socks. I sort of feel like I’m back in college and I’ve brought a boy back to my dorm room to fuck him for the first time.” She licked her lips at Andy, seeing him just standing there. “You don’t get over here quick, mister, and I’m going to, what was it that Lexi said? Pull a Piper on you?”

That cut through the tension like a battleaxe and Andy laughed a little bit, kicking off his shoes and socks. “No no, anything but that,” he said with a grin. “Did they tell you the whole story?”

“No, but I’ll hear it soon enough,” she said, uncrossing her legs, moving to lay back on the bed. “Right now, Mr. Rook, you owe me one proper fucking.”

“Unless you want me calling you Doctor the whole time, you’d better start calling me Andy,” he said, peeling his shirt off, tossing it aside as he unbuttoned his pants, pushing them and his boxers down to the floor to leave him standing naked, as he heard her gasp a little bit. “It’s not that big, so you don’t make a big deal on my account.”

“No, I’ve...” She started giggling a little. “I’ve never seen one circumcised before. It’s... quite

the striking look.”

“Looking isn’t what most people do with it.”

He started to crawl onto the bed and before he could get far onto it, she rushed forward, placing both of her hands against the back of his neck and pulled him in a searing kiss, the kind he was unexpected, but returned in kind the best he could.

He was about to lean into her when she turned him and shoved him onto his back on the bed. The bedroom they were in wasn’t at all decorated, and felt rather spartan, although she’d adjusted the dimmer switch to set the lights at an appropriately moody half-power. “I know what I’m going to fucking do with it, if that’s okay with you,” she said, kissing his forehead.

“Hey, I’m just the delivery device at the end of the day,” he joked, although he saw a slightly sad expression cross her face. “I’m kidding. It’s just a weird life.”

“One I’m very happy you’re letting me enter,” she said as she straddled his waist, rubbing the tip of his cock across her slit. A few seconds later, she pushed herself down onto it, and let out an intense groan of ecstasy, her fingernails almost scratching into his chest, the priming orgasm taking hold of her as her body quaked, her head falling down, almost shaking her hair loose from the bun. “FFfuck they aren’t kidding about that first step being a fucking doozy...” she laughed, reaching up and pulling the chopsticks from her hair, tossing them aside. “They’d be falling out anyway. You don’t mind, do you?”

“It’s okay, you do you,” he said to her, feeling her hands on his shoulders.

“Well, no, I’m going to fucking do *you*, that’s the fucking point,” she giggled, her hair hanging down to her collarbone. “The other one, the next one... it’s really going to be stronger than that?”

“Don’t know anyone who’s said otherwise.”

“Then fuck me, Andy... c’mon and grind up into me... your cock feels so fucking good inside my tight little cunt... Were you turned on seeing me handcuffed on my hands and knees last night? I know I was... the idea of being all tied up and vulnerable and helpless against you...”

He was a little surprised at how wide she could push her thighs, almost doing the splits on him, each time she pushed herself down onto his cock. Despite as much sex as Andy got on a daily basis now, there was something definitely wild about it being someone *new*, someone whom with they didn’t quite know each other rhythms and patterns yet.

It was also wild knowing that she was bound to him already, and that until he got off, she *couldn’t*. He’d never really given it much of a thought before, but the expression on her face made it clear just how much she wanted that orgasm, how much she needed it.

Her ass bounced against the tops of his thighs and the sweaty slapping sounds of their bodies colliding over and over again filled the room, blending in with her whines, whimpers and moans.

“Fuck me, Andy... fuck me fuck me fucking fuck me!”

He was torn between wanting to give her a good first performance and between rushing his body towards a climax, but in the end, he knew that the longer he took, the more he was simply keeping her from that biochemical Everest that they would never quite reach again, even if they were close enough to wave at it each time they’d fuck. So he let her panting breath in his ear, and that constant stream of dirty talk that he suspected Fi or Melody had told her he liked, push him into the red zone quickly.

“You’re gonna cum, aren’t you? Fuck, I’ve never fucked without a condom before... it’s so much fucking better, Andy... do it... please? *Please?* Fill up my tiny pussy and make me yours. Give me that cum...”

She mashed her lips against Andy’s in the kind of wanton kiss he only associated with someone deep in the throes of priming, and when her tongue hooked onto his, his balls drew up and he began to pump hot cum inside of her trembling cunt, sending her body over the edge, large shakes and shudders before the kiss broke and she flopped unconsciously atop of him, the word ‘imprinting’ escaping her lips over and over again, even as he rolled her onto her back and pulled a sheet up and over her.

He knew the rest of his day was going to be buried in questions, so before he left the room, he went to go take a long, hot shower in peace.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

May 5th, 2021

“You think this is a good idea?” Nathaniel asked Andy as they both tried to sit and wait patiently, glancing at their phones checking yet again for a message that still hadn’t yet arrived.

“I think at this point there’s enough rot that having two sets of eyes on the situation is probably for the best, don’t you?” Andy shot back, checking to make sure the Glock he’d been given was secure in its holster.

“This is more than two pairs of eyes,” Nathaniel said, gesturing to the group of security personnel gathered around them in the parking lot of the beach, ready to hop into their vehicles as soon as the message came. They were dressed in full combat gear, weapons at the ready, and there were a couple of members of the Air Force Security Forces from New Eden base as well, although most of the Air Force personnel were stationed on the other side of the target, where General Bonner was waiting with them. Even Andy and Nathaniel had on body armor. “I’ve got nearly my whole team here, except for the couple of people I left back at Watkins Manor to make sure it wasn’t completely with its pants down.”

“You call it that too?”

“What, referring to the house as Watkins Manor?”

“Yeah, I just started referring to my place as Rook Manor one day, and it stuck and I’ve been doing it ever since,” Andy admitted.

“Sounds less pretentious than calling it a mansion, even if it is,” Nathaniel said with a slight chuckle. “You’re like me – you don’t want to rub anyone’s face in your wealth. That’s one of the many reasons why we get along so well, I think.”

“I didn’t *have* any wealth until you came along, Nathaniel, so thank you again for that.”

“It’s only money,” Nathaniel said with a laugh. “What can it really buy you?”

“Your security team for one.”

“I suppose that’s fair, but that feels more like a price of having money than a benefit,” Nathaniel sighed almost a touch remorsefully.

“I’m a little surprised the head of your security team’s a man, to be honest.”

“Well, there’s only so many slots in my personal life I can dedicate to bodyguards, so I ended up hiring Elliott and his team to provide a higher level of security,” Nathaniel said. “It’s kind of an elegant design – he basically knew security forces were going to be at a premium when the plague hit and so he insisted everyone on his team be an operator, so they could just become a new company, and, wham, bam, thank you ma’am, Bob’s your uncle, here they are. Elliott’s got ten women soldiers in his company, and his original wife is handling logistics and planning now, so that makes them officially Watkins’ Dirty Dozen.”

“Let’s hope it ends better for yours than it did for the movie’s.”

“I still don’t like you being here, sir,” Octavia, Nathaniel’s lead bodyguard said to him. “There’s absolutely no reason we need to be putting ourselves at risk like this.”

“Oh, relax,” Lexi said with a chuckle. “I doubt anyone’s even going to put up a fight. They aren’t going to see it coming and we’re going to roll in like we’re carpet bombing them back into the stone age. The risk is very minimal.”

“Minimal isn’t zero,” Octavia said, narrowing her Persian eyes at Andy’s bodyguard. “I prefer keeping our risk at zero as much as possible, simply because knowing the principal goes down means not only does my paycheck dry up, there’s a decent chance my life goes with it.”

“Aren’t you carrying a disaster kit?”

“Disaster kit?” Andy asked Lexi, arching an eyebrow.

Lexi blanched for a second, frowning slightly, as if she wished she hadn’t said something.

“Sorry boss, this is probably a lot more morbid than you’d want to know about, but I guess you do have the right to know that I’m carrying it.” She reached into her satchel bag and pulled out a small brown

pouch about the size of a large cellphone. “Disaster kit.” She unzipped it and showed it to him. Inside there was a large, capped steel syringe and four empty vials, and immediately Andy understood what it was and what it was for.

In the event of his death, Lexi would go into partner salvation mode. She would extract as much necrotized semen from his dead testicles as she could and take it with her to make sure every one of his partners could be reassigned as quickly and safely as possible. It made sense, and he certainly didn’t want anything to happen to his Team in the event of his death, but it certainly was gruesome thinking about how emergency contingency plans had been made in case the absolute worst happened to him, so having the plan in place made perfect sense.

Octavia nodded to Lexi. “I carry something like that, yes, but I hope to never have to use it.”

“Me neither, but there’s only so much control I have over this world, so it’s better to be prepared and not need it than to need it and not have it,” Lexi sighed, zipping the pouch up, tucking it back into her bag. “Were you annoyed when he decided to bring on a whole outside team to help you in your job? I imagine I might’ve been if Andy’d done it.”

The Persian woman shook her head. Andy had wondered how her voice had gotten the Spanish tinge to her accent but didn’t want to be impolite ask. “It makes my job easier, even if I dislike knowing they aren’t quite as invested in my principal as I am.”

Lexi laughed in agreement at that. “If he dies, they don’t have to worry about finding somebody new to fuck. Yeah, I find that’s incentive for me to keep Andy as safe as I can.”

“I do not think your principal is quite as careless as mine is,” Octavia said with a slight smirk.

“Oh, I’d happily put Andy up against Nathaniel any day.”

“Hey!” Nathaniel laughed. “We’re *right here*.”

“And?” Octavia said, her smirk not having shrunk one bit.

“The things we put up with,” Nathaniel said to Andy with a laugh of his own.

“Speak for yourself,” Andy chuckled, glancing back out at the Pacific Ocean. “I’m happy to do whatever Lexi tells me in times of crisis.”

“And when it’s not times of crisis?” Lexi asked, arching one of her slender black eyebrows at him. “Why not then, hm?”

“Hey, the book tour went fine and you advised me not to do that at first.”

“Fine, you mean, except for the shooting.”

“That wasn’t at or *about* me.”

“It was still *near* you.”

“So was the shootout at the house,” Andy laughed, “and I listened perfectly well then.” He turned to glance over at Elliott, pressing his hands together in gratitude. “Thanks again for coming to our rescue there,” he told the older man. “I know it might’ve looked like we had it under control, but I was nervous as all hell, especially considering we had C4 on the vault door.”

“It didn’t have detonators in it, Andy, I told you!” Lexi protested, still grinning while she did, as if she found his nervousness charming.

“Not a problem, sir,” Elliott told him, his voice deep and gravelly, like a thousand cowboys on a million dusty roads. “We were happy to help, and no, sir, you did not look much like you had it under control. You looked like a handful of kindergarteners who’d managed to accidentally get a grizzly bear into a bear trap. I think you were still more scared of them than they were of you, and you lot had them in handcuffs and naked after they’d rescued you from their countrywomen.” Elliott’s face hinted at a smile he wasn’t allowing himself to show. “The Air Force must’ve very much had their hands full to have such a shitty response time.”

“Their people took swings at General Bonner, my friend Phil Macros, his co-worker Bill McKenna, and a few others, but I guess they thought getting the public face of the American response to DuoHalo would be a feather in their cap, so they sent their meanest crew after me. Thankfully, the Empty Wives team was there to handle them, otherwise shit would’ve definitely gone sideways pretty

damn quickly.”

“Hell of a few weeks you’ve had, Andy,” Nathaniel said with a smile.

“And I’m still not out of the soup yet,” Andy said, glancing back at his phone once more, cursing how long the other team was taking to get in place. The last thing he wanted was for them to get spotted and people to have a chance to prepare for their arrival. “I don’t know why, but I’ve got a pretty bad feeling that LP’s deep in the weeds and needs our help a great deal.”

“I thought you said the visit was hard to get a read on,” Nathaniel said.

“That’s true, but the fact that we weren’t allowed to speak to LP alone at any time while we were there?” Andy shook his head with a sigh. “Something was very much not right with him, and even going through their tour felt... off.”

“Did they get hit by a CCP strike team as well?” Lexi asked Andy.

“They did, but according to the information they sent up the food chain, they ‘handled it,’ although details beyond that are a little sketchy,” Andy said.

“Details for anything about that place are *super* sketchy,” she grumbled.

“I agree with you, Lexi, and that’s why we’re where we are.”

Andy’s secure line message terminal chirped and he glanced down eagerly to read the message.

-We go in 2 min, at 4pm exactly.-

“Okay folks, 2-minute warning,” Andy said to the gathered group, seeing the Security Services members were already getting ready, so he suspected the pair had gotten the same alert message he had. “We’re about to roll in, but remember, we’re trying to do this peacefully, and under no circumstances should this turn into a bloodbath. We’re not even the primary on this, but the secondary is almost as important, because it means we’re ensuring nobody sneaks out the back way. Remember, we think they may have done something to the serum, so people may act strangely. Do your level best to keep your cool, but we aren’t letting *anyone* leave the premises, no matter what their reasons. Everybody got that?”

“Heard, sir!” came back the response from a dozen or so women holding machine guns, which Andy couldn’t help but admit felt kinda cool.

“Alright, folks, let’s go save our people.”

Everyone began piling into Humvees, Tesla Model Ys and Escalades, as they lined up and started heading towards the giant wall fences of Valhalla Shores. There were only two entrances to the campus, and they needed to hit both at once, otherwise there was a good chance word might leak and runners might make a break for it. Andy’s Model Y was right up front with the Security Services Humvee right behind him.

Lexi brought the Model Y up to the gate and one of the two airmen on guard duty moved out of the box and over towards the driver’s side window, gesturing for Lexi to roll it down. Just then, the two Security Services members hopped out of their Humvee and moved quickly and efficiently towards the guards, their weapons drawn and pointing with intent.

“Weapons down, ladies,” the lead Security Services officer, Captain Shepherd, said to the two guards. “This base is being given a full inspection under suspicions of unauthorized and perhaps unnatural research, but all you two need to do right now is sit down and shut the fuck up.” The two guards looked like they were deer caught in the headlights, the one still inside the booth glancing at an alarm button on the wall, but Shepherd shook her head. “Don’t do it, airman. Any move towards that button will be considered an act of treason and I will be forced to shoot you.”

It seemed like that was enough for the two women guards, as both stepped forward and out of the booth, letting the other Security Services offer put twisticuffs on them and seat them on the ground.

“What now, Captain?” Andy asked her.

“Now, sir, we stay here, lock down the exit so no rats scurry out, and you, well, you go find your man, see if he can give up the ghost about what the *fuck* is going on in here,” Shepherd said to him.

Messages were being relayed back and forth on a secure data line, and the message came down the pipeline that the main front gate had been taken without anyone being tipped off, so the vehicles were rolling in and fast, almost like it was a rolling strike. They were cutting off communications lines for the people of Valhalla Shores as they moved in because they didn't want a chain reaction, they didn't want everything to go south and collapse. The minute the warning hit, they knew all the reprobates and guilty parties were going to scatter like cockroaches in the sunlight. And that moment was going to hit before they got throughout the entire base, but they needed to push it out as long as possible, because nothing was going to put that problem back in the box.

Andy felt like he was on the frontlines as their Tesla headed straight for the lion's den, as they pulled up on the main buildings, and Lexi and was out the door before he felt like the vehicle had even come to a complete stop, holding a rifle she'd been loaned by the Air Force for the raid. They moved over to Structure C and Andy gave Lexi the nod. Melody had been left to guard the manor and the family, so Lexi was accompanied by a woman named Acuna from Elliott's team as backup.

They burst through the front door and the woman at the front desk was about to reach for either her phone or her gun when Lexi drew down on her, Acuna making sure to give the lobby a quick sweep. "Hands way, way, *way* up, sister," Lexi cautioned. "I'm hoping you're just a gate jockey doing her job, but if I see you so much as twitch funny, I gotta put you down, and we both know it, m'kay?" She looked over at Andy, giving him a nod. "Cuff her."

While they'd been waiting, the tac team had taught Andy how to apply zipcuffs quickly and correctly, so that was going to be his job as they moved up to find Lesser Phil. He pulled the woman's arms behind her back and zipcuffed them tightly together.

The airman looked up at Andy, and there was a bit of desperation in her eyes. "Knock me out. Please. Or cover my ears."

"What?" Andy said.

"I don't have time to explain, sir, so please... please just knock me out..."

Acuna stepped over and slammed the shoulder brace of her rifle into the woman's face, knocking her unconscious. "The hell was that about?"

"I don't know," Andy said, "but I sure as hell don't like it. C'mon, let's go."

"One sec," Lexi said, stepping to the desk. She couldn't disable the alarm from the lobby, but she could at least see where the guards and their checkpoints were, and thankfully it looked like Structure C wasn't one of the buildings with the massive amounts of guards everywhere. She picked up the phone to turn on the PA system, but then just set it next to a desk speaker as she pulled up a web browser and set it to Lofi Hip Hop Radio, letting that play over the airwaves, so people couldn't use the PA system to communicate in the building. It would be clear something was slightly wrong, but they wouldn't be able to let the whole building know at once.

They snagged the keycard from the guard and headed over to the elevator, pushing the third-floor button as the elevator began to move. When the doors opened on the third floor, people were looking around, confused by the music that was playing through the air.

"LP!" Andy shouted, and Lesser Phil's head popped up from one of the cubicles before ducking back down, popping up again with noise-canceling headphones strapped onto his ears, a big smile on his face as he started running over towards them, holding an iPad with him. Andy gestured to the headphones, and LP grabbed his tablet and typed into it.

-I'll tell you shortly, but don't let anyone from Valhalla Shores SAY ANYTHING.-

They headed back to the elevator, as Andy sent a message across the secure channel. *'Homer One to Zulu Actual, do not let anyone outside of our team speak inside target area. Have been warned by recovered asset.'*

'Zulu Three, can confirm. Personnel seem boobytrapped.'

'Actual here: Boobytrapped how?'

'Three reporting: Saw one woman say something and then half a dozen women just blanked out'

and fell to the ground.'

'Actual here: Switch to rubber bullets, gas masks and tear grenades. Use flashbangs liberally. No way to tell friendlies from foes.'

The music from LP's headphones was leaking out of the edges, which meant it must have been absolutely deafening for LP. Nine Inch Nails, and it sounded like the Broken EP, angry and aggressive and full of heavy crunchy sounds. Andy saw LP gesturing wildly at his tablet, so he glanced down and saw what LP had typed. *-Only women can issue commands and even then, only verbally. Men incapable of issuing orders.-*

He nodded and then sent another message across the channel *'Homer One: Asset reports men cannot trigger boobytraps.'*

'Actual here: Level of confidence in that intel, Homer One?'

'99%, Actual. No reason to doubt, every reason to believe.'

'Copy that. Knock out everyone, but women are higher priority. Actual on the move. Location, Homer One?'

'Structure C but heading over to General Ibanez's office now.'

'Meet you there, Homer One.'

When he'd asked for a callsign, General Bonner had said he could be called Homer. He'd hoped it was after the poet, and not the Simpsons character, but the General wasn't saying either way. It probably didn't even matter. They hopped back into the elevator and Andy typed into LP's tablet – *What the hell is happening here?*

Tell you when we can speak, but long story short, they found a way to make people obey commands, whether they want to or not.

What the FUCK, LP?

That wasn't my division! There were several factions here when it started. Now there's only Ibanez.

The elevator dinged and they were back on the ground floor as they headed over towards the main building, finding Bonner and five members of her team in the lobby waiting for them, the guards already handcuffed and gagged.

"You wanna tell me what's going on here, Rook?" General Bonner asked him as they approached.

Andy gestured to LP to take his headphones off, something he did nervously. "LP, what the hell's happening here?"

"They've found a way to induce a kind of 'spike' into an existing or even a new Team, by giving an altered version of the serum to a woman before she's paired up. She then becomes a sort of Override for anyone in her Team, man or woman alike, and anything she says must be obeyed if the command words are given, and there's nothing—"

"Apollo echo! Stop breathing!"

General Ibanez was standing by the elevator, holding a cellphone in her hands that had just played the sound clip they'd just heard played at maximum volume.

Phil suddenly looked panicked, gesturing *wildly* at his throat, while all the guns trained on General Ibanez.

"Easy there, folks... you're going to let me walk away, or your friend there is going to suffocate to death," Ibanez said as she started making her way over towards Andy, inching her way towards the doorway, cellphone still held in one hand. "Ever watched a man suffocate, especially when it's just his own inability to breathe that's killing him? Nasty way to die." She got to the point where she was almost right beside Andy, but clearly she hadn't seen the holstered weapon on his hip because when she was nearly on top of him, Andy drew the gun, turned and shot her in the left thigh with one quick, fluid motion, like it was as natural as breathing for him, and *no one* in the room had seen it coming.

"Make him start breathing right now, otherwise I'm going to introduce you to so much pain,

you'll only wish you were dead," Andy said, pointing the gun at her slumped form, even as he felt all the military personnel tensing up, some of them considering drawing on him.

"You would'n—"

BLAM!

The pistol in his hand belched another round of lead and fire, this time into the General Ibanez's other thigh, as General Bonner's women lifted their guns to point at Andy very nervously before Bonner gestured for them to lower them. "I've missed the femoral artery both times. Shit, I've gotten good enough at my aim that they're mostly just flesh wounds. The next one's taking off a fucking kneecap, you bitch," Andy said, his voice like burning steel. "After that, I'm going to start targeting places with even more nerves. I write fantasy horror for a living, General Ibanez, and you are threatening one of the very few remaining male friends I have left on this planet. So, if you're wondering if I know how to hurt you, I've got ideas that would curdle your morning milk, and I fucking damn well have the will to use them. I'm not going to count to ten. Shit, I'm not even going to fucking *count*. Make him breath, now, or you will struggle with your last thousand breaths, you'll be in so much pain."

Ibanez looked at Andy for a second, as if trying to size him up, and a half a second later, he was certain he saw genuine fear in her eyes, because it was now terrifyingly clear to her that if Andy's friend died here, she too would die here as well, but nowhere near as fast, Andy would make certain of that even if it killed him.

The General glanced at the phone, and then pushed a button, as another sound clip cut loudly through the air so quiet you could hear a flea cry. "Apollo Echo! Continue breathing!" the voice from the phone said and suddenly Lesser Phil wheezed in a desperate gasp of air, panting to recover his stability, as Andy took the phone from Ibanez.

Andy took one more look at General Ibanez's face, and then cracked her in the forehead with the bottom of the pistol grip, knocking her out.

"Jesus, Rook," General Bonner said, stepping over towards him. "Were you really gon—"

"Yes," Andy said, as calmly as if he'd been discussing the weather. "I would've just killed her to start with if I wasn't worried about not being able to unlock the phone if I did that."

"It's not an easy thing to live with, Rook, taking a life."

"Any worse than watching your friend suffocate to death because you don't have the willpower to help them?" Andy said, turning that stone-eyed gaze up to stare down the General. "Thought not." He turned to glance at Lesser Phil. "What the *fuck* happened here?"

"Fucked up shit," LP said, still struggling to recover his composure as he stood up, but found his feet wobbly. "Why do you think I tried to get your help?"

"You didn't really reach out to me about it."

"Couldn't."

"Explain."

"In early January, a covert ops team was able to get a small crate containing doses of the Gabon version of the Quaranteam serum, which they were safely able to bring back here to Valhalla Shores," LP said, moving to sit down on one of the benches in the lobby. "You know about the pacification part of that one, yeah?"

"Yeah, only just," Andy said. "I learned about that yesterday."

"Well, in January of this year, we got a whole crate of it, and one of the doctors here began tearing it apart, seeing if they could figure out what made it different," Lesser Phil grumbled. "I'm not supposed to *know* any of this, mind you, but that's why I was trying to get your attention, not coming to the bachelor's party or even the wedding, because I would have to have had my handler with me, and if she got a whiff I was trying to signal you, she could've made me jump off a ledge or something, and bye-bye to me."

"Your handler?"

LP nodded. “Every Team here in Valhalla Shores has one, someone who’s part of Ibanez’s little cabal. They have a sort of mental key into anyone they’re bound to. They say a two-word phrase then issue an order, and then whoever’s on that Team that can hear the order has to do it, no matter what it is. And they’ve ordered some wild and heinous shit.”

“Shit,” General Bonner said. “One of the women said ‘Zeus Neptune – Forget 2021,’ to a room full of people, and suddenly I was staring into a sea of blank faces. You’re telling me they just lost all their memories of this year?”

“Every single one of them – totally gone,” LP said.

“Fuck!” the General shouted, stamping her foot.

“How does it work, LP?”

“I just told you.”

“No, how does getting a handler work?”

“Oh,” he said. “I sort of know the broad strokes, but not all the specifics. They give a woman a spiked version of the Quaranteam serum – it’s some combination of our serum, the Gabon serum and the Sergei Swerve; they call it the Rover Variant – and when she imprints on a man, that man’s guaranteed to go into a regeneration state, but as he does, much like women don’t know they say ‘imprinting,’ the man’ll say ‘awaiting override.’ The next two words he hears are that woman’s override phrase, and as the man has sex with the rest of the members of his Team later after he’s woken up again, it’ll spread the override phrase to all of them, one by one until they all have it installed in their brains, like a fucking Trojan horse brainworm. Her imprinting sleep has about a sixty-second delay trigger on it, so she can input the encoding phase before she starts imprinting herself.”

“Jesus, LP,” Andy said. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you call for help?”

“They control the communications lines here, and the only reason I know what I know is because I’ve been snooping around and haven’t gotten *caught* yet,” LP said, exhaustion plain on his face. “We were all given a command that we couldn’t talk about our experiences with the serum outside of the walls of Valhalla Shores, so if I’d gotten permission to come to your wedding, I couldn’t think of any way to let you know we were in trouble. I can tell you *here*, because the way they said it, I’m free to talk about it within the walls, which is how I got the rest of my Team prepared when this day came. I tried to tell you, man. I desperately wanted to get you alone for even two minutes when you were here recently, but I couldn’t get the damn guards to leave us alone for even a minute. Speaking of which, what took you so fucking long to come back here?”

“Niko gave birth to our son last week, literally right after I left here.”

LP chuckled, shaking his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “My *fucking* luck, am I right? Congrats, man. I sent a text message to Brandy as soon as I saw you, and she knocked out Chelsea, our handler in the Team, got her tied up and gagged so she can’t say or do anything, but I guess after your visit her last week, Chelsea prerecorded some voice clips for the General to use in case of emergency, to use me as leverage against you.” LP looked down and then looked back up at Andy’s face. “You were really going to—”

“You’re fucking right I was,” Andy said calmly, still looking at General Ibanez’s unconscious bleeding body. “Shit, I still half want to, but we’re going to need her alive to unpack what sort of clusterfuck they’ve gotten us into. Tell me this brainrape version of the serum is contained entirely in Valhalla Shores.” When LP didn’t answer, Andy turned back to look at his friend with terror in his eyes. It wasn’t just bad; it was fucking next level bad. When it rained, it always fucking poured like he was Noah, and God had a woodshop project for him. “Jesus, Phil, how much?”

“About fifty thousand doses went out last week,” Lesser Phil said, the weight of it like a ton of bricks on his shoulders. “It was the third consecutive week of shipments about that size. All said and done, since they started, I’d say close to a quarter of a million doses of this shit are loose and in the wild right now. I have no idea where the fuck Ibanez sent them. They could be here in the states, or she may have sold them off to the highest bidder. I couldn’t find any paper trail on where they’re going

once they leave the base. I'm sorry, man."

Andy glanced down at Ibanez's unconscious body and kicked her once in the gut as he shouted, "FUCK!"

Chapter Thirty

May 8th, 2021

As much as he used to love travelling, he was finding that getting around in the post DuoHalo world was a lot more complicated than it had been before. Of course, he had nearly two dozen people relying on his health and schedule now, so perhaps that was why it felt like any time he wanted to go anywhere, it was a major undertaking.

The plan was this afternoon they were going to fly out to DC, so that Andy could have appointments with the other members of the Oversight committee as well as the President herself on Monday and Tuesday. He was anticipating flying back Wednesday, so it wouldn't be *too* disruptive to the schedule, but it still meant some people needed to get dosings before he left, so he'd fucked eight partners in the last twenty-fours, and Emily, who he was inside of at that very moment, made nine.

He was sat up in the bed, his back against Piper, who had her back against the backboard, while Emily was bouncing up and down in his lap, a sort of seated cowgirl that allowed the small English woman to take her time, weaving her hips back and forth to let her slide up and down along his cock.

"Where are you, Andrew?" Emily asked him, turning his head to make him look at her. "You know it's rude to be thinking about something else when you're fucking your wife." The expression on her face was still kind and understanding. Emily had grown emotionally a lot over the last half a year, but she still had elements of self-doubt and concern that she wasn't good enough for him. Andy had done his best through constant reassurance and repeated praise to convince her that she wasn't just Sarah's partner who'd come along for the ride, but her own woman that Andy had also fallen in love with along the way.

"Sorry Em," he said, kissing her neck. "Just some heavy things on my mind, but I shouldn't let them interfere with our time together. I'll try and stop thinking about it."

"What can I do to get you more focused on the here and now?" she giggled, wriggling in his lap. "A bit of roleplay? Having me on all fours?" She moved to nibble on his earlobe. "I'm quite eager to feel you cumming inside me, my love. I think I'm at that sweet spot where you might knock me up, and I'm oh so eager to be bred now that we're wed. Doesn't that excite you? Knowing your blushing British bride is a wanton, desperate bitch for you, yearning to be fucked until she's knocked up, proudly bearing your child? Let me give you a child, Andrew. Claim me. Mark me. Fulfill my body's wants. Own me. Give it to me. Cum in this tight young British *cunt*."

There was something special about Emily whispering profanities into his ear – the fact that she always did so with her posh upper class British accent somehow made the words more exquisite, more taboo, more delicious. And even though he was still nervous about the information Phil had dumped on him mere days earlier, his body knew it had a job to do and when he felt her inner muscles clamping down on him, his body responded in kind and provided her with a load of cum to set her at ease, to fill her body's yearning needs, their lips locking as his orgasm triggered hers, and the two releases entwined into one intense shared moment, linking the two of them in the shared pleasure of the orgasm.

When the moment started to pass, Emily pulled back from the kiss and peered into his eyes, her fingers stroking across the back of his shaved head. "You've still got that worry in your eyes, beloved," she said softly to him. "Sooner or later, I wish you'd let me in."

Piper leaned in and kissed Andy's other cheek. "I think it's probably time, Andy," she said to him. "You can't keep it on your shoulders forever."

"You think Ash can handle it? Now?"

"I think Ash is the toughest woman I've ever met, and I spend my summers surrounded by Olympians, Andy," Piper giggled, stroking his face. "Have a little faith in her."

Andy drew in a deep breath and then sighed it out again. "You're probably right," he agreed, leaning his forehead against Emily's, as the tiny blonde smiled impishly at him. "You're both probably right. Okay, Piper, send out a message and why don't we have all the wives meet us in the Bird Cage in about ten minutes. The three of us should definitely hop through a quick shower first."

"I'm not *that* messy," Piper said with mock indignation.

"M'love," Em giggled, "you've still got his cum dripping down onto your inner thighs."

"Okay, so maybe I *am* that messy."

Piper sent a message out to the wives' chat group before they headed into the bathroom and took a quick shower, although Andy did have to politely ask Piper not to try and push for a *second* dose while they were showering, the athlete's engines seemingly running hot that day. After the shower, the three got dressed and headed out of the master bedroom, heading down the hallway, giving a polite wave to the Air Force repair crews that were rebuilding the walls around the hidden elevator that had been damaged during the assault less than a week ago.

It was astonishing how much it felt like happened on any given day for Andy anymore. He missed the week's long vacation they had had for their honeymoon, when the lot of them had simply sat on a beach and enjoyed the surf and the sand, even on the day when the rain had threatened to flood them off their deck chairs.

"It's nice of you to fly me to D.C., Andrew," Emily said to him as the three of them walked over to the bookcase, finding it already open, meaning at least some of his wives were already upstairs and in the little study. "Hopefully your meeting about Ibanez won't be any crazier than the sort of nonsense that I imagine a director's going to get up to after a year of sitting idly on their bottom. Sometimes they can be like feral creatures, directors, willing to scratch at anything and anyone that upsets their delicate sensibilities. It's so strange, having to break up our shooting schedule by allowing people time away to go back and visit their partners, but I suppose this is going to be more common moving forward."

"What are they doing on the weeks while you're not there?"

"Shooting other people's scenes mostly, but also coverage, pickups, and 2nd unit work," Emily said to him, walking with his right arm around her shoulder. "I'm first on the call sheet, but 'Looky Loos' is an ensemble show, so I'm only in like 35-40% of the show's scenes. There's lots of scenes they need to shoot that I'm not in, and that is going to be typical for a lot of productions now. So the scheduling and planning will take more work, but if they really need me for all of a project, they can shoot it in California. If the project was here, I could just take a day off to fly up from LA, have a quickie and then fly back down, but because it's on the other side of the world, that's less plausible."

"Well, the show's set in London, Em," Andy said to her, "and a lot of it is set outdoors in well-known locations, so yeah, it's kinda gonna have to be shot over there. And besides, you're the one who agreed to the show."

"Oh, I'm not complaining, Andrew," she said with a smile, leaning her head against his chest. "I am simply pointing out that these are the things productions need to keep in mind from now on. For the larger teams, it either needs to be less distant from their talent's cock on tap, or they need to prepare to work around on-again-off-again shifts. I'm going to miss you terribly while I'm away. Sleeping by myself sounds truly gruesome."

"You could take Sarah with you, you know, if it'd help you sleep better."

"Maybe for the second or three week while I'm away, but I need to be able to stand on my own two feet at least a little bit," she said, as they reached the top of the stairs, seeing that Moira, Sarah and Niko were already there, hearing Fiona helping Ash's very pregnant, very swollen form up the stairs right behind them, as Andy stepped down to help her up the narrow stairwell.

"You'd better have a damn good reason for making me waddle my pregnant ass up these goddamn tight stairs, Andy," Aisling grumbled as she reached the top of the stairwell.

"Ash, I promise you, this is important," Andy said as his wives all moved to settle in seats around the room, the two couches and two chairs leaving exactly eight seats. "Piper, can you go make sure the door is closed and latched please? And everyone, take a *good* look around the room *carefully* and make sure Nicolette's not hiding behind a cabinet or something."

That elicited a good laugh, which he hoped would fill the room with some cheer before they got into the hard conversation.

Piper headed down the stairs and Andy could hear her latching the lock into place, something they'd *never* done before in the house, which he could tell was imparting some of the gravitas onto his partners. As she started her way back up, Nico turned to look at Andy, narrowing her eyes a little. "Shit's serious, isn't it?"

"Matty's with Jade right now?"

"He's taking a nap, but yeah, Jade's keeping an eye on him," Niko said, as Andy moved to sit down on the couch between Niko and Ash, taking one of their hands into one of each of his own. "Andy, you're scaring me."

"Look, what I'm about to tell you... I've known what I'm going to tell you for less than a week," Andy said with a sigh. "And I probably should've told you all as soon as I knew about it, but I didn't..." He looked around the room, trying to avoid looking at any one face, but his partners had positioned themselves so that he had nowhere to look that wasn't looking at one of them. Niko had just had Matty, and Ash is going to be giving birth soon... I was worried that the news would be a blight on all of that."

"Andy, whatever it is, we can get through all of this together. You should've told at least one of us," Ash said, a tired frustration plain on her face.

"He did," Piper said. "He told me. Because he felt like I had the least at stake with the specific issue, and because he needed to tell someone before he went crazy. I told him to let it sit a few days before he talked to everyone, but that eventually, he'd need to tell all the rest of you, so if you're angry at him for keeping it from you for a bit, that's on me too."

"No wonder you two have both been on edge the last few days," Moira said. "We've all felt like we were walking on eggshells, and figured it was maybe about the attack on the house."

"That certainly didn't help," Piper said.

"Nor did the whole mess with LP," Andy said with a soft laugh.

"I'd thought maybe it was about the new girl, Ming," Niko said, "but she seems so damn nice, I was having trouble making that make sense in my head."

"No no, it's fine. Ming's lovely."

Niko snuggled up hard against him. "Andy, whatever it is, we're a family goddamn it, and we're going to get through it as one, so whatever it is, we can talk about it together," she told him. "So just tell us already."

"When Phil came by on the 3rd, he had some news to share with me, news he hadn't told almost anyone else, news that I'm going to share with you, although I want you to keep in mind, right now, the number of people who know this information is very *very* small, and you shouldn't talk about it with anyone outside of this room yet." Andy turned to glance over at Ash. "Not even Linda, because I don't know if Phil's told her this yet or not, although he probably should've."

"Jaysis, Andy," Ash said, her Irish accent slipping out for a moment. "What's Phil gotten himself into that he hasn't even told Linda about?"

Andy drew in a deep breath and then he started to talk, telling the roomful of his wives about the nanobots, about Team sizes, and most importantly, about the reduced aging speeds. A couple of times, his partners attempted to jump in, but each time, Andy would raise his hand, as if to suggest holding all questions until the end, and then continued.

He took the time to explain that while Phil couldn't be sure exactly how long they'd live, he was currently giving them life expectancies of around two hundred and forty years old, give or take a few decades. But Andy also took great care to explain that wasn't going to affect anyone outside of those within Teams. And then reiterated that it wasn't going to apply to their children. They would easily outlive their own children by decades, if not centuries.

Andy could feel both Ash and Niko's grips on his hands grow a lot tighter at that.

The room was quiet for a couple of minutes, and the first person to speak, surprisingly, was Moira.

“Alright, you bampots, let’s nae get up into a panic yet about any of this,” she said, a sort of odd smile on her face. “I love wee Phil ta death, but he’s not exactly Nostra-fookin’-damus, is he? He doesn’ae know th’ future any more’n the rest of us do. There’s a whole lotta time between now and then, an’ I want you lot to think about what’s changed in just the last twenty-five years alone. Cellphones, the Internet, electric cars... the world’s runnin’ forward so much faster than anyone expected was possible. Whatever Phil thinks he knows ‘bout where we’re goin’ tae be in ten- or twenty-years’ time, there’s no way he’s taken everythin’ intae account.”

“That’s true,” Fiona said. “Look at how much has changed in just a year. A year ago, did you think you’d be married, Andy, much less to multiple women?”

“Christ,” Andy laughed, “I thought I’d probably be stuck living with Eric forever. Not living in a mansion, fathering children and going to visit the President.”

Sarah nodded with a slight smile. “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around every once in a while, you could miss it,” she said with a giggle.

“Thanks Ferris,” Andy shot back. “So nobody’s freaking out?”

“Oh, I’m *concerned*,” Ash said, “but I don’t see any reason to get too worried *now* about it. I don’t even have these two terror twins out of me yet. Yes, I don’t much care for the idea of outliving my children, but that’s a possibility any parent has to deal with. How much slower did you say we were going to be aging?”

“For our Team size? About one month for every six months, or two months a year.”

“So when these kids are turning eighteen, I’ll only look about three years older than I do now?”

“That’s what the math and the science says.”

Niko snorted. “We should all be so lucky.” She reached up and turned Andy’s head to look at her, and he suddenly felt like a child being talked down to. “We all appreciate you being worried about this, Andy, and about how we were all going to react, but time... it’s a funny thing. And being told you have *more* of it? That’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“I’m not keen on watching our kids grow old and die,” Sarah said, “but like Ash said, any parent’s going to have to deal with that possibility.”

“Today and tomorrow aren’t the same thing, baby,” Ash said, squeezing his hand reassuringly. “And whatever Phil thinks he knows about the serum today, it might be different tomorrow. Think of how much he’s learned about the serum in just the last few months alone, and he helped *invent* the bloody thing. His knowledge, *our* knowledge about the serum’s going to keep evolving day by day, and tomorrow’s a new day. And I don’t mind staying young and beautiful a bit longer than I was originally supposed to, while the new reality gets figured out.”

“Stop overthinkin’, ya numpty,” Moira giggled as he looked over the room, seeing nobody was anywhere near as worried as he’d expected them to be. “A *year* is a long time, so *twenty*? That’s bleedin’ eternities, tha’ is.”

“I... I guess that’s totally fair,” Andy said, nodding as he realized not for the first or last time that all his wives were much smarter than he was, or at the very least, wiser. “But if that changes anyone wanting to get pregnant, I completely understand. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a dealbreaker for at least one of you.”

“How soon is the information going to be made public?” Sarah asked him.

“I probably just doubled the number of people who know about this by telling all of you,” Andy said, “but when Phil and I meet with the President tomorrow, we’re going to have to tell her, and I think the ultimate call is hers, although I’d expect it to be relatively soon. People are going to start noticing on their own eventually, although maybe we’ll have a bit of time because of people being in denial about it. And, like I said, it’s based on Team size, so the number of larger Teams isn’t all that plentiful.”

“Are you expecting that number to grow?” Fiona said. “Because if you aren’t, you damn well should. When it gets out that more partners prolong your life, expect loads of people to try and push for their Team size to go up, whether they deserve it or not.”

"I don't deserve it," Andy muttered. "But here we are."

"You *do* deserve it, so get over it, babe," Ash said.

"It doesn't change a goddamn thing for me," Piper said. "As soon as next year's Olympics are over, you're going to get me knocked up and there's not a damn thing you can do about it." The mischievous smile on her lips told Andy that she wasn't kidding, and that no matter what his opinion on the matter was, she was going to get him to put a baby in her. The recent scare at the hospital when Niko was in labor had been a little rattling, but her birth control had held, and Piper's dedication to getting pregnant with Andy's child was only second to her having a second triumphant Olympics. Now that both the Summer and Winter Olympics had been rescheduled for 2022, with the Summer's again in 2024 and the Winter's returning to 2026, Piper would get her one last shot before her retirement.

"Nor for me, Andrew," Emily said to him. "I want to be a mother, and we'll worry about our longevity compared to our children once we get older. So no, it doesn't change a thing for me."

"Me neither," Moira said. "Fi?"

"You can take this child from my cold dead hands," Fiona said with a slight laugh, placing her hand over her belly that was far from showing signs of the life growing within. "Zero regrets."

"Ash?" Andy asked.

"I wanted the twins out before, Andy, and this doesn't change that, nor the condition I want them out in," Ash said with a slightly weary smile. "Sure, it's a complication, but life is full of those."

"Niko?"

Niko clung to his hand a bit more firmly than he'd expected. "Matty is a blessing, Andy. Our own little miracle. Male children are so rare that they're one in ten, and we got one with our very first. Nothing's coming between me and our son. Nothing."

That just left Sarah, and Andy didn't expect it to be a big deal for the tall redhead, but when he looked at her, he could see there was conflict writ large upon her face, as she looked down at her hands, her brow furrowed. "Sarah?"

Sarah jolted her head up suddenly, glancing over at Andy with a shy smile, one he hadn't seen from the bubbly aggressive woman since the time she'd been forced to tell Andy about attending one of his panels in disguise. "I... well, I suppose there really is no good or bad time to bring it up, but I tested positive for pregnancy this morning."

Normally everyone would be cheering and clapping, but knowing what they knew now, there was a certain sense of trepidation, so Andy rose from his feet and moved over to crouch down next to Sarah. "Whatever you want t—"

"We're keeping it," Sarah said, a smile spreading on her face. "I knew something was different when I woke up this morning, and Phil's news doesn't change anything for me. Not a fucking thing. I love you, Andy. More than I thought I could ever love anyone. All of you. I'm going to add a child to this amazing family, and there is not a damn thing any of you fuckers could do to stop me."

Emily rushed over and wrapped her arms around Sarah and hugged the statuesque redhead as hard as she could, giggling the entire time. "You are going to be an excellent mother, Sarah, assuming you can watch your mouth around the child."

The whole room laughed at that, Sarah most of all as she shook her head. "Nah, fuck that. Any kid of mine is going to grow up getting used to hearing Mommy swear, so you'll all just have to deal with it." She leaned down and kissed Andy hard for a long moment, holding his head in her hands when the kiss finally broke, as she whispered to him, "Are *you* okay with it?"

"I'm getting there," Andy replied quietly. "But I'm just as excited as you are. Go us. The kid'll probably be a rock star."

Piper tapped Andy's shoulder. "I know we're trying to keep the information down low, but you're probably going to want to tell Nicolette sooner rather than later. It can probably wait until you get back from D.C., but I wouldn't wait much longer than that."

"She'll want to keep the child anyway," Andy said to himself. "And I get that. I imagine the

news can't stay under wraps too much longer, but it's definitely up to the President on when the information comes out publicly, because Fi's right – there may be some people who try and make a hard push to bring their numbers up, knowing that it comes with the benefit of decelerated aging.”

“How long are you going to be out in D.C. Andy?” Ash said. “Because if you're not here when I go into labor...”

“Three or four days, tops, and if there's even a flutter of you going in labor, I'll hop back on the plane and fly straight back here,” he said. “It's a six-hour flight, and whatever it takes, I'll be here.”

“You damn well better be,” Ash said with a laugh. “Especially considering I've got two of these little fuckers to get out of me.”

“It's not like you're short on things you need to brief the President about,” Niko said with a resigned little giggle. “Slowed aging, Valhalla Falls, General Ibanez, the brainrape variant, China's collapse and the deal with the Empty Wives... you and Phil will probably be talking at them for at least a few hours before anyone gets a word in edgewise.”

“I'm probably going to spend the entire flight there reading up on all the various details we have about the spread of the variants of the virus, so I'd understand if nobody wants to tag along,” Andy said. “Did you ladies decide who wanted to come with me, other than Emily, who we'll basically just be sending off on a commercial flight as soon as we land?”

“I'm coming, Andy,” Fi said, “just because I want to keep documenting this whole story of yours with photos as well as words. I know I don't have the clearance to go with you into the situation room or meet the President—”

“Oh, you can definitely come and meet the President, Fi. You just won't be able to sit in on the high-level briefings,” Andy told her. “But that's fine. Moira? Sarah? Piper?”

“The team's going to be in town for a week of scrimmaging,” Piper said, “so as much fun as it would be to go to the White House, I need to start working with the girls, getting everybody back into shape, and training up the new girl, getting her into rotations, having her get used to the rest of us.”

“New gare-rul?” Moira asked, that word always sounding odd coming off her lips.

“Yeah, one of the old members of the team, Reagan McIntosh, died to DuoHalo, so we needed to get a replacement,” Piper said, frowning a little, clearly not liking thinking about the passing of her former teammate. “I know we think a lot about all the men that died, but we lost a lot of good women out there too. Plus the team has got to get used to the new coach they've saddled us with. We're going to scrim with on-again, off-again weeks, alternating, so we're all travelling some, but also taking care of ourselves too. Whole new world out there.”

“I've got an interview with a couple of the hospitals, deciding if I want to work in someone's ER for a bit, or if I should just open a general practice here in New Eden,” Moira said.

“Hell, you could establish an ER here on the base,” Andy said with a laugh. “Considering the chaos this lot gets up to, we probably need one.”

“Maybe,” she said, “but setting up my own hospital is definitely more work than I want to do. I'd rather just take care of people instead of becoming some kind of *administrator*,” she said, shivering on the last word like it was the most horrible option she could consider.

“Sares?” Emily asked.

Sarah shook her head. “I have to fly down to LA tomorrow for a meeting, so I can't, babe, but I'll come out with you to London for the second and third weeks of filming.”

“Who's the meeting with?”

“Patty Jenkins. She's in talks to direct a Star Wars movie and wants me to read for part of the ensemble cast, see if I'll mesh well with the others.”

“Break a leg, then,” Andy said. “Alright, I guess it's just me, Lexi, Fi, Melody and Em, then.”

“Actually,” Emily said, “Tala was asking if she could go with me to London, and I told her I'd happily book her a ticket. You don't mind, do you?”

“I haven't dosed her in a while, but we can take care of that on the plane, so yeah, should be

fine,” Andy said. “Assuming Phil and Linda don’t mind. And I want to thank you all for being so understanding about why I kept this information to myself for a bit. I truly didn’t want to step on anyone’s moment of joy.”

“This family’s tough as nails, babe,” Ash said, standing up with some help, before moving over and giving him a long kiss. “You built it that way.”

“Are we taking Ming with us?” Fi asked. “I feel like the President may want to meet her, and despite the fact that they already debriefed her here, they may want to do so again.”

“Good thought,” Andy said. “Fi, can you send Ming a message and see if she minds joining us on the trip?”

“One step ahead of you, love,” Fi said, already looking at her phone. “She said she’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“Sounds good.”

From there, everyone said their goodbyes before heading down to gather their things. Phil had said he and his small team would meet them at the private airfield. Andy had stressed that he would be bringing between five and seven people with him, meaning Phil couldn’t bring any more than seven with him, as the plane only held sixteen. But Phil only rolled up with Linda and Violet in tow, and Linda didn’t look all that pleased. She walked past Andy without even saying hello.

“You told them?” Andy asked Phil.

Phil nodded, pulling his own suitcase. “Figured I had to. She’s not mad that I waited to tell her; she’s mad that I told *you* before I told her.”

“Sorry, Linda.”

Linda scowled at him and then sighed. “You’re so damn lucky the wedding’s next month, otherwise I’d have considered making him kick you out of the wedding party.” She tried to hold the angry face for a bit, then laughed, reaching to hug him. “I’m fucking with you, Rook. Relax. It’s annoying, but I’ll get over it long before the wedding on the 12th.” She, Phil and Violet carried their bags up onto the plane.

“Jesus, it truly does run in the family. You’re all phenomenal liars.”

“C’mon,” Lexi said from the plane’s hatch. “Let’s get everyone on board and get this show on the road. We’re burning daylight here. It’s bad form to keep the President waiting.”

“Our meeting isn’t until tomorrow, Lexi,” Andy said as he walked up the stairs into the airplane.

“I think she’s just worried she’s going to misplace D.C.,” Melody teased from the co-pilot’s seat.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Mel,” Lexi said with a laugh as she pulled the airplane’s door up and secured it closed. “I swear, you lose an airfield *one* time, and nobody let you forget it...”

Character Guide

(Author's Note: This is intended to be used as a character reference for the Quaranteam universe on the whole, including the main Quaranteam stories, but also its offshoots, at least the ones authored by me. It may contain minor spoilers, depending on where you are in the story, but I have done my best to keep them to a minimum.)

Team Rook (23 people)

- **Andy Rook** – A 38-year-old content writer for Netflix, who also lives a double life as semi-successful urban fantasy writer Blake Conrad, known for his Druid Gunslinger books. Shaved head, neatly trimmed brown beard, 5'11", hazel eyes, tattooed on the chest with a griffon, could stand to lose a few pounds. Originally from Ohio, has lived in the Bay Area for over a decade. Our protagonist, such as he is. Still reaping the benefits from one random act of kindness to a stranger named Dave.
- **Aisling (Ash) Blake** – A 27-year-old graphic design contractor for Google. Originally from Dublin, she's lived in the States for 4 years. Red hair, freckles, short (5'4"), fit. Outgoing and charming, but also protective of Andy. Aisling showed up first (at the same time as Lily) and has helped keep Andy levelheaded and sane throughout the entire ordeal.
- **Lauren White** – A 35-year-old personal trainer for the San Francisco 49ers. Originally from Australia, she's lived in the States for 2 years. Very tall (6'6"), very tan, blonde, athletic, emotionally involved with Taylor as much as (if not more so) Andy. Lauren is big and boisterous but has a tendency to not think things fully through.
- **Captain Niko RedWolf** – A 22-year-old Air Force Security Forces officer (military police). Originally from South Dakota. Half Lakota, one quarter Mexican and one quarter Japanese. Long, black hair. Toned and slender. 5'4". Sarcastic, wry and witty, Niko has basically become Andy's right-hand woman, along with Ash, whom she considers her best friend. She's helped provide endless insight to the vaccine program being managed at the local Air Force base, where she works.
- **Nicolette (Yvette) Seydeaux (staff)** – The 22-year-old maid of Rook Manor. Blonde, with long curly hair. Extremely buxom. 5'9" or 6'1" (in heels). Second generation French American. Enjoys wearing classic maid's outfits and being a bratty submissive. Pretended to be named Yvette at first, at the suggestion of Phil. Very close friends with Whitney.
- **Katie Rodriguez (staff)** – The 32-year-old gardener of Rook Manor. Hispanic, butch, 5'8", with short black hair cut in a bob, almost always seen in overalls and a button up shirt. Lesbian and wife of Jenny Peters. Had reservations about the program but wanted to ensure safety for her and her wife, so they took the deal and came to join the House of Rook.
- **Jenny Peters (staff)** – The 35-year-old cook of Rook Manor. Midwestern and plump, 5'8", with brown bushy hair. Wears large circular glasses. Tends to be overly motherly. Bisexual. Wife of Katie Rodriguez. Former college roommate of Alexis (Lexi) Coleman.
- **Taylor Morrison** – The 25-year-old ex-ex-girlfriend of Lauren White. Platinum blonde, stacked, short (5'2"). Was in the doghouse upon arrival for having cheated on Lauren almost a year ago, but now a regular member of the house. Closer to Lauren than anyone else, Taylor is still working to find her place in Team Rook.
- **Piper Brown** – A 26-year-old gold medal winning Olympic Volleyball player. Brunette, tall (6'2"), muscular but lean, blue eyed. Went viral for a video of her pre-game warm up dance. Still slightly recovering from the abusive treatment she received at Arthur Covington's home. Has developed very intense feelings for Andy in a very short time.
- **Asha Varma** – An 18-year-old college student and daughter of Dr. Charlotte Varma. Half Indian, half French, raised in London until last year. Brown skin, black hair, pierced navel, wild child attitude. 5'6". Party girl and socialite, Asha tends to enjoy causing trouble, as it gets her attention. Has some growing up to do. Has bonded well with Hannah and Taylor and will be going back to college once lockdown is lifted.
- **Sarah (Sares) Washington** – A 31-year-old actress. 6'2", redheaded, quirky, clumsy and a bit dorky. Originally from New Jersey. Swears like breathing. Very girl next door. Huge fan of the Druid Gunslinger books and had a crush on Andy before she even met him. Big lover of Broadway theater and musicals, both attending and performing in. Was the partner of Emily Stevens before arriving at Team Rook, and still is.
- **Emily (Em) Stevens** – A 30-year-old actress, 5'1", blonde, blue eyed, pale, slender, very posh, British. Left

London for LA just a few years ago. Incredibly charming and witty, with an almost supernatural social sense. Grew up as a child actress in a wildly popular series of movies called “The Dagger Academy” series but has since struggled to establish a successful acting career outside that role. Very sophisticated and has worked to help Andy feel more comfortable in his new financial echelon. Was the partner of Sarah Washington before arriving at Team Rook, and still is.

- **Sheridan Smith** – A 32-year-old acrobat and performer for Cirque Du Soleil. 5'7” Blonde, frizzy hair, slender and extremely flexible. Very laid back and go with the flow. Has been teaching the girls of the house yoga in her spare time. Despite a bit of a rocky start, has grown very fond of her teammates in Team Rook, and of Andy himself. Sheridan tends to protect her heart closely, however, and so her true thoughts are often a little guarded.
- **Hannah Nakamura** – An 18-year-old college student and former cheerleader. Half Hawaiian, half Japanese. Short (5'1”), Asian, with long black hair with blonde stripes in it. Curvy, *very* well-endowed and a firecracker of energy. Originally supposed to be joining the House of Watkins, she is much happier being part of Team Rook. Hannah is adventurous and energetic.
- **Tala Jordan** – A 31-year-old Iranian American woodcrafter and musician. Curvy and incredibly confident about it. Tala was Sheridan's roommate back in college and has played with a large number of failed Bay Area bands, while making puzzle boxes for people such as Elon Musk, Neil Patrick Harris and Criss Angel. Has a fetish with being turned on and made to wait. Was recommended by Sheridan, her roommate in college, to be brought into the house. Tala exudes both unshakable confidence and blue-collar swagger.
- **Jade Dillon** – A 26-year-old cheerleader for the 49ers and kindergarten teacher, Jade is also the daughter of tech billionaire Cormack Dillon, whom she hates. Blonde, bubbly, full of endless joy and confidence. Has a tendency to use fake cuss words, which gets on Andy's nerves like nails on a chalkboard. Also a virgin. Friend/co-worker of Lauren, who recommended she be brought into the house. Has distanced herself from her father as much as she thinks she can, and is a little nervous it may have repercussions, not only to her, but to all of Team Rook.
- **Whitney Wells** – A 23-year-old IT engineer with a penchant for BDSM. Jet black hair, icy blue eyes, porcelain white skin, ruby red lips, slender, almost frail, figure. Likes being completely under a Master's control. Best friend and regular play partner of Nicolette, who recommended she be brought into the house. Whitney can sometimes seem a little cold or distant, but Andy has decided this is mostly just a self-defense mechanism, and that the woman simply prefers to keep her opinions guarded.
- **Fiona Smith** – Andy's former girlfriend from college. A 38-year-old journalist who has spent most of the last fifteen years covering the Washington D.C. beat. Brunette, 5'11”, slender but in very good shape. Fiona has more history with Andy than nearly anyone in the household, and brought her partner, Moira, with her when she chose to join the Rook household after having spent a decade and a half apart from him. They picked up right where they left off without so much as a blip.
- **Moira MacLeod** – A 33-year-old Scottish doctor who had a threesome with Andy and Fiona some fifteen years ago at a wedding in Scotland. Andy lost touch with her after that, but apparently she's kept in touch with Fiona enough that Fi insisted on bringing her into the Rook household when she arrived. Slender, fit redhead with riotous red curls, pierced nipples and a handful of tattoos. Worked for Doctors Without Borders. An optimistic pragmatist, Moira is one for getting things done first and deciding how to feel about them later.
- **Alexis (Lexi) Coleman (staff)** – A 35-year-old former operative in the CIA. Latina, muscular, 5'6”, dark hair. Had significant scarring (burn scars) on her chin, neck and chest from an unknown event, but was restored as part of the imprinting process. After leaving the CIA in 2017, worked as PMC for a while, then as a bodyguard for a while. Former UCLA roommate of Jenny, who suggested she be brought into the house. Head of Andy's security, along with Niko. Has a big heart and will always take the more difficult option if it means helping more people.
- **Maya (Summer) Steele** – A 37-year-old Jewish American former stuntwoman and current director. Her hair styles vary wildly and regularly, and her nose looks as though it's been broken and reset once before. Described as a hard-drinking woman, with a very confident attitude and strong opinions, she worked as the stunt coordinator on several Dagger Academy movies with Emily, who suggested she be brought into the house.
- **Mali Merrick (staff)** – A 32-year-old personal and professional finance manager from Wales, who recently inherited Emily Stevens' account, and has been invited to relocate to America, join Team Rook, and take over management of the now substantial Rook family fortune. Lost her childhood sweetheart and fiancé to DuoHalo very early on in the pandemic. Is currently organizing her relocation to the States, along with bringing Andy “his plane.”
- **Melody Park (staff)** – A 28-year-old mercenary, and formerly Covington's personal bodyguard, now part of Team Rook, joining Andy's protective detail. Her family immigrated from South Korea in the 60s. She's ex-Army, ex-Ranger and dangerous as hell. Certainly has kept most of her opinions on the whole Quaranteam system to herself, but make no mistake, there's careful plans and refined thoughts rolling around behind those quiet eyes.

- **Matthew T'oele Rook** – Andy and Niko's newborn son.
- **Dr. Ming-Yue Chen** – A 35-year-old doctor from China specializing in nanobiotechnology who joined Team Rook after helping rescue them from an invading CCP force. A member of the Empty Wives movement, she spent most of her life in Shanghai, but spent close to a decade in London as part of her education.

Team Yang (16 people)

- **Eric Yang** – A 39-year-old engineer, and Andy's former roommate. Second generation Japanese American. Short (5'5") but athletic, if a bit shy and bookish. Piggybacked on Andy's one good deed into a complete life change he wasn't expecting. Andy and Eric are friends, but not overly close ones, despite having shared a condo for most of a decade. Eric has been working indirectly for the US intelligence as part of something called Project: Long Thought, which has both ties to the CIA and the NSA.
- **Lily Wu** – A 25-year-old coder for Door Dash. Second generation Japanese American. Dyed purple hair, short (5'2"), punkish. Eric's first partner, who expected to be his only partner only for life to get majorly in the way. Lily is the iron fist that runs the House of Yang, sometimes making decisions for Eric so he doesn't spend too long dwelling on them.
- **Jenny Carnero** – A 28-year-old meteorologist for the local Fox News channel. Statuesque brunette (5'10") who always remains overly tanned. Lily's ex-roommate who had to be rescued after fleeing from the person she was supposed to be paired up with, before getting paired up with Eric. Threatened to tell her story to the reporters at the station she worked at, but Lily convinced her that doing so would be bad for all involved. Phil claimed to have cleaned the mess up, and also to have ensure the problem wouldn't happen again to other people.
- **Sarah Wilson** – A 26-year-old HR specialist with Adobe Systems. Short (5'3"), blonde, Nordic and curvy. Sarah's a bit of a fretter, always expecting the worst of everyone and everything. Originally from Kansas. Meshes especially well in Team Yang, but has some deep seeded distrust of governmental systems.
- **2nd Lieutenant Rita Arroyo** – A 25-year-old Latina member of the Air Force's Security Services, assigned to Eric as his protection detail, but also his partner. Ex college athlete but seems to fit well within the Yang House. Easy going until shit goes down then turns all business at the drop of a hat.
- **Jane Fowler** – A 31-year-old blonde, blue eyed farm girl from Oklahoma who moved out to California to become a professional chef half a decade ago. Curvy, relentlessly upbeat. Serves as the cook/caretaker for the House of Yang.

Team Marcos (22 people)

- **Phil Marcos** – A 34-year-old Filipino project manager for Boeing, working in conjunction with the Air Force to manage the vaccine development/distribution program trying counter the epidemic. Probably (strike that, *definitely*) involved in a sizable amount of heavily classified shit. Tall (5'11"), slender and usually exhausted. Has a deep love of fighting games and mischief. Phil always knows more than he can talk about. Phil has been heavily involved with the response to the DuoHalo virus but is unable to talk to even his close friends about it, as per his agreement with the Air Force. As of late, however, Phil has decided to let Andy see behind the curtain more and more.
- **Audrey Percy** – A 29-year-old Hispanic psychologist. Short (5'1"), very curvy. Also a big fighting games fan. Has been doing her best to keep Phil sane throughout the apocalypse. One of the first successful recipients of the current vaccine. Has been helping coordinate the base's mental health responses to all of the side effects from the Quaranteam serum. Pregnant with Phil's child and engaged to him.
- **Lt. Colonel Linda Hayes** – A 35-year-old Caucasian lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. Blonde, fit, lethal. Also doubling as Phil's bodyguard most days. Paired up with Phil at the exact same time as Audrey, a split moment decision she's later remarked was the best thing she's ever done with her life. Linda is razor sharp, quick witted and while her pairing with Phil was originally intended to be mostly professional, she's fallen very hard for her partner since their initial meeting.
- **Tamika Jefferson** – An 18-year-old African American college student. Short (5'2"), curvy, disaffected and disinterested in most things. Tamika's paired up with Phil purely for convenience, as she is a lesbian, and the daughter of one of the other scientists on the base.
- **Yuko Takahashi** – A 22-year-old first generation Japanese immigrant and video game engineer. Very short (4'10"), very slender but extremely agile. The most sarcastic of Phil's partners. She feels Phil takes too much of the risk and does not garner nearly enough of the reward for all the things he has dealt with both on and off base for the past year.
- **Dr. Charlotte Varma** – A 44-year-old French infectious disease researcher working with the Air Force and

Boeing. Lead developer on the current vaccine. Average height (5'7"), blonde, matronly but also a bit bougie. Originally from Paris, she moved to London and married Dev Varma, before they emigrated to the US earlier this year with their teenage daughter, Asha (now part of Team Rook). Dev died in a lab accident on the Air Force base where DuoHalo was being studied. Was rescued from Covington by Andy but chose to go with Phil, with Andy's blessing.

- **Natalie Jacobsen** – A 25-year-old pre-med student and stripper, Natalie is Taylor's best friend who Taylor suggested be added to the Rook household, but when Andy passed, he recommended her over to Phil, who decided to add her to his household to keep Taylor's friend nearby. Natalie seems a little overwhelmed by all the new faces and people in her life but is doing her best to integrate to her new family.
- **Rachel DeMarco** – A 28-year-old infectious disease researcher working with the Air Force and Boeing. Was originally responsible for getting Covington the women he wanted, either legitimately or questionably, but revolted against him, leading the New Daughters of Revolution. As per the terms of their surrender, has been paired into House Marcos. Has a very “just get through it” attitude that almost borders on nihilism.
- **Master Sergeant Violet 'BigTits' McGuinness** – A 26-year-old Security Forces member of the Air Force who's been brought in to operate as Phil's nighttime security detail. Because of his knowledge of the DuoHalo virus and the serum being used to treat it, Phil was given two handlers, not just one, although Linda is still very much in command, both of the operation and of the household. Violet is a stark contrast to Linda, soft and gentle whereas Linda is fast and coarse. Phil's survival and well-being is always her number one priority, as McGuinness was there when the lab accident that killed Charlotte's first husband happened.
- **Winnie Brookmeyer** – A 34-year-old originally from Ohio, she was a private chef to some high-end tech bro before he died to DuoHalo. She also had a sideline gig appearing on cooking shows, where she was a rising star, right up until the pandemic hit. Winnie and Linda were in a yoga class together, so when it came down that Phil was going to need a house with a staff, Linda went to work recruiting her friends.
- **Valerie Staples** – A 38-year-old executive assistant for the same tech bro that Winnie had worked for, Valerie takes scheduling to new levels entirely. When Linda reached out to Winnie, she also reached out to Valerie, asking her to take over the house management job for Team Marcos. Valerie and Winnie are a couple, but both enjoy a little spice of men in their life from time to time.
- **Bella Porter** – A 26-year-old former cannabis grower who is doubling as the house's maid and gardener, while still growing pot out of the greenhouse for the mansion. Bella's fairly laid back but was chosen by Linda as someone she felt like she could trust, as they'd become friends since they met one day when Linda was out getting marijuana and Bella was incredibly helpful.
- **Paloma Gallagos** – A 33-year-old former Spanish intelligence officer, brought to the US as part of Operation Honey Trap, offering insight into the Spanish National Intelligence Centre, Spain's CIA/FBI equivalent. Probably has her own agenda, but also definitely seems to have fallen hard for Phil on first contact, something Phil suspects may be down to a DuoHalo variant.
- **Rochelle Waters** – A 26-year-old civil rights attorney from Atlanta, half-black and half-white, who has been involved in voting rights and defund the police movements for the better part of her life. Has been working with the Quaranteam Project in an attempt to increase adoption rate among paranoid and distrustful communities.
- **Ingrid Virtanen** – A 23-year old physical therapist from Helsinki, Finland, she operates as a sort of front-line first-wave personal doctor for the Team.

The House of Covington

- **Arthur Robert Covington IV** – A 63-year-old investment banker. Considers himself the most important person in New Eden. Certainly is the richest. A horrible prick with a rumored proclivity for making his partners do awful things. Has ties within the Quaranteam project, and the organization behind the construction and management of New Eden. Attempted to break Piper Brown, unsuccessfully, and still holds some deep resentment over it. Was taken hostage by his own Team until they could be extracted from his pairing and repaired with other people. The person Andy hates the most.

The (former) House of Covington

- **Lisa Davis** – A 25-year-old graphic design contractor for Google. Ex colleague of Aisling. Partner for Covington, who does not allow her to speak in public. Ash has been trying to find ways to talk to her on the side, but Covington is very particular about visitors to his house and has refused to let Lisa come out to see Aisling.
- **Veronica DeLaCruz (deceased)** – A 27-year-old Hispanic card dealer for the House of Covington privately, as well as professionally over at a local casino. Cheated on her partner (Arthur) with a man named Brian

Morrison, and the sexual encounter resulted in her death. The first fatality in New Eden, her death is being used to remind women the dangers involved in being unfaithful in the new world.

- **Alicia Covington** – A 46-year-old housewife and socialite. The mother of Covington's two children, Alicia is a silent but lethal force in the House of Covington. She certainly seems like she has her husband's ear, but also mostly applies that influence from the shadows, never once speaking out about him in public, or in front of company. Make no mistake about it, however, Alicia is a controlling power broker in Team Covington, and she is not to be underestimated under any circumstances. She has been part of his particular viper's nest since long before DuoHalo and has used it at every opportunity to strengthen her power base.
- **Layla Greene** – A 25-year-old former Fox News analyst. White, blonde, blue eyed, fake tits, fake lips, fake personality, a seemingly perfect yes woman. Layla left Fox to become a communications consultant, and Arthur brought her into the house to help him shape his message and communications, possibly considering a run at politics, or just feeling like the ultra-rich were going to need image managers moving forward.
- **Hope DeMarco** – A 31-year-old ex-Marine, 5'10", muscular and Germanic, blonde hair, blue eyes, half-sister of Rachel. Former drug addict who got clean and joined the service. Petty, vindictive, spiteful, and angry a lot of the time.
- **Amber** – the butler for the House of Covington.
- **Darcy** – one of the maids in Covington's house, French, blonde.
- **Janice Flowers** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.
- **Eloise Childs** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.
- **Teresa Kenzington** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.

The House of Vikovic

- **Gregor Vikovic** – A 52-year-old business owner. Russian, huge (6'2", 275lbs), muscular, with a big, braided silver beard and a fondness for expensive things, particular food and drink. One of the more elite members of New Eden.

Former House of Vikovic

- **Katarina Vikovic** – A 41-year-old homemaker, and Gregor's first wife. Came over with him from Russia a couple of decades ago, but has dual citizenship since 2005, much like her husband. Participated in the New Daughters of the Revolution's revolt, and was unpaired from Gregor.

Team Watkins

- **Nathaniel Watkins** – A 41-year-old investor and insanely rich self-made gadfly. Tall (6'1"), lean and Waspish, Nathaniel tends to look more like an out-of-work yoga instructor than the forty-first richest man in the world. His brown beard is always somewhat disheveled and seems to relish always walking around in socks and Birkenstocks. Has a friendly relationship with Andy, whom he gave a shitload of money to, seemingly to punish his son.
- **Benny Watkins** – An 18-year-old high school student. Benny is Nathaniel's biggest failure, spoiled and thoughtless, entitled and arrogant. His claiming of Deborah Barnes resulted in his punishment by his father, and the reassignment of Hannah to Andy.
- **Deborah Barnes** – A 34-year-old veterinarian from Los Gatos, originally from Kansas. She was originally assigned to Nathaniel, who used her as a stake in one of Covington's poker games. She was won by Andy, but Benny claimed her before she could be relocated. As part of Benny's punishment, Deborah's been assigned control of Benny.
- **Erin Teresa Donegal (Teri)** – A 36-year-old pharmaceutical representative. Dated and lived with Andy about a decade ago until she gave him an ultimatum - "either your friends go, or I do." Andy gave her the boot, and she stalked him on and off since then. Second generation Irish American. Blonde (but dyes her hair brown), curvy. Andy refused to bring her into his house, and she was reassigned to the House of Watkins.
- **Eliza Watkins** – A 38-year-old tech exec (although she looks significantly younger), and Nathaniel's first wife, Eastern European who immigrated to the US after attending university stateside, where she met Nathaniel. A very smart and measured woman who shows an immeasurable amount of patience, especially in contrast to her free-wheeling and reckless husband. Yet the two seem very much in love, and she values his safety extremely highly.
- **Octavia Hakimi** – The 35-year-old head of the Watkins security detail. Persian, although has a slight Spanish accent, probably ex-military or special forces. Adept at blending in and not being noticed. Almost always dressed in all black and has a sort of quiet deadly confidence that makes her not a force to be lightly reckoned with.

- **Rosalyn Chambers** – One of Nathaniel Watkins' assistants.
- **Nina Choi** – One of the women won by Watkins during the poker game at Covington's.

The House Of Haunton

- **Mayor James Haunton** – The 54-year-old mayor of New Eden. Portly and short tempered. Has a mustache that whole bowls of soup could get lost in.

Former House Of Haunton

- **Major Monica Peters** – The 36-year-old wife of the mayor, who doubles as the greeter and tour guide of New Eden for the most recent arrivals. Originally the head of the base where Phil was working but was superseded by the arrival of Major General Fielder. Caught up in the scandal of the NDR and illegal forcible reassignments of several individuals under the direction of Covington.

The House of Jacobson

- **Jake Jacobson** – The 49-year-old owner of the AllStore chain of department stores. Jet black hair with a pencil thin mustache. More reptilian than human, with beady eyes and a perpetual sneer on his face. Hot tempered, petty, and vindictive.
- **Ariel Smith** – the woman won by Jacobson during Covington's poker game.

Team Baker (9 people)

- **Xander Baker** – A 38-year-old auto mechanic and car restorer from Ohio. Andy's oldest and best friend. Being relocated to New Eden to get paired up with Captain Betsy Ross. Covered in tattoos, ridiculously muscular, Xander is a gentle giant. Not to be allowed near karaoke machines under peril of death.
- **Captain Betsy Ross** – A 34-year-old Air Force officer, working on the reconstruction program, rebuilding America's heavily damaged infrastructure. Soon to be Xander's first partner. Betsy is insanely smart but has confidence issues when it comes to relationships.
- **Madison Buckley** – A 26-year-old singer/musician in a symphonic metal band named Nicomachean but extremely friendly and upbeat. One of the first people to be paired with Xander, she was only willing to be paired with him if he relocated to California, which he immediately agreed to, although she had to compromise and move to northern California from her home near Los Angeles.
- **Brooke Maloney** – A 24-year-old Olympic swimmer, and friend of Piper. Second generation Swedish American. Blonde, short (5'4") and extremely athletic. Originally, Piper was trying to convince Andy to bring Brooke into the House of Rook, but Andy immediately recognized her personality would be a better fit for Xander, and asked Phil to help redirect her.
- **2nd Lieutenant Samantha Percy** – The 27-year-old member of Xander's family handpicked by Captain Linda Hayes to operate as his security detail. Like most of Linda's Girls, Samantha is a highly decorated combat soldier with special skills in asset protection. She tends not to be too chatty out in public.
- **Alicia Geller** – A 37-year-old retired actress (ex-child star) turned schoolteacher (high school history). She's mostly glad to be forgotten by most of Hollywood and has enjoyed her life as a teacher. Had some particularly bad experiences as a child star, which she is reluctant to discuss casually.
- **KC Kadrey** – A 20-year-old Vietnamese American Stanford student majoring in mechanical engineering. Bright, bubbly, always the life of the party. Has a golden retriever named Boggle she takes with her everywhere.
- **Serena Ortiz** – A 27-year-old Latina Federal Marshall. Very much a Southwestern girl, having grown up in New Mexico, playing cops and robbers before she grew up and took it professional. Has a reputation of tracking down fugitives and spotting subtle mistakes that give criminals away. Very full of bravado, but mostly seems earned. Very much a genuine cowgirl.

Team Friedman (12 people)

- **Ari Friedman** – A 47-year-old former golf pro turned tech job surfer, a member of the board game group, Ari stumbles through careers like most people stumble through fashion phases. His life is always upside down, he's always learning something new that he's just picked up and he doesn't seem to have any regular habits beyond the boardgame group.
- **Gwen Friedman** – Ari's 41-year-old wife pre-pandemic, manages a non-profit focused on ocean conservation.

Gwen's still adjusting to having to share her husband with so many other women but seems like she's making peace with it.

Team Wilson (13 people)

- **Jenna (Jones) Wilson** – A 34-year-old heavyset woman with an oversized personality, one of the original members of the board game group, was paired off early as part of Phil's “protect my friends” efforts.
- **Dale Wilson** – A 39-year-old wall-of-muscle FBI agent, Dale was paired up early with Jenna very early on in the pandemic. Andy had thought it an odd pairing at first, but the two seem to have a natural matching rhythm and get along incredibly well, so as long as his friend is happy, he's happy for her. He seems a little frustrated that he's being sidelined from most active fieldwork for his family's protection, however.

Team Pak (11 people)

- **Phil Pak (a.k.a. Lesser Phil/LP)** – A 37-year-old Korean-American man who was part of Andy's friend group before the pandemic. LP works for the NSA as a Data Analyst (as far as Andy knows) and has always been especially jovial and joyous.
- **Brandy Pak** – A 31-year-old housewife, Phil's original wife, and mother of LP's 5-year old son, Kyung-jae (KJ) who has been a stay at home mom since Andy's known her.

The House of... Dave? Aka Team Straussman

- **Dr. David Straussman (previously just “Dave... something or other?”)** – a thirty(ish)-something(?) quarantine management engineer for the CDC, who came to test Andy and Eric, and found out that Andy was secretly Dave's favorite author. In exchange for an advance copy of the newest unpublished Druid Gunslinger book, he put Andy and Eric into the system as Top Level VIPs, which has changed their life forever. Nice dude, but Dave's just this guy, you know?

The House of McCallister (Mr.)

- **Dr. Adam McCallister** – the man behind the pairing portion of the Quaranteam serum. For reasons still unknown, Adam McCallister was directly responsible for the creation and integration of the portion of the Quaranteam serum that makes it function as a bonding agent between men and women. A Stanford graduate, McCallister has worked in both the private sector and for the military for some time. Recently, he has defected to the Soviet Union, although there are reports that he's no longer in their care. Cause of departure, also unknown.

The Exiled (House of the former Mrs. McCallister)

- **Dr. Eve (Evie) (McCallister) Merriweather** – Adam's former wife, a very smart biochemist in her own right, who fled Adam's company in Russia and made her way back to the States. Probably knows more about DuoHalo and Quaranteam, both professionally and intimately, than anyone else on the planet. In essence, Patient Zero.
- **Sergei Petrov** – gay man in possession of a mutated biology, whose sperm functions as a sort of 'pairing reset' for women, and also allows men to pair with other men, although the resistance to the virus is much less strong than the standard Quaranteam serum. Could be the Rosetta Stone in terms of finding offshoots and variations from the serum to enable further options.
- **Andrei Ivanov** – Sergei's boyfriend, a former military man who aided in their escape from Russia. Andrei was responsible for Eve and Sergei's flight from a remote Soviet testing facility and agreed to come with them to the States, as long as he and Sergei could openly be together.
- **Master Sergeant Kathy 'K-Rod' Rodriguez** – A member of the military detail assigned to keep watch on Eve by Captain Linda Hayes. Friend of Niko's.
- **Second Lieutenant Kiki 'Pax' (formerly 'Pakky') Pak** – A member of the military detail assigned to keep watch on Eve by Captain Linda Hayes. Friend of Niko's.

Staff on the Quaranteam Project

- **Major General Fielder** – military commander in charge of the base managing the Quaranteam serum. When he came on to take over the project, he saw potential, and has been one of the guiding hands on every step they have taken thusfar. Currently removed from the project and facing charges of willful endangerment and abuse of

power regarding his direction of assigning women against the direction of the Oracle system.

- **3 star Lt. General Bonner** – military commander responsible of taking over control and oversight of the program formerly headed by Major General Fielder. When Fielder's horrific actions came to light, the Air Force responded by sending in new management. Bonner is a no-nonsense General who is determined to make sure things are being done the right way.
- **Major Monica Peters** – *See House of Haunton*
- **Adam McCallister** – *See House of McCallister*
- **Phil Marcos** – *See Team Marcos*
- **Charlotte Varma** – *See Team Marcos*
- **Rachel DeMarco** – *See House of Covington*
- **Matt Cunningham** – division chief (electrics half) of Project Impulse, the precursor to the Quaranteam project. Specializes in electrical signal transmission, both mechanical and biological.
- **Charles Daniels** – section chief (biofeedback engineering), discoverer of the Daniels effect, where a bonded group of individuals find their neurochemistry adapting to work better as a cohesive unit.
- **Wes Bridges** – division chief (bio half) (dead) – died in the accident with Dev Varma and several others, which only Adam McCallister survived.
- **Hunter Wilson** – section chief (electronics interface) (dead) – died in the accident with Dev Varma and several others, which only Adam McCallister survived.
- **Martin Grant** – section chief (weapons engineering) – brought in late to the process but was first to discover that the Quaranteam provides a baseline resistance to most forms of toxins, including alcohol. Also discovered the occasional large-scale regenerative effects sometimes associated with an imprinting.
- **Bill McKenna** – Phil's friend and coworker, has perhaps the most knowledge about the base serum in existence. He and Phil co-developed the original base serum together, the two of them both taking some wild swings with the other's work to piggyback onto building something great and adaptable.
- **Nate Campbell** – section chief (aeronautics engineering) – one of the first successful test cases of the Quaranteam serum, with his wife Sharon.
- **Dev Varma (deceased)** – former husband of Charlotte Varma, died in a lab accident at the base, which exposed him to DuoHalo. One of the key researchers behind the Quaranteam serum, at least in the early days of it.
- **Miguel Cunningham** – One of the people brought on late to the Quaranteam project, when it became clear they were going to be needed to do social and emotional matchmaking of people on an unprecedented scale, the Air Force brought in Miguel Cunningham to design the system known as The Oracle, which quizzes all men and women as to their conscious (and subconscious) mental, emotional, sexual and physical wants and desires, then does the best it can to pair people up within the realm of possibility. The project seemed like a Hail Mary when conceived, but so far has been wildly successful, although the stress of maintaining and scaling the project up has certainly taken a toll on Miguel, who often looks exhausted and in desperate need of a vacation. Still, he's being hailed as a hero for developing a workable solution under such a short deadline.

Team McKenna

- **Bill McKenna** – Bill is one of the cofounders of the original serum, and along with Phil Marcos, Dr. Charlotte Varma and Dr. Adam McCallister (as well as Dr. Eve McCallister, without her knowledge), developed the Quaranteam serum.
- **Grace McKenna** – Bill's original wife, from long before the pandemic. They have a 20-year old daughter. She has been more amused than annoyed at what they've had to do to expand their household in order to maintain Bill's life.
- **Jen McKenna** – Bill's 18-year old daughter, paired off with a man named Tony. Tried to get her father to take in one of her friends to keep her safe, but Bill refused, claiming it would be strange to be banging one of his daughter's friends.
- **Julia Narakova** – One of Bill's partners, a former Victoria Secret model.
- **Kenna** – Jen's friend in question. When she was delivered to a failcase, she had to be repaired, and Bill was the only man with a high enough rating in a close enough compatibility score to be added to his household. As such, she is now part of Team McKenna.
- **2nd Lieutenant Jackie Alvarez** – The member of Linda's Girls assigned to keep Team

McKenna (Bill specifically) safe.

- **Second Lieutenant Kiki 'Pax' Pak** – A member of the military detail originally assigned to keep watch on Eve by Captain Linda Hayes, but has since been reassigned back to Bill McKenna. Friend of Niko's.

Linda's Girls

- **Captain Linda Hayes** – *See Team Marcos*
- **2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf** – *See Team Rook*
- **Master Sergeant Violet 'BigTits' McGuinness** – *See Team Marcos*
- **2nd Lieutenant Rita Arroyo** – *See Team Yang*
- **Master Sergeant Kathy 'K-Rod' Rodriguez** – *See Team Cunningham*
- **Second Lieutenant Kiki 'Pax' Pak** – *See Team McKenna*
- **2nd Lieutenant Samantha Percy** – *See Team Baker*
- **2nd Lieutenant Jackie Alvarez** – *See Team McKenna*
- **2nd Lieutenant Nancy Meyers** – *See Team Petrov (via Merriweather/Watkins)*

The Politicians

- **Senator Caroline Giancola (D, KS)** – One of the two Senators from Kansas, Senator Giancola has made it a point to be on the front line, determining what's going on with the DuoHalo crisis, the Quaranteam serum, the Oracle selection system and the restructuring of America under the new system.
- **Representative Madeline Engle (R, ID)** – A Representative for the House from Idaho, Rep. Engle feels that the entire Quaranteam process has been manipulated and corrupted from the very start, and has been on the warpath looking for everyone she feels is to blame for the dire straits the country is in.
- **Senator May Collins (D, CO)** – One of the two Senators from Colorado, Senator Collins is a member of the committee reviewing and advocating for the Male Protection Act. Senator Collins is a new appointee, replacing a male senator who died.
- **Senator Evelyn Yang (D, NY)** – One of the two Senators from New York, Senator Collins is a member of the committee reviewing and advocating for the Male Protection Act. She has been a senator from New York for the last six years.
- **Senator Ruth Hadaway (R, IA)** – One of the two Senators from Iowa, Senator Hadaway has long been one of the bastions of the far-right conservative movement within the Republican party. She was elected with the support of the Tea Party in 2002, and moved to become a strong MAGA supporter in 2015.

Staff at Opprimo Research (Valhalla Shores)

- **General Teagan Ibanez** – The head of the Opprimo Research facility at the center of Valhalla Shores.
- **Doctor Abernathy** – One of the head researchers at the Opprimo Research facility at the center of Valhalla Shores focusing on nanobot communications.